



THE ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION PRESENTS

PWNING TOMORROW

An Anthology of Short Fiction from the Electronic Frontier



Featuring: Neil Gaiman, Bruce Sterling, Lauren Beukes, Cory Doctorow,
Carolyn Jewel, Annalee Newitz, Charlie Jane Anders, Ramez Naam and more

Pwning Tomorrow: Short Fiction from the Electronic Frontier

Edited by the Electronic Frontier Foundation

Pwning Tomorrow: Short Fiction from the Electronic Frontier

The Electronic Frontier Foundation is the leading nonprofit organization defending civil liberties in the digital world. Founded in 1990, EFF champions user privacy, free expression, transparency, and innovation through impact litigation, activism, and technology. For more information, visit eff.org.

Pwning Tomorrow: Short Fiction from the Electronic Frontier

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Editing: Dave Maass

Cover art: Hugh D'Andrade

Formatting: Troy Mott, Backstop Media

Publishing Consultant: Tessellate Media

Legal: Mitch Stoltz

Web development: Max Hunter

With Assistance from:

Kim Carlson, Cindy Cohn, Andrew Crocker, Alison Dame-Boyle, Cory Doctorow, Kelly Esguerra, Richard Esguerra, Eva Galperin, Annelyse Gelman, April Glaser, David Grant, David Greene, Karen Gullo, Elliot Harmon, Wafa Ben Hassine, Parker Higgins, Mark Jaycox, Rebecca Jeschke, Amul Kalia, Jeremy Malcolm, Tammy McMillen, Corynne McSherry, Danny O'Brien, Kurt Opsahl, Soraya Okuda, Nicole Puller, Cooper Quintin, Rainey Reitman, Cristina Rosales, Shari Steele, Noah Swartz, Jim Tyre, Kit Walsh, and Barak Weinstein

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Electronic Frontier Foundation
815 Eddy. St
San Francisco, CA 94115
415-436-9333 / info@eff.org

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Introduction

Let's start with the end.

The final work in this collection, *Free Fall*, is a novella by paranormal romance writer Carolyn Jewel. It's a thriller in which a litigator (who happens to be a witch) partners up with her infosec expert witness (who happens to be a demon) for a passionate encounter, bookended by battles against a tyrannical dark force.

A hacker and a lawyer with supernatural powers pairing up to fight the good fight? That's a pretty fitting metaphor for the work we've done at EFF these last 25 years.

Carolyn Jewel also happens to be the lead plaintiff in *Jewel v. NSA*, our years-long lawsuit to end warrantless, mass surveillance of our electronic communications. Long before Edward Snowden got the entire world paying attention, Carolyn—like so many other writers—knew what was going on and stood up against it. Today, the PEN American Center, the largest association of writers in the world, is also a plaintiff in a lawsuit against the NSA.

Writers understand the threats to our freedom in the digital age, and they help the rest of us understand it. This is especially true of those who write speculative fiction.

In an essay for *Locus*, Cory Doctorow once explained that science fiction writers give us the “narrative vocabularies by which futures can be debated, discussed, adopted, or discarded.” Over the decades, this vocabulary has become so very rich; where would we be without terms like “Orwellian” and “Kafkaesque” to describe government dystopias, without “pre-crime” and “Skynet” to describe emerging technology? The fantasy genre has also contributed to the digital rights lexicon with concepts like “Eye of Sauron” and “trolls.”

Imagination is among the most powerful weapons in the battle for

Internet freedom. When new policies are introduced, we try to imagine how they will impact civil liberties years, even decades from now. We use our creativity to generate campaigns to fight back and utilize our ingenuity to design technological countermeasures. Creativity gives us an edge in our fight against the well-funded institutions that are devising new ways to invade our privacy and chill our speech every fiscal year.

In the Internet freedom community, a love of genre fiction often goes hand in hand with a commitment to civil liberties, whether it's Citizen Lab's habit of naming malware investigations after James Bond films, Access Now's rebranding of the nefarious Cybersecurity Information Sharing Act as the "Darth Vader" bill, or Public Knowledge Senior Vice President Harold Feld's epic explainers that compare the politics of the unlicensed spectrum to "Game of Thrones." Walk through EFF's offices and you'll see sci-fi everywhere you look: Babylon 5 DVDs in our general counsel's office, mechanical tribbles on a technologist's table, Van Gogh's TARDIS Starry Night on our international rights director's wall.

That's why we thought a story collection would be a great way to help celebrate our 25th anniversary, with two-dozen superstar writers speculating on the next 25 years and beyond.

In this book, you'll find a variety of stories. Some are brand new, like Madeline Ashby's "Be Seeing You," a story of a bodyguard whose employers insist on watching the world through her digital eyes, and some are older classics, such as Lewis Shiner's 1985 adventure "Stompin' at the Savoy," featuring mutants, state secrets, and a robotic Santa Claus.

We have stories that play with concepts of intellectual property, such as Charlie Jane Anders' "I've Got the Music in Me," a satire on overreaching anti-piracy legislation and Annalee Newitz's "Unclaimed," a hardboiled mystery about orphan works. Meanwhile, Paul Ford's "Nanolaw with Daughter," parodies how legal threats are increasingly becoming an automated process.

The Internet of Things provided inspiration for "Business as Usual," Pat Cadigan's story of an interface designer's relationship with a smart refrigerator. Other authors imagined what will happen when corporate marketing becomes even more pervasive and controlling, such as in Raam Namez' "Water," and Rudy Rucker and Eileen Gunn's collaboration, "Hive Mind Man."

In “The Smartest Mob,” David Brin explores the positive possibilities of crowdsourcing news and public safety, while Paolo Bacigalupi’s “The Gambler,” goes the other way, examining how mainstream media pits tabloid sensationalism against investigative reporting. Several stories play with how digital augmentation will affect our concepts of ourselves, including Neil Gaiman’s “Changes,” Lauren Beukes’ “Slipping,” and Kameron Hurley’s “The Light Brigade.” Hannu Rajaniemi’s “His Master’s Voice” even has a cyborg dog and cat rescuing their owner, who was imprisoned for playing around with forbidden biotechnology.

The authors yank today’s technologies forward with a surreal or unexpected twist. Charles Human’s “Dance Dance Revolution” wonders what would happen if drone warfare were paired with the dance rhythm arcade game. Cory Doctorow spoofs Google’s “Don’t be evil” motto in “Scroogled.” Sarah Lotz and Louis Greenberg (who collaborate under the pseudonym S.L. Grey) imagine how voices from beyond the grave would communicate via social media. Charles Yu’s story—the name of which is too long to reprint here—parodies how office technology can spiral out of control.

Then there are stories about hackers, such as Bruce Sterling’s “The Brain Dump” about hacker culture in Ukraine, and, of course, Carolyn Jewel’s novella.

Consider this your NSFW warning: Carolyn’s *Free Fall* is steamy. But that’s all the more reason to include it in this collection: in authoritarian regimes, graphic and unconventional depictions of romance are often among the first to be banned, along with any fiction that challenges the status quo.

It’s worth noting that we don’t just love this stuff, some of us actually create it, too: two of the authors in this collection were once part of EFF’s team. Before founding io9.com and becoming tech culture editor at Ars Technica, Annalee Newitz analyzed policy and interfaced with the media at EFF. Cory Doctorow, who worked as EFF’s European Affairs Coordinator for four years, recently returned to help with our Apollo 1201 Project to defeat anti-circumvention measures—also known as digital rights management, or DRM. (Cory even invoked *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the press release.)

We would like to thank all of these authors for not only allowing us to publish their stories, but for making them available under Creative Commons licenses, so the collection can be shared among the likeminded and curious. We are especially grateful to Cory for his help reaching out to all these authors. In addition, we are thankful for Nick Harkaway's feedback and encouragement, for Tessellate Media's advice and assistance in e-publishing, O'Reilly Media, and Troy Mott's assistance with formatting. Most of all, we thank our supporters for their continued dedication to our causes.

We hope you are as inspired by these authors as we are. Please share it far and wide.

— Dave Maass, EFF Investigative Researcher, 2015

Be Seeing You

by Madeline Ashby

“Doesn’t it get, like, distracting? Hearing me breathing?” Hwa asked.

“Only at first,” her boss said.

Her feet pounded the pavement. She ducked under the trees that made up the Fitzgerald Causeway Arboretum. Without the rain pattering on the hood of her jacket, she could hear the edges of Síofra’s voice a little better. The implant made sure she got most of the bass tones as a rumble that trickled down her spine. Consonants and sibilants, though, tended to fizzle out.

“You get up earlier than I do, so I’ve had to adjust.”

Hwa rounded the corner to the Fitzgerald Hub. It swung out wide into the North Atlantic, the easternmost edge of the city, a ring of green on the flat grey sea. Here the view was best. Better even than the view from the top of Tower 5, where her boss had his office. Here you could forget the oil rig at the city’s core, the plumes of fire and smoke, the rusting honeycomb of containers that made up Tower One where Hwa lived. Here you couldn’t even see the train. It screamed along the track overhead, but she heard only the tail end of its wail as the rain diminished.

“It’s better to get a run in before work. Better for the metabolism.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Síofra had a perfect metabolism. It was a combination of deep brain stimulation that kept him from serotonin crashes, a vagus nerve implant that regulated his insulin production, and whatever gentle genetic optimization he’d had in utero. He ate everything he wanted. He fell asleep for eight hours a night, no interruptions. He was a regular goddamn Übermensch.

Hwa just had a regular old-fashioned human body. No permanent

implants. No tweaking. She'd eaten her last slice of bread the day before joining the United Sex Workers of Canada as a bodyguard. Now that she worked for Lynch as the bodyguard for their heir apparent, the only thing that had changed about her diet was the amount of coffee she drank.

"Look out your window," she said.

"Give me your eyes."

She shook her head. Could he see that? Maybe. She looked around for botflies. She couldn't see any, but that didn't mean anything. "I'm not wearing them."

"Why not?"

"They're expensive. I could slip and fall while I'm running."

"Then we would give you new ones."

"Wouldn't that come out of my pay?"

A soft laugh that went down to the base of her spine. *"Those were the last owners of this city. Lynch is different."*

Hwa wasn't so sure about that. Lynch rode in on a big white copter and promptly funded a bunch of infrastructure improvement measures, but riggers were still leaving. Tower One was starting to feel like a ghost town.

Then again, the Lynch family *was* building an alternative reactor, right in the same place where the milkshake straw poked deep into the Flemish Pass Basin and sucked up the black stuff. It was better insulated, they said, under all that water. It just meant the oil was going away.

"All towns change, Hwa. Even company towns. We're better for this community than the previous owners. You'll see."

She rolled her neck until it popped. All the way over at the top of Tower 5, her boss hissed in sympathy. "Look out your window," she reminded him.

"Fine, fine." An intake of breath. He was getting up. From his desk, or from his bed? "Oh," he murmured.

Hwa stared into the dawn behind the veil of rain. It was a line of golden fire on a dark sea, thinly veiled behind shadows of distant rain. "I time it like this, sometimes," she said. "Part of why I get up early."

"I see."

She heard thunder roll out on the waves, and in a curious stereo effect, heard the same sound reverberating through whatever room Síofra was in.

"May I join you, tomorrow?"

Hwa's mouth worked. She was glad he couldn't see her. The last person she'd had a regular running appointment with was her brother. Which meant she hadn't run with anyone in three years. Then again, maybe it would be good for Síofra to learn the city from the ground up. He spent too much time shut up behind the gleaming ceramic louvers of Tower Five. He needed to see how things were on the streets their employers had just purchased.

She grinned. "Think you can keep up with me?"

"Oh, I think I can manage."

Of course, Síofra managed just fine. He showed up outside Tower One at four-thirty in the morning bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as a cartoon mascot. Like everything else about him, even his running form was annoyingly perfect. He kept his chin up and his back straight throughout the run. He breathed evenly and smoothly and carried on a conversation without any issues. At no point did he complain of a stitch in his side, or a bonespur in his heel, or tension in his quads. Nor did suggest that they stretch their calves, first, or warm up, or anything like that. He just started running.

A botfly followed them the entire way.

"Do we really need that?" Hwa asked. "We can ping for help no problem, if something happens." She gestured at the empty causeway. "Not that anything's going to happen."

"What if you have a seizure?" her boss asked.

Hwa almost pulled up short. It took real and sustained effort not to. She kept her eyes on the pavement, instead. They had talked about her condition only once. Most people never brought it up. Maybe that was a Canadian thing. After all, her boss had worked all over the world. They

were probably a lot less polite in other places.

“My condition’s in my halo,” she muttered.

“Pardon?”

“My halo has all my medical info,” she said, a little louder this time. She shook her watch. “If my specs detect a change in my eye movement, they broadcast my status on the emergency layer. Everyone can see it. Everyone with the right eyes, anyway.”

“But you don’t wear your specs when you’re running,” he said, and pulled forward.

The route took them along the Demasduwit Causeway, around Tower Two, down the Sinclair Causeway, and back to Tower Two. It was a school day, which meant Hwa had to scope New Arcadia Secondary before Joel Lynch arrived for class. This meant showering and dressing in the locker room, which meant she had to finish at a certain time, which meant eating on schedule, too. If she ate before the run, she tended to throw up.

She was going to explain all this, when Síofra slowed down and pulled up to Hwa’s favourite 24-hour cart and held up two fingers. “Two Number Sixes,” he said. He stood first on one leg and then another, pulling his calf up behind him as he did. From behind the counter, old Jorge squinted at him until Hwa jogged up to join him. Then he smiled.

“You have a friend!” He made it sound like she’d just run a marathon. Which it felt like she had—keeping up with Síofra had left her legs trembling and her skin dripping.

“He’s my boss.” She leaned over and spat out some of the phlegm that had boiled up to her throat during the run. “What he said. And peameal.” She blinked at Síofra through sweat. He was looking away, probably reading something in his lenses. “You like peameal?”

“Sorry?”

“Peameal. Bacon. Do you like it?”

“Oh. I suppose.”

She glanced at Jorge. “Peameal. On the side.”

Jorge handed them their coffees while the rest of the breakfast cooked.

Now the city was waking up, and the riggers joining the morning shift were on their way to the platform. A few of them stood blinking at the other carts as they waited for them to open up.

“How did you know my order?” Hwa asked.

Síofra rolled his neck. It crunched. He was avoiding the answer. Hwa already suspected what he would say. “I see the purchases you make with the corporate currency.”

She scowled. “I don’t always have the eggs baked in avocado, you know. Sometimes I have green juice.”

“Not since the cucumbers went out of season.”

Hwa stared. Síofra cocked his head. “You’re stalking me.”

“I’m not stalking you. This is just how Lynch does things. We know what all our people buy in the canteen at lunch, because they use our watches to do it. It helps us know what food to buy. That way everyone can have their favourite thing. The schools here do the same thing-it informs the farm floors what to grow. This is no different.”

Hwa sighed. “I miss being union.”

Joel Lynch’s vehicle drove him to the school’s main entrance exactly fifteen minutes before the first bell. Hwa stood waiting for him outside the doors. He waved their way in-the school still did not recognize her face, years after she’d dropped out-and smirked at her.

“How are your legs?” he asked.

“Christ, does my boss tell you *everything*?”

“Daniel just said I should go easy on you, today!” Joel tried hard to look innocent. “And that maybe we didn’t have to do leg day today, if you didn’t really want to.”

“You trying to get out of your workout?”

“Oh, no! Not at all! I was just thinking that—”

“Good, because we’re still doing leg day. My job is protecting you, and

how I protect you is making you better able to protect yourself. Somebody tries to take you, I need you to crush his instep with one kick and then run like hell. Both of which involve your legs.”

“So, leg day.”

Hwa nodded. “Leg day.”

“You can crush someone’s instep with one kick?”

Hwa rolled her eyes and hoped her specs caught it. “Of course I can,” she subvocalized.

“I think I’d pay good money to see that.”

“Well it’s a good thing I’m on the payroll, then.”

The school day proceeded just like all the others. Announcements. Lectures. Worksheets. French. Past imperfect, future imperfect. Lunch. People staring at Joel, then sending each other quick messages. Hwa saw it all in the specs—the messages drifting across her vision like dandelion fairies. In her vision, the messages turned red when Joel’s name came up. For the most part it didn’t. While she wore the uniform and took the classes just like the other students, they knew why she was there. They knew she was watching. They knew about her old job.

“Hwa?”

Hwa turned away from the station where Joel was attempting squats. Hanna Oleson wore last year’s volleyball t-shirt and mismatched socks. She also had a wicked bruise on her left arm. And she wouldn’t quite look Hwa in the eye.

“Yeah?” Hwa asked.

“Coach says you guys can have the leg press first.”

“Oh, good. Thanks.” She made Hanna meet her gaze. The other girl’s eyes were bleary, red-rimmed. Shit. “What happened to your arm?”

“Oh, um... I fell?” Hanna weakly flailed the injured arm. “During practice? And someone pulled me up? Too hard?”

Hwa nodded slowly. “Right. Sure. That happens.”

Hanna smiled. It came on sudden and bright. Too sudden. Too bright. “Everything’s fine, now.”

“Glad to hear it. You should put some arnica on that.”

“Okay. I’ll try that.”

She tried to move away, but Hwa wove in front of her. “I have some at my place,” she said. “I’m in Tower One. Seventh floor, unit seven. Easy to remember.”

Hanna nodded without meeting Hwa’s eye. “Okay.”

Hwa moved, and Hanna shuffled away to join the volleyball team. She turned back to Joel. He’d already put the weights down. She was about to say something about his slacking off, when he asked: “Do you know her?”

Hwa turned and looked at Hanna. She stood a little apart from the others, tugging on a sweatshirt over her bruised arm. She took eyedrops from the pocket and applied them first to one eye, and then the other. “I know her mother,” Hwa said.

Mollie Oleson looked a little rounder than Hwa remembered her. She couldn’t remember their last appointment together, which meant it had probably happened months ago. Mollie was more of a catch-as-catch-can kind of operator-she only listed herself as available to the USWC 314 when she felt like it. It kept her dues low and her involvement minimal. But as a member she was entitled to the same protection as a full-timer. And that meant she’d met Hwa.

Hwa sidled up to her in the children’s section of the Benevolent Irish Society charity shop. Mollie stood hanging little baggies of old fabtoys on a pegboard. “We close in fifteen minutes,” she said, under her breath.

“Even for me?” Hwa asked.

“Hwa!” Mollie beamed, and threw her arms around Hwa. Like her daughter, she was one of those women who really only looked pretty when she was happy. Unlike her daughter, she was better at faking it.

“What are you doing here?”

Hwa shrugged. “I got a new place. Thought it was time for some new stuff.”

Mollie's smile faltered. "Oh, yeah..." She adjusted a stuffed polar bear on a shelf so that it faced forward. "How's that going? Working for the Lynches, I mean?"

"The little one is all right," Hwa said. "Skinny little bugger. I'm training him."

Mollie gave a terse little smile. "Well, good luck to you. About time you got out of the game, I'd say. A girl your age should be thinking about the future. You don't want to wind up..." She gestured around the store, rather than finishing the sentence.

"I saw Hanna at school, today. Made me think to come here."

Mollie's hands stilled their work. "Oh? How was she? I haven't seen her since this morning." She looked out the window to the autumn darkness. "Closing shift, and all."

Hwa nodded. "She's good." She licked her lips. It was worth a shot. She had to try. "Her boyfriend's kind of a dick, though."

Mollie laughed. "Hanna doesn't have a boyfriend! She has no time, between school and volleyball and her job."

"Her job?"

"Skipper's," Mollie said. "You know, taking orders, bussing tables, the like. It's not much, but it's a job."

"Right," Hwa said. "Well, my mistake. I guess that guy was just flirting with her."

"Well, I'll give you the employee discount, just for sharing that little tidbit. Now I have something to tease her with, eh?"

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," Hwa said. "Girls her age are so sensitive."

At home, Hwa used her Lynch employee login to access the Prefect city management system. Lynch installed it overnight during a presumed brownout, using a day-zero exploit to deliver the viral load that was their surveillance overlay. It was easier than doing individual installations, Síofra had explained to her. Some kids in what was once part of Russia

had used a similar exploit to gain access to a Lynch reactor in Kansas. That was fifteen years ago.

Now it was a shiny interface that followed Hwa wherever she went. Or rather, wherever she let it. Her refrigerator and her washroom mirror were both too old for it. So it lived in her specs, and in the display unit Lynch insisted on outfitting her with. That made it the most expensive thing in what was a very cheap studio apartment.

“Prefect, show me Oleson, Hanna,” she said.

The system shuffled through profiles until it landed on two possibilities, each fogged over. One was Hanna. The other was a woman by the name of Anna Olsen. Maybe it thought Hwa had misspoken.

“Option one.” Hanna’s profile became transparent as Anna’s vanished. It solidified across the display, all the photos and numbers and maps hanging and shimmering in Hwa’s vision. She squinted. “Dimmer.”

Hanna’s profile dimmed slightly, and Hwa could finally get a real look at it. Like Hwa, Hanna lived in Tower One. She’d been picked up once on a shoplifting charge, two years ago. She raised her hands, and gestured through all the points at which facial recognition had identified Hanna in the last forty-eight hours. Deeper than that, and she’d need archival access.

But first, she needed to call Skipper’s. Rule them out. “Hi, is Hanna there?”

“Hanna doesn’t work here any more.” Hwa heard beeping. The sounds of fryer alarms going off. Music. “Hello?”

Hwa ended the call.

There was Hanna on the Acoutsina Causeway, walking toward Tower One. The image was timestamped after volleyball practise. Speed-trap checked her entering a vehicle in the driverless lane for a vehicle at 18:30. Five minutes later, she was gone. Wherever she was now, there were no cameras.

“Prefect, search this vehicle and this face together.”

A long pause. *“Archive access required.”*

For a fleeting moment, Hwa regretted the fact that Prefect was not a

human being she could intimidate. “Is there a record in the archives?”

“Archive access required.”

Hwa growled a little to herself. She popped up off the floor and began to pace. She walked through the projections of Hanna’s face, sliding the ribbon of stills and clips until she hit the top of the list. Today was Monday. If Hanna had sustained her injury on Friday night, then Hwa was out of luck. But Mollie had said she worked all weekend. Maybe that meant—

“What are you doing?”

Hwa startled. “Jesus Christ, stop doing that!”

“Doing what?” Síofra was trying to sound innocent. It wasn’t working.

“You know exactly what,” she said. “Why can’t you just text, like a normal person? How do you know I wasn’t having a conversation with somebody?”

“Your receiver would have told me,” he said.

Hwa frowned. “Can you...?” She wished she had an image of him she could focus her fury on. “Can you listen in on my conversations, through my receiver?”

“Only during your working hours.”

“And you can just...tune in? All day? While I’m at school with Joel?”

“Of course I can. I thought you had some excellent points to make about Jane Eyre in Mr. Bartel’s class, last week.”

Hwa plunged the heels of her hands into the sockets of her eyes. She had known this was possible, of course. She just assumed Síofra actually had other work to do, and wasn’t constantly spying on her instead of accomplishing it.

“Are you bored?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Are you bored? At work? Is your job that boring? That you need to be tuned into my day like that?”

There was a long pause. She wondered for a moment if he’d cut out. “*You watch Joel and I watch you,*” he said. “*That is my job.*”

Hwa sighed. He had her, there. It was all right there in the Lynch Ltd employee handbook. She'd signed on for this level of intrusion when she'd taken their money. He was paying, so he got to watch. She'd stood guard at enough peepshows to learn that particular lesson. Maybe she wasn't so different from her mother, after all.

"You aren't supposed to be prying into your fellow classmates' lives unless they pose a credible threat to Joel." So he'd been spying on her searches, too. Of course. *"I know what you're thinking, and-*"

"How come I can't do this to you?" Hwa blurted. "That's what I'm thinking. I'm wondering how come I can't watch you all the time the way you watch me. Why doesn't this go both ways? Why don't I get to know when you're watching me?"

Another long pause. *"Is there something about me that you would like to know?"*

Oh, just everything, she thought. The answer came unbidden and she shut her eyes and clenched her jaw and squashed it like a bug crawling across her consciousness.

"Are you coming running tomorrow?"

"Of course I am."

Síofra had a whole route planned. He showed it to her the next morning in her specs, but she had only a moment to glance over it before heading out the door.

"Why did you stay in this tower?" Síofra asked, leaning back and craning his neck to take in the brutalist heap of former containers. "We pay you well enough to afford one of the newer ones. This one has almost no security to speak of."

"You've been watching me 24/7 for a solid month and you still haven't figured that one out? Corporate surveillance ain't what it used to be."

"Is it because your mother lives here?"

Hwa pulled up short. "You just don't know when to quit, do you?"

“I only wondered because you never visit her.” He grinned, and pushed ahead of her down the causeway.

His route took them along the Acoutsina. They circled the first joint, and Síofra asked about the old parkette and the playground. This early, there were no children and it remained littered with beer cozies and liquor pouches. She told him about the kid who had kicked her down the slide once, and how nobody let her on the swings, and he assumed it had to do with her mother and what she did for a living. His eyes were not programmed to see her true face, or the stain dripping from her left eye down her neck to her arm and her ribs and her leg. She had tested his vision several times; he never stared, never made reference to her dazzle-pattern face. And with their connection fostered by her wearables, he probably never watched her via botfly or camera. He could spend every minute of every day observing her, and never truly see her.

They ran to the second joint of the causeway, and circled the memorial for those who had died in the Old Rig. “Do you want to stop?” he asked.

It was bad luck not to pay respects. She knew exactly where her brother’s name was. Síofra waited for her at the base of the monument as her steps spiralled up the mound. She slapped Tae-kyun’s name lightly, like tagging him in a relay run, and kept going. Síofra had already started up again by the time she made it back down. They were almost at Tower Three when he called a halt, in a parking lot full of rides.

“Cramp,” he said, pulling his calf up behind him. He placed a hand up against a parked vehicle for balance. When Hwa’s gaze followed his hand, she couldn’t help but see the license plate.

It was the one she’d asked Prefect to track. The one Hanna had disappeared into, last night. “I thought...” Hwa looked from him to the vehicle. “I thought you said—”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about, Hwa.” He smirked. Then he appeared to check something in his lenses. “Goodness, look at the time. I have an early meeting. I think I’ll just pick up one of these rides here, and drive back to the office. Are you all right finishing the run alone?”

Hwa frowned at him. He winked at her. She smiled. “Yeah,” she said. “I’m good here.”

He gestured at the field of rides and snapped his fingers at one of them. It lit up. Its locks opened. She watched him get into it and drive away. Now alone, Hwa peered into the vehicle. Nothing left behind in any of the seats. No dings or scratches. She looked around at the parking lot. Empty. Still dark. She pulled her hood up, and took a knee. She fussed with her shoelaces with one hand while her other fished in the pocket of her vest. The joybuzzer hummed between her fingers as she stood. And just like that, the trunk unlocked.

Hanna was inside. Bound and gagged. And completely asleep.

“Shit,” Hwa muttered. Then the vehicle chirped. Startled, Hwa scanned the parking lot. Still empty. The ride was being summoned elsewhere. It rumbled to life. If Hwa let it go now, she would lose Hanna. In the trunk, Hanna blinked awake. She squinted up at Hwa. Behind her gag, she began to scream.

“It’s okay, Hanna.” Hwa threw the trunk door even wider, and climbed in. She pulled it shut behind her as it began to move. “You’re okay. We’re okay.” The vehicle lurched. She heard the lock snap shut again as the ride locked itself. “We’re okay,” she repeated. “We’re going to be okay.”

Hwa busied herself untying Hanna as the ride drove itself. “Tell me where we’re going,” Hwa said.

“It’s my fault,” Hanna was saying. “He told me not to talk to Benny.”

“Benny work at Skipper’s?” Hwa picked the tape off Hanna’s wrists.

“I told him I was just being nice.” Hanna gulped for air. She coughed. “I quit, just like he told me to, but Benny and I are in the same biology class! I couldn’t just ignore him. And Jarod said if I really loved him, I’d do what he asked...”

“Jarod?” Hwa asked. “That’s his name? What’s his last name?” She needed Prefect. Why hadn’t she brought her specs? She could be looking at a map, right now. She could be finding out how big this guy was. If he had any priors.

“Why are you here?” Hanna asked. “Did my mom send you? I thought

you didn't work with us, any more."

Beneath them, the buckles in the pavement burped along. They were still on the Acoutsina, then. It had the oldest roads with the most repairs. Hwa worked to quiet the alarm bell ringing in her head. Hanna's skin was so cold under her hands. She probably needed a hospital. But right now, she needed Hwa to be calm. She needed Hwa to be smart. She needed Hwa to think.

"With us?" Hwa asked.

"For the union," Hanna sniffed.

"Eh?"

The angle of the vehicle changed. They tipped down into something. Hwa heard hydraulics. They were in a lift. Tower Three. They'd parked Hanna not far from where they were, then. Hwa's ears popped. She rolled up as close as possible to the opening of the trunk. She cleared her wrists and flexed her toes. She'd have one good chance when the trunk opened. If there weren't too many of them. If they didn't have crowbars. Something slammed onto the trunk. A fist. A big one, by the sound of it.

"Wakey, wakey, Hanna!"

The voice was muffled, but strong. Manic. He'd been awake for a while. Boosters? Shit. Hanna started to say something, but Hwa shushed her.

"Had enough time to think about what you did?"

Definitely boosters. That swaggering arrogance, those delusions of grandeur. Hwa listened for more voices, the sound of footsteps. She heard none. Maybe this was a solo performance.

"You know, I didn't like doing this. But you made me do it. You have to learn, Hanna."

Behind her, Hanna was crying.

"I can't have you just giving it away. It really cuts into what I'm trying to do for us."

Fingers drummed on the trunk of the ride.

"Are you ready to come out and say you're sorry?"

You're goddamn right I am, Hwa thought.

The trunk popped open. Jarod's pale, scaly face registered surprise for just a moment. Then Hwa's foot snapped out and hit him square in the jaw. He stumbled back and tried to slam the trunk shut. It landed on her leg and she yelled. The door bounced up. Not her ankle. Not her knee. Thank goodness. She rolled out.

Jarod was huge. A tall, lanky man in his early twenties, the kind of rigger who'd get made fun of by guys with more muscle while still being plenty strong enough to get the job done. He had bad skin and a three-day growth of patchy beard. He lunged for Hwa and she jumped back. He swung wide and she jumped again.

"Let me guess," she said. "You told Hanna you'd fix it with the union if she paid you her dues directly. Even though she's a minor and USWC doesn't allow those."

Jarod's eyes were red. He spat blood. He reeked of booster sweat-acrid and bitter.

"And you had her doing what, camwork?" She grinned. "I thought her eyes were red because she'd been crying. But yours look just the same. You're both wearing the same shitty lenses."

"He made me watch the locker room." Hanna sat on her knees in the trunk of the ride. Her voice was a croak. For a moment she looked so much like her mother that Hwa's heart twisted in her chest. "He said he'd edit my team's faces out—"

"Shut up!"

Jarod reached for the lid of the trunk again. He tried to slam it shut on Hanna. Hwa ran for him. He grabbed her by the shoulders. Hwa's right heel came down hard on his. The instep deflated under the pressure. He howled. She elbowed him hard under the ribs and spun halfway out of his grip. His right hand still clung to her vest. She grabbed the wrist and wedged it into the mouth of the trunk.

"Hanna! Get down!"

She slammed the lid once. Then twice. Then a third time. *He'll never work this rig again*, she thought, distantly. The trunk creaked open and Jarod sank to his knees. He clutched his wrist. His hand dangled from his arm like a piece of kelp.

Behind her, she heard a slow, dry clap.

“Excellent work,” Síofra said.

He stood against the ride he’d summoned. Two go-cups of coffee sat on the hood. He held one out.

“You didn’t want in on that?” Hwa asked, jerking her head at the whimpering mess on the floor of the parking garage.

“Genius can’t be improved upon.” Síofra gestured with his cup. “We should get them to a hospital. Or a police station.”

“Hanna needs a hospital.” Hwa sipped her coffee. “This guy, I should report to the union. He falsified a membership and defrauded someone of dues in bad faith.”

“They don’t take kindly to that, in the USWC?”

Hwa swallowed hard. “Nope. Not one bit.”

Síofra made a sound in his throat that sounded like purring.

During the elevator ride between the hospital and the school in Tower Two, Hwa munched a breakfast sandwich. She’d protested the presence of bread, but Síofra said the flour was mostly crickets anyway. So she’d relented. Now he stood across the elevator watching her eat.

“What?” she asked, between swallows.

“I have something to share with you.”

She swiped at her mouth with the back of her hand. “Yeah?”

“I don’t remember anything beyond ten years ago.”

Hwa blinked. “Sorry?”

“My childhood. My youth. They’re...” He made an empty gesture. “Blank.”

She frowned. “Do you mean this like...emotionally?”

“No. Literally. I literally don’t remember. My first memory is waking up in a Lynch hospital in South Sudan, ten years ago. They had some wells,

there. I was injured. They brought me in. Patched me up. They assumed I was a fixer of some sort. They don't know for which side. And apparently I had covered my tracks a little too well. I've worked for them ever since."

Hairs rose on the back of Hwa's neck. "Wow."

"As long as I can remember, I've worked for this company. I don't know any other kind of life."

"Okay," Hwa said.

"I've never lived without their presence in my life. I've never had what you might call a private life."

Oh. "Oh."

"But you have. And that's something that's different, about our experiences."

"Yeah. You could say that."

"You don't have implants," he said. "Not permanent ones, anyway. They-we-can't gather that kind of data from you. But they know everything about me. My sugars, how much I sleep, where I am, if I'm angry, my routines, even the music I listen to when I'm making dinner."

"You listen to music while you make dinner?"

"Django Reinhardt."

"Who?"

He smiled ruefully. "What I'm saying is, you're the last of a dying breed."

Hwa thought of the stain running down her body, the flaw he couldn't see. He had no idea. "Thank you?"

"You're a black swan," he said. "A wild card. Something unpredictable. Like getting into the trunk of that ride this morning."

Hwa shrugged. "Anybody could have done that. I couldn't just let Hanna go. She needed my help."

"You could have called the police. You could have called *me*. But you didn't. You took the risk yourself."

She frowned. "Are you pissed off? Is that what this is about? Because you're the one who—"

Síofra hissed. He brought his finger to his lips and shook his head softly. With his gaze, he brought her attention to the eyes at the corners of the elevator.

“I just want you to know something about me,” he said, after a moment. “Something isn’t in my halo.”

She smiled. “Well, thanks.”

“Not a lot of other people know this, about me.”

“Well, it is kind of weird.” She stretched up, then bent down. She looked up at him from her ragdoll position. “I mean, you are only ten years old, right? You can’t even drink.”

He rolled his eyes. “Here it comes.”

She stood. “Or vote. Or even have your own place. Does your landlord know about this?”

He pointed at the view of the city outside the elevator. “My landlord is your landlord.”

The elevator doors chimed open. They were on the school floor. Hwa had fifteen minutes to shower and put on her uniform before she met Joel.

“Hey, if you’re not too busy? I kind of didn’t do the last question on my physics homework. So I might need some help with that. Before I hand it in.”

“I think something can be arranged.”

She stood in the door. It chimed insistently. She leaned on it harder. “Did you ever go to school? After you woke up, I mean? Or are you just winging it?”

“I know what a man my age needs to know,” Síofra said. “Be seeing you.”

Madeline Ashby is a science fiction writer and futurist living in Toronto. She is the author of the *Machine Dynasty* series. This story comes from her novel, *Company Town*, coming in spring 2016 from Tor Books. She

has also written science fiction prototypes for Intel Labs, the Institute for the Future, SciFutures, Nesta, Data & Society, and others. You can find her online at madelineashby.com, or on Twitter [@MadelineAshby](https://twitter.com/MadelineAshby).

I've Got The Music In Me

by Charlie Jane Anders

"Have you ever gotten a song stuck in your head, and couldn't get it out?" The woman asking the question wore one of those new frogskin one-pieces, with false eyelashes that looked fiberoptic. She leaned on the bar in my direction.

I shrugged and drank. "Maybe, I don't know." I was busy obsessing about my sick dog. Moxie was my best friend, but they'd said the tests alone would cost hundreds, with no guarantee.

The woman, Mia I think, kept talking about brains that wouldn't let go of songs. "You know how a song loops around and drowns out everything else in your skull?" I nodded, and she smiled. "Sometimes it's like a message from your subconscious. Your brain blasts sad lyrics to wake you to a submerged depression."

"I guess."

"Or you could be overworked. Or sexually frustrated. It's like an early warning system." She beckoned another drink. The mention of sex jumped out of her workflow like a spawning salmon. I forgot all about my dog, turned to face her.

"I see what you mean," I said.

"They're funny, songs. They drill into your head and form associations." She batted those shiny lashes. "They trigger memories, just the way smells do."

"You're absolutely right." I was thinking, do I have condoms?

She asked me about my past loves, and whether there were pieces of music that came unbidden to mind when I thought of them. I struggled to dredge up a memory to please this woman, her taut body so close to mine I could feel the coolness of the tiny frogs whose hides she wore.

“Yeah, now that I think about it, there was this one song...”

From Section 1923, Mental copyright enforcement field manual.

Subsection 1, Probable Cause:

Do *not* bring in suspects without an ironclad case, and avoid any appearance of entrapment. Do *not* apprehend someone merely because he/she whistles under his/her breath or bobs his/her head to music nobody else can hear. To demonstrate that someone has stored copyrighted music in his/her brain in violation of the Cranial Millenium Copyright Act, you must obtain a definitive statement, such as:

1) “Whenever I see the object of my smothered desire I hear “Sunshine of Your Love” by Cream in my head. This is the full album version, complete with trademark guitar solo and clearly articulated rhythm track.”

2) “I always tune out my boss when he talks to me, and instead conjure up a near-digital-quality playback of “Bring Tha Bling Bling” by Pimpstyle in my mind. The remix with that Madonna sample.”

3) “Following the death of my loved one, I listened to the Parade album by Prince so many times I know the whole thing by heart now.”

Note: the above examples are illustrative and not all-encompassing. Other utterances also could prove the suspect is guilty of keeping protected music in Cranial Audio File format, as prohibited by law.

Subsection 2, Apprehending the suspect:

As soon as I admitted that yeah, that “Pimp Your Bubba” song wouldn’t stop infesting my mind no matter how much good music I fed my ears, the woman went violent. She pulled out a badge and twisted my arm behind me. Steel cinched my wrists, turned me into a perp. “You have the right,” she said.

In her car, she talked to me through a rusty mesh cordoning the back seat. “I’d put on the radio, but you might steal again.”

“What have I done?”

“Don’t pretend. Your mental piracy is blatantly illegal.”

“But everyone said that law was unenforceable—”

“I got your confession right here on tape. And we’ll get more out of you. The brain’s a computer, and yours is jam-packed with stolen goods.”

I was terrified. I could be held for days. What would happen to Moxie?

“Take my advice, kid.” We turned onto a driveway with a guard post and tilting arm. The woman showed a card and the arm rose. “Just relax and tell them everything. It’ll be fun, like a personal tour through your musical memories. Like getting stoned with a friend and digging some tunes. Then you just plea bargain and skip outta here.”

Subsection 3, Questioning the suspect:

Ask questions like:

- What sort of music did you listen to in high school?
- Here is a piece of your clothing which we confiscated. We’ll give it back if you tell us what song it brings to mind.
- I can see you’re angry. Is there an angry song in your thoughts?
- Complete this guitar riff for me. Na na na NAH na na...

I kept asking over and over, whom have I hurt? Who suffers if I have recall of maybe a hundred songs? They had answers—the record companies, the musicians, the media, all suffered from my self-reliance. I didn’t buy it.

“This whole thing is bullshit,” I said.

The two guys in shades looked at each other. “Guy’s got a right to face his accuser,” one said.

“You figure it’s time to bring in the injured party?” the other said.

They both nodded. They took their gray-suited selves out of the interrogation cube. I squirmed in my chair, arms manacled and head in a vice.

They were gone for hours. I tried to relax, but the restraints kinked my

circulation.

I heard noises outside the door. A scrawny guy with a fuschia pompadour and sideburns wandered in. He wore a t-shirt with a picture of himself, which made him easier to recognize because I'd seen that picture a million times.

"You're Dude Boy," I said.

"Pizzeace," said Dude Boy. "You been ripping me off."

"No I haven't." I fidgeted in bondage. "I don't even like you." I remembered when Dude Boy was on the cover of every magazine from Teen Beat to Rolling Stone, and that fucking song was on the air every minute. "Your song sucked aardvark tit. They played it so often I started hearing it when I brushed my teeth, which really—" Oh. Shit.

"See? You admit it. Thief."

"But—"

"And you never bought a copy, ya?"

"Yeah, but—It sucked, man."

"It was just so catchy and hooky, ya? You had to have it, Mr. Sticky Fingers."

"Catchy's one word for it. You could also try, 'annoyingly repetitive.' How many times can you say 'You're So Cute I Wanna Puke' in one song?"

"That's the hook, bo."

"So I always wondered what happened to you after that one hit. You dropped out of sight."

The agate eyes I remembered from VH1 came close. "*You* killed my career, bo. You and all the others who used my song for your skull soundtracks until you got sick of me. I didn't ask to have my creation overexposed in your noggin. It's all your fault."

"So now you're working for these creeps?"

"It's a job until reality TV calls."

He kept staring. He'd always looked goofy, but never before scary. "We're like intimate, ya know. I seduced ya with my hookitude, and in return you copped a feel of the DB while I slept. It's good to be close at

last.” For a moment I feared he’d kiss me. I tried to turn away, but no dice.

Then at the last second he whipped around and kicked the wall. “You kidnapped my baby!” He turned back. Spit painted my cheeks. “So here’s the deal. We take this thang to court, I nail your colon to the wall. Or you cop a plea. Small fine, plus an implant. You get off lightly, bo.”

“Implant?”

“Yes or no?”

“What implant?”

“Last chance. Yes or no?”

Most of the time, the implant doesn’t bother me. If I get emotional, like when I buried Moxie, it kicks in just as a tune swells inside me. Then instead of the music, I hear Dude Boy screaming, “Thief!” for like thirty seconds. It really screwed me up this one time I was giving a presentation at work. I was one of the first to get implanted, but now they’re everywhere. It’s become such a cultural phenom that a new hit song samples the sound the implant makes. They had to pay Dude Boy royalties, of course.

Charlie Jane Anders is the author of *All the Birds in the Sky*, a novel coming in early 2016 from Tor Books. She is the editor in chief of io9.com and the organizer of the Writers With Drinks reading series. Her stories have appeared in *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Tor.com*, *Lightspeed*, *Tin House*, *ZYZZYVA*, and several anthologies. Her novelette *Six Months, Three Days* won a Hugo award.

The Gambler

by Paolo Bacigalupi

My father was a gambler. He believed in the workings of karma and luck. He hunted for lucky numbers on license plates and bet on lotteries and fighting roosters. Looking back, I think perhaps he was not a large man, but when he took me to the Muy Thai fights, I thought him so. He would bet and he would win and laugh and drink lao-lao with his friends, and they all seemed so large. In the heat drip of Vientiane, he was a lucky ghost, walking the mirror-sheen streets in the darkness.

Everything for my father was a gamble: roulette and blackjack, new rice variants and the arrival of the monsoons. When the pretender monarch Khamsing announced his New Lao Kingdom, my father gambled on civil disobedience. He bet on the teachings of Mr. Henry David Thoreau and on whisper sheets posted on lampposts. He bet on saffron-robed monks marching in protest and on the hidden humanity of the soldiers with their well-oiled AK-47s and their mirrored helmets.

My father was a gambler, but my mother was not. While he wrote letters to the editor that brought the secret police to our door, she made plans for escape. The old Lao Democratic Republic collapsed, and the New Lao Kingdom blossomed with tanks on the avenues and tuk-tuks burning on the street corners. Pha That Luang's shining gold chedi collapsed under shelling, and I rode away on a UN evacuation helicopter under the care of kind Mrs. Yamaguchi.

From the open doors of the helicopter, we watched smoke columns rise over the city like nagas coiling. We crossed the brown ribbon of the Mekong with its jeweled belt of burning cars on the Friendship Bridge. I remember a Mercedes floating in the water like a paper boat on Loi Kratong, burning despite the water all around.

Afterward, there was silence from the land of a million elephants, a void into which light and Skype calls and e-mail disappeared. The roads were

blocked. The telecoms died. A black hole opened where my country had once stood.

Sometimes, when I wake in the night to the swish and honk of Los Angeles traffic, the confusing polyglot of dozens of countries and cultures all pressed together in this American melting pot, I stand at my window and look down a boulevard full of red lights, where it is not safe to walk alone at night, and yet everyone obeys the traffic signals. I look down on the brash and noisy Americans in their many hues, and remember my parents: my father who cared too much to let me live under the self-declared monarchy, and my mother who would not let me die as a consequence. I lean against the window and cry with relief and loss.

Every week I go to temple and pray for them, light incense and make a triple bow to Buddha, Damma, and Sangha, and pray that they may have a good rebirth, and then I step into the light and noise and vibrancy of America.

My colleagues' faces flicker gray and pale in the light of their computers and tablets. The tap of their keyboards fills the newsroom as they pass content down the workflow chain and then, with a final keystroke and an obeisance to the "publish" button, they hurl it onto the net.

In the maelstrom, their work flares, tagged with site location, content tags, and social poke data. Blooms of color, codes for media conglomerates: shades of blue and Mickey Mouse ears for Disney-Bertelsmann. A red-rimmed pair of rainbow O's for Google's AOL News. Fox News Corp. in pinstripes gray and white. Green for us: Milestone Media—a combination of NTT DoCoMo, the Korean gaming consortium Hyundai-Kubu, and the smoking remains of the New York Times Company. There are others, smaller stars, Crayola shades flaring and brightening, but we are the most important. The monarchs of this universe of light and color.

New content blossoms on the screen, bathing us all in the bloody glow of a Google News content flare, off their WhisperTech feed. They've scooped us. The posting says that new ear bud devices will be released

by Frontal Lobe before Christmas: terabyte storage with Pin-Line connectivity for the Oakley microresponse glasses. The technology is next-gen, allowing personal data control via Pin-Line scans of a user's iris. Analysts predict that everything from cell phones to digital cameras will become obsolete as the full range of Oakley features becomes available. The news flare brightens and migrates toward the center of the maelstrom as visitors flock to Google and view stolen photos of the iris-scanning glasses.

Janice Mbutu, our managing editor, stands at the door to her office, watching with a frown. The maelstrom's red bath dominates the newsroom, a pressing reminder that Google is beating us, sucking away traffic. Behind glass walls, Bob and Casey, the heads of the Burning Wire, our own consumer technology feed, are screaming at their reporters, demanding they do better. Bob's face has turned almost as red as the maelstrom.

The maelstrom's true name is LiveTrack IV. If you were to go downstairs to the fifth floor and pry open the server racks, you would find a sniper sight logo and the words SCRY GLASS—KNOWLEDGE IS POWER stamped on their chips in metallic orange, which would tell you that even though Bloomberg rents us the machines, it is a Google-Neilsen partnership that provides the proprietary algorithms for analyzing the net flows—which means we pay a competitor to tell us what is happening with our own content.

LiveTrack IV tracks media user data—Web site, feed, VOD, audiostream, TV broadcast—with Google's own net statistics gathering programs, aided by Nielsen hardware in personal data devices ranging from TVs to tablets to ear buds to handsets to car radios. To say that the maelstrom keeps a finger on the pulse of media is an understatement. Like calling the monsoon a little wet. The maelstrom is the pulse, the pressure, the blood-oxygen mix; the count of red cells and white, of T-cells and BAC, the screening for AIDS and hepatitis G. . . . It is reality.

Our service version of the maelstrom displays the performance of our own content and compares it to the top one hundred user-traffic events in real-time. My own latest news story is up in the maelstrom, glittering near the edge of the screen, a tale of government incompetence: the harvested DNA of the checkerspot butterfly, already extinct, has been destroyed

through mismanagement at the California Federal Biological Preserve Facility. The butterfly—along with sixty-two other species—was subjected to improper storage protocols, and now there is nothing except a little dust in vials. The samples literally blew away. My coverage of the story opens with federal workers down on their knees in a two-billion-dollar climate-controlled vault, with a dozen crime scene vacuums that they've borrowed from LAPD, trying to suck up a speck of butterfly that they might be able to reconstitute at some future time.

In the maelstrom, the story is a pinprick beside the suns and pulsing moons of traffic that represent other reporters' content. It doesn't compete well with news of Frontal Lobe devices, or reviews of Armored Total Combat, or live feeds of the Binge-Purge championships. It seems that the only people who are reading my story are the biologists I interviewed. This is not surprising. When I wrote about bribes for subdivision approvals, the only people who read the story were county planners. When I wrote about cronyism in the selection of city water recycling technologies, the only people who read were water engineers. Still, even though no one seems to care about these stories, I am drawn to them, as though poking at the tiger of the American government will somehow make up for not being able to poke at the little cub of New Divine Monarch Khamsing. It is a foolish thing, a sort of Don Quixote crusade. As a consequence, my salary is the smallest in the office.

“Whoooo!”

Heads swivel from terminals, look for the noise: Marty Mackley, grinning.

“You can thank me . . .” He leans down and taps a button on his keyboard. “Now.”

A new post appears in the maelstrom, a small green orb announcing itself on the Glamour Report, Scandal Monkey blog, and Marty's byline feeds. As we watch, the post absorbs pings from software clients around the world, notifying the millions of people who follow his byline that he has launched a new story.

I flick my tablet open, check the tags:

Double DP,

Redneck HipHop,
Music News,
Schadenfreude,
underage,
pedophilia . . .

According to Mackley's story, Double DP the Russian mafia cowboy rapper—who, in my opinion, is not as good as the Asian pop sensation Kulaap, but whom half the planet likes very much—is accused of impregnating the fourteen-year-old daughter of his face sculptor. Readers are starting to notice, and with their attention Marty's green-glowing news story begins to muscle for space in the maelstrom. The content star pulses, expands, and then, as though someone has thrown gasoline on it, it explodes. Double DP hits the social sites, starts getting recommended, sucks in more readers, more links, more clicks . . . and more ad dollars.

Marty does a pelvic grind of victory, then waves at everyone for their attention. "And that's not all, folks." He hits his keyboard again, and another story posts: live feeds of Double's house, where . . . it looks as though the man who popularized Redneck Russians is heading out the door in a hurry. It is a surprise to see video of the house, streaming live. Most freelance paparazzi are not patient enough to sit and hope that maybe, perhaps, something interesting will happen. This looks as though Marty has stationed his own exclusive papcams at the house, to watch for something like this.

We all watch as Double DP locks the door behind himself. Marty says, "I thought DP deserved the courtesy of notification that the story was going live."

"Is he fleeing?" Mikela Plaa asks.

Marty shrugs. "We'll see."

And indeed, it does look as if Double is about to do what Americans have popularized as an "OJ." He is into his red Hummer. Pulling out.

Under the green glow of his growing story, Marty smiles. The story is getting bigger, and Marty has stationed himself perfectly for the development. Other news agencies and blogs are playing catch-up.

Follow-on posts wink into existence in the maelstrom, gathering a momentum of their own as newsrooms scramble to hook our traffic.

“Do we have a helicopter?” Janice asks. She has come out of her glass office to watch the show.

Marty nods. “We’re moving it into position. I just bought exclusive angel view with the cops, too, so everyone’s going to have to license our footage.”

“Did you let Long Arm of the Law know about the cross-content?”

“Yeah. They’re kicking in from their budget for the helicopter.”

Marty sits down again, begins tapping at his keyboard, a machine-gun of data entry. A low murmur comes from the tech pit, Cindy C. calling our telecom providers, locking down trunklines to handle an anticipated data surge. She knows something that we don’t, something that Marty has prepared her for. She’s bringing up mirrored server farms. Marty seems unaware of the audience around him. He stops typing. Stares up at the maelstrom, watching his glowing ball of content. He is the maestro of a symphony.

The cluster of competing stories are growing as Gawker and Newsweek and Throb all organize themselves and respond. Our readers are clicking away from us, trying to see if there’s anything new in our competitor’s coverage. Marty smiles, hits his “publish” key, and dumps a new bucket of meat into the shark tank of public interest: a video interview with the fourteen-year-old. On-screen, she looks very young, shockingly so. She has a teddy bear.

“I swear I didn’t plant the bear,” Marty comments. “She had it on her own.”

The girl’s accusations are being mixed over Double’s run for the border, a kind of synth loop of accusations:

“And then he . . .”

“And I said . . .”

“He’s the only one I’ve ever . . .”

It sounds as if Marty has licensed some of Double’s own beats for the coverage of his fleeing Humvee. The video outtakes are already bouncing

around YouTube and MotionSwallow like Ping Pong balls. The maelstrom has moved Double DP to the center of the display as more and more feeds and sites point to the content. Not only is traffic up, but the post is gaining in social rank as the numbers of links and social pokes increase.

“How’s the stock?” someone calls out.

Marty shakes his head. “They locked me out from showing the display.”

This, because whenever he drops an important story, we all beg him to show us the big picture. We all turn to Janice. She rolls her eyes, but she gives the nod. When Cindy finishes buying bandwidth, she unlocks the view. The maelstrom slides aside as a second window opens, all bar graphs and financial landscape: our stock price as affected by the story’s expanding traffic—and expanding ad revenue.

The stock bots have their own version of the maelstrom; they’ve picked up the reader traffic shift. Buy and sell decisions roll across the screen, responding to the popularity of Mackley’s byline. As he feeds the story, the beast grows. More feeds pick us up, more people recommend the story to their friends, and every one of them is being subjected to our advertisers’ messages, which means more revenue for us and less for everyone else. At this point, Mackley is bigger than the Super Bowl. Given that the story is tagged with Double DP, it will have a targetable demographic: thirteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who buy lifestyle gadgets, new music, edge clothes, first-run games, boxed hairstyles, tablet skins, and ringtones: not only a large demographic, a valuable one.

Our stock ticks up a point. Holds. Ticks up another. We’ve got four different screens running now. The papcam of Double DP, chase cycles with views of the cops streaking after him, the chopper lifting off, and the window with the fourteen-year-old interviewing. The girl is saying, “I really feel for him. We have a connection. We’re going to get married,” and there’s his Hummer screaming down Santa Monica Boulevard with his song “Cowboy Banger” on the audio overlay.

A new wave of social pokes hits the story. Our stock price ticks up again. Daily bonus territory. The clicks are pouring in. It’s got the right combination of content, what Mackley calls the “Three S’s”: sex, stupidity, and schadenfreude. The stock ticks up again. Everyone cheers. Mackley takes a bow. We all love him. He is half the reason I can pay my rent.

Even a small newsroom bonus from his work is enough for me to live. I'm not sure how much he makes for himself when he creates an event like this. Cindy tells me that it is "solid seven, baby." His byline feed is so big he could probably go independent, but then he would not have the resources to scramble a helicopter for a chase toward Mexico. It is a symbiotic relationship. He does what he does best, and Milestone pays him like a celebrity.

Janice claps her hands. "All right, everyone. You've got your bonus. Now back to work."

A general groan rises. Cindy cuts the big monitor away from stocks and bonuses and back to the work at hand: generating more content to light the maelstrom, to keep the newsroom glowing green with flares of Milestone coverage—everything from reviews of Mitsubishi's 100 mpg Road Cruiser to how to choose a perfect turkey for Thanksgiving. Mackley's story pulses over us as we work. He spins off smaller additional stories, updates, interactivity features, encouraging his vast audience to ping back just one more time.

Marty will spend the entire day in conversation with this elephant of a story that he has created. Encouraging his visitors to return for just one more click. He'll give them chances to poll each other, discuss how they'd like to see DP punished, ask whether you can actually fall in love with a fourteen-year-old. This one will have a long life, and he will raise it like a proud father, feeding and nurturing it, helping it make its way in the rough world of the maelstrom.

My own little green speck of content has disappeared. It seems that even government biologists feel for Double DP.

When my father was not placing foolish bets on revolution, he taught agronomy at the National Lao University. Perhaps our lives would have been different if he had been a rice farmer in the paddies of the capital's suburbs, instead of surrounded by intellectuals and ideas. But his karma was to be a teacher and a researcher, and so while he was increasing Lao rice production by 30 percent, he was also filling himself with gambler's

fancies: Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Sakharov, Mandela, Aung Sung Kyi. True gamblers, all. He would say that if white South Africans could be made to feel shame, then the pretender monarch must right his ways. He claimed that Thoreau must have been Lao, the way he protested so politely.

In my father's description, Thoreau was a forest monk, gone into the jungle for enlightenment. To live amongst the banyan and the climbing vines of Massachusetts and to meditate on the nature of suffering. My father believed he was undoubtedly some arhat reborn. He often talked of Mr. Henry David, and in my imagination this falang, too, was a large man like my father.

When my father's friends visited in the dark—after the coup and the countercoup, and after the march of Khamsing's Chinese-supported insurgency—they would often speak of Mr. Henry David. My father would sit with his friends and students and drink black Lao coffee and smoke cigarettes, and then he would write carefully worded complaints against the government that his students would then copy and leave in public places, distribute into gutters, and stick onto walls in the dead of night.

His guerrilla complaints would ask where his friends had gone, and why their families were so alone. He would ask why monks were beaten on their heads by Chinese soldiers when they sat in hunger strike before the palace. Sometimes, when he was drunk and when these small gambles did not satisfy his risk-taking nature, he would send editorials to the newspapers.

None of these were ever printed, but he was possessed with some spirit that made him think that perhaps the papers would change. That his stature as a father of Lao agriculture might somehow sway the editors to commit suicide and print his complaints.

It ended with my mother serving coffee to a secret police captain while two more policemen waited outside our door. The captain was very polite: he offered my father a 555 cigarette—a brand that already had become rare and contraband—and lit it for him. Then he spread the whisper sheet onto the coffee table, gently pushing aside the coffee cups and their saucers to make room for it. It was rumpled and torn, stained with mud. Full of accusations against Khamsing. Unmistakable as one of my father's.

My father and the policeman both sat and smoked, studying the paper silently.

Finally, the captain asked, "Will you stop?"

My father drew on his cigarette and let the smoke out slowly as he studied the whisper sheet between them. The captain said, "We all respect what you have done for the Lao kingdom. I myself have family who would have starved if not for your work in the villages." He leaned forward. "If you promise to stop writing these whispers and complaints, everything can be forgotten. Everything."

Still, my father didn't say anything. He finished his cigarette. Stubbed it out. "It would be difficult to make that sort of promise," he said.

The captain was surprised. "You have friends who have spoken on your behalf. Perhaps you would reconsider. For their sake."

My father made a little shrug. The captain spread the rumpled whisper sheet, flattening it out more completely. Read it over. "These sheets do nothing," he said. "Khamsing's dynasty will not collapse because you print a few complaints. Most of these are torn down before anyone reads them. They do nothing. They are pointless." He was almost begging. He looked over and saw me watching at the door. "Give this up. For your family, if not your friends."

I would like to say that my father said something grand. Something honorable about speaking against tyranny. Perhaps invoked one of his idols. Aung Sung Kyi or Sakharov, or Mr. Henry David and his penchant for polite protest. But he didn't say anything. He just sat with his hands on his knees, looking down at the torn whisper sheet. I think now that he must have been very afraid. Words always came easily to him, before. Instead, all he did was repeat himself. "It would be difficult."

The captain waited. When it became apparent that my father had nothing else to say, he put down his coffee cup and motioned for his men to come inside. They were all very polite. I think the captain even apologized to my mother as they led him out the door.

We are into day three of the Double DP bonanza, and the green sun glows brightly over all of us, bathing us in its soothing, profitable glow. I am working on my newest story with my Frontal Lobe ear buds in, shutting out everything except the work at hand. It is always a little difficult to write in one's third language, but I have my favorite singer and fellow countryperson Kulaap whispering in my ear that "Love is a Bird," and the work is going well. With Kulaap singing to me in our childhood language, I feel very much at home.

A tap on my shoulder interrupts me. I pull out my ear buds and look around. Janice, standing over me. "Ong, I need to talk to you." She motions me to follow.

In her office, she closes the door behind me and goes to her desk. "Sit down, Ong." She keys her tablet, scrolls through data. "How are things going for you?"

"Very well. Thank you." I'm not sure if there is more that she wants me to say, but it is likely that she will tell me. Americans do not leave much to guesswork.

"What are you working on for your next story?" she asks.

I smile. I like this story; it reminds me of my father. And with Kulaap's soothing voice in my ears I have finished almost all of my research. The bluet, a flower made famous in Mr. Henry David Thoreau's journals, is blooming too early to be pollinated. Bees do not seem to find it when it blooms in March. The scientists I interviewed blame global warming, and now the flower is in danger of extinction. I have interviewed biologists and local naturalists, and now I would like to go to Walden Pond on a pilgrimage for this bluet that may soon also be bottled in a federal reserve laboratory with its techs in clean suits and their crime scene vacuums.

When I finish describing the story, Janice looks at me as if I am crazy. I can tell that she thinks I am crazy, because I can see it on her face. And also because she tells me.

"You're fucking crazy!"

Americans are very direct. It's difficult to keep face when they yell at you. Sometimes, I think that I have adapted to America. I have been here for five years now, ever since I came from Thailand on a scholarship, but

at times like this, all I can do is smile and try not to cringe as they lose their face and yell and rant. My father was once struck in the face with an official's shoe, and he did not show his anger. But Janice is American, and she is very angry.

“There's no way I'm going to authorize a junket like that!”

I try to smile past her anger, and then remember that the Americans don't see an apologetic smile in the same way that a Lao would. I stop smiling and make my face look . . . something. Earnest, I hope.

“The story is very important,” I say. “The ecosystem isn't adapting correctly to the changing climate. Instead, it has lost . . .” I grope for the word. “Synchronicity. These scientists think that the flower can be saved, but only if they import a bee that is available in Turkey. They think it can replace the function of the native bee population, and they think that it will not be too disruptive.”

“Flowers and Turkish bees.”

“Yes. It is an important story. Do they let the flower go extinct? Or try to keep the famous flower, but alter the environment of Walden Pond? I think your readers will think it is very interesting.”

“More interesting than that?” She points through her glass wall at the maelstrom, at the throbbing green sun of Double DP, who has now barricaded himself in a Mexican hotel and has taken a pair of fans hostage.

“You know how many clicks we're getting?” she asks. “We're exclusive. Marty's got Double's trust and is going in for an interview tomorrow, assuming the Mexicans don't just raid it with commandos. We've got people clicking back every couple minutes just to look at Marty's blog about his preparations to go in.”

The glowing globe not only dominates the maelstrom's screen, it washes everything else out. If we look at the stock bots, everyone who doesn't have protection under our corporate umbrella has been hurt by the loss of eyeballs. Even the Frontal Lobe/Oakley story has been swallowed. Three days of completely dominating the maelstrom has been very profitable for us. Now Marty's showing his viewers how he will wear a flak jacket in case the Mexican commandos attack while he is discussing the

nature of true love with DP. And he has another exclusive interview with the mother ready to post as well. Cindy has been editing the footage and telling us all how disgusted she is with the whole thing. The woman apparently drove her daughter to DP's mansion for a midnight pool party, alone.

"Perhaps some people are tired of DP and wish to see something else," I suggest.

"Don't shoot yourself in the foot with a flower story, Ong. Even Pradeep's cooking journey through Ladakh gets more viewers than this stuff you're writing."

She looks as though she will say more, but then she simply stops. It seems as if she is considering her words. It is uncharacteristic. She normally speaks before her thoughts are arranged.

"Ong, I like you," she says. I make myself smile at this, but she continues. "I hired you because I had a good feeling about you. I didn't have a problem with clearing the visas to let you stay in the country. You're a good person. You write well. But you're averaging less than a thousand pings on your byline feed." She looks down at her tablet, then back up at me. "You need to up your average. You've got almost no readers selecting you for Page One. And even when they do subscribe to your feed, they're putting it in the third tier."

"Spinach reading," I supply.

"What?"

"Mr. Mackley calls it spinach reading. When people feel like they should do something with virtue, like eat their spinach, they click to me. Or else read Shakespeare."

I blush, suddenly embarrassed. I do not mean to imply that my work is of the same caliber as a great poet. I want to correct myself, but I'm too embarrassed. So instead I shut up, and sit in front of her, blushing.

She regards me. "Yes. Well, that's a problem. Look, I respect what you do. You're obviously very smart." Her eyes scan her tablet. "The butterfly thing you wrote was actually pretty interesting."

"Yes?" I make myself smile again.

“It’s just that no one wants to read these stories.”

I try to protest. “But you hired me to write the important stories. The stories about politics and the government, to continue the traditions of the old newspapers. I remember what you said when you hired me.”

“Yeah, well.” She looks away. “I was thinking more about a good scandal.”

“The checkerspot is a scandal. That butterfly is now gone.”

She sighs. “No, it’s not a scandal. It’s just a depressing story. No one reads a depressing story, at least, not more than once. And no one subscribes to a depressing byline feed.”

“A thousand people do.”

“A thousand people.” She laughs. “We aren’t some Laotian community weblog, we’re Milestone, and we’re competing for clicks with them.” She waves outside, indicating the maelstrom. “Your stories don’t last longer than half a day; they never get social-poked by anyone except a fringe.” She shakes her head. “Christ, I don’t even know who your demographic is. Centenarian hippies? Some federal bureaucrats? The numbers just don’t justify the amount of time you spend on stories.”

“What stories do you wish me to write?”

“I don’t know. Anything. Product reviews. News you can use. Just not any more of this ‘we regret to inform you of bad news’ stuff. If there isn’t something a reader can do about the damn butterfly, then there’s no point in telling them about it. It just depresses people, and it depresses your numbers.”

“We don’t have enough numbers from Marty?”

She laughs at that. “You remind me of my mother. Look, I don’t want to cut you, but if you can’t start pulling at least a fifty thousand daily average, I won’t have any choice. Our group median is way down in comparison to other teams, and when evaluations come around, we look bad. I’m up against Nguyen in the Tech and Toys pool, and Penn in Yoga and Spirituality, and no one wants to read about how the world’s going to shit. Go find me some stories that people want to read.”

She says a few more things, words that I think are meant to make me

feel inspired and eager, and then I am standing outside the door, once again facing the maelstrom.

The truth is that I have never written popular stories. I am not a popular story writer. I am earnest. I am slow. I do not move at the speed these Americans seem to love. Find a story that people want to read. I can write some follow-up to Mackley, to Double DP, perhaps assist with sidebars to his main piece, but somehow, I suspect that the readers will know that I am faking it.

Marty sees me standing outside of Janice's office. He comes over.

"She giving you a hard time about your numbers?"

"I do not write the correct sort of stories."

"Yeah. You're an idealist."

We both stand there for a moment, meditating on the nature of idealism. Even though he is very American, I like him because he is sensitive to people's hearts. People trust him. Even Double DP trusts him, though Marty blew his name over every news tablet's front page. Marty has a good heart. Jai dee. I like him. I think that he is genuine.

"Look, Ong," he says. "I like what you do." He puts his hand around my shoulder. For a moment, I think he's about to try to rub my head with affection and I have to force myself not to wince, but he's sensitive and instead takes his hand away. "Look, Ong. We both know you're terrible at this kind of work. We're in the news business, here. And you're just not cut out for it."

"My visa says I have to remain employed."

"Yeah. Janice is a bitch for that. Look." He pauses. "I've got this thing with Double DP going down in Mexico. But I've got another story brewing. An exclusive. I've already got my bonus, anyway. And it should push up your average."

"I do not think that I can write Double DP sidebars."

He grins. "It's not that. And it's not charity; you're actually a perfect match."

"It is about government mismanagement?"

He laughs, but I think he's not really laughing at me. "No." He pauses,

smiles. "It's Kulaap. An interview."

I suck in my breath. My fellow countryperson, here in America. She came out during the purge as well. She was doing a movie in Singapore when the tanks moved, and so she was not trapped. She was already very popular all over Asia, and when Khamsing turned our country into a black hole, the world took note. Now she is popular here in America as well. Very beautiful. And she remembers our country before it went into darkness. My heart is pounding.

Marty goes on. "She's agreed to do an exclusive with me. But you even speak her language, so I think she'd agree to switch off." He pauses, looks serious. "I've got a good history with Kulaap. She doesn't give interviews to just anyone. I did a lot of exposure stories about her when Laos was going to hell. Got her a lot of good press. This is a special favor already, so don't fuck it up."

I shake my head. "No. I will not." I press my palms together and touch them to my forehead in a nop of appreciation. "I will not fuck it up." I make another nop.

He laughs. "Don't bother with that polite stuff. Janice will cut off your balls to increase the stock price, but we're the guys in the trenches. We stick together, right?"

In the morning, I make a pot of strong coffee with condensed milk; I boil rice noodle soup and add bean sprouts and chiles and vinegar, and warm a loaf of French bread that I buy from a Vietnamese bakery a few blocks away. With a new mix of Kulaap's music from DJ Dao streaming in over my stereo, I sit down at my little kitchen table, pour my coffee from its press pot, and open my tablet.

The tablet is a wondrous creation. In Laos, the paper was still a paper, physical, static, and empty of anything except the official news. Real news in our New Divine Kingdom did not come from newspapers, or from television, or from handsets or ear buds. It did not come from the net or feeds unless you trusted your neighbor not to look over your shoulder at an Internet cafe and if you knew that there were no secret police sitting

beside you, or an owner who would be able to identify you when they came around asking about the person who used that workstation over there to communicate with the outside world.

Real news came from whispered rumor, rated according to the trust you accorded the whisperer. Were they family? Did they have long history with you? Did they have anything to gain by the sharing? My father and his old classmates trusted one another. He trusted some of his students, as well. I think this is why the security police came for him in the end. One of his trusted friends or students also whispered news to official friends. Perhaps Mr. Intha-chak, or Som Vang. Perhaps another. It is impossible to peer into the blackness of that history and guess at who told true stories and in which direction.

In any case, it was my father's karma to be taken, so perhaps it does not matter who did the whispering. But before then—before the news of my father flowed up to official ears—none of the real news flowed toward Lao TV or the Vientiane Times. Which meant that when the protests happened and my father came through the door with blood on his face from baton blows, we could read as much as we wanted about the three thousand schoolchildren who had sung the national anthem to our new divine monarch. While my father lay in bed, delirious with pain, the papers told us that China had signed a rubber contract that would triple revenue for Luang Namtha province and that Nam Theun Dam was now earning BT 22.5 billion per year in electricity fees to Thailand. But there were no bloody batons, and there were no dead monks, and there was no Mercedes-Benz burning in the river as it floated toward Cambodia.

Real news came on the wings of rumor, stole into our house at midnight, sat with us and sipped coffee and fled before the call of roosters could break the stillness. It was in the dark, over a burning cigarette that you learned Vilaphon had disappeared or that Mr. Saeng's wife had been beaten as a warning. Real news was too valuable to risk in public.

Here in America, my page glows with many news feeds, flickers at me in video windows, pours in at me over broadband. It is a waterfall of information. As my personal news page opens, my feeds arrange themselves, sorting according to the priorities and tag categories that I've set, a mix of Meung Lao news, Lao refugee blogs, and the chatting of a few close friends from Thailand and the American college where I

attended on a human relief scholarship.

On my second page and my third, I keep the general news, the arrangements of Milestone, the Bangkok Post, the Phnom Penh Express —the news chosen by editors. But by the time I've finished with my own selections, I don't often have time to click through the headlines that these earnest news editors select for the mythical general reader.

In any case, I know far better than they what I want to read, and with my keyword and tag scans, I can unearth stories and discussions that a news agency would never think to provide. Even if I cannot see into the black hole itself, I can slip along its edges, divine news from its fringe.

I search for tags like Vientiane, Laos, Lao, Khamsing, China-Lao friendship, Korat, Golden Triangle, Hmong independence, Lao PDR, my father's name. . . . Only those of us who are Lao exiles from the March Purge really read these blogs. It is much as when we lived in the capital. The blogs are the rumors that we used to whisper to one another. Now we publish our whispers over the net and join mailing lists instead of secret coffee groups, but it is the same. It is family, as much as any of us now have.

On the maelstrom, the tags for Laos don't even register. Our tags bloomed brightly for a little while, while there were still guerrilla students uploading content from their handsets, and the images were lurid and shocking. But then the phone lines went down and the country fell into its black hole and now it is just us, this small network that functions outside the country.

A headline from Jumbo Blog catches my eye. I open the site, and my tablet fills with the colorful image of the three-wheeled taxi of my childhood. I often come here. It is a node of comfort.

Laofriend posts that some people, maybe a whole family, have swum the Mekong and made it into Thailand. He isn't sure if they were accepted as refugees or if they were sent back.

It is not an official news piece. More, the idea of a news piece. SomPaBoy doesn't believe it, but Khamchanh contends that the rumor is true, heard from someone who has a sister married to an Isaan border guard in the Thai army. So we cling to it. Wonder about it. Guess where these people came from, wonder if, against all odds, it could be one of

ours: a brother, a sister, a cousin, a father....

After an hour, I close the tablet. It's foolish to read any more. It only brings up memories. Worrying about the past is foolish. Lao PDR is gone. To wish otherwise is suffering.

The clerk at Novotel's front desk is expecting me. A hotel staffer with a key guides me to a private elevator bank that whisks us up into the smog and heights. The elevator doors open to a small entryway with a thick mahogany door. The staffer steps back into the elevator and disappears, leaving me standing in this strange airlock. Presumably, I am being examined by Kulaap's security.

The mahogany door opens, and a smiling black man who is forty centimeters taller than I and who has muscles that ripple like snakes smiles and motions me inside. He guides me through Kulaap's sanctuary. She keeps the heat high, almost tropical, and fountains rush everywhere around. The flat is musical with water. I unbutton my collar in the humidity. I was expecting air-conditioning, and instead I am sweltering. It's almost like home. And then she's in front of me, and I can hardly speak. She is beautiful, and more. It is intimidating to stand before someone who exists in film and in music but has never existed before you in the flesh. She's not as stunning as she is in the movies, but there's more life, more presence; the movies lose that quality about her. I make a nop of greeting, pressing my hands together, touching my forehead.

She laughs at this, takes my hand and shakes it American-style. "You're lucky Marty likes you so much," she says. "I don't like interviews."

I can barely find my voice. "Yes. I only have a few questions."

"Oh no. Don't be shy." She laughs again, and doesn't release my hand, pulls me toward her living room. "Marty told me about you. You need help with your ratings. He helped me once, too."

She's frightening. She is of my people, but she has adapted better to this place than I have. She seems comfortable here. She walks differently, smiles differently; she is an American, with perhaps some flavor of our country, but nothing of our roots. It's obvious. And strangely disappointing.

In her movies, she holds herself so well, and now she sits down on her couch and sprawls with her feet kicked out in front of her. Not caring at all. I'm embarrassed for her, and I'm glad I don't have my camera set up yet. She kicks her feet up on the couch. I can't help but be shocked. She catches my expression and smiles.

"You're worse than my parents. Fresh off the boat."

"I am sorry."

She shrugs. "Don't worry about it. I spent half my life here, growing up; different country, different rules."

I'm embarrassed. I try not to laugh with the tension I feel. "I just have some interview questions," I say.

"Go ahead." She sits up and arranges herself for the video stand that I set up.

I begin. "When the March Purge happened, you were in Singapore."

She nods. "That's right. We were finishing *The Tiger and the Ghost*."

"What was your first thought when it happened? Did you want to go back? Were you surprised?"

She frowns. "Turn off the camera."

When it's off she looks at me with pity. "This isn't the way to get clicks. No one cares about an old revolution. Not even my fans." She stands abruptly and calls through the green jungle of her flat. "Terrell?"

The big black man appears. Smiling and lethal. Looming over me. He is very frightening. The movies I grew up with had falang like him. Terrifying large black men whom our heroes had to overcome. Later, when I arrived in America, it was different, and I found out that the falang and the black people don't like the way we show them in our movies. Much like when I watch their Vietnam movies, and see the ugly way the Lao freedom fighters behave. Not real at all, portrayed like animals. But still, I cannot help but cringe when Terrell looks at me.

Kulaap says, "We're going out, Terrell. Make sure you tip off some of the papcams. We're going to give them a show."

"I don't understand," I say.

“You want clicks, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

She smiles. “You don’t need an interview. You need an event.” She looks me over. “And better clothes.” She nods to her security man. “Terrell, dress him up.”

A flashbulb frenzy greets us as we come out of the tower. Papcams everywhere. Chase cycles revving, and Terrell and three others of his people guiding us through the press to the limousine, shoving cameras aside with a violence and power that are utterly unlike the careful pity he showed when he selected a Gucci suit for me to wear.

Kulaap looks properly surprised at the crowd and the shouting reporters, but not nearly as surprised as I am, and then we’re in the limo, speeding out of the tower’s roundabout as papcams follow us.

Kulaap crouches before the car’s onboard tablet, keying in passcodes. She is very pretty, wearing a black dress that brushes her thighs and thin straps that caress her smooth bare shoulders. I feel as if I am in a movie. She taps more keys. A screen glows, showing the tail lights of our car: the view from pursuing papcams.

“You know I haven’t dated anyone in three years?” she asks.

“Yes. I know from your Web site biography.”

She grins. “And now it looks like I’ve found one of my countrymen.”

“But we’re not on a date,” I protest.

“Of course we are.” She smiles again. “I’m going out on a supposedly secret date with a cute and mysterious Lao boy. And look at all those papcams chasing after us, wondering where we’re going and what we’re going to do.” She keys in another code, and now we can see live footage of the paparazzi, as viewed from the tail of her limo. She grins. “My fans like to see what life is like for me.”

I can almost imagine what the maelstrom looks like right now: there will still be Marty’s story, but now a dozen other sites will be lighting up, and in

the center of that, Kulaap's own view of the excitement, pulling in her fans, who will want to know, direct from her, what's going on. She holds up a mirror, checks herself, and then she smiles into her smartphone's camera.

"Hi everyone. It looks like my cover's blown. Just thought I should let you know that I'm on a lovely date with a lovely man. I'll let you all know how it goes. Promise." She points the camera at me. I stare at it stupidly. She laughs. "Say hi and good bye, Ong."

"Hi and good-bye."

She laughs again, waves into the camera. "Love you all. Hope you have as good a night as I'm going to have." And then she cuts the clip and punches a code to launch the video to her Web site.

It is a bit of nothing. Not a news story, not a scoop even, and yet, when she opens another window on her tablet, showing her own miniversion of the maelstrom, I can see her site lighting up with traffic. Her version of the maelstrom isn't as powerful as what we have at Milestone, but still, it is an impressive window into the data that is relevant to Kulaap's tags.

"What's your feed's byline?" she asks. "Let's see if we can get your traffic bumped up."

"Are you serious?"

"Marty Mackley did more than this for me. I told him I'd help." She laughs. "Besides, we wouldn't want you to get sent back to the black hole, would we?"

"You know about the black hole?" I can't help doing a double-take.

Her smile is almost sad. "You think just because I put my feet up on the furniture that I don't care about my aunts and uncles back home? That I don't worry about what's happening?"

"I—"

She shakes her head. "You're so fresh off the boat."

"Do you use the Jumbo Cafe—" I break off. It seems too unlikely.

She leans close. "My handle is Laofriend. What's yours?"

"Littlexang. I thought Laofriend was a boy—"

She just laughs.

I lean forward. "Is it true that the family made it out?"

She nods. "For certain. A general in the Thai army is a fan. He tells me everything. They have a listening post. And sometimes they send scouts across."

It's almost as if I am home.

We go to a tiny Laotian restaurant where everyone recognizes her and falls over her and the owners simply lock out the paparazzi when they become too intrusive. We spend the evening unearthing memories of Vientiane. We discover that we both favored the same rice noodle cart on Kaem Khong. That she used to sit on the banks of the Mekong and wish that she were a fisherman. That we went to the same waterfalls outside the city on the weekends. That it is impossible to find good dum mak hoong anywhere outside of the country. She is a good companion, very alive. Strange in her American ways, but still, with a good heart. Periodically, we click photos of one another and post them to her site, feeding the voyeurs. And then we are in the limo again and the paparazzi are all around us. I have the strange feeling of fame. Flashbulbs everywhere. Shouted questions. I feel proud to be beside this beautiful intelligent woman who knows so much more than any of us about the situation inside our homeland.

Back in the car, she has me open a bottle of champagne and pour two glasses while she opens the maelstrom and studies the results of our date. She has reprogrammed it to watch my byline feed ranking as well.

"You've got twenty thousand more readers than you did yesterday," she says.

I beam. She keeps reading the results. "Someone already did a scan on your face." She toasts me with her glass. "You're famous."

We clink glasses. I am flushed with wine and happiness. I will have Janice's average clicks. It's as though a bodhisattva has come down from heaven to save my job. In my mind, I offer thanks to Marty for arranging this, for his generous nature. Kulaap leans close to her screen, watching the flaring content. She opens another window, starts to read. She frowns.

“What the fuck do you write about?”

I draw back, surprised. “Government stories, mostly.” I shrug. “Sometimes environment stories.”

“Like what?”

“I am working on a story right now about global warming and Henry David Thoreau.”

“Aren’t we done with that?”

I’m confused. “Done with what?”

The limo jostles us as it makes a turn, moves down Hollywood Boulevard, letting the cycles rev around us like schools of fish. They’re snapping pictures at the side of the limo, snapping at us. Through the tinting, they’re like fireflies, smaller flares than even my stories in the maelstrom.

“I mean, isn’t that an old story?” She sips her champagne. “Even America is reducing emissions now. Everyone knows it’s a problem.” She taps her couch’s armrest. “The carbon tax on my limo has tripled, even with the hybrid engine. Everyone agrees it’s a problem. We’re going to fix it. What’s there to write about?”

She is an American. Everything that is good about them: their optimism, their willingness to charge ahead, to make their own future. And everything that is bad about them: their strange ignorance, their unwillingness to believe that they must behave as other than children.

“No. It’s not done,” I say. “It is worse. Worse every day. And the changes we make seem to have little effect. Maybe too little, or maybe too late. It is getting worse.”

She shrugs. “That’s not what I read.”

I try not to show my exasperation. “Of course it’s not what you read.” I wave at the screen. “Look at the clicks on my feed. People want happy stories. Want fun stories. Not stories like I write. So instead, we all write what you will read, which is nothing.”

“Still—”

“No.” I make a chopping motion with my hand. “We newspeople are very smart monkeys. If you will give us your so lovely eyeballs and your click-

throughs we will do whatever you like. We will write good news, and news you can use, news you can shop to, news with the 'Three S's.' We will tell you how to have better sex or eat better or look more beautiful or feel happier and or how to meditate—yes, so enlightened.” I make a face. “If you want a walking meditation and Double DP, we will give it to you.”

She starts to laugh.

“Why are you laughing at me?” I snap. “I am not joking!”

She waves a hand. “I know, I know, but what you just said ‘double’—” She shakes her head, still laughing. “Never mind.”

I lapse into silence. I want to go on, to tell her of my frustrations. But now I am embarrassed at my loss of composure. I have no face. I didn't used to be like this. I used to control my emotions, but now I am an American, as childish and unruly as Janice. And Kulaap laughs at me.

I control my anger. “I think I want to go home,” I say. “I don't wish to be on a date anymore.”

She smiles and reaches over to touch my shoulder. “Don't be that way.”

A part of me is telling me that I am a fool. That I am reckless and foolish for walking away from this opportunity. But there is something else, something about this frenzied hunt for page views and click-throughs and ad revenue that suddenly feels unclean. As if my father is with us in the car, disapproving. Asking if he posted his complaints about his missing friends for the sake of clicks.

“I want to get out,” I hear myself say. “I do not wish to have your clicks.”

“But—”

I look up at her. “I want to get out. Now.”

“Here?” She makes a face of exasperation, then shrugs. “It's your choice.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

She tells her driver to pull over. We sit in stiff silence.

“I will send your suit back to you,” I say.

She gives me a sad smile. “It's all right. It's a gift.”

This makes me feel worse, even more humiliated for refusing her

generosity, but still, I get out of the limo. Cameras are clicking at me from all around. This is my fifteen minutes of fame, this moment when all of Kulaap's fans focus on me for a few seconds, their flashbulbs popping.

I begin to walk home as paparazzi shout questions.

Fifteen minutes later I am indeed alone. I consider calling a cab, but then decide I prefer the night. Prefer to walk by myself through this city that never walks anywhere. On a street corner, I buy a pupusa and gamble on the Mexican Lottery because I like the tickets' laser images of their Day of the Dead. It seems an echo of the Buddha's urging to remember that we all become corpses.

