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SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

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13



Amethyst Loscocco • B. Morris Allen • Eugene Morgulis • Evan Dicken • Frank Oreto
Holly Schofield • Jennifer Noelle Welch • Marco Panessa • Nancy Waldman • Steve Toase

Fantasy Scroll Magazine
Speculative Fiction — Issue #13 — June 2016

**Featuring works by Amethyst Loscocco, B. Morris Allen, Eugene Morgulis,
Evan Dicken, Frank Oreto, Holly Schofield, Jennifer Noelle Welch,
Marco Panessa, Nancy Waldman, Steve Toase**

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Editorial, June 2016

Iulian Ionescu

Welcome to Issue #13 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

Ladies and gentlemen—welcome to the summer. It's finally here, hot and steamy. Well, at least in the US Northeast. Between Copa Americana, The Euro 2016, the upcoming Olympics, and the many other events going on at the same time, it seems like this is the summer of sports.

I hope our Issue 13 will manage to distract you from all that and, at least for a few hours a day, emerge you into a world of wonder. As you will see, this issue doesn't have a cohesive theme, but jumps between sci-fi, fantasy, and horror, hoping to keep you on edge, reading through the end.

We start with Marco Panessa's "*TOP SECRET: The Union Station Hypersphere Incident*." Science buffs will love this story and will probably comment that, all jokes aside, what's described in there is actually possible.

"*The Stubbornness of Wizards*" by Eugene Morgulis continues the master-apprentice theme from our previous issue, and follows a young wizard with really strong opinions.

B. Morris Allen delights us with his fast-paced story, "*O!*," a short, yet poignant little tale.

Next is a truly creepy flash story by Steve Toase called "*Peeling Skin*." The title says it all. Or does it?

"*My Mother After Life*" by Amethyst Loscocco follows—another flash story in this issue. "*No Gods but Men*" is next, a fantasy short story by Evan Dicken.

Holly Schofield's story "*Standard Deviant*" is next, a reprint from *Lightspeed Magazine*'s special issue, "Women Destroy Science Fiction."

"Murmuration" by Jennifer Noelle Welch, and "Phase II" by Frank Oreto are next. There are two very different stories that will surely entertain you.

The last short story in this issue is "*Bedroom Community*," an apocalyptic little tale about human interaction.

We end the fiction section with another installment of Shamrock, the graphic novel by Josh Brown with art by Alberto Hernandez. We are at episode 8—*Illusion*.

In the non-fiction section, we've included a movie review for "*The Curse of the Sleeping Beauty*," directed by Pearry Reginald Teo, and a movie review for Madeline Ashby's "*Company Town*." Because our non-fiction editor, Amber, had some health issues, we decided to keep the interviews for next time. We wish her a speedy recovery!

Well, that's all folks. Enjoy the summer,
enjoy the games, and, most of all, enjoy our
Issue 13!

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TOP SECRET: The Union Station Hypersphere Incident

Marco Panessa

Commander Bowman:

I have confirmed that five of our operatives sacrificed their lives to acquire this document. Four were summarily shot upon capture; the last delivered this document to the drop point and swallowed her standard-issue cyanide capsule as the Special Forces converged. But after reading this document—just a summary of the official report given to the President, said to run some two thousand pages—I hope you will agree that five lives were an acceptable loss. We cannot let their plans come to fruition. If they succeed . . . Henry, I don't see how even one person in the whole world could survive. We need to do something. Tonight.

Lt. Commander Cassandra Langley



Introduction

To the attention of the President of the United States, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Ranking Members of the House and Senate Intelligence and Armed Services Committees, and the Secretaries of Defense and Homeland Security:

Please find attached a summary of the Commission's report on the events of 23 February 2025, in and around Union Station, Washington, D.C., focusing primarily on the five seconds during which the anomaly manifested, secondly on the aftereffects of the anomaly's passage through our universe, and thirdly on the implications and the Commission's recommended action plan. The Commission would like to thank the "Mesa Double-Diamond" group at Los Alamos for their mathematical assistance, particularly Dr. Abbott, whose background in superunification physics was indispensable to our effort to complete this report within two years of the anomaly's appearance (hereafter the "Incident"). Furthermore, the Commission would like to thank the generosity of Goddard Space Flight Center, in Greenbelt, Maryland, for providing the Commission with a sequestered office environment and generous lab facilities in which to perform certain experiments and calculations without fear of disturbance, and we hope that our mutual cooperation may continue as the next steps are taken.

The Commission is hereby dissolved and may not be reconvened, nor may its members make any contact with one another for as long as they live, and the same said for their successors, heirs, executors of their estates, and all other such parties, pursuant to Emergency Regulation OS-999-AAA (the "Blank Flag" doctrine). Thank you for your time.



Timeline of the Incident

23 February 2025, 08:44:15.03 — In the Main Hall of Union Station in Washington, D.C., a mote of blue material becomes visible to four offsite-linked security cameras operated by Shake Shack and Starbucks retail locations and three cameras operated by Amtrak security personnel.

08:44:15.05 (backdated) — The Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) in Hanford, Washington State, detects statistically significant gravitational waves in the direction of the nation's capital.

08:44:15.80 — The mote of blue material has expanded into what is now clearly a sphere. The sphere is growing, its blue color brightening over time.

08:44:16 — The three mentally competent eyewitnesses begin to pass through the doors at the far end of the West Hall and lay eyes upon the anomaly, while it is still growing. Their names are Duncan Marshall (Witness 101), Beverly Jackson (Witness 280), and Katherine Bourn (Witness 599).

08:44:17.50 — The blue sphere reaches its maximum radius, abruptly turns red, and begins to shrink. All electrical devices within a two block radius, including the security cameras aimed at the anomaly, cease to function at once. The competent eyewitnesses report a sensation of extreme vertigo which briefly incapacitates Witness 101 and Witness 599.

08:44:17.80 — Security cameras mounted in the vicinity of the Capitol Building, several blocks south of Union Station, record an air pressure shockwave rising over the tree line that impedes their direct observation of the station. This is the best estimate for when Union Station begins to collapse.

08:44:19 — Witness 280 recovers from her bout of vertigo and looks down the length of the West Hall as the roof starts collapsing. She reports seeing the anomaly glowing red and continuing to shrink before turning to run.

08:44:19.97 (calculated) — The anomaly compresses from a sphere back down to a point and disappears.

08:44:20-25 — Union Station completely collapses.

08:44:30 — The first emergency calls are made by citizens who see the debris plume over the site of the station from some distance away, as the phones of all those close enough to have seen the collapse firsthand have been disabled.

08:46:30 — District of Columbia police officers stationed outside the radius of electrical failure are the first emergency responders to reach the scene. They report widespread panic on the periphery but an eerie calm closer to the wreckage. Many hundreds of individuals near the station are physically unharmed but present catatonic symptoms. Police responders, focused upon the search for survivors beneath the ruins, attempt to command these individuals to move out of the perimeter, but these individuals no longer respond to words, or, in extreme cases, any outside stimuli.

08:48:00 — The President is informed and declares a state of emergency in and around the District of Columbia and immediate adjustment of defense posture to DEFCON 3. The working theory at this point, which the Commission recommends remain the public explanation for the Incident, is that a very large bomb has detonated in Union Station during the morning rush hour.

09:12:00 — The first Central Intelligence Agency counterterrorism agents arrive on the scene and liaise with District responders and Capitol Police forces. A significant perimeter is established around the remains of Union Station, encompassing all the areas to which civilians near the station were temporarily evacuated.

09:25:00 — It becomes clear to federal responders that the station's collapse was not preceded by an explosion or any reports of architectural decay. The President is informed that the disaster was neither a structural accident nor an act of terrorism with conventional weapons.

09:29:00 — On the orders of the President and his national security advisors, all surviving witnesses within the cordoned-off perimeter are informed that they will be debriefed in the West Virginia black site codenamed "Dark Current." Central Intelligence Agency protective custody vehicles are dispatched to the scene to process them.

09:45:00 — One hour following the Incident, all survivors within the perimeter have been removed from the scene, the fire department is scouring the wreckage for victims in conjunction with federal counterterrorism investigators, downtown Washington street traffic is banned, mandatory evacuations have begun in a one-mile circle around Union Station, precautionary evacuations have begun one to three miles from Union Station, and the special standby facility codenamed "Svalbard" has been activated at Goddard Space Flight Center.

10:15:00 — The President charges [Commissioner 1] with assembling a "Blank Flag" task force Commission to investigate the Incident, review the defense vulnerabilities that were

exploited by its instigators, recommend solutions to those vulnerabilities, and supply the President with action plans for a proportionate military response.



Summary of Findings

On 23 February 2025, beginning at 08:44:15 in the Main Hall of Union Station in downtown Washington, D.C., approximately thirty-six feet in from the front doors, fifteen feet from the left-hand entrance to the West Hall, and centered six feet in the air, a four-dimensional object passed through our universe.

The object manifested first as a point, and over the course of two and a half seconds, this point grew into a sphere whose radius increased with time until it reached a maximum width of four feet and seven inches. Over the following two and a half seconds, the sphere shrank back to a point and disappeared. Most of Union Station collapsed immediately following the Incident, but seven security cameras witnessed the anomaly and transmitted their data to external servers before the destruction of the building. An indeterminate number of closed-circuit cameras were later established to have been facing the anomaly, and some were recovered from the wreckage, but electromagnetic disturbances created by the object had wiped their memory.

Some 1,940 people were present in Union Station or its immediate vicinity at the time of the Incident. The Commission has established that 844 of the fatalities from the Incident were caused by the collapse of Union Station, while the other 525 were apparently killed by the anomaly's presence itself. The remaining 571 individuals in the vicinity were all placed under protective detainment by the Department of Homeland Security and have been well cared for in New Groom, Nevada. All but a few dozen of those individuals, who were generally of sound mind and body, have been rendered mentally incompetent by their experiences. The Commission established that those few dozen who escaped with their minds intact were all at the outer perimeter of the disaster zone.

Three eyewitnesses were facing the spot where the anomaly manifested while still standing far enough away not to suffer adverse psychological effects. These three competent witnesses were all about to enter the station's side entrance, standing within a few feet of the doors that faced down the long and narrow West Hall toward the site of the anomaly in the Main Hall. This was later established to be the longest possible sightline onto the anomaly from outside the footprint of the station's wreckage. These eyewitness accounts, in conjunction with the video

evidence and the classified LIGO report detailing gravitational waves detected in association with the Incident (Gregg et al. 2025), form the basis of the Commission's conclusions about the physical nature of the object and where it might have come from.

It is the Commission's belief that the object that triggered the Incident was a four-dimensional hypersphere, passing through our universe of three spatial dimensions. The hypersphere's destabilization of electromagnetic forces in its vicinity, leading to the collapse of Union Station and the incapacitation of almost everybody within five hundred feet of its locus, can be ascribed to the severe shearing in local space-time exerted by the incredible energies necessary to force the hypersphere to cross our three-dimensional space, without resorting to either supernatural explanations or any conscious malice on the part of the hypersphere itself. Finally, the Commission contends that the hypersphere was deliberately launched by some entity residing in another three-dimensional universe entirely distinct from our own, and that the hypersphere was aimed at yet a third entirely distinct universe, for purposes as yet unknown.



The Shape of the Anomaly

The idea of "other dimensions" has long been a familiar trope in popular culture, but the layman's conception of this term is inaccurate. When the average American speaks of "other dimensions," they are generally referring to whole parallel worlds, perhaps populated by supernatural or occult phenomena, but still structured fundamentally along a three-dimensional pattern, and therefore amenable to exploration by a member of our species who manages to cross over to that fantastical place. Before going further, it is essential to dispel this notion.

Leaving aside the dimension of time (see Appendices F and G for primers on the relevant general relativity field equations), let us consider the three spatial dimensions in which human beings exist. A dimension is defined as a unique direction in which one can travel. If one is restricted to stepping left or right, there is no way to move backward or forward. Thus we say that these two directions are district dimensions. By adding vertical height, this description covers all three dimensions in which human beings can travel.

Until the Incident, scientists and theoreticians were more or less convinced that reality contained no more than three spatial dimensions, as demonstrated by the 2023 Berlin symposia that disproved string theory. But a rich mathematical heritage exists, extending geometry into four dimensions, and higher numbers besides. The Commission has drawn upon the expertise of

Dr. Abbott and his group at Los Alamos National Laboratory to make conclusions about the physical nature of the anomaly and the type of higher-dimensional space-time from which it may have originated.

The basic shapes in the five lowest dimensions are a point (zero dimensions), a line (one dimension), a circle (two), a sphere (three), and a hypersphere (four). It will prove instructive to consider a cross-section of each shape, that is, what a slice of each shape looks like. For instance, a slice taken out of a cube parallel to any of the cube's faces will be a square. Any slice taken through a circle will be a line, and any slice taken through a sphere will be a circle. A cross-section of any shape appears to be one dimension lower than the shape from which the slice was taken. It is therefore conjectured that a cross-section taken through a four-dimensional hypersphere will be a three-dimensional sphere.

Dr. Abbott and his affiliates at Los Alamos have established a canonical interpretation of how human beings would perceive a hypersphere passing through our universe, an interpretation that exactly matches the surviving camera feeds and descriptions of the object put forward by the three mentally sound witnesses. The interpretation, which is by analogy, is as follows.

