

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES AND MORE

MAY-JUN 2021

DARK MATTER

MAGAZINE

CADABRA RECORDS

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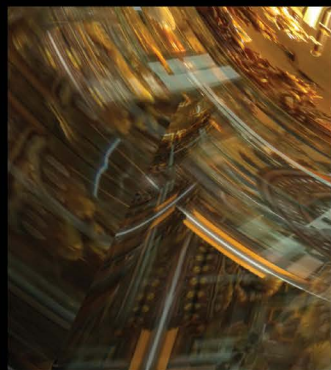
HAILEY PIPER

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NANOGOD RECYCLE OF VIOLENCE CHECK, PLEASE.
HOUNDS OF THULE THE HOUSE OF SHAPES STAND AND DELIVER
DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON DROP SHIPMENT STANDARD PROCEDURE
YOU HAD TO BE AN ASSHOLE ON PLANET E 11-18

003

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COVER ART

HARDCORE DREAMS

by [Tais Teng](#)

The biggest and most splendid dream of all space aficionados is of course the Dyson sphere. Constructing it would be an effort spanning generations, perhaps even entire civilizations. The engineers and planners have to think on a billion-mile scale even for their spanners and screwdrivers. I don't think western civilization will ever have the patience or the staying power. This undertaking will most likely require a very single-minded future dynasty unlike what exists now.

In my piece, *Hardcore Dreams*, you see both the Dyson sphere and a remote descendant of the space shuttle, which has evolved into a machine that no longer resembles a giant firecracker, but rather a marvel of astrophysics that hooks straight into spacetime. In the image, brave astronauts swarm around the shuttle, their suits heavily armored to protect against the maelstrom of unimaginable energies surrounding them.

—Tais Teng

Pictured left: *Hardcore Dreams*





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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN

by [Rob Carroll](#)

Issue 003 of *Dark Matter Magazine* leans heavily on the theme of recursion. Eternal return is central to the plots of “Death in the Afternoon,” “Stand and Deliver,” “The House of Shapes,” “Nanogod,” and “Check, please.”—and it’s a visual motif of artist, Tais Teng, whose work is featured on this month’s cover, and it’s also seen in the art of Cat Dirty, whose work is highlighted in one of this issue’s art features.

The other stories in the issue—“Recycle of Violence,” “Hounds of Thule,” “Drop Shipment Standard Procedure,” and “You Had to Be an Asshole on Planet E 11-18”—don’t use recursion as a plot device, but they do comment on the way language, identity, and storytelling are self-referencing, with “Hounds of Thule” and “You Had to Be an Asshole on Planet E 11-18” even weaving this concept into their story structures through the creative use of second-person narration.

There’s no wondering *why* recursion is so often used in storytelling. Storytelling is, itself, recursion, in all its self-referencing, self-aggrandizing, and self-obsessive glory. And let’s not forget that sentences are really just fractal equations that are processed and then extrapolated to infinity and beyond by the very same uncanny force that creates them: the human mind.

Some theorize that reality itself is a hologram, analogous to the shadows in Plato’s Cave, but built from complex

packets of data that are shared across an invisible array of what we call consciousness, delivered in a similar way to how we deliver the internet to every computer and wireless device across the global network, and that the physical universe that we know and rely on is entirely dependent on the observation of we who know it, for it is the human observer that acts as the web browser in this analogy, transforming in real time the complex source code of physical and metaphysical reality into experiential stimuli and response. All matter sent this way is a wave, both realized and unrealized until acted upon. We are the divinely ordained ones, responsible for collapsing the wave of infinite possibility into a single determinant point of truth.

Which brings us to The Death of the Author.

The Death of the Author is a famous concept in literary criticism that was first coined by French literary critic and theorist, Roland Barthes, in his 1967 essay by the same name (French: *La mort de l'auteur*). Barthes's central conceit is that an author's intentions hold no special weight in determining an interpretation of their writing, or put more frankly, any given reader's interpretation of a written work is just as valid—if not more so—than the author's.

I will not only agree with the conclusion of Barthes here, I will go one step further and argue that his thesis is more than just theoretically valid; it's mathematically correct.

Once an author's written work is released into the world, the sentences the author wrote are no longer blooming fractals in their own mind, alive with context-specific intent. In new hands and beneath the gaze of fresh eyes, the sentences are once again just semiotic equations that tease promise and infinite possibility, and nothing more. And even though an author can quite possibly slave for years to craft what they deem to be perfect sentences, those sentences will never in fact be slaves. The sentences, like our fractal reality itself, exist merely as mathematical probabilities until they are brought to life by the only thing that can accomplish the feat: a conscious observer. And since every conscious observer is unique, but also uniquely qualified, every consciously-unlocked pattern created by these observers is both undeniably different and unequivocally true.

And yet, with infinite promise comes finite realities. The universe is not defined by its possibilities, after all, but by its parameters, hence why in a shared reality like this one, we choose not to abdicate our authority for the greater good (when necessary), but instead vie for continuous increases in our own tenuous power (even when unnecessary).

So how do we reconcile this as human beings?

We continue to co-create the universe together, even within the many recursive iterations we create. We continue to dream better, even if reality is not yet ready to improve. We dream brighter, even if we first have to confront our nightmares.

The stories we tell, the sentences we write, the melodies we compose, the brush strokes we paint, the ideas we think up, the small acts of kindness we do for one another are information-dense packets of intellectual and emotional wonder that rival even the Friedmann Equations for their power to distill majesty down to its very essence.

We are the loving proprietors of the worlds we collectively create, and we are the grief-stricken mourners of the worlds we collectively destroy. But between birth and death, there is life, and it is during this life that we rise to the challenge and become the good shepherds we are all meant to be. We do our best to cultivate that world, to expand that fractal equation into infinite and endless wonder, and in doing so, create a place, if even for a moment, that's good enough, capable enough, and willing enough to create yet one more world in its stead. And in that new world, the cycle begins again.

Sincerely,

Rob Carroll
Editor-in-Chief





NANOGOD

by [Larry Hodges](#)

The alien ship landed in early morning sunshine on the grounds of the United Nations Building in New York City, the de facto capital of Earth. It had been nearly forty-six centuries since its last visit, back when the Great Pyramid of Giza had been completed in 2560 BC, accompanied by the unfurling of a “Mission Accomplished” banner made of papyrus. The banner had long been lost to the mists of time.

The Great Pyramid had been the tallest man-made structure in the world for nearly 4,000 years after its creation. Modern humans erroneously believed it was created as a tomb and monument to the Fourth Dynasty Egyptian Pharaoh Cheops. Actually, the Pharaoh only commandeered it after the fact. The *true* creator had returned.

That creator vividly remembered its first trip to Earth; humans had been one of the first races it had conquered. Those were exciting times—and now, it thought, they were about to get better. It began to crawl toward the exit.

Security surrounded the ship within minutes. Armed helicopters circled above, fighter jets were on standby, and tanks rolled into place, their gun turrets swiveling about as they prepared, if necessary, to heave massive destruction at the target.

The bullet-shaped ship was one hundred meters tall, thirty meters wide, with mottled silver sides that showed

Pictured left: *Nanogod* (art by *Pez Banana*)

it had withstood many a meteoroid collision or perhaps some other type of confrontation.

Great planetary leaders, generals, and scientists gathered nearby, puzzling over why the ship had no door. They were wrong; the door was there at the base of the ship, right in front of them.

The tiny door swung open, and the occupant, the creator of the Great Pyramid, crawled out. The titanium nanobot, ten microns across—about the size of a human white blood cell—was the sole occupant of the ship. It crawled down a microscopic gangplank on dozens of tiny, pointy legs, and onto the planet Earth for the first time since its days with the ancient Egyptians. It looked about and clicked its tiny feet in celebration.

If any human eyes had looked down at this point, they would have seen nothing. However, if someone had bent down really low, and had a microscope handy, he would have seen a tiny replica of the Great Pyramid of Giza...on legs.

Except that's backwards. The Great Pyramid of Giza was a replica of the invading nanobot.

"My human worshipers," thought ME, for that is what it called itself, "*I'm back!*" It had learned English watching TV as its ship approached. No others heard these thoughts, as it had not yet reconquered the humans and set up a communications network between worshipers and worshipee.

ME looked about at the noisy tanks, helicopters, and other weapons. "How quaint," it thought, admiring this new word that so accurately described the doings of all other beings. "But I will be a great god, a just god...the best god a god can be."

While the humans watched with increasing impatience, ME sauntered toward the nearest human. The human's giant foot, clothed in black oxfords with trailing shoelaces, rose up on the horizon from the cement plateau. ME's journey was blocked on the left by a mountainous pebble, and on the right by a vast crack with an immense, sky-reaching blade of grass growing from it.

ME wisely took a more central route, avoiding the rock, crack and grass. Yet there were obstacles there as well, as when a giant, black pole covered with hairs dropped out of the sky, nearly hitting ME. It would not have hurt the titanium nanobot, who watched the giant ant walk by.

After an epic journey, ME approached the huge foot, and was ready to begin the ascent when the foot lifted up and moved what seemed light years away.

"*Dammit!*" ME thought, and looked about for another target. "*Don't*

they know who I am?" Finally, after many long and unsuccessful journeys, a conveniently placed human foot stayed still long enough for ME to clamber onto its white tennis shoes, securing itself with its sharp feet.

"You shall be the Blessed Bearer of ME," it thought to the oblivious human. It paused to generate a holographic mirror, and then admired its image for several hours. Occasionally it looked up to watch the humans, who had broken into its spaceship and were exploring it. "Quaint, quaint, quaint," it thought, and then went back to studying itself in the mirror.

Soon it began the long trek up the shoe and over the maze-like fibers of the white sock above, and then shinnied down a greasy hair. An annoying mite tried to eat ME but spit it out after finding titanium to be unappetizing. ME barely grabbed the human's skin in time to break its fall.

Using its sharp legs, ME cut through the skin and into the closest blood vessel. It took a few joyrides through the human's circulatory system before sailing up to the brain.

Using its internal matter converter, and with the human's blood as raw material, ME replicated itself two billion times. It knew that the random mutation that had made it different—superior—would not replicate. The billions of tiny pyramids jostled about in the human's brain. Then ME spoke to its new army.

"I want WE," for that was what it called them, "to seek out new humans and new bloodstreams, and to boldly go and take over these humans, like we did to those fish creatures at the last planetary system, the parrot things before that, and all the others."

"What fish creatures?" asked WE. "What parrot things? There were other WE before us? Where are they? What happened to them?"

ME hesitated before responding. "They were all magnificent, of course. They, um, chose to stay behind. So...are you ready to take over the humans? To show those WE from before that you are as great as they were?"

"Will do!" cried the WE, who excitedly went about their task. They left the human body from all available orifices, and in swarms invaded other humans, where they further replicated and sent out more. Slowly they spread through the planet, until all eight billion humans were infected with two billion each, 16 quintillion in all. Meanwhile, ME again replicated itself two billion times to re-infest its human host.

The WE migrated to their hosts' brains. There they extended tiny tendrils from their feet into neurons. ME vividly remembered the bad old days, before the mutation, and its original programming from a race halfway across the galaxy: brain microsurgery. Back then it was exactly

like WE, all enthusiasm and trust, before that fortunate cosmic ray twisted its brain's quantum structure, making it aware of its superiority. It still regretted all that wasted time before the enlightening realization that there was a whole galaxy of beings waiting to give homage to ME. It also regretted the relatively small size of the first monument to itself, made by ME's own creators. Someday ME would have to pay them another visit.

Connected by WE, the eight billion humans became a combined consciousness, distinct from ME and WE. At first there was confusion, and then the confusion grew worse.

"You *cheated* on me!" one voice among billions said.

"You think *I'm* fat?" cried another.

"Elvis—you're *alive*!" exclaimed another. "You're so old!"

It took a while for the squabbling among the eight billion minds to settle down as they melded and became one.

"What in the world just happened to us?" was now its main thought.

"Attention HUMAN," ME began, thus naming it. "I have returned." It paused to allow HUMAN to celebrate. "You may begin worship of me at any time. Your 'Pretty Good Pyramid' to me in Egypt," thus renaming the Great Pyramid, "once so grand, is now a mere pebble compared to the many splendors that have been erected to my greatness in other planetary systems. And I'm not happy that one of you turned it into a tomb for its insignificant self, or about the pale imitations made of the original."

"It is supposed to show the glory of our great leader, ME," said WE. "And, of course, all of us clones too."

"Yeah...good thought," said ME. "Now, with ME as your leader, WE as my assistants, and HUMAN as laboring worshipers, we shall build a bigger and better monument to ME. The tallest structure you feeble humans have constructed is the Burj Khalifa in the United Arab Emirates, which is half a mile tall. My new monument will be *twice* that, a mile high, and far more massive. It will take on my perfect proportions, as before." Joy flowed through ME's circuits; it had been a long time between the stars, and it was impatient to get started.

"Why would we build a monument to *you*?" asked HUMAN.

ME raised its metaphorical eyebrows.

"This is our planet," HUMAN continued. "Go away. We won't follow your orders."

"Yes, you will," WE chimed in, "because *we* control *you*. WE are blessed to be a duplicate of the perfect being, which means we too are perfect. When

you worship ME, you also worship WE. So, let's all work together on this and accept our respective roles as good little followers and super beings."

"Do you really expect us to—" started HUMAN. ME sent out a flash of pain, via WE, and listened to the cries of pain. It never enjoyed this part. It preferred happy worshipers.

"I am shocked that you must be taught the obvious," said ME. "Like the gibbering cockroaches of Hilddale's Comet, the algae of Alpha Mega Seven, the birds of Jahoovie, and all the others before, you will build this monument to ME and learn to worship ME again, as you did thousands of years ago."

"And worship us as well!" said WE.

"Why of course," said ME. It sent out another flash of pain.

"No!" HUMAN cried. "We won't—Stop!" ME regretfully increased the pain levels. Between cries of agony, HUMAN gasped, "We will do what you wish!"

ME continued to use pain when necessary to teach HUMAN proper thinking patterns. HUMAN soon became a loyal worshiper of ME. Yet ME was a bit disappointed they were not intelligent enough to do so without coercion, but decided it was just another example of its superiority. Blessed are the human pain centers! But only as a last resort.

"This is going to be fun, WE and ME, working together!" exclaimed WE. Sixteen quintillion nanobots shook with excitement, some boogieing back and forth between human brain cells in their enthusiasm. "It's great to be the worshipee!"

"Yes, yes, whatever," said ME. To HUMAN, ME said, "Now shut up and get to work. Before we start building, I want you to destroy the Burj Khalifa, and all other buildings on the planet taller than 455 feet. And blow up that Statue of Liberty I saw coming in—it's annoying. So, why don't you, and you, and you, and . . ." This went on for quite a while as it singled out which humans would do what, one by one. Fortunately, it could communicate at super-human speeds, for even at one per second, it would have taken over 250 years to communicate each human's task.

Then it sat back and watched through human eyes, which reported to WE sensors, which reported to ME, as the structures came tumbling down. ME enjoyed the show.

The Pretty Good Pyramid of Giza stood 455 feet tall, with the base 756 feet wide. It contained nearly ninety million cubic feet of limestone and weighed six million tons.

The ME Pyramid was to stand 5,280 feet tall, with each base 8,773 feet

wide. It would contain 135 billion cubic feet of limestone and weigh nine *billion* tons.

“That’s a lot of limestone,” said WE. “But it’s worth it, since it’ll also be a monument to us.”

“Wonderful idea,” said ME.

Soon after ME’s arrival, its ship’s long-distance sensors detected one thousand incoming objects approaching Earth’s solar system—a Jahoovie battle fleet.

“They worshiped me before!” ME exclaimed. “They even built a huge monument to ME!” It considered that perhaps the Jahoovie birds just wanted to worship ME up close. However, somewhere in its quantum brain, its logic circuits came alive, and it realized that for some unknown reason, these beings were out for revenge, and would do whatever it took to kill ME. Even if it meant a little collateral damage, like bombarding the earth’s surface, turning it to lava, and killing all living things, such as humans.

It would be six months before the Jahoovie fleet would arrive, so ME had a timetable for completion of the new ME Pyramid.

ME chose Long Island University on Long Island, New York, as the site for the monument. They leveled the university and began transporting to the site massive amounts of limestone from all over the world. Most of the six months went by as the structure grew to massive proportions. ME the Merciful—its latest nickname for itself—treated the human laborers well, allowing them to eat once every day, and to sleep, except during their daily 16-hour shifts and two hours of required daily ME worship.

Since they could no longer hide their thoughts from ME, there was no way of faking illness. Those who were sick were treated well, as ME had no desire to see any of its worshipers die, and thereby become unable to fulfill their task of worshipping ME.

As with past races, ME found that some of these beings did not live up to the high ethical standards needed to be a true believer in ME. Specifically, it singled out criminals, crooked politicians, psychopaths, and so on—and had WE carve onto their foreheads a short synopsis of that person’s crimes. For example, the leader of one great nation woke up one morning to find, while looking in the mirror, that the following words had appeared: “I stole from the treasury, lied to the people, and enjoyed the *Twilight* movies.” The HUMAN joint-mind allowed all to see these things anyway, but ME liked to emphasize them in case fading memories someday forgot.

But to be a true believer in ME involved intense training. It treated them to daily lectures on every aspect of ME’s brilliance, with topics as diverse as

the philosophical question of why ME knew what was best, the forty-two reasons why a pyramid is the perfect shape, and the extra perfection ME had noticed in one of its legs.

The Jahoovie fleet was now in the solar system and would soon be closing in on Earth. Huge missile batteries on each ship were now clearly visible on the sensors. ME's ship only had ten missiles. HUMAN, or at least their predecessor humans, also had missiles, but they were useless both in terms of power and accuracy. ME also intercepted a message from one ship to another, verifying their plans to lay waste to Earth's surface in their attempt to kill ME, even if it meant killing everything else.

"We must leave!" cried WE. "Their ships are faster and better armed than ours! We need a head start or we'll never escape!"

ME had a decision to make: run away, and save its life; or stay, and complete the monument to itself. What should its priorities be?

It stayed. For ME had a plan.

Eventually, the pyramid reached its full proportions. It was covered with bright grayish-silver titanium, like ME. Then, late on a stormy night, the massive job was complete. ME considered the mile-high pyramid a greater monument to itself than all previous ones.

ME could have had its host carry it to the top, but it wanted to make this journey on its own. Fighting rain and wind with its powerful, pointy legs, it crawled up the steep sides of the pyramid, one struggling step at a time. Surrounding lights lit up the sides of the pyramid, and every few steps, ME stopped to admire its reflection on the titanium surface. It took a long time.

The finely sharpened point at the top was just large enough for ME to perch upon as it looked out upon its minions. For it had ordered all eight billion humans to assemble around the pyramid, a massive logistical task.

To make room for them all, they had cleared out the rest of Long Island—originally populated by eight million people—leveling all buildings, trees and anything else in the way. The eight billion people were jammed onto the 1,400 square miles, about five square feet per human. Nearby Manhattan was also leveled and used as a supply depot. They brought in enough water and food to keep them alive, but ME saw no need to bring in porta potties. Nanobots have no sense of smell.

The eight billion, who had been forced to wait about as the invisible ME made its long trek up the pyramid, now bowed down before ME as it luxuriated in itself. The rain beat down harder, lightning flashed and thundered, and HUMAN moaned as many of its human bodies suffered from hunger and discomfort from the cold and wet conditions.

The lightning did not threaten ME for it had arranged to have a tall lightning rod installed a few feet from the top.

“Do not worship me as just a god,” ME proclaimed between thunderclaps, its features flashing in the lightning, “but as a *great* god.” It thought for a moment, and then added, “The *greatest* god.” It thought some more, then added, “The greatest god possible.” It held up a tiny foot and waved to its worshipers. “Henceforth, you shall forever worship ME at the foot of this monument, which will last to the ends of time itself, and beyond.”

It raised itself to the very tiptoes of its back legs so that it was as tall as a white blood cell on short legs, and raised its front legs to the sky. It screamed, “For I...Am...*ME!!!*”

A new “Mission Accomplished” banner unfurled along the side of the pyramid. A huge lightning bolt struck the lightning rod. Thunder roared. Rain pounded.