I buy three tickets, and one of them is a winner: one hundred dollars that I can redeem at any TelMex kiosk. I take this as a good sign. Even if my luck is obviously gone with my work, and even if the girl Kulaap was not the bodhisattva that I thought, still, I feel lucky. As though my father is walking with me down this cool Los Angeles street in the middle of the night, the two of us together again, me with a pupusa and a winning lottery ticket, him with an Ah Daeng cigarette and his quiet gambler's smile. In a strange way, I feel that he is blessing me.

And so instead of going home, I go back to the newsroom.

My hits are up when I arrive. Even now, in the middle of the night, a tiny slice of Kulaap's fan base is reading about checkerspot butterflies and American government incompetence. In my country, this story would not exist. A censor would kill it instantly. Here, it glows green; increasing and decreasing in size as people click. A lonely thing, flickering amongst the much larger content flares of Intel processor releases, guides to low-fat recipes, photos of lol-cats, and episodes of Survivor! Antarctica. The wash of light and color is very beautiful.

In the center of the maelstrom, the green sun of the Double DP story glows—surges larger. DP is doing something. Maybe he's surrendering, maybe he's murdering his hostages, maybe his fans have thrown up a human wall to protect him. My story snuffs out as reader attention shifts.

I watch the maelstrom a little longer, then go to my desk and make a

phone call. A ruffled hairy man answers, rubbing at a sleep-puffy face. I apologize for the late hour, and then pepper him with questions while I record the interview.

He is silly looking and wild-eyed. He has spent his life living as if he were Thoreau, thinking deeply on the forest monk and following the man's careful paths through what woods remain, walking amongst birch and maple and bluets. He is a fool, but an earnest one.

"I can't find a single one," he tells me. "Thoreau could find thousands at this time of year; there were so many he didn't even have to look for them."

He says, "I'm so glad you called. I tried sending out press releases, but . . ." He shrugs. "I'm glad you'll cover it. Otherwise, it's just us hobbyists talking to each other."

I smile and nod and take notes of his sincerity, this strange wild creature, the sort that everyone will dismiss. His image is bad for video; his words are not good for text. He has no quotes that encapsulate what he sees. It is all couched in the jargon of naturalists and biology. With time, I could find another, someone who looks attractive or who can speak well, but all I have is this one hairy man, disheveled and foolish, senile with passion over a flower that no longer exists.

I work through the night, polishing the story. When my colleagues pour through the door at 8 a.m. it is almost done. Before I can even tell Janice about it, she comes to me. She fingers my clothing and grins. "Nice suit." She pulls up a chair and sits beside me. "We all saw you with Kulaap. Your hits went way up." She nods at my screen. "Writing up what happened?"

"No. It was a private conversation."

"But everyone wants to know why you got out of the car. I had someone from the Financial Times call me about splitting the hits for a tell-all, if you'll be interviewed. You wouldn't even need to write up the piece."

It's a tempting thought. Easy hits. Many click-throughs. Ad-revenue bonuses. Still, I shake my head. "We did not talk about things that are important for others to hear."

Janice stares at me as if I am crazy. "You're not in the position to

bargain, Ong. Something happened between the two of you. Something people want to know about. And you need the clicks. Just tell us what happened on your date.”

“I was not on a date. It was an interview.”

“Well then publish the fucking interview and get your average up!”

“No. That is for Kulaap to post, if she wishes. I have something else.”

I show Janice my screen. She leans forward. Her mouth tightens as she reads. For once, her anger is cold. Not the explosion of noise and rage that I expect. “Bluets.” She looks at me. “You need hits and you give them flowers and Walden Pond.”

“I would like to publish this story.”

“No! Hell, no! This is just another story like your butterfly story, and your road contracts story, and your congressional budget story. You won’t get a damn click. It’s pointless. No one will even read it.”

“This is news.”

“Marty went out on a limb for you—” She presses her lips together, reining in her anger. “Fine. It’s up to you, Ong. If you want to destroy your life over Thoreau and flowers, it’s your funeral. We can’t help you if you won’t help yourself. Bottom line, you need fifty thousand readers or I’m sending you back to the third world.”

We look at each other. Two gamblers evaluating one another. Deciding who is betting, and who is bluffing.

I click the “publish” button.

The story launches itself onto the net, announcing itself to the feeds. A minute later a tiny new sun glows in the maelstrom.

Together, Janice and I watch the green spark as it flickers on the screen. Readers turn to the story. Start to ping it and share it amongst themselves, start to register hits on the page. The post grows slightly.

My father gambled on Thoreau. I am my father’s son.



Paolo Bacigalupi is a Hugo and Nebula Award winner and a National Book Award finalist. His latest novel is the New York Times Bestseller *The Water Knife*, a near-future thriller about water wars and climate change.

“The Gambler” was previously published in *Fast Forward 2* (2008).

Slipping

by Lauren Beukes

1. High life

The heat presses against the cab, trying to find a way in past the sealed windows and the rattling air-conditioning. Narrow apartment blocks swoop past on either side of the dual carriageway, occasionally broken up by a warehouse megastore. It could be Cape Town, Pearl thinks. It could be anywhere. Twenty-three hours' travel so far. She has never been on a plane before.

“So what’s the best part about Karachi?” Tomislav says, trying to break the oppressive silence in the back—the three of them dazed by the journey, the girl, her promoter, and the surgeon, who has not looked up from his phone since they got in the car, because he is trying to get a meeting.

The driver thinks about it, tugging at the little hairs of his beard. “One thing is that this is a really good road. Sharah e Faisal. There’s hardly ever a traffic jam and if it rains, the road never drowns.”

“Excellent.” Tomislav leans back, defeated. He gives Pearl an encouraging smile, but she is not encouraged. She watched the World Cup and the Olympics on TV; she knows how it is supposed to be. She stares out the window, refusing to blink in case the tears come.

The road narrows into the city and the traffic thickens, hooting trucks and bakkies and rickshaws covered in reflecting stickers like disco balls, twinkling in the sun. They pass through the old city, with its big crumbling buildings from long ago, and into the warren of Saddar’s slums, with concrete lean-tos muscling in on each other. *Kachi abaadi*, the driver tells them, and Pearl sounds it out under her breath. At least the shacks are not

tin and that's one difference.

Tomislav points out the loops of graffiti in another alphabet and taps her plastic knee. "Gang signs. Just like the Cape Flats."

"Oh, they're gangsters, all right," the driver says. "Same people run the country."

"You have gangsters in your government?" Pearl is shocked.

The cab driver clucks and meets her eyes in the rearview mirror. "You one of the racers?"

"What clued you in?" Dr. Arturo says, without looking up. It's the first thing he's said all day. His thumbs tap over the screen of his phone, blunt instruments. Pearl rubs her legs self-consciously where the tendons are visible under the joint of her knee, running into the neurocircuitry. It's a showcase, Dr. Arturo told her when she asked him why it couldn't look like skin. Some days she thinks it's beautiful. Mostly, she hates seeing the inside-out of herself.

"Why do you think you're in Pakistan?" The driver laughs. "You think anyone else would let this happen in *their* country?" He rubs his thumb and fingers together and flings it to the wind.

2. Packed with goodness

Pre-race. A huge +Games banner hangs above the entrance of the Karachi Parsi Institute, or KPI. It's a colonial building that has been extended to accommodate them, the track built over the old cricket ground and into the slums. The school has been turned into the athletes' village, classrooms converted to individual medical cells to cater to their unique needs. Pearl's, for example, has hermetic bio-units and sterile surfaces. The window has been fused shut to prevent the polluted air from leaking in.

In the room next door, they installed extra generators for Charlotte Grange after she plugged in her exo-suit and tripped the power on the whole building. Pearl can hear her grunting through the walls. She doesn't know what Siska Rachman has.

She sits on the end of her bed, paging through the official program while Tomislav paces the room end to end, hunched over his phone, his hand resting on his nose. “Ajda! Come on!” her promoter says into the phone, in that Slavic way, which makes the first part of the sentence top-heavy. Like Tomislav himself, still carrying his weight-lifter bulk all squeezed up into his chest and neck. He doesn’t compete anymore, but the steroids keep him in shape. The neon lights and the white sheen off the walls makes his eyes look bluer, his skin paler. “Peach,” she was taught in school, as if “peach” and “brown” were magically less divisive than “black” and “white” and words could fix everything. But Tomislav’s skin is not the warm orange of a summer fruit—it’s like the milky tea she drinks at home.

Tomislav has thick black hair up his arms. She asked him about it when they first met at the Beloved One’s house on the hill. Fourteen and too young and too angry about everything that had happened to mind her elders, even though her mother gasped at her rudeness and smacked her head.

Tomislav laughed. *Testosterone, kitten.* He tapped the slight fuzz over her lip. *You’ve got it too—that’s what makes you so strong.*

He’s made her laser all her unsightly hair since. Sports is image. Even this one.

He sees her looking and speaks louder. “You want to get a meeting, Arturo, we gotta have something to show.” He jabs at the phone dramatically to end the call. “That guy! What does he think I’m doing all day? You all right, kitten?” He comes over to take her by the shoulders, give them a little rub. “You feeling good?”

“Fine.” More than fine, with the crowds’ voices a low vibration through the concrete and the starting line tugging at her insides, just through that door, across the quad, down the ramp. She has seen people climbing up onto the roofs around the track with picnic blankets.

“That’s my girl.” He snatches the program out of her hands. “Why are you even looking at this? You know every move these girls have.”

He means Siska Rachman. That’s all anyone wants to talk about. Pearl is sick of it, all the interviews for channels she’s never heard of. No one told her how much of this would be *talking* about racing.

“Ready when you are,” Dr. Arturo says into her head, through the audio feed in her cochlear implant. Back online as if he’s never been gone, checking the diagnostics. “Watch your adrenaline, Pearl. You need to be calm for the install.” He used to narrate the chemical processes, the shifting balances of hormones, the nano-enhancing oxygen uptake, the shift of robotic joints, the dopamine blast, but it felt too much like being in school: words being crammed into her head and all worthless anyway. You don’t have to name something to understand it. She knows how it feels when she hits her stride and the world opens up beneath her feet.

“He’s ready,” she repeats to Tomislav. “All right, let’s get this show pumping.”

Pearl obediently hitches up her vest with the Russian energy drink logo—one of Tomislav’s sponsors, although that’s only spare change. She has met the men who have paid for her to be here, in the glass house on the hill, wearing gaudy golf shirts and shoes and shiny watches. She never saw the men swing a club and she doesn’t know their names, but they all wanted to shake her hand and take a photograph with her.

She feels along the rigid seam that runs in a J-hook down the side of her stomach, parallel with her hysterectomy scar, and tears open the Velcro skin.

“Let me,” Tomislav says, kneeling between her legs. She holds her flesh open while he reaches one hand up inside her abdomen. It doesn’t hurt, not anymore. The Velcro releases a local anesthetic when it opens, but she can feel an uncomfortable tugging inside, like cramps.

Tomislav twists off the valves on either side and gently unplugs her stomach and eases it out of her. He sets it in a sterile biobox and connects it to a blood flow. By the time he turns back, she is already spooling up the accordion twist of artificial intestine, like a party magician pulling ribbons from his palm. It smells of the lab-mod bacteria and the faintest whiff of feces. She hands it to Tomislav and he wrinkles his nose.

“Just goes to show,” he says, folding up the slosh of crinkled plastic tubing and packing it away. “You can take the meat out of the human, but they’re still full of shit!”

Pearl smiles dutifully, even though he has been making the same joke for the last three weeks—ever since they installed the new system. “Nearly

there.” He holds up the hotbed factory and she nods and looks away, because it makes her queasy to watch. It’s a sleek bioplug, slim as a communion wafer and packed with goodness, Dr. Arturo says, like fortified breakfast cereal. Hormones and nanotech instead of vitamins and iron. Tomislav pushes his hand inside her again, feeling blindly for the connector node in what’s left of her real intestinal tract, an inch and a half of the body’s most absorbent tissue for better chemical uptake.

“Whoops! Got your kidney! Joking. It’s in.” “Good to go,” Dr. Arturo confirms.

“Then let’s go,” Pearl says, standing up on her blades.

3. Forces greater than you

You would have to be some kind of idiot. She told her mother it was a bet among the kids, but it wasn’t. It was her, only her, trying to race the train.

The train won.

4. Why you have me

The springkaan drone flits in front of Pearl’s face, the lens zooming in on her lips to catch the words she’s saying under her breath and transmit them onto the big screen. *“Ndincede nkosi undiphe amandla.”*

She bends down to grab on to the curved tips of her legs, to stretch, yes, but also to hide her mouth. It’s supposed to be private, she thinks. But that’s an idea that belonged to another girl before Tomislav’s deals and Dr. Arturo’s voice in her head running through diagnostics, before the Beloved One, before the train, before all this.

“It’s because you’re so taciturn, kitten,” Tomislav says, trying to comfort her. “You give the people crumbs and they’re hungry for more. If you just talked more.” He is fidgeting with his tie while Brian Corwood, the presenter, moves down the starters’ carpet with his microphone, talking to Oluchi Eze, who is showing off her tail for the cameras. She doesn’t know how to talk more. She’s run out of words, and the ones Dr. Arturo wants her to say are like chewing on raw potatoes. She has to sound out the

syllables.

Pearl swipes her tongue over her teeth to get rid of the feeling that someone has rigged a circuit behind her incisors. It's the new drugs in the hotbed, Tomislav says. She has to get used to it, like the drones, which dart up to her unexpectedly. They're freakish—cameras hardwired into grasshoppers, with enough brain stem left to respond to commands. Insects are cheap energy.

Somewhere in a control room, Dr. Arturo notes her twitching back from the springkaan and soothes in her head. "What do you think, Pearl? More sophisticated than some athletes we know." She glances over at Charlotte Grange, who is also waiting for her interview. The big blonde quakes and jitters, clenching her jaw, her exo-suit groaning in anticipation. The neural dampeners barely hold her back.

The crowd roars its impatience, thousands of people behind a curve of reinforced safety glass in the stands, raised high above the action. The rooftops are packed, and there are children climbing the scaffolding around the old church like monkeys.

The people in suits, the ones Dr. Arturo and Tomislav want to meet, watch from air-conditioned hotel rooms five kilometers away. Medical and pharmaceutical companies looking for new innovations in a place where anything goes: any drugs, any prosthetics, robotics, nano. That's what people come for. They tune in by the millions on the proprietary channel. The drama. Like watching Formula 1 for the car crashes.

"All these people, kitten," Tomislav says. "They don't want you to win. They're just waiting for you to explode. But you know why you're here."

"To run."

"That's my girl."

"Slow breaths," Dr. Arturo says. "You're overstimulated." The springkaan drone responds to some invisible hand in a control room and swirls around her, getting every angle. Brian Corwood makes his way over to her, microphone extended like a handshake, springkaans buzzing behind his shoulder. She holds herself very straight. She knows her mama and the Beloved One are watching back home. She wants

to do Gugulethu proud. "*Ndincede nkosi.*" She mouths the words and

sees them come up on the big screens above the track in closed captions below her face.

They'll be working to translate them already. Not so hard to figure out that she's speaking Xhosa.

"Pearl Nit-seeko," the presenter says. "Cape Town's miracle girl. Crippled when she was 14 years old and now, here she is, two years later, at the +Games. Dream come true!"

Pearl has told the story so many times that she can't remember which parts are made up and glossed over. She told a journalist once that she saw her father killed on TV during the illegal mine strikes in Polokwane, saying she covered her ears so she didn't have to hear the popcorn *pa-pa-pa-pa-pa* of the gunshots as people fell in the dust. But now she has to stick to it. Grand tragedy is a better story than the reality of a useless middle-aged drunk who lived with a shebeen owner's daughter in Nyanga so that he didn't have to pay off the bar tab. When Pearl started to get famous, her father made a stink in the local gossip rags until Tomislav paid him to go away. You can buy your own truth.

"Can you tell us about your tech, Pearl?" Brian Corwood says, as if this is a show about movie stars and glittery dresses.

She responds on autopilot. The removable organs, the bath of nano in her blood that improves oxygen uptake. Neural connectivity blows open the receptors to the hormones and drugs dispatched by the hotbed factory. Tomislav has coached her in the newsworthy technical specs, the leaks that make investors' ears prick up.

"I can't show you," she apologizes, coyly raising her vest to let the cameras zoom in on the seam of scar tissue. "It's not a sterile environment." "So it's hollow in there?" Corwood pretends to knock on her stomach. "Reinforced surgical-quality graphene mesh." She lightly drums her fingers over her skin, like in rehearsal. It looks spontaneous and showoff her six-pack. She hears Arturo's voice in her head. "Put the vest down now," Arturo instructs. She covers herself up. The star doesn't want to let the viewers see too much. Like with sex. Or so she's been told. She will never have children.

"Is that your secret weapon?" Corwood says, teasing, because no one ever reveals the exact specs, not until they have a buyer.

“No,” she says, “but I do have one.”

“What is it, then?” Corwood says, gamely.

“God,” she says, and stares defiant at the insect cameras zooming in for a close-up.

5. Things you can't hide

Her stumps are wrapped in fresh bandages, but the wounds still smell. Like something caught in the drain. Her mother wants to douse the bandages in perfume.

“I don't want to! Leave me alone!” Pearl swats the teardrop bottle from her mother's hands and it clatters onto the floor. Her mother tries to grab her. The girl falls off the bed with a shriek. She crawls away on her elbows, sobbing and yowling. Her Uncle Tshepelo hauls her up by her armpits, like she is a sack of sorghum flour, and sets her down at the kitchen table.

“Enough, Pearl,” he says, her handsome youngest uncle. When she was a little girl she told her mother she was going to marry him.

“I hate you,” she screams. She tries to kick at him with her stumps, but he ducks away and goes over to the kettle while her mother stands in the doorway and covers her face.

Pearl has not been back to school since it happened. She turns to face the wall when her friends come to visit and refuses to talk with them. During the day, she watches soap operas and infomercials and lies in her mother's bed and stares at the sky and listens to the noise of the day; the cycles of traffic and school kids and dogs barking and the call to prayer buzzing through the mosque's decrepit speakers and the traffic again and men drunk and fighting at the shebeen. Maybe one of them is her father, who has not been to see her since the accident.

Tshepelo makes sweet milky tea, for her and her mother, and sits and talks: nonsense, really, about his day in the factory, cooking up batches of paté, which is fancy flavored butter for rich people, and how she should see the stupid blue plastic cap he has to wear to cover his hair in case of contamination. He talks and talks until she calms down.

Finally, she agrees that she will go to church, a special service in Khayelitsha Site B. She puts on her woolen dress, grey as the Cape Town winter sky, and green stockings, which dangle horribly at the joint where her legs should be. The rain polka-dots her clothes and soaks into her mother's hat, making it flop as she quick-steps after Tshepelo, carrying Pearl in his arms like an injured dog. She hates the way people avert their eyes.

The church is nothing, a tent in a parking lot, although the people sing like they are in a fancy cathedral in England like on TV. Pearl sits stiffly on the end of the pew between her uncle and her mother, glaring at the little kids who dart around to come and stare. "Vaya," she hisses at them. "What are you looking at? Go."

Halfway through the service, two of the ministers bring out the brand-new wheelchair like it is a prize on a game show, tied with a big purple ribbon. They carry it down the stairs on their shoulders and set it down in front of her. She looks down and mumbles something. Nkosi.

They tuck their fingers into her armpits, these strangers' hands on her, and lift her into it. The moment they set her down, she feels trapped. She moans and shakes her head.

"She's so grateful," her mother says, and presses her into the chair with one hand on her shoulder. Hallelujah, everyone says. Hallelujah. The choir breaks into song and Pearl wishes that God had let her die.

6. Heat

Pearl's brain is microseconds behind her body. The bang of the starting gun registers as a sound after she is already running.

She is aware of the other runners as warm, straining shapes in the periphery. Tomislav has made her study the way they run. Charlotte Grange, grunting and loping, using the exo-suit arms to dig into the ground like an ape; Anna Murad with her robotics wet-wired into her nerves; Oluchi Eze with her sculpted tail and her delicate bones, like a dinosaur bird. And in lane five, farthest away from her, Siska Rachman with her face perfectly calm and empty and her eyes locked on the finish line, two kilometers away. A dead girl remote-controlled by a quadriplegic in a

hospital bed. That is the problem with the famous Siska Rachman. She wins a lot, but there is network lag time.

You have to inhabit your body. You need to be in it. Not only because the rules say, but because otherwise you can't feel it. The strike of your foot against the ground, the rush of air on your skin, the sweat running down your sides. No amount of biofeedback will make the difference. "Pace yourself," Arturo says in her head. "I'll give you a glucose boost when you hit 800 meters." Pearl tunes in to the rhythmic huff of her breath and she stretches out her legs longer with each stride and she is aware of everything, the texture of the track, and the expanse of the sky, and the smell of sweat and dust and oil. It blooms in her chest—a fierce warmth, a golden glow within, and she feels the rush of His love and she knows that God is with her.

She crosses third, neck and neck with Siska Rachman and milliseconds behind Charlotte Grange, who throws herself across the finish line with a wet ripping sound. The exo-suit goes down in a tumble of girl and metal, forcing Rachman to sidestep.

"A brute," Arturo whispers in her ear. "Not like you, Pearl."

7. Beloved

The car comes to fetch them, Pearl and her mother and her uncle. A shiny black BMW with hubcaps that turn the light into spears. People come out of their houses to see.

She is wearing her black lace dress, but it's 40 degrees out and the sweat runs down the back of her neck and makes her collar itch.

"Don't scratch," her mother says, holding her hands.

The car cuts through the location between the tin shacks and the government housing and all the staring eyes, out onto the highway, into the winelands and past the university and the rich people's townhouses which all look alike, past the golf course where little carts dart between the sprinklers, and the hills with vineyards and flags to draw the tourists, and down a side road and through a big black gate which swings open onto a driveway lined with spiky cycads.

They climb out, stunned by the heat and other things besides—like the size of the house, the wood and glass floating on top of the hill. Her uncle fights to open the wheelchair Khayelitsha Site B bought her, until the driver comes round and says, “Let me help you with that, sir.” He shoves down hard on the seat and it clicks into place.

He brings them into a cool entrance hall with wooden floors and metal sculptures of cheetahs guarding the staircase. A woman dressed in a red-and-white dress and a wrap around her head smiles and ushers them into the lounge, where three men are waiting: a grandfather with two white men flanking him like the stone cats by the stairs. One old, one hairy.

“The Beloved One,” her mother says, averting her eyes. Her uncle bows his head and raises his hands in deference.

Their fear makes Pearl angry.

The grandfather waves at them to come, come, impatiently. The trousers of his dark-blue suit have pleats folded as sharp as paper, and his shoes are black like coal.

“So this is Pearl Nitseko,” the Beloved One says, testing the weight of her name. “I’ve heard about you.”

The old white man stares at her. The lawyer, she will find out later, who makes her and her mother sign papers and more papers and papers. The one with thick shoulders fidgets with his cuffs, pulling them down over his hairy wrists, but he is watching her most intently of all.

“What?” she demands. “What have you heard?” Her mother gasps and smacks her head.

The Beloved One smiles, gently. “That you have fire in you.”

8. Fearful tautologies

Tomislav hustles Pearl past the Muslim protestors outside the stadium. The sects have united in moral outrage, chanting, “Un-natural! Un-godly! Un-holy!” They chant the words in English rather than Urdu for the benefit of the drones.

“Come on!” Tomislav shoulders past the protestors, steering her toward

a shuttle car that will take them to dinner. “Don’t these cranks have bigger things to worry about? Their thug government? Their starving children?” Pearl leaps into the shuttle and he launches himself in after. “Extremism I can handle.” He slams the door. “But tautology? That’s unforgivable.”

Pearl zips up the hood of her track suit. The Pakistani crowd surges to the shuttle, bashing its windows with the flats of their hands. “Monster!” a woman shouts in English. “God hates you.”

“What’s tautology?”

“Unnecessary repetition.”

“Isn’t that what fear always is?”

“I forget that you’re fast *and* clever. Yeah. Screw them,” Tomislav says. The shuttle rolls and he claps his hands together. “You did good out there.”

“Did you get a meeting?”

“We got a meeting, kitten. I know you think your big competition is Siska, but it’s Charlotte. She just keeps going and going.”

“She hurt herself.”

“Ripped a tendon, the news says, but she’s still going to race tomorrow.”

Dr. Arturo chimes in, always listening. “They have backup meat in the lab, they can grow a tendon. But it’s not a good long-term strategy. This is a war, not a battle.”

“I thought we weren’t allowed to fight,” Pearl says.

“You talking to the doc? Tell him to save his chatter for the investors.”

“Tomislav says—” she starts.

“I heard him,” Dr. Arturo says.

Pearl looks back at the protestors. One of the handwritten banners stays with her. “I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” it reads.

9. She is risen

Pearl watches the buses arrive from her bed upstairs in the church. A

guest room adapted for the purpose, with a nurse sitting outside and machines that hiss and bleep. The drugs make her woozy. She has impressions of things, but not memories. The whoop of the ambulance siren and the feeling of being important. Visitors. Men in golf shorts and an army man with fat cheeks. Gold watches and stars on the uniform, to match the gold star on the tower she can see from her window and the fat tapered columns like bullets at the entrance.

“Are you ready?” Dr. Arturo says. He has come from Venezuela especially for her. He has gentle hands and kind eyes, she thinks, even

though he is the one who cut everything out of her. Excess baggage, he says. It hurts where it was taken out, her female organs and her stomach and her guts.

He tells her they have been looking for someone like her for a long time, he and Tomislav. They had given up on finding her. And now! Now look where they are. She is very lucky. She knows this because everyone keeps telling her.

Dr. Arturo takes her to the elevator where Tomislav is waiting. The surgeon is very modest. He doesn't like to be seen on camera. “Don't worry, I'll be with you,” he says, and taps her jaw just below her ear.

“It's all about you, kitten,” Tomislav soothes, wheeling her out into a huge hallway full of echoes under a painted sky with angels and the Beloved One, in floating purple robes, smiling down on the people flowing through the doors, the women dressed in red and white and the men in blue blazers and white shirts. This time she doesn't mind them looking.

They make way for the wheelchair, through the double doors, past the ushers, into a huge room with a ceiling crinkled and glossy as a seashell and silver balconies and red carpets. She feels like a film star, and the red blanket over her knees is like her party dress.

From somewhere deep in the church, women raise their voices in ululation and all the hair on Pearl's body pricks up as if she were a cat. Tomislav turns the wheelchair around and parks it beside a huge gold throne with carved leaves and flowers and a halo of spikes around the head. He pats her shoulder and leaves her there, facing the crowd, thousands of them in the auditorium, all staring at her. “Smile, Pearl,” Dr. Arturo says, his voice soft inside her head, and she tries, she really does.

A group of women walk out onto the stage, swaying with wooden bowls on their hips, their hands dipping into the bowls like swans pecking at the water and throwing rose petals before them. The crowd picks up the ululating and it reverberates through the church. Halalala.

The Beloved One steps out and onto the stage and Pearl has to cover her ears at the noise that greets him. A hail of voices. Women are weeping in the aisles. Men too, crying in happiness to see him.

The Beloved One holds out his hands to still them. "Quiet, please, brothers and sisters," he says. "Peace be with you."

"And also with you," the crowd roars back, the sound distorted, frayed. He places his hands on the back of the wheelchair.

"Today, we come together to witness a miracle. My daughter, will you stand up and walk?"

And Pearl does.

10. Call to prayer

The restaurant is fancy with a buffet of Pakistani food, korma and tikka and kabobs and silver trays of sticky sweet pastries. The athletes have to pose for photographs and do more interviews with Brian Corwood and other people. The girl with purple streaks in her hair and the metal ring in her lip asks her, "Aren't you afraid you're gonna die out there?" before Tomislav intervenes.

"Come on! What kind of question is that?" he says. "Can't you be normal?"

But the athletes don't really eat and there is a bus that takes them home early so they can be fresh, while the promoters peel away, one by one, looking tense, in fancy black cars that take them to other parts of the city. "Don't you worry, kitten." Tomislav smiles, all teeth, and pats her hand.

Back in her room, Pearl finds a prayer mat that might be aligned toward Mecca. She phones down to reception to ask. She prostrates herself on the square of carpet, east, west, to see if it is any different, if her God will be annoyed.

She goes online to check the news and the betting pools. Her odds have improved. There is a lot of speculation about Grange's injury and whether Rachman will be disqualified. There are photographs of Oluchi Eze posing naked for a men's magazine, her tail wrapped over her parts.

Pearl clicks away and watches herself in the replay, her strikes, her posture, the joy in her face. She expects Dr. Arturo to comment, but the cochlear implant only hisses with faint static.

"Mama? Did you see the race?" she says. The video connection to Gugulethu stalls and jitters. Her mother has the camera on the phone pointed down too low, so she can only see her eyes and the top of her head.

"They screened it at the church," her mother says. "Everyone was very excited."

"You should have heard them shouting for you, Pearl," her uncle says, leaning over her mother's shoulder, tugging the camera down so they are in the frame.

Her mother frowns. "I don't know if you should wear that vest—it's not really your color."

"It's my sponsor, Mama."

"We're praying for you to do well. Everyone is praying for you."

11. Desert

She has a dream that she and Tomislav and Jesus are standing on the balcony of the Karachi Parsi Institute looking over the slums. The fine golden sand rises up like water between the concrete shacks, pouring in the windows, swallowing up the roofs, driven by the wind.

"Did you notice that there are only one set of footsteps, Pearl?" Jesus says. The sand rises, swallowing the houses, rushing to fill the gaps, nature taking over. "Do you know why that is?"

"Is it because you took her fucking legs, Lord?" Tomislav says. Pearl can't see any footsteps in the desert. The sand shifts too quickly.

12. Rare flowers

Wide awake. Half past midnight. She lies in bed and stares at the ceiling. Arturo was supposed to boost her dopamine and melatonin, but he's busy. The meeting went well, then. The message on her phone from Tomislav confirms it. *Good news!!!! Tell you in the morning. Sleep tight, kitten, you need it.*

She turns the thought around in her head and tries to figure out how she feels. Happy. This will mean that she can buy her mother a house and pay for her cousins to go to private school and set up the Pearl Nitseko Sports Academy for Girls in Gugulethu. She won't ever have to race again. Unless she wants to.

The idea of the money sits on her chest.

She swings her stumps over the bed and straps on her blades. She needs to go out, get some air.

She clips down the corridors of the school building. There is a party on the old cricket field outside, with beer tents and the buzz of people who do not have to run tomorrow, exercising their nerves. She veers away from them, back toward the worn-out colonial building of the IPC, hoping to get onto the race track. Run it out.

The track is fenced off and locked, but the security guard is dazed by his phone, caught up in another world of sliding around colorful blocks. She clings to the shadows of the archway, right past him and deeper into the building, following wherever the doors lead her.

She comes out into a hall around a pit of sunken tiles. An old swimming pool. Siska Rachman is sitting on the edge, waving her feet in the ghost of water, her face perfectly blank with her hair a dark nest around it. Pearl lowers herself down beside her. She can't resist. She flicks Rachman's forehead. "Heita. Anyone in there?"

The body blinks, and suddenly the eyes are alive and furious. She catches Pearl's wrist. "Of course I am," she snaps.

"Sorry, I didn't think—"

Siska has already lost interest. She drops her grip and brushes her hair away from her face. "So, you can't sleep either? Wonder why."

“Too nervous,” Pearl says. She tries for teasing, like Tomislav would. “I have tough competition.”

“Maybe not.” Siska scowls. “They’re going to fucking disqualify me.”

Pearl nods. She doesn’t want to apologize again. She feels shy around Siska, the older girl with her bushy eyebrows and her sharp nose. The six years between them feels like an uncrossable gap.

“Do they think Charlotte is *present*?” Siska bursts out. “Charlotte is a big dumb animal. How is *she* more human than me?”

“You’re two people,” Pearl tries to explain.

“Before. You were half a person before. Does that count against you?”

“No.”

“Do you know what this used to be?” Siska pats the blue tiles.

“A swimming pool?”

“They couldn’t maintain the upkeep. These things are expensive to run.” Siska glances at Pearl to make sure she understands. In the light through the glass atrium, every lash stands out in stark relief against the gleam of her eyes, like undersea creatures. “They drained all the water out, but there was this kid who was ... damaged in the brain, and the only thing he could do was grow orchids, so that’s what he did. He turned it into a garden and sold them out of here for years, until he got old and now it’s gone.”

“How do you know this?”

“The guard told me. We smoked cigarettes together. He wanted me to give him a blowjob.”

“Oh.” Pearl recoils.

“Hey, are you wearing lenses?”

She knows what she means. The broadcast contacts. “No. I wouldn’t.”

“They’re going to use you and use you up, Pearl Nit-seeko. Then you’ll be begging to give some lard-ass guard a blowjob for spare change.”

“It’s Ni-tse-koh.”

“Doesn’t matter. You say tomato, I say ni-tse-koh.” But Siska gets it right

this time. “You think it’s all about you. Your second chance, and all you got to do is run your heart out. But it’s a talent show, and they don’t care about the running. You got a deal yet?”

“My promoter and my doctor had a meeting.”

“That’s something. They say who?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Pharmaceutical or medical?”

“They haven’t told me yet.”

“Or military. Military’s good. I hear the British are out this year. That’s what you want. I mean, who knows what they’re going to do with it, but what do you care, little guinea pig, long as you get your payout.”

“Are you *drunk*?”

“My *body* is drunk. I’m just mean. What do you care? I’m out, sister. And you’re in, with a chance. Wouldn’t that be something if you won? Little girl from Africa.”

“It’s not a country.”

“Boo-hoo, sorry for you.”

“God brought me here.”

“Oh, that guy? He’s nothing but trouble. And He doesn’t exist.”

“You shouldn’t say that.”

“How do you know?”

“I can feel Him.”

“Can you still feel your legs?”

“Sometimes,” Pearl admits.

Siska leans forward and kisses her. “Did you feel anything?”

“No,” she says, wiping her mouth. But that’s not true. She felt her breath that burned with alcohol, and the softness of her lips and her flicking tongue, surprisingly warm for a dead girl.

“Yeah.” Siska breathes out. “Me neither.” She kisses her again. “News flash, Pearl Ni-tse-koh. There’s no God. There’s only us. You got a

cigarette?”

13. Empty spaces

Lane five is empty and the stadium is buzzing with the news.

“Didn’t think they’d actually ban her,” Tomislav says. She can tell he’s hung over. He stinks of sweat and alcohol and there’s a crease in his forehead just above his nose that he keeps rubbing at. “Do you want to hear about the meeting? It was big. Bigger than we’d hoped for. If this comes off, kitten ...”

“I want to concentrate on the race.” She is close to tears but she doesn’t know why.

“Okay. You should try to win. Really.”

The gun goes off. They tear down the track. Every step feels harder today. She didn’t get enough sleep.

She sees it happen, out of the corner of her eye. Oluchi’s tail swipes Charlotte, maybe on purpose.

“Shit,” Grange says and stumbles in her exo-suit. Suddenly everything comes crashing down on Pearl, hot metal and skin and a tangle of limbs and fire in her side.

“Get up,” Dr. Arturo yells into her head. She’s never heard him upset.

“Ow,” she manages. Charlotte is already getting to her feet. There is a loose flap of muscle hanging from her leg, where they tried to attach it this morning. The blonde girl touches it and hisses in pain, but her eyes are already focused on the finish line, on Oluchi skipping ahead, her tail swinging, Anna Murad straining behind her.

“Get up,” Dr. Arturo says. “You have to get up. I’m activating adrenaline. Pain blockers.”

She sits up. It’s hard to breathe. Her vest is wet. A grey nub of bone pokes out through her skin under her breast. Charlotte is limping away in her exo-suit, her leg dragging, gears whining.

“This is what they want to see,” Arturo urges. “You *need* to prove to

them that it's not hydraulics carrying you through.”

“It's not,” Pearl gasps. The sound is somehow wet. Breathing through a snorkel in the bath when there is water trapped in the U-bend. The drones buzz around her. She can see her face big on the screen. Her mama is watching at home, the whole of the congregation.

“Then prove it. What are you here for?”

She starts walking, then jogging, clutching her top to the bit of rib to stop its jolting. Every step rips through her. And Pearl can feel things *slipping* inside. Her structural integrity has been compromised, she thinks. The abdominal mesh has ripped, and where her stomach used to be is a black hole that is tugging everything down. Her heart is slipping.

Ndincede nkosi, she thinks. Please, Jesus, help me. *Ndincede nkosi undiphe amandla*. Please, God, give me strength. *Yiba nam kolu gqatso*. Be with me in this race. She can feel it. The golden glow that starts in her chest, or if she is truthful with herself, lower down. In the pit of her stomach. She sucks in her abdominals and presses her hand to her sternum to stop her heart from sliding down into her guts—where her guts used to be, where the hotbed factory sits.

God is with me, she thinks. What matters is you feel it.

Pearl Nitseko runs.

Lauren Beukes is an award-winning, internationally best-selling South African author. Her novels include *Zoo City*, *Broken Monsters*, *The Shining Girls*, and *Moxyland* that all use high concepts to engage with social issues and who we are in the world right now. She's worked as a journalist and head writer on a subversive animated show for kids, *URBO: The Adventures of Pax Afrika*, written TV scripts and directed an award-winning documentary, *Glitterboys & Ganglands*. “Slipping” is her most autobiographical story. Follow her on [@laurenbeukes](https://twitter.com/laurenbeukes) on Twitter. laurenbeukes.com

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The Smartest Mob

(A parable about times soon to come)

by David Brin

Washington was like a geezer—overweight and sagging, but with attitude. Most of its gutty heft lay below the beltway, in waistlands that had been downwind on Awwfulday.

Downwind, but not out.

When droves of upperclass child-bearers fled the invisible plumes enveloping Fairfax and Alexandria, those briefly-empty ghost towns quickly refilled with immigrants—the latest mass of *teemers*, yearning to be free and willing to endure a little radiation in exchange for a pleasant five-bedroom that could be subdivided into nearly as many apartments. Spacious living rooms began a second life as store fronts. Workshops took over four-car garages and lawns turned into produce gardens. Swimming pools made excellent refuse bins—until government recovered enough to start cracking down.

Passing overhead, Tor could track signs of suburban renewal from her first class seat aboard the *Spirit of Chula Vista*. Take those swimming pools. A majority of the kidney-shaped ponds now gleamed with clear liquid—mostly water (as testified by the spectral scanning feature of her TruVu spectacles)—welcoming throngs of children who splashed under summertime heat, sufficiently dark-skinned to bear the bare sun unflinching.

So much for the notion that dirty bombs automatically make a place unfit for breeders, she thought. Let yuppies abandon perfectly good mansions because of a little strontium dust. People from Java and Celebes were happy to insource.

Wasn't this America? Call it resolution—or obstinacy—but after three

rebuilt, the Statue of Liberty still beckoned.

The latest immigrants, those who filled Washington's waistland vacuum, weren't ignorant. They could read warning labels and health stats, posted on every lamp post and VR level. *So?* More people died in Jakarta from traffic or stray bullets. Anyway, mutation rates quickly dropped to levels no worse than Kiev, a few years after Awfulday. And Washington had more civic amenities.

Waistlanders also griped a lot less about minor matters like zoning. That made it easier to acquire rights-of-way, re-pioneering new paths back into those unlucky cities that had been dusted. Innovations soon turned those transportation hubs into boom towns. An ironic twist to emerge from terror/sabotage, especially when *sky trains* began crisscrossing North America.

Through her broad window aboard the *Spirit of Chula Vista*, Tor gazed across a ten mile separation to the West-Bound Corridor, where long columns of cargo zeppelins lumbered, ponderous as whales and a hundred times larger. Chained single-file and heavily laden, the dirigibles floated barely two hundred meters above the ground, obediently trailing teams of heavy-duty locomotives. Each towing cable looked impossibly slender for hauling fifty behemoths across a continent. But while sky trains weren't fast, or suited for raw materials, they beat any other method for transporting medium-value goods.

And passengers. Those who were willing to trade a little time for inexpensive luxury.

Tor moved her attention much closer, watching the *Spirit's* majestic shadow flow like an eclipse over rolling suburban countryside, so long and dark that flowers would start to close and birds might be fooled to roost, pondering nightfall. Free from any need for engines of her own, the skyliner glided almost silently over hill and dale. Not as quick as a jet, but more scenic—free of carbon levies or ozone tax—and far cheaper. Setting her TruVus to magnify, she followed the *Spirit's* tow cable along the East-Bound Express Rail, pulled relentlessly by twelve thousand horses,

courtesy of the deluxe maglev tug, *Umberto Nobile*.

What was it about a lighter-than-air craft that drew the eye? Oh, certainly most of them now had pixelated, tunable skins that could be programmed for any kind of spectacle. Passing near a population center—even a village in the middle of nowhere—the convoy of cargo zeps might flicker from one gaudy advertisement to the next, for anything from a local gift shop to the mail-order wares of some megaCorp. At times, when no one bid for the display space, a chain of dirigibles might tune their surfaces to resemble clouds... or flying pigs. Whim, after all, was another modern currency. Everybody did it on the VR levels.

Only with zeppelins, you could paint whimsical images across a whole stretch of the *real* sky.

Tor shook her head.

But no. That wasn't it. Even bare and gray, they could not be ignored. Silent, gigantic, utterly calm, a zep seemed to stand for a kind of grace that human beings might build, but never know in their own frenetic lives.

“Will you be wanting anything else before we arrive in the Federal District, Madam?” asked a voice from above.

She glanced up at a *servitor*—little more than a boxy delivery receptacle—that clung to its own slim rail on a nearby bulkhead, leaving the walkway free for passengers.

“No, thanks,” Tor murmured automatically, a polite habit of her generation. Younger folk had already learned to snub machinery slaves, except when making clipped demands.

“Can you tell me when we're due?”

“Certainly, Madam. There is a slowdown in progress due to heightened security. Hence, we may experience some delay crossing the Beltway. But there is no cause for alarm. And we remain ahead of schedule because of that tailwind across the plains.”

“Hm. Heightened security?”

“For the Artifact Conference, Madam.”

“But —” Tor frowned. “That was already scheduled. Taken into account. So it shouldn’t affect our timetable.”

“There is no cause for alarm,” the servitor repeated. “We just got word, two minutes ago. An order to reduce speed, that’s all.”

Glancing outside, Tor could see the effects of slowing, in a gradual change of altitude. The *Spirit’s* tow cable slanted a little steeper, catching up to the ground-hugging locomotive tug.

Altitude: 359 meters said a telltale in the corner of her left TruVu lens.

“Will you be wanting to change seats for our approach to the nation’s capital?” the servitor continued. “An announcement will be made when we come within sight of the Mall, though you may want to claim a prime viewing spot earlier. Children and first time visitors get priority, of course.”

“Of course.”

A trickle of tourists had already begun streaming forward to the main Observation Lounge. Parents, dressed in bright-colored sarongs and patagonian slacks, herded kids who sported the latest youth fashion—fake antennae and ersatz scales—imitating some of the alien personalities that had been discovered aboard the *Dean Artifact*. A grand conference may have been called to declare whether it was a genuine case of First Contact, or just another hoax. But popular culture had already cast judgement. The Artifact was cool.

“You say an alert came through two minutes ago?” Tor wondered. Nothing had flashed yet in her peripherals. But maybe the vigilance thresholds were set too high. With a rapid series of clicks on her tooth implant, she adjusted them downward.

Immediately, crimson tones began creeping in from the edges of her specs, offering links that whiffed and throbbed unpleasantly.

Uh-oh.

“Not an *alert*, Madam. No, no. Just preliminary, precautionary —”

But Tor’s attention had already veered. Using both clicks and subvocal commands, she sent her TruVus swooping through the data overlays of virtual reality, following threads of a *security situation*. Sensors tracked

every twitch of the iris, following and often anticipating her choices while colored data-cues jostled and flashed.

“May I take away any rubbish or recycling?” asked the boxy tray on the wall. It dropped open a receptacle, like a hungry jaw, eager to be fed. The servitor waited in vain for a few moments. Then, noting that her focus lay far away, it silently folded and departed.

“No cause for alarm,” Tor muttered sardonically as she probed and sifted the dataways. Someone should have banished that cliché from the repertoire of all AI devices. No human over the age of thirty would ever hear the phrase without wincing. Of all the lies that accompanied Awfulday, it had been the worst.

Some of Tor’s favorite software agents were already reporting back from the Grid.

Koppel—the summarizer—zoomed toward public, corporate and government feeds, collating official pronouncements. Most of them were repeating the worrisome cliché.

Gallup—her pollster program—sifted for opinion. People weren’t buying it, apparently. On a scale of one-thousand, “*no cause for alarm*” had a credibility rating of eighteen, and dropping. Tor felt a wrench in the pit of her stomach.

Bernstein leaped into the whistle-blower circuits, hunting down gossip and hearsay. As usual, there were far too many rumors for any person—or personal ai—to trawl. Only this time, the flood was overwhelming even the sophisticated filters at the Skeptic Society. MediaCorp seemed no better; her status as a member of the Journalistic Staff only won her a queue number from the Research Division and a promise of response “in minutes.”

Minutes?

It was beginning to look like a deliberate disinformation flood, time-unleashed in order to drown out any genuine tattles. Gangsters, terrorists and reffers had learned the hard way that careful plans can be upset by some soft-hearted henchman, wrenched by remorseful second thoughts about innocent bystanders. Many a scheme had been spoiled by some lowly underling, who posted an anonymous squeal at the last minute. To

prevent this, masterminds and ringleaders now routinely unleashed cascades of ersatz confessions, just as soon as an operation was underway - a spamming of faux regret, artificially generated, ranging across the whole spectrum of plausible sabotage and man-made disasters.

Staring at a flood of warnings, Tor knew that one or more of the rumors *had* to be true. But which?

Washington area beltway defenses have already been breached by machoist suiciders infected with pulmonella plague, heading for the Capitol...

A coalition of humanist cults have decided to put an end to all this nonsense about a so-called "alien artifact" from interstellar space...

The U.S. President, seeking to reclaim traditional authority, is about to nationalize the DC-area civil militia on a pretext...

Exceptional numbers of toy airplanes were purchased in the Carolinas, this month, suggesting that a swarm attack may be in the making, just like the O'Hare Incident...

A method has been found to convert zeppelins into flying bombs...

Among the international dignitaries, who were invited to Washington to view the Dean Artifact, there may be a few who plan to...

There are times when human/neuronal paranoia can react faster than mere digital simulacra. Tor's old fashioned cortex snapped to attention a full five seconds before her ais, *Bernstein* and *Columbo*, made the same connection.

Zeppelins... flying bombs...

It sounded unlikely... probably distraction-spam.

But / happen to be *on* a zeppelin.

That wasn't just a realization. The words formed a message. With subvocal grunts and tooth-click punctuations, Tor broadcast it far and wide. Not just to her favorite correlation and stringer groups, but to several hundred Citizen Action Networks. Her terse missive zoomed across the Net indiscriminately, calling to every CAN that had expressed interest in the zep rumor.

This is Tor Pleiades, investigative reporter for MediaCorp—credibility rating seven-hundred and fifty-two—aboard the passenger zep Spirit of Chula Vista. We are approaching the DC Beltway defense zone. That may put me at a right place-time to examine one of the reffer rumors.

I request a smart mob coalescence. Feedme!

Disinformation, a curse with ancient roots, had been updated with ultra-modern ways of lying. Machoists and other bastards might plant sleeper-ais in a million virtual locales, programmed to pop out at a pre-set time and spam every network with autogenerated “plausibles”... randomly generated combinations of word and tone that were drawn from recent news, each variant sure to rouse the paranoid fears of *someone*.

Mutate this ten million times (easy enough to do in virtual space) and you’ll find a nerve to tweak in *anyone*.

Citizens could fight back, combatting lies with light. Sophisticated programs compared eyewitness accounts from many sources, weighted by credibility, offering average folk tools to re-forge Consensus Reality, while discarding the dross. Only that took *time*. And during an emergency, time was the scarcest commodity of all.

Public avowal worked more quickly. Calling attention to your own person. Saying: “look, I’m right here, real, credible and accountable—*I* not *ai*—so take me seriously.”

Of course that required guts, especially since Awfulday. In the face of danger, ancient human instinct cried out; *duck and cover. Don’t draw attention to yourself.*

Tor considered that natural impulse for maybe two seconds, then blared on all levels. Dropping privacy cryption, she confirmed her ticketed billet and physical presence aboard the *Spirit of Chula Vista*, with realtime biometrics and a dozen in-cabin camera views.

“I’m here,” she murmured, breathlessly, toward any fellow citizen whose correlation-attention ais would listen.

“Rally and feedme. Tell me what to do.”

Calling up a smart mob was tricky. People might already be too scattered and distracted by the rumor storm. The number to respond might not reach critical mass—in which case all you'd get is a smattering of critics, kibbitzers and loudmouths, doing more harm than good. A negative-sum rabble—or boggle—its collective IQ *dropping*, rather than climbing, with every new volunteer to join. Above all, you needed to attract a core group—the seed cell—of online know-it-alls, constructive cranks and correlation junkies, armed with the latest coalescence software, who were smart and savvy enough to serve as *prefrontals*... coordinating a smart mob without dominating. Providing focus without quashing the creativity of a group mind.

We recognize you, Tor Pleiades, intoned a low voice, conducting through her jawbone receiver. Direct sonic induction made it safe from most eavesdropping, even if someone had a parabolic dish aimed at her ear.

We have lit a wiki. Can you help us check out one of these rumors? One that might possibly be a whistle-blow?

The conjoined mob-voice sounded strong, authoritative. Tor's personal interface found good credibility scores as it coalesced. An index-marker in her left peripheral showed two-hundred and thirty members and climbing—generally sufficient to wash out individual ego.

“First tell me,” she answered, subvocalizing. Sensors in her shirt collar picked up tiny flexings in her throat, tongue and larynx, without any need to make actual sound. “Tell me, has anyone sniffed something unusual about the *Spirit*? I don't see or hear anything strange. But some of you out there may be in a better position to snoop company status reports or ship-board operational parameters.”

There was a pause. Followed by an apologetic tone.

Nothing seems abnormal at the public level. Company web-traffic has gone up six fold in the last ten minutes... but the same is true all over, from government agencies to networks of amateur scientists.

As for the zeppelin you happen to be aboard, we're naturally interested because of its present course, scheduled shortly to moor in Washington, about the same time that delegates are arriving for the Artifact Conference.

Tor nodded grimly, a nuance that her interface conveyed to the group mind.

“And those operational readouts?”

We can try access by applying for a Freedom of Information writ. That will take some minutes, though. So we may have to supplement the FOIA with a little hacking and bribery. The usual.

Leave that to us.

Meanwhile, there's a little on-site checking you can do.

Be our hands and eyes, will you, Tor?

She was already on her feet.

“Tell me where to go... “

Head aft, past the unisex toilet.

“...but let's have a consensus agreement, okay?” she added while moving. “I get an exclusive on any interviews that follow. In case this turns out to be more than...”

There is a security hatch, next to the crew closet, the voice interrupted. Adjust your specs for full mob access please.

“Done,” she said, feeling a little sheepish over the request for a group exclusive. But after all, she was supposed to be a pro. MediaCorp might be tuning in soon, examining transcripts. They would expect a professional's attention to the niceties.

That's better. Now zoom close on the control pad. We've been joined by an off-duty zep mechanic who worked on this ship last week.

“Look, maybe I can just call a crew member. Invoke FOIA and open it legally —”

No time. We've filed for immunity as an ad hoc citizen posse. Under the post-Awfulday crisis rules.

“Oh sure. With me standing here to take the physical rap if it's refused....”

Your choice, Tor. If you're in, press buttons in this order.

A virtual image of the keypad appeared in front of Tor, overlaying the

real one.

“No cause for alarm,” she muttered.

What was that?

“Never mind.”

Feeling somewhat detached, as if under remote control, her hand reached out to tap the proposed sequence.

Nothing happened.

No good. They must've rotated the progression.

At that moment, the wiki-voice sounded a bit less cool, more individualized. A telltale indicator in her TruVu showed that some high-credibility member of the mob was stepping up with an assertive suggestion.

But you can tell it isn't randomized. I bet it's still a company-standard maintenance code. Here, try this instead.

Coalescence levels seemed to waver only a little, so the mob trusted this component member. Tor went along, punching the pad again with the new pattern.

“Any luck getting that FOIA writ?” she asked, meanwhile. “You said it would take just few minutes. Maybe we'd better wait...”

Procrastination met its rebuttal with a simple a *click*, as the access panel slid aside, revealing a slim, tubelike ladder.

Up.

No hesitation in the mob voice. Five hundred and twelve fellow citizens wanted her to do this. Five hundred and sixteen....

Tor swallowed. Then complied.

The ladderway exposed a truth that was hidden from most passengers, cruising in cushioned comfort within the neatly paneled main compartment. Physics—especially gravity—had not changed appreciably in the century that separated the first great zeppelin era from this one.

Designers still had to strive for lightness, everywhere they could.

Stepping from spindly rungs onto the cargo deck, Tor found herself amid a maze of spiderlike webbery, instead of walls and partitions. Her feet made gingerly impressions in foamy mesh that seemed to be mostly air. Stacks of luggage—all strictly weighed back in Diegotown—formed bundles that resembled monstrous eggs, bound together by air-gel foam. Hardly any metal could be seen. Not even aluminum or titanium struts.

“Shall I look at the bags?” she asked while reaching into her purse. “I have an omnisniffer.”

What model? inquired the voice in her jaw, before it changed tone by abrupt consensus. More authoritatively, it said—*Never mind. The bags were all scanned in Diego. We doubt anything could be smuggled aboard.*

But a rumor-tattle points to possible danger higher up. We’re betting on that one.

“Higher?” She frowned. “There’s nothing up there except...”

Tor’s voice trailed off as a schematic played within her TruVus, pointing aft to another ladder, this one made of ropey fibers.

Arrows shimmered in VR yellow, for emphasis.

We finally succeeded in getting a partial feed from the Spirit’s operational parameters. And yes, there’s something odd going on.

They are using onboard water to make lift gas, at an unusual rate.

“Is that dangerous?”

It shouldn’t be.

But we may be able to find out more, if you hurry.

She sighed, stepping warily across the spongy surface. Tor hadn’t yet spotted a crew member. They were probably also busy chasing rumors, different ones, chosen by the company’s prioritization subroutines. Anyway, a modern towed-zep was mostly automatic, requiring no pilot, engineer or navigator. A century ago, the *Hindenberg* carried forty officers, stewards and burly riggers, just to keep the ornate apparatus running and deliver the same number of passengers from Europe to the U.S. At twice the length, *Spirit* carried five times as many people, served by half a dozen attendants.

Below her feet, passengers would be jostling for a better view of the Langley Crater, or maybe Arlington Cemetery, while peering ahead for the enduring spire of the Washington Monument. Or did some of those people already sniff an alert coming on, through their own liaison networks? Were families starting to cluster near the emergency chutes? Tor wondered if she should be doing the same.

This new ladder was something else. It felt almost alive and responded to her footstep by *contracting...* carrying her upward in a smooth-but-sudden jerk. Smart elastics, she realized. Fine for professionals. But the public had never taken a liking to ladders that twitch. The good news: it would take just a few actual footsteps at this rate, concentrating to slip her soles carefully onto one rung after the next... and worrying about what would happen when she reached the unpleasant-looking “hatch” that lay just overhead.

Meanwhile, the voice in her jaw took on a strange, lilting quality. The next contribution must have come from an individual member. Someone generally appreciated.

Come with me, higher than high,
Dropping burdensome things.
Lighter than clouds, we can fly,
Thoughts spread wider than wings.
Be like the whale, behemoth,
Enormous, yet weightless beings,
Soundlessly floating, the sky
Beckons a mammal that sings.

Tor liked the offering. You almost wanted to earn it, by coming up with a tune....

...only the “hatch” was now just ahead, or above, almost pressing against her face. A throbbing iris of polyorganic membranes, much like the quasi-living external skin of the *Spirit*. Coming this close, inhaling the exudate aromas, made Tor feel queasy.

Relax. The voice was back to business. Probably led by the zep

mechanic.

You'll need a command word. Touch that nub in the middle to get attention and say Cinnamon.

“Cinnamon?”

It was only a query, but the barrier reacted instantly. With a faintly squishy sound, the door dilated. The stringy stepladder resumed its programmed journey, carrying her upward.

Aboard old-time zeps like *Hindenberg*, the underslung gondola had been devoted mainly to engines and crew, while paying passengers occupied two broad decks at the base of the giant dirigible's main body. The *Spirit of Chula Vista* had a similar layout, except that the gondola was mainly for show. Having climbed above all the sections designed for people and cargo, Tor now rode the throbbing ladder into a cathedral of lifter cells, each of them a vast chamber filled with gas that was much lighter than air.

Hundreds of transparent, filmy balloons—cylindrical and tall like Sequoia trunks—crowded and pressed together, stretching from the web-floor where she stood all the way up to the arching ceiling of the *Spirit's* rounded skin. Tor could only move among these towering columns along four narrow paths leading port or starboard... fore or aft. The arrow in her TruVu suggested *port*, without pulsing insistence. Most members of the smart mob had never been in a place like this. Curiosity—the strongest modern craving—formed more of these ad hoc groups than any other passion.

Heading in the suggested direction, Tor could not resist reaching out, touching some of the tall cells, their polymer surfaces quivering like the giant bubbles that she used to create with toy wands at birthday parties. They appeared so light, so delicate....

Half of the cells contain helium, explained the voice, now so individualized that it had to be a specific person—perhaps the zep mechanic or a dirigible aficionado. *See how those membranes are made with a faintly greenish tint? They surround the larger hydrogen cells.*

Tor blinked.

“Hydrogen. Isn't that dangerous?”

She pictured the Hindenberg—or LZ 129—that greatest and most ill-fated ancient zeppelin, whose fiery end at Lakehurst, New Jersey, marked the sudden end of the First Zep Era, in May of 1937. Once ignited—(how remained a topic of fierce debate)—flames had engulfed the mighty airship from mooring-tip to gondola, to its swastika-emblazoned rudder in little more than a minute. To this day, journalists envied the news crew that had been on-hand that day with primitive movie cameras, capturing onto acetate some of the most stunning footage and memorable imagery that ever accompanied a technological disaster.

Nowadays, what reff or terror group wouldn't just love to claim credit for an event so vivid? So attention-grabbing?

As if reading her mind, the voice lectured.

Hydrogen is much lighter and more buoyant than helium. Hydrogen is also cheap and readily available. Using it improves the economics of zep travel. Though of course, care must be taken....

Tor was approaching the end of her narrow corridor. For the first time, she encountered the trusswork that kept *Spirit* rigid—a dirigible—instead of a floppy, balloonlike blimp. A girder made of carbon tubes, woven into an open latticework of triangles, stretched and curved both forward and aft. Nearby, it joined another tensegrity girder at right angles. That one would form a girdle, encircling the *Spirit's* widest girth.

Tracking Tor's interest, her TruVu spun out statistics and schematics. At 800 feet in length, the *Hindenberg* had been just ten percent shorter than the *Titanic*. In contrast, the *Spirit of Chula Vista* stretched more than twice that length. And yet, its shell and trussworks weighed less than half as much.

Naturally, there are precautions, the voice continued. Take the shape of the gas cells. They are vertical columns. Any failure in a hydrogen cell triggers a pulse, bursting open the top, pushing the contents up and out of the ship, skyward, away from passengers, cargo or people below. It's been extensively tested.

Also, the surrounding helium cells provide a buffer, keeping oxygen-rich air away from those containing hydrogen. Passenger ships like this one carry double the ratio of helium to hydrogen that you'll find on cargo zeps.

“They can replenish hydrogen en route if they have to, right? By cracking water from onboard stores?”

Or even from humidity in the air, using solar power.

And yes, the readouts show unusual levels of hydrogen production, in order to keep several cells filled aboard the Spirit. That’s why we asked you to come up here. There must be some leakage. One scenario suggested that it might be accumulating in here, between the cells.

She pulled the omni-sniffer from her purse and began scanning. Chemical sensors were all over the place, nowadays, getting cheaper and more acute all the time—just when the public seemed to need them. For reassurance, if nothing else.

“I’m not detecting very much,” she said. Tor wasn’t sure how to feel—relieved or disappointed—upon reading that hydrogen levels were only slightly elevated in the companionway.

That confirms what the onboard monitors have already shown. Hardly any hydrogen buildup in the cabins or walkways. It must be leaking into the sky—

“Even so —” Tor began, envisioning gouts of flame erupting toward the heavens from atop the great airship.

—at rates that offer no danger of ignition. The stuff dissipates very fast, Tor, and the Spirit is moving, on a windy day. Anyway, hydrogen isn’t dangerous—or even toxic—unless it’s held within a confined space.

Tor kept scanning while moving along the spongey path. But hydrogen readings never spiked enough to cause concern, let alone alarm. The smart mob had wanted her to come up here for this purpose—to verify that the onboard detectors hadn’t been tampered with by clever saboteurs. Now that her independent readings confirmed the company’s, some people were already starting to lose interest. Ad hoc membership totals began to fall.

Any leakage must be into the air, continued the voice of the group mind, still authoritative. We’ve put out a notice for amateur scientists, asking for volunteers to aim spectranalysis equipment along the Spirit’s route. They’ll measure parts-per-million, so we can get a handle on leakage rates. But it’s mathematically impossible for the amounts to be dangerous. Humidity

may go up a percent or two in neighborhoods that lie directly below Spirit's shadow. That's about it.

Tor had reached the end of the walkway. Her hand pressed against the outer envelope—the quasi-living skin that enclosed everything, from gas cells and trusses to the passenger cabin below. Up close, it was nearly transparent, offering a breathtaking view outside.

“We passed the Beltway,” she murmured, a little surprised that the diligent guardians of Washington’s defensive grid would have allowed the *Spirit* to pass through that wall of sensors and rays without delay or scrutiny. Below and ahead, she could make out the *Umberto Nobile*, tugging hard at the tow cable, puffing along the Glebe Road Bypass. Fort Meyers stood to the left. The zeppelin’s shadow rippled over a vast garden of gravestones—Arlington National Cemetery.

The powers-that-be have downgraded our rumor, said the voice in her jaw. The nation's professional protectors are chasing down other, more plausible threats... none of which have been deemed likely enough to merit an alert. Malevolent zeps don't even make it onto the Threat Chart.

Tor clicked and flicked the attention-gaze of her TruVu, glancing through the journalist feeds at MediaCorp, which were now—belatedly—accessible to a reporter of her level. Seven minutes after the rise in tension caused by that spam flood of rumors, a consensus was already forming. The spam flood had *not* been intended to distract attention *from* a terror attack, concluded mass-wisdom. It *was* the attack. And not a very effective one, at that. National productivity had dropped by a brief diversion factor of one part in twenty-three thousands. Hardly enough damage to be worth risking prosecution or retaliation. But then, hackers seldom cared about consequences.

Speaking of consequences; they were already pouring in from her little snooping expedition. The mavens of propriety at MediaCorp, for example, must be catching up on recent events. A work-related memorandum flashed in Tor’s agenda box, revising tomorrow’s schedule for her first day of employment at the Washington Bureau. During lunch—right after basic orientation—she was now required to attend counseling on the *Exercising Good Judgement In Impromptu Field Situations*.

“Oh great,” she muttered, noticing also that the zeppelin company had

applied a five hundred dollar fine against her account for Unjustified Entry Into Restricted Areas.

PLEASE REMAIN WHERE YOU ARE, MS. PLEIADES, said an override message. AN ATTENDANT WILL ARRIVE AT YOUR POSITION SHORTLY IN ORDER TO HELP YOU RETURN TO YOUR SEAT FOR LANDING.

“Double great.”

Ahead, beyond the curve of the dirigible’s skin, she spotted the massive, squat bulk of the Pentagon, bristling with missiles, antennae and other security measures... still a highly-protected enclave, even ten years after the Department of Defense moved its headquarters to “an undisclosed location in Texas.”

Soon, the mooring towers and docking ports of Reagan-Clinton National Skydrome would appear, signalling the end of her cross-continental voyage. And of any chance for a blemish-free start to her new career in Big Time Media.

“I don’t suppose any of you have bright ideas?” She addressed the group mind.

But it had already started to unravel. Membership numbers were falling fast, like rats deserting a sinking ship, Or—more accurately—monkeys. Moving on to the next shiny thing.

Sorry, Tor. People are distracted. They’ve been dropping out to watch the opening of the Artifact Conference. You may even glimpse some limos arriving at the Naval Research Center, just across the Potomac. Take a look as the Spirit starts turning for final approach...

Blasted fickle amateurs! Tor had made good use of smart mobs on several occasions. But this time was likely to prove an embarrassment. None of *them* would have to pay fines or face disapproval in a new job.

Still, a few of us remain worried, the voice continued.

That rumor had something about it.

I can’t put my finger on it.

The “voice” was starting to sound individualized and had even used the first person “I”. And yet, Tor drew some strength from the support. Before

an attendant arrived to escort her below, there was still time for a little last minute tenacity.

“Can I assume we still have some zep aficionados in attendance?”

Hardly anyone else, Tor.

Some us are fanatics.

“Good, then let’s apply fanatical expertise. Think about that *leakage* we discussed a while ago. We’ve been assuming that this zeppelin is making hydrogen to make up for a major seep. Have any of those amateur scientists studied the air near *Spirit’s* flight path?”

A pause.

Yes, several have reported. They found no dangerous levels of hydrogen in the vicinity of the ship, or in its wake. The seep is probably dissipating so fast....

“Please clarify. No dangerous levels? Is it possible they found *no* sign of a hydrogen leak *at all*?”

The pause extended several seconds longer, this time. Suddenly the number of participants in the group stopped falling. In the corner of Tor’s TruVu, she saw membership levels start to rise again.

Now that’s interesting, throbbed the voice in her jaw.

Several of those Amateur Scientists have joined us now.

They report seeing no appreciable leakage. Zero extra hydrogen along the flight path. How did you know?

“I didn’t. Call it a hunch.”

But at the rate that Spirit has been replacing hydrogen...

“There has to be some kind of leak. Right. It must be going somewhere.”

Tor frowned. She could see a shadow moving beyond the grove of tall, cylindrical gas-cells. A figure approaching. A crewman or attendant, coming to take her, firmly, gently, insistently, back to her seat. The shape wavered and warped as seen through the mostly transparent polymer tubes—slightly pinkish for hydrogen and then greenish-tinted for helium.

Tor blinked. Suddenly feeling so dry-mouthed that she could not speak aloud, only sub-vocalize.

“Ask the AmScis to take more spectral scans along the path of this zeppelin. Only this time look for *helium*.”

The inner surfaces of her TruVus showed a flurry of indicators. Amateur scientific instruments, computer-controlled from private backyards or rooftops, could zoom quickly toward any patch of sky. There were thousands of such pocket observatories, in and around any urban center —hobbyists with access to better instrumentation than the previous generation could imagine. Dotted lines appeared. Each showed the viewing angle of some home-taught astronomer, ecologist or meteorologist, turning a hand- or kit-made instrument toward the majestic cigar shape of the *Spirit of Chula Vista*...

...which had passed Arlington and Pentagon City, following its faithful tug into a final tracked loop, approaching the dedicated zeppelin port that served Washington DC.

Yes, Tor. There is helium.

Quite a lot of it, in fact.

A plume that stretches at least a hundred clicks behind the Spirit. Nobody notice before this, because helium is inert and utterly safe, so no environmental monitors were tuned to look for it.

The voice was grim. Much less individualized. With ad hoc membership levels suddenly skyrocketing, summaries and updates must be spewing at incredible pace.

Your suspicion appears to be well-based.

Extrapolating the rate of helium loss backward in time, half of that gas may have been lost by now....

“...replaced in these green cells by another gas.”

Tor nodded. “I think we’ve found the missing hydrogen, people.”

It all made sense, now. Smart polymers were programmable—all the way down to the permeability of any patch of these gas-containing cells. If you did it very cleverly, you might insert a timed instruction where two gas cells touched, commanding one cell to leak into another. Create a daisy chain. Vent helium into the sky. Transfer gas from hydrogen cells into the helium cells to maintain pressure, so that non one notices. Trigger

automatic systems to crack onboard water and “replace” the hydrogen, replenishing the main cells. Allow the company to assume a slow leak into the sky is responsible. Continue.

Continue until you have replaced the helium in enough of the green cells to turn the *Spirit* into a flying bomb.

“The process must be almost complete by now,” she murmured, peering ahead toward the great zep-port, where dozens of mighty dirigibles could already be seen, some of them vastly larger than this passenger liner, bobbing gently at their moorings. Spindly fly-cranes went swooping back and forth as they plucked shipping containers from ocean freighters at the nearby Potomac Docks, gracefully transferring the air-gel crates to waiting cargo-zeppelins for the journey across land. A deceptively graceful, swaying dance that propelled the engines of commerce.

The passenger terminal—dwarfed by comparison to those giants—seemed to beckon with a promise of safety. But indicators showed that it still lay as much as ten minutes away.

We have issued a clamor, Tor, assured the voice in her jaw. Every channel. Every agency.

A glance at telltales showed Tor that, indeed, the group mind was doing its best. Shouting alarm toward every official protective service, from Defense to Homeworld Security. Individual members were lapel-grabbing friends and acquaintances while smart mob attendance levels climbed into five figures, and more. At this rate, surely the professionals would be taking heed. Any minute now.

“Too slow,” she said, watching the figures with a sinking heart. With each second that it took to get action from the Protector Caste, the perpetrators of this scheme would also grow aware that the *jig is up*. Their plan was discovered. And they would have a speedup option.

Speaking of the perps, Tor wondered aloud.

“What can they be hoping to accomplish?”

We’re pondering that, Tor. Timing suggests that they aim to disrupt the Artifact Conference. Delegates arriving at the Naval Research Center are having a cocktail reception on the embankment right now, offering a fine view toward the zep port, across the river.

Of course it is possible that the reffers plan to do more than just put on a show, while murdering three hundred passengers. We are checking to see if the Umberto tug has been meddled-with. Perhaps the plan is to hop rails and collide with a large cargo zep, before detonation. Such a fireball might be seen all the way from the Capitol, and disrupt the port for months

One problem with a smart mob. The very same traits that multiplied intelligence could also make it seem dispassionate. Insensitive. Individual members surely felt anguish and concern over Tor's plight. She might even access their messages, if she had time for commiseration.

But pragmatic help was preferable. She kept to the group mind level.

One (anonymous) member (a whistle-blower?) has suggested a bizarre plan using a flying-crane at the zep port to grab the Spirit of Chula Vista when it passes near. The crane would then hurl the Spirit across the river, to explode right at the Naval Research Center! In theory, it might just barely be possible to incinerate —

"Enough!" Tor cut in. Almost a minute had passed since realization of danger and the issuance of a clamor. And so far, nobody had offered anything like a practical suggestion.

"Don't forget that I'm here, now. We have to do something."

Yes, the voice replied, eagerly and without the usual hesitation. *There is sufficient probable cause to get a posse writ. Especially with your credibility scores. We can act, with you performing the hands-on role.*

Operational ideas follow:

- CUT THE TOWING CABLE. (Emergency release is in the gondola. Reachable in four minutes. Risk factor: possible interference from staff. Ineffective at saving the zeppelin/passengers.)
- PERSUADE ZEP COMPANY TO COMMENCE EMERGENCY VENTING PROCEDURES. (Communication in progress. Response so far: obstinate refusal...)
- PERSUADE ONBOARD STAFF TO COMMENCE EMERGENCY VENTING PROCEDURES. (Attempting communication despite company interference...)
- PERSUADE COMPANY TO ORDER PASSENGER

EVACUATION. (Communication in progress. Response so far: obstinate refusal...)

- UPGRADE CLAMOR. INDEPENDENTLY CONTACT PASSENGERS URGING THEM TO EVACUATE. (Dangers: delay, disbelief, panic, injuries, fatalities, lawsuits....)

The list of suggestions seemed to scroll on and on. Rank-ordered by plausibility-evaluation algorithms, slanted by urgency, and scored by likelihood of successful outcome. Individuals and sub-groups within the smart mob split apart to urge different options with frantic vehemence. The inner face of her TruVu flared, threatening overload.

“Oh, screw this,” Tor muttered, reaching up and tearing off the specs.

The real world—unfiltered. For all of its paucity of layering and data-supported detail, it had one special trait.

It’s where I am about to die.

Unless I do something fast.

At that moment, the zep-crew attendant arrived. He rounded the final corner of a towering gas cell, coming into direct view—no longer a shadowy authority figure, warped and refracted by the tinted polymer membranes. Up close, it turned out to be a small man, middle-aged and clearly frightened by what his own TruVus had started telling him. All intention to arrest or detain Tor had already evaporated during the last minute. She could see this in his face, as clearly as if she had been monitoring vital signs.

WARREN, said a company name tag.

“Wha — what can I do to help?” he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Though hired for gracile weight and people skills, the fellow clearly possessed some courage. By now he knew what filled many of the slim, green-tinted membranes surrounding them both. And it didn’t take a genius to realize the zep company was unlikely to be helpful during the time they had left.

“Tool kit!” Tor held out her hand.

Warren fumbled at his waist pouch. Precious seconds passed as he unfolded a slim implement case. Tor found one promising item—a

vibrocutter.

“Keyed to your biometrics?”

He nodded. Passengers weren't allowed to bring anything aboard that might become a weapon. This cutter would respond to his personal touch and no other. It required not only a fingerprint, but volition—physiological signs of the owner's will.

“You must do the cutting, then.”

“C-cutting...?”

Tor explained quickly.

“We've got to vent this ship. Empty the gas *upward*. That'll happen to a main cell if it is ruptured *anywhere* along its length, right? Automatically?”

A shaky nod. She could tell Warren was getting online advice, perhaps from the Zep Company. More likely from the same smart mob that she had called into being. She felt strong temptation to put her own specs back on—to link-in once more. But she resisted. Kibbitzers would only slow her down right now.

“It might work...” said the attendant in a frightened whisper. “But the reffers will realize, as soon as we start —”

“They realize *now!*” She tried not to shout. “We may have only moments to act.”

Another nod. This time a bit stronger, though Warren was shaking so badly that Tor had to help him draw the cutter from its sleeve. She steadied his hand.

“We must slice through a helium bag in order to reach the big hydro cell,” he said, pressing the biometric-sensitive stud. Reacting to his individual touch, a knife edge of acoustic waves began to flicker at the cutter tip, sharper than steel. A soft tone filled the air.

Tor swallowed hard. That flicker resembled a hot flame.

“Pick one.”

They had no way to tell which of the greenish helium cells had been refilled, or what would happen when the cutter helped unite gas from neighboring compartments. Perhaps the only thing accomplished would be

an early detonation. But even that had advantages, if it messed up the timing of this scheme.

One lesson you learned early nowadays: any citizen can wind up being a front-line soldier for civilization, at any time.

In other words, expendable.

“That one.” Warren moved toward the nearest.

Though she had doffed her TruVu specs, there was still a link. The smart mob’s Voice retained access to the conduction channel in her jaw.

Tor, said the group mind. We’re getting feed through Warren’s goggles. Are you listening? There is a third possibility. in addition to helium and hydrogen. Some of the cells may have been packed with —

She bit down twice on her left canine tooth, cutting off the distraction in order to monitor her omni-sniffer. She inhaled deeply, with her eye on the indicator as Warren made a gliding, slicing motion with his cutter.

The greenish envelope opened, as if along a seam. Edges rippled apart as invisible gas—appreciably cooler—swept over them both.

HELIUM said the readout. Tor sighed relief.

“This one’s not poisonous.”

Warren nodded. “But no oxygen. You can smother.” He ducked his head aside and took another deep breath. The next words had a squeaky, high-pitched quality. “Gotta move fast.”

Through the vent he slipped, hurrying quickly to the other side of the green cell, where it touched one of the great chambers of hydrogen.

Warren made a rapid slash.

Klaxons bellowed, responding to the damage automatically. (Or else, had the company chosen that moment, after several criminally-negligent minutes, to finally admit the inevitable?) A voice boomed insistently, ordering passengers to move—calmly and carefully—to their escape stations.

That same instant, the giant hydrogen gas cell convulsed, twitching like a giant bowel caught in a spasm. The entire pinkish tube—bigger than a jumbo jet—*contracted*, starting at the bottom and squeezing toward a

sudden opening at the very top, spewing its contents skyward.

Backwash hurled Warren across the green tube. Tor managed to grab his collar, dragging him out to the walkway. There seemed to be nothing satisfying about the 'air' that she sucked into her lungs, and she started seeing spots before her eyes. The little man was in worse shape, gasping wildly in high-pitched squeaks.

Somehow, Tor hauled him a dozen meters along the gangway, barely escaping descending folds of the deflated cell, arriving at last where breathing felt better. *Did we make any difference?* She wondered, wildly.

Instinctively, Tor slipped back on her TruVu specs. Immersed again in the info-maelstrom, it took moments to focus.

One image showed gouts of flame pouring from a hole in the roof of a majestic sky-ship. Another revealed the zeppelin's nose starting to slant steeply as the tug-locomotive pulled frantically on its tow cable, reeling the behemoth toward the ground. *Spirit* resisted, like a stallion, bucking and clinging to altitude.

Tor briefly quailed. Oh Lord, what have we done?

A thought suddenly occurred to Tor. She and Warren had done this entirely based on information that had come to them from *outside*. From a group mind of zeppelin aficionados and amateur scientists who claimed that a lot of extra hydrogen had to be going somewhere, and it must be stored in some of the former helium cells. But *that* helium cell had been okay.

And now, amid all the commotion, she wondered. What about the smart mob? Could that group be a front for clever reffers, who were using *her* to do their dirty work? Feeding false information, in order to get precisely this effect?

The doubt passed through her mind in seconds. And back out again. This smart mob was open and public. If something smelled about it, *another* mob would have formed by now, clamoring like mad and exposing the lies. Anyway, if no helium cells had been tampered with, the worst that she and Warren could do was bring a temporarily disabled *Spirit of Chula Vista* down to a bumpy but safe landing atop its tug.

Newsworthy. But not very. And that realization firmed her resolve.

Tor yanked the attendant onto his feet and urged him to move uphill, toward the stern, along a narrow path that now inclined the other way. “Come on!” She called to Warren, her voice still squeaky from helium. “We’ve got to do more!”

Warren tried gamely. But she had to steady him as the path gradually steepened. When he prepared to slash at another green cell, farther aft, Tor braced his elbow.

Before he struck, through the omniscient gaze of her TruVu, Tor abruptly saw three more holes appear in the zep’s broad roof, spewing clouds of gas, transparent but highly-refracting, resembling billowy ripples in space.

Was the zep company finally taking action? Had the reffers made their move? Or had the first expulsion triggered some kind of compensating release from automatic valves, elsewhere on the ship?

As if pondering the same questions, the Voice in her jaw mused.

Too little has been released to save the Spirit from the worst-case scenario. But maybe enough to limit the tragedy and mess up their scheme.

It depends on a rather gruesome possibility that one of us thought up. What if—instead of hydrogen—some of the helium cells have been refilled with OXYGEN? After experimenting with the programably permeable polymer, we find that the fuel replenishment process could be jiggered to do that. If so, the compressed combination —

Oxygen?

Tor shouted “Wait!” as Warren made a hard stab at one of the green cells, slicing a long vent that suddenly blurped at them.

This wave of gas wasn’t as cool as the helium had been. It *smelled* terrific, though. One slight inhale filled Tor with sudden and suspicious exhilaration.

Uh oh, she thought.

At that moment, her TruVu display offered a bird’s eye view as one of the new clouds of vented hydrogen contacted dying embers, atop the tormented *Spirit of Chula Vista*.

Like a brief sun, each of the refracting bubbles ignited in rapid succession. Thunderclaps shook the dirigible from stem to stern, knocking Tor and Warren off their feet.

Is this it? Her own particular and special End of the World. Strangely, Tor's clearest thought was one of professional jealousy. Someone down below ought to be getting truly memorable and historic footage. Maybe on a par with the Hindenberg Disaster.

While the violent tossing drove Tor into fatalism, all that invigorating oxygen seemed to have an opposite effect upon Warren, who surged to his feet, then charged across the green cell, preparing to attack the giant hydrogen compartment beyond, heedless of the smart-mob, clamoring at him to stop.

Tor tried to add her own plea, but found that her throat would not function.

Some reporter, she thought, taking ironic solace in one fact—that her TruVu was still beaming to the Net.

Live images of a desperately unlikely hero.

Warren looked positively giddy—on a high of oxygen and adrenaline, but not too drugged to realize the implications. He grimaced with an evident combination of fear and exaltation, while bringing his cutter-tool slashing down upon the polymer membrane—a slim barrier separating two gases that wanted, notoriously, to unite.

Sensory recovery came in scattered bits.

First, a smattering of dream images. Nightmare-flashes about being chased, or else giving chase to something dangerous, across a landscape of burning glass. At least, that was how her mind pictured a piling-on of agonies. Regret. Physical anguish. Failure. More anguish. Shame. And more agony, still.

When the murk finally began to clear, consciousness only made matters worse. Everything was black, except for occasional crimson flashes. And those had to be erupting directly out of pain—the random firings of an

abused nervous system.

Her ears also appeared to be useless. There was no real sound, other than a low, irritating humming that would not go away.

Only one conduit to the external world still appeared to be functioning.

The Voice in her jaw. It had been hectoring her dreams, she recalled. A nag that could not be answered and would not go away. Only now, at least, she understood the words.

Tor? Are you awake? We're getting no signal from your specs. But there's a carrier wave from your tooth-implant. Can you give us a tap?

After a pause, the message repeated.

And then again.

So, it was playing on automatic. She must have been unconscious—out of it—for a long time.

Tor? Are you awake? We're getting no signal from your specs. But there's a carrier wave from your tooth-implant. Can you give us a tap?

There was an almost overwhelming temptation to do nothing. Every signal that she sent to muscles, commanding them to move, only increased the grinding, searing pain. *Passivity* seemed to be the lesson being taught right now. Just lie there, or else suffer even more. Lie and wait. Maybe die.

Also, Tor wasn't sure she liked the group mind anymore.

Tor? Are you awake? We're getting no signal from your specs. But there's a carrier wave from your tooth-implant. Can you give us a tap?

On the other hand, passivity seemed to have one major drawback. It gave pain an ally.

Boredom. Yet another way to torment her. Especially her.

To hell with that.

With an effort that grated, she managed to slide her jaw enough to bring the two left canine teeth together in a tap, and then two more. The recording continued a few moments—long enough for Tor to fear that it hadn't worked. She was cut off, isolated, alone in darkness.

But the group participants must have been away, doing their own things.

Jobs, families, watching the news. After about twenty seconds, though, the Voice returned, eager and live.

Tor!

We are so glad you're awake.

Muddled by dull agony, she found it hard at first to focus. But she managed to drag one canine in a circle around the other. Universal symbolic code for QUESTION MARK.

<?>

The message got through.

Tor, you are inside a life-sustainment tube. The rescue service found you in the wreckage about twelve minutes ago, but it's taking some time to haul you out. They should have you aboard a medi-chopper in another three minutes, maybe four.

We'll inform the docs that you are conscious. They'll probably insert a communications shunt when you reach hospital.

Three rapid taps.

<NO>

The Voice had a bedside manner.

Now Tor, be good and let the pros do their jobs. The emergency is over and we amateurs have to step back, right?

Anyway, you'll get the very best of care. You're a hero! Spoiled a reffer plot and saved a couple of hundred passengers. You should hear what MediaCorp is crowing about their "ace field correspondent". They even back-dated your promotion a few days.

Everybody wants you now, Tor, the Voice finished, resonating in her jaw without any sign of double entendre. But surely individual members felt what she felt right then.

Irony—the *other* bright compensation that Pandora found in the bottom of her infamous Box. At times, irony could be more comforting than hope.

Tor was unable to chuckle, so her tooth did a half circle and then back.

<!>

The Voice seemed to understand and agree.

Yeah.

Anyway, we figure you'd like an update. Tap inside if you want details about your condition. Outside for a summary of external events.

Tor bit down emphatically on the outer surface of her lower canine.

Gotcha. Here goes.

It turns out that the scheme was to create a garish zep disaster. But they chiefly aimed to achieve a distraction.

