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JANUARY 2013

## SCIENCE FICTION®



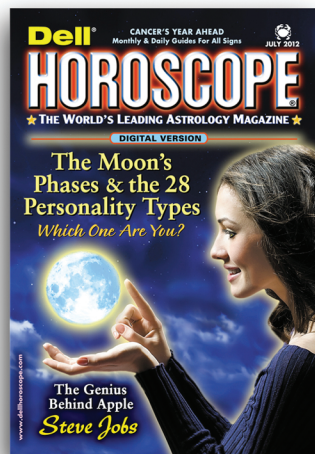
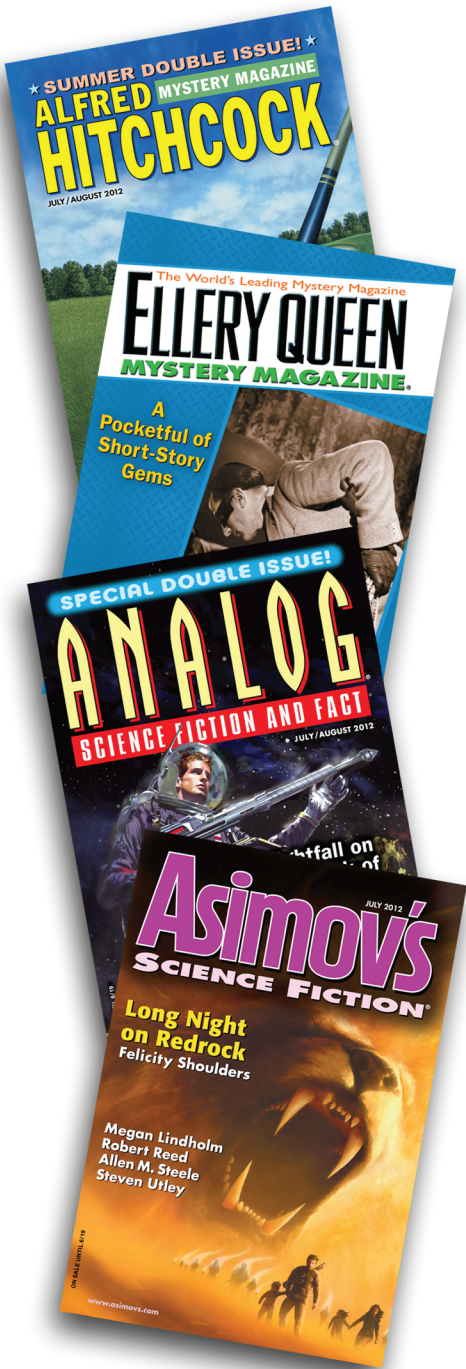
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# Asimov's<sup>®</sup>

## SCIENCE FICTION

JANUARY 2013

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## POET OF MARS

I had to swim upstream to appreciate the works of Ray Bradbury. The two people who most shaped my earliest tastes in science fiction were not fans of his tales. My grandfather, a firefighter and avid reader, made no attempt to hide his annoyance with an author who could imagine a world where firemen started fires and burned books. My father maintained that Bradbury mostly wrote fantasy and that genre didn't interest him. My dad had introduced me to the hard-SF trinity of Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein. His passion for Edgar Rice Burroughs, who brought us princesses, warriors, and synthetic men of Mars, was limitless. My father liked some Bradbury. He'd read "A Sound of Thunder" to me and we'd spent a few hours discussing the consequences of a time traveler stepping on a butterfly, but he didn't care for stories about ordinary life or fiction that held a surreal edge. He certainly had no patience for a book about a suburban development on Mars.

I never could convince my father that Burroughs' swordsmen knocking around Barsoom were any less fantastic than Bradbury's vision of the same planet. No one in my family expected me to mindlessly imitate their taste in literature, but my discovery of the joys of *The Martian Chronicles* was one of my first steps toward independent thinking. I quickly devoured *The Illustrated Man* and *I Sing the Body Electra* on my own. When, at sixteen, I lent my minister my favorite novel—*The Listeners* by James Gunn—he returned the favor by handing me *Dandelion Wine* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Some of Bradbury's writing fell under science fiction, some of it was definitely fantasy, but the distinction didn't seem very important. What was important was that it exposed me to a different way to tell a story, and a different story to tell.

Commenting on Bradbury's death this past June, New York Times' critic Michiko

Kakutani said the author "saw the strange and miraculous everywhere, and mastered the art of spinning them into enduring yarns." According to the *Times* obituary by Gerald Jonas, Bradbury found acceptance in magazines like *Mademoiselle* and *The Saturday Evening Post* by eliminating SF jargon from his prose. "He packaged his troubling speculations about the future in an appealing blend of cozy colloquialisms and poetic metaphors." Bradbury wasn't the only SF author writing about ordinary life or using metaphoric language. Contemporaneous writers include Zenna Henderson, Theodore Sturgeon, Alfred Bester, and Kurt Vonnegut. Along with Vonnegut, though, he was one of the very, very few SF authors who appealed to a mass audience. Echoes of Bradbury's themes and the attention he paid to the style and language of his writing can easily be found in the works of many modern SF, fantasy, and mainstream authors.

Bradbury said that he read poetry every day of his life. In 1971, Caltech held a symposium in celebration of Mariner 9, which would become the first spacecraft to orbit another planet the following day. It's well worth viewing an excerpt from a NASA video of the event at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBtZjbTDTdk&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBtZjbTDTdk&feature=youtu.be). Bradbury is clearly delighted to be included, but believes he is the "least scientific of all the people up on the platform." Instead of talking about science, he reads from his lovely poem, "If Only We Had Taller Been." Bradbury felt the poem encapsulated "why I love space travel, why I write science fiction."

By the time I entered the field, he seemed to be concentrating more on poetry and playwriting than on fiction. Once, we asked permission to reprint a poem, but his representative told us the work would cost us a thousand dollars. Since that was a significant portion of the budget for an entire issue, we were unable to pur-



sue reprint rights any further.

Still, although Bradbury moved beyond science fiction's borders, his roots were in the genre. Bradbury had grown up on the works of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. He believed that Edgar Rice Burroughs was the "most influential writer in the history of the world." In a conversation with Sam Weller, author of *Listen to the Echoes, The Ray Bradbury Interviews*, he remarked, "Say to a girl or boy at age ten: Hey, life is fun! Grow tall! I've talked to more biochemists and more astronomers and technologists in various fields, who, when they were ten years old, fell in love with John Carter and Tarzan and decided to become something romantic. Burroughs put us on the moon. All the technologists read Burroughs."

A lot of people grew tall on the works of Ray Bradbury. On May 31, 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev held a luncheon at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC, for various cultural luminaries that included Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury. According to Isaac, they were invited because the president "wanted to meet with representatives of American culture who were well-known in the Soviet Union. For instance, Ray Bradbury and I are science fiction writers whose books are enormously popular in the Soviet Union."

Perhaps Burroughs put us on the Moon, but Bradbury was no less influential. Just yesterday as I write this, on what would have been his ninety-second birthday, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory announced that it was naming Curiosity's Martian touchdown site Bradbury Landing. Michael Meyer, a NASA program scientist for Curiosity said, "This was not a difficult choice for the science team. Many of us and millions of other readers were inspired in our lives by stories Ray Bradbury wrote to dream of the possibility of life on Mars."

In addition to the chessmen and gods and all the job titles Burroughs proposed, someday when we've settled Mars, we'll probably need surveyors and realtors and doctors and actuaries and teachers and engineers of Mars. We'll need writers and poets, too, but Bradbury was and will remain a very special poet of Mars. ○

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## THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA

I've been reading *Odd Jobs*, a bulky collection of essays that John Updike published in 1991—one of many such collections that that prolific writer produced. In it I've come across a startling account of the relationship between Updike and John Cheever, his great predecessor as a chronicle of suburban angst in short stories for *The New Yorker* and other magazines.

You may be wondering why I want to discuss Messrs. Updike and Cheever in a science fiction magazine, since neither one, after all, is generally considered to be a science fiction writer. In fact, both did dabble a bit in the stuff: Cheever's eerie 1947 story, "The Enormous Radio," has been reprinted in more than one SF anthology, while Updike wrote half a dozen stories that could be called science fiction or fantasy, several of which made it into Year's Best Science Fiction collections, and even one SF novel, *Toward the End of Time*. But what interests me about the Updike-Cheever material in *Odd Jobs* is the light it casts on the general attitudes of writers toward one another, and, indirectly, on the way science fiction writers in particular relate to each other.

*Odd Jobs* contains no less than four brief Updike pieces about John Cheever. The first, from June, 1982, is a reverent obituary. The second, published five months later, is Updike's speech at Cheever's funeral, a longer and quite touching description of the man, with some details of their friendship late in Cheever's life, when both men were going through personal anguish and Cheever was lost in an alcoholic daze. The third essay, from 1985, adds a few notes on Cheever's earliest published work. But the fourth essay, dating from 1990, provides the big surprise: Cheever's collected correspondence had now been published,

and Updike, with great restraint, tells of his discovery of a most uncomplimentary reference to him in one of Cheever's letters: "Updike, whom I know to be a brilliant man, traveled with me in Russia last autumn [1964] and I would go to considerable expense and inconvenience to avoid his company. I think his magnanimity [sic] specious and his work seems motivated by covetousness, exhibitionism, and a stony heart."

It is a brave man who would quote, in a major magazine, a remark like that about himself coming from an important writer whom he considered to be a close friend and a colleague of the greatest ability. But Updike goes on, in what can be seen either as heroism or masochism, to quote an equally harsh assessment of himself by another of his literary idols, *New Yorker* humorist S.J. Perelman, in a published letter to comic poet Ogden Nash: "The very next morning I had to fly to Washington to a reception for Presidential scholars at which J. Cheever was a great help. Also present at this was that eminence gris, J[ohn] O'Hara, and that somewhat younger eminence and literatus, J. Updike. The latter read extracts from three works of his to the assembled scholars, which I couldn't personally hear as I was overtaken by the characteristic nausea that attacks me when this youth performs on the printed page."

Updike handles all this with remarkable grace: "The effect, of finding myself discussed with such gleeful malice in the letters of men whom I idolized, and whose works I had pondered in my teens as gifts from above and signposts to heaven, is chastening, perhaps edifyingly so." And of Perelman's view of him he says, "To think that I was, however modestly, an irritant to his exquisite sensibility is almost a source of pride. To those who

yearn to join the angels, even the sound of angelic mockery is music. And dead men shouldn't be blamed for having their private letters published." As for Cheever, Updike notes that the period when he made that comment about him was, for Cheever, a time "of financial straits and ruinous drinking," when he might well have taken a sour view of his young and wildly successful colleague, and he goes on to show that in later years "Cheever was always courteous to me and increasingly friendly and kind," giving every sign that a real friendship existed between the two men.

Writers are generally prickly, competitive characters. (Updike straightforwardly admits that Cheever's 1964 complaint that *The New Yorker* had rejected everything he had written in the previous three years left him "exultant," for it meant there would be that much more room in the magazine's pages for his own fiction.) Describing the attitude of established writers toward eager, ambitious newcomers, Updike says, "Aspiring, we assume that those already in possession of eminence will feel no squeeze as we rise, and will form an impalpable band of welcoming angels. In fact, I know now, the literary scene is a kind of *Medusa's* raft, small and sinking, and one's instinct when a newcomer tries to clamber aboard is to step on his fingers."

The *Medusa* to which Updike refers here is a French naval frigate that ran aground off the coast of West Africa in 1816. There were about four hundred people on board, but the lifeboats had room for only a couple of hundred of them. Some 147 survivors of the wreck managed to scramble aboard a hastily constructed raft, with a single bag of biscuits and two casks of water for provisions; others, likely, were driven back into the sea by those already on the raft. In the course of the terrible thirteen-day voyage that followed all but fifteen perished, some through starvation or dehydration, and some, apparently, killed in fighting aboard the raft. (The accounts of the survivors hint at cannibalism, too.) In 1818

the French artist Theodore Gericault did a huge and terrifying painting called *The Raft of the Medusa*, grimly depicting the hideously overcrowded raft; it is one of the treasures of the Louvre today.

Quite possibly, judging by the references to him in the letters of Cheever and Perelman, *New Yorker* contributors of fifty years ago did regard the relentlessly productive and frighteningly talented Updike as an ominously threatening competitor, rather than as a gifted young colleague who deserved a warm welcome. I don't know. I never sought to find a place for myself in the New York literary scene.

But within the world of science fiction I was certainly as ambitious a young writer as there was, back when I was making my debut in the middle 1950s, and I was more prolific even than Updike, then. My name, and the names of my myriad pseudonyms, could be found on the contents pages of every SF magazine from *Astounding*, *Galaxy*, and *Fantasy and Science Fiction* at the top end of the field to *Amazing Stories* and *Imagination* at the pulpy bottom. If I had been greeted by my senior colleagues the way Updike had, I surely would have had my fingers sorely stomped as I struggled to climb aboard the raft. But that was not what happened.

When I was still in my teens in 1953 the writer and editor Harry Harrison, who had commissioned an article on SF fandom from me, took me under his wing and gave me invaluable advice about agents, editors, and how to conduct a writing career. Then Randall Garrett, a well-known writer of the era, came to New York, landed by a lucky accident in the same little hotel near Columbia University where I was living, and struck up a collaborative relationship with me, taking me downtown to all the SF editors and giving my fledgling career an enormous boost. In 1955, when I had begun to sell my first few stories, I attended the World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland and, under Garrett's mentorship, was introduced to most of the famous writers of the era—Isaac Asimov, Edmond Hamilton and his wife Leigh Brackett, Fritz Leiber, E.E. Smith, and



others. They greeted me cordially, making me feel welcome among them. I remember with particular pleasure a long amiable conversation with James Gunn, a writer whose work I held in especially high esteem, in which he laid out for me the rewards and pitfalls of trying to write science fiction professionally, as I had already resolved to do.

In the year that followed, I graduated from college and set up in business as a full-time writer, and came into contact with more of the established pros: Frederick Pohl, Lester del Rey, Gordon R. Dickson, Cyril Kornbluth, James Blish, Damon Knight, Algis Budrys, and the rest of the glittering roster of that time. I was ten to twenty years younger than most of them, but they accepted me as a friend, or, I suppose, a kind of mascot, and, even though my stories were now appearing by the dozen in the magazines, never once did I feel that anyone was trying to push me off the raft. Indeed, cagey old Lester del Rey transformed my entire career for the better about 1958 with just a couple of sentences of shrewd advice.

So far as I know, it has always been that way in science fiction: the older writers extending helpful hands to the new ones. I recall Cyril Kornbluth, circa 1957, telling me that he saw it as an obligation to do just that. Harlan Ellison had had any number of proteges over the years; so have Gardner Dozois and Joe Haldeman and George R.R. Martin, and other senior figures of the field, and so have I. I could cite many other examples. Damon Knight brought the Science Fiction Writers of America into being in 1965 with the goal of providing an informational interface between the veteran pros and the beginners. It has been enormously useful to them. Not long after, the annual Clarion Writers' Workshop was launched as an event where hopeful beginners could learn from working writers, and a little later came the Writers of the Future contest, founded by Golden Age SF writer L. Ron Hubbard: dozens of major writing careers, over the years, have come from these two enterprises.

I do wonder, after having read the Updike/Cheever material, how I would feel if the Collected Letters of my old friends came into print and I were to discover, all these decades later, that they had secretly feared and despised me as a cold-hearted literary climber. But I don't think they did. They treated me as a friend, and I believe they meant it. In any case, the Collected Letters of science fiction writers are published very rarely, if at all, and I may never have Updike's experience of coming across a letter such as Cheever's. H.P. Lovecraft's letters have been collected, yes, but he was before my time. There's one volume of Robert A. Heinlein's letters (I am not in them), and several of Philip K. Dick, who does mention me here and there, but not in any harsh way. (He complains to someone that I'm making more money than he is; but he did that to my face, too.)

Some of the correspondence of the great editor John W. Campbell has been published, too, and there's a reference to me in a 1959 letter from Campbell to E.E. ("Doc") Smith that pleased me very much when I came across it: "Bob Silverberg is a kid: a nice kid, whom I like, just as I did Ike Asimov some 20 years ago. . . . Bob needs time and experience; Ike did, 20 years ago. Ike is no longer a kid; I respect and like him as a man. Bob will get there." Campbell, of course, was an editor who was publishing my stories, not a writer who might have seen me as a dangerous competitor. But he could have said, as John Cheever in a dark moment said of John Updike, "Bob Silverberg's work seems motivated by covetousness, exhibitionism, and a stony heart." He didn't. I suspect there are no such ugly surprises waiting for me in the letters of the writers who welcomed me to the field half a century ago. Perhaps John Cheever was a very complicated man to have as a friend; or perhaps science fiction writers tend to be nicer to each other than *New Yorker* writers are. It could be that both statements are true. ○

# Asimov's

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**Alaya Dawn Johnson's short stories have appeared in multiple venues, including the anthologies *Welcome to Bordertown* and *Zombies vs. Unicorns*. She is the author of *Moonshine* and *Wicked City* (Thomas Dunn Books), two urban fantasy novels set in the 1920s on New York City's Lower East Side. Alaya's YA debut, *The Summer Prince* (Arthur Levine/Scholastic), will be out in the spring. She can be contacted via her website, [www.alayadawnjohnson.com](http://www.alayadawnjohnson.com). In her first tale for *Asimov's*, two women must take a perilous voyage through a dangerous alien domain, all the while avoiding where . . .**

# THEY SHALL SALT THE EARTH WITH SEEDS OF GLASS

**Alaya Dawn Johnson**

**I**t's noon, the middle of wheat harvest, and Tris is standing on the edge of the field while Bill and Harris and I drive three ancient combine threshers across the grain. It's dangerous to stand so close and Tris knows it. Tris knows better than to get in the way during harvest, too. Not a good idea if she wants to survive the winter. Fifteen days ago a cluster bomb dropped on the east field, so no combines there. No harvest. Just a feast for the crows.

Tris wrote the signs (with pictures for the ones who don't read) warning the kids to stay off the grass, stay out of the fields, don't pick up the bright-colored glass jewels. So I raise my hand, wave my straw hat in the sun—it's hot as hell out here, we could use a break, no problem—and the deafening noise of eighty-year-old engines forced unwillingly into service chokes, gasps, falls silent.

Bill stands and cups his hands over his mouth. "Something wrong with Meshach, Libby?"

I shake my head, realize he can't see, and holler, "The old man's doing fine. It's just hot. Give me ten?"

Harris, closer to me, takes a long drink from his bottle and climbs off Abednego. I don't mind his silence. This is the sort of sticky day that makes it hard to move, let alone bring in a harvest, and this sun is hot enough to burn darker skin than his.

It's enough to burn Tris, standing without a hat and wearing a skinny strappy dress of faded red that stands out against the wheat's dusty gold. I hop off Meshach, check to



make sure he's not leaking oil, and head over to my sister. I'm a little worried. Tris wouldn't be here if it wasn't important. Another cluster bomb? But I haven't heard the whining drone of any reapers. The sky is clear. But even though I'm too far to read her expression, I can tell Tris is worried. That way she has of balancing on one leg, a red stork in a wheat marsh. I hurry as I get closer, though my overalls stick to the slick sweat on my thighs and I have to hitch them up like a skirt to move quickly.

"Is it Dad?" I ask, when I'm close.

She frowns and shakes her head. "Told me this morning he's going fishing again."

"And you let him?"

She shrugs. "What do you want me to do, take away his cane? He's old, Libs. A few toxic fish won't kill him any faster."

"They might," I grumble, but this is an old argument, one I'm not winning, and besides that's not why Tris is here.

"So what is it?"

She smiles, but it shakes at the edges. She's scared and I wonder if that makes her look old or just reminds me of our age. Dad is eighty, but I'm forty-two and we had a funeral for an eight-year-old last week. Every night since I was ten I've gone to sleep thinking I might not wake up the next morning. I don't know how you get to forty-two doing that.

Tris is thirty-eight, but she looks twenty-five—at least, when she isn't scanning the skies for reapers, or walking behind a tiny coffin in a funeral procession.

"Walk with me," she says, her voice low, as though Harris can hear us from under that magnolia tree twenty feet away. I sigh and roll my eyes and mutter under my breath, but she's my baby sister and she knows I'll follow her anywhere. We climb to the top of the hill, so I can see the muddy creek that irrigates the little postage stamp of our corn field, and the big hill just north of town, with its wood tower and reassuring white flag. Yolanda usually takes the morning shift, spending her hours watching the sky for that subtle disturbance, too smooth for a bird, too fast for a cloud. Reapers. If she rings the bell, some of us might get to cover in time.

Sometimes I don't like to look at the sky, so I sprawl belly-down on the ground, drink half of the warm water from my bottle and offer the rest to Tris. She finishes it and grimaces.

"Don't know how you stand it," she says. "Aren't you hot?"

"You won't complain when you're eating cornbread tonight."

"You made some?"

"Who does everything around here, bookworm?" I nudge her in the ribs and she laughs reluctantly and smiles at me with our smile. I remember learning to comb her hair after Mom got sick; the careful part I would make while she squirmed and hollered at me, the two hair balls I would twist and fasten to each side of her head. I would make the bottom of her hair immaculate: brushed and gelled and fastened into glossy, thick homogeneity. But on top it would sprout like a bunch of curly kale, straight up and out and olive-oil shiny. She would parade around the house in this flouncy slip she thought was a dress and pose for photos with her hand on her hip. I'm in a few of those pictures, usually in overalls or a smock. I look awkward and drab as an old sock next to her, but maybe it doesn't matter, because we have the same slightly bucked front teeth, the same fat cheeks, the same wide eyes going wider. We have a nice smile, Tris and I.

Tris doesn't wear afro-puffs any more. She keeps her hair in a bun and I keep mine short.

"Libs, oh Libs, things aren't so bad, are they?"

I look up at Tris, startled. She's sitting in the grass with her hands beneath her thighs and tears are dripping off the tip of her nose. I was lulled by her laugh—we don't often talk about the shit we can't control. Our lives, for instance.

I think about the field that we're going to leave for crows so no one gets blown up for

January 2013

touching one of a thousand beautiful multi-colored jewels. I think about funerals and Dad killing himself faster just so he can eat catfish with bellies full of white phosphorus.

"It's not that great, Tris."

"You think it's shit."

"No, not *shit*—"

"Close. You think it's close."

I sigh. "Some days. Tris. I have to get back to Meshach in a minute. What is going on?"

"I'm pregnant," she says.

I make myself meet her eyes, and see she's scared; almost as scared as I am.

"How do you know?"

"I suspected for a while. Yolanda finally got some test kits last night from a river trader."

Yolanda has done her best as the town midwife since she was drafted into service five years ago, when a glassman raid killed our last one. I'm surprised Tris managed to get a test at all.

"What are you going to do? Will you . . ." I can't even bring myself to say "keep it." But could Yolanda help her do anything else?

She reaches out, hugs me, buries her head in my shirt and sobs like a baby. Her muffled words sound like "Christ" and "Jesus" and "God," which ought to be funny since Tris is a capital-A atheist, but it isn't.

"No," she's saying, "Christ, no. I have to . . . someone has to . . . I need an abortion, Libby."

Relief like the first snow melt, like surviving another winter. Not someone else to worry about, to love, to feed.

But an abortion? There hasn't been a real doctor in this town since I was twelve.

Bill's mom used to be a registered nurse before the occupation, and she took care of everyone in town as best she could until glassman robots raided her house and called in reapers to bomb it five years ago. Bill left town after that. We never thought we'd see him again, but then two planting seasons ago, there he was with this green giant, a forty-year-old Deere combine—Shadrach, he called it, because it would make the third with our two older, smaller machines. He brought engine parts with him, too, and oil and enough seed for a poppy field. He had a bullet scar in his forearm and three strange, triangular burns on the back of his neck. You could see them because he'd been shaved bald and his hair was only starting to grow back, a patchy gray peach-fuzz.

He'd been in prison, that much was obvious. Whether the glassmen let him go or he escaped, he never said and we never asked. We harvested twice as much wheat from the field that season, and the money from the poppy paid for a new generator. If the bell on lookout hill rang more often than normal, if surveillance drones whirled through the grass and the water more than they used to, well, who was to say what the glassmen were doing? Killing us, that's all we knew, and Bill was one of our own.

So I ask Bill if his mother left anything behind that might help us—like a pill, or instructions for a procedure. He frowns.

"Aren't you a little old, Libby?" he says, and I tell him to fuck off. He puts a hand on my shoulder—conciliatory, regretful—and looks over to where Tris is trudging back home. "You saw what the reapers did to my Mom's house. I couldn't even find all of her *teeth*."

I'm not often on that side of town, but I can picture the ruin exactly. There's still a crater on Mill Street. I shuffle backward, contrite. "God, Bill. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

He shrugs. "Sorry, Libs. Ask Yolanda, if you got to do something like that." I don't like the way he frowns at me; I can hear his judgment even when all he does is turn

and climb back inside Shadrach.

"Fucking hot out here," I say, and walk back over to Meshach. I wish Bill wasn't so goddamn judgmental. I wish Tris hadn't messed up with whichever of her men provided the sperm donation. I wish we hadn't lost the east field to another cluster bomb.

But I can wish or I can drive, and the old man's engine coughs loud enough to drown even my thoughts.

Tris pukes right after dinner. That was some of my best cornbread, but I don't say anything. I just clean it up.

"How far along are you?" I ask. I feel like vomit entitles me to this much.

She pinches her lips together and I hope she isn't about to do it again. Instead, she stands up and walks out of the kitchen. I think that's her answer, but she returns a moment later with a box about the size of my hand. It's got a hole on one side and a dial like a gas gauge on the other. The gauge is marked with large glassman writing and regular letters in tiny print: "Fetal Progression," it reads, then on the far left "Not Pregnant," running through "Nine Months" on the far right. I can't imagine what the point of that last would be, but Tris's dial is still barely on the left hand side, settled neatly between three and four. A little late for morning sickness, but maybe it's terror as much as the baby that makes her queasy.

"There's a note on the side. It says 'All pregnant women will receive free rehabilitative healthcare in regional facilities.'" She says the last like she's spent a long day memorizing tiny print.

"Glassmen won't do abortions, Tris."

No one knows what they really look like. They only interact with us through their remote-controlled robots. Maybe they're made of glass themselves—they give us pregnancy kits, but won't bother with burn dressings. Dad says the glassmen are alien scientists studying our behavior, like a human would smash an anthill to see how they scatter. Reverend Beale always points to the pipeline a hundred miles west of us. They're just men stealing our resources, he says, like the white man stole the Africans', though even he can't say what those resources might be. It's a pipeline from nowhere, to nothing, as far as any of us know.

Tris leans against the exposed brick of our kitchen wall. "All fetuses are to be carried to full term," she whispers, and I turn the box over and see her words printed in plain English, in larger type than anything else on the box. Only one woman in our town ever took the glassmen up on their offer. I don't know how it went for her; she never came home.

"Three months!" I say, though I don't mean to.

Tris rubs her knuckles beneath her eyes, though she isn't crying. She looks fierce, daring me to ask her how the hell she waited this long. But I don't, because I know. Wishful thinking is a powerful curse, almost as bad as storytelling.

I don't go to church much these days, not after our old pastor died and Beale moved into town to take his place. Reverend Beale likes his fire and brimstone, week after week of too much punishment and too little brotherhood. I felt exhausted listening to him rant in that high collar, sweat pouring down his temples. But he's popular, and I wait on an old bench outside the red brick church for the congregation to let out. Main Street is quiet except for the faint echoes of the reverend's sonorous preaching. Mostly I hear the cicadas, the water lapping against a few old fishing boats and the long stretch of rotting pier. There used to be dozens of sailboats here, gleaming creations of white fiberglass and heavy canvas sails with names like "Bay Princess" and "Prospero's Dream." I know because Dad has pictures. Main Street was longer then, a stretch of brightly painted Tudors and Victorians with little shops and restaurants on



the bottom floors and rooms above. A lot of those old buildings are boarded up now, and those that aren't look as patched-over and jury-rigged as our thresher combines. The church has held up the best of any of the town's buildings. Time has hardly worn its stately red brick and shingled steeples. It used to be Methodist, I think, but we don't have enough people to be overly concerned about denominations these days. I've heard of some towns where they make everyone go Baptist, or Lutheran, but we're lucky that no one's thought to do anything like that here. Though I'm sure Beale would try if he could get away with it. Maybe Tris was right to leave the whole thing behind. Now she sits the children while their parents go to church.

The sun tips past its zenith when the doors finally open and my neighbors walk out of the church in twos and threes. Beale shakes parishioners' hands as they leave, mopping his face with a handkerchief. His smile looks more like a grimace to me; three years in town and he still looks uncomfortable anywhere but behind a pulpit. Men like him think the glassmen are right to require "full gestation." Men like him think Tris is a damned sinner, just because she has a few men and won't settle down with one. He hates the glassmen as much as the rest of us, but his views help them just the same.

Bill comes out with Pam. The bones in her neck stand out like twigs, but she looks a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw her, at Georgia's funeral. Pam fainted when we laid her daughter in the earth, and Bill had to take her home before the ceremony ended. Pam is Bill's cousin, and Georgia was her only child—blown to bits after riding her bicycle over a hidden jewel in the fields outside town. To my surprise, Bill gives me a tired smile before walking Pam down the street.

Bill and I used to dig clams from the mud at low tide in the summers. We were in our twenties and my mother had just died of a cancer the glassmen could have cured if they gave a damn. Sometimes we would build fires of cedar and pine and whatever other tinder lay around and roast the clams right there by the water. We talked about anything in the world other than glassmen and dead friends while the moon arced above. We planned the cornfield eating those clams, and plotted all the ways we might get the threshers for the job. The cow dairy, the chicken coop, the extra garden plots—we schemed and dreamt of ways to help our town hurt a little less each winter. Bill had a girlfriend then, though she vanished not long after; we never did more than touch.

That was a long time ago, but I remember the taste of cedar ash and sea salt as I look at the back of him. I never once thought those moments would last forever, and yet here I am, regretful and old.

Yolanda is one of the last to leave, stately and elegant with her braided white hair and black church hat with netting. I catch up with her as she heads down the steps.

"Can we talk?" I ask.

Her shoulders slump a little when I ask, but she bids the reverend farewell and walks with me until we are out of earshot.

"Tris needs an abortion," I say.

Yolanda nods up and down like a sea bird, while she takes deep breaths. She became our midwife because she'd helped Bill's mother with some births, but I don't think she wants the job. There's just no one else.

"Libby, the glassmen don't like abortions."

"If the glassmen are paying us enough attention to notice, we have bigger problems."

"I don't have the proper equipment for a procedure. Even if I did, I couldn't."

"Don't tell me you agree with Beale."

She draws herself up and glares at me. "I don't know *how*, Libby! Do you want me to kill Tris to get rid of her baby? They say the midwife in Toddville can do them if it's early enough. How far along is she?"

I see the needle in my mind, far too close to the center line for comfort. "Three and a half months," I say.

She looks away, but she puts her arm around my shoulders. "I understand why she would, I do. But it's too late. We'll all help her."

*Raise the child*, she means. I know Yolanda is making sense, but I don't want to hear her. I don't want to think about Tris carrying a child she doesn't want to term. I don't want to think about that test kit needle pointing inexorably at *too fucking late*. So I thank Yolanda and head off in the other direction, down the cracked tarmac as familiar as a scar, to Pam's house. She lives in a small cottage Victorian with peeling gray paint that used to be blue. Sure enough, Bill sits in an old rocking chair on the porch, thumbing through a book. I loved to see him like that in our clam-digging days, just sitting and listening. I would dream of him after he disappeared.

"Libs?" he says. He leans forward.

"Help her, Bill. You've been outside, you know people. Help her find a doctor, someone who can do this after three months."

He sighs and the book thumps on the floor. "I'll see."

Three days later, Bill comes over after dinner.

"There's rumors of something closer to Annapolis," he says. "I couldn't find out more than that. None of my . . . I mean, I only know some dudes, Libby. And whoever runs this place only talks to women."

"Your mother didn't know?" Tris asks, braver than me.

Bill rubs the back of his head. "If she did, she sure didn't tell me."

"You've got to have more than that," she says. "Does this place even have a name? How near Annapolis? What do you want us to do, sail into the city and ask the nearest glassman which way to the abortion clinic?"

"What do I want you to do? Maybe I want you to count your goddamn blessings and not risk your life to murder a child. It's a *sin*, Tris, not like you'd care about that, but I'd've thought Libby would."

"God I know," I say, "but I've never had much use for sin. Now why don't you get your nose out of our business?"

"You invited me in, Libby."

"For *help*—"

He shakes his head. "If you could see what Pam's going through right now . . ."

Bill has dealt with as much grief as any of us. I can understand why he's moralizing in our kitchen, but that doesn't mean I have to tolerate it.

But Tris doesn't even give me time. She stands and shakes a wooden spatula under his nose. Bill's a big man, but he flinches. "So I should have this baby just so I can watch it get blown up later, is that it? Don't put Pam's grief on me, Bill. I'm sorrier than I can say about Georgia. I taught that girl to read! And I can't. I just can't."

Bill breathes ragged. His dark hands twist his muddy flannel shirt, his grip so tight his veins are stark against sun-baked skin. Tris is still holding that spatula.

Bill turns his head abruptly, stalks back to the kitchen door with a "Fuck," and he wipes his eyes. Tris leans against the sink.

"Esther," he says quietly, his back to us. "The name of a person, the name of a place, I don't know. But you ask for that, my buddy says you should find what you're after."

I follow him outside, barefoot and confused that I'd bother when he's so clearly had enough of us. I call his name, then start jogging and catch his elbow. He turns around.

"What, Libby?"

He's so angry. His hair didn't grow in very long or thick after he came back. He looks like someone mashed him up, stretched him out and then did a hasty job of putting him back together. Maybe I look like that, too.

"Thanks," I say. We don't touch.

"Don't die, Libs."

The air is thick with crickets chirping and fireflies glowing and the swampy, sea-weed-and-salt air from the Chesapeake. He turns to walk away. I don't stop him.

We take Dad's boat. There's not enough gas left to visit Bishop's Head, the mouth of our estuary, let alone Annapolis. So we bring oars, along with enough supplies to keep the old dinghy low in the water.

"I hope we don't hit a storm," Tris says, squinting at the clear, indigo sky as though thunderheads might be hiding behind the stars.

"We're all right for now. Feel the air? Humidity's dropped at least 20 percent."

Tris has the right oar and I have the left. I don't want to use the gas unless we absolutely have to, and I'm hoping the low-tech approach will make us less noticeable to any patrolling glassmen. It's tough work, even in the relatively cool night air, and I check the stars to make sure we're heading in more or less the right direction. None of the towns on our estuary keep lights on at night. I only know when we pass Toddville because of the old lighthouse silhouetted against the stars. I lost sight of our home within five minutes of setting out, and God how a part of me wanted to turn the dinghy right around and go back. The rest of the world isn't safe. Home isn't either, but it's familiar.

Dad gave us a nautical chart of the Chesapeake Bay, with markers for towns long destroyed, lighthouses long abandoned, by people long dead. He marked our town and told us to get back safe. We promised him we would and we hugged like we might never see each other again.

"What if we hit a jewel?" Tris asks. In the dark, I can't tell if it's fear or exertion that aspirates her words. I've had that thought myself, but what can we do? The glassmen make sure their cluster bombs spread gifts everywhere.

"They don't detonate that well in water," I offer.

A shift in the dark; Tris rests her oar in the boat and stretches her arms. "Well enough to kill you slowly."

I'm not as tired, but I take the break. "We've got a gun. It ought to do the trick, if it comes to that."

"Promise?"

"To what? Mercy kill you?"

"Sure."

"Aren't you being a little melodramatic?"

"And we're just out here to do a little night fishing."

I laugh, though my belly aches like she's punched me. "Christ, Tris." I lean back in the boat, the canvas of our food sack rough and comforting on my slick skin, like Mom's gloves when she first taught me to plant seeds.

"Libs?"

"Yeah?"

"You really don't care who the father is?"

I snort. "If it were important, I'm sure you would have told me."

I look up at the sky: there's the Milky Way, the North Star, Orion's belt. I remember when I was six, before the occupation. There was so much light on the bay you could hardly see the moon.

"Reckon we'll get to Ohio, Jim?" Tris asks in a fake Southern drawl.

I grin. "Reckon we might. If'n we can figure out just how you got yerself pregnant, Huck."

Tris leans over the side of the boat, and a spray of brackish water hits my open mouth. I shriek and dump two handfuls on her head and she splutters and grabs me from behind so I can't do more than wiggle in her embrace.

"Promise," she says, breathing hard, still laughing.

The bay tastes like home to me, like everything I've ever loved. "Christ, Tris," I say,



and I guess that's enough.

We round Bishop's Head at dawn. Tris is nearly asleep on her oar, though she hasn't complained. I'm worried about her, and it's dangerous to travel during the day until we can be sure the water is clear. We pull into Hopkins Cove, an Edenic horseshoe of brown sand and forest. It doesn't look like a human foot has touched this place since the invasion, which reassures me. Drones don't do much exploring. They care about people.