Imagine a species of two-dimensional beings, confined to the surface of a pool of water. Unable to look underwater or above the surface, these beings perceive their entire universe as a multitude of other two-dimensional shapes. Suppose a sphere is held at rest just touching the water's surface. The two-dimensional beings will see the very bottommost point, the sphere's south pole, as a dot in their flat world.

Now consider letting the sphere sink into the water. As the sphere descends, the two-dimensional beings will perceive the dot of the sphere's south pole widening into a circle, the cross-sectional slice of the sphere. The circle will widen and widen until the sphere is half-submerged, at which time the radius of the circle they can see will be equal to the radius of the whole sphere. Then, as the sphere sinks further, the beings will perceive the circle shrinking again back to a point, before it vanishes altogether. The two-dimensional beings observed a circle appear out of nowhere, grow, shrink again, and then disappear, but as three-dimensional beings, we understand that they have merely seen a sphere sink unimpeded through the water's surface. The size and shape of the sphere have not changed in three dimensions, but the two-dimensional beings saw a series of circles that varied with time—the cross sections of the sphere.

The hypersphere manifested within our universe, in Union Station at 08:44:15 on the morning of the Incident, in a precisely analogous fashion. Camera recordings and eyewitness testimony describe an object that appeared as a point out of nowhere, ballooned into a sphere with a maximum radius of four feet seven inches, and then shrank back down to a point and

disappeared. Recalling that a slice through a hypersphere is a three-dimensional sphere, we can look back at the analogy of how the flat beings perceived a sphere passing through their two-dimensional universe, and conclude that we would perceive a hypersphere passing through our three-dimensional universe exactly as described by the competent witnesses of the Incident. This constitutes sufficient proof as far as the Los Alamos working group is concerned that the anomaly was a hypersphere, and after reviewing the relevant mathematics (see Appendix B, pages 5-21), the Commission concludes the same.



Damage Assessment of the Incident

The anomaly inflicted three principal categories of damage: the destabilization of macroscopic physical structures (namely the collapse of Union Station), the deactivation of all electronic devices within about one thousand feet of the hypersphere's locus, and the mental incapacitation of most people closer than five hundred feet. Evidence reflecting each category of damage, while sometimes difficult to untangle from the greater chaos of the Incident, has led the Commission to certain conclusions about the structure of the higher-dimensional meta-reality within which our three-dimensional universe apparently rests. Simulations and calculations performed at the special standby facility codenamed "Svalbard" in Goddard Space Flight Center have converged upon a system of hypotheses which would, in conjunction, explain the damage wrought by the appearance and subsequent disappearance of the hypersphere.

The easiest damage mechanism to understand is the shockwave that collapsed Union Station. Backdating Capitol Building security camera footage, the shock front appears to have triggered immediately following the moment the hypersphere achieved its maximum radius and started shrinking. Corroborated by the classified measurements by the LIGO instrument in Hanford, Washington (Gregg et al. 2025), the prevailing explanation is that the hypersphere caused a severe, localized gravitational disturbance as it began exiting our universe; that is, as the sphere began to shrink.

To understand why this would occur, let us return to our analogy of two dimensional beings on the surface of a pool of water. Envision dropping a sphere into the water from some height. The two-dimensional beings will see a series of circular cross sections of the sphere, as previously argued, but additionally the surface of the water will ripple and splash as the sphere

impacts. Moving along a fourth-dimension axis perpendicular our universe, the hypersphere caused analogous gravitational rippling in the fabric of space-time around Union Station.

These gravity waves were severe enough close to the anomaly to shear apart local collections of matter near the anomaly's point of emergence. The station collapsed because local space-time was so warped by the hypersphere's energy that the direction of strongest gravity no longer pointed uniformly down. The entire station would have been pulled in multiple other directions at once, the chaotic forces breaking apart its support structures until the station crashed in a jumble to the ground.

The electromagnetic pulse that disabled all electrical devices within a radius of several hundred yards is currently beyond the reach of the Commission's scientific expertise. [Commissioner 7] has advanced the theory that large gravitational shearing may violate locality and prevent adjacent particles from exchanging photons, leading to a breakdown in any nearby conductive device experiencing a current. To examine the matter, a vacant warehouse at Goddard Space Flight Center was converted into an advanced high-energy laboratory for a number of experiments meant to probe how rapid gravitational disturbances affect electromagnetic forces. Unfortunately, laboratory-scale science is currently incapable of producing gravitational disturbances large enough for such tests. Until we develop the capability to move objects along the fourth spatial dimension, we cannot test this theory further.

Finally, there is the peculiar matter of all survivors within a certain distance of the anomaly experiencing mental breakdowns from which not one of them has recovered as of this writing. The Commission admits this is the thorniest issue of all, and no testable explanation has been advanced as to why this mass incapacitation occurred. However, the Commission posits that the same gravitational disturbance which likely triggered the electromagnetic pulse is probably also responsible for the incapacitation of the bystanders in the Incident. Since no tests can be conducted, the Commission recommends focusing on the hypersphere's physical damage mechanisms rather than dwelling on this mystery.

[Commissioner 25] has written a separate appendix on this issue which [pronoun redacted] insisted be included with this report, without which [Commissioner 25] would have refused to sign off on these findings. The Commission as a whole is of the belief that [Commissioner 25]'s appendix represents superstition at best and fearmongering at worst, and recommends that no policy decisions be based on its credulous speculations.



Origins of the Anomaly

There is currently no means by which we can prevent a four-dimensional object from passing through our three-dimensional universe. Since we lack the currently-unimaginable ability to construct a four-dimensional barrier, we are utterly defenseless against the ravages of any other such anomaly impinging upon our world.

Given that we cannot yet mount such a defense, the next best option is to develop a theory as to why the hypersphere appeared where it did, and whether that indicates certain other locations are also in danger. This is the point of gravest security concern: upon reviewing the evidence, the Commission concludes that the hypersphere was intentionally launched by other intelligent beings.

Our three-dimensional universe is vast beyond description, an inexpressible volume of empty space dotted here and there with stars and planets so tiny when measured against the breadth of all things that an all-seeing God would find such heavenly bodies smaller than we find electrons and protons. There is no reason to suppose a four-dimensional object passing through our universe would just happen to manifest near a galaxy, let alone a star, let alone a world, let alone less than two miles from the White House, the Capitol Building, and the Supreme Court. The odds of a hypersphere passing through our universe inside Union Station by pure chance are miniscule to the point of absurdity.

It is therefore clear to the Commission that the hypersphere emerged in Union Station because it was directed there purposefully. This implies—and the Commission acknowledges the enormity of this statement, but implores the President not to dismiss it—that someplace else in the higher-dimensional reality of which our three-dimensional universe is but a sliver, there exists an alien race of unspeakable power, possessing the ability to launch objects along the fourth spatial dimension.

Los Alamos National Laboratory's "Mesa Double-Diamond" group, led by Dr. Abbott, has calculated the minimum energy production required to launch the hypersphere. If we assume the launching civilization also lives in a three-dimensional universe, one totally distinct from ours and which is separated from our universe by some distance along the fourth dimension, the energy necessary to move the hypersphere to the immediately "adjacent" universe (the lowest-energy assumption) is no less than ten to the fifty-eight joules, or about one-quarter the per-second energy output of an entire galaxy. If the launching civilization is farther away in the fourth dimension, the energy required to launch the hypersphere and have it reach our universe would increase exponentially. In Appendix A, [Commissioner 6] reports that for a median reasonable distance of the launching civilization from our universe, the energy required to launch

the hypersphere is in excess of ten to the seventy joules, or about ten times the per-second energy output of all the galaxies in our universe combined.

The Commission contends, in other words, that there must exist a universe hosting a civilization of such breathtaking scope that every last star in every last galaxy that universe contains has been yoked to an engine of unspeakable might, capturing and harnessing every last drop of energy from all those multitudes of heavenly bodies. That energy—the energy of a universe—was then expended to propel a four-dimensional hypersphere out of their realm, across an unknown number of intervening universes, and then through our own.

The Commission hopes that the awe-inspiring enormity of this conclusion is clear. The first question must be: *why*? Why expend whole universe's worth of energy for the singular purpose of launching a hypersphere—for all that eyewitness accounts and camera recordings can tell, just a solid piece of unidentified metal in four dimensions—out of their very universe and have it pass through our own? In comparison to such all-powerful beings, humans are amoebae gliding underfoot. Why propel the hypersphere through our universe in such close proximity to the seat of the United States government?

Earth, and the United States in particular, must for some reason be worth noticing. [Commissioner 2] theorizes that the hypersphere may have been a signal flare merely indicating that the civilization exists, across almost unbreakable boundaries of space and time. If this theory is correct, perhaps the civilization hopes that we will study the physics of the Incident and emulate their tremendous power output, allowing us to launch four-dimensional objects of our own. The energy required scales non-linearly with the mass of the object; directing a four-dimensional construct with the radius of a dust grain back toward the hypersphere's origin universe could require as little as ten to the twenty-four joules, or a hundredth of the Sun's per-second energy output. Assuming the civilization is watching for our reply, they may be able to detect our trans-universal dust grain, and peaceful communications could be established.

Unfortunately, the Commission as a whole has reached a less pleasant conclusion. Unless the launching civilization possesses such a surfeit of available energy that they think nothing of squandering a whole universe brimming with stars and galaxies, if they intended to signal peacefully to Earth, they should have propelled the hypersphere with just enough energy for it to come to a halt with part of its cross-section impinging on our universe, and no farther. Instead, the anomaly passed through our universe without measurably slowing down, continuing along its fourth-dimensional trajectory. This implies it was aimed somewhere else.

It is the Commission's belief that the hypersphere was a weapon. The launching civilization fired it at some other universe beyond our own in the fourth-dimensional direction, with the

intent that the hypersphere would deliver either its remaining kinetic energy or activate some unknown offensive capability upon reaching/impacting its target. [Commissioner 6] has computed that for a reasonable estimate of the fourth-dimensional distance the hypersphere might cover after exiting our universe, the amount of energy it could deliver to its target may be in excess of ten to the seventy-five joules. The resultant explosion would be enough to disintegrate whole superclusters of galaxies; if the target universe is relatively close by, the hypersphere might obliterate absolutely everything there. The hypersphere could kill universes.

Los Alamos has calculated that for certain configurations of higher-dimensional reality, the emergence point of the hypersphere in the intervening universes of its trajectory could be chosen freely, regardless of its destination. Having somehow become aware of Earth's existence, the launching civilization must therefore have chosen a trajectory for their weapon which would impinge upon our universe close to our center of government as a kind of warning shot, a secondary objective for the hypersphere on the way to its primary target. The Commission is in general agreement that they must find humanity's level of technological advancement threatening, and the Incident was meant to intimidate us away from developing the energy production necessary to force an object into other universes, the minimum achievement of ours which would present a threat to their security.



The Commission's Recommendation to the President

If the passage of the hypersphere through Union Station was meant to terrorize humanity into curtailing our technological advancement, the launching civilization must be considered an adversary of the United States. As such, all reasonable and prudent measures must be taken to signal that we shall not tolerate such an unprovoked attack, and that the United States shall undertake a proportionate response if necessary.

Neither the United States nor Earth at large produces enough energy to press objects across the fourth-dimensional barrier into other universes. Overcoming this impediment is essential to showing the launching civilization that we shall not cower before their threats. To this end, the Commission humbly recommends that the President approve the Action Plan presented in Section 3. It is broadly in three steps, as follows:

Phase 1. Expand the special standby facility codenamed "Svalbard" at Goddard Space Flight Center into a high-energy physics laboratory, hiring experts from around the world to clarify the science, and in particular the energy requirements, of trans-dimensional motion.

Phase 2. By the year 2100, develop a network of fusion reactors capable of outputting ten to the twenty watts of electrical power, all to be devoted to tests of a four-dimensional launching apparatus developed under the leadership of the Svalbard facility's engineers and scientists.

Phase 3. By the year 2127, in one century, successfully construct a four-dimensional object of macroscopic size (minimally the size of a dust grain) and imbue it with sufficient energy from the dedicated fusion reactors to propel it into the universe whose civilization attacked the United States during the Incident.

The Commission is unsympathetic to complaints from certain quarters that this Action Plan strays outside the realms to which national defense has traditionally been restricted. Long ago, there was no such thing as war on the seas, or in the air, or in space. As our technology improves, old boundaries fade. Our new foe has fought in this combat theater longer than humanity, but has the United States not defeated one superior adversary after another for two hundred and fifty years? The crude threats of aliens who fear our progress must not dissuade us. Never shall the United States accept a position of weakness. Never shall the United States refuse to fight for our freedom to grow and thrive.



Cassie:

You, me, Nova Squad. Ten days from now, outside Helena in the prearranged place. Bring the coordinates of Goddard Space Flight Center. We'll drive to Malmstrom Air Force Base from there. Security shouldn't be able to stop us. They let 19-year-olds guard the nukes, these days.

