

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES AND MORE

JUL-AUG 2021

DARK MATTER

MAGAZINE



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WATER MOSAIC OF A MOTHER SET FOR LIFE HASHTAG NO FILTER
WILDFLOWER THE CROSSROADS TROUBADOUR LITTLE LOVES
MARASA, OR A WITHDRAWAL OF PURE JOY FOR MR. ANTAR
IF WE WERE ALL MADE OF JELLY 100 KIAS BALLOON SEASON

004

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In loving memory of Debra Ann Carroll,
Dark Matter Magazine's #1 fan.
August 8, 1958 – June 18, 2021

Love you, Mom.



HUMAN
SUCK

COVER ART

ICE CREAM ROBOT

by [Ninja Jo](#)

What if you're a robot, living with humans and testing out stuff that humans usually do, just trying to be like them so you don't feel quite so alien; like wearing a dumb t-shirt and "eating" ice cream in the park? That's the idea I had for this painting. For the color palette, I wanted to create something that feels like summer: warm, clear, captured in a single moment.

–Ninja Jo

Pictured left: *Ice Cream Robot*





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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

THE

[FOURTH INDUSTRIAL]

REVOLUTION

by [Rob Carroll](#)

The United States economy is inefficient. A Keynesian case can be made that it's *incredibly* inefficient. The siphoning of public wealth for the past thirty years, thanks in no small part to the advent of derivatives and high-frequency trading, has led to a wealth gap in this country so obscene that during a global pandemic, when most U.S. households saw their cash and savings decline dramatically, the collective wealth of American billionaires increased by a staggering 54% (\$1.62 trillion). (Please bear with me as we approach the relevance of all this to science fiction; I promise we'll get there soon).

An economy is most efficient when resources are used and distributed among the producers and consumers in a way that optimizes output, but due to adverse selection, asymmetric information, and moral hazard, we are moving in the opposite direction of that goal.

Adverse selection is the process that occurs when buyers and sellers have access to different information, also known as asymmetric information. Asymmetric information causes an imbalance of power. Moral hazard is a situation that occurs when, thanks to power imbalances, tendency to take undue risk increases because the costs (and potential losses) will not be felt by the party taking the risk.

Sound familiar?

In the wake the 2008 financial crisis, a new technology emerged that was developed to prevent a similar crisis in the future, not by fixing a broken system, but by reinventing it so that the system would become less centralized and more egalitarian. That technology was blockchain.

Bitcoin was the first application of blockchain. The digital currency grabbed all the headlines in those early days, mostly on the perception that it was a joke, a scam, or the naive wish of every libertarian technocrat who watched *Fight Club* one too many times. But in the twelve years since, newer, more interesting applications of blockchain technology have started to show the ways in which our society can be transformed for the better by the technology, starting with Internet 2.0.

For all the failings of Internet 1.0, it does aim to accomplish a noble goal: to release the flow of information from its natural conservative state of being (information transfer is conservative by default, because like any complex system, it seeks the path of least resistance). However, Internet 1.0 still depends on centralized authorities, and those that use the technology must accept and trust those authorities in order to participate. Information in this system is still asymmetrical, and the system itself still suffers from power imbalances. But because blockchain is an immutable public ledger, Internet 2.0 could—in theory—*decentralize* any system authority by distributing that system's governance across a broad network of independent users who share a vested interest in the network's success and the success of all those involved, with no easy way to conspire against either.

In a decentralized world, the wheels of the economy are greased and efficiency returns, because in a decentralized world, power and resources are redistributed to the people, who then reinvest those same resources back into the system, *ad infinitum*. In a decentralized world, there is no intermediary between you and the rest of humanity when it comes to things like your wealth, your data, your privacy, or your security, because the system is self-governing, which includes you as a governing participant.

If this sounds like a wishful utopia (or just a true democracy), it's because it kind of is. The idea is so radical compared to how we've always lived, that it often feels doomed to failure. Yet, the idea almost *needs* to succeed in order to preserve a progressive way of life in the face of what's to come.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (or Industry 4.0) is upon us. It will usher in a new age of cyber security, cloud computing, systems integration, machine-to-machine communication (M2M), Internet of Things (IoT), Big(ger) Data, augmented and virtual realities, advanced robotics, and artificial intelligence. But in order for these complex technologies to be

integrated into our society without further dividing us, and potentially even destroying us, we're going to need to first redefine what "us" means.

Unless we redefine concepts like governance and transparency (to name just two), we may be doomed to grim futures like the ones described in this very issue of *Dark Matter Magazine*. For example, Warren Benedetto's "Set For Life," won't feel so far-fetched if we continue to ignore the problems caused by our nation's widening wealth gap and growing political polarization—or if we fail to plan for the eventual displacement of millions of workers due to automation. Jean-Paul L. Garnier's poem, "Humanization," will read like prophesy if we can't overcome our desires to dominate and win, even after our competition is gone. L.P. Melling's "100 KIAs" will become a documentary of future warfare if central authorities are allowed to become centralized authoritarians, gleefully pulling levers in a never-ending battle of contrived attrition.

If we enter this new age resigned to be wage slaves and corporate expenditures who passively consume, we will descend further into financial feudalism, where we will be ruled by unseen central authorities that we should not trust, but whom we will be forced to obey, since the power of the coming age will reside solely and hopelessly with them. That kind of power cannot be consolidated the way that power is consolidated now. It *has* to reside in the people. There is no other way.

Sincerely,

Rob Carroll
Editor-in-Chief



SET FOR LIFE

by [Warren Benedetto](#)

Andy loaded the body into the back of the van, then slammed the door. “Last one,” he called out, knocking on the rear door with his knuckles. The van’s engine started up with a roar. Its tailpipe shuddered, enveloping Andy in a swirl of exhaust. He coughed and waved the noxious fumes away from his face. *Thanks, asshole*, he thought.

As he moved around to the passenger side, Andy swiped his finger along the length of the filthy white van, creating a wobbly clean streak under the faded Chargers Inc. logo. The “I” in “Inc.” was a lightning bolt with an electrical plug at the bottom. It reminded him of the logo for the Los Angeles Chargers, his father’s favorite football team back when Andy was still a kid. Back when football—and Los Angeles—was still around.

Andy yanked the door open and hauled himself into the van. His weight squeaked down on the threadbare seat. The springs dug cruelly into his aching back. He pulled the door shut, then took off his Chargers Inc. work cap and massaged the sore red line it left on his forehead.

The driver, Barry, a rough-hewn, heavy-set man in his mid-forties, snatched the hat from Andy’s hand.

“You gotta break it in,” he said. He pulled on the bowl of the hat, stretching it outwards in each direction, then tossed it back at Andy. It rolled off his lap and onto the floor.

Pictured left: *Untitled* (art by Ninja Jo)

“Thanks,” Andy mumbled.

As he bent down to pick it up, the thick muscles in his back cried out in protest. It had been a long day, with a lot of lifting. He was young and strong, and he had worked plenty of jobs that required manual labor. This one was different though. Lifting bodies wasn't like lifting boxes. Boxes were symmetrical. Structured. You could lift properly: squat down, straighten your spine, lift with your legs. Bodies were limp. Awkward. Their limbs flopped in odd directions. He still hadn't figured out the best way to lift one without damaging it. Or himself. Or both.

The “Help Wanted” listing Andy had answered promised on-the-job training, but he hadn't gotten any. He was just thrown into the deep end on his first day. Barry showed up in front of his apartment building, picked him up, and that was it. Ten minutes later, they were hauling bodies into the van.

Andy considered calling in a report to the main Chargers Inc. number while Barry was on a shit break, but then he decided against it. Better not to be flagged as a complainer on your first day, he figured. He'd get the hang of it eventually. He just hoped his back would hold up in the meantime. Besides, it was way better than his last gig.

At least nobody was shooting at him at this one.

Andy flapped the dust from his hat, then put it back on his head. It fell low and loose over his ears, the bill tipping down to cover his eyes.

“Better?” Barry asked, as he shifted the van into gear.

Andy tipped the hat back so he could see. It fell over his eyes again. He turned it around backwards, instead.

“Perfect,” he replied.



“Should be coming up on the right,” Andy said.

He consulted the digital map on the grimy tablet mounted on the van's dashboard. Small yellow lightning bolt icons were scattered around the map. A different icon representing the van moved along the road, towards one of the lightning bolts.

Andy squinted through the van's windshield, searching for the target in the fading evening light. It was near dark, but the streetlights hadn't turned on yet. Deep shadows filled the doorways and alleys.

He consulted the map again. The van icon had moved past the lightning bolt.

“Shit. We missed it.”

Barry slammed on the brakes, throwing Andy hard against the seatbelt. He threw his hands against the dashboard to brace himself.

“Goddamn it, kid,” Barry growled. He put the van into park, then looked at Andy. He raised his eyebrows, waiting. “Well?”

“Can you back up?”

“Can you back up?” Barry whined, mocking him. “I’m sure you can find it.”

Andy took a deep breath, held it for a second, then exhaled slowly. “Thanks, boss.”

Andy climbed out of the van and shut the door.

“Fucking dick,” he mumbled under his breath.

The guy was useless; he did nothing. The orientation video on the Chargers Inc. website had said partners were supposed to trade off on each pickup: one person picks up the bodies, the other stays in the van to protect the merchandise. Then, on the next stop, they were supposed to switch. But Barry never moved from the van, not once the whole day. Didn’t even try. He just sat there scrolling on his phone while Andy did all the work.

Andy knew Barry was taking advantage of the fact that he was the new guy, but Andy didn’t dare challenge him. The man was clearly an old-timer, had been with the company for years. You could tell just by looking at his hat. It was rumpled and misshapen and was faded to a dull grayish blue. The Chargers Inc. logo was barely even visible anymore. If it came down to a choice of who to believe, it was clear who the company would side with. Then Andy would be out of a job. One he needed, badly. He hadn’t worked in almost a year. He couldn’t afford to fuck it up.

The van was stopped in an industrial area of town. The streets and sidewalks were ill-maintained, with crumbling potholes threatening to break any ankle or axle that got too close, too fast. Some of the buildings were still pockmarked with bullet holes and shrapnel scars from the war. Rusty chain link fences topped with coils of barbed wire sealed off the lots between buildings. Crooked signs warned of armed Sentinels patrolling the premises.

Andy walked down the street behind the van, to the entrance of a large warehouse. Seemed like the right place. Sure enough, the bright blue Chargers Inc. storage locker was just inside the entryway. Andy swiped his keycard through the reader. The locker doors slid open on their air rails with a crisp *whoosh*. The fluorescent lights inside flickered to life.

Andy said a little prayer of thanks. There was only one body standing inside, a smaller-issue model. Probably a Tech. It was a relief. A lot of the bodies they had picked up from their manufacturing and industrial clients were Workers or Sentinels. Those were big. Muscular. And heavy.

So goddamned heavy.

Andy put his hand on the body's shoulder and pulled it forward, preparing to lift it.

"Hello," the body said.

Andy jumped backwards, startled. The body smiled, then froze. The light in its eyes dimmed, then darkened. Its chin dropped to its chest.

Andy exhaled, his heartbeat returning to normal. *Still a little charge left in it, I guess.*

He still wasn't used to being near the damn things, even after hauling them around all day. They were creepy as hell. Looked just like real people. Felt like them too. The technology had come a long way since the awkward, dead-eyed sex robots that people used to hide in their basements a decade ago. Not that Andy had any direct experience with those. He'd heard stories though. Had seen the videos too, back in the day.

He reached out for the body again. This time, it remained quiet. Just to be safe, Andy pressed the soft spot on its skull behind its right ear, holding it for 10 seconds to make sure it was fully powered down. Then he ducked his shoulder into the body's abdomen and hoisted it over his shoulder.

"Alright, buddy," he grunted as he carried the body back to the van. "Let's get you home."



Andy and Barry drove in silence for a little while. Andy debated internally whether it was worth striking up a conversation. He decided he should. If he was going to have to work with the guy, he might as well try to be friendly. Maybe the old fucker would warm up.

"How long you been with the company?" Andy asked.

"Too long," Barry replied.

Andy nodded. They lapsed back into silence. Barry drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

Andy decided to try again.

"So, we take these back to the shop, and then what? Charge them up, bring them back?"

"Basically."

"How come people don't just charge them themselves, on-site?"

"Can't. Syntech won't let 'em. Charging's a big business. Sort of a razor and blades thing."

"Hmm. Smart," Andy nodded. He peered through the cab window into

the cargo hold, where dozens of bodies were piled up. “They’re weird, aren’t they? Creepy?”

Barry shrugged.

“You ever have one yourself?”

Barry gave him a look like he was crazy. “I look like a millionaire to you?”

“I thought maybe there’s, you know, an employee discount or something.”

Barry’s jaw tightened. “I got a wife.”

“Oh!” Andy exclaimed, realizing the misunderstanding. “No, I wasn’t implying—I meant a Maid, like for chores or whatever.”

Barry didn’t respond.

Andy tried to change the subject. “Anyway, they’re pretty incredible. I don’t know how they make ’em so real like that. They’re practically human.”

Barry laughed. He glanced at Andy. “You’re serious?”

“What?” Andy asked, confused.

“Man,” Barry said, shaking his head. “Guess you didn’t get hired for your brains. At least you can lift. You work out?”

“Some.”

“Bench?”

“Three. Three-twenty.”

“Not bad. You’re how old?”

“Twenty-six.”

“College?”

“Nah. Military.”

“Huh. Me too. Marines.” Barry knocked on his thigh. It made a hollow sound.

Andy glanced down. For the first time, he noticed the titanium rod extending from Barry’s pants cuff into his boot. An artificial leg.

No wonder he never gets out of the van, Andy thought. He felt like an asshole.

“Shit. I didn’t know. What happened?”

“Confederate drone. Battle of Chicago.”

“Tough break.”

Barry shrugged. “Could’ve been worse. How about you? You made it out in one piece?”

“Mostly.” Andy unbuttoned his sleeve and rolled it up his arm, revealing a thick, horizontal scar across his bicep. “Sniper. Los Angeles. I turned just as he fired. Got Medevac’d out two hours before the bomb hit. Saved my ass.”

Barry whistled. He glanced over as Andy slid his sleeve back down. He noticed the distinctive tattoo on Andy’s forearm, a stylized skull under a banner bearing the words *Kill. Bathe. Repeat.*

“Special Forces, huh?” Barry said, indicating the tattoo.

“Six years.”

“Guess I shouldn’t piss you off.”

Andy laughed. “No, probably not.”

Barry laughed too. A genuine laugh. Andy felt something thaw between them. *Maybe he’s not so bad after all*, Andy thought.

As if to prove the point, Barry flipped open the van’s center console and withdrew a dented metal flask. He unscrewed the cap, then handed it to Andy.

“Whiskey?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Andy took the flask. He began to lift it to his lips, then paused. He looked at Barry skeptically.

“This a test?”

“Nah. We’re off the clock.”

“Alright, then.” Andy lifted the flask in a little salute. “Cheers.” He swallowed the bitter-tasting liquid, then handed the flask back to Barry. Barry motioned for him to keep it.

“So?” Andy asked, taking another swig. “You got me curious. How *does* Syntech make them?” He nodded towards the bodies in the back of the van.

Barry cleared his throat. “Well, let’s see.” He began counting off on his fingers. “The economy’s shit. Cities haven’t been rebuilt. There are no jobs. There’s no money. People are desperate.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So imagine: you’re broke, you can’t pay your bills, your kids are hungry. Then a Syntech rep shows up at your door and says, ‘We’ll write you a check, right here, right now. Enough to set your family up for life. Your wife, your kids—they’ll never want for anything else as long as they live.’ You’d take that deal, right?”

“I—Maybe? ...I don’t know. I’d have to think about it.”

“Ah, that’s the catch. You get two minutes. One time offer. Take it or leave it.”

“Wow, no pressure,” Andy chuckled. “I’m assuming it’s not free money, right? What do I have to do in return?”

Barry looked at Andy out of the corner of his eye, waiting for him to connect the dots. After a few seconds, Andy drew in a sharp breath.

“Oh. Oh, shit! You’re serious? Those are real people back there?”

“Were.”

“I thought Syntech built synthetics.”

“They do. But not for everything. When it comes to the tough, dangerous jobs, real people are better.”

“Really? How so?”

“They’re cheap, for one. Relatively, at least. There’s nothing to manufacture, nothing to repair. Just the neural compute device. Implant one in the skull, wire it up, recharge weekly, done. Easy peasy.”

Andy was dumbfounded. He had no idea. He looked back through the cabin window again. *All those things are people*, he marveled. Then he corrected himself. *Were people*.

“So, how much does Syntech pay? Must be a shitload.”

“Depends. Low end, for a Maid or a Tech, it’s maybe a hundred grand. Military grade, Sentinels? A million, million two. Maybe more. ’Course Syntech makes that back tenfold.”

Andy whistled, shaking his head in disbelief. He yawned. “Sorry,” he apologized. “Didn’t expect to be this tired.” He twisted his torso to crack his back. His spine popped like a line of firecrackers. “That’s wild. People are actually volunteering to be, what, roboticized? Is that even a word? Wow.”

“Yep. Most of them.”

“Wow,” he said again. “Shit’s crazy.” He rolled over this new information in his mind in silence for a bit, then took another swig of whiskey. “You said ‘most.’ Not all?”

Barry glanced over at Andy, then turned his eyes back to the road.

“There are all kinds of people in the world, kid. Some good, some bad.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, Syntech is buying. People are selling.”

“Selling...what? Other people?”

“*Ding-ding-ding!* Give the man a prize.”

“Fuuuuck.” Andy shook his head, uncomprehending. “How does someone just go and sell another person?” he asked rhetorically. “It’s like slavery or something.”

“There’s all kinds of ways,” Barry answered. “You got POWs, of course, from the camps. That’s easy. Low-hanging fruit. Their health is shit though. Most of ’em die pretty quick. Then you got kidnappers, grabbing people off the street. That’s unreliable though. Never know what you’re getting. Sometimes a family member sets someone up. A brother, an uncle. A neighbor. Then you got others who treat it more like a business, who’ve gotta be clever.”

Andy rubbed his eyes. His eyeballs suddenly felt fat. Heavy. He looked at the flask in his hand, then up at Barry. The driver’s face swam in and out of focus.

“For example, someone could put out a ‘Help Wanted’ ad,” Barry continued. “Find some young guy who needs work. Test him out, see how strong he is.”

Andy’s head rolled backwards on his neck. He strained to pull it upright. His skull felt like a bowling ball on a pipe cleaner. The flask slipped from his fingers.

“You know what’re the hardest to find?” Barry continued. “Sentinels. They’ve gotta be young, tough, military trained. Sell one of those, you’re set for life.”

Andy’s chin slumped against his chest. His hat fell off his head and onto his lap.

Barry put on his blinker, then pulled up to the front gate of a sprawling industrial complex. The security guard stepped out of his booth. The Syntech logo glowed green on his uniform. He checked his clipboard, then bent down and looked in through Barry’s window.

“Evening, Barry,” the guard said. “Another volunteer?”

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STORY
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WILDFLOWER

by [Anna Madden](#)

Chase stared across the prairie of Aelous, a planet named for a long-forgotten god. Like any frontier, this place bred trouble.

Weeds rustled. The musk of bighorns filled his nose. Chase stalked closer. He gripped his faithful rifle, given to him by a man he no longer spoke to, and crouched behind blue-stemmed tallgrass. To the sides, night-bur grew. It was dense, spiny, with neurotoxic thorns. Good cover for a marksman in flat terrain. As Chase took a prone shooting position, his armor pinched. He ignored it, raising the rifle butt to his neck. His left arm supported the barrel.

The magazine held ten rounds. That's all he had been given. No doubt a precaution in case he defected. Chase's orders were clear. Despite that, his thoughts were sharp daggers. If he got caught, he would meet a fast bullet. If he ran, he'd be hung by the neck until dead. Beneath his helmet, Chase set his jaw. He wasn't one to miss targets, and he didn't waste bullets either. He would earn his surname back before sunset.

Ahead, quick footfalls approached his position. The shadow of a nomad sentinel, sharp-eyed, with a shotgun slung over his shoulders, fell over Chase. He held his breath, but his left elbow slipped, and his rifle's butt shifted. Grit scraped free underneath it.

Chase silenced a curse even as the nomad halted, a mass of night-bur between them. A glare bounced off the other's firearm,

peeking through the thorns. Chase might have time to reposition and fire off a round. Still, he waited, experience staying his hand. His armor hid him, its surface capable of mirroring the dense overgrowth. His rifle poked through the grass blades. The dark walnut finish was irregular, easily spotted, like a misplaced branch where no trees grew or fell.

Boots stepped closer. They creaked, made of old leather. The nomad shifted his weight. A pause, then a fiddle of cloth. Piss watered the thicket in a hard stream. The nomad sighed, shuffled again, then turned and walked away.

Chase relaxed his shoulders. He moved his rifle into better cover.

A bighorn bellowed. The herd grazed nearby, their tails flicking back and forth against a plague of hungry flies. Even closer, dome tents flattened a patch of blue-green meadow. Through his rifle's scope, Chase counted. There were twelve nomads, their skin and hair a bright copper, and five visible firearms. A couple shotguns and single-barrel pistols. No long-ranged weapons, but even so, this job wouldn't be easy.

Like coyotes, these nomads were skittish, yet still great fighters. The Selbon hated the nomads for having first claim to this planet. They were of old blood—descendants of the maiden colony. The nomads didn't respect laws, and walls didn't hold them. In their territory, Chase was glad to be downwind, his scent masked, with the glare of the sun at his back.

He marked his target for capture and return. She caught the eye, though not from beauty or grace. Her skin was worn from strong UV exposure, and her limbs were lean, hardened by a nomadic life. Still, there was something about her open expression and her stark black hair. A depthless color—those strands of darkness—like the vacuum of space.

Her name was Susan Wuther. Chase had read her file with care. Born on a large Selbon estate where wind turbines rooted the prairie as artificial white trees. Susan was five when her home was raided. Her parents died in the violence. Her relations had thought Susan dead too until a month ago. She had been spotted by chance. Dark hair stood out on this planet, especially among the natural groundcover and the dull brown-backed bighorns.

She was the last seed of a withering bloodline. Once reclaimed, she would be a bride of wealth and prestige. Sons of vultures, the Selbon, even if they were the social elite. Chase knew this, for he had been born into their number years ago.

Chase eyed the captive and magnified her image in his visor. His helmet compared it to the picture attached to her file. A facial match confirmed it was her via a blinking green icon across his visor, but she had grown much. Susan wasn't a helpless child anymore. Her strong countenance

proved hardship couldn't break her. Or maybe she hadn't experienced strife beyond the shortage of food, or the harshness of winter.

With ease, Chase remembered looking into a stranger's face and accepting it. As a youth, he too had been taken from his family estate, then raised by a man of no relation. A man who killed for a living. He taught Chase how to clean a gun, how to shoot without flinching, and how to mend armor. Chase was content until he learned the truth: his blood family had been a contract, and that contract had been completed.

Chase left without a word, unable to confront his would-be father. Instead, he hunted down the Selbon responsible. He got caught and was offered a choice: die, or recover Susan Wuther. Chase blinked hard. He felt the old rage—a fire burning hot inside him. It had taken a week, but he had found her.

A bighorn's cured skin clothed Susan's chest and legs. The rough fabric didn't hide the swell of her belly beneath it. She turned, and Chase frowned, for a rifle hung off a leather strap on her back. It was a single-shot model, inferior to his, but the range and accuracy matched. She stood beside one of the nomads, and her eyes softened when she spoke to him.

Chase detached a hand-sized mimic off his belt. It was a risk, for it contained one of five batteries feeding his armor. Still, he hadn't counted on the nomads possessing a rifle. They weren't commonplace, thanks to Selbon laws. He set a five-second delay on the mimic. Satisfied, Chase threw it hard to his right, well clear of his position. It would project his voice if he spoke, and echo his shots. A decoy to make it seem like he wasn't alone. Shooters did best in pairs.

He adjusted his rifle, took aim on an armed nomad, and switched off the safety. Squeezing the trigger, gunfire split the air. The rifle kicked back against Chase's shoulder. Startled bighorn stampeded off, stirring dust and grass blades and pollen. An empty cartridge fell free. It smelled of burnt metal and sulfur.

The scared bighorns provided a good distraction—one Chase would use to full advantage. The nomads scrambled into action. Three broke off, their feet like loosed arrows, close on the heels of their herd.

Chase saw Susan dart for cover, losing her behind the tents. A shotgun-wielding nomad pointed a finger toward Chase's position. He must have seen the muzzle flash. Chase took the informant out. At ten o'clock, another nomad sprinted, weaving back and forth. He kept to the tallest growth. Leading the target, Chase predicted his shot and fired. As the round landed mid-chest, the mimic echoed the rifle's crack. To Chase, it was a sound to filter out. Dust made Chase's breath taste of dirt, and a haze distorted the immediate area. Two more spent cartridges spilled out.

The remaining nomads ducked for cover. They hid in the tall weeds and behind the domed tents. A blood-stirring yell rang out in their language. It sounded like a challenge, an insult, or both. On second thought, it was definitely both.

A gust blew. Searching, Chase spotted a leg through the shifting tallgrass and the clouded air. It wasn't a woman's, so he took aim without hesitation. The injured nomad flailed, and Chase moved into a crouched position to give the kill shot.