Tris falls asleep as soon as we pull the boat onto the sand. I wonder if I should feed her more—does she need extra for the baby? Then I wonder if that's irrational, since we're going all this way to kill it. But for now, at least, the fetus is part of her, which means we have to take it into consideration. I think about Bill with his big, dumb eyes and patchy bald head telling me that it's a *sin*, as though that has anything to do with your sister crying like her insides have been torn out.

I eat some cornbread and a peach, though I'm not hungry. I sit on the shore with my feet in the water and watch for other boats or drones or reapers overhead. I don't see anything but seagulls and ospreys and minnows that tickle my toes.

"Ain't nothing here, Libs," I say, in my mother's best imitation of *her* mother's voice. I never knew my grandmother, but Mom said she looked just like Tris, so I loved her on principle. She and Tris even share a name: Leatrice. I told Mom that I'd name my daughter Tamar, after her. I'd always sort of planned to, but when my monthlies stopped a year ago, I figured it was just as well. *Stupid Bill, and his stupid patchy hair*, I think.

I dream of giant combines made from black chrome and crystal, with headlights of wide, unblinking eyes. I take them to the fields, but something is wrong with the thrasher. There's bonemeal dust on the wheat berries.

"Now, Libby," Bill says, but I can't hear the rest of what he's saying because the earth starts shaking and—

I scramble to my feet, kicking up sand with the dream still in my eyes. There's lights in the afternoon sky and this awful thunder, like a thousand lightning bolts are striking the earth at once.

"Oh, Christ," I say. A murder of reapers swarm to the north, and even with the sun in the sky their bombs light the ground beneath like hellfire. It's easier to see reapers from far away, because they paint their underbellies light blue to blend with the sky.

Tris stands beside me and grips my wrist. "That's not . . . it has to be Toddville, right? Or Cedar Creek? They're not far enough away for home, right?"

I don't say anything. I don't know. I can only look.

Bill's hair is patchy because the glassmen arrested him and they tortured him. Bill asked his outside contacts if they knew anything about a place to get an illegal abortion. Bill brought back a hundred thousand dollars' worth of farm equipment and scars from wounds that would have killed someone without access to a doctor. But what kind of prisoner has access to a real doctor? Why did the glassmen arrest him? What if his contacts are exactly the type of men the glassmen like to bomb with their reapers? What if Bill is?

But I know it isn't that simple. No one knows why the glassmen bomb us. No one *really* knows the reason for the whole damn mess, their reapers and their drones and their arcane rules you're shot for not following.

"Should we go back?"

She says it like she's declared war on a cardinal direction, like she really will get on that boat and walk into a reaper wasteland and salvage what's left of our lives and have that baby.

I squeeze her hand. "It's too close," I say. "Toddville, I think you're right. Let's get

going, though. Probably not safe here.”

She nods. She doesn’t look me in the eye. We paddle through the choppy water until sun sets. And then, without saying anything, we ship the oars and I turn on the engine.

Three nights later, we see lights on the shore. It’s a glassmen military installation. Dad marked it on the map, but still I’m surprised by its size, its brightness, the brazen way it sits on the coastline, as though daring to attract attention.

“I’d never thought a building could be so . . .”

“Angry?” Tris says.

“Violent.”

“It’s like a giant middle finger up the ass of the Chesapeake.”

I laugh despite myself. “You’re ridiculous.”

We’re whispering, though we’re on the far side of the bay and the water is smooth and quiet. After that reaper drone attack, I’m remembering more than I like of my childhood terror of the glassmen. Dad and Mom had to talk to security drones a few times after the occupation, and I remember the oddly modulated voices, distinctly male, and the bright unblinking eyes behind the glass masks of their robot heads. I don’t know anyone who has met a real glassman, instead of one of their remote robots. It’s a retaliatory offense to harm a drone because the connection between the drone and the glassman on the other side of the world (or up in some space station) is so tight that sudden violence can cause brain damage. I wonder how they can square *potential brain damage* with *dead children*, but I guess I’m not a glassman.

So we row carefully, but fast as we can, hoping to distance our little fishing boat from the towering building complex. Its lights pulse so brightly they leave spots behind my eyes.

And then, above us, we hear the chopping whirr of blades cutting the air, the whine of unmanned machinery readying for deployment. I look up and shade my eyes: a reaper.

Tris drops her oar. It slides straight into the bay, but neither of us bother to catch it. If we don’t get away now, a lost oar won’t matter anyway. She lunges into our supply bag, brings out a bag of apples. The noise of the reaper is close, almost deafening. I can’t hear what she yells at me before she jumps into the bay. I hesitate in the boat, afraid to leave our supplies and afraid to be blown to pieces by a reaper. I look back up and see a panel slide open on its bright blue belly. The panel reveals dark glass; behind it, a single, unblinking eye.

I jump into the water, but my foot catches on the remaining oar. The boat rocks behind me, but panic won’t let me think—I tug and tug until the boat capsizes and suddenly ten pounds of supplies are falling on my head, dragging me deeper into the dark water. I try to kick out, but my leg is tangled with the drawstring of a canvas bag, and I can’t make myself focus enough to get it loose. All I can think of is that big glass eye waiting to kill me. My chest burns and my ears fill to bursting with pressure. I’d always thought I would die in fire, but water isn’t much better. I don’t even know if Tris made it, or if the eye caught her, too.

I try to look up, but I’m too deep; it’s too dark to even know which way that is. *God*, I think, *save her. Let her get back home.* It’s rude to demand things of God, but I figure dying ought to excuse the presumption.

Something tickles my back. I gasp and the water flows in, drowning my lungs, flooding out what air I had left. But the thing in the water with me has a light on its head and strange, shiny legs and it’s using them to get under my arms and drag me up until we reach the surface and I cough and retch and *breathe, thank you God*. The thing takes me to shore, where Tris is waiting to hug me and kiss my forehead like I’m the little sister.

"Jesus," she says, and I wonder if God really does take kindly to demands until I turn my head and understand: my savior is a drone.

\* \* \*

"I will feed you," the glassman says. He looks like a spider with an oversized glassman head: eight chrome legs and two glass eyes. "The pregnant one should eat. Her daughter is growing."

I wonder if some glassman technology is translating his words into English. If in his language, whatever it is, *the pregnant one* is a kind of respectful address. Or maybe they taught him to speak to us that way.

I'm too busy appreciating the bounty of air in my lungs to notice the other thing he said.

"Daughter?" Tris says.

The glassman nods. "Yes. I have been equipped with a body-safe sonic scanning device. Your baby has not been harmed by your ordeal. I am here to help and reassure you."

Tris looks at me, carefully. I sit up. "You said something about food?"

"Yes!" It's hard to tell, his voice is so strange, but he sounds happy. As though rescuing two women threatened by one of his reaper fellows is the best piece of luck he's had all day. "I will be back," he says, and scuttles away, into the forest.

Tris hands me one of her rescued apples. "What the hell?" Her voice is low, but I'm afraid the glassman can hear us anyway.

"A trap?" I whisper, barely vocalizing into her left ear.

She shakes her head. "He seems awfully . . ."

"Eager?"

"Young."

The glassman comes back a minute later, walking on six legs and holding two boxes in the others. His robot must be a new model; the others I've seen look more human. "I have meals! A nearby convoy has provided them for you," he says, and places the boxes carefully in front of us. "The one with a red ribbon is for the pregnant one. It has nutrients."

Tris's hands shake as she opens it. The food doesn't look dangerous, though it resembles the strange pictures in Tris's old magazines more than the stuff I make at home. A perfectly rectangular steak, peas, corn mash. Mine is the same, except I have regular corn. We eat silently, while the glassman gives every impression of smiling upon us benevolently.

"Good news," he pipes, when I'm nearly done forcing the bland food down my raw throat. "I have been authorized to escort you both to a safe hospital facility."

"Hospital?" Tris asks, in a way that makes me sit up and put my arm around her.

"Yes," the glassman says. "To ensure the safe delivery of your daughter."

The next morning, the glassman takes us to an old highway a mile from the water's edge. A convoy waits for us, four armored tanks and two platform trucks. One of the platform beds is filled with mechanical supplies, including two dozen glass-and-chrome heads. The faces are blank, the heads unattached to any robot body, but the effect makes me nauseous. Tris digs her nails into my forearm. The other platform bed is mostly empty except for a few boxes and one man tied to the guardrails. He lies prone on the floor and doesn't move when we climb in after our glassman. At first I'm afraid that he's dead, but then he twitches and groans before falling silent again.

"Who is he?" Tris asks.

"Non-state actor," our glassman says, and pulls up the grate behind us.

"What?"

The convoy engines whirr to life—quiet compared to the three old men, but the

noise shocks me after our days of silence on the bay.

The glassman swivels his head, his wide unblinking eyes fully focused on my sister. I'm afraid she's set him off and they'll tie us to the railings like that poor man. Instead, he clicks his two front legs together for no reason that I can see except maybe it gives him something to do.

"Terrorist," he says, quietly.

Tris looks at me and I widen my eyes: *don't you dare say another word*. She nods.

"The convoy will be moving now. You should sit for your safety."

He clacks away before we can respond. He hooks his hind legs through the side rail opposite us and settles down, looking like nothing so much as a contented cat.

The armored tanks get into formation around us and then we lurch forward, rattling over the broken road. Tris makes it for half an hour before she pukes over the side.

For two days, Tris and I barely speak. The other man in our truck wakes up about once every ten hours, just in time for one of the two-legged glassmen from the armored tanks to clomp over and give us all some food and water. The man gets less than we do, though none of it is very good. He eats in such perfect silence that I wonder if the glassmen have cut out his tongue. As soon as he finishes, one of the tank glassmen presses a glowing metal bar to the back of his neck. The mark it leaves is a perfect triangle, raw and red like a fresh burn. The prisoner doesn't struggle when the giant articulated metal hand grips his shoulders, he only stares, and soon after he slumps against the railing. I have lots of time to wonder about those marks; hour after slow hour with a rattling truck bruising my tailbone and regrets settling into my joints like dried tears. Sometimes Tris massages knots from my neck, and sometimes they come right back while I knead hers. I can't see any way to escape, so I try not to think about it. But there's no helping the sick, desperate knowledge that every hour we're closer to locking Tris in a hospital for six months so the glassmen can force her to have a baby.

During the third wake-up and feeding of the bound man, our glassman shakes out his legs and clacks over to the edge of the truck bed. The robots who drive the tanks are at least eight feet tall, with oversized arms and legs equipped with artillery rifles. They would be terrifying even if we weren't completely at their mercy. The two glassmen stare at each other, eerily silent and still.

The bound man, I'd guess Indian from his thick straight hair and dark skin, strains as far forward as he can. He nods at us.

"They're talking," he says. His words are slow and painstakingly formed. We crawl closer to hear him better. "In their real bodies."

I look back up, wondering how he knows. They're so still, but then glassmen are always uncanny.

Tris leans forward, so her lips are at my ear. "Their eyes," she whispers.

Glassman robot eyes never blink. But their pupils dilate and contract just like ours do. Only now both robots' eyes are pupil-blasted black despite the glaring noon sun. Talking in their real bodies? That must mean they've stopped paying us any attention.

"Could we leave?" I whisper. No one has tied us up. I think our glassman is under the impression he's doing us a favor.

Tris buries her face in the back of my short nappy hair and wraps her arms around me. I know it's a ploy, but it comforts me all the same. "The rest of the convoy."

Even as I nod, the two glassmen step away from each other, and our convoy is soon enough on its way. This time, though, the prisoner gets to pass his time awake and silent. No one tells us to move away from him.

"I have convinced the field soldier to allow me to watch the operative," our glassman says proudly.

"That's very nice," Tris says. She's hardly touched her food.

"I am glad you appreciate my efforts! It is my job to assess mission parameter achievements. Would you mind if I asked you questions?"

I frown at him and quickly look away. Tris, unfortunately, has decided she'd rather play with fire than her food.

"Of course," she says.

We spend the next few hours subjected to a tireless onslaught of questions. Things like, "How would you rate our society-building efforts in the Tidewater Region?" and "What issue would you most like to see addressed in the upcoming Societal Health Meeting?" and "Are you mostly satisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with the cleanliness of the estuary?"

"The fish are toxic," I say to this last question. My first honest answer. It seems to startle him. At least, that's how I interpret the way he clicks his front two legs together.

Tris pinches my arm, but I ignore her.

"Well," says the glassman. "That is potentially true. We have been monitoring the unusually high levels of radiation and heavy metal toxicity. But you can rest assured that we are addressing the problem and its potential harmful side-effects on Beneficial Societal Development."

"Like dying of mercury poisoning?" Tris pinches me again, but she smiles for the first time in days.

"I do not recommend it for the pregnant one! I have been serving you both nutritious foods well within the regulatory limits."

I have no idea what those regulatory limits might be, but I don't ask.

"In any case," he says. "Aside from that issue, the estuary is very clean."

"Thank you," Tris says, before I can respond.

"You're very welcome. We are here to help you."

"How far away is the hospital?" she asks.

I feel like a giant broom has swept the air from the convoy, like our glassman has tossed me back into the bay to drown. I knew Tris was desperate; I didn't realize how much.

"Oh," he says, and his pupils go very wide. I could kiss the prisoner for telling us what that means: no one's at home.

The man now leans toward us, noticing the same thing. "You pregnant?" he asks Tris. She nods.

He whistles through a gap between his front teeth. "Some rotten luck," he says. "I never seen a baby leave one of their clinics. Fuck knows what they do to them."

"And the mothers?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, just lowers his eyes and looks sidelong at our dormant glassman. "Depends," he whispers, "on who they think you are."

That's all we have time for; the glassman's eyes contract again and his head tilts like a bird's. "There is a rehabilitative facility in the military installation to which we are bound. Twenty-three hours ETA."

"A prison?" Tris asks.

"A hospital," the glassman says firmly.

When we reach the pipeline, I know we're close. The truck bounces over fewer potholes and cracks; we even meet a convoy heading in the other direction. The pipeline is a perfect clear tube about sixteen feet high. It looks empty to me, a giant hollow tube that distorts the landscape on the other side like warped glass. It doesn't run near the bay, and no one from home knows enough to plot it on a map. Maybe this is the reason the glassmen are here. I wonder what could be so valuable in that hollow tube that Tris has to give birth in a cage, that little Georgia has to die, that a cluster bomb has to

destroy half our wheat crop. What's so valuable that looks like nothing at all?

The man spends long hours staring out the railing of the truck, as though he's never seen anything more beautiful or more terrifying. Sometimes he talks to us, small nothings, pointing out a crane overhead or a derelict road with a speed limit sign—*55 miles per hour*, it says, *radar enforced*.

At first our glassman noses around these conversations, but he decides they're innocuous enough. He tells the man to "refrain from exerting a corrupting influence," and resumes his perch on the other side of the truck bed. The prisoner's name is Simon, he tells us, and he's on watch. For what, I wonder, but know well enough not to ask.

"What's in it?" I say instead, pointing to the towering pipeline.

"I heard it's a wormhole." He rests his chin on his hands, a gesture that draws careful, casual attention to the fact that his left hand has loosened the knots. He catches my eye for a blink and then looks away. My breath catches—Is he trying to escape? Do we dare?

"A wormhole? Like, in space?" Tris says, oblivious. Or maybe not. Looking at her, I realize she might just be a better actor.

I don't know what Tris means, but Simon nods. "A passage through space, that's what I heard."

"That is incorrect!"

The three of us snap our heads around, startled to see the glassman so close. His eyes whirr with excitement. "The Designated Area Project is not what you refer to as a wormhole, which are in fact impractical as transportation devices."

Simon shivers and looks down at his feet. My lips feel swollen with regret—what if he thinks we're corrupted? What if he notices Simon's left hand? But Tris raises her chin, stubborn and defiant at the worst possible time—I guess the threat of that glassman hospital is making her too crazy to feel anything as reasonable as fear.

"Then what is it?" she asks, so plainly that Simon's mouth opens, just a little.

Our glassman stutters forward on his delicate metallic legs. "I am not authorized to tell you," he says, clipped.

"Why not? It's the whole goddamned reason all your glassman reapers and drones and robots are swarming all over the place, isn't it? We don't even get to know what the hell it's all for?"

"Societal redevelopment is one of our highest mission priorities," he says, a little desperately.

I lean forward and grab Tris's hand as she takes a sharp, angry breath. "Honey," I say, "Tris, *please*."

She pulls away from me, hard as a slap, but she stops talking. The glassman says nothing; just quietly urges us a few yards away from Simon. No more corruption on his watch.

Night falls, revealing artificial lights gleaming on the horizon. Our glassman doesn't sleep. Not even in his own place, I suppose, because whenever I check with a question his eyes stay the same and he answers without hesitation. Maybe they have drugs to keep themselves awake for a week at a time. Maybe he's not human. I don't ask—I'm still a little afraid he might shoot me for saying the wrong thing, and more afraid that he'll start talking about Ideal Societal Redevelopment.

At the first hint of dawn, Simon coughs and leans back against the railing, catching my eye. Tris is dozing on my shoulder, drool slowly soaking my shirt. Simon flexes his hands, now free. He can't speak, but our glassman isn't looking at him. He points to the floor of the truckbed, then lays himself out with his hands over his head. There's something urgent in his face. Something knowledgable. To the glassmen he's a terrorist, but what does that make him to us? I shake Tris awake.

"Libs?"



"Glassman," I say, "I have a question about societal redevelopment deliverables." Tris sits straight up.

"I would be pleased to hear it!" the glassman says.

"I would like to know what you plan to do with my sister's baby."

"Oh," the glassman says. The movement of his pupils is hardly discernible in this low light, but I've been looking. I grab Tris by her shoulder and we scramble over to Simon.

"Duck!" he says. Tris goes down before I do, so only I can see the explosion light up the front of the convoy. Sparks and embers fly through the air like a starfall. The pipeline glows pink and purple and orange. Even the strafe of bullets seems beautiful until it blows out the tires of our truck. We crash and tumble. Tris holds onto me, because I've forgotten how to hold onto myself.

The glassmen are frozen. Some have tumbled from the overturned trucks, their glass and metal arms halfway to their guns. Their eyes don't move, not even when three men in muddy camouflage lob sticky black balls into the heart of the burning convoy.

Tris hauls me to my feet. Simon shouts something at one of the other men, who turns out to be a woman.

"What the hell was that?" I ask.

"EMP," Simon says. "Knocks them out for a minute or two. We have to haul ass."

The woman gives Simon a hard stare. "They're clean?"

"They were prisoners, too," he says.

The woman—light skinned, close-cropped hair—hoists an extra gun, unconvinced. Tris straightens up. "I'm pregnant," she says. "And ain't nothing going to convince me to stay here."

"Fair enough," the woman says, and hands Tris a gun. "We have ninety seconds. Just enough time to detonate."

Our glassman lies on his back, legs curled in the air. One of those sticky black balls has lodged a foot away from his blank glass face. It's a retaliatory offense to harm a drone. I remember what they say about brain damage when the glassmen are connected. Is he connected? Will this hurt him? I don't like the kid, but he's so young. Not unredeemable. He saved my life.

I don't know why I do it, but while Tris and the others are distracted, I use a broken piece of the guard rail to knock off the black ball. I watch it roll under the truck, yards away. I don't want to hurt him; I just want my sister and me safe and away.

"Libs!" It's Tris, looking too much like a terrorist with her big black gun. Dad taught us both to use them, but the difference between us is I wish that I didn't know how, and Tris is glad.

I run to catch up. A man idles a pickup ten yards down the road from the convoy.

"They're coming back on," he says.

"Detonating!" The woman's voice is a bird-call, a swoop from high to low. She presses a sequence of buttons on a remote and suddenly the light ahead is fiercer than the sun and it smells like gasoline and woodsmoke and tar. I've seen plenty enough bomb wreckage in my life; I feel like when it's *ours* it should look different. Better. It doesn't.

Tris pulls me into the back of the pickup and we're bouncing away before we can even shut the back door. We turn off the highway and drive down a long dirt road through the woods. I watch the back of the woman's head through the rear window. She has four triangular scars at the base of her neck, the same as Bill's.

Something breaks out of the underbrush on the side of the road. Something that moves unnaturally fast, even on the six legs he has left. Something that calls out, in that stupid, naive, inhuman voice:

“Stop the vehicle! Pregnant one, do not worry, I will—”

“Fuck!” Tris’s terror cuts off the last of the speech. The car swerves, tossing me against the door. I must not have latched it properly, because next thing I know I’m tumbling to the dirt with a thud that jars my teeth. The glassman scrambles on top of me without any regard for the pricking pain of his long, metallic limbs.

“Kill that thing!” It’s a man, I’m not sure who. I can’t look, pinioned as I am.

“Pregnant one, step down from the terrorist vehicle and I will lead you to safety. There is a Reaper Support Flyer on its way.”

He grips me between two metallic arms and hauls me up with surprising strength. The woman and Simon have guns trained on the glassman, but they hesitate—if they shoot him, they have to shoot me. Tris has her gun up as well, but she’s shaking so hard she can’t even get her finger on the trigger.

“Let go of me,” I say to him. He presses his legs more firmly into my side.

“I will save the pregnant one,” he repeats, as though to reassure both of us. He’s young, but he’s still a glassman. He knows enough to use me as a human shield.

Tris lowers the gun to her side. She slides from the truck bed and walks forward.

“Don’t you dare, Tris!” I yell, but she just shakes her head. My sister, giving herself to a glassman? What would Dad say? I can’t even free a hand to wipe my eyes. I hate this boy behind the glass face. I hate him because he’s too young and ignorant to even understand what he’s doing wrong. Evil is good to a glassman. Wrong is right. The pregnant one has to be saved.

I pray to God, then. I say, *God, please let her not be a fool. Please let her escape.*

And I guess God heard, because when she’s just a couple of feet away she looks straight at me and smiles like she’s about to cry. “I’m sorry, Libs,” she whispers. “I love you. I just can’t let him take me again.”

“Pregnant one! Please drop your weapon and we will—”

And then she raises her gun and shoots.

My arm hurts. Goddamn it hurts, like there’s some small, toothy animal burrowing inside. I groan and feel my sister’s hands, cool on my forehead.

“They know the doctor,” she says. “That Esther that Bill told us about, remember? She’s a regular doctor, too, not just abortions. You’ll be fine.”

I squint up at her. The sun has moved since she shot me; I can hardly see her face for the light behind it. But even at the edges I can see her grief. Her tears drip on my hairline and down my forehead.

“I don’t care,” I say, with some effort. “I wanted you to do it.”

“I was so afraid, Libs.”

“I know.”

“We’ll get home now, won’t we?”

“Sure,” I say. *If it’s there.*

The terrorists take us to a town fifty miles from Annapolis. Even though it’s close to the city, the glassmen mostly leave it alone. It’s far enough out from the pipeline, and there’s not much here, otherwise: just a postage stamp of a barley field, thirty or so houses and one of those large, old, whitewashed barn-door churches. At night, the town is ghost empty.

Tris helps me down from the truck. Even that’s an effort. My head feels half-filled with syrup. Simon and the others say their goodbyes and head out quickly. It’s too dangerous for fighters to stay this close to the city. Depending on how much the glassmen know about Tris and me, it isn’t safe for us either. But between a baby and a bullet, we don’t have much choice.

Alone, now, we read the church’s name above the door: *Esther Zion Congregation*

*Church, Methodist.*

Tris and I look at each other. "Oh, Christ," she says. "Did Bill lie, Libby? Is he really so hung up on that sin bullshit that he sent me all the way out here, to a *church*. . ."

I lean against her and wonder how he ever survived to come back to us. It feels like a gift, now, with my life half bled out along the road behind. "Bill wouldn't lie, Tris. Maybe he got it wrong. But he wouldn't lie."

The pews are old but well-kept. The prayer books look like someone's been using them. The only person inside is a white lady, sweeping the altar.

"Simon and Sybil sent you," she says, not a question. Sybil—we never even asked the woman's name.

"My sister," we both say, and then, improbably, laugh.

A month later, Tris and I round Bishop's Head and face north. At the mouth of our estuary, we aren't close enough to see Toddville, let alone our home, but we can't see any drones either. The weather is chillier this time around, the water harder to navigate with the small boat. Tris looks healthy and happy; older and younger. No one will mistake her for twenty-five again, but there's nothing wrong with wisdom.

The doctor fixed up my arm and found us an old, leaky rowboat when it was clear we were determined to go back. Tris has had to do most of the work; her arms are starting to look like they belong to someone who doesn't spend all her time reading. I think about the harvest and hope the bombs didn't reap the grain before we could. If anyone could manage those fields without me, Bill can. We won't starve this winter, assuming reapers didn't destroy everything. Libby ships the oars and lets us float, staring at the deep gray sky and its reflection on the water that seems to stretch endlessly before us.

"Bill will have brought the harvest in just fine," I say.

"You love him, don't you?"

I think about his short, patchy hair. That giant green monster he brought back like a dowry. "He's good with the old engines. Better than me."

"I think he loves you. Maybe one of you could get around to doing something about it?"

"Maybe so."

Tris and I sit like that for a long time. The boat drifts toward shore, and neither of us stop it. A fish jumps in the water to my left; a heron circles overhead.

"Dad's probably out fishing," she says, maneuvering us around. "We might catch him on the way in."

"That'll be a surprise! Though he won't be happy about his boat."

"He might let it slide. Libby?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry—"

"You aren't sorry if you'd do it again," I say. "And I'm not sorry if I'd let you."

She holds my gaze. "Do you know how much I love you?"

We have the same smile, my sister and I. It's a nice smile, even when it's scared and a little sad. ○

**James Van Pelt teaches high school and college English in western Colorado and blogs at <http://jimvanpelt.livejournal.com>. His fiction has made numerous appearances in most of the major science fiction and fantasy magazines. His third collection of stories, *The Radio Magician and Other Stories*, received the Colorado Book Award in 2010. The author's newest collection, *Flying in the Heart of the Lafayette Escadrille* (Fairwood Press), was released in October 2012. His latest story is a bittersweet look at the consequences of growing up with an imaginative father and those voyages taken on . . .**

# THE FAMILY ROCKET

**James Van Pelt**

**T**he thing about stories is there's the ones you want to tell, and there's the one that happened. I'll hold off telling you which kind this one is.

"My family is . . . eccentric." I helped Rachael squeeze under the chain link fence. She'd worn a nice flannel shirt and jeans that were already muddy. But even by the distant street's uneven lights wavering through tree branches, she was beautiful.

I waved at the security camera, although it was unlikely my parents would be watching the monitor.

She laughed in that low-throated way that made me tingle as she brushed off her pants. "*Everyone's* family is eccentric. Besides, I love you. Are you afraid they'll scare me off?"

"We'll see."

"Where are we?"

I led her onto the beaten and oil soaked dirt inside the fence. After pushing a hundred yards through damp underbrush, Papa's salvage was a relief.

"My father's junk yard."

"You told me already your family was in the recycling business."

A mountain of broken cars blocked our view, but the river murmured beyond. My childhood home stood beside it, out of sight on the yard's other edge, where my young life had been spent, exploring the ever changing landscape, finding treasure, hunting rats.

"Papa wanted us to go to space," I said, holding her hand. We wended our way through a shadowed passage, metal towering on both sides.

"That's a good dream."

"No, not a dream. An obsession. He lived for Mars and Venus and Neptune. He filled us with his desire."

Above, in the narrow gap that revealed the sky, Papa's stars glittered and winked.

Rachael paused, holding me back for an instant. I could feel the box with its diamond ring promise weighing heavily in my pocket. Could I ask her? Did I dare?

See, there's a story about Rachael and the ring. That's a story that could go many ways. In some, I ask her. In others I don't. In a couple, she asks me before I get up the nerve. Those are nice ones. And, of course, there's what actually happened.

"But your family . . . never any money, you said."

Rachael's family lived with wealth. She spent summers in Europe, cruised the Bahamas on her parents' yacht.

"The equipment was always a week from breaking down."

"A ticket on a rocket ship costs a fortune."

"Ten fortunes." Commercial space travel had been around my entire life. Flights left daily for the inner planets, but only the very, very rich could escape. Space was not for my father, or my mother, or the six children. "But Papa convinced us we went to Mars, one summer. The trip to Mars . . ." I laughed. "Mars is our Santa Claus, and the moon is our Easter Bunny. Fairies were asteroids and comets were our happily ever after."

"So, you never went."

"That's just it. We did. Papa bought a rocket ship, worked on it, and took us to Mars. Oh, it was glorious too." I remembered the ship's rumbling beneath us, the stars through the windows, and then, finally, Mars swimming into view, a ruddy red stoplight.

"A private citizen can't buy a spaceship," Rachael said. "You can't launch one from a junkyard."

"That's true. I found out about a year later. He'd faked the whole adventure. The ship was a mockup he'd bought for the salvage, but instead of melting it down, he bolted automobile engines into its base, and fitted the ports with 3D view screens. He shepherded us aboard, started the engines, and took us on an imaginary voyage. We were so young! But the trip was a fairy tale, all illusion so we would believe we'd traveled to space. The thing is, we never talk about it as if it was a story. My family maintains the story, and I think Papa, over time, has come to believe it. Maybe he always believed it."

"Your dad is delusional?"

"For years." The junk yard corridor turned in an unexpected direction and forked. I took the right passage. We had moved past cars. Flattened refrigerators, ovens, washers and dryers, stacked like giant, wrinkled playing cards created the walls. "He's eighty now, retired, my brother and sister run the yard while Papa works on his rocket ship. They say he spends all his time there, tinkering, making 'improvements.' He won't let them near it now."

"Your father sounds like a romantic. Taking his children to space. That's sweet. He must have loved you very much."

Before I'd moved away from home for good, we'd fought, standing near his ridiculous rocket, his puppet show. I'd belittled him. I'd told him he was a fool. He'd spent thousands of dollars on his space ship. Even as I walked away, I regretted yelling at him. I loved going to Mars; I loved him for taking me, but when we hurt family we bring out the nuclear bombs. For years after he didn't talk to me. Even Mama took months to forgive me. Every time I came home, that argument's echo filled the house.

\* \* \*

Painful parts in real stories are the hardest to tell. Maybe that's why we pay professional strangers to listen to them, or we figure ways to disguise them in fiction. They happen to other characters, not us. What I've said here might have happened exactly the way I've said it, or maybe I made myself less an asshole than I was. There's no way for *you* to know, but *I* do, no matter how often I tell it.

"He's an insane saint, my papa. I want you to see the ship. It's the best way you'll understand what you are getting into with me, with my family. We are poor, Earth-bound, and crazy." That came out with more bitterness than I meant. When I was ten, the summer we flew to Mars, I'd dreamed about the stars. Papa took me to launches. Once, we toured a launch pad. Exhaust had coated every surface within a hundred yards with "blast glass," a thin, black layer of brittle chemical remnants created in the superheat and rocket fuel and tortured air.

I'd kept a piece in my dresser for years, like obsidian, dark as space, sharp and cool and magic.

Papa's secret. Papa's hidden life. Papa's reality. We hadn't told our cousins or aunts. The uncles didn't know, nor did our friends, but now when the children came home for holidays, now with their husbands and wives, we'd be sitting at the table, and Papa, losing his mind, would light his pipe. "This reminds me of the trip we took. Remember when we passed the moon? We were together then, we were."

Everyone laughed, even my in-laws. They nodded knowingly. Alzheimer's. Senile dementia. I forced my smile. We never, never, never went to Mars, and we never, never, never escaped for even a minute the junk yard. We were buzzards. Hyenas with presumptions of grandeur, feeding off metal carcasses. If Rachael could love me knowing that, then we had a chance. I would give her the ring.

The dogs leapt on us then. Rachael didn't scream like many would have. They almost knocked me over, quiet as ghosts, as deadly as circus clowns. The two huge, black and brown dogs licked my hands.

"Good security force," she said, then rubbed one playfully between its ears.

"What's to steal?"

"Your life was here. This is a valuable place." She waved her arm to encompass moonlit aluminum-can bales, rusted water tanks, jumbled wire in bird's-nest bundles. "And when you were a child, this is where your dad took you to Mars."

"This is where my dad filled my head with . . ." What? Junk? False hope? Sometimes at night, years later, when I thought I would never get away, I'd lie on the porch, looking at the constellations. The river whispered its mockery in the background. Precarious metal mountains teetered in the yard. Some nights, I'd see a real rocket's silvery streak, and the noise would caress me, like distant thunder rolling, rolling, rolling.

"You're too serious," she said. "This is beautiful at night. I'm looking forward to meeting your dad and the whole family."

I laughed. "They won't know what to make of you."

"I wanted to go to Mars too."

"But . . . you could. What's stopping you?"

She squeezed my hand. "There's country club rich, and there's buy tickets to space rich. Besides," she said, "I didn't have the right person to go with before."

That's when I knew I would ask her to marry me, regardless of my family, regardless of my dreamer father and his trip to the stars.

That's the truth, no matter how I tell the story. Before Rachael said I was the right person to take to the stars, I hoped she was the one. Afterward, well, the heart knows itself.

\* \* \*

I was eager, now, to find the path through the metal piles and to show her the rocket. We'd look at it standing in the moonlight, and then I'd walk her to the house. Mama would be at the kitchen table, sorting through the bills or reading a book. Papa might be there too, although he could be in the yard somewhere, exploring by flashlight, or he could even be at the rocket. Maybe I'd introduce Rachael to him in the rocket's night-time shadow.

The path led downhill, and I knew we were close. The rocket stood at the bottom of a shallow hollow so it was not visible from the road or the house, and finding it so suddenly startled me. We rounded twisted iron girders in tumbled stacks and saw her, stained by time, but still glistening, reflecting the moon's bright light, a tall, silvery bullet. Rachael gasped.

"I didn't imagine it so big," she whispered.

The dogs whined and ran back the way we'd come.

White smoke curled around the rocket's base. From within it, a subterranean growl arose.

"What's happening?" Rachael moved closer to me.

I looked at the grand ship in wonderment. "He's started the engines, just like he did so many years ago. He must have seen us come through the fence."

The growl deepened, became more like a roar. "That doesn't sound like automobile engines," Rachael said.

I took a step toward the ship. Something crackled beneath my shoe, a thin layer of glass. I held a piece to the moon. Black, smooth, razor edged.

Flame spurted from the rocket's bottom.

I grabbed Rachael's arm, and we ran from the noise growing so loud that at the end it knocked us down, even behind the sheltering metal barriers we'd put between ourselves and the screaming, howling avalanche illuminating every hubcap and transmission and broken metal sheet with acetylene clarity.

I rolled onto my back, my ears aching, and watched the flame climb into the sky. Climb, climb, climb until it was no more. Until the stars swallowed it and stared back at me. Rachael lay beside me, watching too.

"It's impossible," I said, barely able to hear myself. "He waited for me so I would see, and then he left. It's impossible."

"I never met him."

That's one way the story could go: Papa flying finally, riding a beam of flaming torchlight into the sky, the rocket shouting its long, triumphant song like a million shrieking angels.

I like that story.

Or it might have gone exactly the way I've told it here until the part where Rachael and I stepped into the hollow with its waiting spaceship.

No blast glass underfoot. Just packed dirt. Instead of exhaust escaping from the rocket, all was still. Rachael gasped a little, under her breath. "It's real," she said. "Your father has a spaceship."

"Yes," I said, seeing it with her eyes.

At night, it truly was wondrous. Moonlight transformed jumbled metal around it into alien landscapes where every broken windshield and bent chrome bumper caught reflections like diamonds.

Then, the hatch in the ship's base opened, spilling out light. Papa stood there as a silhouette. "Come in," he called, his voice frail with age but still himself, still my father. "It's good to see you, son."

When we got close, he said, "Who is this vision?"



January 2013

“It’s Rachael, Papa. She’s my . . . I wanted to introduce you.”

“What do you think of space travel?” he asked. His face dissolved into a thousand wrinkles when he smiled.

“I hear you have stories,” Rachael said.

My father reached for her hand. “I can do better than that, young lady. I can take you.” He looked up. “If you’d care to go. I can take you both.”

We shut the door. Strapped ourselves in. Papa sat in the captain’s chair, and he made us count down, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6 . . .

When I was ten, my papa took me to space. We saw the moon and asteroids and comets and Mars. He gave me Mars when I was ten so I would have it my entire life. I spent my life not thanking him, but I’ve thanked him now.