Henry



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Marco Panessa is a physicist, educator, and author. His short fiction has appeared in *Escape Pod*. He currently maintains affiliations with American University and Catholic University of America, and has performed research at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. On the rare occasion he is not teaching or writing, Marco enjoys traveling and impulse-buying more books than he will ever have time to read. He lives with his fiancée in Washington, DC.

The Stubbornness of Wizards

Eugene Morgulis

We wizards are a stubborn lot, but it is from our stubbornness that we draw our power. To demonstrate what I mean, I shall relate the story of a young wizard-in-training.

Now then.

I awoke one spring morning to a knock at my cottage door. I was not yet in a mood to get up, much less to take visitors, so I coaxed a fire into the stove and waited in bed for my tea kettle to come to a boil. Only once I had finished my tea (made of leaves I blew in on an oriental wind) and drained the last few drops of coziness from my bed, only then and not a moment sooner, did I rise to greet my early-morning visitor, who I half-expected to be gone. It was two hours later, after all.

But no. There at my doorstep stood a young girl, as pale and lonesome as the last daisy petal. So small that she barely reached the tip of my beard.

"Are you Mr. Grindleflog?" she asked.

"I am the Great Wizard Grindleflog, if that's what you're asking. And you are?"

"Dora."

"Fine," I said. "If you have business, then let me hear it."

Of all the terrible qualities children possess, the worst is shyness. A child always has something to say, but when you stick your face right up to theirs and shout "Out with it!" they either cry or go running behind their mothers' skirts. Dora, I will admit, was not shy in the least. To the contrary, she regarded me directly with clear blue eyes and pleaded her case concisely.

She told me that, for as long as she could remember (which could not have been that long) she had a knack for talking to animals, which is of course an early manifestation of magical acumen. Dora thought nothing unusual of this gift, and it went unnoticed, until Dora's parents stumbled upon her playing the perfect host to a table of squirrels, nodding along with their gossip and dutifully refilling their thimbles with acorn tea. After this and several other fantastical events, it was strongly suggested that Dora seek tutelage in the ways of magic, lest she become a danger to herself or others. In fact, she was not to return home until she did. After wandering alone for several days, a traveler pointed her in my direction. So, here she was.

"Please, Mr. Grindleflog," she said. "I would very much like to be a great wizard like you. May I stay here and be your student?"

Well. You will not be surprised to learn that, due to their inherent stubbornness, wizards make terrible students. Though we all share a love of learning, we also loathe instruction. For instruction requires a relationship built upon a mutually agreed superiority, master to pupil, which no young wizard can abide. To wit, I do not recall my own mentor fondly, and though I have offered wise counsel to a select few over the years, I long ago resolved not to take on any students. And certainly no lodgers.

I explained all this to the girl at my doorstep. "So you see, young lady," I said, "my mind is made up against it, and was so long before you asked, long before you were even born. I therefore reject your request for tutelage." With a wave of my hand, I opened the gate behind her. "Good day, Dora."

The girl swallowed and blinked, but did not otherwise budge.

"I came to learn all you can teach me," she said, "and I will not leave until I do." Her eyes narrowed. "You should know," she added, "that I am as stubborn as a rock."

I narrowed my eyes to match. "Well too bad for you, little Miss, for I am stubbornner than a rock."

To drive the point home, I motioned across my lawn to the child-sized boulder that resided there. With a flick of my wrist, I sent its bulk soaring into the next field. It landed several seconds hence with a muted whump.

Dora looked toward it and said nothing for a time, listening to the late morning breeze that blew in her face. Finally, with a deep sympathetic sigh, she whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," I told her.

"Not you," she shot back. "I was apologizing to the rock, which wanted nothing more than to rest there in the lovely grass. But you threw it away without even asking."

I found Dora's naïveté amusing enough to overlook her indignance. "Precious child," I tutted, "a wizard does not ask. A wizard commands. The rock may have wanted to stay put, but I wanted to see it fly. It is a matter of will, you see. Yours must be the strongest. Stronger than the rock. Stronger than the volcano that forged it, the earthquake that moved it, and the wind that weathered it. Ten thousand circumstances conspired to set the rock there, precisely there, and nowhere else. A wizard's will dwarfs them all."

I then leaned down so that my face was close to hers, and spoke in a deep soft voice so as not to frighten her. "It is presently my will," I said, "that you leave my property."

Hearing this, Dora turned and proceeded down the walkway, her head held high. A little red squirrel peeked back at me from Dora's thicket of black hair. As soon as she passed the gate, the child pirouetted to face me again.

"I will respect your wishes," she called from the road. "But it is still *my* will that you teach me how to be a wizard. If you will not do that today, then I shall wait here until you change your mind."

I had not laughed so hard in years. "Haven't you been listening, dear girl? A wizard never changes his mind. He changes the world to match his mind."

"His or *her* mind," chirped Dora.

"Yes. His or her mind," I corrected myself.

As I closed the door, I became aware of two things. The first was that it had been over sixty years since I last corrected myself. The second was that the correction had been entirely the girl's doing, which meant that she was powerful indeed. I would have to be careful.



I went to bed early that night, and called down a gentle rain to lull me to sleep. I let it pour all night long, and well into the next morning, enjoying its pleasant patter on my thatch roof.

The next day, after clearing the skies, I ventured out, only to find young Dora waiting outside my gate, true to her word. She displayed all the evidence of an incommodious night — black hair matted, peasant dress wrinkled and soaked. But Dora's bright blue eyes bespoke a singularity of purpose undiminished by material discomfort.

She was also seated atop a familiar-looking rock.

"How did that get there?" I demanded, pointing to the rock.

Dora smiled and looked down for a moment. "I asked it to come back," she said, "so that I could sit on it. I'd been standing all day and my legs were tired. It would not budge at first, but then I promised not to sit on it too long. Then the rock said . . . (*Here, she furrowed her brow and attempted a low voice*) . . . 'Very well, but 300 years at the most.' And then it rolled here!"

Dora beamed at me, proud as punch, wholly unaware of how unwizardly she was being.

"A true wizard would never debase himself, or herself, by bargaining with mindless objects," I told her. "I, certainly, never have and never shall." I retired to my cottage without a further word.



It rained again that night. Heavier this time, with violent clashes of thunder and lightning and a moaning wind that rattled my shutters. In my bed I sat awake, fraught with memories, and one in particular.

I remembered how, many years ago, that dreadful old goat I called Instructor placed before me a glass bead and instructed me to raise my arm toward it. "Your arm shall not move until the bead moves," he said in his raspy condescending manner. So I sat there, in Wyndamere Hall, for many hours, during which my body twisted and pulled, but my arm remained as motionless as the bead before me. The two were linked, you see, in my mind and thus in actuality. I raged at the bead and my arm until the sweat poured from my brow and finally, exhausted, I collapsed. When I regained consciousness, my master chastised me for being a weak-willed newt and dismissed me as a failure. The next day, he made me try again. After weeks of agony, I succeeded in shifting my arm and sending the tiny bead skittering across the table. But when I looked up for an acknowledgment of my success, my master simply placed a larger bead in front of me.

That is how one masters the inanimate. Magic is not supposed to be fun, easy, or polite. So while my schooling was not without difficulty, I am proud to say that I learned the proper techniques and respect for the rigor they entail. And to have some duckling turn up from nowhere and easily accomplish feats with which other wizards struggled for years—and to do so by simply *asking*—well. It was not proper. It was not fair.

It was also not worth fretting over, so I put it from my mind and listened to the raging weather outside. And who doesn't love a good storm? Dora certainly did not mind, for she was still outside my gate the next morning. Except now I found her sitting atop the rock beneath a brand new apple tree.

"Mr. Grindleflog!" she squeaked without even waiting to be spoken to, "It rained so hard last night, and I asked it to stop, but it wouldn't, so I asked a tree to grow to cover me, and look!"

"Hmph," I said.

"Oh, and look what else I can do!"

Before I could refuse, Dora held a small hand forward, whispered *please please please*, and an apple fell from the tree into her palm. Dora presented it to me.

"Hungry?" she asked.

As a matter of fact, I was. And as I reached to take the apple, a thought sprouted in my mind that Dora was, after all, a darling child. With her ruddy knees and a twig positioned in her messy hair just so. I also noted just how small she was and admitted to myself that she'd take up very little space in my lonely old cottage if I were to invite her to be my ward and student—

But ah! Here, I caught myself and shook the insurgent thoughts from my head. As I did, Dora's excited smile widened and she made a silly *ta-da!* motion with her hand, as if she were redoubling her efforts to force endearment into my mind. I quickly resolved to make her see the fruitlessness of her attempts to charm me.

I breathed a hex that rotted the apple in Dora's hand, and she dropped it with a shriek. I then reached toward her tree and clenched my hand into a fist, causing the wood to twist and snap in a shower of splinters. Finally, I brought my fist down on the rock, upon which Dora stood, shattering it into gravel.

The girl glared up from the ground with her lips pressed together so tightly that they lost all color. I could see her willing her tears not to fall. She said nothing, but I felt Dora's icy gaze on me as I stamped back to my cottage.



I spent a long while thereafter peering through my window as Dora raised new trees at the edge of my property and molded the living wood into a shelter for herself. When she wanted nourishment, a steady stream of squirrels brought her fruits, nuts, and berries. When she got cold—as when I called down that unseasonable blizzard—a jumble of wild rabbits huddled around her for warmth.

As the girl made herself more comfortable, I experienced the reverse. Everything in my cottage conspired against me. Furniture wobbled. Shoelaces broke. Silverware bent. My tea brewed bitter no matter how precisely I'd steeped it. I would put on my sleeping robe, the one with the stars and moons, only to find that I was wearing my gardening robe, with the suns and flowers. It was quite useless, too, as all of the flowers in my garden had died, although that may have had something to do with the blizzard.

I knew, of course, what, or rather who, was causing all the trouble. The message was clear. Dora was not going anywhere, and I would know no peace until I acceded to her demands for tutelage. It was to be a battle of wills.

As you may have guessed, I was far from helpless in such matters. To be sure, I could have removed Dora forcibly, but wizards who brutalize children tend to draw attention, which was the last thing I wanted. Besides, stubborn as she was, Dora would only find a way to return. No, no. I would have to make the girl abandon her vigil of her own accord. So, while Dora tried to befuddle me with childish pranks and inconveniences, I resumed my efforts to get rid of her for good.



The trees that Dora enchanted proved harder than her first one, and I found myself unable to affect them directly. I did foment a minor earthquake that shook them terribly, but the trees and the girl stayed put. And, since she'd already withstood every trick of inclement weather I could conjure, I moved on to other means. By day, flocks of birds squawked incessantly in her branches. By night, wolves howled menacingly in the darkness. My charms whipped them into a frenzy, until even I shuddered at their haunting cries. Yet Dora remained, her tree palace towering over my cottage.

I knew perfectly well that it would take more than a putrid stench to root her out, but I concocted nasty stink potion nonetheless, if only to see how Dora would react. The little troll changed the wind. Afterwards, as I was digging up the nullification spell with a handkerchief over half my face, I came across a sophisticated cold fire illusion, intended to scare rather than burn. It produced the visual effect marvelously, but Dora was not fooled. In fact, as the false flames engulfed her fortress, she revealed herself to demonstrate just how unafraid she was. That image burned in my vision and remained even when I shut my eyes tightly. The silhouette of a girl, standing implacable in the fire.

More time passed, and I confess that I grew desperate.

Now, I will not call what happened next a mistake, for wizards do not make mistakes. I will say, however, that it was an unfortunate and unexpected occurrence.

I recognized that Dora would leave neither out of discomfort nor fear, but it occurred to me that a young girl living in a tree would be susceptible to missing something all children stupidly cherish. Their mothers. A true wizard, of course, has no use for such nonsense, for attachment breeds compromise. Why, I have not thought of my own mother in ages and barely remember what she looked like. If that seems harsh, then so be it. I assure you that it has only made me stronger. But I suspected—correctly, I might add—that Dora would not be so disciplined.

So, late one night, I changed my voice to be soft and feminine. And I added to it a weary maternal aspect. It was an easy thing to do, and easier still was to throw it deep into the forest.

"Darling daughter," I called by proxy. "How I have missed you. I came to find you, but I am lost and afraid. Run to me, my child. Find me. *Help me.*"

I repeated this and similar such entreaties, and before long, I saw Dora's small dark figure scramble down from her tree and tear off into the woods. I changed the source of the sound frequently, to ensure that she would search in vain, growing ever more frustrated, lonely, and afraid. How far would she go, I wondered, until she figured out the ruse? Would she simply

return afterwards to continue to defy and torment me? I had no way of knowing, but there was a clumsy desperation to Dora's flight that told me that something in her had changed. I chuckled and toasted to my victory.

Then I heard Dora scream, and it took me a moment of listening to understand why.

The mad wolves were still out.

I reached forth with my mind to bring the beasts to heel, but the madness, which I had inflicted upon them, would not subside. I knew then that I had no choice; I would not be blamed for that child's death. It had been weeks, or perhaps months, since I'd left my cottage, but I ran after her nonetheless.



I arrived in a clearing to find Dora frozen before a quickly closing semicircle of wolves. There were so many. Far more than I expected. I could not even say how many there were, for they all appeared as one snarling, hairy fog dotted with yellow eyes and gnashing teeth. Their growls filled the night air with a perpetual grumble of menace and death. For the first time in ages, I trembled and knew fear.