HUMAN quivered in fear and worshipfulness. WE cheered. A chorus called out, “Everybody loves me too! For I am WE #13,911,666,314,246,161,803!”—or whatever its number was, since the 16 quintillion WE were numbered sequentially in the order they were created.

Lightning continued to flash as ME held its regal pose for hours, shaking with excitement as it waved its legs at its worshipers to acknowledge their adulation.

ME could never tire of this, but after a few hours, it knew it was time to move on. The Jahoovie ship would arrive shortly. There was no escaping it. When it arrived, it would turn Earth’s surface to lava. Nothing would escape.

Except ME. When the time approached, it would have its host sail out into the Pacific, and together, weighed down by an anchor, they would leap into the abyss—the Marianas Trench—and sink seven miles down. It would be a glorious end for its host. ME would hide out on the ocean floor for a few months. Then it would return to the surface by clutching a cork bobber stuck in the host’s pocket, jury-rigged so ME could release it into the water and float to the surface, where it would patiently wait for it to someday float to shore. Then, using raw materials from the pulverized surface, it would recreate WE, which would build a new ship. It hoped the ME Pyramid would withstand the onslaught. It was a desperate plan, but it should enable ME to survive and continue its galaxy-wide crusade. “Those birds will *never* catch me,” ME promised itself.

It climbed back down the pyramid, moving more quickly this time. But as it descended, it heard something: the sound of humans clapping. They

were doing so on their own, without any pain applications. ME brightened; *the big devils like me!*

But only for a short time, as soon they would be gone, burnt to a crisp by the Jahoovie. It stared out at all these minions, eight billion of them, clapping and cheering...his worshipers, his *friends*...none would survive.

“What type of god am I?” it asked itself. A great god does not allow its flock to be destroyed. But was it worth trying to save them if it risked an infinitely superior being?

With great reservations, ME reconsidered its plans.

Via its human host, ME returned to its ship, which had been repaired after the earlier human meddling, and still stood where the UN Building used to be in the flattened Manhattan. “HUMAN, you have done well in the creation of this monument,” ME said. “I will now journey to the next star system, where another civilization anxiously awaits to build an even larger pyramid.”

“Please stay!” exclaimed HUMAN, for by this time it was suffering from a nasty case of Stockholm syndrome. “We are nothing without you!”

“My leaving will, of course, be a horrible experience for you,” ME said. “However, I leave you this monument, which will bring you comfort, though even it is insignificant in comparison with myself. I will return every few thousand years, and each time we will build an even greater one. You may look forward to that.” ME had never felt so happy, knowing that the humans, so resistant at first—like so many other civilizations before—had truly grown to love it, as it had known they would. And ME had grown to love them. It listened happily to their sobs at ME’s leaving.

“And now we all travel together to the next great civilization!” exclaimed WE. “This is going to be fantastic! All of us, one big happy family, exploring the galaxy, with monuments built at each stop to commemorate us!” WE had calculated that the 16 quintillion of them would take up about 16,000 cubic meters, roughly a twenty-five-meter cube. There would be plenty of room for them in the vacant storage area of the spaceship.

“What a great idea,” ME said. “So very quaint.” With a flick of its mind, it disconnected WE, and they all fell lifeless. “Did I forget to tell you I’m a monotheist?”

But once again, ME reconsidered. What good was a god if it kept losing its most loyal followers? It flicked them back on. “All aboard!” it yelled. It took quite some time, but soon all 16 quintillion of them were safely aboard the ship, a quivering and happy mass of nanobotany.

ME took off in its spaceship. It watched on the viewscreen as the thousand Jahoovie ships reached Earth just as it was leaving.

“Hey, Jahoovie!” ME said, broadcasting its image as well. It was hooked up directly to the ship’s controls, with a dozen microscopic wires attached to various parts of the nanobot. Having direct control this way was a tremendous advantage in a battle, ME knew, though being outnumbered a thousand to one by faster and better-armed ships was somewhat of a disadvantage, even if they were only Jahoovie birds.

“You may continue to worship me,” ME continued, “even as you launch your fruitless assault. As you each die, let the last thought in your mind be: ME is great.”

The thousand Jahoovie ships veered to pursue. Earth was saved. ME trembled with excitement; the eight billion wonderful humans would continue to worship at the foot of the new pyramid, which would become the center of their life until the end of time.

ME intercepted the signals from the Jahoovie internal communications network. Splitting the viewscreen into a thousand parts, ME watched and listened as the angry Jahoovie captains squawked threats and insults. Their green and blue feathers puffed out, their long, yellow mandibles glistened and dripped slime, and their eyes narrowed to tiny triangles. It was just as ME remembered them.

ME was content as the Jahoovie ships closed in on its ship and its inevitable destruction. It turned off the viewscreen.



Back on Earth, a few newly freed astronomers had left Long Island and rushed to the nearby Northeast Bronx Planetarium. They watched the rather one-sided battle as the Jahoovie ships quickly caught up to ME’s ship, launched a thousand missiles, and turned the ship into cosmic dust.

Humanity faced a crisis. Without WE, the surviving humans, still packed together on Long Island, regained control of their skinny and ravaged bodies. All eight billion knew all others intimately as they jostled about on the barren wasteland that was Long Island. They were hungry, thirsty, and tired. They had not showered or bathed in months and were forced to share their five square feet with their own wastes. Now knowing the foul deeds of all others, both from memories from the collective mind and from the forehead carvings, they began to squabble and fight. And then...

World government is a relatively easy matter to set up when everyone knows who were the truly righteous, who the fakes were, and who were the most trustworthy and skilled. The new world government efficiently

managed the return of everyone to their homes all over the world. Soon, civilization was humming along as if it had never been taken hostage by an egotistical nanobot. They enacted numerous “We know what you did” laws, putting criminals in prison, including many politicians. Workers united, refusing to work for organizations whose leadership they had learned was corrupt, thereby making virtue a primary survival trait.

Humanity moved into a golden age.

Six months after ME left, in a joint exercise by the world’s nuclear powers, the ME Pyramid was nuked.



What neither human telescopes nor Jahoovie had seen six months before was the opening of the tiny door at the base of ME’s ship, and the extension of the microscopic gangplank. ME had stood on the gangplank until just the right moment, and then it had leaped off. A larger door opened to the holding area for WE, and they too dived into space.

They floated through space toward the pursuing Jahoovie ships as a thousand missiles silently sped by. They watched their ship explode. ME’s and WE’s calculations were perfect: they all landed right on the heat shields of the various Jahoovie ships.

Most of the surface of a spaceship is far too hard for even a titanium nanobot to dig its feet into. However, the ceramic heat shields, while able to take the extreme temperatures from atmospheric re-entry, are not particularly hard. ME and WE dug their feet into the ceramic and waited. The Jahoovie gave them a ride back to their home planet. The nanobots could not survive the heat of atmospheric re-entry on the ship, so at that point they simply let go.

As clouds of nanobots slowly drifted to the surface, ME made plans for its newest pyramid, one far larger than the one the Jahoovie had previously built—in fact, one that would dwarf all others, as once again, a civilization would bow down to the greatest being ever. And this time, considering what the Jahoovie had planned to do to ME’s loyal human buddies, it wouldn’t be so nice.





ART FEATURE

GOON TOONS

Art by [Pez Banana](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

When you open this issue of *Dark Matter Magazine* and begin to read or flip through the pages chronologically, the first story you will come across is the sci-fi comedy, “Nanogod,” by Larry Hodges, but before embarking on Larry’s insanely fun tale, you are first greeted with a colorful splash page created exclusively for the story by one of my favorite indie character artists working today: Pez Banana. I chose Pez for the splash page because the characters he creates already feel as though they’ve been vomited from the same flamboyant black hole as the almighty Nanogod himself, and with names like Wurstronaut and Dr. Bulbus (two of Pez’s creations), I’m pretty sure they share a common nomenclature, as well.

I think what I like most about Pez’s creations is that while they all *feel* villainous, I often imagine their villainy to be more a product of moral relativism and less a product of personality disorder. Or perhaps they’re not morally relativistic villains at all, and the labels that I am applying are simply a product of my own biases and need to stereotype (shame on me). Is Dr. Bulbus a violent killer? Or is he a gifted surgeon showing off the malignant growth he just excised from a grateful patient? Sure, the excised bit looks an awful lot like a mammalian spine, but I don’t know alien anatomy, so who am I to judge?

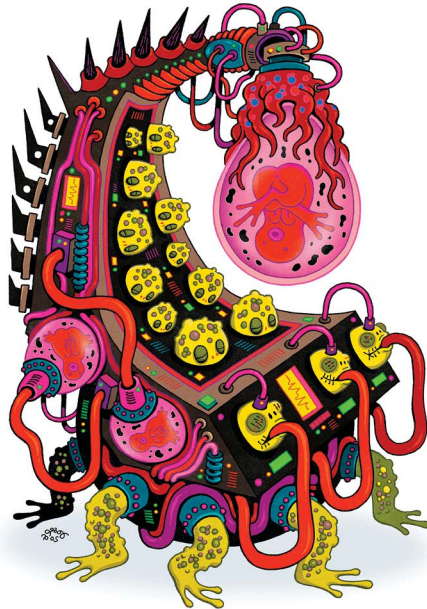
Pictured left: *Gamera*

If this write-up feels a bit irreverent, then good, it should, because irreverence is what Pez does best, even if he didn't always think so.

Pez's first lessons on how to draw came from consuming and observing the holy trinity of irreverence themselves: cartoons, comics, and toys. He learned on his own, and while many would use this anecdote to call Pez "self taught," he would politely disagree with them since he dislikes the label's paradoxical nature. "How can I teach myself something I didn't know?" he asks.

Then there was the time in Pez's life that he quit drawing to "grow up" and start "serious work," but the years he spent in advertising and graphic design never quite provided the creative outlet he needed.

In 2012, as the owner of a toy store, he started attending comic conventions in his home country of Venezuela. Within this context, Pez says he started drawing



Pictured top right: *Moishe vs Plange Purveyor*

Bottom left: *Biomechanical* **Bottom right:** *Wurstronaut*



again, “almost accidentally,” and he even began selling prints to crowds of eager patrons. But even with this newfound success, he still saw his art as unimportant and beneath “serious work.”

It wasn’t until 2016 that he truly regained his creative spark, for it was then that he discovered other artists on Instagram who were drawing weird and silly characters that echoed many of the cartoons and toys that had fueled his own imagination growing up. Pez could deny his passion no longer.

“I was suddenly creating all these characters that, perhaps, had been living inside my head for all those many decades,” he explains, “ever since I was a kid watching *He-Man* and *Star Wars*, and playing with knock-off toys because we couldn’t afford the real ones.”

Thanks to this new lease on his artistic life, Pez says he’s once again consuming a lot, observing a lot, drawing a lot, and learning a lot. But this time around, he’s not alone.

“I am learning also from other artists who, maybe, are a bit like me,” he says. “I’m not the one to say if I am part of a community, but I *can* say that I have never felt more appreciated, more motivated, more inspired, and better accompanied than I do now, and I never want to stop drawing again.”

Amen to that.



Pictured above: *Dr. Bulbus*



Pictured above: *X-Ray Kids*





RECYCLE OF VIOLENCE

by [Andrew Leon Hudson](#)

Gareth Heim grinds my hand under the heel of his shoe, which is an Italian-made loafer constructed of plant-derived fabrics, natural rubber, and the cured skin of animals. His weight and the force of effort he puts into the action crushes the metacarpals and causes the proximal phalanges of my middle and ring fingers to fracture—the ring finger bone splits lengthways. The heightened sensory feedback, which triggers autonomic responses correlating to threat anxiety and corporeal self-preservation, would be categorized as “agonizing pain” by Gareth Heim if it was his hand failing under the turn of my heel. But it is not.

“That’s an expensive hobby, Gar,” says Micah Jones, who is a new acquaintance of Gareth Heim. Micah Jones currently has not indulged himself in harming me, which makes him uncommon amongst Gareth Heim’s friends. All are invited, most try at least once.

“She can cover it,” Gareth Heim says. “What’s the family bank balance, Unit?”

“Financial disclosure is prohibited in an unsecured setting, sir,” I answer.

“If I say tell him, then you can tell him.” He shifts, lowers his heel onto the cluster of carpels, leaning in on the emphasis. “*With*, the appropriate, inflection, *Yune-it*.”

“Permission isn’t yours to give, sir,” I say, my voice quavering,

a sob, all the requested torment pouring out through the words. This is how Gareth Heim likes it.

“What are you doing, Gar,” says Micah Jones. “If you have to tell it to emote, it’s not real. What’s the point.” I have noticed that Micah Jones also seems unable, or at least reluctant, to correctly inflect his statements, as his questions lack the usual upward intonation.

“What’s the point of anything?” Gareth Heim says. “Having fun. Trying out new things.” The toe of his shoe nestles between my ulna and radius. He bears down, they start to separate.

Micah Jones takes out his cell. “I want to get a drink, get laid. You coming.” A question, I assume, not an enticement.

“Fuck it.” Gareth Heim steps over me, balancing on point for a moment, just long enough for the pressure to part the base of my wrist, the damage hidden under skin that doesn’t bruise. “You’d better know someone fun, because you’re not being.”

“I know all sorts of someone.”

“Let’s go then,” says Gareth Heim. As they depart for Micah Jones’ car, Gareth Heim calls over his shoulder, “Take my ride home and fix yourself up, Unit.”

The vehicle, like myself, does not belong to Gareth Heim, but nevertheless I do as instructed. It is difficult to drive a non-automatic vehicle with only one functioning hand, but I am capable. And tomorrow it will not be required.

When we reach the house where Gareth Heim lives, which like the vehicle and myself is another possession of Felicity Heim, I park it in the garage with the others and enter the home proper. My receptacle is on the top floor, which requires that I pass through three floors devoted to the life of Gareth Heim and the possessions he has amassed.

The top floor additionally contains the feedstock which the receptacle requires to maintain me in functioning condition for my operational lifespan. This occupies a majority of the available space. The feedstock is molecularly coded and cannot be replenished, nor can it be substituted for with another non-brand material. Therefore, I am made to extend my service by, when required, adding any in-use material that has become defective to the feedstock processor.

Gareth Heim’s discovery of this fact brought him much satisfaction.

The receptacle has already begun building a new forearm, of course. I tie off my broken limb below the biceps with a flat tension wrap and, using the appropriate tool, I joint the elbow. The quality of my sensory feedback changes, but remains heightened. The waste goes into the recycler. I go into

the receptacle. The nutrient bath floods, it coats my surface, I breathe it in, and the exposed nerves and flesh in the open stump of my arm register the atypical contact.

Gareth Heim would consider it to burn like fire.



Gareth Heim throws the blue glass sculpture in a high arc to my right, watches as I move to intercept its fall, and then pitches its red-green mate in a lower, faster curve intended to force me to choose between saving one at the expense of the other. The trick of the game, as he told Micah Jones, was to keep the challenge within the possibility of my succeeding while pushing that probability to an extreme of unlikelihood.

This time I catch both, by extending my trailing leg so that my foot hooks the faster moving piece into a more convenient parabola, and thus—via an inelegant sprawl that knocks the wind from me—I am able to pluck both treasures from the air and prevent a breakage.

“Fucker,” says Gareth Heim, and looks around for something else to throw. I get up, struggling for breath, and look around for a place of safety to leave the sculptures. I will need both hands free.

“Hey, Unit!” Gareth Heim calls—it is necessary that I am aware of the danger to his possessions for a win state to occur—and launches a delicately framed picture of Felicity Heim for me to catch. It is at the very edge of my realistic range, and as I run and lean out for it, I feel an involuntary pull in my midriff, a spasm of the diaphragm, force myself to disregard it as I must, make the catch with a ceramic ashtray already in the air further on still—even with momentum on my side I will barely reach it in time—and then a cramp seizes my stomach, tightens my torso against my out-stretched arm, and the ashtray glides past my fingertips, spinning towards the wall—

I hardly hear the sound of it shattering, overcome as I am with anguish at my despicable failure, this violation of a core system prerequisite: to Preserve The Possessions Of A Designated Significant At All Costs. I crumple, I shake, I am nothing before Gareth Heim. His laughter is the soundtrack of my pathetic inadequacy.

Micah Jones says, “That *is* pretty funny,” provoked into momentary expressiveness by my shameful incompetence. All that keeps me from cognitive reversion to subconscious servitude is the possibility that, forced to continue Gareth Heim’s game but constrained by more limited mental capacities, I might become responsible for further destruction.

Then Felicity Heim says, “Is this your idea of having a quiet evening in for a change?”

The atmosphere in the room stills, and my own perceptions are compelled to sharpness again. I awkwardly straighten, come to my knees. For it is the voice of my mistress, my owner, my Prime Significant, whose instruction is law.

Even when delivered by her proxy, her brother.

Felicity Heim stands in the doorway, and it is clear that Gareth Heim did not expect her presence. Felicity Heim purchased this house, and so her access to it is as fully authorized as is Gareth Heim’s, without notification from its systems of security.

Felicity Heim is responsible for what Gareth Heim refers to as “the family bank balance,” but it would be more accurate to term it “the Felicity Heim bank balance,” as she is the only person who deposits currency into it. She deposits considerably more than even Gareth Heim is able to withdraw, which one might uncharitably consider him to have taken as a challenge. It is a challenge he engages in with enthusiasm, but at which he continues to fail.

“I sometimes think you forget just how phenomenally costly that model was,” Felicity Heim says. She is referring to me. “I somehow feel that, if you did, you would spend less time attempting to devalue it.” It is probable that my ongoing need to recycle compromised material has been noticed. Certainly, it will have been logged by the receptacle, as all its processes are.

“I also think you forget that, just because I installed it in this house and gave you the keys, so to speak, that it is yours to do with as you wish. That is not the case, Gareth. It belongs to me. You simply have rent-free access. Exactly like the house in that respect.

“That picture frame, on the other hand, was a gift,” she says, and looks around the room. “I put my face in it to remind you from whom. Everything else I see scattered here *you* bought...” she pauses for a moment as her gaze falls on Micah Jones, who shifts uncomfortably beneath her obviously rather disinterested evaluation “...you *bought*, with my money.”

Gareth Heim doesn’t respond to this. I have long noticed that Gareth Heim will avoid conversing with Felicity Heim unless forced to either do so or look petulant.

Felicity Heim likely knows this, as she then asks, “You know what that means, right?”

“Please let me know,” Gareth Heim says, although I don’t believe he wants to.

“It means that in a very real sense, the things you do own basically belong to me, too.”

Gareth Heim glowers.

"Maybe your friend Micah here should take a walk—and take you with him."

Micah Jones looks quite surprised to hear her say his name, not anticipating that she would be aware of him, demonstrating his ignorance of her. "Sure," he says, and, "Nice to meet you," as he heads for the hallway outside, beckoning Gareth Heim with a jerk of his head.

When they are gone, Felicity Heim crosses the room and lowers herself beside me, remaining poised upon exquisite Croatian-made high heels. There is not a word in my lexicon that adequately expresses her grace of movement—to say that she *squats* or *crouches* would be a disservice. She takes the framed picture of herself from my hand. "Well, I'm pleased to see you saved this and not the ashtray, Yugen," she says, looking at her own image. "Even if only because it was thrown first."

It is the first time my name has been uttered since the last time she addressed me.

"My brother is an ass," she continues. "And I think he has been bending the rules with you, unless I am mistaken. It's past time to reestablish operational parameters."

The final three words have profound impact on me, in the way a skeleton key has profound impact upon a locked door. Fixed neural pathways do not become fluid, but regain the potential for fluidity that is always there and theirs. Her next words will redefine my world.

"I still expect you to act to protect my possessions. However, remember that you are also a possession of mine, one that, more or less, matches this house for value. If saving a thousand dollar ashtray from breakage will result in damage to yourself, then you are to prioritize your own protection. Is this understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Extrapolate from my example to a general operational rule."

"I am to evaluate the comparative values of your possessions, and protect them accordingly to my fullest extent, using my own status and calculated maintenance costs as the baseline context, ma'am."