Rachael and I will be parents someday. I hope I can do as well for my own children as Papa did for me. ○

# BIKINI SNOW

From the fungal cloud  
of smoke

it drifts down,  
searing

the naked atoll —  
black manna

that is neither cold  
nor built

upon a hexagon,  
but torn

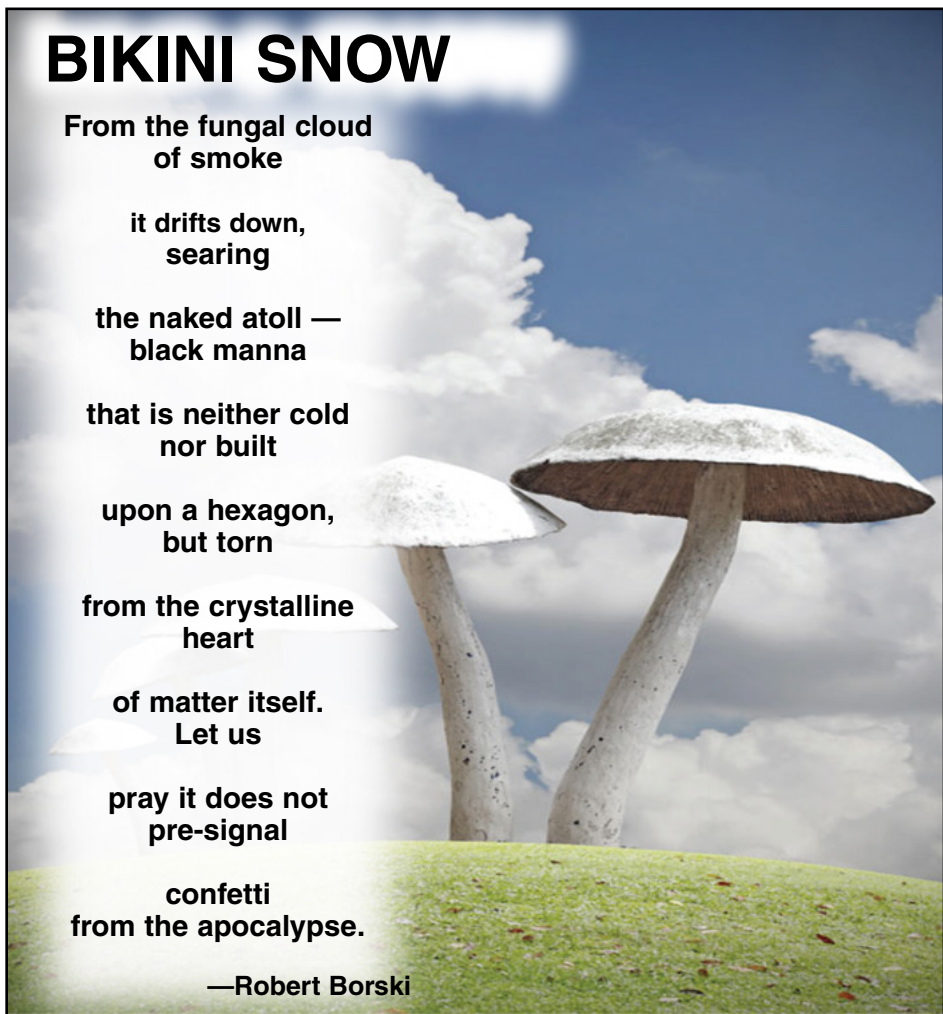
from the crystalline  
heart

of matter itself.  
Let us

pray it does not  
pre-signal

confetti  
from the apocalypse.

—Robert Borski



**Will McIntosh's debut novel, *Soft Apocalypse*, was a finalist for both the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and a Locus award. His second novel, *Hitchers*, was published in 2012 by Night Shade Books. Will is a frequent contributor to this magazine. His story, "Bridesicle," won the 2010 Readers' Award, as well as the 2010 Hugo Award for Best Short Story. Will is currently working on a novel based on "Bridesicle," which will be published by Orbit books. The author lives in Williamsburg, Virginia, with his wife and two children. His new tale for *Asimov's* is a relentlessly harrowing ride that reveals what life is like . . .**

# OVER THERE

Will McIntosh

*"... there is nothing in the formalism of quantum mechanics that demands that a state of consciousness cannot involve the simultaneous perception of a live and a dead cat."*

—Roger Penrose

The plot to "Over There" can't be separated from its graphic layout. We plan to post a PDF of this story on our website <[www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)>. If you have difficulty reading "Over There" on your electronic device, please look for it on our site.

Nathan had dressed up a little for the big experiment, and now he felt like an idiot. Ridley was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. The T-shirt had a picture of a Slinky on it, and looked like he'd pulled it out of the bottom of his hamper. Diane was wearing grey sweats.

If he was honest about it, he hadn't dressed up solely for the experiment. Right after he was meeting Justine for coffee, to celebrate if things went as planned, and to commiserate if the experiment was a bust. The thought of seeing Justine made his stomach do a little flip. Even after five months, it still felt like a wonderful surprise that he'd met her.

"Okay, we're gorgeous, it looks gorgeous," Ridley said, sweeping his long, stringy hair behind his ear, tapping madly at the keyboard linked to the splitter.

Nathan pulled himself out of his love-smitten reverie, back to the work at hand, which in his case was observing the wave function collapse for split one.

If they pulled this off, if they could actually teleport this much matter at this distance, while simultaneously observing both collapses of the wave function, everyone would shit, especially Liu and Casson, those arrogant Stanford pricks.

"Okay. Ready? We're ready. Does anyone want to say anything before I release the hounds?" Ridley asked.

Nathan wiped his palms.

"Go for it," Diane said.

"Does anyone have a pen? I want to record that for posterity," Nathan said.

Diane feigned swatting Nathan in the back of the head, then returned her attention to measuring split two.

Ridley went for it, initiating the sequence.

Nothing was supposed to happen when Ridley initiated the sequence, at least nothing noticeable at the macro level, but Nathan's teeth began to vibrate. He pressed them together; his nose tickled as the vibration transferred.

He felt dizzy. Terribly dizzy. He thought he must be sick, or having a stroke or something, but it couldn't be that because Diane was on the floor, and Ridley's forehead was resting on his keyboard. The floor tilted madly, and Nathan fell, his palms slapping cold tile. The world snapped into utter darkness for a second, then light and color returned.

There was something terribly wrong with him, but he was too disoriented to understand exactly what it was. He took a few huffing breaths, tried to get his bearings.

The lab was the same as always, cluttered with journals, the guts of electronics, fast food takeout bags. But it was as if his view of the room had an echo. He blinked hard, but it didn't help. It was as if he had two crisp, slightly discrepant views of the lab layered on top of each other, or beside each other. There were two; that much was clear.

His head spinning, Nathan grasped the black granite tabletop to steady himself. Only, he did and he didn't. He could feel the cool granite under his fingers, but in some sense his hands also stayed at his sides. Like they were in two places at once. It was a horrible sensation. A deep, rattling moan escaped him.

"I don't . . . I don't," Ridley stammered. He was blinking hard, and weaving in a tight circle like a drunk. So it was definitely happening to all of them.

Diane turned to look out the tall window, then everyone else did as well, although there was nothing of note happening outside. Only there was. It just wasn't happening here; it was happening in the *other* here. In the other here they were looking through lemon-tinged air at a thin vertical band of radiant yellow light sweeping across the horizon.

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Nathan felt himself reach for the tabletop, but his hands didn't move. He both did and didn't clutch the tabletop while an awful humming, an electric moan, grew louder. It was a horrible sound; familiar, but he couldn't imagine where he could have heard it before. Maybe in his nightmares, as a child. A yellow light suffused the room as the noise got louder.

Diane went to the window and lifted the blinds, revealing a copse of pine trees and a picnic bench, the whole scene bathed in yellow light. She squatted slightly, stared at something above the trees. "*What the hell is that?*"

He and Ridley hurried to the window.

There was a ribbon of yellow light, like a fat laser pointed straight up at the clouds. It was careening madly along, shifting direction constantly while maintaining an even, almost mechanical pace.

They were hearing a terrible sound. In that other place Nathan was asking Diane if she could hear the sound.

"What's happening?" Nathan asked.

Diane looked at Nathan. She was gasping, looked like she was about to vomit. "Did you just ask me if I'm hearing a sound?"

Nathan swallowed, nodded. "I think so, yeah."

"Jesus, what is this?" Ridley muttered to himself. His whole face was shaking, his hands hanging limp at his sides like he was afraid to move them.

"Did *we* do this?" Diane asked. She spun and tapped frantically at her keyboard, her hands quavering.

"Did you already ask that? I think you did. Or did you?" Nathan shut his mouth. He was pretty sure he was in shock, and starting to babble. It must have been them. They'd done something. There were two of him now. Two Diances. Two Ridleys. Only not really two; it was still him over there. He was in two places at once. That was it. That felt about right.

Over there, they had gone outside to investigate. A sickening gulf had opened between the two points of view as Nathan was both in and not in the lab.

"What are you doing?" he asked Diane, who was still punching keys.

"I don't know. Maybe if we run it again—"

The words broke Ridley from his catatonia. He lunged at Diane's work station, knocked the keyboard from under her fingers and sent it spinning. "*Are you crazy? What if it splits again?*"

Outside, someone was screaming. Not the sound of someone in pain, more like what you might hear in an asylum. Nathan felt like joining her.

"What if *what* splits again?" Nathan asked, his lips numb. Both sets of his lips numb. He pinched his temples.

"We should go look, too," Nathan said. He wasn't sure how to clarify what he was saying, how to reference that other side. Diane nodded and headed toward the door. Evidently there was no need.

Through silent assent they followed

"Do you hear that?" Nathan asked. Diane nodded slowly, her gaze locked on the yellow band.

"Jesus," Ridley said, his voice a shaking mess. "I'm here and I'm not. I—" He pressed his hand over his mouth, his eyes unfocused, let out a choked sob.

The yellow band passed out of sight, and the awful hum faded. Now Nathan could hear another sound: screams, off in the distance. Dozens of them.

"What did we do?" Diane whined, like a kid who broke a vase while her parents were out.

"We couldn't have done this," Ridley said.

Without a word Nathan wandered out of the lab, into the hall, and pushed through the exit door. Diane and Ridley were at his shoulders as he stepped onto the sidewalk.

Outside the screams were sharper, the panic palpable. They passed a student kneeling in the grass, rocking, his hands clapped over his ears. Young women were pouring out of a dorm like it was on fire.

"The yellow thing was over there." Diane pointed through the black iron fence that surrounded the university, past Fordham Road, where people were clutching each other in terror, howling at the sky.

They passed through the gate, left the neatly landscaped oasis of the university and entered paved chaos, following Diane across Fordham Road and down Third Avenue, winding among crashed and abandoned cars. As they walked Nathan called Justine and arranged to meet her at the corner of Third and 188<sup>th</sup> Street. To his relief she didn't ask if he knew what had happened. He didn't want to tell her over the phone.

"We can't tell anyone about this," Ridley said when Nathan disconnected.

Nathan gawked at him, sure he must have misheard.

"I'm serious, Nathan. If we did this—and I'm not saying we did—no one's going to know unless we tell them." Ridley dragged his hand down his face, made a sound like a dog snuffling in the dirt.

the same path they'd taken in the other place, eager to keep the two points of view relatively consistent.

No one spoke as they hopped down stone steps and out the unattended gate. Ridley was staring at his iPhone, wheezing from the brisk pace; Diane was glassy-eyed, her attention focused on events in the other place.

"How could this have happened?" Nathan asked. "Does anybody understand it?"

"We didn't do this." Ridley stopped walking, turned toward Nathan. "How *could* we? It was a tiny fucking experiment. The timing is just a coincidence."

When Nathan didn't argue, Ridley continued, leading with his belly, man-tits bobbing with each stride.

Nathan opened his mouth, chose his words carefully. "If it *had* been us—just theoretically—how might it have happened?"

"We were observing two different collapses of the wave function," Diana offered. "Like opening two—"

"*We had nothing to do with this,*" Ridley said.

Nathan struggled to focus; it was hard to gather his thoughts with the press of two sets of images, two trains of thought.

Two. He thought about what Diane had been trying to say before Ridley cut her off. It seemed inconceivable that they could have driven a wedge through *everything*.

What was his responsibility here? Should he get somewhere private and call 911? Would he go to jail if he did?

All three of them squawked or shouted, almost simultaneously, to what they were seeing in the other place.

Diane lurched to a stop. Still holding that thousand-yard stare, she crossed herself, got down on her knees and clasped her hands together. Nathan had never heard her mention being religious, but now she whispered an urgent prayer, her head down, her lips pressed to trembling hands.

It was difficult to concentrate on what was happening here when on the other

Ahead, a gathering crowd was staring at . . . something. Ridley and Diane picked up their pace but were still too slow for Nathan. He ran ahead to see what was going on.

He stopped running when he drew close enough to see what everyone was looking at. The yellow light had passed over a winding strip of the city as wide as a lane of traffic, leaving everything it touched hard, like stone, chalk-white, and covered with tightly bunched ridges.

Even the people. They were frozen mid-gesture, their features masked by ripples that resembled burn scars. One figure was on hands and knees, head slung low to the ground. Another was looking at the sky, one hand raised to block the glare. She was holding a child's hand, and that child was clutching a smaller child's hand.

"Oh my god," Ridley croaked from behind Nathan.

A muscular, vaguely simian guy poked at a truck in the affected zone. Nothing terrible happened to his finger, so he reached out and grasped the truck's side-view mirror. "Hard as rock," he said.

Nathan knelt and ran his fingers along the affected surface of the road. It was hard and rough, deeply furrowed between the ripples.

"A weapon. It's gotta be," an Italian-looking guy in a natty grey suit said, pushing out his lower lip.

Nathan looked up, traced the calcified trail across Third Avenue to the spot where it snaked up the side of a brick tenement and disappeared. He pressed his hands to his ears, only half-aware of the rising mechanical hum, like a croaking baritone caught on a minor cord. Then it was drowned by piercing screams. People raised their arms to point over the storefronts, at another yellow band coming their way.

Instinct took over. Nathan sprinted toward the campus, his breath coming in tight gasps. Then he realized there was no reason the campus would be safer than anywhere else. He glanced back, saw the light was still coming—

side Nathan was running for his life. Diane must be running for her life, too, though they'd gotten separated and Nathan didn't have time to look around for her.

It jolted him, seeing her bare boxy knees pressed to the pavement as all hell broke loose on the other side.

"Run. Run," Ridley shouted.

Diane's eyes flew wide open. She inhaled for what seemed an impossibly long time, then let out a scream that went on and on, rising and falling in pitch, her eyeballs bulging with animal terror.

Nathan stepped back from her, his heart pounding as the yellow light bore down on him in the other place. He raised his arms defensively and shouted, his shout all but drowned out as Diane screamed again from the bottom of her lungs, from the bottom of her soul.

He wanted to believe that what he was experiencing over there was a mass delusion, that it made no difference whether that blinding light swept over him or not, but over there was no delusion. It was as real as here.

As soon as the yellow light missed him over there, he rushed to Diane's side. Halfway through the next scream she stopped abruptly and froze, her mouth still cranked wide, her breath coming in nasty jerks.

Gently, Nathan grasped her shoulders. "Are you all right? What's the matter? What happened?"

"It got her," Ridley said. His voice fell to a whisper. "I can see her. God, she's—"

Nathan knew what she was. Petrified. A swirling white statue fused to the white pavement. He searched Diane's eyes, which were darting wildly, not seeing him at all. He took her trembling hands, which were still squeezed together, though he was sure she was no longer praying.

"You're still alive. You're here, safe," he said. He made a shushing sound, trying to soothe her.

Diane whimpered, focused on him. She tried to speak, but nothing came but quick breaths.

coming fast. He needed to get inside. Up ahead the orange neon sign for Ray's Pizza caught his eye; he yanked open the steel door and rushed inside to find a dozen others squatting by the windows, peering into the sick yellow sky. Nathan pressed into a space at the window and watched the yellow band.

Bands.

There were two of them, one a few blocks away, the other maybe thirty blocks south. Nathan's insides went liquid as the closer one shifted direction, cutting diagonally, right toward them.

"*Shit. Oh, shit. Oh, fuck,*" someone said as the humming grew so loud Nathan's face vibrated. Half a dozen people rushed for the door, fled in all directions as the blinding yellow stripe crossed a roof and surged onto Third Street, bearing down on them, leaving a path of white, petrified city in its wake. Nathan watched it sweep over a fleeing man, leaving behind a white figure perched on one foot, one elbow straining back, the other forward.

The sound doubled him over, flooding his every cell. The light seemed to split his skull wide open, even though his eyes were shut. Nathan couldn't hear his own scream; then, as it was tailing off, he could.

The light was receding. He opened his eyes and, blinking away tears, looked outside. The yellow beam was nowhere in sight, though the chrome on the vehicles lining the street, and the windows across the street, still carried a yellow tinge. A telltale white stripe angled across 187<sup>th</sup> Street, painted a diagonal up the face of the Citibank building.

The hum softened further, replaced by the tinny, urgent report of a newscaster on a big TV mounted on the wall between framed photos of Joe DiMaggio and Robert DeNiro.

The screen was divided into four images, four aerial views of cities under siege. Three tight yellow beams were running through Paris in the top right feed. Christ, did they really cause this? It was inconceivable.

"An invasion. It's an invasion," an old



"It's okay. It's over."

"No . . ." She struggled to compose herself, to get the words out. "No, it's not." Then she lost it again.

She wasn't acting like someone who'd just gone through a traumatic experience, she was acting like someone going through a traumatic experience *now*. She was acting like she was still over there . . .

"Oh. Oh God. You're still in your body over there?"

Diane scrunched her face and nodded, tears streaming down oily cheeks.

He wanted to run, to get far away from her, to never think about what she'd just told him. The yellow beam didn't kill you? It just turned you to plaster or stone or whatever it was and you were trapped in there? For how long? Till you died over here?

Nathan staggered to his feet, turned to Ridley, who was studying the pavement, his lips moving silently. "We have to tell someone what we did. We have to call someone. It might help them figure out how to fix it."

Riddley grabbed the collar of Nathan's sports coat, yanked him until their noses were pressed together. "*We tell no one*. Don't you get it?" His breath smelled like fish. "They'll *kill* us. They'll string us up and beat us with tire irons." He let Nathan go; Nathan lurched backward, nearly falling. "This is happening *everywhere*. All over the world. If we're responsible, we're the biggest mass murderers of all time."

"We're not *murderers*," Nathan said. "If we screwed up, it was an accident. We weren't trying to hurt anyone. Christ, we weren't even trying to hurt the *electrons*."

Ignoring him—or maybe just too deep in shock to process his words—Ridley bent and grasped one of Diane's arms. "Help me."

Nathan rubbed his eyes. "God." Could the other place be just a mass hallucination? He wished he could believe that. He bent beside Diane, helped her to her feet. She barely seemed aware they were

woman with bleached-blond hair said. Some people who'd fled into the basement were filing up the stairs, their eyes locking on the TV screen as soon as they came through the door.

"Basements are no good." It was a short, dark-haired woman with a nose ring, staring down at her phone, speaking loud enough that everyone could hear. "The light toasts everything, inside buildings and out." She scrolled down as people waited. "It can't reach down to the subways, though."

Nathan headed for the door. He didn't want to end up like Diane, who he was trying to console on the other side, who was out there somewhere on that strip of white stone. The safest bet was to stay underground until someone figured out how to stop the things, whatever they were.

"Where's the closest station?" a guy behind him asked.

"On Grand Concourse. It's three blocks," Nathan said. Then he paused, moved aside to let others pass. What if they were down there for days? The less often they had to come up to get food and water, the better.

He called Justine, told her to meet him at Ray's, then he went to the cooler and pulled out a half dozen bottles of water and set them on the counter. The store was empty except for Nathan. He was trying hard to ignore what was going on *over there*. *Over there* needed to take care of itself, because he had real problems over here. He went behind the counter, grabbed some plastic takeout bags and set them on the counter, then looked for food. He snagged some loaves of bread, then considered the meats in the deli display. His best bet was the heavily cured shit, given the lack of refrigeration. He slapped long loaves of salami, pepperoni, prosciutto on the counter, then stuffed it into two bags.

Justine pushed through the door, her eyes wild with fear.

"Grab these." He handed her two bags, the plastic handles stretching under the weight of the bottles as she took them. "Let's go."

moving her, but her feet worked once they got her going.

"Get to a subway," Nathan said.

"What?" Riddley asked.

"Over there. Get to a subway. It can't get you underground. That's what I was told, anyway."

"All right," Ridley said. "Thanks."

"Do you have any idea what happened?"

Ridley was studying his phone as they walked. "The experiment was your idea. You know as well as I do, there's no way we could explain this. We're in way over our heads."

They passed through the gate, onto Fordham Road. There was very little traffic; people were standing around in clusters, looking scared and bewildered.

"It's not pointless. We were observing two different collapses of the wave function, and now there are two realities."

"And now there are two realities," Ridley's tone was mocking. "Well, there you go, you explained it."

"Shut up, Ridley. You know what I mean."

Ridley only response was to groan impatiently. Diane was looking around, her breath now coming in long, slow *woofs* like a coma victim on a respirator.

A guy in a T-shirt ran past, staring up at the red brick apartment building they were passing. He shouted, "Rebecca?" and disappeared into the building.

"Where are we going?" Nathan asked.

"Your apartment."

"My apartment? We need to get her to a hospital. She needs help."

"Her and a billion other people. The hospitals are going to be packed. One of your roommates is a clinical psychologist, isn't she?"

"She's a *second-year student*. Brianna can't handle this."

"Well, she's all we've got right now. We'll call Diane's family as soon as we get there." Ridley's phone rang; he lifted it to his ear. "Yeah. No, I'm okay. Are you okay?" After a pause he said, "I know. I have no idea. What are they saying on TV?"

"Where?"

"The subway. The light doesn't reach down there."

The bags swung wildly as Nathan ran, a loaf of pepperoni whacking his knee with each stride. Justine was just ahead of him, looking perilously thin and absurdly tall (though part of that was the heels on her black boots), long corkscrews of flaming red hair whipping in the breeze.

Last semester Nathan had developed a serious crush on her, while she sorted out a problem he was having with his paychecks. Every time he'd passed her on campus after that his mouth went dry and he couldn't figure out what to do with his hands.

"What's happening? Do you have any idea?" Justine asked. "Oh, shit!" she shouted before he could answer. The humming was back—low, but rising. Nathan glanced around but couldn't see the light beam.

He spotted it when they reached the next block—north this time, half a mile away. "We've got time," he said, gasping, though he didn't slow.

Word had spread quickly about the subway. Half a block from the subway entrance they were stopped cold by a crowd of thousands, all pushing to get down the same flight of stairs. Nathan and Justine merged into the pack and let themselves be swept along.

"What do you think is happening?" Justine asked. "I don't buy that alien invasion crap."

"Yeah. I don't know." Now wasn't the time. He'd tell her when they were safely below.

"I don't like standing still; I want to keep moving. It keeps my mind off the—" She searched for a word, pressed her hands to her cheeks, took a deep, hitching breath. "God, what the fuck is going on? I'm gonna lose my mind."

"I know. Me, too."

The logjam moved more briskly than it appeared, and soon they could see people ahead pouring down the stairs. People were casting nervous glances at the sky,

That had to be Ridley's wife, Cameron. He was lying to his wife. Nathan really didn't want to lie to Justine, or his family, about this. With a jolt, Nathan thought of his mom and dad. Still clutching Diane's thick upper arm with his left hand he fished his phone out of the front pocket of his jeans and dialed his folks.

They were all right. One of the yellow lights had passed down Cypress Street, a few blocks from their house, and they had seen some of their neighbors, frozen and alabaster. Nathan didn't mention what had happened to Diane.

They watched the news, combed the Internet for new information, and took turns sitting with Diane while she screamed. Brianna said there was nothing she could do until Diane could speak, short of sedating her. They didn't have any Valium. They tried giving her a glass of vodka, but she knocked it out of Brianna's hand in panicked flailing.

On the news, they learned the beams of yellow light weren't originating at a source; they were simply materializing in the upper atmosphere. They had no footage, of course, and struggled to find the words to report on a disaster of apocalyptic proportions that was happening in an elsewhere they didn't understand and had no name for. The beams were running across the other place like scalpels, their movements random in the true sense of the word.

By nightfall, Diane was able to speak. She was not okay, was not recovering, but her hysteria had evolved into a deep, relentless anguish and existential terror. Brianna stayed with her while Nathan made tea. He brought it out and set it beside Diane, who was lying on the couch while Brianna knelt beside her, holding her hand.

"Can you tell me what you're feeling right now?" Brianna asked in a soft voice.

"I'm all alone," Diane said. "I can't see or hear anything. I can't move. If I could move, the darkness would go on forever in all directions. There's nothing here."

but the yellow light was moving off to the west, toward Manhattan. Nathan had the sense that if it had come this way the crowd would have stampeded like skittish cattle. Suddenly there was a step underfoot, and Nathan struggled to keep his balance as he was swept down the steps and toward the turnstiles. People were climbing over or under, not bothering with MetroCards.

They headed down a walkway to the subway platform. It was packed beyond belief. They kept going, squeezing between people, seeking a spot they could establish as their own. Every square foot was occupied.

It kept getting tighter as more people pushed their way down; he could see people growing panicky.

Nathan saw people vaulting off the platform and heading into the pitch-black subway tunnel. Nathan pointed it out to Justine. "What do you think?"

"Yeah. Anything's better than here," she said.

Moments later they were feeling their way along the tunnel, trying not to step on people huddled together on the gravel floor. Nathan looked back at the half-circle of light receding behind them.

They settled in a dank, concrete room two levels below the subway tunnels, directed there by a police officer with a flashlight. The cop told them the network of rooms and tunnels under the city went down seven levels, a crisscross of outlets for water, power, and sewage. Enough space for everyone who made it down.

It grew late, but they didn't sleep. No one did. They all lay awake talking, flashlight beams and open cell phones puncturing the pitch dark. No one could get a phone signal, but their other selves could talk to other people whose other selves were still above ground. There were no subways in Ottumwa, Iowa, or Hopulikit, Georgia. Or the suburbs surrounding New York City, for that matter. There was nowhere for most people to hide, and they were dying. Though maybe dying was the wrong word.

"Okay, I understand." Brianna pinched her upper lip, thinking. She was in a T-shirt and khaki shorts, looking nothing like a therapist, and she looked scared. "Why don't we start by doing some relaxation exercises?"

"Am I dead?" Diane asked. "Do you think this is what it feels like? I can't stand it. I can't stand this for another second. I want to die." She didn't mean it figuratively; Nathan could hear the entreaty in her tone. She was a gut-shot soldier on the battlefield, begging to be euthanized.

Brianna looked overwhelmed. She repeated her suggestion that Diane try relaxation exercises, and when Diane didn't respond Brianna reached for the bottle of vodka and took a generous swig.

And in that other place, Justine put the finishing touch on Nathan's teetering grip on his composure. He kept his mouth shut, not daring to voice Justine's question. But what if it was true? What if dying over here didn't release you from the bizarre lucid death you experienced over there, and it just went on and on?

Nathan half-listened to Brianna's inept attempts to relieve Diane's suffering, which was probably beyond the most gifted clinician. If not for Justine's observation, Nathan would have been convinced that a bullet was the kindest solution.

In terms of his own pain and fear, Nathan found himself wanting nothing but to be with Justine. He cursed the fates that they'd only had a few months together before this stereophonic hell-scape happened.

With Brianna's soothing therapist voice as background music, he focused on *over there*, where he was arranging to meet Justine *over here*. As soon as Justine suggested the zoo, he grabbed his white Fordham sweatshirt. On the way downstairs he marinated in guilt for leaving Brianna to care for Diane, but there was nothing he could do but stand over them with his hands in his pockets. Diane's family was coming in the morning, driving from Pittsburgh to bring her home.

"I wasn't sure how scared I should be up there, you know?" Justine said as they lay on the damp concrete.

"What do you mean?"

She rolled to face him. "When I saw that light coming, I was terrified. At the same time I was in that other place, watching the whole thing, and I was thinking, I'm safe, aren't I? It can't get me over here."

Nathan considered not telling her about Diane, but with so many people dying she would hear soon enough. So he told her. As he spoke Justine began to tremble, then to cry.

"But we're fine, we're safe down here," he said, interrupting himself. Justine closed the distance between them and pressed her face into his chest. It was comforting to feel her lips, the tip of her nose, pressed against him. Most days his heart leapt to be in such intimate contact with this bright, attractive woman, but today he relished her touch for other reasons. Today his mother would have been an acceptable alternative.

"We can't stay down here forever," Justine said, her voice shaky and muffled. "What if it never stops, or it really is aliens, and they figure out we're hiding down here and make it so the beams go deeper?" She took a ragged breath and spoke her final thought rapidly, as if trying to get the words away from her as quickly as possible. "And what if, when we die over there, we still don't die here, and it goes on forever?"

He'd never felt such fear as at that moment. It was as if Justine had just proven the existence of hell, and told Nathan he might be going there. Because she had, and he might.

They lay silently for a few minutes. Nathan shivering, his heart pounding, the damp floor cutting right through his clothes. He pressed closer to Justine, wishing they were somewhere warm.

"You awake?"

Justine lifted her head. "Yeah."

"Where are you right now, in the other place?" he asked.

"In my apartment."

\* \* \*

Justine was sitting on one of the concrete pilings lining the wide front gate, which was open. Someone had forgotten to lock the Bronx Zoo. She stood as Nathan approached, stepped forward, locked him in a tight hug.

"Let's go in." She motioned toward the entrance.

They couldn't see any animals in the dark, just the outlines of fences with teeth at the top to discourage climbers. Only the howls and coos and chittering that filled the air distinguished it from a city park. They kept to the center of the widest walkways, avoiding the heavier dark of the shadows.

"I'd rather not talk about what's happening, if that's okay," Justine said, her heels on clicking the pavement. "I need a break."

"That's fine with me."

They passed the giraffe compound, then the Congo Gorilla Forest. Nathan spotted a lone gorilla leaning on his fists, watching them from in front of its log and straw house.

"I never told you this, but before we went out for the first time, I thought I wasn't smart enough for you," Justine said. "Or too tall. You came to my office three or four times with questions about your paychecks, and you were always really nice to me. But when I passed you on campus you acted like I was invisible."

"I get very nervous when I'm around someone I like. My mouth gets dry and my palms sweat. All but the first of those visits to the Financial Aid office were just excuses to see you."

"Get out." She laughed a little.

"I'm serious."

They passed the Reptile House, still not talking about the dragons. It was easy to avoid the topic, because they'd spent so much time talking about it *over there*. There wasn't much more to say.

Justine reached out and took his hand. His guilt at not telling her the truth was growing heavier, like bricks piled on his chest. If he didn't tell her soon, how would

"Are you awake there?"

Justine laughed dryly. "I'm never going to sleep again. Not until I'm whole again, and the dragons are gone."

"Do you want to meet?"

Justine squeezed his hand. "Yes. Meet me in front of the zoo? I don't want to be around a lot of people; I need to balance this." The room was growing uncomfortably cramped as people settled into the meager spaces not already occupied. The odor of stale damp air was being replaced with fear sweat mixed with a hint of pee and shit from a nearby makeshift toilet area.

"Someone spotted Jesus walking the streets of Detroit. The Dragons went right through him," said a guy with long black hair streaked with gray. He had absurdly big biceps, and a raised scar on his cheek that probably had an interesting story attached to it.

"So what do you think really happened?" Justine asked softly. Nathan thought she'd dozed off.

"I don't know," he blurted. The lie came easily, because the truth was so complicated. All sorts of rumors were flying. The yellow bands of light were new weapons technology unleashed by the Chinese. Alien ships had been detected just beyond Earth's atmosphere. It was the end of days, and Jesus was walking the streets of Detroit. Nathan was one of the few people on Earth who knew it was none of those. In all likelihood even the President didn't know.

A fresh pang of guilt stabbed him at that thought. He should call someone, offer what information he could. He couldn't do it from here, so it had to be *over there*.

"I don't think it's aliens, or a world war." He needed to tell Justine the truth as soon as possible. But this was not the place to do it. He should tell her *over there* in the empty zoo, where no one could overhear. Then he'd make the call.

"Hey." The guy with the biceps squatted, holding out three twenties. "Let me buy some of that food, will you?" He was

she ever trust him? He felt like he needed to tell someone, to explain how there was no way they could have foreseen this. At the same time he was terrified, unsure of how she would react.

"I have to tell you something," he began, his voice trembling. "Just now, when I said I had no idea how this could have happened?" Justine nodded. There was no need to specify that he'd said it over there, not over here. It was all the same. "I didn't want to say anything because of all the people around." He swallowed thickly. "I know what happened, because we caused it. Our experiment caused it."

Justine froze. "I'm sorry. What did you just say?"

He took a deep breath; his heart was beating against his ribs. "No one else knows. I haven't even told my parents."

Justine shook her head slowly. "Wait. You're saying your experiment caused all of this, all over the world?"

Nathan looked at the ground. It was hard to meet her eyes. "It wasn't only my experiment. It was Ridley and Diane's, too. But yes, I think we're responsible."

"Oh my God." She covered her mouth with a clenched fist, shook her head, then let her hands drop and gaped at him. "You're serious."

"Yes."

"And I'm . . ." She paused, shook her head. She looked ready to leap at his throat. "Well that's just fine." She wiped her nose with her sleeve. "As long as it was an accident. Millions of people are dying, we're down here in the *fucking* sewer, and I'm—" She broke off, stared into the trees, shaking her head. "And I'm carrying the child of the man responsible for it all."

Nathan gaped at Justine. She was pregnant?

"*Oh, shit,*" Justine said. They stood frozen, like deer caught in headlights, all of their attention *over there* as the goon who'd overheard Justine's outburst repeated it, as heads turned and murmurs spread through the dark room.

He was in trouble. He thought of what Ridley had said, about how people would

one of the new arrivals who was standing because there was no room to sit. Nathan and Justine were clinging to each other, trying to hold onto their space, the food and water wedged between them as the room grew ever more crowded.

Justine pulled the top of one of the bags closed. "Sorry. We haven't decided what we're going to do with it yet," Justine said. "There are so many people."

"Oh, come on." The guy poked the bills at her. "My kids are hungry." Nathan didn't see any kids in his little circle, just two other guys. Justine didn't answer, she just scooted as far away from the guy as she could.

The guy raised his voice. "What are you gonna do, eat it all yourself in front of the rest of us?"

Others were looking to see what the commotion was.

"It's your food. Don't let him tell you what to do with it." Nathan looked toward the voice. It was an old guy with dark eyes and a nose with a divot at the tip. Nathan stood, and Justine followed. "Hang on to it." He raised his voice, looked pointedly at the guy still holding his twenties. "Last I checked we still had a right to our own property."

The guy turned to face his friends, like he hadn't heard the guy and had simply decided to say something to one of them. He slipped the twenties back into his pocket.

"Thank you," Nathan said.

The man waved it off. "The power of being old. You can get away with saying anything you want, because everyone looks pathetic punching an old man."

Over there, he was telling Justine the truth. He braced himself.

"Oh, my God," Justine shrieked. Thrown off-guard by the violence of her reaction, Nathan turned to face her. She looked ready to spit razor blades. "You can't be serious. Tell me you didn't really do this."

"I told you," Nathan said, his voice hushed, "we had *no idea* there was risk involved. Not in a million years could we have guessed—"

"Well that's fine, then." Justine's eyes

kill them if they found out. "We have to get out of there."

Justine didn't answer, wouldn't even look at him.

When Nathan saw Justine staying behind while he ran from the goons over there, he turned and headed toward the exit, his head still reeling from Justine's revelation.

"Nathan." She'd been so absorbed in the events over there, he'd walked a good hundred feet before she even noticed he was leaving. He kept walking.

"Nathan."

He stopped, turned.

"Run, Nathan. They're coming after you," Justine said, her voice level, almost matter-of-fact.

Nathan looked around, to be certain she was talking about the mob over there. Justine was still leaning against a chain link fence, staring at the ground, making no attempt to catch up with him.

So he left.

He'd been sure if he explained, Justine would understand. Now he saw how stupid he'd been. There was too much blood on his hands. Even though he hadn't meant to do it, there was simply too much blood.

On the dark streets, people were walking aimlessly, sitting in small groups, checking for news on their phones and pads. Nathan passed a young guy in a Fordham sweatshirt hunched on a stoop, wailing. He wanted to climb into bed and never wake.

Nathan's phone woke him. He stumbled out of bed and followed its jangling tones into the kitchen. It was Justine.

"You're in trouble." Her voice was shaking, her nose plugged. "Someone snapped a picture of you in the tunnel, and they crowdsourced it and figured out who you are and what you do. Your Facebook photo is being passed around, on both sides."

Nathan's legs went rubbery. He clutched the door jamb, let the phone drop away from his ear. "This can't be happening." He squeezed his eyes shut, pressed his forehead against the mold-

were slits, her nostrils flaring. "As long as it was an accident. Millions of people are dying, we're down here in the *fuck-ing* sewer—" She broke off.

"Hold on." The guy with the muscles had a hand on Justine's shoulder, trying to turn her around. "Are you saying this guy had something to do with this shit?" Everyone in sight turned.

Justine looked at the guy, back at Nathan. "No. Of course not. We're arguing about something else."

The guy pushed in closer. "No, *I heard*." He pointed at Nathan, nearly poked his chest. "This guy said, 'We had no idea it was risky,' and *you* said, 'Millions of people are dying because of you.' What else could that mean?"

"That's not what I said." Justine shook her head frantically as the guy looked back at his friends, who were listening intently. They looked at each other, nodding, then looked around at others, as if mustering support.

Nathan slid between the old man and a teenaged girl standing next to him. Justine was arguing with all three of the guys now, all of them muscle bound goons. He took a few more steps.