It had been my hope that I would be better able to control the animals once I confronted them directly. Yet, the opposite occurred. Trepidation is the enemy of resolve, and with the wolves closing in, I found myself suddenly powerless. I could conjure neither spells, nor charms, nor glammers, nor hexes. There was nothing left for me but my fate, of which I was no longer the master.

And then, at the height of my despair, I felt an energy wake in my fingertips. I thought, at first, that I had tapped some hidden reserve of power. But when I looked at the source, I saw that it was Dora, who, standing beside me, had wrapped her hand around my own. For a moment, I forgot the situation and regarded the girl plainly. Her thicket of black hair was now a veritable storm cloud. She looked older, too. Not bigger, mind you, for she was still a tiny little thing. But there was somehow more of her now. Her voice had changed likewise. Though it was still no deeper than a chipmunk's sneeze, it acquired a resonance that permeated the air with pregnant vibration.

So I trusted her when she turned to me and said, "It's ok, Mr. Grindleflog. I'll show you how to do it."

Before I knew what "it" was, Dora closed her eyes and exhaled deeply. The wolves were now so close that I could smell their stinking breaths and hear the slap of their tongues against their

snouts. Yet, I felt no fear. Rather there was warmth, and tenderness, and harmony, and joy, and a hundred other things besides. It was something I had not felt for a great many years. Not since I, as a boy, left my home and mother to study magic at that dreadful academy so far away. I clung to the feeling even as it overwhelmed me, just as I clung to Dora's hand.

The wolves received it as well, apparently, for they became as docile as lapdogs and slunk off into the night.



Dora and I walked back to my cottage together, her hand in mine all the while. When I asked her what she'd done, she answered without hesitation.

"You talk on and on about will and dominance," she said. "But a wolf, or a tree, or a rock who wishes to obey will do so more readily than one who is forced. It is not a matter of imposing one's will, but making another choose to accept it as their own."

"And how do you accomplish that?" I asked.

"I make them love me," she said as naturally as she pleased. "But to do that, I have to love them first. So I find the best part of them. I loved the rock for its patience and endurance from its birth in the underground fires, and its slow journey to the surface, to the moment you crushed it. I loved the acorn for its yearning to be a tree, and encouraged it to grow and play with me in the sunlight. Even the wolves I pitied for their confusion and fear of hunger, and loved them all the more. So they became my friends, too."

"The wolves are your friends?" I asked.

"*All* things in this world are my friends. Or one day shall be." Dora looked at me and smiled in a way that made my breath catch in my chest.

I was then reminded of something. Not a memory, exactly, but something more potent and precious, tucked away in the cupboard of my mind. I could feel Dora grasping for it, and I resolved to find it first. When I did, it was as if I had stepped through the surface of a frozen pond and crashed into the water below. Except the water that surrounded me was warm and full of light, and I felt only security and contentment inside my mother's pillowy embrace that smelled like stewed yams and was as big as the world. The feeling was more powerful than any spell I'd ever learned or devised. If Dora found this place, I knew, then she would have me.

So I destroyed it.

I then let go of Dora's hand and gazed triumphantly into her confused face.

"I shall not be swayed by your dirty tricks," I said, now stopping before my gate. "And I am far too stubborn to change my mind. A wizard, you see—"

"That's alright," she said gently. There was resignation in her voice, though it almost sounded like pity. "I have learned all you can teach me anyways. So, I'll leave you alone."

"That doesn't count!" I hissed at the sneak, angrier than I realized, "I never agreed to teach you. I never took you in. And I never, ever changed my mind."

"Then let's call it a truce and part as friends."

I snorted at this last, desperate attempt. "I agree to nothing."

"Very well," Dora replied. With that, she curtsied and walked off into the darkness.



I never saw Dora again. Not that I would have cared to.

I haven't seen many people since that time, in fact, for these woods gained a reputation for being dangerous and inhospitable. And there have been even fewer travelers in the years since I put up a fog around these parts that makes one think they left something important at home as soon as they enter. Not even tax collectors come around anymore, since Queen Theodora the Charming and Wonderful exempted this land from taxation. I've certainly no complaints about that!

She passed by this way once, you know? The Queen! Oh yes. It was during the election. And who ever heard of an election for Queen anyway? Well, perhaps it's a good change. Regardless, it was during her campaign, when she travelled from town to town winning over all the peasants and gaining their favor, no doubt willing to promise anything to anyone until she was loved by all. Just like a politician.

I did not meet Queen Theodora, though I did peer from my window as her retinue passed with its music and gaudy banners. She even waved to me. Such a trifling gesture, and yet it stuck in my mind. It made me think of a woman too perfect to exist, full of patience, wisdom and unconditional love. Like someone I'd known for ages, yet was as hazy as a forgotten dream. I recall thinking right then that perhaps we did need a new Queen, one who could nurture, guide, and protect the realm. Perhaps it was something I'd always wanted. Well, I knew immediately that this Theodora would make a charming and wonderful Queen. Pity if she never returns.



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Eugene Morgulis was born in Kiev and raised in Milwaukee. He currently resides in Boston, where he works, writes, and dreams of the White Mountains. Eugene's other short fiction is due to appear in the upcoming *Adventures of Pirates Anthology* from Zimbell.

O!

B. Morris Allen

"A soul?" The shopkeeper was a small, wiry man, with eyes the color of warm caramel. "I'm afraid not, ma'am. Not really in our line, you see." He glanced at something under the counter before him, and called to the back room, "Rion, could you come out for a moment?"

"Your sign says 'Sundries'," said his client. A sleek, glossy brunette beneath the hood, her voluminous cloak did little to hide exaggerated curves.

"Busy," came a moan from the back room.

"I believe our sign says 'O!', which is the name of the store. But the placard in the window does say 'sundries'. That is, after all, what we sell. Great and powerful sundries, if I may say." He beamed proudly. "I could sell you *stoles*, for example, made from the finest cirrus clouds. I have one in a nice loamy color that would set off that fair skin."

"I don't—"

"Or," he continued smoothly, "I could sell you *shoals*. There are some good ones off the coast of Letsha." He gestured vaguely west.

"Why would I need shoals? I said *souls*."

"Did you?" He cocked his head. "I could sell a couple of *skulls*, which might once have *held* a fine soul. Or," he rushed as she tried to interrupt, "a few *skæls* in fine bronze, designed by northern artisans to hold the finest ale. Perhaps," he held up a finger to forestall another interjection, "even some *skirls* of pipers to make music to drink the ale by. But no souls. I could," he smiled, "sell you *moles*—beauty spots, you might call them, though your beauty needs no help." She sighed as he concluded. "So, as you see, we do indeed sell sundries, just not the kind you want."

"But I *need* a soul." Her voice was higher pitched now, on the edge of strident.

"I don't see why, ma'am. Most people are given a fine one at birth, and they're remarkably difficult to lose. Attached, you see." He turned his head. "Rion!"

A gasp from the back room: "Not . . . just . . . now."

"I *need* one."

"Surely you don't need two souls? Even as . . . vivid a woman as yourself would hardly need two. And then there's the problem of where to keep it. Your very attractive skull, you see, already has one. Where to put the other? In the ribcage? Lungs and heart are in the way. In the

belly? Not for so trim a woman as yourself. In the bosom?" He smiled appreciatively. "There, madam might have room. But surely the space is used to best advantage already?"

"Listen, you little pipsqueak!" Her voice had definitely crossed the border to strident. "I need a soul. Can you sell me one or not?"

"Oh, most assuredly not, ma'am. For one thing, our trade is in much more exotic items. For another, there's no demand. While we do occasionally receive a query about them, no one really *needs* an extra soul. Leaving aside golems." He leaned forward "No *supply* of souls, either. Despite what the stories say, you can't really lose yours. Shrink it, yes. Crack it, mutilate it, shave pieces off it, yes. Lose it completely, no. There's always some little bit that grows back."

"Believe me, mine is . . . " Her green eyes lit. "Wait! What was that you said, about shaving pieces off? Where can I get some of those?"

"Not really—"

"In your line, I know. Drop the patter, fool. Where can I get one?"

He sighed in his turn. "Well . . . " He looked below the counter, turned fully toward the back room. "*Rion!*" He faced his client again. "So hard to get a good apprentice these days. If this one doesn't shape up soon . . . " He nodded toward the door. "If you really must have such a thing . . . though what you would do with a fragment of someone else's soul I don't know . . . you might try down at Malvento's. Just a few doors down that way." He pointed right. "Can't miss it; you'll see the shrunken heads out front. They might have something for you. I've never," he shuddered, "been inside, myself."

A hard green gaze held his eye for a long, cold moment, and then it and its author turned and glided to the door, a near circle with a vertical rail tangent to the left-hand edge.

"Other side," he called, as the woman fumbled with gleaming brass at the rightmost periphery of the circle. "That's the hinge." The would-be customer was still for a moment, then glided just as smoothly to the other side and pulled the door in. She stepped over the curved sill, and tried to slam the door, only for the latch to click softly into place. "Quality hardware," said the storekeeper smugly, "and other sundries." He puffed out his chest. " *RION!*"

"Yes boss?" a large young man stooped under the curtain from the back room. "Sorry, got a little caught up back there." The young man's face was oddly pale for one with such dark brown skin.

"Well, it's too late now," the shopkeeper said, turning. "Honestly, Rion, you must at least *try*. This was a classic case of a difficult customer, and I wanted you to see how I handled her. Now she's gone. How will you learn if you don't watch?"

"Sorry, boss." The apprentice looked down at the floor. "I'll just go back, then." He turned to go.

"Wait," the shopkeeper ordered. "You look a little peaked. How's the inventory going? Surely it shouldn't take this long."

"The . . . um, . . . the uh, . . . *the inventory!* Of course. Fine. Just fine. No problem. Almost done."

"You sure? Some of those grimoires in the back can be a little heavy. Shouldn't be a problem for a big boy like you!" He slapped the young man on the waist, that being as high as he could reach. "Long as you don't open them, of course."

"Of course," the apprentice muttered.

"In any case, I'm sorry you missed this client. She wanted to buy a soul. A *soul*." The other gaped. "Can you believe it? A soul. Any fool knows you can't buy a soul. Where would it come from?" He looked at his apprentice for a response. "Eh? They don't grow on trees, you know."

"Don't . . ." the apprentice swallowed. "Don't people sell them?"

The shopkeeper snorted. "Sell them. As if you could." He shook his head as the young man gaped. "Sure, every now and then some fool tries, makes a deal with some demon or other. They'll *crush* your soul; make you *feel* like it's gone. Maybe scar it, cut off a slice or two. But they can't actually take it from you, just like they can't fulfill the promises they make. Even if they take a *piece* of soul, it will grow back, in time."

"They can't? They do?"

"Oh sure, given the right conditions. If you made such a foolish deal, you'd still be in thrall to the demon, of course. Still damned to eternal torture, etc. But with your soul attached." He waved a dismissive hand. "Off you go then."

Rion scurried away, bending his head to pass under the doorway and past the curtain. He emerged into a maze of shelves and boxes, and turned immediately to the left, where the shelves grew bowed with dusty volumes. He raced down the narrow passage, heedless of fragile and costly items as he zigged and zagged through the storeroom.

He emerged at last into a small open space. Tall candles flickered, illuminating complex, angular diagrams on the floor. In the center of one, a horrid shape of fangs and bristles and horns oozed murk into a pool of darkness steaming around its base.

"Back at last," it hummed. "Took your time, but no harm done." A handful of fangs rearranged into a grimace. "Knew you were too wise a man to pass up a deal like this." A finger of murk protruded past the first chalk line, where the demon had been rubbing with one wide hoof. "Once in a lifetime chance to gain the skills of a master trader."

Shivering, Rion stepped cautiously into the center of the other diagram, knelt. His shaky hand picked up the chalk, skittered it across the break in the outer line. Then sifted yellow powder for the middle line. And with a sharp knife, the blood for the inner circle. It dripped slowly, the drops puddling in a not very straight line until they merged with the other pools, now almost dry.

He turned to face the demon. "Sorry," he said, scanning the dank tome before him, "deal's off." He spoke the words of ritual, made the mystic passes, pulled off a fingernail, and, after a moment of intense agony, burnt it. At every step, the demon grew more frantic, throwing itself against the thin spot in the diagram around it. Just as it broke through the inner circle, it began to shrink and waver, and before its murk had washed away the second barrier it vanished entirely, leaving behind only a fading echo of anger. In the storeroom, the hulking apprentice clamped a shaking hand around his bleeding finger. "No souls," he said with a shudder of relief. "Not in our line," he mumbled, and fainted.

At the front of the store, the dying sun sent shadows looming against the window. A heavy hand crashed against the door. The shopkeeper straightened and put the cloth back on a crystal globe under the counter. Reaching into his cloak's deep pockets, one hand snugged an expensive 'Demon-Safe' charm back into its box, and the other powered down a top of the line Exorcisor.

"Other side," he called out, just as the door swung in to reveal a diminutive green-clothed figure.

"I've lost me rainbow," it said. "What've you got?"