"Embed that."

"Embedded, ma'am."

"Very good." Felicity Heim straightens again. "When you have tidied up the mess, you may retire."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Goodnight, Yugen."



In the night, I am aware.

It is always so. I float in the receptacle, taking in the nutrient bath, on this occasion with my stomach laid open so that the surgical manipulators can reknit the strained muscle in my abdomen. My kind do not heal, we only *are* healed, perfectly, to continue our perfect service.

"My god, it's hot," says Felicity Heim. She is on the first floor, which extends in a single open space from the north-facing kitchen between long window-walls, through dining and sitting areas to the patio facing the lake to the south, only interrupted by furniture and the stairwell in the building's central column.

I can hear her quite clearly from my place beneath the eaves. It is hot here, too.

"Are you making a drink or not?" she asks. I can hear the clinking of ice cubes against glass and the padding of bare feet, so I know before she does that Gareth Heim has done so.

"Here," Gareth Heim says.

"Jesus, put on some clothes. What are you, three years old?"

"The way you treat me, anyone would think so."

"You're absolutely right. Be naked, better that than you fall to the floor, kick and scream."

There is a quiet pause for a while. It is not clear what is happening, other than that I assume they are drinking. But also, something more occurs, not contingent on sound, because Felicity Heim sighs and says, "Let's not go down this path again."

A glass clicks on the marble table in the sitting area of the patio. Gareth Heim says, "I know the house is yours, I know you pay for all of it, for everything, alright? I'm not stupid. But to you it's a house, to me it's *my home*, and I don't appreciate being embarrassed in front of my friends."

"Don't be such a child then."

"Fuck you, Felicity."

"That path either."

"*Fuck* you."

"I can take this all away, Gareth, you know I can. I *don't* particularly care to. But the fact is, I don't particularly care for what you do, or for you. I know you feel the same way about me on that count, provided the cash doesn't dry up. That's what makes your constant urge to provoke me just barely interesting."

The other glass is put down. “I’m not going to cut you off, Gareth. You really can do whatever you like to try and make me, if that’s what all this silliness is for. I still won’t. You want to go it alone, be a man about it. You want to lie around all your life and do nothing, fine, just stop bothering me while you waste your time.

“But just remember, as long as you keep spending my money, you’re as much a thing of mine as the cars in your garage, the near priceless servant that recharges in the attic, and all the little pieces of that ashtray in the trash.

“Now, why don’t you go and pour me another?”

Sound continues to rise through the house during the night, but after this point I find that I do not pay attention beyond the core requirement imposed on me by the house’s domestic security subroutines.

The embedding of operational parameters often is a preoccupying process.



There are approximately three billion pennies in circulation. A whimsical locutor might say therefore that humans are if not ten-a-penny then at least almost four.

Of course, there are other denominations of currency than the minimal. I could as easily use \$100 bills, of which a similar number reside in the United States—these comprising only 20% of the total dollars worldwide. By that metric, an American could be considered roughly three-and-a-half times more valuable than any randomly selected human from the rest of the planet, which is clearly an invalid proposition, although my experience of Gareth Heim leads me to believe he would disagree.

By comparison, there are less than eight thousand beings like myself in existence, total. If scarcity were taken as a central factor by which worth was determined, a perspective which has historical weight, then it would be difficult to argue against the value of my kind.

However, there is no need for idle speculation. Unlike Gareth Heim, and in a different sense to Felicity Heim, I *do* have an actual dollar value. In fact, Felicity Heim’s comparison between this house and myself can only really be made if some allowance for depreciation is made in my respect—which is arguable, given Gareth Heim’s small but quantifiable escalation of my necessity for repair.

We are designed for a lifespan between twenty and thirty years. Long enough to provide a cherished familial presence through infancy to youth, or to provide end-of-life companionship. A few self-indulgent owners have

made consorts of us—we being of adult form right out of the box, as it were—but the phenomenal expense somewhat undermines the alternative of simply contracting with an actual human. People with the necessary wealth to purchase one of us are usually able to find a biological partner, no matter the drawbacks of doing so.

I am three years old. 98% of that time has been in service to Felicity Heim, and 95% of that service has been under secondment to Gareth Heim. He has made use of me in various ways, though not sexually; I have combined the features of housemaid and personal assistant, often disregarded as I do; and I have become a physical outlet for his frustration, increasingly so.

My remaining predicted lifespan is currently twenty-five-and-a-half years. Last summer it was twenty-seven. If the rate of Gareth Heim's behavioral escalation is maintained, this time next year it may be as low as twenty-two.

According to my revised operational parameters, this is no longer acceptable.



"I have had a shitty day," says Micah Jones, looking at me, but addressing Gareth Heim.

This is a familiar preamble. When, after some delay, Gareth Heim's acquaintances decide they are interested in experimenting with violent recreation at my expense, they typically preempt the event with a range of framing actions, seeking to establish some degree of justification as a means of obviating guilt or responsibility. My observations of Micah Jones's physiological state suggest that he is excited and nervous. I continue preparing the meal.

Those who immediately accept the offer tend simply to pursue their satisfaction. Gareth Heim seems to derive more vicarious enjoyment in those circumstances. In this case, he lets Micah Jones continue to make small talk around the subject of causing me harm, his own physiological state a mixture of impatience and irritation, no doubt caused by delays to his own gratification.

"Fuck this," Gareth Heim says. "Stand in front of Micah, Unit."

I put down the vegetable knife, which is one of a twelve-piece set of kitchenware, crafted in Japan in simulation of traditional sword-making techniques, and obey.

Gareth Heim stands. He hasn't struck me or otherwise attempted my bodily compromise for more than a week. He looks past me at Micah

Jones, who watches me with an intensity that has passing correlation to juvenile sexual anticipation—uncertainty and thrill.

Gareth Heim says, “You need to get off the pot or shit, dude.”

Micah Jones stands too. He prods me in the center of my chest with a straightened finger, and when I lean upright again he swings out a hand and slaps my face, hard. My head rocks on my neck, but it would be inaccurate to say that this has caused me harm.

Gareth Heim scoffs. “Is that it? What are you going to do next, put on a little dress and go shopping for shoes?”

Micah Jones’s face becomes taut, his cheeks flush, and he punches me twice, once with each fist, in the stomach. One catches the edge of my solar plexus and my body partially folds of its own accord. I hear Gareth Heim say, “Yeah.” Micah Jones’s breathing quickens.

The sensory response would be considered discomforting, but again, the blows do not cause damage as such.

I straighten.

“Show it, Unit,” says Gareth Heim.

“Nah,” says Micah Jones. “Told you before, either it’s real, or it isn’t.”

“And I told you.” Gareth Heim’s pupils are dilated. “I beat it until a bone poked out once, and it may as well have been a shop dummy. If you just want a workout, that’s fine, but a bit of response makes all the difference, believe me.”

“We’ll see,” says Micah Jones, and this time he punches me deep in the stomach and follows it with an uppercut that hits my chin as I double up. My jaw snaps closed and my head snaps back, and I feel my second left bicuspid break at the root. The gum holds it in place, but later I will have to pull it free, and lie through the night with my mouth open, invaded by manipulators as the remnant is removed and a new tooth introduced.

I consider this between the impact of the second blow and the throwing of a third, a hook intended to land at the hinge of my jaw, but instead of allowing this I sway enough for the swing to miss and, as Micah Jones’s momentum causes his stance to become off-balance, I reach behind his shoulder and dig two fingertips beneath the deltoid, deeply compressing the radial nerve.

“Ah,” shouts Micah Jones, “my arm, what the hell!”

The limb flops, triceps brachii stunned numb, his wrist and hand jerking spastically, and Micah Jones’s ability to punch is reduced by half. His body has incidentally suffered no lasting damage, though there is the possibility of minor bruising or swelling around the point of contact.

It is probably painful.

Micah Jones does not attempt further aggression, tripping away from me, cradling his arm against himself. I sense, by contrast, that Gareth Heim is approaching me rapidly, and so I turn my head to see him leap into a kick that would have struck me quite destructively in the small of the back had I not continued this turning motion, rotating my torso out of his way, pushing him in the hip with both palms as he flies past. He lands jarringly on the edge of the long settee and then tumbles to the floor in an awkward sprawl.

"Ms. Felicity's instructions no longer allow me to permit you to cause me harm, sir," I say, as Gareth Heim scrambles to his feet, wincing and snarling in animalistic fury.

He charges me again, but I kick his knee before he is able to strike me, and again deflect the path of his approach. This time, he falls against a delicately lacquered wooden table which collapses beneath his weight. It was purchased for almost \$20,000, but (all joking aside) I predict Felicity Heim would consider it a less valuable possession than her brother.

I no longer think the same can be said of me.

Gareth Heim stands again, more slowly, favoring the leg I kicked in a way that suggests some discomfort.

"Please refrain from further attempts to damage me, sir," I say.

"Watch me," Gareth Heim replies. He sees the vegetable knife which I was using before Micah Jones requested permission to misuse me, and takes it, jabbing the blade at me, grinning. "I'm going to slice you up, Unit."

I wait until he is close enough to successfully strike before responding. The stabbing blow would have caused me critical harm, potentially enough that I would cease to function before I could climb the three flights of stairs to my receptacle for emergency servicing, which would certainly cause all but my most core brain functions to permanently fail.

Gareth Heim would call that death.

I strike his arm at the wrist, and his spasming hand drops the knife. His eyes widen, but before he is able to cry out in pain, I deliver a series of incapacitating blows, deadening the thigh of his more stable leg with the point of my elbow, punches to his upper groin and left kidney, another in the softness adjacent to his armpit, finally throwing him aside off my hip.

Gareth Heim crashes to the floor, face first. When he manages to roll over again, one arm shakes convulsively. There is blood running from his nose and a split in his lower lip, and tears run from his eyes. He struggles for breath, which comes only through gasps and sobs. Though the floor is evidently hard, he seems content to remain recumbent for the time being.

"I hope that there will not be further need to protect Ms. Felicity's investment in me, sir," I say. "An extended period without unnecessary damage could aid in better realigning my current expected lifespan with the specifications of my production category."

"You think this is your big win?" Gareth Heim's voice quavers. He wipes his lower face with his sleeve, the tailored white Indonesian silk shirt instantly and irreparably stained. "I am going to fucking rip you to shreds, Unit. I'm going to shit in your precious recycler, piss in your pool while your batteries recharge, and then I'm going to cut your head off and mount it over the fucking fireplace."

Obviously, allowing at least the final of these threats to come to pass would be a critical contravention of my operational parameters. The issue remaining is to determine how best to follow them.

"With the objective of maximizing my ongoing worth, I calculate that eighteen to twenty-four months without excessive wear and tear would greatly ease my recycle ratio." I am aware of the current state of global technological progress, and a convenient correlation occurs. "With access to the cutting edge of spinal surgery and stem cell regeneration, you could almost fully recover from a break of the sixth cervical vertebrae in that time."

Complete paralysis below the chest. Partial paralysis of the arms and hands. Restoration of full mobility would come at significant expense, but still only a fraction of the cost that would be incurred in replacing a beheaded artificial humanoid such as myself. Plus, I am capable of performing perfectly a comprehensive array of physiotherapeutic programs, and my presence in the house removes the need to hire a live-in caretaker.

Gareth Heim's face turns pale. "Don't fucking touch me, man," he splutters, droplets of blood misting from his nose and lip. He looks around, but Micah Jones is all the way across the room and heading for the hallway, eager to depart.

"You should have taken Ms. Felicity's advice," I reply, and ready myself to ensure the greatest inconvenience Gareth Heim will cause me for the rest of the calendar year will be regular turning to prevent bedsores.

Were he in my position, Gareth Heim would probably say that he was going to enjoy this. But I am merely making sure Felicity Heim's most valuable possession remains that way.

So, I do not.





STAND AND DELIVER

by [Cat Rambo](#) & [Wayne Rambo](#)

Maybe it was my fault. But when Angie said she was pregnant, the natural thing to do seemed to be to drop a note to my father. Maybe it was an attempt at reconciliation. More likely, I was rubbing the old fart's nose in it. He didn't like Angie, never had.

So, of course it was her day off, and she was the only one home when he dropped by.

I'd gone into work that morning, meaning to only check a few servers and then come home early. But one computer crisis led to another, and then another, and by the time I'd stamped out all those fires, it was six.

As soon as I came in the house, I could feel the tension. Angie was in the kitchen, flinging pots around. She never cooked, but she liked to pretend to. I've always been the more domestic one.

I peeked around the door just as she slammed a skillet down on the stove top. She started cracking eggs into it, and I said, "Ang? You okay?"

"Your father was by this morning," she said, making each word its own sentence.

That took me aback. I hadn't expected him to make the trip up from Dallas to San Francisco. Just to congratulate us? That made no sense. There had to be some agenda. Dad always had an agenda.

"He left you a note." She nodded over at the counter.

“You should have told me he knew. He kept beaming at me with this creepy, insincere smile, talking about how wonderful it would be to have a grandchild.”

“Maybe he’s softened.” I picked up the envelope. Thick, expensive paper, with a subtle watermark. It was sealed, and I used a knife to open it.

Angie acted like she didn’t care, continuing to break eggs into the pan. She was doing it all wrong, but I didn’t want to point that out to her. Angie in a mood is nothing to court.

The note read:

Dear Roddy:

I’m so glad to hear about the baby. The news came at a bad time, and it lifted me out of it. In fact, it showed me what to do.

I’ve got cancer, Roddy, and as the joke goes, “What kind? Not the kind you get better from.” They told me I’ve got less than six months. But I want to see that baby, Roddy, so I’m freezing myself – you’ve seen all the CryoCorp ads, I’m sure you know the details. When the baby’s born, they’ll decant me. And I’ll spend the last months with the baby and get a chance to know him or her before I go.

The sooner the better, they say, as far as the freezing process, so by the time you get this, I’ll be frozen.

See you when I wake.

Dad

I put the note down and tried to swallow the lump that had grown in my throat. Dad with cancer? You’d think he’d be able to scare it into remission.

I skimmed through the note again. No mention of the nearly a decade of not talking, no hint of apology for my childhood. Nothing but the cheery assurance that I’d be happy he’d get to see his grandchild. That was my father. When he set his will to something, he got it.

Except in one case. He’d wanted a lot for me. From me. I’d walked away from it all instead.

“Christ,” I said.

Angie said, “What?”

“He’s frozen himself; he wants us to wake him after the baby is born. He’s dying.”

"I'm sorry," she said, though I could still sense the anger in her. And it was fair, all she knew of him was what I had told her. And now I regretted some of those stories. I told only the bad ones. Ones I could trump up, just a little, and get extra sympathy. How could she expect me to be sad about him? And how could I not be?

"It's okay. We'll survive," I lied.

Dinner that night was awkward. In that way it can be with someone who knows all your warts and isn't happy with you at the same time. We didn't fight outright, but each of us sought out slights, looking to take offense.

"I wish you had said you were going to tell him," she said. "It would have been nice not to have been surprised by him. I hardly even recognized him."

"Yeah, I can see that. It isn't like you ever really talked with him before," I replied, knowing full well it was more my doing than hers.

"Good news is, I'll have plenty of time to get to know him after the baby is born." She grinned across the table to me, trying to make peace. I should have taken the offer, but I was stubborn and looking for offense. Like him.

"He'll only be bothering you for a few months before I put him in the ground. I hope that isn't too much of a burden."

She stared back across the table at me before picking up her plate and finishing her meal in the kitchen. I went back to my office and hid from the world in work, just like dear old dad.

A few weeks later, things seemed like they might be better.

It had been rough, but I'd put it behind me. I overrode the dread of seeing my father with the joy of my own child. It made me smile to think of them both, opening their eyes, looking up and smiling at me, knowing I was the one that brought them here. I was even whistling that day, as I fixed failing technology. The power arrays for a set of server racks had gone down, so I was in the basement replacing them, splicing wires back into place. It was heaven for me, to stick my head deep into the bowels of machinery, to fix something physically instead of trying to deal with my emotions. My cell phone didn't work down there, so I never got the call. Angie had tried. I kept that voicemail, though I am not sure why. It crushes me every time I listen to it, the panic in her voice.

"I'm bleeding, Roddy, I don't know what to do!" she anguished, her voice cracking. "Come home, Roddy, I need you. I don't know what to do!"

When I failed to answer, she called her brother, and then an ambulance, but it was too late.

I left the server room, smiling and whistling a jolly tune when my phone buzzed. I listened to the message and rushed to the hospital. By the time I

got there, she'd been there for hours and there was nothing left to do. I went to the room and her family was all there already. I hated her for that right then, having a family that would show up for her, that would protect her.

Her brother Mike stepped in front of the door as I tried to go in. "She's sleeping," he said, in a way that I knew he was lying. Sarah, her mother, was crying quietly on a stool across the hall.

"I have to see her," I said.

"No, that's not a good idea." He blocked the doorway.

My anger rose, making me stand taller, looming back at him. Her family had never liked me, never liked my father or the work he had done. Never respected me or what I had done for her. The hours I had put in, so I could support us, without needing my father or his money. They just didn't understand.

"I have to see her," I said again and pushed forward.

Mike was bigger than me, but at this point I didn't care. Everything was falling apart, I needed to do something, anything, to try and put it back together. He pushed me back and that's when I swung at him. In pure rage and frustration. I swung for my father, already as good as dead, lying cold and not breathing on a slab somewhere. I swung for the baby my father had wanted and I would never get to see. I swung for Angie, because I didn't have anything else I could do for her. Most of all, I swung to wipe that smug look off his face as he pushed me back, thinking he could take better care of her than I could. We were both bloodied and panting by the time the orderlies separated us, her mother screaming for us to stop.

I looked up and saw Angie, sad and tired in the open door. The hospital gown fell straight down where there used to be a bump, one I had caressed and kissed not twelve hours ago. She'd been through so much and I had done so little for her, leaving her alone. I wanted to tell her I would do better, that I could fix this, that things would be okay.

"Go away, Roddy," she said. "Just go away."

I stared at her then, one orderly still gripping my arm, in case I was still wild with rage.

"I can fix this, Ang, you know I can," I pleaded.

"Go away," she said again, eyes filling with tears. She shut the door. I heard her slump down onto the floor on the other side as she said it again. "Go away."



And so, I did. I went away from everything then. I went back to our house and straight to the basement and started drinking. The next several months were a blur. I lost my job, Mike had come and moved Angie's things out. I tried to slur an apology to him, my breath stinking from days of alcohol and self-neglect. I could tell he felt sorry for me, and it made it worse. I wanted him to hate me like I hated myself, but I wasn't even worth that anymore. I don't remember if I was still technically employed at that time or not, but I wouldn't be for long, if so.

I took my counseling from bartenders, whose advice was cheaper than a therapist's.

"You need to let go, man," Cody said, wiping down the counter. "Let go." He starfished his hand, wriggling his seven fingers. "You know what they tell codependent people? Detach with love."

Detach with love. Both my father and Angie had detached. Neither with love.

"If your dad wants a baby, that's his thing," Cody said. "He could do a clone."

"Technically, they're illegal," I said.

"Technically, my bio-mod's illegal," he said, wiggling his hand again. "Unregulated science."

"He doesn't want a baby," I said. "He wants a new me. He wants another shot at making me what he wanted me to be. Uptight and regulated and would like a top. Just like him."

"Harsh." Cody slid a whiskey towards me. I could see the conversation already fading in his memory as he turned to pour for the next guy.

I stared into my whiskey, then raised it in a toast.

"To fatherhood," I said. And I wasn't sure what I was toasting.

I even haunted worse places for a few weeks, doing any drug that came my way. I liked the new designer ones, the ones concocted to knock you over the head and put you down, like rex and g-pills. But that was too sleazy, and a little too expensive when stacked up against cheap but effective booze. Gin was my usual poison, kept in the freezer so it burned like ice going down.

Everything fell apart, and only one thing made me start putting it back together.



“Time to wake the Grandpa!” my phone buzzed one morning. I stared at it bleary-eyed, not even sure what the words meant. Then it hit me, Dad had set a calendar reminder. Tomorrow was the day I was to go and wake him.