"Hey!" one guy shouted. For a second Nathan locked eyes with Justine, willing her to follow, but her face was unreadable, her eyes brimming with tears of hurt, or anger, and she stayed put as the three men came after him.

Nathan ran, pushing through the tight crowd, stepping on feet. Behind him there were shouts of protest; he glanced back to see a wedge being driven through the refugees by five or six men. Nathan ducked down and surged forward, unsure where he was heading.

He reached a platform, then a staircase with a slimy metal railing. Navigating by the dim glow of cell phones Nathan picked his way down among people sleeping on the stairs. Near the bottom he landed on someone's leg; his foot rolled, his ankle twisting painfully, and he fell forward, landing on top of more people.

He was up an instant later, limping, feeling along a rough stone wall in the dark.



ing as Justine's voice called to him. "I didn't mean to do anything wrong." Justine went on calling his name.

Nathan saw that he had dozens, maybe hundreds of text messages. The first one was simple and to the point.

*You're dead.*

He put the phone to his ear. "I'm here."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't expose you on purpose. Please believe that."

Nathan pressed his hand to his chest in a fruitless attempt to slow his racing heart. "It was an accident, you mean. You did something, and there was an unintended consequence."

"You have to get out of here," she said. "Change what you look like and get far away. On both sides."

He didn't want to go anywhere; he wanted to keep the deadbolt locked and hide under the blankets until the world was sane again. "Where would I go? My picture will keep spreading until everyone knows it was me."

"Upstate, into the country. We can avoid dragons in a car—people are posting strategies."

"We?"

He could hear her breath shaking on the other end of the phone. "Where are you, over there?"

"In a drain pipe, as far underground as I could get."

"Get to the front gate of the zoo. I'll pick you up."

His heart leapt.

But no, he couldn't. He couldn't let her take that risk, especially carrying their child. "No, it's not safe for you to be with me."

"I have to get out of those tunnels," Justine said. "Someone took our food during the commotion when you left. It's so crowded I can barely inhale. I'd rather take my chances up top. With you."

"With me. The mass murderer."

"You didn't mean to hurt anyone," she said. "I see that, now that I've had time to think it through. I'm sorry."

Nathan stifled a sob. He hadn't realized just how badly he needed to hear someone say that.

\* \* \*

When Justine called him *over there*, he was in a pipe. It was angling downward, and there was a stream of slimy water trickling down the center. He was trying hard to leave his cell phone closed at least part of the time to preserve the charge, but it was terrifying to trudge along in the dark, expecting to step on a plump rat each time his foot landed. He'd been sure he'd never hear from Justine again. He'd been angry, until the tunnels got so small and dark and empty that all of his attention turned to being afraid, and his anger flickered out. Now, as Justine told him that he'd been ID'd by name as one of those responsible, this new, brighter fear swallowed his fear of the tunnel and almost made it seem a safe, protective place.

Safe or not, he couldn't stay down there for long without food or water. While he talked to Justine over there, he picked up his pace, splashing in the runoff, feeling the chilly water penetrate his shoes. The clock was ticking as his photo was passed from phone to phone, both over there and over here.

Nathan rounded the corner and took the first two steps, then stopped cold. The top of the staircase was crowded with frozen figures. He climbed a few more steps and could see the line where grey concrete became alabaster marble. The dragon had penetrated maybe twenty steps down into the station.

He touched the first contaminated step with just the toe of his sneaker, like he was testing water. Then, gingerly, he climbed two more steps before he reached the doomed statue-people.

Trying his best not to touch them, he slid between an old man clutching a backpack and a large woman with her back to the old man. There was a tight space beyond. He rested for a second before crawling between a young couple reaching to embrace each other. Beyond them, a black man was in mid-fall, his arms frozen in a pinwheeling motion, his fingers splayed. Nathan looked away from his expression of wide-eyed alarm, still identifiable through the thick, swirling ridges.

"I'll meet you in a half hour, over here. Same place."

Twenty minutes later Nathan was wheeling a suitcase along 186<sup>th</sup> Street, toward the gates of the zoo. He was wearing a Mets cap with the brim pulled low, and kept his gaze on the ground.

Because he was staring at the ground, he almost passed Ridley. It was Ridley's shadow that Nathan noticed. In fact, he nearly walked over it.

Ridley was hanging from a rope strung across the telephone wire. His eyes and tongue bulged from a face the color of a bruise. There was a raw, bloody patch on his head, where he might have been hit with a crow bar.

"Oh, shit," Nathan said in a low, panicked voice. "Oh, shit. Ridley." This was his fault, too. His chest hitched as he tried to hold himself together, but there was no way he could walk calmly to the zoo now. He ran, trying to keep his head down but relying more on getting there quickly than on not being noticed.

Ridley was dead. What about Diane? She was probably dead, too. He could try calling her, once he was in Justine's car.

Turning onto Belmont Avenue he passed a woman who did a double-take as he raced by.

"Hey!" she called after him. Nathan kept going. Even now, he couldn't quite grasp the notion that anyone would want to kill him. Nathan had never been one to elicit strong reactions from people. He'd never done anything that merited notice, had always moved along in a secure cocoon of harmlessness. That he might go down in history as a killer made no sense.

Two guys burst out of an apartment door as Nathan approached 188<sup>th</sup> Street.

"*There he is,*" one shouted, pointing at Nathan.

"No, it's a mistake," Nathan called breathlessly. The guys sprinted after him. Ahead, four more people were running toward him, looking right at him. There was a subway entrance just ahead. Nathan bolted down the stairs, calling, "*I didn't do anything,*" over his shoulder at

All of the figures looked shocked, or scared, and all of their faces were turned in the same direction—up and back, along the path of destruction, or maybe the path of erasure was more apt.

That's what the dragons were doing: erasing life, erasing color and texture. Eventually everything in this world would be a uniform, calcified nothing, save for the consciousness of seven billion screaming souls.

He had to keep his thoughts focused on Justine, on their child. Their children? Was there one child on each side? There must be.

As Nathan brushed the stone breast of a middle-aged woman in stone librarian glasses and stepped free of the erasure zone, a realization clicked into place. Eventually he would share the fate of these people. No one could stop the dragons, because the dragons were restoring some sort of quantum equilibrium. *One world on, one off.* The moment Ridley had set the experiment in motion, the end of this world became inevitable. He couldn't prove this mathematically on an erase-board, but in his gut he knew it was true.

In the other place—the living place—Nathan stared up at Ridley, who was dead. More blood on Nathan's hands. Ridley had warned him to tell no one, but Nathan had ignored him.

"God, Ridley, I'm so sorry."

Nathan ran the five blocks to the zoo, eyeing dragons that stayed near the horizon. The city was mostly deserted, save for the dragons' victims, and if the few people he passed recognized him they gave no indication. Justine was waiting in front of the gates in her Camry.

"Ridley's dead," Nathan said. "How did they connect him to me?"

"By Googling you. Ridley blogged about the experiment. He mentioned you and Diane by name."

Nathan couldn't think of a reply. Once they knew where to look, how hard could it be for a billion angry souls to connect the dots?

"I should kill myself now, on both sides." If you killed yourself over here, would

the footfalls behind him. He vaulted the turnstile, his momentum hurling him a dozen feet beyond, where he landed on all fours, his palms scraped by the concrete floor.

An instant later he was up, taking the steps to the platform four at a time. When he reached the bottom he vaulted down to the tracks without hesitation, and fled into the blackness of the tunnel.

He glanced back. There were a dozen people behind him, drowning the sound of the gravel crunching under his feet as he ran blindly, not daring to use his phone to light his way. If he could just make it to those deep tunnels, they'd never find him. He could drink runoff, surface fifty blocks away a couple days from now, then contact Justine and flee to the country.

He felt a damp cross-breeze to his left, the unmistakable odor of sewage, and realized there must be a way down. He had to go slow, to feel his way to the breach in the wall, then stumble along a catwalk. Water was running somewhere below. Risking the light, he opened his phone, spotted a rickety metal staircase and scurried down.

"This way!" someone shouted. They were following. At the bottom of the stairs Nathan opened his phone again, spotted a wide round tunnel and bolted into it. A moment later he heard them behind him.

It no longer sounded like a dozen pursuers. The rumble of voices, punctuated by the occasional individual shout, sounded like enough to fill a stadium. Nathan risked a glance back: multiple flashlight beams painted the walls, the ceiling, the ground, and revealed a throng of churning legs and shadowed faces.

Forgetting his fear of stumbling over a dropoff, Nathan ran full-out, his breath coming in a panicked squeal, his feet splashing in the dank sewage, his arms stretched in front of him.

Then he hit something. He hit face-first, so hard that he lost himself for a while. As he came back he thought he

you escape hell? Did you have to be alive when a dragon got you to get trapped in hell? That made sense, somehow.

Justine looked at him intently, taking her eyes off the road longer than was safe. "Please don't. I don't want to be left alone."

"Shit, someone spotted me, over there," Nathan said.

"Run."

He nodded. There was nothing they could do about it over here, so they got going.

Justine drove while Nathan watched for dragons. Evidently the trick was never to let one get too close. The dragons moved at thirty-six miles per hour, and never in a straight line for long, so you could always outrun one if it wasn't on top of you.

"They're after me. A lot of them."

Justine only nodded. What could she say?

What if Nathan told them he was going to be a father? He was just a stupid assistant professor who'd made a huge mistake, and his baby needed a father. Would they forgive him?

They passed over an erased strip, the pitch of the tires dropping momentarily. On a sidewalk out his window he saw a young girl, maybe nine, carrying her dog, her eyes wide with fear. Frozen like that for all time.

No, they wouldn't forgive him. They couldn't forgive him. Not for this.

"We have to change how you look," Justine said. "Maybe cut your hair and dye it brown, for a start."

Nathan nodded, distracted by the other side. "That sounds good." On the other side things weren't going so good.

"When is the baby due?" he asked. He didn't want to think about what was happening over there.

"September eighteenth, give or take."

Would the baby be born at the same time in both places? What if the child survived in one place, but not the other? He didn't want to think about that. It was hard to think about anything as he ran for his life, over there.

"Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?"

"It's still too early."

was home in his bed, that he must have been in a car accident because his nose and mouth hurt worse than anything he'd ever experienced. Some of his teeth were gone; he opened his mouth to cry out.

His cry was drowned by shouts of discovery as he was blinded by flashlight beams that reminded him vaguely of the light of the dragon, and brought him back to this miserable spot in a dark sewer under the city.

Rough hands pulled him to his feet, then more hands lifted him off the ground, and he was carried.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked. When no one answered—or, more likely, no one heard him over the shouts of the mob—he added, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

A celebratory cry rose from a thousand throats as Nathan emerged into the light. He was passed up to the platform, immediately felt a cord tighten around his neck, an orange extension cord, like the one his father used to trim the shrubs along the edges of their yard. Someone yanked the cord, pulling it tighter, so tight Nathan struggled to breathe. He reached for the cord and tried to loosen it. They hadn't given him time to speak. He tried to tell them that—that he had the right to explain himself, but a guy in a dress shirt and khakis tossed the other end of the cord over a steel beam up in the ceiling, and there was more cheering.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a guy swing something—a bat—then he felt roaring, ungodly pain in his knee. Someone punched him in the cheek, reigniting the pain from his collision with the pipe, then fists rained down on him from all sides.

They pulled the loose end of the cord, dragging him partially upright. It occurred to Nathan that he could still reach Justine over here—that her voice could be the last thing he heard. He reached into his pocket and fished out his cell as he pictured Justine. He pressed the one key and put the phone to his ear, knowing this was going to be awful, re-

Run. Run. He wanted to get out of the car and run over here, as if he could help himself over there with his rested lungs. If they caught him, they would kill him. For real, they would kill him. It was difficult for him to wrap his mind around that.

It was so dark over there . . .

He reached for his face and doubled over as he hit something over there and went down.

Justine pulled over. "Are you all right?" She asked, gently touching his head.

"I ran into something. I'm down. They're coming for me. Oh God, they're coming for me."

"You're here, with me," Justine said. She squeezed his wrist, tried to draw his hand away from his face. "Do you hear me? You're here. Look at me."

Nathan lifted his head and looked at Justine. Her eyes were red, her cheeks wet with tears. She was so beautiful. "You're really pregnant?"

She smiled, nodded. "I really am. Swear to God."

Nathan nodded, took a shuddering breath. "They got me. They're carrying me."

"Focus on here. Block it out."

Justine slowed, turned into the parking lot of a Walgreen's.

"What's our plan?"

"We're going to my parents. My father has a backhoe; he's building a shelter."

Nathan nodded. It was hard to think straight, because of what was happening over there. He squeezed his eyes shut. "Oh, God. It hurts."

Justine wrapped her arms around his head, pressed him to her bosom, rocked him. "It's almost over, Nate. It's almost over and then everything will be okay."

He wanted it to be over. It was intolerable; every second was intolerable. They were all around him, glaring at him like he was the devil, hurting him.

Nathan tried not to be there, to be fully on this side, but it was impossible. He was both here and there, not partly here and partly there.

He opened his eyes, lifted his head to look at Justine.

minding himself that he'd still be over there.

His feet left the ground and the noose bit into his neck, ramming his windpipe closed. He kicked frantically, trying to find something to stand on, tore at the cord around his neck with one hand, doggedly clutching the phone to his ear with the other.

The man with the bat hit his arm and knocked the phone out of his hand. It tumbled into the crowd. Nathan reached up to grab the cord, but didn't have the strength. He strained to breathe, would give anything for just one breath.

The shouts receded.

And then it was over.

"It's over," he said.

"You're not over there any more? At all?"

"No. I'm just here now."

Relief blossomed on Justine's face. She took Nathan's head in her hands and kissed him once. "Stay here. I need to get scissors and hair dye."

Nathan nodded. The door closed; he closed his eyes. Images of his last seconds on the other side raced through his head. He took a deep breath, tried to banish them, but he suspected they'd never stop. He clapped his hands over his ears to banish the awful buzzing. His eyes snapped open. The buzzing. He'd forgotten this was the bad side, the side with the dragons. Throwing open the door he leaped out.

There was a dragon coming over the roof of Walgreens, heading toward them.

There was another, bearing down to his left.

"*Justine*," he screamed, halfway to the entrance already, running fast, faster than he'd ever run. They had to get in the car, had to drive.

Three people burst out of the store as he neared, raced toward their cars clutching looted remnants. Justine appeared out of the farthest aisle clutching two packages, running like mad. The dragon materialized at the back corner of the store, floor-to-ceiling, tearing over shelves of pain killers and greeting cards before veering straight down the center row. In a flash it cut right, then left, straight at Nathan. Justine raced toward him, one hand outstretched, her mouth cranked open in a scream drowned by the deafening hum.

At the last instant the dragon veered right again, over the clearance display.

Then over Justine.

He stood frozen as the hum of the dragon faded, leaving him in an empty drug store with a swirling marble statue of the love of his life. He dropped to the floor, never taking his eyes off Justine, not wanting to move any closer, wishing the dragon would come back and paint him with its cold light.

*She wasn't gone*, he reminded himself. She was still *over there*, still pregnant, safe from dragons. But she was also trapped in that statue.

Struggling to his feet, Nathan headed toward the pharmacy.

He was grabbing a container of Pedialite, to wash down the large number of pills he planned to take, when he suddenly realized there was a reason to go on living, at least for a while. He dropped the Pedialite and headed for the car.

"I'm calling you, over there," Nathan said, his voice thick from crying. "I want to hear your voice. When you answer, tell me you love me?"

"I will. I do love you, Nathan." She took his hand, pressed it to her belly.

As the noose tightened over there, he reached for his throat here, took deep exaggerated breaths to reassure himself that over here, he was breathing.

"I'm dying. They're killing me."

Justine kept his hand firmly on her belly, whispered that everything would be okay, told him it was almost over.

He squeezed his eyes shut, his head spinning, his entire body spinning.

Nathan pulled Justine's Camry to the curb in front of an unremarkable house in an unremarkable neighborhood in Saugerties, New York. A woman was carrying a milk jug filled with water toward an open basement door set in the ground beside her house. She was an old woman, seventy at least.

He rolled down the window. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

The woman glanced toward him, took a few steps toward the door.

"I don't mean to bother you, but I'm trying to contact my wife. She's pregnant, with our first child. Can you help me, please?"

Nathan had thought those lines through carefully, and they caused the woman to pause. She scanned the sky, then approached Nathan's car, stopping a dozen feet from it. Nathan stayed in his car, figuring he would present less of a threat that way.

"What do you need me to do?"

"She died over here. A dragon got her." The woman tisked in sympathy. Nathan waited a beat before continuing. "The problem is, I died over there. In a riot."

As the full impact of Nathan's situation sunk in, the woman pressed her palm to her mouth. "Oh my God, that's terrible."

"It sure is. I can barely stand it, not knowing if my wife is all right. I was wondering if you would be kind enough to call her, over there?"

"Of course." She stepped up to Nathan's window, bent down, hands on knees. "It'll only be a minute. I'm heading into the house now." After a pause, she said, "All right. What's the number?"

Nathan fed her Justine's number, three digits at a time.

"It's ringing," she said. As the silence dragged on, she added, "You think they'll ever get the power back on, over here?" Then quickly, "Wait—I've got her."

"Tell her it's Nathan."

The woman nodded. "She's crying. No—she's laughing. A little of both, I guess."

"How is she? Is it terrible?"

Pause. "She says to please go back to the drug store. Take some dynamite or something with you and blow her up." The woman squeezed her eyes shut, shook her head. "She says please hurry."

Would that work? Could anything penetrate that white substance? Nathan had no idea. "Tell her I'm leaving right now. I'll hurry."

"She says if it doesn't work, she'll hang on, she won't do anything to hurt the baby. All that matters now is the baby." The woman choked up, her eyes brimming with tears. "Our baby will be happy, that's what matters."

"Tell her that's what I'm living for. I'm going to try very hard to stay alive until she's born."

Tears broke from the woman's eyes and rolled down her weathered cheeks.

"What did she say?" Nathan asked, wiping tears.

"She's crying. She says she loves you with all her heart."

"Tell her I love her, too. Tell her I'll call as often as I can, until the baby is born." Then he'd take the pills.

The woman nodded. "I told her. She says good bye."

Nathan held his hand out the window. "Thank you."

The woman took his hand, squeezed it. "It was a pleasure." Still clutching his hand, she wiped her eyes with her other sleeve. "Sad as it is, it's the best thing that's happened to me in a long time." She gestured toward the basement door. "Do you want to come down, have something to eat?"

Nathan shook his head. "I have to find dynamite."

She nodded. "When's your baby due?"

"September eighteenth."

The woman smiled. "Safe journey."

**January 2013**

Nathan smiled. That now-familiar hum rose on the horizon. “You’d better get inside.”

He pulled off, gunned the Camry down the block, fleeing another of his dragons. ○

# MITHRIDATES, HE DIED OLD

Nancy Kress

**The winner of four Nebulas and two Hugos, Nancy Kress's most recent books are the stand-alone novella *After the Fall, Before the Fall, During the Fall* (Tachyon), which received a very enthusiastic reception, and the YA science fiction novel *Flash Point* (Viking), which was released in November. Of her latest story she says: "A.E. Housman is one of my favorite poets. Like all my favorite poets, he is very unfashionable: rhyming, aristocratic, unconvoluted, and dead. His poem 'Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff,' which is actually about the mythical king Mithridates, has fascinated me for forty years, and I was so happy to write a story using its famous last line."**

**S**he hadn't expected to enjoy dying so much.

Because of course she was dying, that car had practically run over her head, and even though she knew there were people (what people?) clustered around her bed (what bed?), they were irrelevant. They'd been there a long time (how long?) without interesting her. What did interest her was how good everything suddenly felt. They (who?) had kept that possibility from her before now! Well, what could you expect, people always tried to keep the good things for themselves. . . .

"No one tells you anything useful," she muttered, and there was a stir among the people around the bed. A rustle, like wind in distant grass, or students taking their stupid notes at her carefully prepared lectures, writing down everything wrong. What had these fools thought they'd heard? "No nun sells you anything youthful?" "No pun spells anything suitable?"

No matter. What mattered was the drugs she had suddenly been given. Because of course it must be drugs, to help ease her dying. Such lovely drugs, both for the sensations they gave her now and for the dreamless forever sleep they would soon usher in. . . .

"She's thrashing around!" the daughter said. "She's in pain!"

"I don't think so," the daughter's husband said. "Look, honey, she's smiling!"

Dr. Turner frowned. Well, maybe the patient was smiling, but it was such a twisted smile you couldn't be sure. Turner hadn't wanted to do this in the first place. For five days he'd been arguing against the clinical trial, but that horrible new law, H-743A, left the decision to the family. *If a patient shall be certified by three licensed medical practitioners to be beyond accepted aid, then so-called "last-ditch" medica-*



*tions under clinical trial may be administered at the request of court-verified health proxies that blah blah blah.* Turner opposed experimentation on the helpless. He was suspicious of everyone's motives: the drug companies, the researchers recording everything at the back of the room, the weepy families. No good could come of using poor—he had to glance at his notes for her name—Margaret Lannigan as a lab rat for some new brain drug that, like 90 percent of them, wouldn't get FDA approval anyway.

Margaret drifted pleasantly. No lectures to prepare, no tests to grade with twisted parroting of her precise literary analyses . . . Students always got it wrong. "No gun kills you anything rueful." Rather A.E. Housman, that . . . rose-lipt maidens and the athlete dying young . . .

"What do you know about guns?" Beth said. "Words are your weapons, not guns."

Margaret shrieked and clawed at the air. "You're dead!"

"And you're not," Beth said. "Yet."

"She *is* in pain," the daughter said. "Oh, stop the procedure!"

"It can't be stopped," Dr. Turner said sourly. The shunt had delivered the drug directly into the patient's brain, bypassing the blood-brain barrier. He'd been right; this trial was a terrible mistake. He folded his arms, pursed his lips, and watched as the patient subsided, once more inert on the bed. What had they expected? People were idiots.

Beth stood at the end of Margaret's bed—not on the floor but actually on the bed—in a long white nightgown. Her blond hair hung in two braids over her shoulders, framing her pretty, unlined face. In her hand she held a book covered in blue cloth, its end pages bright fake gold.

Margaret said, "I'm hallucinating."

"You wish."

That was how Margaret knew it really was Beth. No hallucination of her own would ever say "You wish." Nor "as if" nor "bummer" nor any of the other deplorable slang the students used to avoid actual thought. All of it was exactly the sloppy speech Beth would have employed if she hadn't died in the era of "groovy" and "heavy, man," both of which she actually had said.

"How . . . why . . ."

Beth leaped lightly to the floor. No thud. She walked to the head of Margaret's bed, passing lightly through the vague, agitated people milling around there. She said, "Didn't count on the afterlife, did you, Maggie?"

"Don't call me Maggie," Margaret said, without thinking, because it was what she'd always said to her sister when they were young.

"I don't have to listen to you anymore," Beth said. "I don't have to be bullied by you, soured by you, laughed at by you. Do you remember this, Maggie?" She held out the blue book.

"Of course I remember," Margaret snapped. Anger steadied her a little. "Your adolescent drivel." "

"So you told me when you swiped the book and read it. That poetry mattered to me. Why were you so nasty about it?"

"I was honest, not nasty. You never could take criticism."

"I didn't ask for it. Not from you."

"Literature should be subjected to high standards."

"Not the poetry of fourteen-year-old girls!"

"Even that," Margaret said firmly. This was solid ground. She had taught fourteen-

year-olds for forty years now at a prestigious private school. "It does children no good to be given false praise."

"It does them no good to be subjected to sarcasm, either."

Beth hadn't been changed by wherever she'd been (where?) since her death from cancer at eighteen. Beth never would change. Dumb, romantic, trusting to a fault. She wearied Margaret, just as she always had. "I'd like you to go away now. I'd like to be left alone."

"As if," Beth said.

The patient had quieted. Her monitors hummed gently. Heart rate eighty-seven, blood pressure one-sixty over ninety, both predictable responses to trauma. Turner didn't look at the brain-wave graphs. That was for the researchers who'd set up this travesty.

The daughter's husband said, "Tell us again, doctor, what this drug does?"

Now *there* was a question! Turner couldn't give the real answer, which was "Who the hell knows?" In his opinion—not that the FDA heeded it; he was only the primary physician on the patient's case, after all—the family had no business even being here for the clinical trial. Law H-743A again.

He gave the accepted answer. "The usual pathways to arousal aren't working in your mother-in-law's brain. This drug acts on the deep brain to create an alternate means of arousal. If it succeeds, the patient will come out of her coma."

"If?" the son-in-law said.

"If." Almost he told them about Phineas Gage, but then decided against it. Always best to limit the supplemental knowledge you offered to families. It reduced the risk of malpractice suits later on.

Despite her words, Beth vanished. Well, she never had been reliable. Margaret closed her eyes, hoping for that lovely rush of sensation to return. It did not. Instead another young voice said, "Mrs. Lannigan."

Coming toward her bed, pushing his way through the seething insubstantial people, was a young man who undoubtedly had been one of her students. They had a look, these prep school boys: perfect teeth, straightforward gaze, good manners, lacrosse sticks. Although this one carried a sheaf of papers. Margaret prided herself on never forgetting a name, and after a moment she had it: William Calabrese. Class of '05.

"I'm not holding office hours now," she said crisply.

"I know."

"Are you dead, too?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then please come see me during scheduled office hours."

"I can't. I'm not at Gladwell anymore."

Then she remembered. Of course he wasn't any longer at Gladwell. "You were expelled for cheating."

"Plagiarism. And I didn't do it."

"Of course you did. You turned in a paper on the myth of Mithridates, and my TA found the paper for sale on the Internet."

"No, he did *not*," Calabrese stepped closer. "He found one with the same idea but not the same details. I came up with that idea on my own!"

"And did all the research, I suppose," Margaret said witheringly. "You—a fifteen-year-old boy—not only related King Mithridates's obsession with poison to events in his father's and grandfather's lives, but also included 'plausible guesses' at the molecules that supposedly let Mithridates slowly build up immunities to poison by ingesting tiny amounts every day."

"Yes, I did! It really interested me! I was going to be a doctor!"

"Were you. And did you become one, or did shortcuts fail you in that, too?"

"I lost my scholarship to Gladwell and ended up at a public school, where the science courses were so poor I wasn't prepared enough for college. Plus the expulsion was on my record. Did you know I was only at Gladwell because of the scholarship?"

"No." That was not the kind of thing Margaret concerned herself with. Her business was teaching. She added, "The entire honor board voted on your expulsion, Mr. Calabrese. They agreed with me."

"Few people dared disagree with you at that school. And the vote was close, four to three."

She said sharply, "How do you know that?"

"I made it my business to find out. You ruined my life, Mrs. Lannigan, and—"

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic. Really." She closed her eyes, hoping the hallucination would go away. Evidently it did because his last words came to her faint and somehow blurry, as if they were seen as well as heard:

"Your fucking unfounded suspicions ruined my life."

There was a stir at the back of the room, among the researchers studying their elaborate monitors. The family hadn't noticed. Turner glanced at the EEG graph, but this was not his field and he couldn't see anything overtly abnormal about the series of spiky lines. One of them said softly, "Heightened activity in the hippocampus."

Turner's eyebrows rose. He hadn't realized the drug might affect the hippocampus, with its heavy involvement in memory. Had the researchers known?

Phineas Gage had kept his memory. After a three-foot iron rod had blown through his head during a blasting accident while constructing the Rutland & Burlington Railroad in 1848, no one had expected him to survive. But he had, despite losing a half-teacup of brain tissue.

The daughter's husband said, "Look, her lips are moving a little. . . . She's scowling."

The daughter bit her lip. "Well, she always did."

No more rush of good sensations. However, nothing painful, either. The Houseman poem about Mithridates drifted into her mind, undoubtedly due to the hallucination of young Calabrese. "Calabrese"—an Italian name, among the Carters and Guests and Burdens and VanLudens. Had he really been on full scholarship? "I tell the tale that I heard told/ Mithridates, he died old." That was because the king of Pontus took a sub-dose of poison every day, building up immunity, and so could not be poisoned by his enemies, wise old monarch . . .

"I'm sorry!" someone screeched.

Margaret peered through the crowd of restless and insubstantial shapes, which seemed to have increased in number. A middle-aged woman barreled toward the bed, shrieking. "I'm so sorry!"

She stood too close to Margaret's head, a bunch of silver-wrapped flowers quivering in her hands. Tears streamed down her face. This was the type of woman that Margaret most disliked: overwrought, untidy, badly dressed, hair dyed brassy red. No self-respect. Who on earth was she?

"So, so sorry!"

"So you just made clear," Margaret said in the dry, precise voice that could bring the most pedigreed parents to heel.

"I didn't mean to do it!"

Do what? For a brief insane moment Margaret thought the woman had poisoned her (*Mithridates, he died old. . . .*) and that's why she lay in this bed. But Margaret hadn't been poisoned, she'd been . . . Now she had it.

"You were driving the car that ran over me."

"Yes! And I'm so sorry!"

The accident, which until now had been hazy in her mind, grew suddenly clearer, brighter. Too bright, as if some switch in her brain flooded the memory with operating-room light. The blue Buick had driven around the corner, going too slow. Margaret, already a quarter of the way across the street, had stopped to glance at it with suspicion. Was the driver drunk? An idiot? What would she do next? You couldn't trust the people allowed behind the wheel nowadays. . . . Margaret retreated back to the curb. But meanwhile the fool woman behind the wheel, probably assuming that Margaret would continue crossing the street, had swung her car closer to the curb to give Margaret time to leave the Buick's lane. Margaret, seeing that, had corrected herself, stepping briskly forward; the Buick had also corrected. It was like those sidewalk encounters where people try to dodge around each other, both moving sideways in the same direction, and end up colliding, both with irritated smiles. Except that this collision was between a person and four thousand pounds of metal, happening in what Margaret remembered now as agonizingly slow motion.

If she hadn't assumed that the driver was stupid or drunk . . .

Margaret demanded, "Are you dead, too?"

"No! I mean . . . a big car like that, it's an Electra, my husband always chooses them because—"

"Were you drunk?"

"Of course not! Look, I brought you these." She held out the bouquet. Pink carnations and white gardenias, as if for a prom. Margaret had never liked the lush, hectic scent of gardenias.

"Go away," Margaret said, and closed her eyes. Her head hurt. If she hadn't been so suspicious of the driver . . .

What if young Calabrese really had not plagiarized that paper?

The informed-consent release for the patient, signed by her daughter, had included pages and pages of possible side effects. They were, Turner thought sourly, a ridiculous joke. The brain was the last frontier; nobody knew how it worked, and nobody knew what side effects could come from enzymes injected into it. They would stimulate arousal, yes—or at least, they did so in mice and chimpanzees—but what cascades of neuro-reactions would they also set off? What was going on in this woman's head?

Phineas Gage had spoken just a few minutes after his accident, had walked around, had not even experienced pain in his head.

The researchers in the back of the room muttered excitedly to each other: hippocampus, amygdalae, thalamus, new neural pathways. . . .

The daughter burst into tears.

And now Emily stood beside Margaret's bed. Emily, who'd been such a disappointment all her life. Margaret had named her for the self-sufficient and musical Emily Dickinson, not for the current crop of flashy young movie actresses, and Emily had turned out to be . . . well, *tinny*. Like the sound of music played through cheap speakers: nothing wrong with the basic tune, but the result was thin and weak in the treble, and missing bass notes.

"I might have had those bass notes if you had let me grow up," Emily said.

"What?" Margaret, outraged, tried to sit up. She failed.

"You didn't, you know, Mummy. You always knew best, always dictated what I was supposed to do and be, which was exactly like you. But I wasn't."

Of course she wasn't. From infancy Emily had been timid and pallid. Margaret

had had to protect her from the world, a wearisome task she'd been secretly glad to turn over to her son-in-law when Emily, in the only act of defiance in her entire rabbit life, had run off and married him at nineteen.

"If you had only let me grow up, make some of my own decisions, not been so damn suspicious that I would fuck up—"

"Vulgarity only reveals your lack of vocabulary," Margaret said, but all at once she wasn't so sure. Had she refused to let Emily make any of her own decisions? Something was happening in Margaret's head, something monstrous that she didn't understand. These people, they were controlling her *just as she'd always suspected they would*—

"No!" she screamed. "I won't! *I will not!*"

"Did she try to speak just then?" the daughter asked. "I thought she made a little noise!"

"Maybe she's coming around," said the son-in-law.

Dr. Turner moved toward the patient's bed.

A researcher said, with awe, "Look at the spikes in frontal lobe pathways to the amygdala."

The daughter said, "What's an amygdala?"

Her husband answered. "I think it involves thinking. Making judgments, maybe? But I might be remembering wrong."

He was remembering wrong, Dr. Turner thought. The frontal lobe made judgments. The amygdala governed fear, anger, and hostility. After the iron rod had destroyed much of Phineas Gage's left frontal lobe, plus structures not identifiable to nineteenth-century medicine, his behavior had changed completely. His friends saw him as "no longer Gage." Supposedly, he'd become fitful, obstinate, profane, incapable of holding a job.

Margaret refused to open her eyes. If she didn't open her eyes, she wouldn't have to see, not any of it.

"You can't escape that way," Beth said.

Margaret squeezed her eyes shut tighter.

"The light hurts, doesn't it? But you can't escape it, Maggie. Not me, or Emily, or that student, or the Buick driver."

"Go away."

"I will, you know," Beth said. "But you won't. And now you see yourself, too."

"Go away!"

"*Mithridates, he died old.*" You used to quote that at me, do you remember? But did Mithridates have any fun at all while he was alive? Always taking poison, always slightly ill from it, his stomach sour, his guts constipated. His face all pinched, trusting no one."

"Leave me alone!"

"You will have to learn everything all over again, Maggie. You can do it." Beth moved closer, and a moment later Margaret felt her sister's kiss on her forehead.

It was the kiss that did it. Margaret screamed in fury, in frustration, in anger. Her whole body thrashed and flailed, which sent agonizing pain through her head and then through her right arm, which had struck the metal bed rail. She was being flayed alive, her skin stripped off her in layers, make it stop *make it stop*—

"Make it stop!" the daughter cried. Dr. Turner sprang forward, and additional staff rushed into the room. A nurse tried to pull the daughter and son-in-law out, but with surprising power the daughter threw off the nurse's grasp. The patient continued to thrash. She was geriatric, there was risk of fracture, why hadn't anyone thought to

strap her down, they were going to lose her—

Slowly the patient quieted. She opened her eyes. Tears flowed from them. The daughter leaned over the bed and grabbed the patient, risking further injury—damn fool woman! No—*women*, plural.

But the patient *did* seem fully released from coma. Dr. Turner elbowed the relatives aside.

"Mrs. Lannigan—can you hear me?"

No response. The patient kept gazing at her daughter and shedding useless tears. Dr. Turner, as a trained professional, automatically noted the nature of that gaze, and was startled. He hadn't usually seen such humble beseeching, as if asking the daughter's forgiveness for something—what? The daughter hadn't been driving the accident car. Maybe Social Services better send a caseworker.

"Mrs. Lannigan, please answer. Can you hear me?"

"Y . . . yes."

"What is your first name?"

"Margaret."

Was it? Dr. Turner didn't remember, but the relatives didn't object. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

He had never seen such a trusting smile. But then she winced in pain. "My arm . . ."

The arm was broken. The numbers on the monitor shot up farther, in response to pain. Briefly her eyes rolled back in her head and he opened his mouth to call for the crash cart. But she rallied.

"Mrs. Lannigan—"

"What smells of gardenias?" she said. Then she began to cry in earnest, reaching out to clutch her startled daughter's hand.

Although for a century and a half, medical books taught that Phineas Gage had been completely changed by what was done to his brain, the most recent research suggested that the behavioral changes had not in fact lasted. That made more sense to Dr. Turner. People were what they were, and anything else was just naïve and wishful thinking.

Margaret Lannigan had indeed broken the osteoporosis-thinned bones of her arm while thrashing around after her coma. And her severe headache had lasted for nearly two days, impervious to painkillers. Dr. Turner's suspicions had all been justified. As for the patient babbling on and on about "trust"—well, painkillers often caused babbling.

On the Clinical Trial Sheet he wrote: "Experimental drug too hard on patient. Not recommended for approval."