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B. Morris Allen writes the occasional speculative fiction story from a base on the green and rainy Oregon coast. He grew up in a house full of books that traveled the world. Nowadays, they're e-books, and lighter to carry, but they're still multiplying. He's been a biochemist, an activist, and a lawyer, and now works as a foreign aid consultant. When he's not roaming foreign countries fighting corruption, he's on the Oregon coast, chatting with seals. In the occasional free moment, he edits *Metaphorosis* magazine, and works on his own speculative stories of love and disaster.

Peeling Skin

Steve Toase

Beryl, smiled at the postman and placed her next door neighbor's parcel on the floor. At home all day, she often took in packages for those who were out at work.

Before closing the door, she glanced across the corridor. Edith hadn't taken in her newspaper yet. If it was still there at tea-time she might pop over and check her fellow pensioner was okay. Edith wasn't as active these days and sometimes struggled.

Being neighborly was important to Beryl. Edwin, who lived upstairs, made it very hard work. Day and night he played experimental jazz music. If he had chosen folk, or even country, maybe it wouldn't have been so bad. She could never settle, the atonal recordings too uneven to fall into the pattern of background noise. She asked him to maybe not play it so loud, but he just used very impolite language at her and slammed the door in her face.

The poppet was made to an old recipe, using clay from the youngest grave in the churchyard and moss grown on the skull of a murder victim. Beryl stroked her hand over the tuft of hair embedded in the head. Dried food and sour milk from the rubbish bag stuck the follicles together. Rubbing the surface of the small body with bluebells, she used a flint awl to press the crushed petals into the clay. Her fingers smelled of spring woodlands and road kill.

The effect wasn't instant. It took time. All the best low magic did. About a week later the jazz was played less and less. Then the only noise coming from Edwin's flat was the tinkle of bells like a sea of cats moving around the upstairs rooms. After a while even that drifted off to become an occasional spasm of sound.

Many months before, she'd stolen the caretaker's master key and copied it. Just in case one of her elderly neighbors fell and couldn't get to their phone. She opened Edwin's front door. From the kitchen came the smell of clogged drains. Junk mail scuffed under her feet as she walked down the hall.

Edwin sat bolt upright on the sofa, fingers gripping the cushions so tight they'd burrowed into the foam. Most of his skin was covered in tiny metal bells, curved loops hooked into raw muscles, just visible through wounds that did not heal. He noticed her and started, setting off a peel of uneven ringing like churches competing. His eyes were red from lack of sleep. Beryl saw several places where new bells waited under the skin to erupt, lips and clappers straining the skin to cracking. A row of traditional cow bells hung down his spine.

"How are you doing, Edwin?" Beryl said, sitting down beside him. Judging by his trousers he hadn't moved in days.

"Piss off," he said.

Beryl shook her head. With a nurse's touch she picked up Edwin's arm and shook it in the air. He whimpered and tears slipped down the grease staining his cheeks.

"There's no need to be rude," she said, opening her bag and taking out a plastic bowl. "Now, you're not going to be moving for a while, so I've brought you some soup." She held his chin so the bells embedded in his jawbone stayed silent as she fed him. "After all, it's important to be neighborly."



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Steve Toase lives in North Yorkshire, England and occasionally in Munich, Germany. His stories tend towards the unsettling and unreal. Steve's work has appeared in *Cabinet de Fees' Scheherazade's Bequest*, *Innsmouth Magazine*, *Not One Of Us* and *Cafe Irreal* amongst others. In 2014 his story *Call Out* was published in *The Best Horror Of The Year Anthology 6*. He is currently working with Becky Cherriman and Imove on a commissioned project called *Haunt*, about the haunting presence of Harrogate in the lives of people experiencing homelessness or living in vulnerable housing.

My Mother After Life

Amethyst Loscocco

After my mother died, she came into the house every night and cleaned. I could hear the water running and pans settling into the dish rack. I wanted to yell down for her to rest in peace or something, but I knew she would not hear me.

So I tried to clean every inch of the house so she would have nothing to do, but still she polished the copper bottoms of the pots till they shone like a dream kitchen commercial. She transplanted the jade plant on the windowsill as I had been meaning to do for months. She found some paint in the garage and painted the front door a brilliant yellow. When Charlene, my coworker, came by to bring me some paperwork, her look of condolence verging on pity quickly turned to awe. I mumbled something about having too much time on my hands, what with bereavement leave and all.

"How do you know it's her?" asked Ben, who slept like the dead ought to.

"Because she always leaves three cigarettes in the ashtray, smoked down to their yellow filter."

"What do you think she wants?" he asked unfazed.

"To never let me sleep again."

I got a machine that played the soothing sounds of the ocean, wave after wave, rolling onto a beach somewhere I had never been. It didn't help. I knew she was there, painting stars on the ceiling or alphabetizing my bookshelf.

I did not want to go down and talk to her. What if she could only speak zombie talk or looked horribly disfigured? What if she looked the same? What if she acted like nothing had happened? What if I didn't recognize her at all? What if we had nothing to say?

Then she started baking. I was furious.

I stomped—rather ineffectively with my bare feet—down the stairs and into the kitchen. Her back was to me as she carefully cut little strips of dough and braided them around slices of glazed pear.

"What are you doing here?" I asked in a voice that trembled more than I would have liked.

"Making braided cherry Danish, except you didn't have cherries so I used pear."

"No! What are you doing here? You . . . you died."

She picked her cigarette up from the blue ceramic ashtray and turned around to face me. She was still wearing the sensible black dress we had buried her in. It wasn't the sleeveless red one with tiny white polka dots that she had wanted and I knew I would be hearing about that.

"Well, yes I did, but they seem to have forgotten to collect me or something. Death, he's awfully busy these days. I met him though, as he was rushing by to take care of Geraldine down the street. Reminded him I still needed to be taken to the other side. He scanned a list, scratched a few notes and said he would have one of his guys take care of me as soon as possible and sorry about the wait. He's hiring new staff, you know? Maybe I should look into it. I wonder what it takes?"

Somewhere in the midst of that I started sobbing. A great stream of silky smoke slipped from her pale lips.

"Come on now, Gwen, I'm sorry. None of this was according to plan. I had things to do. I hadn't even started my bucket list yet. Besides, Jared, that sonofabitch, still owes me money. A lot of money. Don't forget to ask him if you ever get in a pinch."

She stuck the pear Danish into the oven as I slumped into a chair at the kitchen table.

"Tea?" she asked.

"Sure," I said out of habit. She clicked the button on the electric kettle and pulled down a single cup. My favorite—the one that changed colors with the heat of the tea.

"Since when did you become such a Martha Stewart?" I pulled the sleeve of my pajamas over my hand and scrubbed the tears from my face. "You never used to bake. You never even made me a cake for any of my birthdays. The day after my tenth birthday, you brought home a rainbow cake from Safeway and told me to imagine the candles."

She brought the ashtray to the table and sat across from me. The smell of smoke and formaldehyde was overwhelmed by the sweet scent of baked pears.

"Honey, I did badly by you. But I did what I knew." She tipped her head up and let a stream of smoke curl up towards the ceiling. I imagined her soul was like that smoke, curly and indifferent to obstacles.

The kettle dinged once and she got up and poured the steaming water over a tea bag. The smell of chamomile and rosehips wafted across the ceiling to twirl with the smoke.

"There was just never enough time, or money for that matter, after your Dad left."

"To the space station?" I looked her right in the eyes, daring.

She started to hum *Rocket Man*, like she always did.

"Cut the crap mom, I know he died after a show in Fresno with a needle in his arm. Aunt Lily told me at the funeral."

She seemed to fade a little or maybe her eyes were reflecting the pale flourishes of the wallpaper.

"Your Dad was like the wind, he blew wherever his passions took him and one day he just blew away from us. It was an El Niño year."

She brushed at some ash that fell from her cigarette onto the pale blue tablecloth. It just made a grey smudge. I thought about putting my hand on top of hers, but I was too scared to touch her. Besides, we had never done that kind of thing when she was alive.

"I remember," I said, and pushed the ashtray closer to her—the one that I had always kept for her impromptu visits, and was still here, months after her death.

She smiled as she carefully stubbed out her cigarette on the tray.

The kitchen door opened up behind me. She stared over my shoulder and sighed, "Well, look who was good enough to find time in his busy schedule for me? I think I will ask about that job." She rested her hand briefly on my shoulder as she walked by. It felt like the wind.

"Maybe I'll see you around honey."

Ben and I ate all three pear Danish for breakfast. I inhaled deeply, but there was no trace of cigarette smoke left, just pear and sunshine.



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Amethyst Loscocco is a freelance writer, science nerd and web designer. She loves to tell a story that makes you forget what you were doing. As a child she was constantly trying to talk to fairies, sight UFO's, and break into other dimensions. She studied Molecular and Cell Biology at U.C., Berkeley. This just encouraged her obsession with the magical little details that move life forward, not always in a straight line of course. She completed a writing program with honors at the U.C. Berkeley Extension. She lives in Oakland, California with two dancing German shepherds.

No Gods but Men

Evan Dicken

The village celebrated the dying of the light. Drunken revelers lined Red Stick's single dirt road, tribal boundaries eddied by the foot stamping skirl of whistle and hand drum. Despite the jovial mood, I knew better than to brave the red-gold light of the setting sun. The sight of me would remind them of what was to come, what they were working so hard to forget.

"*Narantuyaa*." My name flashed like brook trout amidst the murky babble of conversation. It meant sunbeam in the lowland dialect, but the villagers spoke it like a curse. Before Arigh had broken the Temple, they would've happily bound me to a stone at low tide—thus did the Cants of Light prescribe for witches. Perhaps at Piketown they still might, but Red Stick was far from the old provincial capital, and Temple doctrine had mostly given way to the practicalities of surviving the long night. There were horrors in the dark, terrible things that slipped through the frayed seams of our world to spread death and madness. When they came creeping into Red Stick, a witch was a fine thing to have around. In the light though, I was safe to hate.

Men, women, even children made warding signs as I passed, hands crossed and fingers splayed to mimic Heruar's fan. They called me traitor, heretic, ignoring that I'd been taken by the Temple as a child—another virgin bride destined for the harem of a jealous and petty god. I'd been eighteen when I met Arigh, full of foolish notions collected from the few poems and chapbook romances that made it over the Temple's walls. He'd been handsome and exotic, a sorcerer from the heart of the Old Empire, skilled in the ancient mysteries. More, he'd been someone I could talk to, someone I could touch. Heruar had seemed a distant god. There were stories, yes—floods, lightning, and the like—but my dalliance had seemed such a small thing. How could I have fathomed the pettiness of divinity?

I met the villagers' contempt with a narrow-eyed scowl, muttering as if I were thinking of some curse to lay on them. I wasn't, but they retreated nonetheless.

A muffled cheer came from town, fading into the warm peal of steel drums as dancers took to the street in anticipation of the hallowed spinsters who would lead the festival. But for a moment of weakness—well, more nine months of weakness—I might've been among them, basking in the sun's faded glow.

My yurt lay just beyond the estuary, shielded from the view of my betters by a stand of gnarled poplar. I batted aside the tent flap, then paused. Someone had lit a fire in the battered

copper pot, helping themselves to my small stock of dried lavender to cut the acrid smell of burning saltwillow.

The maze of bloodstained trigrams I'd inscribed on the tent poles should've warned me of an intruder. Another witch then, although I had no rivals and nothing worth stealing.

A woman sprawled in my single rude chair, booted feet propped upon her travel pack. Her face was concealed by a hood, but she wore leather pants and a wide-sleeved shirt laced tight over the bodice and drawn at the waist by a thick belt from which hung a sword and dagger, both curved in the old imperial style.

"What do you want?" I feigned nonchalance, hoping the shadows would conceal the surreptitious movement of my hands as I summoned a particularly nasty bone-shattering curse.

She leaned into the firelight, drawing back her hood to reveal severe, high-boned features, dusky skinned and thin-lipped with dark eyes that seemed to sparkle in the murky firelight. It was a face I knew well—twenty years ago, it could've been mine.

"Hello, Mother." Lian affected an Imperial accent, vowels whetted to grating sharpness. She'd inherited her father's flair for the dramatic.

"You're back."

She smiled. "I always come back."

"I don't have any money, and if you're looking for someplace to hide—"

"I'm not in trouble." Many had been taken in by Lian's earnest tone, her wide, guileless eyes. I'd seen her wrap people with words deftly as a hunter snares prey, smiling and sincere right up until she slipped a dagger into their side. My daughter always lied best when she was in trouble.

"Get out." I opened the tent flap and stepped aside.

"Please." She slipped into the throaty lowland burr of the coastal marshes, hands stealing to the slight swell of her stomach. "I'm pregnant."

I snorted.

"It's true this time. The father is a smith out of Piketown, a good man. We—"

"—just need a little money to help set up a forge." I didn't even try to hide the bitter twist of my lips. "Or is it to pay a dowry so you can marry?"

She gave a wry nod. "Well yes, actually, but—"

"Spare me, Lian." I glared at her, a litany of cruelties building behind my gritted teeth. She would take my money, my food, my love; promise me whatever she thought I wanted, pulling lies from the air casually as a spinner might draw thread from wool. Then, when things fell apart, she would run—just like always.