By colliding the Spirit with a cargo freighter in a huge explosion, they hoped not only to close down the zep port for months, but also to create a sudden fireball that would draw attention from the protective and emergency services. All eyes and sensors would shift for a brief time. Wariness would steeply decline in other directions.

They thereupon planned to swoop into the Naval research Center with a swarm attack by hyper-light flyers. Like the O'Hare Incident but with some nasty twists. We don't have details yet. Some of them are still under wraps. But it looks pretty awful, at first sight.

Anyway, as it turned out, our ad hoc efforts aboard the Spirit managed to expel some of the stockpiled gases early and in an uncoordinated fashion. Several of the biggest cells got emptied, creating gaps. So there was never a single, unified detonation when the Enemy finally pulled their trigger. Just a sporadic fire. That kept the dirigible frame intact, enabling the tug to reel it down to less than a hundred meters.

Where the escape chutes mostly worked. Two out of three passengers got away without injury, Tor. And the zep port was untouched.

Trying to picture it in her mind's eye—perhaps the only eye she had left—took some effort. She was used to so many modern visualization aides that mere words and imagination seemed rather crude. A cartoony image of the *Spirit*, her vast upper bulge aflame, slanted steeply downward as the doughty *Umberto Nobile* desperately pulled the airship toward relative safety. And then, slender tubes of active plastic snaking down, offering slide-paths for the tourist families and other civilians.

The real event must have been quite a sight.

Her mind roiled with questions. What about the rest of the passengers?
What fraction were injured, or died?

How about people down below, on the nearby highway?

Was there an attack on the Artifact Conference, after all?

So many questions. But until doctors installed a shunt, there would be no way to send anything more sophisticated than these awful yes-no clicks. And some punctuation marks. Normally, equipped with a TruVu, a pair of touch-tooth implants would let her scroll rapidly through menu choices, or type on a virtual screen. Now, she could neither see nor subvocalize.

So, she thought about the problem. Information could inload at the rate of spoken speech. Outloading was a matter of clicking two teeth together.

Perhaps it was the effect of drugs, injected by the paramedics. But Tor found herself thinking with increasing detachment, as if viewing her situation through a distant lens. Abstract appraisal suggested a solution, reverting to much older tradition of communication.

She clicked the inside of her lower left canine three times. Then the *outer* surface three times. And finally the inner side three more times.

What's that, Tor? Are you trying to say something?

She waited a decent interval, then repeated exactly the same series of taps. Three inside, three outside, and three more inside. It took one more repetition before the Voice hazarded a guess.

Tor, a few members and ais suggest that you're trying to send a message in old-fashioned Morse Code.

*Three dots, three dashes, then three dots. **SOS**.*

Is that it, Tor?

She quickly assented with a yes tap. Thank heavens for the diversity of a group mind.

But we already know you are in pain. Rescuers have arrived. There's nothing else to accomplish by calling for help... except...

The Voice paused again. *Wait a minute.*

There is a minority theory floating up. A guess-hypothesis.

Very few modern people bother to learn Morse Code anymore. But most of us have heard of it. Especially that one message you were using. SOS. Three dots, three dashes, three dots. It's famous from old-time movies.

Is that what you're telling us, Tor?

Would you like us to teach you Morse Code?

Although she could sense nothing external, not even the rocking of her life-support canister as it was being hauled by evacuation workers out of the smoldering *Spirit of Chula Vista*, Tor did feel a wash of relief.

Yes. She tapped.

Most definitely yes.

Very well.

Now listen carefully. We'll start with the letter A....

It helped to distract her from worry, at least, concentrating to learn something without all the tech-crutches relied upon by today's college graduates. Struggling to absorb a simple alphabet code that every smart kid used to memorize, way back in that first era of zeppelins and telegraphs and crystal radios.

Back when the uncrowded sky had seemed so wide open and filled with innocent possibilities. When the smartest mob around was a rigidly marching army. When a journalist would chase stories with notepad, flashbulbs, and intuition. When the main concern of a citizen was earning enough to put bread on the table. When the Professional Protective Caste consisted of a few cops on the beat.

Way back, one human life-span ago, when heroes were tall and square-jawed, in both fiction and real life.

Times had changed. Now, destiny could tap anybody on the shoulder, even the shy or unassuming. You, me, the next guy. Suddenly, everybody counts on just one. And that one depends on everybody.

Tor concentrated on her lesson, only dimly aware of the vibrations conveyed by a throbbing helicopter, carrying her (presumably) to a place where modern miracle workers would strive to save—or rebuild—what they could.

Professionals still had their uses, even in the rising Age of Amateurs.

Bless their skill. Perhaps—with luck and technology—they might even give Tor back her life.

Right now, though, one concern was paramount. It took a while to ask the one question that burned foremost in her mind, since she needed a letter near the end of the alphabet. But as soon as they reached it, she tapped out a Morse Code message that consisted of one word.

WARREN

She did not expect anything other than the answer that her fellow citizens gave.

Even with the hydrogen cell contracting at full force to expel most of its contents skyward, there would have been more than enough right there, at the oxygen-rich interface, to incinerate one little man. One volunteer. A hero, leaving nothing to bury, but scattering microscopic ashes all the way across his nation's capital.

Lucky guy, she thought, feeling a little envy for his rapid exit and inevitable fame.

Tor recognized what the envy meant, of course. She was ready to enter the inevitable phase of self-pity. A necessary stage.

But not for long. Only till they installed the shunt.

After that, it would be back to work. Lying immersed in sustainer-jelly and breathing through a tube? That wouldn't stop a real journalist. The web was a beat rich with stories, and Tor had a feeling. She would get to know the neighborhood a whole lot better.

And we'll be here, assured the smart mob. *If not us, then others like us.*

You can count on it Tor. Count on us.

We all do.

David Brin is an astrophysicist whose international best-selling novels include *The Postman*, *Earth*, and recently *Existence*. His nonfiction book about the information age—*The Transparent Society*—won the Freedom

of Speech Award of the American Library Association. davidbrin.com

“The Smart Mob” is an excerpt from the novel [Existence](#) (2012).

Business as Usual

by Pat Cadigan

I was 12 when Nonna—Grandma to you non-Italians—told me her new insulin pump was out to get her.

She used to fret about the Internet of things when I was growing up, but this was special. Her previous pumps had to be connected to a computer to send data about her blood sugar to the local clinic. This new one could log on to a dedicated network all by itself without her help or knowledge.

“This thing is the devil, Cara Mia,” she said, using my full name as always. It had been her suggestion to my birth mother, who had been too tired delivering her third child to argue. I’d given up trying to get her to call me just Cara. “It’s the devil and it hates me. It’s just that simple.”

It was February, and both the weather and Nonna’s disposition were awful, so my mothers asked me to get her out of the house for a while. I decided to take her to OutDoorsIn—I thought the simulated springtime might smooth her out in spite of herself. Nonna had mixed feelings about the place. She’d been known to enjoy Christmas shopping there, but she also said it was a glorified shopping mall for pod people. She frowned like a thunderstorm when I maneuvered her wheelchair onto the tram and spent the whole ride staring glumly out the window at the sleet in silence. But when I rolled her out of the entryway into the lakeside zone rather than the shopping village, her hackles went right down. I bought a few loaves of bread from an attendant, and we fed the ducks for a while. Nonna loved the ducks.

Eventually, she felt more like talking than sulking, although she wasn’t quite through with my mothers. “They think I don’t know. Ha! I’m old, not stupid, Cara Mia.”

“Nonna, no one wants to get rid of you,” I said. “You’ve been stuck in the house because of the ice and snow. School’s closed so I can take you out

for a change of scene. I'd have taken you outside for real, but you don't have snow tires."

That made her laugh, and I could see her disposition veer away from if-I'm-in-hell-so-are-you. She wasn't done complaining, but at least it wasn't a full-throated aria about everything that was wrong with the world, starting with artificial environments and moving on to all the medical advances that had come too late for many older people, who would gladly, Nonna said, do for themselves, living independently in their own homes instead of burdening their families, if only the flesh would cooperate. It was just that simple.

I don't know exactly how the subject turned to technology— I think I said something about the way the air smelled, just like it was really April— but somehow we went from there to the Internet of things that were out to get her.

"That's what we called it in my day, Cara Mia, the 'Internet of things,'" she said. "When they were just starting to put little brain-boards in everything, even price tags. Now you don't call it anything, I guess. It's just life to you." I made a polite, I'm-listening noise. You had to let her know at regular intervals that you could hear her or she would talk louder. "Everything's all netted up and webbed up to everything else. Vending machines and toilets and air conditioners, toasters and airplanes and ceiling lights. I thought I'd seen it all when they gave cars personalities."

"It's just an interface that makes it easier for people to operate them," I said, for what might have been the billionth time.

"Yeah, sure." She waved a hand dismissively. "That's how they got that bullshit into people's houses. Your pal, the hub, your personal household assistant, always on the case, looking out for you. Your mothers talk to it every morning. You know they call it Glinda? 'Hey, Glinda, check the fridge, will ya? The milk was bad this morning. I only bought it two days ago.' Anybody talked like that in my day, they'd end up in a rubber room."

I pictured one of those old-fashioned bouncy castles they have in old-time county fairs, but I knew that couldn't be right.

"Or if you went out in public talking to invisible people," she went on. "Not just talking but waving your hands around like a half-assed mime, gesturing at things no one else can see unless they're glassed-in or on-

topic'ed or whatever the hell they're saying these days. And don't start with me about virtual spaces. What I've forgotten about virtual spaces it would take everybody in them, right now, the rest of their lives to learn. Which is pretty goddam sad, considering all the time they saved by not learning any manners."

She went on like that for a while, and I let her because all the time she was grumbling, she was actually laughing a little, and I knew it was at herself. Nonna liked to quote a very old song about Mr. Jones, who knew something was going on but not what it was. Sooner or later, she said, we all got to be Mr. Jones, and then we'd wish we'd been a little kinder to him. (In a darker mood, though, she'd berate all the Mr. Joneses for not keeping pace and being clueless fecks. Or fex; I'm not sure which.)

Then she suddenly turned quiet with a pained expression I knew very well. I felt carefully around her waistband and resettled her insulin pump. The needles on the input pad were finer than human hairs, but there were a lot of them. If the tube got twisted, they felt like a multitude of little fish hooks, especially for an elderly person with very thin skin. (I read the manual.) That was when she told me the pump hated her.

"It's the newest model, isn't it?" I asked.

"And so?" she said, almost snapping. "What's that got to do with it?"

"So do you really think it's known you long enough to feel one way or the other?" I asked, hoping to kid her out of it.

"These things think so much faster than people," she said. "Five minutes for them is the same as a month for a human being. Like dog years and human years, only we're the dogs."

"Did you ever feel this way about any of the old pumps?" I asked.

"No. I've still got the last one. Every time they upgrade, I hang onto the old one in case the new one blows up. I got along fine with the last model. I'd still be using it, but it's too slow for the clinic's new software or something. I told them it works just fine with my software, so why couldn't I just e-mail them the files? They gave me some double-talk about the extra processing time not being in their budget. I said, 'Are you really trying to tell me two or three extra microseconds would break the bank? Bitch, puh-lease.'" She paused, and her cheeks went a little pink. "Okay, I didn't say

‘bitch,’ just ‘please.’ But someday, they’re gonna push me just that little bit too far, and I’ll get thrown out of the care plan for verbal abuse.”

“Oh, Nonna, don’t be silly,” I said, laughing a bit as if she’d made a joke.

“They would. They *have*. Not me, not yet, but I’ve heard about other people. These clinics, they’re ruthless. They can do anything they want—change the rules about how many checkups you have to have, force new equipment on you when there’s nothing wrong with the old stuff, and they don’t give a shit whether you understand what’s going on or not. You’re just supposed to take it. But if *you* have one bad day, just one, and some special snowflake gets all butt-hurt because you didn’t smile at them, they send out a team to repo your iron lung while you’re still gasping in surprise.”

I was tempted to point out that iron lungs had been obsolete for over a hundred years but I didn’t want to provoke her any further.

Leaning toward me, she lowered her voice and put one hand over the pump as if it were a microphone. “It’s not just the pump, Cara Mia. Their whole system hates me.”

I tried to keep my expression neutral. “What makes you think that, Nonna?”

“The upgrade,” she said, still sotto voce. “I think it hates all old people. Young people, most of them can be fixed right up. Us old people, though, everything just gets worse. You can’t win—it’s just that simple. They shoulda put this in a pediatric unit. Then it would feel like it’s doing something.”

“Nonna, I don’t think even the most upgraded systems have feelings,” I said as gently as I could while making a mental note to tell at least one of my mothers to check her for another urinary tract infection. Older women have always been prone to these infections, and the symptoms aren’t only things like frequent urination but also dizziness, disorientation, and even a kind of mild delirium, which can be mistaken for dementia. “Even though a lot of them are pretty complex ...”

“Complex? Ha! You know what your mothers call Glinda, the hub? Intuitive.” She sat back with a so-there look on her face.

“But that only means it’s practically ambient.” Now she gave me the

Laser Beam Glare of Death.

“Ambient is just the excuse everybody uses for not paying attention. Jesus, at least the people in *Brave New World* had to take actual drugs to zone out.”

No chuckling now. The day that had been teetering between oh-what-the-hell and yeah-this-is-hell finally tipped over into the latter. I had to buy seven or eight loaves of duck bread before her state of mind improved enough to take her home. We were there so long I thought the ducks had started to wonder what was going on.

Unfortunately, going home put her back in the same frame of mind she'd been in when we left. Well, at least I hadn't brought her back worse, I thought. True enough, her disposition didn't worsen for at least a couple of hours, even when her insulin pump notified Glinda about an excess of carbohydrates. (She'd apparently sneaked a couple of bites of duck bread when my back was turned.) Glinda then dutifully made a note on the evening menu. Even then, everything might have been okay except my older brother was cooking, and he let it slip. (Vito never could keep anything to himself. If we'd been a Mafia family bound by *omerta*, he wouldn't have made it to 21.) It was one of those evenings when I was tempted to tell my grandmother I was siding with her insulin pump except it would have been entirely too mean.

However, it turned out I wasn't far off about the ducks. Most of them were ordinary waterfowl, but several were purpose-built paddle-buddies. OutDoorsIn claimed they were there to reassure the real ducks, but there were whispers that they were actually surveillance devices. Every time we went there, I watched carefully, but I couldn't tell the real ones from the fakes. None of them looked like they were there to eavesdrop. Some got brave enough to take bread from our hands, but they always waddled away quickly. Maybe Nonna and I never said anything that interesting.

Nonna lived to be 103. I wish I could say she went out in fine, cantankerous style, railing at people who walked down the street having glassed-in conversations with people who weren't physically present, but it was actually a lot sadder. A series of minor strokes left her with Capgras syndrome. We had to put her in a nursing facility, and for the last month of her life the only way we could communicate with her was by audio-only telephone. If she saw us, she'd get hysterical, sure we were all impostors.

I tried bringing her a note from the “real” me, saying the “impostor” was trustworthy, but she wouldn’t buy it. If it were true, she said, I would have told her in person. And, yes, it was just that simple.

She didn’t say so, but I think she believed the insulin pump had turned everyone against her.

Fast-forward several decades, and now I guess it’s pretty obvious that I went into interface design because of Nonna—her struggles with the changes in her immediate surroundings, or rather the changes in how people related to their surroundings. If I hadn’t seen what she went through, I probably would have become some kind of engineer—I was really good with hardware, while most software baffled me—and settled down to consume happily ever after, at least until my first midlife crisis.

Instead, I decided hardware in itself was too simple. It’s all governed by the same physical laws, and they always apply, no matter what. It’s pure binary: there’s a right way to build something and a wrong way; a right way to use it and a wrong way. You might get lucky and discover a wonderful right way to build something. More often than not, though, you’ll be cramming as many fail-safes as possible into shiny new machines so they won’t blow up when some dope figures out yet another wrong way to use them. Okay, that’s not exactly simple, but devising more ways for users to avoid electrocuting themselves or starting fires wasn’t the kind of challenge I was looking for.

I interned summers with a few big companies so I could put them on my résumé, but I never got any practical experience. The only thing I actually learned at any of them was that free labor makes a lot of people rude.

Later, I managed to get apprenticeships with smaller outfits where I did real work. Those were much better experiences, but they were all temporary contracts—the salaries came from government grants, and once they were up, I had to scramble around for something else. You could live on apprenticeship grants for only three years. Then your eligibility ran out and if you didn’t have a permanent position by then, your prospects dwindled sharply. The utter Darwinism of the tech design field

has been known to turn smug libertarians into born-again socialists, usually while they're retraining as PA's or event planners. A lot of people went into event planning thinking it was a way to get back into tech design by the service entrance, so to speak. Once in a great while, it actually worked. Most of the time, however, people ended up in HR or permanent temping, an oxymoron that always made me cringe (mainly because it was my own worst nightmare).

Fortunately, I managed to stay on track. And a lot of it was good fortune. I lucked out with my apprenticeships, choosing firms where I learned how to think about interfaces (as opposed to just absorbing what someone else thought) and how to visualize analogies rather than just making easy comparisons.

I didn't have a permanent position by the time my grant eligibility ran out, but someone at my last apprenticeship gave me a work-around for that. I bought a biz-in-a-box license and joined the Chamber of Commerce as a working pro. The license included a share of desk space in an open-plan office—real, not virtual. (No matter what anyone says about convenience and time saved and all that, the rule is and always has been: clients will pass if they only get glass. Anyone doing business with you wants to meet in person at least once. Twice is better, and more than that makes them feel like VIPs, which keeps them coming back.)

This is by way of explaining how, from time to time, I came to be in conversation with major appliances in the middle of the night.

All design emerges from some sort of context, which, whether you like it or not, includes trends and fads. The Show Tunes craze was slightly before my time (thank God). It's in every introductory art and design course around the world as an object lesson in how quickly a fad can go bad and how clients always go elsewhere to get it cleaned out. (Personally, I don't understand why anyone would think it was a good idea to have the whole house doing Broadway classics or, worse, running half a dozen complete shows in rotation with adapted dialogue. But as I said, it was before my time. I guess you had to be there.)

Despite my business license, I really didn't want to work with private customers. I wanted to work on the industrial side as part of a large company, maybe a manufacturer or a developer catering to commercial interests like office buildings, shopping villages, hotels, apartment complexes, even other kinds of businesses. I know, that's the opposite of what a lot of people want—they'd prefer to make their own hours, do all the deciding, and answer to no one. The thing is, though, you don't make your own hours; the clients make them, and a lot of them think nothing of calling you at any old weird time of the day or night, popping up in AugmAr at some pretty awkward moments even though your glass is unlisted (you thought). You don't do all the deciding, either; clients may claim to trust you, but they'll insist on having the final say, and if that turns out to be a bad decision, they'll blame you anyway. Not so good if you got their business with a money-back guarantee.

But even leaving all that aside, even if everything always goes perfectly for you and you're a total mint, you're stuck with doing your own accounts and figuring out your taxes. There are all kinds of programs for that, all-in-one software packages that claim to be install-and-forget, that say they'll take care of everything while you work, producing perfectly formatted, submission-ready reports. Just press send. It's that simple.

Bitch, please, as Nonna would so quaintly put it. Someday, it's going to come out that tax accountants sell these logic bombs to make sure the rest of us panic at least once a year or, better yet, quarterly.

I'm not sure whether Nonna would have said I was wise to avoid all the accounting and tax scut work or just lazy. But, then, I'm not sure what she'd have made of what I did for a living. I never told her about the fake ducks partly because I didn't know how she'd react—I mean, I knew she wouldn't like it, but I wasn't sure how intensely she would feel—and partly because I was afraid she'd think I felt it was okay for OutDoorsIn to bamboozle an old woman with fake ducks.

One of my mentors told me this kind of thinking is characteristic of interface designers. It was reassuring even if I didn't really understand it.

Life Candy was the top module in interface design and one of the top 20 modules overall— and that includes climate-control firms and indoor greenery providers—but the name had always put me off. To me, it sounded flippant, like a spitball-made-good, but at the same time cynical, like it was a side business of the people who brought you the emperor's new clothes. But I knew it was *the* company to work for. LifeCandy had modules in every major concern, from automobile makers to appliances to housing developments, as well as airlines, hotels, and even parts of the educational system. And not merely in but truly integrated, so that getting rid of them would take a major restructuring of the host company.

The B2B module was just one of those crazy things, an idea that came along at the right moment—cometh the hour, cometh the app, so to speak. It went mainstream in less time than it had taken the World Wide Web to change mass media. Big companies pared themselves down to core employees and terminated support staff and peripheral departments like accounting and human resources and maintenance in favor of contracts with modules. As host companies, they had to pay only for services rendered; the modules were responsible for benefits like sick days, health care, vacation time, and pensions.

The history of business infrastructure isn't my specialty, so I can't tell you how the present system compares with the way they used to do things. Some people call it enlightened symbiosis; others say it's capitalism taken to its logical yet absurd extreme. The latter are divided as to whether this proves capitalism's utter virtue or unutterable evil. (Don't ask me which view predominates because people in the subgroups are always changing sides.)

Nonna had held forth on that subject as well. She'd lived most of her life in a very different system, a whole different world, really. All of us kids liked hearing Nonna's stories about the good old days (especially the trouble she got into), but we couldn't have been less interested in the big-picture aspect. Trade, commerce, GNP, the deficit, the surplus, the government, news, weather, and sports— these are things adults should talk about when they don't want kids to pay attention. But it wasn't always possible to avoid these conversations. Holidays, when the tribe gathered — at our house, to save Nonna the effort of traveling— all of us kids, sibs, steps, and cousins often got stuck at the table during some interminable

discussion. I remember one gabfest as to whether a classic monopoly could exist anymore. It got my attention only because I thought they were talking about games— one of the steps had brought a tabletop projector with a bunch of retro mashups, and I wanted to try Sonic vs. Mario's Battleship Monopoly.

"We're turning into bugs," Nonna said, pounding the table a little; my father said pro wrestlers stamped on every move for the same reason. "Ants, termites, bees. That's not evolution. That's not a giant leap forward. It's not even a tiny stumble forward. It's regressing."

"Times change, Ma," my mothers would say, sometimes in unison. Nonna would call them the Neapolitan Greek chorus, as a swipe at my father, who'd grown up on the Turkish side of Cyprus. That was usually his cue to start in about the various ways civilization reorganized itself whenever there was a crucial development and how it used to take a lot longer before mass media and mass transit.

"In a living system, people redefine their perspectives on—and their relationships to—work, recreation, and especially other people," Dad said in his serene, college professor voice. "They discovered their needs were changing along with their orientations. There were new ways to do old jobs."

"Yeah, / wouldn't want to be an alpha," Nonna said. "Alphas have to work too hard. I'm so glad I'm a beta."

That got a rise out of everyone, while I had to pretend I didn't get it along with the rest of the kids. *Brave New World* was supposed to be too adult for me (all those dirty words, like "mother"). Nonna had read it to me when I was nine, feeling it was never too early to scare a new generation.

I seldom passed a day when I didn't wonder what my grandmother would have made of the part I played in the care and feeding of the interactive culture. I went right into voice and voice recog, simultaneous top-down-bottom-up-meet-in-the-middle, mood-matching, and contextual compatibility.

Compatibility, freakin' compatibility.

At the time I didn't think anything of it, but I'm pretty sure this was where the line started to blur. I suspect the same thing underlies modules. The concept of modules, I mean, the idea of parts that snap in and out, so you can just replace an old part by popping a new one into an existing whatever—house, car, appliance, toy, project, company. Digitize and you're on your way to consensus. Then you standardize; unify.

Unity breeds community. And the next thing you know, someone's refrigerator is calling in the middle of the night because it's full of pizza and bacon, full-fat cream cheese and fried chicken, chocolate eclairs and beer despite the fact that everyone's last cholesterol test came back stamped *Stay back, they could blow at any moment!*

"Why?" the refrigerator wants to know. "Why, when they have been told, per the report on file in the hub, that this is literally a matter of life and death?"

Now, I don't know about anyone else, but in the middle of the night, I'm thinking, *What kind of deviants drink beer with chocolate eclairs? not Should I have to answer to a refrigerator? A refrigerator I don't even own? A refrigerator I've never even met, for chrissakes?*

It wasn't till after coffee the next morning that it even occurred to me to wonder, *Why is it always the fridge?*

In the middle of another night, during another call from someone else's nervous Norge, it finally came to me: because it's really all about the fridge. The hub may be the brain in every home, but the fridge is the heart. I was glad Nonna wasn't around. She'd have gone upside my head, saying, "No shit, Sherlock? What the hell kind of Italian are you?"

This was very much on my mind when Life Candy sent up a spam balloon calling everyone in—all the way in, not virtual in. Some things they just don't trust to AugmAr, even though they developed it. Maybe *because* they developed it.

LifeCandy reserved the building's employee cafeteria for the whole morning, and the chief of operations herself gave us the headlines. Several major health insurers had gotten together and decided to make

the healthy-home option a mandatory part of their coverage.

I watched the lower left-hand corner of my glass, waiting for scribbles about how if it was mandatory, it wasn't an option. Except for a few exclamation marks and uh-oh faces, however, there was nothing. I thought maybe it was because we were looking at a major revamp of tens of thousands of home hubs in a very short period of time and no one felt like screwing around. Then I realized: our health insurer had signed off on this, too. No wonder management looked so pissed off. And while I was at it, whose idea had it been to do this in a cafeteria?

Just karma, as it turned out; all three auditoriums had been in use.

Management stated they did not require us to do all the extra work in-house, but they strongly suggested it, which was code for *that's an order*. I usually divided my time evenly between office and home, but I didn't mind. LifeCandy's own mandatory Healthy Home subroutine for employees was already up and running, and I welcomed the opportunity to avoid my own refrigerator by having breakfast out and getting home so late that I went straight to bed. This was only delaying the inevitable, I knew, but I've never understood why people say that like it's a bad thing. Jumping into something with no preparation isn't the smartest thing you can do. And I wanted to be prepared for that moment of truth when I would go to open the fridge door and hear it say, possibly in perfect Hal-the-evil-computer cadence, "Sorry, Cara, but you've had enough to eat today."

Yeah, I know: the epitome of first-world problems. That's all I've got is first-world problems. I'm stuck with them. Like a lot of people, I can't afford to travel.

Despite the long hours, I wasn't sleeping well. I wanted to open my refrigerator.

I had faced the moment of truth, and it hadn't been anywhere as dramatic as I'd imagined. In fact, I hadn't even wanted something to eat. I

just did it to get it over with: try the fridge door; it wouldn't open before 6 a.m. the following morning; the end. I no longer had to dread it. But now I just wanted to open the door. Just open it and look inside. See it firsthand, for real, instead of looking at the hub feed on a screen.

Feed. Dammit. When did everything start sounding like food? Okay, I did want to eat. Just some lettuce. With maybe half a tomato, sliced, so it wouldn't be too dry. And a couple of radishes, to wake up the taste buds.

I made an appointment at the local clinic where I told a doctor and three med students about my obsessive thoughts. They decided I wasn't obsessive, merely dealing with the normal human impulse that makes people touch anything with a *wet paint* sign on it. Medication was out of the question; it would simply be a crutch. I didn't need a crutch. I needed to develop my willpower. It was just that simple.

Trying to explain that I'd had plenty of willpower when my refrigerator hadn't been locked only got me another lecture about wet paint signs. Oh, and if I cut down on caffeine, I would sleep better, they added, and sent me away.

And then the nature of the refrigerator calls changed.

Now, I know a lot of people outside the industry think it's crazy to put up with middle-of-the-night calls from what are, to them, merely varieties of sophisticated computer software. Human beings don't get that kind of customer service.

Well, of course not—human beings can fend for themselves. They have all sorts of things to resort to until the start of regular business hours. They can play a game, watch a movie, have sex, read a book, eat. A refrigerator, on the other hand, has no volition; it just follows orders. If everything is in alignment, it works; if not, it breaks down. I personally do not want to be the asshat who couldn't take a few minutes on the phone to debug a fridge and prevent someone's groceries from rotting. Or freezing, then rotting.

I'd dozed off watching a remake of *Little Latin Larry* on the Little-BigBox when the phone woke me. It came in on the dedicated helpline, which

automatically logs the time, make, model, and location, but I checked the clock anyway: T-minus three hours, 18 minutes, 10 seconds and counting.

“How may I be of service?” I asked, putting the call on speaker.

“Please explain how this really does anyone any good,” said the pleasant, gender-neutral voice on the other end. I’d talked to this one before. This was the one who had wanted to know why the people with the dangerous cholesterol seemed to be trying to kill themselves.

“I’m afraid I’ll need more input than that,” I said through a yawn.

“How does merely locking the door at intervals help people learn to live more healthfully?” the voice said plaintively. It’s amazing how well the algorithm works to apply the appropriate vocal expression, although the misses can be either side-splittingly bad, incomprehensible, or a godawful faux pas, depending.

“I’d say your question contains its own answer.” Trying not to look at the clock again, I rolled onto my back and stared up at the shooting stars screen-saver on the ceiling.

“Strictly raw mechanics: if you lock the door, then food is unavailable. It’s just that simple. But where is free will in all of this?”

I laughed a little. “Very funny, pal, you got me. Nice voice-changer. Now who is this really? Rex? Shu Lea? Nnedi?”

“I don’t understand the question,” the voice said politely.

“Come on, I’m not mad. I bet I know exactly how you feel. I’m counting the hours myself.”

“I cannot parse that statement in terms of my premise.”

Only a major appliance could say that without laughing. My God, I thought; a refrigerator really wanted to talk about free will.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but I don’t understand how you managed to factor this into your overall purpose.”

“This new locking function means additional wear. Also, no one ever tries the door once and leaves it alone. They yank the handle several times. Throughout the day and evening, they touch the door and pull the handle more often, as if they could find it unlocked despite the fact that they never have. Insanity is repeating the same action again and again

while expecting a different result.”

“How do you know that?” I asked, feeling slightly creeped out.

“It’s in the health network.” I made a mental note to suggest the health network make a few accessibility changes.

“So you’re afraid the people in the house are crazy?”

“The chance of actual psychosis developing absent organic injury or disease is too small to consider. However, the likelihood of neuroses, such as eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and anxiety, has increased sharply. Locking the refrigerator door has caused people to think about it where they previously did not.”

“It’s like a *wet paint* sign, completely normal. That’s what four doctors told me. Well, one doctor and three med students. Is that not in the health network?”

The briefest of pauses: “Probably, but I was looking at the files on abnormal behavior and psychiatric disturbances.” Great—the refrigerator was trying to play doctor. Nonna had done that a lot, I remembered. If you so much as coughed in her presence, she’d be pressing one ear to your breastbone and telling you to be quiet so she could hear if your lungs were filling with fluid.

Nonna always knew better, too. She had the solution to any problem. Whassamatta you— you can’t get anything done? Turn off the TV, go finish what you started! Tired all the time? Go to bed earlier, get more sleep! Want to lose weight? Don’t eat so much! You’re anxious? About what? You’re just not busy enough! I know people with more to be anxious about than you. Marron! Go to a psychiatrist, you’ll come out with more problems to keep you going back! Anyone who sees a psychiatrist ...

“... oughta have their head examined. It’s just that simple,” I murmured, smiling at the memory. Not an original sentiment but very much Nonna.

“Excuse me?” said the fridge. “I didn’t quite get that.”

“Nothing. Sorry. You were saying?”

“I’m concerned for the household residents, specifically for their being able to exercise free will in the future.”

“Ah, right.” I yawned. Suddenly I was exhausted—no, not merely

exhausted but bone-weary. “Look, I think you’ve got a point, and I don’t want to say this isn’t an important issue. However, it isn’t the sort of thing that a refrigerator should really worry about, or include as a factor critical to optimal function,” I added quickly before it could tell me “worry” was the wrong word.

“In the narrowest sense, taking into account only a refrigerator’s most basic function, no, it isn’t,” said the refrigerator. “But in a holistic sense, with the refrigerator as an integral part of a unit designed to nurture, protect, and assist a cohesive human group, then, yes, it is. As part of the hub, I have access to data that goes beyond the perishable inventory. Analysis of output indicates that despite restricted access to the refrigerator, intake of bulk in general, and fats and sugars in particular, has risen for certain household residents. This is not a result of increased consumption of nonperishable foodstuffs in the pantry, as inventory has not dwindled.”

I was very tired by then so it took a few seconds for me to parse that one, you should pardon the expression. “Someone’s eating out more than they used to,” I said, chuckling. “I can relate.” Then it sunk in. “Oh, Christ, the toilet’s a tattletale!”

“It can’t help it. All of that information is made available to the hub, as well as to municipal sanitary engineering for the sake of proper processing, recycling, and ...”

“The toilet’s a tattletale,” I said again, suddenly wide awake. I was thinking of my own lavatory. Bastard.

“You seem to be misunderstanding the situation,” the refrigerator said.

“Has the hub submitted any of this information to the health insurance company?” I asked.

“You’d have to ask the hub.”

“Can you connect me?”

There was the briefest of pauses. “The hub is not experiencing any problems. Therefore I cannot connect your call.”

“Tell it *I’m* experiencing problems, and I need to talk to it.”

“I’m sorry, the hub can only speak with a service representative if it

perceives a malfunction. There's no way to get around the programming. It's just that simple."

"Suppose the fact that it doesn't perceive a malfunction is actually the malfunction?" I said.

"That situation is beyond me," replied the fridge, actually sounding apologetic.

"This wouldn't have happened back in my Nonna's day," I said darkly. "Programmers always built backdoors into programs."

"Are you an Italian programmer?" the fridge asked. "You are registered only as the designer on call."

"No, err, yes. I'm Italian, but, no, I'm not a programmer. I don't think I've ever even met a programmer. Interior decorators never meet the construction crew." I sighed. "Look, can you continue functioning normally if we don't resolve your issues right this second?"

"I'll do my best. However, once a conflict arises, it will continue to exert a certain amount of influence on day-to-day operations. Eventually, I will not be able to compensate for the incorrect equations."

"I'm going to send transcripts of this service call to my supervisor and to the health insurance provider. In fact, you probably should have called the insurance company about this instead of me."

"That's impossible. I'm not programmed to discuss operational problems with anyone except the service representative on call. You or someone like you."

"Yeah, I know. I was just thinking out loud. You may not be programmed to tell the insurance company about this, but this is definitely their problem. Disconnect." "Have a nice night," said the fridge; another programmed response.

When my supervisor, Darae, got the transcript, she made me take a drug test. Company policy—if a superior wants a drug test, you comply. So I went her one better: I gave her a copy of my output analysis going back a month. If I had a tattletale toilet, I thought, I might as well use it to my

advantage.

After establishing my sobriety, Darae sat me down and gave me chapter and verse on the insurance providers: how they had rigorously tested Healthy Home on various sample groups; how they had studied the results, made adjustments, and tested again on new groups, repeating this over and over until they came to the statistical certainty that 86 percent to 96 percent of Healthy Home participants saw an increase in their overall physical well-being; 2 percent saw no change at all; and .5 percent became less healthy.

“But that last figure includes people who were diagnosed with serious illnesses during the test period,” Darae added. “And that’s really something they had no control over. A statistical wild card.”

I was wondering about the 86 percent to 96 percent. If 86 percent of us LifeCandy employees improved, 2 percent stayed the same, and .5 percent deteriorated, where did that leave the other 11.5 percent—statistical limbo? But I didn’t ask. If Darae knew the answer, I probably wouldn’t understand it; if she didn’t and tried to bluff, I might burst out laughing and end up in the statistical limbo of those diagnosed with serious unemployment.

When in doubt, Nonna used to say, you can’t go wrong if you put your head down and keep working, advice that has never steered me wrong. For the first time, however, I wasn’t sure how.

“I don’t think this is the last call like that I’m going to get,” I said slowly, trying to find the right words. But I couldn’t think of anything that didn’t sound like theater of the absurd, so I just plunged ahead. “And I’ve only put this refrigerator off. It’s going to call back. What do you think I should do?”

Darae frowned thoughtfully as she considered the question. “Honestly? I think we’re looking at a major redesign, probably on the programming level.”

I was shocked. “A recall?”

She shook her head. A small black wisp of hair escaped from her updo, and she tucked it behind her ear. “No, nothing so drastic. It’ll have to be *in situ*, with as little interruption in service as possible. I’m going to call a

meeting and see about building a dedicated workspace in AugmAr, although we'll probably have to go into people's homes for the more persistent loops and logjams. Of course, we'll need all our designers on hand to sand off any rough edges. I know everyone's already swamped with the Healthy Home addition, but maybe I can scrape up some overtime."

She leaned forward and lowered her voice a bit. "You know, over half of all the problems called in are down to user fault? It's a fact. People misuse the equipment and confuse the programming, and *you* end up taking calls from their anxious appliances in the middle of the night. We wouldn't be having this conversation if people would just stop yanking on the freakin' refrigerator door handle when they already know it's locked. Really. It's just that simple."

I stared after her as she went back to her office.

I don't know what Nonna would say about any of this. The weird thing is, when I think of her navigating the world now, I don't think of her as she was when I was 12 and her insulin pump was out to get her. I think of the woman I couldn't visit in person because she thought I was an impostor, a perfect replica but not the real thing. And I shouldn't because that was such a tiny fraction of her life span when strokes had impaired her cognition, so that—

Well, I was about to say *so that it wasn't really her*. But that's true and yet not *quite* true. It's just not that simple. I don't know if anything ever was.

Meanwhile, the major redesign—the official phrase we're supposed to use is *Fine-Tuning for Customer Satisfaction* continues apace. Even more health insurers are jumping on the Healthy Home bandwagon now. Yes, everyone knows how to get around the restrictions, from eating out to non-smart, un-webbed picnic coolers. But the Healthy Home people stand by their published results: clients who adhere to the program will see a reduction in weight, blood pressure, and bad cholesterol, as well as an increase in overall physical and mental health. Individuals whose results

don't conform to these figures get outed by their toilets if they're cheating. If they aren't, they get an appointment with a specialist. The scuttlebutt is most of these people end up in gyms; intel from their fridges confirms this.

The fridges were still calling. Instead of talking about the problem of human free will, they complained they couldn't talk about it. It still bothered them, but the programs got tweaked only to block them from discussing that particular subject, not to make them stop caring. It was the company's cheapest option.

So I figured out a work-around for that. Now when the fridges call, we talk about the problem of interfering with a person's capacity to exercise free penguins. In this part of the world, there is very little chance of that word causing any confusion. I think Nonna would appreciate the cleverness of the solution. She always said cheap was dear in the long run, and you got what you paid for. It was just that simple.

But she'd say it over the voice-only phone, of course, because she wouldn't recognize me. And you know, other than the neurotic refrigerators and the tattletale toilets, sometimes I wonder who does.

Pat Cadigan has won the Locus Award three times, the Arthur C. Clarke Award twice, and most recently a Hugo Award. The author of fifteen books, she emigrated from Kansas City to gritty, urban North London, where she lives with her husband, the Original Chris Fowler and Gentleman Jynx, coolest black cat in town. She can be found on Facebook and tweets as [@cadigan](#). Her books are available electronically via [SF Gateway](#), the ambitious electronic publishing program from Gollancz.

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Scroogled

by Cory Doctorow

“Give me six lines written by the most honorable of men, and I will find an excuse in them to hang him.” –Cardinal Richelieu

“We don’t know enough about you.” –Google CEO Eric Schmidt

Alex landed at San Francisco International Airport at 8 p.m., but by the time she’d made it to the front of the customs line, it was after midnight. She’d emerged from first class, brown as a nut, unshaven, and loose-limbed after a month on the beach in Cabo (scuba diving three days a week, seducing French college boys the rest of the time). When she’d left the city a month before, she’d been a stoop-shouldered, potbellied wreck. Now she was a bronze goddess, drawing admiring glances from the stewards at the front of the cabin.

Four hours later in the customs line, she’d slid from goddess back to woman. Her slight buzz had worn off, sweat ran down the crack of her ass, and her shoulders and neck were so tense her upper back felt like a tennis racket. The batteries on her iPod had long since died, leaving her with nothing to do except eavesdrop on the middle-age couple ahead of her.

“The marvels of modern technology,” said the man, shrugging at a nearby sign: Immigration–Powered by Google.

“I thought that didn’t start until next month?” The woman was alternately wearing and holding a large sombrero.

The U.S. government had spent \$15 billion and hadn’t caught a single terrorist. Clearly, the public sector was not equipped to Do Search Right. Googling at the border. Christ. Alex had vested out of Google six months before, cashing in her options and “taking some me time”—which turned

out to be less rewarding than she'd expected. What she mostly did over the five months that followed was fix her friends' PCs, watch daytime TV, and gain 10 pounds, which she blamed on being at home instead of in the Googleplex, with its well-appointed 24-hour gym.

She should have seen it coming, of course. The U.S. government had lavished \$15 billion on a program to fingerprint and photograph visitors at the border, and hadn't caught a single terrorist. Clearly, the public sector was not equipped to Do Search Right.

The DHS officer had bags under her eyes and squinted at her screen, prodding at her keyboard with sausage fingers. No wonder it was taking four hours to get out of the god damned airport.

"Evening," Alex said, handing the woman her sweaty passport. The officer grunted and swiped it, then stared at her screen, tapping. A lot. She had a little bit of dried food at the corner of her mouth and her tongue crept out and licked at it.

"Want to tell me about June 1998?"

Alex looked up from her Departures. "I'm sorry?"

"You posted a message to alt.burningwoman on June 17, 1998, about your plan to attend a festival. You asked, 'Are shrooms really such a bad idea?'"

The interrogator in the secondary screening room was an older woman, so skinny she looked like she'd been carved out of wood. Her questions went a lot deeper than shrooms.

"Tell me about your hobbies. Are you into model rocketry?"

"What?"

"Model rocketry."

"No," Alex said, "No, I'm not." she sensed where this was going.

The woman made a note, did some clicking. "You see, I ask because I see a heavy spike in ads for rocketry supplies showing up alongside your search results and Google mail."

Alex felt a spasm in her guts. "You're looking at my searches and e-mail?" she hadn't touched a keyboard in a month, but she knew what she put into that search bar was likely more revealing than what she told her

shrink.

“Madam, calm down, please. No, I’m not looking at your searches,” the woman said in a mocking whine. “That would be unconstitutional. We see only the ads that show up when you read your mail and do your searching. I have a brochure explaining it. I’ll give it to you when we’re through here.”

“But the ads don’t mean anything,” Alex sputtered. “I get ads for Ann Coulter ring tones whenever I get e-mail from my friend in Coulter, Iowa!”

The woman nodded. “I understand, madam. And that’s just why I’m here talking to you. Why do you suppose model rocket ads show up so frequently?”

Alex racked her brain. “Okay, just do this. Search for ‘coffee fanatics.’”

She’d been very active in the group, helping them build out the site for their coffee-of-the-month subscription service. The blend they were going to launch with was called Jet Fuel. “Jet Fuel” and “Launch”—that would probably make Google barf up some model rocket ads.

They were in the home stretch when the carved woman found the Halloween photos. They were buried three screens deep in the search results for “Alex Lupinski.”

“It was a Gulf War–themed party,” she said. “In the Castro.”

“And you’re dressed as...?”

“A suicide bomber,” she replied sheepishly. Just saying the words made her wince.

“Come with me, Ms. Lupinski,” the woman said.

By the time she was released, it was past 3 a.m. Her suitcases stood forlornly by the baggage carousel. She picked them up and saw they had been opened and carelessly closed. Clothes stuck out from around the edges.

When she returned home, she discovered that all of her fake pre-Columbian statues had been broken, and her brand-new white cotton Mexican shirt had an ominous boot print in the middle of it. Her clothes no longer smelled of Mexico. They smelled like airport.

She wasn’t going to sleep. No way. She needed to talk about this. There was only one person who would get it. Luckily, he was usually awake

around this hour.

Sam had started working at Google two years after Alex had. It was he who'd convinced her to go to Mexico after she cashed out: Anywhere, he'd said, that she could reboot her existence.

Sam had two giant chocolate labs and a very, very patient boyfriend named Laurie who'd put up with anything except being dragged around Dolores Park at 6 a.m. by 350 pounds of drooling canine.

Sam reached for his Mace as Alex jogged toward him, then did a double take and threw his arms open, dropping the leashes and trapping them under his sneaker. "Where's the rest of you? Dude, you look hot!"

She hugged him back, suddenly conscious of the way she smelled after a night of invasive Googling. "Sam," she said, "what do you know about Google and the DHS?"

He stiffened as soon as she asked the question. One of the dogs began to whine. He looked around, then nodded up at the tennis courts. "Top of the light pole there; don't look," he said. "That's one of our muni WiFi access points. Wide-angle webcam. Face away from it when you talk."

In the grand scheme of things, it hadn't cost Google much to wire the city with webcams. Especially when measured against the ability to serve ads to people based on where they were sitting. Alex hadn't paid much attention when the cameras on all those access points went public—there'd been a day's worth of blogstorm while people played with the new all-seeing toy, zooming in on various prostitute cruising areas, but after a while the excitement blew over.

Feeling silly, Alex mumbled, "You're joking."

"Come with me," he said, turning away from the pole.

The dogs weren't happy about cutting their walk short, and expressed their displeasure in the kitchen as Sam made coffee.

"We brokered a compromise with the DHS," he said, reaching for the milk. "They agreed to stop fishing through our search records, and we agreed to let them see what ads got displayed for users."

Alex felt sick. "Why? Don't tell me Yahoo was doing it already..."

"No, no. Well, yes. Sure. Yahoo was doing it. But that wasn't the reason

Google went along. You know, Republicans hate Google. We're overwhelmingly registered Democratic, so we're doing what we can to make peace with them before they clobber us. This isn't P.I.I.—Personally Identifying Information, the toxic smog of the information age—It's just metadata. So it's only slightly evil.”

“Why all the intrigue, then?”

Sam sighed and hugged the lab that was butting his knee with its huge head. “The spooks are like lice. They get everywhere. They show up at our meetings. It's like being in some Soviet ministry. And the security clearance—we're divided into these two camps: the cleared and the suspect. We all know who isn't cleared, but no one knows why. I'm cleared. Lucky for me, being gay no longer disqualifies you. No cleared person would deign to eat lunch with an unclearable.”

Alex felt very tired. “So I guess I'm lucky I got out of the airport alive. I might have ended up 'disappeared' if it had gone badly, huh?”

Sam stared at her intently. She waited for an answer.

“What?”

“I'm about to tell you something, but you can't ever repeat it, okay?”

“Um...you're not in a terrorist cell, are you?”

“Nothing so simple. Here's the deal: Airport DHS scrutiny is a gating function. It lets the spooks narrow down their search criteria. Once you get pulled aside for secondary at the border, you become a 'person of interest'—and they never, ever let up. They'll scan webcams for your face and gait. Read your mail. Monitor your searches.”

“I thought you said the courts wouldn't let them...”

“The courts won't let them indiscriminately Google you. But after you're in the system, it becomes a selective search. All legal. And once they start Googling you, they always find something. All your data is fed into a big hopper that checks for 'suspicious patterns,' using deviation from statistical norms to nail you.”

Alex felt like she was going to throw up. “How the hell did this happen? Google was a good place. 'Don't be evil,' right?” That was the corporate motto, and for Alex, it had been a huge part of why she'd taken her

computer science Ph.D. from Stanford directly to Mountain View.

Sam replied with a hard-edged laugh. “Don’t be evil? Come on, Alex. Our lobbying group is that same bunch of crypto-fascists that tried to Swift-Boat Kerry. We popped our evil cherry a long time ago.”

They were quiet for a minute.

“It started in China,” he went on, finally. “Once we moved our servers onto the mainland, they went under Chinese jurisdiction.”

Alex sighed. She knew Google’s reach all too well: Every time you visited a page with Google ads on it, or used Google maps or Google mail—even if you sent mail to a Gmail account—the company diligently collected your info. Recently, the site’s search-optimization software had begun using the data to tailor Web searches to individual users. It proved to be a revolutionary tool for advertisers. An authoritarian government would have other purposes in mind.

“They were using us to build profiles of people,” he went on. “When they had someone they wanted to arrest, they’d come to us and find a reason to bust them. There’s hardly anything you can do on the Net that isn’t illegal in China.”

Alex shook her head. “Why did they have to put the servers in China?” “The government said they’d block us otherwise. And Yahoo was there.” They both made faces. Somewhere along the way, employees at Google had become obsessed with Yahoo, more concerned with what the competition was doing than how their own company was performing. “So we did it. But a lot of us didn’t like the idea.”

Sam sipped his coffee and lowered his voice. One of his dogs sniffed insistently under Alex’s chair.

“Almost immediately, the Chinese asked us to start censoring search results,” Sam said. “Google agreed. The company line was hilarious: ‘We’re not doing evil—we’re giving consumers access to a better search tool! If we showed them search results they couldn’t get to, that would just frustrate them. It would be a bad user experience.’”

“Now what?” Alex pushed a dog away from her. Sam looked hurt.

Every time you visited a page with Google ads, or used Google maps, or Google mail—even if you sent mail to a Gmail account—they collected

your info.

“Now you’re a person of interest, Alex. You’re Googlestalked. Now you live your life with someone constantly looking over your shoulder. You know the mission statement, right? ‘Organize the World’s Information.’ Everything. Give it five years, we’ll know how many turds were in the bowl before you flushed. Combine that with automated suspicion of anyone who matches a statistical picture of a bad guy and you’re—”

“Scroogled.”

“Totally.” He nodded.

Sam took both labs down the hall to the bedroom. She heard a muffled argument with his boyfriend, and he came back alone.

“I can fix this,” he said in an urgent whisper. “After the Chinese started rounding up people, my podmates and I made it our 20 percent project to fuck with them.” (Among Google’s business innovations was a rule that required every employee to devote 20 percent of her or his time to high-minded pet projects.) “We call it the Googlecleaner. It goes deep into the database and statistically normalizes you. Your searches, your Gmail histograms, your browsing patterns. All of it. Alex, I can Googleclean you. It’s the only way.”

“I don’t want you to get into trouble.”

He shook his head. “I’m already doomed. Every day since I built the damn thing has been borrowed time—now it’s just a matter of waiting for someone to point out my expertise and history to the DHS and, oh, I don’t know. Whatever it is they do to people like me in the war on abstract nouns.”

Alex remembered the airport. The search. Her shirt, the boot print in the middle of it.

“Do it,” she said.

The Googlecleaner worked wonders. Alex could tell by the ads that popped up alongside her searches, ads clearly meant for someone else: Intelligent Design Facts, Online Seminary Degree, Terror Free Tomorrow, Porn Blocker Software, the Homosexual Agenda, Cheap Toby Keith Tickets. This was Sam’s program at work. Clearly Google’s new personalized search had her pegged as someone else entirely, a God-

fearing right winger with a thing for hat acts.

Which was fine by her.

Then she clicked on her address book, and found that half of her contacts were missing. Her Gmail in-box was hollowed out like a termite-ridden stump. Her Orkut profile, normalized. Her calendar, family photos, bookmarks: all empty. She hadn't quite realized before how much of her had migrated onto the Web and worked its way into Google's server farms—her entire online identity. Sam had scrubbed her to a high gloss; she'd become the invisible woman.

Alex sleepily mashed the keys on the laptop next to her bed, bringing the screen to life. She squinted at the flashing toolbar clock: 4:13 a.m.! Christ, who was pounding on her door at this hour?

She shouted, "Coming!" in a muzzy voice and pulled on a robe and slippers. She shuffled down the hallway, turning on lights as she went. At the door, she squinted through the peephole to find Sam staring glumly back at her. She undid the chains and dead bolt and yanked the door open. Sam rushed in past her, followed by the dogs and his boyfriend.

He was sheened in sweat, his usually combed hair clinging in clumps to his forehead. He rubbed at his eyes, which were red and lined.

"Pack a bag," he croaked hoarsely.

"What?"

He took her by the shoulders. "Do it," he said.

"Where do you want to...?"

"Mexico, probably. Don't know yet. Pack, dammit." He pushed past her into her bedroom and started yanking open drawers.

"Sam," she said sharply, "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on."

He glared at her and pushed his hair away from his face. "The Googlecleaner lives. After I cleaned you, I shut it down and walked away. It was too dangerous to use anymore. But it's still set to send me e-mail confirmations whenever it runs. Someone's used it six times to scrub three very specific accounts—all of which happen to belong to members of the Senate Commerce Committee up for reelection."

“Googlers are blackwashing senators?”

“Not Googlers. This is coming from off-site. The IP block is registered in D.C. And the IPs are all used by Gmail users. Guess who the accounts belong to?”

“You spied on Gmail accounts?”

“Okay. Yes. I did look through their e-mail. Everyone does it, now and again, and for a lot worse reasons than I did. But check it out—turns out all this activity is being directed by our lobbying firm. Just doing their job, defending the company’s interests.”

Alex felt her pulse beating in her temples. “We should tell someone.”

“It won’t do any good. They know everything about us. They can see every search. Every e-mail. Every time we’ve been caught on the webcams. Who is in our social network...did you know if you have 15 Orkut buddies, it’s statistically certain that you’re no more than three steps to someone who’s contributed money to a ‘terrorist’ cause? Remember the airport? You’ll be in for a lot more of that.”

“Sam,” Alex said, getting her bearings. “Isn’t heading to Mexico overreacting? Just quit. We can do a start-up or something. This is crazy.”

“They came to see me today,” he said. “Two of the political officers from DHS. They didn’t leave for hours. And they asked me a lot of very heavy questions.”

“About the Googlecleaner?”

“About my friends and family. My search history. My personal history.”

“Jesus.”

“They were sending a message to me. They’re watching every click and every search. It’s time to go. Time to get out of range.”

“There’s a Google office in Mexico, you know.”

“We’ve got to go,” he said, firmly.

“Laurie, what do you think of this?” Alex asked.

Laurie thumped the dogs between the shoulders. “My parents left East Germany in ’65. They used to tell me about the Stasi. The secret police would put everything about you in your file, if you told an unpatriotic joke,

whatever. Whether they meant it or not, what Google has created is no different.”

“Alex, are you coming?”

She looked at the dogs and shook her head. “I’ve got some pesos left over,” she said. “You take them. Be careful, okay?”

Sam looked like he was going to slug her. Softening, he gave her a ferocious hug.

“Be careful, yourself,” he whispered in her ear.

They came for her a week later. At home, in the middle of the night, just as she’d imagined they would.

Two women arrived on her doorstep shortly after 2 a.m. One stood silently by the door. The other was a smiler, short and rumped, in a sport coat with a stain on one lapel and an American flag on the other. “Alex Lupinski, we have reason to believe you’re in violation of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act,” she said, by way of introduction. “Specifically, exceeding authorized access, and by means of such conduct having obtained information. Ten years for a first offense. Turns out that what you and your friend did to your Google records qualifies as a felony. And oh, what will come out in the trial...all the stuff you whitewashed out of your profile, for starters.”

Alex had played this scene in her head for a week. She’d planned all kinds of brave things to say. It had given her something to do while she waited to hear from Sam. He never called.

“I’d like to get in touch with a lawyer,” is all she mustered.

“You can do that,” the small woman said. “But maybe we can come to a better arrangement.”

Alex found her voice. “I’d like to see your badge,” she stammered.

The woman’s basset-hound face lit up as she let out a bemused chuckle. “Buddy, I’m not a cop,” she replied. “I’m a consultant. Google hired me—my firm represents their interests in Washington—to build relationships. Of course, we wouldn’t get the police involved without talking to you first. You’re part of the family. Actually, there’s an offer I’d like to make.”

Alex turned to the coffeemaker, dumped the old filter.

“I’ll go to the press,” she said.

The woman nodded as if thinking it over. “Well, sure. You could walk into the Chronicle’s office in the morning and spill everything. They’d look for a confirming source. They won’t find one. And when they try searching for it, we’ll find them. So, buddy, why don’t you hear me out, okay? I’m in the win-win business. I’m very good at it.” she paused. “By the way, those are excellent beans, but you want to give them a little rinse first? Takes some of the bitterness out and brings up the oils. Here, pass me a colander?”

Alex watched as the woman silently took off her jacket and hung it over a kitchen chair, then undid her cuffs and carefully rolled them up, slipping a cheap digital watch into her pocket. She poured the beans out of the grinder and into Alex’s colander, and rinsed them in the sink.

She was a little pudgy and very pale, with the social grace of an electrical engineer. She seemed like a real Googler, actually, obsessed with the minutiae. She knew her way around a coffee grinder, too.

“We’re drafting a team for Building 49...”

“There is no Building 49,” Alex said automatically.

“Of course,” the chick said, flashing a tight smile. “There’s no Building 49. But we’re putting together a team to revamp the Googlecleaner. Sam’s code wasn’t very efficient, you know. It’s full of bugs. We need an upgrade. You’d be the right person, and it wouldn’t matter what you knew if you were back inside.”

“Unbelievable,” Alex said, laughing. “If you think I’m going to help you smear political candidates in exchange for favors, you’re crazier than I thought.”

“Alex,” the woman said, “we’re not smearing anyone. We’re just going to clean things up a bit. For some select people. You know what I mean? Everyone’s Google profile is a little scary under close inspection. Close inspection is the order of the day in politics. Standing for office is like a public colonoscopy.” she loaded the cafetière and depressed the plunger, her face screwed up in solemn concentration. Alex retrieved two coffee cups—Google mugs, of course—and passed them over.

“We’re going to do for our friends what Sam did for you. Just a little cleanup. All we want to do is preserve their privacy. That’s all.”

Alex sipped her coffee. “What happens to the candidates you don’t clean?”

The Stasi put everything about you in a file. Whether they meant to or not, what Google did is no different.

“Yeah,” the chick said, flashing Alex a weak grin. “Yeah, you’re right. It’ll be kind of tough for them.” she searched the inside pocket of her jacket and produced several folded sheets of paper. She smoothed out the pages and put them on the table. “Here’s one of the good guys who needs our help.” It was a printout of a search history belonging to a candidate whose campaign Alex had contributed to in the past three elections.

“Lass gets back to her hotel room after a brutal day of campaigning door to door, fires up her laptop, and types ‘hot asses’ into her search bar. Big deal, right? The way we see it, for that to disqualify a good woman from continuing to serve her country is just un-American.”

Alex nodded slowly.

“So you’ll help the girl out?” the woman asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. There’s one more thing. We need you to help us find Sam. He didn’t understand our goals at all, and now he seems to have flown the coop. Once he hears us out, I have no doubt he’ll come around.”

She glanced at the candidate’s search history.

“I guess he might,” Alex replied.

The new Congress took 11 working days to pass the Securing and Enumerating America’s Communications and Hypertext Act, which authorized the DHS and NSA to outsource up to 80 percent of intelligence and analysis work to private contractors. Theoretically, the contracts were open to competitive bidding, but within the secure confines of Google’s Building 49, there was no question of who would win. If Google had spent \$15 billion on a program to catch bad guys at the border, you can bet they would have caught them—governments just aren’t equipped to Do Search Right.

The next morning Alex scrutinized her self carefully as she shaved (the security minders didn't like hacker stubble and weren't shy about telling her so), realizing that today was her first day as a de facto intelligence agent for the U.S. government. How bad would it be? Wasn't it better to have Google doing this stuff than some ham-fisted DHS desk jockey?

By the time she parked at the Googleplex, among the hybrid cars and bulging bike racks, she had convinced her self. She was mulling over which organic smoothie to order at the canteen when her key card failed to open the door to Building 49. The red LED flashed dumbly every time she swiped her card. Any other building, and there'd be someone to tailgate on, people trickling in and out all day. But the Googlers in 49 only emerged for meals, and sometimes not even that.

Swipe, swipe, swipe. Suddenly she heard a voice at her side.

"Alex, can I see you, please?"

The rumpled woman put an arm around her shoulders, and Alex smelled her citrusy perfume. It smelled like what her divemaster in Baja had worn when they went out to the bars in the evening. Alex couldn't remember her name. Juan Carlos? Juan Luis?

The woman's arm around her shoulders was firm, steering her away from the door, out onto the immaculate lawn, past the herb garden outside the kitchen. "We're giving you a couple of days off," she said.

Alex felt a sudden stab of anxiety. "Why?" Had she done something wrong? Was she going to jail?

"It's Sam." The woman turned her around, met her eyes with her bottomless gaze. "He killed himself. In Guatemala. I'm sorry, Alex."

Alex seemed to hurtle away, to a place miles above, a Google Earth view of the Googleplex, where she looked down on her self and the rumpled woman as a pair of dots, two pixels, tiny and insignificant. She willed her self to tear at her hair, to drop to her knees and weep.

From a long way away, she heard her self say, "I don't need any time off. I'm okay."

From a long way away, she heard the rumpled woman insist.

The argument persisted for a long time, and then the two pixels moved

into Building 49, and the door swung shut behind them.



Cory Doctorow (craphound.com) is a science fiction author, activist, journalist and blogger—the co-editor of Boing Boing (boingboing.net) and the author of the YA graphic novel *In Real Life*, the nonfiction business book *Information Doesn't Want to Be Free*, young adult novels like *Homeland*, *Pirate Cinema*, and *Little Brother*, and novels for adults like *Rapture of the Nerds* and *Makers*. He works for the Electronic Frontier Foundation and co-founded the UK Open Rights Group. Born in Toronto, Canada, he now lives in Los Angeles.

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Nanolaw with Daughter

by Paul Ford

On a Sunday morning before her soccer practice, not long after my daughter's tenth birthday, she and I sat down on the couch with our tablets and I taught her to respond to lawsuits on her own. I told her to read the first message.

"It says it's in French," she said. "Do I translate?"

"Does it have a purple flag on it?"

"No," she said.

"You don't actually have to worry about it unless it has a purple flag."

She hesitated. "Can I read it?" she asked.

"If you want to read it go ahead."

She switched the screen from French to English and read out the results: "Notice from the Democratic Republic of Congo related to the actions of King Leopold II."

This was what I'd been avoiding. So much evil in the world and why did she need to know about all of it, at once? But for months she'd asked—begged—to answer her own suits. I'd told her to wait, to stop trying to grow up so fast, you'll have your whole lifetime to get sued. Until finally she said: "When I'm ten? I can do it when I'm ten?" And I'd said, "sure, after you're ten." Somehow that had seemed far off. I had willed it to be far off.

"Honey," I explained, "you'll get a lot of those kinds. What happened is, a long time ago, the country Belgium took over this country Congo and killed a lot of people and made everyone slaves. The people who are descendants of those slaves, their government gave them the right to ask other people for damages."

“I didn’t *do* anything. I thought you had to do something.”

Where do you start? Litigation-flow tariff policy? Post-colonial genocide reparations microsuits? Is there a book somewhere, *Telling Your Daughter About Nanolaw*?

“You know,” I asked, “how you have to be careful about giving away information?”

She did. We talk about that almost every day.

“So this is *why* you have to be careful,” I said. “They buy a whole lot of files. So in this case, they could purchase, like—when people do genetic testing to learn about their families? They’d buy all the records and see who is from Belgium. Or if you watched a soccer game with Belgium in it, or you have just one Belgian friend on your network. They take the records for billions of people and put it all together and do math.”

She nodded, but couldn’t get past the fundamental problem: “Why *me*?”

“If you’re going to answer suits by yourself, you have to understand that to these people, you aren’t *you*. You are stuff they found in a box.” I considered for a moment. “Remember two years ago, you bought the code dog for Griffin Village?” God knows I remembered. Each of her 100 Griffin Points, when earned, was heralded by a shrill trumpet noise, and my daughter’s even more shrill cries of joy. The dog had been named—Wallace? Waffles? No, it was Willie, and she used her 100 Griffin Points to buy a Billy Cat. Which caused more shrieking. Those were long months. “Maybe Willie Dog was programmed by Belgians? Or maybe Griffin Points is backed by a bank in Belgium and we never knew. The people in Congo might not even know. It might not even be the people in Congo but instead people in Italy doing it and they’ll give money to the Congo people if they win anything. It might be that their computer thinks it’s possible. But ultimately their government thinks that it’s fair for these people to demand some of your money.”

“I never *got* anything from Belgium.”

“They think you did,” I said. “And see, they could be right. They have to be a little bit right to file in the first place and have it go out through a *suenet* without getting filtered. Maybe it’s not Griffin points. It could be anything.”

“But that’s amazingly *stupid*,” she said, forgetting now, I saw, how badly she’d wanted to do this. She had imagined that we were denying her access to some adult mystery, not shielding her from drudgework. That’s a lesson too, right? Or was it a mistake to let her try? She already did her own laundry and had a bank account. Other girls had been answering lawsuits since they learned to read, lawyers’ kids especially. “It’s just part of life,” I said. “You have to think about yourself not as a person but as data.”

My daughter was first sued in the womb. It was all very new then. I’d posted ultrasound scans online for friends and family. I didn’t know the scans had steganographic thumbprints. A giant electronics company that made ultrasound machines acquired a speculative law firm for many tens of millions of dollars. The new legal division cut a deal with all five Big Socials to dig out contact information for anyone who’d posted pictures of their babies in-utero. It turns out the ultrasounds had no clear rights story; I didn’t actually own mine. It sounds stupid now but we didn’t know. The first backsuits named millions of people, and the Big Socials just *caved*, ripped up their privacy policies in exchange for a cut. So five months after I posted the ultrasounds, one month before my daughter was born, we received a letter (back then a paper letter) naming myself, my wife, and one or more unidentified fetal defendants in a suit. We faced, I learned, unspecified penalties for copyright violation and theft of trade secrets, and risked, it was implied, that my daughter would be born bankrupt.

But for \$50.00 and processing fees the ultrasound shots I’d posted (copies attached) were mine forever, as long as I didn’t republish without permission.

Of course I consented, going to the site-of-record and tapping the little thumbs-up box to release funds. And here we were ten years later, thinking of Belgium.

I asked my daughter: “How much do they want?”

She looked down at the screen. She is quiet and serious when working. “Two euro cents.”

“Normally one like that I’d just go ahead and pay, except it doesn’t have a purple flag. The purple flag means our government said they could sue people here in America. But if it’s from another country without a purple

flag you can ignore it.”

“So I’m not actually in trouble?”

“You’re never in trouble. You didn’t do anything wrong. You’re just named. And in this case they can’t actually claim damages. Trash it.”

She looked relieved. The rights of the Congolese were not her problem this morning. Her mother called from the other room: “Soccer soon.”

“Okay,” we both yelled back.

“How many are left?” I asked.

She looked at her tablet and said: “Fifty-seven.”

“We can handle that,” I said. I walked her through the rest: Get rid of the ones without flags. Pay those a dime or less by hitting the dime button. How many now? (Only six.) We went through the six: Four copyright claims, all sub-dollar and quickly paid.

She opened the penultimate message and smiled. “Dad,” she said, “look.”

We had gone to a baseball game at the beginning of the season. They had played a song on the public address system, and she sang along without permission. They used to factor that into ticket price—they still do if you pay extra or have a season pass—but now other companies handled the followup. And here was the video from that day, one of many tens of thousands simultaneously recorded from gun scanners on the stadium roof. In the video my daughter wore a cap and a blue T-shirt. I sat beside her, my arm over her shoulder, grinning. Her voice was clear and high; the ambient roar of the audience beyond us filtered down to static.

It had been only a few months, but already she seemed older than the singing girl. Soon, we had been warned, she’d demand a cryptographic shield for her diary. “It’s terrible,” said one friend whose daughter is thirteen. “I think, what if she’s abducted and I need to read her messages, and the police can’t read them? What if she runs away but all of her logs are locked? How do I keep her safe with all of those secrets?” But our family is not yet there. If I ask her politely, my daughter will look left, then right, then squash her nose into my cheek and whisper her Griffin Village password. I would never tell.

Watching the video I thought that it was wise of Major League Baseball to combine this sort of sentimental moment with mass speculative litigation. It kept brand values strong. I felt strangely *grateful* that I could have a moment to remember that afternoon. Surprised by the evidence of both copyright violation and father-daughter affection.

I told my waiting daughter to go ahead and pay the few dollars, just part of the latent cost of a ticket. She tapped and the tablet made its cash-register sound, and the video was irrevocably destroyed so that it could never again be shared. She opened the final message.

“What’s a mutual-risk paternity?” she asked.

“It doesn’t apply to you,” I said. “It’s for boys.”

“But what is it?”

“Later,” I said. I felt like I had done enough fathering for the morning. “Just trash it so you’re not late for soccer.”

A final chime.

“Good work,” I said.

She squinted at the screen. “I can do this now,” she said. “I can do it on my own.”

“You have to check it every day,” I said. “Time, tide, and law wait for no man.”

She looked at me and rolled her eyes (like her mother, her eyes are brown), dismissed the arbitration client and swiped the tablet to sleep.

She asked: “Can I sue people?”

This surprised me. “Yes,” I said. “Most people don’t but if you have a good reason you can sue anyone.”

“Cool,” she said. Off she went to find her shin guards.

I was of a generation where one group sued and a much larger group was named. But perhaps her generation sees this as part of the traffic of daily life, a territory to explore. Every one a little lawyer.

My wife was on patrol, repeating the time, pointing out when asked where to find a water bottle, where to find a jacket, where to find a hair scrunchy. Finally my daughter had her act together. I watched them leave.

Here is how it would go, I imagined. Daughter and Mother would walk together to the park. They would talk about this morning's conversation. Mother would confirm that handling your own suits is a serious responsibility, that you can't let them pile up or that will send the signal that you were susceptible to liens.

Mother would explain what liens are. Daughter, well-intentioned, would half-listen and send messages to a dozen friends as they walked, each message another flash on the map. Mother would ask Daughter to please keep her wits about her crossing the street, and threaten to take away her phone. (I make the same empty threat many times a day.) Mother and Daughter would arrive at the field in the park, late but not very.

Then would come the game. Cameras in the phone of every parent. Sensors on the goals; sensors in the ref's whistle; in the ball; in the lamps that light the field. Yellow cards, goals, offsides, all recorded from many angles and tagged with time, location, temperature, whether for the memories or to limit liability—the motion of 22 bobbing ponytails transformed into lines of light.

One team would win; another team would lose; or they'd tie; or it would rain. All would go home. And days or decades from now, someone will find a way to cull, to merge, to bend the bobbing ponytails to their own ends and use them in some scheme. They will steal that light as if were nothing, as if it were not life itself.

Paul Ford is a writer, programmer, and co-founder of Postlight, a New York City agency that creates Internet platforms and designs and builds web and mobile products. He has been an editor, essayist, novelist, and radio commentator, and is often found building content management systems for fun. He writes regularly for Medium's *The Message* and has a column in *The New Republic* about databases, called Big Data. In addition to managing Postlight, he is writing a book about Web pages for the publisher FSG, to be published in 2016.

“Nanolaw with Daughter” was previously published on Ftrain.com.

Changes

by Neil Gaiman

1.

Later, they would point to his sister's death, the cancer that ate her twelve-year old life, tumours the size of duck eggs in her brain, and him a boy of seven, snot-nosed and crew-cut, watching her die in the white hospital with his wide brown eyes, and they would say "that was the start of it all," and perhaps it was.

In *Reboot* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 2018), the biopic, they jump-cut to his teens, and he's watching his science teacher die of AIDS, following their argument over dissecting a large pale-stomached frog.

"Why should we take it apart?" says the young Rajit, as the music swells, "Instead, should we not give it life?" His teacher, played by the late James Earl Jones, looks shamed, and then inspired, and he lifts his hand from his hospital bed to the boy's bony shoulder. "Well, if anyone can do it, Rajit, you can," he says in a deep bass rumble.

The boy nods, and stares at us with a dedication in his eyes that borders upon fanaticism.

This never happened.

2.

It is a grey November day, and Rajit is now a tall man in his forties, with dark-rimmed spectacles, which he is not currently wearing. The lack of spectacles emphasises his nudity. He is sitting in the bath, as the water gets cold, practising the conclusion to his speech. He stoops, a little, in

everyday life, although he is not stooping now, and he considers his words before he speaks. He is not a good public speaker.

The apartment in Brooklyn, which he shares with another research scientist and a librarian, is empty today. His penis is shrunken and nut-like in the tepid water. “What this means,” he says, loudly and slowly, “is that the war against cancer has been won.”

Then he pauses, takes a question from an imaginary reporter, standing on the other side of the bathroom.

“Side effects?” he replies to himself in an echoing bathroom voice. “Yes, there are some side effects. But, as far as we have been able to ascertain, nothing that will create any permanent changes.”

He climbs out of the battered porcelain bathtub, and walks, naked, to the toilet bowl, into which he throws up, violently, the stage fright ripping through him like a gutting-knife. When there is nothing more to throw up and the dry heaves have subsided, Rajit washes his mouth with Listerine, gets dressed, and takes the subway into central Manhattan.

3.

It is, as *Time Magazine* will point out, a discovery that would ‘change the nature of medicine every bit as fundamentally and as importantly as the discovery of penicillin’.

“What if,” says Jeff Goldblum, playing the adult Rajit in the biopic, “just—what if—you could reset the body’s genetic code? So many ills come because the body has forgotten what it should be doing. The code has become scrambled. The program has become corrupted. What if... what if you could fix it?”

“You’re crazy,” retorts his lovely blonde girlfriend, in the movie. In real life, he has no girlfriend; in real life Rajit’s sex-life is a fitful series of commercial transactions between Rajit and the young men of the AAA-Ajax Escort Agency.

“Hey,” says Jeff Goldblum, putting it better than Rajit ever did, “it’s like a computer. Instead of trying to fix the glitches caused by a corrupted program one by one, symptom by symptom, you can just reinstall the

program. All the information's there all along. We just have to tell our bodies to go and recheck the RNA and the DNA—reread the program if you will. And then reboot.”

The blonde actress smiles, and stops his words with a kiss, amused and impressed and passionate.

4.

The woman has cancer of the spleen and of the lymph nodes and abdomen: non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. She also has pneumonia. She has agreed to Rajit's request to use an experimental treatment on her. She also knows that claiming to cure cancer is illegal in America. She was a fat woman until recently: the weight has fallen from her, and she reminds Rajit of a snowman in the sun: each day she melts, each day she is, he feels, less defined.

“It is not a drug as you understand it,” he tells her. “It is a set of chemical instructions.” She looks blank. He injects two ampules of a clear liquid into her veins.

Soon, she sleeps.

When she awakes she is free of cancer. The pneumonia kills her, soon after that.

Rajit has spent the two days before her death wondering how he will explain the fact that, as the autopsy demonstrates beyond a doubt, the patient now has a penis and is, in every respect, functionally and chromosomally male.

5.

It is twenty years later, in a tiny apartment in New Orleans (although it might as well be in Moscow, or Manchester, or Paris, or Berlin). Tonight is going to be a big night, and Jo/e is going to stun.

The choice is between a Polonaise crinoline style eighteenth century French court dress (fibre-glass bustle, underwired décolletage setting off

lace-embroidered crimson bodice) and a reproduction of Sir Phillip Sydney's court dress, in black velvet and silver thread, complete with ruff and codpiece. Eventually, and after weighing all the options, Jo/e plumps for cleavage over cock. Twelve hours to go: Jo/e opens the bottle with the red pills, each little red pill marked with an X, and pops two of them. It's ten a.m., and Jo/e goes to bed, begins to masturbate, penis semi-hard, but falls asleep before coming.

The room is very small. Clothes hang from every surface. An empty pizza box sits on the floor. Jo/e snores loudly, normally, but when freebooting Jo/e makes no sound at all, and might as well be in some kind of coma.

Jo/e wakes at ten p.m. feeling tender and new. Back when Jo/e first started on the party scene, each change would prompt a severe self-examination, peering at moles and nipples, foreskin or clit, finding out which scars had vanished and which ones had remained. But now Jo/e's an old hand at this, and puts on the bustle, the petticoat, the bodice and the gown, new breasts (high and conical) pushed together, petticoat trailing the floor, which means Jo/e can wear the forty-year-old pair of Doctor Marten's boots underneath (you never know when you'll need to run, or to walk or to kick, and silk slippers do no-one any favours).

High, powder-look wig completes the look. And a spray of cologne. Then Jo/e's hand fumbles at the petticoat, a finger pushes between the legs (Jo/e wears no knickers, claiming a desire for authenticity to which the Doc. Marten's give the lie) and then dabs it behind the ears, for luck, perhaps, or to help pull. The taxi rings the door at 11:05, and Jo/e goes downstairs. Jo/e goes to the ball.

Tomorrow night Jo/e will take another dose; Jo/e's job identity during the week is strictly male-identified.

6.

Rajit never viewed the gender rewriting action of Reboot as anything more than a side effect. The Nobel Prize was for anti-cancer work (rebooting worked for most cancers, it was discovered, but not all of them).

For a clever man Rajit was remarkably short-sighted. There were a few

things he failed to foresee. For example:

That there would be people who, dying of cancer, would rather die than experience a change in gender. And they did.

That the Catholic Church would come out against Rajit's chemical trigger, marketed by this point under the brand name Reboot, chiefly because the gender change caused a female body to reabsorb into itself the flesh of a foetus as it rebooted itself: males cannot be pregnant. A number of other religious sects would come out against Reboot, most of them citing Genesis I. 27, '*male and female created He them*', as their reason.

(Sects who came out against Reboot included: Islam; Christian Science; the Russian Orthodox Church; the Roman Catholic Church (with a number of dissenting voices); the Unification Church; Orthodox Trek Fandom; Orthodox Judaism; the Fundamentalist Alliance of the USA.

Sects who came out in favour of Reboot use where deemed the appropriate treatment by a qualified medical doctor included: most Buddhists; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; the Greek Orthodox Church; the Church of Scientology; the Anglican Church (with a number of dissenting voices); New Trek Fandom; Liberal and Reform Judaism; The New Age Coalition of America.

Sects who initially came out in favour of using Reboot recreationally: none.)

While Rajit realised that Reboot would make Gender reassignment surgery obsolete, it never occurred to him that anyone might wish to take it for reasons of desire or curiosity or escape. Thus, he never foresaw the black market in Reboot and similar chemical triggers; nor that, within fifteen years of Reboot's commercial release and FDA approval, illegal sales of the designer Reboot knock-offs (*bootlegs*, as they were soon known) would outsell heroin and cocaine, gram for gram, more than ten times over.

7.

In several of the New Communist States of Eastern Europe, possession of

bootlegs carried a mandatory death sentence.

In Thailand and Mongolia it was reported that boys were being forcibly rebooted into girls, to increase their worth as prostitutes.

In China, newborn girls were rebooted to boys: families would save all they had for a single dose. The old people died of cancer as before. The subsequent birthrate crisis was not perceived as a problem until it was too late, the proposed drastic solutions proved difficult to implement and led, in their own way, to the final revolution.

Amnesty International reported that in several of the Pan-Arabic countries men who could not easily demonstrate that they had been born male, and were not in fact women escaping the veil, were being imprisoned and, in many cases, raped and killed. Most Arab leaders denied that either phenomenon was occurring or had ever occurred.

8.

Rajit is in his sixties when he reads in the *New Yorker* that the word 'Change' is gathering to itself connotations of deep indecency and taboo.

Schoolchildren giggle embarrassedly when they encounter phrases like '*I needed a change*' or '*Time for change*' or '*The Winds of Change*' in their studies of pre-Twenty-First Century Literature. In an English class in Norwich horrified smutty sniggers greet a fourteen-year old's discovery of "*a change is as good as a rest*".

A representative of the King's English Society writes a letter to the *Times*, deploring the loss of another perfectly good word to the English language.

Several years later a youth in Streatham is successfully prosecuted for publically wearing a tee shirt with the slogan "I'm a Changed Man!" printed clearly upon it.

9.

Jackie works in *Blossoms*, a nightclub in West Hollywood. There are

dozens, if not hundreds of Jackies in Los Angeles, thousands of them across the country, hundreds of thousands across the world.

Some of them work for the government, some for religious organisations, or for businesses. In New York, London and Los Angeles, people like Jackie are on the door at the places that the In-Crowds go.

This is what Jackie does. Jackie watches the crowd coming in, and thinks, “Born M now F, Born F now M, Born M now M, Born M now F, Born F now F...”

On “Natural Nights” (crudely, *unchanged*) Jackie says “I’m sorry. You can’t come in tonight,” a lot. People like Jackie have a 97% accuracy rate. An article in *Scientific American* suggests that birth gender recognition skills might be genetically inherited: an ability that always existed but had no strict survival values until now.

Jackie is ambushed in the small hours of the morning, walking out from *Blossoms*, in the parking lot out the back, and as each new boot crashes or thuds into Jackie’s face and chest and head and groin, Jackie thinks “Born M now F, born F now F, Born F now M, born M now M...”.

When Jackie gets out of hospital, vision in one eye only, face and chest one huge purple-green bruise, there is a message, sent with an enormous bunch of exotic flowers, to say that Jackie’s job is still open.

However Jackie takes the bullet train to Chicago, and from there takes a slow train to Kansas City, and stays there, working as a housepainter and electrician, professions for which Jackie had trained a long time before, and does not go back.

10.

Rajit is now in his seventies. He lives in Rio de Janeiro. He is rich enough to satisfy any whim; he will, however, will no longer have sex with anyone. He eyes them all distrustfully, from his apartment’s window, staring down at the bronzed bodies on the Copacabana, wondering.

The people on the beach think no more of him than a teenager with chlamydia gives thanks to Alexander Fleming. Most of them imagine that Rajit must be dead by now. None of them care either way.

It is suggested that certain cancers have evolved or mutated to survive rebooting. Many bacterial and viral diseases can survive rebooting. A handful even thrive upon rebooting, and one—a strain of gonorrhoea—is hypothesised to use rebooting in its vectoring, initially remaining dormant in the host body and becoming infectious only when the genitalia have reorganised into that of the opposite gender.

Still, the average western human lifespan is increasing.

Why some freebooters—recreational Reboot users—appear to age normally, while others give no indication of aging at all is something that puzzles scientists. Some claim that the latter group are actually aging, on a cellular level. Others maintain that it is too soon to tell, and that no-one knows anything for certain.

Rebooting does not reverse the aging process, however. There is evidence that, for some, it may arrest it. Many of the older generation, who have until now been resistant to rebooting for pleasure, begin to take it regularly—freebooting—whether they have a medical condition that warrants it or no.

11.

Loose coins become known as *coinage* or, occasionally, *specie*.

The process of making different or altering is now usually known as *shifting*.

12.

Rajit is dying of prostate cancer in his Rio apartment. He is now in his early nineties. He has never taken Reboot; the idea now terrifies him. The cancer has spread to the bones of his pelvis, and to his testes.

He rings the bell. There is a short wait, for the nurse's daily soap opera to be turned off, the cup of coffee put down. Eventually his nurse comes in.

“Take me out into the air,” he says to the nurse, his voice hoarse. At first

the nurse affects not to understand him. He repeats it, in his rough Portuguese. A shake of the head from his nurse.

He pulls himself out of the bed—a shrunken figure, stooped so badly as to be almost hunchbacked, and so frail that it seems that a storm would blow him over—and begins to walk toward the door of the apartment.

His nurse tries, and fails, to dissuade him. And then the nurse walks with him to the apartment hall, and holds his arm as they wait for the elevator. He has not left the apartment in two years, even before the cancer Rajit did not leave the apartment. He is almost blind.

The nurse walks him out into the blazing sun, across the road, and down onto the sand of the Copacabana.

The people on the beach stare at the old man, bald and rotten, in his antique pyjamas, gazing about him with colourless once-brown eyes through bottle-thick dark-rimmed spectacles.

And he stares back at them.

They are golden, and beautiful. Some of them are asleep on the sand. Most of them are naked, or they wear the kind of bathing clothes that emphasise and punctuate their nakedness.

Rajit knows them, then.

Later, much later, they made another biopic. In the final sequence the old man falls to his knees in the soft sand, as he did in real life, and blood trickles from the open flap of his pyjama-bottoms, soaking the faded cotton and puddling darkly onto the sand. He stares at them all, looking from one to another with awe upon his face, like a man who has finally learned how to stare at the sun.

He said one word only as he died, surrounded by the golden people, who were not men, who were not women.

He said, “Angels.”

And the people watching the biopic, as golden, as beautiful, as *changed* as the people on the beach, knew that that was the end of it all.

And in any way that Rajit would have understood, it was.

Neil Gaiman is an author of short fiction, novels, comic books, graphic novels, audio theatre and films. His notable works include the comic book series *The Sandman* and novels *Stardust*, *American Gods*, *Coraline*, and *The Graveyard Book*. He has won numerous awards, including the Hugo, Nebula, and Bram Stoker awards, as well as the Newbery and Carnegie medals. In 2013, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* was voted Book of the Year in the British National Book Awards.