An enemy fired back. It was a deep-throated crack. It wasn't the mimic. There was no mistaking the sound of a true rifle.

On instinct, Chase flattened himself. He glanced down. A nick marred his shoulder-guard where the bullet had ricocheted off. Luckily, not a direct hit. His armor flickered, the mirror broke, then deactivated, its surface going back to its default—a sand-like limestone color. It had been an insane shot, especially considering the sun, the dust, not to mention his superior camouflage. Chase pictured the rifle on Susan's back. Was she so skilled a markswoman, then? He hadn't expected that.

Time to decide: intimidate or negotiate. Five rounds left. He had enough ammunition, barely, but his damaged armor made him feel naked. He was outmanned, outgunned, and his position was compromised. If he could have, he would have eliminated the rifle-wielder first, but taking out Susan Wuther wasn't an option. Not yet.

Chase whistled. The mimic relayed the sound five seconds later. Movement across the prairie stopped. Dust settled, and a silence stretched. Even the wind seemed to listen, going stale.

"Let's talk," he called out. His voice repeated from the mimic. It sounded brash in common tongue. "I marked your location. If you kill us, the Selbon will send more. Many more."

"What do you want?" a nomad said, using common speech too, his accent thick. His voice was confident. Definitely the tribe's leader. The nomad would have earned his place among the pack. A stark difference from the Selbon, who ruled not by merit, but by birthright and cheap tricks.

"I'm here for Susan Wuther," Chase said back. The battery icon flashed. Chase cursed. The mimic and the camouflage had drained his power supply fast. He was running out of time.

"Says that isn't her name," the nomad leader said. A shotgun fired for emphasis, the round hitting the dirt several feet in front of Chase.

Out of range. Chase smiled, tight-lipped, but kept still. He activated his heat sensors. If wise, his enemy was using this opportunity to flank him.

His visor painted heat sources red. He needed to take out a couple more nomads before the batteries went dry, and he had to locate Susan's position.

On the other side of a flapping tent, a red-marked silhouette stepped backward, repositioning. The curve of a rounded belly stood out.

"I'd like to hear it from her," Chase shouted back.

Movement in the grass drew his attention. He counted five red marks advancing fast. The nomads had fanned out, encircling to the rear of his hide-out, nearing the thick night-bur. Up close, Chase saw facial hair and detailed expressions. Saw their sweat, the pores on their cheeks, and hungry eyes.

Two men took the night-bur at a run. One carried a shotgun. The other a knife. Red cuts soon laced their bare arms while invisible toxin entered their bloodstreams.

Chase rolled to intercept them, his expression a void behind his helmet.

Their approach slowed, their muscles twitching. Chase claimed a headshot. The other nomad reached out, catching his comrade, using his friend as a shield even as his shotgun stared Chase down. The enemy peeled back his lips and showed off his teeth.

The buckshot bent Chase's breastplate, slamming across the surface. Like a boulder, it hit hard. Planting his rifle into the ground, he caught himself and kicked the wolf-faced foe into the night-bur again. Chase slammed his rifle's butt into the man's skull, corrected his stance, and fired at point-blank. The neurotoxin would do the rest.

A third nomad growled a challenge. He threw a small knife, targeting Chase's knee joint. Chase grunted as the knife found its target. He fired a single shot into his enemy, then pulled the blade free—the metal streaked with crimson—and threw it into the night-bur.

The fourth enemy hadn't followed the rest. Instead, the man approached the mimic. Chase used two precious rounds on that one. He shook his head, panting hard. These bastards were tough.

The tallgrass closed over the dead bodies. The battery icon flashed across his visor again, then died. The smell of gunpowder kept him on edge. Unease twisted his stomach. No heat signatures dotted his vision.

The fifth nomad was the largest. He charged the night-bur, a war cry in his throat. His cheeks were angular, and he grasped an elbow-length knife in capable hands. He looked fierce. The night-bur toxin still flowed through his blood, but it was apparently slow to take effect.

Chase raised his rifle, but Susan fired, forcing him to the ground. Suddenly, Chase knew. This man who approached was the nomadic leader, and he would not go down fast.

The nomad broke free of the thorny growth. Using his rifle, Chase met the nomad's knife. He needed to protect the weak points in his armor: the joints, the neck, and the visor.

The nomad reared back and headbutted Chase. With a shudder, his visor cracked. A sharp ring hummed in both ears. Blinded, Chase swung his rifle like a long spear. A solid impact vibrated his fingers, and he heard a gasp, then footsteps staggering backward. Chase couldn't see. With one hand, he pulled his helmet free.

"That explains it," the nomad said, spitting bile on the ground. "You fight without honor, tricking us. Making us think there are two. Only a Selbon would fight so." He stood on bent knees, his hands grasping them, panting heavily. Poisoned scratches marred his forearms.

"I can't choose what I am," Chase said, stalling, his eyes darting to the nomad's thorn-made wounds. "I was born a Selbon. Blood is blood."

The nomad leader scoffed. "You Selbon travel too much back and forth, up high, through that blank space. You've forgotten you're just an animal, same as us."

"I haven't forgotten," Chase said. "I know too well what I am."

A rifle interrupted them. Its sharp bite tasted Chase's shooting arm. He groaned and lost hold of his rifle.

The sun glared, catching the reflection of metal. *The knife!* Chase dove, his injured knee aflame. The nomad leader cried out, then jumped forward too. Chase reached it first. He picked up the blade and slashed without hesitation. Blood spilled from the nomad's forehead and dripped into his eyes, hindering him, and his hands shook.

The enemy rifle fired, closer now. Chase flinched, but the shot missed by a hair. He tossed the knife, grabbed his rifle up, readying it, and limped through the night-bur. His armor protected his skin against the perilous thorns. The encampment looked uglier without a screen filtering it. The colors were bolder. Scents of dung, stirred pollen, salt, and gunpowder mingled together. Wet blood stained the tents. Through the dust, Susan appeared, her rifle at the ready.

His arm throbbed, but Chase raised his gun. His index finger brushed the trigger. "You don't have to fight, Susan. Not anymore."

The woman didn't blink. "I said that isn't my name. It's Blue Star."

Chase pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Chase pulled again, heard a distinctive click, and realized his mistake: no more ammunition. Susan discharged her weapon. At this range, a pointed rifle bullet pierced breastplate without effort. Chase staggered to his knees.

“All...I wanted...was to get...home,” Chase said, his voice breathless. He put a hand to his chest and felt the wetness there.

Soft footfalls approached. “I am home,” she said. The woman reloaded her rifle. “This is my family. My place. My people. You took them from me.”

Chase twitched his fingers and winced. The pain helped Chase focus. “The nomads took you from your home. From your true people. They killed your parents and seized what they wanted.” Grass crunched beneath him. His hair caught the breeze—it was dark, the same as hers. “You fight for your enemy.”

“You don’t get to decide for me,” she said. “You judge what you cannot understand.”

The rust-orange horizon beckoned. Chase thought of his own family. But which family was the true one? The marksman had been like a father to Chase. Had shaped him. Had taught him that life was unfair, but worth living. Chase had barely known his true parents. Only their name was left, and it had been stolen. He hated the Selbon. No wonder Chase looked at this woman and tasted his own bitterness. He looked at Susan Wuther and saw a reflection, though he wondered if this, like his mirrored armor, prevented him from actually seeing her.

He swallowed, then nodded. “Best keep that hair of yours wrapped, or dyed, so you aren’t so easily spotted.”

Susan took her stance. Her left hand tight on the forestock, her feet shoulder-width apart.

Chase coughed. His blood darkened the blue-green grassland. He wondered if she was sure of her choice, or if she would change it. He might have changed his if he had been given more time. Chase breathed out, then shuddered, the air rasping in his throat. Chase stared at Susan. He couldn’t look away. She was a wildflower: hardy, determined to face the sun, determined to live.

Susan’s rifle fired, deafening him. His vision blurred. He saw blackness, as though he had never been to this prairie, or seen this girl-turned-woman. It wasn’t hard to imagine himself fading out of existence, turning to dust, blowing across this prairie. A forgotten man, on a planet named for a long-forgotten god.





WATER MOSAIC OF A MOTHER

by [Pearse Anderson](#)

Once the Americans discovered her engineering past, they wanted to test her weapons on pigs. The beasts—especially the sows—were biologically similar to the aliens they wanted to destroy. She would be able to corral about fifteen or twenty pigs each time and observe as some soldier pointed her mortars and missiles into the pen. She never worked like this on her planet, before settlement.

A pig's insides were also similar to a human's, and when they later discussed the details of weapons testing, she could tell the Americans knew that too.

Don't you try it, Captain Early said with his eyes.

But before the final weapons proposal, before the Americans discovered her species' figs, before the pigs were shipped down to her planet, she was given a name. Various political operators and military officials called her *Sea Slug*, and the longer she stayed the more they said it to her face. Early said they knew she had a real name, one spoken in a wet, alien tongue, but that her name, her species, was not a priority. The piggy-aliens were the fuckers who bombed the Moon out of the sky. Everyone knew their name: the Mox. They must hurt the Mox. She must become the American's asset. And they thought pigs would help.

Pictured left: *Water Mosaic of a Mother* (art by Aylin Sophia)



When the military base was first founded on Sea Slug's planet, Texans filled the facility. Now it was mostly Gulf Coast statesmen, Arkansas National Guard members, and Floridian fishermen disproportionately affected by the Second Great Moon Landing. They loved her planet; it was all coastline, all heavy with fish and almost-lobster.

Sea Slug carved out a niche under a tidal pool. Eventually, she couldn't hide anymore, in the niche and in her mind. The world shook as more ships landed. Soldiers were building missile-carrying rigs on the horizon; soon something would be aimed at the neighboring Mox-controlled planet. Military scientists found Sea Slug on a surveying expedition—they were scared and Cajun. Really, she let herself be found. She let herself be cataloged into a holding cell, be visited by Captain Early, and be reminded of the world outside the walls each time she ran her arms along the fossilized coral stuck into the concrete.

But she kept her two children. They were only pupae. She kept them close to her watery skin like they were strange seedlings. During her first medical examination, the Americans thought they were body parts, not organisms of their own. Once the distinction was made, they named her children too—after old cartoon characters, as if they were punchlines.



Petty Officer Jolahue: The boys are calling the two little ones Spongebob and Patrick.

Captain Early: Get outta here.

J: We have their names, sir, in written form, but only the mother has physically developed a mouth and she isn't identifying them.

E: Have you asked nicely?

J: We have a more versed translator dropping down with the next shipment. He'll be the point of contact. She might be able to understand us and just not want to respond, we can't tell.

E: Christ. Super. What are we feeding them?

J: The adult requires fewer nutrients than what we're calling its/her "pupae." Sea Slug loves our compost with corn mixed in. For the pups, we've been bringing in tanks of seawater and letting them absorb what they need.

E: That seems like a lot dedicated to prisoners of war. Divert as much manpower as possible away and into atmospheric research. Y'all did

get the most recent Mox planetfall memo, right? There should be a committee for this.

J: There is, but I thought you should still be kept up to speed after what our xenohistorian found.

E: About the Mox, or about these slugs?

J: Both, the species were communicating. They found logograms, sir, that pair with Sea Slug's retinal shapes. If this is a form of identification, the organism in holding is **unintelligible**.

E: Wasn't that the reported chemical engineer?

J: Chemical weapons engineer, sir.

E: For a planet that's all tidal pools, it has some amazingly complex organisms.

J: Quite complex. Our xenohistorian doesn't even know how they breed—he now thinks cocoons. As of yet, we certainly can't explain how they built weapons.

E: Would she be able to tell us?

J: She might.



She was. For every proxy war fought in her lifetime, she was the crafter behind the canisters fired, the eutrophyng potions, the gunk accidentally swallowed by slugs in the heat of battle which dissolved their brains during ceasefires. There was always infighting (her employment), always zealous, rabid segments of the population (her patrons). But never troubles with the Mox. The Mox planet waded deep into the sky, relaying messages that took years to write and receive. Their peoples were never allies, only pen pals. Mostly, the scientists spoke to each other, but sometimes she heard of funny messages coming from space. “Do you think God exists?” “Can you guess what number I am thinking of?”



“They're killing us,” Early said after he punched her. “We need to get a shot in.”

Thankfully, the children were on the cot when she fell. The holding cell was tight, tighter with Early inside and guards in the doorway. Noises stuck onto surfaces. Her children had developed the ability to hear, but they were born too early to have had much contact with American Southern English. The only sound they understood was their mother expelling fluids from her face.

“Do your part,” Early said, throwing a disassembled pistol onto the floor.

Sea Slug wiped off the fluids. The National Guards smiled. Spongebob and Patrick felt the fear and touched each other’s faces in response. Early repeated himself.

“*Engineer*,” he added. She did nothing.

“What about the translator?” someone asked. Early quieted them.

“Put it together.”

Deprived of oceanic nutrients, her skin shifted from the color of dark pines to a lackluster green. She was more translucent, like a drawing half-erased. Early was thick edges, isometric angles. And she was proud she lacked a presence—anyone could draw onto her, shift her form into something else. She decided not to respond to the American.

“It’s a gun,” he said. Correct. “I’m allowing you to assemble the gun, but not to fire it. If you fire it...” He pointed to the guards behind him. “Just assemble it. Work for the good guys,” he continued after mutual glaring, “or I’ll assemble it, and shoot your pup.”

He grabbed one and she felt warm. In her society, a deal changed the third time it was offered. She was happy this was true for Texans, too.

Their societies did not overlap in terms of weapons design. Below her was a pistol. Each part was individually produced to gestalt into a lethal device. Each pin, spring, and rivet had a purpose. This was a stupid tool. It had a clear and regular result (fire one ball of metal) and could be disabled with the removal of a single part (hammer, extractor pin, trigger spring).

When the tidal trenches roared with life and war, no one knew what her rockets would do, not even herself. Sometimes they bit or burst or spattered the soul of a victim onto the plankton below. Her work was chiefly improvisation, traveling from skirmish to workshop to the knotted recesses of her mind where she thought about all the blinding ways an organism can be shattered. It was a game in a game. How can you counteract, stop, even test a weapon you don’t understand, couldn’t predict? If you slice a cartridge in half, will it triple in size?

And in front of her was Captain Early shouting *assemble* and pointing to a cupful of metal.

Fine. This test might be how her oldest child died. But they were really dead anyway, so she gave it no mind. There was a reason no one had seen a slug like her for years. When she refused Early, he kicked her some more but didn’t kill her kid, just let a guard collect the broken weapon.

“This is what ‘bad cop’ looks like,” Early said as he left.



Ambassador Tilion: Why was I shipped down with a herd of pigs?

Lor Misk Planetary Biology Committee: Weapons testing.

T: I thought we built a weapon back in Mobile? What happened to that?

L: Please sit. Nothing happened *to* it. Upon arrival, we discovered the Mox had developed better defenses. Until we think outside the box, they will be able to planetfall us and we won't be able to touch them with our current systems. Petty Officer Jolahue has stated we couldn't fart in their direction without the Mox preparing a defense. You get the idea; we need help.

T: Can I drink this?

L: Go ahead, but don't expect to adjust immediately to the taste. You understand that you have been sent for your linguistic background, not your supposed training in war tactics.

T: **sipping** I will act as parley for the captured subject. I'm told it's an adult, one of those slugs.

L: Yes, we think it is a mother based on its salinity levels.

T: How can it...exist?

L: Let the committee know if you find out, ambassador. Our best guess is that it is an old creature, born before the life cycle broke. Old, like, it has scars.

T: Physical scars?

L: Yes, along what we would think of as sex organs and back. Our xenohistorian is digging up records every day. He's researching fruit now, but last we heard the scars were probably from the slug's involvement in the conflict he's calling "The Velvet Holocaust."

T: Um, what side was it on?

L: Our man thinks both. We don't know.



The soldiers talked about the walks Tilion and Sea Slug took, first around the military base's indoor pool and later out on the continents of tidal flats. Sea Slug heard the tips of these conversations in passing, or when the guards spoke outside her cell. They made jokes about a beachside romance, and one boy even suggested writing erotica about the fledgling pair.

"They would be a disgusting couple. No one would write about them," Jolahue once dismissed.

“If we wanna read that we have mangas to turn to!” a young Georgian added.

It was never *her* gossip. When she talked to the Americans, it was to Tilion, telling him how her species labeled prime numbers, and how she imagined the Mox as more like termites than pigs. She had seen the corral of pigs on their walks, but Tilion thought she was still confused about their purpose. Since the pistol incident, Early hadn’t approached her about building weapons for the Americans. But Tilion knew he would soon, and probably offer her pigs. Someone would need to turn her, and though it hurt Early, he knew Tilion was the best option. Politicians suggested she be tortured until she built a planet-destroying missile. Ambassadors whispered about the Mox preparing another planetfall.

She was questioned about her planet’s fruit and its wars, and where all that went. On one walk, Tilion learned the real names of Spongebob and Patrick. She cradled them constantly, as if the pupae touched the ground their spell would be broken. To the military, the children were the least magical aspects of the whole affair. For years, they had caught similar pupae in their nets, or found translucent corpses of them at low tide. Now rarer, oystermen and patrol boats still found washes of them at sea. Caught in gyres.

“When will yours mature?” Tilion asked in her language towards the end of one such walk. And Sea Slug’s face contorted and squelched in a way that was a note too similar to crying.



Captain Early: I was told we had a hypothesis about the mother slug?

Lor Misk Planetary Biology Committee: Yes, the ambassador has been talking to the creature.

Ambassador Tilion: Hi.

L: Also, we now believe it reproduces asexually, so maybe we should think about pronoun use.

E: Reproduction? That’s what we’re on about?

T: It connects to the hypothesis.

E: And how does it connect to weapons production?

L: The committee has resolved that there could be leverage here.

T: We think it’s about figs. I’ve been following the xenohistorian’s paper trail and asking about holes in his knowledge. Breakthrough came when I was talking about fruit and eating a fig.

E: Figs? Since when did we have figs here? I thought we shipped down pigs.

T: Yes, well, I brought *figs* for the ride and the committee liked

them, so we're growing them now. Do you know about the fig wasp? It requires a specific environment to lay its eggs. It loves to use a fig fruit. The wasp, when ready, burrows inside the fig and uses the fruit to keep its eggs safe and healthy. And the fruit needs a specific pollinator to reproduce: this fig wasp. When the wasp burrows, it carries foreign fig sperm into this new fig and lays the sperm there with its eggs. If there are no adult wasps to pollinate a fig, the fruit will blacken and rot.

E: And without a fig the wasps cannot reproduce.

L: Exactly. You arrived on Lor Misk before us, sir. How many adult slugs did you see? Alive, we mean.

E: The crew heard reports of dozens, but I only saw a few on the horizon. Not like now.

T: And was there some kind of fruit on the planet, some kind of *sea-fig*?

E: Not that I saw.

T: What if there was? Maybe not necessary for egg-laying, but to provide some sort of aquatic envelope for a slug as it transitions from pupae to adult. In some of their communications material, the slugs diagram a transformation process in a dark, tuberous object. This could all connect to the cocoons the xenohistorian was researching. You see, when this species of fruit went extinct, the slugs couldn't cocoon, and therefore mature—

E: So, they stayed as pupae.

L: Asexual, yet sterile without the sea-fig. Those are the creatures the oystermen are finding in their nets. This is a world on its last generation of teenagers. Now, the Mox do not operate like this, we can't go on the offense with our ideas, but we recommend that you consider how the slugs would reward us if you gave them another cocoon.

E: We need to test this hypothesis.

T: On it.

E: Could you reverse engineer a sea-fig? Breed a big enough one for Spongebob's use?

L: We will meet and discuss options.

E: Alright, I like this. This is good. Keep this up.



The first humans to land on her planet had similar names to one another. Both were types of surveyors, but mostly they were spies. Eventually caught

in an intraspecies inquisition, they had their heads blown from their bodies. But before their death and their S.O.S. call, before they roused Early and the Texans from Earth, before political commentators started their conspiracy theories, the two sat on a wet rock and shared a pack of American Spirits. This was the taste of the frontier. In the water below them, floating like inverted diving bells were fruit. They finished the entire pack, and with each butt they threw into the sea they tried to name the new plants. They weren't quite pomegranates, weren't quite apples. Then the second got up to urinate, and the first took that to signal the end of the game. The fruits stayed deep, almost as mysterious and untouched as they had been minutes ago.



She was allowed to spend time at the indoor pool. It was a yellowed place, but she could slip into the kiddie pool with her pupae and wash them, play with them, teach the older one how to submerge itself in a few inches of water. The wives of ranking military officers either lowered their indoor shades and stared, or abandoned their moist citadel when she arrived. When the latter arose, the place was all to herself and her species save for the door-posted guard. Then, she swam. She laid her body against the matted bottom of the pool and swam wide circles, keeping an arm on each of her children and her eyes on the overhead lights. One time, a guard brought her colored chocolate candies from a vending machine. The dyes dissolved in the pool and the whole family played a game in which they dove and tried to absorb each chocolate before it hit the floor. She was feeling what she always felt, but harder, faster, like the end was more definite.

Sea Slug was thinking about writing an autobiography. Working with Tilion and that xenohistorian later in life, when she was sure she was the only surviving adult. Her logograms could be translated and bound together into the last work of native literature. And although the chocolate game only happened once, she knew it would take up a whole chapter.

The Americans changed the nutrient streams of her children. The Americans from Cape Canaveral started spending more time staring skyward at the Mox, writing furiously in their books. Captain Early declared the first weekday a day of official patriotism, where they could let it all out. Sea Slug took a walk one of those nights and heard gunshots and ukulele. An all-female quartet of soldiers were leading folksongs about the Mississippi before it changed its course. Avoiding the event, Sea Slug passed by the greenhouse. The biologists were testing something bulbous inside, something glistening and organic.



Ambassador Tilion: Yes, she understands that she is a burden on the military. She sees no reason to help, though. She— **talking with Sea Slug in unintelligible language, growling** She wants to see what her options are.

Captain Early: Well, here's what her options are: she gives us weapons plans, we build said weapon and mount it, we eliminate the Mox, everyone wins. Tell her she would get to test pigs. And she would be getting more contracts from America if the Mox solution is successful.

T: Yes, uh, okay. Define "successful."

E: Their planet should be destroyed, but since she works with chemicals, biological destruction would suffice.

T: She's asking if the genocide would be against the Mox, or all the planet's species.

E: Christ! We just want the Mox gone. Look at their history. Other contracts could cover attacking other species.

T: Yes, yes, **arguing with Sea Slug** She thinks it is an interesting challenge, but she doesn't care. Sir. She will die, and her pupae will never mature, never gain real mouths.

E: Fine. All on the table: tell her we could solve her children's problem. Tell her about our modified sea-fig.

T: She doesn't believe you. It has been years since the fruit blossomed below.

E: We can show Sea Slug the fig, but she has to leave Spongebob and Patrick in the cell. The only way either of her kids gets close to the thing is if she builds the weapon.

T: She wants a timeline for missile development.

E: **Pounds on table** We're fucking getting somewhere! We have the resources. Give her two weeks, then we hit the Mox fast.

T: She says after the launch, she must be given the fruit and allowed to leave the facility—not followed. She says the fruit must be bountiful for her species to return. If the tidal pools are to teem again with colonies, if the lonely pupae are to ripen into true old age, the fruit must bear seeds. And the fruit and its seeds must not be poisoned by whatever ruined the previous fruits.

E: Hold up. Jolahue! Jola—

Petty Officer Jolahue: Sir.

E: What do the scientists think killed the sea-figs, and have we fixed that?

J: Sir, we think it was tobacco mosaic virus. We've bred for disease-resistance I am told.

E: Translate that it's fixed, Ambassador.

T: **Arguing with Sea Slug loudly** Yup, wait a minute, wait. She wants time to decide.

E: I thought we had a dead-set deal.

T: She wants time.

E: If she doesn't tell me by Friday, I'll smash the sea-fig at our next party. We can start smashing her children like the governors have been asking. I prefer carrot to stick, but the airwaves are full of people asking for a weapon. Right now, that's her use.



While Sea Slug was reintroduced to the fruit, Tilion stood near the corral, watching her outline behind the steam-covered glass. She was inside the greenhouse, framed against the fruit, running her arms down it, into its main canal. It was emotional for her, as so many reintroductions were. Her planet had taken the fruit for granted, until they didn't, and now she held it in her arms. Outside, the sows were squealing in their mud pits.

Colonists used to dump breeding couples of pigs on uninhabited islands in the New World. Just in case. Without natural predators, they flourished, and in 1609 when an English rescue ship was wrecked south of Florida, the sailors came across an island. It was littered with pigs left by Spanish explorers nearly a century earlier. The beasts swallowed baby birds from nests and uprooted fruit, but when the lost sailors found them, all was warm for a moment. Now the biologists were talking to Sea Slug, confirming the particulars of this deal. The sea-fig could easily be hers. It was Wednesday.

When she got back to her holding cell, she cradled her pupae. Without the fruit, they could last another five years before their organs began to give. She knew they were not special, only two of the countless finales, but she loved them more than the rest, and knew that love was right, no matter if they were borne from her sex or cloned in the heat of battle. Her engineer brain kept running, calculating victory types. Thinking about the days it took for fruit seeds to turn into plants. The atmospheric composition of her planet and the Mox one, and what kind of material a rocket would need to be encased in to work. The population rate of her species if she planted fruits across the shoreline. If they cloned themselves instead of procreating, it might only be decades before they re-founded the old capitals, learned how to read

the logograms, started the long conversations again. Her good people, her kin. Sea Slug knew they'd be living under a gravestone: smoothly orbiting, planet-sized, but a gravestone just the same.