He underlined it twice. ○

# Just Another Day In THE Burbs

He wakes up  
to find all his neighbors  
are first generation holographs,  
stuck in the same old  
daily-routine loop,

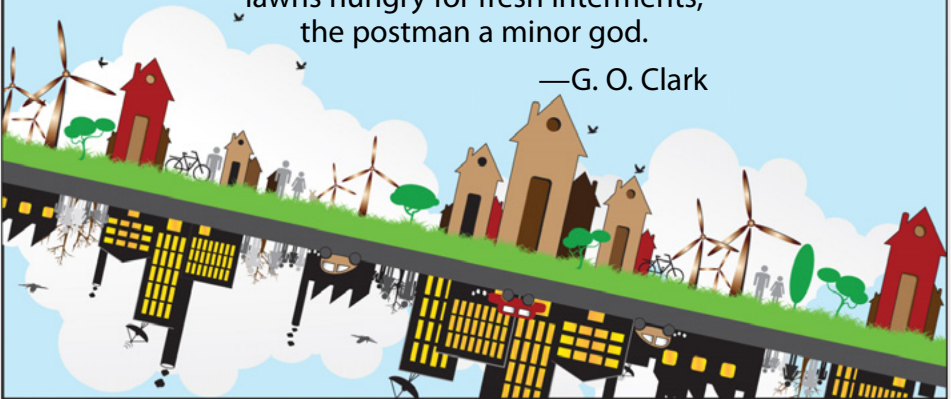
his fifteen-year-old cat,  
merely obsolete animatronics  
with a gyroscope for a heart,  
programmed like  
a toy train,

his long-legged,  
blue-eyed, blond-haired wife  
most likely a clone of the original  
who secretly left one night  
many years ago,

and his mind a mundane  
loaner from the Reality Shop,  
still in tow after thirty odd years,  
repairs on the original taking  
much longer than expected.

It's just another day in  
the burbs, dark secrets simmering  
behind closed curtains, close-cropped  
lawns hungry for fresh interments,  
the postman a minor god.

—G. O. Clark



# THE LEGEND OF TROOP 13

Kit Reed

**A trip up Mount Palomar with four writers sparked this Kit Reed story about feral Girl Scouts. “The Legend of Troop 13” is the newest of six new stories in *The Story Until Now*, a “best-of” collection coming out in March from Wesleyan University Press. As it turns out, 2013 is a big year for Kit: both the collection and her novel, *Son of Destruction* (Severn House Publishers), will be published on March 15. In 2012, the author’s collection, *What Wolves Know* (PS Publishing), was a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award.**

## The Lost Troop

In the mountains tonight, in the jagged hills below the observatory, the Girl Scouts’ voices ring—just not where you can hear, for the missing girls of Troop 13 are as wary as they are spirited.

“Beautiful,” Louie says. He paints the observatory dome, top to bottom on his revolving scaffold, so he’s in a position to know. He says, “It’s a little bit like angels singing.”

It would lift your heart to hear them, tourists claim, because tourists believe everything they hear, whether or not they actually heard it.

Although they’ve been missing for years, some people think the legendary lost Girl Scouts of Troop 13 are still out there on Palamountain, camping in the shadow of the great white dome. We don’t know how it happened or where our girls went when they went missing, but tourists come to the mountain in hopes, and business is booming.

They claim they came to see the cosmos through the world’s largest telescope, but the men’s wet mouths tell you different.

As for our girls, there have been signs, e.g.: surprise raids on picnic tables, although it could be bears. Outsiders swear the Last Incline is booby-trapped with broken glass and sharp objects, but they can’t prove it. They have to lug their ruined tires downhill to Elbow and by the time the wrecker brings these tourists back uphill with their new tires, the road is clear—no Scouts, no sign of Scouts, but their cars have been rifled.

So there’s a chance our girls are running through the woods in their green hats at this very minute, with their badge sashes thrown over items missing from our clotheslines. It’s like a party every night, twelve Girl Scouts on their Sit-Upons around the campfire—feasting on candy and s’mores, judging from supplies stolen



in midnight break-ins at Piney's Store. Our sheriff and the State Police looked for months; the FBI came, but the cold trail just got colder. It's been so long that even their mothers have stopped looking.

Now, you may come to Palamountain expecting to find dead campfires, skeletal teepees, abandoned Sit-Upons; you may think you spotted little green hats bobbing up there on the West Slope, but don't expect to catch up with them. You won't find our lost girls, no matter how hungry you are for love or adventure, so forget about easing whatever itch you thought you'd scratch here. They haven't been seen or heard from since the day Tracie Marsters threw the gaudy Troop Leader Scarf around her throat and led them up the mountain.

What happened to the Scouts in Troop 13, really? Why did they not come back from that last patrol, when we patted their little green hats and kissed them goodbye so happily? Did they not love us, or are there things on Palamountain that we don't know about? Were they wiped out in a rockfall or kidnapped by Persons Unknown, or are they just plain lost in the woods, and still trying to find their way back to us? Our Scouts couldn't be carried off against their will, that's unthinkable. Their motto is "Be Prepared," and they'd know what to do. We would have found markers: bits of crumpled paper on the trail, blazes on the trees, to signify which way they were taken.

We're afraid they went looking for someplace better than the settlement at Elbow, halfway up the East Grade on Palamountain, or our boring home town in the foothills. Prepared or not, we don't want to think about them running around in some big city. Unless they were running away from home and us personally, which is even worse.

Better to think of them as still up there, somewhere on Palamountain.

Listen, there have been sightings!

A tourist staggers into Mike's bar in the Elbow and he is all, *I alone am left to tell the tale, I alone am left to tell* . . . At this point words desert him; it was that intense. No, he can't tell you where, or what, exactly, and that's the least of it.

We need to shush him, so we shush him. That kind of talk is bad for business.

If they're still up there, they're too happy to hurt you. They're probably fine, running along to: "Ash Grove" or "Daisy, Daisy, we honor your memory true," that's the Girl Scout version, "We are Girl Scouts, all because of you . . ."—wonderful songs. You won't hear them singing as they bound along, because Scouts are trained to be careful, they'd be trilling.

It's a pretty sound but it chills your blood, according to Louie, who has heard it. He says, "If you hear them coming, *run*."

No, we think. Not our girls. How could those sweet things be dangerous?

### Edwin Ebersole III

Five A.M., and we've been on this bus for so long that the babies are panicking, not all at once, but more or less sequentially. Yow, one cries. Wawww, goes the next; uu-uck and aaah aaah aaaa; and the big ones erupt in counterpoint, Are we there yet, wawww, are we there yet, aaaah aaaah aaaa, Are we there yet? Bwaaaaaa, Are we . . . it's like a class project on chain reaction. The racket is exponential and we're all too anxious and depressed to make it stop and the only thing that keeps me going on this excursion is the glittering secret in my pocket and the chance that I can get what I want out of this trip, up there at the top. It's taking too long!

Fifty movers and shakers with wives and kids, riding into the experience of a lifetime in a stinking, overloaded repurposed Greyhound bus, and why? Evanescent Tours sold us on the trip of a lifetime. It was the card. Triple cream stock. Engraved. Gold ink.

EVANESCENT TOURS PRESENTS:  
 THE TOP OF THE WORLD, VIA LUXURY COACH.  
 Palamountain Observatory Exclusive  
 And the kicker?  
*by invitation only*

Who wouldn't bite? No riffraff, just us, the business elite, and, better? Every man on this tour is like me, tough, successful, rich. No ordinary guys on this bus. They can't afford it, and for us, top of the world, with more T.K. See, these pretty little Girl Scouts vanished up there when they were small, nobody knows how. The lost little girls must be big girls by now. Every man on this bus has stated reasons for riding up the mountain, but at bottom, there are babes in those woods and they need us.

We're going up the mountain to hunt. Like we can get back something we lost before we even knew it was missing.

The hell of it is, Serena's on to me. I plugged this trip as our second honeymoon, that I'd booked especially for her, but she knows. Nowhere is it written, but she knows we've never been happy. She jumped up in the middle of the night and dragged our girl Maggie off to sit in the back, and for what? All I did was move on my wife in the dark because she is after all my wife, and we've been traveling for so long that my want ran ahead of me.

Dammit, the bus was dark. They were all asleep.

I thought, 2 A.M., okay, let's make the time go by a little faster—you know.

Serena slapped my hand away. "Back off, you horny fuck!" and I went, "I was just . . ." which devolved into the usual.

Serena: You always . . .

Me: I never, and besides, you . . .

Her: I always, and you say you love me but you never . . .

This happens to couples in enclosed situations: the vacation house, the Carnival Cruise. This bus.

Thousands I spent to get us here, high-end launch party at a luxury hotel on the coast, with us done up like kings: for me, Gucci shoes, the Hugo Boss tux with the Armani vest. I even bought Serena a Valentino gown. Champagne smashed across the prow of our private vehicle, full access to the Observatory, satisfaction guaranteed, I bought front row seats for the spectacle of the century, and where are we?

Nowhere.

We've been rolling for days, all the toilets are stopped up and the video player is kaput. We're running out of food, probably because the driver got us lost back there. Worse yet, he isn't speaking to us.

We don't know if he's sworn to secrecy by Evanescent Tours, or if he's pissed at us for bitching, or just plain out of control.

I personally think the captain is mad. This Clyde Pritchard is one hostile hick. He drives without stopping except for gas, at which point, given the sticker price on this extravaganza, he should let us get out, relieve ourselves at the Roaming Mountains Dine and Dance that we whizzed past an hour ago instead of in one of his rolling cesspools, he should let us visit our luggage for necessities and eat hot food for a change, instead of the freeze-dried dinners Evanescent Tours Incorporated vacuum-packed for the days or is it weeks we'll be in this rat trap.

*Later—*

Last night the judgmental knuckle-dragger threw packs of beef jerky and rattler paté at us, one each, and warned us to limit fluids because, well, you don't want to know. Today it was oyster crackers, one miserable packet each, stamped with the name of some crap diner in the flatlands. Are we low on food? What if he runs off the

road out here where I can't get a signal? What if we have to kill and eat each other, in hopes somebody will see the vultures circling and rescue whoever's left?

I parleyed with the guys. "Does he know who we *are*? Nobody treats us like trailer trash. We're *rich*." A bunch of us got together and went up there to stick it to the slack-jawed hick. At least he could tell us which route he is taking, the East Slope Road, or the West Slope Incline, which is, like, our polite way of saying, *Jerkoff, do you know what you're doing?*

He won't answer. He snaps his head around, glaring, and when we don't back off, he pulls a sidearm out of his belt. "Back to your seats or I fire," he says, and he's not kidding.

I pass a note to Serena, and watch it going hand over hand to the bench seat in the back, where she is braiding fishermen's lures into our daughter's hair. Without both-ering to open my heartfelt apology, she tears it to shreds and braids paper butterflies in with all the other junk in Maggie's hair.

My son Eugene the felon drags his paw across my arm. "Dad."

"Shut up, Eugene."

Kid goes, "I saw a sign!"

A sign. Like we're pilgrims, looking for the golden calf or something. Owait. It says . . . but this pissed-off fool is whipping around curves so fast that I catch it out of the corner of my eye. *Mount Palamountain*. "Guys!"

Our heads snap back on our necks so fast that nobody hears. We take a sharp turn and start the climb. Our hearts rise up.

We are going to the mountain! The mountain, where I get mine.

## Clyde Pritchard

*I thought you'd be excited, but you don't give a crap. I stop at the Overlook to let you look up at Palamountain and around at territory surrounding, it's a perfect 360 but you don't care, you just circle like bears fixing to take a dump right here on Overlook Point and the next thing I know, you're wandering across the road sniffing for something in the woods, this Ebersole guy in the lead. Look at you, with candy wrappers stuck to your camp shorts and pork rinds ground into your big, white Jell-O thighs, drooling red because of the gummy rattlesnakes I threw you after lunch. Cover those legs, they're disgusting! If I left you off right here I'd be doing you a favor, you wouldn't be smarter by the time you made it back downhill to the highway exit ramp, but by God you'd be thinner.*

*I show you the nth wonder of the world, the full 360, and . . .*

Okay, Clyde, try. "Friends, look up! From here, you can see the monster telescope move! At this height, critters you've never seen before streak by so fast that you don't even know they're stalking you, these woods bristle with undergrowth that you don't see anywhere, winding suckers around petrified trees, and . . ." Oh shit. "Wait a minute. Where are you going?" Uncouth fuckers. "Come back!"

*But you run for the woods with your pants on fire, like you'll find those girls hiding behind the next tree, so I do what I have to, it's company regulations. I yell.*

"Okay then, watch out! There's rattlesnakes in those ferns and the last thing you want is for one of those mean suckers to bite you, they can strike up to six feet high," but nobody stops.

"Okay, dammit. Go ahead and get bit." I'd be glad, but I have to read off the warning card: *Evanescent policy*.

"When it happens, do not make a cross and try to suck the venom out. You have to raise the part that got bit higher than your head and hightail it for the observatory gift shop. Agatha can help you . . . if you get back on the goddam bus. Do you hear me? There's antivenin in the gift shop and Agatha can call 911 for you on the land line,

*that is, if we get there before closing time . . .*

*"I warned you."*

*Like you care. You crunch after Ebersole, loaded for bear. Agatha's visiting her great-granddaughter in Scottsdale at the moment, and she might not get back until Thursday, but I did what I could, and you brought it on yourselves.*

*"Okay, assholes. Be careful out there."*

## The Lost Girls

Oh yay hurray, another great day, running along in our badge sashes and deerskin shoes for we are, first of all, Girl Scouts, and so very proud! Melody Harkness is our leader now, and she's the best! Moira's put Girl Scout trefoils on the moccasins she made for us, for with the needles Stephanie carved from bones cut out of the last deer we brought down, and beads sewn on with hair pulled out of Delia, who has plenty to spare because it grew until it was long enough to sit on, Moira can make anything. For wild girls we're pretty well dressed, considering. Scouting makes you resourceful. Steal a bed-sheet or two from the line behind the P.O. when Miss Archibald's out delivering the mail and, man, Nancy will whip up a sweet outfit, and if anything rips, Ella will patch it, that's her job.

There's tons of food for girls who know how to find it, you can kill it in the woods or dig it out of the dirt, plus, there's food in gangs of places you wouldn't think to look, like, there's food in the day trippers' cars and summer cabins and down at Piney's store in Elbow; there's food on picnic blankets and food on windowsills just asking for it so don't you moms worry about us.

In spite of what you think happened, your Scouts that used to be so little and cute are fat and sassy now, and we're doing fine, fine, fine. We run along singing, just not so anybody but us can hear, we are that fine, and our songs are wonderful! We move fast and keep it low, so you can't hunt us down and catch us, and the fun will never end. If it did, that would be the end of us so if you were thinking of catching us, forget it or it will be the end of you. Nobody sneaks up on Troop 13, our motto is Be Prepared, don't even try.

We get what we want and we keep what we have which is fun, fun, *fun*, Troop 13 is forever, so beware.

## Ida Mae Howells

19—

I'm so lucky! I'm a happy, lucky girl, running free with my sister Scouts, and all because I chased a kitty in the woods when I was little, and got lost for good which was lucky, *lucky* because it was so awful at home.

It was the day our grade came up Palamountain to see the stars.

I got so lost!

I wouldn't of, if everybody wasn't so mean to me, so I guess that was lucky too. We were up to stars in first grade so Mrs. Greevey brought us all the way up in the school bus to see stars through the giant telescope. Ahead of time I was very excited to come, but it was awful on the bus. Betty Ann and them said eeeww, dirty underpants, when I fell down getting on the bus. They wouldn't sit with me, which, it's not my fault Uncle Martha's always gone and never did the wash, so I had to ride all the way up the mountain in my dirty underpants all by myself. Also it was loud and ugly in the bus, because of all those boys yelling at you and rubbing stuff in your hair and them all fighting in the aisles. Mrs. Greevey yelled that she would buy us all ice cream sandwiches at Piney's Store when we got to the Elbow if we would only shut up, she yelled and yelled but it only got worse.

Mrs. Greevey made the driver stop at Piney's anyway, either it was them ganging

up on her or she forgot. Kids jumped down and ran into Piney's so fast that Mrs. Greevey fell down and hurt herself, I think she even cried. She was too upset to count when we went into the store and I guess she wasn't counting when they all came back after, except not me.

They left without me, and you know what? I was glad!

See, Gerald pushed me down the back steps and my ice cream all squeeze out of the sandwich and got mooshed into the dirt. They all laughed, so I had to get down and play like I had a rock in my shoe until they got bored of waiting for me to get up and forgot. Then Jane threw a rock at Billy Carson and Gerald and them piled on her, which pretty much served her right. I ran into the woods while nobody was looking so I wouldn't have to mess, I went way, way up there on the hill where it was quiet, so I never even saw them get back on the bus.

The cutest little kitty came up to me!

I tried to pet it, but it ran away so I ran after it, it looked so cuddly and soft. By the time I gave up, I was lost and it was getting dark. Well, I could of screamed and hollered until somebody down at Piney's Store would of heard me and they came up and found me, but then I would of had to go sit in the store and wait for the bus to come back down and I'd have to go home to Uncle Martha and them. I'm not never going back, I'd rather die. So I just set there doing nothing and waiting for the kitty to come back, and my bones would still be sitting there waiting except there were noises in the woods like kids trying not to laugh and the next minute, they came.

It was this wonderful lady Miss Tracie, with a special scarf around her hair. I found out later that meant she was the troop leader, and those cute things on the girls were badge sashes and Girl Scout pins with three gold leaves, so just when I could of starved to death or died of loneliness, Troop 13 found me and I went home with them.

They didn't ask who was I or was I lost or what was I doing up there. They just brought me back to their camp and fed me on pigs in the blanket and s'mores until I couldn't eat any more so when I felt better, I explained. Miss Tracie said be glad that kitty was too fast for me because there are no kitties in these woods, just mountain lions, and if the mother had found me I would be dead by now.

She said I should thank my stars, but I was already thanking my stars because by the time the fire went out and everybody sang "Day is done . . ." Miss Tracie decided I could stay. She called Council and they voted me in. This girl Myrna whispered that it was either that or, but she never told me the or. I was way happy because nobody voted to send me downhill to Piney's, so I would never, ever have to go back to Uncle Martha and the bike gang, they said Piney would of sent me home and they might torture me until I told on Troop 13.

Now this is my home! Wherever we set down our Sit-Upons and build a fire and put up our tents. Camp is so, so much nicer than Uncle Martha's big old shed on the freeway down at the tippy bottom of the hills, where they were so mean to me, plus I had to do all their dirty dishes and they made me sleep in the loft.

The first week Miss Tracie taught me the Girl Scout Promise and a bunch of other Girl Scout things, she asked did I want to be one. Yes! So by Saturday I was a brand new member of Troop 13 although I was only in first grade. See, Miss Tracie was a great, great troop leader, and they don't have Brownies here. Plus something happened to this other girl in the troop and they needed one more.

That was so wonderful, they *needed* me!

That night we all stood around the fire saying the Girl Scout Promise, "On my honor I will try . . ." where we promise to follow the Girl Scout Law. Miss Tracie and them and me, we all put our hands over our hearts and swore to "make the world

better and be a sister to every Girl Scout," and that is what we do.

### Clyde Pritchard

*"Here we are, people. It's a short walk to the top from this point, but you have to stay in line and follow me. It's steep."*

*So what if the bus broke down on the West Grade and we're here after closing time? I left voicemail so Gavin and Lionel will hang in long enough to give you the tour.*

*This is all your fault and I want you off my back. Eli had to truck new parts uphill from Elbow because you fat fucks overloaded my bus and it blew a Thing and now you're bitching because we got here late, when it was you that ditched the wives and kids at the Overlook, two hours wasted sitting on our thumbs. Like your lost girls would be in there rubbing up against trees, all hot and ready to give you what you want. Believe me, you don't want to tangle with them.*

*Two hours, and you come back empty-handed, red in the face and pissed off at me, and Ebersole reams me out for making you late.*

*Shut up, asshole. We're here.*

*Look at you looking back, like you'll spot them flitting through the woods at the bottom of Observatory Hill. One of your women goes to look over the edge before I can head her off. She jams her fists in her mouth, all, eek and I have to grab her elbow and help her pull herself together before the others freak, but you don't care. You don't even see. The air is so thick with your desire that it's hard to corral you and aim you toward the stone steps to the top.*

*Time to grab the walkie and start the spiel. I bang on the mouthpiece. "A-hem."*

*I heard that dirty laugh.*

*"Welcome to the Palamountain observatory, crown jewel of the western range. We usually walk up from the parking lot, but I parked on the Last Incline because we're late. Excited much?"*

*Parking on the ledge is risky, given that we're nosed into an eight thousand-foot drop, but so is shoving you up the long, windy path from the parking lot at this hour, when tourists are more likely to stray and get lost or snakebit or worse.*

*I funnel you into the straight and narrow, a hundred stairsteps to the brass double doors as daylight thins out and starts to go. I think up mountain gods so I can pray that Gavin and Lionel are still on deck when we hit the top. "Light's going, so watch your step."*

*You're all mutter grumble, mutter mutter, "... food in this place," "... restaurant," "bloody starving," "... restaurant," Ebersole, belching, "... food!"*

*The sun is in a nosedive and you're thinking food? "There's plenty to see once we get into the rotunda, plus the amazing Palamountain gift shop has snacks." Yeah, I hear you snarling, "snacks!" Okay, Clyde, think fast. "Fountain pens and snow globes with the Palamountain dome. Observatory patches, spyglass mini-scopes. Sky's the limit, you can get meteorite fragments, powerful pills for what ails you, moon rocks! Baseball caps and warmup jackets with the Palamountain emblem, show the people where you've been!"*

*Like that works. "... Starving, get it?"*

*"Food."*

*The nth wonder of the universe and you're all, food. "There are marvels in the rotunda, and you can get food and drink in the gift shop on the exit side. Beef jerky, volcanic stew, moon pies." I invent, to keep you quiet. "Whiskey singles, Palamountain wines..."*

*("Restaurant!")*

*About the restaurant. There is no restaurant, which is not my problem. And there's more, and this is what I'm dreading, laying out the more.*

*I could tell you outright, but you don't want to hear. You bang on your chests like*

*uncaged gorillas in the fading light, yelling "Top of the world," and "Bring it on," like our lost girls will hear what big men you are and swarm out of the woods all warmed up down there and waiting for you to come out when the tour is done. Well, I can tell you about that. Your women are over you, and our girls . . . You don't want to know. You don't need to know that there have been Incidents, not to mention the lawsuit, so whatever you thought you heard about Troop 13, you're wrong.*

*There is no Troop 13, trust me, there are no wild girls out there, get it? But if you see them coming, run! Shit, who am I to tell you rich, ravenous pigs what to look out for when you can't even be bothered to field strip your cigarettes? You and your hidden desires can rot in hell. I waste my life hauling you up here by the busload, with your fat wallets and I-can-buy-and-sell-you squints and I am done with you.*

*Ebersole straight-arms me. "I want in!"*

*I want him dead. "And on this level, the Waiting Room."*

*This is bad. The observatory's dark, just the one light over the keyhole to the double doors to the Waiting Room. I check my phone: no texts, no missed calls. Usually I unlock the doors and give a little speech in the Waiting Room while you file in, saying this is the air lock, the last chamber between you and the wonders of space, which is Gavin's cue to come out and give his speech and unlock the rotunda, but the observatory is dark and Gavin isn't here.*

*Where is everybody?*

*So I stall. "Before we go in, you need to take the circular staircase up to the observation deck and get your vanity shots. Snap the wife and kids in front of the Palam-ountain dome." Good thing you're easily distracted. Every one of you tenses up, like, where to pose them and who's first. Like the family matters. You're all about getting off your crap screen shots so the homefolks can start feeling bad right now because you're here, and they can't afford it. I pretend to consult my watch. "And be back here in um. Oh, fifteen."*

*By that time, Gavin had better be here. There's the Evanescent regulation for late arrivals like us, and I want you toured and gift shopped before I break the news.*

*As soon as you guys tramp up the steps to the observation deck, I pull out my phone, but even Lionel isn't picking up.*

*Where is everybody anyway?*

*"Problem?" Ebersole is back, all suspicious and mean.*

*"No problem." I lock my face up tight and throw away the key. "Better hurry or you'll lose the light."*

*Randy slutgrubbers, you're back in five, agitating to get inside the rotunda and get your tour because you can't wait to get out. You expect to ditch me and the family when you're done and go have your way in the woods. Well, good luck with that. I hear it in your ugly laughter and your muttered asides, all rank and gross. I can smell it on you. I want to yell into the microphone, but, company regulations: I'm not allowed to say shut up, shut up. Whether or not Gavin shows I need you inside, where I can keep track, so I say, "Welcome to the world-famous Palamountain Observatory, the largest and finest in the world." I unlock the doors and herd you into the Waiting Room with a tired "Ta-DA."*

*You damn near trample me, getting in. Good thing you don't hear the clang as the doors behind you shut. I switch on the lights and the women relax a little bit but you guys bang on the doors to the rotunda like you bought and paid for it, "Open up!"*

*"Sorry for the delay, folks. The keys. . ."*

*"Let's get this over with." You turn into a monster with twenty heads, teeth bared in angry growls and your flabby bodies bunched like that's all muscle: big men. Used to getting what you want.*

*Sooner or later, I have to break the news.*

*Nobody gets into the rotunda unless Gavin shows up with the keys and nobody leaves until Lionel fires up the telescope after which the docents talk, after which there's the light show so when I explain that we're stuck here until morning, at least you got your money's worth. See, after the tour I let you into the gift shop so you can load up on junk food before I lock you into the Waiting Room. If you're eating when I tell you what happens next, it will soften the blow. Except Agatha's in New Mexico and we're waiting for Gavin, and Gavin isn't anywhere.  
I've looked.*

## The Lost Girls

Now—

My my, where did the time go?

Day is done, gone the sun and we're still rollicking, laughing and frolicking in our special place, eating the catch of the day while Marcia toasts a yummy batch of s'mores over our sweet little fire. We're down to our last mini-marshies but nobody really cares, nobody worries because that cute Claude from the valley brought another busload up the mountain today. They stopped at the Overlook, and, Melody saw. You can see practically everything from there!

Melody's the oldest, but she wears the tattered badge sash with pride, over a sweet pink dimity something she snatched from a clothesline back in the day. Melody sees everything, and Melody knows. That girl runs these woods.

"Freeze dried eggs and fresh orange juice on that bus," she says, "Lots of good things!"

"And Clyde'll leave them off when he goes."

He will, he's never seen us but he must love us, he always puts leftovers on the rock at the Overlook when the bus goes back downhill.

Patsy giggles. "Plus whatever they're carrying, if . . ."

"If . . ." It's catching, like music. "Whatever they're carrying if . . ." If we happen to want.

Day is done, yay for fun!

It's not Ida Mae's fault how she talks, she didn't get much education; she goes, "And whoever they brung."

Stephanie is all, "Girls, let's hold back on this one," but nobody listens, because she's only been in this troop since her folks' car broke down and she replaced Sallie Traub that was in the bear trap accident, even Melody couldn't save her.

Marcia is like, "Stephanie, shut up," and Steph goes, "No, you shut up," which is not to say that Girl Scouts fight among themselves, because that would be a violation of the Girl Scout code, so Melody goes, "Girls, shhhh!"

Melody is in charge and for a minute, we do.

But Stephanie's all this and Marcia's all that, and people are taking sides because when we finished the BBQ tonight, enough wasn't, well, quite enough. Melody's extra worried because there'll be tourists at the observatory tonight, and it's after hours. If anything happens, she has to say who and what we take and if we take somebody, what we do with them, which is a lot, so she sings:

"Day is done . . ."

And we all sing, "Gone the sun," and by the time we finish we're pretty much chill, because that's what Melody really means when she starts singing, she means, "Chill."

We all lay back with our heads on our Sit-Upons and Melody's all happy to see us settled in the firelight so she starts our most favorite, favorite story to keep us settled. It's "The Bloody Finger of Ghostine Deck," about something awful that happens on a boat. She strings it along and *strings* it along until the moon is high and every-



one but Ida Mae Howells is snuggled down in the canebrake and sound asleep because Melody put Ida Mae on guard. She has to wake us all up if one of them strays down here, it's so exciting!

She kind of whispers, just like this, it's so low and so *sharp* that we know it even in our sleep:

"They're here."

### Clyde Pritchard

*Back off, assholes. It's hard to breathe without you all up in my face. Rich fat pricks closing in, all puffed up and pushy with your needs, you're overflowing the space. "Sorry for the delay, folks. In the old days the telescope was hand operated, staff here around the clock. These days it's all computerized, and our research assistant . . ." I don't know where Lionel is, but I can tell you what Lionel is. Lionel is late. ". . . will be with you after he does a couple more things."*

*I fill some time with a little spiel about the Bleeding Heart restaurant on down in the Elbow, at which point you all perk up because you've been agitating about the no-restaurant ever since we arrived. You finished your last pork rinds and candy bars on the Overlook and I can hear you gulping drool. I hit the high spots on the Bleeding Heart menu, from Mountain Ash Venison all the way down to Palamountain Passion, Mag's sensational dessert, to distract you until Gavin comes, which should be any minute now except it isn't and yeah, I know where your minds are wandering, it's stuffy in here and it's getting late.*

*Too late. Okay then. Break the news. Tour or no tour, you will not be leaving the observatory tonight. Whatever you think you heard about Troop 13 and those wild girls, for your safety and mine, you're socked in here until it gets light. I pull out the card and read the *Evanescence Night-time Regulation: Late arrivals must remain on the premises until 8 A.M. It's my job to lug thirty bedrolls out of the lockers when the tour's done and we're back in the Waiting Room, show you the toilets and vending machines and lock you in for the night.**

*Break it gently.*

*"Okay folks, you'll eat well at the Bleeding Heart, but it won't be tonight. Trust me, you'll get your tour tomorrow morning as soon as Gavin, comes in. We'll be back in Elbow by noon, but right now . . . For your comfort and safety, we're bunking here." The women groan but you . . .*

*"The fuck we are."*

*"Where it's warm and safe."*

*Ebersole. "We're not paying for safe." I know what you want. You stink of it. "Bathrooms and vending machines down the hall to your left, soft drinks, Slim Jims and Pocky Sticks so you won't starve. Gavin's always here by eight. You'll get your your private tour."*

*The noise you make is ugly, ugly.*

*". . . out of here."*

*Oh hell, I go, "I know you're sick of waiting, but trust me, it's worth waiting for."*

*Your minds go running along ahead to the dirty place. There are things I could tell you about Troop 13, but you don't like me any more than I like you, so why should I? As the *Evanescence* tour driver, I am forced to add, "People, it's not safe out there!"*

*But you're all stampeding, threatening legal action or worse.*

*Okay, in situations like this, the foyer is the safest place to sleep, but no way am I bedding down with you ignorant, flatulent, loud-mouthed fools. You want out? Okay, you asked for it.*

*You'll bitch when I fill your pockets with food from the machines and frog-march you down the steep staircase to the ledge, but the bus is almost as safe as the Waiting Room, so get used to it. See, I don't mind your women or the kids but I can't stand an-*

*other minute of you, and don't go thinking I don't have the power. You backed off when I pulled my gun? Now the Evanescent taser shows its teeth. You'll let me shovel you back onto the bus and lock you in for the night, which I am obligated to do, because even though you signed off on the liability clause before you came on this tour and I don't like you, I am responsible, so sleep safe and fuck you.*

*By the time you look for me I'll be laying out my bedroll back here in the Waiting Room, drunk on the silence, happy as a rat in a barrel of rum.*

### Edwin Ebersole III

One more sleepless night on that toilet of a tour bus, one more dinner of crap freeze-dried packets supplied by Evanescent Tours, no way am I walking back into that.

Why are we still here? I'll tell you why. The technician never showed up. Docents never showed up. We jammed that retard driver's face into the surveillcam and an old lady came. It took forever and she was mad as a cow in heat, but she unlocked the gift shop so this Clyde could herd us out past astronaut T-shirts and bogus moon rocks, shoving us through like a bunch of mountain mice. Six figures blown on this excursion and not one shot of us looking through the giant telescope or any other damn thing and Serena is even more pissed at me because I can't call a taxi and I damn well won't fake a heart attack so Life Star will come and lift us out of here.

As if this dumb hick marching us down a hundred steps in the dark could get Life Star to do anything but take a piss on him and besides, how's Life Star landing on this Godforsaken crag which I don't mind, because . . .

I am damn well not leaving until I get what I came for. Just watch me boogie, all fake-walking down the steps with you, marking time while everybody follows this Clyde like lemmings to the slaughter. Well, up yours Clyde, while you herd my family *down* the steps I'm fake-walking backward, *up* the steps, and I'll hide at the top until you've loaded them on and locked everybody in. No way am I piling into that rolling garbage can they call a luxury coach. I'll luxury you, Evanescent Tours Incorporated, I'll sue your brains out as soon as I get what I came for and bring her back at which point you might as well know, Serena, you and I are done.

I came up the mountain to get me a sweet, sexy, grown-up Girl Scout. I know she's out there, like, you think a babe like her wants to stay up here all funky in the woods when she can have me, and everything that comes with? E.g., the little diamond something-something that I brought to lure her out of the hills. It's in the security pocket in my cargo pants, and in case you were worried about me hunting sweet pussy all alone out here in the dark, I came prepared. Cavalry boots laced up to the knees under the leg extensions I zipped on while you were all flopping around the Overlook, so if there are snakes out there, no worries, this beekeeper's hat with a see-through veil thing will keep me safe.

I rolled it down like a theater curtain as soon as the hick led us out into the dark. Winners get what they pay for and I'm here to get mine, so don't think you can stiff me. The minute you slam the door on that death trap and run for the waiting room I hum a few bars to let her know that I am here and I love her already, and everything good will happen, all she has to do is show herself.

Do you hear me, sweetheart?

This is me not-singing, not-crooning this love song that I wrote inside my head on those long, terrible nights in the luxury coach, I'm rolling it out right now, for you.

"Are you lonely, do you miss it, do you want it, do you hate running wild and sleeping in the dirt, would you like something pretty, see I brought it, just for you . . ." going into a sort of ooo oooo ooooo . . . as I come down the steps and I let it get a little bit louder after I pass that stinking sardine can full of losers and head downhill into the parking lot by the woods where I happen to know you're hiding out. I get a little bit

louder because I love you already and I want to hear, how old are you now, sweetheart, twenty? Eighteen?

Babe, listen to me singing, see me crouching low like a tiger romancing his mate, come to me, sweet baby, let me show you diamonds, and if you like them, I'll buy you a diamond collar and lead you out of these filthy woods on a diamond leash, and the first thing we'll do when we get off this stupid mountain is get you into a nice hot shower and scrub you down until your nipples lift and all your skin turns pink and then, you and I can . . . and then . . .

## Ida May Howells

Now—

I'm a Scout and I have sisters now, and Uncle, Martha and them can go to hell. It's sad what happened to Miss Tracie, but they gave me her Girl Scout pin after it happened because she didn't need it any more, and then we sang "Day is done" and gave her a really nice funeral before we put her in next to Ellie DeVere and some girl named Sallie inside the lime cave under the ledge on the Last Incline.

I love my troop and, you know what? After Uncle Martha and all, I love that there's only us *sisters* around. We live together and we play together and we belong together and when one of us gets too big for what we were wearing, Melody sees to it, and Martha makes alterations and if there's nothing on hand Stephanie goes out with the raiding party and they bring back such cute things! Melody's the oldest, and Melody knows what we need and who gets what when we're one short, and she knows if a girl is lost in the woods and she knows if that lost girl needs us, and after we find her or if she finds us, Melody decides whether or not this girl belongs, and if not, Melody knows what to do about it, and if something worse happens, she knows what to do and *how*, and Melody decides *when*.

Melody decided and now it's my turn to be up on the hill all by myself, she gave me the Midnight Watch. This is so cool! Me, hiding on the slope by the parking lot keeping watch, so my sister Scouts can sleep safe.

She trusts me to stay awake and be vigilant, so they can't sneak up on us while we sleep.

Like, these guys come crunching into the woods in the dead of night acting all heroic, like they're here to be nice, but we know they all want to Do Things to girls in the woods up here where nobody sees it and nobody can hear. Twice we caught men hunting us for the reward, like they could drag us back down the mountain in their teeth, back to our boring, stupid old lives. Well, we took care of them.

Sleep safe, girls. Nobody gets past me. I'm watching them people in the bus away up the Last Incline, no problem. Clyde marched them down and locked them all in the bus. They're asleep, so I can relax.

Wait! What's that? Did I dream it? Did I accidentally fall asleep? Who's out there anyway?

Oooooh nooooo!

And why am I all weird right now, thinking about all those outsiders, *this close*. We all hung back today when the bus left the Overlook, and when Clyde drove past, up the Last Incline, we were glad. See, in the parking lot, they get out and bop around and sometimes one gets lost. Then Stephanie warns us so low that only we can hear, "Run!" So we pick up and run.

We can't let them find us. If they find us, it will be bad.

Except this time it isn't them, it's only me.

And he's singing. Somebody is out here singing, I can hear him, it's for me!

*Are you lonely, do you miss it, do you want it*, it's so weird, and then, in the bushes something sparkles just above my head and the sneaky, nice-nasty sound comes

with, too low for anybody but Ida Mae to hear, *it's so pretty, would you like it*, and the sparkle hangs closer, *do you want it, see I brought it just for you* and all of a sudden I don't want to move, I don't jump, I don't sound the alarm because I want to listen, I have to see, *if you want it you can have it . . .* and I should hoot to warn my sister Scouts but instead I just let the song happen until I see him through the leaves, he's singing and singing, he's close!

He looks huge in *all that stuff*, and, oh! Miss Tracie, I talked to him, I did! I kept it low, so as not to reach the others, I whispered, "Oh, you can take off the hat, our rattlers are all curled up sleeping in their holes," which is a lie, but I had to see what he looked like in the face behind the veil.