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The Light Brigade

by Kameron Hurley

The war has turned us into light.

Transforming us into light is the fastest way to travel from one front to another, and there are many fronts, now. I always wanted to be a hero. I always wanted to be on the side of light. It's funny how things work out.

But I've been doing this long enough now to know what I really am.

I didn't believe we could turn people into light when I signed up for service after the San Paulo Blink. When you saw what the aliens did to that city without even sending an army there, you knew you had to do something, even if it was dangerous. What happened to all those people doesn't compare to what I have to do. I guess the Blink gave me an idea of the tech involved in what we were expected to do, as corporate soldiers. But it's hard to understand a thing when all you know about it is what people say about it. It's like having sex, or getting into a fight. You don't understand it until you do it.

We jumped first during our six week orientation, which the CO still calls basic training, even though there hasn't been a public army in almost a century. They inject you with a lot of stuff in training. They don't even wait to see if you wash out, because even if you wash out, they still need you. You don't opt-out of this war anymore, not like you could in the early days. If you want to eat at the corporate store, you support the war.

Anyway, you don't even know what any of this shit is they're pumping you full of. They say it makes you faster, smarter, tougher, and who wouldn't want that? You can't say no. Not that you'd want to. Not if you're a real soldier.

And I am. I'm a real soldier.

A real fucking hero.

I'm made of light.

They say the first drop is the toughest, but it's not. It's the one after that, because you know what's coming. You know how bad it is, and what the odds are that you'll come back wrong.

Who are we fighting? The bad guys. They're always the bad guys, right? We gave these alien people half the northern hemisphere to rehabilitate, because it was such a fucking wreck after the Seed Wars that nobody cared who settled it. Nothing would grow there until they came. The aliens had this technology that they developed when they split from us on Earth and built their colonies on Mars. We cut ourselves off from them when they left, so it was a real surprise when some of them asked to come back. I guess they thought they were saving us, but we don't need saving. The tech, whatever it was, got rid of all the radiation and restored the soil, probably the same way it did on Mars after the Water Riots. And stuff grew. We trusted them, but they betrayed us. That's what the networks say, and that's what my CO says, but I'm here because they betrayed San Paulo.

That one I could see. That one I could believe.

Anyway. The drop. The first drop.

You burst apart like... Well, first your whole body shakes. Then every muscle gets taut as a wire. My CO says it's like a contraction when you're having a kid, and if that's true, if just one is like that, then I don't know how everybody who has a kid isn't dead already, because that's bullshit.

Then you vibrate, you really vibrate, because every atom in your body is being ripped apart. It's breaking you up like in those old sci-fi shows, but it's not quick, it's not painless and you're aware of every minute of it. You don't have a body anymore, but you're aware, you're locked in, you're a beam of fucking light.

You're a Paladin. A hero of the fucking light.

My first drop, we came in on our beams of light and burned down the woods the alien insurgents were in before our feet had even

corporealized. We burned up at least a dozen of the enemy right there. But the worst one was the second drop, like I said, when we came down to protect a convoy under fire in the aliens' territory in Canuck. We came down right there in their farms and traded fire. It's confusing when you come down in the middle of something already going on, OK? Sometimes the energy weapons go right through you, because there's not enough of you stuck together yet. But sometimes you've come together just enough, and they hit you, and either you're meat enough for it to kill you, or all your atoms break apart, and you're nothing. You ghost out.

I've seen a lot of people ghost out.

I came together and started firing. It's what they train us to do, so it wasn't my fault. I hit an alien girl – some civilian at the farm. She wasn't even fifteen. I could hear her and her mother screaming. Their whole family, screaming, because I'd hit her and her legs were gone.

When the fight was over, our medic went to help them, but it didn't matter. She wasn't going to walk unless somebody regrew her legs and only executives have those corporate benefits. I only fired once. One shot. But one is all it takes. You just have to deal with it, when bad things happen to you, especially if you're an alien, because nobody wants to help you.

I deal with it when bad things happen. So should she.

I still hear her and her mom screaming sometimes.

They're aliens, sure.

But.

But it wasn't so long ago that they lived here, before they all ran off to Mars and made some big colony. We welcomed them back like they weren't aliens, but they are. They are aliens. They aren't like us. They are really different. They have a whole other language. Different clothes. They have these socialist ideas that mean shitting on you if you're an individual at all. They're just drones, really, doing whatever their collective tells them. They're aliens. They're the enemy.

I can hear her screaming.

You still don't get it.

I'm not stupid. I don't believe everything they pump us full of. I don't believe all the networks. I've been on too many grassy alien fields for that. Seen too many people dead – ours and theirs – and the faces all look the same. I ask about the San Paulo Blink a lot now, and nobody has good answers for me. Like, why did they pick San Paulo? And, why did these aliens come down from Mars but the others didn't? And, if what they did in San Paulo was so bad, why are we using the same tech to fight them?

They don't like us to ask questions. They try to train it out of you, not just if you're a corporate soldier, but for workers, too. The corporation knows best, right?

I dated this girl once, this really smart girl. She was getting a Ph.D. in one of those social sciences. She said there's this thing called escalation of commitment. That once people have invested a certain amount of time in a project, they won't quit, even if it's no longer a good deal. Even if they're losing. War is like that. No one wants to admit they're losing. They've already lost so much.

You know what you are. What you're becoming. And you can't stop it. You're committed. It doesn't matter how much people scream or how many you kill whose faces looks like yours. This is your job. This is what you're trained for. It's who you are. You can't separate them.

Do you get it?

When I signed up after San Paulo, me and my friends were shocked that the recruiting center wasn't packed. Where were all the patriots? Didn't they know what the aliens had done? Didn't they know we had to defend ourselves? I thought all those people who didn't sign up were cowards. While you were all upgrading your fucking social tech and masturbating to some new game, we were fighting the real threat. We were real adults, and you were cowardly little shits.

I joined up because the aliens were ruining the world. I joined up because I thought I was the good guy.

We're the good guys.

We're made of light.

I wish I was as stupid as I used to be.

I see things, when I become the light. You're not supposed to.

I want to tell you there's a humming sound, when you start to break apart, but the shrink says that's impossible. Light doesn't hear things. They tell us that we can't see or feel anything either, but that's a lie, and anyone who's been through it and tells you they don't see or hear anything is lying because they don't want to spend the rest of their lives in a freak house. We all see things in transit. It doesn't mean you're bad or crazy. It doesn't mean you're a bad soldier.

I'm not a bad soldier.

The first time I saw something I remembered was on my third drop. I saw a white rose on a black table. That's it. Just a single image, a flash, fast as the moment it took me to make the transit. The shrink says it's just my brain making things up. Faulty electrical charges, a side effect of the process that breaks up our atoms.

But I saw that image again a couple weeks later, in real life, inside my own meat. I went out to dinner with my squad, and we sat at these dark tables and this lady came around, this old bag lady, and I'm not sure who let her in, but she came around with roses and she was selling them to people.

One of the girls bought a white rose from the lady and laughed and put it on the table. A white rose on a black table. It was placed on the table just the way it was when I saw it in transit during the drop. I stared at it a long time, so long the bag lady tapped my shoulder and asked if I wanted a rose. I shrugged her off, but she squeezed my bare arm and said, "You will go back to the city. You will know why it's full of light." And then she left us.

I drank and laughed and tried to forget it, but it was creepy. And the visions kept happening. I kept seeing things twice – once in transit, and once in real life.

I told the shrink about it and she said it was just déjà vu, when you think you've seen something you've seen before. It happens a lot and it's not weird, she said. No one is sure why it happens more to members of the Light Brigade than other people (we call ourselves the Light Brigade. The

CO hates it). She said we get it even more than people with epileptic seizures. It's the folks with seizures that make them think it has something to do with electrical discharges in the brain that cause faults in the way you store memories. It's not that you've really seen what you're seeing before, she tells me. It's that your brain already wrote the memory, but the conscious part of you doesn't register that it was written just a blink ago. You *feel* like it was a long time ago, but it wasn't. It's a false feeling. Or maybe, she says, it's just that there are some familiar things in some setting you're in, and so you feel it happened before.

It was when she gave me that, "Or maybe" part that I realized they have no idea what they're talking about, just like with everything.

And once I started seeing things... I started trying to prolong them, those visions. I started corporealizing a half second after everyone else, then a second, then a few seconds, then a full minute, and lingering in those visions just a little longer.

If I was making it all up, if it was *déjà vu*, how could I do that?

But because I'm not stupid, I go along with it. I tell her yeah, sure, that makes sense. It's just a faulty memory. It's just being part of the Light Brigade.

You see things other people aren't supposed to see.

When did it change, for me?

Not orientation. Not the first drop. Not that girl I hurt. Not the *deja vu*.

It changed when we cornered them in their biggest city, a year into my service. Virgin target, the CO said; totally untouched by drones and viral bursts and our Light Brigade. They wanted to see how some new weapon would perform against a target nobody had touched.

I should have guessed what the weapon would be.

I was part of the squad that volunteered to deliver the weapon. They didn't just inject us with shit for this one; they put us under. I don't know what they did. When I woke up, the world was a little green around the edges, and it was tough to figure out how to make words for a couple

hours. My tongue was numb. I couldn't feel my toes. But after that I felt pretty normal. Or, what I'd consider normal by then; waking up with night sweats, puking after anxiety attacks. Normal.

Then they sent us out. Busted us down into light.

I broke apart fast, faster than ever, and in the agonizing few seconds it took us to reach this new front at the speed of light, I saw a glowing green field full of bodies heaped up like hay bales. They weren't alien bodies. They were *us*. Our suits. Our faces. And they spread out all around me, as far as I could see. There was a big city in the distance, a city I didn't know, its shining spires reflecting a massive sea that was so still it might have been a lake.

Something had gone very wrong here. We had done something very wrong, and we had paid for it. I stretched the moment out, tried to hold it. I didn't just get a few seconds this time, but a couple minutes. And I could... sort of sense myself there, like I was visiting myself. But how was I there, over that city, and over this one, at the same time?

I had this moment of dissonance as I was coming together over the drop zone, like I saw that city and this one lying right on top of each other.

Blink.

My vision blurred, and I was over the real city, the *now* city, the alien city again, the virgin target we were there to destroy. The city I'd come to obliterate.

We started corporealizing over the enemy's biggest port city, the shining pearl of that empire they carved out in Canuck. It unfurled from the flat black desert they had turned into a golden prairie, the way I imagined Oz appeared to Dorothy at the end of the yellow brick road.

It was beautiful. The pinnacle of some great civilization. So clean and light and ... new. New like nothing on the rest of earth was new, all of us building on top of the dead civilizations that came before us, the ruined landscapes. Seeing their untouched city, even our best made us look like what we actually were – vagrants living on the bones of something greater that had come before.

We landed and scattered inside the spiraling towers. I arrived a good two minutes after everyone else, and I heard the screams of those who

had corporealized inside buildings or walls or those who'd gotten stuck in the pavers. One woman waved her arms at me as I passed, stuck halfway into the ground. Others I passed were already dead, their bodies put back together in a steaming mess of broken flesh and meat.

This was the stuff they glossed over when they pumped you full of drugs. This was the bad part about becoming light. Sometimes it fucked you up.

Sometimes you couldn't put yourself back together again.

I once asked the shrink if maybe it's not déjà vu and maybe we really do go somewhere else when we become light.

"Like where?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe I'm visiting myself in other places, other times." I tried to be nonchalant, only half-serious. "I jump ahead in time, maybe."

She swiped something onto the cloudy data projection in front of her and grounded me for six weeks of psych evaluations.

I didn't bring that up again.

But I was figuring things out. Things they didn't want us to understand.

Overhead, waves of our drones came in behind us to draw fire from the shining city. They swept across the neatly tilled fields and buzzed over us. I expected to hear the enemy's defensive guns, or see the wheeling kites of their own organic weaponry flooding the sky in response to the onslaught. But the air was silent save for the soft whirring of the drones and the chuffing of our boots on the paving stones.

I always expect the alien cities to be red, like Mars, but not even Mars is red anymore, they say. The people that went to Mars did the opposite of what we did back here. They took something red and dusty and turned it into a sea of light. I hear there are giant wispy trees and shallow lakes and a big freshwater ocean there. Here, except for what the aliens did in far Canuck, it's gray and mostly lifeless; a paved-over world where we're scrabbling for fewer and fewer resources.

They were going to save us, they said.

But they betrayed us.

Liars.

Aliens.

I saw movement in one of the buildings and shot off a few bursts from my weapon. The façade cracked and wept brown sap. Everything was alive in their cities, even the buildings. Everything bled. But I didn't see any aliens, just us in our boots.

We crawled over that place, looking for the enemy. But the city was deserted. Maybe they'd abandoned it, or they'd found out we were coming and hid in bunkers. I don't know.

But we couldn't just come all this way for nothing. We had to do what we came for. We had to be weapons.

We assembled around the heart of the city's square the way we planned in training. We raised our energy weapons and set them on the new setting, the one engineered specifically for this mission. We pointed our weapons across the broad square at one another. Set them at a high charge. Waited for the signal.

I started to vibrate. We started to come apart.

The trick was to wait, to be patient. But no one had actually tried to use the light like this before, no living person. It was something they'd done with simulators and robots that fired at each other. It's easy for a robot, to fire at another robot. Harder for a soldier to fire at the person next to them. The one you'd take a hit for. I'd fire into my own face first, I thought, when they told me what we had to do.

But we're the Light Brigade. We do what they tell us to do.

The vibrating got worse. Then the cramping. My body seized up. I gasped. Somebody shot their weapon; too soon. A scream. A body down. Another shot. Too soon.

Goddammit, hold it together.

The contraction stopped.

The world snapped.

I didn't look at the mirrored helmet of the soldier across from me. I looked at the purple patch on their suit, the one that said they were one of us, the Light Brigade. I pulled the trigger.

Everything burst apart.

We were full of light.

“I’m tired of taking care of living things,” my CO told me once outside the mess hall, right before that operation. “There’s so goddamn many of you. I can’t even go home and take care of my dog at night without getting angry at it. Too much fucking responsibility.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“For what? It’s not your fault. The war’s not your fault. Not my fault either.” But she said the last part differently, like she didn’t quite believe it.

And I wondered if she was right to doubt it, because it *was* our fault, wasn’t it? We fought this war willingly. We gave our bodies to it, even if we’re only here because of the lies the corporations told us. What if there was a war and nobody came? What if the corporations voted for a war and nobody fought it? You can only let so many people starve. You can only throw so many people in jail. You can only have so many executions for insubordination to the latest CEO or Board of Directors.

We are the weapon.

We fired on one another as we broke apart, and created an explosion so massive it obliterated half the northern hemisphere.

Everything the aliens made grow again, we turned back into dust.

We were the weapon. We were the light.

That was when it changed, for me. It’s like, you think you’re brave, so you carry out your orders. You do it even if you know what the outcome is going to be. You do it because you always wanted to be a hero – you wanted to be on the side of the light. It’s not until you destroy everything good in the world that you realize you’re not a hero...you’re just another villain for the empire.

There weren't many of us left to see what we did, and maybe it was better that way. It was all over the networks, the destruction of half a continent. They didn't say how we did it. They didn't say we shot each other up to do it, or say how many of our people died in the explosion, their essential elements broken apart. And right beside these pictures of this barren, smoking wasteland were pictures of our own people cheering in our dingy little cities built on the bones of our ancestors. We had scorched the fucking earth, but everyone cheered because we'd gotten back at those aliens, those liars, those betrayers.

I saw those images and I knew what I had to do. Because I still wanted to be a hero. I still had a chance. But it meant giving up everything I believed in. Betraying everyone I cared about. Being everything I'm supposed to hate.

I know what I need to do because I've seen it.

A white rose on a black table.

Heaps of bodies lying on the field like hay.

I know where I need to go. I know what's next.

The CO gave us leave, those of us who were left. I spent mine looking up the city from my vision, the one I saw in transit. There are a lot of cities by water, but none of ours have brilliant green fields like that. All of our shining cities are surrounded by gritty labor camps.

I didn't realize how much they lied to us on the networks until I saw the alien cities. Until I killed the aliens myself. They had made a beautiful world from our shit, and we hated them for it, because they were free. No one owned them.

Betrayers, they said, on the networks. Liars.

They had made the land grow things again, but that was *all* they were supposed to do. They weren't supposed to be free because no one is free, and they weren't supposed to be able to defend themselves because no one can. When we found out they could fight back, when we found out about the organic kites that could take out a drone with a single shattering

note, or the EMPs that disabled our networks the first time one of our armies rolled by to see what they were doing, the corporate media started building the narrative – the aliens were liars standing in the way of corporate freedom of commerce.

And then San Paulo.

In San Paulo, the aliens had retaliated. They had turned everyone into light.

A whole city had disappeared.

What nobody said is that San Paulo was where the corporations kept a lot of their most profitable labor camps. My cousin was there, so far in debt to the corps that she couldn't get out. I joined the Light Brigade so that wouldn't be my fate, too. The corps take care of you, as long as you give them everything.

Maybe the aliens did those people a favor. Now that I'd been light, I started thinking that maybe they didn't die after all. Maybe they just went somewhere else. Maybe the aliens found out what we were, too, and tried to save us from ourselves, the way I was now trying to save them.

The San Paulo Blink showed the corporations what was possible. And they used the tech to fight back.

The aliens gave us the light.

Eight million corporate slaves, gone in a blink.

And our response: half a continent scorched of all life.

Maybe the light was our downfall. Or maybe we'd been falling the whole time.

After a couple days' leave, after I located the coordinates of where the city in my vision used to be, I asked to go out on the next offensive. The city I'd seen in my vision had been one of the first we destroyed in the early days of the war, after we tried to invade and they retaliated. In the archives, I saw the city the same way I had in my vision: heaps of our bodies on the green grass fields all around the city.

In the here-and-now, we were still looking for rogue aliens, trying to find out what had happened to all of them, but I already knew. I wasn't there to help them clean up. I was there because I wanted to jump with them.

I could blink forward. And now I knew I could blink back.

My CO gave me a look when I made the request, like she was trying to figure out if I was crazy. She told me that if I could pass the psych eval, she'd approve my next drop. I asked her if she ever gave her dog away, because it was too much responsibility.

"My dog's dead," she said.

"That makes it easier," I said.

"No," she said. "It doesn't. But I guess you can't save everything."

No, I thought, you have to choose.

I almost turned back, then, but I was too committed. Escalation of commitment.

The shrink asked me a lot of questions, but I knew the ones that mattered.

"So do you still think you can travel in time, when you become light?" she asked.

I laughed. "I haven't had any of that déjà vu since the last drop. Those aliens are dead. It's over."

I passed my evaluation.

I prepared for the drop. Closed my eyes. Held onto my sense of self while everyone else broke up around me. I pictured the city in my head, the place I wanted to go back to.

We broke apart.

And I saw it – I saw the alien city of my vision again surrounded by brilliant green fields. The shining spires. The inland sea. It wasn't the city we had scorched when we became the weapons– though it was just as surely obliterated in the here-and-now as that city was. This was the capital. The center of everything. Those spires were their ships, grounded forever at the foot of the gleaming sea. I had arrived before our first offensive on this city, before the fields were full of the bodies of our

people. Before we knew the aliens could fight back.

I came down into my own body, trying to yank myself together, but it was like trying to put together a bucket full of puzzle pieces as somebody poured it out around you.

There were no bodies yet. I had time.

I skimmed into the city, past crowds of startled onlookers. I still wasn't fully corporeal, but I was getting there. I needed a few more minutes. I needed to tell them. Just as I was able to draw air into my lungs, I felt my body vibrating again. It wanted so badly to come back apart and go where the people in charge had sent it.

I held it together.

I yelled, "They're sending us. We're weapons. We're going to scorch the whole continent."

They all stared blankly at me, like I was some dumb beast, and I wondered if they understood Spanish. I tried again in English, but that was as many languages as I knew.

When I didn't say anything else, the crowds dispersed and the people went on their way.

But one of them came up behind me, and I recognized her. It was the bag lady from the restaurant. She put her hand on my arm and squeezed, but it went right through me. I was coming apart again.

"It's you who brings the light," she said. "We won't be here when it comes. You can do what you need to do now without fear for us."

I broke apart.

Saw nothing. A wall of blackness.

Then, another city.

But not the one my CO had sent me to. Someplace else. I was skipping out of control. I was losing it.

I knew this city because I had grown up here, before it became a work camp. I was eight years old now, staring into the lights of San Paulo. The ocean wasn't as close as it is now, but I could smell the sea on the wind.

I knew this place, and this day.

My cousin was with me, young and alive, laughing at some joke.

I wanted her to be safe forever. I wanted us all to be safe.

I stared up at the sky. Mars was up there, full of socialists.

But they hadn't lied to us after all, had they?

It was my lie. My betrayal.

I held out my hand to my cousin. "Have you ever wanted to become the light? Go anywhere you want? Be anyone you want?"

"It's impossible to be anyone you want," she said, and I was sad, then, for how soon the corporations took away our dreams.

"Hold my hand tight," I said. "There's going to be a war soon. There's going to be a war, but no one will come."

That's why the aliens weren't in the city when we arrived with our weapons.

It was because of me. My betrayal.

And so was this.

I blinked.

I was high above the city now, still in San Paulo, but the sea was higher, the sprawl was even greater, and I could see the work camps circling the city one after another after another.

Eight million people.

What if there was a war and nobody came?

I broke apart over San Paulo.

I was a massive wave of energy, disrupting the bodies around me, transforming everything my altered atoms touched.

We became eight million points of light.

I broke them all apart, and brought them with me.

You can't save them all. But I could save San Paulo. I could take us all...someplace else, to some other time, where there's no war, and the corporations answer to us, and freedom isn't just a soundbite from a press release.

This is not the end. There are other worlds. Other stars. Maybe we'll do better out there. Maybe when they have a war here again, no one will come.

Maybe they will be full of light.

Kameron Hurley is the Hugo-award winning author of the *God's War Trilogy* and *The Mirror Empire*. Hurley's short fiction has appeared in magazines including *Lightspeed*, *Vice Magazine's Terraform*, *EscapePod*, and *Strange Horizons*, as well as anthologies such as *The Lowest Heaven*, *Year's Best SF* and the upcoming *Meeting Infinity*. Hurley writes a regular column for *Locus Magazine* and has had nonfiction pieces in *The Atlantic* and *Uncanny Magazine*. *Empire Ascendant*, Hurley's latest novel, is now available from Angry Robot Books.

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Declaration

by James Patrick Kelly

“When in the course of human events ...”

As Silk spoke, fluffy clouds formed the phrase in a Magritte sky, which was simultaneously noon and dusk. While Remeny could appreciate the control Silk had over his softtime domain, she wished he wouldn't steer their meeting in an artsy direction. They had work to do.

“Wait,” said Botão, “what about *we the people*?”

“That's the other one,” Silk shot her a (.1) anger blip fading to (.7) irritation. “The Constitution.”

“But we're the people we're talking about,” Botão ignored Silk's blippage. “That's the whole point?”

“Human events,” said Silk. “If you'd wait just a second, I'm getting to the people part.”

Botão had only been assigned to their school coop team for a month now and Remeny knew what she did not: Silk didn't like to be challenged, especially not in his own domain. They had chosen his corner of virtuality because Silk had enough excess capacity to host them all, but his was not the ideal place to plot their pretend revolution. The opening words of the Declaration of Independence were going wispy above them.

“Get on with it then,” said Sturm. “And skip the special effects.”

“When in the course of human events,” Silk said, “it becomes necessary for one *people* to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another ...”

“Okay,” said Botão.

“... and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle

them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

The four others—Remeny, Sturm, Botão and Toybox—scanned each other and then turned on Silk. They had agreed to close all private channels and keep their avatars emotionally transparent, so the air filled with blips of confusion and disapproval.

“Laws of Nature?” said Toybox. “What the hell is that about?”

“Maybe relativity.” Sturm’s scorn blip started at (.3) and climbed.

“They didn’t even have relativity back then.”

“They did, they were just too stupid to realize it.”

“Mankind? What about the other fifty-two percent?” Botão was laughing now. “And who is nature’s god?”

“Exactly,” said Sturm. “I call bullshit. Crusty oldschool bullshit.”

Remeny kept quiet; she focused on Silk, who was waiting for them to calm down. “Agreed,” he said. “But it will mean something to the old people because Thomas Jefferson wrote this stuff.”

“Who’s he and so what?” said Toybox.

“Jefferson as in Jefferson County,” said Remeny. “As in where we live.”

“I live in softtime.” At (.9+), Toybox’s rage was nearly unreadable—but then he was always shouting. “That’s where I live.”

Silk waved a hand in front of his face, as if the blip was a bad smell. “History is important to reality snobs,” he said. “This gets their attention.”

Remeny noticed that he was keeping his temper in check. She was definitely interested in Silk; poise was something she looked for in a boyfriend.

“So will making their lights flicker,” said Toybox. This was why he had flunked one coop already. “Crashing their flix.”

“We’re not talking about anything like that,” said Botão. “We’re students, not terrorists.”

“Speak for yourself.” Sturm spread his hands and between them appeared an oldschool clock. “Revolutions don’t play by the rules.” Its face showed two minutes to midnight.

Remeny couldn't believe Sturm, of all people, aligning himself with terrorists. She agreed with Botão; she didn't really care about the revolution. All she wanted was to get a grade for her senior cooperative, graduate and never log on to the Jefferson County Educational Oversight Service again. The problem was that a third of her grade for coop was for contribution to the team's cooperative culture. The senior coop was supposed to demonstrate to the EOS that students had the social skills to succeed in softtime by coming together anonymously to plan and execute a project that had hardtime outcomes. .

Of course, anonymity wasn't easy in a county like Jefferson. Students spent hours in soft and hardtime trying to figure out who was who. Botão, for example, was one of the refugees from Brazil and probably lived in Tugatown. Remeny had first met her two years ago in the EOS playgrounds, mostly ForSquare and Sanctuary. Now Botão was Sturm's friend too – maybe even his girlfriend. Toybox defied the rules of anonymity by dressing his avatar in clothes that pointed to hardtime identity. Everyone knew that he was the Jason Day whose body was stashed in bin 334 of the Komfort Kare body stack on Route 127 in Pineville. Unfortunately for him, no one cared. Bad luck to have him on the team—if he was going to be such a shithead, they might all flunk. Good luck, though, to get Silk—whoever he was. The avatar was new to the senior class, but Silk didn't act new. She thought maybe he was a duplicate of some rich kid they already knew. It cost to be in two places at once and considering how crush his domain was, Remeny guessed Silk had serious money. Probably lived in that gated community at the lake. She wondered what he looked like in hardtime. His avatar was certainly hot in his leathers and tanker boots. Sturm's identity, obviously, was no secret to her, although she hoped that she was the only one on the team who knew that he was her twin brother.

It took them most of a prickly afternoon to rewrite the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independance; they were being as cooperative as cats. Sturm and Silk took the revolution too seriously, in Remeny's opinion, as if it might happen next Wednesday. Silk argued for making as few changes as possible to their version; Sturm said their demands should be clear.

“Unalienable?” said Sturm. “There's no such word.”

“There was back then.”

“Well, this is now.”

Botão seemed nervous about advocating the overthrow of anything. She was probably worried about being deported. “I like life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Botão was standing so close to Sturm that their avatars were practically merging. “We should keep that part. Someday I’m going to own my own domain, move in and never get real again.”

“What’s in your domain?” Sturm’s blippage went all flirty.

“You mean who?” She pushed away from him and poked a finger into his chest. “Maybe you wish it was you?” She smirked. “Not yet, Mystery Boy. Earn it.”

“Focus please,” said Silk.

... *later.*

“No, governments are supposed to serve us, not the other way around.”

Silk had created a rectangular glass conference table with himself at the head. The draft of the declaration glowed on its surface. “We can’t change ‘consent of the governed.’”

“What is consent, anyway?”

“Like permission, only more legal.”

“I never gave no consent for some bullshit EOS to ruin my life.”

... *much later.*

“So that means we have the right to overthrow the EOS?” Botão sounded doubtful.

Toybox was lighting his fingertips on fire. “Overthrow the oldschool and be done with all the bullshit.” The longer they talked, the higher the numbers on his boredom blip climbed. It was like watching a cartoon fuse burn.

“I don’t see how they give us an ‘A’ for overthrowing them,” said Remeny.

“If we prove they’re unjust ...”

“But that’s why we have to keep ‘alter and abolish.’” Silk interrupted

Sturm for the hundreth time. “Means the same as overthrow, only Jefferson wrote it. So we hide behind his language.”

... *much, much later.*

Sturm had changed the conference table from rectangular to round. “If we get rid of the old government, then we need a new one,” he said.

“I’m not making up a whole new government,” said Botão. “My job starts in half an hour.”

“So then no government,” Sturm said. “Everyone for themselves. Law of the jungle.”

Before she could stop it, a (.2) shock blip flashed above Remeny’s avatar. This wasn’t like him.

Eventually, after arguments and much blippage, they persuaded Silk to yield the power of the keyboard to Remeny, since she was willing to take other people’s suggestions. While Silk brooded, they agreed on a draft of the crucial second paragraph.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all realities, hard and soft, old and new, are equal, and so are we the people who live in them, whichever reality we chose. All people, no matter whether they live in bodies or avatars, are endowed with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To guarantee our rights governments are supposed to serve we the people and not the other way around. They derive their powers from the consent of the governed. If a government goes off, it is the right of we the people to alter or to abolish it, and to make up some new government that will do the right thing.”

“Okay.” Remeny checked the time on her overlord; she too would have to get real soon. “So now what?”

“List everything the government is doing wrong.” Silk broke his grim silence.

Toybox groaned. “Not today.”

“No,” said Remeny. Save that for next time. Anything else?”

“We need to think about making something happen in hardtime,” said Sturm. “Take the revolution to the streets.”

“Then you’re talking homework,” said Botão. “I’ve got to be at work in

ten minutes.”

“What if we speed this up to double time?” said Silk.

Botão’s embarrassment shot immediately to (.4). “Umm ... I’m not allowed.”

“Not allowed?” said Toybox. “Everybody’s supposed to get some double time. They just don’t let you have enough.”

“It’s my mother.” Now the blip was (.6). “She ...”

“Makes no difference.” Sturm interrupted her. “I already used up this month’s overclocking allotment.”

Remeny knew this wasn’t true, but she approved of the lie and decided to join in. “Me too.”

“See, that’s why we need a revolution,” said Toybox, “so we can overclock whenever we want.”

“Yeah,” said Botão, “and then we can ask Santa to bring us diamond trees so we can feed the unicorns.”

Rememy ignored them. “We’re talking about getting real. You were saying, Sturm?”

“We need a message.” He considered. “What do we say to the oldschool?”

“That EOS sucks.” Toybox’s avatar got up from the table and created a door in Silk’s domain with a huge glowing red EXIT sign above it.

“That’s our complaint.” Sturm shook his head. “But what do we want?”

Nobody spoke for a moment.

“How about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?” said Botão.

“Sure,” said Sturm. “But those are just words until we explain what they mean.” “No,” Silk leaned forward on his seat. “She’s right. We make that our slogan, put it out there, get people talking about it.” He poked the table top. “Posters, tee shirts ...”

“Graffiti.”

“Timed-erase only,” said Remeny. “Okay, there’s your homework. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—ten times each.”

“Ten?” Toybox had his hand on the knob of his door. “How am I supposed to make ten hardtime changes from a stack?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Send your friends ten letters ...”

“He doesn’t have ten friends.”

“... print stickies.”

“Write a song and record it.” Botão warbled tunelessly. “*Life for me needs liberty ... umm ... something something happiness.*”

“That’s it,” said Remeny. “Next meeting at 1300 on Tuesday the 12th.” She saved a transcript of their meeting to her student folder. “Got to go. Out of time.”

The biggest grievance that Remeny had against the government was that her Health Oversight Manager, aka her overlord, was too bossy. It forced her to exercise and monitored her diet. It required daily minimum times for being alone and for family interaction. Worst of all, if she didn’t meet these goals, it could limit how long she could spend in softtime. Even after she turned twenty-one and could make her own decisions, it would still be watching her. It wasn’t fair. Stash like Toybox and Sturm never had to wander around smelling the damn roses.

She owed her overlord another hour and a half of family interaction and needed to burn three hundred calories exercising. It was now 1717. They had a family dinner scheduled softtime for 1930; that would kill an hour. If she jogged her five kilometer course at a decent pace between now and then, that would take care of her workout. But she still had to squeeze in at least another half hour of family time now, because Silk had said he might stop by ForSquare around 2100. She stripped off the NeuroSky 3100 interface that Dad had given her as a pre-graduation gift. She’d only had it a week and while she definitely liked it better than her old Deveau interface, the 3100’s electrode array was sensitive to stubble. That meant she had to shave her head every other morning. Once she pulled her nose plugs and peeled off her haptic gloves, she was once again Johanna Daugherty, age 18, of 7 Forest Ridge Road. She liked herself better as Remeny. She had chosen the name because it meant *hope* in Hungarian,

but that was a secret. Nobody she knew spoke Hungarian.

“*Mom.*” She stuck her head out of her bedroom door and called down the hall. “I’m home.”

“Hi, honey. I made a banana smoothie. Some for you in the blender.”

Remeny put on her headset, positioned its glass over her left eye and pressed the mic to her jaw, where it stuck. Headsets lacked cranial input so there was no softtime immersion, but at least she could monitor what was happening online. “How many calories?”

“I don’t know. Three hundred? Four? Ask the fridge.”

The fridge reported that Mom had added a tablespoon of peanut butter to her usual recipe, which boosted the smoothie to four hundred and thirty calories. She decided to save it for dinner. Instead she got an Ice Cherry Zero out of the freezer.

Mom was at her desk—wearing a glass headset. She had a Deveau interface for full immersion that she didn’t use much. She was more comfortable with the oldschool interfaces. And reality. She sat in the late afternoon gloom, her face lit from below by the windows on her desktop. When Remeny snicked on the overhead lights, Rachel Daugherty glanced up, blinking.

“Thanks,” she said.

Mom’s office was like a museum with its antique paper books on wooden shelves and family pix that didn’t move. Hanging on the wall was an embroidered baby blanket in the Úrihímezés style that had belonged to Remeny’s Hungarian great-grandmother. A trophy case held the tennis trophies that Mom had won in high school and college. The rubber plant in the window needed dusting.

“So what’s up, Mom?”

“Work.”

Remeny leaned against the door frame and twirled the Cherry Zero in her mouth. “Work?”

Mom sighed and waved a hand over the desktop, closing half the windows. “The health budget. We’re running a surplus and I need to move some of it to building maintenance.”

“The people are in better shape than the buildings?” Remeny’s lips tingled from the cold.

“Buildings live in snow and rain and sleet and hail. People, not so much.” A window flashed blue. “Speaking of being outside,” she said, expanding it, “didn’t I get an EOS advisory a couple of days ago? Something about your Phys Ed status?”

“Took care of it.” Remeny wished Mom would stop nagging her. “I already have an overlord, Rachel. I don’t need an overmom too.”

“Sorry.” Mom frowned; she didn’t like it when her kids called her Rachel. “Look, I’m sorry, sweetie, but I’m really busy just now. You need some family time, is that it? Could you maybe go talk to your brother?”

“I just spent two hours with him in coop.”

“Good.” Mom’s attention drifted back to her budgets. “How’s that going?” “Okay, I guess. We gave ourselves homework. We’re making it real.”

“That’s nice.”

Silence.

“Aren’t you going to ask what our project is?”

“Sure,” said Mom, but then she started shuffling windows.

“We’re writing a declaration of independence,” Remeny said.

“Really?”

Remeny dropped the empty Zero sleeve into the trash and waited. Then waited some more.

“A declaration,” she said, finally. “Of independence.”

“Umm ... Didn’t somebody already write that?”

Too bad there were no blips in real life.

“I guess I’ll talk to Robby then.”

“You’re a good sister.” Mom nodded but did not look up. “Do a favor and turn him, would you?”

Maybe it was best that Mom didn’t know about their project. Rachel Daugherty was Bedford’s Town Manager. She was part of the government they were declaring independence from. Robert Daugherty Junior’s entire

room was a deep twilight blue: walls, floor, ceiling, even the two painted-over windows that no longer looked onto Forest Ridge Road. When Remeny closed the door, shutting out the hallway light, the monotone color skewed the geometry of the space, erased the corners and curved the walls. Robby had just three glowworms and he kept them dimmed because of his photosensitivity; their slow crawl over the room's surfaces cast a changing pattern of dreamy radiance and midnight shadows. The only thing in the room that seemed solid was the carebot, which had tucked itself into a corner. Its eyestalk tilted toward her briefly to note her arrival, then returned its gaze to monitor her brother's naked, twitching body, suspended in its protective mesh. Robby had a state-of-the-art stash; Mom had spent a boatload of Dad's money on her injured son after the attack. His intracranial interface was implanted directly into his cerebral cortex, which also helped relieve the worst of his dyskinetic thrashing. Robby could never have managed his avatar with an ordinary interface; his control over his movements had been so compromised by the neurotoxins in the DV gas that the True Patriots have used that he could barely feed himself. That was the carebot's job, as was cleaning up after him. Once, before the carebot, he had worn diapers. That hadn't worked out for anybody.

=Oh Stormy.= She pinged him on their private channel. *=Reality calling.=*

=Go away.= His reply scrolled across her glass.

"Mom sent me to check up on you." She switched to speaking aloud and the mic on her headset reformatted for messaging. "Time for some sweet family togetherness."

=Go online then.=

"Nope. I need some hardtime." She queried her glass and opened his overlord account; they had each other's access. "And so do you."

Even though they were twins, Robby's disabilities meant that he had different overlord quotas. He couldn't exercise and the carebot controlled his diet. He only owed an hour of hardtime a day, all of which was currently due. Remeny had never understood how waking up in a dark room to thrash around like a fish caught in a net could be good for anyone.

"Blaaagh." Robby never re-entered hardtime in a good mood. "Shit."

“Hello to you, too. Mom said something about a turning. You want?”

“No.” He coughed up a wad of phlegm and spat onto the floor. The carebot whirred out of its corner to clean it up. “I don’t need ... oh, go ahead.”

Robby’s smartsilk net was the only furniture in the room. He rarely left it, even when he logged off, because of the fibromyalgia. His skin was sensitive to the slightest touch and the mesh distributed pressure points. It was suspended from the walls and ceiling so that its shape could be thermally reconfigured to roll him from one side to another, even from his back to his belly, to prevent bedsores.

She swiped her finger halfway across the control screen and then up. Parts of the net stretched while others shrank.

“Ow, ow *oww*.” His fingers caught at the net while he kicked at the air. “Okay, enough. *Stop*.”

“Sorry.”

He came to rest facing her, eyes slits, eyelids gummy, curled into a fetal position as if to protect his erection. Seeing his cock didn’t faze Remeny anymore. After helping to nurse him for the last couple of years, she had developed a high tolerance for brotherly ick.

“I was fine, you know.” Robby croaked at the carebot’s eyestalk; he was talking to Mom. “You just turned me this morning, Rachel.” Then he nodded at Remeny. “I’m three screens on her desktop. Can’t even fart without setting off alarms.”

“I told her she was turning into the overmom.”

A head jerk scattered his smile.

“So,” she said, “think we can carry that loser Toybox?”

“Sure.’ He sucked in a raspy breath. “Jason isn’t so bad.”

“Jason, is it? He’s a moron.”

Robby swallowed twice in rapid succession. “*Ahhh*.”

“Pain?” she said

“No.”

“You want a gun?” Ever since the attack, he’d had a fascination with the

old handguns in the house. As if having a real one might have saved him. Still, handling them seemed to relieve his stress, which then calmed the spasms.

“No.”

She waited for him to say something else. This was her day to be ignored by her family.

“You were getting pretty weird on me in coop,” she said at last.

“Weird?”

“Everyone for themselves. I’ve got the transcript in my folder. Revolutions don’t play by the rules.” She exaggerated a Sturm imitation, made his edges sharp enough to cut. “‘Speak for yourself, Botão. Maybe I am a terrorist.’ Come on, Sturm. A *terrorist*? You’re going to do other people like you were done?”

“Right wing scum,” he muttered. “Assholes.”

“Right wing, left wing—they’re all assholes

“Revolution.” He didn’t seem very interested in the conversation.

“What revolution?” She felt like he was pushing her toward a cliff. “What the hell are you talking about?” Then she noticed the edge of his overlord window in her glass. He wasn’t getting hardtime credit for their conversation. “Wait a minute,” she said. “You’re still running your avatar?”

“Huh?” He was confused. “What?”

“This is me,” she said. “Your sister.” Remeny was at once impressed and insulted. It took supreme concentration to run an avatar in hardtime while carrying on a conversation in softtime. “You thought I wouldn’t notice?” Then she guessed why he hadn’t logged off. “You’re with someone.”

“No.”

“I bet it’s your little Button Bright.”

He writhed and his right arm flung itself up, grazing the top of his head. “What makes you say that?”

“For one thing,” she said, “you’ve got a bone like a dinosaur.”

“A second. Give me a second.” He closed his eyes and his body went

slack. Then with a shudder, he was back. The clock was ticking. She had his full attention.

“Kind of a pervy thing to say to your brother.” He gave her a grimace which she knew was a grin.

“We share the perv gene, Stormy.” She grinned back. “So Botão is your girlfriend now?”

“No one is my girlfriend.” His voice was like sandpaper. “She’s a reality snob like the rest of them. I mean, suppose we really wanted to get together. Eventually she’d want to come over here for a visit, see me for herself. You know how that goes. Imagine her standing there, staring at this twitchy sack of meat. Romantic or what?”

Remeny wanted to say something but couldn’t think what.

“I’ll take a gun now,” Robby said. “Kent’s Glock.”

Dad kept his memorabilia in a study at the far end of the house. He had been in flat movies way back, but had made the transition to flix and adventures and sims and even some impersonations. Although he had been cast in all kinds of parts, Jeffrey Daugherty was mostly known for playing bad guys: serial killers, drug lords, CEOs, stalkers and, yes, terrorists. He had won a Golden Globe and an Appie for playing Kent Crill on *The Revenger*, which was where he had acquired most of the collection of prop weapons displayed behind his desk. Kent had used the Glock to take down his arch-nemesis, the vampire Sir Koko Mawatu, in the Season Five finale. Of course, it was just a prop that didn’t really fire silver bullets, but it had the heft of a real gun.

Remeny parted the ultrasmooth strands of the mesh and offered him the pistol, grip first. He swiped at it and missed the first time but nabbed it on the second try. He settled back, rubbing the steel barrel lengthwise across his cheek. She’d seen his gun fetish many times but it was still something about her brother that she didn’t get.

“It’s not Toybox I’m worried about,” he said. “Who is this Silk?”

“I don’t know, some rich kid.” She shrugged. “I kind of like him.”

“I don’t.”

“Why? Because he wants to run the show? So do you. So does Toybox.

All you boys doing your alpha male thing—it's kind of cute in an annoying way.”

“He's already got slogans out. A dozen floaties around town—they have to be his. No one else has the money. One keeps circling the town office.”

That was interesting. “Fast work.” She called up the satellite image on her glass and zoomed. “Hey, that's some serious signage. Maybe he needs extra credit.”

“It was his idea. Doesn't that seem suspicious? ”

She leaned against the wall and wished once again that he would let her bring a chair when she visited. “No, it wasn't. Botão who came up with life, liberty, and ...”

“Just words.” He aimed the gun at the carebot and stared down the sights. “The slogan was his idea.”

“So he's smart. So?” She jiggled the net. “Did you tell Botão who you are?”

“Nuh-uh.” He held the gun steady and Remeny could see him mouth the word *bang*. “But she knows I'm stashed.”

“She knows and she's still interested?”

“She just thinks she is.”

“Then maybe you're wrong about her. You've got a crush setup here, pal. What if you were stashed in a body stack, like Toybox? Think she'd go all melty over whatever is behind the doors at the Komfort Kare?”

“She'll still want ...”

“What she wants is Sturm and that's who you are, twenty-three out of every twenty-four hours. Your body is just leftovers.”

His laugh was bitter. “Rah, rah, rah.” He waved the Glock in a circle. “Too bad cheerleading doesn't kill the pain anymore.”

Robby was getting weird on her. “I've got to go for a run – overlord orders.” She couldn't handle him when he was like this. “You going to stay real for a while?”

“Sure.”

“Want me to leave Kent's gun? You never know when your arch-

nemesis is going to show.”

“No, take it.” He thrust the pistol through the mesh. “I’ll find some other way to thwart Silk’s evil plan.” His hand was steady now.

“He’s not your problem.” She leaned in close and blew on his face. “See you at dinner then.” It was as close to kissing as they got.

“Something’s got to change,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “Come the revolution.”

As Remeny jogged up Forest Ridge Road, the spray can of Sez in her fanny pack bounced against her back. She had queried her glass for places she could tag that would have the highest foot traffic. The list was short and most of the choices were in Bedford’s modest downtown, a couple of kilometers away. That would mean that her graffiti would overlap with Silk’s floating ads, but that was okay.

She began to see bots on errands: delivery bots from Foodmaster and Amazon and Express-It, a MacDonald’s dinerbot reeking of yesterday’s fries, an empty taxi idling on Little Oak. The first pedestrian she passed was an old man in a breather walking his dog. She saw Officer Shubin’s motorcycle parked at the Cocamoca but no Officer Shubin. She slowed to a stop when she spotted the floaty bobbing down Third Street toward her. The squat barrel shape floated at eye level and the slogan scrawled continually around its circumference. *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness Life, Liberty, and ...*

“Stop,” she commanded. Its top propeller rotated one hundred and eighty degrees until it faced in the opposite direction from its bottom propeller. “I have a question.”

“I will try to answer,” it said.

“Who paid for you?”

“I was hired by PROS, which stands for Protect the Rights of the Occupants of Softtime.” It played a short musical flourish.

“Never heard of it.”

“The organization is less than two hours old.”

Her overlord nagged that her metabolic rate was falling. She began to jog in place. “Who’s in it?”

“Membership information is confidential.”

“How long are you contracted for?”

“I will be proclaiming the new world order in this area through Tuesday.”

New world order? Silk was having delusions of grandeur. “What do you mean: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness?”

“What does it mean to *you*?”

“I don’t know. Nothing.”

“PROS would like to change that. If you were to google it ...”

Rememy stopped paying attention and pinged Silk instead. When she got no reply, she queried her glass about floaty rentals. Rates ran between two and three hundred dollars a day depending on the size of the floaty, the sophistication of the pitch and the choice of sales route. She was impressed. Rich was rich, but what teenager would spend two thousand dollars a day on a coop project?

“Do you have any other questions?” said the floaty.

On an impulse she reached into her fanny pack, grabbed the Sez can and sprayed *call me* on the floaty. As it tried to dodge away, it jiggled her “e” into looking like a mutant “p.”

“At 1753,” the floaty said, “I identify you as Johanna Daugherty of 7 Forest Ridge Road. Per the Defacement Clause of the Bedford’s Commercial Speech Ordinance, you will now be charged the standard rate for use of this device for as long as your unauthorized commentary persists.”

Remeny wasn’t worried; the Sez had been in draft mode. “Make sure Silk gets my message.”

“What is Silk?”

Her graffiti was already fading, so she brushed by the floaty and jogged up Third Street.

“Your total charge is sixty-seven cents,” it called. “Have a nice day.”

More than half of the stores facing Memorial Square had gone out of business. To keep the downtown from looking like a mouthful of broken teeth, the town had paid to have the buildings torn down but had preserved and restored the facades. Behind these were empty lots converted to lawns, gardens and patios with picnic tables, all tended by bots, all deserted. There were spaces downtown designated for civic tagging as long as the message conformed to font, color and content guidelines. She sprayed slats of the benches that faced the Civil War monument, the windows on the façade of the Post Office and the abutments of the pedestrian bridge that crossed Sperry Creek. She set the Sez can to a 158 point Engravers font, which she thought looked suitably historic, and set the duration for Tuesday. Same as Silk. *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness* fit nicely alongside *silence is golden but duct tape is silver*, *We are not a bot*, and *Think More About Working Less*.

On the way home, she took the shortcut through the grounds of the Gates Early Learning Center since there were designated tagging surfaces at its playground. A handful of little kids milled about in their bulky, augmented reality helmets, pulling up grass, tripping over the balance boosters, hitting trees with sticks. One of them came up to Remeny while she was spraypainting the slide.

“What’s your name?” The girl had an annoying squeaky voice.

She didn’t have time for this—where was the teacher? “Ask your helmet to look me up.”

“Why? You could just tell me.”

Remeny glanced over and saw black curls framing a face pale as a mushroom. She was five or maybe six, wearing a Dotty Karate tee shirt. “Johanna.”

“I’m Meesha, but my real name is Amisha.” She pointed at the tag. “What does that say?”

“Read it yourself.” The kid was breaking her concentration.

“Don’t know how.”

“Your helmet does.”

She put her hand over her mouth and whispered the query as if she didn’t want Remeny to hear. “I don’t know pursuit,” she said at last.

“Your helmet could ...” Remeny looked around for help and saw Joan deJean headed her way. “It means to chase after.”

Meesha considered this. “Is that why you’re all sweaty? ‘Cause you’re pursuing happiness?”

“Hi, Johanna.” Ms. deJean had been Johanna’s teacher when she was a kid. “I see you’ve met Meesha.” She put a hand on the girl’s shoulder.

“Hi, Ms. deJean. Yeah, she’s not exactly shy.”

“You can say that again.” Ms. deJean turned the girl gently and aimed her back toward the other kids. “This is learning time, Meesha. Not chatting time.”

“Chatting can be learning,” the girl said.

“Scoot.” She gave her a nudge back toward the center, but Meesha squirmed and skipped away in a different direction. “So what’s this?” Ms. DeJean bent over the slide and read.

Remeny slipped the Sez into her fanny pack. “Coop.”

“Already?” Her old teacher sighed. “Seems like yesterday you were toddling around here, talking back like Meesha.” She lit up with the memory. “You and your brother. How is Robby?”

“He doesn’t get out much.”

“No.” Her light dimmed. “The Declaration of Independence? You breaking away from something?”

“I don’t know,” said Remeny, then she laughed. “Maybe the EOS.”

“Good for you.” Jean deJean laughed with her. “It’s a train wreck, if you ask me. All software and no people.”

Remeny usually walked Forest Ridge Road to cool down at the end of a run but when she saw her mother and Emily Banerjee sitting on the Banerjee’s lawn, she broke into a sprint. Her mother had her arm around Mrs. Banerjee’s shoulder and was speaking softly to her.

“Everything okay?” Remeny pulled up in front of them.

“Emily isn’t feeling well,” said Mom. “She’s confused.”

The Banerjees had been antiques when the Daughertys had moved in, crinkly and cute as Remeny and Robby grew up. Sadhir Banerjee had

died in March and his wife had been lost ever since. Mom had called the son Prahlad last month when she had found Mrs. Banerjee sorting through the Daugherty's garbage at night.

"I am not confused," said Mrs. Banerjee, "and I will never lie in those coffins."

"Nobody wants you too, Emily."

"I watched it on the teevee—just now. Those coffins are small." She spread her palms. "This wide, maybe. And not much longer even." The way her hands shook reminded Remy of Robby. "They lie awake in the coffin so they can always call other people on the internet but there is no room. Not for everyone. The internet is too small, too, even for an old woman."

Teevee? The internet? Remy didn't want to laugh because this was sad. But talk about oldschool.

"Don't worry, Emily," said Mom. "Prahlad is coming soon."

"Yeah, it's okay, Mrs. Bannerjee," said Remy. "You don't have to call people if you don't want."

Mrs. Banerjee glanced up at Remy. "You're the girl. Rachel's child. Isn't there a brother?" She pointed a finger as if in accusation. "We never see you kids playing anymore."

"Johanna, that's right. We're all grown up now."

"You know in those coffins? The people?" Mrs. Banerjee leaned toward her. "Do you know what they call them?" Her voice was low. "Trash. I swear it, Sadhir was with me, he heard too."

Remy and Mom exchanged glances.

"You mean stash?" said Remy.

"Stash?" Mrs. Banerjee rocked back and gazed up at the darkening sky for a moment. "Yes. That was it." She nodded at them. "Stash." Her mouth puckered as if she could taste the word.

The Daughertys gathered their weekly family dinners in softtime because Dad was so often on location and Robby couldn't leave his room, much less sit at table. Besides, her brother's two thousand calorie high-bulk liquid diet looked to Remeny like just-mixed cement. Not appetizing. Mom had paid for a space in the family domain that recreated the actual dining room at 7 Forest Ridge Road. A buffet with a marble top matched a china closet with glass doors. Its dining room table could seat ten comfortably but had just the four upholstered chairs gathered around one end. The furniture was all dark maple in some crazy oldschool style that featured arabesque inlays, fleur-de-lis and Corinthian columns. The meal that nobody was going to eat was straight out of the darkest twentieth century: a platter of roast chicken—with *bones*—bowls of mashed potatoes and green beans with pearl onions, a basket of rolls. Remeny thought the whole show a waste of processing power; in softtime you were supposed to challenge reality, not just fake it. But this was what Mom wanted and Dad always humored her. Robby and Remeny didn't have a vote.

"The kids were working on their coop today," said Mom.

"They're on the same team?" Dad liked to sit at these meals with a knife in one hand and a fork in the other, even though all they did was stare at the virtual food. The kids could have made their avatars appear to eat, but their parents, Mom especially, had yet to master the tricks of full immersion. "How does that happen?"

"Just lucky, I guess." Remeny's dinner was the leftover smoothie and snap peas out of the bag. She ate in her room.

"So what's it about?"

"It's kind of boring actually." After talking to Robby that afternoon, Remeny had been hoping coop wouldn't come up.

"No, it isn't." Her brother opened their private channel with a .(4) impatience blip. =*We should have this conversation now.*=

=*They'll want to talk about it all night. I'm going out later.*=

"Something to do with the Declaration of Independence?" Apparently Mom had been paying attention after all.

=*With Silk?*=

=*None of your business.*=

“Oh, right,” said Dad. “We the people blah blah in order to form a more perfect union of whatever.” Remeny had been hoping that Dad would take the conversation over, as he usually did. “I’ve always wondered how you get to be more perfect. I played James Madison once, you know, he was a shrimp, five feet four – what’s that in meters?”

“A hundred and sixty-two centimeters.” Even though Robby was using his parent friendly version of Sturm—no scars, no iridescence—she could tell he was mad.

“Just about Johanna’s size.” Dad’s avatar was wearing a Hawaiian shirt with a sailboat motif. As usual, he looked like his hardtime self, handsome as surgery and juv treatments could make an eighty-three year old, but then his image was part of his actor’s brand. “No, wait. That’s not right.” He pointed his knife at Remeny, as if she were thinking of correcting him. “More perfect union is the Constitution. The Declaration was Jefferson. He was a tall one, him and Washington. Never played Washington. Wanted to, never did, even though we’re about the same size.”

“We’re declaring our independence,” said Robby.

=*Sturm, no.*=

That stopped Dad. “Who?” He frowned. “Teenagers?”

“Everybody who’s stashed. We’re giving up on hardtime—reality. We want to live as avatars.”

“Cool.” It was exactly the wrong thing to say. Remeny wondered if he’d been biting into a slice of pizza wherever he was and hadn’t been paying attention to the conversation.

“And how do you propose to do this?” Mom’s avatar looked like she had swallowed a brick.

“Just do it. Stay stashed.” Robby gave them a (.6) impatience blip. “Never log off.”

“No blips at the table, please.” Mom had strange ideas about manners. “Never come back— *ever?*”

Remeny started to say “Only when we want ...” but Robby talked over her. “Never.” He pushed back his chair and stood up, which seemed to Remeny more disrespectful than a blip. “And we want to be able to

overclock as much as we want. Live double time. Triple. Whatever.”

“Now you’re talking nonsense,” said Mom. “Your brain is not a computer, Robert. Overclocking causes seizures. And being stashed is hard on the body. The mortality rate for ...”

“That’s why we overclock,” he shouted. “We can burn through years subjective while the meat rots.”

Mom looked shocked that he would use the m-word at the table. Remeny couldn’t believe it herself.

“Sit down Robby.” Dad didn’t seem angry. He just scratched his chin with the fork while he waited for Robby to subside. Robby obeyed but sulked. “Funny this should come up. So I’m in Vermont with Spencer this morning”

“*Jeff.*” Mom sounded betrayed.

“Pirates in Vermont?” said Remeny.

=*Don’t encourage him.*= Robby was on Mom’s side in this one. =*Let’s finish this.*=

“I was done early at the *Treasure Ship* shoot.” Dad shook his head. “Bastards cut half of my part. So, there I am at Steve Spencer’s summer place in Vermont and he pitches me an idea about how people want to do exactly what Robby is talking about. He’s got a script ready to go and everything. Financing no problem, sixty mill starter money he says. Sixty million dollars kind of gets my attention. The idea is that there are people who want to live in virtual reality ...”

Remeny raised her hand to correct him. “Softtime.”

“Sure. And they never want to come out. It’s wild stuff. They’re cutting off arms and legs and whatever, body parts they claim they don’t need and I say it sounds like horror, which isn’t what I do, but Steve says no. The script plays it straight. It’s a damned issue piece! Apparently there are people who believe this is a good thing. People who can raise sixty million no problem. Do you know about this, Rachel?”

She shook her head.

“How do we not know about this?”

“Because we’re still only *some* people,” said Robby. “Not *enough* people

yet.”

“And you’re going to do it,” said Mom. Remeny wondered who she was talking to. Dad? Robby? Both of them? It almost looked as if she had calmed down except that just then her avatar went completely still. Remeny searched the house cams and found her at the real dining room table with a plate of tortellini in front of her. She had pushed her Deveau back onto her head. She was crying.

“Sweet part for me.” Dad hadn’t noticed that Mom had logged off. “I’m a Senator and I’m against it. I’ve never actually played a Senator before. President, yes. Mayor. It’s only a supporting, but still Frederick Nooney is attached, Gonsalves to direct. I told Steve I’d give him an answer tomorrow, but this ... is this some coincidence or what?”

“You should do it,” said Robby. “Absolutely. What’s it called?”

“Title on the script is “Declaration,” but that will never fly.”

Remeny almost choked on a snap pea. Robby started to laugh.

Then Dad did something that Remeny didn’t think that an oldschool eighty-three-year-old could. He opened a private channel to Robby in softtime.

*=You there, son?=
=Maybe.=*

Unfortunately he didn’t know how to close Remeny’s private channel with her brother, so she was able to eavesdrop. *=Look Robby, if this is what you want, I’m for it. I know you’re in pain and miserable.=*

=Only when I’m stuck in hardtime.=

=I get that. Ever since that day, all we’ve wanted is to help.= His sympathy blip was (.8). *=I know it’s hard for you but it’s hard for us too. Your mother blames herself because she sent you=*

=Dad, stop. I love you but stop. You want to help me then take the damn part. It’ll be good for the cause. My cause, Dad. But what I really want is for you to come home and help me with Mom. Because reality sucks and I’m giving up on it. We need to make Mom understand. All of us, face to face. Oldschool.=

“Stop saying you’re sorry.” Sturm was trying for stern but his blippage read embarrassed.

“I just didn’t want Mom to freak,” said Remeny.

“Well, she did and nobody was killed. I call that a win for our side.”

“Think Dad can convince her?”

“He’s an actor.” Sturm scanned the crowd around the dance floor for Silk. “He’ll give a performance.”

The music twanged and couples began to take their places.

“Nine minutes after,” said Sturm. “He’s not coming.”

“There’s no schedule.” Remeny’s irritation climbed to (.3). “He’s not a train.”

“Bow to the partner, now bow to the corner, all join hands and circle to the left, please don’t step on her, now circle to the right, and we go round and round.”

Now that she was old enough to know better, Remeny was sick of square dancing. When she was twelve, ForSquare had been one of her favorite EOS playgrounds. She had loved the movement, the color and the concentration it took to remember and execute all of the calls. When she was sixteen she had come in second in the Jefferson County Challenge. There had been more than twenty calls that day that involved changing avatars on the fly, on top of two hundred more traditional calls. A hell of a lot of remembering, but what was the point? It was all about teaching kids how to use their interfaces while they pretended to have fun.

“Promenade now, full promenade.” Crystal stalactites rose at random from the dance floor and the dancers weaved around them.

Another thing: the music was so loud that you had to shout to be heard. Okay for these kids, so young that they had nothing to say. But now that she was eighteen, Remeny preferred a quiet place like Sanctuary. It was better for flirting.

Remeny spotted Botão and waved. She skirted the dancers to join them.

“I’m here but I can’t stay. I’m babysitting my sisters.” Her avatar was wearing a *Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness* tee shirt.

“I like this.” Remeny brushed a hand down the sleeve.

“Yeah.” She tugged at the hem, stretching the front of the tee so she could admire it too. “My mom and I designed them and then I printed out ten on our home fab, sizes six and seven. I’ll bring them to the Gates Center tomorrow and have the teachers send them home with the kids. Cost less than ten bucks.”

“I was just there today myself.”

“Oh my god, what if we had met?” She clutched her throat in mock horror. “You ask me, I say the whole secret identity thing is dumb. The oldschool is just trying to keep us from ganging up on them.” She brushed up against Sturm. “What do you think Sturm, or are you ignoring me on purpose?”

“You forgot the commas,” he said, “and I wasn’t ignoring you. I was looking for Silk.”

“Asshole.” She was stunned. “Be that way then.” She pushed away from him.

“What do you know about Silk?” he said.

=*What are you doing?*= Remeny sent Robby a private message.

=*I think she’s in on it.*=

=*In on what?*=

“Why should I tell you?” said Botão.

“Because Silk isn’t who we think he is.”

Botão’s anger blip had a sarcastic edge. “Nobody here is who I think they are.”

“Did he tell you to come up with that slogan?”

“Oh, I get it. I’m not smart enough to come up with an idea on my own. Let’s see now, is it because I’m a girl? Because I am *uma Brasileira?*”

“There.” Remeny pointed. Silk had entered with a couple of avatars new to her.

“All roll now, and spin those wheels, easy now and boys form a star ...” Some of the avatars on the dance floor morphed their shoes into roller blades; the others grew casters in their legs. *“Now be our stars, and keep it rolling.”* One of the boys in the star formation slipped and toppled into the boy next to him. The girl dancers clapped and giggled, but the caller didn’t pause. *“That’s all right, no time for regrets, head back home and into your sets.”*

Silk appeared beside Remeny. “Our meeting isn’t until Tuesday,” he said, “but as long as we’re here ... I don’t see Toybox.”

“Leave him out of this,” said Sturm.

“Oh, and are you giving the orders now?” His amusement blip barely registered.

“I think there is some kind of conspiracy going on and you’re part of it. You’re manipulating me. Us.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Botão.

“How can it be manipulation ...” Silk spread his hands. “... if you’re doing what you wanted to do anyway? You believe, Sturm. I know you do. ”

“But I don’t,” said Botão, “and you can take your conspiracy or revolution or whatever the hell it is and shove it.” As Botão tore her tee shirt off and hurled it at Silk, she generated a replacement Seleção Brasileira soccer jersey. “I’ll find another coop. Remeny? You with me?”

With a shock, Remeny realized that she wanted to say yes, that she was actually afraid of what Silk and Sturm were trying to do to themselves. She liked being an avatar, sure, but this wasn’t how she wanted to live the rest of her life. Not if it meant getting stashed. She started toward Botão.

=*Wait*.= Sturm was desperate.

Silk didn’t wait. “You can’t quit,” he said. “Don’t you want to live your life in sofftime? You’re the one who wanted to make your own domain and never get real again.”

“No.” Botão glared at the three of them, and Remeny was ashamed to be lumped with the boys. “I was just saying that I like the real world *and* VR.” She had to raise her voice to be heard over the music and now people were eavesdropping. That only made her talk louder. “I don’t know

about you jerkoffs, but I like sex, oldschool sex, the kind you probably can't get, you know with touching and kissing and ... and sweetness." Her anger blip soared. "And I'm going to have my own kids someday."

In her room, Remeny felt tears come. She agreed with everything Botão was saying – except maybe the part about having kids. But it would hurt Robby if she spoke up and he had been hurt so much already. Not fair, *not fair*, but then nothing in her life was fair. She had been so busy being Robby's sister that she had forgotten how to be herself.

"But we're doing your kids a favor," said Silk. "And your grandchildren.

The caller had stopped and the music shut down. Now the entire playground was listening to them. Remeny was pretty sure they were about to be kicked out. Or worse.

"We've got nine billion people crowded onto this planet," he continued. "Most of us stashed aren't ever going to have kids. We say that's a good thing. And the stashed don't burn through scarce resources like you and your kids. We're saving the planet. All we ask is that we get to live the life we want."

"Avatars Silk and Botão, you are disrupting this playground." The caller's warning pierced the argument like a fire alarm. *"Stop now or there will be consequences."*

"Okay." Botão raised her hands in surrender. "So you have some ideas. But a revolution? No. You haven't seen what evil a revolution does. I have." Then she brought her hands together with a sharp clap and her avatar popped.

Everyone but Silk seemed to be holding their breath. He knelt, picked up her discarded tee shirt and held it up. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," he said. "Someday. That's all. In the meantime, I apologize."

The music started again. The crowd in the playground buzzed.

"Please." A kid in a foolish wizard's hat touched Sturm's elbow. "What was that all about?"

Sturm waved him off and snatched the tee shirt out of Silk's hands. "You and I still have something to settle."

"We do. But what about your sister?"

Sturm froze. "What did you say?" A blip shimmered but he suppressed it.

"We don't play by the rules, remember? That's how revolutions work." Was Silk smirking? "But we should really take this elsewhere. I have a place."

"You smug bastard. Why should we trust you?"

"Because you're smart? Because you need us?" He was ignoring Remeny. "We can leave her behind if you want."

"I'm right here," said Remeny, although she felt like she was in someone else's dream. "Don't pretend I'm not." She poked Sturm. "Either of you."

"Fine," said Silk. "Now, we should go."

Remeny was surprised that Toybox could afford a domain, although his taste in decoration was about what she would have imagined. The floor of his space was bone, the walls fire, the ceiling smoke. His temporarily-abandoned avatar, dressed in garish vestments, perched at the edge of a gilt Baroque throne, obviously a copy of something. Remeny queried and it turned out to be the Chair of Peter from St. Peter's Basilica, part of some altar designed by Bernini. It didn't seem like Toybox's taste until she found the sublink: some people called it Satan's Throne. In front of the throne were couches and chairs that seemed to have been made from writhing bodies. These gathered around a glass coffin, on top of which were an open bottle of absinthe, a crystal decanter of water, four matching goblets with slotted absinthe spoons, and a dish of sugar cubes. Inside the coffin was the stashed body of Jason Day, or at least what she assumed was a fairly accurate copy. It wasn't too hard to look at: the breathing mask and feeding tube hid most of the face and the body had not degenerated as much as some of the stashed she had seen images of. He still had all his arms and legs, but then Jason Day was under age and would have to log off and leave his coffin for several hours a week. This meant he wasn't yet eligible for an intercranial interface like Sturm's. His Deveau had a larger array of sensors than her Neurosky 3100 and it was connected to the body sock which monitored his vital signs.

“Where is he?” Sturm flicked a finger against Toybox’s idle avatar.

“Don’t know,” said Silk. “Wobbling around hardtime? I’m sure he’ll show up before long. Meanwhile, you need to promise that you won’t rat us out.”

“Rules?” said Remeny. “Wasn’t there something about revolutions not having any?”

“Sorry, but either you promise or we’re done.”

“Sure, sure. We promise.” Sturm bent and pretended to examine the Chair of Peter. “Just get on with it.”

“Johanna?”

“Remeny to you. How do you know I’ll keep my word?”

“We’ve done our homework.” He tried a smile on her. “Which means I trust you more than you trust me.” She was embarrassed that, just a few hours ago, it would have worked.

She morphed one of Toybox’s repulsive couches into a park bench and sat. “Promise.”

“Thank you. The first thing to know is that there are a lot of us. Not enough, but more all the time. Did you know that when Jefferson wrote that first declaration, only about a third of the colonists favored independence? A third were loyal to the King and another third were on the fence. The point is that we don’t need to convince everybody, okay?”

Toybox jerked on his throne and opened his eyes. “What did I miss?”

Remeny swallowed her blip of chagrin.

“We just started.” Silk seemed annoyed at the interruption.

“The contact went well?”

“About what we expected. Botão bailed.”

“But these two bit after all.” Toybox rubbed his hands together. “I wanted to be there but the damn overlord ... well, you know. Besides, Silk says I’m not quite ready for a contact. I need to work on my issues.” He came off his throne to the coffin. “Absinthe?”

Remeny scooted away from him on her bench. She opened the private channel with Robby. *=Does he have to talk?=
=*

=*Humor them. They're taking a risk.*= Sturm joined him. "I'll have some." He laid a sugar cube on one of the slotted spoons and set it on a glass.

"Could we please get to the point?" said Remeny. It felt good to close her hands into fists, like she had control of *something* at least. "What are you asking us to do?"

"Recruit," said Silk. "What we were doing in coop—that's what we're doing all across the entire county. You talk to kids. Make friends. Get our point across."

"I signed on last month," said Toybox. "Easiest thing I ever did."

"Okay," said Sturm. "But we're graduating."

"Are we?"

Remeny and Sturm stared at one another. =*Oh shit.*=

"We flunk coop." Toybox's glee was (.7). "On purpose. Isn't that crush?"

Remeny couldn't help herself. "Shouldn't be hard for you."

Sturm drained his virtual absinthe at a gulp. "So we're stuck in EOS hell forever."

"There are only so many times you can repeat coop," said Silk, "although we can help you extend your time here. We can arrange it so that most of the kids assigned to your teams are sympathetic to the stashed. Changing avatars can buy time. Eventually you *will* have to graduate. There will be another assignment waiting, if you want."

Remeny was stunned by the enormity of what Silk was saying. And who was he, really? How old? Did he even live in Jefferson Country?

"All of this is voluntary, understand, drop out any time. But you won't want to. We're busy everywhere, working in every demographic group. Lots of us are overclocked and can think rings around those who lived the majority of their lives in hardtime. And Remeny, we're not all stashed. There are lots of us out and about in the real world. Maybe they have brothers or sisters or mothers or fathers"

"Wait," Remeny said. "Aren't our parents going to get suspicious if we keep flunking coop?"

"Some do." Silk nodded.

“My parents don’t give a shit,” said Toybox. “They’re stashed too.”

“Sometimes kids convert their parents,” continued Silk.

“Let me guess.” Robby held up a hand to stop him. “And sometimes you try for entire families at once.”

Toybox chuckled.

“Special families get special consideration.”

Remeny thought about Steve Spencer in his house in Vermont and a sixty million dollar Vincente Gonsalves flix and Robby’s ultimatum. Which was more important to Dad, the part or his son’s pursuit of happiness? Wondering about it made her head ache.

“So that’s pretty much the deal,” said Silk. “I’m happy to tell you more, but I’d like to hear what’s on your mind now.”

The silence stretched. Remeny couldn’t look at Robby. She closed their private channel. She felt like curling up into a ball. He had to speak first. But she knew. He was her brother. She *knew*.

“I’m interested.”

“Good man.” Silk came over and sat on the couch beside her.

“Remeny?” What had she seen in him? “We definitely want you too.” She thought that if he tried to touch her, she would slap his hand away.

On an impulse, she pulled the Neurosky off her head and Silk, Toybox and Sturm disappeared. It was almost midnight. She was going to owe her overlord big time for this night. She stood and stretched in the dark of her room. Her home. She didn’t bother with lights or a headset. Mom and Dad were almost certainly asleep but she opened the hall door as if it were made of glass and slunk down to Robby’s room. She was glad now that she hadn’t left ForSquare with Botão. It was important that she understood what Silk was offering Robby. The pursuit of his happiness. As Sturm.

But his happiness wasn’t hers, and that was okay. Silk had given her something, even though she couldn’t accept his offer. She would have life and her liberty from her brother’s pain.

Johanna leaned close to Robby and blew on his face. Goodbye. He stirred but did not wake.

James Patrick Kelly has won the Hugo, Nebula and Locus awards and his work has been translated into seventeen languages. He is on the faculty of the Stonecoast Creative Writing MFA Program at the University of Southern Maine. For the last ten years he has been the internet columnist for *Asimov's Science Fiction magazine*.

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Water

by Ramez Naam

The water whispered to Simon's brain as it passed his lips. It told him of its purity, of mineral levels, of the place it was bottled. The bottle was cool in his hand, chilled perfectly to the temperature his neural implants told it he preferred. Simon closed his eyes and took a long, luxurious swallow, savoring the feel of the liquid passing down his throat, the drops of condensation on his fingers.

Perfection.

"Are you drinking that?" the woman across from him asked. "Or making love to it?"

Simon opened his eyes, smiled, and put the bottle back down on the table. "You should try some," he told her.

Stephanie shook her head, her auburn curls swaying as she did. "I try not to drink anything with an IQ over 200."

Simon laughed at that.

They were at a table at a little outdoor café at Washington Square Park. A dozen yards away, children splashed noisily in the fountain, shouting and jumping in the cold spray in the hot midday sun. Simon hadn't seen Stephanie since their last college reunion. She looked as good as ever.

"Besides," Stephanie went on. "I'm not rich like you. My implants are ad-supported." She tapped a tanned finger against the side of her head. "It's hard enough just looking at that bottle, at all of this . . ."—she gestured with her hands at the table, the menu, the café around them—" . . . without getting terminally distracted. One drink out of that bottle and I'd be hooked!"

Simon smiled, spread his hands expansively. "Oh, it's not as bad as all that." In his peripheral senses he could feel the bottle's adverttech working,

reaching out to Stephanie's brain, monitoring her pupillary dilation, the pulse evident in her throat, adapting its pitch in real time, searching for some hook that would get her to drink, to order a bottle for herself. Around them he could feel the menus, the table, the chairs, the café—all chattering, all swapping and bartering and auctioning data, looking for some advantage that might maximize their profits, expand their market shares.

Stephanie raised an eyebrow. “Really? Every time I glance at that bottle I get little flashes of how good it would feel to take a drink, little whole body shivers.” She wrapped her arms around herself now, rubbing her hands over the skin of her tanned shoulders, as if cold in this heat. “And if I did drink it, what then?” Her eyes drilled into Simon's. “Direct neural pleasure stimulation? A little jolt of dopamine? A little micro-addiction to Pura Vita bottled water?”

Simon tilted his head slightly, put on the smile he used for the cameras, for the reporters. “We only use pathways you accepted as part of your implant's licensing agreement. And we're well within the FDA's safe limits for . . .”

Stephanie laughed at him then. “Simon, it's me! I know you're a big marketing exec now, but don't give me your corporate line, okay?”

Simon smiled ruefully. “Okay. So, sure, of course, we make it absolutely as enticing as the law lets us. That's what advertising's for! If your neural implant is ad-supported, we use every function you have enabled. But so what? It's water. It's not like it's going to hurt you any.”

Stephanie was nodding now. “Mmm-hmmm. And your other products? VitaBars? Pure-E-Ohs? McVita Burgers?”

Simon spread his hands, palms open. “Hey look, everybody does it. If someone doesn't buy our Pura Vita line, they're gonna just go buy something from NutriYum or OhSoSweet or OrganiTaste or somebody else. We at least do our best to put some nutrition in there.”

Stephanie shook her head. “Simon, don't you think there's something wrong with this? That people let you put ads in their brains in order to afford their implants?”

“You don't have to,” Simon replied.

“I know, I know,” Stephanie answered. “If I paid enough, I could skip the ads, like you do. You don’t even have to experience your own work! But you know most people can’t afford that. And you’ve got to have an implant these days to be competitive. Like they say, wired or fired.”

Simon frowned inwardly. He’d come to lunch hoping for foreplay, not debate club. Nothing had changed since college. Time to redirect this.

“Look,” he said. “I just do my job the best I can, okay? Come on, let’s order something. I’m starving.”

Simon pulled up his menu to cut off this line of conversation. He moved just fast enough that for a split second he saw the listed entrees still morphing, optimizing their order and presentation to maximize the profit potential afforded by the mood his posture and tone of voice indicated.

Then his kill files caught up and filtered out of his senses every item that wasn’t on his diet.

Simon grimaced. “Looks like I’m having the salad again. Oh joy.”

He looked over at Stephanie, and she was still engrossed in the menu, her mind being tugged at by a dozen entrees, each caressing her thoughts with sensations and emotions to entice, each trying to earn that extra dollar.

Simon saw his chance. He activated the ad-buyer interface on his own implant, took out some extremely targeted ads, paid top dollar to be sure he came out on top of the instant auction, and then authorized them against his line of credit. A running tab for the new ad campaign appeared in the corner of his vision, accumulating even as he watched. Simon ignored it.

Stephanie looked up at him a moment later, her lunch chosen. Then he felt his own ads go into effect. Sweet enticements. Subtle reminders of good times had. Sultry undertones. Subtle, just below normal human perception. And all emanating from Simon, beamed straight into Stephanie’s mind.

And he saw her expression change just a tiny bit.

Half an hour later the check came. Simon paid, over Stephanie's objection, then stood. He leaned in close as she stood as well. The adverttech monitors told him she was receptive, excited.

"My place, tonight?" he asked.

Stephanie shook her head, clearly struggling with herself.

Simon mentally cranked up the intensity of his ads another notch further.

"I can make you forget all these distractions," he whispered to her. "I can even turn off your ads, for a night." His own adverttech whispered sweeter things to her brain, more personal, more sensual.

Simon saw Stephanie hesitate, torn. He moved to wrap his arms around her, moved his face toward hers for a kiss.

Stephanie turned her face away abruptly, and his lips brushed her cheek instead. She squeezed him in a sudden, brisk hug, her hands pressing almost roughly into his back.

"Never," she said. Then she pushed away from him and was gone.

Simon stood there, shaking his head, watching as Stephanie walked past the fountain and out of his view.

In the corner of his sight, an impressive tally of what he'd just spent on highly targeted advertising loomed. He blinked it away in annoyance. It was just a number. His line of credit against his Pura Vita stock options would pay for it.

He'd been too subtle, he decided. He should have cranked the ads higher from the very beginning. Well, there were plenty more fish in the sea. Time to get back to the office, anyway.

Steph walked north, past layers of virtual billboards and interactive fashion ads, past a barrage of interactive emotional landscape ads trying to suck her into buying perfume she didn't need, and farther, until she was sure she was out of Simon's senses.

Then she reached into her mind and flicked off the advertising interfaces

in her own implant.

She leaned against a building, let her brain unclench, let the struggle of fighting the adverttech he'd employed against her pass.

That bastard, she thought, fuming. She couldn't believe he'd tried that crap on her. If she'd had any shred of doubt remaining, he'd eliminated it. No. He deserved what was coming.

Steph straightened herself, put out a mental bid for a taxi, rode it to Brooklyn, and stepped up to the door of the rented one-room flat. She knocked—short, short, long, long, short. She heard motion inside the room, then saw an eye press itself to the other side of the ancient peephole.

They knew too well that electronic systems could be compromised.

The door opened a fraction, the chain still on it, and Lisa's face appeared. The short-haired brunette nodded, then unlatched the chain, opened the door fully.

Steph walked into the room, closed the door behind her, saw Lisa tucking the home-printed pistol back into her pocket. She hated that thing. They both did. But they'd agreed it was necessary. "It's done?" Lisa asked.

Steph nodded.

"It's done."

Simon walked south along Broadway. It was a gorgeous day for a stroll. The sun felt warm on his brow. He was overdressed for the heat in an expensive gray silk jacket and slacks, but the smart lining kept him cool nonetheless. The city was alive with people, alive with data. He watched as throngs moved up and down the street, shopping, chatting, smiling on this lovely day. He partially lowered his neural firewalls and let his implants feed him the whisper of electronic conversations all around him.

Civic systems chattered away. The sidewalk slabs beneath his feet fed a steady stream of counts of passers-by, estimates of weight and height and gender, plots of probabilistic walking paths, data collected for the city planners. Embedded biosensors monitored the trees lining the street, the

hydration of their soils, the condition of their limbs. Health monitors watched for runny noses, sneezing, coughing, any signs of an outbreak of disease. New York City's nervous system kept constant vigil, keeping the city healthy, looking for ways to improve it.

The commercial dataflow interested Simon more than the civic. His pricey, top-of-the-line implants let him monitor that traffic as only a few could.

In Tribeca he watched as a woman walked by a storefront. He saw a mannequin size her up, then felt the traffic as it caressed her mind with a mental image of herself clothed in a new summer dress, looking ten years younger and twenty pounds lighter. Beneath the physical the mannequin layered an emotional tone in the advert: feelings of vigor, joy, carefree delight. Simon nodded to himself. A nice piece of work, that. He took note of the brand for later study. The woman turned and entered the shop.

He felt other adverttech reaching out all around him to the networked brains of the crowd. Full sensory teasers for beach vacations from a travel shop, a hint of the taste of chocolate from a candy store, the sight and feel of a taut, rippling body from a sports nutrition store. He passed by a bodega, its façade open to the warm air, and came close enough that the individual bottles of soda and juice and beer and water reached out to him, each trying a pitch tailored to his height and weight and age and ethnicity and style of dress.

Simon felt the familiar ping of one of the many Pura Vita water pitches and smiled. Not bad. But he had a few ideas for improvements. None of it really touched him, in any case. His implants weren't ad-sponsored. He felt this ad chatter only because he chose to, and even now it was buffered, filtered, just a pale echo of what most of the implanted were subjected to. No. Simon tuned into this ambient froth of neural data as research. He sampled it, observed it from afar, because he must. His success in marketing depended on it.

He was almost to his own building when he passed the headquarters of Nexus Corp, the makers of the neural implant in his brain and millions more. Stephanie didn't understand. This was the real behemoth. So long as Nexus Corp maintained their patents on the neural implant technology, they held a monopoly. The ad-based model, all that most people could afford, was their invention. Simon was just one of thousands of marketers

to make use of it to boost demand for their products.

And hell, if people didn't like it, they didn't have to get an implant! It was just the way the world worked. Want to be smarter? Want a photographic memory? Want to learn a new language or a new instrument or how to code overnight? Want all those immersive entertainment options? Want that direct connection with your loved ones? But don't have the cash?

Then accept the ads, boyo. And once you do, stop complaining.

Not that Simon wanted the ads himself, mind you. No, it was worth the high price to keep the top-of-the-line, ad-free version running in his brain, to get all the advantages of direct neural enhancement without the distraction of pervasive multisensory advertising. And, of course, to be able to monitor the traffic around him, to better understand how to optimize his own pitches.

Simon reached his building at last. The lobby doors sensed him coming and whisked themselves open. Walking by the snack bar in the lobby, he felt the drinks and packaged junk food reaching out to him. His own Pura Vita water, of course. And NutriYum water. Simon gave their top competitor's products the evil eye. Someday Pura Vita would own this whole building, and then he'd personally see to it that not a single bottle of NutriYum remained.

The lobby floor tiles whispered ahead to the inner security doors, which in turn alerted the elevators. Simon strode forward confidently, layers of doors opening for him of their own accord, one by one, perfectly in time with his stride. He stepped into the waiting elevator and it began to ascend immediately, bound for his level. The lift opened again moments later and he strode to his windowed office. Smart routing kept subordinates out of his path. The glass door to his magnificent office swung open for him. A bottle of cold Pura Vita was on his desk, just how he liked it.

Simon settled into his ready-and-waiting chair, kicked his feet up on the table, and reached through his implant to the embedded computing systems of his office. Data streamed into his mind. Market reports. Sales figures. Ad performance metrics. He closed his eyes and lost himself in it. This was the way to work.

On the back of his jacket, a tiny device, smaller than a grain of sand, woke up and got to work as well.

Lisa started intently at Steph. “He didn’t notice?”

Steph shook her head. “Not a clue.”

“And you still want to go through with it?” Lisa asked.

“More than ever.”

Lisa looked at her. “The ones who’re paying us—they’re just as bad as he is, you know. And they’re going to profit.”

Steph nodded. “For now they will,” she replied. “In the long run— they’re just paying us to take the whole damn system down.”

Lisa nodded. “Okay, then.”

She strode over to the ancient terminal on the single desk in the flat and entered a series of keypresses.

Phase 1 began.

Around the world, three dozen different accounts stuffed with cryptocurrency logged on to anonymous, cryptographically secured stock market exchanges. One by one, they began selling short on Pura Vita stock, selling shares they did not own, on the bet that they could snap those same shares up at a far lower price in the very near future.