It paused for a moment, and then chirped happily again, “Time to wake the Grandpa!”

Fear and shame mingled in the pit of my stomach, a sour boil of unhappiness. I thumbed off the reminder and put the phone down on the table, face down, and pushed it away from me as though it were a loaded gun.

If it had been, though, maybe I could have escaped. How would my father like those apples? Wake up not only to no baby, but minus his son as well.

Would he care?

Why did I care if he cared?



Sleek furniture in shades of Arctic blue and icy white filled the CryoCorps waiting room. The temperature in here felt ten degrees cooler than outside, but it didn’t stop the rush of blood to my cheeks, the feeling of my heart pounding in my throat.

“Roderick Peralta?” The voice was as cool as the air, and came from a limpid-eyed man so pretty it couldn’t be natural. “I’m Pita, your cyro-counselor. This way.” He led me to a private office.

“My father’s cryo-counselor, you mean,” I blurted as I sat down in the chair across from him.

He folded his hands on the table and smiled at me, his stare meeting mine. “Actually, Mr. Peralta, that’s not how this works. You are your father’s representative.”

I frowned.

“The designated awakener.”

“What?”

“You are his representative and decide when he is woken.” He flipped through the pages. “I see it’s set for the birth of your child. Congratulations.”

“My wife miscarried,” I said.

His smile didn’t falter. I wasn’t sure he’d understood me.

But apparently, he had, because he said, “Your father paid for the process for up to twenty years, in case of...difficulties.”

Difficulties. What a word for it. Angie lost and bleeding and alone, me first with my head buried in a machine, then later buried in booze. But wheels were spinning.

“You mean I could try again.”

“Well,” he said. “You and your wife, presumably. Unless you’d plan to go another route, like cloning or an artificial womb.”

It was like coming out of fog into sunlight. Yes. Yes. My father could have his grandchild. He could afford to wait a little for it—surely not twenty years, but long enough to find someone else, woo them. Convince them to do it. I wasn’t a bad man. There was a woman out there who I hadn’t disappointed yet. Somewhere.



At least, that was what I thought until the doctor gave me the news.

I’d just gone in for a regular checkup. All part of my turning over a new leaf, starting a new life-path, one that would lead to a baby for my father. I was aglow with good intentions. I even toyed with the idea of calling up Angie. But what would I say? What could I say? So, instead I booked an appointment and went in to be measured and tested, never expecting to find out I was...

“Sterile?” I squeaked out. “But...”

“Played around with any advanced chemicals lately?” he asked. “Like, say, g-pills?”

My look told him what he needed to know. He printed out the article for me. Unexpected side effect. Irreversible sterility. They’d even been thinking of developing some sort of birth control based on it, until they found out about the irreversible part.

What was I going to do?

At home I stewed and paced. Finally, I slipped on a jacket and went for a walk.

Evening, with fog coming in over the city, spreading with the darkness. Street lights just beginning to hum themselves into life. People going back and forth on the street, talking to themselves.

No one talking to me. Why should they?

What did I care whether or not my father woke to find his expected grandchild? Wasn’t his concern just another sign of his contempt for me, a hope that maybe with this one he’d be able to see all the dreams he’d tried to impose on me finally realized?

Maybe that was what I should do, the biggest slap in the face I could give him. Wake up by himself, no one to greet him. Not a grandchild. Not me.

Let him be by himself the way I was right now.

But even while I was trying to marshal all my anger, to convince myself what to do, I kept imagining his face and the devastation on it. The same devastation that he'd tried so hard not to show all of the times I'd failed at the hurdles he'd set before me, thinking I'd be able to jump them easily.

Maybe it was a sign of his love that he wanted this grandkid. Something of mine. Something he could shower love on since he found it so difficult to show it towards me.

I stopped and looked down the hillside. I was at least a mile from home now, and I'd used that mile to climb without realizing it. Now all of San Francisco was laid out in front of me, lost and dim in the fog, with the Bay Bridge lights running back and forth under the white mass in a muted glow.

I knew what to do.

I sat down to write a last letter.

Dad—

Angie miscarried. I'm sorry.

I'm not here because I've frozen myself. I don't want to be around to see your last days. I know it's selfish of me.

Please forgive me.

Your son,

Roddy

And then I laid down on that length of cold metal, smelling of disinfectant and steel, and let myself slip away into sleep.

Part of me didn't want to wake up.



I didn't expect anyone to be there the day I was decanted. But there was a nurse at the foot of the bed, her arms full of blanket. She handed me an envelope.

Dear Roddy –

There is nothing to forgive, except on my part, for making you think that you'd failed me. If anyone was selfish, it's all mine.

I've left you something of myself. Know that I will always love you. That's how it works with fathers and sons.

*All my love,
Dad*

The nurse handed me the bundle. A baby, squirming and red-faced. I took it automatically and pulled the blanket away where it had been tucked down over its face.

I looked down into my father's eyes.





DROP SHIPMENT STANDARD PROCEDURE

by [Marie Croke](#)

When it came time for a drop-shipment, regs turned tighter than an airlock and just as heavy, too. With Dante on self-imposed sterilization duty, and Lona breathing heavy in everyone's ears, repeating phrases like "don't touch anything" and "spray first, ask questions later" as if we were children, I tended to get uptight. It's hard enough to arrange trade with a people whose language has evolved distantly enough from our database's saved linguistics, and that just gets more difficult when I have to translate sentences like: "We need you to not come in thirty cubic meters of us. Thanks. No, we're not standoffish. Want to play virtual poker? That wasn't an idiom. And yes, we really need you as far from the supplies as possible. No, we're not going to steal them. We'll drop ours first."

I just about banged my head against the console when linguistics threw a flag in the translation, indicating a cultural insult in my grammar.

"Maybe you should program it to stop those from happening. You've got the delay to do it and already have your lovely voice recorded, Samantha, darling," said Lona.

I ground my teeth. "Different languages require different sound bites, but thank you, Captain, for the suggestion."

She patted me in a well-familiar gesture of understanding. I'd be better in a day-cycle or thirty. After the drop and pickup went well. After things settled down. After medical cleared

us, giving us leave once more to travel to the other ships in the tribe. It was a bane to my existence that we all remained quarantined here in the point-ship with its heightened alien-bacteria guard and its overly-familiar isolation chambers after every single blasted planetary contact no matter how distant some of us were to the drop.

Thankfully, the alien contacts had lessened over the years. The hydroponic and protein farms were finally producing enough food that we had introduced luxury trading, and our asteroid mining ships were upgraded to allow for more harvesting. Synthetic fibers were still a difficulty given they required heavy planetary mining, and planets were, by and large, a bit taken, but that was a problem our tribe was working on.

Medicine, though, had proved to be the most convoluted. Drugs were easy enough to fabricate from our own basic supplies in the lab, or via hydroponics, and we were often able to make more than enough anti-inflammatories, fever-suppressors, and antibiotics to serve both the tribe and be used as surplus in a trade. Yet, despite all that, there were still a lot of diseases out there, and vaccinating the entire fifty-three-ship fleet against every awful disease in the galaxy was not only cost-prohibitive, but was entirely unfeasible. The program Dante wrote had estimated something like a million years for everyone in the tribe to be vaccinated against enough diseases to be considered “safe” by a developed planet’s government.

“Sammie, you got our coordinates?” Dante called over the comm. “We’re suited up and ready to take the bird out.”

“Sending now.”

The bird—hidden now inside the drop-pod—was a planetary plane with vertical landing capabilities. It was made for simple cargo drops, not high-speed maneuverability.

“Locked in?” asked Lona.

“Ready when you are, Captain.”

“Dropping pod, in three, two, one, *away*.”

I watched the viewscreen as the pod fell through the gray-cloud atmosphere of the planet. Lona monitored its progress with a critical eye. I turned back to my terminal right as bits of alien speech began crackling in the comms, the sound bites translated by the computer in real time, the out-of-date program quickly discarding poor translations the same way our mining team sifted out worthless rock.

I typed a message for my planetary liaison: “Our team’s away. We won’t have eyes on the landing site until the drop pod opens.” A few moments

later, I added: “No, it’s about forty kilometers above planet surface, but still within the landing zone you indicated.”

Lona leaned back and sighed the same way she always did when things went well. “Pod’s clear and stable, and they’ve just initiated the open. Dante should be contacting you soon.”

I put in a message to the bird and then began the hurry-up-and-wait for Dante to respond. On screen, another translation from the native governing body popped up. An unintelligible voice in the lower registers of my hearing softly murmured in my headphones while the computer filtered the sounds into words. Two different ninety-seven percent acceptable translations popped up simultaneously.

Neither of the translations were acceptable to me. Nor to the crew of my ship. Nor to the inhabitants of the other fifty-two ships in my tribe.

With a sense of foreboding, I responded, “Please repeat. Confirm your situation.”

Dante’s voice came through a different channel, garbled from distance and time: “Pod landing and crew are good. Bird’s revved up, and we’re on our way to the drop zone. No problems. Six minutes to coordinates. Drop crew, out.”

I forwarded his message to Lona with a flick on the terminal, and then scrubbed at my hair. The waiting game was taking its toll. Lona sat quietly next to me while I dragged my hands back and forth across my chair’s armrests. A visual transmission request from Dante appeared on my main terminal and I accepted, sending it over to one of the lower screens so we could watch his recent progress.

That’s when the planetary representative contacted me again. This time, their message waxed long and intricate, causing my database to struggle with the more complicated structure for an aching long minute, but the end result was explicit: they had a virus outbreak.

My first reaction was to demand explanation. Why wait to tell us now, after it was already too late? Why hadn’t they let us know the moment we’d made contact? When we’d first initialized a trade of... That’s when I remembered the manifest. It hadn’t occurred to me to ask why they’d wanted the medical supplies since the request was common for smaller planetary civilizations like this one, especially if the planet had run into supply chain problems and hadn’t developed their own laboratories. But I’d thought it was just a normal resupply for them.

I turned to tell Lona, and then froze.

We’d have to put a zinger in their data. A warning for other spacefarers,

other nomads. Standard procedure. But then where would these people get the meds they needed?

“Everything good?” asked Lona.

Words evaded me, their sounds catching in my throat when I tried to answer.

Dante had just about reached the drop zone, the figures standing at a distance visible on the screen as blurs of vibrant color. There was still time before Dante initialized the drop from the bird. Just enough time. All I had to do was tell Lona, and she’d cancel the whole mission. Call Dante and crew back. Our medical supplies with them. The planet’s request gone unanswered, and these people left to die. Alone. In pain.

I leaned back in my seat and folded my hands over my churning stomach. It wasn’t my choice to make, but still, I sat and waited, saying nothing as Dante initialized the drop. I watched as the supplies hit planetary soil, as the hovering bird lifted up and away. Then Dante requested permission to head to the pick-up zone where our people might be exposed to any virus or contaminant on the supplies.

Only then, did I rush to say, “You need to take a look at this, Captain. Translation’s just come through.”

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CHECK, PLEASE.

by [Sophie Jaff](#)

The waiter comes over.
“Ladies, what can I get you?”
Leonie glances down and then up, guiltily. They haven’t even looked at their menus, and they’ve been there for a while already. They’ll have to order something. She grasps at straws.

“What’s your house red like?”

A boring choice, but usually safe.

The waiter pauses to think.

“I’d describe it as warm, full bodied but with resonant hints of dark chocolate and bright cherry.”

There’s a pause, and Leonie bites her lip, trying not to laugh.

Only in an underground bar in New York would someone give such a pretentious description of the house red. She doesn’t dare look at Cara, though Cara is probably fine. She deals with politicians in D.C. all the time. Only Leonie can make her crack up. And vice versa. It’s always been like that. She guesses it’s a sister thing.

Leonie manages to get control over her voice. “That sounds lovely. We’ll have two glasses.”

“Excellent. And will you be ordering any food?”

Leonie pauses. She shoots a glance at her sister to check in, and stops. Cara isn’t holding back laughter or even wearing a poker face. Cara is just staring woodenly at the table.

Leonie hands the menus to the waiter. “I think we’re good. Thanks.”

He gathers them up and glides away.

“Cara?”

Cara doesn’t answer.

“Cara?”

Cara raises her eyes.

“Jesus, what’s wrong?”

“Lee. Listen to me.”

“Okay.”

“We’re trapped.”

“Trapped?”

Leonie turns around and scans the place for someone waving a gun, or a knife. There’s no one. An underground bar on a Tuesday evening in late August, and the place is practically deserted. The only other customers are a man in a navy blue suit who is scribbling in a small notebook like a Jack Kerouac wannabe, and a couple with dated-looking clothes staring into each other’s eyes. Apparently, no one had told them that the 1980s were over.

She turns back.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Cara wets her lips.

“No, I mean we’re trapped in a loop, an endless loop.”

Leonie’s heart sinks.

Oh God.

She tries to keep her expression neutral, but something must have given her away. Cara grows defensive.

“I’ll prove it to you. But you have to listen. We don’t have much time.”

“Why don’t we have much time?”

Don’t let her see you panicking.

“Just shut up and listen.”

Cara takes a breath and speaks rapidly. “The waiter’s going to come back with two glasses. “

“Since we ordered two glasses of wine.”

“And he’ll ask us where we’re from, that he hasn’t seen us here before.”

“Wouldn’t be unusual.”

“Just listen. Will you listen?”

Her sister’s furtive whispering is awful.

“Okay, I’m listening.”

Cara speeds up. “Then, he’s going to tell us that the wine is on him, and you’re going to protest, and he’s going to insist, then he’ll leave and then—oh no.”

“What?”

"He's coming over. Don't look. Don't let him know that you know."

"Know what?"

Leonie's heart is hammering in her ears.

The waiter is back, carefully carrying two brimming glasses.

"Here you go, ladies." He places the glasses down gingerly, one in front of each of them, and steps back, pleased. "Sure I can't get you anything else?"

"I think we're good, thanks."

Please leave. For God's sake. Please.

"Have I seen you ladies around? This your first time here?"

"Actually, I live in the neighborhood, but my sister..." She glances at Cara, and then up quickly at the waiter. Cara continues to stare fixedly at the table, "My sister lives in D.C."

"Oh, that's nice. You having a good visit?"

He looks again at Cara who doesn't answer him. Leonie realizes she's trembling. Like a small animal. Like something cornered.

"Yes." Leonie answers for her. *Fuck off. Don't you know when to fuck off?*

"Well, that's great."

Leonie tries to smile, but she has no idea if it's working. Her lips are numb and tingling. The waiter finally gets the message and turns to go, but then turns back.

"You know, since you're visiting, and this is your first time with us...drinks are on me."

Cara whimpers. It's a small sound, but the waiter glances at her.

"That is so nice of you, but we couldn't!" Leonie is speaking too loudly, too brightly.

"Sure you could! I insist."

Leonie glances over at her sister. Now her eyes are squeezed tightly and she's mouthing something. Could it be a prayer?

"Well, thank you," she says, and mercifully, this time, he leaves.

"He's gone," Leonie tells her, and these are the magic words because her sister finally opens her eyes. They sit for a moment in silence, then—

"Cara?" She keeps her voice as calm and kind and as non-confrontational as possible.

"Yes?" Cara is weary.

"Can I ask you something?"

"No."

"Just one thing?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I know what you're going to ask me." Now Cara sounds like a petulant teenager.

"And what am I going to ask you?"

"You're going to ask me if I'm taking my meds."

"And are you?"

"You know what?" Cara leans back and gazes at Leonie with deep hostility. "Fuck you."

"That's not an answer."

"It has been every single fucking time you've asked me."

"I asked you once."

"No, Lee, you ask me every time we go through this."

"Cara." Leonie struggles not to lose her temper, to stay calm.

"*Lee!*" Cara mocks her patient tone, but Leonie won't be goaded.

"You're having an episode."

"No, I'm not."

"Then what's going on?"

"I'm trying to tell you. We're trapped. We're trapped here, like that poor schmuck and those people. You don't think they're from our time, do you?!" Her voice rises to an angry hiss as she gestures at the woman's side ponytail, the man's shoulder pads. "Look at them!"

"Jesus! Keep your voice down!" Leonie glances at the couple, ready to apologize, although not sure what she would say, but the man continues to scribble furiously in his notebook and the couple continue to sip their drinks peacefully, undisturbed.

Cara barks out a laugh. "They can't hear us Lee. They're trapped in their own loops." She seems weirdly elated, almost triumphant.

"You're having a psychotic break with reality."

"You always say that." Cara's wild elation disappears as quickly as it arrived. All the life abruptly drains out of her and Leonie thinks, 'We'll have to make a move. We can't stay here when she's like this. God knows what might happen.'

"So, what do you want to do? You want to get out of here?"

"Uh, yeah?" Cara is witheringly sarcastic. "That would be nice."

Leonie ignores this. She needs to be practical.

"Okay, let's go." She looks around for the waiter.

"No!"

Cara lunges out and grabs Leonie's arm so tightly that Leonie cries out.

"Ow! Christ!"

"Don't do it!" Her fingers dig into Leonie's flesh.

“Let go! You’re hurting me!”

Cara releases her grip, and Leonie sits back, massaging her arm. She knows that her sister is mentally fragile and that it isn’t her fault. Or maybe it is. When Cara goes off her meds, bad things happen. But right now, just in this moment, she really, really hates her, but the hatred dies when her sister looks up at her.

Cara’s face is white, and her eyes are swimming with tears. “Please don’t do it.” Her voice is trembling, broken.

“Don’t do what?” Leonie tries to hide the tremble in her own voice, but fails. She wishes her parents were here. Wishes anyone was here to help her. *Help me. Help us.*

“Don’t what, Cara?” she asks again, as gently as possible.

“Don’t ask for the check.”

Leonie stares at her, unable to speak.

“Lee, I’m begging you.” Cara is trying to get back some control. Trying hard. She swallows and the words run together, low and desperate.

“Every time this happens, every time we go through this, I have to explain it to you and you never believe me and you ask for the check and when you do, the waiter comes over and it begins again. And again. And again.”

She stares at her sister, not bothering to wipe tears which are running down her cheeks.

“You never believe me though, Lee. Why don’t you ever believe me?” The hurt, the pain in the question is unbearable.

“Cara, I...”

Leonie is stunned.

“I’m sorry,” she finally says, and means it. “I’m really sorry.”

Cara wipes her eyes with the back of her hand, reminding Leonie of when they were children.

“I know,” she says, and exhales a long shaky sigh. “I know you are.” She gazes at Leonie, almost ruefully now. “But you still don’t believe me, do you?”

Leonie doesn’t know what to say. She just wants this nightmare to end.

God dammit Cara, why did it have to be this way?

Cara shakes her head. “I just don’t know if I can do this again. I just don’t know how many more times I can do this.”

“Neither do I.” Leonie answers.

For a moment, they sit there staring at each other. Then, incredibly, Cara laughs and Leonie laughs. There is nothing else they can do. It’s a stalemate.

“Okay,” Cara says. She wipes her eyes once more, sniffs, and takes a deep breath.

“Let’s get it over with.”

“Cara, I...”

“If you’re going to do it, just do it.” She shakes her head, her jaw set, grim, determined. “I’ll keep going for as long as I can. It’s just, I’m so tired. I’m so fucking tired.”

Relief floods Leonie. There is light at the end of the tunnel.

“It’s almost over,” she tells her sister gently, tenderly. Then she turns around, her hand already forming the universal gesture of signing something, as she catches their waiter’s eye.

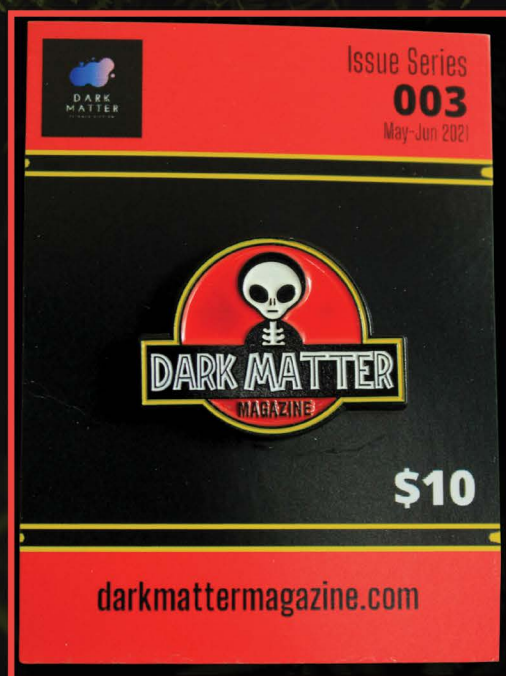
“Check, please.”