"Oh," he said, "are you in there? Let me see you, come out and look at me, and let me look at you." If he Tried Something I would have bopped him but he didn't move, he just waited in what was left of the moonlight, dangling this sparkly thing and singing his long, sweet song thing that made me squirm down there, *if you want it you can have it, I brought diamonds just for you . . .*

And they're so shiny and he's so close that I almost, almost betrayed the spirit of Miss Tracie and Melody and Stephanie and all my other sister Scouts sleeping under my watch. I'm weak! I think: *It's okay, I don't even have to warn.*

I tell myself: *I just want to see him. Then I'll decide.*

I tell myself: *be careful, careful, Ida Mae, there are gangs of big city folks asleep on the ledge up there, right there, in the bus*, but his song is so sweet, so soft and so all about me and my chain of diamonds that I squirm forward on my elbows like a rattler in heat and at the last second I rear up so he sees me and like he promised, he takes off the veil hat and I'm all, "Oh, crap."

"You," he says, in a different voice, he's so *ugly*, and this is awful. He says it like: *ewwww*. "You aren't . . ."

And I think: *fine!* so I say, too low to wake up my sister Scouts, "Well neither are you. Go away!" but I keep coming at him because I want the sparkly. I'll just grab it and let him go.

But he snaps off a branch and starts swinging at me like I'm a monster that he has to kill but it's okay, I have my rock.

I really think I can just bop him and roll him off the edge before my sisters come but he yells "Get away from me" mean enough to scare the whole mountain and I vomit one last warning, "Shut up, shut up!"

But he howls in my face, "Get away, you ugly dirtbag." Then he shouts out the worst thing ever. "You're too damn *old!*"

So I smash him with the rock. Then I bash his head and bash it and bash it, I have to wipe that disgusting, hurtful word off his disgusting face. By the time my sister Scouts are wide awake and charging uphill to join, there's not much left to bash but, oh boy, he screamed so loud that up there on the ledge, lights pop on all over Clyde's bus and we hear them hammering to get out. Usually we're such good Scouts that we come and go without anybody knowing, but this time it got loud, and it's all my fault.

"Ohhhh, Melody, I'm so *sorry.*"

Her voice goes hard. "Don't worry, I heard."

"Old." This is awful, it comes out in a sob. I'm so *embarrassed*. Everybody is. "Old!"

Stephanie looks down at what's left of the man, like he's a rattler we had to squash. "We all heard."

"Okay girls, Scout council." Melody points and we squat in a circle around what's left of what we just did, wondering what to do.

Sisters, worrying. "Tomorrow they'll find out."

"They don't have to." Melody is the one who decides *whether*.

This is so *hard*. I say, "They can't find out."

We shudder. "Nobody can."

"They might." Even Stephanie is scared.

Melody comes down on that like a hammer, "They won't find out," and we all feel better because Melody also decides *when*.

Day and night, summer, winter, year after year for a really long time, we have protected our sweet life on the mountainside. Nothing gets between Troop 13 and our freedom, and nothing will.

"Okay" Melody says, "Council," Melody says, and we squat in a circle and begin. After Council, she will say *how*.

Either we do what we usually do, break camp and fade away to the East Grade and do like it says the Girl Scout prayer, "Help us to see where we may serve/ In some new place in some new way," praying that nobody looks out the window when the sun comes up and Clyde backs that bus around and comes downhill and that Louie doesn't care what the vultures are eating when he cranks himself up the dome . . .

Or we go up to the ledge and do something else about it tonight.

Clyde never unlocks the bus until the sun comes up. There are enough of us to get it rolling, all it takes is one little push. ○

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**Intrigue, betrayal, and death—the excitement never lets up at the grand old Martian . . .**

# HOTEL

**Suzanne Palmer**

**T**he man came across the red sands alone and on foot, the storm whipping at his back. He flailed his way through the dome lock with his one free hand, then stumbled through the inner seal and wide, wooden double doors to collapse to his knees on the old, worn carpeting. Still cradling a small case in his other hand, he unlocked the faceplate of his suit and took whooping, desperate breaths even as his eyes found the unimpressed gaze, neither welcoming nor otherwise, of the man who sat with his chin in his hands looking down at him from the ancient and dusty desk. “By all the gods, old and new, loved and feared, named and unnamed, and fierce Ares highest among them all,” the man on the floor said, “please, tell me you have a vacancy.”

The old man at the desk pushed his antique spectacles up his nose. “Do you have a reservation?”

“You take reservations?” the newcomer exclaimed.

The desk clerk sniffed. “No,” he said, that one word suggesting blame for that fact could be laid at the feet of the newcomer as easily as anywhere else. He flipped open a wide paper book, and after some consideration, looked again at the new arrival. “I may have a room available,” he said at last. “There is the matter of payment, and expected length of stay.”

The newcomer unclipped his helmet, took it off, and laid it carefully on the carpet. Laboriously he unbuckled his pack and set it beside the helmet, then held out the small case. Flipping the latches as he got to his feet, he opened it for the old man. On the couches behind them, the young girl with shockingly pink hair who had been trying desperately to act as if she was paying no attention craned her neck, but could not see inside.

The old man behind the desk raised one eyebrow. “How long do you plan on staying?”

“Four days,” the newcomer said, closing the case again and setting it down on the desk. “Perhaps only three, perhaps five, but no more nor less than that.”

“There are rules.”

“So I have been led to understand,” the man said. His suit began to make small snapping sounds as it adjusted to the change in temperature.

“No weapons. No exceptions. No modern tech beyond the lobby. If you have medical implants or other assistive devices, you must disclose them and potentially submit to having them examined. If you disturb the other guests unnecessarily you will be ejected, with or without prior warning depending on the offense, with no reimbursement for any remaining time. By that same token, the hotel is not responsible for any damages to your person, your dignity, or any possessions not in our direct safe-keeping inflicted by other guests, especially if you work for the government.”

“Which government?”

“Any government.”

"Agreed."

"Hotel staff exist for my convenience, not yours."

"Agreed."

"And no parties."

The man raised his two arms, empty hands outstretched to either side, as if to emphasize that he had come alone. "Also agreed."

The clerk picked up the case, and it disappeared behind the desk. He pushed the old register forward and handed the man a pen. "Sign in," he said.

The man picked up the pen, tapped the paper with it, and stared at it in puzzlement. "Click the button on the top to activate the ink," the clerk said, "then use it like a stylus." The man did that, and with an unpracticed hand managed to scrawl out a name across the register. He had barely lifted the pen back up off the page when the clerk slid the book out from under it. He turned it around, harrumphed, then plucked the pen out of the man's hand. "Mr. Smith. Welcome to the Rosley," he said, "the most expensive run-down-to-shit hotel in human space."

"You're Mr. Rosley?"

"I'm Eddard," he said, and pointed at the man's pack. "If you'll hand over your tech and any other items you'd like to place in the hotel's safe, I'll see that your bottles are recharged by the end of your stay. Compliments of the hotel."

The guest opened his pack, took out a small hand-held device. "My electronic assistant . . . ?"

The clerk rapped the desk and the man set it down with a sigh, then removed more items from his pack. "A satellite compass and an interactive novel," he said. "And a legal pad."

"You can keep that," Eddard said, taking the others. "What else?"

"Only my pack itself, of course. Sir."

"Your exosuit as well, if it's smart. You can drop that off once you're settled and changed," the clerk said, picking up the items and stowing them in a padded box. Then he reached up behind him and pulled down some object hung there on a piece of red string and tossed it down on the desk. It was a brass oval ring with an extended limb terminating in wide, flat teeth. "Twenty-two B. Nice view of Arsai Mons to the northwest."

Smith picked up the object, turning it over in his hand. "What is it?"

The old man sighed. "Your room key, Mr. Smith. Sofi, can you show him how to work it?"

The girl on the couch perked up, and with a grin vaulted over the back of the sage-green sofa. She walked toward the desk, straightening out a pink mini-skirt that matched her hair perfectly. "Twenny-two Bee," she said. "Easy, right up the vader. You family with Smith in Thirty-one Aye?"

"Uh, no."

"Oh. Or Smith in Thirty Aye?"

"No."

The girl wiped her brow. "Sure not, 'cause you don't look like a Haxallian."

"There's a Haxallian named *Smith* here?"

The old man chuckled. "We seem to get a lot of guests named Smith, Mr. Smith. Even occasionally alien ones."

"Vader's this way," the girl said, pointing. "You know about vaders?"

"Elevators?" The man guessed. "Of course."

"Smokeydokey," she said. She pressed a button set into the gold-brocade patterned wall, and a door slid open on a dusty and ill-lit carriage. The man stepped in after the girl and faced front as the door closed again, then flattened himself against the back wall when the elevator gave a lurch and began to move upward.

"It's not magnet-lift," he said.

"Naw," she said. "S'got a big string out of the top for pulling it up and down."

"How old are you?"

She shrugged. "Dunno. Hey here, second floor!" The elevator gave another lurch and came to a stop, and the man left it with a little more haste than necessary. "Twenny-two Bee, over here."

The girl led him around the corner to a door with the number in brass in the center, no palm-plate beside it. She pointed at the handle and a small hole in the center of it. "You put the key in there. Turn one way, clicky, door locked. Turn the other way, clicky, door unlocked."

He frowned. "But if someone else has a key . . ."

"All diff'rent."

"Yes, but, what if they took mine?"

"Then your stuff gets to be in their room." She shrugged again. "So don't let anyone take yer key."

"It doesn't seem like a very secure system."

"S'why we has a safe."

He stuck the key in, wiggled it around clumsily until it clicked, then pushed the door open. The room was fairly small, accented with reds and golds to match the landscape outside. He walked across the carpeting and looked out the room's small window at the dome in the distance, the promised view beyond it obscured by the same dust storm that had chased him here.

Something moved on the grounds below and he jumped. Three large animals ambled slowly across the sand, pale brown with black and white faces and long, sharp horns. "What the hell are those?"

The girl was still lurking in the doorway. "Oryx," she said. "From Earth."

"What are they doing on *Mars*?"

"Some guest. Couldn't pay so he took off without 'em. At first Roz thought maybe he'd come and buy 'em back, but been years now."

"How long have you been here?"

"Not as long as them," she said.

"I can't place your accent. You're not from Mars."

"Here now, tho."

"You're not one for specifics, are you? Thanks, I think I'm okay."

"Smokey," she said, and left.

He spent five minutes or so fumbling with the key before he found the small latch on the door that allowed him to lock it from the inside, and after flipping it he laid down on the bed, his arms wrapped around his near-empty pack, and watched with amazement the slow wanderings of the magnificently improbable animals outside.

The girl returned to the lobby and couch, flinging herself sideways over the back to land prone on the cushions, then fished blindly on the carpeting below with one hand until she found and retrieved her book from where she'd dropped it.

The old man at the desk sighed, having long since given up complaining about her abuse of the furniture. "So, what do you think?"

She didn't look up. "Trouble."

"Trouble?" A young woman walked into the lobby. She was wearing an apron emblazoned with the stylized hotel logo and carrying a small mountain of biscuits on a plate, which she set down on the desk. Her blonde hair bore faint remnants of the same pink so boldly declaring itself on the girl's head.

"New guest. Another 'Smith,'" the old man said. "Makes three."

"Is that a record?"



"Five once, ten years or so back. There was a fire." He took a biscuit from the plate, stuck it in between his teeth, then rapidly shoveled the rest into a fold in his shirt.

"Hey!" Sofi shouted. "Verah, he took—"

The woman reached into her apron pocket and set another handful of biscuits on the couch arm. Then she pointed toward the front window, and a more distinct dust-plume growing more discrete by the moment. "More on their way," she said. "That can't be the supply buggy, can it?"

Eddard came out from behind the desk, acquiring a brass-knobbed cane on his way around it, and stood, slightly stooped, beside the blonde woman. "Damned dust," he said, then after a minute. "That *is* the buggy."

"But it's due today," Verah said. "It's not late. It's never not late."

"Hmmmph. Can't be coincidence. Got to be trouble."

"Said so," Sofi said from the couch.

Rickard was the sort of man whose facial expression was fixed into a permanent angry scowl, so much so that it was the subject of heated discussion among the longer-term residents as to whether it was an indicator of gross shortcomings in personality or in genetics. He had been driving the supply run to the Rosley for eight years now and would without fail show up days—or weeks—late, curse at and otherwise thoroughly abuse whatever staff or residents he happened to lay eyes on, and invariably threaten that, iron-clad agreement or not, this delivery—which amounted-to-nothing-more-than-theft-from-the-good-and-hardworking-people-of-Ares-Two would be the last and they'd all starve (or suffocate or freeze) and he'd only return when he could burn the wreck of a place down and spit on all their corpses.

No one ever really paid him much attention. Secretly, they were all somewhat fond of him, and suspected he was of them as well. Now, though, beneath his scowl lurked something deeply and uncomfortably anxious. He had not come alone, and if he didn't seem inclined to stand anywhere near the old man or Verah, or Hroknek Jarir from Seventeen Aye (who had come down yet again to complain about the scents of mating from the room beside his own), neither did he seem particularly keen on standing with the two men who had escorted him in the door.

"Rickard," the old man said.

The driver nodded slightly. If acknowledgement, if apology, if neither, it still seemed a concession.

It was one of the other men who spoke first—a tall, solidly built man in a quietly nondescript suit that screamed *government*. "I'm Agent Chernin," he said, as if that explained everything. "We need to search the premises, and we'll start by having a look at your guest list."

"No."

Chernin blinked. "Excuse me?"

"No." The old man repeated. "Sorry."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Also, no. Some first-gen bunghole someone managed to stuff into a suit and sent out to hassle folks, at a guess."

A faint but unmistakable Sofi-chuckle floated down from the mezzanine. Verah glanced up quickly but couldn't see where the girl had got herself to. For his part, Hroknek Jarir was rubbing his arms together and emitting a low-pitched hum of displeasure.

Chernin undid a pocket and pulled out identification and a badge. He thrust it out, almost slapping the old man in the nose with it. "Mars Colonial Authority. Does this help you?"

"Well, now I know who to complain to once you've ceased stinking up my lobby,"

the old man said, sitting back on the stool behind the desk. "This hotel and its grounds are neutral territory. You have no authority here."

"We bring you air, water, fuel, and food," Chernin says. "You want that to end, Mr. Wise-ass? Because all I have to do is snap my fingers, and then where would a miserable little parasite like you be?"

"Sitting right here with my copy of the Agreement at hand and our lawyer on the sat line. It's been tried before."

"This is a law enforcement action," Chernin said, emphasizing each word. "I've tried being reasonable—"

"Sir, let me try reasoning my way," the other newcomer said. He stepped forward and stuck an energy pistol in Eddard's face. Beside Verah, Hroknek Jarir's hum had become louder, lower, and now was accompanied by a hissing sound as the Ponkian drew in air. Anyone watching—which wasn't too many people, at the moment—would see that the alien was swelling up, growing larger. "The guest list, *now*," the man with the gun said.

"Arning . . ." Chernin said.

"We can't afford to lose this, Chernin. We do it my way."

"I'd put down the gun, if I were you," Verah said.

The man glanced at her, pistol still steady in the old man's face. "And what do you think you can do about it?"

"I'm saying, if you've got any brains at all you'll put that thing away."

"You think you've got some sort of immunity here?" he shouted, swinging the pistol around. "You think you—"

At that point the expanding Hroknek Jarir had reached comical proportions; the barely discernible vestiges of his distorted head were now pressed against the lobby ceiling. When the gun swung toward Verah, who was standing directly beside him, he let out an ear-piercing shriek. Then, with an enormous pop, the entire lobby was lost in a cloud of viciously foul-smelling, sea-green gas.

A shot went off, the flash an indistinct blur in the haze, and was followed by a loud crack and the distinct sound of the pistol hitting the floor. A chorus of coughing and retching came from within the cloud. From somewhere down the halls an indignant voice called out. "Hey, what fucking idiot just scared the Ponkian?"

By the time the miasma had begun to clear—no small feat, even with the hotel's overdriven air-handling systems—the old man had retrieved the pistol from the floor, hefting his cane with pride and hoping he'd left a mark on the man's hand when he'd hit him.

Someone had closed the fire doors between the lobby and the rest of the hotel to try to contain the gas. Hroknek Jarir had collapsed onto one of the sofas, wiping at his brow. "Dear-oh," he said. "Such a mmmm headache that will leave, always mmmm."

Rickard had been fast-thinking enough to snap his faceplate shut and was standing as unobtrusively as he could manage behind a potted palm. Arning knelt, gasping for breath, tears streaming down his face and onto hands splayed out on the carpet below. Verah stood behind him holding a broom, clearly prepared to do something non-janitorial with it if the moment required.

"What . . . the . . . hell?" Chernin said at last, on all fours not far from his comrade.

"Our guest, Estimable Jarir, is a Ponkian," Eddard explained. "Kind of like a cross between a pufferfish and a giant skunk, and very prone to emotional upset. And I think we can all agree that guns are very upsetting, can't we?"

Chernin rolled over and lay on his back on the floor, groaning. Arning started to rise to his feet, saw Verah's grip on the broom handle shift, and stayed put. "We've got a convoy of armored personnel buggies out there with an entire team," he said. "You can't hold us hostage forever."

"Hostage? Idiot. You can leave anytime." Eddard waved at the front door. "Please, go right now."

"I can't believe they sent you damned clowns to do this," Rickard finally spoke up. He met Eddard's eyes. "Old man, we'd like to rent a room. One night."

"Rickard, what the hell?" Arning said. "You don't have—"

"Shut the hell up. A room, old man."

"There is the matter of payment." Eddard said, warily.

Arning made to speak again, but Rickard turned and pointed at him with a single fierce finger and made his angry face, and the man shut his mouth. Then Rickard unzipped the front of his suit, slipped a hand in, and took out a rectangular object, holding it out to Eddard by thumb and forefinger as if fearing contamination.

The man's eyes lit up and he took it, turned it gingerly edge-on, and read the faded gold print there. He opened it, turned a page, and for the briefest of moments pure joy creased his lips. Then, perhaps realizing he was giving away too much, he frowned and snapped the book shut. "This will cover it, even for you," he said. "There are rules."

Rickard looked at the other two, then scowled and began unsealing his suit. From a pocket he produced a small but mean-looking pistol that he laid on the front desk. It was followed by a small handful of gadgets, then after some contortions the suit itself. He turned to look at the two men who had come with him, only to see them staring, unmoving, at him. "Hurry it the fuck up, assholes," he said, and pounded his finger on the empty desk next to his own stuff.

"I am not surrendering my weapon to these *outlaws*," Chernin said.

"Fine. Then give your stuff to your shit-for-brains partner here and send him back to your rent-an-army so he can tell them to sit quietly out there and wait like good little soldiers," Rickard said, pointing at Arning. "Loose goddamned cannon makes me want to kick him in the face. You want what you came here for, you do it my way now, got it?"

"Rickard, what's your plan here?" Chernin asked.

"You can't storm the place, so do the next best thing—check in. You've got your eyes, haven't you? You want to know if what you're looking for is here, what more do you need?"

With obvious reluctance Chernin drew his own weapon out and held it grip-first to his partner. "Arning, take this and go wait with the others at the perimeter."

"You can't be serious—"

"I am. Rickard's right. You know what's at stake."

"But . . ." Arning scrambled to his feet and away from Verah before taking the pistol. "My energy pack needs time to recharge before I can leave. The suit heater—"

"Oh for fuck's sake," Rickard said. He rummaged through his pack, then tossed a small rectangular block to the man. "Take it and get the hell out of here."

Arning unclipped his own supply and clicked the new one into place. "A spare? That's convenient."

"That's *prepared*. This is Mars, not camping in your mommy's backyard with a flashlight and a teddy bear. Now, do you think you can make it back to the others without someone coming along to hold your hand?"

"Screw you, Rickard, you low-life, loser Martian scum. Do you have any idea how much I hate you?"

"No, but you can tell me all about it someday when I've sliced you open and I'm eating your own liver in front of you, just to show you how much I care."

Before Arning could leap at Rickard, Chernin was between them, hands out to block the confrontation. Arning turned, slammed his suit faceplate shut, and left the hotel with a swagger that struck more than one person there as unearned. "Good

mmmm-ridding of him," the Ponkian muttered from where he was slouched on the couch, slowly deflating.

The old man slid a key across the desk, and Chernin picked it up. "Thirty-five A. Southeast facing Solis Planum. Nice view of back the way you came," he said. "You can't miss it; it's right next to the ice machine."

Chernin claimed an overstuffed armchair as his own and sat there with a hotel newspad in his hands, fidgeting, scowling, and occasionally dozing, but not, as far as anyone could tell, actually reading. When Smith Three found his way back down to the lobby a few hours later to ask about dinner, Chernin started awake, dropping the newspad on the floor.

The pink-haired girl was sitting perched on the desk, the old man Eddard nowhere to be seen. "Dinner soon," she told Smith Three. " 'Pends on what supplies came in. Gov'ment agent over there rode in with the buggy and might know."

Smith Three turned sharply to stare at Chernin. They locked eyes with each other for a long minute. "I'll take dinner in my room, if that's okay," he said, turning back to Sofi.

The girl nodded. "Smokey. I'll tell Verah."

The man glanced back at Chernin, then hastily left the lobby. Chernin stood up and pretended to stretch, and then started to head after Smith.

"No rassing guests," the girl said, just as Eddard appeared through the same doorway, blocking Chernin's path.

Defeated, Chernin glared back at the girl. "Why the hell did you tell him I was an agent?"

" 'Cause y'are," she said. "Be stupid if I said you was a rocket-tech or someit, since we don't got rockets."

"How long's he been here?"

The girl answered, "While."

"And I don't suppose you can tell me what his name is?"

She smiled. "Smith!"

"You know, sometimes people use the name Smith to hide their real identity, because they're criminals and agitators hiding from the law," Chernin said.

"Oh, true? Shouldah interduced you as *genius* gov'ment agent."

Chernin's hand strayed toward where his pistol would have been, fingers twitching.

"Maybe now's a good time for you to go back to your own room until dinner is ready," Eddard said.

"He can't. Rickard locked him out," the girl said. "Said he paid for the room, he was gonna have hisself a bath and a nap."

"Then you, Sofi, can go to the kitchen and give Verah a hand, like you're supposed to," the old man said, and gently but firmly shoved her off the desk.

Once she was gone, Chernin sank back into the chair. "Quite a mouth on that girl. Get her in trouble some day."

"Has before and will again," the old man agreed. His eyes narrowed. "Not from you, though, and not here."

"You sound awfully sure of that."

"That's because I am," the old man said. He reached under the counter and pulled out the book Rickard had paid him with, running his fingers over the worn cover before gingerly lifting it to reveal the first page. "Now shut up. I'm reading."

The Rosley's dining room was small, with a handful of round tables covered with old but clean tablecloths, an eclectic collection of mismatched chairs unevenly spaced

around them. A large window looked northwest toward the distant crinkling of the red-orange ground that was the far edge of Noctis Labyrinthus. The boundary of the dome shield was a pencil-thin line crossing the ground, like a shadow cast by a wire, everything outside it made just perceptibly darker. Inside it a solitary antelope wandered past.

Sofi put small trays of rolls on each of the tables, then picked one up—still warm—and took a bite as she watched the animal out the window. She liked the view better in the morning, when a faint mist from sublimating frost ghosted across the distant canyons.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Someone spoke, and she turned around to find that Smith One—a short, reedy man who moved like a dancer—had entered and was filling a clean mug from the nearby stack at the coffee urn. “Can’t get used to that yellow sky. It seems weird, where I come from.”

She shrugged, taking another bite of her roll. “Grew up on a space station,” she said. “Whole planets is weird.”

Verah came in with the cart and handed Sofi a stack of still-warm plates. The girl set them on the tables, then returned for silverware. A man and a woman, both wearing matching bright red “I biked Olympus Mons” T-shirts, strolled in holding hands, their eyes looking only at each other. They took two seats at the back of a table in one corner of the room and drew the seats to touching before sitting down.

Smith One turned from the window, glanced briefly at the couple, then took a seat on the other side of the room. Verah and Sofi were setting down covered dishes on the tables as the Haxallian, Smith Two, made its way into the dining hall. Two of its five fluorescent purple legs had been tucked, somewhat ridiculously, into the arms of a white Rosley Hotel bathrobe, the remainder of which dragged on the floor behind it. It eyed the couple in the corner much as Smith One had, except through many more eyes, then moved to join the solitary man.

The alien extracted a small, rounded box from a ventral cavity and placed it on the table. He whistled at it, and moments later the box produced a credible human voice. “Do you mind if I join you?” it said.

Smith One waved for the alien to take a chair, and after some contortions to get its legs realigned to fit, it did. The Haxallian’s head swiveled around and it eyeballed the couple, then rolled back. “All of that intrusive noise and smell,” it complained through the translator, “and still no eggs. How much longer until she can kill and eat him?”

“Unfortunately, humans don’t work that way,” Smith One said.

The Haxallian eyed the couple again. “A pity,” it said.

Rickard came in, looked at the couple, looked at the table with Smith One and the Haxallian, and picked the empty table in between. He was just starting to butter a roll when Chernin entered, looking haggard and as if he’d slept on a floor all night. He stopped halfway into the room and stared. Smith One, just serving himself some pasta, froze as well.

“You!” Chernin shouted.

“You!” Smith One shouted back, and in one smooth motion sent the pasta fork sailing across the room.

Chernin dodged as it flew over his shoulder and stuck into the wall behind him. His hand slapped at his side where his gun should have been. Swearing, he turned and picked up the coffee urn and hoisted it up above his head, ready to throw, when the urn was plucked with sudden force out of his hands from behind.

He stumbled backward with it and found himself face to face with Verah, the urn now in her arms. She glanced at the fork stuck in the wall, then over at the table where Smith One stood, every knife but one from the table now held in his left hand, the lone exception poised in his right for throwing.

"Mr. Chernin," she said. "You got an explanation?"

"He's a Sfazili government operative," Chernin said.

"And you're an Earth one," she reminded.

"He has no jurisdiction here!"

"Neither," she said, her voice severe, "do you. The Rosley is neutral ground. It's in the Agreement."

"But—"

"No 'buts.' You know the rule about bothering the guests. Both of you."

"I was not bothered," the Haxallian said.

"... what?" The groom asked from the corner.

Verah let out an exasperated sigh and set the coffee urn back on its small stand. "And either of you? Do you want to lodge a complaint about the other?"

Smith One and Chernin locked eyes. "No, ma'am," Chernin said, and Smith One nodded. "Me either, ma'am."

"Fine," she said. "Then sit down and eat your dinner, and if I catch either of you throwing stuff again, you're gonna get nothing but beets and peanut butter every single meal for as long as you stay."

Rickard stifled a laugh, and she turned on him. "And you, Mr. Rickard—your lop-sided supply deliveries are why I have an excess of beets and peanut butter to threaten them with in the first place. Think about that as you enjoy your dinner."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, the smirk never leaving his face.

"Mmmmmmpardon me," the Ponkian said, from the doorway.

"Ah, good! Estimable Jarir," Verah said, brightening, taking one of his arms and leading him over to the table. "If you do not mind, please sit beside Mr. Smith, here." Obliging, the Ponkian slid out the chair beside Smith One and collapsed onto it. Verah turned, gesturing imperiously at Chernin with a crooked finger. "You," she said. "Sit on the other side of Estimable Jarir."

"I—"

"SIT!" She roared.

Chernin did.

"There. Enjoy your dinners, and please mind your manners around our Ponkian guest, here."

Verah returned to the kitchen where Sofi was just loading up a tray with dinners for those guests who had chosen to stay in their rooms. The girl was finally putting on a little weight, had even grown a few inches since they'd come to the Rosley, never intending to remain for more than a few days.

"Do you like it here?" she asked.

"What?" Sofi seemed startled by the question. "S'good. Nice and quiet, most'a the time, and I like Eddard. And Roz, when he's awake. And the books."

"It could be getting dangerous."

"Dang'rous everywhere. More safe here than lots of places," Sofi said. She looked down at the tray, continued loading it. "And it feels like home. 'Sides, there's oryxes here. I like them."

Verah folded a napkin into a fan, set it on the tray. "Then we'll stay a little longer," she said. "Homes are good things to have, when you can. And family's what you make."

Sofi smiled wide. "Sisters'a the heart," she said, and picked up the tray and left the kitchen.

She dropped off three meals at guests' doors, thinking about Verah and coming to Mars and wondering what the book that Rickard gave Eddard was and making up a

poem about oryxes in her head. It didn't rhyme, but Verah said they didn't always have to rhyme, so she thought it was probably okay.

Smith Three, the last delivery, let her in on the second knock. She carried the tray in on one hand, picking up the antique folding stand with the other. Kicking it open with one foot as Verah had taught her, she set the tray down and stepped back. "Dinner's pasta," she said, pointing, "and soup and salad, and tea. Hope it suits."

Smith Three picked up the pasta lid and peered underneath. "It looks great, thank you," he said. "Can I ask a question?"

"Sure." She shrugged. "Don't know much answers, though."

He turned, pointed toward the window. "Why are they all standing right outside my window?"

"Is they?" Sofi walked over and looked down, and sure enough a half-dozen long, black and white antelope faces peered back up. "Must like you, I guess."

He laughed. "Or there's something to eat down there."

"Probably. They's modded for Mars, to eat terrorformed lichen. Also Verah says they's *emphatic*. Know who they like."

"Empathic?" He guessed, sounding dubious.

"Yeh, someit like. When you're done with dinner, put the tray out your door and somebody will get it."

"Okay, thanks," he said.

She closed his door behind herself, and went back to the elevator. When the doors opened, inside it Smith One was sitting on top of a very red-faced Chernin with his hands around his neck, and Chernin was whacking Smith One in the head as hard as he could with one of his shoes.

She coughed, and they froze. "Killin' a guest is kinda like 'rassing," she said. "Also, you're using up all the space in the vader."

Smith One loosened his grip, but didn't remove his hands from Chernin's neck. "We're just goofing," he said.

"Go back to the dining room, or to your own rooms," she said, and made her best angry-Verah frown. "Whatever you two is fighting over, neither of you going to get it if you're both dead or thrown out." She laughed. "And if you're dead we throw you out anyway! Har!" She stood there, holding the tray in front of her like a shield—or a weapon—until the two men released each other, stood up, and walked stiffly away in opposite directions. Then she stood there a little longer to make sure they didn't come back.

Sunset crept toward the Rosley as the vast shadow of Arsai Mons slowly reached out across the red sands to take hold of them. Verah sat looking out the window at the row of squat, square vehicles sitting, waiting, just along the invisible line where the hotel's sovereign space ended and Mars began. *Earth-owned Mars*, she thought. *That's a fight we're in the middle of, whether we want to be or not.* Just as the light began to fail, she saw a last glint in the low hills beyond. "Interesting," she said out loud, in much the same way she'd say "interesting" upon discovering bugs in the fruit.

"What is?" a voice said quietly at her shoulder, and she jumped.

An ancient, rail-thin, barefoot man with unkempt wild white hair and beard stood there in gray pajamas, a ratty plaid bathrobe hanging loose from his bone-thin shoulders.

"Full police convoy just at the limit, out at the checkpoint on the main road in," she said. "Someone else out there, just out of line of sight from the convoy. We had an agent come in with Rickard, not sure what they're looking for."

"Well, I came looking for tea," the man said, not concerned. "I'm cold."

"You're always cold, Mr. Rosley," Verah said. She got up from her perch at the window, the last of the dying day at her back. "It's what comes from freezing yourself for weeks and months at a time. Sit. I'll bring you some tea and a sandwich."

"Just tea, please."

"Tea and a sandwich," she said.

He waved his hand in the air, not looking at her, not bothering to argue. "I'll be in the bar," he said.

"Of course you will," Verah said. She expected no less.

Eddard was, by the standards of what passed for local talent, quite good at the piano. Once he'd managed to get himself comfortably seated on the small bench, he'd put his fingers on the keys, close his eyes, and some time later—seconds, minutes, it varied—he'd start to play.

The Ponkian had taken up a small table across from the Haxallian and they were playing some unfathomable up-spin game involving small metal disks and pyramids and complex folded vellum shapes passed back and forth. The couple celebrating their bimarrriage had taken up the lounge's small couch doing things that could have very easily—and more politely, the Ponkian had pointed out loudly—been done in their room.

The very old man wandered in, went behind the bar, unlocked the cabinet, and poured himself a drink. He caught Eddard's gaze, and the younger of them nodded.

"Uncle," Eddard said, and continued playing. The very old man sat and listened, one gaunt hand curled around his glass.

Verah came in a few minutes later and set a teapot and cup and a small plate with a sandwich on it in front of him. "Here you go, Mr. Rosley," she said. She turned to go, then realized she'd forgotten the sugar packets in her apron pocket and turned back toward him. She felt something brush past her before she felt the sharp sting.

Putting her hand down to her side, it came away with blood. Her eyes alit on the knife on the floor against the far wall, and then met Eddard's. "Hell. Knife," she said.

Eddard was half-up from the piano bench as Verah was turning, trying to think her way through the trajectory of the knife back to its source. The groom from the newlywed couple was standing now, the perpetual stupid-happy grin he'd worn for the better part of a week's stay replaced with such a cold and determined stare that it was as if he had an entirely new face. Another knife was poised in his hand as his bride, similarly transformed, lifted a small tube to her lips and blew. Across the room the Ponkian made a startled sound, turned an alarmingly mottled shade of yellow, and crumpled to the floor.

The groom had just begun his second throw when a chair flying across the room collided with the side of his head. He went down. "Fucker!" Rickard yelled from the doorway, already reaching for another chair.

"Get him out of here!" Verah shouted to Eddard, pointing sharply at the ancient man standing there with his sandwich and tea, surprise and confusion on his face. She moved to stand between him and their attackers.

Eddard wrapped an arm around Rosley and tugged him toward the door. The bride dropped her blowpipe to the floor as she leapt up onto the table and drew a pair of knives from inside her dress. She raised one of the knives, then had to throw herself sideways off the table to dodge the next chair that came sailing across the room. She rolled, came back to her feet with blade at the ready just as the two old men disappeared through the door.

"No!" she shouted, and threw her blade at Rickard, embedding it in the underside of the chair he'd lifted to block her. She kicked her partner sharply and he groaned and tried to roll over, still entangled in the chair that had felled him. "Get up, idiot!"



Chernin walked through the doorway and stopped, staring at Rickard. "Get down, stupid!" Rickard shouted.

Chernin took cover behind the supply driver, staring at Verah crouched behind the bar and the Ponkian stretched out on the floor. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

The bride took advantage of the momentary distraction to throw a table over on its side, cover for both herself and her partner. Peering around it, she gestured with the point of her blade toward where Verah was crouched. "There's no way she can get out of here without me getting her first. If you want her alive, put down the chair."

"She's outnumbered," Verah shouted, hefting a half-full bottle of gin. "And I've got ammunition of my own."

"Yeah, but do you have your little pink-haired friend?" The bride-assassin snarled. "I don't think so."

"You're lying."

"Am I?" The bride reached into a pocket with her free hand and threw a small hank of pink hair on the floor. "We just want the old man," she continued. "No one else here needs to get hurt, and you can get the kid back safe and sound."

"This is nothing to do with me," the Haxallian's translator box calmly declared. They all ignored it.

"You won't find him," Verah said. "It's a big hotel, and no one knows it better than those two. Even I couldn't find them, if they didn't want me to."

"Better hope you're wrong."

"Maybe I can help here," Chernin said, stepping out from behind Rickard. The look Rickard shot him could have blackened and peeled the wallpaper around him.

"And who the hell are you?" the bride asked.

Chernin raised one hand, and with the other reached slowly around to his pocket. "I'm getting my identification out," he said. "I'm a senior agent with Mars Colonial Authority."

"The law? And you're going to help us?" She kicked her partner again. He groaned.

"If I were to witness the commission of a crime on Martian soil, I would be obligated to bring the full weight of law to bear on you, but as people keep kindly pointing out to me, I have no jurisdiction here. So, to be blunt, I really don't give a rat's ass what you do to any of these people," Chernin said. "I came to this godforsaken rogue pocket of hell because there's something here I need to find, and that duty is the only one that matters to me. You need to search the hotel, I need to search the hotel. We could help each other."

"You're a pus-sucking turd of an Earther whore, Chernin," Rickard said.

Chernin pointed to Rickard. "Count him among the people I don't care what happens to," he said.

The bride's partner finally managed to get to his feet beside her, still swaying, an angry red welt on his cheek below a swollen eye and a knife held too tight in his shaking hand. "What. . . ?" he asked.

"I'll catch you up later," she told him, not taking her eyes off the room. "You, Mr. Potty-mouth," she said, pointing at Rickard. "Put the chair down or else."

Reluctantly, Rickard set the chair back down on the floor. One hand still gripped the back, poised to pick it up again and hurl it at a moment's opportunity. "You," she said, turning to Chernin. "You and my partner here are going to tie everyone in this room up."

"With what?"

She nodded her chin toward the windows. "Curtain sashes."