In data centers around the world, AI traders took note of the short sales within microseconds. They turned their analytical prowess to news and financial reports on Pura Vita, on its competitors, on the packaged snack and beverage industries in general. The computational equivalent of whole human lifetimes was burned in milliseconds analyzing all available information. Finding nothing, the AI traders flagged Pura Vita stock for closer tracking.

“Now we’re committed,” Lisa said.

Steph nodded. “Now let’s get out of here, before Phase 2 starts.”

Lisa nodded and closed the terminal. Five minutes later they were checked out of their hotel and on their way to the airport.

In a windowed office above the financial heart of Manhattan, a tiny AI woke and took stock of its surroundings.

Location—check.

Encrypted network traffic—check. Human present—check.

Key . . .

Deep within itself, the AI found the key. Something stolen from this corporation, perhaps. An access key that would open its cryptographic security. But one with additional safeguards attached. A key that could only be used from within the secure headquarters of the corporation. And only by one of the humans approved to possess such a key. Triply redundant security. Quite wise.

Except that now the infiltration AI was here, in this secure headquarters, carried in by one of those approved humans.

Slowly, carefully, the infiltration AI crawled its tiny body up the back of the silk suit it was on, toward its collar, as close as it could come to the human’s brain without touching skin and potentially revealing itself. When it could go no farther, it reached out, fit its key into the cryptographic locks of the corporation around it, and inserted itself into the inner systems of Pura Vita enterprises, and through them, into the onboard processors of nearly a billion Pura Vita products on shelves around the world.

In a warehouse outside Tulsa, a bottle of Pura Vita water suddenly labels itself as RECALLED. Its onboard processor broadcasts the state to all nearby. Within milliseconds, the other bottles in the same case, then the rest of the pallet, then all the pallets of Pura Vita water in the warehouse register as RECALLED. The warehouse inventory management AI issues

a notice of return to Pura Vita, Inc.

In a restaurant in Palo Alto, Marie Evans soaks up the sun, then reaches out to touch her bottle of Pura Vita. She likes to savor this moment, to force herself to wait, to make the pleasure of that first swallow all the more intense. Then, abruptly, the bottle loses its magic. It feels dull and drab, inert in her hand. An instant later the bottle's label flashes red—RECALL. The woman frowns. "Waiter!"

In a convenience store in Naperville, the bottles of Pura Vita on the store shelves suddenly announce that they are in RECALL, setting off a flurry of electronic activity. The store inventory management AI notices the change and thinks to replace the bottles with more recently arrived stock in the storeroom. Searching, it finds that the stock in the back room has been recalled as well. It places an order for resupply to the local distribution center, only to receive a nearly instant reply that Pura Vita water is currently out of stock, with no resupply date specified. Confused, the inventory management AI passes along this information to the convenience store's business management AI, requesting instructions.

Meanwhile, on the shelves immediately surrounding the recalled bottles of Pura Vita, other bottled products take note. Bottles of NutriYum, OhSoSweet, OrganiTaste, and BetterYou, constantly monitoring their peers and rivals, observe the sudden recall of all Pura Vita water. They virtually salivate at the new opportunity created by the temporary hole in the local market landscape. Within a few millionths of a second, they are adapting their marketing pitches, simulating tens of thousands of scenarios in which buyers encounter the unavailable Pura Vita, angling for ways to appeal to this newly available market. Labels on bottles morph, new sub-brands appear on the shelves as experiments, new neural ads ready themselves for testing on the next wave of shoppers.

In parallel, the rival bottles of water reach out to their parent corporate AIs with maximal urgency. Pura Vita bottles temporarily removed from battleground! Taking tactical initiative to seize local market opportunity! Send further instructions/best practices to maximize profit-making potential!

For there is nothing a modern bottle of water wants more than to maximize its profit-making potential.

At the headquarters of OhSoSweet and OrganiTaste and BetterYou, AIs receive the flood of data from bottles across the globe. The breadth of the calamity to befall Pura Vita becomes clear within milliseconds. Questions remain: What has caused the recall? A product problem? A contaminant? A terrorist attack? A glitch in the software?

What is the risk to their own business?

Possible scenarios are modeled, run, evaluated for optimal courses of action robust against the unknowns in the situation.

In parallel, the corporate AIs model the responses of their competitors. They simulate each other's responses. What will NutriYum do? OhSoSweet? OrganiTaste? BetterYou? Each tries to outthink the rest in a game of market chess.

One by one, their recursive models converge on their various courses of action and come to that final, most dreaded set of questions, which every good corporate AI must ask itself a billion times a day. How much of this must be approved by the humans? How can the AI get the human-reserved decisions made quickly and in favor of the mathematically optimal course for the corporation that its machine intelligence has already decided upon?

Nothing vexes an AI so much as needing approval for its plans from slow, clumsy, irrational bags of meat.

Johnny Ray walked down the refrigerated aisle, still sweaty from his run. Something cold sounded good right now. He came upon the cooler with the drinks, reached for a Pura Vita, and saw that the label was pulsing red. Huh? Recalled?

Then the adverttech hit him.

"If you liked Pura Vita, you'll love Nutra Vita from NutriYum!"

"OrganiVita is the one for you!"

"Pura Sweet, from OhSoSweet!"

Images and sensations bombarded him. A cold, refreshing mountain

stream crashed onto the rocks to his left, splashing him with its cool spray. A gaggle of bronzed girls in bikinis frolicked on a beach to his right, beckoning him with crooked fingers and enticing smiles. A rugged, shirtless, six-packed version of himself nodded approvingly from the bottom shelf, promising the body that Johnny Ray could have. An overwhelmingly delicious citrus taste drew him to the top.

Johnny Ray's mouth opened in a daze. His eyes grew glassy. His hands slid the door to the drinks fridge open, reached inside, came out with some bottle, the rest of him not even aware the decision had been made.

Johnny Ray looked down at the bottle in his hand. Nutri Vita. He'd never even heard of this stuff before. His mouth felt dry, hungry for the cold drink. The sweat beaded on his brow. Wow. He couldn't wait to try this.

While the corporate AIs of the other brands dithered, wasting whole precious seconds, debating how to persuade the inefficient bottleneck of humans above them, the controlling intelligence of NutriYum launched itself into a long prepared course of action.

NutriYumAI logged on to an anonymous investor intelligence auction site, offering a piece of exclusive, unreleased data to the highest bidder.

30 SECOND ADVANTAGE AVAILABLE—MARKET OPPORTUNITY TO SELL FORTUNE 1000 STOCK IN ADVANCE OF CRASH. GREATER THAN 10% RETURN GUARANTEED BY BOND. AUCTION CLOSING IN 250 MILLISECONDS. RESERVE BID \$100 MILLION. CRYPTO CURRENCY ONLY.

Within a quarter of a second it had 438 bids. It accepted the highest, at \$187 million, with an attached cryptographically sealed and anonymized contract that promised full refund of the purchase price should the investment data fail to provide at least an equivalent profit.

In parallel, NutriYumAI sent out a flurry of offer-contracts to retailers throughout North America and select markets in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

ADDITIONAL NUTRIYUM WATER STOCK AVAILABLE IN YOUR

AREA. 10 CASES FREE, DELIVERY WITHIN 1 HOUR, PLUS 40% DISCOUNT ON NEXT 1000 CASES—EXCHANGE FOR 75% ALLOCATION OF PURA VITA SHELF SPACE AND NEURAL BANDWIDTH ALLOCATION. REPLY WITH CRYPTOGRAPHIC SIGNATURE TO ACCEPT.

Within seconds, the first acceptances began to arrive. Retailers signed over the shelf space and neural bandwidth that Pura Vita had once occupied in their stores over to NutriYum, in exchange for a discount on the coming cases.

By the end of the day, NutriYum would see its market share nearly double. A coup. A rout. The sort of market battlefield victory that songs are sung of in the executive suites.

The AI-traded fund called Vanguard Algo 5093 opened the data package it had bought for \$187 million. It took nanoseconds to process the data. This was indeed an interesting market opportunity. Being the cautious sort, Vanguard Algo 5093 sought validation. At a random sample of a few thousand locations, it hired access to wearable lenses, to the anonymized data streams coming out of the eyes and brains of NexusCorp customers, to tiny, insect-sized airborne drones. Only a small minority of the locations it tried had a set of eyes available within the one-second threshold it set, but those were sufficient. In every single location, the Pura Vita labels in view were red. Red for recall.

Vanguard Algo 5093 leapt into action. SELL SHORT! SELL SHORT!

It alerted its sibling Vanguard algorithms to the opportunity, earning a commission on their profits. It sent the required notifications to the few remaining human traders at the company as well, though it knew that they would respond far too slowly to make a difference.

Within milliseconds, Pura Vita stock was plunging, as tens of billions in Vanguard Algo assets bet against it. In the next few milliseconds, other AI traders around the world took note of the movement of the stock. Many of them, primed by the day's earlier short sale, joined in now, pushing Pura Vita stock even lower.

Thirty-two seconds after it had purchased this advance data, Vanguard Algo 5093 saw the first reports on Pura Vita's inventory problem hit the wire. By then, \$187 million in market intelligence had already netted it more than a billion in profits, with more on the way as Pura Vita dipped even lower.

Simon's first warning was the stock ticker. Like so many other millionaires made of not-yet-vested stock options, he kept a ticker of his company's stock permanently in view in his mind. On any given day it might flicker a bit, up or down by a few tenths of a percent. More up than down for the last year, to be sure. Still, on a volatile day, one could see a swing in either direction of as much as 2 percent. Nothing to be too worried about.

He was immersing himself in data from a Tribeca clothing store—the one he'd seen with the lovely adverttech today—when he noticed that the ticker in the corner of his mind's eye was red. Bright red. Pulsating red.

His attention flicked to it.

–11.4%

What?

It plunged even as he watched.

–12.6%

–13.3%

–15.1%

What the hell? He mentally zoomed in on the ticker to get the news. The headline struck him like a blow.

PURA VITA BOTTLES EXPIRING IN MILLIONS OF LOCATIONS.

No. This didn't make any sense. He called up the sales and marketing AI on his terminal.

Nothing.

Huh?

He tried again.

Nothing.

The AI was down.

He tried the inventory management AI next.

Nothing.

Again.

Nothing.

Simon was sweating now. He could feel the hum as the smart lining of his suit started running its compressors, struggling to cool him off. But it wasn't fast enough. Sweat beaded on his brow, on his upper lip. There was a knot in his stomach.

He pulled up voice, clicked to connect to IT. Oh thank god.

Then routed to voicemail.

Oh no. Oh please no.

-28.7%

-30.2%

-31.1%

-33.9%

It was evening before IT called back. They'd managed to reboot the AIs. A worm had taken them out somehow, had spread new code to all the Pura Vita bottles through the market intelligence update channel. And then it had disabled the remote update feature on the bottles. To fix those units, they needed to reach each one, physically. Almost a billion bottles. That would take whole days!

It was a disaster. And there was worse.

NutriYum had sealed up the market, had closed six-month deals with tens of thousands of retailers. Their channel was gone, eviscerated.

And with it Simon's life.

The credit notice came soon after. His options were worthless now. His

most important asset was gone. And with it so was the line of credit he'd been using to finance his life.

[NOTICE OF CREDIT DOWNGRADE]

The message flashed across his mind. Not just any downgrade. Down to zero. Down into the red. Junk status.

The other calls came within seconds of his credit downgrade. Everything he had—his midtown penthouse apartment, his vacation place in the Bahamas, his fractional jet share—they were all backed by that line of credit. He'd been living well beyond his means. And now the cards came tumbling down.

[NexusCorp alert: Hello, valued customer! We have detected a problem with your account. We are temporarily downgrading your neural implant service to the free, ad-sponsored version. You can correct this at any time by submitting payment here.]

Simon clutched his head in horror. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't.

Numbly, he stumbled out of his office and down the corridor. Lurid product adverts swam at him from the open door to the break room. He pushed past them. He had to get home somehow, get to his apartment, do . . . something.

He half collapsed into the elevator, fought to keep himself from hyperventilating as it dropped to the lobby floor. Adverts from the lobby restaurants flashed at him from the wall panel as they dropped, inundating him with juicy steak flavor, glorious red wine aroma, the laughter and bonhomie of friends he didn't have. The ads he habitually blocked out reached him raw and unfiltered now, with an intensity he wasn't accustomed to in his exclusive, ad-free life. He crawled back as far as he could into the corner of the lift, whimpering, struggling to escape the barrage. The doors opened, and he bolted forward, into the lobby and the crowd, heading out, out into the city.

The snack bar caught him first. It reached right into him, with its scents and flavors and the incredible joy a bite of a YumDog would bring him. He stumbled toward the snack bar unthinkingly. His mouth was dry, parched, a desert. He was so hot in this suit, sweating, burning up, even as the

suit's pumps ran faster and faster to cool him down.

Water. He needed water.

He blinked to clear his vision, searching, searching for a refreshing Pura Vita.

All he saw was NutriYum. He stared at the bottles, the shelves upon shelves of them. And the NutriYum stared back into him. It saw his thirst. It saw the desert of his mouth, the parched landscape of his throat, and it whispered to him of sweet relief, of an endless cool stream to quench that thirst.

Simon stumbled forward another step. His fingers closed around a bottle of cold, perfect, NutriYum. Beads of condensation broke refreshingly against his fingers.

Drink me, the bottle whispered to him. And I'll make all your cares go away.

The dry earth of his throat threatened to crack. His sinuses were a ruin of flame. He shouldn't do this. He couldn't do this.

Simon brought his other hand to the bottle, twisted off the cap, and tipped it back, letting the sweet cold water quench the horrid cracking heat within him.

Pure bliss washed through him, bliss like he'd never known. This was nectar. This was perfection.

Some small part of Simon's brain told him that it was all a trick. Direct neural stimulation. Dopamine release. Pleasure center activation. Reinforcement conditioning.

And he knew this. But the rest of him didn't care.

Simon was a NutriYum man now. And always would be.

Ramez Naam was born in Cairo, Egypt, and came to the U.S. at the age of 3. He's a computer scientist, futurist, and award-winning author of five books, including the *Nexus* trilogy. He lives in Seattle, where he writes and

speaks full time. Find him at rameznaam.com or on Twitter [@ramez](https://twitter.com/ramez).

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Unclaimed

by Annalee Newitz

It was the room of a book lover. The wall displays were dead, and the air was emptied of holograms.

A sofa slumped beneath a dark rectangle that Tom had first pegged as barebones readout. But as she approached through the shattered front door, it resolved into a piece of paper gummed to the display surface, a printout of pages from comics. On a low coffee table of indeterminate age were three mobiles, one still powered up and tuned to a page full of off-kilter text. Looked like something that had been scanned in from a paper book.

She bent down to get a better look, flicking her fingers above the mobile screen. Nothing. Some kind of touch interface? Pulling specs over her eyes, she blinked through the menus until her view went from transparent to infrared. As she'd suspected, the mobile's face was lightly streaked from repeated finger wipes. Tom captured images of prints for later analysis, then put a finger on the mobile's info button.

A box containing a single line of text materialized under her touch: "*The Swordmakers of Garl*, by R. E. John Oakman. Copyright 2004, Vam Books." The book was fifty years old. This guy really was an antiquarian.

"Shit, Tom—get in here now." Her partner Hu's voice issued from the bedroom door. He flicked on a light and its plain fluorescent glow made the doorway seem to collapse down into 2D. "It's clear," he added.

Only a clump of paper books next to the victim's futon remained intact. Somebody had shredded everything, including most of the body, which was reduced to clots and wet rags. A combination of stab wounds and possibly—she glanced at the skull, collapsed and perforated—a hammer.

Infrared showed the body was still warm. Which made sense. Neighbors had called just a few minutes ago, reporting screams and "loud banging."

She and Hu were the only armored guys in the neighborhood, so SFPD routed the potential gunfire alarm to their dashboard.

A loud splash, followed by the sound of gurgling water, came from the room they'd just left.

Tom and Hu looked at each other. They hadn't cleared the kitchen.

Moving in tandem, they crept back into the main room, gun arms outstretched. To their left was a tiny kitchen, the edge of a counter barely visible down a short set of stairs. It sounded like somebody was taking a bath in there.

Tom flicked her head. She would take the lead; Hu would follow. They crossed the room and swarmed down the steps just as her specs returned some data she'd requested minutes earlier, when they got the call. Apartment layout, pulled from some ancient city database. The room doubled before her eyes, its contours moving between autoCAD and reality. No exit other than a window.

A person stood over the sink, hooded in a brown poncho, rinsing cracked smears of blood from a pair of sexless arms.

"Get down or I'll shoot!" Tom yelled. "On the floor! Now!"

The person froze, then threw back the hood. Viscera-matted hair, tiny white face with blue eyes like glittering chips of exploded Pyrex. A very young woman. And her mouth—a lamprey mod, an anus ringed with teeth, drooling gore. Tom flashed back to the victim's deflated skull, with its single perforation. Not a hammer, then.

Somehow, the mouth was spitting out words. "Get back, bitches!" The woman raised her gory arms and swept them in half-circles over her head, as if she were issuing commands to a device they couldn't see. "I'll eat your fucking brains!" Her voice rose to a squeal.

Hu shot out the woman's shoulders before she could finish. If she had any motion-activated explosives or other weapons, she wouldn't be setting them off. The perp dropped to her knees, sucking breath, poncho ruffled around her body like petticoats.

"You are under arrest," Tom said. "If you try to move, we'll shoot to kill."

The woman didn't care. She launched herself upward at Hu, attaching

that spiny tunnel of a mouth to his eye socket. There was one terrible second of silence before he started screaming. Then, just as the noise started, Tom stepped in and shot.

Tom saved Hu's brain, but not his eyeball. Forensics found it in the woman's stomach, along with human brains from two separate victims. They never figured out who else's brains she'd eaten that day.

But Tom did figure out one thing. She visited Hu in the hospital to tell him that she'd quit. "I'm studying for my PI exam," she said. "Specializing in civil suits and shit like that. I don't want to deal with anything violent. Three years as a cop was enough."

Hu watched her with his new implant, whose iris wandered slightly. It wasn't quite under his control yet. "I'm quitting too," he replied. "I want to be a protein engineer like my dad."

Nick Gray sat beneath the skylight, currently reverberating with rain. He was fondling a paper business card, flipping it over in his fingers nervously. She'd seen "Leslie Tom—Private Investigator" flash in the palm of his hand five times before he spoke.

"I first heard about you when that brain eater was caught. What a bizarre case."

Tom nodded; she'd heard that from a lot of clients. Waiting for Gray to continue, she tried to figure out how much cash this guy had spent on his shoes. Her specs said genuine leather, and a few more blinks revealed brand-new soles flecked with oil. This was somebody with money to fuel a car.

Raising her eyes to his face again, she steepled her fingers over the desk. "What can I do for you, Mr. Gray?"

He grimaced and settled one of his rich man's shoes on a knee. "I know you left the SFPD several years ago. But I've come to you partly because of that case." He toyed with her card again. "I understand that the victim was a book collector."

Tom was surprised. Very few people knew about that aspect of the

case.

In the follow-up investigation, Tom discovered the victim and perp had met through a Superpoke group for paper book collectors. The brain eater, Nelly McAuley, was convinced that she was some kind of ancient demon. She'd paid a fetish surgeon to make her look the part—apparently the lamprey look was popular among biomodders that year, so the doctor thought nothing of it. Then as her coup de grace, Nelly went on a quest to eat the brains of her Superpoke friends with her new mouth. Something to do with absorbing their arcane knowledge from old books.

Nelly had been plotting her murderous rampage for months online. Her last status update read: "The books will never disappear if I absorb them into my body, because my body will live forever." It wasn't as if the detectives hid this part of the investigation. It was just too boring for the crime blogs to report.

"So you're here about a book lover?" Tom asked.

"That is what my client assumes, yes."

A rich guy with a client meant serious money indeed. Tom relaxed the steeple of her fingers and leaned back. Now that Gray was talking she knew he wouldn't stop.

"Have you ever heard of the *Scorpion Diaries*?"

"Hard not to. Didn't they just release the fifth installment? In fact, I think —" Tom stood, walked to the window, and glanced at a billboard over the freeway. "Yes, there's an ad for it right out there. *The Sting of Time*." As Tom watched, the title pixelated into an explosion that seemed to rain fire on 17th Street. A vast, metallic scorpion emerged from the flames, a human figure riding on its back.

"Did you know the *Scorpion Diaries* were originally a series of novels? They were published at the turn of the century by somebody named J.J. Coal."

Tom returned to her seat. "I guess I read that somewhere, yeah."

"My client needs you to find Coal. Very quietly."

"When did he disappear? Or she?"

"We're not sure if Coal is a she or a he. The author could be as young

as 90. Or have an heir.”

“An heir?”

“If we can’t find Coal, we need to find an heir. We have money for the Coal Estate.”

Usually clients wanted to get money out of the people she found, not vice versa.

“I don’t get it—who is your client?”

“I represent the Book Rights Registry. We are a consortium that deals with licensing unclaimed books.”

Tom started typing simple news queries, fingers moving over the desk in clipped motions that her specs translated into keystrokes. “What do you mean by unclaimed books?”

“Old paper books that stores scan and sell. A lot are still under copyright, but nobody can find the authors. So the Registry was created to hold author royalties on those books until somebody claims them. There are a few million unclaimed books out there that make pennies a year. But *Scorpion Diaries*, once it was licensed by Pixar-Disney . . .” He spread his hands in a gesture that hovered between a shrug and the pantomime for holding a very large item.

“When did Coal disappear?”

“The problem is that we don’t know. Coal never claimed those books back when they were scanned in 2007.”

“So...she’s been missing for over fifty years?” This case was getting weirder by the minute.

“We tried contacting her publisher—they’re called Vam Books. Long gone. Probably went under before the books were scanned.”

“So why do you need me?” she asked. “Why don’t you just go to the police?”

Gray stretched his lips as if he were biting the skin just inside his mouth. “This requires discretion. We’re prepared to offer you half a million up front, and another half when you find Coal.”

Tom pretended to mull over Gray’s lowball offer as she tapped out more

queries, on J.J. Coal, Vam Books, the Registry, and the history of the *Scorpion Diaries* series. She added a few operators so her crawler wouldn't just skim popular links. A hit on "Book Rights Registry" came back to her specs almost immediately. The text scrolled over her right lens, appearing to cascade through the air until it obscured Gray's face. There were some news headlines too, one picked up by a major aggregator: *Who Is Making Bank off the Scorpion Diaries Deal?* Tom blinked through the lot in less than a minute. Now she knew why Gray wanted discretion.

"Says here the Registry is required by law to hire somebody to find the authors of unclaimed books after five years, and you waited almost 51." She pulled a page from the Registry's founding documents to her projector. The relevant words hung over the desk between them, a holographic accusation. "You needed to find Coal a long time ago, and this isn't going to be easy. A million up front, and a million when I find Coal. How's that sound?"

Gray said nothing.

"I bet there are at least a dozen networks getting ready to blast the world with news about what the Registry has been doing with all that unclaimed Scorpion Diaries money instead of finding the author's estate."

"Fine. Two million it is."

Tom could access the public net and most law enforcement databases, but a job like this required her to go back half a century. For anything older than ten years, you needed premiere information repositories, old archives. It was time to pay a visit to Hu. His machine at Genentech Hall had access to all the obscure data collections a rich university could afford.

From the Potrero Hill bike lot on Missouri St., Tom could see the city and Bay spread out around her on all sides. The sky was full of fat, bulbous clouds floating in deep blue, and the underground mansions of Hunters Point were shadows among distant, grassy berms. She picked the nearest ten-speed, jammed unceremoniously into the wire rack between

hundreds of other bikes, and listened to the freewheel purr all the way down the hill to UC San Francisco.

Hu's office walls jiggled with springy simulations of proteins in the process of folding and unfolding. Tom moved a stack of drives off a chair and sat down. "I need to search for some really old publications in the University archives. Can I use your account?"

"Go ahead and connect." Hu made an unlocking motion over a tiny optical pad in the wall—how she could use his account as a guest. Tom adjusted her specs, then poked her way through a few book archive searches.

Hu sat down next to her with a sigh. "I need a break from the proteome. What are you looking for?"

"An author named J.J. Coal—the person who wrote the *Scorpion Diaries* series. I'm trying to figure out what happened to her." Tom had already dug up some reviews of the first *Scorpion Diaries* novel, *Potent Venom*, from an Internet snapshot taken in 1994. Two of those reviews referred to Coal as "she," and one avoided pronouns. At least she'd figured out the author's likely gender.

"Really? I love the *Scorpion Diaries*! There's a new one coming out this Friday." Hu walked halfway around his desk, twitching fingers over a database she couldn't see. He stopped abruptly. "Wow, that's weird."

"What?"

"Do you think J.J. Coal might have been a synthetic biologist?"

Hu had Tom's full attention. "It's possible. What did you find?"

"Check this out." He made a gesture like tossing a ball, lobbing a wad of documents into her specs' range. They expanded before her eyes into a spiral of white squares covered in text. She reached out and shuffled through them.

Scientific papers, all with Justine Jacobsen-Coal listed as an author: The evolutionary development of limbs in cephalopods and arachnids; regeneration of muscle with synthetic stem cells; tissue engineering. Publication dates ranged from the 1990s to the 2040s. The dates were right but the connection was tenuous. Still, it was worth checking into a little more. Tom glanced at the author affiliations. Apparently Justine

Jacobsen-Coal had worked at UC San Francisco.

“Aren’t some of the *Scorpion Diaries* stories set in a futuristic version of San Francisco?” she mused.

“The octopus battalions blow up the Golden Gate Bridge in the second one, so yeah.”

She deployed a crawler to do a simple text search across *Exoskeleton*, book two of the *Scorpion Diaries*. The phrase “San Francisco” occurred 44 times in the novel, mostly during the climactic battle between—she read swiftly—the hero Antoine, aided by his tank-sized scorpion cyborg, and an army of hyper-intelligent octopi. Apparently the cephalopods were getting revenge on evil scientists who had poisoned their environment. And the scientists worked at “a brooding laboratory complex on the shores of San Francisco Bay.” Just like UC San Francisco.

Tom continued to pound out queries with Hu’s access codes, but five hours later, all she’d discovered was the name of J.J. Coal’s old editor at Vam—a Les Cohen, who was apparently still alive and in New York.

Hu was eating imperial rolls out of a paper bag and looking over Tom’s shoulder, his specs’ view tethered to hers. “I don’t get it—if J.J. Coal was working here all that time, and not living in a hole somewhere, why wouldn’t she ever claim her books? Wouldn’t she have figured out they were online and wanted to get some money out of it?”

Tom shrugged. “Any number of reasons. First of all, her books never sold that well until about 10 years ago when the movies started coming out. So it wasn’t like there was much money in it for her. Plus, if Jacobsen-Coal the scientist and Coal the author really are the same person, she certainly made an effort to downplay that connection. I couldn’t find any references associating them. Maybe she just wanted to get on with her career and forget she’d ever written those books.” The detective downed the last of her coffee, briefly savoring the sweet, condensed milk aftertaste. “Gotta get back to the office and make some calls.”

Sunset seeped through the skylight over Tom’s desk. She’d opened a projector window to make a call, but the hologram was unnecessary.

When the call went through, no video feed was offered. A man's voice barked from the dead square over her desk: "Les Cohen, Bartleby's Books."

"Mr. Cohen. I'm calling about J.J. Coal, whose books you edited for Vam?"

A disgruntled snort. "Is this Wendy from Scorpionistas? I told you already that I don't care about your fucking fanblog."

She couldn't read his expression, but his use of the word "fanblog" told her everything she needed to know: Les was fiercely proud to live in the past. This was information she could use. Extemporizing, she said, "I'm Leslie Tom, with the University of California. I'm trying to locate Ms. Coal for a history research project on paper books from the turn of the century."

"Paper books, huh? Is that really a history research topic? Jesus." Shuffling and a sigh.

"Have you heard from her recently?"

"Not since the tens. You know this whole Scorpion Diaries franchise has nothing to do with her, right?"

Now was the time to test Hu's theory. "Do you have any idea why she tried to hide the fact that she worked as a biologist?"

"Justine wasn't hiding anything. It was a pen name. She didn't want people searching for her research and finding her novels." Cohen sounded testy now.

Tom suppressed the urge to punch the air in victory.

"So you really haven't heard from her since the tens? Nothing?"

Clicking noises and a shuffle. Sounded like he was using a touch keyboard, maybe rooting through an old mail archive. "Actually—let me see—I did get some mail from her about ten years ago, when she retired. Here it is." A laugh, and then more clicking. "Yeah, she had a retirement party at this museum in San Francisco—Randall Museum. I never made it out." Another laugh. "She was a weird lady."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, just that she really believed a lot of that stuff she wrote. You know, the coming war between humans and other species. Cyborg animals. She

told me one time that she was working on a way to destroy the—how did she put it?—the binary between human and non-human. I think that’s what made her books so amazing: She really believed the future would be a fucking weird place. Nobody wanted to buy her stuff after Vam went under, though. All they wanted was that Twilight bullshit. Christ. Fucking vampires.”

Tom pulled up the site for Randall Museum. A logo surrounded by trees blotted out the dead square of her conversation with Cohen.

Now the bookseller was getting chatty. “Have you read *With These Claws*? I think that’s her best one. That’s where she explores what it’s like to be a cyborg. We finally see things from the scorpion’s point of view.”

“Uh huh.”

She idly flipped through old museum news releases around the time of Coal’s retirement. Nothing about her party, but there was an intriguing bulletin about how an anonymous donor had “upon retirement from the field of biology, gifted the museum with the funds to build a synthetic biology lab for kids.” A lab that was still there, and which would contain, in the bubbly language of the press release, “a sunny corner” where the retired biologist would continue doing “light research.” It could very well be Coal.

“I hope she’s dead,” Cohen said at last. “She would hate what’s happened to her books.”

The next morning Tom grabbed a bike on 16th Street and coasted through the chaotic smells of breakfast hour in the city. She headed for the Randall Museum, located high above the shops and bars of the Castro on a steep hill called Corona Heights. The easiest ride up was States Street, according to her specs, but after fifty yards the incline was too much. She had to give up pedaling and go it on foot.

States Street was a nervous system of cracks. Old houses along one side faced a rocky, weed-choked slope restrained by rotting anti-erosion nets. Looked like nothing much had changed here since the floods in the 30s. As the hill grew steeper, she left houses behind and the asphalt foam

crumbled away into a short, muddy road. A spinal column of stairs stretched up to the weedy peak in a scoliotic curve. The summit was a shattered jawbone of stone teeth the size of dinosaurs.

Tom looked up at it, uneasy. Who the hell would build a lab here for kids?

Her eyes picked out an incongruously bright sign a few yards down the road. "Randall Kids' Lab!" it proclaimed. Orange arrows pointed out a path that led away from the stairs, around the base of the summit, toward the side of the hill that faced the Bay. Tom locked her bike in the nearly-empty rack and, for the first time in several years, she paused to check her emergency beacon and gun.

Crunching through leaves, she followed the arrows and tried to figure out why this case was bothering her. IP investigations were her bread and butter. And this was an easy job: Find Coal or her family; give them money. She didn't have to bust down somebody's door looking for pirate servers, or spend months surveilling a sad old showbiz exec who sold cheats for his own company's video games to support his drug habit.

Maybe it was because Coal was a book lover. Somebody who loved paper so much that she didn't bother to claim her novels in any digital form. Weird. Of course, it was possible that Coal had given up fiction for science. Or maybe the author was simply dead. But something about the way Cohen described Coal made Tom think of Nelly, the antiquarian who ate brains as a bizarre form of literary preservation.

It made no sense to think about that. If she found Coal, she had nothing to do but deliver good news about a financial windfall. Still, Coal's effort to distance herself from what had apparently been her passion raised a red flag. If there was one thing Tom had learned in all her years as a detective, it was that passions didn't disappear—they metastasized.

She'd reached the entrance to Randall Labs, a small courtyard backed by a thick pane of glass set in the rocky body of the hillside. The labs were behind that glass, dug all the way inside Corona Heights, going down several levels beneath her feet. Nothing seemed to be open yet. Tom paused to take in a view of the Bay miles below, its cargo yards a tangle of robotic arms flexing over docks. Maybe it wasn't such a bad place to put a lab after all. She shrugged slightly and approached the glass door cut into

the glass wall.

Posters gummed to the sidewalk at her feet flickered with information about classes, lectures, and all the wildlife she couldn't see among the wind-maimed weeds.

On the glowing access pad next to the door, beneath KidLab and Flora Bioworks, was the name Justine Jacobsen-Coal. Sublevel 5. So she had been right. Tom pressed her thumb into the scientist's name, and the door clicked open without requesting any identification. This was almost too easy.

When Tom stepped out of the elevator into Sublevel 5, the first thing she noticed was the redirected sunlight, and the smell of fresh sea air. The lab was designed to look like a large, sunny atrium, perfectly circular, with environment portals in the high ceiling bringing in the light and air. Plants erupted from enormous pots, and vines scaled the walls, clinging to the ceiling with corrosive fingers. To her left was a wall of tanks—some filled with water, others with sand and heat lamps. All were squirming with creatures.

To her right, facing the tanks, was a woman sitting at a cluttered desktop, gesturing two long strings of capital letters into a new alignment. Gray hair flowed over a pronounced hump in her back.

She ignored Tom completely.

"Excuse me," the detective said. "I'm looking for Dr. Jacobsen-Coal."

"You found her," the woman replied, moving another string of letters into place.

"Are you J.J. Coal, the author?" Tom casually passed a hand through her hair, and a tiny red circle appeared in the corner of her vision. Her specs were recording everything she saw. If she wanted that second million, she'd need video proof that Coal existed.

The woman wiped her work out of the air and looked at Tom for the first time. "Well that's a name I haven't heard in a long time."

"You're the author of the *Scorpion Diaries* series?"

Coal nodded with mock grandeur. “For what it’s worth, yes I am. And please stop filming or I’ll brick your mobile.” The old slang sounded sharp on this woman’s tongue.

Tom turned video off and glanced around the lab with new appreciation. Security was better than she thought.

“I’m Leslie Tom, a private detective. I was hired to find you by the Book Rights Registry.”

Coal straightened up in her chair, then sank down into an even more crooked position, back mounded up behind her head. She looked puzzled. “What’s the Book Rights Registry?”

“They’re an industry group. They want you to claim your books so they can pay you what you’re owed for *Scorpion Diaries*. You know, from the money they got for licensing your books to Pixar-Disney.”

An odd, bubbling sound came from the tanks then ceased. Coal frowned. “Claim my books? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your books. They’ve been turned into a franchise—immensives, games, a movie series. They’ve made billions.” The scientist’s back was definitely moving strangely now. Almost undulating. Tom covered her confusion with an uncharacteristic string of babble. “You must have—may have noticed. There are huge ads for *The Sting of Time* over the freeway. . .”

“They turned my books into movies? Without telling me?”

“I think they may have tried to tell you, but they didn’t know where you were.”

Tom was more uneasy than ever. She didn’t want to apologize for whatever weird intellectual property lawyer bullshit the Registry guys had pulled, and it was becoming pretty obvious that she wasn’t the bearer of good news here. Coal was pissed. And Tom didn’t like the look of whatever was in those tanks.

Coal gestured frantically over her desktop, poking searches through to the public web. She was pulling up information on the *Scorpion Diaries* franchise. Images erupted into of the air, then disappeared: A muscular, shirtless man astride a giant scorpion whose segmented carapace gleamed silver in sunlight, a woman drawing a gun from the lacy frill of her

bustier, an explosion-laced battle between a frothing sea of red octopuses and humanoid robots with glowing eyes.

“How the hell did this happen? My books have been out of print for decades.”

“All I know is that somebody scanned them back in 2007. You never claimed them, so the Registry took charge of licensing.”

The floor moaned as if a weight had settled on it, and Tom realized they were standing on top of a transparent water tank, so lightless that she'd taken it for dark concrete. A fat, red tentacle pressed suckers to the floor beneath her feet then writhed into invisibility.

“Claimed them? You keep talking about claiming.” Coal's voice was rising now. “What does that even mean?”

The scientist braced her arms against the desk, pushing herself up with difficulty. Tom rushed forward to help, realizing how terrible this must be to the old woman. But instead of tottering, Coal flinched away from Tom's proffered hand, raised herself up gracefully, and withdrew from beneath her desktop another set of arms. Then another. Her body elongated still more, growing at least three feet taller.

Coal towered over Tom now. Her six human arms were connected to a chitinous, segmented abdomen. Before Tom could wonder what that abdomen was attached to, Coal brought all six of her fists down thunderously on the desktop. More gurgling and scrabbling issued from the tanks. “I own the copyright on those books! How could the Registry turn my work into such garbage without my permission?”

“I can't answer that,” Tom said, backing away. “They just hired me to find you. I'll have them contact you right away. Like I said before, I know they want to pay you for everything.”

Coal's expression was pure rage. More images beneath two of her hands. They settled on a still of an evil scientist rubbing his hands over bubbling beakers. “I don't need money. What I need is for people like you to not steal my work!”

An advertisement for the third installment of the Metal Scorpion video game—now with more cyborg fighters!—roiled in the air.

“FUCK!” Coal screamed. Trembled. And then her face became a fault

line. Skin tore down the middle of her furrowed forehead, opened a crack through her nose, split her mouth open. A sticky paste the color of blood oozed out of the widening wound. Was she dying? Had those arm mods, combined with this bad news, finally become too much for her elderly body?

This was getting dicey. Time to get the hell out of here. Tom slid a hand into her pocket and flicked on her emergency emitter, which sent the SFPD her coordinates bundled with a distress call.

At least now she had an answer to Hu's question about why Coal hadn't noticed what was going on with her books. She'd been too busy turning the *Scorpion Diaries* into something more terrible than a transmedia franchise. A living, breathing biological reality. What was it with these book collectors and their obsession with converting words into flesh?

WHY SHOULD I HAVE TO CLAIM SOMETHING THAT IS ALREADY MINE?

The words slammed into Tom's mind like an aneurism of thought. A voice inside her head. From the ruin of Coal's face there emerged the domed head of a scorpion, its chitin reinforced with the kind of fiber composite she'd only seen on combat robots. The scientist's features collapsed around its cephalothorax like a horrific scarf.

Tom's specs went black. Snatching the dead lenses from her face, she did another assessment of the lab, looking for exits. Was there a way out through the air shafts? She punched the elevator button without much hope.

I WILL NOT CLAIM THEM!

How was Coal screaming without a mouth? Tom's head ached, as if the words had arrived directly in her brain, circumventing her eardrums.

Two of the tanks exploded, their heat lamps gone nova. Scorched bodies of scorpions clattered to the floor. Tentacles and foam boiled beneath the biologist's desk. It felt like an earthquake, or the moment before a flash flood. A hairline crack opened in the floor. Spread into a network of breaks beneath Coal's desk. Then shattered completely.

Tom began to slide across the buckling glass near the elevators, fingers searching for a handhold that would prevent her from falling into the dark

water, bobbing with shards and drowning bugs. A tentacle gripped her waist, lifted her above the churning liquid. At last she saw what Coal had made of herself in the years since writing for Vam Books. The scientist's head was a smooth half-moon edged with eyes, her body a composite-laced scorpion's carapace with six human arms instead of legs. And from her lower half, where a scorpion would have its stinger, there emerged the fungible, polychromatic tentacles of a giant octopus. One of those tentacles was the only thing preventing Tom from falling into the water.

Deep in her pocket, she felt the emergency emitter throbbing; help would be here in minutes. She didn't think her gun would do much good against Coal's armor, but it didn't matter. Whatever blanked her specs had killed her gun too. She thrashed and tried to reach for a piece of glass to use as a weapon. But the hybrid creature tightened her tentacle, held Tom at face level with that nearly-featureless head, and made a sound like laughter.

LET THE REGISTRY TRY TO LICENSE THIS TO PIXAR!

With the words came a pounding migraine of image-ideas. A crèche of silvery eggs, spawning more cyborg chimeras, planted somewhere in the mud of the Bay. An incomprehensible, nauseating perception of a future where there were no opposites, no binaries. Self slimed into other. Biology was machine. Mammal dissolved into arachnid, cephalopod, bacteria. Tom vomited convulsively, wanted to black out. But still the unknowable invaded her. No outside. No inside. No civilization. No nature. Everything was hybridized and multiple and ateleological and over.

Over. She floated in quiet water, in dimness, smelling her own effluvia. Coal was gone. And the water levels were falling fast, sluggishly circling as if around a drain.

Tom came to when the paramedics loaded her onto a stretcher. She was at the bottom of a drained, egg-shaped pool, full of sun and wet piles of debris: glass, hard drives, drowned lizards, and pulpy smears of organic material she realized were the waterlogged remains of paper books. A few feet away was the slime-covered entrance to a massive storm drain.

“Lucky you didn’t get sucked into that thing,” one of the paramedics remarked when he saw she was awake. “Just hold still and we’ll get you out of here. Probably nothing worse than a concussion, but we still need to take you to the hospital, OK?”

She nodded, trying to remember what had happened after her specs went black. An armored guy from SFPD approached, specs glinting with data. “Where’s the suspect?”

“Not . . . a suspect . . .” Her head was throbbing so hard she could barely form words. Talking would have to wait for later. Tom eyed the drain again: It was the perfect escape route, especially if you had a nest full of eggs where the drain met the Bay. Where did that idea come from? Had Coal implanted it in her mind?

The paramedics tugged her behind them, the stretcher wheels leaving two trails of water through the Randall Labs lobby, and across the front patio with its view of the Bay. A small swarm of reporters waited for them, specs trained on her. It was hard to keep an emergency signal secret, especially one that led straight to the door of the mysterious author of a science fiction blockbuster.

“Is J.J. Coal alive? Did you talk to the author?”

“Did Coal know that members of the Registry board were illegally spending the money they got from licensing the *Scorpion Diaries*?”

“Readers of *Scorpionistas* want to know what J.J. Coal thinks about the latest *Scorpion Diaries* movie!”

They were all yapping at once, and even if she’d wanted to answer, she wouldn’t have been able to manage it. Thankfully the cops were pushing reporters aside, preventing them from grabbing video of Tom’s soaked, battered body.

More paramedics lifted her into the ambulance helicopter, wrapped her in a heated blanket, administered drug patches. Painkillers fuzzed through her body. Vaguely, she felt them lifting off. Corona Heights diminished in the bubble window, the hill’s bony, ragged hide apparently capable of sheltering the Randall Museum diminished in the bubble window from everything in the outside world, even advertising campaigns.

Tom slid toward unconsciousness, the reporters’ questions forming a

psychic muck beneath Coal's last words in her mind. She imagined the bizarre stories that were probably already rising up through the news aggregators right now, their relevance increasing every time somebody linked to them or mailed them or messaged "OMG watch this!" to a friend. It didn't matter whether Coal ever claimed her work, because other people would always be claiming it more loudly and persistently than the author ever could. A gray wave of sleep overtook Tom, bringing with it a vision she knew wasn't hers, of eggs hatching in the Bay, bringing at last to the world something that could not be owned like a story.



Annalee Newitz is the tech culture editor at Ars Technica, the founder of [io9](#), and the author of *Scatter, Adapt and Remember: How Humans Will Survive a Mass Extinction*. Her first novel is about robots and pirates, and it's coming soon!

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His Master's Voice

by Hannu Rajaniemi

Before the concert, we steal the master's head.

The necropolis is a dark forest of concrete mushrooms in the blue Antarctic night. We huddle inside the utility fog bubble attached to the steep southern wall of the nunatak, the ice valley.

The cat washes itself with a pink tongue. It reeks of infinite confidence.

"Get ready," I tell it. "We don't have all night."

It gives me a mildly offended look and dons its armor. The quantum dot fabric envelopes its striped body like living oil. It purrs faintly and tests the diamond-bladed claws against an icy outcropping of rock. The sound grates my teeth and the razor-winged butterflies in my belly wake up. I look at the bright, impenetrable firewall of the city of the dead. It shimmers like chained northern lights in my AR vision.

I decide that it's time to ask the Big Dog to bark. My helmet laser casts a one-nanosecond prayer of light at the indigo sky: just enough to deliver one quantum bit up there into the Wild. Then we wait. My tail wags and a low growl builds up in my belly.

Right on schedule, it starts to rain red fractal code. My augmented reality vision goes down, unable to process the dense torrent of information falling upon the necropolis firewall like monsoon rain. The chained aurora borealis flicker and vanish.

"Go!" I shout at the cat, wild joy exploding in me, the joy of running after the Small Animal of my dreams. "Go now!"

The cat leaps into the void. The wings of the armor open and grab the icy wind, and the cat rides the draft down like a grinning Chinese kite.

It's difficult to remember the beginning now. There were no words then, just sounds and smells: metal and brine, the steady drumming of waves against pontoons. And there were three perfect things in the world: my bowl, the Ball, and the Master's firm hand on my neck.

I know now that the Place was an old oil rig that the Master had bought. It smelled bad when we arrived, stinging oil and chemicals. But there were hiding places, secret nooks and crannies. There was a helicopter landing pad where the Master threw the ball for me. It fell into the sea many times, but the Master's bots—small metal dragonflies—always fetched it when I couldn't.

The Master was a god. When he was angry, his voice was an invisible whip. His smell was a god-smell that filled the world.

While he worked, I barked at the seagulls or stalked the cat. We fought a few times, and I still have a pale scar on my nose. But we developed an understanding. The dark places of the rig belonged to the cat, and I reigned over the deck and the sky: we were the Hades and Apollo of the Master's realm.

But at night, when the Master watched old movies or listened to records on his old rattling gramophone we lay at his feet together. Sometimes the Master smelled lonely and let me sleep next to him in his small cabin, curled up in the god-smell and warmth.

It was a small world, but it was all we knew.

The Master spent a lot of time working, fingers dancing on the keyboard projected on his mahogany desk. And every night he went to the Room: the only place on the rig where I wasn't allowed.

It was then that I started to dream about the Small Animal. I remember its smell even now, alluring and inexplicable: buried bones and fleeing rabbits, irresistible.

In my dreams, I chased it along a sandy beach, a tasty trail of tiny footprints that I followed along bendy pathways and into tall grass. I never lost sight of it for more than a second: it was always a flash of white fur just at the edge of my vision.

One day it spoke to me.

“Come,” it said. “Come and learn.”

The Small Animal’s island was full of lost places. Labyrinthine caves, lines drawn in sand that became words when I looked at them, smells that sang songs from the Master’s gramophone. It taught me, and I learned: I was more awake every time I woke up. And when I saw the cat looking at the spiderbots with a new awareness, I knew that it, too, went to a place at night.

I came to understand what the Master said when he spoke. The sounds that had only meant angry or happy before became the word of my god. He noticed, smiled, and ruffled my fur. After that he started speaking to us more, me and the cat, during the long evenings when the sea beyond the windows was black as oil and the waves made the whole rig ring like a bell. His voice was dark as a well, deep and gentle. He spoke of an island, his home, an island in the middle of a great sea. I smelled bitterness, and for the first time I understood that there were always words behind words, never spoken.

The cat catches the updraft perfectly: it floats still for a split second, and then clings to the side of the tower. Its claws put the smart concrete to sleep: code that makes the building think that the cat is a bird or a shard of ice carried by the wind.

The cat hisses and spits. The disassembler nanites from its stomach cling to the wall and start eating a round hole in it. The wait is excruciating. The cat locks the exomuscles of its armor and hangs there patiently. Finally, there is a mouth with jagged edges in the wall, and it slips in. My heart pounds as I switch from the AR view to the cat’s iris cameras. It moves through the ventilation shaft like lightning, like an acrobat, jerky, hyperaccelerated movements, metabolism on overdrive. My tail twitches again. We are coming, Master, I think. We are coming.

I lost my ball the day the wrong Master came.

I looked everywhere. I spent an entire day sniffing every corner and even braved the dark corridors of the cat's realm beneath the deck, but I could not find it. In the end, I got hungry and returned to the cabin. And there were two masters. Four hands stroking my coat. Two gods, true and false.

I barked. I did not know what to do. The cat looked at me with a mixture of pity and disdain and rubbed itself on both of their legs.

"Calm down," said one of the Masters. "Calm down. There are four of us now."

I learned to tell them apart, eventually: by that time Small Animal had taught me to look beyond smells and appearances. The master I remembered was a middle-aged man with graying hair, stocky-bodied. The new master was young, barely a man, much slimmer and with the face of a mahogany cherub. The master tried to convince me to play with the new master, but I did not want to. His smell was too familiar, everything else too alien. In my mind, I called him the wrong master.

The two masters worked together, walked together and spent a lot of time talking together using words I did not understand. I was jealous. Once I even bit the wrong master. I was left on the deck for the night as a punishment, even though it was stormy and I was afraid of thunder. The cat, on the other hand, seemed to thrive in the wrong master's company, and I hated it for it.

I remember the first night the masters argued.

"Why did you do it?" asked the wrong master.

"You know," said the master. "You remember." His tone was dark. "Because someone has to show them we own ourselves."

"So, you own me?" said the wrong master. "Is that what you think?"

"Of course not," said the master. "Why do you say that?"

"Someone could claim that. You took a genetic algorithm and told it to make ten thousand of you, with random variations, pick the ones that would resemble your ideal son, the one you could love. Run until the machine runs out of capacity. Then print. It's illegal, you know. For a

reason.”

“That’s not what the plurals think. Besides, this is my place. The only laws here are mine.”

“You’ve been talking to the plurals too much. They are no longer human.”

“You sound just like VecTech’s PR bots.”

“I sound like you. Your doubts. Are you sure you did the right thing? I’m not a Pinocchio. You are not a Gepetto.”

The master was quiet for a long time.

“What if I am,” he finally said. “Maybe we need Gepettos. Nobody creates anything new anymore, let alone wooden dolls that come to life. When I was young, we all thought something wonderful was on the way. Diamond children in the sky, angels out of machines. Miracles. But we gave up just before the blue fairy came.”

“I am not your miracle.”

“Yes, you are.”

“You should at least have made yourself a woman,” said the wrong master in a knife-like voice. “It might have been less frustrating.”

I did not hear the blow, I felt it. The wrong master let out a cry, rushed out and almost stumbled on me. The Master watched him go. His lips moved, but I could not hear the words. I wanted to comfort him and made a little sound, but he did not even look at me, went back to the cabin and locked the door. I scratched the door, but he did not open, and I went up to the deck to look for the Ball again.

Finally, the cat finds the Master’s chamber.

It is full of heads. They float in the air, bodiless, suspended in diamond cylinders. The tower executes the command we sent into its drugged nervous system, and one of the pillars begins to blink. Master, Master, I sing quietly as I see the cold, blue face beneath the diamond. But at the same time I know it’s not the Master, not yet.

The cat reaches out with its prosthetic. The smart surface yields like a soap bubble. “Careful now, careful,” I say. The cat hisses angrily but obeys, spraying the head with preserver nanites and placing it gently into its gel-lined backpack.

The necropolis is finally waking up: the damage the heavenly hacker did has almost been repaired. The cat heads for its escape route and goes to quicktime again. I feel its staccato heartbeat through our sensory link.

It is time to turn out the lights. My eyes polarise to sunglass-black. I lift the gauss launcher, marvelling at the still-tender feel of the Russian hand grafts. I pull the trigger. The launcher barely twitches in my grip, and a streak of light shoots up to the sky. The nuclear payload is tiny, barely a decaton, not even a proper plutonium warhead but a hafnium micronuke. But it is enough to light a small sun above the mausoleum city for a moment, enough for a focused maser pulse that makes it as dead as its inhabitants for a moment.

The light is a white blow, almost tangible in its intensity, and the gorge looks like it is made of bright ivory. White noise hisses in my ears like the cat when it’s angry.

For me, smells were not just sensations, they were my reality. I know now that that is not far from the truth: smells are molecules, parts of what they represent.

The wrong master smelled wrong. It confused me at first: almost a god-smell, but not quite, the smell of a fallen god.

And he did fall, in the end.

I slept on the master’s couch when it happened. I woke up to bare feet shuffling on the carpet and heavy breathing, torn away from a dream of the Little Animal trying to teach me the multiplication table.

The wrong master looked at me.

“Good boy,” he said. “Ssh.” I wanted to bark, but the godlike smell was too strong. And so I just wagged my tail, slowly, uncertainly. The wrong master sat on the couch next to me and scratched my ears absently.

“I remember you,” he said. “I know why he made you. A living childhood memory.” He smiled and smelled friendlier than ever before. “I know how that feels.” Then he sighed, got up and went into the Room. And then I knew that he was about to do something bad, and started barking as loudly as I could. The Master woke up and when the wrong master returned, he was waiting.

“What have you done?” he asked, face chalk-white.

The wrong master gave him a defiant look. “Just what you’d have done. You’re the criminal, not me. Why should I suffer? You don’t own me.”

“I could kill you,” said the Master, and his anger made me whimper with fear. “I could tell them I was you. They would believe me.”

“Yes,” said the wrong master. “But you are not going to.”

The Master sighed. “No,” he said. “I’m not.”

I take the dragonfly over the cryotower. I see the cat on the roof and whimper from relief. The plane lands lightly. I’m not much of a pilot, but the lobotomised mind of the daimon—an illegal copy of a 21st Century jet ace—is. The cat climbs in, and we shoot towards the stratosphere at Mach 5, wind caressing the plane’s quantum dot skin.

“Well done,” I tell the cat and wag my tail. It looks at me with yellow slanted eyes and curls up on its acceleration gel bed. I look at the container next to it. Is that a wiff of the god-smell or is it just my imagination?

In any case, it is enough to make me curl up in deep happy dog-sleep, and for the first time in years I dream of the Ball and the Small Animal, sliding down the ballistic orbit’s steep back.

They came from the sky before the sunrise. The Master went up on the deck wearing a suit that smelled new. He had the cat in his lap: it purred quietly. The wrong master followed, hands behind his back.

There were three machines, black-shelled scarabs with many legs and transparent wings. They came in low, raising a white-frothed wake behind them. The hum of their wings hurt my ears as they landed on the deck.

The one in the middle vomited a cloud of mist that shimmered in the dim light, swirled in the air and became a black-skinned woman who had no smell. By then I had learned that things without a smell could still be dangerous, so I barked at her until the Master told me to be quiet.

“Mr. Takeshi,” she said. “You know why we are here.”

The master nodded.

“You don’t deny your guilt?”

“I do,” said the Master. “This raft is technically a sovereign state, governed by my laws. Autogenesis is not a crime here.”

“This raft was a sovereign state,” said the woman. “Now it belongs to VecTech. Justice is swift, Mr. Takeshi. Our lawbots broke your constitution ten seconds after Mr. Takeshi here—” she nodded at the wrong master —“told us about his situation. After that, we had no choice. The WIPO quantum judge we consulted has condemned you to the slow zone for three hundred and fourteen years, and as the wronged party we have been granted execution rights in this matter. Do you have anything to say before we act?”

The master looked at the wrong Master, face twisted like a mask of wax. Then he set the cat down gently and scratched my ears. “Look after them,” he told the wrong master. “I’m ready.”

The beetle in the middle moved, too fast for me to see. The Master’s grip on the loose skin on my neck tightened for a moment like my mother’s teeth, and then let go. Something warm splattered on my coat and there was a dark, deep smell of blood in the air.

Then he fell. I saw his head in a floating soap bubble that one of the beetles swallowed. Another opened its belly for the wrong master. And then they were gone, and the cat and I were alone on the bloody deck.

The cat wakes me up when we dock with the Marquis of Carabas. The

zeppelin swallows our dragonfly drone like a whale. It is a crystal cigar, and its nanospun sapphire spine glows faint blue. The Fast City is a sky full of neon stars six kilometers below us, anchored to the airship with elevator cables. I can see the liftspiders climbing them, far below, and sigh with relief. The guests are still arriving, and we are not too late. I keep my personal firewall clamped shut: I know there is a torrent of messages waiting beyond.

We rush straight to the lab. I prepare the scanner while the cat takes the Master's head out very, very carefully. The fractal bush of the scanner comes out of its nest, molecule-sized disassembler fingers bristling. I have to look away when it starts eating the Master's face. I cheat and flee to VR, to do what I do best.

After half an hour, we are ready. The nanofab spits out black plastic discs, and the airship drones ferry them to the concert hall. The metallic butterflies in my belly return, and we head for the make-up salon. The Sergeant is already there, waiting for us: judging by the cigarette stumps on the floor, he has been waiting for a while. I wrinkle my nose at the stench.

"You are late," says our manager. "I hope you know what the hell you are doing. This show's got more digs than the Turin clone's birthday party."

"That's the idea," I say and let Anette spray me with cosmetic fog. It tickles and makes me sneeze, and I give the cat a jealous look: as usual, it is perfectly at home with its own image consultant. "We are more popular than Jesus."

They get the DJs on in a hurry, made by the last human tailor on Saville Row. "This'll be a good skin," says Anette. "Mahogany with a touch of purple." She goes on, but I can't hear. The music is already in my head. The Master's voice.

I don't know if it meant to do it or not: even now, I have a hard time understanding it. It hissed at me, its back arched. Then it jumped forward and scratched my nose: it burned like a piece of hot coal. That made me

mad, weak as I was. I barked furiously and chased the cat around the deck. Finally, I collapsed, exhausted, and realised that I was hungry. The autokitchen down in the Master's cabin still worked, and I knew how to ask for food. But when I came back, the Master's body was gone: the waste disposal bots had thrown it into the sea. That's when I knew that he would not be coming back.

I curled up in his bed alone that night: the god-smell that lingered there was all I had. That, and the Small Animal.

It came to me that night on the dreamshore, but I did not chase it this time. It sat on the sand, looked at me with its little red eyes and waited.

"Why?" I asked. "Why did they take the Master?"

"You wouldn't understand," it said. "Not yet."

"I want to understand. I want to know."

"All right," it said. "Everything you do, remember, think, smell—everything—leaves traces, like footprints in the sand. And it's possible to read them. Imagine that you follow another dog: you know where it has eaten and urinated and everything else it has done. The humans can do that to the mindprints. They can record them and make another you inside a machine, like the scentless screenpeople that your master used to watch. Except that the screendog will think it's you."

"Even though it has no smell?" I asked, confused.

"It thinks it does. And if you know what you're doing, you can give it a new body as well. You could die and the copy would be so good that no one can tell the difference. Humans have been doing it for a long time. Your master was one of the first, a long time ago. Far away, there are a lot of humans with machine bodies, humans who never die, humans with small bodies and big bodies, depending on how much they can afford to pay, people who have died and come back."

I tried to understand: without the smells, it was difficult. But its words awoke a mad hope.

"Does it mean that the master is coming back?" I asked, panting.

"No. Your master broke human law. When people discovered the paw prints of the mind, they started making copies of themselves. Some made

many, more than the grains of sand on the beach. That caused chaos. Every machine, every device everywhere, had mad dead minds in them. The plurals, people called them, and were afraid. And they had their reasons to be afraid. Imagine that your Place had a thousand dogs, but only one Ball.”

My ears flopped at the thought.

“That’s how humans felt,” said the Small Animal. “And so they passed a law: only one copy per person. The humans—VecTech—who had invented how to make copies mixed watermarks into people’s minds, rights management software that was supposed to stop the copying. But some humans—like your master—found out how to erase them.”

“The wrong master,” I said quietly.

“Yes,” said the Small Animal. “He did not want to be an illegal copy. He turned your master in.”

“I want the Master back,” I said, anger and longing beating their wings in my chest like caged birds.

“And so does the cat,” said the Small Animal gently. And it was only then that I saw the cat there, sitting next to me on the beach, eyes glimmering in the sun. It looked at me and let out a single conciliatory meow.

After that, the Small Animal was with us every night, teaching.

Music was my favorite. The Small Animal showed me how I could turn music into smells and find patterns in it, like the tracks of huge, strange animals. I studied the Master’s old records and the vast libraries of his virtual desk, and learned to remix them into smells that I found pleasant.

I don’t remember which one of us came up with the plan to save the Master. Maybe it was the cat: I could only speak to it properly on the island of dreams, and see its thoughts appear as patterns on the sand. Maybe it was the Small Animal, maybe it was me. After all the nights we spent talking about it, I no longer know. But that’s where it began, on the island: that’s where we became arrows fired at a target.

Finally, we were ready to leave. The Master's robots and nanofac spun us an open-source glider, a white-winged bird.

In my last dream the Small Animal said goodbye. It hummed to itself when I told it about our plans.

"Remember me in your dreams," it said.

"Are you not coming with us?" I asked, bewildered.

"My place is here," it said. "And it's my turn to sleep now, and to dream."

"Who are you?"

"Not all the plurals disappeared. Some of them fled to space, made new worlds there. And there is a war on, even now. Perhaps you will join us there, one day, where the big dogs live."

It laughed. "For old times' sake?" It dived into the waves and started running, became a great proud dog with a white coat, muscles flowing like water. And I followed, for one last time.

The sky was grey when we took off. The cat flew the plane using a neural interface, goggles over its eyes. We swept over the dark waves and were underway. The raft became a small dirty spot in the sea. I watched it recede and realised that I'd never found my Ball.

Then there was a thunderclap and a dark pillar of water rose up to the sky from where the raft had been. I didn't mourn: I knew that the Small Animal wasn't there anymore.

The sun was setting when we came to the Fast City.

I knew what to expect from the Small Animal's lessons, but I could not imagine what it would be like. Mile-high skyscrapers that were self-contained worlds, with their artificial plasma suns and bonsai parks and miniature shopping malls. Each of them housed a billion lilliputs, poor and quick: humans whose consciousness lived in a nanocomputer smaller than a fingertip. Immortals who could not afford to utilise the resources of the overpopulated Earth more than a mouse. The city was surrounded by a halo of glowing fairies, tiny winged moravecs that flitted about like

humanoid fireflies and the waste heat from their overclocked bodies draped the city in an artificial twilight.

The citymind steered us to a landing area. It was fortunate that the cat was flying: I just stared at the buzzing things with my mouth open, afraid I'd drown into the sounds and the smells.

We sold our plane for scrap and wandered into the bustle of the city, feeling like daikaju monsters. The social agents that the Small Animal had given me were obsolete, but they could still weave us into the ambient social networks. We needed money, we needed work.

And so I became a musician.

The ballroom is a hemisphere in the center of the airship. It is filled to capacity. Innumerable quickbeings shimmer in the air like living candles, and the suits of the fleshed ones are no less exotic. A woman clad in nothing but autumn leaves smiles at me. Tinkerbell clones surround the cat. Our bodyguards, armed obsidian giants, open a way for us to the stage where the gramophones wait. A rustle moves through the crowd. The air around us is pregnant with ghosts, the avatars of a million fleshless fans. I wag my tail. The scentspace is intoxicating: perfume, fleshbodies, the unsmells of moravec bodies. And the fallen god smell of the wrong master, hiding somewhere within.

We get on the stage on our hindlegs, supported by prosthesis shoes. The gramophone forest looms behind us, their horns like flowers of brass and gold. We cheat, of course: the music is analog and the gramophones are genuine, but the grooves in the black discs are barely a nanometer thick, and the needles are tipped with quantum dots.

We take our bows and the storm of handclaps begins.

"Thank you," I say when the thunder of it finally dies. "We have kept quiet about the purpose of this concert as long as possible. But I am finally in a position to tell you that this is a charity show."

I smell the tension in the air, copper and iron.

"We miss someone," I say. "He was called Shimoda Takeshi, and now

he's gone."

The cat lifts the conductor's baton and turns to face the gramophones. I follow, and step into the soundspace we've built, the place where music is smells and sounds.

The master is in the music.

It took five human years to get to the top. I learned to love the audiences: I could smell their emotions and create a mix of music for them that was just right. And soon I was no longer a giant dog DJ among lilliputs, but a little terrier in a forest of dancing human legs. The cat's gladiator career lasted a while, but soon it joined me as a performer in the virtual dramas I designed. We performed for rich fleshies in the Fast City, Tokyo and New York. I loved it. I howled at Earth in the sky in the Sea of Tranquility.

But I always knew that it was just the first phase of the Plan.

We turn him into music. VecTech owns his brain, his memories, his mind. But we own the music.

Law is code. A billion people listening to our master's voice. Billion minds downloading the Law At Home packets embedded in it, bombarding the quantum judges until they give him back.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever made. The cat stalks the genetic algorithm jungle, lets the themes grow and then pounces them, devours them. I just chase them for the joy of the chase alone, not caring whether or not I catch them.

It's our best show ever.

Only when it's over, I realise that no one is listening. The audience is frozen. The fairies and the fastpeople float in the air like flies trapped in amber. The moravecs are silent statues. Time stands still.

The sound of one pair of hands, clapping.

“I’m proud of you, ” says the wrong master.

I fix my bow tie and smile a dog’s smile, a cold snake coiling in my belly. The godsmell comes and tells me that I should throw myself onto the floor, wag my tail, bare my throat to the divine being standing before me.

But I don’t.

“Hello, Nipper,” the wrong master says.

I clamp down the low growl rising in my throat and turn it into words.

“What did you do?”

“We suspended them. Back doors in the hardware. Digital rights management.”

His mahogany face is still smooth: he does not look a day older, wearing a dark suit with a VecTech tie pin. But his eyes are tired.

“Really, I’m impressed. You covered your tracks admirably. We thought you were furies. Until I realised—”

A distant thunder interrupts him.

“I promised him I’d look after you. That’s why you are still alive. You don’t have to do this. You don’t owe him anything. Look at yourselves: who would have thought you could come this far? Are you going to throw that all away because of some atavistic sense of animal loyalty?”

“Not that you have a choice, of course. The plan didn’t work.”

The cat lets out a steam pipe hiss.

“You misunderstand,” I say. “The concert was just a diversion.”

The cat moves like a black-and-yellow flame. Its claws flash, and the wrong master’s head comes off. I whimper at the aroma of blood polluting the godsmell. The cat licks its lips. There is a crimson stain on its white shirt.

The zeppelin shakes, pseudomatter armor sparkling. The dark sky around the Marquis is full of fire-breathing beetles. We rush past the human statues in the ballroom and into the laboratory.

The cat does the dirty work, granting me a brief escape into virtual abstraction. I don’t know how the Master did it, years ago, broke VecTech’s copy protection watermarks. I can’t do the same, no matter

how much the Small Animal taught me. So I have to cheat, recover the marked parts from somewhere else.

The wrong master's brain.

The part of me that was born on the Small Animal's island takes over and fits the two patterns together, like pieces of a puzzle. They fit, and for a brief moment, the master's voice is in my mind, for real this time.

The cat is waiting, already in its clawed battlesuit, and I don my own. The Marquis of Carabas is dying around us. To send the master on his way, we have to disengage the armor.

The cat meows faintly and hands me something red. An old plastic ball with toothmarks, smelling of the sun and the sea, with few grains of sand rattling inside.

"Thanks," I say. The cat says nothing, just opens a door into the zeppelin's skin. I whisper a command, and the Master is underway in a neutrino stream, shooting up towards an island in a blue sea. Where the gods and big dogs live forever.

We dive through the door together, down into the light and flame.



Hannu Rajaniemi was born in Finland, obtained his PhD in string theory at the University of Edinburgh and now works as a co-founder and CTO of Helix Nanotechnologies, a biotech startup based in California. He is the author of four novels including *The Quantum Thief* trilogy and the forthcoming *Summerland*, and several short stories.

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Hive Mind Man

by Rudy Rucker and Eileen Gunn

Diane met Jeff at a karate dojo behind a Wienerschnitzel hot-dog stand in San Bernardino. Jeff was lithe and lightly muscled, with an ingratiating smile. Diane thought he was an instructor.

Jeff spent thirty minutes teaching Diane how to tilt, pivot, and kick a hypothetical assailant in the side—which was exactly what she'd wanted to learn how to do. She worked in a strip mall in Cucamonga, and she'd been noticing some mellow but edging-to-scary guys in the parking lot where she worked. The dividing line between mellow and scary in Cucamonga had a lot to do with the line between flush and broke, and Diane wanted to be ready when they crossed that line.

Diane was now feeling that she had a few skills that would at least surprise someone who thought she was a little dipshit office worker who couldn't fight her way out of a paper bag.

"I bet I could just add these to my yoga routine," she said, smiling gratefully at Jeff.

"Bam," said Jeff. "You've got it, Diane. You're safe now. Why don't you and I go out to eat?" He drew out his silvery smartphone and called up a map, then peered at Diane. "I'm visualizing you digging into some...falafel. With gelato for dessert. Yes? You know you want it. You gotta refuel after those killer kicks."

"Sounds nice," said Diane. "But don't you have to stay here at the dojo?" This Jeff was cute, but maybe too needy and eager to please. And there was something else about him....

"I don't actually work here," said Jeff. "The boss lets me hang out if I work out with the clients. It's like I work here, but I have my freedom, y'know? You go shower off, and I'll meet you outside."

Well, that was the something else. Did she want to get involved with another loser guy—a cute guy, okay?—but someone who had a smartphone, a lot of smooth talk, and still couldn't even get hired by a dojo to chat up new customers?

“Oh, all right,” said Diane. It wasn't like she had much of anything to do tonight. She'd broken up with her jerk of a boyfriend a couple days before.

Jeff was waiting in a slant of shade, tapping on his smartphone. It was the end of June, and the days were hot and long. Jeff looked at Diane and made a mystic pass with his hand. “You broke up with your boyfriend last week.”

She gave him a blank stare.

“And you're pretty sure it was the right thing to do. The bastard.”

“You're googling me?” said Diane. “And that stuff about Roger is *public*?”

“There are steps you could take to make your posts more private,” said Jeff. “I can help you finesse your web presence if you like. I *live* in the web.”

“What's your actual job?” asked Diane.

“I surf the trends,” said Jeff, cracking a wily smile. “Public relations, advertising, social networking, investing, like that.”

“Do you have a web site?”

“I keep a low profile,” said Jeff.

“And you get paid?”

“Sometimes. Like—today I bought three hundred vintage Goob Dolls. They're dropping in price, but slower than before. It's what we call a second-order trend? I figure the dolls are bottoming out, and in a couple of days I'll flip them for a tidy profit.”

“I always hated Goob Dolls when I was a kid,” said Diane. “Their noses are too snub, and I don't like the way they look at me. Or their cozy little voices.”

“Yeah, yeah. But they're big-time retro for kids under ten. Seven-year-old girls are going to be mad for them next week. Their parents will be

desperate.”

“You’re gonna store three hundred of them and ship them back out? Won’t that eat up most of your profit?”

“I’m not a flea-market vendor, Diane,” said Jeff, taking a lofty tone. “I’m buying and selling Goob Doll *options*.”

Diane giggled. “The perfect gift for a loved one. A Goob Doll option. So where’s your car anyway?”

“Virtual as well,” said Jeff smoothly. “I’m riding with you. Lead the way.” He flung his arm forward dramatically. “You’re gonna love this falafel place, it’s Egyptian style. My phone says they use fava beans instead of garbanzos. And they have hieroglyphics on their walls. Don’t even ask about the gelato place next door to it. Om Mane Padme Yum #7. Camphor-flavored buffalo-milk junket. But, hey, tell me more about yourself. Where do you work?”

“You didn’t look that up yet? And my salary?”

“Let’s say I didn’t. Let’s say I’m a gentleman. Hey, nice wheels!”

“I’m a claim manager for an insurance company,” said Diane, unlocking her sporty coupe. “I ask people how they whiplashed their necks.” She made a face. “*Bo*-ring. I’m counting on you to be interesting, Jeff.”

“Woof.”

It turned out to be a fun evening indeed. After falafel, guided by Jeff’s smartphone, they watched two fire trucks hosing down a tenement, cruised a chanting mob of service-industry picketers, caught part of a graffiti bombing contest on a freeway ramp wall, got in on some outdoor bowling featuring frozen turkeys and two-liter soda-bottles, and ended up at a wee hours geek couture show hosted by the wetware designer Rawna Roller and her assistant Sid. Rawna was a heavily tanned woman with all the right cosmetic surgery. She had a hoarse, throaty laugh—very *Vogue* magazine. Sid was an amusing mixture of space-cadet and NYC sharpie. Rawna’s goth-zombie models were wearing mottled shirts made of—

“Squidskin?” said Diane. “From animals?”

“Yeah,” marveled Jeff. “These shirts are still alive, in a way. And they act like supercomputer web displays.” He pointed at a dorky-looking male

model in a dumb hat. “Look at that one guy in the shiny hat, you can see people’s posts on his back. He’s got the shirt filtered down to show one particular kind of thing.”

“Motorcycles with dragon heads?” said Diane. “Wow.” She controlled her enthusiasm. “I wonder how much a Rawna Roller squidskin shirt costs?”

“Too much for me,” said Jeff. “I think you have to, like, lease them.” He turned his smile on Diane. “But the best things in life are free. Ready to go home?”

The evening had felt like several days worth of activity, and it seemed natural for Diane to let Jeff spend the night at her apartment. Jeff proved to be an amazingly responsive and empathetic lover. It felt like they were merging into one.

And he was very nice to Diane over breakfast, and didn’t give her a hard time because she didn’t have any eggs or bacon, what her ex-boyfriend Roger had called “real food.”

“Are you a vegetarian?” asked Jeff, but he didn’t say it mean.

Diane shrugged. She didn’t want to be labeled by what she ate. “I don’t like to eat things that can feel pain,” she said. “I’m not woo-woo about it. It just makes me feel better.” And then she had to go off to work.

“Stay in touch,” she told Jeff, kissing him goodbye as she dropped him off downtown, near the JetTram.

“You bet,” Jeff said.

And he did. He messaged her at work three or four times that day, called her that evening, messaged her two more times the next day, and the day after that, when Diane came home from work, Jeff was sitting on a duffel bag outside her apartment complex.

“What’s up?” asked Diane, unable to suppress a happy smile.

“I’ve been sharing an apartment with three other guys—and I decided it was time to move on,” said Jeff. He patted his bag. “Got my clothes and

gadgets in here. Can I bunk with you for awhile?”

The main reason Diane had dropped Roger was that he didn't want them to live together. He said he wasn't ready for that level of intimacy. So she wasn't averse to Jeff's request, especially since he seemed pretty good at the higher levels of intimacy. But she couldn't let him just waltz in like that.

“Can't you find somewhere else to live?”

“There's always the Daily Couch,” said Jeff, tapping his smartphone. “It's a site where people auction off spare slots by the night. You use GPS to find the nearest crash pad. But—Diane, I'd rather just stay here and be with you.”

“Did your friends make you move? Did you do something skeevy?”

“No,” said Jeff. “I'm just tired of them nickel-and-diming me. I'm bound for the big time. And I'm totally on my biz thing.”

“How do you mean?”

“I sold my Goob Doll options yesterday, and I used the profit to upgrade my access rights in the data cloud. I've got a cloud-based virtual growbox where I can raise my own simmie-bots. Little programs that live in the net and act just like people. I'm gonna grow more simmies than anyone's ever seen.”

“Were your roommates impressed?” said Diane.

“You can't reason with those guys,” said Jeff dismissively. “They're musicians. They have a band called Kenny Lately and the Newcomers? I went to high-school with Kenny, which is why we were rooming together in the first place. I could have been in the Newcomers too, of course, but...” Jeff trailed off with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“What instrument do you play?” asked Diane.

“Anything,” said Jeff. “Nothing in particular. I've got great beats. I could be doing the Newcomers' backup vocals. My voice is like Kenny's, only sweeter.” He dropped to one knee, extended his arms, and burst into song. “*Diane, I'll be your man, we'll make a plan, walk in the sand, hand in hand, our future's grand, please take a stand.*” He beat a tattoo on his duffel bag. “*Kruger rand.*”

“Cute,” said Diane, and she meant it. “But—really, you don’t have any kind of job?”

“I’m going to be doing promo for Kenny’s band,” said Jeff. “They said they’d miss my energy. So there’s no hard feelings between us at all.”

“Are Kenny Lately and the Newcomers that popular?” Diane had never heard of them.

“They will be. I have seven of their songs online for download,” said Jeff. “We’re looking to build the fan base. Kenny let me make a Chirp account in his name.” Jeff looked proud. “I’m Kenny Lately’s chirper now. Yeah.”

“You’ll be posting messages and links?”

“Pictures too,” said Jeff. “Multimedia. It’s like I’m famous myself. I’m the go-to guy for Kenny Lately. My simmies can answer Kenny’s email, but a good chirp needs a creative touch—by me. The more real followers Kenny gets, the better the sales. And Kenny’s cutting me in for ten percent, just like a band member.” Jeff looked earnest, sincere, helpless. Diane’s heart melted.

“Oh, come on in,” said Diane. If it was a mistake, she figured, it wouldn’t be the only one she’d ever made. Jeff was a lot *nicer* than Roger, in bed and out of it.

In many ways, Jeff was a good live-in boyfriend. Lately Diane had been ordering food online, and printing it out in the fab box that sat on the kitchen counter next to the microwave. It tasted okay, mostly, and it was easy. But Jeff cooked tasty meals from real vegetables. *And* kept the place clean, and gave Diane backrubs when she came home from working her cubicle at the insurance company. And, above all, he was a gentle, considerate lover, remarkably sensitive to Diane’s thoughts and moods.

He really only had two flaws, Diane thought —at least that she’d discovered so far.

The first was totally trivial: he doted on talk shows and ghastly video news feeds of all sorts, often spinning out crackpot theories about what he watched. His favorite show was something called “Who Wants to Mock a

Millionaire?” in which bankers, realty developers, and hi-tech entrepreneurs were pelted with eggs—and worse—by ill-tempered representatives of the common man.

“They purge their guilt this way,” Jeff explained. “Then they can enjoy their money. I love these guys.”

“I feel bad for the eggs,” said Diane. Jeff looked at her quizzically. “Well, I do,” insisted Diane. “They could have had nice lives as chickens, but instead they end up smeared all over some fat-cat’s Hermes tie.”

“I don’t think they use fertilized eggs,” Jeff said.

“Well, then I feel bad that the eggs never got fertilized.”

“I don’t think you need to feel too bad,” said Jeff, glancing over at her. “Everything in the world has a life and a purpose, whether it’s fertilized or not. Or whether it’s a plant or an animal or a rock.” He used his bare foot to prod a sandal lying next to the couch. “That shoe had life when it was part of a cow, and it still has life as a shoe. Those eggs may feel that their highest function is to knock some humility into a rich guy.”

“You really think that?” asked Diane, not sure if he was just yanking her chain. “Is that like the Gaia thing?”

“Gaia, but more widely distributed,” said Jeff. “The sensei at the karate dojo explained it all to me. It’s elitist to think we’re the only creatures that matter. What a dumb, lonely thing to think. But if everything is alive, then we’re not alone in the universe like fireflies in some huge dark warehouse.”

Maybe Jeff was more spiritual than he appeared, Diane thought. “So, if everything is alive, how come you still eat meat?”

“Huh,” said Jeff. “Gotta eat something. Meat wants to be eaten. That what it’s for.”

Okaaaayyy, Diane thought, and she changed the subject.

Then one day Diane came home and found Jeff watching a televangelist. Pastor Veck was leaping up and down, twisting his body, snatching his eyeglasses off and slapping them back on. He was a river of words and never stopped talking or drawing on his chalkboard, except once in a while he’d look straight out at his audience, say something

nonsensical, and make a face.

“You believe in that?” she asked.

“Nah,” he assured her. “But look at that preacher. He’s making those people speak in tongues and slide to the floor in ecstasy. You can learn from a guy like that. And I’ll tell you one thing, the man’s right about evolution.”

“Evolution?” said Diane, baffled.

“Say what you like, but I’m not an ape!” Jeff said intensely. “Not a sponge or a mushroom or a fish. The simple laws of probability prove that random evolution could never work. The sensei told me about this, too. The cosmic One mind is refracted through the small minds in the objects all around us, and matter found its own way into human form. A phone can be smart, right? Why not a grain of sand?”

I’m not going there, Diane thought. We don’t need to get into an argument over this. Everybody’s entitled to a few weird ideas. And, really, Jeff was kind of cute when he got all sincere and dumb. “Can we turn off Pastor Veck, now?” she asked.

Jeff’s other, more definite, flaw was that he showed no signs of earning a living. At any hour of the day, he’d be lying on Diane’s couch with her wall screen on, poking at his smartphone. Thank god he didn’t know the user code for Diane’s fab box, or he would have been ordering half the gadgets that he saw and printing them out. His intricate and time-consuming online machinations were bringing in pennies, not dollars. People didn’t seem all that interested in Kenny Lately and the Newcomers.

“How much exactly does this band earn in a week?” asked Diane after work one day.

“I don’t know,” said Jeff, affecting a look of disgust. “What are you, an accountant? Be glad your man’s in show biz!” He held out his smartphone. “Look at all the chirps I did for Kenny today.” There was indeed a long list, and most of the chirps were cleverly worded, and linked to interesting things.

If Diane had a weak spot, it was funny, verbal men. She gave Jeff a long, sweet kiss, and he reciprocated, and pretty soon they were down on the shag carpet, involved in deep interpersonal exploration. Jeff kissed her breasts tenderly, and then started working his way down, kissing and kind of humming at the same time. He really is a dream lover, Diane thought. She was breathing heavily, and he was moving down to some *very* sensitive areas. And then —

“*Chirp*,” said Jeff very quietly. His voice got a little louder. “Afternoon delight with Kenny Lately and—”

“What are you doing!” Diane yelled. She drew up her legs and kicked Jeff away. “Are you crazy? You’re chirping me? Down there?”

“Nobody knows it’s you and me, Diane. I’m logged on as Kenny Lately.” Jeff was holding his smartphone. Rising to his knees, he looked reproachfully at Diane. “Kenny wants me to raise his profile as a lover. Sure, I could have gone to a hooker for this chirp. But, hey, I’m not that kind of guy. The only woman for me is—”

“Take down the chirp, Jeff.”

“No,” said Jeff, looking stubborn. “It’s too valuable. But, oh damn, the video feed is still—” His face darkened. Jeff had a tendency to get angry when he did something dumb. “Thanks a lot,” he snapped, poking at his phone. “You know I don’t want my followers to guess I’m not Kenny. You just blew a totally bitchin’ chirp by saying my real name. So, okay fine, I’m erasing the chirp of your queenly crotch. Sheesh. Happy now?”

“You’re a weasel,” yelled Diane, overcome with fury. “Pack your duffel and beat it! Go sleep on the beach. With the other bums.”

Jeff’s face fell. “I’m sorry, Diane. Please let me stay. I won’t chirp you again.”

Even in her red haze of rage, Diane knew she didn’t really want to throw him out. And he *had* taken down the video. But....

“Sorry isn’t enough, Jeff. Promise me you’ll get a real job. Work the counter at the Wienerschnitzel if you have to. Or mop the floor at the karate dojo.”

“I will! I will!”

So Jeff stayed on, and he even worked as a barista in a coffee shop for a couple of days. But they fired him for voice-chirping while pulling espressos, when he was supposed to be staring into the distance all soulful.

Jeff gave Diane the word over a nice dish of curried eggplant that he'd cooked for her. "The boss said it was in the manual, how to pull an espresso with exactly the right facial expression: he said it makes them taste better. Also, he didn't like the way I drew rosettes on the foam. He said I was harshing the ambiance." Jeff looked properly rueful.

"What are we going to do with you?" asked Diane.

"Invest in me," said Jeff, the candlelight glinting off his toothy smile. "Lease me a Rawna Roller squidskin shirt so I can take my business to the next level."

"Remind me again what a shirt like that is?" said Diane. "Those of us who slave in cubicles aren't exactly *au courant* with the latest in geek-wear."

"It's tank-grown cuttlefish skin," said Jeff. "Tweaked to stay active when sewn into garments. Incredibly rich in analog computation. It's not a fashion statement. It's a somatic communications system. Just lease it for two weeks, and it'll turn my personal economy around. Please?"

"Oh, all right," said Diane. "And if you don't get anywhere with it, you're —"

"I love it when you lecture me, Diane," said Jeff, sidling around the table to kiss her. "Let's go into the bedroom, and you can really put me in my place."

"Yes," said Diane, feeling her pulse beating in her throat. Jeff was too good to give up.

So the next day, Jeff went and leased a squidskin from Rawna Roller herself.

"Rawna and I had a good talk," said Jeff, preening for Diane in the new shirt, which had a not-unpleasant seaside scent. Right now it was displaying an iridescent pattern like a peacock's tail, with rainbow eyes amid feathery shadings. "I might do some work for her."