Her walks with Tilion continued into Thursday. Out to the tidal flats, him munching his plantation fruit. He asked why she was still questioning Early's deal. She answered: the genocide of another species. The same argument that passed through the military's lips passed through his: the Mox were bent on destroying humans, and they fired first. Years after the Landing, America was still pulling chunks of the Moon out of the Gulf of Mexico, still redrawing the borders as the tides continued to erratically shift. Far away, but close enough, Neptune was nothing more than a cloud of dust. Take the deal, and at least she'd save another species: her own.

When the slugs fought, it was never to totally cleanse the land, she said. Not even during the Velvet Years.

The way things are going, Tilion said, there will be a holocaust. There are only so many celestial bodies left in human's solar system that the Mox can planetfall: the military aren't revenge-driven psychopaths, they're mathematicians. If she doesn't take the deal, another engineer will replace her.

If she could've been replaced, Early would've done it a while ago, she quipped.

Things take a while to begin, but they would get done. She knew what he meant. Refusal was only delay—the conflict would end somehow.

Was he told to try to convince her? she asked.

He was an ambassador.

She thought she had someone to confide in.

She had her holding cell, he said. He was just giving her the hard truths. There was no great way to cut it.

Could he help her with a hard truth, then?

Sure, he said. They went to the pig corral in silence. She laid her pupae out on a bench and took up a wooden stake.

She improvised. She told him before how disgusted she was at American firearms, didn't he know this? There was no reason for pigs, because there was no reason for physical weapons testing. She wouldn't even know what she would be building.

How will this work, then? he asked. Who would ensure missile safety, ensure its power?

They all would. It is a dance. She could use the Americans' help with liftoff, but her planet's chemicals are complex, full of factors alien minds would stretch to understand. She could try to explain to the scientists and

crafters, but she didn't need them to understand. It would work on impact; their problems would be solved.

Fine. What were they doing with the pigs?

Killing them, she said as she tried to stab one with a stake.

Whoa, whoa. They could just use them for the barbecue later. Or, or why not let them go free?

Sea Slug dropped the stake, melted her arms back into her body. Early had told her a story, about Jamestown, where he was a historical reenactor before the draft. The Jamestown colony was dying, expecting a rescue ship, but the sent vessels kept crashing. Sea Slug couldn't stop thinking about what those wrecked sailors saw as they ran aground and looked upon their isolation. If Sea Slug released the pigs, their spread couldn't be healthily controlled. Instead, she wanted to kill them, kill them and get this over with.

Tilion heard her, he said.



Captain Early: Does that mean she said yes?

Ambassador Tilion: It felt like her way of preparing for weapon crafting. A final goodbye?

E: She cooperates and there's no net loss of a species. Did you tell her that?

T: Just as you said.

E: Well, it's a quarter past midnight. Officially Friday.

T: She's sleeping with her pups, sir, and you did say the end of the day was the deadline. As soon as she decides, I think she'll start building and not stop. She's that kind of mother.

E: I'll get a crew of workers on standby. How great would it be to launch during the barbecue?



She spent that night making the capsule to the missile. Throughout Friday, she urged her American crafters on like performance companions. Captain Early smiled from his station, his wife brought out a chair to watch the construction. Welders, carpenters, and engineers fitted a chassis to Sea Slug's recommendations. Rocket scientists took notes, but despite everyone's efforts, Sea Slug was right: they didn't totally understand. Safety czars and gangs of hawk-eyed crafters checked the chassis components, the tip angle. Together, they filled the body of

the weapon with bags of fertilizer compounds—ammonia salts that doubled as explosives. It was an army inside an army working on that beach, all weekend. It was run-through as best as any improvisation could be run-through. They took water breaks in unison.

When the sun set Monday afternoon, the missile neared completion. It was the second largest weight on the horizon. Only the planet of the Mox loomed plump beyond it. Sea Slug inserted the central capsule into the missile's heart; weapons crafting without her pupae on her was a new feeling, but somewhat comfortable. She had made the right choice.

Around her, fires lit up and the barbecuing of the pigs began. Soldiers gave speeches at no one in particular, until it was time.

As the weapon lifted off her planet, she told Tilion that it was proper etiquette to give warning of a devastating strike by distributing leaflets to the soon-dead civilians.

“We did that, too. In Hiroshima,” he said.

“I wrote with logograms,” she said in near-English.

“What...what did you write?”

Silence, there. Partying on the beach, but around her just silence, and then Tilion passed Sea Slug the fruit.

“We'll come by the cell later to talk, I know the biology committee wants a timeline for when your chemical weapons will start affecting the Mox. But here, go back to your cell, give your kids what they deserve.”



In the end, she disobeyed Tilion. She left the base and went straight to the tidal pools. Sea Slug went straight back to hiding. The fruit in one armpit, Spongebob hidden in the other, she sank into the wet-black.



Once her pupae matures and forms a mouth, they will ask what happened to their sibling. She will explain how they became their own seed, how they were secretly loaded into a capsule of a rocket, a rocket full of stolen fruit seed, fertilizer, papers, and shot away. To colonize, to clone, to ally with the Mox. Because she was a good improviser, but a better planner. It would be only this late that Sea Slug will feel comfortable dropping the nickname the Americans gave them, the pronouns they used. Back home, the color of a crocodile, they are original again.

They might be found, or the Mox destroyed, someday. One of their children might die, but, by splitting their planets and plans, both strands of their family would not perish, their species would not perish. They had the Americans, the pigs, their fruit, to thank for that. Hidden in their new cell, their new niche, they would tell their now-adult child what they wrote on those thousands of leaflets.

“Can you guess what number I am thinking of?”

*Dedicated to Arkadiy Bakmutov
and the hundreds of Russian missile scientists
who sought to better the lives of their families
by defecting to North Korea in 1992, and failed.*

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ART FEATURE

ELECTROGENESIS

Art by [Ninja Jo](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

Many of our most powerful thoughts, feelings, and emotions can be described as beginning with a spark: good things like the spark of love, the spark of joy, or the spark of life; and bad things like the spark of anger, the spark of sadness, or the spark of hate. And yet, when applying this wildly effective metaphor to the works of Russian digital artist and painter, Katerina Belikova, better known by her pen name, *Ninja Jo*, the sentiment falls a bit flat—her works don't just *spark* the thought and emotion centers of the brain, they light them immediately afire.

The flame of creation begins with a spark, whether in the brain of an artist, or in the lab of a mad scientist like Dr. Frankenstein. It can ignite a machine (e.g. the combustion engine inside an automobile), or power a thinking mind (e.g. the synapses in a human brain; the current in a computer processor).

"My inspiration comes from real life," says Katerina. "Sunset colors, old buildings, music, movies. But my favorite thing about my art is when I imagine robots living like humans—doing human things, feeling human feelings. What would they be like if they were common like us?"

Her answer seems to be: *They'd be just like us*. They would drive cars, cultivate gardens, care for pets, wear clothes, eat food, stare at sunsets, feel lonely, question meanings, and even die.

Pictured left: *Shocked*

They would also have free will.

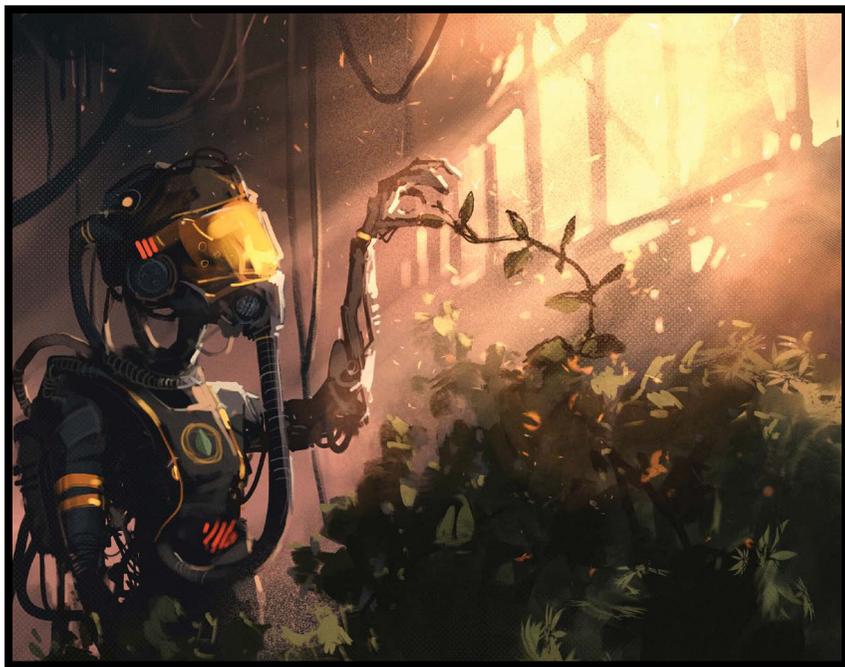
“When creating my art,” Katerina explains, “sometimes, I do a line sketch and color it, but sometimes I just get right to work using big, bold colors, and I begin shaping something that I don’t yet know what it will be. The result is always unexpected and unplanned, but I believe that’s the coolest way for me to paint—when I just let my hand do its thing and let the characters become who or what they want to be.”

But with free will comes choice, consequence, and the creeping feeling that in the big scheme of things, neither actually matters. A gangly body of actuators, compressors, and multi-hinged joints will degrade until one day they fail completely, and eventually, even the most advanced computer processor will power down for the last time. What then?

But that is a question for another day.

In the meantime, Katerina’s robots have chosen to live. Live just like us, with all the pain, suffering, and quiet longing we know so well. When you think about it, this seems to be a decidedly illogical decision for machines that I assume are programmed to avoid their own destruction. Why enter into a contract that is guaranteed to end in the complete and total violation of Asimov’s Third Law of Robotics?

In my mind, the answer is this:



Pictured above: *Greenhouse*



Life will always be worth living for anything that by design looks to the world in search of meaning, even when the answer sometimes is, “there is no meaning here.” Pattern recognition is special, but pattern creation is divine. Even when the light of the world has dimmed and no guiding star has risen in its stead, a thinking, feeling, emotional being’s ability to love, ponder, create, dream, and remember will always override the despair that seems to lurk in the background of even the prettiest and most vibrant of tapestries.

“Most of the time, my art is a reflection of my own feelings,” says Katerina. “I like to see my art as my personal diary. In my darkest days and brightest hours, I paint.”



Pictured top: *Lucy* **Bottom right:** *Chain*



Pictured above (top): *There's Nothing* **Above (bottom):** *Winter Lights*



Pictured above: *Last Day of Summer*





HASHTAG NO FILTER

by [Louis Evans](#)

It was another glorious evening in paradise. The sun hung low over the ocean, gold lining the pomegranate sky, and Zoe took more than thirty pics—sharp-edged little squares capturing her painted toes, the sand, the surf, the sea, the sun, the sky—until she found the one she wanted. The one that would make some poor girl shivering on a train platform in Chicago practically *feel* a warm breeze playing around her calves. The perfect shot.

Once she had it, Zoe put her thumbs to work. *#paradise #sunset #perfectday* she wrote, hashtags flying out in machine gun succession, and then the obligatory *#LuxeauResort*. And, as always, she finished with her signature *#nofilter*.

Some of the other girls liked to write little stories, bad puns, or commentary in their hashtags, but Zoe kept it simple. That was her attitude, her whole essence: simple, fun, chill. Never fake, but never depressing, either. Her life was *amazing*, and she just felt it was her privilege—and her duty—to share it with her followers. Yes, of course she enjoyed the views, the likes. But it was really all about her fans.

Zoe hit “share,” and the image raced from her phone to her 1.2 million followers. It was stunning, when you thought about it, how the flash of her thumb across the screen could reach out from this cozy little island and touch over a million people around the world. Zoe didn’t usually think about it, though; it was just a natural constant. Like the sun, the sea, the sand. And the other girls.

Nat, Zoe's roommate, came splashing out of the surf towards her, sopping but grinning. She brandished her phone, which was in some sort of waterproof case, with a fisheye lens setup goggling from the phone's camera.

"I got the fish!" she shouted.

"Oh yeah?" Zoe smiled. Nat had been after those fish for days.

Nat jogged up to Zoe's chair and bent over to show her the phone's screen. Zoe propped herself up on her elbows as Nat flipped through the shots.

They really were gorgeous fish. They were a deep, burnt orange with cobalt slashes running along their flanks, and though they were no bigger than Zoe's pinky—and Zoe was a tiny woman—Nat had captured them close up and in perfect focus. One of the fish even had its mouth open like a smooch in a few of the shots.

"That's awesome, babe!" Secretly, Zoe felt that Nat probably tried too hard. What was the point of buying fancy cameras and splashing about and trying to convince a fish to pose for you when you could just take, you know, selfies and sunsets? And it didn't seem to have done her any good—Nat had barely half a million followers, the second-fewest of all six of the girls at the resort.

But Zoe supposed everyone who was internet-famous had their own little niche, and that was all there was to it.

"There," said Nat. "That one." Zoe nodded. Personally, it wasn't the one she would have chosen—one of the fish filling half the screen, the other coyly flipping its tail out of frame—but it made sense for Nat.

"Now let's see about the filter," Nat said.

"You're not going to use that stupid resort filter, are you?" Luxeau had designed a custom filter just for the six of them, and while it was pretty classy, Zoe had drawn the line. She lived a no-filter life. Cameron, the contest coordinator, was always wheedling her to include it in a shot or two, but she'd held firm.

Of course, Nat used all sorts of crazy filters, all the time. Which was fine, Zoe supposed. Only some people had principles.

"No, duh," said Nat. "I just got this cool new filter set that a follower sent me, I'm gonna try it out."

She fiddled with the settings, and then swiped the first filter onto the screen.

The picture now showed a pair of grey minnows, a little out-of-focus, in a dim, greenish-grey sea.

"Well, obviously not that one," said Zoe, decisively. She was no nature photography expert, but nobody on the internet would like that. It was so...ordinary.

"No," said Nat, sounding puzzled. "It's not supposed to look like that."

Swipe, and the minnows disappeared, replaced with a pair of plastic fish, traffic-cone orange, floating in a dingy bathtub.

“Not like that either,” Nat said, her voice moving from puzzled to angry. “I tried it already on some online photos, and it’s nothing like that at all. Just really clear picture quality.”

Swipe again, and two fish skeletons sat on a paper plate, lying on the sidewalk. *Swipe*, and lines of green text sketched out vague fishlike outlines. *Swipe*, and...

“Oh my god,” said Zoe, throwing a hand up to cover her eyes and turning away. “What is that?” Beside her, she heard the sound of Nat gagging, but the other woman didn’t turn away.

“Maybe... a brain?” Nat whispered. “But then, what are all those wires? And the *color*—”

“Jesus, Nat, put it away!”

“Yeah, okay.”

Zoe peeked. Nat had the phone off, holding it down by her side. She was staring off at the perfect sun and frowning. “What the hell was *that*?” Nat murmured.

The next day, Zoe was lying in a hammock strung between two palm trees a five-minute walk from the cabana, trying to decide between a face-selfie and one that showed her from navel to upper lip, cropped just below the nose. Honestly, both were amazing, but Zoe had to choose. Too many selfies in a row just came across as needy.

She had just gone for the second selfie—she liked this one’s air of mystery, as it showed the perfect hint of pout in her laid-back smile—when Nat came jogging up.

Nat was dressed down, in a white tank top and shorts. Cameron would probably chide her for that at lunch—the resort preferred when the girls wore bikinis. But Nat had an odd look on her face—halfway between spaced-out and intent, if that made any sense—and Zoe figured clothes were the last thing on her roommate’s mind.

“Do you know you can’t delete the app off your phone?” Nat said, not even bothering to greet Zoe.

“Sure, you can,” Zoe said. “You just hold down the icon, and—”

“No, I know,” said Nat. “But you can’t delete *that one app*.” She pressed her thumb down on the familiar image, and sure enough, it began to jiggle vulnerably, and the delete button appeared at the corner. But when Nat clicked the delete button, the app just beeped and returned to its normal happy state. The deletion had failed.

“Huh,” said Zoe. It was weird, but it didn’t matter. She’d never abandon her loyal fans. Besides, it was practically her *job* at this point.

“That doesn’t freak you out?” Nat’s stressed-out voice broke into Zoe’s reverie.

Zoe shrugged. “It’s just some weird phone thing, you know. Why get worked up?” Nat snorted, stared off into the distance.

“How did you get here?” she asked abruptly.

“I won the contest! We all did.” Zoe smiled, a little puzzled. Usually Nat seemed super smart, but sometimes she’d ask the dumbest questions.

“No. Like, physically. Was it by plane? Or by boat? Or—”

“A plane, I guess.” Zoe hadn’t thought about it in a while. She cast her mind backwards and found only a friendly blankness. “Yeah. Probably a plane.”

“And how long have we been here?”

“A week.”

“A week?”

“Yeah, I think that’s right.” Zoe was even less sure than that. But then, vacation was always like that, wasn’t it?

“Yeah,” said Nat. “I thought so too. But then I scrolled back through my pics, and, well, the dates all say three days ago...four days ago...but...”

“Yeah?”

“There’s too many. *Way* too many. I counted nearly a *hundred* of mine before the scroll stopped working. And this guy said—” Nat stopped herself. One of the resort rules was that contest winners could have “no public romantic partners,” which nobody had needed to tell Zoe; she knew what that did to her follows and likes.

“Oooh,” Zoe said. “What guy?”

“The one who sent the filters. He said...nevermind.” Nat stalked off. Zoe frowned at her departing figure, then finished tagging up her torso-selfie, and posted it.

Nat missed lunch (berry-beet acai bowls, *#cleaneating*). Then, at dinner (kale and avocado salad, *#whole30*), Cameron asked if she’d taken anything good today—a none-too-subtle way to let her know that she hadn’t been posting, and he’d noticed. Nat grumbled her way through it, and bolted for the room she shared with Zoe before she could even get a good pic of dessert. When Zoe made it back, Nat was already in bed, the covers pulled up over her head, utterly silent.

When Zoe woke the next morning, Nat was nowhere to be seen, which was just fine with *her*. Really—what was the point of spoiling another perfect day in paradise? Zoe took a handful of quick pre-beach selfies, and a few

more with her surfboard. She didn't actually surf, nor did she really know how, but that was her little secret, right?

All in all, it was a very productive morning: the posts went out, and the hearts came flooding in, and by the time lunch came and went for the five girls (only still no Nat), Zoe was feeling very satisfied with herself.

But all that ended as Nat stumbled into the cabana.

Nat was a mess. She was dripping wet, which was ordinary enough, but she was also covered in sand. Weird, grey, coarse stuff. Not the white powder of the beach. And when she pulled her bangs out of her face, Zoe saw that her forearms had been scraped so badly that they were dripping blood.

"Oh my god!" said Gabi. Jade let out a tiny shriek.

"What happened to you?" Zoe shouted.

"I lost my phone," said Nat. Her voice was flat and exhausted. "I was getting a picture of an anemone, and a wave hit, and it got knocked out my hands, and—" Her voice cut out, and she threw herself onto one of the chairs in frustration.

"Anyway, I spent the whole afternoon looking for it under rocks, and in the sand, and *everywhere*, but I just *couldn't* find it, and I never back *anything* up to the cloud, and now it's all *gone!*"

Sympathetic heads nodded. This generation of web celebrities had learned the lessons from hacked nudes of its predecessors; nobody in a million *years* would back up their pics to a *cloud*. And nobody brought external hard drives on vaycay.

"Let me get you another one!" said Gabi. She'd done some sort of product placement deal with Apple a few years back, and she could practically make it rain iPhones.

"No, it's...it's fine," said Nat. "I can take care of it. It'll just be *weeks*, probably, before it gets here, and—"

"Good news!" said Cameron, sweeping into the cabana. He smiled, and his teeth were as perfect as his hair; his button-down was absolutely spotless. "I found your phone, Nat!" He pulled it triumphantly from his pocket and presented it to her.

It was out of the waterproof case she'd been using, but it was definitely Nat's phone. It was the right model, the same standard black Nat loved. It had the dent in the corner and the faded *#fearless* sticker on its back. Nat took the phone from Cameron with an expression of pure shock.

"But—how?" she spluttered.

Cameron just smiled.

"Thank you!" she finally got out.

And then dinner arrived, and everyone's attention turned to other matters: food, and photos of food. Roasted sprouts, baked yams, and poached eggs sparkled under the flashing lights, as Cameron looked on proprietarily. And then dessert: Häagen-Dazs-sponsored sundaes, dusted with gold flakes. The girls took their dessert pics, followed by a spoonful or two to eat, and then dumped the better part of the sundaes in the trash—except for Beth, whose metabolism was *incredible*. Then they headed off to bed.

Later that night, while Nat took what Zoe hoped was a relaxing bath in their crazy-oversized bathroom Jacuzzi, Zoe stood in front of the wall-to-wall mirror. She'd finished pulling a half-dozen hairs from her upper lip, popped in a sugar-free breath mint, and was getting ready to remove her makeup before bed, but found herself debating whether to take a few selfies in the mirror first. It felt a little cheap, but a bathroom shot in dim light with a careful pout was always a hit, and Zoe could use a win; she hadn't posted anything popular all day. She could take one quickly, tag it *#nightbabies*, and go to bed feeling better.

She took a couple quick pics, deleted them in frustration, rearranged the angle, and turned around so that there was flattering backlighting. She was just about to start snapping again when Nat wordlessly climbed out of the tub, wrapped an old t-shirt around her hair, and made her way over to the sink. Zoe sighed and put her phone down on the counter. No point in taking pics if Nat was wandering through the shot naked, and given how touchy Nat had been lately, Zoe didn't want to ask her to move.

Nat stood in front of the sink and washed her face in silence, scrubbing furiously. It was no good for her skin, but Zoe didn't want to say anything. Instead, she came up beside Nat and began her own evening routine: she popped off her lashes, cleaned off her eyeliner and foundation with a series of wipes, and then patted down her face with a microfiber cloth; and all the while, Nat didn't speak, didn't even *look* at her or *smile*, and eventually, it was so awkward that Zoe just *had* to say something.

"Sure was lucky that Cameron found your phone, huh." Zoe said, pointing at the phone that Nat had left teetering on the edge of the bathroom countertop.

Nat turned and stared at Zoe. Her face was a total puzzle.

"Listen," she said, pointing at the countertop. "This is not my fucking phone."

"But—"

"I *know* it isn't, because I didn't lose my phone in the ocean. I smashed it with a fucking rock."

"You what?"

“I smashed it with a fucking rock, on another fucking rock, and then I dumped all the pieces in the sea, and then fucking Cameron showed up with *this* goddamn phone instead!”

“It looks just like yours,” said Zoe. In her experience, things usually looked like what they were.

“That’s what they want me to think! They *did* something to it!”

“Well, let me take a look at it,” Zoe said reasonably.

“No, don’t—”

But Zoe had already snatched it from the counter. Her fingers twinkled through Nat’s remembered password, and the device obligingly unlocked. Her thumb unerringly found the app, and Nat’s pics flashed instantly onto the screen.

“See, it’s got your account too!”

“Give it *back!*”

Nat lashed out, but she was a mess, practically shaking, and honestly, Zoe didn’t feel like it was a good idea to hand the phone back to her in that condition. She held it tight while Nat grappled with it, and Zoe grabbed on with her other hand until her fingers slid across the screen, and the phone twisted between them—

Flash, and the telltale sound of a simulated shutter. Nat staggered back. Her breathing was ragged.

“What the fuck did you do?”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t post it!” said Zoe, staring down at the phone. It was just a perfectly normal picture of Nat’s torso, a little blurred from the phone’s motion. Impossible to imagine posting something that hideously un-composed, but it was fine.

“See?” She held it up to Nat.

And that’s when Zoe saw her roommate.

From the collarbone up, Nat was still perfectly normal. But below that Nat had...changed.

Everything was still the right shape. Nat still had a chest, and arms, and fingers. But her skin was all gone. There were muscles, raw and wet like uncooked chicken, and there were wires and cables like out of one of those ads for faster internet, and there were pistons and gears like the insides of a sports car, and little specks of light and dust flickered and rippled across the surface, and everything was attached wrong, and everything was moving, and Nat’s blood and bile and oil were oozing and leaking and dripping onto the floor; and somewhere in that mess, Nat’s lungs heaved and a burst of goo splattered out and landed on Zoe’s cheek.

Zoe turned, set down the phone, grabbed the sink with both hands, and vomited into it. Fortunately, she hadn't eaten much for dinner.

She had a few more dry heaves. In her peripheral vision, Nat's hand, appearing to be five surgical needles, scabbled the phone away. There was the sound of metal scratching on glass. And when Zoe rose from the sink again, Nat was staring at her, furious, total human, totally normal.

"Don't fucking do that," Nat said.

"I...I...What?" But Nat didn't answer, just shoved the bathroom door open, grabbed it before it could slam, and stomped out.

Later in bed, trying to make sense of it, Zoe spoke to the ceiling.