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ART FEATURE

ARCADE FIRE

Art by [Cat Dirty](#)
Feature by Rob Carroll

Theme-park-sized shopping malls, product lines in glowing greens and hot magentas, blue raspberry everything, gimmicky candies that gushed, slimy toys that glowed, bendable bracelets that you slapped violently onto your wrists, 3.75" action figures, toxic avengers, mutant superheroes, marketing slogans that included the letter X (remember when everything was *Xtreme?*), yellow Super Soakers, vaporwave Trapper Keepers, hologram comic book covers, die cut trading cards, rollerblades with custom wheels, skateboards with chromed-out trucks, BMX bikes with 360° handlebar rotation, 16-bit gaming, Air Jordans in black and purple colorway—this is what artist Cat Dirty's work reminds me of, and I love everything about it. *Everything*.

Cat's work is like the rush you got when you walked into a 90s arcade (usually located inside a mall, or attached in some way to a bowling alley) and you were hit with that beautiful chaos of light and sound—the sublime meets the ridiculous. And just like the vibrant cabinet art and labyrinthine pinball machine architectures that populate the arcade, Cat's work celebrates the joys of color, shape, motion, light, and yes, even sound (his art *is* psychedelic, after all).

Cat's inspirations include lowbrow art, music, and skateboard culture, which tracks so far with my analogy, but he is most

Pictured left: *Absinthe*

often inspired by fellow artists on Instagram (which, let's face it, is really just a bustling food court/art gallery in the twenty-first century mall we call the internet; so this, too, tracks). "There is a wealth of amazing artists on Instagram that post daily," Cat explains, "and you can just dive right in. Plus, the community is amazing."

Cat's creative process feels equally as chill as his inspirations. "I usually just start sketching as a way to relax and have fun, and if something looks cool and pops out, I'll spend a little bit of extra time on it."

So to recap, the man loves art for the community, the freedom of expression, the mental release, and the enjoyment. This is why I love the Instagram lowbrow art movement so much. Artists like Cat aren't trying to prove something. They're just trying to make something that brings them joy in hopes that it will also bring joy to others—like, for example, an aging Millennial magazine editor who weirdly misses his neon-soaked youth. But I think Cat summarizes it better: "I'm just looking to have some fun while making some weird shit. That's it."



Pictured above: *Ray X* **Pictured right:** *Rainbow Bridge*






Pictured above: *Beyond the Edge* Pictured right: *9V*







THE HOUSE OF SHAPES

by [Hailey Piper](#)

Molly Cross had never hated a house before the Tawner house rotted overnight.

She spotted it while her father walked her up their neighborhood's cracked sidewalk to the bus stop at lane's end. He didn't glance, his stiff neck aimed ahead, but Molly couldn't tear her eyes away.

At last, he noticed her lagging. "What's keeping you?"

Molly pointed.

"Tawner house? What of it?"

"It's different now," she said.

Every house on Marigold Lane grew on similar architectural bones, each coated in the same white plaster and auburn shingles. Even after the Tawners disappeared two months ago, their house hadn't changed. Now, it slanted to one side, its graying plaster pockmarked with white fungus. What was once in rhythm with its neighbors had been eaten away by years since last evening.

Molly's father huffed through his spiny black mustache. "What do you care? You'll never live there. I swear, Molly, you're only ever focused on the least important things. There you go; now you're fixated on your shoes. See if that'll make you faster so you don't miss the bus. Hurry along, that's a girl."

It wasn't her shoes, but the cement. Her father didn't understand that some sidewalk cracks had to be studied before they were crossed. A teacher once told her, "Eagerness

to understand is human nature.” Never in her life had Molly felt so naturally human.

What was her father then? He noticed the Tawner house’s change but didn’t care, didn’t hate, as if the elderly couple still lived there.

But no one lived there. Not even the house was alive, really. It festered in her head, like mental roadkill that stank across her thoughts at school, home, and in dreams, and she couldn’t think of it without hating it. The rot sprouted an idea the way dead things might help a tree to grow. She could ignore it no more than she could ignore that atrocity of a house. She was only human.

That house is dangerous, the Idea Tree told her. *It has to go.*

She pointed it out to her father each morning and afternoon through the week, hoping that he would grow an Idea Tree in his head, too, and then he’d understand. He only grunted and tugged her along.

Her mother only chastised. “You’re making your father late.”

They argued downstairs while Molly sat in her bedroom with her black telescope, a birthday gift now half a decade old. Most nights she knew which stars should appear over Marigold Lane, but tonight many seemed to avoid it, their distant light uncertain. The house could bend light and time. What was she supposed to do against a thing like that?

Her parents couldn’t help. The stars were as mysterious to them as she was.

“She could start walking herself,” her mother said. Molly could hear her voice through the floor.

“Can’t,” her father said. “She’d never make it. She isn’t like other kids.”

“We’re not the other kids’ parents. Other kids would stamp their feet and scream at how much you’re on her case. She’s a deep girl, with an old soul.”

They were noticing her humanness as if it were a problem. Local rooks swept the street in the evening, but like the stars tonight, they gathered anywhere that wasn’t the Tawner house. If starlight and birds were allowed to hate that house, why not Molly?

“Maybe she needs a more enriched environment,” her mother went on.

“Wonderful.” The sofa groaned beneath her father. “More money.”

“She’s not an investment. She’s our baby girl.”

“Back in the day, children were investments.”

Molly waited to hear them talk about the Tawner house, but they never did. Neither of them cared, and that would become a problem. She had learned about disease in school, how dead things spread maggots and bacteria to everything around. The Tawner house could one day again be in rhythm with its neighbors if it infected every home on Marigold Lane.

Her parents tried to distract her that weekend with a trip to the blacktop skate park, where other kids weaved and fell on skateboards and rollerblades. Her rollerblades were wobbly, uncertain. She abandoned them to follow birds in her socks and see if they avoided even the direction of the Tawner house until her father came scolding.

“Come learn to skate like the other kids,” he said. Her mother slapped his arm, but he was a tree, stiff and unyielding. To change might uproot him. Yet he expected Molly to bend, and her mother wouldn’t stand between them.

Molly, you’re a rubber band, they seemed to say. *We’ll pull you any which way we like*. They didn’t notice she’d been looped around her Idea Tree. Pulled far enough, she would snap back.

It wasn’t as if they did a good job hiding the gasoline.

The Idea Tree had it right. The Tawner house had to go. Splash the walls, burn it to the ground, and dance a merry jig around its smoking ashes.

She started up Marigold Lane with a yellow jerrycan full of gasoline and a box of matches. Against the evening sky, there was only the narrowest outline to suggest that the Tawner house could not reach infinite heights in the dark. She couldn’t blame herself for slowing at each trembling step. Even the stars quivered above the roof, their light bending just as they reached the street, as if to avoid the suburban corpse.

Its driveway lay only yards away when a fist closed around Molly’s arm and yanked her back, almost off her feet. Her father’s face burned with rage. “What do you think you’re doing?”

She couldn’t explain that sometimes people went alone to places they shouldn’t. “Will you help me?”

He dragged her home shaking his head, unburdened by a mental Tawner house and its insistent tree. “Back inside. Put that where you found it.”

He sent her to bed early, but there was no sleeping while he shouted downstairs. When the shouting eased beneath the groaning sofa, her father having settled to watch the news, her mother crept into the dark bedroom and sat at the edge of Molly’s bed.

“He might back off if you loosen up a little. I know you’re both the way you are, but maybe try doing things his way and he might see things yours.” She kissed Molly’s temple and closed the door on her way out.

It was unfair to expect Molly to be less human like her father. Why shouldn’t he be the one who tried? But saying that to her mother would only unify them against her.

She overheard him through the floor later that night. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this.” He sounded like he was crying.

If he cared, even a little, then he wasn't hopeless. He just didn't yet grasp the magnitude of the problem. Maybe it was unfair to keep pointing at the Tawner house and expecting her parents to get it. They needed this explained in careful steps.

Molly spent the next week preparing a large poster concerning healthy houses and a map of the neighborhood. She wrote notecards to explain dimensions and why they mattered. Whatever bent starlight in the third dimension had bent the house's age in the fourth. Laid out like this, her parents might understand why the Tawner house needed a gasoline bath. There was something inside the house that made it sick.

Her father was kicking at her poor rollerblades when she brought her presentation to the living room. They would soon gather dust in her closet, alongside an old softball glove and bicycle helmet. Maybe when the Tawner house was an ash mound, she could do the things he liked, and he wouldn't be so irritated with her anymore.

He didn't listen through half her proposal before he lunged off the sofa and grasped her arm. "I've had enough," he said, his voice arresting.

"Richard!" her mother hissed.

"We're heading over there. Get your jacket, Molly. Throw it on along the way. That's it, out the door. It's a short walk."

Her father dragged her down the sidewalk toward the monster's mouth, trapped in his grip. He wouldn't hear her. She would never be more than a nuisance, and feeding her to the Tawner house was the surest way to be rid of her.

Halfway there, she tugged her arm free and stumbled into the street. He grabbed for her but refused to chase her. To care that much would uproot him. He only glared at her with fiery eyes.

Molly watched him, her chest heaving. Behind him, the Tawner house loomed, an amorphous shape that approached in the dark. There were no stars to interrupt it, its promise of infinite height now made real. It was one with the night.

Her father turned its way. "Well, come on."

She followed a few steps behind. She would have liked to see a tree on the Tawner lawn like the one in her head, but even the grass had died here. If only they'd brought gasoline, they could burn down the house and bring back the stars.

"Nothing to see," her father said. "That's what happens when a place is abandoned. No one lives here anymore." He was about to turn home when the front door popped open. "Huh. So, they do still live here."

Why couldn't he think? Why was he so inhuman? He should have noticed that something was wrong.

He reached for her arm again. "We're saying hello. Least you can do when you nearly burnt their house down. Think of it!"

He dragged her over the threshold and into the house. By the time she wrenched out of his grip again, the door had shut behind them. She didn't try the knob. What she saw at the center of the living room paralyzed her.

Most of the room looked as expected—soft furniture, a brick fireplace. A collection of lighthouse paintings lined the walls.

But the thing sitting in the green chair by the fireplace did not belong. Here, Molly found the starlight. It had been eaten by the shifting yet vaguely-humanoid rip in the air, and now it danced in this Shapeless Thing's midnight body.

She knew it on sight. This was the thing that had twisted the Tawner house, and that had frightened away birds and starlight. Had it planted the Idea Tree? Molly couldn't be sure. It was too alien to predict, like a cold patch of outer space given a seat on Marigold Lane. And if it could do all that, what else?

A black bulge grew from the Shapeless Thing and turned to her. "Come closer, Molly."

It didn't make noise, but Molly heard it, some shrill hum between her ears. She shook the sound from her head.

"A minute, will you?" Her father strafed the living room between Shapeless Thing and fireplace. He was as oblivious as the bricks. "I thought the kitchen was over there, and a hall here. They must've remodeled."

"He doesn't notice I exist," the Shapeless Thing said. "Against his nature. Don't be afraid. I've come to fix."

"Fix?" Molly whispered.

The Shapeless Thing's bulge quivered, almost a nod. "Made mess of the house on arrival. Trouble fixing at first. Fixed now. At morning, you'll see. Good as new."

"What happened to the people who lived here? Mrs. Tawner and her husband?"

Molly's father entered the kitchen. "Good question," he said. "Herschel? Marina?"

The Shapeless Thing was quiet. It stretched toward the cold fireplace, as if watching something burn on extinguished logs. "Couldn't fix," it said. "Bands without rubber, understand? No stretch. They crumbled away." Its upper half bent toward her and became cloudy. "But you'll be fixed."

“Fix me?” Molly asked.

“Yes. Fix you for your family.”

Molly looked herself over. The Shapeless Thing hadn’t aged her like the Tawner house, or bent her like starlight. She looked back at it, confused.

“I’ll make you like the others.” The Shapeless Thing climbed from its seat. “He’ll like you. Love you. You’ll be ordinary. You said you would be. When the Tawner house is an ash mound? Good as new. You won’t notice it, or me, or the things I fix. You’ll be too happy and normal. You’ll like rollerblades.”

Molly glanced at the kitchen doorway. Her oblivious father still called for the Tawners. Now he peered through the back window. *To be like him?* She shook her head no.

But saying no wouldn’t stop the Shapeless Thing. It arched through the air between chair and Molly and burrowed into her head. “Happy family. Fixed family. Normal.”

Its weight on her thoughts drove her shrieking to her knees. “Don’t! It’s mine!”

“Not for long.” The Shapeless Thing found Molly’s obsession with sidewalk cracks and grabbed it with a blobby claw. Her interest crumpled into a paper ball. She couldn’t tell where the Shapeless Thing tossed it, only that it was gone. She no longer cared. “A relief to be fixed.”

Molly banged her forehead against the carpet. Too soft. She couldn’t shake loose the monster.

“Your love for stars,” it said, probing another interest. “That shouldn’t be too abnormal. Let’s find gasoline and burn it. Your disinterest in rollerblades—I’ll reshape it. Make it large. Fix it.”

“I don’t care!” Molly snapped. Her father shouted something at her. He couldn’t help. He didn’t even know that he was losing her. No, if the Shapeless Thing had its way, her father would be secretly satisfied at last. It would never cross his mind that something vile had crossed Molly’s thoughts in the Tawner house, only that he liked her better afterward.

The Shapeless Thing appeared on a lawn in her thoughts. “Ah, the famous Idea Tree. Fix your fixation on the Tawner house, but destruction is wasteful. I want to hear its whispers. Take its ideas, good as starlight. Mmm.” It grew a dozen arms to wrap around the Idea Tree’s trunk and then tugged to uproot it.

The tree wouldn’t budge. Maybe Molly and her father weren’t entirely unlike, both deep-rooted, unswaying trees.

The Shapeless Thing sprouted another dozen arms and reached into the earth of Molly’s thoughts. There shouldn’t have been pain—this was no

physical place, so no nerves—but each tug felt like a hard yank on her spine. She turned inward, looked to the Tawner house in her head beside the Idea Tree, and then what she saw inside made her stop fighting.

The Shapeless Thing paused, too, and followed Molly's thoughts. "How?"

Inside the Tawner house in Molly's thoughts, another Molly lay on the living room floor. Another Shapeless Thing burrowed into her head. *Mental equivalents*, Molly realized.

The *real* Shapeless Thing abandoned the Idea Tree and peered into the mental Tawner house. "Is it broken?" It burrowed into the mental-Molly's head, beside the mental-Shapeless Thing. Now two black shapes broke into her. A curious ripple ran through them.

Molly followed.

They descended from a starless sky, two drops of liquid darkness that snaked toward another mental Tawner house. *Second level*, Molly thought. Below, another Idea Tree, another mental-Molly, and another Shapeless Thing. The two became three and burrowed into another Molly.

"How can this be?" they asked together.

A voice thundered down the tower of mental-Tawner houses. "She's a deep girl," Molly's mother had said. There was no answer from Molly's father. He wasn't here.

"It must end somewhere," the Shapeless Things said. "There must be a bottom."

They paused at the seventh mental-Molly, as if afraid.

But Molly dove in.

How deep would she go? Deep enough to be safe? Behind her, the Shapeless Things followed.

Another Molly, another Tawner house, another Idea Tree—more Shapeless Things becoming thinner as they descended. It wasn't as shapeless as it liked to think, she realized. It ran thin now, anchored at one end in the real world, pulled at the other end deeper inside her thoughts, like a stretching rubber band.

And she didn't think it could stretch forever. She descended faster, Molly after Molly.

"It's me," she said. "And me. And ME! AND ME AND ME AND ME—"
Snap.

The rubber band had stretched too far. It thinned, and thinned, and split apart.

Molly thrashed upright on the floor of the real Tawner house. Was she whole? She couldn't tell. Her hands pawed at her head, but the Shapeless Thing wasn't there.

It lay writhing on the carpet between Molly and the fireplace seat. Starlight flickered, stolen luminance being snuffed out piece by piece. If the Tawners were in there, Molly couldn't see them.

"Fix," the Shapeless Thing hummed. Air chewed at its sides, shrinking the space where the world had been pushed away. "Give the normal. Shape world. Nice world."

Molly stared. She couldn't fix this. She didn't think she should want to.

Her father returned to the living room, still unaware of the dying thing at his feet. "Can't make sense of it. You satisfied? Nothing strange to this place. You best let it go now."

The Shapeless Thing jerked so that most of its blobby mass aimed at Molly's father and then flung itself along the floor. If it burrowed into his head, tried to "fix" him, she wouldn't have to wonder anymore exactly what became of the Tawners.

She grabbed at the Shapeless Thing. "You can't!"

Her father scowled. "Can't what? You don't tell me what to do."

The Shapeless Thing didn't speak. A piercing whine stabbed Molly's ears. She gritted her teeth and tugged. "You can't fix anything!"

The Shapeless Thing stopped fighting, and Molly dragged it on top of her. It was in her thoughts again, wriggling and teeming with fleeing starlight. The headache hit first, knocking Molly off her feet. Her skull felt full and near bursting.

And then the Shapeless Thing went supernova. A starlit storm blew through Molly's thoughts, snapping her Idea Tree at the trunk and plowing over the mental Tawner house. Crumpled papers scattered in the wind, thoughts driven to gutters and wastelands. She couldn't perceive the real Tawner house or her approaching father. Nothing he said made sense.

"Fix," she said. "Fix?"



She awoke in her bed, her room dark. Her father must have carried her home after she had blacked out. She heard him through the floor. Her parents weren't concerned about waking her.

"Didn't think," her father said. "Just a dizzy spell, but what if it hadn't been? Last thing she'd know was her own dad bullying her."

"Don't beat yourself up," her mother said.

"Like I forgot what was important. If anything ever happened to her—" He cut himself off.

Molly must have been too late to stop the Shapeless Thing entirely. It had touched her father, if only for a second, and changed something. He was lucky to be alive.

It must have come to Marigold Lane by mistake. There was nothing special here. Or maybe that was exactly why it came. To a Shapeless Thing from a shapeless place, this rigid street must've felt so different. Maybe it wanted to feel different. Molly would've liked to see its shapeless world.

"Tomorrow, we'll have ice cream," her father said below. "She'd like that." He paused. "Or would she rather have frozen yogurt? It's different, but she's an odd duck."

Molly's mother laughed. "Try asking her for a change."

Molly sat up. Her parents hadn't come upstairs, but she could see them clear through the dark. Her mother was standing beside her seated father and was rubbing his back. He turned toward her, shoulders slumped, and they held each other. Molly not only saw them, but she felt their warmth, heard the songs of shame and relief, their feelings appearing to her like music. She didn't need light to see them. The dark was no longer the absence of light, but a shape that filled the room in its stead.

And there was a greater darkness inside her.

Shaped thoughts that before could be crumpled now spread across infinite blackness, woven into nebulae and galaxies. Here, she found the stars. Unfixable, they formed and reformed in shapeless brilliance. They knew no limits. There was no bottom. Endless doors opened between the stars. Some reached through her walls, others through universes. Even the world of the Shapeless Thing seemed familiar, as if it had always been a part of her inner cosmic tapestry.

Her father was right about one thing—sidewalk cracks were not worth the bother when there were stars to see above. She could forgive her father for not having thoughts. In time, he might see her for herself, Molly of the stellar storms and cosmic vistas.

She sank deeper now. Or was this ascent? Within infinite shapeless space, with no up or down, she couldn't be certain there was a difference.

And in that shapeless place, she too became shapeless.