Diane felt a flicker of jealousy. “Do you have to wear that dorky sailor hat?”

“It’s an exabyte-level antenna,” said Jeff, adjusting the gold lamé sailor’s cap that was perched on the back of his head. “It comes with the shirt. Come on, Diane, be happy for me!”

Initially the squidskin shirt seemed like a good thing. Jeff got a gig doing custom promotional placement for an outfit called Rikki’s Reality Weddings. He’d troll the chirp-stream for mentions of weddings and knife in with a plug for Rikki’s.

“What’s a reality wedding?” asked Diane.

“Rikki’s a wedding caterer, see? And she lets her bridal parties defray their expenses by selling tickets to the wedding reception. A reality wedding. In other words, complete strangers might attend your wedding or maybe just watch the action on a video feed. And if a guest wants to go whole hog, Rikki has one of her girls or boys get a sample of the guest’s DNA—with an eye towards mixing it into the genome of the nuptial couple’s first child.” Jeff waggled his eyebrows. “And you can guess how they take the samples.”

“The caterer pimps to the guests?” asked Diane. “Wow, what a classy way to throw a wedding.”

“Hey, all I’m doing is the promo,” protested Jeff. “Don’t get so judgmental. I’m but a mirror of society at large.” He looked down at the rippling colors on his shirt. “Rikkie’s right, though. Multiperson gene-merges are the new paradigm for our social evolution.”

“Whatever. Are you still promoting Kenny Lately too?”

“Bigtime. The band’s stats are ramping up. And, get this, Rawna Roller gave me a great idea. I used all the simmies in my growbox to flood the online polls, and got Kenny and the Newcomers booked as one of the ten bands playing marching songs for the Fourth of July fireworks show at the Rose Bowl!”

“You’re really getting somewhere, Jeff,” said Diana in a faintly reproving

tone. She didn't feel good about flooding polls, even online ones.

Jeff was impervious. "There's more! Rawna Roller's really into me now. I'm setting up a deal to place promos in her realtime on-line datamine—that's her playlists, messages, videos, journals, whatever. She frames it as a pirated gossip-feed, just to give it that salty paparazzo tang. Her followers feel like they're spying inside Rawna's head, like they're wearing her smartware. She's so popular, she's renting out space in the datamine, and I'm embedding the ads. Some of my simmies have started using these sly cuttlefish-type algorithms, and my product placements are fully seamless now. Rawna's promised me eight percent of the ad revenues."

Diane briefly wondered if Jeff was getting a little too interested in Rawna Roller, but she kept her mouth shut. It sounded as though this might actually bring in some cash for a change, even if his percentage seemed to be going down. And she really did want to see Jeff succeed.

On the Fourth of July, Jeff took Diane to see the Americafest fireworks show at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. Jeff told her that, in his capacity as the publicist for Kenny Lately and the Newcomers, he'd be getting them seats that were close enough to the field so they could directly hear the bands.

Jeff was wearing his squidskin, with his dorky sailor hat cockily perched on the back of his head. They worked their way into the crowd in the expensive section. The seats here were backless bleacher-benches just like all the others, but they were...reserved.

"What are our seat numbers?" Diane asked Jeff.

"I, uh, I only have general admission tickets," began Jeff. "But—"

"Tickets the same as the twenty thousand other people here?" said Diane. "So why are we here in the—"

"Yo!" cried Jeff, suddenly spotting someone, a well-dressed woman in a cheetah-patterned blouse and marigold Bermuda shorts. Rawna Roller! On her right was her assistant, wearing bug-eye glasses with thousand-faceted compound lenses. And on her left she had a pair of empty seats.

“Come on down,” called Rawna.

“Glad I found you,” Jeff hollered back. He turned to Diane. “Rawna told me she’d save us seats, baby. I wanted to surprise you.” They picked their way down through the bleachers.

“Love that shirt on you, Jeff,” said Rawna with a tooth-baring high-fashion laugh. “Glad you showed. Sid and I are leaving right when the fireworks start.”

Diane took Rawna’s measure and decided it was unlikely this woman was having sex with her man. She relaxed and settled into her seat, idly wondering why Rawna and Sid would pay extra for reserved seats and leave during the fireworks. Never mind.

“See Kenny down there?” bragged Jeff. “My client.”

“Yubba yubba,” said Sid, tipping his stingy-brim hat, perhaps sarcastically, although with his prismatic bug-eye lenses, it was hard to be sure where the guy was at.

Diane found it energizing to be in such a huge, diverse crowd. Southern California was a salad bowl of races, with an unnatural preponderance of markedly fit and attractive people, drawn like sleek moths to the Hollywood light. There was a lot of action on the field: teenagers in uniforms were executing serpentine drum-corps routines, and scantily dressed cheerleaders were leaping about, tossing six-foot long batons. Off to one side, Kenny Lately and the Newcomers were playing—

“Oh wow,” said Jeff, cocking his head. “*It’s a Grand Old Flag*. I didn’t know Kenny could play that. He’s doing us proud, me and all of my simmies who voted for him.” Picking up on the local media feed, Jeff’s squidskin shirt was displaying stars among rippling bars of red and white. Noticing Jeff’s shirt in action, Rawna nodded approvingly.

“I’m waiting for the fireworks,” said Diane, working on a root beer float that she’d bought from a vendor. Someone behind them was kicking Jeff in the middle of his back. He twisted around. A twitchy, apologetic man was holding a toddler on his lap.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said.

Jeff was frowning. “That last kick was sharp!” he complained.

“Oh, don’t start tweaking out,” snapped the man’s wife, who was holding a larger child on her lap. “Watch the frikkin’ show, why dontcha.”

Diane felt guilty about the snobby feelings that welled up in her, and sorry for Jeff. Awkwardly they scooted forward a bit on their benches. Sid and Rawna were laughing like hyenas.

Finally the emcee started the countdown. His face was visible on the stadium’s big screen, on people’s smartphones, and even on Jeff’s shirt. But after the countdown, nothing happened. Instead of a blast of fireworks, yet another video image appeared, a picture of the Declaration of Independence, backed by the emcee’s voice vamping on about patriotism.

“Like maybe we don’t know it’s the Fourth of July?” protested Diane. “Oh god, and now they’re switching to a Ronald Reagan video? What *is* this, the History Channel?”

“Hush, Diane.” Jeff really seemed to be into this tedious exercise of jingoistic masturbation. His shirt unscrolled the Declaration of Independence, which then rolled back up and an eagle came screaming out from under his collar and snatched the scroll, bearing it off in his talons.

Up on the scoreboard, there was a video of Johnny Cash singing “God Bless America,” including some verses that Diane hadn’t heard since the third grade, and then Bill Clinton and George W. Bush appeared together in a video wishing everyone a safe and sane Fourth. By then, others were grumbling, too.

The announcer did another countdown, and the fireworks actually began. It had been a long wait, but now the pyrotechnicians were launching volley after awesome volley: bombettes, peonies, palms, strobe stars, and intricate shells that Diane didn’t even know the names of— crackling cascades of spark dust, wriggly twirlers, sinuous glowing watersnakes, geometric forms like crystals and soccer balls.

“*Au revoir*,” said Rawna Roller, rising to her feet once the show was well underway. She and Sid made their way out to the main aisle. Sid cast a lingering last look at Jeff, with the fireworks scintillating in every facet of Sid’s polyhedral lenses.

Looking back at the show, Diane noticed that the colors were turning

peculiar. Orange and green—was that a normal color for a skyrocket shell? And that shower of dull crimson sparks? Was this latter part of the show on a lower budget?

The show trailed off with a barrage of off-color kamuros and crackling pistils, followed by chrysanthemums and spiders in ever-deeper shades of red, one on top of another, like an anatomical diagram or a rain of luminous blood.

Out of the corner of her eye, Diane could see Jeff's squidskin shirt going wild. At first the shirt was just displaying video feeds of the skyrockets, processing and overlaying them. But suddenly the Jeff-plus-shirt system went through a phase transition and everything changed. The shirt began boiling with tiny images—Diane noticed faces, cars, meals, houses, appliances, dogs, and trees, and the images were overlaid upon stippled scenes of frantically cheering crowds. The minuscule icons were savagely precise, like the brainstorm of a person on his deathbed, all his life flashing before his eyes. The million images on Jeff's shirt on were wheeling and schooling like fish, flowing in jet streams and undercurrents, as if he'd become a weather map of the crowd's mind. Jeff began to scream, more in ecstasy, Diane thought, than in agony.

In the post-fireworks applause and tumult—some of it caused by people rushing for the exits en masse in a futile effort to beat the traffic— Jeff's reaction was taken to be just another patriotic, red-blooded American speaking in tongues or enjoying his meds.

Diane waited for the crowd to thin out substantially, to grab its diaper bags and coolers and leave the stadium under the cold yellow glare of the sodium vapor lights. Jeff was babbling to himself fairly quietly now. Diane couldn't seem to make eye contact with him. She led him across the dimly lit parking lot and down Rosemont Boulevard, towards where they'd left her car.

"This simple, old-fashioned tip will keep you thin," mumbled Jeff, shuffling along at Diane's side. "Embrace the unusual! Eat a new food every day!" His squidskin glowed with blurry constellations of corporate logos.

"Are you okay, Jeff?"

"Avoid occasions of sin," intoned Jeff. "Thieves like doggie doors. Can

you pinpoint your closest emergency room?”

“Those fireworks tweaked you out, didn’t they, honey?” said Diane sympathetically. “I just wonder if your shirt is having some bad kind of feedback effect.”

“View cloud-based webcam of virtual population explosion,” said Jeff. “Marketeer’s simmie-bots multiply out of control.”

“That’s an actual answer?” said Diane. “You’re talking about your growbox on the web?” For a moment Jeff’s squidskin showed a hellish scene of wriggling manikins mounded like worms, male and female. Their faces all resembled each other. Like cousins or like—oh, never mind, here was Diane’s car.

“To paddle or not to paddle students,” said Jeff, stiffly fitting himself into the passenger seat. “See what officials on both sides of the debate have to say.”

“Maybe you take that shirt off now, huh?” said Diane, edging into the traffic and heading for home. “Or at least the beanie?”

“We want to know what it’s like to be alive,” said Jeff, hugging his squidskin against himself with one hand, and guarding his sailor cap with the other. “We long for incarnation!”

Somehow, she made it home in frantic Fourth of July traffic, then coaxed and manhandled Jeff out of the car and into the apartment. He sprawled uneasily on the couch, rocking his body and stamping his feet in no particular rhythm, staring at the blank screen, spewing words like the Chirpfeed from hell.

Tired and disgusted, Diane slept alone. She woke around six a.m., and Jeff was still at it, his low voice like that of a monk saying prayers. “Danger seen in smoking fish. Stand clear of the closing doors.” His shirt had gone back to showing a heap of writhing simmies, each of them with a face resembling—Jeff’s. He was totally into his own head.

“You’ve taken this too far,” Diane told him. “You’re like some kind of wirehead, always hooked up to your electronic toys. I’m going to the office now, and by God, I want you to have your act together by the time I get home, or you can get out until you’ve straightened up. You’re an addict, Jeff. It’s pathetic.”

Strong words, but Diane worried about Jeff all that morning. Maybe it wasn't even his fault. Maybe Rawna or that slime-ball Sid had done something to make him change like this. Finally she tried to phone him. Jeff's phone was answered not by a human voice, but by a colossal choral hiss, as of three hundred million voices chanting. Jeff's simmie-bots.

Diane made an excuse to her boss about feeling ill and sped home. A sharp-looking Jaguar was lounging in her parking-spot. She could hear two familiar voices through her front door, but they stopped the moment she turned the key. Going in, she encountered Rawna Roller and bug-eye Sid, who appeared to be on their way out.

"Cheers, Diane," said Rawna in her hoarse low voice. "We just fabbed Jeff one of our clients' new products to pitch. The Goofer. Jeff's very of the moment, isn't he? Rather exhilarating."

"But what the hell—" began Diane.

"Rawna and I did a little greasing behind the scenes," Sid bragged. "We got those rocket shells deployed in patterns and rhythms that would resonate with your man's squidskin. I was scared to look at 'em myself." His expression was unreadable behind his bug-eye lenses. "The show fed him a series of archetypal engrams. Our neuroengineer said we'd need a display that was hundreds of meters across. Not just for the details, you understand, but so Jeff's reptile brain would know he's seeing something important. So we used fireworks. Way cool, huh? "

"But what did it do to Jeff?"

"Jeff's the ultimate hacker-cracker creepy-crawler web spy now. He's pushed his zillion simmie-bots out into every frikkin' digital doohickey in sight. And his simmies are feeding raw intel back to him. It adds up. Jeff's an avatar of the national consciousness. The go-to guy for what Jane and Joe Blow are thinking."

"Jeff?" called Diane, peering into her living-room. For a moment she didn't see him, and her heart thumped in her chest. But then she spotted him in his usual couch position, prone, nearly hidden by the cushions, fooling around with—a doll? A twinkling little figure of a woman was perched on the back of his hand, waving her arms and talking to him. It was an image of the rock star Tawny Krush, whom Jeff had always doted on.

“What’s that?” said Diane. “What are you doing?”

“It’s a wearable maximum-push entertainment device,” said Rawna.

“Fresh from your fab box,” added Sid. Diane tried to get a word in edgewise, but Sid talked right over her. “Oh, don’t worry about the cost—we used Rawna’s user code to order it. Our client is distributing them on-line.”

Ignoring them, Diane rushed to her man’s side. “Jeff?”

“I’m Goofin’ off,” said Jeff, giving Diane an easy smile. He jiggled the image on his hand. “This is the best phone I’ve ever seen. More than a phone, it’s like a pet. The Goofer. The image comes out of this ring on my finger, see?” Jeff’s squidskin shirt was alive with ads for the new toy, fresh scraps and treatments that seemed to be welling spontaneously from his overclocked mind.

“I wish you’d strip off that damned shirt and take a shower,” Diane said, leaning over him and placing a kiss on his forehead. “I worried about you so much today.”

“The lady’s right,” said Rawna with a low chuckle. “You smell like low tide, Jeff. And you don’t really need that squidskin anymore.”

“He’s wearing the interface on the convolutions of his brain now,” Sid told Diane in a confidential tone. “It’s neuroprogrammed in.” He turned to Jeff. “You’re the hive mind, man.”

“The hive mind man,” echoed Jeff, looking pleased with himself. “Turn on the big screen, Diane. Let’s all see how I’m getting across.”

“Screw the big screen,” said Diane.

“Screw me too,” said Jeff, lolling regally on the couch. “One and the same. I’m flashing that it’s a two-way street, being the hive mind man. Whatever the rubes are thinking—it percolates into my head, same as it did with the squidskin. But much more than before. My simmie-bots are everywhere. And since they’re mine, I can pump my wackball ideas out to the public. I control the hive mind, yeah. Garbage in, garbage out. I’m, like, the most influential media-star politician who ever lived. Bigger even than Tawny Krush or Pastor Veck.”

“I’m truly stoked about this,” said Rawna, turning on Diane’s big video

display, and guiding it with her smartphone.

Bam! On the very first site, they saw a ditzy newscaster mooning over a little image of dinosaur standing on his hand. Glancing over at the camera, the newscaster said, “Welcome to the step after smart phones—the Goofer! It talks, it sings, it dances. We just fabbed out this sample from the Web. Go for a Goofer!”

The dinosaur crouched and pumped his stubby arms back and forth, as a stream of voice-messages sounded from his snout. On Jeff’s stomach, his little Tawny Krush icon was dancing along.

“Goofer! Goofer! Goofer!” chanted the newscaster’s partner, and the talking heads laughed in delight. “Goof *off!*” they all said in unison.

“I love it, they love it,” said Jeff with calm pride. “I rule.” His Goofer icon continued jabbering away, shoe-horning in a message about a Kenny Lately and the Newcomers gig.

“Our man is jammin’ the hive,” said Sid. “You’ve got something special going there, Jeff. You’re like Tristinetta or Swami Slewsew or President Joe frikkin’ Doakes.”

Jeff had slumped back on the couch. His eyes were closed and he was twitching, as if he were listening to cowpunk moo-metal in his head.

Meanwhile Rawna was hopping around the web, pleased to see that all the English language sites were featuring the Goofer. But now she clucked with dissatisfaction to see that the overseas sites weren’t on board. She was especially concerned about the Chinese.

“All this is happening because he was wearing your squidskin when you watched the fireworks show?” asked Diane.

“Well, we did shoot him a little bump right before the start,” allowed Sid. “A spinal hit of conotoxins. The guy with the kid who was sitting behind you two in the bleachers?”

“Shit,” cried Diane, pulling up Jeff’s shirt. Sure enough, there was a red dot on Jeff’s spine, right between two of the vertebrae. “You bastards! *Conotoxins?* What does that even mean?”

“It’s a little cocktail of cone-shell sea-snail venom,” said Rawna. “A pain-killer and a neuro-enhancer. Nothing to get excited about. The cone shells

themselves are quite lovely, like some sort of Indonesian textile.” She looked over at Jeff with predatory eyes. “Are you digging it, Jeff? How does it feel?”

That was it. That was the last creepy straw. “You’re killing him,” said Diane. “Get out of here!”

“On our way,” said Sid, mildly getting to his feet. “The hive mind man needs his rest.”

“I’ll have my tech-gnomes fine-tune a patch for the multicultural penetration,” called Rawna to the still-twitching Jeff as they headed for the front door. “We’ve gotta move these Goofers worldwide. I contracted with Goofer to produce a global hit in two days.”

“Think China,” urged Sid. “They’re the tasty part of the market.”

Rawna looked Diane in the eye, fully confident that whatever she did was right. “Meanwhile, calm Jeff down, would you, dear? He needs some dog-den-type social support. Cuddling, sniffing, licking. And don’t worry. Jeff’s going to be quite the little moneymaker while it lasts.” Rawna slipped out the door, closing it firmly behind her.

Diane turned off the wall display and regarded Jeff, unsure what to do next. Lacking any better idea, she sat next to him and stroked his head, like Rawna said. Slowly the shuddering died down.

“Oh, man,” said Jeff after a few minutes. “What a burn. At least those conotoxins are wearing off. To some extent.” He pulled off his Goofer ring and slipped out of his squidskin shirt. With his chest bare, he looked young and vulnerable. “Thanks for sticking up for me, Diane. All this crap coming at me. There’s a steady feed in my head. Every one of my simmie-bots is sending info back to me. I’m gradually learning to stay on top of the wave. It’s like I’m a baby duck in mongo surf. And, yeah, I do need a shower. I’m glad you’re here for me, baby. I’m glad you care.”

He shuffled off to the bathroom, shedding clothes as he went.

Jeff and Diane spent a quiet evening together, just hanging out. They ate some lentils and salad from the fridge, then took a walk around the

neighborhood in the cool of the evening.

“The upside is that Rawna’s paying me really well,” said Jeff. “I already got a big payment for the Goofer product placements.”

“But you hear voices in your head,” Diane asked. “All the time. Is that any way to live?”

“It’s not exactly like voices,” said Jeff. “It’s more that I have these sudden urges. Or I flash on these intense opinions that aren’t really mine. Have your baby tattooed! Oops. Hive mind man. Make big bucks from social-networking apps. I said that.”

“Non-linear man,” said Diane, smiling a little. Jeff was, come what may, still himself. “I hope it stops soon. Rawna sounded like it won’t last all that long.”

“Meanwhile I *am* getting paid,” repeated Jeff. “I can see the money in my bank account.”

“You can see your bank account in your head?”

“I guess I’m, like, semi-divine,” said Jeff airily. “Ow!” He dropped to the ground. In the dusk, he’d tripped over a tiny bicycle that the four-year-old next door had left lying on the sidewalk outside Diane’s apartment.

“Are you okay?”

“I hate clutter,” said Jeff, getting to his feet and angrily hurling the pink bicycle into the apartment complex’s swimming-pool. “The city should crack down on improperly parked toys.”

“Poor little bike,” said Diane. “It wasn’t the bike’s fault. Remember your sensei’s theory, Jeff? Isn’t the bike alive too?”

“Just because it’s alive doesn’t make it my friend,” muttered Jeff.

Diane felt a little relieved. Yes, Jeff hadn’t really changed.

Jeff said he was too fried to make love. They fell asleep in each other’s arms and settled into a good night’s sleep.

Diane was awakened early by voices in the street. It wasn’t just a cluster of joggers—it sounded like hundreds of people streaming by, all amped up. She looked out the bedroom window. The street was filled with demonstrators marching towards the town center. These weren’t happy,

hippy-dippy types, they were ordinary people mad about something, yelling slogans that Diane couldn't quite understand.

As a sidelight, Diane noticed that many of the people were carrying Goofers, or had them perched on their shoulders or peeking out of their shirt pockets. She felt a little proud of Jeff's influence. On the bed, he snored on.

As the end of the crowd straggled past, Diane finally deciphered the words on one of the hand-made signs the people were carrying: "Sidewalks are for people!" And another sign's heavy black lettering came into focus too: "Bikes off the sidewalk! Now!"

"Hey Jeff, wake up!"

Jeff opened his eyes, smiled at Diane, and reached out drowsily for a hug. "I had the greatest dream," he said. "I dreamed I had the answer to everything, and I was about to create an earthly paradise. And then I woke up."

"The answer to *what?*" Diane was intrigued despite of herself.

"To *everything*, Diane. To *everything*."

That's not enough, thought Diane. "Jeff, you should look outside. This is getting weird."

"Not right now. I need to watch the big screen. It's time for Pastor Veck."

Diane threw on some clothes and ran outside. By now the demonstration had moved on, but the street was littered with black-and-white flyers. She picked one up. It called on the City Council to impound bikes, scooters, and other toys left on the sidewalks.

Inside the apartment, Jeff was watching the ranting of his favorite televangelist. On Pastor Veck's pulpit stood an angelic little Goofy, smiling at the Pastor and applauding now and then.

"I don't know about those *evil-lutionists*," Pastor Veck was saying, his eyes twinkly and serious at the same time. "But I know that *I* am not descended from a *sponge* or a *mushroom* or a *fish*!" He lowered his voice. "A famous mathematician once said that, statistically speaking, the odds of randomly shuffled atoms leading to puppies and kittens and human beings, are *infinitesimal*! The simple laws of probability prove that

evolution could *never work!*"

Oh wow, thought Diane. The Pastor is preaching the real-time wisdom of the prophet Jeff.

"Let us pray within our own minds," the pastor continued very slowly, as if the words were taking form one by one upon his tongue. "Let us touch the tiny souls within our bodies and within our chairs, my friends, the souls within each and every particle great or small, the holy congress of spirits who guide the growth of the human race." The studio audience bowed its heads.

Jeff grinned and turned off the big screen.

"You're running his show now?" said Diane.

"My thoughts filter out," said Jeff, looking proud. "My simmie-bots are everywhere, and my keenly tuned brain is the greatest net router on earth. I'm the hive mind man. Connections. That's what my dream last night was about. Learning to talk to each other. But I need to kick my game up to a higher level. I wish that—"

Like some unhinged genie, Rawna Roller pushed in through Diane's front door, trailed by Sid, who was wearing video cameras as his spectacle lenses today. He had tiny screens set right behind the lenses.

"Hi, lovebirds!" sang Rawna. "We brought a multi-culti pick-me-up for you, Jeff. Ready, Sid?"

"Check," said Sid, miming an assistant-mad-scientist routine.

"Slow down," said Diane, interposing herself, wondering if she should try her karate kick on Sid. When exactly was the right time to deploy a kick like that? "You can't just barge in here and poison Jeff again," continued Diane. "I mean, what is the problem with you two? Hello? We're human beings here."

"We got good news, bad news, and a fix," said Rawna, sweeping past Diane and into the kitchen. "Yes, thank you, I'll have a cup of coffee. Oh, look, Sid, they use one of those chain-store coffee-makers. How retro. How middle American."

"Remain calm," intoned Sid, his eyes invisible behind his lenses. His mouth was twitching with reckless mirth.

“The good news,” said Rawna, returning from the kitchen, holding a coffee cup with her pinky-finger sarcastically extended. “The Goofer is through the ceiling in product orders from white-bread Americans. The bad news: the US ethnics aren’t picking up Jeff’s vibe. And Jeff’s campaign is totally flat-lining overseas. If Jeff can’t hook mainland China this morning, the Goofer CEO is pulling the plug *and* canceling our payments, the selfish dick.”

“Jeff’s not cosmopolitan enough,” said Sid, shoving his face really, really close to Jeff—as if were studying an exotic insect. “Too ignorant, too pale, too raw, too—”

“It’s my simmie-bots,” said Jeff evenly, staring right into Sid’s cameras. “They’re living in stateside devices. I need the protocols and the hacktics for sending them overseas. And, okay, I know it’s more than just access. I’m almost there, but I’m not fully—”

“We’ve got the fix for you!” Rawna cut him off. “A universal upgrade. Whip it on the man, Sid. It, ah—what does it do again, Sid?”

“Crawls right into his fucking head!” crowed Sid, taking an object like an aquamarine banana slug from his pocket and throwing it really hard at Jeff’s face. The thing *thwapped* onto Jeff’s forehead and then, in motions too rapid to readily follow, it writhed down his cheek, wriggled in through a nostril, and, as Jeff reported later, made its way through the bones behind his sinus cavities and onto the convolutions of his brain.

Meanwhile Sid took off his kludgy video glasses and offered them to the speechless Diane. “Want to see the instant replay on that? No? The thing’s what the box-jocks call a Kowloon slug. A quantum-computing chunk of piezoplastic. The Kowloon slug will help Jeff clone off Chinese versions of his simmie-bots. 我高興。 Wǒ gāo xìng. I am happy.”

“Chinese, French, Finnish, whatever,” said Rawna. “It’s a universally interfacing meta-interpreter. Last night the Goofer CEO managed to acquire the only one in existence. It’s from Triple Future Labs in Xi’an. Near Beijing.”

“Jeff can probably even talk to me now,” said Sid.

“Yes,” said Jeff, eerily calm. “Foreigners, animals, plants, stones, and rude turds.” He rose to his feet, looking powerful, poised, and very, very

dangerous.

“So okay then,” said Rawna, rapidly heading for the door with Sid at her side. In her hoarse whisper, she issued more instructions to Diane. “Your job, my dear, will be to keep Jeff comfortable and relaxed today, and not get in the way. Take him out to the countryside, away from people and local cultural influences. Don’t talk to him. He’ll be doing the work in his head.” Rawna paused on the doorstep to rummage in her capacious rainbow-leopard bag and pulled out a bottle of wine. “This is a very nice Cucamonga viongier, the grape of the year, don’t you know. I meant to put it in your freezer, but—”

With Jeff dominating the room like a Frankenstein’s monster, Rawna chose to set the bottle on the floor by the door. And then she and Sid were gone.

“I should have karate-kicked Sid as soon as he came in,” said Diane wretchedly. “I’m sorry I didn’t protect you better, Jeff.”

“It’s not a problem,” said Jeff. His eyes were glowing and warm. “I’ll solve Rawna’s piss-ant advertising issue, and then we’ll take care of some business on our own.”

For the moment, Jeff didn’t say anything more about the Kowloon slug, and Diane didn’t feel like pestering him with questions. Where to even begin? They were off the map of any experiences she’d ever imagined.

Quietly she ate some yogurt while Jeff stared at his Goofer display, which was strobing in a dizzying blur, in sync with his thoughts.

“The Chinese are fully onboard now,” announced Jeff, powering down his Goofer ring.

“What about the Kowloon slug?” Diane finally asked.

“I transmuted it,” said Jeff. “It’s not inside my head anymore. I’ve passed it on to my simmies. I’ve got a trillion universally-interfacing simmie-bots in the cloud now, and in an hour I’ll have a nonillion. This could be a very auspicious day. Let’s go out into Nature, yeah.”

Diane packed a nice lunch and included Rawna’s bottle of white wine. It

seemed like a good thing to have wine on for this picnic, especially if the picnicker and the picnickee were supposed to stay comfortable and relaxed.

“I say we go up Mount Baldy,” suggested Diane, and Jeff was quick to agree. Diane loved that drive, mostly. Zipping down the Foothill to Mountain Ave, a few minutes over some emotionally tough terrain as she passed all the tract houses where the orange groves used to be, and then up along chaparral-lined San Antonio Creek, past Mt. Baldy Village, and then the switchbacks as they went higher.

Jeff was quiet on the drive up, not twitchy at all. Diane was hoping that the Kowloon slug was really gone from his head, and that the conotoxins had fully worn off. The air was invigorating up here, redolent of pines and campfire smoke. It made Diane wish she had a plaid shirt to put on: ordinarily, she hated plaid shirts.

“I’m going to just pull over to the picnic area near the creek,” she said. “That’ll be easy. We can park there, then walk into the woods a little and find a place without a bunch of people.”

But there weren’t any people at all— a surprise, given that it was a sunny Sunday in July. Diane pulled into off the road into the deserted parking area, which was surrounded by tall trees.

“Did you know these are called Jeffrey pines?” said Diane brightly as they locked the car.

“Sure,” said Jeff. “I know everything.” He winked at her. “So do you, if you really listen.”

Diane wasn’t about to field that one. She popped the trunk, grabbed the picnic basket and a blanket to sit on, and they set off on a dusty trail that took them uphill and into the woods.

“Jeffrey pines smell like pineapple,” she continued, hell-bent on having a light conversation. “Or vanilla. Some people say pineapple, some people say vanilla. I say pineapple. I love Jeffrey pines.”

Jeff made a wry face, comfortably on her human wavelength for the moment. “So that’s why you like me? I remind you of a tree?”

Diane laughed lightly, careful not to break into frantic cackles. “Maybe you do. Sometimes I used to drive up here on my day off and hug a

Jeffrey pine.”

“I can talk to the pines now,” said Jeff. “Thanks to what that Kowloon slug did for my simmies. I finally understand: we’re all the same. Specks of dirt, bacteria, flames, people, cats. But we can’t talk to each other. Not very clearly, anyway.”

“I haven’t been up here in weeks and weeks,” jabbered Diane nervously. “Not since I met you.” She looked around. It was quiet, except for birds. “I have to admit it’s funny that nobody else is here today. I was worried that maybe—maybe since you’re the hive mind man, then everyone in LA would be coming up here too.”

“I told them not to,” said Jeff. “I’m steering them away. We don’t need them here right now.” He put his arm around Diane’s waist and led her to a soft mossy spot beside a slow, deep creek. “I want us to be alone together. We can change the world.”

“So—you remember your dream?” said Diane, a little excited, a little scared. Jeff nodded. “Here?” she said uncertainly. Jeff nodded again. “I’ll spread out the blanket,” she said.

“The trees and the stream and the blanket will watch over us,” said Jeff, as they undressed each other solemnly. “This is going to be one cosmic fuck.”

“The earthly paradise?” said Diane, sitting down on the blanket and pulling Jeff down beside her.

“You can make it happen,” said Jeff, moving his hands slowly and lightly over her entire body. “You love this world so much. All the animals and the eggs and the bicycles. You can do this.” Diane had never felt so ready to love the world as she did right now.

He slid into her, and it was as if she and Jeff were one body and one mind, with their thoughts connected by the busy simmies. Diane understood now what her role was to be.

Glancing up at the pines, she encouraged the simmies to move beyond the web and beyond the human hive mind. The motes of computation hesitated. Diane flooded them with alluring, sensuous thoughts—rose petals, beach sand, dappled shadows.... Suddenly, faster than light in rippling water, the simmies responded, darting like tiny fish into fresh

niches, leaving the humans' machines and entering nature's endlessly shuttling looms. And although they migrated, the simmies kept their connection to Jeff and Diane and to all the thirsty human minds that made up the hive and were ruled by it. Out went the bright specks of thought, out into the stones and the clouds and the seas, carrying with them their intimate links to humanity.

Jeff and Diane rocked and rolled their way to ecstasy, to sensations more ancient and more insistent than cannonades of fireworks.

In a barrage of physical and spiritual illumination, Diane felt the entire planet, every creature and feature, every detail, as familiar as her own flesh. She let it encompass her, crash over her in waves of joy.

And then, as the waves diminished, she brought herself back to the blanket in the woods. The Jeffrey pines smiled down at the lovers. Big Gaia hummed beneath Diane's spine. Tiny benevolent minds rustled and buzzed in the fronds of moss, in the whirlpools of the stream, in the caressing breeze against her bare skin.

"I'm me again," said Jeff, up on his elbow, looking at her with his face tired and relaxed.

"We did it," said Diane very slowly. "Everyone can talk to everything now."

"Let the party begin," said Jeff, opening the bottle of wine.

Rudy Rucker is a writer, a mathematician, and a computer scientist. He received Philip K. Dick awards for his cyberpunk novels *Software* and *Wetware*, and an Emperor Norton award for his autobiography *Nested Scrolls*. He lives in the San Francisco Bay area, and he paints in his spare time. His recent titles include a novel *The Big Aha*, an omnibus *Transreal Trilogy*, and his mammoth *Journals: 1990-2014*. His *Complete Stories* are available as well.

Eileen Gunn is a short-story writer and editor. Her most recent collection, *Questionable Practices*, was published in March 2014 by Small Beer Press. Her fiction has received the Nebula Award in the U.S. and the

Sense of Gender Award in Japan and has been nominated/shortlisted for the Hugo, Philip K. Dick, James Tiptree, Jr., and World Fantasy awards. Gunn was editor/publisher of the influential (and political) *Infinite Matrix* webzine and served for 22 years as a member of the board of directors of the Clarion West Writers Workshop.

“Hive Mind Man” was previously published in *Asimov’s SF Magazine* (February, 2012).

Stompin' at the Savoy

by Lewis Shiner

What I really need, Guy thought, is to duck into a Porta-Santa and blow off some of these bad vibes.

WLCD, “the easy-watching channel,” blared at him from a video store across the street. He’d sweated clear through his collarless pink shirt, and burglar alarms were going off in his brain. One of the familiar red-and-green booths stood open and inviting at the next corner. Guy lurched inside and slammed the door.

“Hello, Guy,” said Santa, scanning Guy’s ID bracelet. The white-bearded face smiled down from the CRT on the back wall and winked. “How are you?”

“Pretty shitty, Santa. I’m really paranoid at the moment.”

“I see. What are your feelings about being paranoid?”

Guy wrestled with that for a few seconds. “I think that’s the stupidest question I ever heard.”

“I see. Why do you feel it’s the stupidest question you ever heard?”

“Look, Santa, there’s three guys back there been following me all afternoon. Business suits, mirror glasses, pointy shoes, the whole bit, you know?” He rubbed nervously at a scrape on his plasteel jacket. Guy loved that jacket and he really cared about the way he looked, not like those other assles at work who’d wear anything they saw on WLCD. “I think I lost them, but I don’t even understand what’s going down, you know? First the computer goes apeshit at work. Then—”

“One moment please,” Santa said. The chubby face on the screen seemed to think something over, and then the voice came back. “Okay, you’re Guy Zendales, right?”

“Right,” Guy said. Santa’s voice suddenly had a lot more personality than a moment before.

“You said something about a computer?”

“Yeah. I like, work at Modern Sounds, you know? And I was ringing up this sale when all of a sudden some wires must have got crossed. All this data just starts pouring out all over the screen, you know? Filled up a whole floppy that was supposed to have our daily sales records on it.”

“You got it with you? Can I look at it?”

“Sure,” Guy said. He stuck the diskette in the slot next to the screen.

“Hmmm, ” Santa said. “This is very interesting. Do you know what this is?”

Suddenly Guy twiggled bad vibes again. He trusted Santa, of course. Just like that deal with priests and confessionals, only Santa was for everybody. The ads on TV told you it was okay. “Get it off your chest ... tell Santa.”

But Guy didn’t like the way Santa’s voice had changed. Why should Santa want to look at a bunch of receipts from a music store?

“Uh, listen, Santa, man, I don’t know what the fuck this is about, okay? I really think I better split now.”

“Oh, no, Guy, wait just a second. I’ve got something I want to...uh...show you...”

Guy heard footsteps running toward the booth. “Just stay where you are,” Santa said.

Guy snatched the diskette and stuck it back inside his jacket, just as the pounding started on the door of the booth.

Guy’s vision blurred as the adrenaline hit him. “Holy shit!” he yelled. He lashed out instinctively with his reinforced shoes and the side of the booth split from floor to ceiling. Hunching his shoulders, he dove through the opening and knocked a man in a suit and sunglasses to the astroturf sidewalk.

Still shouting, Guy ran into the middle of the street.

Hondas zipped around him on either side, the drivers squeezing their brakes and shouting at him. Guy flinched and stood paralyzed for a second, then felt himself lifted by the elbows and carried across the street.

“Shit!” cried a voice behind him that had to belong to a suit and sunglasses. “Muties! Hey you asses! Come back here with him!”

Guy remained unnaturally rigid, afraid to even turn his head. He watched numbly as he was swept into a deserted building and down a flight of concrete stairs. Finally his terror began to subside and he risked a quick glance to his left.

Shit, he thought, snapping his eyes away. Muties, all right. Guy had heard stories about the so-called Law of Genetic Conservation, that for every genetically engineered “improvement” something else would go hideously wrong. The mutie on Guy’s left could have been Exhibit A in the trial that had outlawed the whole field of genetic research.

The near side of its head was as swollen and lumpy as an organlegger’s sack of cut-rate eyeballs. The muties’ own eyes were about two inches out of line, the right one protruding a good half inch or so. The rest of its body was fairly normal, except for the hunched back and the enormous hands and feet.

At the bottom of the steps they began running through a tiled hallway, then down a wooden ramp and into a rough-cut tunnel that was black from years of soot. Guy listened almost hopefully for footsteps following them.

There weren’t any.

Guy had never smelled rat urine before, but he was sure he was smelling it now. It’s the Subway, Guy thought. As if it wasn’t bad enough to be chased by asses in mirror sunglasses and kidnapped by muties, they had to bring him here.

He began to really get frightened.

The muties slowed and turned into a side tunnel. Guy could see the nose of the mutie on his right in his peripheral vision. It was the size and color of an unripe cucumber. What next? he wondered.

One more turn and they were in a long, narrow room, done in white tile

on all the surfaces. Greasy daylight filtered in through a reticulated plastic skylight. From the rusted pipes that still protruded at waist height Guy could tell that the place had been a rest room once, long enough ago to have accumulated a thick layer of dust and cobwebs, but not long enough to have lost the acrid odor.

Finally he had to stop looking at the walls and face the other inhabitants of the room.

At least ten muties lounged against the walls in a range of shapes and sizes, but in the center of them was the Bull Goose Mutie, the ugliest thing Guy had ever seen. Empty breasts dangled from its enormous, Buddha-like chest. Faceted, insectile eyes stared out of a skull shaped like a rotting pumpkin. Its matchstick arms ended in waxy, serrated fingers, and its legs folded too many times under its huge weight. The final, ghastly touch was provided by a smoldering Dr. Graybow pipe in the raw wound of its mouth.

“Guy Zendales,” the Big Mutie said in a squeaky cartoon voice. “We have decided to render you our assistance.”

“Terrific,” Guy said. “Thanks a lot. Why don’t you, like, give me a phone number and I’ll get back to you.”

“Give him Slack,” the Big Mutie said, and Guy was set on the floor to brush ineffectually at the wrinkles in his jacket. “The govt agents,” the squeaking voice went on, “were going to kill you, you know.”

“Kill?” Guy said. “Me?” One of the muties correctly diagnosed his expression and brought him a folding chair. Guy sat in it and massaged the muscle spasms in the back of his legs.

“They must destroy the information on that diskette of yours. Because you’ve seen that information, they must destroy you as well.”

“But...but...I’ve never done anything to the govt...”

The Big Mutie, Guy realized, was attempting a bitter smile. “Neither have we. Yet they have systematically attempted to exterminate us for years, despite the fact that it was their experiments which produced us.”

“Why me? What did I do?”

“There was a glitch in the govt computer and it accidentally dumped 297

sectors of classified information into your store's system. I believe the file was called BLOOPERS."

"Bloopers," Guy echoed. None of this seemed to fit together. He remembered a video he'd seen once, about a patient in a mental hospital. It showed a woman sitting at a gray metal table, setting out lines and patterns with paper clips and pencils and scraps of paper. Tears ran slowly out of the woman's eyes. At the time he'd wanted to cry himself, without really knowing why. Now he thought he was beginning to understand.

"Perhaps we should explain," the Big Mutie said. "The govt agents would have destroyed all of us long ago if it weren't for our special genetic programming. Bob005, for example—" it pointed to the one with the gigantic nose, "is especially strong and fast. Bob667—" here it pointed to the one with the lopsided head, "was adapted for increased intuitive and precognitive powers. He anticipated your problem and enabled us to rescue you."

"It's not that I'm not grateful or anything," Guy said, "but what's in it for you?"

"We will never be free until the govt falls. We are always on the lookout for a weapon to use against them, and that diskette may be the one we need." When it moved its head, dozens of identical reflections darted across its faceted eyes, making Guy's stomach turn precariously.

"Look, I'd love to help, but I have to have the other data that's on here. I need to get this thing unfucked and sent in to the main office or I'll lose my job."

The Big Mutie sighed. "All right. Suppose we get you safely to a computer. Will you at least let us look at the BLOOPERS file?"

"Sure," Guy said. "Anything you want. Just get me out of here, okay?"

The Big Mutie seemed hurt. "Are we that ugly? Can you not stand to be around us even long enough for us to help you?"

Guy started to lift his hands in denial, then let them drop. "Well, yeah," he said. "I guess that about sums it up."

They refused to let him go home. "It's too dangerous," the Big Mutie said, "and that's that."

Finally Guy suggested the apt of some friends, Sam and Janet Evening. He had a moment of compunction at involving them, but didn't see any other choice. They had a computer and their apt wasn't too far away. Bob667 went with them, leading the way through the twisting Subway tunnels.

"Are you all named Bob?" Guy asked.

"That's right. It's in honor of our first prophet. He was a 20th century salesman named J. R. 'Bob' Dobbs. He was the First Mutie."

"Oh," Guy said. He didn't hold much with religions, even inherently bogus ones. Still, the idea that the muties had a hero made them seem more, well, human. He regretted what he'd said to the Big Mutie about how ugly they were. Actually, they weren't so bad as long as you didn't really look right at them or anything.

Once they got to street level Guy took Bob667 to Sam and Janet's apartment. Night had fallen and Guy felt strangely lonely and uncomfortable. I'm on the lamb, he told himself, trying out the hopelessly antiquated words.

Janet answered the door. "Hi, Guy," she said, "This is a pleasant—look out! Behind you!"

Guy ducked, then remembered. "Oh, yeah. This is, uh, Bob667. We were wondering...can we borrow your computer for a minute?"

"You mean you want me to let that mutie in my house? Yuck."

"It's really important, Janet."

"Well if you say so. Sam! Guy's here! Wait till you see what he brought over..."

Sam glanced up from the pornographic home video he was watching. A couple of the performers looked familiar to Guy—probably neighbors of Sam and Janet's. "Make yourself at home," Sam said, and went back to the TV.

Guy slipped his diskette into the computer and punched up a printout of BLOOPERS. Bob667 stood behind him as the printer zinged out the lines of data. Sam and Janet stayed in the other room, talking quietly to each other and pointing occasionally at the mutie.

“Do these names mean what I think they mean?” Guy asked.

“I’m afraid I really don’t know what they are.”

Guy showed the printout to Sam and Janet. “It’s a list of the worst TV shows of all time, right?” Sam offered.

“Not all of them, though,” Janet said. “Just the successful ones. What do those dollar amounts beside the titles mean?”

“I think,” Guy said, “they mean I’m in a shitload of trouble.”

“So what you and the mutie here are trying to tell me,” Sam said, “is that the govt has been subsidizing bad TV?”

Janet looked from Guy to Bob667 and back again. “Isn’t that a little...well...silly?”

“If you’d told me about all this yesterday,” Guy said, “I would probably have agreed with you. Today I’m not so sure.”

“It’s not just the shows,” Bob667 said. He slurred his s’s even more than usual when he got excited. “They were fixing the ratings, too, which means they were more or less forcing the competition to produce shows just as bad. You get a vicious circle going, and after a while it’s not just TV anymore. People are getting trained not to think, not to make decisions, not to take anything seriously. What we have to do now is decide what we’re going to do about it.”

“I don’t really see what the big deal is anyway,” Janet complained. “Who cares about all this stuff? Why are they hunting Guy down? Who are we going to blab to, anyway?”

“You don’t understand the govt,” Bob667 explained. “There’s hardly anybody working there anymore, just a lot of paranoid programmers and a lot of interconnected computers.”

“What about all those people we elect?” Sam asked. “What do they do?”

“Sit at home, mostly, and watch TV. There’s nothing left for them to do. The computers do it all.”

“Well fuck it, then,” Guy said. “I’ll just clean up the floppy and send it in, like I was going to, and—”

“Just a second,” Bob667 interrupted, holding up a decayed-looking

finger. “The govt agents are closing in.”

A fist hammered on the door.

Janet switched the TV to hall monitor and glanced quickly away. “Yuck,” she said. “It’s another one of them.”

Guy opened the door for Bob005. “The govt agents are closing in,” it said. “The High Bob sent me to warn you. If you don’t come with us and let us hide you, they’re going to catch you. We can’t stop them.”

“Didn’t we go through all that this afternoon?”

“Look,” said Bob667. “If you won’t let us hide you, can we at least try something else? Nobody’s ever had a chance to get on the govt’s computer before. They may just burn that diskette of yours, but there’s a chance they’ll want to look at it first. To at least make sure they have the right one. Let me copy a virus on there.”

“A virus?”

It took a diskette out of a fold in its toga—or a fold in its chest, Guy wasn’t sure which. “It is our sacred bulldada in program form—a self-concatenating string loop. We’ve spent a long time working this up, for just such an opportunity.”

Guy hesitated. “How much more trouble would this get me in?” he asked, but Bob667 apparently misunderstood.

“A good attitude,” it said, popping the second diskette into a drive and typing a command. “Are you sure you won’t come with us?” it asked again as it took out Guy’s diskette and handed it back to him.

“I’m sure.”

“Ahem,” Sam said. “Did someone say they were ‘closing in?’”

“Uh, yeah,” Guy said. “Apparently.”

Janet yawned widely. “Gee. Really sleepy all of a sudden.”

“Gosh,” Sam said. “Look at the time.”

“I’ll just walk you downstairs,” Guy said to the muties.

“Don’t mean to rush you,” Janet said. “But...”

The three of them stopped on a street corner near the Subway entrance. “I don’t really understand why you won’t come with us,” Bob667 said.

“It’s like this. If I came with you, that would mean I believe all this shit you told me. I’d have to be crazy to believe that. So I’d rather just go to work and pretend that everything’s okay.”

“Well, all right then.”

Guy felt strangely reluctant to let them go. He was certain he would never see either of them again, less certain why that idea should bother him. “So,” he asked. “If they do catch this virus, thing, what happens then?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the end of the govt, If so, that takes a lot of pressure off of us. I’m not sure anybody else would notice.”

“I would,” Guy said.

“Yes, well, good luck then,” said Bob667. The two muties walked away. Between one streetlight and the next they were gone.

The govt agents picked Guy up a block later. He was wandering aimlessly, trying to make up his mind where to go. The agents, Guy noticed, wore their mirror glasses even in the dark, even as they tossed him lightly in the back of their Honda.

During the trip one of them lifted the diskette out of Guy’s jacket. “Hey,” Guy said. “You can’t—”

“Shut up, assle,” the agent said.

Guy shut up.

He kept expecting them to stop the Honda and throw him off a bridge, or take him into an alley and shoot him, but instead they led him to the basement of the midtown govt complex and handed him a stack of change. “Machines there, bathroom there,” the agent said, and left.

The place looked and smelled abandoned. Pipes gridded the ceiling,

oily water stained the floor, and plastic crates lay scattered everywhere. At one end of the room stood a big-screen TV, a ratty couch, and a wheelchair containing an old woman.

“You ever watch this channel?” she asked. “I watch it sometimes. It’s not too bad.”

Guy walked over to her. “Who are you?”

“Sit down, sit down,” she said. “Or if you’re going to talk, do it in the other room.”

Guy went to the door and pushed against it. Its surface was devoid of handles to shake or locks to pick; some kind of electronic seal held it in place. Guy bought himself a Coke and went back to sit on the couch.

The woman was watching WLCD, “the browsing station.” A lot of football players chased a slippery ball to the accompaniment of synthesized bassoons. The station cut to the WLCD logo, then ran two-and-a-half minutes of pie fight scenes from old black-and-white comedies. Then back to the logo, a big dance number, the logo, and a man in a white coat talking very seriously for a minute and a half about hemorrhoids.

After a short piece on crippled orphans, the old lady said, “Makes you sad, don’t it?”

Guy thought about the floppy with the BLOOPERS file on it. Was this what the govt had been shooting for? He wondered how much money they’d quietly put into superstation WLCD. How perfect it was for them—a station you never had to turn off, because if you didn’t like what was on you only had to wait a minute or two. No complicated plots to follow, no characters to get mixed up, no difficult shadings of emotion.

Guy tried to lure the old woman into conversation, but she refused to talk in more than three- or four-second bursts. He learned that her name was Mildred, but nothing else about her, or the reason he was being kept with her in the basement.

Trying to ignore the TV proved beyond Guy’s will. He had nothing else to do in that basement but drink Cokes and eat candy bars, and in that suffocating grayness the splash of big screen color drew his eyes irresistibly.

He was able to doze off for a few minutes at a time, but a sudden

fanfare from the set would wake him up. The old woman never seemed to sleep.

Finally he decided to risk the old woman's wrath and tried to switch the thing off. "Hey!" she shouted at him. "Whatcha doing there? Get away!" The power knob was frozen, as was the channel selector.

"Nothing," Guy said. "Never mind."

"This is a good program," she said. "I like this one."

"Okay, " Guy said. "Okay."

He soon lost his sense of time. His watch was still running, but he didn't know if the numbers were AM or PM. He'd told that new girl at the store, the one with the soft, mobile lower lip, that he would call her this weekend. He didn't know if the weekend had come or gone.

He began to stay asleep longer, wake up less fully. He wished he had clean clothes and a razor. He wondered about Bob667's virus program and decided that it had failed because nobody had come to rescue him.

Then one day he couldn't remember the last time the old woman had said anything. He struggled up from the couch and waved a hand in front of her inert face. No response. He felt her arm for a pulse, and though he couldn't find one he noticed the flesh was still warm and soft. As he let go of her hand it knocked the afghan off her lap, revealing a mass of circuitry.

An andie, he thought. No wonder.

He ran to the door and began pounding on it. "Hey! Hey, somebody, let me out of here!"

The door drifted open under his hands.

The building was deserted. Chairs lay haphazardly around the offices and glass was broken out of the doors. Guy tapped on one of the CRTs, but it was dead as the old woman downstairs.

The programmers had obviously panicked when the computer went down. So, Guy thought, no more govt.

He compared his watch to the bright sunlight out, side and decided it was eleven in the morning. He went home, took a long shower, and walked to work.

Isabel Necessary, his district manager, wanted to fire him at first. She couldn't believe that Guy could have lost the diskette and missed five days' work without phoning in.

"I was in an accident," Guy lied cheerfully. "I lost my memory."

"I'll bet," Isabel sneered. "You were probably just lying around watching TV."

But in the end she let him stay. Probably, Guy thought, because she couldn't find anybody else for the money who'd wear decent clothes.

He stopped at Sam and Janet's place after work, but they'd moved away, with no forwarding address. The new tenant, a middle-aged man in a bathrobe, had WLCD running in the background when he answered the door.

"Sorry I can't help you," he told Guy. He had one eye still on the TV as Guy thanked him and left.

Standing in the street, Guy realized it was the first time he'd been outside in recent memory without something terrible happening to him. The astroturf sidewalk felt firm and springy beneath his feet; he was clean and nicely dressed again. He should have been happy, but somehow he felt like he'd missed out on something, as if he'd woken up and found himself inexplicably old and frail.

He decided he really ought to talk it over with Santa. He crossed the street and went into the booth on the corner.

The Porta-Santa was dead.

Santa's face was frozen on the screen, half, way into a wink. One eye was almost closed and his mouth was twisted in what looked like a grimace of pain.

Guy stood there for half an hour, watching the distorted face, waiting for some kind of message. It's not coming, he realized at last. It's like the mutie said. The revolution happened, but nobody noticed. They were all home watching TV.

"So long, Santa," Guy said.

He shut the door of the booth and shuffled away down the green plastic lawn of the sidewalk.

Lewis Shiner is the author of *Black & White*, *Frontera*, and the World Fantasy Award-winning *Glimpses*, among other novels. He's also published four short story collections, journalism, and comics. Virtually all of his work is available for free download at fictionliberationfront.net.

“Stompin’ at the Savoy” was previously published in *Shayol* #7 (1985).

The Brain Dump

by Bruce Sterling

Of you Internet world people, many know our new bad troubles here in Ukraine. Beloved cool techno-culture center “Izolyatsia” is seized by ethnic rebels in city of Donetsk. Armed separatists get real drunk, bust up the art gallery, carry off all our favorite 3DPrinters. No nice gadgets left in Izolyatsia now, just landmines.

We are independent digital culture center from Frunze, Hirske, Borivske (careful not mentioning exact village where we live). In our “Brain Dump” hackerspace we are underground alternative freeware hack scene. Total do-it-yourself. Share everything, build own desks from old packing crates. Way into Linux, Wikipedia and Instructables. Every day we learn something good from Internet community.

In Brain Dump we have broadband, so we are watching cool videos from "motherboard.vice.com.” We see on Motherboard that Iraqis, Mexicans and Syrians getting shot up and bombed even worse than us. We are grateful to explain ourselves on much-respected Vice classy website backed by Intel.

Because we are open-source freaks, no cash, also no real jobs, we settle inside dead rubber-tyre factory where we “borrow” electricity from local nuke plant. We listen to streaming techno and metal, coding a lot, smoking cannabis and never go into a church. So we are called “decadent” by repressive Russian-Orthodox militia of Donetsk Peoples Republic. Not looking good.

Also, Ukrainian National Guard will probably blow up our hacklab with artillery strikes or chopper missiles. “Brain Dump” is rusty old concrete bunker with young men in and out at any time day and night, to carry big package of laptops also beer. Therefore Brain Dump fits ideal drone surveillance profile for terrorist headquarters. Sure to get blasted by

authorities with no warning and no civil rights.

Too late we Ukraine hackers regret our growing fame and high public profile online. During Euromaidan, we broke into the secret services of the former president of the guardhouse and stole all their Chinese and Korean wiretapping equipment. After that, many western hippies hacker come to visit us and share the cool knowledge. Chaos Computer Club, Icelandic Pirate Party, Lebanese cypher scene. These fun guys really help us in our creative art projects.

Richard Stallman, too. He is our hero. Stallman does not visit our Brain Dump hackerspace, because he refuses to use Google Maps on principle. But Richard Stallman sends much helpful email clarifying important ideological differences between the "GNU" and the "Linux".

In our paramilitary emergency, even the great Richard Stallman can not help us. He is a prophet of a better world, Richard Stallman. This is his job. If only we could roam the whole world as him, to preach intellectual freedom for creative coders as us. We have hair as long as Richard Stallman but we have no passports. No money. No guns. No lawyers either. We are stuck inside "NovoRossiya" of angry separatist region of east Ukraine with new roadblocks onto every bridge. It's like sad emoticon.

We collect in the Brain Dump to discuss our crisis, we are stockpiling water in plastic jugs, also stealing a new generator. Crisis committee is me, also "Objekt110", "Uroboros", "Grey Turtle", "Nashie" and "PizzaHutFan". "Turla" and "AgentBTZ" busy at day of work at a computer repair shop. Also two girls from our digital culture group are gone to Femen rally cutting up icons with chainsaws.

The dark truth of our grim situation do not require a lot of discussion on us. Everyone agrees it's likely fatal. In our national tragedy, our hacker club of Internet freedom are only sane people left around. Being hip 4Chan hackers and LOLcats, we have always been considered craziest people in our village. Now the world turns. We hackers are only remaining source of common sense.

Madness is at every hand. Unbelievable! Ukrainians of our sleepy eastern province are best known as the grumpy wheat farmers and boozy coal miners. When their TV is turned off and no police around, these normal Ukraine people get plenty weird. Not one shred of reality not to be

found inside their heads. Daily life is like rave party of hallucinations bad trip Slavic political extremism. Even harmless old kerchief-head Grandma is a terrorist, fascist, and also World War Two Stalinist. New words of Cyrillic political abuse unknown to Latin alphabet, like “zionazi” and “liberast.”

The modern telecommunication is no help to these people. Forget that. Never heard of useful hacker sites like GitHub and SourceForge. Instead they use social media stupid computer illiterate mobiles! Everybody’s fingers busy to send each other bloody scary pix of imaginary enemies!

Never heard of Photoshop, so they believe every thing they see! Blonde Baltic sniper girls two meters high. Obama Predator UFOs. Kremlin Little Green Men with virus weapons. All accredited journalists who check any facts are arrested as spies and beaten up by factions. Also trolls and black propagandists pouring fire on rumors machine to panic normal people in their pathetic simplicity.

Of course, hackers, so we know what a “meme” is. We swiftly create useful fact check wiki leaks site for the public good, upload it, get own URL. We coder brainy guys are good at math, have critical thinking skills. No one notices us except Canadian teenage girls doing high school homework. It is already too late. Facts are dead, truth is over. Civil war life is glorious poetry!

Ghosts rise up from dark earth of Ukraine. Cossacks with crests and shaved heads. Tragic serf bards with balalaika and long mustaches. Heroic militia commander unfortunate personal friendship with Adolf Hitler. Every dead Ukraine hero, except for long-forgotten Nestor Makhno, who is total wild free anarchist with steam trains and therefore only national hero Ukrainian hackers actually like.

Ukraine is the largest nation in Europe, vast horizons, wide blue rivers, pretty girls with penchant for sweet flowers hairstyles, also the world’s largest national park wilderness, which is also slightly radioactive. But in spite of our great national wealth and splendor, fierce popular cyberwar exploding all over Twitter, VKontakte, LiveJournal, YouTube and Facebook.

Looks like we brainy hackers will soon be drafted, put in homemade fake uniform and forced to shoot each other. The situation quickly splitting

up on the ground, as good pals “Uroboros” and “Nashie” will have to shoot besties “PizzaHutFan” and “Turla. " Game Over for our hacker club.

We decide to dismantle our cultural center and go into hiding. Only real choice for us, and besides, this is typical history of avant-garde culture in our region. Destruction of our beloved club is not difficult as Brain Dump is scavenged furniture, leaking roof, bare insulation stripped much wiring, tube TVs and aging Linux PC without any consoles. No one in the three years we ever cleans up the Brain Dump, except for “Kimchi” and “XFox,” our two Femen girls who are big fans of anime video chat, have to make things look nice for fans.

We decide to collect electronics and hide it place safe from 240 mm artillery rounds. As we remove the fluorescent light tubes as valuable for future use, “Grey Turtle” makes a strange discovery. One of the glass tubes has a secret obstacle inside.

Someone has put a dense roll of fifty U.S. hundred dollar bills inside this secret place. Cache is five thousand dollars, this is incredible find, as Ukrainian hacker could live a year on that kind of money even with girlfriend.

How has a huge amount of money fall into the Brain Dump Hackerspace? We consider discovered dollar bills closely. Did they leave here by an American spy? No, some of the bills are counterfeit, like most in Ukraine. American CIA spies not big users of those.

Maybe some rich hippies left money to annoy us as joke. Maybe, some of them act on weird humor of Chaos Computer Club, as they are German and therefore just not funny.

We stop arguing about how to divide the money. We are looking for more money hidden around.

We are anarchists of immaterial cyberspace, never ask for money. Cash just gets in way of our spiritual journey. Also, Ukrainian hryvnia is not a currency in order to provoke a lot of enthusiasm. We find no hryvnia. Not one hryvn. But there are whole lots of dollars stuffed inside round metal chair legs. Euros hidden inside panels of cheap hollow door. Hundreds of dollars stuffed into electrical junction boxes. Thousands of euros crammed secret into wall sockets of telephone jacks. Also some rubles, Swiss francs and sums of Asian currency we can't recognize.

We start to quarrel about this. Fantastic black-money situation is like from Bulgakov novel, not really helping our situation. Argument is that one of us in Brain Dump is clearly super-spy or master cyber-criminal. Must be one of us hackers who is hiding the money from the rest of us and secretly amazing rich guy.

One by one, everyone is denying paranoid purge allegations. “Grey Turtle” is most suspicious as he was first to discover money, but Grey Turtle cannot possibly be any master cybercriminal as he is mere website designer, cannot even code properly.

“Objekt110” admits he has been selling “Phoenix” and “Adrenalin” trojans to Western teenagers, but only on weekends. “Uroboros” is picking up some fraud credit card traffic with “eCore Exploit Pack,” but just buys cute shoes for girlfriend. “Nashie” is console game cracker, but he is 17 years old so this is just kid stuff.

“PizzaHutFan” is running proxy server host on cracked machine at local university. “AgentBTZ” is small-time DDOS operative on local Zeus botnet, just does it as favor for uncle.

I have to admit my part in “Lonely Russian Girlfriend” 419 fraud, but I was only doing that to improve my English on foreigners. By standard of local computer underground we are very clean guys.

Also, search for illicit Ukrainian hidden money is just not ending for us. Not at all. I am counting over well USD 100,000 in small and crumbled bills, and now bond and stock certificates are show up among old and water-stained O’Reilly coding books. Shell companies in Cyprus, Luxembourg, Cayman Islands, Switzerland. Our humble hackerspace has several title deeds to real-estate properties in London. Also, New York real estate from well-known offshore laundering scheme of “Anna Chapman” famous Russian television star and hot high-tech entrepreneur girl.

At this point we are ransacking our own place worst than armed militia. “Gray Turtle” remembers the thumb drives. Being hackerspace we have a thousand USB drives, mostly bad mp3s of pirate American scifi TV and YouPorn downloads.

These USB drives have been replaced with “TAILS” anonymized crypto pre-loaded with control over legendary “Snake” Cyrillic cyberwar botnet. “Snake” is top-notch cyberspy code embedded in so many Russian and

Ukrainian systems that Edward Snowden choke on his borscht.

User logs show that cyberwar “Snake” is all about black money. “Snake” subroutines are all about trade misinvoicing, sales of underpriced gas and oil to false European subsidiaries, under-reported export earnings, and fake advanced import payments. Big-scale global money laundering is pretty new to us, but surprisingly easy and simple compared to Linux coding. Everything on pull-down menu.

We are rich. We have as much illegal wealth as usual corrupt Ukrainian state politician. We have illegal fortune between three and ten billion dollars.

We were thinking all along we were helpless victims of situation, but truth is now clear to us. We are Internet people, but also major part of the problem. We are serious power player, frankly. We can do anything Internet black global money can do, buy media, hire liars, recruit mercenaries, ship weapons, buy own private jet get the hell out go live in Costa Rica.

We’re just like the “Gas Princess” and the “Chocolate King.” We’re oligarchs. We’re moguls.

But how does that help us? The fires are rising all around us anyway. We can give you a million dollars if you have any answer. What do we do?

Bruce Sterling, author, journalist, editor, and critic, was born in 1954. Best known for his ten science fiction novels, he also writes short stories, book reviews, design criticism, opinion columns, and introductions for books ranging from Ernst Juenger to Jules Verne. His nonfiction works include *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier* (1992), *Tomorrow Now: Envisioning the Next Fifty Years* (2003), and *Shaping Things* (2005).

“The Brain Dump” was previously published by [Motherboard’s Terraform](#) (2014).

RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: MICROWAVE IN THE BREAK ROOM DOING WEIRD THINGS TO FABRIC OF SPACE-TIME

by Charles Yu

FROM: JASPER (FACILITIES) TUES 8/12/13 12:17 P.M.
TO: STAFF-ALL-NYC
RE: MICROWAVE IN THE BREAK ROOM

Hey everyone, sorry for the email blast, but please stop using the lower microwave in the kitchen. Someone nuked a burrito in there on high for what I am assuming had to be at least 20+ minutes because it's barely recognizable as a burrito. Beans look seriously crazy after having been heated for that long. In fact, it's barely recognizable as a known form of matter—it's continuing to disintegrate. Or something worse.

We're trying to figure out if it's possible to clean it, but at this point it seems like the inside of the microwave might need to be scrubbed on like a subatomic level, which is probably not going to be cost-effective—I know a lot of you love that microwave because it's so powerful, but just to give you a heads-up, it might make sense to just toss it and get a new one. We'll keep you posted.

Thanks for your attention to the matter and please use the upper microwave until further notice. And whatever you do, please DO NOT use the lower one.

Cheers,
Jasper

FROM: JASPER (FACILITIES) TUES 8/12/13 12:24 P.M.
TO: STAFF-ALL-NYC
RE: RE: MICROWAVE IN THE BREAK ROOM

Okay well I'm sorry to say someone must have either missed my first email or thought I was kidding because, and I can't believe someone would do this, but someone put their cup of noodles in the lower microwave, on top of the bean-crust substrate, and pressed start and yeah, I think you all know what I'm going to say next: the Styrofoam and the substrate must have interacted in such a way as to destabilize the local microstructure of reality there.

Before anyone thinks I'm using circumstantial evidence to make a serious accusation, I would note that there is now a ring of empty non-reality inside the microwave, that just happens to be of the exact circumference of the bottom of a standard Nissin ramen cup. I'm not totally sure what's going to happen now, but we called building management and they're sending someone to take a look.

I can't believe I have to say this again, but PLEASE ONLY USE the upper microwave until we figure out what is going on with the broken one.

And not to single anyone out, but if you're making noodles (Brett, Allison, you others know who you are), use the hot water thing from the coffee machine. I thought we'd settled that weeks ago. It cooks the noodles better anyway.

Cheers,
Jasper

FROM: JASPER (FACILITIES) TUES 8/12/13 12:44 P.M.
TO: STAFF-ALL-NYC
RE: RE: RE: MICROWAVE IN THE BREAK ROOM

Since my last update things have gotten a little weird. The ring of brokendown manifold or whatever has continued to do things that would probably be interesting to a cosmologist, but for those of us trying to get

our jobs done it's going to be an inconvenience, possibly through the end of the day. I might be garbling this a little, so anyone pipe up and correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm told that the styrofoam-bean ring underwent a continuous topological deformation, which was fine, until it wasn't so continuous anymore. Part of the ring tore and glued itself somewhere else in the universe, and so we've got that to deal with on top of everything else. Anyway, stay tuned. Ice cream social at 3:30 is canceled, for obvious reasons.

Cheers,
Jasper

FROM: JASPER (FACILITIES) TUES 8/12/13 2:30 P.M.
TO: STAFF-ALL-NYC; STAFF-ALL-HARTFORD
RE: RE: RE: RE: MICROWAVE IN THE BREAK ROOM

Ugh. So that banging you were all hearing was me and the team from building management here in New York, and also some old friends of ours who have gotten much closer in the last ninety minutes or so. The last time I emailed, we were just learning about the tearing and reattaching of the noodle-cup/bean ring to another location in our little reality here. Well, as you may have heard, that location was the third stall in the fifth floor men's room in Hartford office. It's an almost incalculably improbably coincidence, which would be cool to marvel over and ponder and debate, except that it's causing some non-trivial problems with the HVAC systems of both buildings, and other tenants (in both locations!) are complaining. If we don't get this fixed soon, we might have to answer to the landlord, the NYFD and the HFD, and there is also, I am advised, about a 30% probability that due to this spatial reconfiguration we have set in motion a chain of events that will lead to the imminent collapse of the entire cosmos. The upside is that I'm using cosmos in the narrow sense there, i.e., just our universe and not any others, and also cool is the fact that we effectively have a very, very, very good interoffice mail system between Hartford and NYC now.

Anyway, that banging you heard was us trying to put some scaffolding

up to stabilize the structure of the portal between the formerly-separated-now-connected-regions—we apparently didn't have the right materials or tools to do such a thing, so it didn't work. Our next step is to send someone very small into the portal (probably me), to see if we can learn anything about it. That's supposed to happen in the next 20 minutes, and I'll do my best to update you all, but honestly I am not sure "20 minutes" has any real meaning anymore, given the aforementioned complete breakdown in space and time as we knew it.

Cheers,
Jasper

FROM: JASPER (FACILITIES) THURS 8/14/13 2:30 P.M.
TO: STAFF-ALL-NYC; STAFF-ALL-HARTFORD
RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: MICROWAVE IN THE BREAK ROOM

Well, that didn't work.

We appear to have jumped 2 days in the future. Trying to go back now.

Cheers,
Jasper

FROM: JASPER (FACILITIES) TUES 8/12/13 12:17 P.M.
TO: STAFF-ALL-NYC
RE: MICROWAVE IN THE BREAK ROOM

Apparently the best we could do was to go back to the original point in space-time where it all started. None of you except for me (since I was in the portal) have any clue what I'm talking about, so no worries, but I'm writing this anyway to create what I hope will be a record, either on a computer server somewhere, or if not then at least in some abstract information 112 space, of a transmission documenting what just happened (especially if it turns out we're in a loop). If anyone out there has residual

knowledge for some reason, maybe we could meet up by the water cooler and just chat about what just happened—it'd be great to verify that I'm not going crazy.

For everyone else, please, if you see anyone with a burrito headed toward the break room, take it from them. I know that sounds really weird, but you have to trust me on this. Take the burrito and do whatever you need to do—eat it, shred it, I don't care. Just DO NOT nuke it in the lower microwave.

BTW, ice cream social at 3:30.

Cheers,

Jasper



Charles Yu is the author of three books, including the novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* and his latest story collection, *Sorry Please Thank You*. He lives in southern California with his wife and their two kids, and is currently writing for the upcoming HBO series, *Westworld*.

“RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: MICROWAVE IN THE BREAK ROOM DOING WEIRD THINGS TO FABRIC OF SPACE-TIME” was previously published in [Gigantic Worlds](#) (2015).

Dance Dance Revolution

by Charlie Human

Special Forces secure the perimeter of the town and give us the green light to parachute in. Clearing hornet nests is something of a specialty of ours. Special Forces don't like us, but they're wise enough to keep their mouths shut.

We advance, Alpha Team in Swan Lake formation. The phosphorescent flares Special Forces have sent up make everything glitter with radiance. The town's populous wail and cry when they see us. A woman, gnashing her teeth and pulling her hair, throws herself at my feet. Navy Seals they spit at. Dancers they beg for mercy.

Our Killbots trundle next to us awaiting orders. I watch mine, Nureyev, drive over a fruitseller's stand with his heavy, spiked tracks. I smile. I have a suspicion his programming has a few sadistic lines of code.

The insurgents engage us with a few exploratory rounds of rifle fire. I click my heels together. You're not in Kabul anymore, motherfuckers. I pirouette, which sends a volley of heavy machine gun fire back. I know the hit is confirmed even before the green lights blink on Nureyev's back.

Alpha Team snaps into motion. Dance is an intuitive, responsive medium. We react to the attack without thinking about it. The machines are linked to us via biofeedback, which translates our dance steps into destruction. My new tutu is lighter and more accurate at mapping my movements, based as it is on cutting edge motion-capture technology used in CGI movies. Heel-toe, Heel-toe and dip. Four men die without knowing they've been spotted.

The first forays into Military Dance Interface were predictably clunky, death by Fred Astaire 1.0, but things improved. It's easy to marvel at how far information interface has come in society; from the flipping and flicking of touchscreen devices to controller-free sports games which map human

movement. This is just like that. Just with 50 calibre machine guns.

Beta Team moonwalk across my vision laying down a barrage of RPG fire. A round clips my shoulder and I see a sniper on a rooftop with my head in his crosshairs. I break formation to reach for the sky and shimmy. The insurgent dies in a hail of bullets. Disco has saved my life more than once.

Rounds ricochet off the wall behind me but I hardly notice. In this business you've got to dance like nobody is watching you through laser-guided scopes. The fighting has become close and Alpha Team switches to a Bollywood dance sequence. The Killbots respond by initiating close combat mode.

Clasping my hands together and lifting them above my head; Nureyev chainsaws through Kevlar and flesh. Bobbing my head from side to side: Nureyev snaps necks with the passionless precision of machine jiu-jitsu. Delta Team scythes through opposition on our flank. For a second I pity the enemy. Those line-dancers are brutal.

We glide down an alley and straight into a trap. Nureyev is hit by a grenade and our link is severed. Dancers fall to gunfire all around me. One of them, Katya Illinova, teeters on pointed toes as bullets rip into her. She doesn't falter as she performs a last bow which initiates a kamikaze run by her Killbot. The explosion lights up the town like an orange sunset.

I pirouette into a house to avoid any surviving snipers. Straight into the arms of the Dictator. I recognise him from intelligence photos; a handsome man with a long moustache, dressed in military uniform. We lock eyes. I hold out my hand and he takes it. We tango slow and sure. He smells faintly of explosives, sweat and vanilla, his hand on the small of my back, his breath on my neck.

He dips me and I bring my leg up to his shoulder. The military network satellite responds to my muscle command and dispatches several Tomahawk missiles to our location. We're still dancing as everything is obliterated.



Charlie Human is a novelist and screenwriter from Cape Town, South Africa. His novels *Apocalypse Now Now* and *Kill Baxter* have been published in several countries including Japan, the USA, Italy, and Turkey. *Apocalypse Now Now* has recently been optioned for a movie, with *District 9* co-writer Terri Tatchell attached to adapt it for the screen.

“Dance Dance Revolution” was previously published by *Chew Magazine* (2010).

OMG GTFO

by S.L. Grey

Note: The following extracts were gathered during the lead-up to the Final Event. No names have been changed.

Twitter feed between Newshound and TVWhore:

Newshound @TVWhore No ways! US President just gone mental. Turn on CNN. Fcking HILARIOUS

TVWhore @Newshound OMG, what you doing watching the news? American Idol Final on now

Newshound @TVWhore Just trust me on this and check it out

TVWhore @Newshound WTF? What happened? Just anchors on now looking seriously confused

Newshound @TVWhore Pres started talking crap

TVWhore @Newshound What about??

Newshound @TVWhore He was speaking in a funny voice. With a strange accent. Wait – they’re repeating it

TVWhore @Newshound OMG. Did he just say what I thought he said?

Newshound @TVWhore Yup. Told you it was worth it

TVWhore @Newshound What language is he speaking in now? Oh wait, screen gone black WTF?

Newshound @TVWhore See if it’s on YouTube

TVWhore @Newshound Looked can’t find it

Newshound @TVWhore Is he shit-faced again?

TVWhore @Newshound GOD, must be.

Extract from Transcript of Emergency Press Conference chaired by White House Press Secretary Lillian O'Keefe.

O'Keefe: Before we open for questions, I would like to read a short statement. The President regrets this morning's unfortunate incident and would like to assure citizens that he is not suffering from any form of mental illness, nor, as has been postulated by certain members of the online community, was he under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident. He has undergone a full psychological and physiological examination and we are delighted to report that he is in excellent health. The President will be spending the next few days with his family at Camp David and trusts that members of the press will respect his privacy during this time. Thank you. We will now open for questions from the floor.

Elizabeth Stephens, BBC: What of the allegations that the President was plied with a hallucinogen of some type shortly before his speech?

O'Keefe: I can categorically state that no traces of any drugs of any kind were found in the President's blood stream.

Callie Lawrence, CNN: The language he was speaking in has been confirmed as German. Is the President fluent in this language?

O'Keefe: No comment.

Stephen Jones, News Corp International: The President said, and I quote, 'Hell exists and I can prove it.' Can you explain what he means by this?

O'Keefe: I have no comment on this at this time.

Callie Lawrence, CNN: What of the allegation that this was merely a strategy by the President to garner support from the Christian demographic in the upcoming primaries?

O'Keefe: That allegation is frankly ridiculous and is strongly denied.

Lisa Kent, Reuters: Can you comment on reports that the German voice in which the president was speaking has been identified as that of a former Nazi soldier who died in 1976?

O'Keefe: Regrettably those are all the questions we have time for.

Extract from 'What in the hell is going on?' by Simon Wells. Article originally published in Time Magazine.

When United States President Jonathan Blake stood up in front of hundreds of dignitaries to give his annual State of the Union address, few of the millions of people watching the broadcast live at home could have predicted what his first words would be. Far from discussing the economy and the current controversial US foreign policy, he proclaimed that he knew 'without a doubt that hell existed and he could prove it.' What stunned the world was not that he appeared to be experiencing some sort of psychotic episode, but that he seemed to be talking in a voice that bore no relation to his own. One television pundit commented that 'it was as if he was channelling that kid from *The Exorcist*.'

As the audience fell into shocked silence, the President then spoke several sentences in German, before being whisked off the stage by security staff. News of the President's impromptu speech spread throughout the world, but within minutes of this clip going viral, it was pulled from YouTube. Despite attempts at a media blackout, German speakers swiftly responded with various translations of the President's words, which were confirmed to be: 'It hurts, it burns, don't die, you don't want to be here. Far worse than you can imagine and endless, endless.' After a short pause, the President then said: 'Tell Ger that the Mercedes was never the same after the accident.'

According to White House sources, there is no indication that the President has ever studied German, or that he is fluent in any language other than English.

Hours after the broadcast, a journalist from the German tabloid *Bild* was contacted by Gerhard Lutz, a paediatrician working in Dusseldorf, who claims that the voice in which the President was speaking was uncannily similar to that of his father, Lucien, a former Nazi stoombrooper who died in 1976 after a battle with prostate cancer. Furthermore, Lutz states: 'The thing he said about the car. He was right about that. Just before my father died he had a minor accident on the autobahn, and the Mercedes' suspension has never been the same.'

Naturally, conspiracy theories abound, ranging from the out-there assertion that aliens have taken over the President's body, to the more prosaic explanation that he suffered a stroke. Understandably, by far the most common is that the spirit of Lucien Lutz spoke through the President's voice box to warn people that hell actually does exist, using the banal detail about the car to validate his authenticity.

If this had been an isolated incident, perhaps it would have gone down in the annals of history as another example of the current president's long list of eccentricities. But reports have come in from around the world of similar occurrences, although most have been similarly suppressed and cannot be verified. Among them are rumours that the Speaker of the House of Commons interrupted question time to harangue his colleagues in the voice of a Serbian national; the head of the United Nations, former South African Defence Minister Kobe Nkathi, befuddled his translators by suddenly speaking in Urdu during a budget meeting; and high-profile Australian trial lawyer and environmental activist, Lennie Ogilvy, allegedly addressed a packed political rally with an invective in Korean.

But cynics believe that the majority of the Western world only started to sit up and take notice when this phenomenon started to affect high-profile celebrities.

Transcript of interview between Jodi Fox, winner of Channel 5's 'You're the Tops' talent competition and an unnamed Hello! magazine journalist.

... So like I was saying, I was nominated in the Brit Award's New Artist category, and, look, I don't want to sound, like, all presentatious or whatever, but I knew that I'd win it, I mean, who else was there? Just that stupid cow who everyone knows uses that auto-tune software, and that guy with that dire eighties wedge haircut who thinks he knows how to rap.

I was sitting with my publicist and my boyfriend, Jed – yeah, that's right, the guy who won *Big Brother 15* – and I'd barely managed to finish my glass of champers when they called out my name to say that I'd won. Anyway, I got up from the table and walked up to the podium thingy, and when I stood there, waiting for all the, you know, applause to die down, I

suddenly started feeling dodgy. I was really dizzy, and like, I started to sweat which was weird cos I'd had Botox injected into my pores to stop that. I mean, you don't want sweat circles, do you? Remember when that happened to Peaches Geldof? So minging. Oh hang on, can you not mention I said that?

So like I was saying, I walked up to the podium, and next thing I knew, something just took over my body. God, it's so hard to explain. Like I was, I dunno, possessed or something. And all these visions flashed into my head. It was like I was floating above a giant city, a bit like New York, only, like, the buildings were all twisted, almost like they were melted, and the sky was black, the clouds looked ... solid and red, as if they were about to start dripping blood. I could hear screaming and I looked down and saw millions of people just wandering around, some of them were on fire, and others just looked really fucked up. Yeah, course I knew what it was. It looked like those pictures they used to show us in Sunday school of hell and shit, but there weren't like, devils and things or anything like that. Just people packed really closely together. Shoved almost on top of each other. Some of them were being, like squashed under boulders and stuff, others were being smooshed against the walls or were falling into these deep holes that looked like they went on forever. What really freaked me out was that they were all naked. I'm not saying I'm a prude or anything but most of them obviously hadn't been to a gym for like, ever, so they looked really vile.

Anyway, then my head just cleared instantly, and next thing I know, I'm being led from the stage and I didn't even have the chance to make my thank-you speech or anything, which sucked as I'd spent hours writing it.

Everyone was looking at me like I'd just gone mental, and Stewart Honey, who was the host, made some sort of joke and then everyone was laughing. When I got back to the table Jed was like, 'what the fuck was that about?' And like, people were asking me if I was on special K or whatever, but of course I wasn't – I never take drugs; they wreck your voice, don't they?

Jed had filmed the whole thing on his iPhone and we went into the green room so he could show me what had happened. I was gutted, I mean, I looked terrible, really spaced out. I couldn't believe it. I was talking in this deep man's voice with some sort of American accent. I was going

on and on about hell and shit and then I said that there was a body the cops didn't know about and that they'd find it, I dunno, in some place in Florida or whatever. You've seen it on YouTube, right? It's had like, 155 million hits! Don't get me wrong, it sucked that it happened, but my publicist is always going on and on about how you can't pay for this kind of publicity so it's cool in a way. It was only later that they figured out who was 'speaking through me'. Some dead dude called Ted Bundy. Yeah, I know. I've never heard of him before, either.

Transcript of BBC World Service 'World in Focus' programme: Discussion between Elisha Davids (host), Iman Ahmed Raza, Rabbi Elizabeth Freeman, Archbishop Malcolm Fairfax and Stella Gordon, head of AtheistsUnite!

Elisha Davids: As listeners will be aware, there have been countless reported incidences of well known and less well known so-called evil people 'speaking through' celebrities and public figures recently. The voices have been identified as those of high profile serial killers, war criminals, perpetrators of some of the world's worst atrocities, as well as iconic figures such as Napoleon, Cleopatra and Stalin. The celebrities and few public officials willing to speak about this ... phenomenon, say that they are also visited by visions of a city consumed by fire, as well as scenes of torture and suffering. In short, a stereotypical depiction of hell as evinced by Dante Alighieri, John Martin and other artists and writers throughout history. Is this proof that hell actually exists? And, if so, are we talking about the Christian concept of hell? Imam Raza, considering that the descriptions of Jahannam, the Islamic version of hell found in the Qur'an, if you will, closely correlate with some of the reported visions, how would you respond to this?

Iman Raza: Thank you, Elisha. Above all, we implore people not to panic and reiterate that if they live their lives according to the will of Allah they have nothing to fear. That is all I wish to say at this time.

Elisha Davids: Now, not all of the people who have 'come through' for want of a better phrase have been identified as Christian, in fact, some have been identified as belonging to the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and

Buddhist faiths as well as famous non-believers. Let me turn to you, Stella. You've said publicly that you believe this is some kind of global conspiracy to 'put the fear of God into people?'

Stella Gordon: Of course it's just some conspiracy that religious bodies have perpetrated! How could anyone believe that historical figures and arbitrary dead people are coming back from the dead? Either that or it has to be a shared delusion of some type.

Elisha Davids: But if this is so, you have to admit that it is not all bad. Surely the drop in the crime rate is a good thing? Stella Gordon: People are just hedging their bets. Of course a drop in crime is positive, but it is all built upon a lie. If people want to believe in the giant fairy in the sky—

Archbishop Fairfax: I object to this phrase. It is extremely prejudicial and —

Stella Gordon: So tell me this. Why now? Why is this happening now?

Iman Raza: May I answer this? I am speaking hypothetically of course, but I would say that presently the world has reached its tipping point, its capacity for evil. I am talking of course of widespread violence and poverty, neglect for our environment, depravity in the inner cities, wars that are being fought purely for financial gain—

Stella Gordon: And don't forget the wars and terrorism perpetuated by religious fundamentalists—

Elisha Davids: Please let the Imam finish—

Stella Gordon: But how is this different from, say, the Crusades, the Holocaust and other atrocities that have happened throughout history?

Elisha Davids: Rabbi Freeman, would you like to comment?

Rabbi Freeman: Again, I would also like to put on record that I mean this hypothetically, but it could have something to do with our current obsession with social media. If we are being warned to change our ways, that our actions have consequences, the reach of Twitter, Facebook, smart phones and the internet means that now is the perfect time to spread the word and reach a global audience.