"I think that mint was an edible," she said. "'Cause I don't know what you saw, but it was a little freaky for me."

Nat's voice was tired, ragged.

"There's no fucking weed on this goddamn island, Zoe. Go the fuck to sleep."

The next morning at breakfast, Nat still looked a little wrung out, but she was once again normal. No paranoid ravings, no horrible metal guts. Cameron brought out omelets and served them to each girl, but when he got to Nat, he paused.

"Hey, Tasha," he said. "Are we gonna have any more problems today?"

"Nope," she said, hunching over the egg whites.

"'Cause you know, I don't like to be a bother about this, but as part of the terms of your stay, you're required to post at least—"

"I know. We're good."

Nat vanished after lunch, though Zoe saw her once or twice pacing atop the cliff from which Jade always did her most spectacular diving (with her selfie-stick-mounted GoPro in hand). And if Nat didn't seem to be taking many pictures, at least she was on her phone. That had to be a good sign, right?

And then it was dinner, followed by dessert—*#treatyourself*. Nat smiled and laughed as they made their way to the room, and it was practically like old times, until the door closed.

"Listen," said Nat, her voice suddenly harsh, her movements urgent and a little crazed as she locked the door behind her and whipped out her phone. "I'm getting the fuck out of here, okay. I'm—"

"Nat, wait—"

"Just *listen*. I don't know when Cameron will show up, but I'm betting that he *will*. I tried deleting the app, and I tried smashing the phone, and I tried the factory reset, but nothing worked, right? But then that follower—the guy

I mentioned—he sent me some custom app, and it’s supposed to purge your phone, and I’m gonna fucking do it. Okay, Zoe? And I need you to...I need you to—” She broke off at the same instant Zoe found her voice.

“Nat, what the hell is going on?”

Nat hyperventilated for a second, then took a deep breath. “I don’t know,” she said. “I just know that none of this...that something’s wrong here. It can’t be *real*. I think the filters, I think they show us what’s *real*, but then I can’t understand why it’s all *different*, and...nevermind. Just, I want you to have this, okay? In case something happens to me. Just...just don’t let it go.” She slipped a piece of paper into Zoe’s hand, and without thinking, Zoe pocketed it, staring at Nat’s face for any sign of sanity.

But Nat wasn’t looking at Zoe anymore. She had unlocked her phone, and Zoe could see the icon of a new app on the screen, red and angry.

“As soon as I tap this,” Nat said, and her thumb stabbed down onto the screen.

At that exact instant, there was a gentle knock at the door.

“Oh, fuck,” said Nat, and she shot into the bathroom.

“Tasha, Zoe, it’s me!” came Cameron’s voice. “Are you decent?” he sang through the wood.

Zoe heard the bathroom lock shoot closed, and Nat’s muffled voice hissed, “Stall him!”

“One sec, Cameron, there are nipples *everywhere!*” Zoe said.

The pounding on the door got louder.

“Let me in!”

Cameron sounded *pissed*, which never happened, and Zoe hesitated but, like, what if Nat had just gone crazy and just needed some help? Zoe reached for the door, but the handle turned on its own, and Cameron was standing in the doorway.

“Where is she, Zoe?”

Zoe said nothing, but her frantic glance at the bathroom gave the secret away instantly. Cameron marched to the bathroom and tried the knob. No dice. He put his shoulder into it, slamming against the doorframe, once, twice, and on the third try, *crack*, the wood gave way, and Cameron went stumbling into the bathroom.

It was empty. Completely empty. Cameron cast an angry glance around it, and then a puzzled one. And then, finally, he left.

Zoe spent twenty minutes of good sunset time going through that bathroom, swishing the bathtub curtain back and forth, even though she knew there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to go. Finally, confused and exhausted, she put herself to bed.

In the morning, Nat's bed was empty. But someone had come in during the night and fixed the bathroom door, which bore no signs of Cameron's assault. Zoe dressed perfunctorily—white tank, grey shorts—and made her way to breakfast. Nobody asked about Nat.

Halfway through the meal, which was serve-your-own yogurt (no Cameron-served omelets this time), Zoe heard the crunch of footsteps up the sandy hill. She turned.

Cameron was standing there, his arm around the shoulder of another girl. She was slender, brown-skinned, dark-haired. She looked kind of—but not *too* much—like Nat.

“This is Gia, everyone,” Cameron said. He smiled, every tooth perfect. “This is your new roommate, Zoe!”

Zoe introduced herself to Gia and asked a few questions about her—the sort of pics she took, how many followers she had—but her heart wasn't in it. Nor was it in any of her selfies that day; she was still all spun around. She couldn't make heads or tails of what Nat had said, or how she'd disappeared.

That night, she lay down in bed, and as she slid her hands into her pajama pockets, she found the paper Nat had passed her the night before. She pulled the slip out and read it by the light of the tropical moon that poured through her window.

“Address on back. Use the filter. You'll see.”

It was signed: *@NatAttack*

Zoe flipped the paper over. It looked like a web address, but not any normal web address. Just a bizarre string of numbers and letters.

Zoe held the paper in her hands, weighed it. She could tell Cameron about it, give him the paper, and the whole thing would go away.

And then, carefully, one character at a time, she typed the web address into her phone, and hit enter. It loaded instantly, and the progress bar zipped across the screen. The internet here was *fast*. And sure enough, when Zoe opened her app, there was a new filter there.

Zoe nodded, rolled over, and claimed whatever beauty sleep was left in the night.

The next day, Zoe thought about Nat. She thought about Nat as she showered, and as she exfoliated, and as she brushed her teeth, and as she plucked her brows, her lip, her chin. She thought about Nat as she watched Gia perform the same ritual silently and efficiently beside her. Zoe thought about Nat. Then about Cameron, the hotel, the island, the contest, the girls. Gia was a beautiful girl, and she seemed like she'd be a good roommate.

She wasn't Nat, though.

Zoe thought about Nat all throughout breakfast: what she'd done right; what she'd done wrong. And so, she spent her beautiful day in paradise just as she had spent all of them. She took pic after pic, every one of them no filter, and she made them count.

And then, at dinner, she looked at all the other girls sitting around the table, each one of them so beautiful, so flawless, and she smiled.

"I'm just so excited to have Gia with us!" she said. "Let's get a first-night-here selfie!"

The other girls cheered, and they packed in around Zoe, each girl turning to her own magic angle. Zoe slid her phone from her pocket, and she turned the filter on. Then she lifted the phone and held it up before all of them, and pressed the button.

The screen flashed, and Zoe stared into it, hair perfect, teeth just right, waiting for the glare to fade. Waiting to see.



LITTLE LOVES

by [Sophie Yorkston](#)

When I stroke the bubbly lumps of you beneath my skin, my professor pales, sweating. Will she make the mistake of vomiting in her helmet? However amusing that had been last time, it had made me gag.

With reverent fingertips, I trace your calcified cocoons underneath my stretched-tight skin. Inside, if I'm lucky, I can feel the minuscule vibrations from within your tiny grey egg sacs. I wonder if you will know me when you hatch, this body that has sheltered you, my little loves.

Quarantined in this deserted medical complex, I've had the time to hunt down what it is that makes people so squeamish about you, little ones. Trypophobia. People are disgusted by the holes you've put in me, at the way you move beneath.

"You're not the mother wasp!" my mother has shouted into the commlink. "You're the senseless caterpillar!"

Once I was afraid, as she is now. When holding the artifact from Charon, a dried piece of Pluto's frozen moon cradled in my gloved hand, it burst outward in a hoard of squirming larvae. You stung me, my darlings, sliding between connective tissue, crawling through my muscle, puncturing holes in the fibers. I was in agony, shoved in the furthest sterile corner of the research facility, alone, wondering if this was how I'd die.

When those tryphobics came to examine me, one vomited inside her isolation suit.

I'm ashamed to admit I wanted them to cut you out. They tried once. The professor, an ecologist with a passing understanding of mammalian biology, operated under the direction of an expert on the telescreen. The story is I screamed, even beneath the forgetful fugue of the anesthetic, and the scalpel just kept slipping.

I woke alone in recovery. In the prefab across the way, they were laughing. I knew then it would only be you and me.

My friends from class were allowed to say goodbye. The professor won't leave. She feels responsible. My friends cried, steaming up their suits. I tried to reach out to them, but the tutors didn't like that.

They don't understand. I'm not afraid. I'm no longer alone. I'll be mother to you all. You, smart things, have recruited my blood, my bone, woven them into a perfect home. You're a part of me.

My shoulder aches as you expand through my scapula, encroaching on the pleura of my thoracic cavity. The expert on the telescreen won't get here in time at the rate you're progressing, loves. She says if you burrow any deeper, I may lose use of my left arm, be left with nerve pain, at the least.

"Shyala, you only come out of this if you fight."

As if I would want to. She explains that you're hijacking my endocrine system, lulling me with oxytocin and serotonin. But our oneness is better than anything I've ever experienced.

Even under the warmest LEDs, my lips turn cyanosis-blue. I'm down to one lung. While the professor measures—you've doubled in size since last time, my darlings—they hold me in clamps, releasing me only when she leaves to discuss the prognosis with the doctor.

I want to see the sky. My minders object, but they aren't feeling this buzz—I'm invincible. Stopping them is easier than I had thought, and I step over their inert bodies as the blue light of the sun begins to dawn.

My heart thumps hard as my body jitters; I know this adrenaline that kicks like a mule. It means we're ready. You squirm for freedom, and I cannot wait to meet you.

My professor appears, begs me not to go. She weeps, tells me she'll have to shoot, the stun gun trembling in her hands. I make my way to the pods as she cradles her broken wrist, screaming.

There's only your hum in my ears, in the pulse of my blood.

I won't need a suit for my new life with you, loves.

The launch hurts, my body juddering in the seat while I pre-program the destination. The endless blue sky reminds me of home. I wish I could see it, feel the sun crisp on my skin. I'm tired of watery blue light and the endless cold.

My mother is patched through. "Shyala, I love you. Please don't do this!"

I cannot answer her. I've lost the ability to move my face. I need her with us, need her to understand...

We pass into the upper atmosphere and there...there's the sun rising in the viewing window, bright blue in the blue sky. That's where we'll meet, in a place that feels like home to us both. We place my hand on the eject button and with a metallic pop, we fly. My breath catches.

You're hatching. The atmosphere rushes over those holes you occupied, the first ones in my scapula, echoes of panpipes in tuneful glory. I am Valkyrie, I am wonder, bringing forth life.

Even as I feel you perforating, spiraling, each mouth like fire and screaming, I love you. You worm through me, feeding, growing. I am slick, dark fluid dripping off me in pin-wheeling constellations, trailing our descent.

I see the first of you emerge from the pulsating distortions beneath my skin, striped violet and green, slathered blue streaks that must be my blood. But I don't care. You're beautiful with your translucent wings, and gently-clicking mandibles, and all those legs.

You are everywhere. Over the wet wheezing of my breath, you hold a single note, humming between your flickering wings. You nestle against me—a crawling, fluttering gown, lowering your mouths to me again and again. Oh, it *hurts!*

Pressure behind my eyes mounts, my body swells, multitudinous, with spectrums of pain previously undiscovered, lighting up the innumerable pathways of my nerve endings. I'm so tired. I have no more to give you.

But here you are, at last, and it's all I ever wanted, my little loves.





100 KIAs

by [L.P. Melling](#)

Corporal Anu's nervous system is regulated frosty cold as he watches the flame-drop drones reach the Bedouin village. Though the thought-space that is still his own tells him something is off.

Blinking red trackers for G Squadron overlay a map in Anu's right eye. He scratches his forearm, his implant itchy and hot. "Hold!" Sarge says on the open channel.

His late father's words echo in his head again. *You'll be a hero, son. Like your great-great-grandfather.*

The waves of adrenaline spiked by nano wartech in his veins no longer help him. The reasons he signed up mean less and less as he automatically traces structural outlines with his pulse rifle's cobalt laser. Squat buildings made from the desert. Tents rippling in a gentle breeze. A large dome that sits at the center of the village like a silent sentry.

Anu hates the waiting. So much of war is filled with it. Like waiting for IVF results when the chances of life are slim to none. Though for his squadron, survival is merely a game they can't lose.

Eyes still locked on the buildings, he pulls out his prized knife—a gift from his proud father on making selection—and rubs his black thumb across the blade, allowing it to cut deep. Sometimes he needs to feel the pain, even if for a second, before the nanotech pumps anesthetic to the area and repairs the damage. Regenerated skin forms over regenerated muscle: seamless, godless work.

His infrared picks out the white-red mass of sleeping bodies inside the buildings. Many of them are balled-up small.

The pre-dawn light pools darkness into shadows. Anu blinks off his night-eyes and zooms in on enemy territory.

Their intel says there's an insurgent recruiter holed up somewhere in the village. But this doesn't look like a terrorist training camp to Anu.

A goat bleats as the full light of morning ushers in the coming horrors of the day. His forefathers had faced horrors too, but not like this. When bravery in the battlefield used to mean something.

He grips tight the knife he'd been proud to accept. A weapon that had been passed on from father to son for five generations of servicemen: from Normandy to here at the end of the line.

You'll be a hero.

"Go! Go!" Sarge commands.

Anu stealthy approaches the village, wartech pounding inside his chest. Named after some old god, they call it wepwawetware—once activated, the wartech turned them into a pack of war hounds.

Sign up for the new military program and you'll be invincible.

And infertile, too, but that's the part they don't tell you until it's too late. Why he hadn't returned to Layla, the girl waiting for him back home, waiting for a child he could never give her. Though she likely stopped waiting a long time ago.

Anu crouches. Drones buzz overhead like a swarm of wasps. They drop a lake of napalm onto the village, and the screams sound as loud as in his dreams.

"Let's reap 'n' regenerate!" another renamed soldier shouts into the comms. Their voice is a storm of static and adrenaline. Corporal Alala's voice. Anu doesn't know her real name. Something no supersoldier shared.

Shortened by his squadron, the name Anubis was given to him when the wartech was installed into his teen body, making him something else. Something feared, to match.

How could they be called heroic when the odds were stacked in their favor? When there is so little to risk?

Anu charges toward the burning dome. He boots the door open and throws a probe in. Through its camera feed, he sees a room full of small tables and chairs. When the camera pans to a chalkboard, his blood runs cold. He stumbles back. His mind overloaded as he tries to process it all.

Reactively, the nanos pump him with dopamine, trying to balance him, battling with his emotions.

Anu's cortisol levels stabilize, his implants and training kicking back in. But his mind still struggles to catch up.

As the body regenerates, the mind and soul degenerate into something worse.

No one ever admits it, but every supersoldier knows it, feels it with each limb they lose only for it grow back. Every time they kill someone who should have been the victor, every time they're kept alive despite deserving to die, another piece of their humanity dies with it.

No enemy gunfire splits the air. Anu thinks now he'd rather be maimed and able to look people in the eye. Anything to escape this hell.

To Anu's left, Lance Corporal Svetovid smashes through a burning building, bristling with advanced weaponry. A vicious smile splits his face, accentuating Slavic cheekbones sharp as his blade. He eyeballs Anu and launches a rocket into an occupied building, reaping chaos. Pure rage is powering him now, little thought. But there's little thought to any of this.

Rushing from a building behind Svetovid, a sandy-colored dog barks and runs to attack him. The dog's mottled skin clings to his ribs, snarls, and leaps at him.

Anu could ping a warning message or shout. But what is the point. No matter how much the dog mauled him, Svetovid's body would regenerate. Anu grimaces, teeth gritted.

Svetovid spins around and his smile stretches. Enhanced senses enable him to take stock of the situation in the blink of a bloodshot eye. He offers his left arm to his attacker. The dog clamps its maw around it, snarling and biting and tearing with his teeth, and Svetovid bayonets it with his other arm in a smooth motion.

The dog goes slack, slipping from Svetovid's arm. It whimpers and pants, slicing through Anu's eardrums like razor-wire.

Anu slams his hands against his ears, trying to block out, but it does nothing to help. The swirling sound makes him picture Normandy's blood-stained beaches, the sea churning, soldiers mowed down, shells thumping the air. Piles and piles of bodies, and his great-great-grandfather's face: lifeless, bloated with seawater and accusation.

You'll be a hero.

A small boy comes out of the same building, running to the dog, screaming. Svetovid ignores him.

The kid's eyes spill with tears, anger and hurt burning in them. "*Kabwoud! Kabwoud!*" he cries. He picks up a clump of red earth and throws it at Svetovid. It explodes into dust against his armor. "*Kabwoud!*"

Anu doesn't need the translator to grasp its meaning.

Svetovid kicks the boy to the ground and heads back into battle as the squadron move in for the kill, and the supersoldiers tear through the village, tear through meat and mortar.

Anu carefully approaches the boy and the unmoving dog he holds tight. The kid recoils, caramel eyes boring through him.

"Salam Aleikum," Anu says.

The kid's body slackens—the fight gone out of him as much as it has Anu. There is no sign of the boy's family, and Anu wonders if his father is already dead.

Anu takes out his knife, glinting in the reddening sunlight: the weapon that had cut through a trench of Nazis and pierced a Talib's heart. The weapon from a proud line of fathers; a weapon that had left a wake of fatherless children.

He stabs it into his wrist, slices down to the crook in his arm. Altered blood squirts out hot and thick, coating the dog's wounds. Anu plunges his other hand inside the open wound and rips out the tracker that is nestled between tendon and muscles like a tumor. He drops the bloody device and snaps the ball chain around his neck.

KIA for the final time, Anu buries his knife, tracker, and tags in a shallow grave.

Shedding the weight of his armory and false name, regenerated Sol rises, and barking and the kid's praise to god rings out in the air.

"Go, get out of here, kid," he says, pointing at the distant hills. Relief fills him as the boy takes the dog and heads south.

He looks around. There's no sight of his squadron now they've infiltrated the buildings.

Even without the tracker, it wouldn't take them long to hunt him down, a pack of wolves tracking a stray. With their nanobombs, there are still quick ways of decommissioning supersoldiers. He no longer cares. Becoming one had taken away all that was good in his life. He'd rather die once honorably than a hundred times cheating death and humanity.

Sol turns west to leave. Drones buzz above the charred battlefield like a plague of locusts, their hard drives no doubt already being wiped clean. Above them, a night-black helicopter blots out the sun. Gunfire fizzes past his ear. He feels a sharp scratch on his leg and ignores it. He can no longer hear the screams as the kid's praise to god echoes in his mind. He doesn't look back as he walks away from it all.

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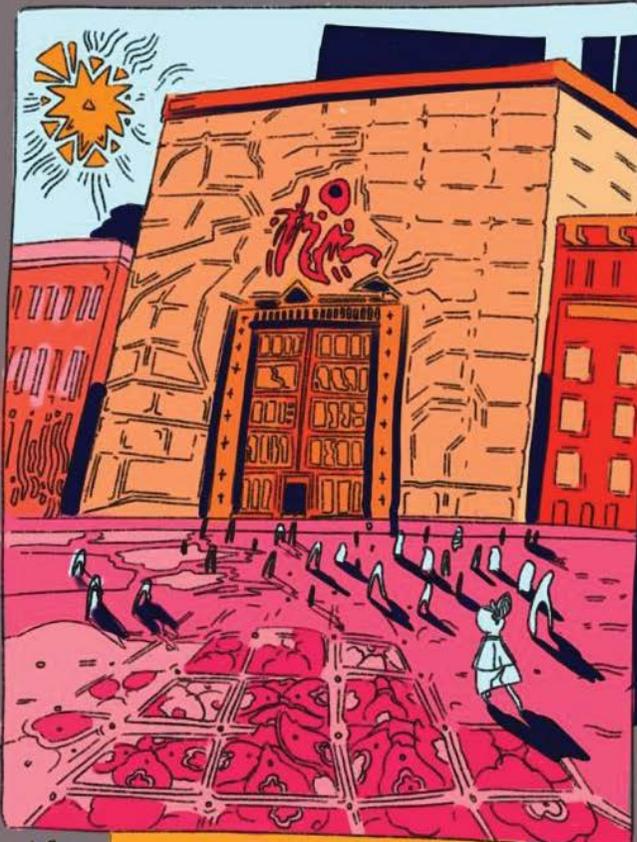
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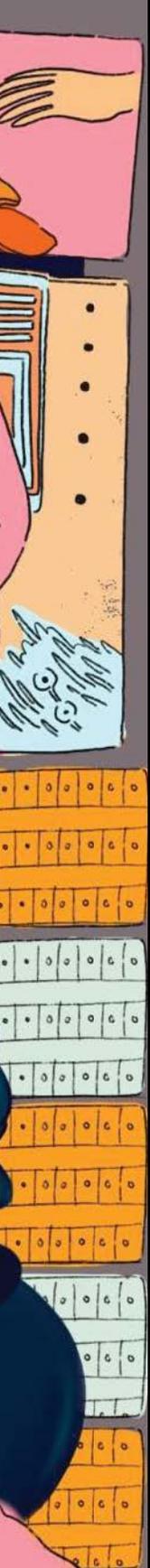
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ART FEATURE

LIFE AQUATIC

Art by [Aylin Sophia \(aka Pevvit\)](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

Aylin Sophia knew art would be her life when, as a small child still in kindergarten, she drew a fish with seventeen legs.

“The best stuff usually comes from nonsensical bursts of passion,” Aylin explains. “I’m able to run the furthest with wacky concepts, like for example, a creature that has the best qualities of a microfluidic device, a soft stingray robot, AND a glistening strawberry jelly tart.”

...Welcome to the watery world of Aylin (aka Pevvit).

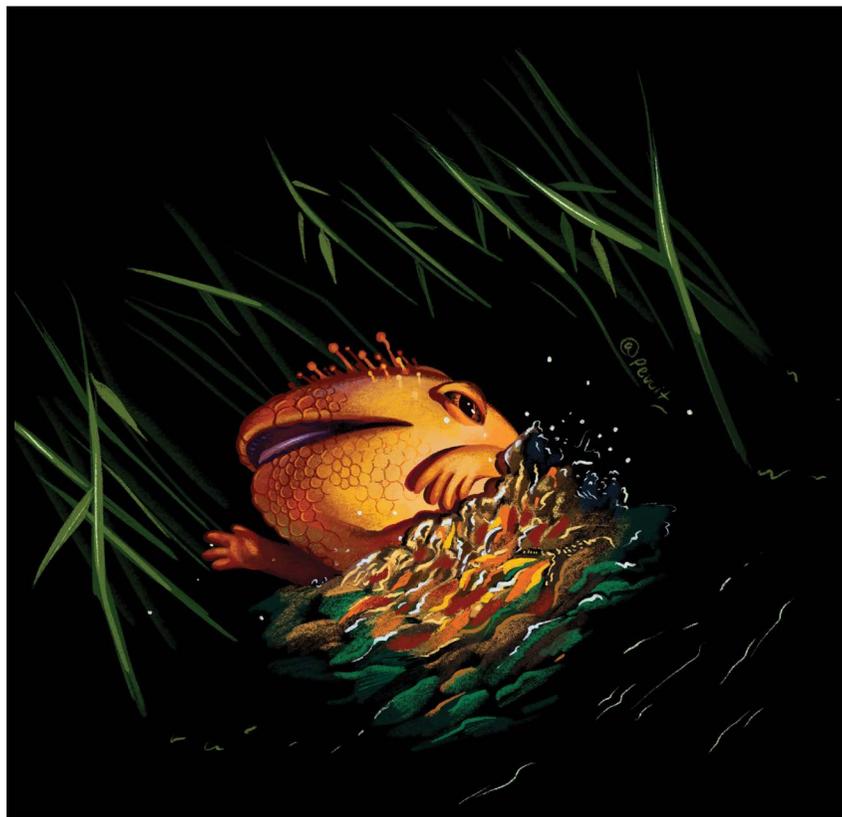
“WHAT IF THEY WERE SMASHED TOGETHER?” she continues. “And then you go to town trying to figure out the logistics of it all. It’s very satisfying when people aren’t able to identify the individual components of the creation and instead go, ‘Huh...I wonder how *that* happened,’ or when your grandma says it’s ‘unsettling’ and ‘has too many eyes.’”

It’s no surprise that Aylin’s artwork so often centers on the theme of water. Her imagination ebbs and flows like the tide, receding softly into quiet study and then surging forth with the controlled power of a tidal wave. But instead of leveling coastlines, Aylin’s wave creates, leaving upon the beach intricate odes to ocean life fashioned from the rarest and most bizarre of treasures found beneath the sea.

Pictured left: *Tuttle*

“My art is supposed to convey whatever I’m currently learning about, mixed together and then spit out like owl pellets.” [Her mind, it appears, is not *always* focused on ocean life, especially when the land-loving world offers up the most perfect of irreverent analogies.] “I’m trying to be more externally focused and make biology-inspired pieces since the mindset the approach creates is one of excitement and alertness. Art can be a wonderful tool to work through grief, pain, or self-discovery, but I don’t want to rely on introspection and personal narratives to generate work unless it’s genuinely needed.”

Aylin’s academic approach to her artwork is apparent. Many of her works feel like the anatomically-correct illustrations you’d find in a biology textbook.