"Can't you just dart them?" the groom asked.

"Used up my last human-prepped dart on the girl, and my last blank keeping that

toxic gasbag from going off," she said, pointing to the sleeping Ponkian. "So no, we tie them up. You—cook," she said, pointing at Verah. "You're going to open the hotel safe for me."

Verah shrugged. "I don't have the combination. Only Roz and Eddard do. I'm a *cook*."

"I'm really starting to hate this job," the woman said. "Fine. Agent man, after these dear folks are secured, you and I are going to go through every inch of this hotel—together, so I can watch you—while my partner here keeps these people on their best behavior. That work for you?"

"That works for me," Chernin said.

"This really has nothing to do with me," the Haxallian said again, and was just as soundly ignored as before.

Rickard, Verah, the Haxallian, and the still-drugged Ponkian were tied up and left locked up in the lounge with warnings to stay quiet and not make trouble if they wanted to live. The groom had to emphasize "quiet" several times, and "live" more than once, before Rickard finally ran out of opinions on the subject. "I'm going to be right outside that door," the groom said, running one hand across his swollen cheek, "and I'd love an excuse."

A few minutes later Chernin and the bride dragged in Smith One, unconscious and bleeding from a scalp wound. They tied him to Rickard.

"Do you think you'll get away with this?" Verah asked.

"Yes," Chernin said. "We've informed the other guests that there's a police action in progress and they should stay in their rooms, and just like good citizens they're doing as they were told. Maybe you could learn from them." He slammed the door on his way out, and they all heard the lock click.

They were left alone again. The Ponkian was snoring now.

"I apologize," the Haxallian said, "but I am finding this no longer entertaining, and I have some pressing business to conclude." It stretched its purple tentacle arms out across the floor, thinning and growing longer, until its entire body had grown so elongated that the sashes used to tie it simply fell away. "And now I take my leave of you."

It picked up its translation box and put it in its mouth and swallowed, where the box remained eerily visible just below the surface of its translucent exoderm. With all its arms free, it stretched up to the ceiling, spreading its purple tentacles out in a star formation across the surface like a viscous liquid, then lifted itself up from the floor and began to ooze across the ceiling. In moments it reached the air return and dropped the vent cover down onto the carpeting with a dull thump. The Haxallian disappeared into the narrow duct.

"Wow." Rickard said, craning his head up to watch the acrobatics. "I didn't know they could do that."

"Me either," Verah said, "but it solves the mystery of how it's been able to steal so many damned hotel bathrobes out of a locked closet."

"Too bad it couldn't have cut us free before it went. I have some business of my own to conclude with that bastard Chernin."

Verah sighed. "Hotel!" she called out.

A smooth, artificial voice answered from everywhere and nowhere. "Yes, Miss Verah?"

Rickard stared at her. "You have a fucking *simulated intelligence* in this dump? How come I've never known this?"

"You never asked," Verah said. "It's a Class E SI, runs all the support and mech systems along with a few other limited functions. It's decades out of date, but it's embedded throughout the entire hotel, which at the moment is pretty useful. Hotel, where is Sofi?"

"Miss Sofi is in the tool closet in the buggy garage."

"Is she okay?"

"She is breathing but is not responsive to queries."

"Thanks, Hotel," Verah said. "Where is Mr. Brown?"

"Guest Mr. Brown is in the lobby, near the reception desk."

"Mr. Brown?"

"Our fake groom," Verah said. "We're going to have some trouble getting out of this room without him seeing or hearing us. Where are the other guests?"

"Guest Mrs. Brown is in the second floor corridor, outside room Twenty-Four B. Guest Mr. Chernin is in the second floor corridor, outside room Twenty-Four A. Guest Mr. Rickard is in the Lounge. Guest Smith One is in the Lounge. Guest Smith Two is in the ventilation system. Guest Smith Three is exiting room Twenty-Two B via his window. Guest Est. Jarir is in the Lounge. Guest Mr. Tanden is in the gym. Guest—"

"That's enough, thank you, Hotel," Verah said. "Please tell me when Mr. Smith Two exits the ventilation system, and where Mr. Smith Three goes, assuming he manages to get out of his room without breaking his neck. Is Mr. Rosley in lockdown?"

"Yes."

"Is Eddard with him?"

"Yes."

She turned to Rickard. "Are you going to cause me any trouble?" she asked.

"Certainly," he said, "but you're not on the top of my list today."

"Okay, so where's the knife?"

"What?"

Verah rolled her eyes. "I don't for a second believe you handed over all your weapons at the front desk just like that. Since we haven't detected any tech on you, and you seem to have a particular contempt for your gun-wielding friends—"

"No friends of mine."

"—Whatever. I'm guessing you've got a knife, and since you haven't already cut your way free, it's somewhere you can't reach it. Maybe I can."

"Left boot," he said. "What did you do before you ended up here? Security work? Mugger?"

"Actually, I ran a hot dog stand on a space station."

"Must have been one tough station."

"Not as bad as where we went from there," she said. "Now slide over so I can try to reach the knife."

"Miss Verah, Guest Smith Two has exited the ventilation system," the Hotel said.

"He's back in his room?"

"He is in room Thirty A."

"That's interesting," Verah said. She let herself fall onto her side with her back to Rickard, and ran her hands down his leg until she found the familiar shape of a knife handle. "I've got it," she said. "Now what?"

"Can you drop it—carefully!—between my knees?"

"I can try," she said.

"What's interesting? About the Haxallian."

"He's in the Ponkian's room," Verah said. She managed to get the knife onto Rickard's legs, then rolled away.

Rickard bent his legs up and pulled the blade free with his teeth. "Th goim to hab to fwee you firf," he said. "Cub hea, an ven dome fubbin moob if you wan to keeb yoh ahms."

"You cut me and you'll learn the true meaning of misery," she answered, and held out her bound hands.

\* \* \*

The most recent of the Mr. Smiths carefully let himself over the edge of the small balcony outside his room, his bag with its diminished contents slung diagonally across his back. He had to admit that he had been equal parts pleased and dismayed to discover the window actually opened; if the dome blew, it was a good bet they were all dead anyway, but it still seemed like a worthy precaution to seal them.

Of course, if they had, he'd still be in his room.

Hanging down from the balcony railing, he regretted that he couldn't just drop his bag down ahead and so be able to roll when he hit the ground himself, but there was nothing for it. He steeled himself and let go, dropping down to the red sand and falling into a crouch. On Earth, with its oppressive gravity, he'd likely have broken something. *Another reason to love the Red World*, he thought.

Something nudged him from behind, nearly knocking him over. He went down on one knee and whirled around, hands raised to defend himself, and found himself staring into large, sad brown eyes set into a long rorschach face. This close, and in the half-light of dusk, the thin black horns looked more menacing than elegant. He moved himself a half-step backward before slowly rising to his feet.

Another oryx bumped him from the side, and he looked around and realized he was surrounded.

"What?" he said.

The lead oryx head-butted him again, gently, pushing him, and in that manner he was methodically, relentlessly, herded away from the hotel wall.

Eddard picked up a blanket, shook reddish dust from it, then wrapped it around the old man's shoulders. "Is that better?" he asked.

"Still cold. Can we go back for my tea? I forgot my tea."

"Not yet. Hotel says Verah and Rickard are still in the lounge but no longer restrained, so we just have to wait for them to clean up and give us the all-clear," Eddard said, sitting down wearily on the small padded bench. The room was tiny, enclosed, impenetrable by anything short of nearly nuclear force. They were safe, as boring as that might be. "It could be a while."

"Better not take too long," Rosley said. "I'm meeting someone."

Eddard laughed. "Roz, you spend 90 percent of your time frozen in that old life-pod capsule you scavenged after the war, and what's left you spend sitting in the lounge drinking gin or sitting in the *library* drinking tea. You barely meet the people here who work for you, much less anyone else."

"I like Verah. She seems a responsible sort."

"Yeah. She is."

"She makes good sandwiches."

"Yes, she does."

"And Sofi—good kid. Smart. Pays attention. More to her than meets the eye."

"Well." Eddard considered. "She's a good kid, anyway."

"Do you think she'll stay?"

"Sofi?"

"Verah. Both of them."

"For a while, I guess. You're not getting any younger, uncle, even without people trying to kill you. Once you're gone . . . well, you know what's going to happen here then. Better if none of us stick around for that."

Rosley only grunted, pulling the blanket tighter around his thin shoulders. "Hotel," he called out. "Tell Verah to get a move on. And if they're still in the lounge, tell her there's an old box down under the back of the bar."

"Yes, Mr. Rosley," the Hotel answered.

The two sat there in glum silence for many long minutes. At last, Rosley took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, as if to breathe out his own impatience. "Nephew," he said, and elbowed Eddard, who had started to doze off.

Eddard started awake, looking around them in some alarm. "What is it?" he asked. "You know any good jokes?"

Eddard put his face in his hands, then ran them up and over his thinning hair. "Yeah," he said at last. "There once was this crazy hotel on Mars . . ."

"You find anything?"

"I think so," Verah said. She put the box up on the bar, brushing her hand across the lid. "From the amount of dust on this, I bet it's been sitting here untouched since the Rosley was built, seventy years ago."

Rickard was kneeling next to the unconscious Smith One checking his pulse, but got up and came over to look. "That's an old Mars Service box," he said.

She lifted the lid off carefully, folded back a brittle sheet of red tissue paper, and pulled out an old, folded uniform and a small container. Rickard took the container, opened it, and whistled. "Medals," he said. "A Martian Medal of Honor, not to mention a Red Heart and a Spear of Ares. Where the hell did this come from?"

"It's Roz's," Verah said. She pulled a cap out of the box and set it atop the uniform, then drew out a gun. "He was in the war, barely more than a kid at the time. Sole survivor of the Battle of Ares Vallis."

"He was *that* guy?!" Rickard exclaimed. "Damn! He single-handedly saved Ares One."

"That's how he ended up here. They asked him what he wanted as a reward and he said a place of his own. They took him literally. I think it amused the colonials at that time to give him his own tiny kingdom, back when the whole planet was pretty much a lawless frontier anyway. It wasn't until Earth stepped in and imposed order with the Mars Colonial Authority that anyone had a problem with it, but there was no legal way to undo the Agreement. This place is the only spot on Mars that's free. At least until Roz dies. You can bet that's why those two are trying to kill him."

"But he's a hero."

"You're only a hero as long as people remember or care what you did, and memory is short. Roz has no heirs, so when he dies the hotel and grounds revert back to MCA control and then all hell breaks loose."

"What about Eddard? They're related, right?"

"Eddard doesn't want it. He doesn't like the idea of having a target on his back, and he's not that much younger than Roz. Also, early Mars colonial culture was matrilineal, before Earth came back in and set up the Authority with a whole lot of Redemption politicians on the board, and Roz takes that seriously. As do a lot of Free-Marsers, who see this place as almost hallowed ground. It's a symbol to them, as is Roz himself."

"If they kill the old man, it provokes a war with the Free-Marsers that Earth pretty much can't lose. I get it now."

"Yeah. Roz is dying anyway," Verah said. "I don't know why they can't just leave him in peace until his time is up. He'd have died years ago if it wasn't for the cryo, but that's taking its toll too."

"The MCA isn't known for patience."

"Now that's certainly true. You know anything about guns?"

"You don't?"

"Not really. Sofi's a much better shot."

Rickard held out his hand. "Give it here," he said. Taking it, he turned the gun over and raised his eyebrows. With what almost could have been mistaken for reverence, he powered it on.

"Miss Verah, I detect active tech in the lounge in your immediate vicinity," the Hotel said.

"It's okay, Hotel. We've got it."

"Thank you, Miss Verah."

"It's still got a trace charge," Rickard said, flicking the safety back on and tucking it carefully into his waistband. "Not much of one, but maybe enough to knock someone down for a minute or two, if it doesn't explode in our faces."

"Better than nothing," Verah said. She stood there looking around the room, then walked over and stared up at the ceiling vent the Haxallian had abruptly exited through. "Help me move this table?"

"What for?"

"I have a plan."

"I'm not climbing out through the fucking ducts."

"I'm not expecting you to. Your ass'd get stuck anyway," she said. "So shut up and help."

Mr. Brown was standing in the hotel lobby to one side of the large front window, looking at the lights of the police convoy just outside the perimeter of the Rosley grounds and dome, and feeling less than pleased with the situation. While certainly the action he and his partner had contracted to undertake was to the direct benefit, probably pleasure, and possibly pay of those waiting at the line, neither were they the sort to let gratitude get in the way of stringing the assassins up quite publicly, if they caught them. Mrs. Brown wasn't dumb enough to actually trust the agent, but he wasn't convinced the agent still wouldn't get the better of her.

*I took my shot too soon*, he told himself for the hundredth time. Once the old man had been identified, he should have waited for a better chance. He hadn't believed he could miss. He never missed. He hated this place. He hated Mars. Stupid poor gravity must have thrown him off.

A loud clang came from the locked lounge behind him. It was about time somebody died, even if it wasn't anyone he was getting paid for. He ran to the door and unlocked it, kicking it open. No one was hiding behind the door, amateur trick number one. One of the tables had been pushed to the center of the room, a chair standing in the center of it atop the heavy tablecloth, and a metal grill of some sort lay on the floor. He looked up and spotted the open duct.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," he grumbled. Carefully he got up on the table and stood up on the chair, knife at the ready, and peered carefully up into the ceiling.

All of a sudden he was moving, falling, the chair slipping out from under him as the entire table tipped over sideways. Too late, he realized they were hiding under the table. "I hate you!" he shouted as he went down.

He hit the floor hard, trying to roll with it, the chair tangling in his legs. Then that horrible supply driver was standing right above him, a large glass bottle raised up high.

"Check out time," the driver said, and everything went black.

"Now what?" Smith Three stood in the center of the floor of the buggy garage. He was talking half to himself, half to the array of antelope faces crowded across the doorway like an inscrutable wall of expectation. It occurred to him that he could easily take a buggy and get out; he would regret the loss of his suit, but not so sorely as the loss of his freedom.

What would truly rankle would be having gone as far as he had to leave with his job unfinished, thanks to one rogue Colonial Agent. *I don't even know he's looking for me*, he thought. *Should it matter if he was?*

There was a muffled bang and what sounded like shouting coming from further inside the garage. He picked up a mallet from a workbench and followed the sounds to a locked door in the back.

There was another bang, followed by a distinct swear.

"Hang on," he called through the door. Two good swings with the mallet knocked the handle straight off the door. It lazily swung open.

The pink-haired girl was against the back wall of the tool closet, a pipe wrench raised at the ready. He set the mallet down on the floor and held up both hands, backing away. "It's just me," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Too right," she said, climbing out of the closet. "That nitchy cudder stucked me with a dart and I woke up in here."

"Who? The agent?"

"Naw, the bride woman."

"Huh," Smith Three said. "Why?"

"Dunno," Sofi said. "Didn't like the room service? Me and my wrench are gonna go ask her about it some."

"There's something going on in the hotel," he said. "It might be safer to stay here."

"Probably. I can come let you know when it's safe again."

"No, I meant you. . . . Never mind." He sighed. "We may not be able to get out of here anyway, because the oryx—" He turned as he spoke, and then stared at the open garage door, at nothing but the fading light on distant, empty hills. "—are gone. They were all right there, the whole lot of them."

"Sure they was," Sofi said. "You coming?"

He looked down at his bag, slung across his chest, and debated stowing it somewhere here in the garage, then decided if something happened to him the contents wouldn't matter anyway. "I'm coming," he said. It was harder to make his way back toward the hotel now that darkness had set in.

Verah and Rickard stood over the unconscious man. Rickard had turned the table entirely upside-down and tied the man, spread-eagled, to all four legs. "If only there were such a thing as Martian Fire Ants," Rickard said. "Because you know they'd be the best fucking fire ants in the entire universe."

"Yeah, well, if we didn't have other things we need to be doing right now, I'd show you how to make a hot pepper paste to put fire-anything-you-can-think-of to shame," Verah said.

Rickard smiled.

He pointed at Smith One and the Ponkian, both still unconscious. "So what do we do with them?"

"I have no idea," she said. "Leave them here? We're a real hotel, after all; they could just be innocent guests."

"No one is innocent."

"I suppose not," she said. "Chernin and this one don't get along at all." She nudged Smith One gently with her foot, and the man curled up in his sleep.

"I hate him less already," Rickard said.

"Chernin said he was a Sfazili agent."

"Probably at the hotel for the same thing as us, then. Rumor is, some stolen data is going to be handed over here, data from the research the Bomo'ri are doing on the artificial creation of hyperspace jump points. Priceless. Chernin's informant was a Sfazili. That's all I know, and I wouldn't even know that much if that chump-monkey Arning wasn't the biggest lip-flapper on Mars."

"I don't think that has anything to do with the Browns, though," Verah said. "Hotel, where are Mrs. Brown and Mr. Chernin?"

"Mrs. Brown and Mr. Chernin are in the corridor outside room thirty-four A."

"Where is Smith Two? Is it still in Est. Jarir's room?"

"No. Mr. Smith Two has entered the ducts again and is exiting into its own room."

"Did it take anything from Est. Jarir's room?"

"Yes. A sweater."

Verah laughed, wearily. "I'm sure it will complement its collection of stolen bathrobes quite nicely," she said. "Are any other guests in unexpected places or changed positions since last we spoke? Exempting those now in this room."

"Yes. Smith Three is returning to the hotel from the buggy garage."

"The buggy garage . . . Hotel, is Sofi still okay?"

"Sofi appears to be okay."

She let out breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "So what now?" she asked Rickard.

He put one foot on top of Mr. Brown's chest. "Two against two. Time to go make some violence."

"Don't forget, we've got the Hotel on our side."

"Yeah? What can the Hotel do?"

Verah smiled.

*Another damned empty room*, Chernin thought. The woman had kicked the door in, taken a quick peek under the bed, behind the curtains, in the bathroom and closet, then declared the room clean and moved on. The problem was, the woman didn't want him out of her sight—nor, honestly, he her; that trust was equally balanced at a bare minimum—and she was impatient for him to keep up, especially since he was unwilling to tell her what he was looking for.

Not that he actually knew what he was looking for, either; the data could be in any form, could be gone by now, maybe never existed. He just had to hope he'd know it when he saw it. He was down on his knees, checking out the underside of the vacant room's desk, when the woman called from across the hall. "Agent-man! This one was occupied, and our guest has gone out the window."

He got up, sending hateful thoughts to his knees as he did so, and went across the hall. The bed was made, the room empty of any belongings. "Looks vacant to me," he said.

"Door was locked from the inside," she said. "Towels are still damp."

Chernin walked over to the window and looked out. "That's a long drop," he said.

"In one-third gravity? Not impossible for someone in good physical shape," she said.

"In the morning we'll be able to follow the footprints."

"This place doesn't have until morning."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, one way or another I'm going to get my target. I prefer a small, precise hit, but if I have to resort to gross overkill with lots of collateral damage, so be it."

"You have a bomb." He didn't need to ask.

She ignored him. "My objective's not here, and at his age he certainly didn't go out the window. Let's move on."

"Hold on, it takes me—"

"Might I suggest, Agent," she said, a growl in her voice, "that given the time constraints, you put your effort into helping me? Because if I find my guy, you can have this place to yourself for as long as you want, but as soon as I decide I'm sick of hide and seek, you are out of time."

"Hotel, lock down all rooms. Now."



The door slammed shut with such force that both Chernin and the woman jumped, each reaching for non-existent guns. "What the hell?" Chernin said. He grabbed the door handle and turned, but the door wouldn't budge.

"Useless . . . get out of the way," the woman said. He stepped aside as she rammed the door with her shoulder in the same move that had successfully opened more than two dozen doors before. This time the door failed to yield, eliciting a surprised *wuf* from the woman. Chernin went down on one knee, examining the edge of the strike plate on the door frame. "Magnetic lock," he said.

"That's not very early Mars-period," she said, rubbing her shoulder. "I want a refund. Or instead . . ." She reached down into the top of her gown and pulled out a small chip barely larger than her fingernail, and snapped it in two.

Verah and Rickard had just locked the lounge up from the outside and were heading to the stairs when the Hotel spoke up again. "Miss Verah, I have just detected a microsecond 46.2GHz transmission from Guest Smith Three's room," it said.

"Shit, that's a detonator frequency," Rickard said. "One of those two jonesless, boot-sucking fartmongers just armed some sort of explosive device."

"How can you tell they only armed it?"

"Because I'm still talking to you instead of admiring my own handsome, crispy corpse."

"Well, crap," Verah said. "Now what?"

"We talk to them," Rickard said, "and we hope they're just as disinterested in being blown up as we are. Maybe they'll negotiate."

"Somehow I don't expect they'll have terms we'll like, but maybe it'll stall them. I'll talk to them while you go look for the bomb," Verah said.

"You sure? Don't let them be rude to you."

"I can handle rude," she said. Turning, she ran up the stairs and down the corridor of the second floor guest wing, slowing as she came close to Twenty-Two B. She thought she could hear arguing inside, but she couldn't make it out. Steeling herself, she raised one hand and knocked smartly on the door.

"And who is that?" came the bride's voice.

"The cook, ma'am," Verah said. "I've come to talk."

"Unlock the door and bring me the old man, and me and my partner will walk out of here and never look back."

"I'm afraid I can't give you Roz. I have some credit—"

There was a laugh. "I don't care about credits, girl. I care about my reputation, and that rides on me seeing that old man properly set for the grave. No one else needs to be hurt."

"She's got a bomb," Chernin's voice came through the door, followed by what sounded distinctly like a slap.

"I hate people who spoil surprises," the woman said. "But now that he has, you've got forty-one minutes to bring me the old man or he dies anyway, and so does everyone else."

"So will you."

"Yeah, well, I hate all of you just enough to consider it worthwhile."

"I have your partner. We could trade—we give him back, and you leave and take your bomb with you."

Laughter. "You can keep him, the useless bungler. Now go get the old man—I can see you standing there through the peephole, you know."

"I'm going," Verah said, walking away and thinking furiously.

"No offense, but I'd rather not be found dead with you," Chernin said.

"Yeah, well, I don't like you either," Mrs. Brown said. "If it helps, I have no intention of dying in this rat-trap." She ran a hand along the hem of her dress, then grabbed with both hands and ripped at the seam, pulling out a small metal disk about the size of a Martian dollar.

"Is that . . ." Chernin started to say.

"EMP mine. Limited radius. Got a pacemaker?"

"No."

"Too bad," she said, and slapped the disk on the doorframe above the strike plate. "Three, two, one—"

There was a muffled buzz and simultaneously the door clicked open and the lights went out, leaving them in pitch blackness. "Zero," she finished. "I'm getting out of here. If I were you, Agent-man, I'd stay out of my way."

The lights in the stairwell flickered, and the floor above her dropped into darkness. Verah swore, nearly tripping on the last step and hitting the landing hard. "Hotel?" she called out.

"Miss Verah. I have lost approximately eighty percent of the hotel from my sensors, along with numerous control systems."

"Some sort of micro-EMP device," Rickard said, coming around the corner. "Your guests are free again. We don't have a lot of time, even if your lady wasn't lying to us."

"Why would she lie?"

"I would, if it was me. I'd tell you that you had more time than you did, because it would likely screw any last-minute plans you were making to move against me."

"Well, let's hope she's not that clever," Verah said. "I think I know where the bomb is."

"Oh?" Rickard's eyebrows went up, and she felt a brief flush of satisfaction that she'd surprised him.

"They remote-activated the bomb, right? But Hotel didn't sense any other tech in the hotel activating. If the bomb was here and shielded—which assumes they've got some ultra-portable shielding tech we don't know about—then they could have just as easily brought weapons, and then they wouldn't have had to resort to throwing old-fashioned knives at us. So they can't have that kind of shielding."

"Ah! But if the bomb's not in the hotel . . ."

She looked at him, and he looked at her. "Buggy garage," they both said simultaneously.

"I've got to warn Eddard and Roz and the remaining guests," she said. "Some of them have suits; it'll buy them a few hours, anyhow."

"Go. I'll go see if I can get Sofi out, and do something with the bomb."

Verah hesitated, then nodded. "Thanks, Rickard," she said, and turned and ran. He turned the other way and did the same.

Sofi and Smith Three were half way across the sand when ahead of them most of the hotel flickered and went dark. Smith Three put out a hand and lightly touched Sofi's shoulder. "We don't have any idea what's happening in there," he said, keeping his voice low.

Sofi shrugged, the gesture lost to the night. "Been worse places," she said. "An' it's a whole lot easier to find out what's happening by lookin' than by sitting out here."

"True," he said, "although, do you see, off past my shoulder? Lights in the distance. That's a police convoy. They must have come with your agent. They're starting to move—the lights going out must have pushed them into action. They'll be coming

here, either to check on their man or finish his job. Let's hope they don't have one of their typical trigger-happy idiots in charge."

"Agent was looking for someit. You?"

"I hope not," he said. "But it's always possible."

"Yer a Free-Marsie."

"Yes."

"You never been here afore?"

"No. They needed someone who wasn't known in this area."

"Why?"

"I can't answer that," he said. "Can you get us inside?"

"Just gotta find the door. How's yer night eyes?"

"I can't even see you."

Sofi took his hand. "Then come on. I can see a bit."

Mrs. Brown left the room. She expected the agent to be right on her heels and had decided to just snap his neck and be done with him; he hadn't been much use so far, and it was increasingly unlikely with each passing second that that would change. But the agent didn't immediately follow, and by the time she was around the corridor bend it didn't matter.

It was a short jog down the hall to the honeymoon suite; she'd carefully paced the hall enough to move through it blind. Breaking into the room, she grabbed her bag from the luggage stand, threw it open, and pulled out her surface suit. Another sat nestled below it, and she spared a moment's thought for Mr. Brown. Then she shrugged off the thought, stepped out of her sundress, and pulled the suit up and on.

A fast snap of her fingers and a glowlight appeared on one of the suit gloves. Raising her hand palm-out so she could see without blinding herself, she pulled close her cosmetics kit, a bag of tacky Ares Five souvenirs, and Mr. Brown's shaving kit. Laying out select items on the bed, she quickly assembled them into a pressure rifle.

She checked it again, then extinguished the hand light. Now all she needed to do was get out of the hotel, find concealment near the dome entrance, and make sure no one else left before the bomb took care of the job once and for all.

Chernin waited until he was sure the woman had gone, then slipped off his shoes and crept carefully out into the hall, listening furiously. He flinched at the sudden sound of a door being busted open. His left hand, seeking the wall, found a slick, cold surface instead. Belatedly he realized it was the dead hulk of an old-fashioned PhobosCola machine, another victim of the EMP mine.

There was room in the alcove beside it and he slipped into it, trying to make out what it was the woman was doing. Only at the very end, with the methodical clicks and snaps, did he recognize the sounds. The knowledge pushed him further back into the gap. He'd expected her to attempt to kill him right after the mine, but just because she hadn't didn't mean she'd overlook the opportunity twice.

She walked right past without seeing him, but what little he could make out of her was a black form, no yellow polka-dot sundress in sight.

He waited until he heard her go down the stairs, then went back the direction she'd come until he found the open door. A few hints of early starlight through the window led him to the open suitcase on the bed, and, like a gift, a second surface suit inside it. He grabbed it like he was grabbing onto a life raft. What little he remembered of Mr. Brown suggested that it was going to be a tight fit, but if he could get it on, he would.

Verah ran back toward the lounge. "Hotel!" she called out as she ran. "Alert Eddard

and Roz that we've got a potential for a dome-breach. They need to stay put until they get the all-clear or rescue shows up."

"I will, Miss Verah."

"If . . ." She started, then tried again. "If something happens to me, tell Eddard and Roz I said thanks. This was a good place for Sofi and me, first peace we've had in years, and no regrets. Got it?"

"Yes, Miss Verah."

"Okay. Thanks, Hotel. Please inform any guests you can reach that they should suit up if they can, just in case."

Verah turned into the lounge. The Estimable Hroknek Jarir was sitting up now, still pale and yellow. Mr. Brown remained tied to the upside-down table; either he was still unconscious or pretending to be, but she checked his bonds anyway. If he suffered whatever fate his faux bride had planned for the rest of them, that was just fine with her.

Smith One was not moving, the stillness somehow awfully complete. She knelt beside him, checking first his pulse, then rolled him over to attempt chest compressions. She winced and let him fall back where he was.

Casting her eyes around, she spotted what she didn't think she was looking for. Snagging a dishrag off the edge of the bar, she crawled under a table and carefully retrieved the bloodied object. Wrapping it up carefully, she tucked it into her apron.

Verah turned to the Ponkian. "Did you see what happened?"

"I just woke mmmm up," Hroknek Jarir said.

*Great*, Verah thought. "Estimable Jarir, do you have a surface suit in your room?"

"No," he said. "Such things are difficult for my people. Because of our mmm defense mechanism, binding clothing can damage us. Why mmmm do you ask?"

"The people who attacked us may breach the dome."

"Dear-oh!" The Ponkian sat up straighter, grew slightly rounder. "I have a mmm breather apparatus. We are mmm resilient quite well to exposure events as long as we have sufficient carbon dioxide, yes."

"I suggest you go get it, then. The power is out in that part of the hotel—do you have a light?"

"We mmmm also see quite well in the dark."

"If you see anyone else, please warn them," she said. "I have to go."

The Ponkian had braced himself with one of the flung-about chairs and was attempting to get to his feet. "And him mmmm?" he asked, pointing weakly at Smith One.

"Lucky man, doesn't need oxygen any more," she said on her way out.

Sofi stopped dead in her tracks and pulled Smith Three down. "I see someit moving," she whispered. "Get low."

They lay flat on the sand, Smith Three unable to make out anything. "It's Rickard," the girl said at last. "Somebody behind him too, can't make 'em out, all in black, like light don't even wanna touch 'em."

"A stealth suit," Smith Three said. "It's got to be that woman who attacked you and was searching the hotel."

"Yeah, well, fancy suit do you no good if you don't know how to move on Mars," she said. "Running like she's got a wedge up. You stay here, okay?"

He shook his head. "It'd be better if I—"

"You got a wrench?"

"What? No."

"Well, I do. So stay here."

Just like that, she slithered away from him and was gone. He cursed under his breath, unable to make out exactly where she'd gone, and thinking of his night goggles sitting with his own suit back in the hotel safe doing no one any good at all. Then he closed his eyes and slowed his breathing and did his best to listen.

Rickard was moving fairly quickly toward the buggy garage, the only source of light in the area, unaware that he'd picked up a second shadow. Sofi stayed low until both had passed her, then slipped in behind the follower. Raising the wrench, memories of being darted and stuffed in the tool closet fresh in her mind, she brought it down hard on the woman's head.

"Aeeeee," the woman said, in a distinctly non-woman voice, and went down on his/her hands and knees in the sand. Sofi grabbed the suit mask and pulled, not caring that she could feel a good handful of hair through the material. It came off, revealing a reddened face, eyes tightly shut in pain.

"Agent Chernin," Sofi said, surprised. "Sorry, thought you was that nitchy Mrs. Brown."

"Careful! He's working with her!" Smith Three called, working his way across the sand toward them.

Rickard was still running for the buggy garage, as if nothing had happened. Somewhere not far away there was a click, and all three of Chernin, Sofi, and Smith Three threw themselves flat as the first shot went off. The report from the second almost seemed to come after the splinter of wood and a shout of surprise. Verah was a silhouette against the bright square of the open hotel doorway, already ducking back, but slow.

"Verah, get down!" Sofi shouted, not caring if it gave her own position away.

"I can't see your Mrs. Brown at all," Smith Three hissed. "She must have a suit on too." He was moving on his hands and elbows toward Sofi and the still-prone Chernin. "If so, she could be anywhere, and she can see clear as day. She must figure we're pinned down and is saving her shot for more credible threats. Agent, you're wearing a suit, too—can you see her?"

Chernin didn't answer.

Smith Three poked the man, and he didn't move. "Bright Ares Below," he said, putting his hand on Chernin's back.

"Is he dead?"

"Not yet, I don't think," Smith Three said. "Although I guess we know who was a credible threat after all."

Another shot rang out, and they saw Rickard stumble, then pick himself back up and continue to run, hunched over and a little crookedly, still heading for the garage in the distance. "He isn't going to make it," Smith Three said.

"Must be someit awful important," Sofi said. She stood up. Smith Three made a grab for her, but missed. "Hey, stupid woman!" Sofi shouted, and began running toward a small rise where she thought the woman must be, the wrench held high. "I'm free, and now it's my turn to take some thumping on you!"

Verah broke from the doorway. "Sofi, get down!"

"I've got enough power to take out all of you!" The woman called out. "You're just making it easy for—" Her voice broke off suddenly, and there was a moment of silence except for the dull sounds of feet on sand, before she started screaming, a low, choking wail that built rapidly to an agonizing crescendo.

Sofi found Mrs. Brown on her knees in the sand behind the rise, two long black shapes protruding from her abdomen. Then they moved, shifting, withdrawing, and the woman pitched forward, making a strange keening, moaning sound. Behind her, the ghost of a long white face flashed in the night as it backed away, with only a single huff for commentary.

The pink-haired girl stood there as the woman rolled over onto her back, her hands splayed across her black suit, staring up at the Martian sky. "Well," Sofi said, "don't hardly seem fair to hit you now."

"What . . . the *fuck* . . . ?" the woman said.

Sofi kicked the rifle away, then sat down cross-legged beside her. "It's an oryx," she said. "They're emphatic."

Verah reached them, saw the woman was down, and hardly stopped. "I'm going after Rickard," she said. "There's a bomb in the buggy garage."

"Ah," Sofi said, as Verah disappeared toward the bright square in the distance. "That explains him not saying thanks." Meeting Mrs. Brown's eyes, she gave her a good, vicious poke with the wrench, and the woman let out a string of curses. "Shows you to play with bombs. Not nice at all."

Rickard swore, one hand against his side where the woman had grazed him—at least, he was telling himself it was a graze, and if it wasn't, well, fuck it—as he reached the doorway of the buggy garage at long last. No more shots came out of the dark, and he'd heard the scream, and hoped that meant the shooter was down. *No time to look*, he told himself. He'd kept a steady count in his head—his watch hadn't survived the EMP blast—and figured, if they were lucky, they had maybe ten minutes left.

The garage held his own supply buggy, a microbug with Titan plates, and a larger buggy with no rear windows and "Just Married" scrawled across the back of it. It was locked.

He kicked it a few times, but his side hampered him getting his full weight behind it. Instead he picked up a mallet that had been conveniently left in the middle of the floor and beat at the door. Whatever it was made of, it was certainly not the usual cheap-ass Earth crap that made up the vast majority of buggy sales on-planet; it wouldn't even dent.

Footsteps behind him, and he turned. Verah ran in, out of breath. "I can't get the fucking thing open," he said.

"I can run back and see if she's got the keycard on her," Verah said.

"No time," Rickard said. He pulled open the door to the cab of his supply buggy and threw the trailer release lever, not caring that he hadn't put down its wheels yet.

There was a horrendous screech as the trailer was ejected from the back of the buggy and slid on its connecting lock across the polycrrete floor.

"What are you doing?" Verah asked.

"Getting rid of the bomb," Rickard said. He pulled himself up into the cab and backed it around, slamming hard into the newlywed wagon just as he threw the trailer magnet back on. There was a slap of metal on metal that stung the air as the two locked together hard and fast.

"I'm coming with you," Verah said.

"Hell no, you're not," Rickard said. He reached down from the open door of the cab and handed her Roz's ancient service pistol. "Take this."

"I told you, I'm no good with guns."

"Just point it at whoever the fuck you need to, and try not to mention that you don't know how to use it," he said. "Now get your skinny Mars-trash ass out of my way or I'll run you over."

Reluctantly, Verah stepped back. "Thanks, Rickard," she said.

"Don't thank me," he said. "I'm leaving you with an entire trailer full of artichokes and banana paste. Now let's see how wide awake the people outside are!"

He drove into the garage's envelope, waited impatiently for the seals to change, then drove out into the open air of Mars. He could see Chernin's police convoy mak-

ing top speed toward the hotel, and behind them, nearly hidden by the dunes, the faint light of what must have been the Browns' ride out.

He shifted the buggy up to top speed, jolting and crashing over the dunes, and aimed straight for the lights. Bad luck for Arning and friends that they were directly in the path between him and the other vehicle; at least he probably wouldn't live to hear Arning and his friends shoot their mouths off about it, if he made it that far.

Verah watched, just the other side of the transparent envelope seal, as Rickard's buggy with the bomb-laden car in tow headed straight for Chernin's convoy. They flashed their lights and blared their horns at him, but he never changed course, and at last they all swerved away, scattering, as he barreled through. She could see the tiny dot of light of the other vehicle as it suddenly broke cover and tried to get out of Rickard's path. She couldn't see more than that, until the sudden fireball filled her vision and she flinched as if struck by the furious heat and sound of it, even from this far away.

When the smoke cleared, she couldn't see anything at all.

Turning away from the envelope, she walked back out through the garage, toward the hotel, numb.

Sofi and Smith Three were together trying to drag Chernin back inside. The woman lay where she was, and Verah left her; she wasn't breathing any more.