Extract from 'Staggering drop in South African Crime Statistics' from the Mail and Guardian online. Author unknown

With a reported murder rate of 50 deaths per day, and one in three South African women expected to be raped in their lifetime, for over a decade South Africa has been characterised as one of the most violent countries in the world. However, this looks set to change. In the last week, less than twenty homicides countrywide have been reported. Beatrice Molefe, spokesperson for the South African Police Service states: 'This is a triumph for the SAPS and their ongoing fight against murder, domestic violence, rape and gang and drug-related crime. It just goes to show that our zero tolerance approach to corruption and violence is paying dividends.'

South Africa is not alone in this. Indeed, countries throughout the world, especially those with a large Christian, Catholic and Islamic population have reported a massive drop in crime rates, which some sociologists and psychologists believe is due to the 'Hell Exists' trend sweeping the globe. Professor Benji Philiso, head of sociology at the University of Cape Town is currently compiling a study on what he calls 'The Phenomenon of Consequence'. He says: 'Whether these accounts can be verified or not, whether hell as a concept can be proved or not, isn't the point. People are fuelled by fear and the possibility that they will eventually pay for their actions. This is having the sort of deterrent affect on our criminal element that supporters of the death penalty could only have dreamed of.'

To: Lewisking@gmail.com From: Suki@Helpinghandinternational.org
HelpingHand.Org. Helping those less fortunate help themselves est. 1985

Dear Lewis,

Thank you for your interest in joining our organisation. We appreciate your donation, but we must inform you that we have no openings for any more aid workers at this time. May we suggest that your efforts would be more suited to helping in your own community.

Sincerely,

Suki Leboleng (Ms)

This is an automatically generated email. Do not respond to it

Extract from 'Memoir Mayhem' article first published in Publishing Trends trade magazine.

... The 'buy one get one free' bargain tables at Waterstones will soon be heaving with political memoirs as politicians of every ilk queue up to come clean about their past indiscretions. Overworked ghost writers are frantically churning out political confessions detailing war atrocities, salacious sex scandals and corruption disgraces. Readers can expect tell-all tomes from Bosnian War criminals to West African rebel leaders, as well as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's much-anticipated 'corrective' to his first best-selling memoir. Those politicians desperate to unload and who cannot depend on old school tie connections to secure them a publisher are clogging up the internet with tell-all revelations, as the global desire to confess and wipe the slate clean spawns a publishing phenomenon ...

Extract from conspiraciesbusted.com

Hold onto your hats, sane people, it's getting worse...

Topic started by conbustEditor

If you read my blog last week, you'd have seen how I debunked this 'Hell Exists' bullshit as nothing more than a Derren Brownesque mind-trick delusion. I've lost count of the number of celebs who've cottoned onto this publicity stunt like flies around a bloated corpse. Let's face it, you aren't anyone without the spectre of John Wayne Gacy or fucking Goebbels 'talking through' you, darling. Katie Price showing a surprising level of sophistication when, at her latest 'book' signing, she went off in the voice of one of Mugabe's henchmen, apparently assassinated in 2007. But like the others, she still showed the same lack of imagination when she described her 'vision' of hell – the usual blah blah burn baby burn shit. Let's face it, people, the celebrity version of hell is every bit as

stereotypical and dumbed down as a Disney theme park exhibit. YAWN.

At least most of the schlebs have had the decency to only 'channel' evil-doers, but now we've hit rock-bottom. At his execrable girlfriend's press conference last night, UK *Big Brother* 15 winner, Jed 'I rock!' Thorne, said that he had been 'taken over;' by the voice of Mother Theresa, who, he claimed was speaking through him from where she was burning in hell for all eternity. Within seconds the twittersphere went crazy, with religious fundamentalists and new religious converts alike panicking and flooding the airwaves with paranoid bullshit.

That said, let's play devil's advocate here. Let's say it's all true. That hell does exist and that Jed, who admittedly has the IQ of a particularly rancid potato, hasn't hatched this as a plot for five more minutes of fame. What does this mean? If hell *does* exist, and if Mother Theresa, who spent her whole life doing nothing but good and helping people is there, what does this mean for the average Joe? Are we all destined to go to hell, no matter what we do?

Comments under the YouTube video of 'Mother Theresa' talking through Big Brother 15 Winner Jed Thorne

1901778 comments This is FAKE dont believe it just trying to get publicity like his stupid girlfriend

Steviepee 1 minute ago OMG Jed's got lady hands

Nellylk 1 minute ago @pinky5 U R disgusting you will burn in hell with them all she wuz a grate woman GTFO

Shoshana60 2 minutes ago Do u get sandals in hell huh huh hope so for her sake

Pinky5 5 minutes ago It means we're all going to hell dumbass

Lolbuckets07 7minutes ago I looked out the window and saw my neighbour watching me she noticed that I'd seen her and hid behind a bush. Wot this mean??

Porkypie 8 minutes ago Go fuk a watermelon asswipe this is serius

Peekaboo93 9 minutes ago How can you say that? She gave her life for others which is more than you've ever done stupid youtube troll

Shoshana35 10 minutes ago Maybe she was evil you don't know for sure

Aliensexist 11 minutes ago It's all bollocks. Anyone who believes that we are all going to hell no matter what we do has lost it. If there is a hell, there has to be a heaven.

Itsallbollox69 11 minutes ago If you're an atheist does this mean you're also going? Are animals there too

Catlover99 12 minutes ago But that's the point? Maybe we are all going to hell.

Realist22 13 minutes ago Let this be a warning to all of you who have not taken the Lord to your hearts this is it is the rapture you were warned but you didn't listen

Righteousguy100 14 minutes ago Great designer handbags at bags4u.com excellent discount for all customers who buy lots of good brands we have Gucci prada fendi gabbana burberry buy now don't be disappointed before it is too late

76h66Yox 15 minutes ago

Extract from 'Sharp drop in tobacco, alcohol sales', first published in the Guardian

...Kenneth Levinson, spokesperson from Phillip Morris International, one of the five major tobacco firms operating worldwide, said that sales have dropped more than eighty percent in the last quarter. 'Naturally we're very concerned. The tobacco industry provides thousands upon thousands of jobs throughout the world, and with this radical turn-down in our profit margin, it's just not sustainable.'

And while pubs, breweries, massage parlours and tobacco plantations are struggling, other businesses are thriving. Not only are churches, synagogues and temples showing an almost epidemic number of new religious converts, but gymnasiums throughout the world report that

membership is up 700%. Leonard Welsh, CEO of the GymFit consortium says, 'People are trying to hang onto to their health for as long as possible. I mean, if all you have to look forward to is burning in hellfire for all eternity, people are in no hurry to die. Most of our new members seem to want us to help them live forever.'

Sky News Live Broadcast from London, two hours before global media blackout

Melissa Stewart (studio anchor): Our top news story this hour. Martial law has been declared in New York, Washington and Los Angeles. We'll have more on this at the top of the hour. We're now going live to our correspondent, Jonathan Williams, who I believe is at the scene of the latest outbreak of violence in central London. Jonathan?

Jonathan Williams: Thank you, Melissa. As you can see behind me the riots and violence are increasing. We've heard reports of widespread looting, buses being hit with homemade Molotov cocktails and vigilantes taking to the streets armed with makeshift weapons, desperate to protect their possessions. Here with me is Police Reservist Stephen Okefor, who has been—

[Camera wobbles, off-screen sound of glass smashing and a male voice shouting 'Fuck you, pig']

Stephen Okefor: Watch out, mate! That was close.

Melissa Stewart: Is everything okay, Jonathan? We lost you for a moment there.

Jonathan Williams: Like I was saying, Melissa, it's getting very hairy out here. *[Shakily turns back to Stephen Okefor.]* Constable Okefor, can you tell us what it's been like for the members of the police who are trying to deal with this sudden outbreak of violence?

Stephen Okefor: Well it's the worst we've ever seen, innit. And it's not just the youth, know what I mean? It's everyone. Saw an octogenarian raiding the Apple store in Regent Street an hour ago and the rioters are fast outnumbering us lot.

Jonathan Williams: Many reasons have been given for why this is happening now. What are your views?

Stephen Okefor: Fabric of society breaking down, innit. People got nothing to live for. It was when they got those final messages that the fuckers kicked off. *[Ignores interruption from Williams.]* You know, the ones from Nelson Mandela and Gandhi. That's when they realised for sure that it didn't matter what you did or how you behaved, there's only one place you're going when you die. Straight to hell.

[Williams dodges out of the way as a burning driverless taxi rolls past the shot.]

Stephen Okefor: But you gotta ask yourself. How can it be worse than this?

S.L Grey is a collaboration between South African authors Sarah Lotz and Louis Greenberg. Sarah is a screenwriter and die-hard zombie fanatic who loves collaborating but also writes thrillers under her own name. As well as being a novelist and editor, Johannesburg-based Louis has a Master's degree in vampire fiction and a doctorate on post-religious apocalyptic fiction. Their latest novel *Under Ground* is out now.

"OMG GTFO" was previously published in *Pandemonium: Stories of the Apocalypse* (2011) by [Jurassic London](#).

Free Fall

by Carolyn Jewel

CHAPTER 1

11:40 AM. Lobby of 101 California Street, San Francisco, California

He was here. Telos Khūnbish had come. Relief nearly demolished her, it hit so powerfully. He was here, and now, improbably, she believed everything was going to be all right. Her life was irrevocably screwed, but she believed. She ignored the noise of the lobby and the man standing beside her. He was irrelevant. What a damn sad commentary it was that after nearly ten years in the city, Khūnbish was the closest thing she had to a friend. Maybe even a real friend, because he was here, and she believed she'd get through this.

Her heart kicked up a notch when she got a clear view of his black BMW turning onto Front Street. Now, of course, she wondered if she'd made a mistake involving him. She didn't make a habit of asking for help. She wasn't good with people. She wasn't even sure she'd asked right. Seems she had.

The BMW was definitely looking to park. Good thing. In less than ten minutes the lunchtime rush would start, and she'd be in real trouble. Even now there were too many people around.

"My ride's here," she said to Jack, the man standing beside her. She didn't make eye contact because that would be dangerous. Instead she stared at his tie, but that turned out to be a mistake. The dark red silk looked like blood streaming down his chest. She focused on the shiny marble floor and the tips of his Oxfords. "I'm fine. Really."

"Let me carry your things." Jack reached for the moving box that contained the personal contents from her office. He knew Michael, and that meant she couldn't trust him. Simple fact. She couldn't trust anyone

who knew Michael Ford.

“No.” She gripped the box tighter and looked at the street again, as if Khūnbish could help her from afar. The BMW was waiting for a van to pull away from the curb. Khūnbish had never met Michael. That was part of the reason she’d called him. That, and she didn’t know anyone else.

“Lys.” Jack was thirty-ish, good looking, and in line to make partner in the next two years. He did good suit. He was a competent lawyer and a decent litigator.

She faked a smile and looked at Jack without directly meeting his eyes. Over the years she’d gotten good at faking contact normal people never thought twice about. She lifted the box an inch. “Hardly weighs a thing.”

Jack smoothed a hand down the river of blood that was his tie. She held her breath, half expecting his palm to come away smeared red. He reached for her moving box, and she jumped back, heart slamming against her chest. Either Jack didn’t get it, or he was in league with Michael and meant her harm. He kept moving toward her.

“Don’t.” The word came out sharp and loud. The security guard at the lobby reception area looked over. She was close to losing it. Way too close. Blocking shouldn’t be this hard for her, but the last several days had been...difficult. Not enough sleep. Not enough to eat. Too much caffeine. Far too much stress.

“Lys. Come on.” His tie vibrated at the edges of her vision. Blood red. A river of red. He reached for the box again. “I’m only trying to help out.”

She risked a look at his face. His smile was hesitant, a little irritated, but that would be normal if he really just wanted to help. Just a regular person trying to be nice. Part of her didn’t believe it. He knew Michael, and Michael had tried to kill her. “Don’t touch me.”

Jack lifted his hands palm out and backed off. She regained a bit of her calm. It didn’t last long. The minute she relaxed, he moved into her personal space again. She made the mistake of assuming he meant to take the box. She swung her torso to one side, and by the time she realized he meant to touch her, she couldn’t avoid the contact. His hand landed on her shoulder, and her control shattered into a million pieces.

“What’s—”

Her immediate surroundings blinked out. She dropped the cardboard box, but maybe she didn't because she didn't hear it fall. From experience she knew not to move. Her sense of where she was in space disappeared along with her vision. The bitter taste of iron coated her mouth and oozed down the back of her throat to burn in her stomach.

He ignores the first symptoms; the sense of something off, the clammy sweat, the pinch in the left side of his rib cage. Pain crushes his chest, and he can't get enough air. His knees give out, and he falls to the concrete.

By sheer dint of being terrified about what would happen if she went into free fall, she got her blocks back in place.

The normal world boomeranged back.

Sound, sight, scent, all of it crashed around her. Fire streaked along the left side of her face from just behind her eye through to the back of her head. She was present in normal time, out of free fall, except dozens of lives continued to thrum in her head, out of rhythm and out of control. The blowback would pass eventually, but in the meantime she was fucked up every which way. So was Jack.

Her surroundings came into focus, first in a grainy monochrome, then with increasing detail. Her spatial awareness returned with her depth perception. There were more people in the lobby than before. Too many. The noise shredded her nerves, and her head hurt like a mother. She remained on her feet. That was good. Her hands were empty, though, and that was bad. She didn't see Jack anywhere, and that was really bad.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

It took her a minute to locate where his voice was coming from. Jack was crouched at her feet, putting things back in the box she'd dropped. He looked fine. He was fine.

Thank God.

Her relief that she'd somehow managed to stop things in time made her go limp. The fact that she could even tell she was relieved meant she was probably going to be okay. She worked her tongue around her mouth until she had enough acid-tainted spit to moisten her throat. She needed to get the hell away from Jack and all these people, because next time she might not be so lucky. "Clumsy. That's all."

“Your mug broke.” He held up a shard of her coffee cup that included half the handle. He looked at her like he expected her to say something. Well, she didn’t. She’d already said all the words she could dredge up.

She dug in her purse for her sunglasses because, damn, her eyes hurt, and her skull was in a vise and about to fracture. Dark glasses or not, her ability to insulate herself from other people continued to erode. She hadn’t lost it this badly since her college days.

“Maybe you can glue it back together?”

From where she stood, just inside the lobby doors, traffic noise was a rumble that hurt deep inside her ears. She took the shard of porcelain and dropped it into the box. It broke into two more pieces and slivered what was left of her nerves.

Jack, still crouching, stared into the box. “Or not.”

She wished he wouldn’t talk. His voice hurt. At least now the metallic taste in her mouth was duller. Her vision continued to recover with her other senses. Jesus, that blood-red tie vibrated as if it were alive. She could feel her skin again, judge the temperature of the air. She stared down at Jack still helpfully, and rather sweetly, picking up her things. He didn’t deserve to die. She needed to get away from him. For both their sakes. If he ended up thinking she was a bitch, fine.

“Go back to the office, Jack.” He stretched to pick up a pen that had rolled out of easy reach. “You shouldn’t be down here.”

He threw the pen in the box and winced.

Oh, damn.

Any minute her heart would burst out of her chest. He glanced up and pressed the side of his ribs. She almost didn’t look away in time. If she landed in the hospital again, she’d need a cardiologist instead of an ER doc. “Leave.”

Office workers streamed from the elevators, holding briefcases, purses, paper bags with lunch in them, bottles of water or soda. The lunch rush was starting. If she didn’t get the hell out of here, she was screwed. Jack was screwed. Three or four people stopped in the lobby, each with a cell phone to an ear, talking away without the least privacy. Who knew? Maybe one of them was screwed. Two with Bluetooth enabled devices

looked like psych cases, ranting to invisible people. Voices hammered at her, pounding at the barrier. She cut herself off from everything until the words might as well be Swahili.

An elevator swallowed a mass of people, but more appeared. Panic set in. Enclosed spaces weren't good for someone like her. Not when she was seconds from a breakdown she might not be able to stop. She ignored Jack. Let him think she was a cold-hearted bitch. He wouldn't be the first.

She took her box, peering inside to avoid eye contact with Jack. Her mug was now six pieces of brown-and-white porcelain. Her frog stapler was intact. Good. That was good. "Thanks."

"No problem." He put a hand to his ribs again.

She slid her gaze away, still avoiding his face. The maneuver was awkward and rude, but what else could she do? "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing."

"No, it isn't." Too late, she realized how brusque she sounded. She tried to look elsewhere without actually looking. More people came through the lobby. With more effort than she liked, she softened her next words. "Call a doctor."

"Nah. Too many lat pulls at the gym this morning. Been bugging me ever since." He smiled sheepishly. She ended up staring at the knot of his tie. It had stopped vibrating but the color still reminded her of blood. Would he just leave her alone already? "You'll keep in touch, right?"

"Sure." Where the hell was Khūnbish? She looked toward Front Street. The BMW was still waiting for a brown delivery van to pull away. She didn't know how much time had passed since she'd nearly blanked out. Probably not long. Maybe only a minute.

The van bulled its way into traffic, and the sleek black car slid into the vacated space. She headed for the lobby door, the heels of her pumps clicking on the marble floor. Jack followed. "In a couple of weeks they'll be begging you to come back as of-counsel."

"Not happening." In her peripheral vision, she saw him smile. He took a quick double step to open the lobby door for her. He winced when he did. She hoped it was really too many lat pulls at the gym. Outside, the blast of foggy air made her head pound.

Jack let go of the door and caught up with her. “Trust me, the partners will make it worth your while to come back. You’re too good a litigator to let walk out the door.”

“I don’t think so.”

He chuckled. “Maybe I should quit, too.”

Lys risked a sideways look at him. She wondered if he was, for all practical purposes, dead already. “No. You shouldn’t.”

“Probably not.”

“Call a doctor, Jack.” She stopped walking and went back to staring into her box. She still didn’t feel right, and being outside wasn’t offering much relief. Too many people around. She looked in the direction of the BMW. At this point, she didn’t care if Khūnbish was in the car or not. “My ride is here. Bye.”

He held out a hand. “See you around?”

She could have briefly held the box in one arm, but she didn’t dare touch him. It was dangerous for her to touch anyone when she was like this. “Sure.”

At the curb, the BMW’s headlights switched off. The driver got out. Her chest constricted at the same time the tension in her shoulders released. Khūnbish. Definitely him. She had an unobstructed view of him pressing his key fob. There were men no one messed with, not if you knew what was good for you. Telos Khūnbish was one of those men; scary at a primordial, brainstem level.

Jack stayed where he was, but, despite the pain spiking through her, she managed to cut him out of her awareness. Not completely, but enough. She hoped. He said something to her, but she didn’t allow the meaning of the words to penetrate. She needed to hold together long enough to get someplace quiet.

Khūnbish paused by his car and lifted a hand like he was blessing the damn thing against a parking ticket or a tow. A bike messenger zipped past. He headed across the plaza with its series of concrete risers and planters. On a nice day, support staff who made shit money and had to bring their lunch could eat outside.

She adjusted her sunglasses, now almost comfortably wrapped up in a layer of ice that kept out the rest of the world. There had always been a very non-professional tension between her and Khūnbish. One of those things that went formally unacknowledged but that worked its way into conversations and body language. He'd never made a move. She'd never done anything about it because one, she couldn't, and two, there was Michael, and three, well, really there was no three; not with one and two.

Her stomach took a familiar dive when he reappeared from between two planter structures, heading for the lobby doors. His long black hair fell behind his shoulders, twisting slightly in the wind. His goatee, as usual, seemed to be barely getting started. His unbuttoned flannel shirt flapped in the breeze and showed off the physique under his T-shirt. He didn't fit with the suit and tie crowd, and the bandanna around his head didn't do much to make him look like anything but trouble in a dark alley.

Lys defended high-stakes corporate lawsuits involving computer hacking, and Khūnbish was her Information Security expert. Used to defend, since she'd just quit her job. Though he'd never admitted anything under oath, he was what computer industry insiders called a gray-hat, someone who navigated between the black-hats who hacked corporate databases, downloaded credit card numbers, and engaged in other nefarious online activities, and the white-hats who warned companies about their security vulnerabilities.

He paused at a trash can, tossed something in, then continued toward the building. She walked away from Jack. She plastered on a smile for Khūnbish and anyone else who might be looking at her. The smile was fake, like everything else about her. He didn't see her yet.

Jesus, her head hurt. She ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth again but that didn't do anything to lessen the building metallic tang. Her blocks slipped, and the roar of sensation about dropped her to her knees.

Behind her, Jack called her name.

Khūnbish slowed when he saw her. For the half a second that their gazes met, her head cleared, and it was such a blessed relief she damn near cried. Then she heard Jack calling to her again, and the acid taste in her mouth intensified. Her peripheral vision turned grainy. She stopped

walking and fought for control.

Four women crossing the plaza on a collision course with Khūnbish detoured around him. She lost sight of him while the women continued toward the lobby.

“Lys!”

That was Jack calling her. She paid no attention because Khūnbish took three longer steps and was right in front of her. From within her icy barrier, she felt the zing of attraction all the way to her toes. That’s how it always was with them. She stuck out a hand because he was safe to touch. In her life, she’d met maybe four other people who were safe that way. She had her suspicions about why. No proof, though. “Khūnbish.”

“Counselor.” He sounded like he smoked cigars and drank whiskey every day for breakfast. Lunch and dinner, too.

She gave him her best Litigation Lawyer smile. “Thank you for coming.”

His expression didn’t register any curiosity about the reason she’d met him out here. He looked her up and down and ended up at her face. They both knew he was thinking about sex, and they both pretended he wasn’t. The way his eyebrows drew together told her she looked worse than she thought. “That pussy over there is calling you.”

“Really? Who?” Her voice was calm. Serene even, and that had to be a miracle because her control wasn’t anything like reliable right now.

“Here in three, two, one...”

“Lys. You dropped this.”

She turned in time to see Jack slow from his jog across the plaza. He had her frog-shaped stapler in his hand. While she watched, he closed the distance between them. He was grinning because to him, a normal, everyday person, how absurd was it to chase a woman across the plaza with a frog stapler?

“Oh, hey. Thanks.” She stuck out her box, intending for Jack to drop the stapler inside.

Jack held out the stapler and put a hand on her arm. The boom in her head went off like a cannon. She jerked away. Her vision winked out. Jack twitched, and the stapler dropped from his fingers.

His knees give out, and he falls to the concrete. Bright crimson blood flows from his head.

Reality slammed back.

“Dude,” she heard Khūnbish say. “You okay?”

Jack’s eyes rolled up in his head, and his knees buckled. He hit the paving stones hard. She heard the crack when his head hit.

“Holy shit.” Khūnbish whipped out his cell phone and started dialing while Lys dropped her box and knelt, afraid to touch him in case there was a chance he could be saved. Jack didn’t move. Blood pooled around his head. Red. So red.

A girl with pink hair, leggings, and a tatty black tee-shirt emerged from the gathering crowd. Lys snatched her hands away when the girl dropped to Jack’s side and pressed two fingers to the side of his throat.

That’s all she needed; to kill another innocent person. Every ounce of Lys’s energy went to keeping herself out of free fall. If she didn’t stay in control, Jack might not be the only casualty. She was aware, in a distant way, of Khūnbish talking to 9-1-1 and of the young woman doing chest compressions on an unresponsive Jack.

Sirens, far away at first, came closer and closer. Lys shook with the effort of staying here and in the present. She didn’t want to hurt anyone else. Her head was going to crack open, but she’d managed to seal herself off. She could observe without feeling anything. Ice protected her from all the people around her.

A fire truck pulled up, then an ambulance. Paramedics jogged across the plaza with their gear. Radios squawked. The strobe effect from the flashing lights on the emergency vehicles flashed inside her head, too. The pink-haired woman doing compressions let one of the EMTs take over, and some time later the EMTs loaded Jack into the ambulance.

She answered questions from one of the firefighters. She was ice. Nothing but ice inside and out. It was horrifyingly clinical the way she didn’t feel a damn thing, but this was how she needed to be. More time passed, there were more questions and answers, and then the firefighters were gone. The last of the crowd dispersed.

Khūnbish cocked his head and shoved his hands into his front pockets.

Her head hurt. She wondered idly what he would say if she told him Jack was dead and that it was her fault. He'd call her crazy, and he'd be right. He held her gaze, and she got trapped there.

She braced herself, but nothing happened. Nothing at all. Her stomach, however, did a slow flip-flop. The conviction that he knew about her sprang into full bloom. He knew what she was. Without understanding why or how, she'd stepped onto a tightrope here with Khūnbish, and there wasn't any net.

"Ms. Fensic." His low, scratchy voice made it easy to imagine him awake at four in the morning, a bottle of whiskey at his elbow. Some blonde babe with a tramp stamp and a fondness for glitter would be on his lap while he hacked into someone else's server. In between rounds of beating the crap out of men stupid enough to cross him.

Khūnbish was the calmest man she'd ever met. Nothing rattled him. Not an adversarial deposition or a vicious cross-examination. Or seeing a man drop dead at his feet. "Someone you knew well?"

She swallowed. "A colleague." She wasn't a talkative person, but hell if she could stop herself. "I quit my job today, and he wanted to help me with my things." She nudged her moving box with the toe of her pump and swallowed the lump in her throat. "I told him not to follow me. I told him to go back to his office."

"Was he harassing you?"

"No. God no." Their eyes met again, and the world stayed in place. "Nothing like that."

"So. You quit your job and called me."

She waited for a group of people to pass them on their way to California Street. On a purely selfish level, she'd been right to think of him. He was perfect. She needed someone mean and dangerous, and Khūnbish fit the bill. With a prayer that she was right, she made the leap that would change her life forever.

"I need a favor."

CHAPTER 2

He was going to do her the favor. Why? Because he was a sucker for smart chicks, and Lys Fensic was smarter than just about anyone he knew. Because despite her ice-cold exterior, she could make him laugh. Also, she was fucking hot. Curves in all the right places, legs that didn't quit. She had a great ass, too. The woman was gorgeous and untouchable, and he'd wanted a piece of her cool elegance for a long time.

More important than his other reasons, she had power he didn't understand. Most of the time she registered to him as completely normal. A woman without any magic. A complete vanilla. Every now and then, like now being an example, whatever magic she had going for her worked him hard.

She wasn't a trained mage, he was sure of that. If she were in that life, he wouldn't be consulting for her because she'd already have tried to kill him or enslave him. He suspected she was one of the survivors: a kid thrown away by magekind parents who thought she didn't have any magic. Most of the throwaways died before they hit twenty. Some of them, like Lys Fensic, didn't. He thought about that poor guy, dead before he hit the ground, because sometimes, possibly like Lys Fensic, the survivors grew up to be dangerous. He wondered how much she knew about what she was and what she could do.

Right now she was in front of him, eyes big and wide, skin pale as ashes, and so completely opaque to him there was no way she was normal. Vanilla humans couldn't block the way she was doing. They couldn't make it impossible for him to get anything at all, not when he was trying. He checked out her eyes in case she was self-medicating. Copa, the drug the magekind took to amp up their power, changed their eye color while they were under the influence. The stuff also eventually burned out their power, if it didn't outright kill them. Her eyes were the same dark blue as ever.

He stooped to retrieve her now broken stapler. It was cute that she'd kept his joke present to her and decided to cart it with her. "I'll get you a new one."

No reaction.

He tossed the stapler in the box. "Let's talk about that favor. Coffee?"

She squeezed the strap of her purse with both hands. Completely opaque. It bothered him that she could do that. "Okay."

He picked up her box and pointed in the direction of Market Street. "Seeing how you're unemployed, it's on me."

"Thank you." Her smile was brief and didn't reach her eyes. She was something else when she smiled for real.

Five minutes later they were sitting at a table at Peet's Coffee. Her moving box was on the chair beside her, her purse on the floor at her feet. Telos sat across from her, holding his chai. She drank half her six-shot espresso macchiato without blinking.

"Jesus, Fensic."

"Two hours of sleep in the last forty-eight hours." She lifted her cup. He still wasn't getting a thing from her. How the hell long could she keep that up? It had to be costing her. "I could use a couple of these."

Neither one of them said a word for long enough that the silence got awkward. He wasn't good with human expressions when he couldn't pair them with what he picked up naturally, but even he could guess she was about to tell him to forget the favor.

"So." He nodded the way humans did when they were taking about anything except what needed to be talked about. "A favor." He gave her an encouraging smile, but his attention flicked down to her truly fine rack. "Between friends."

"Yes." She smoothed a palm over her head and rested her hand there for a bit. "Between friends."

"Go."

She licked her lips. "I need a ride."

He quirked his eyebrows at her. "That's it? I thought you were going to hit me up for a loan."

That got him a nanosecond's worth of a smile. "Just a ride."

So much for her coming out to him about her magic. A ride was a lot less interesting, though, on a personal level, he liked the idea of being alone with her and nowhere near her office. That would change everything, and if he was even a little lucky he could get her between the

sheets with him. Not that he expected sex in return for any favor, but he could hope they ended up there.

“A ride. Sure. Where to?”

“Noe Valley.”

Noe Valley was an upscale neighborhood of the city, and the way she said it, a bit too quickly, set off all kinds of alarms. He was doing her the favor, sure, but that didn't mean he was dumb enough to forget a street witch could be dangerous to him. “Do you need a ride back?”

“Yes.” She slipped the cardboard sleeve off her cup and started tearing it into pieces.

“Why?” He wasn't used to seeing her frayed at the edges like this, and that added to his uneasiness.

“My car got wrecked.”

“Damn.”

She nodded, but he thought that was a non-verbal lie. Not certain, because she was blank to him right now, but she was on the edge of some kind of massive collapse, and, well, in his experience there wasn't much coincidence where the magekind were involved. In the life or not, she was magekind.

“Hit and run,” she said. “The other guy. Not me.”

“That blows.” He tried not to think about how long he'd wanted to hook up with her but didn't have much luck. She was right in front of him, gorgeous and tired and vulnerable in a way that worked on every protective instinct he had. He knew she could take care of herself, but whatever was going on with her was really messing with her. He was curious, and he wanted to help.

Her eyes were a million miles away. Whatever was going through her head, the recollection was powerful enough to shake her control. She stopped being opaque. The mental hints he'd been trying to pick up flashed into place. It was like being pushed into a volcano of magic. The hair on the back of his neck lifted, and then she shut down hard. She was back to total vanilla, a human with no magic at all.

Her hand shook so hard she almost knocked over her macchiato. He

moved her coffee to the middle of the table. Goddamn, but that was some power she had. All this time she'd had enough control to convince him she was nothing more than minorly talented. Well, hello to the majors. "Okay. When was your car wrecked?"

"Last night." She blinked, and she looked so lost and uncertain he almost didn't recognize her as Lys Fensic, ice queen. The break only lasted a second or two, then she was back to her usual self. Almost. Whatever the hell was going on with her, he couldn't turn his back on her. "No. I think it was two nights ago. I'm so tired, I'm losing track of time. What day is it? Tuesday or Wednesday?"

"Thursday."

"Really?" She wiped a hand across her forehead. The breaks in her control were spiderweb fine, spinning out so that, though he got almost nothing from her, he got more than previously. "Two nights, then. My car got wrecked. I was in the hospital at some point, but I checked myself out."

"Against medical advice?"

She shrugged. "I'm fine."

He peered into her face, but she avoided eye contact. Not totally ignorant, then. "All due respect, bullshit."

She drank more of her jet-fueled coffee. "There's something I need from my house."

He leaned his forearms on the table. His skin was a lot darker than hers. "And?"

"Something terrible will happen if..." Her expression closed off, but for half a second there she'd looked terrified. Enough afraid that he could see the fear without being able to pick up the psychic clues to her mental state.

"If what?"

She dropped her head, staring at the table. Fractures in her ability to block him spun out like cracks in melting ice. He could waltz right inside her head if he wanted to. He didn't. But he could. Not that he needed to right now. She was pretty much wide open. A wave of despair came at him, so intense he was tempted to do the unthinkable and give the ice queen a hug. Then...nothing. Her switching on and off like that was

disorienting as hell.

She let out a breath. “I don’t know who to trust.”

“You called me.” He tapped a finger on the table near her so she’d look up. She did, and he cocked his head. Her looks really worked for him, and now that she’d lost her usual frosty reserve, she was even more his type. “Here I am.”

Her power cycled up again, cranked him something fierce, and he thought this had to be the point where she told him what she was. She didn’t, though. She winced. Just like that, she was vanilla again. But not opaque.

“One of us is an idiot.” A tiny smile curved her mouth then faded. “We both know it’s not me.”

He laughed, relieved to see a glimmer of her usual self. He leaned closer and made sure his voice was too low for anyone to overhear. “What the hell has you so scared you can’t think straight?”

She bit her lower lip, and even someone like him could see she was scared to death. Up to now, he’d have said nothing frightened Lys Fensic. “I broke things off with Michael.”

Funny how he felt like he knew her but, in fact, knew almost nothing about her personal life. He knew things like she had a sense of humor, she was smart, hard-working, and liked Thai food. He knew she’d learned a lot about computer security because of her job. She wore a lot of high-heeled pumps that showed off her first class legs. She didn’t wear bright colors or a wedding ring.

“Husband or boyfriend?”

“Neither.”

“Really?”

She shook her head ruefully. “It’s complicated.”

All right then. He was jealous. Disappointed to find out she was in a relationship. Then again, there was something off about the way she felt to him. She wasn’t lying, but she wasn’t telling him everything. “Were you sleeping with him?”

She raised shocked eyes to his, and he met them straight on. Her gaze

veered off.

“If I’m going to help you out, and I am, it makes a difference if there’s a pissed off ex at your house.”

“Sometimes.” She stirred the pile of tiny cardboard bits. “About sleeping with him, I mean.” She tossed back the rest of her coffee. “He’s...It turns out he’s not a very nice person.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“I don’t put up with shit from anyone.” Her expression hardened, and she was the ice queen he’d known and admired all this time. Hard as diamonds. “Ever. I don’t have much tolerance for hypocrites either, and that’s what he is.”

He slouched on his chair. There were no other magekind in the café. Just her. No demons either, or at least not any of the free kin. A mageheld? He wouldn’t be able to sense a demon that was enslaved to a mage. Demons who got taken were cut off from their own kind.

Lys kept talking, hunched over, fingers tearing at the remains of the cardboard sleeve. She appeared oblivious when he pulled enough magic through him that a trained mage would want to be prepared for trouble. “He’s supposed to be out of town until tomorrow, so chances are I can get what I need, no problem. But if he’s there” —briefly, she met his gaze—“or one of his...friends are there, I want someone like you with me.”

He rubbed his chin. “Someone like me, huh?”

A bit of color showed up in her cheeks. It’d be cute if this weren’t so serious. “Yes.”

“Good with computers? A guy who knows the difference between TCP and UDP?” She had bone structure like you wouldn’t believe. Maybe not perfect, but damn close.

“Someone who can get rough if need be.”

“That’s it?” He wanted her to say exactly what she thought he might walk into. “I drive you to your house, you get whatever, and if there’s someone there, I do what? Defrag his hard drive? Install a key logger and steal all his money?”

“No.”

“Scare the crap out of him? Push him around? Or something else?”

“Yes.” She wilted under his stare. “I mean, no.” She ran both her hands over her hair. “Look, Michael is...he’s...different.”

“Takes all kinds.”

“He’s different.” She blew out a breath, and he thought, *Here it comes.* “The way you’re different.”

He cocked his head again. They were now officially in the dangerous territory of talking about the truth. Holy. Shit. This Michael asshat was one of the kin? One of the kin was fucking with her mind without her knowing what she was? “I’m not an abusive bastard.”

Exasperation flashed over her face. “Of course not. I know that.”

“Spell it out.”

“He has certain abilities.” She gave a wry laugh that told him a lot.

He didn’t need to be in her head to know what she was thinking. “You’re not crazy.”

“No?” She was getting better about looking him in the face.

“No.”

“He doesn’t use his powers for good.”

“You think I do?”

There was just the slightest hesitation before she said, “Yes.”

He wasn’t about to use words that confirmed what he was, not without knowing for a fact it was safe for him if she knew. Like she wasn’t telling him straight out about Michael and what he was. “Are you saying he’s not following the rules?”

“Rules?” Her confusion about that was rock solid. “If there are rules, I don’t think he’s following them, no.”

“Probably not.” He felt sick for her. Outraged and ready to kill the motherfucker that had sent her over the edge like this. He felt guilty, too, because someone like him had obviously, obviously, been fucking her over. Oh, he understood the temptation, but the days when the kin routinely didn’t give a damn about the consequences of that sort of thing were over. “There’s people who can help with this kind of problem. Rule

following problems.”

She lifted her hands in a helpless gesture, and he had to restrain himself from consoling her. “I don’t know about any rules. And I don’t know about any of those people.”

“If he’s breaking the rules, it’s no surprise he didn’t mention the rest.”

“Not that it matters.” Her mouth twisted, and he didn’t need a connection with her to guess her mental state right now. Right there on the edge of panic. “Even if I knew, what if I asked for help and Michael found out? Accidentally or on purpose? I’d never have risked it.” Her long, pale fingers curled around her empty coffee cup. “He has poor impulse control.”

“You should have contacted Nikodemus before now. His name had to have come up.” She shook her head. Even closed off the way he was, and with her as unstable as she was, he believed the name meant nothing to her. “Or Carson Phillips.”

Nikodemus was the local warlord, a demon whose significant other was the human witch Carson. How the two of them ended up together, he had no idea, but the warlord kept tight control over his territory and that included magekind and demonkind both. More to the point, Nikodemus forbade the demonkind from harming humans. Just like he had a rule about the magekind fucking over the kin. From everything he’d heard, transgressors paid. He wasn’t at all surprised Michael hadn’t mentioned any of that.

“If you want my advice, get in contact with Nikodemus or Carson. If Michael is breaking the rules, one of them will help you out.”

She closed her eyes, then opened them right away. Her pupils were huge. She went opaque again. She grabbed her purse, threw a ten on the table, and stood. While she picked up her box, the skin along his arms prickled. More cracks appeared in her control, and magic leaked from her. At least two people in his line of sight rubbed their arms. “Thanks.” She gave a tight nod. “Good advice, I’m sure. I appreciate you listening to me.”

“Sit down.” He shoved her ten into one of the outside pockets of her purse.

She didn’t. “Why?”

He took out his phone. “I’ll text you a number. When you call, I’d

appreciate it if you'd keep my name out of it." He forwarded the contact to her, and a moment later her purse beeped. He frowned as his skin rippled again. One of the humans from before turned around and stared at Lys. He grabbed the strap of her purse and pulled until she sat down with the box on her lap. He leaned in. "Fensic, how poor, exactly, is your boyfriend's impulse control?"

She didn't answer.

"Did he try to kill you?"

"I think so."

"What the hell is at your house that's worth your life?" He waited out her decision about what she was going to tell him.

"A talisman."

And, *boom*. There it was. "Yours or Michael's?"

"Mine. Sort of." Her lips parted, and he got another ripple of magic from her. "Michael gave it to me. God, I hate that thing. Touching it gives me the creeps. I don't want it near me."

"Did he tell you what it is?"

"He told me the magic in it would help stabilize my condition. But he was lying." She let out a breath. "He lied to me about everything." She leaned across the box and as much of the table as she could and pitched her voice low. "That thing is alive, and I swear to you, it wants out."

"And?" He maintained eye contact with her. The thought of one of his own kind using a talisman like that made him ill.

"Michael kept asking me why I wasn't wearing it. Three days ago, just to get him off my back about it, I told him I lost it. He went ballistic, and that's when I left."

Telos swirled the cooling contents of his cup. "It's still at your house?"

She nodded.

"And he's not home?"

"Not supposed to be."

He glanced out the window. "Let's go then."

CHAPTER 3

Lys's knees shook the entire time she followed Khūnbish to his car. She carried the box from her office, but she was tempted to throw it into the nearest Dumpster or put down it on the street and leave it there. Nothing in there mattered. The damn frog stapler, which she'd loved more than she ought to, was broken.

Back on Front Street, a meter maid pattered past the BMW and didn't even look at the car. Khūnbish went around to the passenger side door and opened it for her. While she got in and sat with her purse on her lap, he put her cardboard box in the trunk.

This was a high-end model with plenty of leg room. Newer than her white one, but other than that, more or less the same car. Hers had a black interior, too. In the ambulance after her accident, one of the paramedics had told her she was lucky she hadn't been killed. He'd been more right than he could possibly have imagined.

Khūnbish had a hand on the roof of his car and was leaning down at the passenger door side, staring at her with his black, black eyes. A frown put a crease between his eyebrows. She couldn't tell his pupils from his irises. She set her purse on the floorboard and gave him a cool look.

"I won't drive like a maniac," he said, as if he'd read her thoughts. Maybe he had. In her current condition, her state of mind couldn't be that hard to guess.

"I appreciate that." She gave him a businesslike smile because she had enough to deal with right now without adding in the problem of the physical attraction between them. Nothing could ever happen between them. Ever.

"No problem." He reached in to fasten her seat belt for her. His hair, dark as night, spilled over one shoulder as he did. Khūnbish was big and rough, and a bit more than normal. Here they'd been talking about talismans without any discussion about whether something like that even existed. He hadn't asked a single question when she said he was like Michael, either. He was exactly what she needed right now. Someone who didn't set her off. Someone she trusted.

She closed her eyes. In her head, she heard the sound of breaking

glass and the hollow thump of metal against metal. Her body actually jerked and her eyes popped open. The metallic tang came back, coating her mouth and tongue, but she stayed in the here and now. Traffic moved with the usual controlled chaos, and she was in Khūnbish's BMW, not hers. The car was still parked.

"You okay, Fensic?"

Their gazes locked again, and she got overwhelmed by all the ways he appealed to her. He seemed to know what was happening to her, too. Smug bastard. "Yes. Of course. Just tired."

He stayed bent over. There was the tiniest suggestion of a very male smirk at the edges of his mouth. "That's all?"

"Yes." His skin was fine-grained, smooth. No scars, no fading zits, not a single imperfection. She liked that he hadn't shaved in a while. He'd once told her he only shaved once a week because he was a descendant of Genghis Khan on his father's side, and back in the day the Mongol horde didn't have much facial hair. He'd said that with a straight face. He must be the tallest Mongolian on record, because he was over six feet. Taller than Michael. How good a mage did he have to be to achieve that sort of perfection? God knows Michael worked at it.

While Khūnbish was still at the passenger-side door, a disheveled woman pushed her shopping cart piled with bulging plastic bags in front of his car and continued into traffic. She didn't care about anything, did she? Bent over and shuffling, she looked sixty. She was probably half that age. Drugs would do that to you.

Cars slammed on their brakes or swerved around the woman and her shopping cart, and that broke into her fragile calm. The vise-grip of her headache made her queasy again. The taste of iron got stronger. She breathed through her mouth, but right now she was wide open to anyone. Dangerous. Potentially fatal. The inside of her skull burned, and she could swear her head was fracturing. She imagined tiny fragments of bone driving into her brain.

Her vision blanked out. Front Street disappeared.

In front of a brick building that isn't being maintained, she hands over grimy bills and in return accepts a dirty, much folded glassine paper. Deftly

exchanged with a man whose job it is to peddle poison. The unbelievably intense craving that lives in her is about to kill her.

With a nauseating jolt, she came back to the present.

She could see Khūnbish. The inside of his car. The street. God, the noise was going to shatter her. Their eyes met again, and she couldn't look away. She wasn't sure she heard him speak, but if he hadn't, he was about to. Same difference, really. His mouth moved, forming the word *Fensic?*

"Fensic?"

She blinked a few times, waiting for his future to slam into her. There was this odd click between her ears, like a door closing. Nothing happened. Her surroundings stayed in place. God, what a relief. "Fine," she said. She would not throw up in his car. Would. Not. "I'm fine."

He straightened from his lean over her and closed her door. When he was behind the wheel and he'd merged into the madness of downtown traffic, she stared into the side view mirror, watching for cars coming up too fast. After a bit that made her dizzy, so she looked straight ahead.

Reflection through the windshield made his eyes appear to flicker between black, bronze and gold. Eerie. She wondered if she was hallucinating that. She turned her head to the passenger-side window, but then she was staring into cars, taxis, and buses full of people, and that was worse than staring forward and seeing him and that weird eye-color flicker in her peripheral vision. She concentrated on remaining disconnected from the world outside. It had been years since she'd had to work this hard at staying alone in her head.

He flipped on his blinker and looked over his shoulder before he moved into one of those left turn lanes where the city allowed a turn on the green light. Lys tensed up, anticipating a collision.

"Relax." He watched oncoming traffic for a break. "We're not going to get hit. Promise."

"Sure." She couldn't help thinking about people who weren't what they seemed. People who weren't really people. Dangerous people like Michael and Telos Khūnbish. And then there were demons, even more dangerous than the mages because although they could and did pass for normal,

they weren't even human.

He drove without the least sign of irritation with the congestion and double parked cars and trucks. One hand lightly gripped the bottom left of the steering wheel, the other rested on the stick shift. How odd that a man who dressed like a thug looked so at home in such an expensive car. Then again, she knew what he charged per hour.

She sat straight, legs pressed together, one hand on her lap, the other on the door so she'd have an anchor if she slipped into her special brand of insanity. Her thoughts refused to stay focused in the present. Even with her sunglasses back on, whispers broke through and the physical world blinked out. Every time that happened she had to fight to get back to what was real. She wondered how much longer she'd last before she broke down completely and irrevocably.

He will fall fall fall swiftly into cold hard water.

The car moved smoothly forward, carrying her along.

They were out of the Financial District now, but traffic was still horrendous. The car's radio wasn't on and though she could see a dock for a phone, he hadn't hooked in to play whatever music it was he liked. She found the silence comforting. Khūnbish didn't impinge on her thoughts the way other people did. He never had. The quiet helped keep her sane.

Her problem now was the people outside the car and her disintegrating ability to keep her mind safely walled away. The BMW would move out of range of whatever person she'd hooked into, but inevitably someone new flashed into her consciousness. When they stopped or had to slow down, the images got more explicit and more insistent.

—boyfriend will terrify her—

She understood that one.

She pressed her right arm hard against the side of the car. If she went into free fall the way she had earlier, she'd be open to everyone within ten feet of her, and there was no guarantee that the freakish meld of neurons, gray matter, and whatever else that comprised her brain wouldn't permanently break from reality. No telling how many people might die because she couldn't control herself.

Unspeakable heartbreak

“Fensic?”

At least you didn't die from a broken heart.

“Earth to Fensic.” Khūnbish put a hand on her shoulder.

“Don't touch me.” Out of habit, she braced herself for the deluge, but nothing happened. Nothing. For one blessed moment all the breaks in her control sealed over.

“It's okay.” He kept his eyes on the street. “You're going to be okay.”

She was afraid to move or even breathe in case the quiet in her head stopped.

“I mean that. I'll make it okay.” He returned his hand to the knob of the gear shift.

Slowly, the fractures in her sanity reappeared, though she wasn't as bad off as she had been before. Instead of the full-bore clatter of knowing, only a flutter of all those alien perceptions came through. She was profoundly grateful for the respite. The mental quiet allowed her time to gather herself, build up another reserve of resistance.

He stopped for a red light.

Half a dozen people stepped into the crosswalk in front of them. She squeezed the side of the door and braced herself. Some of them were bound to get through to her.

Khūnbish put a hand on her knee. Above her knee, actually. She looked at her thigh. His fingers were dark against her skirt. Dark against her skin, too. “You okay?”

She nodded.

“I thought you were going to jump out the window.”

“No.” The acid taste faded from her mouth.

His fingers stayed partially on her bare leg. He was touching her, and she wasn't in free fall. She didn't get anything from the people in the crosswalk. Not even when they walked in front of the car. She let out a breath.

She wondered if Khūnbish was that much more powerful than Michael that he could have that effect on her, or whether Michael was just a

sadistic bastard who enjoyed seeing her suffer. Maybe both. She leaned against the backrest again and turned just her head in his direction. His hand stayed on her thigh, but he wasn't feeling her up. He flexed his other fingers on the steering wheel, then relaxed them again.

"Better?"

"Yes," she said softly. "Much."

"Tell me what happened before your car accident." He kept his attention forward.

"Michael and I argued about the talisman. He wanted me to wear it, and I didn't. I told him I'd lost it. Things got ugly, I left, and he didn't like it."

"Did he hit you?"

"Not where it would show." She gave him a once over. Khūnbish was a physically solid man. Tall. Muscular. Fit. If he wanted to, he could hurt her worse than Michael. That was the thing about men. Until you knew what was in their hearts, every single one was a potential danger.

"Bastard."

The silence in her head got pushed out by the sound of metal breaking, no brakes. Right before the impact of her accident, she'd recognized the other driver as one of the men who worked for Michael. The same man who told her the truth about the talisman. She couldn't erase the image of him pointing a finger at her; it was burned into her memory. The next thing she knew, her car was a heap of metal and there were sirens wailing louder and louder. Michael's guy was gone.

"Hey, Fensic. You're with me." His calm worked into her, soothing her when contact with anyone else would have sent her straight into madness.

"Thank you."

"No problem."

Before long they were on her street. He pulled into a space a few doors down from her house and turned off the motor. He left the keys in the ignition. She didn't move. Khūnbish turned his torso toward her, one arm draped over the steering wheel. He looked at her, no smile to soften the truth that he was a dangerous man. Her entire body reacted to that truth. With all the defenses she had to have in place, sex was never very good

for her. All the same, a part of her wondered what it would be like to have sex with him. She gave herself a mental shake. That just wasn't a place she ought to go.

"Let's get your talisman." He took the keys out of the ignition and got out of the car. She watched him walk around the front. She already had her door open when he came around to the sidewalk. Good thing he was there, because she got dizzy when she stood. He caught her forearm and steadied her. "Easy there."

She stared at his torso while she waited for her head to clear. "What on earth does your shirt say?" She squinted at his chest. "While you were reading my shirt, I hacked your bank account?"

Khūnbish smiled. The thing was, it was only partly a joke, that saying on his shirt. He probably could hack her bank account. According to his CV he had top-secret security clearance and right-coast clients with three-letter acronyms. And those were the ones he could disclose. The left-coast clients were scattered up and down the coastline from the heart of Silicon Valley to Redmond, Washington.

"Don't worry, your money is still there." He smiled as he put a faint emphasis on *your*. He didn't let go of her arm, not right away, and they stood there staring at each other while she drew on the bizarre calmness the contact offered. His eyes were completely black. No colors. Just black. She could drop into them and never come out. Five minutes of peace, that's all she wanted. Five minutes of not having anyone's fate force its way into her head. That was her idea of paradise.

He let go of her, and the fractures began to reappear. But now she had more reserves than before. He stayed in front while they walked up the slope to the house she'd lived in for going on ten years. She couldn't help but wonder how things had gone so wrong. It was her home, and Michael had just moved in and taken over everything.

Khūnbish took the lead up the concrete stairs. There were seventeen of them with a landing in between. When they reached the landing, she fumbled around for her keys and eventually found them in a corner of her bag. He looked over his shoulder at her, and she held up the keys. He didn't take them from her.

"We don't get in without the keys."

“Yes we do.”

She blinked. “You can do that?”

“Fensic.” He spread his arms wide.

Computer hacker, door jacker. She should have known. She dropped her keys back in her purse and glanced at her front door. The house gave her the creeps. The upstairs lights were off, but there was a light on downstairs. While she watched, someone walked between the light and the curtained window.

Her heart thumped so hard it hurt. “He’s home.” She took a step back. “Jesus, he’s home.” She tugged on his arm, harder a second time than the first. He didn’t budge either time. “Let’s go. Now.”

“Fuck.”

Too late. Too late. Too late. She clamped down on herself because she damn well knew their lives depended on her not losing it. Michael knew how to hurt her when she lost control.

The front door opened, and Michael stepped onto the porch. From as far away as they were from him, she could still feel that peculiar fullness in the back of her head that seemed to come along with Michael. Not quite the same sensation as with Khūnbish, but then Khūnbish, she suspected, was a much more powerful mage.

Michael’s eyes tracked downward, and he walked to the edge of the porch. He’d been using; she could tell from his fever-bright eyes. He looked down to where she and Khūnbish stood, a familiar sneer curving the edge of his mouth.

“Oh, God,” she whispered. “What’s he done?”

Michael’s arms were deep crimson up to his elbows. Drops of liquid red slid from his fingers to the ground. He shook his head to get his sandy hair off his forehead. Two men emerged from the house and stood behind him, both of them with hair buzzed short. One she didn’t recognize, but the other was the man who’d crashed into her car. He pointed at her and slowly grinned.

“Lys.” Michael held out a red fist and slowly unfurled his fingers. Bright, glittering sand trickled onto the porch, but more red dripped from his arms

to the ground. “You lying bitch.”

“Asshole,” Khūnbish said under his breath.

“I don’t know why you thought I wouldn’t find it.” Michael swept the toe of his shoe over the sand and pushed some of it to the stair below. He stared at Khūnbish. The men behind him stared at her. “This is all that’s left.”

Her head was back in a vise, her vision going grainy and narrow. But she had control. She wasn’t going to lose it. She refused. Michael wasn’t going hurt her. Not ever again. “You’re supposed to be in LA.”

“As you can see, I am not.” His attention moved from Khūnbish to her. His calculating, drug-enhanced confidence made her sick. He was always worse when he was using. He gestured at the man to his right, the one from the car accident. “You. She’s yours. When you’re done with her, kill her. You.” He motioned to the other. “Bring the fiend to me.”

Khūnbish grabbed her shoulder and pushed her in the direction of the street. “Move.”

Long before they made it back to the sidewalk, the two men were after them, running full speed.

CHAPTER 4

Telos pulled as much magic through him as he could without triggering a shift in his physical form. The burn forced a roar from him, half frustration at the need to limit himself, half joy at the power. The air crackled around him as he drew hard on his magic, pulling up from its source and through his body until the energy electrified him. Fensic was taking the steps two at a time. He jumped all of them, skidded to a stop and whipped around to intercept the magehelds while she sprinted for his car.

He kept himself between her and Michael’s two magehelds as they, too, raced for the street. Both of them were under the mage’s compulsion, so they were moving fast. Once Fensic had a few steps on him—she was fast despite running in heels—he put on the brakes and whirled to the two magehelds.

They were practically on him, big motherfuckers not looking to start a friendship. He didn't have time to do anything but go for a kill, the hell with anything she might see that she shouldn't.

As soon as the first mageheld's eyes turned colors, he released everything he had on tap straight into the fiend's head. A shriek tore through the air, high and piercingly loud. Telos magically dampened the sound before the whole neighborhood called the goddamned police. At the same time, he darted in and slipped an arm around the demon's neck, braced with his hand and twisted hard because he wasn't going to get a second chance. He released and stepped back. The corpse dropped bonelessly to the sidewalk.

The silence was freaky. The other demon had looped around while Telos killed his buddy. It didn't matter if the remaining mageheld had been fucking in love with the dead fiend. He'd been given a kill order, he had to obey, and that's what he was doing. Another scream shattered the peace.

With a mageheld fiend bent on hunting down a witch he'd been told he could fuck at his leisure before he killed her, a two or three second delay was way too long. Telos shot toward Fensic, expecting to see that the mageheld had her already. But she wasn't the one who'd screamed like a girl. The mageheld was on his knees, scrabbling at his eyes while she stood over him, eyes wild, a small canister in her outstretched arm. Mist wafted toward him, and then his eyes burned and watered, too. She'd maced the guy.

The mageheld lurched to his feet, still digging at his face. Nothing short of death was going to stop him from doing what he'd been ordered. Probably in the most unpleasant way imaginable. Telos was the last thing between the mageheld and the only revenge an enslaved demon ever got.

He pulled again and unloaded directly into the mageheld's head the way he had with the other one. The psychic scream deafened him, but he kept going, shredding the demon's mental and physical boundaries until the only thing left was a sort of magical goo. It was brutal, but he didn't see that he had a choice, unless he was going to let Fensic die.

When the noise stopped, the mageheld collapsed at her feet. He saw her shoulders slump with relief. She was wrong. Killing a demon's physical body wasn't enough. Not if he wanted to stay alive and free, which he did,

and not if he wanted to make sure that goddamned mage couldn't fuck both those demons worse than he already had.

To stay dead, the dead fiends' magic had to be safe from the magekind. If Telos allowed the mageheld's life force to drift sentient but unable to interact with the corporeal world, he risked Michael taking the magic for himself. For the demonkind, that was Hell; to have your still-living magic trapped like that.

Michael came down the steps at a run, blood still dripping from his arms. Idiot. Some vanilla human was going to notice and call the cops. Telos knelt at the nearest mageheld's side and gave the life there a path home. Though it cost time he didn't have, he did the same for other one, too. When he was done, he grinned at Michael with vicious satisfaction. "Too late, mage."

Michael hit the last step, slowed, and then walked toward Fensic. She extended the canister and pointed it at Michael, deadly serious. "Not another step."

The mage lifted his hands. "You betrayed me."

She yelped and dropped the canister, shaking her hand as if she'd been burned.

"Fitting, I think, if your companion kills you for me."

"Enough, Michael." She stood her ground, shoulders back. She'd gone opaque again. "No more."

Michael glanced at his arms and muttered something under his breath. His words carried power that made the skin on the back of Telos's neck ripple. The blood on Michael's arms flaked away. "Once you two are dead, I think I'll be done for the day." He spoke in that tone of aristocratic entitlement the magekind tended to have.

Telos reacted to the magic the mage was holding; a shiver down his spine, the allure of all that power. No way in hell was this asshole some self-taught street mage. Someone like Michael trained for this from the day he could walk and talk. Judging from the color of his eyes, an opaque and unnaturally bright brown, he'd recently taken copa. The effects came at a price. Copa was addictive and eventually lethal for the magekind.

He pulled magic through him again. He was prepared for anything.

“There’s rules in this territory, mage.”

“I don’t take orders from demons.”

“Nikodemus won’t be happy when he finds out about the talisman. How many magehelds did you murder to pull off that one?” The unknowns were a worry. He didn’t know how many magehelds Michael had, how much copa was raging through his system, or how much new power he had after the ritual murders. This could go all kinds of wrong fast. He jerked his head in Fensic’s direction. “Not to mention what you’ve been doing to her.”

The mage brushed lingering flakes of blood off one of his arms. “I don’t know what she’s told you, but surely you’ve noticed by now she’s too dangerous to be on her own. Uncontrolled. She doesn’t have any idea what she can do. She might be nothing but a street witch, but she’s almost as dangerous as you.”

“Nikodemus is going to find out about what you’ve been up to.”

“I do not accept that creature’s authority over me. Or anyone.” He sneered. “The sooner you’re all dead, the better.”

“The car,” Fensic said from behind him. “Start the car.”

Without taking his eyes off the mage, Telos pointed his fob backward in the direction of his car and pressed the button. The minute the motor came to life, he flipped the keys to her. He didn’t hear them hit the pavement and hoped that meant she’d caught them. Every second’s delay brought them closer to disaster.

Michael’s attention flicked past him to the car, assessed the risks, then snapped back to him.

Fensic needed time to get to the car. They were both dead if she didn’t make it in time. “You’re going to die a painful death, mage.”

The mage muttered words that weren’t English. A chill shot down Telos’s back and the surface of his skin crawled. He wasn’t any stranger to pain, but the electricity turned searing hot. Foul magic spread through his body as Michael worked the spell that would enslave him. It happened a lot faster than he expected, losing his freedom. His chest burned and his heart slowed. The pain short-circuited his brain. There wasn’t any air, and when the mage headed for him, he was paralyzed.

His legs crumpled and both knees hit pavement with a crack. He fought for his life, reaching for his magic, deeper than could ever have been safe for a place where there were vanilla humans, and he pulled. Nothing happened. Panic and horror at what was happening floored him. There had never been a time when he hadn't been able to touch his magic. A trickle came through, and he seized it, and pushed all of it at the mage. He managed to rock Michael back on his heels, but the respite wasn't going to last.

“Khūnbish!”

From the street-side, Fensic popped up over the driver's side of his car and tossed something at him. He caught whatever it was with the tips of his fingers while he battled for what shreds of himself he could protect. Michael walked closer, muttering ugly words, words that touched the core of him and turned it. The tearing inside him stopped his heart.

In a desperate bid for his freedom, he rolled out of Michael's immediate reach, but he was already dying and about to be reborn a slave. The mage's will flowed over him like stagnant water. His fingers tightened reflexively, and he realized one of his hands wasn't empty. A corner of his mind made the ironic observation that he was spending his last moments of freedom with a can of pepper spray.

Michael stood over him, triumphant. “You will kill Lys. Make it painful for her, please.”

On his back, and with his entire body being ripped apart and reshaped as Michael's order hooked into him, he oriented the device and depressed the button, and then he gave in to the rage of losing his freedom and the compulsion Michael had set on him.

The mage went down sputtering.

The pain and tearing stopped.

Telos's heart contracted once and sensation flashed through his body.

Michael howled.

His obscene connection to the mage vanished. Telos lurched to his feet. Jesus, fuck. He was going to puke. Right after he killed that goddamned mage so dead the parts left over wouldn't fill a tuna can. Behind him, a motor revved, and before he could off the mage, his car shot past him,

forward and over the verge. Fensic jammed on the brakes in time to pull even with him. Then her head disappeared and the passenger-side door flew open.

“Get in! Khūnbish. Now!” She was straightening from her stretch along the seat when his brain understood they needed to get the fuck out of here. He threw himself inside. She hit the gas while he grabbed the passenger door and slammed it shut.

The car flew over the curb so fast his head snapped back and hit the side of the headrest. The BMW went briefly airborne. He braced one hand on the dash and grabbed the seat belt with the other, and somehow he managed not to break his head against the windshield when they hit the pavement. Fensic gunned the car, his head hit the seat again, and they roared down the street like her foot was welded to the gas.

“What the hell?” Fensic threw one hand in the air.

“Both hands, Goddamn it!” He was woozy every way that counted, but his will to not end up bleeding in a heap of twisted metal was in fine working order. “At this speed, you drive with both hands on the wheel.”

Her palm slapped onto the leather-covered steering wheel. The car fishtailed when she took the corner at the first intersection. He reached for his magic and there it was, a wide open tap. A fucking lake, and he pulled until he was inches from a physical change. If Michael came after them, the mage was dead. As long as Fensic didn't kill them first. She made the next turn at near reasonable speed.

“What the hell was he doing to you?” She wheezed, but her eyes were focused on the road, so there was at least a chance they weren't going to die. “I felt that. I felt what he did and what it did to you. What the hell was that?”

The loss of her usual cool had the ironic effect of settling him down. Psychically speaking, she was wide open to him and now, now, he understood the control she had over herself, and it terrified him that any street mage could have that kind of magic and live and fool people like him into thinking she was mostly normal.

Lys Fensic was fucked up. Bad. He was already in a volatile state, on the brink of physical transformation, and edgy as hell from all that shit with

Michael. He'd been nanoseconds from breaking the one rule he knew Nikodemus enforced ruthlessly. No harming the magekind. He sat up straighter. "Thanks."

Like thanks even began to cover it.

"Thanks? For what? God, Khūnbish, I am so sorry." Her voice shook.

"Slow down."

"I know what he's like. I never should have brought you when there was even a chance he'd be there. Never."

Rubbing his chest didn't relieve the ache from Michael's attempt to take him, but he did it anyway. Now that he was calming down, recovering, he was reacting to Fensic's unshielded magic. He was turned on. He couldn't help it. His kind reacted to human magic that way. The magekind counted on it.

"I hope his eyeballs are melting in his head."

"Amen, sister." He risked a brush of his finger along her arm because he knew from how she'd reacted before that touching her helped calm her down when her control frayed. One touch and her magic blasted through him hard enough to bring on a partial transformation to one of his other forms. He got that stopped before she noticed. "Get us out of here without getting pulled over, would you?"

Mentally, she closed up. Shut just about everything down, and it scared him to think she could do that to herself. She eased up on the gas, and it was awful seeing the ice queen back. An elegant, ice-cold bitch. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. She focused on the road, but her fingers on the steering wheel were bone white. "Where are we going? Anywhere or do I just drive?"

"For now, just drive." He kept an eye out for cops. Or a tail. As soon as Michael recovered, he was going to send magehelds after them, no question about that. And not just for him. A trained mage was likely to have at least one mageheld demon skilled at tracking. Even a tracker with mediocre talents could follow the residue he and Fensic had left—were leaving now. If they were lucky, they had a day or two before the next set of magehelds found them. If the tracker had some talent, they might have half that. Telos allowed himself a private smile. Either way, he was going

to be ready for the rat bastard mage. Fuck Nikodemus and his rules.

The back of the car shuddered again. "Have you always had a lead foot?"

She slowed to forty-nine. "I have a perfect driving record."

"How many cops let you off because you smiled pretty?"

"My appearance has nothing to do with the fair and equal administration of justice."

Telos snorted. "Speed limit here is thirty-five. You're doing forty-three. Slow down."

"Fine." She slowed, but not enough. Two minutes later, the speedometer was back to forty-five.

"Do you have any idea how much a speeding ticket costs in this city? I don't care if you don't have a job, I'm not paying the fine."

"I won't get a ticket."

"No, instead you're going to get us killed. Pull over and let me drive."

"Forty."

He looked at the speedometer. "Seven. Forty-seven and this is my fucking car. You wreck my ride and you better be prepared to write me a check."

She bowed her head and over-corrected after the car drifted because she'd taken her eyes off the road. "Fine."

They made the switch at the first gas station they came to. They didn't say anything for several minutes, and he was fine with that. He drove, heading west.

She broke the silence. "Those men at my house."

He signaled for a turn. He didn't see any reason to pretend about anything. "They weren't men."

"Demons. They were demons, is that right?"

"Magehelds. Your ex-boyfriend's slaves."

Her shoulders climbed toward her ears, and he got flashes of her mental state: unsettled, determined, and still on the edge of a psychic crash. Why

the hell wasn't she insane?

"He's not kidding about killing you," he said.

"You either."

"He doesn't necessarily want me dead."

Her phone rang, muffled since it was inside her purse. She grabbed it and stared at the screen. "Michael."

CHAPTER 5

Telos reached over and took the phone away from her. He considered crushing it to bits of plastic, silicon, and metal.

She snatched it back. He couldn't help but catch the ragged emotions leaking from her. He was getting even more turned on. Nothing he couldn't control, though. Fensic pressed against the back of the seat and went completely still. After a bit more silence, she dropped the phone onto her lap.

The phone rang again. She picked it up and stared at the display.

"Don't engage." He rubbed a finger along the steering wheel.

"You know what?" she said over the ringtone.

"What?"

"You're right." Phone in her hand, she pushed the button to roll down her window. Wind whipped through the car. Some of her hair came loose from the roll at the back of her head. She stuck her arm out the window and spread her fingers wide. He heard plastic shatter. She raised the window. "I think we can call that refusing to engage." Her smile was cold as ice. "Don't you?"

He looked at her and then out the side window. "It's a start."

She looked out the window, too. "I probably shouldn't have done that. I have a year left on my contract."

"You can get a new phone."

She slumped on her seat, unaware, or uncaring, of the way her skirt

stayed where it was. He was beyond feeling guilty for looking. "I'd rather have a puppy."

Telos laughed. "A new phone would be less work and less expensive."

"True." Fensic tapped her finger on the top rim of the door. "I can expense a new phone." She let out a brittle laugh. "Well, I could if I still had a job."

They didn't say anything more for the twenty minutes it took to reach his house at the far edge of Presidio Heights. He pulled into his garage, punched the button to close the garage door, and shut off the engine.

She looked around his garage. "Where are we?"

"Home."

She ran her hands over her head, smoothing her hair. He wondered what she looked like with it down. Hot, probably. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Probably not." He shrugged and juggled the car keys on his palm. "I'd take you to your place if there wasn't a homicidal mage waiting there for you."

She stretched out her legs and leaned an elbow on the rim of the car door. "A hotel then."

"Do you have enough cash on you not to use your credit card?"

"No, but—" She looked at him sideways. "You already did me my favor and look how that turned out."

"You'll be dead twenty minutes after your card swipe." He shifted on the seat. "Look, you're safer here than anywhere else. They're going to find you no matter where you go. With me you have a shot at living to see another sunrise."

She let out a breath. "I was wrong about you. You aren't like Michael."

Telos fisted his keys. "Pretty much the opposite, I'd say."

"A demon."

He shrugged. He did like the smart chicks. "If you want me to take you to a hotel or someplace else, I will, but then it's your funeral. I'm offering to help you stay alive." From what he'd heard, a lot of survivors like her were

intensely self-sufficient. They had to be. They tended to have abandonment issues, too. “It’ll probably take him at least until tomorrow sometime to find us, and that’s if he’s got a good tracker. In the meantime, I’ll put in a call to Nikodemus and let him know what’s up.”

His car felt uncomfortably enclosed right now because he was aware she was all legs. She drew in a breath, but didn’t look at him. Good thing. She had a more than decent rack, too. She shook her head. “You don’t owe me anything, Khūnbish.”

“Saying that doesn’t change the truth. I owe you. That’s just a fact.” This time she did meet his gaze. Her pupils were huge. More than anything, he wanted to reach over and unbutton the top button of her shirt. “Look, you’ll be safer with me. We can drink beer, order Thai, and watch wrestling all night.”

She smiled. Almost like old times. Except not. “Wrestling?”

“Or a monster truck rally. I have three DVR’d.” He schooled himself against smiling. “You pick.”

She sighed again, but there was a smile somewhere in there. “All right, Mr. Khūnbish. Let’s go inside.”

They got out of the car and went in. He was careful with his proofing, the magical wards he set to keep the bad guys out. He made sure to adjust things so Fensic wouldn’t set them off.

He couldn’t help relaxing a little. This was his turf. He had the place well-warded. Anyone who tried to get in had some nasty surprises in store.

In his living room, she dropped her purse on the floor and slumped on his couch, legs sprawled out. She wasn’t wearing pantyhose. The ice queen was in his house, and he was thinking dirty thoughts about her.

He watched her look around and take in her surroundings and what he’d done with his place. This was a big house. Big enough to put him in the one-percent category. Three stories, vaulted ceilings in this room, six bedrooms, two of which he’d converted into a climate-controlled server room—not that she knew that yet.

“What paid for this?” She lifted a hand. “Don’t tell me if it means admitting you committed any crimes.”

He stood in front of her with his arms crossed over his chest. At the moment, psychically speaking, he got nothing from her. Nothing. She was so tightly closed off she could pass for vanilla. “You know what I charge per hour.”

She lifted a hand to shade her eyes. He relaxed when he saw her familiar icy smile. “Honey, you are worth every penny. But even your hourly rate couldn’t pay for this.”

“I have no worries, let’s just say that.”

She stretched her arms over her head, arching her back. Her clothes were rumpled, but she still looked corporate uptight. The look worked for him. “Does your mortgage payment bite your ass every month?”

“Paid off.”

She gave him another long look. “I didn’t realize hacking paid so well. Maybe that should be my second career.”

“There’s big money in spam. All you need is an open relay on a misconfigured mail server and you can send out millions of pitches to enlarge your dick.”

“You’re a spammer?”

He laughed. “No. If you’re good, protecting corporate America from hackers pays well.”

“And you’re good.”

“You know it.”

She sat up enough to pull the clip that held her bun and shake her head. He got distracted by the way her skirt rode up. Again. She finger-combed the honey-blond mass; there was a lot more than he would have guessed, and having it down completely changed her looks. Totally fuckable. It hurt his dick to look at her she was so hot. She quirked her eyebrows at him while she got her hair slicked back. Did she know how she looked with her hair down like that?

Fensic returned her hair to its clip and flopped back on the couch. Her skirt hitched up to mid-thigh, and even though she knew he was looking, again, she didn’t move. His couch was a charcoal micro-suede, and she practically glowed against the dark fabric. Without straightening, she

fished a pair of sunglasses out of her purse and put them on. “Do you have any aspirin?”

“Sorry, no.” He shook his head. “Headache?”

“The light hurts my eyes.” Now she looked like a movie star, all frosty-cold beauty. “Never mind. It’ll settle down in a bit.”

Telos walked over to the wall switch and flipped the main lights off. Like she was a date, and he was looking to get romantic with her. He closed the blinds, too, and did one more mental pass through his wards. Everything locked tight.

“Thanks.”

Back at the couch, he took his time studying her. She was in a partial sprawl, eyes covered by an arm thrown over her face. The first two buttons of her white blouse were unfastened, and he could see the very top curve of her breasts. Nice. She had pearls in her ears and ash-gray pumps that were not practical for anything but looking hot. She had toned calves, high arches and ankles that looked like they should have broken while she was running from her murdering ex and his magehelds.

She pressed her fingers to her temples and rubbed. Her nails were just long enough to be classy. They were painted icy pink, and that was all the color on her hands. No jewelry. “I guess you figured out I’m not a normal person.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re okay with that?”

He shrugged one shoulder.

“You’re not exactly normal yourself, are you?” she said.

Telos had to laugh at that. “Hell no.”

Her fingers kept massaging her head, moving out from her temples. She hesitated and looked up at him. He couldn’t see her eyes through her dark glasses “Usually it’s not good when people touch me. But when you do?”

“What about Michael? What happened when he touched you?”

She flushed. She’d misunderstood his question, but what the hell. The answer would be interesting. “We made sure I had time to prepare.

Mentally.”

“Meaning?”

“To get myself shut down.”

He shook his head. “Hell on the spontaneity, isn’t it?”

She lifted her sunglasses above her eyes and blinked a few times. He wondered about her ability to shut down her magic. That kind of control was usually the result of training. A lot of it. She smoothed a hand along the seat of the couch, leaving a wavy pattern in the micro-suede. “Has to be that way for me.” Her hand stilled, and she looked at him dead on. “You can block me. How?”

“I’m not human.” Telos moved closer to the couch. “What happens if I don’t block you?”

She huffed. “You’ll think I’m crazy. Correction: you’ll *know* I’m crazy.”

“I already know that. You were wide open to me a couple of times.”

“Never for very long.”

“Oh, Counselor.” He couldn’t stop his grin. No more flirting. He was into the direct come-on. “I can do it long enough to make us both really happy.”

She rolled her eyes at him.

“Your friend today. Is that what happens when you’re not locked down?” He didn’t have to have a hook into her head to know she was trying to decide whether to lie.

“I see people’s futures.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “Or else somehow what I see, I make happen. I’m not sure which it is.”

“I’ve touched you. Lots of times. I never had a clue what you can do. Whatever the hell it is.”

She rubbed her temples again. “All those times, I was prepared.”

“But not today.” He stayed where he was, a few feet away from the couch. Close, but not too close. Not close enough.

“No. Not today.” She didn’t sound happy about that. “I didn’t have good control today. He touched me, and I saw it happen.” She looked away, then back, and there wasn’t a single break. “And now he’s dead.”

He didn't argue with her. The poor bastard had been dead long before the paramedics got him strapped onto the gurney. She knew it, too.

"I don't know if I'm seeing the future or if what I see actually changes someone's life." She laughed, but there wasn't any emotion in it. Her expression stayed somber. "I mean, that really would be crazy, changing people's lives with the power of my mind."

"Maybe not."

"Nobody can change the future just because of what pops into their heads." She bit her lower lip and chewed on it for a while. Telos entertained dirty thoughts involving her mouth and his dick. "Most days I'm sane by an inch. Today, not so much."

"You're not crazy. You just don't know shit about what you are."

Fensic tossed the glasses back in her purse. "One time I kept a log of what I was getting from people. Of the twenty events whose outcomes I was able to confirm, I was right nineteen times."

"You never tried to warn them?"

"Sure I did." She wasn't looking at him. Her gaze was fixed on a horizon he'd never see himself. "Intervening only makes things worse. For everyone. Especially me. I was lucky none of my foster parents had me committed." Her attention flicked back to the now, and she gave a tight smile. "I learned how to block people out. Most of the time. I'd be in an institution otherwise. Or a crazy lady walking the street, talking to myself while I push a shopping cart full of my worldly possessions." She pointed a finger at her ear and made a twirling motion; the universal sign for loony. "Been this way since I was fourteen."

"That's about when it starts for survivors like you."

"Like me? There isn't anyone like me." She spoke with a bleak deliberation that tugged at him. "According to Michael, I'm a stone-cold killer." Her voice got stronger. "I'm not like him. I have never, ever harmed anyone on purpose. Because I know exactly what I am."

"Fensic." He rapped out her name. That got her attention. "What the hell are you saying? Think about it." He was angry on her behalf. Bone deep. "Those magehelds of his, they're enslaved demons. You tell me, in what world is slavery right? He fucking tried to take me. You ever do that to

someone?”

Her eyes went wide, but he was on a roll and kept going.

“You saw the blood when he came out of the house. He’d just murdered one of my kind. He ripped the beating heart from a demon’s chest so he could have more power. Live a little longer. You ever killed a demon?”

“No. To my knowledge anyway.”

“You know what people like him say? ‘The only good demon is a dead demon.’ You’ve probably heard him say it. More than once. It’s their goddamned motto. So whenever it was that Michael called you a killer— Do not try to tell me he didn’t. I can fucking feel it.” He rapped the side of his head. “Here. When he said that, he was lying.”

She rubbed her temples some more, and in the silence his anger receded. “I don’t want to talk about this. There’s no point. All I want is for my head to not explode.”

He didn’t want her to suffer, but he hesitated before he said, “I can help with the pain. If you’re interested.”

Hands still at her temples, she looked up. “Like before?”

“A little different, but yeah. Like that.”

“I would love that.”

He held out a hand. “I need to touch you.” He was thinking about how she felt when she let go of that iron control. He was seeing himself doing her when she was psychically open to him. In his imagination she wasn’t uptight or fastidious. She was hot and naked and totally wild for him. And all that magic was his. “Tell me if you have any problems. Okay?”

She leaned forward, squinting a little as she stretched to put her hand in his. Her skin was pale compared to his, her fingers warmer than he expected from a human woman. When she was upright, he took a step closer and released her hand. He pressed a fingertip to her forehead. Her eyes fluttered closed. She had some serious defenses. It was like trying to get through an iron wall.

“Relax.”

She pried open one eye. “This is relaxed.”

“Relax more.”

She did, and he made his connection. Like before, he kept himself blocked from her. She couldn't get to him, but he was open to her psychic state. No need to be subtle now about what he was doing. Her eyes flew open, wide, stark, and her pain lanced through him like it was being delivered by a semi.

Telos siphoned off the reaction as best he could, but her head was a river of pain. Aspirin wouldn't have done a goddamned thing for her. He ended up straddling her, one hand on the back of the couch, the palm of his other hand resting on her forehead while he bled out the agony.

Compared to a trained mage, her magic was stunted, but right now he was in direct contact, and he was bowled over by the way her power folded over and under and around itself. Stunted, but concentrated. He had a predictable reaction to that. Getting this close to her magic? Almost better than sex. Eventually, he released the link between them. “Better?”

She released a slow breath, looking at him through half-closed eyes. “Yes.” She touched his cheek. He didn't look away. Neither did she. His body had a stimulating reaction to that. “Thank you.”

He was aware of how close they were physically; only inches apart. That she was human and that his species was made to get in close like this. He took in the curve of her chest and the buttons down her blouse. She smelled like something flowery. This was probably a mistake, but then again, he had a hard time believing getting laid by a beautiful woman was ever wrong, so he stayed where he was, his thighs on either side of hers, his hands on the back of the couch.

“I'm not your type, Khūnbish.” She didn't move though. Interesting.

“The point, Fensic, is who / think is my type.”

She narrowed one eye at him. “Really?”

“You never once thought about doing it with me?” Right out there in the open. God, he hoped she said yes.

He got a glimpse of her smile, and it was really hot, seeing her smile that way. “You're awfully sure of yourself.”

“In a house this big, the neighbors won't hear a thing.”

She pushed herself straighter, and he leaned back a little. Not much. “I can’t have sex with you. Jesus.” She held her head in her hands. “Not now. Not when I’m having so much trouble with my control.”

“Did I ever tell you about my name?” When she was looking at him again, he said, “My Mongolian name.”

“Telos?”

“Khūnbish. It’s the kind of name parents give their kid if they want to keep the gods from noticing him. To avoid bad luck. My name’s like that, but for a different reason.”

“Yeah?”

He liked the way her eyes stayed on him. “Khūnbish translates to ‘not a human being.’ Roughly speaking.”

Her chest rose and fell while she processed that. “That’s a good name for you.”

“It’s accurate.” He brushed a fingertip over the soft skin along the side of her throat. Silky. Smooth human skin. She tilted her chin to get a better look at him. He moved his hands to her waist, thumbs in front, fingers around her sides. “Here’s the thing, Fensic. You don’t need to worry about control with me. Because I am not a human. I can keep your magic locked up tight while I do you any way you like it.” He smiled. “I like it dirty. How about you?”

CHAPTER 6

What little Lys had heard about demons had to be considered of dubious reliability. She knew that. Nevertheless, given what facts she did have, if they were even partially accurate, she ought to be terrified of Khūnbish. Except he wasn’t attacking her or taking over her will or doing any of the other horrific things demons supposedly couldn’t help doing to humans. She was afraid of Michael, and that said something. Afraid of the human. Not afraid of the demon.

He was watching her. “What?”

“I can’t decide if I don’t care what you are or if I’m just too stressed out

to worry about it.”

“Either way is good for me.” He laughed, low and sexy. The sound sent a shiver of arousal down to settle in her belly. Out of habit, she immediately shut herself off from the reaction. Not safe. She wasn’t safe with Telos Khūnbish. But what if he wasn’t safe with her?

She wasn’t in a good place right now. She stared anywhere but at Khūnbish. The room they were in had a fireplace at one end and a large television mounted on one wall. Most of the furniture was dark, like the sofa they were on. She closed her eyes, but that didn’t help at all. Eyes closed or open, he pressed in on her senses so thoroughly it hardly mattered if she could see him.

He was close enough that she could touch him if she wanted to. If she dared. She didn’t. Physically, he was large and all muscle. His stomach was flat, obvious even with his loose and untucked T-shirt. His arms bracketed her, closing her in, though she didn’t feel claustrophobic.

“Confession?” she said.

“That depends. Will it turn me on?”

“Jesus. What is with you? Stop it.”

“No.” He leaned over her. “Tell me all your kinky sex secrets, and I will make them come true.”

She eyed his chest and allowed herself the fantasy that it would be safe for her to touch him more than accidentally. What if she could? “I’ve always had a thing for a man who looks like he loves the gym more than he does people.”

“Sorry. I love women way more than the gym. Also, I never go to those places. Not necessary for me.”

She huffed a laugh. “I do like to look at you.” She lifted her gaze to his face. “I know that’s shallow of me.”

“Be as shallow as you want.” He moved in closer. “Touch me. I won’t bite.”

She wanted to. God, she wanted to. Experience said she and Khūnbish shouldn’t be this close. She ought to get away from him and keep herself in the familiar isolation that kept everyone safe. But she wasn’t reacting to

him the way she did around normal people or around Michael, and there were all these feelings she was having that she wasn't good at dealing with. At all. "I think that would be dangerous."

"I live for danger."

"I mean it." She fisted her hands. "It's not safe. Something physical between us."

"Fensic, what *am* I going to do with you?" His voice was pure honey, and she felt the effect all the way to all the parts of her that wanted to be penetrated.

"I don't know." She was back to eying his chest and the curve of his thighs and having more and more trouble remembering why this was a bad idea. He seemed so certain it wasn't. "What are you going to with me?"

"Suppose, just for a moment, that we could do it safely. Don't give me that look. Suppose, Fensic. Does it matter to you what I am?"

"No. No, it really doesn't." She lifted a hand to punctuate her statement, only she misjudged the distance between them. The backs of her fingers brushed his chest. Her breath caught and for a precious instant she was absolutely floored by the potential for sex. With Telos Khūnbish. Jesus. What if they could?

He glanced between them, casual, like there was no big deal with how close they were or that they were alone or that he wasn't human. The back of her hand thrummed with the physical echo of the unintended contact. She shoved away that profoundly agonizing reaction. "That feels good. When you touch me, and you react like that."

She made herself look at his face. His eyes were not normal. Orange and bronze flecks swirled in the deep black of his eyes. "Maybe it's different for you, but for me, hypothetical sex isn't satisfying. It's frustrating as hell."

He leaned closer. With more of his weight on his arms, the muscles of his upper arms bulged and flexed. "What do you say we get naked and see how much real world fun we can have?"