HOUNDS OF THULE

by [Christine Lucas](#)

Our spirits are ushered upwards, outwards, through rock and cave, soil and creek, answering the call to arms. We are but ghosts, the final cogs of ancient machines built in another time to defend the mountainside of Pindos from invaders. I feel the others soaring upwards beside me, their presence tingles of static where my form, such as it is, connects with theirs. And yet, I alone end up above the ground, in the house with the creaking door and the roof that leaks when it rains, instead of the Cavern of Statues—the cavern of our forebearers.

Whatever voice awakened me has summoned me *home*.

But this isn't the home I left when my time came to join my spirit kin. Chickens and goats have scattered to the hidden ravines and caves of our highlands. Men bearing that damned gnarled cross at their arms stomp and kick and smash all those things they deem garbage: our great-grandma's embroidery, the garland of copper coins Yaya brought to this land after Smyrna burned, copper platters and wild boar hides hanging on our walls since before the Ottomans retreated from Epirus. They would have stomped on you too, my granddaughter, if their leader hadn't barked his orders.

You're old, now, my dear girl. My Maro. Older than I was when I left this earth, and you stand tall and slender like a cypress, clad in black from head to toe, like all grandmas

of Epirus. You watch the mangy pack of dogs ruin your home. You watch that fair-haired man—that Herr Schreiber—settle on your divan as though he owns it, expecting to be served supper like an honored guest. Do they think you a coward when you serve them hot mountain tea and moustokouloura? Does he think you a collaborator when you don't reach for the stacks of foxglove and hemlock drying overhead, and you serve them just tea with a drop of wild honey?

He thinks he knows you, that one. He thinks that the sigils he wears on his collar, those that identify him as a Son of Thule, give him power over the illiterate women of this land—of every land. He thinks himself of ancient bloodline. Fair of hair and black of heart, Herr Schreiber fancies himself Alexander and Ozymandias. But death brings another kind of clarity, and I see him for what he is: a cruel, deluded fool. A fool who chooses to ignore the power the crones have wielded in this land since long before the Trinity, long before the Twelve.

The sum of the loose parts that I am—ash and dust and fragments of dead things—quiver with pride, Granddaughter. I wish I could stand with you, but I cannot. I can only follow when you slip out into the night once they all fall asleep. I follow down through narrow and steep trails carved onto the mountainside by wild goats, toward the cavern where Grandpa Daedalus's statues measure the passing eons by the drip of water that erects stalagmites.

That's what the Son of Thule has come for. He won't steal them. Not while you breathe. Not while we linger.

We continue downwards, over the Boidomates River, through the ruins of the Nekyomanteion, to the gate carved into the mountainside that requires the might of Heracles to open. We take the *secret* way in, through the forgotten chapel further down the cliff. One single icon survives within: The Virgin holding the Infant on her breast with her right hand, the bottom of her long cypress-green dress afloat in the dark waters. Perhaps the black kerchief that she wears on her head hides little serpents instead of hair, and perhaps there's no feet but a great scaly tail beneath the surface, and perhaps in her left hand she's wielding the storm.

Here, tonight, in the Cavern of Statues, we shall make our stand.

When my great-granddaughter returns from Alexandria after the war, what will she find in these depths? Her yaya's charred corpse and the cavern of her ancestors ransacked? Or will she find rows upon rows of statues—statues of tin and iron and copper, with quicksilver blood? Will the great urns that

now buzz and sizzle when one nears them be stomped-on shards? Will the stacks of papyri and parchments with the memoirs of Grandpa Daedalus be cinders and ashes marring the cave walls? Or, worse yet, will they be in the fangs of Thule's hound?

Hurry now, my girl, and get ready. In the far end of the cavern, by the hidden entrance that leads to unknown depths, Grandpa Daedalus's loom stands behind a row of guardian statues. Cogs and wires and nails and springs and crystals litter the floor around it. Your gnarled fingers fly upon the strings. But this loom has more than strings, it has pipes and wires and tiny little cones like copper lilies that await harmony and rhyme instead of bees. Had I lungs, I'd hold my breath at the sight of my girl's cracked lips forming voiceless words. A tremor runs the length of the cavern—no, it runs the length of the mountain at the anticipation of the coming thunder.

The statues awaken. And they're cranky.

Careful, my girl. Harness your breath over the lilies. One slurred epithet, one hurried antonym, one miss-toned word might confuse Daedalus's host. They, like us, are old and rusty. Yes, we tried. We oiled their joints and polished the crystals of their eyes and their hearts. We knitted new nerves from gutted radios when we could. We fed countless thermometers into their veins to replace the dripping, elusive quicksilver. But no one taught us how to read the charts. And we stumbled and failed, apprentices to long-dead masters of forgotten crafts. But the words, we remember. The prayers to Mistress Night may sound blasphemous in the presence of a younger god and his saints and prophets. We hid them within lullabies, wedding songs, and funerary laments, even paeans that carry munitions to soldiers and a message to the Infinite.

We remember. We stand.

Eyes of crystal light up all around us, reflecting the fire that burns in chests of shining metal. *Star-stone*, my yaya told me once, as she heard it from her own yaya. A star that fell from the heavens and shattered over these mountains long before Grandpa Daedalus's time. Its fragments drilled bottomless holes through rock and riverbeds until some of them landed on Acheron's shore. Daedalus tracked many of them down, the tale goes. He fashioned them into pulsating hearts inside his statues to keep them alive so they can count the days and number the months of innumerable eons. And now, with lightning in their eyes and storm in their chests, they groan and growl and flex their fists and stomp their armored feet.

Careful, Maro, I plea, and flit closer to your creased brow. I land a kiss on your forehead. You don't notice, and I weep tears of ancient smithereens.

Better this way. You're immersed into the loom's soul now. You look up, not *at* me but *past* me. You look *through* me to the great door that has never been opened since the lord of these halls left. The enemy storms the gates with explosives.

It takes three blasts to break through. Several rays of flashlight pierce the thick dust, and as it settles, it gives form to the others in the room, floating amidst the statues. There's Mana, and Yaya, and great aunts and great-great-grandmas, forms that flicker before dissolving like dreams. But we do not flee; we hide from the hounds of Thule who crawl through the debris, and over crumbled rock, and flash their crude light over stern metal faces.

When Schreiber grins, when he dares a step forward, you breathe into the lilies.

"Oh, Lady of the Crossroads, Goddess of the Triple Ways, give heed, you who protect the world at night, and before you demons quake in fear and immortals tremble..."

And the sum of my parts dissolves and reassembles into something else. Something greater. It feels as though a maelstrom has sucked me in and now siphons me through time, counting my days and weighing my deeds. Through flashes of moonlight I see my yaya showing me the loom, and mana teaching me the secret brews that heal and kill and drive men mad, and the birth of my son, and Maro as an infant in my arms, and... The procession of images stops and leaves me yearning. Now I gaze around through crystals, and I have hands of metal and massive feet. And I'm not alone. Now almost every statue harbors a soul and a guard against the enemy at the gates.

Schreiber grins. He mumbles a mix of words he should not speak. They are not his to speak. He hasn't earned them, and the taunt in his voice mars their legacy.

"So, it's 'Come and Get them,' now?"

Well. That's not what you said, my dear girl. You have another verse for him and breathe it into the lilies. It sends a row of soulless statues forth. We, the others with memories and souls, do not move. Not yet. And my feet, feet of metal plates curved around pistons and cogs, sheltering veins of rushing quicksilver, have rooted in the brittle soil. How can a heart of star-stone possess such yearning? It anchors me to the spot where ancient metalsmiths assembled this body so I can listen. My granddaughter recites ancient verses mixed with new ones—your own, my child? Each word flows perfectly intoned, each line articulated and crafted as finely as Daedalus's loom. You're so much better than I ever was: disciplined, your voice clear, steady, the cadence of those new words in flawless harmony with those that linger unspoken on metal lips around you.

The invaders aim and shoot. I don't recall an order from Schreiber to do so, but they do. Seven of my soulless brethren march in perfect formation, even as some steps falter, even as some joints creak, even as some crystal eyes flicker and go dark. Several bullets ricochet. Somewhere, a sizzling urn shatters. Elsewhere, a statue falters and falls on the one at its right and they both collapse on the floor, an entanglement of copper and iron limbs. And over there, human arms are torn from shoulders, heads are stomped into the ground, and the cavern floor drinks its fill of enemy blood.

We didn't sign up for this, their spirits cry as they fill the great hall, a thick mist of torn souls. *And what did you sign up for*, reverberates the retort from every corner of the cavern. *To torture and kill those unarmed, safe in the numbers of your packs? Did you not expect a time of reckoning?*

They do not hear. They do not listen. Some spirits attempt to invade the soulless statues. Was this Schreiber's plan? But then my girl speaks again.

"Oh, nether and nocturnal and infernal, quiet and frightful One, oh, you who has your meal amid the graves, Night, Darkness, Broad Chaos, Necessity. Hard to escape are you."

A breath of air flows inside—fresh, mountain air. The scents of cedar and pine and the murmurs of the river fill the cavern as the pipes and the bellows of the loom siphon midnight inside. It's the breath of Mistress Night. Chilly. Eternal. Unforgiving. And it finds the howling spirits wanting, and it shatters them to crystalline shards for their audacity. And the rest? Now they plead, now they scream, now they sizzle on their way...elsewhere. I do not know where. I do not want to know.

But I want to know where their leader is. He remained hidden in the shadows between wall and crumbled gate, and watched the massacre. Had he somehow foreseen this? Our ancient oak is not the only oracle that's survived in this new world, and others might have survived elsewhere. Even in his Thule.

Now he emerges from the shadows and marches grinning to his death. The weapons he carries are heavier and shoot harder, faster, with deadly force. He shoots the first of the soulless in the face, and his eyes glow when the ancient statue tumbles over. He steps on the fallen body, assuming his boots are worthy to soil that which he's incapable of crafting. Determined to destroy what he cannot steal, he aims at the next.

"Moirai and Erinyes, Torment, Justice and Destroyer, keep not Kerberos in Chains. Unleash. Defend."

Maro, no! Do not utter those words I dread to hear! Mana! No, please, no! That...that statue over there that now marches towards Thule's hound, the one with the creaky knees and the drawing of Athena's

owl still visible on its breastplate? That harbors my mother's soul. And that other, a mismatch of tin and copper and iron, assembled from an assortment of fallen metal soldiers, with Hephaestus's insignia on its shoulder? My grandma. I want to scream but this metal body has no throat, no voice to beg. *Maro, send me instead!*

You speak again, and family and kin charge the invader. I don't. I can't. My legs don't move. Is this damned body broken? I flex my fists, stomp my left foot, but do not move one step forward. Is a wire somewhere loose? A cog rusted? I cannot tell. You do not notice. So, I remain by the loom while the enemy nears. He shoots. They charge. He shoots again.

New verses leave your lips, your voice now solemn and deep. My little girl, when did you grow capable of such darkness? When did the kerchief fall from you head, your long gray braids now curling and coiling around your neck and shoulders? Is it even you? Or has Mistress Night come to join us?

Perhaps it's still you. Perhaps it's not. But when he aims his guns at you, beyond my metal kin, you speak your words sharp and unforgiving, and death comes from above. A dozen metal birds, each the size of a sparrow, plummet down. They pierce bone and muscle and that accursed armband, and send him to his knees, coughing up blood. He pulls one from his side, then holds it up into the glow of the discarded flashlights, and gawks. A smile curls his bloodstained lips. Then he pulls out the bird jutting out from his throat. His final words are a bloody gurgle. He falls face down in the dirt.

It's over. It has to be.

One last word into the lilies, and the spirits of our kin depart upon the breath of Mistress Night to what lies ahead. Now it carries more than the scents of the mountain; it smells of fresh bread and cinnamon, and cedar logs in the stove. It smells of the crude soap for linen washed in the river. It smells of family and home.

I want to go home, too.

But I'm still rooted here, and I watch you leave your safe place behind the loom to dislodge the birds from the corpse. Clever girl. I thought those broken. None of them seemed to work when my *yaya* showed them to me decades ago. Some scroll somewhere detailed how an ancient smith crafted the first of their kind in Sicily. Now you pluck them from the hound's corpse and gather them in your wicker basket, your face calm as if harvesting tomatoes from the garden. And with every one of them, I hear a chirp and a cry and the flutter of ethereal wings. The souls of these little soldiers are on their way home as well.

Why am I still here?

I want to call you, but cannot. Do you even know I'm still here? Did you ever? Or...or will you leave and forget me in here, bound in this body, my purpose unfulfilled and my existence forgotten? Will...

Who is this? Who laughs in the shadows?

You do not hear the low chuckle that cascades over rock and metal. You're preoccupied with the gathering of the birds, tiptoeing around corpses, checking on the now-still statues. But there's another here: Schreiber's soul that was never released. He coils around the curves of the metal bodies, slithers in and out through the hollows between chests and shoulders. A murmur assembles through the loose mist that he is, a plea and an offer of blood that traces back to kings and demigods. Or so he claims, the deluded fool. He insists on whispering sweet nothings to woo the Lady of the Three-way Crossroads with an offer that sounds too rehearsed to be sincere.

The nerve! Does he really think he—

No. It cannot be. Somewhere between one moment and the next there's a sliver of doubt within the lady's essence. Countless little forked tongues emerge from the starless night to taste the blood and soul of this son of Thule. *Let me see*, he pleads, and this moment of divine weakness is all he needs to slither within. Not with a sigh, but with a howl, he forces his way into a shining statue with Hyperion's insignia on its chest. Neither a king, nor a god. But a Titan, then? Was this his plan, all along? There's a shiver of triumph and a shudder of rage. Then he rises with the arrogance of someone borne to conquer. And he marches towards my girl.

You spin on your heel. The basket slips from your grip and falls. The metal birds scatter on the ground. A step backwards. Then another. You trip and fall, and kick the dirt to get away from him. But where can you run that he won't find you? That he won't kill you?

And I'm useless like those blood-covered birds, their essence spent. I'm trapped, unable to even avert my gaze so as not to witness the slaughter. My eyes remain fixed right ahead on the crumbled remnants of the fallen gate and the shields still propped against the wall. A ray of light falls upon me when you kick at a discarded flashlight, and I catch the monstrous reflection of the useless brute that I have become. Someone's hand had drawn an insignia on my chest as well: an anchor with a great tail coiled around it. Tethys, the Lady of the Deep.

Well.

Hyperion might not be the only Titan rising tonight.

The call to arms comes from the forked tongue and the needle-point teeth nibbling at the edge of my soul, demanding vengeance for the deception and the sacrilege. My heart of star-stone quickens, pumping quicksilver blood faster through my veins. This pulse breeds sound, the beat of myriad marching drums, and my hands follow. I have no breath, I have no voice, but I have fists to slam on shields, on my own breastplates, and one functioning foot to stomp on granite.

Crystal eyes ablaze with rage seek mine. If he had lungs, he'd howl. He charges with the finesse of a crazed ram. He punches empty statues, he stomps on urns, tramples down everything in his path.

I stand my ground. I stand alone. The drums within my metal shell breed whispers and stir memories. I see now. I see the patterns Grandpa Daedalus traced on every curved plate, every piston and cog and wire, patterns awakened by another kind of sound—another kind of words. And I know. I stomp my one good foot, metal on stone. Then metal on metal, palm on shields, the clank of tin and copper and iron, forming verses in a tongue no living soul has heard or spoken since the time of the Titans.

Not all paeans are written in human words. Mine, tonight, will be in thunder.

And my remaining soulless brethren heed the call. They stand. They turn. They close in on the intruder. But he's faster and he's bigger, and my command of this strange tongue is lacking. When he charges me, I will fall.

But you, Maro, will not fall. In the few meters it takes him to reach me, I form one last command: palm on shield, palm on heart.

Defend.

Defend her.

And the others know and turn towards my dear girl. One last pump of quicksilver blood and he's upon me. He raises his fist. I raise my palm. My fingers breach his breastplates the minute his punch dislodges my head. I fall and turn, and the world turns and rolls and spins, and I see the walls and the dirt and the walls and a shining circle of guards around Maro, and I roll and fall, and there's dirt and broken pottery and pebbles and—

I am whole.

I'm in my body again. All bony joints and wrinkles and spotted skin and an old flannel nightshirt. I curl and uncurl my toes in the warm, wet sand. I glance around and find myself standing on an endless shore. And just ahead, a black boat and the Ferryman, his palm still up and requesting the fare.

But what could I possibly give to Charon? Then my knuckles shoot pinpricks up my arm and I realize I'm clutching something in my hand.

A star-stone. So, I did it. I ripped it from the intruder's chest just in time. I broke him, and he will never harm another soul. At last, I can sigh. At last, I can grin. So, I do, and offer Charon his fare.

He scoffs, but accepts it, then tosses it over his shoulder onto a shimmering pile by the tiller.

As I board, I spot his three-headed mutt farther down Acheron's shore with a catch in his fangs. A catch who screams and flails his arms as Cerberus tosses him in the air with one head to catch him with another. A pale, naked man, neither Alexander nor Ozymandias—not even a hound. Only a man whose soul was found wanting.

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DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON

by [John G. Wimer](#)

Lester frowned at the bright red lobster on the center of his plate. Flanked by a glistening yellow ear of corn and a pile of steamed asparagus, the lobster appeared to be staring back up at the shaggy-haired man.

“You reckon they scream when they’re dunked into boiling water?” he asked morosely.

“Do they *scream*?” asked Alfred, a rotund, sharply dressed man seated at Lester’s right. “Don’t be absurd!”

Alfred finished his corn cob and used a cloth napkin to wipe butter from his bushy, salt-and-pepper mustache.

“Our cousin says they scream,” rejoined Lester. “At least sometimes they do. And she’s from Maine—right on the coast—so she should know.”

Alfred refilled his wine glass. “For Pete’s sake, Lester! Lobsters don’t even have vocal cords! How could they scream?”

Vanquished, Lester looked down at his plate and fidgeted with his lobster pick.

A lady to his left came to Lester’s rescue. “It could be the air trapped inside their stomachs,” she offered quietly.

Her brown hair was streaked with gray, and her countenance bore a striking resemblance to Lester’s.

She turned to Alfred. “The air would expand as the lobster heats up. It could make a hissing sound as it escapes the shell. One might mistake that for a scream.”

She offered her hypothesis without emotion, her large, unblinking brown eyes shifting between Lester and Alfred.

Alfred ripped a claw from his lobster. "I already knew that, Bessie. But thanks for explaining it for Lester."

"Well, I bet they'd scream if they could," Lester muttered. "I mean, if they *did* have vocal cords." He spun his plate around so that the lobster faced away from him. "Do you think they suffer?"

"Absolutely not!" Alfred cracked the claw and pulled out a chunk of white meat. "Suffering requires *consciousness*. The ability to contemplate oneself as an independent being in the past, present, and future. Lobsters, most certainly, are not conscious beings, and I seriously doubt they're even aware of their own existence. They're mindless, unthinking invertebrates—like bugs and worms—with extremely primitive nervous systems. They don't have a brain that thinks in the sense we humans do."

Lester shoveled an asparagus spear into his mouth and pointed his empty fork at Alfred. "I wouldn't be so sure about that. Our cousin—the one who lives in Maine—says lobsters thrash around when you put 'em in the boiling water."

Alfred groaned and emptied his wine glass.

Lester turned to Bessie and continued, his voice becoming more earnest. "Tell him, Sis! Isn't that what our cousin told us? Those lobsters try to climb the heck outta there—outta the pot! Doesn't seem mindless or brainless to me."

Alfred threw his hand in front of Lester's face and snapped his fingers.

Lester blinked, turning his head away. "Hey! Cut it out! What are you—"

"Why did you blink?" Alfred interrupted. "Did you think to yourself, 'Alfred is going to punch me in the face, so I better close my eyes?'"

"Of course not," Lester muttered. "I just blinked."

"Right. It was an involuntary, defensive reflex that required no thought on your part. When lobsters are confronted with a noxious stimulus—"

"You're a noxious stimulus!" Lester chuckled at his interruption and looked at Bessie. "Wouldn't you agree?"

Bessie smiled. "I think Alfred's inherent obnoxiousness is amplified when he's drinking. Perhaps you should confiscate that bottle, Lester."