Sofi looked up at her. "We safe?" she asked.

Verah nodded. "As much as ever. Chernin still alive?"

"Seems to be."

"Then let's get him inside, and start figuring out where we are. I expect the Authority will be here shortly."

Arning, of course, brought his men in with weapons drawn. She let them bundle Chernin off for medical attention only after Arning agreed to receive and sign a formal complaint for the man's behavior. "We'll be getting you a tally of damages," she said. She figured he was just as responsible for any harm the woman had done while they were briefly partnered.

"You do that, girl," Arning sneered. "Now back off. My men have a job to do here."

"The Agreement—" she started.

He put his pistol against her forehead. The round "o" of it was cool against her skin, reminding her of Rickard's heat, and she did not move. "No," she said.

"I'd back down, Agent, if I were you," Smith Three said from where he'd been quietly standing off to the side, leaning against the wall beside the elevators.

Arning let out a long, loud breath. "What is it this time?" he said. "I don't see your gassy alien chum around, so who's going to stop me?"

"I will, for starters," another voice spoke up from the lobby entrance. Mr. Rosley stood there, leaning on a cane, his other arm looped through Eddard's. "How is it supposed to go? Oh yes! Get off my lawn, assholes."

"Mr. Rosley?" Smith Three spoke up.

The old man turned, stared at him. "And you are?"

"I'm the legal representative you sent for," Smith Three said. He reached into his bag as a half-dozen guns swung his way, and pulled out the legal pad. He held it out, and Eddard took it.

"What is this?" Eddard said.

Roz snatched it from his grasp. "Took your damned time," he said, turned it on, skimmed it with squinting eyes, then put his palm against the screen. It flashed once, and then the bar along the top turned green.

"What is that?" Arning demanded.

"A will," Roz said. "I just legally declared an heir."

"That man has no valid license to operate on Mars," Arning said. "Any document of his you signed has no legal bearing."

Smith Three took out his ID chip and passed it to one of Arning's men. "You are correct that I have no license under the Mars Colonial Authority, but by the Agreement, the Authority has no standing here. On Mr. Rosley's behalf, and that of a free Mars, I have petitioned the Multiworlds Consortium for recognition of this territory as an independent and permanent political entity."

"Someone would have to have spon—"

"If you check," Smith Three said, "you will find that the governing body of Zanzjan T agreed to sponsor our petition; they have more than a passing familiarity with the strong-arm tactics of Earth and their colonial authorities. The petition was granted, and this hotel and its grounds are now officially Free Mars. They've also granted us protectorate status, and temporarily appointed me official liaison between them and us." He turned to Roz. "For only as long as you wish to retain me," he added. "We were somewhat limited for candidates."

"So now can I tell them to go?"

"Unless they want to start a shooting war against all thirty-seven worlds of the Consortium, I believe you can."

Rosley grinned, showing perfect white teeth. "Shoo," he said, waving his hand at Arning.

"And how much longer is your nephew there going to live?" Arning said. "You've only bought yourself a very short reprieve, at best. And your Marsie friends aren't going to be too happy with you, breaking their inheritance-through-the-women code."

"Very true," Rosley said. "If Eddard was my heir."

They all stared at him, except for Smith Three, who was also smiling now. Roz lifted his cane and pointed. "I chose her," he said, and shook the end of his cane so no one could be mistaken who he was pointing at.

"Me?" Verah said.

"Yeah, you. I like you," Roz said.

"You have to accept," Smith Three said. He held out the pad.

"I can't—" she started.

"And let them win?" Smith Three asked. "After all this?"

"Said you was trouble, right from the start," Sofi said. She reached out, took Verah's hand, and placed it on the pad.

"It has to be voluntary," Smith Three said. "Verah?"

The woman looked at Sofi, then at Roz and Eddard. "Oh, hurry up, woman," Roz said. "I'm not getting any younger here."

"You said yourself, you make your family," Sofi said. "First me, now all of us."

"I . . . Okay," Verah said, and pressed down. The legal pad registered and turned green.

"Well, that's done and transmitted," Smith Three said. "It's official."

"Great!" Roz said. "You lot, get the hell out of *our* hotel."

Arning kept his gun up, wavering just slightly, as if deciding the cost/benefit of shooting all of them. "Sir, you can't," one of his men said.

With a growl, Arning turned his weapon toward Verah. "I'm going to solve this right—" he started to say. Verah pulled Roz's old service pistol out of her apron and pointed it at Arning. There was a blue flash, and Verah jumped and dropped the gun even as Arning crumpled to the floor.

Eddard picked up the gun, then checked on Arning. "Just knocked out," he said. "I suggest you get him out of here before he wakes up."



"This isn't over," one of Arning's men said as they gathered up their leader and backed out.

"Buh-bye," Sofi said, and gave a little wave.

The little group stood watching out the window as the soldiers departed, until someone began hammering on the bell on the desk. They turned around and Rickard was there, looking tired and ragged and more than a little burnt around the edges. "Can't a man get some fucking service in this dump?" he asked.

"Well, don't you look like shit," Verah said, grinning from ear to ear. "Not dead, though."

"Spare suit in my buggy. You know how hard it is to put on a suit while driving? Yeah. Bailed out about thirty seconds before the damned thing blew and had to walk all the hell the way back here because nobody could get off their ass and come get me. I need coffee. Right. Now."

Verah smiled. "I think we could manage that."

Morning came in full, the sun rising above Noctis Labyrinthus to shine down upon the Rosley, quiet now, its small herd of oryx near the far east edge of the dome grazing for lichen.

Verah had managed to get a simple breakfast of toast, jam, and coffee together, and they'd all settled into the dining room to eat when they heard banging and swearing coming through the walls from the lounge next door. "Oh, crap!" Verah swore. "I forgot about Mr. Brown and the dead agent! I should have given them to Arning's men. What are we supposed to do with them?"

"Not my problem any more," Roz said. "I'm going back to my freezer." He picked up a slice of toast and crammed it most of the way into his mouth, and left the room.

"If I may suggest," Smith Three said, "now that you're an officially recognized entity, you have the legal authority to detain and charge Mr. Brown on your own."

"And what? Sentence him to life locked in the pantry?"

"Free Mars may only physically be this one tiny place, but it lives and breathes in pockets all over this world. We have people who can handle it."

"Can you take the Ponkian too?" Verah asked.

"Can I *what*?"

"He's the one who killed the Sfazili agent. He stabbed him with a bottle-opener." She pulled the napkin out of her apron and unwrapped it on the table. "The assassins both had knives, Brown was tied down, and no one else was near enough to do it."

"But why?"

"He's one of the data thieves Chernin was looking for. The seller, I believe. I think he woke up and saw an opportunity and took it."

They all stared at her. "That game was all bargain talk," Sofi chimed in. "Seen traders use it afore."

"I don't understand," Smith Three said. "But okay. I'll contact the nearest Martian stronghold and get them to send some people over, once Arning is well out of the way. The checkpoint could be trouble, but . . . well, they can always come in on foot like I did."

There was a clatter. As one, they looked to see the Haxallian standing in the doorway turn and run. Tentacle-arms wrapped in another bathrobe, it tripped and fell flat on its face. "And there's our buyer," Verah said.

"You have no proof," it said through its translation box. "Search me. You will not find any data."

"I'm sure we won't," Verah said. "Which is why we're going to let you leave this hotel on your own. But first, I'd like back that sweater you stole from Estimable Jarir's room. We'll hold it for him, safe and sound, until this thing with the agent is resolved."

The Haxallian struggled out of the bathrobe, but Rickard walked over and put a heavy boot down on one of its tentacles. "I'll go get it," Sofi said, and skipped out of the room.

Smith Three stood up and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I guess I should get going now," he said, "before everything gets complicated again. I have the feeling this place is prone to that, and I still have more documents to file on your behalfs."

"I don't even know your real name," Verah said.

He shrugged. "It's Smith. For real."

Smith shook Eddard's hand, and Verah's, and nodded to Rickard. Stepping over the Haxallian, he paused. "Oh, yes," he said. "One last thing."

He reached into his bag and pulled out a small, square box, and handed it to Verah. "A present from Zanzjan T," he said. "A small upgrade for your hotel computer."

"Thanks," Verah said, looking down at the box, peering under the lid at the small ball nestled within. She had no idea what it was. "After that EMP thing, we need all the help we can get. I do wish we had something to give in return."

Sofi reappeared, a hideously multicolored sweater in her arms, and Verah brightened. "Actually, forget I just said that," she said. "I'd like you to take the sweater back to Zanzjan T for me, with our thanks."

Smith was perplexed. "The governing body of Zanzjan T is a giant intelligent computer. And, uh, having met it, I don't think it has much need of a sweater."

"The sweater's the data," Verah said.

"What?" Smith asked, as the Haxallian let out a squeak.

Verah took the sweater from Sofi, and then handed it to Smith. "Ponkians have to wear expandable clothing, otherwise when they blow up they can suffocate themselves. He told me so himself. And when the assassins took over the hotel, the first thing Smith Two here did was make for the Ponkian's room and steal this sweater. Even with his weird clothing fixation, it seems like an odd priority," she said. "Until you realize the data's been written right into tiny fibers—it *is* the fibers. And cable-stitched, no less. See how they're iridescent, in the right light?"

"That data . . ."

"Was stolen from the Bomo'ri. If it stays here, we'll never see the end of trouble from it. Zanzjan T is near the Bounds, so maybe they have a way of getting it back to them. Seems like the right thing."

Eddard chuckled. "Roz did good picking you," he said. He stretched, hands against the small of his back, and gave the room one last lookover. "Well, I'm off for a nap. That damned lockdown room is about as comfortable as rocks, and Roz was telling me jokes all night. Sixty-year-old *dirty* jokes." He shuddered, and left.

Rickard looked down on the Haxallian. "Since I'm stuck here waiting around until I can get a ride out again, you want someone to help you evict it?"

"Sure."

"With or without its stuff?"

"With. Although, if you could, please see that he doesn't take more than *one* bathrobe," Verah said.

"If you show me that fire pepper thing after."

"Deal."

Rickard dragged the Haxallian away as Smith packed up the last of his things and left. Verah looked at Sofi, and Sofi looked at Verah.

"Well," Verah said at last. "What a complete mess."

"Yeah," Sofi said. She leaned back against the couch and rolled herself over the top to land in a heap on the cushions, and fished her unfinished novel out from underneath. "Home sweet home. So what's for lunch?" ○

# NEXT ISSUE

## FEBRUARY ISSUE

Our February 2013 issue features **Vylar Kaftan's** blockbuster novella about the nineteenth century Incan empire on an alternate Earth. This riveting story about the battle for control of the New World and "The Weight of the Sunrise" is one you won't want to miss. After far too long an absence, **Matthew Hughes** returns to our pages with a tale of high adventure in the Far Future that packs in just about all the excitement you can take "And Then Some" more for good measure!

## ALSO IN FEBRUARY

New author **John Chu** brings us a story about a troubled graduate student, his best friend (who may or may not be an alien), scalion pancakes, and the music of *Candide*, and lets us decide whether we really have "The Best of All Possible Worlds"; Hugo-award-winning-author **Robert Reed** takes a scary look at what could be "The Golden Age of Story"; fairly new author **M. Bernardo** offers a grim vision of a desperate future and what it might mean to be "Outbound from Put-In-Bay"; and another fairly new author, **David Erik Nelson** returns to our pages with a tale, both poignant and amusing, that reveals why "The New Guys Always Work Overtime."

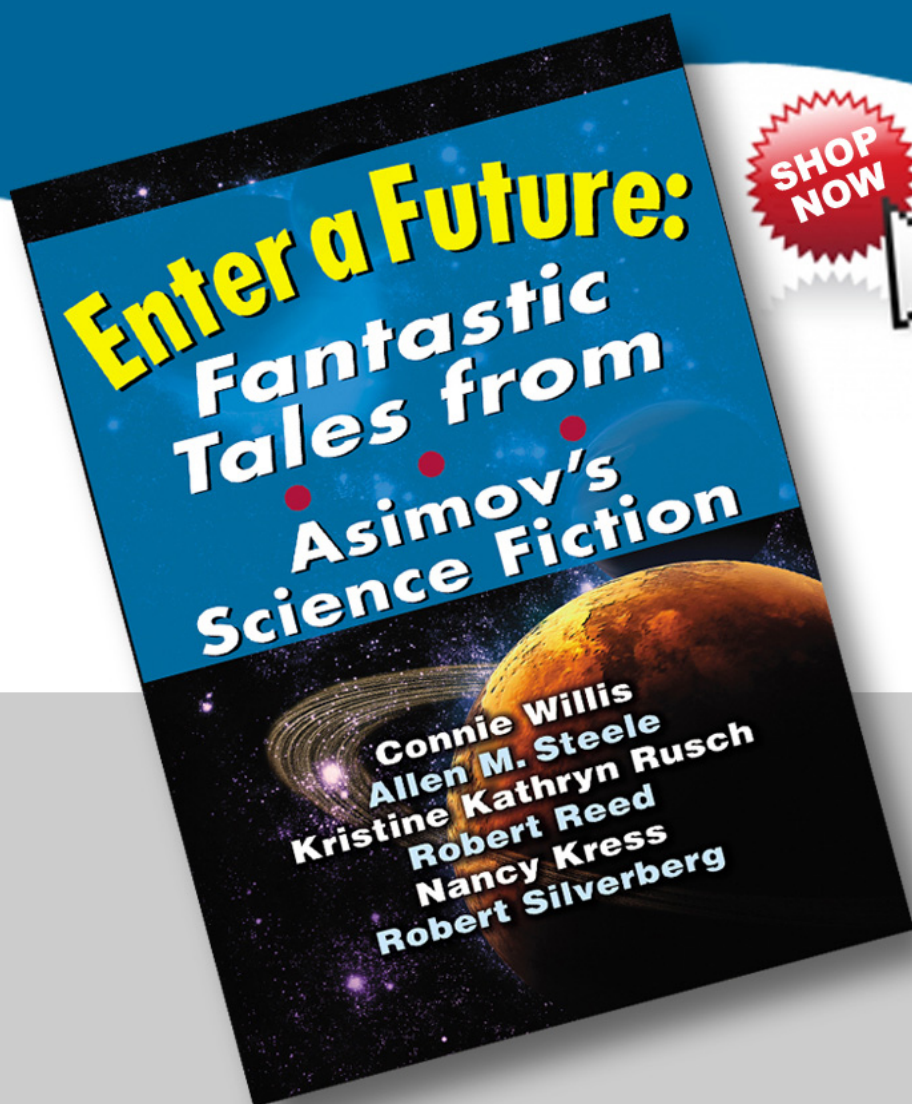
## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** Reflections will take us on an exciting arm-chair journey "Looking for Atlantis"; **Paul DiFilippo's** On Books column sails into uncharted territory as he explores the charms of a D&D novel, an autobiographical manga tale, and other intriguing works; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our February issue on sale at newsstands on December 18, 2012. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle and Kindle Fire, *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, *ebookstore.sony.com's* eReader, *Zinio.com*, and from [magzter.com/magazines/](http://magzter.com/magazines/)

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Naomi Kritzer, Joel Richards, Jason Sanford, Tom Purdom, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Garrett Ashley, Lavie Tidhar, Alexander Jablokov, Michael Cassutt, Neal Asher, Jack Skillingstead, Megan Arkenberg, Benjamin Crowell**, and many others!

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Asimov's is famous for captivating stories and richly rewarding tales by some of today's *best-known SF writers*. Whether they're a jazz musician on a starship, the spirit of H.L. Mencken tangling with a twenty-first century medium, or the new personality of a wayward teenager trying to stake a claim on a body that is and sort of isn't hers, they must all find their way in uncharted territory. Join them on their journey. Turn the electronic page and enter a future!

## PS Art Books

**S**urely you are acquainted with those luxurious “archive” editions of Golden Age and Silver Age comics. Sturdy, well-bound hardcovers with lush paper stock and crisply reproduced and digitally cleaned-up artwork, containing informative and appreciative ancillary material. All the big publishers feature a line of these. Marvel does them. DC does them. Dark Horse does them.

And Pete Crowther does them.

What?!! Little old PS Publishing, better known for its superior and expansive catalog of fiction and its regular original anthology *Postscripts*? How could this be?

Well, it could be because Pete Crowther loves old comics and is a man of consummate vision and professionalism whose passions drive his business. And so now there exists PS Art Books, and what a product they are turning out!

Given the remit of PS Publishing, it follows logically that the comics being reproduced in this new line are all fantastical. And the firm has unearthed a forgotten treasure trove of great work. They have turned to the output of two second-tier publishers who once had flourishing empires and produced much good work, employing the top talent of the era. Those firms are Harvey Comics and ACG.

If folks recall Harvey Comics these days, it’s because of their humorous titles for kids. Richie Rich, Casper, Little Dot, et al. And as for ACG (American Comics Group), they bequeathed us the immortal Herbie Popnecker, the Fat Fury (whose own archives from Dark Horse are well worth your pennies).

But in the 1950s, both firms featured a number of titles in the mold of the more famous ones pioneered by the infamous EC Comics, with their *Tales from the Crypt*, *Weird Science*, and other well-known stablemates.

The Harvey Horrors books include

*Witches Tales* (comprising four PS volumes), *Chamber of Chills* (four volumes), *Tomb of Terror* (three volumes), and *Black Cat Mystery* (four volumes). The ACG books are *Forbidden Worlds* (sixteen volumes) and *Adventures into the Unknown* (twenty-one volumes). All titles comes in three states, ranging from an edition of only twenty-six copies in slipcase with extras, to the still posh baseline incarnation.

I’ve had the privilege to thoroughly read the first volume each of *Witches Tales* (hardcover, £29.99, 288 pages, ISBN 978-1-84863-208-0), *Forbidden Worlds* (hardcover, £29.99, 288 pages, ISBN 978-1-84863-215-8), and *Chamber of Chills* (hardcover, £29.99, 288 pages, ISBN 978-1-84863-160-1), while also gleefully fondling *Tomb of Terror* and *Adventures into the Unknown*. I can report that seldom has so much pleasure been contained in such elegant packages.

Let’s discuss the art first. You’ll encounter beautiful work by such well-known artists as Lee Elias, Al Williamson, Warren Kremer, and Bob Powell. But even when the illustrations derive from the pen of an unknown fellow, the craftsmanship level remains incredibly high. Whereas many of today’s comics seem to me at times to be sloppy, rushed, decompressed, and feature poor draughtsmanship, these old books display an invariant high degree of story-telling proficiency. Not to say that we do not occasionally encounter some botched anatomy or bad staging. But overall, the intelligent and creative panel construction and page design, as well as the realistic depictions of what exists and the marvelously surreal depictions of monsters and imaginary venues, all conduce toward enraptured page turning.

As for the scripting: well, unfortunately the names of most of the writers have been lost to the dustbin of history. But what we do have are the stories on the

page, and they range from genuinely disturbing to outrageously daft. What most strikes me is the lack of boundaries between subgenres. The pop-culture marketplace made no fiddling literary distinctions among weird tropes. This is truly John Clute's big tent of fantastika. Ghosts consort with aliens. Spaceships and wizards coexist. Lost civilizations stand side by side with cursed urban antique stores. It's all grist for the mill, enjoyable both by adolescent and adult audiences of the time. And no punches are pulled, with many a gruesome death and "unhappy" ending. One can see why these comics, led by the excesses of EC, ended up in Congressional hearings.

Appearing in 1951, they hold no personal nostalgia for me, as yet unborn in that year. Still, I found them compelling reading, both on the sheer storytelling plane, and also as brilliant cultural artifacts of another era. When you add in the extras, such as essays by Joe Hill, Ramsey Campbell, and others, and the reproduction of charming advertisements too, you approach reading nirvana. Short of getting your own time-travel machine and voyaging back to 1951, you'll not find the equivalent pleasures elsewhere.

### Steampunk Mockumentary

Perhaps you recall that marvelous tome from 2009, by Paul Guinan and Anna Bennett, entitled *Boilerplate: History's Mechanical Marvel*. A brilliant blend of witty graphics and clever text, the book recounted the "facts" concerning a primitive, Zelig-like robot forgotten by the history books. Now the team of Bennett and Guinan have returned with a similar volume fully the equal of their first masterpiece: *Frank Reade: Adventures in the Age of Invention* (Abrams, hardcover, \$24.95, 176 pages, ISBN 978-0-8109-9661-8). The book even slots neatly into the Boilerplate universe, with guest appearances by Boilerplate and his inventor, Archie Campion.

This time the jumping-off platform for the charming fabulistic excursion consists of the famed dime-novel adven-

tures of boy Edison Frank Reade, Jr. This series was once immensely popular, and in fact received a facsimile reproduction in a number of hardcover volumes put out by Garland Publishing in the 1980s—hardcovers now more rare than the original pulps, if one is to judge by the online marketplace. But Guinan and Bennett remedy this inaccessibility with a generous sampling of the primary texts.

Frank Reade, Jr., was the template for Tom Swift and a host of other young technophilic geniuses who would follow. The thrilling, gadget-heavy exploits of the Reade Family—Frank Sr., Frank Jr., Young Frank, and sister Kate—stretched over seventy years, from circa 1867 to 1937. The authors of this volume collate and extend all the canonical outings into a kind of affecting family saga, fully rationalized and coherent, complete with a secret skeleton in the closet, using the discovery by Kate of hidden journals as their framing device.

The mostly American historical events, with some global detours, of these seven decades are summarized in crisp fashion. Reade's period attitudes involving prevalent prejudices are neither excused nor overly condemned, but dealt with in sensitive fashion that does not detract from the blood and thunder fun. Kate Reade plays a larger part than she did in the original canon, making for an agreeable feminist balance to all the testosterone.

And the illustrations are just superb, a blend of untampered-with originals and seamlessly altered, ingenious compositions that manage to look both fresh and antique. Your eyes will pop at certain double-page spreads that are both purely gorgeous and evocative of proto-SF frissons.

### Three Universes of Short Fiction

The times they are a-changing, especially in the realm of self-publishing. Acres of verbiage have been expended on the pros and cons of authors doing it for themselves. We will have to content ourselves here with saying, "Not all tomes produced in this fashion are valueless." Here's one worthy candidate: *Cherubim-*

bo (Xlibris, trade paper, \$19.99, 190 pages, ISBN 978-1-4628-4731-0) by Gabriel S. De Anda. With prior publication credits in several respectable zines, these stories come pre-vetted by an editorial acumen that is so often absent in other DIY productions. A practicing lawyer, De Anda infuses a couple of pieces with steefal legal expertise, in the vein of Charles Harness. Time travel offers him lots of room for playful speculation, particularly in the emotionally resonant "1969." And some colorful posthumanism informs "My Year To Be A Horse." De Anda's touch is solid yet light-hearted, a winning one-two punch.

In its young existence, Merry Blacksmith Press has already published vibrant collections from Lou Antonelli and Don D'Amassa. Now comes Dan Pearlman's *A Giant in the House & Other Excesses* (trade paper, \$13.95, 198 pages, ISBN 978-0-6125-54713-8), and it's exemplary. Pearlman's writing has never been more polished, nor more neatly carpentered, nor more clever, nor exhibited greater range. Favoring the surreal and absurd over hard SF, his tales inhabit the stranger corners of existence, even when their surface seems purely mimetic, as with "Two-Time Losers," about an adult-education class. The wistful title story might have come from the pen of Italo Calvino, while others conjure up comparisons to John Collier ("Mariah My Soul-Mate") and Rhys Hughes ("Double Occupancy"). All are marked by vividly embellished prose: "The television stood like a toothless mouth retracted against the wall, silent now after disgorging its bellyful of morning news . . ."

Mere mention that the accomplished, always surprising and frequently brilliant Nancy Kress has a new collection out should send *Asimov's* readers running to their online retailers and/or brick-and-mortar bookstores for the latest fix of her clear-eyed futurism. In fact, five of these nine stories first appeared in these pages as a foretaste of *Fountain of Age* (Small Beer Press, trade paper, \$16.00, 384 pages, ISBN 978-1-931520-

45-4). They are "By Fools Like Me," "End Game," "The Erdmann Nexus," the title piece, and "Safeguard." I will assume your familiarity with these, and tell you about the other four. "The Kindness of Strangers" features aliens so nice they are horrible, in a parable about overpopulation. The career of a warped genemodded youngster and his unforeseen place in the larger world is the theme of "First Rites." "Images of Anna" concerns a woman who exhibits a strange relation to cameras and photography. And "Laws of Survival" limns a post-disaster world where love is both a trap and a path out. Together with the five items from this zine, you have a full spectrum of wonders indeed.

### Alien Space Bats Rule!

It's been eight long years since the field was graced with a novel by Tony Daniel, a writer whose short fiction actually debuted in these pages ("The Passage of Night Trains," 1990) and who in that far-off year of 2004 was seen to be moving from strength to strength. In terms of audience, that's almost two generations of readers come into the field who, to their unwitting detriment, might have little awareness of his name. Whether dictates of the marketplace or of personal creativity or both kept him away, we shall not inquire, for such speculation is ultimately bootless. Let us instead rejoice at his return, heralded by the novel *Guardian of Night* (Baen, trade paper, \$13.00, 334 pages, ISBN 978-1-4516-3802-8). It's on a high par with his prior work, though perhaps more streamlined, more compact, and less multivalent.

In the year 2075, Earth is home to a mere 180 million souls. The planet and human civilization have been decimated by alien attacks and plundering. The aliens—humans call them the sceeve, though they call themselves Guardians—come for our gadgets and natural resources, ignoring or peremptorily smushing humans, in the same way we treat ants in our way. Naturally, mankind has

fought back, landing some telling blows but generally outclassed. When the sceeve finally withdrew, humans earned a breathing space. But that interregnum is about to come to an end. The sceeve are closing down the permissible borders of human space. They have dispatched a ship with a megaweapon to threaten our planet. (Those readers who enjoyed the infernal device at the heart of Nick Harkaway's *The Gone-Away World* will be amused to see how Daniel extends the remit of his very similar gadget.) And yet, oddly, the aliens are also showing signs of splintering from within, as a lone Guardian nicknamed "the Poet" runs his pirate broadcasts of "Mutualist treason." In short, Daniel picks a time of maximum uncertainty and chaos for his exciting tale.

We witness all this through a large cast of utterly graspable humans, mostly military and political folks, of all ranks and capacities and temperments. Daniel has a keen eye for the kinds of *in extremis* thinking and behavior that such a wartime situation would engender, acts of desperation, resignation, wild courage, and irrational hope. He paints neither pure villains nor pure heroes, but conflicted individuals each striving to do the best that their own inner light reveals. The reader will certainly inhabit this shattered milieu in very intense fashion, thanks to the believability of these characters.

But Daniel goes a big step further, by sharing the narrative point of view with the Guardians. He builds up the weird physiology and culture and psychology of these aliens with the pure intensity and skill of a Hal Clement. His Guardians have evolved partly in vacuum conditions, and can sustain naked exposure to space. They are "humanoid, bilaterally symmetric, but with a facial muzzle of folded membranes similar to the multiple crenellations of a fruit bat's nose." And they have fluorocarbon blood and communicate by scents!

Our main figure among the Guardians is Arid Ricimer, apostate from the conquering creed of his species. By the time

the novel's done, he's nearly stolen the show from the human characters. And he's exemplified the pitfalls and benefits of always seeking to understand the Other.

Along with his living creations, Daniel does a superb job of extrapolation on vectors of new quantum and nano technology, as testified to not only by the idea-stuffed story but also by his extensive appendix of research.

Critic John Clute in his *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* entry on Tony Daniel refers to the writer's "sustained exuberance," and that quality is manifest here. Daniel's scenario would, in the hands of, say, Cormac McCarthy or Nevil Shute, have resulted in a stick-your-head-in-the-oven tale of helpless resignation to fate. Instead, given Daniel's touch, we get a story which, while still acknowledging the seriousness of affairs, refuses to succumb to despair. This indomitable attitude, I sometimes believe, is what truly separates genre SF from even those mainstream works that employ a high quotient of genuine speculative tropes.

### **The Book That Sailed to Immortality**

Once upon a time, in the far-off year of 1923, a strange handcrafted book was printed, titled *The Ship That Sailed to Mars*. Its author was William Timlin, and his uncanny tale had begun life as a bedtime fable for his children. But two years' worth of repurposed labor had resulted in many beautiful watercolors and plates of calligraphic text, all bound into a luxurious book. Two thousand copies were printed—partly subsidized by Timlin—and made their way into the world. There was never another edition, causing collectors eventually to spend up to fifteen thousand dollars for a copy. The title remained legendary and inaccessible, until now.

All this and much more you can learn from a loving, perspicacious introduction written by a talented modern and simpatico artist named John Howe, an essay that is attached to the Calla Editions reprint of *The Ship That Sailed to Mars* (hardcover, \$40.00, 208 pages, ISBN 978-



1-60660-017-7). Calla is an imprint of our beloved, invaluable Dover Books, the folks responsible for so many other fine reprints. And in fact this facsimile edition reminds me of another title of theirs that I cherished as a teenager: the Kelm-scott Press edition of William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*.

But whereas the Morris reprint was only a sturdy trade paperback, this volume is an oversized hardcover with no beautiful touches missing. Marbled end papers, every page featuring an unprinted verso side, high quality paper stock—it would not surprise me if this edition itself became highly collectible.

But having lavished praise on the production, what of the story and art? Does it fulfill the expectations engendered by rarity?

Howe compares Timlin's paintings to Dulac and Sime, and he's spot on. But there are also flavors of the self-taught splendors of Tolkien and Blake; the high professionalism of Kay Nielsen; the landscapes of Turner and the Hudson Valley

School; and the lush imagery of the Pre-Raphaelites. The Martian Princess lolling on her couch might recall Edward Burne-Jones to you.

And Timlin had a flair for picking just the precisely perfect moments from his tale to illustrate. For instance, the ship flying through a cloud of star-stuff is the quintessential Conceptual Breakthrough instant.

The story itself, likened by Howe to Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1927; 1943), is a brilliant balancing act between allegory and adventure. It's never twee, but always clear-eyed in its hard-won innocence. Savvy readers will hear echoes of E.R. Eddison and Lord Dunsany, as well as Winsor McCay. But most significantly, I think, David Lindsay and his *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) serve as a benchmark. The eccentric vision of a lonely dreamer, made manifest for the illumination of all those lucky enough to encounter it. ○

# TWENTY-SEVENTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

It hardly seems possible that we could be up to the January issue already, but that's what the calendar says—and that means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, which is now in its twenty-seventh year.

**Please vote.** Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you*, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, and cover, you liked best in the year 2012. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp.109-111) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. By the way, we love to get comments about the stories and the magazine, so please free to include them with your ballot. **Please note: unless you request otherwise, comments will be considered for publication with attribution in the editorial that accompanies the announcement of the Readers' Award Results.**

Some cautions: Only material from 2012-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine *Analog*). **Each reader gets one vote, and only one vote.** If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the **Index**. No matter what category you think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than **February 1, 2013**, and should be addressed to: **Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dell Magazines, 267 Broadway, 4th Flr., New York, NY. 10007.** You can also vote online at [asimovssf@dellmagazines.com](mailto:asimovssf@dellmagazines.com), but you must give us your physical mailing address as well. We will also post online ballots at our website, so please check us out at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com).

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so every vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for *your* favorite stories that goes uncounted! So don't put it off—vote today!

BEST NOVELLA:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

BEST POEM:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

BEST COVER:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

As the convention scene hibernates for the holidays, here's a look at the first part of next year. But for now check out PhilCon (where I'll be) or TusCon, and LosCon. Next year, see you at Arisia and Boskone. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

## NOVEMBER 2012

- 9-11—**PhilCon**. For info, write: **Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101**. Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (**Web**) [philcon.org](http://philcon.org). (**E-mail**) [info@philcon.org](mailto:info@philcon.org). Con will be held in: Cherry Hill NJ (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Crowne Plaza. Guests will include: Author Catherynne M. Valente, artist Phil Foglio. The oldest SF, fantasy, and horror convention, since 1936.
- 9-11—**TusCon**. [home.earthlink.net/~basfa](http://home.earthlink.net/~basfa). Hotel Tucson City Center. S. M. Stirling, Ed Bryant, Ian David Lee Summers.
- 9-11—**AnthoCon**. [anthocon.com](http://anthocon.com). Holiday Inn, Portsmouth NH. As in "anthology." Network with writers, artists, and publishers.
- 9-11—**Anime USA**. [animeusa.org](http://animeusa.org). Marriott Wardman Park, Washington DC. "Cavalcade of Whimsy & Riotous Otaku Excess!"
- 8-11—**IlluXCon**. [illuxcon.com](http://illuxcon.com). Altoona PA. For fans and practitioners of the art of illustration, in all its forms.
- 23-25—**LosCon**, 6012 Tyrone Ave., Van Nuys CA 91401. [loscon.org](http://loscon.org). LAX Marriott, Los Angeles CA. V. Vinge, artist Alan White.
- 23-25—**DarkoverCon**, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 10907. [darkovercon.org](http://darkovercon.org). Timonium MD. Work of Bradley, music, spirituality.
- 23-25—**Chicago TARDIS**, Box 2660, Glen Ellyn IL 60138. [chicagotardis.com](http://chicagotardis.com). Westin, Lombard (Chicago) IL. S. Aldred. Doctor Who.
- 30-Dec. 2—**SMOFCon**, c/o Box 310, Huntington Valley PA 19006. [smofcon30.org](http://smofcon30.org). Philadelphia PA. Con organizers talk shop.

## JANUARY 2013

- 11-13—**IllogiCon**. [illogicon.com](http://illogicon.com). Embassy Suites, Research Triangle Park NC. Author Tim Powers, webcomics' Garth Graham.
- 18-20—**MarsCon**. [marscon.net](http://marscon.net). Crowne Plaza, Williamsburg VA. Writers David B. Coe and Tamora Pierce, artist Peter Mohrbacher.
- 18-21—**Arisia**, Box 391596, Cambridge MA 02139. [arisia.org](http://arisia.org). Westin, Boston MA. Steven Barnes, T. Due, Roger Dean, Emerald Rose.

## FEBRUARY 2013

- 15-17—**Boskone**, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. [boskone.org](http://boskone.org). Westin, Boston MA. V. Vinge, L. Snellings, J. Hertz, H. Dale.
- 15-17—**FarPoint**, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. [farpointcon.com](http://farpointcon.com). Crowne Plaza, Timonium MD. L. Arenburg. Trek, SF media.
- 20-24—**ICFA**, Box 3701, Youngstown OH 44513. [iafa.org](http://iafa.org). Airport Marriott, Orlando FL. N. Gaiman, Kij Johnson. Academic meet.
- 22-24—**MystiCon**, 3735 Franklin Rd. SW, Roanoke VA 24014. [mysticon-va.com](http://mysticon-va.com). Holiday Inn Tanglewood. O. S. Card, L. Elmore.
- 22-24—**Redemption**, Ian Murphy, 61 Chaucer Rd., Farnborough Hants. GU14 8SP, UK. [smofcon.com/redemption](http://smofcon.com/redemption). Coventry UK.

## MARCH 2013

- 1-3—**StellarCon**, Box F4, EUC, UNCG, Greensboro NC 27413. [stellarcon.org](http://stellarcon.org). Greensboro NC. The Banes, Wold, Pederson, Allegra.
- 15-17—**LunaCon**, c/o Box 432, Bronx NY 10465. [lunacon.org](http://lunacon.org). Hilton, Rye Town NY. Guests TBA. One of the old-time cons.
- 22-24—**iCon**, c/o Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. [iconsf.org](http://iconsf.org). Hofstra U., Long Island NY. Guests TBA. Big on-campus event.
- 29-31—**MarCon**, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214. [marcon.org](http://marcon.org). Hyatt. Joe Haldeman, F. Paul Wilson, J. Dee. Finally back in March.
- 29-31—**MiniCon**, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408. [mnstf.org/minicon48](http://mnstf.org/minicon48). Doubletree, Bloomington MN. J. Czerneda, R. Tatge.

## APRIL 2013

- 5-7—**RavenCon**, Box 36420, Richmond VA 23235. [ravencon.com](http://ravencon.com). Holiday Inn Select Koger Center. K. J. Anderson, R. Moesta.

## MAY 2013

- 17-20—**CostumeCon**, 1218 Florence Ave., Colorado Springs CO 80905. [cc31denver.com](http://cc31denver.com). Aurora CO. Masqueraders' annual con.
- 24-26—**Anime Boston**, Box 1843, New York NY 10150. [animeboston.com](http://animeboston.com). Hynes Convention Center, Boston MA. Note new weekend.
- 24-27—**BaltiCon**, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. [balticon.org](http://balticon.org). Marriot, Hunt Valley MD. Joe Haldeman, N. Okorafor.

## AUGUST 2013

- 29-Sep. 2—**Lone Star Con 3**, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. [lonestarcon3.org](http://lonestarcon3.org). San Antonio TX. The World SF Convention. \$160+.

## AUGUST 2014

- 14-18—**LonCon 3**, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. [loncon3.org](http://loncon3.org). Docklands, London UK. The WorldCon. £95/US\$160.

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