"I don't want money." Lian spread her hands. "Just your help."

Something in me stared to unclench. She knew my weakness, was living proof of it.

Lian returned my stare calmly, her eyes like my mother's, like mine. Had there been any hint of her father there I could have denied her, cast her into the swamp without a second thought, but Arigh's gifts were writ upon her soul not her face—that was mine alone.

"Whatever it is, I won't help." I said, hating the tremble in my traitorous voice.

"The old Temple of Heruar, where you and Father—"

"Night-cursed ruins." I looked away to conceal my sour frown at the memory of Arigh's betrayal.

"How much was left behind when the temple fell? Relics, treasures, gold enough to see us through a thousand nights. It could be ours."

"Madness. The dark—"

"Who better to brave the long night than a witch?"

"There may still be wards on the temple."

"And who better to slip past them than a priestess?"

"No, I won't risk my life on another of your gambles."

"Oh, your life, I'd forgotten." Lian moved around the tent, one hand trailing along the mud-spattered felt as her voice flattened into the rhythms of poetry. "So is the farmer wedded to the plow, the holy to the word, but tilled fields cannot bind hearts, nor walls contain them."

I squeezed my eyes shut rather than let her see the tears in them. Lian couldn't have known her father had used those same words to tempt me from my cloister. Even after all these years his voice slipped like a chill wind through my thoughts, reminding me my life was but a cage. How many stolen evenings had we spent below the spreading shore pine and tamarack, wrapped in his cloak, discussing life, poetry, the world beyond Temple. He'd told me stories of High Chorumal, the cradle of the Old Empire, destroyed by the hubris of those who would bind gods to the will of men. He spoke of low, river valleys; of lakes filled with horses that could breathe air or water; of high, cold mountains inhabited by people who worshipped clouds and raised strange, twisted scaffolds of bone and sinew so their dead might reach the sky. He'd made the world seem so strange, so wonderful.

I'd thought Lian had inherited Arigh's ambition, when really she was burdened with mine. For all my faults, I'd always tried to do right by her, could I do any less for my grandchild?

"I'll need time to prepare." I pressed a hand to my forehead, eyes squeezed shut as if to shut out my foolishness.

"Thank you." Lian embraced me and I could feel the press of her belly through my thin robes. The baby gave a little kick, already struggling to reach a world that didn't care whether it lived or died.

A new life, a new mistake.



The forest was different in the dark, the usual chorus of frogs and fiddlebugs replaced by the expectant hush of a predator ready to pounce. Cattails and skunk cabbage left greasy stains on our cloaks, drawn tight against a musty breeze that was somehow both humid and icy. The stars were barely visible in the deepening gloom. I remembered trying to teach Lian to navigate by them, back when she'd wanted to be a sea captain, but her fancies had always been like arrows shot high and at random, forgotten before they could ever hit ground.

"They say there's fewer every time." She began to draw her sword, then let it slide back into the sheath with a rasp that set my teeth on edge.

"What?"

"The stars—they say more disappear every night." Lian's sword rasped again. "I wonder where they go."

"I wouldn't know."

"Do you think the darkness has gods as well?" *Rasp. Click.*

"Will you stop that?"

"Stop what?" She did it again.

I glared at her scabbarded sword.

"It relaxes me." She frowned, expression thoughtful, then her sword rasped again.

"Heruar's balls, girl!" I turned on her. "I should curse—"

"There's something out there." She'd dropped into a wary half-crouch, blade glinting in the torchlight.

Beyond her, the darkness seethed.

Loose and liquid, the creature rose into the torchlight. Twice Lian's height, its body was a knot of long, boneless limbs writhing over and around each other like a nest of snakes. Dusky spirals coiled and uncoiled, the creature's twisting outline lost like smoke against a stormy sky. It had no head, just a wide gaping mouth at its center, ragged and toothless. Its scream was tortured metal. Mouthless, it rose in terrible chorus, a rhythmic, shrieking wail that seemed to mimic the cadences of speech.

I swear I heard it call my name.

I watched, paralyzed as Lian's sword flashed out to sever one of the creature's thick, muscular limbs. It writhed after her, lashing the ground with wild fury. Although the strikes seemed uncoordinated, there were so many Lian was hard-pressed. Steel met flesh with a wet smack as she parried a writhing limb, the force of the blow sending her staggering back. She cast one hurried glance at me, then ran.

Just like she always did.

Anger cut through the panicked snarl of my thoughts. I considered sending a hex winging after my faithless daughter, but the creature was more dangerous. Curses spilled from my lips, weak but plentiful. My magic seemed to catch the creature's attention and it flopped toward me. I stammered through my meager repertoire, striking the thing with fever, blindness, even sour milk. I might as well have been cursing the sea.

The creature loomed above me, serpentine limbs splayed like the fingers of a great inhuman hand. What I'd thought was a wet, gaping maw at its center was actually just a hole in the air. The limbs didn't surround it; they *came* from it.

Dully, I raised my torch to illuminate the carpet of long wormlike bodies on the other side, each fighting to slither through the tiny gap. There were more beyond, a vast plain churning with the things, the empty sky above lit by the glow of distant flames. The creature was not one thing, but many, tearing at one another as they struggled to get out.

I'd seen something like this before, back in the Temple. I could almost hear Arigh's triumphant shout as his sorceries tore the Heruar's golden vault asunder while the drill abbesses looked on, powerless to intervene. I'd given him our secrets, trading the ancient mysteries of our order for a fistful of lies. Had Arigh known what darkness his desecration would unleash? Had he cared?

The steel-on-steel screech came again, hooked claws gouging at the ground in a vain attempt to find purchase. The creatures cared nothing for us, had only been reacting to Lian and my attacks. If I just remained still and Lian stayed—

"Mother, run!" My daughter launched herself at the thing. The creature flailed at her, and a lashing claw opened a long gash on Lian's arm. She shifted her grip to hack at it two-handed, but one of the looping tentacles sent her skidding back.

"Stay still!" I tried not to flinch as talons passed close enough to stir the hair on my head. "It doesn't want us!"

Lian tensed as the thing thrashed toward her.

"For once in your life, listen to me!"

She glared, but didn't move.

The creature made a ragged circuit of the clearing, then crashed into the darkness.

I waited a slow hundred count before nodding to Lian. We moved off, taking care to tread lightly.

"How did you know?" she asked after we'd traveled some distance.

"Magic," I lied.

"Sorry I ran." Lian gave a tentative half-smile.

I returned it, if a bit awkwardly. "You're a fool, but thanks for coming back for me."

She nudged me, grinning. "I always come back."



Lian hissed as I pressed the compress to her wound.

"It burns."

"That's how you know it's working." I bound her arm with strips of linen, trying to swallow my grin. I'd used more nettles that were necessary. Lian had a baby to think about; maybe memory of the pain would give her pause next time she decided to do something stupid.

We stood to pick our way past the roots of a stand of swamp willow, gnawing on smoked salmon and hardcakes. To our right, the estuary gurgled seaward. I didn't recognize the surroundings, but that was to be expected. Nothing lasted long in a tide marsh.

"Is this where Father died?"

Lian's question startled me, and I looked around. There was milkweed growing through the cracked flagstones, and a ragged fringe of bottlebrush crowding the murky water of the reflecting pool, but this *was* the plaza where I'd first met Arigh. He'd been among those begging for alms, dressed in patched, woolen robes of a coastal trader, but set apart by his pale eyes, beardless cheeks, and long, braided queue. I couldn't believe the drill abbesses had let him into town—foreigners were always suspect—but they'd passed him by with barely a glance. That, more than anything, should've made me wary.

Arigh had smiled as our fingers met over a crust of old bread, his grin quiet, tentative, and a little bit sad. I wonder now if he'd tried it on every novice who crossed his path, or if I'd been his target from the beginning.

"Was it here?" Lian asked again.

"No." My reply was the rattle of a dying crow.

Rasp. Click.

"You never told me what happened," she said.

I pressed my lips together, afraid of what might spill out. How could I tell her about the screams that had chased me from the temple, and the shame of watching my friends unwound into skeins of bloody thread. All by the throng of clicking, crawling monstrosities that had burst from the hole Arigh had torn in the universe when Heruar finally came to claim what was his.

"We should go," I said.

Lian cast an irritated glance over her shoulder, then nodded.

The temple's great iron-and-bronze doors were scabbed with rust. Lichen skirted much of the gate, the vague outline of protective filigree just visible beneath. Lian approached, but stopped when I raised my hand.

"Wards." I pointed to the lichen around the gate, which shifted as if something crawled beneath it. I scraped some away to reveal the gold and copper wire set into the stones. The filigree had slithered near the edge, bunching like a coiled snake in preparation to cut my daughter to ribbons.

I bowed my head, feeling doubly a traitor as I pressed a hand to the slick stone of the wall. The Cants came as if it had been days rather than decades since I last spoke them. Gold and silver threads crawled up my arm, and for a tired, resigned moment, I hoped they would take me. But they only brushed across my skin before withdrawing back into the stone.

With a shower of rust, the gates creaked open.

At my nod, Lian drew her sword and crept forward, but no razored wires leapt from the gate.

My feet carried me down the old novice paths, threading moss-covered pillars, and halls empty of even the echoes of lavender and sandalwood incense. Each step churned up more I'd thought forgotten—hours spent on my knees, polishing tiles that were now little more than rubble; the small alcove where I and countless other novices had hidden to listen to the priestesses sing the Cants of Dawn. The memories came like knives drawn across my flesh, whetted with the knowledge I had helped cause this ruin.

Great scars marred the walls, holes where stone had run like water with the heat of Heruar's fury. The god had been too bright to look upon, but his outraged bellows had shaken mortar from the ceiling. I remember crying out, not for mercy, but forgiveness. At the time, he'd seemed a force of nature, powerful and unquestionable. Now, all I could picture was a child throwing a tantrum when his toys were taken away.

What manner of god would treat his faithful so cruelly? Who could worship such a thing? Unbidden, my thoughts filled with the image of the barren, lightless place I'd seen at the center of the many-limbed thing.

If there were gods of the night, perhaps it was kinder of them not to feign humanity.

A worn flight of stairs led down to the garden. As a child, I'd played among the greenery—games of blindcatch and p^âque with the other novices, our wild shrieks daring the displeasure of the older nuns.

I had expected to see bones, armor, some evidence of those who had been at the Temple when Heruar and Arigh tore it apart, but there was nothing.

The garden was even empty of trees, the ground covered by a skin of oily muck. The Temple loomed above the destruction, its high steeple pointed heavenward like an accusatory finger. Once, it had been constructed of gleaming marble shot through with veins of gold. Now its exterior was dark as a false promise, smooth and yet somehow possessed of an unsettling irregularity. Walls that had risen in precisely measured cubit now canted at brooding angles, lending the whole structure a hunched and predatory look.

I swallowed against the sudden dryness in my throat. "That isn't Heruar's Temple."

"What does it matter? We're here to rob the thing, not pray to it." Lian waded into the sucking mud.

I conceded with a reluctant nod, wincing as the cold, oily muck came up over the tops of my boots. As we drew closer to the Temple, I realized what I'd thought to be basalt was actually smoky glass. Although it reflected nothing, somehow I could see shapes below the surface—strange, liquid figures that pulled at the eye, hovering just beyond the edge of comprehension.

The wooden doors were carved to resemble a jumble of human bodies, limbs intertwined, their faces relaxed in death. My stomach tightened as I recognized some of them.

"Help me with this." Lian sheathed her sword to put her hands on the thigh of the drill abbess who'd taught me how to read.

I grasped a protruding arm, its owner thankfully buried deep within the mass. The flesh was hard but warm to the touch. Grimacing, we pushed, and the door ground open.

Stepping inside was like slipping into a pool of oil. The air clung to me, the damp soaking through my robes to coat my skin in a thin film of grease. Our torches burned low and sickly, the normal orange-red glow shot through with streaks of bilious green.

The room was long and columned, a moldering carpet running between rows of benches. Faded tapestries surrounded a raised dais made of the same scorched glass as the outside, unmarred by joint or mortar, but rippling with indistinct shapes. Upon it sat a golden idol,

vaguely humanoid, but stooped and twisted. It was of a man on his knees, arms raised as if in supplication, an agonized expression on his perfect face.

We climbed the stone stairs to the dais. Slippery with moss, they were set at an odd angle and just a bit too long, as if not meant for a human gait.

Lian regarded the idol. "Is that—?"

"Heruar."

"A cruel and petty god for a cruel and petty world." The words were muffled, as if spoken through layers of cotton wadding. Even so, I recognized the voice.

"Arigh?"

"I was. Now, I am almost a god." Shadows coalesced behind the altar, taking on the shape of a man, hands resting on the shoulders of the golden idol. All around, the figures within the walls began to shift and move, becoming more distinct, more separate from the stone that housed them. I caught glimpses of grasping claws, glittering eyes, and the coils of long, segmented bodies winding into shadow.

My gaze slipped back to the idol, to Arigh. I'd seen him die, flesh boiled away even as he sought to bind Heruar in chains of night. Had I been wrong? Had he succeeded?

"Lian, we have to—"

She brushed past me. "You promised me gold, father."

"Gold, and more." His smile was a starless sky. "You did well to bring her to me."