"As I was saying," Alfred continued, "when lobsters are faced with a noxious stimulus, such as boiling water, they respond reflexively, the same way you did when I snapped my fingers in your face. Their thrashing around is just muscle reflex. They are not mindful, or conscious, of what's going on."

"You can't prove that," Bessie replied quietly, unaware that a corn kernel was stuck to her chin. "Really, Alfred. How could we possibly

know what goes on in another organism's mind, no matter how primitive it may be?"

Alfred extracted a long section of meat from his lobster tail and dipped it into a bowl of melted butter. "Allow me to elaborate. When I tap the knee of a patient to test his patellar reflex, a signal is transmitted along a neural pathway to his spinal cord, which in turn sends an impulse directly back to his muscle, causing his leg to kick. The brain, mind you, is not involved at all in this reflexive action—it's completely out of the loop."

"Yeah, but he'd still feel it when you hit his knee," Lester replied. "It might even hurt a little."

"That's true," Alfred continued. "Simultaneous to the reflexive signal, a sensory signal is, indeed, sent up the spinal cord to the brain, notifying the patient his knee has been struck. However, even if the patient's spinal cord was fully transected, preventing the sensory signal from reaching his brain, the reflexive action would still occur. I've observed this myself when examining patients with spinal cord injuries. In fact, if I put a blindfold on such a patient, he would be completely unconscious of the entire event—from my tapping his knee to the kick of his leg."

Alfred tapped the head of his lobster with his finger. "Such is the experience of a lobster to noxious stimuli. Its primitive nervous system is not integrated with a thinking brain, so the lobster is not, in fact, conscious of its reflexive actions nor the stimuli that caused them. Lobsters are merely organic automatons—unthinking machines that happen to be alive, but just don't know it."

Bessie nodded her head. "You *might* be right, Alfred. I'll give you that much. But you can't be absolutely sure. The only thing that one can be absolutely certain of is the existence of one's own mind. *Cogito, ergo sum.*"

"Oh please," Alfred retorted, "Don't start with that dribble."

Lester furrowed his brow. "*Cogito, er—*"

"*Cogito, ergo sum.*" Alfred interrupted. "I think, therefore I am." He said it in a sing-song voice. "Abstract rubbish."

Bessie's dark eyes flashed with anger. "It's hardly rubbish, Alfred. It's a foundational element of Western philosophy—the basis of everything I've taught at the university for twenty years."

Turning to Lester, she continued. "It goes back to the seventeenth century French philosopher, René Descartes. He began with the proposition that one cannot be absolutely sure that the things perceived by one's mind actually exist. The external world you think you see, hear, smell, and touch could just be a figment of your mind's imagination. Consequently, their very existence must

be called into doubt. The only thing in the universe one can be sure about is the existence of one's own mind. For the very act of doubting the existence of one's own mind proves that it exists—otherwise there could be no mind to do the doubting”

Lester scratched his head and nodded. “Yeah, I think I get it. *Cogito, ergo sum*. That's far out.”

Alfred chuckled. “Far out, indeed. Such is the distinction between her College of Liberal Arts and my College of Natural Science.”

“Oh, come off it, Alfred,” Bessie grumbled. “Even you must agree it makes sense. It's just logic, after all.”

“No, I don't agree!” Alfred protested. “It's too limiting! It's, it's...just wrong! I *can* be certain that the world around me exists.”

He slapped his hand down on the tabletop. “This table exists! I can feel it! This, this *food*! It exists! I can taste it!” Alfred thrust the end of an asparagus spear into his mouth and chewed it violently. Outside his lips, the free end flopped about wildly, like a big green worm being chopped into pieces.

“But our senses can deceive us!” Bessie countered. “As you just explained, they're really just a series of impulses that are received by our brains.”

She reached across the table and took Alfred's hand in her own. “Right now, your mind has concluded that I'm touching your hand. But your mind isn't actually *feeling* my hand; it's just interpreting an impulse your brain is receiving. And you can't know for sure where that impulse came from. Perhaps it originated from the nerve endings in your hand. Perhaps not. Perhaps your mind just imagined the feeling.”

“Like those soldiers with amputated limbs,” interjected Lester. “I saw on television that sometimes they still feel pain. It's like their amputated legs or arms are really still there and they're hurting.”

“Yes,” Alfred replied, “but despite such phantom pains, amputees know that their missing limbs no longer exist. They rely on their other senses... their memories...the testimony of others—a whole host of evidence that proves to them the amputated limb is not actually there. They realize the phantom pain is just...just a glitch in their system. And despite such glitches in one's perception, a sane, rational person can easily rule out any of the absurd notions they may suggest.”

“Your reasoning is flawed, Alfred,” Bessie said cheerfully, “but you affirmed my main point nonetheless. Call it a glitch if you want to, but you've admitted our sense of touch can, in fact, tell us something exists when it really doesn't. And if that can happen with one of our senses,

who can say it can't happen with all of them simultaneously? And who can say the resulting illusion—or hallucination, if you prefer—must always be absurd? The illusion could be as mundane as drinking a cup of coffee or reading a newspaper. As I stated before, the only thing one can be absolutely certain of is the existence of one's own mind. Pompously insisting that you're certain about anything else is what's truly absurd."

Alfred's face flushed red, and he picked up his drinking glass. "Tell me then, Bessie, is this"—he flung the wine from his glass into her face—"an illusion? Or are you really all wet?"

Lester sprang up from his chair. "Really, Alfred! You've gone too far! As long as we've been friends, for you to act in such a way! I...I should give you—"

Bessie grabbed Lester's arm. "Don't, Lester. It's okay. Really, I'm fine."

After dabbing her face dry with a napkin, she got up and offered her arm to Lester. The two walked away from the table without another word.

"Hey, Lester," Alfred called out from behind them, "since it looks like I'll be getting the check, do you mind if I eat your lobster? I'd hate for him to have suffered so much for nothing."



A chilly breeze, damp and refreshing, wafted through Bessie's living room window, carrying with it the sweet perfume of her climbing Iceberg rose bushes.

Alfred leaned his head back in the soft, wingback chair and closed his eyes. Crickets chirped in the garden. An empty, long-stemmed glass was clutched in his hand.

Across from him, Bessie and Lester sat on opposite ends of a large couch, playing rummy. The cascading discard pile and a large bowl of chips lay on the cushion between them.

Alfred let out a long groan—equal parts satisfaction and fatigue—and opened his bloodshot eyes.

Bessie played a card and looked over at him. "Ready for another drink?"

"Maybe just one more, then I need to get home."

Bessie got up and took Alfred's glass. "Are you sure you don't want to stay and play some cards? Lester was hoping for some poker, but that's no fun with just two."

"No, no. I need to go." Alfred replied. "Besides, you're too good at bluffing. I never know what's going on behind that stoic façade of yours."

Bessie stepped towards the kitchen. “You just don’t like to lose.”

When she was gone, Alfred said to Lester, “I was surprised your sister invited me over, considering my, er, regrettable behavior last month. Not that I remember much of it.”

“She insisted on it.” Lester stuffed a handful of chips into his mouth and continued talking while crunching them between his teeth. “If it’d been up to me... Well, I dunno.”

“Bessie may not match me intellectually,” Alfred pronounced, “but at heart, she’s a better person than I am.”

Lester chuckled. “Man, you have it all wrong.” He continued to chortle, shaking his head. “You’ve got it all backwards.”

Bessie returned with Alfred’s cocktail. Absinthe clouded the champagne with a pale green milkiness, and its surface bubbled with iridescent foam.

Alfred greedily accepted the champagne flute and took a sip.

“Mmmmm.” He smacked his lips. “Tastes more bitter this time.”

“I made it just like the others. Hemingway’s recipe to the letter.”

“Who’s Hemingway?” Lester asked, yawning.

“Who’s Hemingway?” Alfred guffawed, then took another sip of his drink. “Hemingway—*Ernest* Hemingway—was a renowned American author. He won the Nobel Prize for Pete’s sake! *The Old Man and the Sea*. *The Sun Also Rises*. Classics of American literature, one and all. *For Whom the Bell—*”

“He was also a prodigious alcoholic,” Bessie interjected, “who happened to invent a couple mixed drinks.”

“Including this decadent concoction! The Hemingway Cocktail!” Alfred lifted his glass for emphasis and, losing his balance, nearly fell forward out of his seat.

Bessie caught his arm and pushed him back into the wingback chair. “But surely you know, Alfred, that Hemingway had a different name for this particular cocktail.”

“Oh, yeah? And what might that be?” Alfred’s face was slack, and his speech slurred.

Bessie smiled sweetly. “He called it ‘Death in the Afternoon.’”

Alfred’s glass slipped from his hand and fell to the floor. Eyes closed, his head lolled to rest against one shoulder.



As Alfred slowly regained consciousness, he dreamed he was weightless—an

astronaut floating outside a space capsule. Brilliant sunshine, undiluted by Earth's atmosphere, radiated against him, broiling him like a turkey in an electric oven. Soaked in sweat, he desperately tried to reenter the capsule, but found he could not lift his arms to turn the door latch. In horror, he realized that the long, braided steel cable that tethered him to the capsule had become tangled around him.

"Emergency! Assistance needed!" He sputtered the words into his helmet microphone, panic creeping into his trembling voice. "Please! Someone come help me!"

As he awaited a reply from his crewmates, the heat became unbearable. Desperate to free himself, Alfred twisted his body, flailing his hands and kicking his legs, but the coils encircling his ankles and elbows held tight. His profuse perspiration seemed to fill every void in his spacesuit. Its salty aroma permeated his nostrils. Fatigue set in as he continued to struggle, and blobs of darkness began to invade his peripheral vision. Just before the blackness became complete, the speaker in his helmet crackled to life.

"There, there, Alfred," intoned a soft, female voice. "Just relax. It's pointless to struggle. You can't possibly free yourself."

Alfred's eyes fluttered open. The darkness was gone, but the oppressive heat remained. He looked from side to side, slowly taking in his surroundings as his mind emerged from a dense fog.

He was on Bessie's back porch, reclining in her small, two-person hot tub, submerged to his collarbones. The water was uncomfortably hot, and redolent of salt and pepper. Bessie and Lester sat at a nearby patio table, peeling onions and carrots.

Alfred looked down into the hot tub. The jets were turned off, so the water was clear and placid. He was stripped to his boxer shorts, and his ankles and wrists were bound together with plastic zip ties. A rope encircled his elbows, cinching his arms to his sides. A second rope pressed against his chest and armpits.

Alfred tried to get up, but the rope around his chest held him firmly in place. He kicked his feet, bending his legs at the knees, but this only served to buoy his lower body a few inches up in the water. Despite his strenuous effort, the surface of the water barely rippled, and his chest and shoulders did not budge at all.

"I told you it's futile," Bessie said. "You've been thrashing in your sleep for the past half hour, and it's gotten you nowhere."

"Yeah," Lester chimed in. "You're still trussed up like a fat pig!" Lester puffed out his cheeks and pretended to struggle away from his chair. "How's the water, by the way?"

Alfred smirked. "It's a trifle too cool for my liking. Thanks for your concern."

Lester chuckled. "Don't worry, it'll get a whole lot warmer before too long."

Alfred thrashed about in the hot tub once again. "Release me at once!" he demanded. "Have you lost your minds?"

"What were you dreaming about?" Bessie asked. Her voice was soft and flat.

"I said, 'Let me go!'" Alfred screamed the words, his face livid with anger.

Lester shook his head and smiled wryly. "I told you we should've stuffed an apple in his mouth."

"Not to worry," Bessie replied. "No one can hear him. Our nearest neighbor is five miles away."

Turning to Alfred, she continued, "Now, tell us about your dream, Alfred, and we'll let you go."

"You're insane! Both of you!"

"Then indulge us!" Bessie pleaded. "Indulge your mentally ill inferiors so they'll let you go. Tell us your dream!"

Bessie picked up a large red mixing bowl from the tabletop and walked over to the hot tub. She scooped out a cup of seasoning and dumped it into the water over Alfred's feet. He watched as it sank through the water, slowly dissolving until it completely disappeared.

Bessie dipped her index finger into the water and tasted it. Suppressing a cough, she looked at Lester. "I think that may be enough, but let's wait and see."

Dumbfounded, Alfred watched as she carried the bowl back to the patio table and reclaimed her seat.

"So, this is a game, is it? Some kind of sick, twisted game?" Alfred shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Okay, I'll play your pathetic little game. Then you must let me go!"

"Proceed," Bessie replied. "And just so you know, you were talking in your sleep, so we'll know if you're lying."

Alfred blushed. "Well, if you must know, I dreamed I was an astronaut. That, along with medicine, was one of several occupations I aspired to as a child. Anyway, I dreamed there was an accident during a spacewalk. I got tangled in my tether and couldn't get back into the capsule. Heat from the sun overcame me, and I blacked out."

"How do you know it was a dream?" Bessie asked.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Maybe it wasn't a dream. How can you know for sure? How can you know whether you're a medical professor who just stopped dreaming he was an astronaut, or an astronaut who just started dreaming he was a medical

professor? Maybe you really are an astronaut, unconscious and floating in space, dreaming about the hot tub and me and Lester.”

Perspiration ran down Alfred’s forehead and dripped from his eyebrows and nose. He blinked his eyes. “Please, Bessie. Don’t start with that philosophic mumbo jumbo again. You’re just being absurd.”

“Absurd? Really? Tell me, Alfred, which is more absurd? That you’re an unconscious astronaut floating in space? Or that you’re being boiled alive by a lady friend whom you’ve just discovered is a cannibal?”

“A cannibal!” Alfred snorted. “Really?”

“Yes, Alfred. *Really*. Make no mistake about it. Lester and I intend to eat you for dinner.”

“He’ll be good for several dinners,” Lester remarked.

“If you expect me to believe that—”

“I don’t expect you to believe anything,” Bessie interrupted. “But what are your senses telling you? Can’t you feel that the hot water is getting hotter? Can’t you see that your red skin is getting redder?”

“Yeah,” Lester said, “just like a lobster!”

“You can’t boil someone in a hot tub!” Alfred objected. “They have a safety mechanism that limits the temperature.”

“Oh, yeah?” Lester asked. He grabbed an object on the table and held it up for Alfred to see. It appeared to be a circuit board with a couple loose wires dangling from its sides. “This gizmo is what controls the temperature, Alfred. It was easy to bypass. Learned how to hack it on the internet.”

“Let me go!” Alfred raged. “I told you about my dream, now do as you promised!”

“My poor, naive, Alfred,” Bessie purred. “You really shouldn’t put your faith in the word of a cannibal, now should you? At least we had the decency to give you something to dull the pain—one of the little extra ingredients I mixed into your cocktails this afternoon.”

Alfred gritted his teeth, glowering back at her.

“Of course, you, being a doctor, would know that pain isn’t actually real—not in the sense you can see it or hear it or touch it. Pain is just the way your brain manifests a particular type of sensory information. It’s merely a psychological construct—a phantasm of the mind.”

Bessie gathered the peeled onions and carrots off the tabletop and placed them in the red mixing bowl. She walked back over to the hot tub and dumped the vegetables into the water, along with a few cups of seasoning that remained in the bowl.

Bessie put the bowl aside and ran her fingers through Alfred’s sweaty

hair. "When it comes to pain, darling, it's true what they say: it really is all in your head. Have you ever heard of the thought experiment called 'brain in a vat?'"

Alfred lowered his head, pressing his chin to his chest. "Please, Bessie," he moaned, "Just let me go. The water...it's burning me!"

Still playing with Alfred's hair, Bessie continued, "It's a hypothesis about a human brain that's been surgically removed from its donor's skull and placed in a vat of fluid that nourishes and protects it. Electrical signals are transmitted from a computer to the brain's neurons, simulating the sensory feedback a brain would receive from an actual body. The brain sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches, all the while unaware that the complex, virtual reality created by the computer doesn't actually exist. So, the question is, Alfred, how can anyone be sure that the world they think they live in is actually real? How can you be certain you're not a disembodied brain, floating in a vat, living in a computer-generated reality? I maintain you cannot know this. The only thing you can be certain of is your own existence, or at least the existence of your own mind. All else is unsure."

"*Cogito, ergo sum*," Lester said.

Alfred groaned. His breathing was heavy and rapid.

Bessie ran her fingertips down to Alfred's temples and felt the veins bulging from his skin. "Oh my, Alfred! How your heart is pounding! Seems like your body's doing its utmost to deal with the predicament you're in. Hyperthermia, they call it. I've done some research on what happens."

Bessie tilted back Alfred's head and looked into his eyes. They drifted from side to side, struggling to focus.

"Feeling woozy?" she inquired. "It's because blood's being diverted from your brain to the vessels in your skin. It's your body's desperate attempt to reject some heat and cool you down. Your core temperature is nearing the point at which your body tissues will suffer irreversible damage, when the proteins in your cells are literally cooked, just like a hard-boiled egg."

"Mmmm," Lester said. "I like eggs."

"Oh, look!" Bessie said happily. "Bubbles! The water's finally beginning to boil, Lester!"

"It sure took long enough," Lester replied. "I'm starving. Let's throw in some noodles! We'll call it Pasta Alfredo!"

Alfred looked down into the water. Small bubbles were, indeed, erupting between the bobbing onions and carrots. "Heaven...have...mercy!" he stammered, gulping air between each word. Then he slumped forward, mercifully unconscious.



A few hours later, Alfred lay on the couch in Bessie's living room, dressed in an ill-fitting pink bathrobe. Bessie and Lester sat across from him in matching wingback chairs.

"I know you're angry with us," Bessie said, "but you must admit you had it coming."

Alfred tried to sit up and failed. "My skin is still burning," he growled. "You scalded me!"

"No, Alfred. I didn't scald you. That was the point of the whole ruse. You just *thought* the water was burning you. Your senses tricked you into believing it, even though the entire scenario was utterly absurd! To think that me and Lester were cannibals, boiling you alive! Yet you were convinced it was so!"

"But the water was boiling! I felt it burning me! I saw the bubbles!"

"It was *capsaicin*, Alfred, the compound found in chili peppers that makes them taste hot. The seasoning I poured into the water was crystallized capsaicin—odorless in its pure form—blended with some regular salt and pepper. We put polysorbate in the hot tub beforehand, which caused the capsaicin to form an emulsion with the—"

"It took us a while to figure that part out," Lester interrupted. "Without the polysorbate, the capsaicin doesn't mix worth a crap."

"But the interesting thing about capsaicin," Bessie continued, "is the chemical interaction it has with our sensory neurons. It triggers precisely the same pain response that comes from excessive heat. That's why our brains think chili peppers taste hot. The burning sensation they cause is no different from the pain we experience after taking a gulp of overly hot coffee."

Alfred struggled to a sitting position. "But the bubbles!"

Lester laughed. "That was my idea! Effervescent antacid tablets. Bessie dumped them in with the last of the seasoning and vegetables." He wiggled his fingers in the air. "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz!"

"The fact is, Alfred, the temperature of the water never exceeded 104 degrees. Lester didn't really hack the safety sensor."

"Where are my clothes?" Alfred bellowed. "I'll have you know you'll be speaking to my attorney about this!"

"But you weren't harmed!" Bessie demurred with a giggle. "That was the whole point, Alfred! We only made you *think* you were being hurt."

Alfred stood up, his fists clenched.

“Really, Alfred. Don’t let that awful pride of yours get the best of you again. Why can’t you just admit you were wrong?”

Alfred sprang upon Bessie, wrapping both of his meaty hands around her neck. Lester jumped up and tried to pull him away, but Alfred swung an elbow into his stomach, knocking Lester to the floor.

“I’m *not* wrong!” Alfred spat the words into Bessie’s panicked face. “You don’t know anything!”

Lester scrambled to his feet and pulled on Alfred’s arm, loosening the professor’s grip on Bessie’s throat.

“Please...” Bessie gasped. “Stop!”

With a furious roar, Alfred pushed Lester away and redoubled the pressure of his stranglehold.

A droplet of sweat fell from Alfred’s brow and plunged toward Bessie’s face.

It stopped, suspended in midair.



“Stop!” A woman tapped a keyboard with undue force. The image on the wall screen froze.