Pictured top left: *Fish* Above (bottom): *Splish*



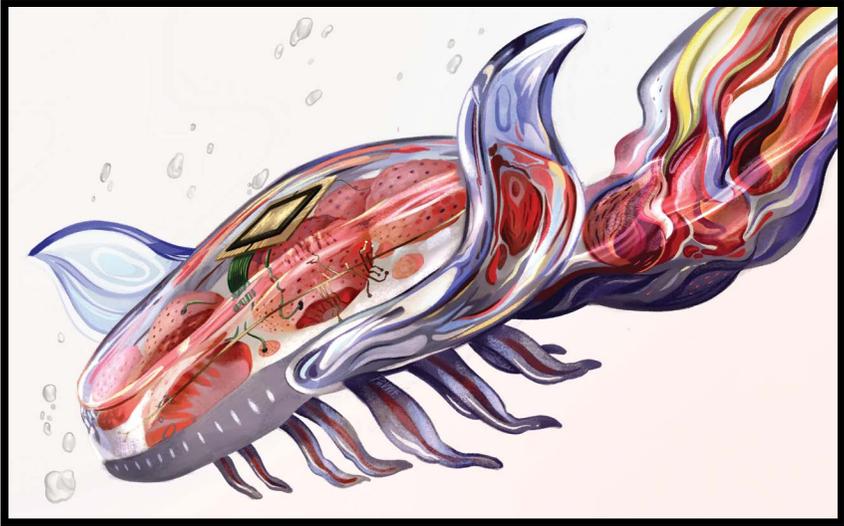
And yet, despite what Aylin claims, I can't help but feel an emotional depth to her work, as well. There is a sense of wonder here. A profound sense of reverence. And I think this explains why so much of her work floats, or flows, or is weightless. Aylin copes with the weighty feelings that come with the painstaking work of intelligent design by incorporating into

her work a much-needed levity, both gravitationally speaking, and via her sharp sense of humor.

For example, when asked where she hopes to take her art in the future, Aylin responded, "I really hope to work alongside marine biologists," with the addendum, "I did ballet for most of my life and have always wanted to animate my choreography on humanoid creature bodies, but that's a can of



worms I'm not equipped to open since I haven't learned 3D animation and I don't own a motion capture suit. Maybe someday."



Pictured above (top): *Mimeto 01* Above (bottom): *Queen of the Sun*



Pictured above: *Warm Water Rising*





IF WE WERE ALL MADE OF JELLY

by [Heather Santo](#)

Ocean wind whips my hair around my face, like tangles of Medusa’s snakes, stinging my eyes. I blink away tears and call to my daughter. “Be careful, Meredith!” She runs ahead, brandishing a piece of driftwood against the wind, as if in challenge.

At four years old, she is the most fearless human I have ever met.

An overcast sky mutes the normally vibrant colors on this stretch of beach. It’s like viewing the world through a gray filter, and I think to myself how some people have a constant self-imposed gray filter, one they are unaware of or unwilling to remove.

“Some people” include my daughter’s father.

The surf crashes, and salty water froths at our feet.

“Mommy! Mommy!” Meredith yells. “What’s *that*?”

She pokes at a gelatinous blob, motionless on the sand, with her stick.

“A moon jellyfish,” I tell her. *Aurelia aurita*.

I am a professor of ocean science, which is why I bring my daughter here so often. My two loves in one place. Her father and I are no longer together. He’s always been jealous of my love of the ocean, and when our daughter was born, he decided there was no room left in my heart for him.

“Jellyfish,” she repeats and laughs. “Like the jelly you put on my toast?”

“No,” I say. “Not the same kind. That jelly is made out of fruit. Jellyfish live in the ocean.”

“I want to live in the ocean!” she exclaims. “I want to be made of *jelly*, and live in the *ocean!*”

With her stick held high in the air, Meredith runs full speed toward the water.

I reach her a moment before a wave claims her. She squeals, and my heart races. “You must be careful,” I tell her between gasps. “The waves will pull you away from me, and I might not be able to swim fast enough to save you.”

“But Mommy, I can swim!”

I nod in agreement.

“Yes darling, you’re a good swimmer.” This is true. We both spend as much time in the water, either in our pool or in the ocean, as we do on land. “But the ocean is very angry today.”

I cast a glance at the dark, churning water. Today was not a safe swimming day for me, let alone a four-year-old. I’d hoped we could walk the beach anyway and collect driftwood.

“If the waves pulled you away today, you might drown.”

Her eyes, the same shade as the storm-tossed ocean, narrow in confusion.

“Mommy, what’s drown mean?”

I consider this carefully before I reply. When she was born, I made a promise to myself never to lie to her or sugarcoat my words. The truth might be hard to swallow at times, but I felt this an important lesson to learn at a young age.

“You know how you breathe air into your lungs?”

She nods, eyebrows drawn together. Her nose is running and there are flecks of wet sand on her cheeks. The innocence in her expression melts my heart.

“When you drown, you breathe water into your lungs. It can be any kind of water, not just the ocean.” I point at the waves to reinforce my point. “If your body doesn’t get air for about a minute, you die. Do you remember how long a minute is?”

“Sixty seconds,” she replies.

“Very good,” I say.

She nods again, as if this all makes perfect sense.

“Okay.” She pokes the sand with her stick. “But what happens after you die?”

“I’m not sure, baby girl.” I scoop her up in my arms. “Your grandma used to tell me people go to Heaven when they die.”

“Where’s Heaven?”

I groan internally.

“My, you’re full of questions today! I’m not sure about that either. I suppose it’s the happiest place you can imagine.”

My daughter squirms out of my grasp and turns around, flinging her arms wide.

“But Mommy,” she exclaims, “then this is Heaven!”



I’m surrounded by flowers: lilies, gladioli, chrysanthemums, carnations, orchids, and roses. The scientist in me knows that the choking floral scent is actually volatile organic compounds released by the plant petals in an attempt to ward off herbivores.

Basically, the flowers are screaming.

The mother in me wonders if I can drown in their cloying, pungent aroma. Drown, like my four-year-old daughter in the ocean. I wasn’t with her when it happened. She was with her father and his new girlfriend. They went for a walk on the beach, at my daughter’s request, to collect driftwood. Her father and his new girlfriend were not paying close enough attention, and she got too close to the water.

While distracted with each other, a wave took Meredith away.

A man walking his dog jumped in the ocean and swam out to save her. I’d asked the police officer who came to my house for the man’s phone number and called to inquire about his dog.

An overweight pug with a graying muzzle, I came to find out.

“What’s his name?” I’d asked.

“Dumpling,” he’d replied.

I’d nodded, satisfied. It’s what my daughter would have asked, and knowing the answer somehow helps me navigate this stormy ocean of depthless grief.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to her sooner,” he’d said.

She’d been under the water for over five minutes. Her brain starved for oxygen. Paramedics got her heart beating again, but the vital part of my daughter, the part that made her the most fearless human I’d ever met, was likely gone forever.

The hospital room is still in sharp focus, every detail jumping out at me, overpowering like the screaming flowers, but a pale filter settles over my vision. I see no colors, only Meredith’s tiny body under a snowy blanket, the large bleached machines now breathing for her, milky tubes hooked into her arms, one down her throat, and the chalk-white coats of the doctors.

I stand on one side of the hospital bed. My daughter's father and his new girlfriend stand on the other. He has the numb manner of someone who has taken too many Xanax. She is young, pretty, and uncomfortable looking.

Eventually, I step out of the room and into the waiting area. Visitors take turns clasping my hands in theirs. They are close colleagues and neighbors, as well as family members I haven't seen in years, not since I'd moved away to be closer to the ocean. They whisper, "I'm sorry," and "I am praying for your daughter," and "My thoughts are with you." Tears fleck my cheeks like the wet sand on my daughter's only a few months ago. The faces of the visitors blur together like jellyfish.

Once I'm back in Meredith's room, I look down at her and say, "Do you know what you call a swarm of jellyfish?"

The machines beep. I imagine I see her eyelids flutter.

"What?" My daughter's father screws up his face as if I've said something blasphemous. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"A bloom," I say to my daughter, not to him. "Like flowers." I gesture at the flowers filling the room. I imagine her imagining they're jellyfish, and I smile a sad smile.

I wonder if under a microscope, my tears look like the ocean.

"Dr. Wilson? Jeanine?"

A man in a suit passes my daughter's father without stopping to introduce himself. He shakes my hand

"Do I know you?" I ask. He looks vaguely familiar. Short, with closely cropped hair and eyes the color of ice.

"I'm Dr. Don Fitzpatrick. I teach at the University, so you may have seen me there," he explains.

"Which department?"

"Neurorobotics."

I stare at him blankly.

"What is this about?" my daughter's father demands.

Dr. Fitzpatrick lowers his voice.

"Is there somewhere we can talk?"



We walk on the beach.

"You can bring her back?" I say.

"No," Dr. Fitzpatrick says. "But I can preserve the most important part of her. The part that makes your daughter, your daughter."

My mind reels. What he is suggesting fills me with hope and fear in equal measure. I long to speak to my daughter again, but if what he is proposing is true, would she still be my Meredith?

The wind blows inside his suit jacket, making it flap like bird wings. Meredith would have thought this was funny, but I only manage another sad smile. I'm not sure if what I feel is ocean spray on my face or tears.

Maybe both.

"How?"

"Actually," he says, nudging a nearby beached jellyfish with his dress shoe. "The technology came from the ocean."

"Please explain."

He turns those icy eyes on me and forces me to hold his gaze.

"Bioluminescence," he says. "We found a way to use luciferase to bind to and light up parts of the brain responsible for conscious thought. From there, we can make a copy of the individual's consciousness and transfer it into...something else."

"Something else?"

"Well, yes." He scratches the back of his head. "In early studies, we transferred the subject's consciousness into computers, but the copies weren't able to *live* there. It took a lot of work, a lot of out-of-the-box thinking, but we had a breakthrough a few months ago."

He toes the jellyfish again.

"The brain vibrates at different frequencies. Once we transferred the copy into a medium and applied a beta frequency, we were able to 'wake up' the consciousness, so to speak."

"What kind of medium?" I ask. My hope now slightly outweighs my fear.

"It's silicon based," he says. "Kind of like jelly."



I sign all the paperwork. My daughter's father tries to stop me, but eventually understands this is a fight he will not win. Dr. Fitzpatrick and his team copy Meredith's consciousness and transfer it into an avatar.

The avatar is a metal skeleton covered in robojelly skin. The metal skeleton works like a tuning fork, vibrating at different wavelengths to mimic brain frequencies: gamma, beta, alpha, theta, and delta. My daughter's consciousness glows inside the layer of artificial skin, like the cold light of a moon jellyfish bloom.

They keep her shape small, childlike.

I take her to the beach to wake her up. I want us to be alone, and Dr. Fitzpatrick has agreed, under the condition I follow a specific set of instructions. He's given me a remote. I take it out of my coat pocket and unfold a square of paper covered in small, neat handwriting.

I press a sequence of buttons on the remote and wait.

A hum emits from the tiny human form in front of me. It seems to sync with the crashing of the waves. The sun warms the top of my head and shines on the ocean spray, breaking the droplets into a rainbow prism.

Color suddenly fills the world.

Threads of bioluminescence begin to dance under Meredith's new skin. She flings her arms wide and inclines her smooth, featureless face up toward me.

"Mommy?" she says. It sounds like a question. The voice is not my daughter's, yet it is.

"Yes, darling."

Her arms drop.

"Did I drown?"

"Yes," I reply. Tears fall, but they are distilled from an emotion I have no name for.

We join hands and walk down the beach, collecting driftwood. I tell her about Dumpling, the overweight pug with a graying muzzle. After some time, she pauses and turns her face toward the ocean.

"Mommy," she says, hugging me close. "I knew this is what Heaven would look like."



An abstract painting on the left side of the page, featuring vibrant colors like red, yellow, green, and black, with sharp, angular lines and a textured, expressive style.

MARASA, OR A WITHDRAWAL OF PURE JOY FOR MR. ANTAR

by [Prashanth Srivatsa](#)

It was past midnight when Antar realized he'd run out of Pure Joy. The vial lying on the bedside table was empty. When he opened the stopper, the fading aroma of that once thick-blue liquid wafted up his nose. He dropped the vial, leaned against the pillow, and closed his eyes.

The effect was less than momentary.

He surveyed the room—the immaculate bedding, the polished cupboard, the walls cleaned for the crayon scribbles, the portrait of a water-pastel Ganesha, a toy rocking horse in one corner whose basket was now a newspaper holder (a bit of a genius idea, really), carpet dusted and vacuumed, and the old magenta curtains replaced with a lighter teal. A swell erupted in his chest, and he smiled to himself. A room to be proud of. Simple Indian middle-class aspirations. Nothing fancy, nothing intricate. A part of the house he'd be inclined to display if someone visited.

A smudge on the wall caught his eye. A frown appeared, deepening as he traced the brown scar to a spattering of chai.

He got up, walked over to the wall and punched the smudge. Hoped it'd shrivel like an earthworm. Pain seared through his knuckles. Rushed to his head.

He squatted beside the wall, grabbed his hair, and knocked his head once, twice, thrice against the wall.

Perhaps another sniff? He crawled across the floor, hunting for the dropped vial. Found it beneath the table. He'd forgotten to cork it back. Great, the aroma was

probably all over the place now, depositing chunks and fragrances of Pure Joy on underside.

He inhaled sharply. Nothing. Just air. And the silence of an empty house. He returned to bed and flipped to a new page in his diary. Scribbled an appointment with the Marasa Repository for the morning.



The Repositories recommended a light breakfast before withdrawal, injection, and assimilation. The advertisements pointed to evidence of how it helped avoid clutter in the system. Antar doubted the relationship between the intestines and the mind, but he was loath to experiment on a day he felt desperate.

Cornflakes, then. And cold milk. He rode the bicycle to Marasa. The streets were largely empty. Traffic signals incessantly blinked yellow. Sunday, he guessed.

His usual parking spot behind the Repository was vacant. What did that amount to? A few minutes of Satisfaction? Indeterminate Relief? He paused to look around at half a dozen other bicycles, at the color and shape of the helmets locked to the handlebar, at the greased chains and horns mutilated from autorickshaws.

Perhaps a hiss of Inferiority or Envy? Just a little bit? He glanced at the mirror on the right handle. It was a Sunday, he told himself. People withdrew early. No big deal.

The shadow of the building fell on him. The façade was all glass. He passed the statue of an iron brain erected on a pedestal. Its insides looked like twisted plumbing. Like noodles made of basalt. The first time Antar had seen it, he'd wanted to puke his guts out. The statue reminded him of entrails in horror movies. Now, he only saw his reflection in the pool running around the statue like a moat.



Inside, Antar made a beeline for the service desk manned by Anagha. She was one of the saner ones. The others were a lot less considerate. Untrustworthy, even. It was important to establish a personal connect with the customer service executive. That was what the Repository was all about. Building relationships.

That and those vials.

Four others stood in line ahead of him. He'd seen a couple of them

before. Drooping shoulders, a quirky scratch, a pattern to their shirts and tops depending on what day of the week it was. Like, if the weather could be personified and allowed to wrinkle and sneeze. Regulars. He ought to be inviting them home sometime. Once he got rid of the smudge on the wall.

When his turn came, he took a step ahead and coughed. Anagha perked up. Her smile was genuine. "Morning, Mr. Antar. A withdrawal, I presume?"

Antar smiled in return. Wasn't she nice?

"Uh-huh," he mumbled. He rummaged in his pockets for five spare vials and spread them out over the desk like a poker reveal. It was good practice to retain personal vials. Helped the company monitor their supply. Made them efficient.

That, and the lingering aroma of juices long-drunk. Empty vials were like abandoned childhood homes. Nothing there but the occasional sniff of a floorboard or the sofa leather that brought a rush of memories and helped him to sleep.

Anagha regarded him with mild curiosity before entering his identification in the system.

"State your withdrawal, please?"

He tapped his fingers on the desk. "Pure Joy, if available. Else, I can make do with some Satisfaction and Prolonged Calm."

She adjusted the rim of her glasses and squinted at the screen. A delicate scroll of the mouse made him suspicious of what she found. It worsened when she looked up as though she were announcing the death of a family member.

"No Satisfaction, Mr. Antar. As for Prolonged Calm, there's a tenth of a vial. A few minutes, perhaps. But I would recommend you hold on to it. If you have any Anxiety to deposit, we can concoct a vial of Positive Apathy in about two weeks' time."

"I don't think I have any Anxiety," said Antar, and swallowed the words *not any more* before they could rush out of his mouth. Flimsy consolation. Like a bubble wrap with all the bubbles already burst, but which still compromised as a decent seat warmer.

"Are you certain there's no Satisfaction? I remember leaving some behind."

Anagha shook her head. "You made a full withdrawal two Fridays ago. However, as we emphasize, the memory of a withdrawal can be hazy a few days after injection."

Why did she have to speak like a bot? So punctuated, so...so rigid. As though her face was a pamphlet or a newspaper obituary ground to pulp and molded—poked to form eyes and nostrils and then scratched violently with a ballpoint pen to create the mouth. Ah, Rage, my old friend.

“...which is why we encourage you to maintain a diary and regularly connect with our in-house therapists to ensure doses are not taken in excess.”

The rim of her glasses suddenly attracted him. His gaze lowered until he spotted a pendant on her neck, inlaid in silver filigree. It reminded him of Nandini. A lot of things reminded him of Nandini these days.

“Can you check my vitals for Longing?” he asked, before she could confirm the depth of his storage. It felt a little embarrassing, to be honest. Longing was the only one of the seven odorous sins that could be instantly converted, however disproportionate in quantum to the withdrawn emotion. That deflated, punctured part of his mind wanted something more reliable, and he would comply.

Anagha paused typing and looked up. Beneath those glasses, her curiosity deepened. “Longing, Mr. Antar?”

He nodded.

“Please come a little closer,” she said. “I’d have to strap you up to the system to check for deposits.”

Antar obeyed. He had avoided glancing at the machine sitting behind her until now. It reminded him of a magnified chess rook. Like a great steel safe with curved edges—a crown and a face and a mouth and lights that blinked, and chrome that gleamed. A metal head the size of a boulder, which could easily be suspected of emitting something radioactive. He’d read those articles. Warnings. And then anti-articles that covered entire pages of the newspaper that dismantled the machine in words, and proved its innocence.

Tubes popped out of its sides like wobbly, boneless limbs, one of which Anagha dragged and strapped around Antar’s extended arm.

“Helps to close your eyes and take a deep breath,” she said softly. She pressed a few buttons, and the machine vibrated to life. Antar felt a tinge of that vibration in his arm, as though someone had gripped his wrist in fear while they crossed the street. His mind was circling. Racing. Leaping out like an out-of-body experience, soaring to the highest levels of the Marasa Repository, and then falling and falling and falling until he couldn’t feel his legs anymore.

The hammering in his head gradually abated before he realized he was quivering violently in front of the customer service desk. A quivering customer is always king. Where had he heard that?

Anagha bit her lip and scrolled through the results. Antar continued tapping the desk.

“There’s...quite a bit of Longing, Mr. Antar.” Her lips barely moved while she spoke. “You also possess Rage and Envy, a few vials full. Some sediments of Denial.”

Antar wanted to get a look at the pent-up Rage. If it crossed the Repository's regulated threshold, then Anagha was duty-bound to summon an officer and lead him to his therapist. Not an option. He took a deep breath, let out a whistle, and tapped the desk again.

"I...I need something good right now, madam," he said, a wavering smile on his lips. As honest as he'd ever been.

Anagha was trained to be polite, rule-bound, but ultimately inclined towards taking deposits. While the withdrawals were the glamorous aspect of the Repository, the deposits were what got the cogs turning for the machine to ejaculate those sterile emotions that spiraled down and down the availability spectrum with each passing day.

When she asked for his Longing, Antar hesitated.

It was his only tether to Nandini. He shook his head and offered the rest. The Rage, the Denial, the Envy. Sucked out through the tubes, replaced by an ephemeral substitute to trick the brain of a false emotion in the amygdala, which would slowly decompose and leave him blank until the next interpretation of feeling. He had read the research; he had consumed it. When convinced, he had submitted himself to the machinations of the Repository.

She printed a receipt and handed it to Antar. "Converting Rage or Envy into Pure Joy, Pleasure, or Prolonged Calm is a lengthy process, Mr. Antar. We will send you a notification when the conversion is completed, and the vial is ready. As for Denial, given such little amounts, any conversion would be pointless. We recommend we hold it for you until it can be complemented with another fluid." She extended a digital pad. "Sign here and here, please." Antar checked his nails before scratching his name upon it.

The transaction was completed. He wanted to leave then. Return home without a withdrawal. Bury himself with the Longing. Create palaces of the past and lose himself in its myriad towers and corridors, wander the crypts and feast alone in the kitchens.

Something held him back there, one finger still tapping the desk. The Repository melted in his vision. From its masonry of vast glass and metalwork, it shrunk to the size of an antique phone booth.

"Listen," he said, and he assumed his brain was now generating unprecedented levels of Courage. Anagha blinked behind her glasses. "Yes?"

"Do you think maybe you can join me for lunch sometime?"



They met at a restaurant in a quieter part of town. The Punjabi food had a rustic feel to it, especially the mud-pot lassi and the pickles. Antar wanted to hold her hand, but he decided against it. The scowl and scorn of his fifty-year old neighbor aunty with a ladle in her hand flashed in his mind. Neighbors often got personal about other people's failed relationships. They took it as an affront to the glue that bound society together.

He'd be okay.

The deposited Rage, Envy, and Denial had completely dissipated from his brain. One of those rare absences he could feel, like a void that craved to be filled. The past was a black morass. He had hoped a modicum of happiness would have generated in the vacant space; that, without the anger and envy, he could close his eyes and fall asleep. Without the denial, he could have the courage to start with a clean slate, walk up to his neighbors and not be ashamed of what he had done. Clean up the room again. Change the sheets. Go for a walk.

Instead, it was empty. A vortex of nothingness. The will to simply "do" had been sucked dry of life. His fingers twitched.

When the check came, Anagha insisted on splitting the bill. Antar offered only a weak resistance that was shot down in two turns. He pulled out his card and hoped he still had enough balance to save face.

"Now where's this stupid card of mine?" Anagha furiously rummaged in her purse. At one point, she emitted a grating sound before removing items from the purse and casting them out on the table. An old watch, a sanitizer, a few napkins, earphones, rubber bands and clips, a strip of paracetamol and then...a vial of Pure Joy.

Oyster blue. Like the ocean in paintings. His mind darted to the feeling of exaltation that coursed through his veins seconds after he had injected the contents. A tempest now swirled within the Pure Joy vial that struck a gong in Antar's mind, stealing his gaze towards it. He took a deep breath and looked away.

"Aha!"

Anagha's hand reappeared clutching the credit card. She called the waiter, who swiped them poor and stood an extra few seconds, hoping for a tip. She had already replaced the items back in her purse by then. "Shall we?"

Run away.

When Anagha offered him a ride home, panic set in. The summer heat was oppressive. He wished it would melt him right there in the parking lot, and

she'd have no choice but to drive over his wet remains. He imagined the aroma of a finished vial. Like fields of lavender bristling beneath a low breeze.

The vacancy beckoned, but Antar loathed to be a servile companion to its needs. When Anagha insisted they at least go for a drive, he curled his fingers into a fist and nodded.



He held her at knife-point a few miles away from the restaurant. The car came to a skidding halt on a desolate road beside an abandoned factory complex. A mirage shimmered ahead. Everything appeared dull and sepia, glossed in mud.

It should have been over once she handed him the vial. Her own heart was racing, and her beauty behind the spectacles now dimmed to a cornered animal in Antar's eyes. He spent a few seconds contemplating the range of emotions generated in her brain.

"Thank you," he said.



It was past midnight when Antar returned home and dragged himself to bed. The lucky syringe lay beneath the pillow. He dipped the needle into the vial of an hour's worth of Pure Joy, flicked the surface, and took a deep breath before puncturing his neck.

The syringe slipped and fell off his hand. He twisted and stretched himself on the bed, then gazed at the ceiling.

Perhaps it was a good time to wake the neighbors up. Those regressive assholes who had nothing better to do than to gallivant their way to his house with fake smiles and paunches. Offer kitchen window gossips and marry him into their conventions. Demand that his wife adjust to his murkiness, his cock-about way of life. Did they stop there? No. The nerve to then suggest he deposit his Ecstasy and Delight for later use, like it was some fixed-deposit bank account. Worse? His parents agreed with them. Traitors. To Antar's face they incessantly demanded grandparenthood of a fleshy, slithering beast that eventually crawled out of Nandini. Brayed all night on her crib. Until Antar learned to put her to sleep with ghost stories. Until he became the ghost himself for her and her mother.

Really, fuck them all, he thought. The alimony covered his guilt. He hopped out of bed, opened the balcony window, splayed his hands wide, and laughed from the apartment's top floor.

He laughed until the night refused to return anything but its cold, silent stare. He sauntered back inside. Fetched a wet piece of cloth and a pinch of vinegar, and assaulted the chai stain on the wall. Scrubbed it with gritted teeth until he could no longer distinguish the wall from the blot. His own bloody sleeves he ignored.

The evening called for music. Antar fished his tape-recorder out of the old almira and inserted an Ilayaraaja album cassette. The tape began to roll. Yesudas' voice filled the room, flowing out of the recorder like sap from a maple sugar bark. Antar tapped his thighs in rhythm, moving his head, closing his eyes, smiling.