"Sorry, mother," I could only gape as Lian swaggered toward Arigh, hands resting smugly on the pommels of her sword and dagger. "I've got a baby to think of."

My throat felt tight, my tongue dry as old driftwood. "I don't understand."

"How could you?" Arigh cocked his head. "I have walked the shores of far Oriab, traded tales with godlings in the night markets of Celephaïs, wrestled a shard from the nameless rock and carried it here to seed. Soon I will rise, not golden, but vast as those who move beyond the stars, my Empire will defy comprehension. I have parted tides of darkness, shattered the barriers between worlds, and yet I cannot take the final step, for I too am bound, to this place, to you, *Naran*."

I winced. The last time he had called me that we'd been laying in tall grass, arms around each other, his face so close to mine I could feel his breath on my lips.

"As you were a path to Heruar, you have now become one to me." He raised a hand. "And that I cannot allow."

Claws clicked on the stairs behind me. I didn't turn, there was no point. I looked to Lian, now just a few steps from Arigh. I don't know what I expected to see in her face, conceit, satisfaction, greed, anything but wide-eyed earnestness.

"Father."

"Yes, my child."

Through the pall of fear, I found myself wondering if Arigh had always been this insufferable.

"If you're to be a god, you'll need a high priestess." She knelt before him.

"Daughter." Arigh raised a hand from the idol to rest it upon her shoulder.

"I love you."

He smiled. "Love is a fool's—"

Lian lunged, smile never wavering as she ran her father through.

With a shriek, Arigh hurled her away. She stumbled from the dais, sword clattering behind.

Golden light spilled from Arigh's wound, casting the temple in harsh relief. He pointed at Lian, his scream almost inarticulate with rage.

Lian snatched up her blade and rose just in time to meet the first of the creatures. I caught a flash of dark chitin and large, luminous eyes before she cut it down. More skittered from the shadows, mouths wide, ragged claws twitching. Lian backed up the stairs, sweeping her sword in wide, looping arcs. The creatures appeared to give no thought to the blade, climbing over the bodies of their dying comrades in a hissing, spitting mass.

Something swept my feet from under me. My head rebounded from the tile, bright colors obscuring my vision. I rolled on my back to see Arigh on his feet, and hissed a curse at him.

"My old hexes?" He waved as if dispelling a bad odor. "Surely after all these years you've come up with something new?"

"I was a little busy *raising a child*." I aimed a kick at his knee and was gratified to see him stagger back a step, hands pressed to his wound. Sunlight bled between his fingers, the skin of his face and hands losing its ebon tone.

I scrambled to my feet, casting an anxious look down the stairs. Lian was bleeding, her face a mask of concentration as she hacked at the churning press.

"They won't kill her." Arigh's smile dripped with cruel promise. "No, your daughter will suffer—"

I drove my fist into his wound.

Arigh stumbled toward the altar, hands outstretched. I followed, kicking and punching, my eyes watering from the noonday glare. Thin lines of light crawled across Arigh's hands and up his neck, veins of glowing gold pulsing just beneath his skin. His flesh had taken on the coppery hue

I remembered, the man behind the shadow finally peeking through. He pawed for the statue of Heruar, but I slapped his hand away.

My hands found his throat, hot as a fistful of coals. I screwed my eyes shut against the glare, Arigh's features picked out like a fresh brand against my darkening vision. The smell of scorched flesh made me gag, but I held on, spitting curses into the brightness as I bore down.

His punch snapped my head back, and I grimaced at the taste of blood. More blows rained down, buffeting me like waves. My world narrowed to a single point, even the blistering agony of my hands receded to a dull buzz. Eventually, the brightness dimmed enough I could open my eyes.

His flesh had taken on the waxy hue of a paper lantern, the light that had made a shadow of him guttering to almost nothing. Arigh pawed at me, each blow weaker than the last. I only grit my teeth and squeezed, our faces close as lovers. His lips brushed my cheek, trying to form words, but I'd long ago ceased caring what he had to say. I held on for what seemed an eternity even after he'd gone limp, willing my tired grip tighter and tighter.

Lian's panicked shout came as if from the end of a long tunnel. The pain came rushing back, the weight of bruises, burns, and broken bones almost bearing me to the floor. I turned, any hope I had of Arigh's creatures going the way of their master dashed as I beheld the tempest below. If anything, his death had unleashed them.

Lian swung her sword in tired arcs, spattering the steps with dark blood. I could see the strain in her face, the exhaustion in every unsure step she retreated up the stairs. I caught my breath, gaze slipping to the idol. Heruar was here. If I destroyed his prison, he would—

Probably kill us all.

I laid a hand on the idol, wincing at its warmth on my scorched flesh. Shadow crept over my fingers, and I sighed as power filled my body, knitting bones and cooling burns.

The world shrunk, infinite depth reduced to the forced perspective of a painting. I felt I could poke my finger through the canvas, burning holes as Arigh had done. There were things in the darkness beyond, vast and uncaring, so limitless in scope the very conception of divinity buckled beneath their slightest movement. I could creep among them, shielded by insignificance—watch, learn, change, and return a god in my own right.

For a moment, I was tempted, but only for a moment.

I pulled my hand back with a gasp, shadow clinging to it like a second skin. I extended it to the screeching mob. There was a flash of light, the silence that followed broken only by Lian's labored breaths and the soft ping of cooling metal.

I closed my fingers around the last small kernel of power I'd taken from Heruar and brought my hand to my mouth. I felt it fill me, tiny, but enough to suit my needs.

"Quite a display." Lian limped onto the landing.

"I have my moments."

She eyed the idol. "Heruar's in there?"

I nodded.

"Don't suppose he'd be grateful to be free?"

My pained wince was answer enough.

"I suppose we've managed well enough without him." She gave a wistful sigh. "All that gold, though."

"Did you plan this all along?" I moved beside her, slipping my arm around her waist to support her weight.

She laid her head on my shoulder. "Something like that."

"Your father," I said as the trembling slowly left my limbs.

"That old bastard? He came to me in a dream." Lian's cough became a rasping chuckle. "I've never had a father before, what's the point of starting now?"

I let the tiniest bit of power flow into her. She stiffened, then relaxed. I could feel the life growing inside her, hoping, dreaming, struggling to reach this heartless world. A mistake, but a good one.

"Your baby," I asked. "There's no smith in Piketown, is there?"

Lian laughed, bright and clear.

"Who is the father?"

"Does it matter?"

I held her tighter, breathing in the steel and leather smell of her hair, then looked at Arigh's crumpled body, wisps of smoke still rising from his sun bleached robes. For the first time in a very long time, I felt like everything was going to be alright.

"No, I don't suppose it does."



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Evan Dicken fiction has most recently appeared in: Analog, Starship Sofa, and Autumn Cthulhu, and he has stories forthcoming from publishers such as: Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Daily Science Fiction, and Chaosium. By day, Evan studies old Japanese maps and crunches data for all manner of fascinating medical experiments at Ohio State University. By night, he does neither of these things.

Standard Deviant

Holly Schofield

Ashley crouched behind the Audi, watching her boyfriend through the plate glass window of the Denny's restaurant. The red and yellow neon sign above punctured the darkness. *Pancakes. Coffee.* And, visible in the window below: her sweet, sweet Brut. He was sprawled sideways in the booth, leaning back against the window, plaid Hurley cap tilted, a cup at his lips. Maddog slouched on the opposite bench, grinning fiercely, his dreadlocks huge. Some chick sat beside him, skinny with spiky black hair, leaning toward Brut; who the hell was that? Plates, piled with bunched paper napkins and cutlery, lay scattered in front of them.

Ashley was late for the party.

As usual.

She shifted her feet and her metal boot studs rasped on the wet pavement. The drizzle had almost stopped but she wrapped her ratty army jacket around her more tightly anyway. She should cross the street and join them in the restaurant—at least it'd be warmer. *Eggs over easy. And hash browns.*

The Audi's windshield burst into a painful kaleidoscope of violets, pinks, and reds. Just her luck to hide behind a car that had some kind of weird electrical problem.

"We need an ambassador." The voice seemed to be coming from the flashing windshield. It was matter-of-fact and friendly.

"Piss off," Ashley said. She squatted even lower behind the car in case the flaring lights caught Brut's eye. *Homefries. And bacon.*

"We have only minutes to keep the wormhole open," the voice said. Ashley flipped her blue hair off her eyes. The hair color was called "dystop-cyan" and cost her the entire haul from a purse-snatching down on Fifth Avenue yesterday, but she'd thought Brut might like the color. He'd liked her zombie-snake tattoo last week, enough to nuzzle her throat where the tail curled around.

"We will recruit you to spread the word. Our spot-checks indicate America and several other countries are finally progressive enough to enroll into the *buzz-buzz-buzz*," the voice said, then chuckled. "That clearly did not translate. Let's use the vernacular: you guys can enroll into the Galactic Federation. Peace and prosperity await."

Huh. Maybe she shouldn't have popped that little white pill she'd found in Maddog's bathroom earlier tonight.

She edged around to the front bumper and stared at Brut through the window again, glad the darkness provided cover. Soon. She'd go to him, soon.

Just not quite yet.

"Get a life," she told the voice. She hoped Brut would take his feet off the seat when she approached the booth.

Her throat was dry. She swallowed and looked more closely at the car in spite of herself.

It was a newer model Audi, dark red in the streetlights. The windows were tight and black, except the windshield which shifted colors in patterns too rapidly to make sense. Clearly, the Red Bull chaser had also been a bad idea.

"Our analyses indicate you are within the range of standard deviation for your country, race, and age," the voice said, with warmth.

"Yeah, a standard deviant, that's me," Ashley muttered. *Not even an original deviant.*

The patterns shifted and emerged into an almost-shape, like a word on the tip of her tongue. If this was a crazy mugger or some kind of scam, it was different than any she'd seen before. And, in four years on the street, she'd seen it *all*.

It might make a good story to impress Brut with. Something to make her stand out among the other chicks. Something to make his eyes glint and the corner of his mouth twitch. Maybe he'd let her spend the night in his apartment again. Maddog's sofa was getting lame.

"What's in it for me?" She put a hand on her hip and pouted at the windshield like a Japanese porn star.

"Improving mankind and expanding world knowledge is not your mandate, I see," said the voice, with a slight edge.

Ashley grinned and flipped a finger at the car. *I can piss anybody off, given a few minutes.*

"Perhaps this will convince you?" The kaleidoscope shifted to blackness so immense, so deep that Ashley gasped. Her skull began a not-unpleasant throb and her eyes felt stretched with infinite possibilities. A high that took her higher than she'd ever been, even that time in Arizona with the peyote.

Rotating planets and whirling galaxies flashed in a cadence that matched her thudding heart and she was lost in the universe, spiraling among the stars.

Finally, her mind found a tiny corner and tugged on it until it opened like a window on her phone. She rubbed a toe on the gritty sidewalk and cleared her throat.

"Why me?" she asked. "I'm, like, nobody. And, like, the most unreliable witness you'll ever find." Just what the cops had told her the night they released her stepdad for the eighth time. Without bail. No one ever did internal exams on trailer park trash.

"A hard truth," the voice said, with an emotion she couldn't label. "However, you are the only one on this street, the wormhole is closing, you have little to lose, and, sadly but most importantly, this nexus will not be disrupted since . . . well, actually . . . no one will miss you."

She glanced at the restaurant window. Brut was holding out his coffee cup and smirking at the unamused waitress. The new chick was on Brut's side of the booth, cuddled against him.

She climbed onto the hood of the car, one boot stud screeching a long silver gouge through the paint. She admired it for a minute then clambered into the whirling space where the windshield should have been. Her last thought, before reeling away into the cosmos, was of the last time she'd seen her mom: high heels clacking, pacing the kitchen floor, cell phone clamped to her ear as she made a date. Her mom had been laughing shrilly at something the client had said when Ashley had slipped out the door.



Ashley dropped gracefully to the street as the closing wormhole deposited her a few centimeters above the pavement. She was lucky to have caught this same nexus in front of the Denny's, almost ten years to the day after she'd left. The Federation had wondrous technology but it was hard science, not magic and not perfect. The space/time juncture was only open for a moment; no time to see how Earth had changed in the past decade.

That shouldn't matter. *She* had changed.

She was ready to be ambassador to the USA. To deliver her message to the country, the continent, the world.

Finally, she was about to do something with her life besides screw it up.

She kept her eyes squeezed shut, waiting for the transit afterglow to recede. She smoothed her chestnut hair behind her ears and straightened the collar of her sleek, form-fitting jumpsuit. She had amused the Federation staff by refusing to give up her boots—their worn leather now in sharp contrast to her chic appearance. The staff had fixed her brain chemistry—no more addictions or depression—as well as adjusting a slight pronation in her left foot and clearing up her herpes. Her muscles were magnificently toned and her posture impeccable. She was trained in politics, in psychology, in negotiation, in persuasion; a hundred years of education crammed into a decade. She was primed to bring humankind, with all their foibles, into the future, into an era of affluence and unbridled happiness.

She stretched joyfully and clicked her metal heels together, like a futuristic Dorothy.

Then she opened her eyes.