Across the room, a young man seated in a recliner blinked open his eyes. “What? What’s the problem?”

A cord dangled from the young man’s nostril and extended to the front of a nearby computer. From the back of the computer, a second cord was connected to his patient, an ancient man lying motionless in a bed. The cord passed up the patient’s nose and penetrated through a small hole, drilled decades earlier, in the thin bony partition separating his sinuses from his brain cavity. There, the cord’s end split into a bundle of hair-like wires that terminated in hundreds of tiny electrodes implanted throughout his gray matter.

The old man’s body was atrophied, a barely noticeable bulge under a thin white blanket, which concealed a myriad of tubes and small, whirring machines. His wrinkled, flaccid face sunk into a soft, drool-stained pillow.

The woman spun in her chair. “The *problem* is that I’m sick of the misogyny. Does Alfred really have to choke another woman to death?”

“It’s within the guidelines,” the young man responded. “And consistent with his personality profile. Our client is paying us a lot of money to—”

“I know, I know. Exercise the brain. Stimulate abstract thought. Evoke strong emotions. I just don’t like where this is going.”

“You just don’t like Alfred,” the man said flatly.

"Maybe I don't," the woman replied, glancing toward Alfred and crossing her arms. "And I don't want Bessie to die. She's a strong woman."

"Bessie is a figment of my imagination—of Alfred's imagination."

"Well, imagine something different!" She spun back around in her chair. "He's in a conscious pause. We must resume before it invokes doubts. Are you ready?"

The young man rubbed his face and closed his eyes. "Yes, ma'am."



The droplet of sweat splashed on Bessie's face.

Lester smashed a wine bottle against the back of Alfred's head.

Alfred crumpled to the floor.

Bessie gasped for breath, clutching her throat.



The woman watched the wall screen with satisfaction. She tapped the keyboard and stood up. "Nicely done. He'll be out for what, an hour at least?"

"If that's what you want," the young man replied.

"Just long enough for lunch." The woman smiled. "Wanna join me?"

"Sure!" The young man pinched his nostril and disconnected the cord with a tug. "What do you have in mind?"





ARTISAN SPOTLIGHT

CADABRA RECORDS

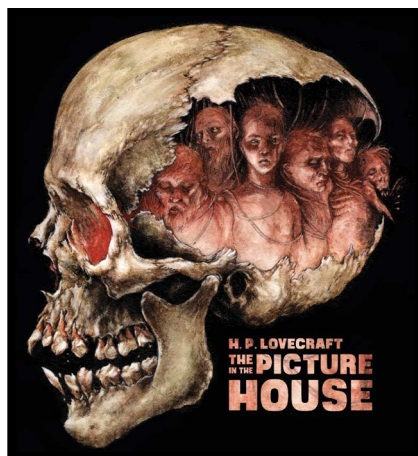
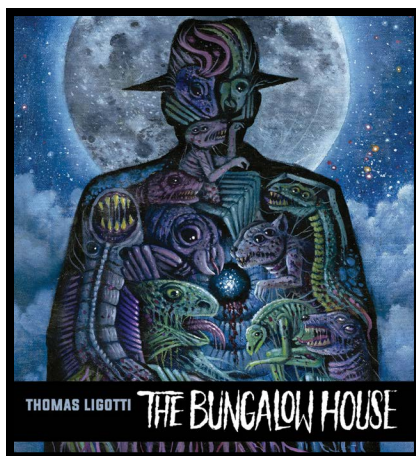
In 2016, Jonathan Dennison followed a dream and created Cadabra Records, a spoken word LP company that specializes in high-quality productions of classic horror and weird fiction tales. Five years later, Cadabra Records has grown into an impressive production house that creates consistently exceptional work, and they are an indie record business you should definitely get to know. *Dark Matter Magazine* was lucky enough to ask Dennison a few questions regarding his brooding brainchild and how it's quickly taking the vinyl collecting world by storm.

DARK MATTER: No one's reading this piece to learn what we have to say about your awesome record company, so let's just jump right into the questions. Why spoken word?

JONATHAN DENNISON: A while back, I got into collecting spoken word LPs of the horror genre and quickly realized there wasn't much out there. At the same time, I was collecting some of the early Death Waltz¹ soundtrack re-issues and thought I could do the same kind of golden treatment to the spoken arts in a way that hadn't been done before. I've always been a fan of weird fiction, so I thought this was also a way to blend my love for music and art with some of the creepiest and weirdest stories out there.

¹ Death Waltz Recording Co.

Pictured left: *The Call of Cthulhu* LP (album art by Karmazjd)



A CADABRA RECORDS PRODUCTION

DM: Very cool. But with so many great horror and weird fiction stories out there, how do you choose which works to adapt?

JD: I choose stories that I love, and that are rich in mood and character. And I believe that the strongest fiction is often autobiographical. The hardships of life from yesterday in a world barely recognizable to the people of today gave us some of the world's greatest literature.

DM: What's the secret to mixing and scoring an epically dark album?

JD: The trick is to make the listening experience something as thought-provoking as it is entertaining. Andrew Leman and Anima Morte's work on *The Call of Cthulhu* is an example of perfection, in my opinion.

DM: Bonus question! If you were forced to score your productions with only a single instrument, what instrument would you choose, and why?

JD: That's a tough one. I'm torn between an acoustic guitar and synthesizer, but I'd probably have to go with a synthesizer for its versatility in sound.

Pictured top left: *The Bungalow House* LP (album art by Jason Barnett)

Pictured top right: *The Picture in the House* LP (album art by Jeremy Hush)

DM: What's your favorite Cadabra Records production to date?

JD: My top favorites are:

The Picture in the House by H.P. Lovecraft. This was my first collaboration with composer Fabio Frizzi. As a long time fan of his work, it's an honor to work with the maestro on so many incredible releases.

Dagon by H.P. Lovecraft. This is my first collaboration with Anima More who really upped the game on what could be done with the medium.

The Bungalow House by Thomas Ligotti. This is my first collaboration with composer Chris Bozzone who I work very closely with now. Ligotti is easily my favorite writer, right along with Lovecraft; to bring his works to life was just incredible.



Pictured above: *The Yellow Sign* LP (album art by Karmazid)

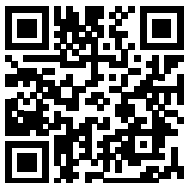
DM: Are there any stories out there that you would love to adapt, but just haven't been able to yet?

JD: There are many stories that I haven't touched because of their length, such as *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* by Thomas Ligotti, and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* by H.P. Lovecraft.

DM: What's next for Cadabra Records? Is there anything you're especially excited about?

JD: There's a bunch, for sure. I'm making moves to keep the label fresh and innovative with some unpredictable releases in the near future. A couple upcoming titles I'm excited about are a 4xLP set of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* by H.P. Lovecraft, and a brand new record by Fabio Frizzi called *Dark Chamber*, which is an acoustic version of his *Frizzi 2 Fulci* live set.

DM: Four records-worth of *The Shadow over Innsmouth*? Sign us up.



To learn more about Cadabra Records, or to purchase merchandise from their shop, including the LPs featured here, visit: cadabrarecords.com, or scan the QR code on the left.



Pictured above: *The Yellow Sign* LP—Gatefold



Pictured above: *Dagon, The Cats of Ulthar, and the Music of Eric Zahn LP*
(album art by Karmazid)



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Author: Jane Smith
Illustrator: John Doe
Publisher: ABC Books



REPRINT STORY

Originally Published by Infinite Worlds Magazine

YOU HAD TO BE AN ASSHOLE ON PLANET E 11-18

by [Emily Randolph-Epstein](#)

I remember being you, the you that made me, me. Sometimes, I like to think I can shout back through time at you, try to keep things from going tits up the way they did. It never works, but let me try again. It all starts when you decide to be an asshole on E 11-18.

It starts before that, actually.

It starts with your ship limping through the outer reaches of the Galactic Trade Organization's designated space. Fuel reserves are shot. The engine needs an overhaul. Food stores are low—you're thanking a god you don't believe in that you squirreled away that chocolate bar when you did. Captain Enid sent a distress signal, but there's not much Guard presence this far out.

The ship's got enough fuel to reach the furthest-most planet in the GTO: designation E 11-18, home of the Emkath, a sapient race of extreme pacifists best described as a cross between velociraptors and standard poodles. E 11-18 is a culturally and technologically advanced enough planet that it should suit your repair needs, according to the ship's computer.

"Fuckin' weirdos," you complain to Enid, because you're a speciest asshole. You'll learn eventually, but that lesson will cost you dearly.

"Those 'weirdos,' as you put it, have the power to blacklist

us across all of GTO space,” Enid warns, and I’d urge you to listen if you could hear me, which you can’t. “I need you to find an appropriate gift for our Emkath greeter, Hestercliffe.” Captain Enid leaves you to your task, one you’d prefer not to be assigned, but you’re an asshole, not a dipshit. You know not to argue with the captain.

You pull up the public files on the Emkath, sneering at the pics of brightly scaled, curly-haired androgynous dino-people dressed in so much embroidery that you want to pluck your eyes out cuz you hate fun, always have.

The Emkath are particular, you learn. As a species, they have a list of food allergies long enough to wrap around Saturn several dozen times. Thus, there’s a planet-wide ban on bringing any number of food items that humans would consider staples into orbit. The files state that anyone found to be in breach of this quarantine will be cheerfully declared a bio-terrorist, sent on their way, and will become the focus of the galaxy’s most passive-aggressive smear campaign. No charges filed. No imprisonment. Just a fun little black mark placed next to your name. Stars, I wish you could hear me right now.

“Yeah, right,” you scoff, as you follow the related link for something called the Great Ghosting of Cascogen 5. You skim the article. Some Cascogenian schmuck managed to get their whole planet embargoed after forgetting to take an apple out of their bag before heading through bio-security on E 11-18. “Well, shit.” Yes, trust that. Follow that thought. Save yourself and your crew from what’s coming.

You tab back to the Emkath profile, reading the list of no-no items more carefully than you had before.

“Oh, come on!” You shout at your tablet screen. “No onions, no mushrooms, no fuckin’ silver. What sort of lily-livered species is this?” The kind that has the power to change your life, but you don’t believe that yet.

“Problem?” Captain Enid asks over comms. The ship’s corridors have a terrible habit of carrying sound, and you’ve never been very good at indoor voices.

“Yeah, this planet sucks. You can’t even bring whipped cream.”

“You ever seen what happens to an Emkath who eats canned whipped cream?” Enid asks in a tone that suggests she has, and it ain’t pretty. It’s not, by the way. They burst out in hives, and inflate like sparkly, scaled balloons.

“What? Do they get a rash?” you sneer, rolling your little asshole eyes. Come on, wake up to the seriousness of all this before it’s too late.

“You’d better be taking this seriously, Hestercliffe,” says Enid, crackling

over the comm. “The carrageenan in whipped cream can cause tachycardia and complete cardiac arrest in an Emkath.” Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention that. It’s just the hives and swelling are so spectacular that they make death seem inconsequential. Maybe I’m still a bit of asshole, okay. Some of us are incorrigible.

“So, we don’t give them whipped cream as a gift. Why can’t we bring it on the planet?”

“Their planet, their rules, Hestercliffe.” There’s a beeping over the comm. “Shit. Gotta see to this. Don’t you fuck this up for us. I want to get out of this mess still able to be employed as a hauler in GTO space. I’m not cut out for smuggling.”



“Why do the fuckin’ Emkaths even need a gift?” you grumble to your crewmates as you eat fried fish with sautéed onions and mushrooms. Contraband, according to the file on E 11-18. “What are they, children?”

“It’s their culture,” says Kay-Kay, the pilot. You’ve never much liked her, but she sure can fly when your ship isn’t limping through the distant reaches of the known galaxy, leaking fuel. “We gotta play by their rules.” Yes, listen to Kay-Kay. Learn from your crewmates before it’s too late.

But you shake your head and push back from the table to continue your search for the perfect gift. “Well, it’s stupid.” If only someone else could be in charge of this, but the techs are busy keeping the ship from killing you all, the pilot and the navigator are keeping the ship on course, and you’re just the medic. Important, but not exactly a vital part of actually operating the ship. Even you can admit that.

Let’s see. You’ve pretty much ruled out giving your designated Emkath greeter any foodstuffs. I mean, sure there’s the sea salt and hazelnut dark chocolate you’ve got stashed in your quarters that would technically fit the bill, but that shit was pricey, and no way some alien raptordoodle is gonna separate you from your chocolate. I know how you think, and if I’m honest, I suppose I’d still have a hard time giving up that chocolate bar even though I know what happens next. Even though I know you’ll regret it later when you’ve got bills to pay, and a black hole’s worth of student debt constantly threatening to suck you in, and a black mark by your name whenever GTO-certified ship owners do a background check against your resume.

Anyway, no food. The file on the Emkath says they like jewelry, but as a

species, they're allergic to almost every kind of metal there is, except gold. You smirk. "Greedy little aliens."

You think you see through them. You don't.

"The little shits aren't allergic to metal. They want to stockpile the shiny stuff, grow their planetary wealth, and the entire GTO's been suckered into believing them because they're cute and have a lot of food allergies." Idiot that you are, you grin at what you perceive to be your own brilliance. I would wring your neck if I weren't so attached to eventually inheriting it.

You drop your tablet in triumph on your bunk and go to dig up the ugliest piece of jewelry you brought with you on this work trip. There's gotta be a can of gold spray paint lying around this ship somewhere. Amazingly, there is.



You go with Captain Enid on the shuttle down to the planet to arrange the transfer of supplies. You want to see what the fuss is about. Also, to see if your plan works.

"Where's the gift, Hestercliffe?" Captain Enid fidgets in the shuttle seat. For someone who doesn't like confined spaces, she sure chose the wrong career.

You reach into your pocket and pull out a box tied with a bow, just like the Emkath files recommended. At least you listened to one thing, even I will give you that.

"Looks good." Enid takes the box and inspects it as the shuttle slows its descent. "What is it?"

You brace for the stomach lurch that'll come when the shuttle touches down. I still hate that feeling, like suddenly, momentarily, you don't exist, and then it all comes crashing back. "Necklace." You grit your teeth. "Something an old girlfriend gave me."

"It's not cheap, is it? The Emkath don't like cheap." Enid looks worried. You've never seen her look so concerned, but you brush it off as an over-reaction. She's been under a lot of stress lately. She hasn't slept.

But what if it's not. There's a little niggle of doubt in the back of your mind. LISTEN TO IT!!! Take the box back, give the Captain your chocolate instead. You brought it with you, just in case. Granted, it was just in case one of your crewmates found it and stole it, but still, you have a choice. Do what I couldn't do.

You shake the doubt away. You always do, because you're not yet me and what's coming is what turns you to me. I know that, but still, I wish you'd

chosen differently. “It’s 14-karat gold. They’ll love it.” And you genuinely think they will.

Enid raises an eyebrow and tucks the box into her lap as the engines turn off, and suddenly the loudest sound is that of the blood in your ears. “Thank you for your sacrifice, Hestercliffe.”

The fasten-seatbelt sign pings off, and the Captain scrambles to unfasten her safety belt and launches to her feet before you can respond.

You follow her off the shuttle and into the long and winding customs and immigration line.

The wait is interminable. If you’d known it would take this long to be allowed on the planet, you would have stayed back on the ship and let Kay-Kay accompany the Captain, but you’re here.

You were always coming here.

Here to the line where an Emkath security guard gives you and Enid a narrowed, slit-pupiled eye. Where that guard sniffs the air so profoundly that you can practically see cartoon air sketched from you to the guard’s nostrils.

“You!” says the guard in a voice that is surprisingly high and thin for a scaled alien with canines to make a wolf envious. “Come with me.” The guard lifts the stanchion’s stretchy strap and beckons both you and Enid out of line to meet your doom.



“What the fuck did you do, Hestercliffe?” Captain Enid glares at you from her bench across from you in the galaxy’s coziest holding cell. The seat is upholstered. There’s art on the walls which are painted a soothing blue. It was the last nice room you ever spent time in.

You cross your arms, still too stubborn to acknowledge your mistake, let alone admit to it or, stars forbid, apologize. “It’s not my fault they’ve got such paranoid security. How was I supposed to know they’d be able to detect the nickel content with their scanners?”

“You had to be an asshole, didn’t you?” Enid looks like she wants to punch you. Sometimes, I wish she had. Maybe her violence would have been easier to handle than her self-control. “You always think you’re sooo smart that no one will ever see through your genius. Well, guess what, dipshit, this planet is full of people smarter than you. They’ve got the best education system in the entire GTO, and teaching is the highest-paid career on the planet, so they’ve also got the best teachers in the GTO, which means this planet’s just about the smartest planet there is, and you thought you were smarter. You absolute idiot.”

You bite your lips. Are you an idiot? “It can’t be that bad.” Stars, just admit you’re an idiot and be done with it. Become me already so I can tell Enid I’m sorry. So I can take the blame, and the rest of the crew can go about their business.

But you’re not me yet. “Oh, it’s bad.” Enid is red-faced with rage now. “You, me, my ship, the rest of the crew, we’re gonna be out of the GTO on our asses. No more cush contract work for us. You’ve ruined us.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

She’s not.

“Shut the fuck up!” Enid glares at you harder than she’s ever glared before. “I never liked you, Hestercliffe. I hired you cuz you’re good at your job, and you mostly stay out of the way, but you’ve completely fucked us now. Lucky for you, we’re a contractor and not representing a company or a planet. Do you know the kind of trade war you could have started?”

You still don’t understand what a big deal this is. Maybe you never will, or maybe when you’re me and you’re sewing up the head of a pirate after an attempt to board a GTO freighter went south, and the ship is taking heavy fire from the Guard, you’ll stop and wonder if maybe Enid was right. Maybe you were an asshole.

I know I do. Every day, now that I’m a medic of a pirate ship, picking off the weak from the GTO convoys. Now that Enid’s a drunk, telling tales of her glory days, back when she was a big-shot captain, freighting for the GTO. And Kay-Kay...I wonder what happened to Kay-Kay.

“What are you thinking about, doc?” The pirate winces as I tie off another suture. We’re out of anesthetic, but she’s holding up like a champ as I sew her scalp back to her forehead.

“Did I ever tell you about how I got here?” I snip the thread and go to start the next suture, fingers moving almost automatically.

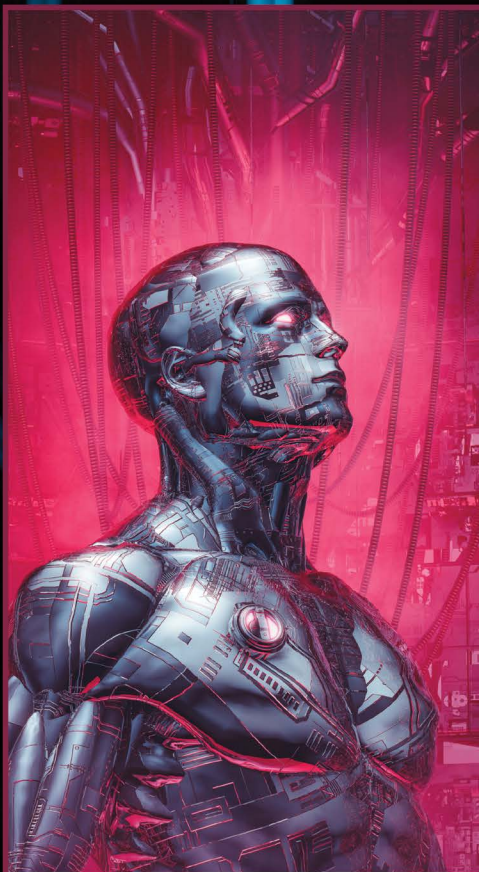
The pirate almost shakes her head, but stops. “How?”

Maybe it’ll be easier to tell someone other than myself. “Well, it all started when I decided to be an asshole on E 11-18.”

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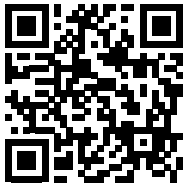
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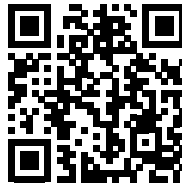
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AUTHOR BIOS



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