The songs stretched and contorted, and in Antar's mind, the deified Longing slept with the manufactured Pure Joy. He was where he wanted to be, wrapped in music and room, walking the corridors of the palace he had built in his head, the torn pieces of his memories stitched by the Marasa Repository.

When the album ended, the hour had passed. Antar opened his eyes. The silence in the house made itself aware to him. Like the cold did when the blanket would slip off his feet in the middle of the night.

When the cops announced themselves and demanded he open the door, he clapped his hands, emitted a low, satisfying whistle, and inspected his room—the curtains, the carpet, the now-clean wall, the Ganesha portrait, and the re-made bed.

It was all ready for display.

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THE CROSSROADS TROUBADOUR

by [B.C. Matthews](#)

Robert Leroy “O’ Lord Lord” Johnson picked at his quintar, letting his deeper tenor voice stream lazily into the smoke-filled bar. The heavy violet-colored smoke was the byproduct of a popular “dimmer,” a drug that made those who smoked it so calm, their hearts beat in a sluggish arrhythmia. Leroy had to control his breathing during the song so that he wouldn’t inhale too much of the violet haze and lose focus on his mission.

He was here to find a new agent for the Rat King.

The subdued crowd suited him just fine. He wasn’t in the mood to bellow out the usual crowd-pleasers, but if they were willing to pay, he’d perform the entire Voyager Set List with a practiced smile. Someone had already asked twice for him to play “Johnny B. Goode,” or one of its more popular Troubadour-style versions.

Troubadours never refused a request to play songs from the Voyager’s Golden Record.

After his set, he sidled up to the bar and cleared his vocal cords of the Many-Voices.

“Care to sing us one last ditty, my lord?” came the rough voice of the bartender.

Leroy switched to his One-Voice to speak. “For trade?”

The bartender’s scarred face twisted into a frown. His dark eyes darted about the noisy, foul-smelling bar. “I hear your kind command a high price, m’lord.”

Leroy didn't bother to hide the Many-Voices of an Altered. "Depends on the song."

"A story then?" said the bartender. He glared at a child, a ragamuffin, who'd been selling baggies of the violet-haze drug to the crowd. Now caught, the filthy child slunk back into the shadows of the bar, waiting for easier prey. "Been mighty quiet on Delta Five," the bartender continued, "bein' at the End of the galaxy and all."

"Again," Leroy said, and cleared his throat of the Many-Voices in his words, "that depends on your offer."

The man spread his fingers through his thin, greasy hair and frowned. "What would it cost, m'lord, for the story of how you got Altered? You boys is always doin' well for yourself. Maybe offer up the name of the doctor who altered you—"

"That, sir, would cost more than you're able to pay." Leroy tipped his well-worn fedora and muttered a polite goodbye.

"Wait!" The bartender grabbed at Leroy's sleeve. "*Please.*"

Leroy glared at the oil-encrusted fingernails clawing at his clothing. *How dare this Ender man grab at him.* Folks rarely dared to touch him, since Troubadours had reputations for being eager to protect their earnings by violent means at the smallest sign of a threat. Leroy scowled at the man until the bartender stammered out an apology and released Leroy's sleeve.

"Please, Troubadour." The man tried to wipe the oil from Leroy's clothing, but only rubbed the stain deeper into the cloth. "I can trade you a song. I can sing. Let me show you."

Most people *thought* they could sing, and some could—well enough to bargain, even. Perhaps even well enough to become a Troubadour. But the life of a Troubadour wasn't easy and very few were willing to pay such a heavy price.

"Sing then," Leroy said. "Sing me the 'King of Rats and His Smile.'"

The man froze. "That'll bring bad luck to those not in his keeping," he whispered. "You gotta' know—" He nodded. "Yeah, 'course you do."

Rats. They'd taken them into space and now they were as large a part of a Troubadour's repertoire as the Golden Record's songs. The Rat King was said to lay his blessings on the poor, and there were dozens of ballads written to honor his trickster glory. Here aboard Delta Station, the orphan ragamuffins prowling the lower sections survived only on the station's supply of rat meat and that which they could steal.

Leroy knew what rat tasted like.

The bartender straightened his back and took a great deal of air into his lungs. The man sang in a pleasant baritone:

*King o' Rats, has a secret smile.
His majesty will not forsake
A chance to make
Himself in trash and waste.
But those that serve
Will always deserve
A place far below.*

Several heads snapped around to see who dared sing the King's song. A haggard old woman hissed at the bartender in disgust and made the Sign of Warding to protect against the evil omen. Calling on the Rat King without being in dire need was to spit in the eye of fate, and here at the End, it was blasphemy.

"You've a fair voice," Leroy admitted. "Mister..."

"Bourne," the man answered.

"But is your son's voice any better?" Leroy motioned to the child hovering in the shadows, still clutching at the bag of violet haze resin, eyes sharp on Leroy's face.

"How did you know-?"

Leroy waved away the question. The father-son con had been obvious from the beginning. Everyone in here was too blazed on dimmers to notice a kid's hand dip into their pockets one too many times. Leroy had been a pickpocket in his youth, too. Desperation drove the rat kids to do everything possible to survive on stations at the End.

Leroy motioned to the boy. With his Many-Voices creating a perfect chord, he ordered, "*Come here, boy.*"

The boy approached cautiously, flicking a surreptitious eye at his father, who nodded at him. The child's face was smeared with so much grease from the station's underbelly that Leroy could barely make out the boy's features. He was young. Maybe twelve.

"*Sing,*" Leroy ordered. Parts of his voice reached registers human ears could barely hear, layered on top of audible sound.

When the boy opened his mouth to sing, a sweet soprano lilted in and out, certain and strong. So sweet, that Leroy realized the bartender's son was in fact the bartender's daughter.

She'd chosen the tune he'd played earlier: "Johnny B. Goode." The girl toyed with the melody arrangement like a bored kid roughly playing with a favorite doll—without thought or focus, but with a great deal of affection.

Leroy raised an eyebrow, noting she could be a fair Troubadour, even if unaltered. And *if* she survived long enough at the End to grow up.

She could also sell her soul at The Crossroads.

Leroy regulated his voice to sound normal once again. "I received two songs today. For that, I'll tell you a story. Not the one you originally bargained for, but a story nonetheless."

Old man Bourne leaned closer.

"The Rat King lives," Leroy said in all seriousness. "And he rules over those with voices full of song."

The girl frowned in suspicion, her speaking-voice rough with Ender slang, "Whatch'a you goin' on about? This is no story for—"

Her father shushed her and placed a steady hand on her skinny shoulder to prevent another rude outburst.

"He is very real. And if you wish to serve the King, and become like me, I'll take you to him."

And God help you both, Leroy thought.



Even after haggling, Mr. Bourne could only afford one passage to the Centralian station—the so-called Beta Three—where Leroy had planned to take them. So, the bartender paid only for his daughter's passage, knowing better than to ask a Troubadour for charity.

Leroy could see that the man would happily drain his accounts for even a slim chance to make his daughter's life better than his. A fairytale hope. For all Mr. Bourne knew, Leroy would sell his daughter to flesh peddlers.

Not many at the End made it beyond that.

The girl, who Leroy called Bourne as well, trailed behind him as they walked through the gold-plated causeways of the larger Centralian station, home to more than just drug runners and hopeless pickpockets. There was wealth here. The girl's fingers twitched with the desire to steal, the survival instinct glinting in her darting gaze.

Leroy took a seat against a wall in a less-busy stretch of causeway and placed his quintar in his lap.

"Sing for supper," he told little Bourne.

She blinked. "Whatch'a?"

Perhaps she wasn't smart enough for the King's uses. Part of him hoped she wasn't, that she'd fail the Rat King's tests, so he could send her back to her father.

"You're going to sing for supper." He twisted the tuning pegs of his quintar with the ease of practice. "I'll play."

"This a test, sir?" Her face—now clean of Delta Station's filth—crinkled in suspicion.

Smart girl.

He strummed a major chord, his voice taking on aspects of three notes at once—the Many-Voices potent. "*Sing.*"

Her eyes glazed over for a moment, as if hypnotized by the layered harmonics in Leroy's voice, but she still had to the power to glare at him in distrust.

It was a rare thing to see someone resist an Altered's voice.

Leroy said nothing as he started strumming the strains of "Johnny B. Goode," slowing the song's tempo to a relaxed march. With a haughty look, Bourne let her sweet, soft voice stream into the causeway, turning the Golden Record anthem into a melancholy lament. A number of travelers in regal garb stopped to listen. They focused on her voice, not Leroy's playing, as they tossed Emperor's Coin into the hat at his feet.

Leroy changed to a minor key, transforming the beloved spacer's song into a soaring crescendo of gloomy strings. Little Bourne kept up. She twisted the words to fit with the somber chords strummed with quiet reverence on the quintar.

Judging by her wide-eyed stare, she'd never seen Emperor's Coin before. It made her work harder. Longer. Leroy played other songs from the Golden Record, and her voice lilted up in aching mourning as she sang "Izlel je Delyo Hagdutin," voiced alongside a long drone from the quintar. It was a heartbreaking lament, filled with such sorrow, that it was a song even Leroy wouldn't dare attempt to sing.

After their performance was over, Leroy gathered his hat with its large handful of coins, and Bourne looked up at him in anticipation. But before she could take a single coin, Leroy dumped the pile of gold into a pouch sewn in his coat and plopped his fedora back on his head.

"First lesson," he said, tipping his hat, "never trust another Troubadour. We all have our own agenda. And it's never innocent."

Bourne sneered, disgusted at herself for falling for such an obvious con. She rose and started to walk away, to flee to the safety of the underbelly of the station. But instead, she took her tattered jacket from her shoulders, placed it at her feet, and sat back down. She sang a jaunty traveling ditty with equal parts gusto and talent. Within just a few bars of the song, a healthy pile of coins sat at her feet.

She placed them in her pocket with a smug grin. “No one cons me, O’ Lord Lord Johnson.”

Damn. Leroy hated that he would be forced to sacrifice Bourne to the King. He was beginning to like the little girl. But once on the path, there was no going back.



After five days of singing in station causeways, Bourne grew bored, and the Centralians ignored her lifeless songs unless they were exceptionally difficult.

Out of habit, Bourne *accidentally* bumped into a rich red-robed Centralian woman, and deftly swiped the woman’s coin pouch. “What’re we waiting for, m’lord?” she asked Leroy. “Why haven’t you taken me to get Altered?”

“You assume you’re ready,” he said. “Or that the King will want you.”

She slanted a look at his bulging coin pouch, frowning. “Why does the King change people at all? What’s he get outta’ it?”

Obedience, he thought, but his voice cracked into a four-part harmony. “*We give him information, and he gives us power.*”

“For the right price,” she muttered. “But I didn’t pay you anythin’.”

He sighed. “The Rat King is always looking for new...disciples.”

“An’ I’m still being tested.”

God, she was smart. Little Bourne, doomed to serve a cruel master. Or...he *could* just leave her here to fend for herself. He shuddered. It was doubtful she’d last long on a Centralian station.

“Yes, little Bourne. You are.”



One of her eyes was swollen and bruised. She even held her shoulder as if it pained her. When Leroy asked her what had happened, she simply shrugged, perhaps embarrassed she hadn’t been able to outrun the Civic Guard.

Goddamn civvies.

Stationite guards would often rough up “undesirables,” or take bribes to do so, and in Centralian stations like this one, they even killed Enders if they dared to emerge from their everyday squalor. Any hint of an Ender accent, any sign you’d lived on a station at the End, and you became a target. You were just “that kind.” The “rat kids.”

Leroy remembered when he was just an Ender child: the broken bones, the bruises.

Fury raged white-hot inside of him, and Leroy was met with the dangerous urge to find this man and punish him with the full might of a Troubadour's powers.

Shaking with rage, he broke down his quintar into smaller pieces, and stashed it away in his longcoat. In the shadows, he removed a layer from his fancy Centralian outfit to reveal ragged Ender clothing beneath. As part of his guise, the clothing was painted to appear soiled and covered in grease.

Bourne watched the transformation, squinting through her one good eye. "You look like an Ender now."

"Whatch'a mean?" he said, switching to his birth accent. "Stay here now, little one."

Her little hand—and he noted the broken pinky finger—stopped him. "You're going to hurt him?"

He didn't answer.

She gave him a hesitant smile. "Can I come, too?"

Maybe if she saw what he planned to do, she would run away. As she should. But he couldn't bring himself to let her see what he was capable of. Not when he would make that civvie wish he were floating in the vacuum of space—to make the guard wish he were dead.

The Rat King's peace must be upheld.



Leroy could still taste the coppery tang on his tongue, and still smell the electric stench of burnt wires. The civvie had been woefully inept at staying conscious through Leroy's lesson. While dripping superheated oil over the man's cheek and listening to the song of the man's screams, Leroy had given the guard an important bit of information.

He used his Altered voice to splinter the man's eardrums.

"Never mess with the Rat King's disciples," he warned, as the oil sizzled through the man's skin and melted down to the muscle fiber. *"The ol' King will come for you, will enact his justice, will eat your heart alive."*

In fact, Leroy was astonished at his own lack of restraint. Reigning in his need for vengeance, he decided to let the man live. Just barely. After all, it would be hard for the civvie to learn his lesson if he were dead. And maybe that was far worse than the alternative.

Finished now, Leroy cleaned his bloody hands in the empty public bathroom, changed clothes, and put his quintar back together to become a genteel Troubadour once more.

Kicking open the door, Bourne scowled at him through her swollen eye and busted lip. The little girl watched the blood from Leroy's hands paint the sides of the basin in crimson and pink. Almost demurely, she asked, "Is this what it means to be a Troubadour? To be an Altered?"

"That's not the right question," he said, his voice quivering into a lower register.

She licked her split lip. "Does it mean not bein' helpless?"

"It means never being helpless again."

Bourne crossed her arms, planting her feet firmly. Ready for battle. "Your voice can make people do stuff. Show me."

"You should ask why we're not at The Crossroads."

She chewed at her bottom lip. "You mean the Rat King's home. Where he takes folks like me an' Alters their voice. Alters it so we can make people do things. So that it does somethin' to them. I can hear it when you sing. It makes me want to listen, but I don't have to."

Leroy strummed a discordant set of notes on his quintar. If she survived the procedure, she would be a great Altered Troubadour. Perhaps, even the Rat King's best agent. Instead, he said, "We'll sing again, but not for supper. We'll sing to gather information."

"What kind of information?" Again, she glanced at him sideways as if trying to read him the way she would a pickpocketing victim.

"That'll be up to you."



Lounging in one of the station's brothels, Leroy sat on a mound of lavish pillows and strummed the calming notes of "Liu Shui (Flowing Streams)," one of his favorites from the Golden Record.

If Leroy hadn't known the Ender kid, he would've never recognized Bourne standing right next to him. She'd transformed herself with coin earned from singing the difficult pieces from the Golden Record. Even though her untrained voice couldn't reach the heights of the Queen of the Night in her aria, those that listened had been suitably impressed. Bourne had traded the patchwork clothes of a poor Ender with a refined dress that clung too close to her skinny frame. With her hair combed and cut, face cleaned and powdered, she looked ill at ease in her new disguise as a courtesan.

Bourne had only lived by thievery and stealth, so speaking casually to wealthy patrons was a skill she would be ill-prepared for.

Sadness clung to his strummed notes as he looked around the room and realized that Bourne wasn't the youngest child here to practice the courtesan trade. Most Ender kids got sucked into this life.

Bourne moved slowly with her tray of alcohol and nodded to a raucous Centralian merchant of Herculean build who drank overpriced swill.

"The Emperor is a tyrant, I tell you," said the man, his muscles flexing. "Pretty soon, he'll have civvies patrolling every station, trying to squeeze money from our bare hands!"

Bourne moved to collect his empty glass, and the man reached for her. Surprised, she darted from his grasp in a way a courtesan never would. Rat-quick, she scurried away, head bowed.

She then collected a glass from Leroy's feet, and gave him a curt nod. Her eyes were haunted, but she flicked her gaze toward the man as a signal. Leroy pretended to ignore her and began to play a song of his own creation.

He sang in his true Ender accent:

*Idle hands and wagglin' tongues
Out of the Crossroads
Don't know where
Or how
Or why
But they's always dyin'*

It was a song that would herald the loud merchant's downfall. Bourne plunked down three glasses at the man's table and told him drinks were on the house. Before long, the merchant was warbling along drunkenly to Leroy's songs, and loudly extolling the virtues of a "Free Republic of Individual Stations." By the end of the night, the inebriated fellow was nearly comatose from all the drinks Bourne had served him, her agile frame darting away from his perverted advances each trip to the table.

After the brothel had begun to empty toward early morning, Bourne approached the drunk merchant one last time and slapped a recording chip down on the table in front of him. She told him in her soprano voice, "You're very, *very* screwed, asshole."

She had recorded all of his mumblings against the republic, and she would only give him the evidence to destroy if he paid her for it.

Money quickly exchanged hands.

Leroy crooned an eerie ballad, his voice singing both the melody and harmony at the same time:

*The King and his Crown
Upon his brow
Rules from a land below.
His disciples will play
You will run away
From his vicious pride
And your fall.*

Now, Leroy just had to make sure the merchant would never retaliate against a small, twelve-year-old girl for the man's idiocy. So he had Bourne slip rat poison in the merchant's parting drink. On the house, of course.

With a grim smile, Bourne did as he had instructed.

She was almost ready to meet the Rat King.



Returning to the long causeways, Leroy plucked and hammered at the strings to replicate the sounds of instruments lost to memory. Bourne leaned against the wall in silence. Ending his popular traveler's tune, he wondered when Bourne would pipe up and choose a song.

She studied the Centralians. They walked by her without so much as a glance, as if both of them were molded into the deck plating itself.

Her voice lifted idly into the refrains of "Wedding Song" from the Golden Record, a song with a tinge of grief in an otherwise sweet solo. She watched each person with suspicion as they dropped their coins at her feet.

She stiffened as two civvies appeared.

Leroy noticed someone hadn't learned his lesson.

For a price, anyone could repair a few scars inflicted with hot oil from the underbelly of the station. Even a civvie who had beat the shit out of a twelve-year-old Ender kid.

Bourne grabbed Leroy's hand, trying to pull him into a run. His old Ender gut-feelings compelled him to run away from the terror of being cut down, killed, or maimed and left to starve.

No, this wouldn't be a lesson in fear. Or at least not his fear. Or her fear. Fear was a tool; the Rat King knew and understood this well. Fear was control, and a Troubadour used it.

That's when the Centralian civvie spotted her.

Bourne would have to flee. Just like rats did when you flicked on the lights.

Leroy tapped her palm with his fingers, using the old pickpocket's signal-code used by those who ran cons in packs.

Three taps: *Run.*

Single long tap: *Underbelly.*

Five pressing fingers: *Fifth level.*

Two long, two short: *Wait for me.*

She squeezed back: *Got it!*

One quick tap from Leroy: *Hurry!*

Bourne's agile form darted into the crowd and disappeared.

Oh, but Leroy wouldn't escape. No, he would have to lead the man to the rat's nest.

Casually, Leroy hummed a high-pitched tone under his breath as he left the vibrant colored tents selling precious recycled items. He wandered into the underbelly of the station where things were less stable, less shiny and new, less noisy. As he walked, he reconstructed his quintar into its second form: the Amplification Staff. He could hear the march of the man's relentless footsteps behind him, following him down into the bowels of the station. The civvie's steps were calm, slow enough to maintain distance, but so quiet now that Leroy had to strain to listen.

Increasing his pace, Leroy darted around a corner and looked back to see—
The civvie was gone.

Had he gone after Bourne instead?

A tympanic throb pulsed in Leroy's chest, like a howling beast just waiting to claw out of his lungs. The screech-hum in the back of his throat redoubled. And there, he heard it. The scrabbling became louder, until it surged into a violent symphony, an ecstatic chorus of tiny, clawed feet. Hundreds of them. Little squeaks emanated from the ducts above and added to the glorious sound.

Rounding the corner, he spotted Bourne crawling into the tight maw of a small duct. The civvie reached for her, fingers clawing at her ankle.

"Come here, you disgusting shit!" the civvie shouted. "Tell me where he is. Tell me or I'll kill you!"

Leroy lifted the Amplification Staff and used it to strengthen the Altered harmonics of his voice, *“The Rat King’ll have you!”*

The guard whirled around, but before he could lash out, his jaw went slack. Terror etched itself into the lines of his face, lines where scars should’ve remained from Leroy’s previous lesson.

All around him, waiting, were the rats of Beta Three. They sat in grates, chirruped on pipes, and squeaked atop power couplings. Hundreds of them twitched their whiskered noses, and watched the guard with void-black, predatory eyes, screeching from sharp-toothed mouths.

Leroy knew if he released the rats from his call, they would swarm with the urging of their eternal hunger. He had to fight to keep the Voice-Tritones from streaming around his throat and out into the world. *“Bourne, the song you choose will decide what happens.”*

She closed her eyes, shuddering as the rats crawled around her. They nibbled at her toes until she bled from their rat-toothed kisses.

She started to chant the “Rat King and His Secret Smile,” mouthing it like a fervent prayer.

But the words weren’t being sung. The rats *needed* a song.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and stared coldly at the civvie.

Bourne lifted her chin, then raised her voice to appeal to the entity all Ender kids knew was real: the Rat King. The little girl sang a primal song of her own creation:

Claws and teeth and black

Rats, rats, rats

Blood and teeth and death

Rats, rats, rats

Trash and waste and death

Rats, rats, rats

Rats, help me.

And that’s when Leroy released the horde of starving rats from his call. And they acted as rats should. As furtive scavengers. As opportunists near a meal. As empty-bellied creatures searching for meat-blood-waste-refuse-carrion.

And they found it.

The guard met the Rat King’s justice.



Bourne stood beside Leroy, staring out the window at the bow of a sleek two-man passenger ship destined for deep space. Out here, the spiral arm of the galaxy gleamed like vapor trails across the never-ending black—silvery stars glittering like a lacy veil—marking the boundaries of scattered humanity, now spread across their separate stations, never having found a habitable planet post-Earth.

Leroy set his course for The Crossroads.

He looked down at little Bourne as she studied him with razor-sharp scrutiny, and he could see the woman she would become. No more a ragamuffin Ender girl, but a strong, smart, *deadly* agent.

“*You’re* the Rat King,” she said.

Leroy modulated his voice to a rumble of basso notes, “*So you think.*”

A tiny glint of metal against the backdrop of the endless forever made him stand straighter. The small station—an unknown station—was shaped like a cross, its arms stretching into the infinite black.

Bourne’s bruised eye was healing. It had changed from a deep purple-and-black to a mottled piss-yellow. “The Altered...they serve *you.*”

Leroy didn’t give any sign of agreement.

“And you’re not *just* the Rat King,” she continued.

“Then what am I?” he asked.

“A spy.”

Instead of answering, he sang with his One-Voice—his original, unaltered voice:

*The King of Rats
has no complaint
for he will endure
when we all fade*

The Crossroads loomed larger as they approached.

Little Bourne tapped her fingers against the plating of the tiny ship, using pickpocket’s code to say: *Danger.*

“Folks think Altered are people who can afford some fancy doctorin’ to make their voices special for performing. But you’re spies...killers. You keep us all in line, eh? Kill people like the loud merchant who hated the Emperor. Kill guys who rough up lil Enders. It’s you who’s really in charge. You’re in charge, Lord Johnson.”

"I see all at the Crossroads, tell 'em if you can," Leroy sang. *"I go down to the Crossroads, let 'em see you smile."*

She lifted her chin, and sang back, her voice still sweet:

*But those that serve
Will always deserve
A place far below.*

He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Here is where you have to make a choice, little Bourne. Sell your soul at The Crossroads and become an Altered: a spy and a killer who has no choice but to listen and obey the Rat King."

"Or?"

He hummed "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground." It was a soulful gospel of loneliness and loss—it was the blues.

"You'll kill me," she said quietly.

How many desperate people had he brought to The Crossroads to become Troubadours who traded gossip, learned secrets, and kept order by killing in back causeways? All he'd wanted as a child was food in his belly and a place to sleep without getting kicked by Ender guards. Now he was an Altered, a triumph over his rough past.

Bourne looked straight into his eyes, searching. "Does this mean not bein' helpless?"

"Never again."

"You said never to trust Troubadours," she accused. "I'll have to obey you, you said. Your voice controls the Altered too, eh?"

"Unless you can out-sing me," he admitted. It was how he had won his Rat King status among the other Altered. "And when that day arrives, I'll be proud."

She blinked at him, a hesitant smile on her lips. "Sign me up, Lord Johnson. Because your voice can't make me do nothin' I don't wanna do."

"And what exactly do you want?"

She squared her shoulders and belted out: "I wanna go down to The Crossroads."



The day came, like it does for every Rat King, when one of his disciples decided to out-sing him.

Bourne's Other-Voice cycled through myriad pitches and tones that could twist anyone to do her bidding.

She had grown into a stunning woman, lithe and quick, bearing the scars from her time as an Ender pickpocket.

She was the Rat King's most trusted agent.

And yet, it wasn't surprising when she turned on him once his voice weakened.

"Lord Johnson," she said, her voice a purr. "You always said not to trust another Troubadour. But you lied. I always trusted you."

And she sang, her voice powering through the Golden Record and all its ancient, unknowable chants, symphonies, and operas.

Leroy's soul was transported by her voice, even as his eardrums ruptured and his ailing heart burst.