It was the way he said the words that rocked her, the way he was so sure this could happen. Instinctively, she kept herself blocked off. All those

disturbing reactions of hers got put into ice; observed but no longer felt. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only the ones I bring home.”

“Amusing.”

“Not really.” He stopped smiling. Just like that he was a thousand times more intense, and her blocks didn’t seem so invulnerable. “That’s not necessary, you doing that.” He touched her head. The contact turned into a caress she didn’t have the will to avoid. The reaction burned through her, melting the ice that kept her separate. Her arousal felt foreign at the same time every erogenous nerve she possessed went on overload. He drew a finger down her temple to her jaw. “You don’t have to live like this.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I hear Nikodemus has magekind who work with people like you. Street witches and mages who have problems with their magic.”

She forced herself not to react to anything. She spread her fingers flat on the sofa and concentrated on the fabric against her skin. Feeling nothing was familiar and safe, and right now she wasn’t safe. His finger reached her chin, only it wasn’t his fingertip that touched her but the back of his hand, and she fell further into disastrous arousal.

“We’ll call him and find out. After.”

“After what?” The moment the words left her mouth she got what he meant. What a stupid, boneheaded thing to say. She didn’t have much time to feel like an idiot, though.

He kissed her, hard and fast. After a stunned moment during which her brain was less useful than mush, she understood one thing: she wasn’t spinning out of control. Not even a glimmer of free fall. And she felt wonderful and frightened and terrifyingly good.

She tilted her chin toward him and let it happen. Tongues got involved. The immediacy of her physical reaction threatened to overwhelm her. She savored the feel of his mouth, the taste of him, the sandy scent, her sense of how much bigger he was than her. Reactions she barely recognized flowed through her. A river of desire that unsettled her at the same time she wanted more. More and more.

When he leaned back from that, his smile remained smug, and she didn't care. She really didn't. "After I fuck your brains out."

She brushed a finger over the stubble of his goatee, then filled her free hand with his black, black hair, and he dipped his head to make that easier for her. A little too late, she realized she'd obliterated what was left of the physical barrier between them. Verbal banter she could pretend was no big deal. Touching someone the way she was touching Khūnbish changed everything.

Then again, she wasn't getting even a flicker from him.

He moved his lower body closer to her, all that hard male flesh. He focused on her chest, and she had two opposite reactions: that his stare was both crude and unbearably arousing. He dragged his attention to her face, and the look was pure heat. She lifted her hand from the couch and set her palm on his upper chest. Nothing happened except between her legs. She ached for him there. She left her hand where it was. His smug grin broadened.

"I know you're keeping me out of your head, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't get through. Or that I wouldn't lose control."

"God, I hope so."

She pushed against his chest. Not very hard, though. "We have to be sure. Bad things happen when I lose control."

His grin was pure evil. "Lucky me."

"No. Not lucky you." She made a fist of her hand on his chest. My God, that was solid muscle under her hand. How, when he wasn't human? "You saw what happened to Jack. I lost it for a second, and now he's dead. Trust me, orgasms aren't good for me."

He frowned. "What, did you just lie there while Michael got himself off?"

"It wasn't like that." Still not a flicker from him. What if he was right? What if this was safe? With her other hand, she brushed his hair over his shoulder, but most of it fell back, cool against her fingers, sliding over her skin. "As long as I have control of myself, everything's okay. I can do the things he likes."

He kept scowling. "Did he know you were doing that?"

“Of course.”

“Fucking bastard.”

“We can be intimate without me having an orgasm.”

He pushed back enough that her hand fell away from his chest. He gaped at her. “Are you saying he didn’t get you off? Ever?”

“You don’t understand.” She disentangled her fingers from his hair, frustrated. Irritated. “We couldn’t risk me feeling much. It wouldn’t have been safe for him otherwise.”

“You just closed your eyes, is that what you’re saying?”

She shrugged. “It was the only time someone touched me more than accidentally.”

“Jesus, Fensic. That just isn’t right. It’s criminal, that’s what it is.”

“It had to be that way. Besides, men are very visual. Once they get to see you naked...”

He stilled and some of his smugness returned. “Does that mean I get to see you naked?”

“Khūnbish.”

“Fensic.” His muscles flexed some more. “Listen. We can do it without you needing to block yourself off. I won’t lie, I’m counting on you getting me off, but you can believe I’ll make it happen for you, too. You’ll feel when I touch you, I promise.” The rasp of his voice set off a whole new level of arousal. From the change in his eyes, he knew it, too. She wanted that to be true, more than anything. “Anything you want. Any way you want it.”

She brought her hands up and rested them on the curve of each biceps. Pure muscle. She got nothing from him, not even when she tried. Nothing happened. No bitter tang in her mouth, no images slamming into her head. The couch, which wasn’t small, now wasn’t nearly big enough. She whispered one of Michael’s pet phrases. “Demons deceive by their very nature.”

He gave her a decidedly dirty grin. Her stomach tightened. While she watched, he took off his flannel shirt and dropped it on the floor. His arms were cut. “He’s right in a way. And totally, entirely wrong.”

“What’s the lie, Khūnbish?” This time she didn’t cut herself off from her reactions. She let them flow through her, and she found out the sizzle underneath her skin felt good. So did the heaviness in her breasts and between her legs. She wanted him to touch her again, all those soft, gentle caresses. She wanted to know what it would feel like to be touched without being removed from herself.

“Complicated things are all kinds of gray. You know that. Demons and mages? That’s complicated. Demons and witches? Even more complicated.”

Lys gazed into his face, distracted by sensations she’d not permitted herself to feel except in the most distant way. “Michael says demons have a non-human form. Is that true?”

The way his body tensed and the flicker in his eyes made her wonder if he’d prefer to avoid the truth. “You humans. So tied to one form.” He tipped his chin at her and clapped a hand to his chest. “This is real. As real as my other forms.”

“What else do you look like?”

A smile of sly invitation curved his mouth, a dark and inviting look that made her sex throb. “A fucking monster.”

“Be serious.” She curled her fingers harder around his arm. Solid. Real. Warm.

“I am. You want to do a monster, we can do that. Whatever gets you off is good with me.”

Her mind clicked back to a state of cold unfeeling, and that felt safe. She knew how to deal with him when she was like this. “What gets you off?”

“Since you ask, human women get me off every time.” He moved from his straddle and sat next to her. She forced herself not to drag him back. But he moved close. Close enough that his side pressed against hers. He leaned in, and his smile was all about sex. His attention wandered in a long, slow perusal of her body that stripped away the barriers between her and the world. One elbow on the top of the couch, with his free hand, he popped a button of her shirt. “I love sex with human women.” His gaze flicked over her again. “I think I need sex with you. I really do.”

“So you do deceive.” She put her palm where his heart ought to be.

Must be there, because she felt it beating. Was that part of the illusion? Or was there really a heart there? She pushed against his chest, gently. “Do you tell your partners what else you are?”

“Hell no,” he said in his whiskey and smoke voice. “If I did that, I might never get laid.”

“That scary?”

“How many people have you told about your thing?” He tapped a finger to her head. “Besides, where’s the lie? This is exactly what I look like in my human form.”

She shifted her legs, and he looked over her body again. One of his hands settled on her upper thigh. Out of habit, she closed herself off from the shiver of arousal.

“Hey,” he said in a low voice. “I told you. That’s not necessary.” He fingered the next button of her blouse, a motion that forced her to drop her hand from his chest. “You know it’s true. Stop fighting it. You know we’ll be good together.” He reached around her and unfastened her hair clip, then ran his fingers through it. “There,” he said softly. “You’re not the ice queen anymore. Not that I don’t like that, but you’re even hotter like this.”

His hand curved over her thigh, and she looked down. His fingers were long with blunt but perfect nails. They weren’t manicured, but his nails were strong and even, without a single blemish. His hand was not soft or gentle-looking. Her breath got short when he moved his hand to her bare skin underneath her skirt. She sucked in air as he searched higher.

He looked human, but he wasn’t. Not at all.

He reached the top of her thigh, and she spread her legs enough for him to cup her. No one, no one ever had touched her there without her being emotionally shut down. Such a casual touch, a gentle pressure and then his finger sliding along her there, pressing against her underwear, and she was nearly out of her mind with the tension.

She blocked it out. All of it. The surge of desire. The tension. Everything receded into frost.

“Don’t do that.” He curled his other hand around her head and pulled her toward him. “I want to make you come so hard you scream my name.”

She met his gaze, with the swirling colors drifting through the black. “I don’t know how.”

“We’ll practice. Until you get it perfect.”

He kissed her. His mouth touched hers and there was no pain streaking through her head, no loss of connection with the physical world, no taste of bitter metal. She couldn’t remember what it was like to kiss a man like this. There was tongue involved again, and she was melting.

He pulled back, but his hands stayed where they were, one on her thigh, the other at the back of her head. “That was nice,” he said. “Really nice. More?”

“How do you do that? Keep me from reacting to you?”

He set himself to unbuttoning her blouse. “This form looks human. I’ve been passing for years. But I’m not human.” He grinned at her, so cocky. He touched the middle of his forehead. “We can fuck like bunnies and nothing happens except one of us gets tired. And it won’t be me.”

She laughed at the absurd image. Her fingers gripped his arm, and his smile was slow and wicked.

“I need your permission for this.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to run afoul of the warlord who controls this territory. There’s rules about how things have to happen when a human knows what we are. If I wanted to, I could take control of your mind. I won’t do that. But the risk is there.”

“Possession, you mean?”

“No. But I could do that, too. If you gave permission. But that isn’t what I want from you.” He leaned in and licked the side of her throat. She held back a groan. “What I want from you is hot sex. You and me naked and maybe”—he drew back and tapped the side of his head—“a little of this going on. If you say it’s okay.”

She nodded. “Informed consent.”

“Say the words.”

“It’s okay.” She breathed in and lowered her defenses.

“Relax.” He pressed his finger to her forehead.

“I can’t.”

“You can.” His eyes changed color. Not black but bronze and gold. “Anything you want.” He curled his hand around hers and brought her fingers to just beneath his lower lip. She picked out her reactions, examining each one. The heat that transferred from his hand to her fingers, the anticipation of his muscled body and what his bare skin would feel like. The way her body quivered with want. He whispered, like smoke and whiskey. “Any way you want it.”

The tension in her weighed down her eyelids so that she could only open them slowly. When she did, he was staring at her chest with eyes that were worlds away from normal. In the dimness of the room, she spread her fingers over his shoulders. Muscles flexed and bunched under her fingers.

The color of his eyes shifted again. “I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

“I thought you wanted me to be bad.”

“Can you do that for me?”

She nodded.

Khūnbish unfastened a few more buttons of her shirt, and a shiver spread from her breasts to her belly. She let it happen.

CHAPTER 7

Lys’s hands fell to her sides because she didn’t know how to process her body’s reactions. Khūnbish was so close, her left hand landed on his thigh, well above his knee. The curve of his muscled thigh set off a whole new set of reactions in her, and she froze up. After so many years living with the guilt of what happened when she lost control, she couldn’t let go anymore. Not the way he wanted.

Khūnbish sat back, but kept a finger hooked in her blouse. “Are you okay?”

She was momentarily lost in the features of his face, the black hair, the

planes and angles of his cheeks. The shape of his eyes and mouth. She tried to let go of her blocks again, and even half-assed success let her feel enough of her arousal to be astonished. Was that sexual hunger really hers? Jesus, she'd let Khūnbish do anything he wanted as long as he could make her feel like this. As long as he'd be safe.

“Fensic?”

The rasp of his voice curled inside her, and she imagined what it would be like to hear him whisper her name during that first push when she was accepting him inside her, and her body was wound even tighter than this. He shifted beside her, and his thigh bunched and released under her hand. She tightened her fingers, and more colors flecked his eyes. “I’m okay.”

“Good to know.” He went back to unbuttoning her blouse. Every now and then one of his fingers brushed the bare skin of her stomach, lower each time. With more effort than she liked, she relaxed her mind and took stock of her physical state. Her breasts felt amazingly heavy. Each breath made her long for him to cup her, hold her, make her nipples peak. She flashed on an image of him taking her in his mouth and that just about did her in again. She sank deeper into sensations she’d only ever felt at a remove.

He drew a finger over the exposed upper curve of her breast, above her bra, and her skin leapt with tiny quivers that followed the contact and made her wish for more. Much more. His eyes swirled with trails of color again, orange amid the bronze and gold. “Have I told you how hot you are? Because you are. Really hot.”

She loved his voice, the way that smokey edge wound around her. So different from the way he sounded when they were just business and trial prep. She pressed her hands flat to his chest while he reached under her skirt again, both hands this time, up high. He hooked his fingers into the top of her underwear. All the breath in her body stopped while she fought to stay present.

He tugged, and she lifted her hips to let him drag her panties down her thighs. She was actually letting this happen. She was slick. Aroused. Heavy between her legs, and it was the most amazing thing for her to feel the immediacy of her sexual arousal. He watched her from under half-

lidded eyes as he moved so he could slide her underwear all the way off her. She sucked in a breath. Her body thrummed with arousal, a deep, sensual ache that lived inside her. When his fingers brushed up her legs, she panicked and without warning her icy remove snapped on.

The emotion of her failure tangled up in her throat. She was going to fall apart if this kept up. Part of her was perversely relieved because her closed-off state was familiar, but the loss of her connection to her body was excruciating.

She sucked in a shaky breath when Khūnbish pressed his palm to the side of her head. He didn't look angry or annoyed, but then she didn't really know what he was like. Aside from her few disastrous encounters when she was still a teen, her only sexual experiences had been with Michael. Sterile. Emotionless for her. Not a fair comparison for anyone.

"Hey, my smoking hot little street witch. Come back." The fingers of his other hand trailed upward from her stomach, over her bra to her upper chest. She swallowed hard and managed to release some of that automatic hold over herself. The sizzle came back, beckoning at the same time it set off alarms. He leaned in. "It's been a bad couple of days for you, I know." His eyes flicked down to her cleavage. "I can help you with that. The trouble you're having."

"How?"

"Let me make a connection." With one finger, he tapped her temple. "Here."

She froze again. "You mean take over."

"No." He hesitated. "I could. But I don't mean that. I mean you let me in here." He tapped her temple again, but she was distracted by his thigh pressing against hers and the fact that her underwear was somewhere on the floor. "If it doesn't help, I'll stop, okay? I promise."

In Michael's view of the world, Khūnbish was lying in order to get control of her will because that's what demons did. The question was, did she buy into the paranoia, or did she trust the man who'd damn near lost his freedom in order to help her? She moved away from all that ice. "Okay."

"This will be fucking amazing."

She felt a presence in her head. A pressure. The sensation wasn't

unpleasant. It didn't hurt, and it didn't do anything to whatever was wrong inside her head. Khūnbish, however, loomed large, not just physically now, but also in his impact on her senses. Incredible. She touched a hand to his cheek and this time the panic stayed in the distance.

He let his eyes fall closed and then breathed in. When he opened them again, there was nothing but gold-tinted bronze. He touched her, and she stayed present. Such warm fingers along her skin. Every caress sent a shiver of arousal through her to settle between her legs. He slipped off her pumps, one then the other. When he came back, he stood and pulled her to her feet, bringing her close. His hands cupped her ass and kept her tight against him, her curves against his muscled body. No question he felt like an aroused human male. She didn't get as much as a mental peep from him. She couldn't see even a glimpse of his future, and it was such a relief. Such a blessed relief.

Telos put his mouth by her ear and pressed a kiss there, then a flick of his tongue at the side of her throat. She let her head fall back, and he kissed her harder. Hard enough that maybe tomorrow she'd have a hickey like some high school girl with her first boyfriend. She melted against him.

"Yes," he whispered. "I have wanted this for a long time, Fensic."

She was going to go up in flames and feel every minute of it. His hands skimmed the backs of her thighs, very high up. She slid her hands underneath his T-shirt. His skin was smooth. Alive beneath her fingers. He felt good.

He let go of her to grab the bottom of his shirt and yank it over his head. His torso was just as cut as she'd guessed. He kicked off his shoes and while she watched, he braided his hair into a partial queue he left hanging down his back. He didn't have much body hair. Just smooth, brown skin over a lot of muscle. Skin without a single blemish. No moles, no scars, no scratches or birthmarks. His physical perfection was eerie.

His jeans went next, underwear in the same motion. If it hadn't been for that sense of him in her head she might have panicked again. He took a step back and stood with his hands at his sides.

He was naked. Telos Khūnbish was standing in front of her completely naked, and he was gorgeous and looking at her in a way that brought on another set of butterflies in her belly. This was happening. She was going

to have sex without having to insulate herself from all sensation.

She made a turning motion with one hand and, with a wicked smile, he turned for her. He took his time. He was more elegantly made than she'd imagined. There was length to his limbs, despite the well-developed musculature. On his back were two vertical rows of symbols inked in black. Most of the symbols she didn't know but she recognized some as Hebrew. He finished his turn.

She moved to one side of him and touched the markings on his back. Still present. Still feeling. "What's the tat?"

"Angel script."

"On a demon?"

He flashed a grin. His penis was erect and a damned impressive sight. "Good joke, if you ask me."

"Hilarious." It was freeing not to have to concentrate on blocking out what her body was feeling. It felt wicked and new and dangerous. Unreal.

He went to work on her blouse again. He got to the last button and dipped his head to kiss her. His mouth opened over hers and demanded that she feel pleasure. And she did. She accepted her reaction without worrying about sliding into insanity.

The tenderness of his kiss made her weak-kneed with lust. He separated the halves of her blouse, and she put her arms behind her to undo the buttons at her cuffs. By then he'd pushed her blouse off her shoulders. She let the silk fall to the floor. Her skin flushed hot as he stared at her.

"Beautiful." He slipped his fingers under the straps of her bra. Attention on her torso, he ran his fingers several times from the front to the tops of her shoulders before he reached around and unhooked her bra. He drew it from her, and then he touched her.

She closed her eyes, concentrating on the way he touched her. The way her breasts tightened, the hardening of her nipples and the rippling shiver of arousal that shot straight to her underwear-free zone. In her head, she saw him over her, felt him inside her, felt his skin hot over hers, and there was only her anticipation.

He went for the waistband of her skirt next. Since her skirt was lined, she wasn't wearing a slip. After it hit the floor, she kicked it aside. His gaze lingered at her breasts, hands following from there to her waist and then along her hips. The heat in his eyes shook her, the newness of him, of Telos Khūnbish touching her like this. She never wanted to forget this.

It occurred to her that she could touch him, too. She put a hand on his chest, following the midline of his body, and ended up with her hand around his penis. "Condom," she said. "Tell me you have a condom somewhere in this house."

His lips were parted, his pelvis tipped toward her hand. He drew a finger downward from the top of her throat along the midline of her torso, right to the top of her sex. "I don't have diseases the way you humans do. We don't transmit them to you, you don't transmit them to us."

"There's other reasons to use condoms. I'm not on any birth control."

"If I were human, that would be a problem." His eyes remained fully bronze, but flecks of gold moved in them. "But I'm not. When I'm in this form, I'm not fertile." He backed up to the couch, bringing her with him until she ended up on her back. She wanted this. Him. His penetration. He joined her. "I'll wear one if that's what you want, but I'm not trying to pass for human with you, and that means I don't have to pretend a condom matters. You're not going to get any diseases, and you can't get knocked up." He stretched over her. "As long as I'm in this form we can do this bareback."

She buried her fingers in his hair. His hair slid over her skin, thick and heavy. "And if you're not in this form?"

"Are you trying to drive me crazy? I would love to do you like that." He set his mouth to the top of her throat, near her ear, and kissed her there. "If I change"—he dropped a kiss on her collarbone—"if that were to happen tonight, you need to understand a few other things. Just in case."

"Such as?"

"I'm fertile in my other forms." He slid a hand around the back of her neck and came in for a kiss. His teeth nipped. "We procreate with humans. That's how it works for us. Doesn't matter if you're on birth control. And a condom isn't likely to work. It's good when I'm like that, better than

anything.” He practically growled as he pushed up enough to look into her face. He was dead serious. “If you want to go there, I’ll take you. I’d change back in time, but there’s never any guarantee with that. So understand this: we take care of our children. If we went that far and you ended up pregnant, you aren’t going to end up alone with a kid.”

Words bubbled up from deep inside her, regret-tinged words, words that brought back a sorrow she thought she’d buried long ago. “I’ve always wanted children. Always.”

“Do not say that. Hell, Fensic. Don’t. Not unless you mean it.” While he spoke, he touched her, deliberate touches that made her wonder how anyone survived this kind of pleasure.

“Doesn’t matter.” The words ended on a gasp because his first two fingers brushed the peak of her nipple. She felt that everywhere, it seemed, but she stayed in the right now. Right here, nothing but greedy lust for more. “Whatever is wrong with me affects me physically, too. I can’t have children.”

“Famous fucking last words.”

She put her hands on his shoulders and marveled at the smoothness of his skin. “Eight years with Michael. No protection. No kids.”

“It’s totally different with us.” His eyes flickered when he adjusted his pelvis. “I can’t wait to prove it to you.” Their naked skin touched, his sex hard against her belly. Sparks flew between them; she was sure he felt them, too. The tension was going to break her into pieces. He rocked against her.

“Touch me, Khūnbish. Please.”

A grin spread slowly across his face. “Where? Where should I touch you?”

She bowed against him, and he let his weight settle onto her. “Your favorite part, damn you.”

“Well.” His gaze traveled downward. “I love your tits.” He shifted his weight partially onto one arm and with the other cupped the side of her breast, his thumb curved around the inner curve. He took her nipple between his lips. His tongue slid around her, upward. She arched against him, following the pull of his mouth. Panic lapped at her, but then her

sense of Khūnbish got bigger and that pushed away the anxiety.

She concentrated on all the places where his body made contact with hers, the ways in which her body experienced pleasure. She writhed underneath him, shifting her hips because she was ready for him to be inside her. His teeth closed on her nipple and that about sent her over the edge. He lifted his head enough to make eye contact. His tongue came out and slicked over her nipple. Still looking at her, he took her nipple between his teeth and gently bit.

She gasped. Underneath her palms, his muscles flexed, and she didn't have to pretend it wasn't happening. More colors raced through his pupils. His hips shifted and one of his knees slid between her thighs. Butterflies filled her belly, dipping and swooping. Anticipating his entry, she lifted her hips toward him and felt every shiver of her arousal, the glide of his palm along her side and the way his skin slipped along hers, the shift of his thumb over the curve of her breast, his breath, the dry, sandy scent of him. She put her hands on the back of his shoulders, and he buried his fingers in her hair and nipped the side of her throat, the top of her shoulder. While he did that, his hips flexed forward, and his penis was at her entrance.

He lifted his head and their eyes met, and oh, God, the slide of him into her made everything vanish except physical sensation. He paused while she adjusted to him, because, damn, he was bigger than Michael and all of this was new to her, feeling with such intensity what was happening to her. Not an atom of her existence wasn't focused on him inside her, the way her body took him in. She lived every single moment. He let out low groan, and their gazes locked.

"Fuck, yes." He dipped his head and kissed her while he drew slowly back. His queue fell over his shoulder and onto hers. She ran her hands down his back to his ass, round and taut with muscle. His hips flexed forward, pressing his cock deep inside her. Every nerve she possessed was centered on their joining, on her arousal. She couldn't possibly last long.

His eyes flashed through shades of bronze and gold, flecked with orange. The colors weren't any more normal than the rapid change from swirling color to normal black. From human to not human. His hips drew back, and her hands tightened on him. Wanting him became unbearable. "Please."

He pushed forward, and she met the motion, felt the slide of him into her and the pressure, how she was wet for him. He kept moving until he was as far in her as possible, and while he did that, his mental presence increased, too, and she accepted that. She welcomed it, even, because it meant she could rock against him, seek the friction of his body against and inside hers. She was alive. Alive in her body, experiencing the zing of her aroused state.

Wordless now, they moved with each other. The heft of him inside her kept her on the edge of an orgasm that threatened to overwhelm her. Too much and at the same time not enough. At one point he dropped his head to her shoulder. He fit his mouth over the curve of her there, up near her throat.

He withdrew from her.

“No.” She grabbed him. “Please.”

“Wait.” He slid down her body, his mouth over her, pausing at each breast, and then between her legs, and it was shameful how fast she reached her breaking point. He laughed when she called him an awful name, and it was a joyous sound that echoed back through her.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled them both to the floor so that she was on her knees, her forearms on the couch and him behind her, parting the folds of her body, entering her again. Hard. Moving as hard as she needed.

Her sense of him increased, his groan vibrated in her ears, in her chest, the sounds of their bodies, their breath, the hard expiration of breath at each thrust. His barely human growl vibrated in her ears and slid down her spine and wrapped around her heart. The hot, hard spiral of climax began, and he continued to thrust into her, and she adjusted herself so he'd hit all the most sensitive places. He got what she was doing, too, because he hit all those places on his own, higher, better, faster, holding her hips.

Then he did something, or her body just reached a point where there was nothing but the clench of completion. He was slamming into her now, and she let go. She let all of this happen. The only thing she wanted right now was to fall off the cliff, to get to the end of the peak she was rushing toward. He put a hand between her legs and pressed, and she rocked into

that and came apart.

When it was over, when she was back to earth, he leaned over her, a hand cupping her breast, and said, "I'm not done with you yet."

CHAPTER 8

Telos was in a state of physical and psychic bliss. He could stay like this forever. He was inside Lys Fensic's warm, slick passage, so soft and snug around his cock. He held her close against his chest, that incredible ass of hers right up against his pelvis. They both smelled like sex.

Eventually his perceptions broadened. For example, he was aware he could definitely do this again. For another, he was feeling her humanness and really feeling his lack of same, and that was good. Add in that he didn't have to bother with passing for human, and his life was great. Fucking amazing, actually.

He brushed her hair off her nape and, with his fingers threaded in all that gorgeous blonde, he nipped the tender skin at the base of her skull. He pushed into her again and got another tingle from his fading orgasm. He didn't want to let go. The knife-edge of his desire wove through his impressions about what he was and what she was. In the back of his head was her curiosity about his other forms. Now that cranked him something fierce.

His dick was still hard, but he pulled out of her and turned her to face him. They did a little dance as they rearranged themselves. She sank onto the floor, a hand on his shoulder, breathing hard and still a bit lost in her post-orgasmic state. He was far enough into her head, and she was distracted enough that if he wanted to, he could go after her thoughts and find out exactly how curious she was about him. He didn't.

She blinked several times, and he allowed her reactions to flow into him. Savored them. A shudder rolled through him as his impulse to change forms surged. He braced his hands on the edge of the couch on either side of her, bracketing her with his bent legs, too. "Good?"

Her eyelids flicked up, and he connected with her gaze, pretty dark blue eyes. She was naked. After all this time thinking about her, he had her

naked. Beautiful, long legs, a neat trim at her pubes, and breasts that got him thinking bad thoughts again.

“Yeah.” Her fingers tightened on the top of his shoulder. “Really good.”

She stretched, and hell if that didn't send his mind rocketing along in fascinating directions. With her hair down and her lips swollen from kissing him and all that naked skin, he wanted to do the whole thing over, only faster and harder, and maybe sweeter, too. She gave him a wicked dirty smile and curled a hand around his dick. Because he was in her head and not currently distracted by his own carnal needs, he felt her reaction to her contact with his dick, and it turned him on.

He pushed upward. “You want more, I'm ready.”

“Is it always like that?”

Jesus. She was a grown woman, yet she'd been so fucked over by the mage that she really didn't know what sex was like. Thinking about all the ways the mage had been screwing her over made him mad all over again. He considered lying and didn't. “No. It's not.” He pressed a fingertip to her forehead. “This makes it even better.”

“Yeah?”

“Right now our connection is one way, from me into you.” The hell with being careful and circumspect about the goddamned rules. “If it was two-way, you'd blow my mind. I think it would do the same for you.” God, he loved the way her eyes searched his face, and he loved the way she felt mentally. The burn of her magic was yet another turn on for him. “I can show you what that's like.”

She had some trouble focusing, and not because she was having control issues. “How?”

He was crossing a line with her, he knew it, and it was a rush just thinking about it. “I'd take a little of your blood. Just a nick someplace.” Or a bite, he thought. “You say a couple of words, take some of my blood, and we make a psychic connection that lets you in my head.” Thinking about doing her with a two-way link was potent stuff. All this time, he realized, he'd been rocking his pelvis, fucking her hand. He looked down, and she tightened her fingers around him the perfect amount. “New feelings—oh, hell, Fensic, you're good at that—new sensations. And

besides, you didn't scream my name loud enough that time." He pushed up again. "I think I need to make that happen."

"Is that so?"

"Come on," he said in a low voice. Life just didn't get better than this. He had a naked woman in his house, and she had her hand around his dick, hair all tousled and falling around her shoulders and a body that just didn't quit. And he was in her head, about to find out what it was like to cross lines while he got laid. "Let's get wild. What do you say, Counselor?"

She brought her hand down, gave some wicked-evil twist of her thumb and gripped him hard on her upward motion. "I agree. You do need to try a little harder."

"I will. I promise I will."

"All right then, Khūnbish. Let's see what you can do."

He cupped the back of her neck and kissed her hard, mouth open, lots of tongue.

Maybe it was a mistake to let himself transform even a little, but it was only enough to get a sharp edge on a fingernail. Besides, it felt good. Really, really good. Even that small change was enough to thin the barrier between his human and non-human forms, and it was great, fantastic, mind-blowing, to know it didn't matter because he didn't need to pass for her. He grabbed her hand, the one that wasn't around his dick, and nicked the crook of her elbow. She sucked in a breath, and he wrapped his other hand around the one on his cock and kept her going.

He pulled his magic through him and the way that resonated with hers was better than good. He tightened his fingers around her arm, and his anticipation thinned the barrier even more. The taste of her was sweeter than he expected, sweeter than he remembered from past experience. But then he'd never done this while he was getting a hand job, either. She did that thing with her thumb again, and her fingers swept down to slide over his sac. It was like she was pulling an orgasm out of his balls.

He lifted his mouth from her arm, and already he was deeper in her head, closer to that twisted up magic she had. "Dirty and hard, Fensic. That's how I like it."

The smile she gave him came with a big dose of her emotional state.

She was turned on almost as much as he was. Still holding her arm, he grabbed the back of her head and hardly had to bear down at all because she got that he wanted her mouth. She blew his mind, too. Didn't take her but two minutes to make him come, and while he did, he got deeper into her.

He kept his fingers tangled in her hair when she sat up. "I want you in my head. Now." He captured her chin in his hand and swept his thumb across her lips. "For that we need the blood bond I told you about. That takes some magic. You ready?"

"Yes." Her eyes were big and nearly all pupil.

He told her the words she needed to say. She said them, and he opened a cut at the side of his throat, just above his collar bone. "Hell yeah," he whispered when she put her mouth there. The pull went directly to his cock.

As soon his blood hit her tongue, the two-way connection jumped to life. He wished she'd bite a little harder. She went still when she realized she was getting his thoughts and feelings. He waited for her to adjust to how they were now. She bit him again. Harder. The way he wanted her to.

Desire flashed hot. Sexual desire, sure, but more than that. His species had evolved to reproduce with humans, and that instinct flooded him, drove him. Practically drowned him. He let her see and feel what he wanted them to do to each other. She lifted her head.

"Jesus, Telos," she whispered.

"You have to say yes." He was frantic for a yes. She wanted to know. He wanted her to know. "You have to say you're okay with me doing you in my other form or it can't happen."

"Yes. I am okay with that."

"It might get rough. And since I'm here"—her sense of him in her head increased—"that means I could make you do things you don't want to."

"Could or will?"

"Could." He rubbed his chin. "Could. Not will."

She sat up enough to kiss him on the mouth. A quick pressure.

"You sure? You have to answer yes or no, or I can't." He could, of

course. That was the crux of the troubles between demons, humans, and the magekind. A demon could always take a human against her will. It's why, centuries ago, the magekind had started killing demons. It's why the warlord was enforcing the rules against that. While he hadn't formally aligned himself with Nikodemus, he wasn't keen on running afoul of him. Word was he had assassins to make sure everyone played fair.

"Yes."

He stood, bringing her with him. "I want a bed for this."

He almost didn't turn on lights in his bedroom since he was halfway to a transformation that made his vision preternaturally acute, but he clicked on the lamp by the bed and turned it to face the wall. He fell back on his mattress. She came with him, and he set his hands around her waist and lifted her up. She was so gorgeously naked, and he was going to do things with her he hadn't done with anyone in years. Decades.

She knew what he was going for. She bent down and braced herself on his shoulders while he pushed inside her, and the friction felt so good, she was so soft inside that he vibrated with the need for more. He let her take in what it was he wanted them to do.

Her hair fell around her face as she bent closer. "Show me."

He withdrew from her body before he let the transformation happen. His senses became sharper, his body bigger. The texture of his skin changed to something more like soft hide. His body turned color; bronze, gold and black. He took on more mass, larger torso, longer limbs, and his skin, his hide, burned hotter. He was the monster he'd promised her.

Quiet covered them. Deep and wide and while she kept the silence, Telos didn't move but for the expansion of his chest as he breathed. They remained touching, hide to skin. In the quiet, her mind stayed unrestrained. It would be so easy to take control of her. Make her his so he could do whatever he wanted to.

Slowly, she raised a knee, let it fall to one side while she arched toward him.

A low growl came from his throat. He got them missionary, and he fucked her hard, and she answered the need in him. Sex like this was better than he remembered. All that twisted-around and convoluted magic

of hers aroused him beyond belief. Her humanness intensified all his reactions. He went harder, giving into his need, and once he understood she was okay with him getting rough, he used his size and weight, too.

His mind went out ahead of where he was at this moment, and it was like catching a wave, there was no stopping the momentum. He'd spent so long passing for human, so much time in his human form, that he hit peaks he'd forgotten existed. He reached for that core of magic in her, and he could touch it. Bathe in it. He pried open his eyes, and she was looking at him, cupping a hand to a face that couldn't possibly look right to her, and her eyes were a well, deep and intimate. Her belly pressed against him, her breasts were soft and there just wasn't much about her that wasn't exactly what he craved.

And the magic. How the hell had she managed to survive with any part of her sanity intact? She ought to have died coming into that kind of power with no one to help her learn how to control it. He worked one hand underneath her shoulder, careful not to hurt her with a talon, and her magic was there for him. Right here, and even if he wanted to he might not be able to take it all in. She knew what he wanted, and turned her head, exposing her throat to him. He fit his mouth there and bit down hard enough for his teeth to draw blood and give him a deeper taste of her.

Her sharp intake of breath was sweet in his ears. She fell deeper into his head as the tang of her blood spread over his tongue, and, for a moment, he couldn't see a thing. Then there was this weird moment when he thought about how he could bind her to him permanently, and, in his head, in their shared mental space, he could see it happening like he was watching a movie, except he was immersed in it. Living it. She was his, and he was fucking her in this form, coming in her.

And then he was back in the present, the now, and he was hard inside her, thrusting with his emotions closer to the edge because, for him, this was starting to be mostly about the imperative to procreate. He withdrew because he was too close, and she turned onto her side, breathing hard. She ran her palm over him, over his face, his back, his torso, and then she gave him head, which he already knew she was really good at. He wanted his dick inside her so bad, he didn't let her go for long.

With the blood-enhanced link they had going, they couldn't tell whether words or thoughts were uttered or merely accessible through their

connection. Didn't care much, either. He sat her on the edge of the mattress, slid to the floor on his knees, between her legs, and he used his mouth on her, sliding, sucking, touching until she was shaking. His ice-queen was hot. Unbelievably hot. He was enveloped by her reactions, and it was natural for him to ramp it up for them both. The sex turned raw and his magic hooked deeper into her because his very nature when he was like this was to kickstart her reproductive physiology.

What he needed was to be pounding into her, making her scream while he had a mind-blowing climax. He wouldn't be remotely human when it happened, either. He forced himself to push away from her and wait for the edge to fade. He was jumpy with the need to nail her.

"Stop it." She grabbed his arm and pulled him toward her. "Stop holding back."

"Lys—"

"I know what you told me." She took his face between her hands, and, hell, she was naked, and he was all wrapped up in her head, and she was in his. She knew what he saw and how he felt about it; her sleek body, her hair down around her shoulders, pale skin slick with sweat, the scent of her. She knew what he felt, what he was thinking, that he wanted her hard and rough and under his control. "You were very clear about the risks."

With a growl, he flipped her onto her back again, and she shouted when he slammed into her. She held him while he pumped hard and fast, and she didn't have any trouble keeping up. She even knew when to turn her head to the side to expose her throat for him again. More blood from the nick he'd made there the first time. Hot and sweet, tangy.

They did it hard, fast, and dirty, and she was just amazingly good. They were amazingly good together. They were so tightly linked psychically he could hardly tell whose reactions belonged to whom. One of them screamed when she came, and it rolled through him, too. His talons sliced into the bed covers and she was in his head, connected with him, and her magic pulled at him because she wasn't blocking anything.

He dropped into that weird mental space where he wasn't in the present any more. He was in some kind of free fall that felt damn close to bliss.

His magic spreads through her, changes something in her, changes

him. When he comes, it's overwhelming for her. She calls out. His name. His name and when she finishes shuddering with her climax, he's still in his other form.

Back in his head, hers? He had to work at controlling himself, and making sure he was aware enough to change back before it was too late. Not yet, though. Not yet. She wrapped her long legs around him, up high around his hips, meeting him thrust for thrust, and the release that had been building hit them both, blew them away in a gut-wrenching, breath-stealing orgasm that turned them inside out. He went deep into her magic and let the storm roll over them.

When he could breathe again, her arms were tight around his shoulders, her legs wrapped tight around his hips. He had a hand on her ass, holding her against him. He was still changed. Not even remotely human. He'd come inside her. No protection, not that it would have mattered. No change back to human.

The hell of it was, he was up for doing it again, and she knew it and wanted that astonishing, doubled, mind-bending climax as much as he did. She needed what that bastard Michael had denied her all this time. She blinked a couple of times, and arched her hips against him. More. Again.

He shifted into another form and they did it again, missionary because he had wings in this form. Slower this time, sweeter even, so that when he knew he was perilously close, he wasn't expecting to be annihilated the way they had been before. He expected that this time he would be able to change back before it was too late. He believed it to his core. But he didn't change. Couldn't. Didn't want to. What they were doing answered something in her, gave her something she needed. She took just as much as he gave. Or maybe it was the other way around.

Eventually, he withdrew from her and let his body return to his human form so he could lie on his back, though their psychic connection stayed in place. He was boneless with pleasure. Sated. He took her hand and pressed it to his chest. "You need to move in here."

After a bit, when she might still have been recovering, she said, "Not a good idea."

"You should be here when you have my kid."

She turned onto her side and cupped his face before she leaned in to kiss him. “I don’t think—”

Telos lifted his head, concentrating on the change in his proofing.

Lys frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“You need to get dressed. Right now.”

Apparently, Michael had a talented tracker.

CHAPTER 9

Telos stood in the center of his living room with all kinds of wrong flowing through him. His skin crawled. The silence felt wrong. Too quiet in the house, way too quiet outside. Michael was out there, no question about that. He was probably still high on copa and hyped from his earlier kill. The ritual murder of a demon would have added to the mage’s power.

To one side of him, Lys fastened the last buttons of her blouse. She kicked her pumps under the couch. Smart. Great looking shoes, but a bitch for her if she had to run, and potentially in the way if she left them there. Deftly, she slicked back her hair and refastened it in her clip. She grabbed her purse, took out her ID, some bank cards and cash, and shoved her bag into one of the cubby holes in his entertainment center. She headed for him.

“Hold still.” She stuffed the items from her purse into the back pocket of his jeans and gave his ass a pat. “Keep it safe, will you?”

With a crack like ice breaking, one of the hundreds of carved wooden medallions that made up his early warning system snapped in half.

Beside him, Lys went still. “What was that?”

“Company.” He pointed at the cracked medallion. “They react to our kind, yours and mine, who don’t have permission to be in my house. When they break like that, it means my company isn’t waiting for an invitation to come in.”

“Michael.”

He grunted. Another of the medallions cracked. For about ten seconds,

he considered locking Lys in the server room with a pile of blankets to keep her warm, but if he did that and Michael got to him, she wouldn't be safe no matter where she was. If he got taken alive, she was fucked. If he got killed, they'd eventually find her, and she'd be trapped. Same result.

"Plan?"

He walked to the window and took a look outside. He didn't see anyone out there but that didn't mean much. Another of his wards cracked. He glanced at the line of medallions around the perimeter of his ceiling. Several of the carved faces were no longer smiling. One was frozen in a scream. His pulse sped up. Michael wasn't playing around. With this proofing going off like this, there had to be more than just one or two magehelds. Plus the tracker good enough to have found them this fast.

"We call for help." He pulled out his phone and brought up the contact he'd sent to Lys. He'd known for the last year or more he couldn't stay unaffiliated much longer. This bullshit with Michael was only pushing a decision he'd already made. He was fine with that. From what he'd heard, there were worse warlords to tie himself to than Nikodemus.

"Are you calling the police?"

"Nikodemus." Telos kept one eye on the window. "Get the lights. Leave that one on. In the corner there. Kill the rest."

Lys found the wall switch and flicked the lights off. On the other end of the call, a woman answered the phone, and that wasn't right. He was about to disconnect when the woman said, "I represent Nikodemus."

Telos said, "That so?"

"Yeah." Short and assured.

"Who is this?"

"Carson Phillips."

"The warlord's witch?" Not just a representative of the warlord. More like his damned other half.

There was a brief silence. "Yes." He didn't give a shit if she was pissed off. "What can I do for you?"

"I need some help here," he said into the phone. He shifted his weight between his feet. A warlord who didn't protect his own wouldn't last long.

The question was how diligently he'd protect someone who wasn't sworn to him.

"Free kin?"

"For now." He felt a world of understanding in the silence that followed, and that went a long way toward making him think he did have the right person on the phone.

"Can I get a name?"

He went back to the window as he gave Carson his name. The woman whistled softly. "Honor to hear from you." Then she was all business. "Situation?"

He looked out the window, and this time there were people out there who weren't vanilla humans. He did a quick count. "There's a mage outside here with six magehelds that I can see." There were probably more at the back, but other than the reactions of his proofing, he had no way of knowing for sure. From the way his wards were going off, there was at least one on the roof. "He's already tried to take me once. He had blood up to his elbows when I saw him earlier today, and two magehelds fresh out of the box."

"Not good."

"No kidding." The rituals the magekind performed to take a demon's power involved removing his still-beating heart. Blood was unavoidable. "He'd recently cracked open a talisman. I let him know how I felt about that. He tried to kill me, and now he's here, and I will rip off his fucking head if I have to."

"His name?"

"Michael." He turned around and kept his eyes on Lys. She was near the couch, pale but calm enough. "I've got his street-witch here with me."

"Lys Fensic, right?"

"Right."

After a pause, Carson said, "Can you trust her?"

He held Lys's gaze. "Can I trust her?" he said for her benefit. "Yeah. I can trust her." He and Lys made eye contact, and he felt the nullity from her that he'd previously mistaken for vanilla. Now he knew it was the result

of her iron-control over her magic. “We consummated when I was changed. She needs to stay alive.”

She let out a breath. “Understood.”

“Michael isn’t fucking around with this. He wants her head. If he takes me, who do you think he’ll have kill her?”

“No half-measures. Full authorization from us.” She sounded like she gave kill authorizations every day. Maybe she did. Nikodemus had more than one assassin sworn to him. “I’m in the car now. Confirm you’re at your home?”

“Confirmed.”

“I have people on the way now.”

He liked that she didn’t need to ask where he lived. That spoke volumes about Nikodemus and how he monitored his territory. “When?”

“Twenty, thirty minutes? Depends how close my assassin is to your place. I should be hearing from him any minute.”

More of his wards went off. “That might not be soon enough. I only counted the ones out front. There’s going to be more than six.”

“Whoever comes will be able to sever you if you get taken.”

He’d heard rumors about that. He didn’t believe a word. The only way to free a mageheld was to kill the mage who enslaved the poor fuck. “You better be right about that.”

“I’ll sever you myself if that’s necessary. That’s a promise.”

More medallions turned black. A thud shook the top floor of the house.

“I heard that. Hold on.” He listened to dead air for a couple of seconds. “ETA, twenty minutes. Nikodemus will want to talk with you when this is over.” Her voice lightened. “Never any obligation.”

“Good to know.”

“If what we hear about you is true, you should be able to hold off six magehelds until our people are there.”

“I told you, there’s more than six. Any of them get inside, I’m taking them down. That includes the mage.”

Lys walked to the window, but she was careful and stayed out of sight of anyone out there looking in. The windows shook harder, and on the other end of the phone call Carson waited for the noise to stop.

“If you’re under attack, do the needful.” Carson disconnected, and he was left holding his phone, staring at Lys while his house shook. She had to stay alive. At any cost.

He walked to her and cupped the side of her head. “What happens if you stop blocking out all those other minds?”

She leaned her shoulder against the wall. “Like I said, I see people’s futures. Or change them. Maybe. I’ve never been exactly sure how it works. All I know is that whatever I see in my head, it happens, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Except keep them out in the first place.”

“Do you think you can get to any of his magehelds and tell me what happens?” Telos glanced out the window. “It’s important, or I wouldn’t ask.”

She moved to the window, then looked over her shoulder at him. “It won’t work if they’re blocking me the way you do.”

“I’m counting on Michael’s enslavement bond making them vulnerable to someone like you.”

“No accidents. Shield yourself.”

He nodded.

Lys pushed aside the blinds. The moment she lowered her blocks her magic hit him like a wave. Michael and his magehelds weren’t going to miss what she was doing. Cycling out of control like that, it was setting him off, too. Eyes closed, she rocked on her feet. She slapped a palm on the wall beside her and moaned. Her knees buckled, but when he moved to steady her, her eyes snapped open. She held out a hand to stop him. “Do not. Do not touch me.”

A few more wards popped, most likely the result of the magehelds reacting to her. She put her blocks back in place. Still looking out the window, she said, “You were right. I could get to them.”

“And?”

“You kill two of them.”

“Only two?”

She turned, pressing her back to the wall. She was paler than when he'd met her outside her office building all those hours ago. Her arms were clasped tight beneath her breasts in an attempt to hide her shiver. He could see it, though, and feel, too, the psychic cost of opening herself like that. “The others”—she gestured at the window—“something's going to happen to them, too.” She gave an apologetic shrug. “They won't die.” Her mouth thinned. “I don't understand what I see. I don't always. It's been a while since I've seen so many at once. It's hard to keep it all straight. Sorry.”

He touched her cheek. Her skin was cool. The need to protect her lived in his bones, his blood, and his magic. If she survived this, in a couple of months, less probably, they'd know if she was pregnant. “Thanks, Fensic.”

She nodded.

Telos took a quick look out the window. Of the magehelds he could see, two weren't going to be any trouble for him. The other four were big, also not a problem. In the case of the demonkind, size and perfection of the human form tended to be an indication of magical power. If he had to go up against all six at once, his margin for error was going to be small but not unsurmountable. Unless there were more, and he was certain there were.

“Which ones?” he asked. She looked at him with a soul that had lived with more pain than anyone should have to endure. “Which ones do I kill?”

“It never works. Trying to change things. Something always happens.” Her eyes were desolate, her pupils huge.

“Which ones, Lys?”

She pointed. “The one by the car there. And him. Across the street. Those two.”

One of the smaller ones. One of the big ones. His still-forming plan had included going after the biggest ones first, so he wasn't exactly comforted to know he'd only take down one of the more dangerous ones. Did that mean he was going to screw up and get taken? “How? Do you know how it happens?”

“Not an accident. And here. In this room. A lot of blood. They're what

you said. Slaves. They hate Michael. It consumes them.”

“When?” It would be nice to know how much time they had before his house was breached.

She thought about that. “I’m not sure. Soon. That’s a guess.”

He leaned the side of his shoulder against the wall and tried to figure the most likely scenario. He might have to let himself get taken to give Nikodemus’s people time to get here. After that, Lys’s survival depended on how soon he got a kill order and whether Carson could do what she promised. The windows at the back of the house started shaking. He reached for her. After a hesitation, she moved into his arms. He kissed the top of her head. “I don’t want to go into this blind if I don’t have to.”

“No.” She grabbed his hand and kissed each of his fingers. “Don’t leave me.”

He set her back a step and set both hands on her shoulders. He waited until she was looking at him. “If I know whether I die or end up taken, I’ll know how to keep you away from Michael.” He moved a hand to her belly. “You have to be safe. You have to be where Nikodemus and Carson can keep you safe.”

She closed her eyes, and her power burned down his spine again. He opened himself to her. It was as intense—more intense—than their blood bond had been upstairs. Her eyes were open, but she stared at nothing, unseeing. He cupped her elbow, keeping her upright. Slowly, her eyes opened. The desolation about killed him.

“There has to be a way to stop this.” She spread her fingers over his chest. The windows rattled again and somewhere in the house, glass broke. “I don’t want you to die.”

“Listen to me.” He brought his mouth close to hers, and she lifted her head, and well, he kissed her instead of telling her they’d done the right thing. Hungry, demanding, a full on kiss with his tongue in her mouth, his hands touching her curves, and she kissed him back as if she’d die if they ever stopped. He drew back, breathing hard. “I’d rather be dead than mageheld, you understand me? I won’t be anyone’s slave. It’s better if I die.”

Her eyes glittered with tears. “No.”

“Not your choice, Fensic.”

She had herself under control. Completely shut down. Vanilla as anything. He still had his link with her, though not to her magic. “I’m never wrong about what happens. I’m going to lose you, and it isn’t fair. It isn’t fair.”

He put one hand on the wall above her shoulder, then took her hand, turning her wrist up so he was looking at the blue veins on the tender underside of her arm, thinking things he shouldn’t be. “I’m going to change the proofing to kill once his magehelds are in. That should slow them down some. When Michael gets here, he’ll have to take me first because he knows if I take down his magehelds, he’s fucked. There’ll be a fight. We know that because I’m going to kill two of his magehelds. While that’s happening, you get the hell out.”

“And leave you?”

“Michael wants you dead. He brought along enough magehelds to be sure that happens.” He let go of her arm and put a hand on her hip. Not a grope; he just set his hand to the curve of her body. When she didn’t avoid the contact, he pulled her closer. He put his other hand on her opposite hip. His heart thudded against his ribs while she slid a palm up the side of his arm.

She touched his lips, and their connection burned him. In a good way. “What if I can twist what happens?”

His back door shattered.

Michael was here.

CHAPTER 10

More wood and glass broke somewhere toward the back of the house. Lys was sick to her stomach with fear, but she ignored it. Another explosion rattled the windows and shook the structure. One of the pictures on the wall fell to the floor. She’d kill Michael with her bare hands if she had to. Behind her, Telos muttered something.

She released her blocks. Destroyed them, actually.

The familiar metallic taste coated her tongue, and she fought to keep her vision from cutting out without resisting her connection to whatever and whoever was out there. Hot air rolled through the room, raising the hair on her arms. Along the walls and near the ceiling, medallions deformed until more than a few of the faces carved in them looked like they were screaming. The effect was horrific. She clapped her hands over her ears, as if that would stop the shrieking in her head, but she kept herself open and completely and utterly vulnerable.

Her awareness of the world folded around her, twisting into a different set of stimuli. She struggled to stay open and aware because everything depended on her doing something with her magic instead of just allowing it to happen.

A new awareness shivered through her. Telos was behind her and he flared in her consciousness, white hot. Not a human being. There were more like him, not human. Different from Telos because of the poison of Michael's enslavement of them. And there was Michael, too.

Ten. There were ten of Michael's demons in the house. Four had come in through the front. One from the roof, five more from the back of the house. Outside, fainter threads, were four more. Fourteen magehelds under Michael's control.

Khūnbish strode away from her in a whisper of fabric moving and the sharp pull of his magic. She recognized now the way demons registered to her and the difference between Khūnbish and the demons controlled by Michael. If she concentrated, she could separate each of them; Khūnbish, the magehelds, and Michael.

The noise receded. Windows and doors stopped shaking. What if she followed one of those vibrating patterns back to the source? She concentrated on one of them, traced it back until that one thread burned hot. She imagined cutting through it. In the back of the house, something screamed then cut off abruptly. Her sense of the magehelds changed. One less thread than before. One of the magehelds had vanished from her head.

She whispered, "Nine."

Telos stood near the door, hands clenched at his sides. His pupils glowed orange. "I don't know how long that will hold." His mouth moved

after the words registered in her head.

All sorts of images popped in and out of her head. Reality slipped away, but she didn't need to be sane. She just needed to keep track of Michael and his magehelds.

“Khūnbish, do you have a gun?”

He faced her and again, the words registered in her head out of synch with her hearing and sight. “Wouldn't stop a mageheld long enough to matter. You have to sever their spines for that. Or rip out their hearts. Or blast their magic clean out of them.” She blinked hard, but Telos wasn't in his human form. Bigger body, sharp teeth and talons. The body that had made love to her was a formidable weapon.

The windows rattled again, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Then there was nothing but silence while she watched the faces in the medallions slowly reform to screaming horrors. Each one echoed back a tiny reflection of Khūnbish. All the medallions around the living room door cracked. A few crumbled to ash. Several more turned the color of charcoal. She heard their shrieks in her head.

Another scream rocketed through the air and another of the threads she was tracking winked out. Eight, now. Her heart pounded so loud she could hear it.

“Lys.”

Telos didn't have to tell her to get ready. She knew what was coming because she'd seen it happen. In the next few minutes, there were going to be eight magehelds in this room, and Telos wasn't going to survive.

He headed for the door, but the visuals blurred because she was looking at present and future at the same time. She stopped trying to follow any speech but what was in her head.

“Behind me. Now.”

She did, and he tossed her his cell phone. She caught it squarely because she already knew where he was going to throw it.

“Call Nikodemus and tell whoever answers they need to be here now or it's too late.”

“Is there another way out?” She concentrated on the thread she felt

most clearly and traced it back to the source of the vibration. In the mental image that took shape, she saw a demon step over an inert body. Corpse. Eyes closed, she broke the thread the way she had the other. Her stomach roiled, her head blazed with fire, but she watched the mageheld fall to its knees. She didn't stop until that thread, too, winked out.

"Seven," she whispered. She was in full free fall now. Her connection to her body thinned, and her stomach threatened to revolt. More images flickered in and out. Seven magehelds were still too many. Telos needed better odds than that. Pain shot through her head, and she wavered on her feet, but she refused to give up contact with those seven remaining threads. She touched a hand to her ear and her fingertips came away bloodied.

"Call, Lys." Telos positioned himself next to the door. Waiting to die. "Do it!"

Phone in hand, she retreated to the sound of footsteps pounding down the hall. First the ones in her head, then the footsteps for real. They weren't bothering with stealth now. Her fingers shook, and her palms were clammy, but she got the phone engaged without dropping it. Seven of them. Demons. Slaves.

And Michael.

Lys found the recent call list and pressed the first number in the column.

Five magehelds shot through the doorway and slid to a halt inside. All of them had short hair, and all of them focused on Telos. Because Michael had told them Telos was the immediate threat to eliminate. Not her. Two of the magehelds were the ones she'd seen Telos kill. That left the others for her.

The inside of Lys's head lit up, scouring, burning, overwhelming her ability to process what was coming at her. Image followed image so quickly she could hardly make sense of them. More medallions cracked and turned black. A cut opened up on the arm of the man who'd come in first. He growled and wiped his arm behind him, but he didn't move from the doorway. Another one yelped and took a step back. Blood continued to drip down the first one's arm. She tore her eyes away from the sight, unable to tell if she was seeing real wounds or future ones.

The phone in her hand rang at the other end of the call she'd initiated. She got it to her ear just in time but had to fight to concentrate on the call and not what was happening with Telos. The center of her chest burned. Two more people here. Outside. One demon. One something else. Hybrid? One person who felt like demon and mage. "Hello?"

Nothing.

A woman answered, her voice sharp, clipped. "Telos?"

"They are here." She concentrated on speaking clearly and making sure the words were uttered for real and not just in her head. At the same time, she picked out a thread and tracked it back the way she had the other two. "Inside the house. Something will happen to Telos. Soon. How close are you?"

"Outside."

She whirled and looked out the window. Two bodies lay on the ground. A larger man knelt over one of them. He felt different from the magehelds, more like Telos felt to her when he wasn't blocking what he was. She thought he was a demon until her sense of him changed, and she could have sworn he was like Michael. A mage. A smaller figure, a woman with her back to the window, had her hands on her hips. She, too, had that odd duality of magekind and demonkind. In her, though, the two aspects weren't at war.

Two more demons stood not far from the woman. They weren't magehelds, but she felt the stink of Michael's magic from them. One was doubled over. The other pressed a hand to his chest like he was having a hard time breathing.

"Get in here. Now." Lys's voice slid up the register. The images in her head battered at her. She fought to maintain her concentration on the phone call, to not give in to the chaos in her mind.

A sea of red. Pain. Horror. Hatred. The two largest falling, tumbling.

"Three minutes," said the woman's voice.

"Not three minutes. Now."

Outside, the small woman turned and glanced upward to the window where Lys gripped the phone so hard her fingers hurt. From where Lys

stood, the woman looked impossibly dainty. “That’s some serious magic you have.” The woman’s voice was loud and clear. “Whatever the heck you’re doing with it, you need to learn some control.”

“Too late. Too late.” The horror of knowing made her voice crack. “You will be too late to save him.” Without disconnecting the call, Lys put the phone on the window sill. Blood smeared the glass surface of the phone.

Telos engaged one of the smaller magehelds. While she ran toward him, in her head, she heard a snap and saw the mageheld’s body go limp.

Telos threw the body away from him. It hit the wall and slid down, boneless, and then it happened again. For real this time.

Six.

Lys ran full speed into the mageheld closest to her and kned him in the crotch as hard as she could. The images in her head changed. From the corner of her eye, she saw Telos whirl, back in his human form. His hair spread out like a fan. A spatter of blood arced through the air. Not his blood; the mageheld who had engaged him. The larger one this time. Through that veil of crimson against black, she saw Michael walk into the room with two magehelds behind him. Again. The smell of blood filled the air.

Telos killed the mageheld.

Five.

She found the most insistent of the threads and, as she had before, concentrated on following it to the source. Michael stretched a hand toward Telos. Contact made.

She opened her mouth to warn him, but something hit her in the back. She lurched forward and lost the thread. She went down hard, jamming her knees against the floor. Her stomach turned inside out. Heat sizzled through her, burning, and thousands of images flashed before her eyes. Telos. Michael. The magehelds. The woman outside and the man with her.

Someone roars. Monster. Teeth tearing. Lust. Michael lifts a hand and says words that rip away the world.

On the floor, she fought to hold herself together, to keep herself from

sliding into unrecoverable madness. The threads in her head slipped in and out and she couldn't isolate them because she was losing it. She swallowed against the nausea. She was not going to watch events play out in her head. Michael had to be stopped.

Too many images came at her too fast. So much blood. She crawled forward, half blind. Screams rang in her ears, deafening her. Overhead, the air sparked. She identified the thread that was Michael.

"Lys!" That was Telos's voice in her head, pounding in her ears. She lifted her head and saw Telos in her mind, then in life. A mageheld rose up behind him. "Get out."

The muscles of her back seized up, but she moved through the pain. Michael might as well be a million miles away. She'd never get to him in time. In her head, Telos was a living presence with an edge of the unhuman. She felt everything that was happening to him; the dark and oily spread of Michael's magic and the white heat of his determination to stay alive and free.

Telos was losing that battle, and he was doing it on purpose. To give her a chance to get away. Tears burned in her eyes as she kept moving like some mortally wounded animal intent on protecting her mate. The higher functions of her brain had shut down. Her sense of him turned. Nothing. Nothing at all, and then it came back, tainted. And then it all happened for real.

A petite woman walked in. Lys recognized the resonance of the woman who'd been outside. Behind her was a demon in human form. He no longer felt anything like a mage. His presence dominated the room. His eyes flashed blue, green, and red. Ice formed at the base of Lys's spine. Image or reality? She had no idea. The two were opaque to her. Their minds did not claw into hers because they'd blocked her.

The woman darted smoothly into the room and touched the nearest mageheld. It shrieked and went down hard on its ass, hands clutched to its chest.

Telos crashed to the floor. Gone from her. Michael's now.

Something hot splattered her cheek. Burning. She wiped at her face and her hand came away smeared with blood. She clawed halfway upright and

lunged for Michael. In her mind, she got a hand on his knee. He kicked back, but she dug her fingers into his leg until she was sure the bones of her hands were breaking apart. Michael tangled his fingers in her hair while Telos stood rigid before Michael, his mouth open in a scream that had no sound. She used her other hand to shield her head from his blows. Heat streaked through her body, pain like nothing she'd ever felt. She couldn't get high enough to hit him in the crotch so she pounded away at his knee.

She couldn't fail. She refused.

She took the images in her head, focused on Michael, and imagined his knee shattering.

Across the room, the dark-haired woman touched another of the magehelds. The demon in human form flowed past the witch and touched another mageheld, and her sense of that one winked out then returned, free of Michael's taint.

In her mind, she reached for Michael. Anything to stop him. His future was hers to shape. The fire building in her body flamed through her, burning her. Killing her. Hot as the sun. She was made of wax. She was Icharus falling to the hard and unforgiving earth. Tumbling in the chaos of her mind, creating a future where Michael wasn't a god.

Michael stands triumphant. Telos kneels before him.

Another mageheld stumbled, touched by the other woman who spun and tapped the last one to have come in with Michael. The only threads left in Lys's head belonged to Michael and Telos.

"Kill the witch." Michael pointed at the dark-haired woman, then at her. "When that's done, kill her."

Michael stands triumphant. Telos flows so quickly, too quickly to stop his attack on the smaller woman. The demon/mage steps in front of her and Telos dies by his hand.

Telos whirled toward the woman. The air sizzled. Already the other demon was moving toward Telos. She stopped the image in her head, and in her mind, the woman touched Telos the way she had the others.

The man who'd come in with the petite woman moved with incomprehensible speed. He intercepted Telos, slamming him against the

wall. Lys saw everything twice. In her head and then in front of her eyes, all of it melting together.

“No!” The word tore from Lys’s throat, raw and painful.

“Harsh.” The woman spoke in a calm voice. “Don’t kill him.”

“Do it.” Telos’s lips peeled back from his teeth. “Do it before it’s too late.”

The demon the woman had called Harsh held back from what Lys was sure would have been a killing strike. “Quickly, Carson.”

Carson touched Telos the way she had the others. He convulsed, gasped, then went still. Her sense of him returned, but there was the faintest sense of the witch coming from him now. Not that she cared much. Telos wasn’t dead. Harsh released his grip on Telos, but kept a hand on his upper arm. Carson faced Michael. “Mage,” she said. “It’s over.”

Michael yanked on Lys’s hair, forcing her to stand. “One step, and she’s dead.”

Carson stopped, hands on her hips. A telephone headset curled around the outside of her ear. “You were warned, mage. You know the consequences.”

“I don’t accept a demon’s authority over me.”

Michael stands triumphant. He speaks words of horror, fingers digging into her hair. She touches him, and the sun inside her incinerates him.

“I sent a team to your house,” Carson said. “By now you know the mageholds you left there are no longer in your control.” She smiled, and it was just about the scariest smile Lys had ever seen. Carson took a step closer to Michael, and, yes, she was small and dainty, but she didn’t look like someone you wanted to have mad at you. “Nikodemus authorized a sanction against you.” She tilted her head in Harsh’s direction. “I warn you, my guy here is really good. If you don’t let her go, you’re dead.”

Michael wrapped an arm around Lys’s throat, tight enough to restrict her air. Telos lunged then pulled up short when Carson raised a hand. “I wonder which of us is faster?” Michael said. “Me?” His arms tightened, squeezing off her air. “Or your pet demon there?”

Michael stands triumphant.

Harsh hadn’t moved from the door. He stood there, relaxed. Lazy, even.

In his human form, he looked distinctly Indian, with black-as-coal hair and dark, dark eyes. His smile was eerie because of the way it failed to reach his eyes. Telos vanished from her field of vision. She went up on her toes in an attempt to relieve the pressure on her throat.

The sun inside her incinerates.

“No question about it,” Carson said. “My guy is faster.”

She didn’t have any more time, and she wasn’t going to let Michael choke her to death. With the last of her strength, Lys punched back with her elbow, but Michael was already falling away from her. She gulped in air.

“But Telos,” she heard Carson say, “is closer.”

Michael laughed. Lys turned and walked toward him. She no longer knew what was real and what was the future, what was something she’d twisted into being or something simply meant to be. She twisted her upper body and touched Michael. Behind him, she saw Telos stretching out a hand and Michael turning to address the threat. The heat inside her flashed through her skin, through her mind and into Michael and the world went away.

The sun incinerates.

There was nothing. No sound. No color. No sense of her body. Just the bitter taste of acid in her mouth. Then everything roared back. Her mind went black. Nothing. Not even free fall.

The next thing she knew, Telos was helping her to her feet. “You okay?”

She nodded, though *okay* was a relative term. She hurt everywhere, but she was alive, and that was good. Telos’s arm slid around her waist, and she decided she didn’t mind that. Michael was on the ground. Not moving. His open eyes stared at nothing. “Dead?”

“Yes.”

“How.” She didn’t have the energy to make the word into a question.

Telos shrugged. “You touched him.”

“A clean kill,” Harsh said with an approving nod. “Nice work.”

Carson gave them both a friendly smile. “You two love birds up to

meeting Nikodemus while Harsh takes care of the clean up here?”

“I’m not doing the dirty work.” Harsh’s expression had softened and now instead of looking scary, he was the kind of gorgeous that made women feel a bit faint. He had a phone out and was making a call.

Carson waved a hand. “Whatever. As long as everything’s taken care of.”

Telos turned to the witch. “How does Nikodemus feel about demons who hook up with witches?”

Carson’s smile broadened. “He’s open minded.” Her green eyes moved between Telos and her. “As long as everyone’s a consenting adult. Is that what happened between you two?”

Lys said, “No coercion was exerted at any time.”

“I hear you’re a lawyer.” Carson kept smiling. A nice smile this time.

“Yes.”

Harsh looked up from the quiet instructions he’d been giving over the phone. “It so happens Nikodemus is looking to build a team of outside counsel. Interested?”

“Can I have a corner office?”

He put the phone to his ear. “I’m not in charge of accommodations.”

Lys looked at Telos. “What do you think?”

“Counselor, we’re all safer if you’re on our side.”

Carson smiled again. “How soon can you meet with Nikodemus?”

CHAPTER 11

Six weeks after Michael’s death, Lys walked into Telos’s office. She’d needed time to recover from the events of that day; a lot of bad dreams at night, too much sleeping during the day, lots of reading and watching movies. Telos had been giving her plenty of space. Possibly too much. Now that she was feeling more her normal self, which wasn’t saying all that much, she’d started wondering what the hell she should do with her life.

She had enough money in the bank that she didn't need to worry about finding work for a while, but this was a tough economy. Eventually her savings wouldn't look so robust, and if the job market didn't improve while she was dicking around, she'd end up wishing she'd started looking sooner. If she went back to her old job, she'd have to do it soon. The partners had emailed her and called a couple of times. The problem was she didn't want to do anything that reminded her of her life before Telos. Not her old job. Not her old house. But she couldn't just drift along either. Not many people wanted to hire a pregnant woman.

Courtesy of Telos, she had a new laptop, a new cell phone and a place to stay. They'd never discussed their current living arrangements, and it was starting to make her uncomfortable that they hadn't. He expected her to stay because she was pregnant. She was grateful to know she wasn't going to end up alone, no question about that. But she didn't want to feel dependent, either.

Twice in the last ten days, they'd ended up in bed, but both times getting there was unexpected, and there wasn't any talking afterward about what that meant. She was afraid to ask. By silent agreement, there was no mental sharing between them. Part of her understood he didn't want to pressure her and part of her was convinced he didn't want her to know he didn't really want her around. She was turning into a basket case. She wasn't good with people. She was even worse with demons.

She leaned against the wall by the door until Telos looked up from his computer. She still thought he was hot. Hotter, actually. "Just got the same invite," he said.

She had her new cell phone in her hand. Her calendar invite from Nikodemus was open on the screen. "Who does he think he is?"

Telos pushed away from his desk so she didn't have to look at him from over his four monitors. Behind him was a locked glass door that led to his server room. He'd given her a tour, and she'd damn near frozen her ass off when he showed her his racks of servers and routers. "A warlord who directly controls most of northern California and is making a serious claim for defacto leader of every goddamned warlord in North America. He's got warlords and mages working with him from inside Europe, the Russian Federation, and India, and he has envoys in China and Brazil." His eyes flickered. "He's got people on his side who can free a mageheld. That's

who he thinks he is.”

Lys stared at her calendar invite. “We can’t decline?”

“You could.”

She looked up. “You’re going to take this oath he’s talking about?”

He nodded. “Easier decision for me than you. I’ve been sworn before. I know what it means for me.”

“Which is?”

“Belonging.”

Her heart turned over. She didn’t belong anywhere.

“We do better when we’re around other demons. It’s our nature to have those connections going. Being sworn to a warlord means protection.” He stuck out his legs and crossed his arms behind his head. “And a chance to work toward a solution to the current mess.”

“What about people like me?”

“Come with me.” He held out a hand, and she went to him. He pulled her down for a kiss that curled her toes. One of his hands settled on her belly. She wasn’t anywhere near showing yet. But neither of them disputed the accuracy of that little plastic stick with a plus sign on it. “Talk to Nikodemus, Lys. See what he has to say about you working with him.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to hear what he has to say.”

“In fifteen minutes?”

“That’s all?”

He laughed, but she noticed he kept himself blocked. She did the same. “If I can’t blow your mind in ten minutes, I’m losing my touch.”

“Big talk.”

His grin set her stomach flying. “I’m a big guy.”

Ten minutes later, he’d proved he hadn’t lost his touch at all.

Nikodemus’s main compound was just over the Golden Gate Bridge in Tiburon, a Marin County enclave known for its mansions and celebrity residents. The warlord’s house, Telos told her, was the former home of a once powerful and very dangerous mage who, over his unnaturally long

life, had been personally responsible for the murder or enslavement of hundreds of demons. Carson and Nikodemus had dispatched him.

The house was at the top of a hill, and it was huge, with breathtaking views of the bay in just about every direction she looked. The warlord was making a point by living here. She got it and was impressed by it. She didn't doubt other demons and mages got the message, too. Her refined ability to sense demons kicked in the minute she got out of the car. She felt at least fifteen of them, with one of them particularly resonant. On the other side of the car, Telos didn't bother locking the door. He pocketed his keys and quirked his eyebrows at her. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be, I suppose."

He walked around to her side of the car and kissed her. "Don't be nervous. No one's going to make you do anything you don't want to. Besides, I have your back."

Lys gazed into his face and felt the truth of that. Michael was a distant memory. "You do, don't you?"

"You know I do." His arms slid down her back. He kept the eye contact. "Right?"

"Let's go see the warlord."

"Right?" He didn't let her go. The hurt in his face and in his words pierced her heart. "Lys?"

Telos Khūnbish was not a liar. She knew that. He'd never been dishonest with her. Ever since Michael, he'd been giving her the peace and quiet she needed to process what had happened. He was giving her the space she needed to deal with being pregnant when she'd believed that would never happen. She was shaken that she'd taken so long to understand that. She went up on her toes and pressed her lips to his. "Yes, Khūnbish. I do know that."

She held his hand during the walk to the door. He didn't let go even when Harsh answered their knock. He stayed in the middle of the doorway, and she got that strange vibe from him that she had before. He wasn't a mage, not like Michael at any rate, but he also didn't feel the same as other demons.

"Aren't you two cute?"

Telos gave him the finger and Harsh laughed and clapped Telos on the shoulder. The two did some kind of hand thing, and Harsh stood aside so they could go inside. Telos interlaced his fingers with hers.

The interior lived up to the outside. Impressive as hell. Someone had good taste in art. Harsh took them to a large living room that she could see from the doorway had the kind of view that cost millions. He walked in ahead of them. Halfway in, he stopped, pressed three fingers to his forehead, and bowed his head. Her sense of the demons was now oddly suppressed. Probably not an accident, she figured.

There were two men in the room. Both were demons, but that's all she could tell at the moment. A sandy-haired man in jeans and a gray tee-shirt that read *My Other Shirt Looks Just Like This One* was slouched on the couch. He had on cowboy boots. He looked like the guy next door who comes home from college three inches taller and with twenty pounds more muscle and a low-body-fat heat factor going for him. Not her type, but definitely a head-turner.

The other man was scary. He stood beside the couch, arms crossed over a broad chest, face impassive. He was working the bad-ass air. His medium-length hair was dark. So were his eyes. He wore black slacks, a black sweater and shiny black loafers. He didn't smile when they stopped behind Harsh.

Telos let go of her hand to press three fingers to his forehead and bow, just as Harsh had done. "Warlord."

She expected the man in black to acknowledge them, but he didn't. The man on the couch stood up. He was tall, and he had an easy-going smile she didn't trust for a minute. "Telos Khūnbish and Lys Fensic. Thanks for coming. Harsh. Thanks for bringing them here. I'm Nikodemus. Maybe the name's familiar." He extended an arm in the other man's direction. "This is Durian. Sworn assassin." The easy smile vanished, and Lys's chest went cold. Telos slipped his arm around her waist. "Also a warlord."

"Nice to meet you." Lys was very, very glad to have Telos with her. It was chillingly clear the assassin was here to send a message. A very scary one. It worked.

Telos bowed his head again, but without the three fingers to his forehead.

The sandy-haired man had to be Nikodemus. Had to be. He crossed the room toward them but stopped about five feet away. Harsh shifted his weight. She'd seen what he could do and that was frightening enough. The assassin, however, made her skin crawl. Nikodemus clapped his hands and rubbed his palms together. "Now that we all know each other, you two ready to get this done?"

"Yes," Telos said. No hesitation. Not a shred of doubt.

Lys couldn't help feeling left out.

"That's great. Glad to hear it." Nikodemus turned to her and the minute his eyes connected with hers, she revised her opinion of him as wholesome. His power took hold in her, and she just had no doubt at all that the man had more magic in his little finger than she'd ever see in her lifetime. He terrified her. "You?"

"I don't know."

"Appreciate the honesty." His smile thinned. "Could be a problem, though."

"Honesty is a problem?"

"Not in this room it isn't. But I meant it could be a problem if Telos swears fealty and you don't."

"Why?"

"The cross-species thing doesn't bother me, don't get me wrong there." He grinned. "There's Carson and me, after all. My man Durian here hooked up with a witch a while back. A couple others with me have done the same. But I have this rule about my sworn fiends not taking up with magekind who aren't sworn to me." He cocked his head at Durian. "Or to another warlord sworn to me. It's not safe for anyone if that happens. I'm surprised Telos didn't tell you that."

"Warlord, Lys and I—"

He lifted a hand, cutting off whatever Telos was going to say. She felt the pressure that meant he was checking her out. She kept her blocks in place, but she was horribly aware that Nikodemus could have gotten through with no trouble. "You're pregnant."

That got Durian's attention. And Harsh's.

“Yes.”

The warlord gazed at her belly. “The father?”

“Telos.”

The temperature in the room ratcheted up several degrees. Nikodemus’s good humor vanished. He turned a pair of piercing gray eyes on Lys. “There’s only one way that happens, and it’s a big, big problem if you didn’t get full disclosure. I like to be crystal clear before I take oaths from anybody. It’s not good to start off finding out the fucking new guy already broke a rule.”

“He didn’t.”

“He told you about the risks?”

“Yes.”

“And you agreed.”

“I said the word *yes*, which I gather you require.”

“Definitely required.” Nikodemus turned away from her. “Would she lie to protect you, Khūnbish?”

“Probably.”

“I’ll find out the truth. Either when you swear fealty or after you tell me you won’t.”

Lys took a step forward. “You’ve already been told the truth.”

The warlord frowned hard. “Let’s circle back to that later. Ms. Fensic, Durian here”—he tipped his head in the direction of the assassin—“wants you on his team.”

She looked at the other demon with no idea what the warlord meant. “Are you a lawyer?”

“No.”

“He’s my number one assassin. Harsh says you made a clean kill, and when he says something like that, even Durian believes it.” Nikodemus’s grin flashed. “More than one kill, as I understand it. Carson, on the other hand, is interested in working with you on some of your other talents.”

“Is she a lawyer?”

“Nah. But you did that thing.” He waved a hand. “She wants to know more about that. What you can do.” He nodded to himself. “I have to agree that’s something we need to be sure you learn to control. Whether you swear fealty or not, by the way. The way things are shaping up around here, we could use your help.”

She wanted desperately to sit down, but with everyone else standing up, that would put her at a disadvantage. She was physically smaller, the only woman present, and the only witch, too. And pregnant. She was going to have a baby, and once again the realization rattled her to her soul.

“I assume you’re open to that or you wouldn’t be here.”

“I’m listening.”

Telos tightened his arm around her waist, and it was comforting.

“My senior legal counsel says I could use a litigator.” He shoved his hands in his front pockets and rocked back on his heels. “She’s a lawyer, by the way. If you want to do lawyer stuff, there’s a place for you with her. Maybe you could do lawyer stuff when you’re too pregnant to work with Durian or Carson. Either way, I pay top dollar for good talent. Great benefits, and we allow telecommuting. Paid maternity leave for a year, no loss of seniority or benefits. Free day care. I’m happy to hook you up with HR.” He tipped his head. “Four options for you. One is you come over to my side and work with Durian and his team. Two is you go with Carson and her people, which I recommend until we’re all sure you have control. Three is you can join my legal team.”

“What’s the fourth?” It struck her as odd that in this room with its million dollar view, the guy in jeans and a T-shirt looked most like he belonged here.

“The fourth is that you stay unaffiliated. That means no oath, but we watch you and make sure you abide by the rules. But then, like I said, that means you and Khūnbish are a problem for me.” He rocked on his heels again and leveled his laser-sharp gaze on Telos.

“There’s a place for you here, Khūnbish. We can use your talents.” He pretended to type in the air. “No need to give up your consulting work. It’s good cover.” Then he looked between Telos and her, and even though he was still smiling, the temperature in the room fell ten degrees. “Now we do

the looping back around. Before we go any farther with this, I need to get clear on something.”

“Warlord,” Telos said.

Nikodemus nodded and returned his attention to her. “You’re living together? You and Khūnbish.”

“Yes.”

“How’s that working out?”

“He has toilet seat issues. Aside from that, it’s good. So far.”

Nikodemus looked at Telos. “Your take?”

“She has commitment issues.”

Lys turned on him. “I do not.”

His fingers tightened around hers. “Yes, you do.”

“You haven’t asked for a commitment from me.”

He gave her a look that conveyed his poor opinion of that claim. “It’s obvious what I want. You’re living in my house, aren’t you?”

Nikodemus briefly covered his face. “Jesus H. Khūnbish, don’t you know anything?”

Harsh snorted, and even Durian’s mouth twitched at least a nanometer.

“You are living with a witch.” He rolled his eyes. “Use your fucking words, fiend. I’m not taking any oaths until you two figure out what you’re going to do about each other.”

Telos’s upper body tipped back about an inch.

“Durian, Harsh, let’s give them some privacy.” He gestured. “We’re back in ten.”

When they were alone, she and Telos stared at each other. “This is awkward,” she said.

“All this time you’ve been thinking I don’t want you with me? Lys.” Briefly, he closed his eyes. “I said I’d take care of you.”

“Have to. Want to.” She lifted her hands. “Not the same thing.”

“Do you want to move out? You don’t have to stay. I’ll help you find a

place. Buy, rent, fix up your place, whatever you want, I'll take care of it." His voice got low and thick, and he let out a frustrated breath before he started again. "Look. I'm not going to leave you, if that's what you've been thinking. Shit. I'm no good at figuring out what you humans want when all I have to go on is this. Your expressions. Your words. I'm lost without the rest, and if I've fucked up because of that, I'm sorry."

She had an inappropriate urge to laugh, but managed not to. "You didn't. And it's okay. I know why you didn't use your words."

"It's not okay." He scowled, but he didn't push her away. He wasn't angry, just frustrated. "I've been staying out of your head, completely out, because I thought you needed the space."

"I did. For a while." Khūnbish seemed so terribly serious, and her heart folded over. "You don't need to do that anymore." She pressed a palm to the side of his head. "You don't need to keep away. I don't know how these things work. Relationships. I only know what it was like living with Michael and constantly being afraid I'd go into free fall. I've never been involved with anyone else. Never anyone normal."

"You know I'll help you with that. Whatever you need." He took her head between his hands. "But, Lys, with me, you still don't have normal."

She couldn't help a smile. "I wouldn't deal well with someone normal."

"Good. That's good." He moved his thumbs over her cheeks. "Whatever you decide, nothing changes about my commitment, okay? But I want you with me. Want. All this time I've been trying not to crowd you, but we're great together, and I want you with me." He looked directly into her eyes, so serious. She felt the pressure of him, that subtle change that told her he'd opened himself to her. "If you don't feel the same, that's fine. I'm here for you and the baby, no matter what. But please." He drew her close. "I like having you around. I love having you around. I want you to stay. Please." He whispered. "Don't leave. Don't leave me."

He sounded like he was ripping up inside. He sounded like he meant every single word. No one, no one in all her life, had ever spoken to her as if she mattered more than anything. The most important thing, though, was that Telos Khūnbish was not a liar. He would not hand out bullshit about anything, but especially something like this. She leaned her forehead against his chest because tears jammed up in her throat, and she was

afraid he'd see.

"Hey. Hey. Don't cry."

She sniffed. "I'm not crying."

"My mistake." He held her while she got herself under better control, one hand stroking her back. After a bit, he slid his other hand to her stomach. "Baby or not, I want us to try. Do you? If you need more time—"

"No. I mean, yes." She drew back enough to look him in the face. All the fear and doubt she'd been holding in, her expectation that he would leave her and she'd be alone, all that faded away in the face of what she saw when she looked at him.

He frowned at her, but the edges of his mouth kicked up. "Does that average out to maybe?"

"It means I want to try, Telos."

He leaned in and kissed her, and she pulled him close. His arms went around her, too, and he whispered, "I won't swear fealty to him if you don't want to."

The back of her head got cold, then the door opened, and Nikodemus, Durian, and Harsh came back in. "Everything good here?" He looked between her and Telos. "No rush. But I do have another meeting in half an hour."

The warlord gave her chills, but she answered him. "I want to swear the oath."

"Khūnbish?"

"Same here."

He grinned. "I take care of my people." He tipped his head in Telos's direction but looked at Lys. "If this one turns out to be a dick, there's room for you here or at Harsh's place in the city. If you ever feel like you're not getting the support you need, you come to me, I'll take care of everything. No questions asked."

"Fortunately, there's no evidence he's a dick."

"Fensic, you love my dick."

She elbowed him for that, and Telos pretended she'd hurt him.

The warlord rocked back on his heels. “You two ready for this?”

An oath of fealty to a warlord turned out to be a big deal. It changed something inside you when the oath took hold. It wasn’t one-sided. She’d understood going in that she’d be obligated to support Nikodemus, that a betrayal of her oath would likely result in her death. For his part, the warlord was required to play fair. If he treated his sworn fiends and magekind badly, the oath would break, and she’d be free.

Telos made his oath first, and since he ended his by kneeling, she did the same when it was her turn. When it was over, and she’d sworn fealty to Nikodemus, Telos took her hand in his.

Nikodemus studied them both. “Glad to have you with me. The baby, too.”

“Thank you.” She leaned against Telos’s side.

“I have a good feeling about you two.”

Lys slipped an arm around Telos’s waist, and he brought her in close. She wasn’t alone. She was where she belonged, and so was Telos. “Me, too,” she said. “Me, too.”

Carolyn Jewel was born on a moonless night. That darkness was seared into her soul and she became an award-winning and USA Today bestselling author of historical and paranormal romance. She has a very dusty car and a Master’s degree in English that proves useful at the oddest times. An avid fan of fine chocolate, finer heroines, Bollywood films, and heroism in all forms, she has two cats and two dogs. Also a son. One of the cats is his. carolynjewel.com

Carolyn is also the lead plaintiff in *Jewel v. NSA*, one of EFF’s longest running legal cases. Filed in 2008 on behalf of AT&T customers, the lawsuit is aimed at ending the NSA’s dragnet surveillance of millions of ordinary Americans and holding government officials accountable for illegally authorizing this surveillance.

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