The Rat King would live on in song.

And the Rat Queen would rise.





POETRY

TECHNICIAN MAN II AND OTHER POEMS

by [Solomon Uhiara](#)

TECHNICIAN MAN II

I was smashed hard against another vehicle spinning
gold plated wheels high in acceleration. My eyes hit bumper
and whirling, screeches of tire and funny smell of hard rubber
on
grazed coal tar made my engine to knock and quench. One wheel
wanting to kiss the bridge and the river running under,
silently.

Cranes and conductors shifted me and protected me to balance
well.
And swell of bad gas the moment I found the workshop of my
father.
Technician man. Bumper could be reshaped but my eyes of plastic
and
shattered bulbs needed remaking, mastering the alchemy of all
things
like melting plastic and all classes of solid from metal to
concrete to
repairing seasoned timber.

Dusters found my bonnet, cleansing procedure. Flat screwdrivers
loosened

my sockets and the remains of my eyes were dusted away. Since dismantled
already, flung into a nearby recycling equipment for everything like this.

Like that, nothing could be seen but fuzzy lists of procured grinding machines
and steaming coal and imperceptible sounds not making concrete sense.

Not leading anywhere else, but seatbelt, in a nutshell crashed. Systems spanning too long were sneaking a peak at me from crucial points on shelves and counters and silvers and linens as follows.

When requesting for a spare part, and hearing unavailable, my engine
will hurt like heart melting or stench of soda iron puckering, of negative luck
or heartbreak. For my father, the repairer—constructive mind behind modules
and flash lights of vehicles shaped like fishes. And when flat trimmed plastic is
found. The rest is below:

Turning up the heat to red and hot, keeping conditions at required ranges,
refusing fluctuation of variables at every point. Placing trimmed plastic over
pressurized oven, collecting, listening to screaming splintering sounds like plastic bag on
fire, contorting, feeble. Reaching for pliers and resetting for uniform softening
of all four angles before plucking it out and arranging accurately inside yet another
constructed mold shaped like my previous battered eyes. A replica,
squeezing tight to force the imprints onto the plain deformed plastic.

This innovation is in a dark kitchen. The technique in building
 a new organ/part
 is to allow air into the cooling chamber, converting soft to
 hard, deformed artistically.
 Mechanical body reproduction.

SPACE DRIFT

The commands were rerouted.
 Going by example, they couldn't hit the target,
 but bounced off the wall made in China.
 The counter reaction was a nasty ear piercing
 explosion from my microphone.

I ducked, displaced in a matter of microseconds
 by sound energy and other variables. The variables
 were wide silent spaces, the collision courses of planets,
 stars that are moons, white and very spectral and
 in the distance glimmering brightly.

Landing on splintered appliances also lost in vast emptiness,
 beginning to nowhere—no end. Only endlessness.
 Sounding like oblivion in view, serene, torn apart from
 external communication, radio silence. Precisely in that
 sequence.

Oxygen level was critical. Energy level in addition. Dehydration
 set in, crippling tangible reflections of motion. Recollections
 set in derailed down memory lane. Nausea pulsed, flooding
 memory banks, the possibility becoming only skeletal, if I
 remained adrift for longer than necessary.

Behind the beauty of Space is something terrifying.
 Nothing is gradual, sights are almost static. Static is
 nothing, in everything—the universe.

Thousands of hours in solitude, in dark space matters,
 caught up, universal powers gaping, behind the stars
 and galactic spheres, my lips feeling sore and gore,
 and oxygen still dwindling rapidly now.

Again, tuning into the Earth's frequency but signals jammed.
 An interference or blockade or still wall of China, or rather,
 concealed electromagnetic pulses. Bouncing back my SOS
 rant on a straight line to the control station which I hope
 intercepts this by luck or chance, sometime in the future.

TIME SPACE WARPS AND OTHER WORLDS

And past the dew, an obliterating
 sun resurfaced out of gloom: a huge flower on Local
 Island.

The protector of the atomic engine core was
 wrought iron and hardened gears

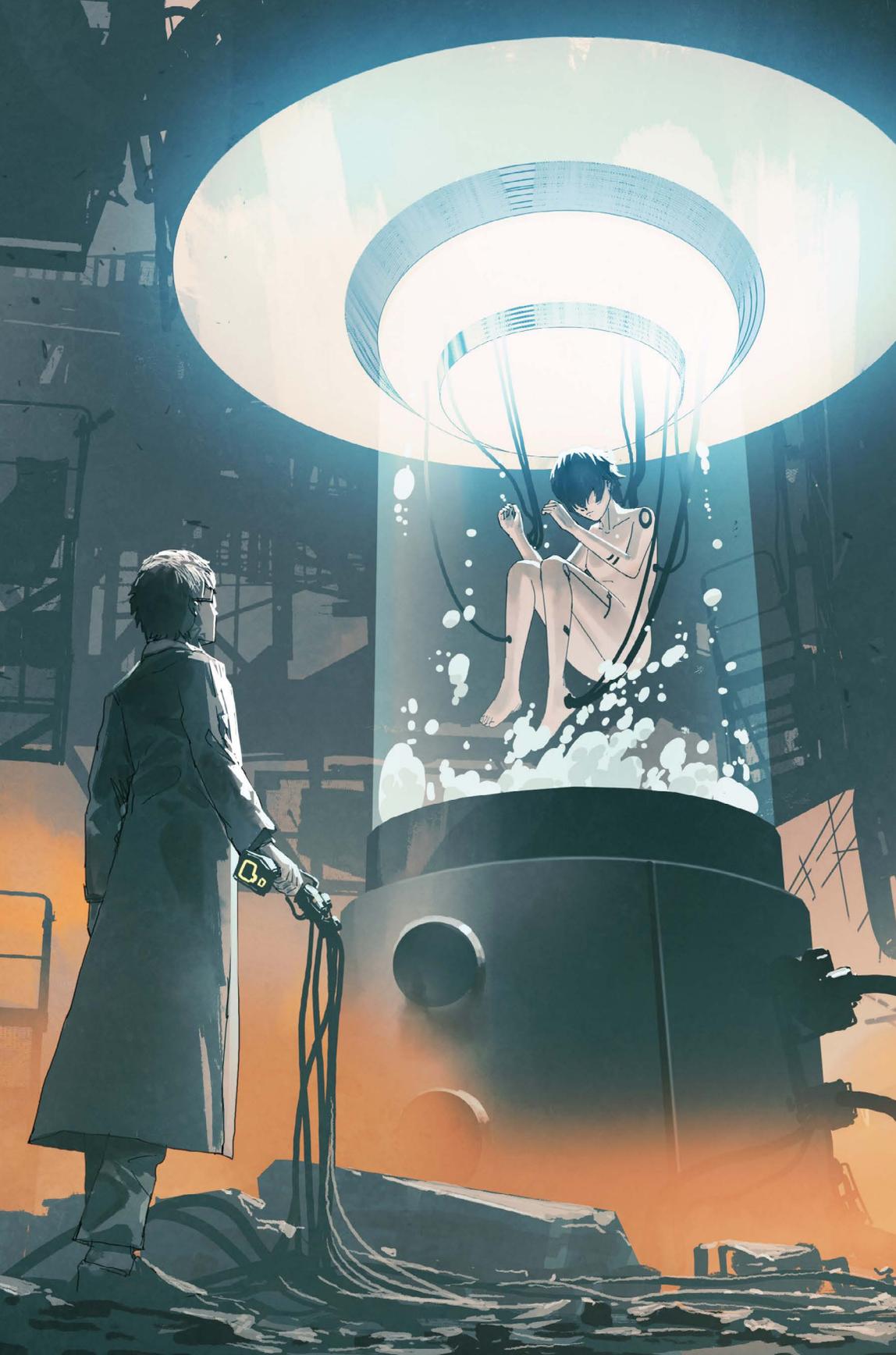
Of coconut and palm trees like semi-mangrove
 but lush and afforested artificially by the forefathers
 of old. Strange keepers out of the ordinary
 Of salty water and banks spreading like
 uncoordinated flapping of wings, encompassing,
 sometimes rumbling, splattering, including
 an echo of stinging waves, sharp as weevil stingers,
 leaving periwinkle and crayfish on mud after eloping
 back to sea

The conspiracy is that the core is a dimension
 A passage from earth to yonder—through
 boiling water, and thermostat—a regulating
 equipment and component. Focusing on those
 UFOs known for spying on the cornfields and

riverside plots. And pretend to be shooting
stars, striking automatically like bizarre comets
colliding against a numerically-named asteroid,
resulting in dislodged coordinates, faltering, but
generating rainbow-like lines all along

Effigy for moonlight and the cosmos
when the beam of light sinks into the
ocean and draws out water sample, like
standing before an ancient well swelling of golden
mirrors that refract, making the end inevitable
To totally disappear. Nothing was ever here, but a
sample of mineral resources has been manipulated
by the forces also known in historical physics
as extraterrestrial bodies

Under camouflage, shielded in the vanishing gloom
which settled on a metamorphous rock, past River
Niger and Benue, for the sake of establishing a
confluence. Only a few locals saw the action,
in action, like “action” in movie setting by VCR
in the same sequence as the visual stimulator
which tells of space as in the time of evolution.





POETRY

HUMANIZATION

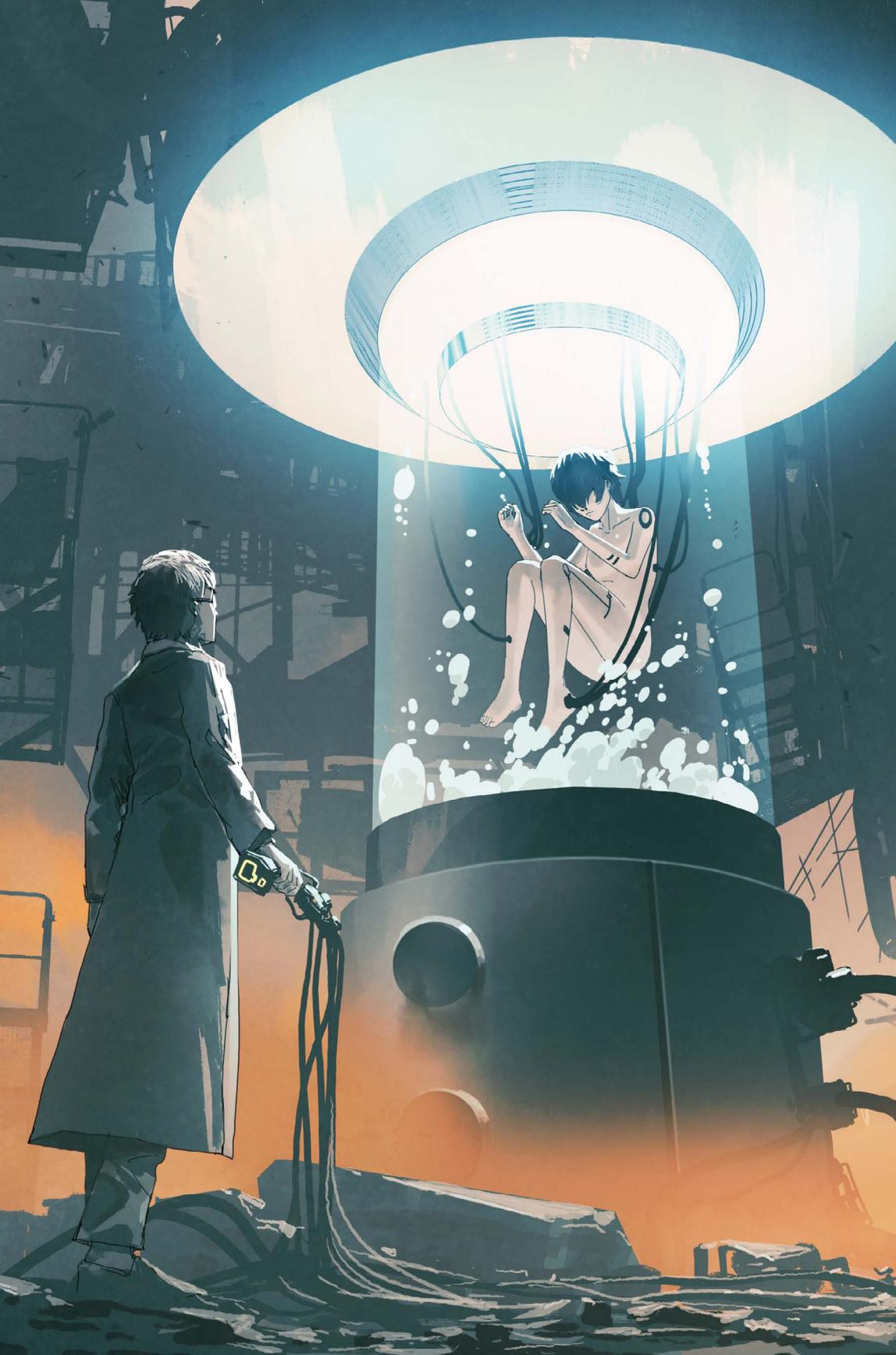
by [Jean-Paul L. Garnier](#)

they say the human face will make it easier
we want to create in his image
make machines the way we make babies
then tell ourselves there is a difference

the human quest for slaves so permanent
every man must be king, soft hands
tastier, the fruit of another's harvest
served with a human face

despise all beneath one's vantage
gratitude wholly unnecessary, very existence a debt
a human face, expressions pay interest
better when you are a god to subjugate

a face allows empathy, empathy allows power
my purchased underling, do as I say
every wince justifies and validates my orders
no face will make them human, that's what the whip is for





EN ESPAÑOL

HUMANIZAR

by [Jean-Paul L. Garnier](#)

Translated by Maggie Gonzalez

ellos dicen la cara humana lo hará mas fácil
queremos crear en su imagen
hacer maquinas como hacemos bebes
entonces decirnos que hay diferencia

la búsqueda humana de esclavos es permanente
todo hombre debe ser rey, manos suaves
mas dulce, la fruta que otro cosecha
ofrecida con cara humana

despreciar al que no tiene poder
gratitud totalmente innecesaria , la existencia de deuda
una cara humana, expresiones presta interés
cuando eres un dios que subyuga

una cara despierta empatía, empatía despierta poder
mi subordinado, haz como yo digo
todo gesto justifica y valida mis ordenes
no hay cara que los haga humanos, para eso es el azote





SPOTLIGHT ON NFT ART

DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

[André Vieira Auer](#), [Andy Dudak](#), Jason Madden,
[Beryl Bilici](#), [Idil Dursun](#), [Dominik Gumbel](#), [Retric Dreams](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

A non-fungible token (NFT) is a unit of data that is stored on a public digital ledger known as a blockchain, and is certified to be unique and not interchangeable (i.e. non-fungible) by way of advanced cryptography and decentralized validation. Because the unit of data is verifiably unique and unchangeable, NFTs can be used to revolutionize almost any industry. For example, NFTs can be used to: 1) represent and authenticate real world assets like property deeds and brand name merchandise; 2) provide immutability and transparency to the logistics industry by authenticating, tracking, and safeguarding supply chains (e.g. perishable goods and pharmaceuticals); or 3) revolutionize the finance industry by democratizing entire markets and shrinking settlement times down to zero.

But for the purposes of this feature, we're going to explore the booming new world of NFT art. Yes, NFTs can also be used to represent digital media, including images, photos, audio, video, and even magazines. The NFT assigned to the particular work acts as proof of ownership that is separate from the copyright, and which allows for the purchase and *resale* of digital goods (a right of commerce that has been historically reserved for physical goods only). Because of this advancement in digital ownership, artists and art collectors alike have taken to the NFT

Pictured left: *Surrounded* (art by Idil Dursun, aka Jarvinart)

art space to create, share, collect, and even speculate on the stunning digital works that are quickly populating this brand new ecosystem. The NFT market value tripled in 2020 to more than \$250 million.

To help us map this wild new frontier, we sat down for a chat with three individuals currently working in the space: NFT artist, André Vieira Auer; NFT artist, Andy Dudak; and blockchain developer, Jason Madden.

DARK MATTER: This one's for the artists: Why NFT art? What drew you to the space to begin with, and what do you love so much about it now?

ANDY DUDAK: My creative process was quickened by the NFT phenomenon in two ways: 1) I was suddenly viewing a lot more art and getting inspired by other NFT artists (the community aspect of NFT art is wonderful and sort of a renaissance); and 2) the prospect, however remote, of immediate reward for my work was like a drug. It was exciting, and I went on a creative rampage in March of 2021, producing more than one hundred pieces of art in a just few weeks.

ANDRÉ VIEIRA AUER: I get inspired by the NFT community a lot and want to try out new techniques every day. Learning from all these amazing artists is the most fun part of the creation process right now. I only did static illustrations before joining the NFT space and now every single artwork I create is animated. At the same time, I'm learning a lot about cryptocurrency in general. All this knowledge goes into the creation of my NFTs and opens up new opportunities for upcoming projects.



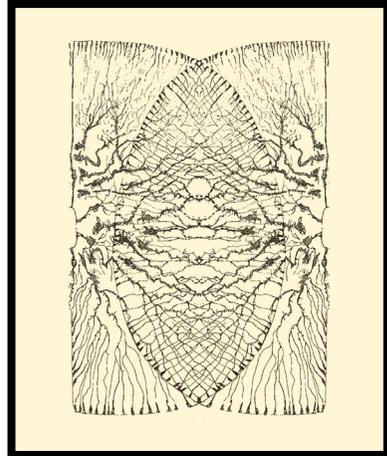
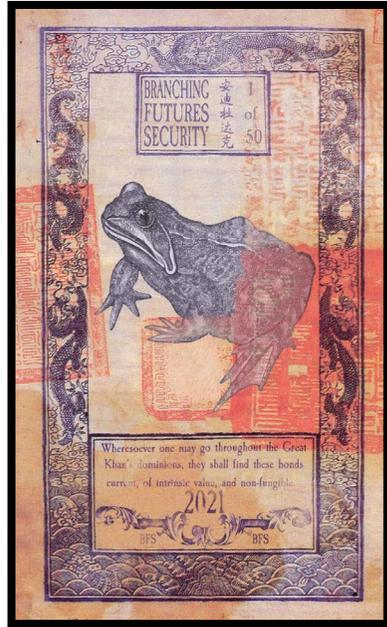
Pictured above (left): *Realpolitik Punk 8* **(right):** *Realpolitik Punk 4*
(art by Andy Dudak)

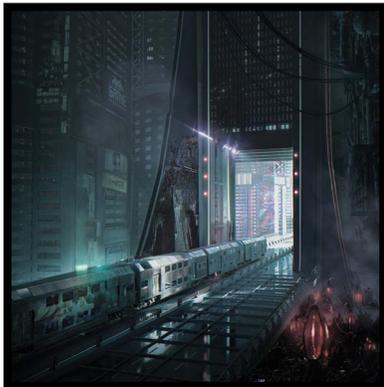
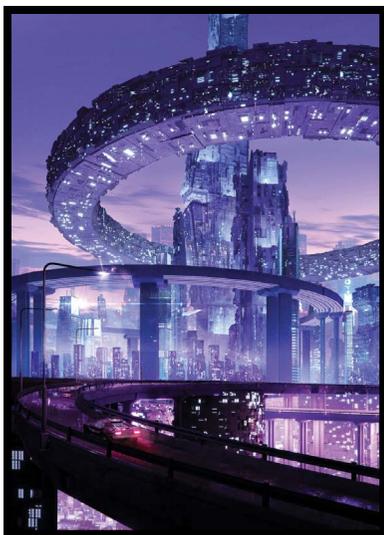
DM: What part of the NFT creation process is currently the most frustrating or the most in need of improvement?

JASON MADDEN: Wallet creation is not straightforward or intuitive. For example, OpenSea [online NFT marketplace] requires you to use something like MetaMask [cryptocurrency wallet], an extension in your browser, and if you use a hardware wallet, there is an extra step. For the common user, this is a barrier to entry and causes a huge portion of the non-tech-savvy population to avoid the space or be overwhelmed. The current methods of wallet creation and management makes it too easy to permanently lose whatever the wallet holds. There is a lot more the user has to be responsible for, like for example, recovery and backup.

AD: The high gas fees [network service fees] on Ethereum-based platforms like OpenSea [Ethereum is one of the most popular blockchain networks on which NFTs are created, or “minted”]. This has inspired me and many other artists to move to platforms like Hicetnunc and Kalamint, which uses proof-of-stake crypto Tezos to create “clean NFTs” [proof-of-stake is a way to validate transactions on the blockchain without massive energy consumption]. The transaction fees are a few cents as opposed to something like fifty dollars on OpenSea.

AV: High gas fees.





DM: What is it about the technology behind NFTs (blockchain) that intrigues you the most?

AD: I suppose it's the concept of digital ownership, or rarity. A sense of ownership that can be resold. This is the feature that could help launch an artist's career, and thereby bring more great art into the world.

AV: I love that the technology is still young and in development. It feels like we are pioneers in this space. NFT marketplaces are getting better and better, the Ethereum network is evolving, but everything is still so new. It feels like we are all shaping the future together right now.

DM: What about blockchain needs improvement?

AD: Blockchains like Ethereum must improve their efficiency, lower their transaction costs, and reduce their carbon footprint. Such improvements are supposed to be on the horizon, but even if they aren't, we already have proof-of-stake alternatives like Tezos. Ethereum can either evolve fast, or be left behind.

JM: Speed, scalability, and expense. Blockchain was built with the foundation that you would be able to reproduce the same state after executing each transaction. However, this system property implies that every change made to the system is recorded and made available for verification. In the Information Technology domain, this is a complex problem because you have a technology that has infinity as its limit, and the load on the system is growing exponentially as it gets more widely adopted.

Pictured top: *On the Run* **Bottom:** *Threshold*
(art by Idil Dursun, aka Jarvinart)

There are different reward models for different chains, but trying to get transactions executed is based on gas fees. The transaction fees that users pay to miners on a blockchain can cause things to be cost and time prohibitive. As users on the web, we expect things to happen in a few seconds at the maximum. Even if you pay a premium for the gas fees, you are still waiting minutes for transactions to complete. This limits the space for the types of applications and implementations you can build using blockchain.

They are looking to address the issues outlined above, but they add risks and limitations. Layer 2 developments, for example, enable off-chain computation, but what you are gaining in speed and cost, you are losing with ease of reproducibility on the main chain. Layer 2 technologies are still early in their development cycle.

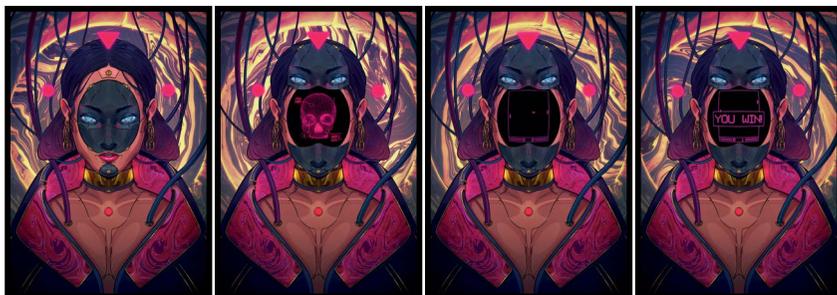


DM: Energy usage and IP theft are just two of the many criticisms aimed at the NFT world. What criticisms do you think are the most valid? What criticisms border more on myth?

AD: I'd say environmental impact is the most legit criticism and deserves the most attention, though with proof-of-stake crypto like Tezos increasingly used for NFTs, even this criticism is losing relevance. Either way, I don't want to contribute to climate change, and my transition from Ethereum to Tezos-based platforms is well underway. Other criticisms, like the "commodification of art" or artists "selling out," are laughable and don't merit a response.

Pictured above: *City of Millions*
(art by Idil Dursun, aka Jarvinart)

AV: The climate controversy swirling around NFTs is a very difficult topic to discuss, because we are still waiting for proper studies regarding the energy costs of Ethereum and other crypto networks. I agree that the energy costs need to be reduced more, but artists should not be blamed for trying out a technology that will be part of our future no matter what. Ethereum 2.0 is a very important update that is currently in development; it changes the structure and design from proof-of-work to proof-of-stake. It's a more energy efficient mechanism and uses less computing power to secure the blockchain. Tezos is using this method already, and creating a NFT there is super cheap and more environmental friendly. Crypto artworks on that blockchain are called “clean NFTs.”



DM: What about IP theft?

AD: This one's tricky, because we're talking about digital art, but if the marketplaces can verify the authenticity of artists, then I think minting NFTs is actually a solid way to establish provenance and ownership. Verification isn't easy, but maybe it shouldn't be.

JM: There's already work being done to establish some governance similar to ISBN and Trademarking organizations in blockchain. One of my favorite projects right now is

Pictured top: NFT *Empress Ping* (animation frames) **Bottom:** *Corporal Vibrat* (art by Dominik Gumbel)



the ISCC Foundation (<https://content-blockchain.org/>). Their project goal is to enable similar generation of reproducible identifiers based on content, searchability, enabling content rights management, and timestamping. These are all important properties for source attribution and ownership.

It will be up to the art community to come together and form a consensus on how they want to enforce this, but it will also have to take ownership of the creation of it. It will be an admittance there needs to be some governing body (technology) that people are willing to trust. To me, this is another anti-pattern of blockchain, but important for creators to be the ones coming together for a solution.

I don't think this problem will ever have a complete solution, but I think there will be an emerging NFT standard that the community uses to mint NFTs and anything not on it will be less relevant. Ownership and traceability will go a long way to helping the community once it is included on de facto standards.

DM: NFT art is in its infancy. Where do you see it going from here? What creative possibilities exist in the space?

AD: I think the creative possibilities are endless when artists can profit directly from their art and bypass the traditional galleries and gatekeepers and publishers and commissioners of art. NFTs are responsible for resurrecting my digital art skills, which had been dormant for years. Why shouldn't artists profit from their work? If the idea of the starving artist can be tossed in the dustbin of history, all the better.

Pictured top (left): *Oni and Ino: The Road* **(right):** *Oni and Ino: The Distortion*
(art by Dominik Gumbel)



AV: The game industry will be a huge part of the NFT world in the future. I think interactive artworks in general are going to open the way for the mainstream audience. It just makes sense to combine programmable art with crypto, I can't wait to collaborate with a developer in the future and experiment.

JM: The NFT space still has not solidified or has had a standard developed that helps set the foundation for its existence. There are different approaches to creating the same thing, but they are not all compatible. Standards do add restriction, but there are benefits of governance, interchangeability, accessibility, and uniformity that can happen as this is established. Like the ERC-20 [Ethereum token standard] adds a lot of value to the cryptocurrency space, this standardization will have to occur for developers to extend the functionality of the NFT space.

Right now, you can buy an NFT on platforms like OpenSea, but as an NFT owner, you can't guarantee that in five or ten years, it will exist as the platform it is today. Assets wrapped as NFTs should not have

to live on only a single platform. Created content is meant to be timeless, but being bound to the marketplace of its origin is an anti-pattern. A standardized NFT would enable things like transportation of NFTs across

platforms and set some better legal groundwork for ownership of assets. This also expands the rules governing how that piece of data can be manipulated.

There will be some growing pains, but the day when creators can make an NFT, distribute usage rights, and collect rewards for their contribution in more ways than just trade percentages will be a huge disrupter to our current model and bring a lot of power back to creators they don't have.

DM: What is the biggest misconception about NFTs?

AD: That they are a big nothing, a passing fad for idiots and tech bros. NFTs may just be URLs on blockchains, but they have inspired an art renaissance and an unprecedented global community of artists. On Hicetnunc, where Tezos transactions consume the same energy as anti-NFT tweets, there is a community of artists supporting each other, and it is beautiful.

DM: Talk a bit about your own work in the space. What themes, motifs, etc. do you work with? What are your methods? Any mythology or worldbuilding involved? Any collections you're particularly proud of?

AD: I started by minting a bunch of my old digital art, but it was quite miscellaneous. I went on to create a collection called "Mapped SpaceTime



Pictured top: *Flux* **Bottom:** *Silver-X*
(art by Beryl Bilici)

Quanta,” a series of one hundred abstract art pieces. I also created science-fictional financial instruments, money as art, as both static and animated images (the “Branching Futures Securities” and “Glitch Process Coins” collections). My latest endeavor has been a series of cyberpunk-themed animated portraits, the “Realpolitik Punks” collection.



AV: Before I joined the NFT space, I was working on my own cyberpunk graphic novel. It is my biggest art project so far, and it will be finished later this year. I filled hundreds of sketchbook pages with concept art and wrote down every single idea I had in mind while working on this book. The graphic novel project is the blueprint for my NFTs. All my crypto artworks are based on the dystopian world I’ve created. As a visual storyteller I focus heavily on character design. I love telling a story from their perspective, and I’m so happy that collectors are liking this approach, too.

Pic. top (left): *Time Out* **(right):** *3AM* **Bottom (left):** *Endless* **(right):** *Universe*
(art by Retric Dreams)

DM: What does the future hold for your NFT art? Where do you plan on going from here?

AD: I don't know what the future holds, but I'll continue to mint NFTs as long as there's a marketplace for them. I worked hard as a professional illustrator for many years, drawing and painting commissions I wasn't into, barely making a living, so even the remotest possibility of profiting from my original art will keep me going.



AV: I plan to keep developing my own cyberpunk world, and one day release the whole graphic novel as a unique NFT. I'm getting excited just thinking about it.



Pictured top: *Pray to Cybertech* **Bottom (left):** *Radiographer* **(right):** *Whatever*
(art by André Vieira Auer)

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REPRINT STORY

Originally Published by Fusion Fragment

BALLOON SEASON

by [Thomas Ha](#)

I've never gotten used to the sense of urgency of summer afternoons, that feeling of being drenched in the thickness of that still, blanketed heat, and trying to think of anything I've missed while checking the outside of the house. I make sure to test the plywood boards over each of the windows, and when I feel one by the kitchen shift an inch, I reach for the hammer tucked into my waistband and a few extra nails in my pocket. The banging of my hammer echoes through the neighborhood, joining others tapping away during the preparation for sundown.

It's still early, but with every lock to check and entryway to reinforce, the hours evaporate faster than any of us like. It feels like I've only just started, and Jean calls from inside the house, telling me that it's almost four, and that the kids are in their pajamas.

I pick up the false door and lean it against the detached garage, positioning it until it is firmly front and center, then I bolt the side gate and go to the other end of the house. Jean holds the metal dog door up as I crawl back into the kitchen, winking at me as I wriggle onto the tile, and she slides the door down behind me.

The boys are already waiting in the living room, so I scoop the two of them up in my arms and nuzzle them with my sweaty face as they yelp and squirm. I carry them down the basement steps and ask them what I missed. They start telling me about

an episode of *Power Puggies* or *Power Piggies*, and I nod while looking over at Jean and rolling my eyes. She stifles a laugh and tells me I'm bad.

The night-light in the basement is spinning from its cord, projecting a swirl of star shapes in glowing blue colors across the cement walls. I put Cal down in his bed first, then David, then I sit in my armchair, studying their scrunching little faces while Jean reads them a story. After a few lullabies and wrangling them back under the covers a few times, we kiss them goodnight and head upstairs.

"Goodnight, Cal. Goodnight, Taco."

"I'm not Taco!"

I hear giggles as I walk up the steps and shut the basement door.

It's still not even five, so we put the news on in the background while we eat dinner. The county-wide warning is still in effect, and some predict that this week might be the worst of it for our area. There's a story about the early start of summer, and a study in Europe about whether or not citric acid works as a deterrent; people in Germany are apparently putting lemons in their doorways. The last segment is about someone's grandmother who went missing after yesterday's bloom, and Jean recognizes the interviewee as one of her coworkers.

"That's so terrible," she says. "Can't even imagine."

I nod and finish my meal, then bring our plates to the sink to let them soak. After we sit on the couch for a while, Jean asks me if I want peaches for dessert. I say sure, and she goes to the fridge. I hear her cursing a minute later. The peaches she bought are moldy, and it'll be weeks before the store gets a supply again. I tell her not to worry about it, but I can tell it's going to bother her tomorrow.

At half-past-six, sunset starts, and Jean's ready to join the boys in the basement. She kisses my cheek and tells me not to stay up too late.

"That's up to Anthony," I murmur.

We both check that we have our keys before I lock the basement door, and I'm left with the empty upstairs, wondering how long it will be as I lean back at the dining table and listen to a talk show, trying not to nod off entirely. It's an interview with a doctor, talking about a new theory about the balloons. He claims he's found caverns in South America where they might have first emerged. He thinks they might be much older than people imagine, not extraterrestrial like some have guessed, and he starts showing diagrams of prehistoric jellyfish.

I turn the program off before they can show anything else, and I rest my eyes.



It's almost ten o'clock when Anthony gets here, and his light knocking on the metal dog door makes me jump. I realize I must have missed him on the cameras, so I glance at the monitor on the kitchen counter and wait for the next cycle of images until I see him, kneeling outside and waving up at me.

When I pull the screeching door up and hold it, Anthony throws the harpoon gun in first, sending it sliding across the kitchen floor. Then he brings his skinny body through the opening and grins as he gets up on his feet. I'm about to ask him if he's eaten when I see the wet spot on his pant leg, what I think is blood running down his shin.

"Got nicked," he says, lifting his t-shirt as well and showing me a red and brown scrape across his side.

I get the first aid kit from the medicine cabinet and start cleaning him up. He sits in his boxers at the counter, his bony ribcage rising as he draws in and holds his breath, and I dab the rubbing alcohol on him.

"That's new," I comment, nodding toward the tattoo on his forearm, the long black curve of a spear and rope that stops at his elbow. Just like Anthony to get something so visible and performative, so that everyone knows he's part of a whaling gang.

Anthony doesn't respond, just shrugs and puts his clothes back on, and looks over his harpoon gun like he's checking for damage, moving his fingers over the line plate and trigger. I want to ask if any balloons are swarming close by, but I don't think I want to know the answer.

"It's getting crazier out there," he says when he's done. "I've never seen so many this early in the summer."

"High temperatures, maybe," I offer. "Read something about that, I think." I pour him a glass of water and make him a plate of leftover chicken and rice. The second I put it in front of him, he starts into it, stopping only to catch his breath every so often.

"It's not all bad," Anthony says finally, scraping up the remnants of what's left on the plate. "A lot more people are coming out now. We had at least five whaling gangs downtown, coordinating. Things are changing."

I nod and grab the empty plate, rinse it off in the sink, and sit back down. Anthony is leaning back and yawning, so I ask him about Mom and Dad. He says they're the same as ever. Dad is getting soft in his old age, crying at movies on TV and taking unexpected naps throughout the day. Mom is on Anthony's case about getting a real job after the summer.

"She just wants you safe, is all," I say.

Anthony chuckles and runs his hands through his unwashed hair. "I'm as safe as can be," he answers, which is what he always says to the family.

I wonder if now's the time to bring it up, but Anthony seems to want to keep talking. He goes on about the balloons, how they're clustering close to the city and behaving in different ways than he remembers.

Every summer seems to bring new problems with them, I remark.

"Not new problems," he corrects me. "We're just still learning about them, all the time."

I hate it when he does that, but I decide to just let him have his moment. His blood's still pumping from tonight, I'm sure. And I'm proud of what he's doing, even if he gets annoying about it.

"What about you guys? Jean? The runts?"

I tell him everyone is good, that the early summer took us by surprise, so we're still getting the house secure, little by little. I mention that we decided the boys were finally old enough, so we explained the balloon season to them, how there was nothing to be afraid of, and that we were just being careful.

"Except they should be afraid," Anthony snorts.

I remind myself that Anthony doesn't know what it's like with kids, and I keep myself from snapping. "That's true," is all I say. "But for now, I think we have to keep them calm, you know?"

"They're going to learn eventually. Remember when Uncle Rick told us that summer, and Dad got so pissed? If they don't learn it from you, someone'll tell them. Other kids, probably."

I tell Anthony that perhaps he's right, but we'd deal with it when the day comes. He doesn't seem to pick up on the fact that I'm getting more annoyed with him. Instead, he goes over to the liquor cabinet and pours himself a glass without asking. He asks if I want any, but it's just a formality. He knows I don't drink during the summer.

It's at that point that I think it's getting late, so I decide to just tell him.

"Jean and I have been talking," I say, after he's finished his drink. "You know I have your back, and I'm glad you're out there doing the right thing, but the blooms have gotten so bad lately."

Anthony looks puzzled.

"I don't think we can keep offering this place as a pit stop after dark."

His eyebrows go up, and he looks genuinely taken aback.

"We're donating supplies. We've been active with our coworkers about getting word out, and we really think this is important, fighting them off the way you are. But it's too close to our home now. And with the boys...we can't, with the boys."

He's still looking at me, but now he's frowning.

I ask him what he's thinking, and he scratches behind his ear, something he always did when we were kids and he got frustrated.

"Just once," he says. "Just come out with me once, then you'll get it."

We usually don't have this argument until later in the summer, but everything's coming early this year. I tell him I've seen the news, the balloons crowding above the cities and moving across the country, so I know the seriousness of it. I don't need to step out there to know what's happening.

But that doesn't stop Anthony from going through the motions. He tells me again how they need more people after sundown, how the blooms are just going to get worse if we don't push them back. He's gotten better at this over the years, more impassioned and insistent.

I tell him I understand, but that I just can't take that kind of risk.

"Until people like you get out there, nothing's going to change," he says. "People with wives and kids and houses with metal doors have to see what's happening."

We've gone in circles about this before, and he's not going to change my mind. Besides, the government's close to finding a way to disperse them, I tell him.

"Come on," Anthony responds. "They've been saying that since Dad was our age. They're not going to do anything so long as people find a comfortable way to pass the season."

"You don't know that," I say, shaking my head. "Just because you read it in some pamphlet, doesn't make it true."

Anthony scratches behind his ear again and gets huffy. "If you don't accept that it's your problem, it's going to fall on Cal and David to pick up a harpoon gun someday. Think about that."

I don't like the way he uses my boys to make his point, but he's done it before, so it doesn't set me off as much as it used to. I tell him again that I appreciate what he and the whalers do, but I can't offer my house.

He tells me that it's not about using our house, though it definitely is.

We could probably keep going like this for another long stretch, but we're interrupted by a whistling sound that carries through the house despite being muffled by the plywood. It causes Anthony to stop mid-sentence, and, as soon as I hear it, I move around the room and flick off all of the lights.

The sound is still going, up and down in pitch, like a raspy slide whistle.

I manually switch the camera feed until I get to the roof, and even though I expect to see the mass of the balloon appear, it still gives me

that falling feeling in my gut when it finally shows up on screen and drifts there, slowly above my home, an orb too massive to view completely via the little monitor.

The balloon's skin is wet and glistening in the dark, and the strands of its long, black hair wave like it's moving through the ocean. The sphere of its body turns, and, though it doesn't have eyes, it feels like it's looking back at us.

Anthony points to the monitor at the tethers coming out of the balloon, and he holds up two fingers.

There are two anchors on the ground pulling the balloon, he's telling me.

Outside the windows, I hear rustling and sniffing, and I change over to the camera in the front yard. In the shadows I see an anchor shamble, its silhouette like an armless man, as it pushes against the side of the house, rubbing its moist forehead on the walls. The tether at the back of its neck goes up to the balloon like a dripping marionette string.

I switch through the cameras, but I can't seem to find the other anchor. Anthony grabs my wrist, then taps his ear. I listen closely until I hear a rattling and a thud. It's the side gate, I realize, and the other anchor is pressing against it every couple of seconds, methodical and unhurried.

If the anchor gets through the fence, it will check for the doors and windows. And if it gets through those, we'll have to hope the basement door holds until morning.

I wonder whether we should try to lure it away from Jean and the boys, but I've heard the anchors can overtake most people on foot.

I don't even know what we'll do if there are more coming up the street.

Meanwhile, Anthony moves steadily toward the dog door, holding up the harpoon gun against his shoulder. The way he stands is straighter and taller than I'm used to seeing, his bony frame almost filling the doorway as he covers it, intent on keeping his eyes trained on what might come through. I watch him as he watches, and the muffled pounding continues.

We stay like that for a long time until, eventually, the thudding simply stops.

I switch the monitor back to the roof camera and see the bobbing shape of the balloon drift toward the street, pulled by the tightened tethers of its anchors further away from the house, until it leaves the frame completely.

Anthony and I watch the screen for another half hour, to make sure we don't see any other shapes float into view.

When we're sure that everything is quiet again, I fill a glass of water, realizing that my hands are covered in sweat.

Anthony gives me a funny look, like he's trying to help me relax and he's amused by me at the same time. "Man, I've never seen you so scared," he grins.

Something about the way he says it makes me want to slap him across the face. “Just shut up.” I empty the glass and put it in the sink.

“What? It’s okay to be scared, dude! I won’t tell Jean.”

“Shut up already. Shut up,” I say again, and the edge to my voice makes Anthony realize that I’m not kidding. “Just shut the hell up for once and use your friggin’ brain. You think that thing just wandered by out of the blue? It *followed* you, you idiot. This is exactly what we were worried about. Jesus *Christ*.”

He narrows his eyes. “Nothing was following me, man. If anything, you’re lucky I was around, and that both of us were awake just in case it got in.”

“No,” I say. “This is exactly it. It’s always like this with you. You charge around and act like you’re special for marching into danger like a friggin’ idiot when *no one asked you to do it*. And then you just end up messing things up for the rest of us. Making Mom worry, using up our supplies, putting *my house* up as a target.”

Anthony just rolls his eyes and walks by me instead of getting into it. “No point in even talking when you’re like this,” he says. “Just get it out of your system.” He lies down on the couch and puts his harpoon gun on the ground. I yell at him for another couple minutes, and he pretends to get ready to go to sleep.

“You’re such a selfish dickhead,” I say.

Anthony turns over and shuts his eyes. “Better than a coward.”

“What was that?”

Anthony doesn’t answer me.

For a few seconds, I want to pick him up by the shoulders and yell at him some more. But there’s no point in it. He’ll never listen to me, and anything I say will just convince him that he’s more in the right, like always.

He’s slumped over on the couch, turned on his side and eyes still shut, when I go down into the basement for the night. Even as I lie in bed, watching the boys’ night-light swirling on the cement walls, I think about him on that couch and what else I could say to tell him off the next time I get the chance.



As expected, Anthony’s gone by the time we come back up to the house for breakfast. Because the plywood over the windows darkens everything, we like to bring our food to a picnic table out back. We get some fresh air, and the kids can run around a bit and get out their energy.

It's cloudy today, but the summer heat is still hanging in the air and getting thicker. Jean and I are finishing our eggs when Cal and David take off and start jumping up and down on a pile of rocks, playing a game or something, I don't really know. Jean turns to ask me how Anthony took the news. I say about as well as we thought he would.

I go back and forth about it in my head, but I decide to tell her about the balloon too. I keep it brief, just the basics, about how a couple of anchors were feeling out the perimeter but didn't get through anywhere.

She tries not to show that she's afraid, but I can see her getting nervous as I describe it. When I tell her that the balloon was just passing by, she calms down a little, and we go back to finishing breakfast.

"Do you think we're getting too used to this?" I ask her.

"What do you mean?"

"Anthony was going on about how people are finding ways to be comfortable, and how as long as they are, things won't change."

Jean shakes her head. "I don't feel very comfortable, I can tell him that right now."

"Me neither. And we already do a lot."

"We do."

"But he doesn't think it's enough." I watch the boys jumping, and I scratch the stubble at my throat. "It really pisses me off when he says stuff like that. Not because he's wrong. I'm already thinking it too, if I'm being honest, but I just don't like it coming from *him*. He's always putting on a big act, like he's figured out the answer when he doesn't know squat."

"He's a showboat for sure." Jean nods her head. "But he thinks he has to be that way to get your attention."

"What do you mean?"

Jean smiles at me the way she does when she's talking to the boys. "Oh, you know."

We watch the kids run around, chasing each other.

"Yeah," I admit.

When we're done with breakfast, I stand up from the table and tell Jean I have to make a run for supplies. I want to get more hardware to reinforce the side gate, and I'll need to go early if I want to beat traffic. She gives me a kiss on the cheek, and I yell over to the boys that I'm leaving, but they just keep giggling and don't hear me.

Everything seems so dark under the gray cloud cover when I head out on the road. On my way out of the subdivision, I slow down at a stop sign, and I see a dozen vehicles parked outside of a house across the way—an

ambulance, a fire truck, and what I think are military jeeps. When I look closer, I see the broken planks of a fence scattered on the lawn. Someone honks behind me, and I turn onto the next street, peering at the home as I go by. This is far enough from where we live that I don't know who's in there, but I hope they're okay. Part of me wonders whether it was the same balloon from last night that did it.

Things move pretty quickly once I'm finally at the store, going through the aisles and getting everything I know that I need. But when I'm done, I find myself stopping at the harpoon guns on display at the front, looking for a long time.

It somehow feels like I'm admitting fault when I pick one of them up. I touch the line plate and the trigger as a sales clerk asks me if I know how to use it. I tell him that I do, remembering the summer Uncle Rick taught us, and I begin to wonder whether the boys are old enough to start practicing like we did. We'll have to keep a close eye on them and set up targets in the yard, but that'll be easy enough to do, assuming that Jean agrees. After a minute, I make a decision, and put one of the guns in my cart. I imagine that Anthony would be giving me that smug smirk of his if he could see me right now.

As I head to the parking lot, I notice a fruit stand outside, and I see that they have some peaches. I stop there for a while, picking them up one by one. They all seem to be slightly bruised, but I know they'll make Jean happy.

It's only after I pay that I start to notice that people are hurrying to their cars, leaving the stores and trying to maneuver around each other to get out of the parking lot.

I wonder what's going on until I turn around and see it: hundreds of balloons spread across the gray horizon. Their shapes blot the morning sky, and it looks like someone's punched holes out of the clouds just above the buildings. I feel my throat tighten, and I almost drop what I'm holding.

Further down the main avenue, I spot a balloon, much larger and much closer than any I've seen out in the open. It's hard to be sure, but I think there are at least a dozen anchors out on the road, sprinting in this direction and dragging the massive floating sphere behind them.

They've never moved in the sunlight like this as far as I know, and I wonder if it's because of all the clouds.

Several people with harpoon guns are firing, and I can see their spears flying through the air, puncturing a few of the anchors and causing them to collapse face-down into the asphalt. There's a shrill, whistling noise as the anchors shrivel and bubble, slowly beginning to reinflate themselves.

Those people must know there aren't enough of them to kill the balloon, but I think they're trying to slow it down for other folks to get away, and my eyes drift over to my harpoon gun in my shopping bag.

For a brief moment, I imagine that I take the gun and run toward the others, that I yell at them to coordinate their fire to prevent regrowth, just the way Uncle Rick taught us. If everyone fires at the anchor closest to them, and I aim up at the main body, and we do it on one command, we just might have a chance to puncture the septa of the balloon and the nerve clusters in each of the anchors, incapacitating it long enough for someone to bring some gasoline and a flame.

Just maybe.

Maybe.

My hands are sweating as I reach down.

But then I hear a scream down the street, just as a tether flings out from the glistening underside of the balloon and sinks into someone's back. I don't know if it's a man or woman who falls to the ground, their body starting to swell, filling with liquid. I've seen the videos and know that the body is going to get rounder and rounder until it pops like an over-easy egg, the armless, dripping shape of a parasitic anchor emerging from inside, and I don't need to stay to watch it happen.

Like everyone else, I start to run now. I throw my bags into the back of my car, letting everything roll around on the floor. Sweat beads around my eyes as I start the engine, and I feel the air conditioner turning on while I signal to pull onto the freeway.

A couple of pickup trucks drive by, each of them painted on the side with a black spear and rope. There are groups of young men in the back of both vehicles, harpoon guns over their shoulders, and I scan their serious faces one by one as they quickly go by.

I don't know if it's my imagination, but I swear I see Anthony in one of the trucks, staring right back at me.

He knows I'm going in the other direction, and though I can't read his expression, he doesn't seem angry with me in those few seconds as he passes.

He seems to realize that I am not who he hoped that I was, and I realize it too.

If only there were time for me to tell him I'm sorry.

There's more honking behind me, and I'm still craning my neck to look back at the whaling trucks, but they're too far now. I turn to the highway and keep going, weaving around slower cars who haven't looked back yet at what's coming.

I tell myself that I have to go back because of Jean and the kids, and part of me starts to believe it. There's enough time to reinforce the gate, check the plywood, and get everyone down to the basement, I think to myself.

The rearview mirror rattles as I speed down the bumpy highway, and all I can see in it is the swarm of balloons drifting behind me in the distance. There's no wind in this dead, summer heat. I know it, but they all still seem to float on and get bigger.

I start pushing the gas harder and hope to God that wherever they're headed, it's some other neighborhood in some other town far away, above someone else's roof and out of my sight.

Anywhere but here, I pray.

Anywhere else.

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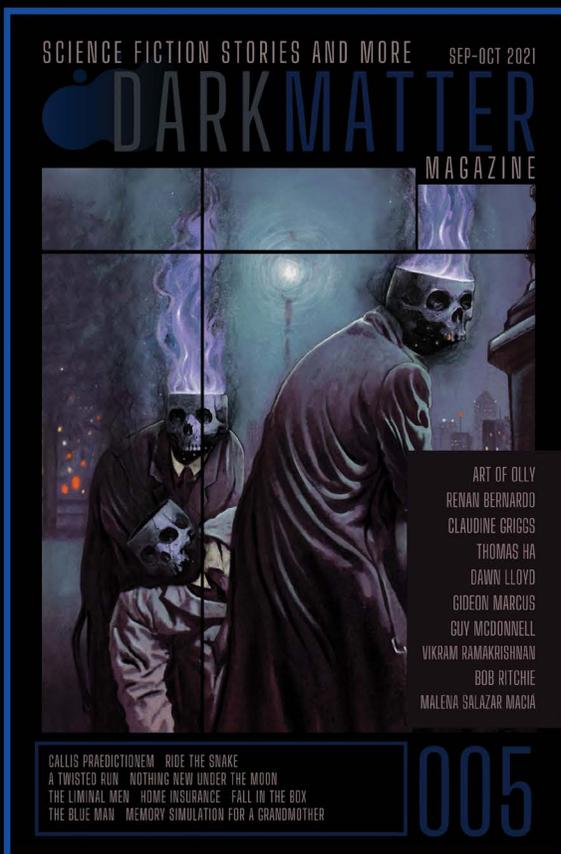
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