The Audi was gone. Litter blew across the street. The Denny's, boarded up and graffitied, loomed at her in the predawn light. She walked toward the restaurant. Her foot hit something soft and she looked down. A rotting corpse lay in the gutter. She hurried past it and up the far curb. A crude newsletter tacked to an unlit lamppost caught her eye. The headline proclaimed: "World Economic Devastation Continues, Billions Starving".

Her message would go unheard.

The party was already over.



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Holly Schofield work has appeared in many publications throughout the world including Lightspeed, Crossed Genres, and Tesseract. She travels through time at the rate of one second per second, oscillating between the alternate realities of a prairie farmhouse and her writing cabin on the west coast.

Murmuration

Jennifer Noelle Welch

Clara stepped back from the floor-to-ceiling window, her breath tightening in her chest. On the mulch below the sill lay the crooked figure of a bluebird, its claws curled tight against its breast. Two downy feathers stuck to the glass, nearly transparent in the sunshine.

The backs of Clara's knees bumped into the edge of her parlor chair, and she sank onto it. The latest issue of *American Birder* lay where she had dropped it on the floral carpet. As she gazed at it, the cover became a watery blur. The taste of her morning tea turned bitter in her mouth.

The twelfth bird that week.

With effort, she slowed her breathing. Her lungs already ached from sobbing, and John would not want her upset. If he were still alive, he would gather the feathered bodies in a towel so she wouldn't have to see them. Even now, four months after his passing, she could picture his white brows pinching together and hear him saying something like, "Poor things. Probably some mad bird flu."

Clara went to the front door and forced herself to undo the deadbolt. *I don't have to leave the house to get help*, she told herself, pulling it open. The thought of setting foot outside set her heart thumping. Sunlight poured through the screen door, stinging her eyes. When she recovered, she saw the neighborhood was quiet, apart from plump Mrs. Rufus stabbing at a patch of dandelions next door.

Clara didn't need to see the other retirees on her street to imagine their whispers. *Shut-in. A recluse, ever since the accident that killed her husband. Wasn't she the one driving?* Clara's face burned. They didn't understand. She'd been distracted by the birds. And now, no matter how much she isolated herself, they threw themselves at her like they didn't want her to forget it. Clara thought of the dead bluebird and wrung her hands. Mrs. Rufus could take care of it. After all, she'd been doing her shopping and yardwork.

Clara rapped hard on the door frame, rattling the screen, and Mrs. Rufus ambled over.

"Would you mind putting more decals on the window for me?" Clara asked.

Mrs. Rufus puffed out her red cheeks, surveying the black hawk silhouettes stuck to each pane of glass on the house. "Honey. You think more will make a difference?"

"What if you moved the plastic owl from the back of the house to the front?" Clara said. Hysteria fluttered in her throat.

Mrs. Rufus took the decals Clara poked through the mail slot and frowned. "Maybe someone in your bird club can explain why it's only your house getting bombed. I know the group's missed you all these weeks."

"I don't think so," Clara said.

"You used to hike circles around all of them." She held out a suntanned arm. "You were browner than me! Don't you want to get out?"

Clara felt Mrs. Rufus searching her face, and concentrated on the reassuring pressure of the screen door's mesh against her fingertips.

"No," she whispered. "But thank you." She shut the door and withdrew to close the window blinds around the house.

How could she explain that the birds tracked her specifically, dashing themselves against the windows of the room she occupied? The first collision had occurred a month after John's funeral. A yellow-shafted flicker, with a brilliant red patch behind its head and large, brown-and-black herringbone wings. Clara had been finishing a paint-by-number of a robin when the thud against the glass sent her brush flying. Pausing in the bedroom with her hand twisted in the window blind cord, she envisioned once again the dead flicker's sturdy, perfect beak.

The incident signaled the start of a mass backyard suicide. One, two, sometimes three birds a day. And today, a bluebird? Her stomach sickened, as though she had snapped the bird's neck in her hands. She used to spend every afternoon roaming the nature trails outside town, documenting what she had liked to call her "feathered free spirits" in her notebook.

"You love birds so much," John had said. "Let's get you a canary."

"Oh, I could never keep one in a cage. They're wonderful, wild creatures," Clara responded. "Let me take you to see the snow geese instead."

Every March a flock made its migration stopover in a field near the local creek. She and John spent the day arm-in-arm, marveling at the sea of white birds. John laughed with her at the flock's raucous honking, and squeezed her hand.

She was driving them home, her cheeks sore from smiling, when a shifting in the sky above the road drew her eye. Thousands of starlings converged and separated in a throbbing, living cloud. "A murmuration!" she cried. Just as she started to explain the phenomenon to John, the jeep skidded on the wet pavement. The steering wheel jerked in her hands. She tugged hard to compensate, and slammed the side of the vehicle—John's side—into a tree.

The window blind in the bedroom smacked against the sill, and Clara jumped. Her gaze fell on her laundry basket, sitting under the house's last uncovered window. So far she'd filled it with the paint-by-number set, her ceramic songbird figurines, and her favorite mug with the

goldfinches on it. It was best to get rid of it all. Give the knickknacks to someone who deserved the hobby. Not a murderer like her. She retrieved her hiking boots from the closet where John's clothes still hung. *I can't be that person anymore*, she thought. *I'm only a death magnet.*

In her mind, she saw them all, lined up like blood offerings. The broken wing of a mockingbird, flopping in the breeze. A wren with a blood-stained cap. A plump, black-and-white jumble she recognized as a chickadee.

Feathers flapped at the window, startling her. A single starling, just like those that had looped above her in the sky that day, perched on the outside sill. It cocked a jet-black eye at her, tap-tap-tapped on the glass, and flew off.

Clara's ribs tightened with anxiety. "What do you want from me?" she whispered.

They had to be able to see the glass. Why were they still trying to force their way in? To remind her of what she'd done? Well. She'd get rid of that part of her life forever. Trembling, she hurried downstairs to the parlor with the laundry basket, sweeping birding notebooks and calendars into it as she went.

She was reaching for the binoculars on the mantle when a reverberating smack stopped her hand. It sounded like a marble hitting the glass. She remembered the insistent expression of the starling's jet-black eye and pulled the curtain back.

A dark form flopped in the mulch. She swallowed a wave of nausea. *It's still alive.* In an instant she was out in the yard, gathering the soft body from beside the bluebird.

The starling's wings worked weakly against her fingers. "Why did you want to break into my house?" Clara said.

A light breeze moved over her skin. The sensation, foreign yet familiar, sent goosebumps up her legs. She glanced up. A murmuration twined above the trees like an immense Moebius strip. She squinted at pinpoints of color in the cloud. Finches, jays, orioles, cardinals, thousands of birds that never flew together, joining and separating. The joyful cacophony of their cries resounded over the neighborhood. Awe replaced her fear.

Movement stirred in her palm. Tiny toes gripped her finger as the starling righted itself.

"You weren't breaking *in*", Clara said, staring at it. "You were trying to get me *out*."

The starling flapped its wings and launched upward. She heard the voice of that other self, her old self, calling after it as it climbed. "Out of that cage. Fly away, now. Quick! Before you're caught again."

Clara looked behind her at the house. The blinded windows gaped back like empty eyes. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen them from outside. Her stomach rose against the

thought of those four walls, so like a box. She turned back to the open sky, and though she stood perfectly still, she felt a sensation like her feet leaving the ground.



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Phase II

Frank Oreto

Folks up on Wheeler Mountain had their fair share of weird that winter. Bo Gifford claimed his prize heifer gave birth to a calf with two asses and Danny said there were a lot more shooting stars than normal. But I think things really started going downhill when my Ford pickup ate Richard Petty.

Little Dale found the old tomcat and named him in the tradition of our family (boys after NASCAR drivers and girls after country music songs). That orange-haired monster might have started life out as Fluffy, but he finished up as Richard Petty. Dale and the twins, Delia and Ruby, loved that mangy thing. Even Shelly doted on it and she wasn't one to take a shine to neither man nor beast. Maybe there's only so much love in the world to go around, because the more Shelly and the kids gave that cat the less they had for me.

It was February when it happened. I grabbed Richard Petty by the scruff of his neck and headed for the door.

"It's too cold," said Shelly. "He's gonna freeze."

"Where the hell you think it slept before we took it in?"

Shelly didn't have an argument for that. Truth be told, it *was* too damn cold. The kind of cold makes you slap a jock strap on your brass monkey. But I'd been getting peanut butter and jelly for lunch because the tuna I liked went into Petty's bowl. I tossed that yowling son of a bitch into the yard like I was trying for a strike at the Bowl-a-Rama.

Let the little shit freeze.

The next morning, I staggered out to the truck after a quick breakfast of Sun Drop and cigarettes. I was thinking about my job—twelve hours on the factory floor screwing part A onto part B. Where Richard Petty spent the night didn't cross my mind.

I started up the truck. The engine made a chunking sound and then whined into life. Petty's final yowl filled the yard like a siren. Shelly and the kids poured out of the house in time to see the blood dripping off the hood as I looked down at the mess that had been their favorite pet.

"What the hell did you do, Lee?" Shelly screamed.

"Me, I didn't do a thing. The damn cat crawled up under the hood. How was I supposed to know?"

"You put him out in the cold. You knew what would happen."

It wasn't true. I tried to explain. Critters were always getting under car hoods looking for a little warmth. Most times they just high tailed it out when the engine started. I didn't plan it. I

hated the cat, but no animal deserved what Richard Petty got. I would've never done such a thing on purpose. Hell, cleaning the engine would take me all day.

The kids didn't say a word. They just looked at me.

I knew the family was upset, but I thought maybe, what with the cat gone, things might get better. They didn't. I had been right about there only being so much love. When the Ford's fan blade tore through all nine of Richard Petty's lives the love died with him. There wasn't anything but anger and blame left for old Lee Swafford Jr.

Shelly took the kids and left a few months later. She claimed I was spending all my time drinking with Danny, instead of looking for a new job after the factory let me go. That was true, but I blamed the damn cat.

I had a plan, though—a way to make some money and get Shelly and the kids to come home. Maybe I was fooling myself. I heard Shelly was dating Bob Gill, owner of Big Bob's Boot Barn, and that little Dale and the girls already called him Daddy. But a man's got to dream. And my dreams were fueled with propane.

Danny and I pulled into the Super Wal-Mart outside of Dayton around 2 a.m. We parked right up close to the long gray cage full of propane tanks. Construction sites went through that shit like a drunk through a case of High Life. It cost them thirty dollars a tank, but I'd sell it to them for half that and it was all profit.

Danny hopped out of the passenger seat. He already had the bolt cutters, what he called the "key to the city," in his hand. The lock clanged on to the asphalt and in five minutes flat we had twenty-five tanks in the truck bed with a tarp over them.

I scanned the parking lot as I pulled out. There were only a few oldsters camping out in their RVs, on their way to see America one Wal-Mart at a time. I'd rubbed some mud on our license plate. The old folks couldn't see worth a shit anyway.

Danny did the math, his eyes rolling up as if the answer was tattooed on the inside of his skull. "Another few weeks and we can go to Phase II," he said.

Danny talked fancy, but I didn't mind. He was the brains of the outfit. I'd been getting in trouble with Danny since the two of us were eight years old. He always had a scheme and there was always a Phase II. This time, Phase II was getting a flatbed truck we could paint up to look official and some uniforms with names on the pockets. We could triple the propane we carried and we'd look like delivery men, so nobody would suspect us. Problem was, we kept drinking up the profits.

Danny grabbed a beer from the cooler and handed it to me. He took a swig off his own can and stowed it between his legs.

"We're on our way, Lee."

He noticed me staring at the truck's gauges.

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "Not a thing." That was what worried me. I loved that Ford, but it was an ornery machine. It burned through gas and oil like a fat man goes through fried chicken. When we started our little enterprise, I figured the first thing I'd need to spend the money on was tuning up the truck. But the thing purred like a kitten: no warning lights, no overheating. Stranger still, I hadn't put gas in the beast for a couple weeks and it still read over half a tank.

The next morning—well, afternoon—I lay on the couch in the trailer, hung over and still worried. What if the gas gauge wasn't working? It would not do to run out of gas with twenty tanks of stolen propane in the truck bed.

I pulled myself up and lit a cigarette to burn away the cobwebs. I was out of Sun Drop. Outside, the sun was high and sweat trickled down the back of my neck. I popped the hood on the Ford and looked inside.

I stood there unable to move for a good minute before I broke and ran. I was in the trailer before the hood clanged shut.

I pulled out another cigarette to replace the one that I'd dropped outside and grabbed a beer from the fridge. My hands shook so much it took three tries to light up. There was something on the truck's engine.

Critters crawl up under truck hoods all the time. I'd told Shelly and the kids that, and it was true. But I'd never seen nothing like this. I closed my eyes and tried to make sense of it. The body had been long and rounded. Parts of it covered by some sort of hard shell but you could see the meat of the thing pressed up through the gaps, all grey and sick looking, like month-old bologna.

There wasn't a head, just the body and at least a couple dozen legs sticking out every which way. Big fleshy sacks hung off the thing's sides, more where the legs jointed up. The sacks would swell up like a bull frog about to croak and go flat again. The legs (I called them legs but they could have been arms or antennae for all I could figure), weren't just holding on to the engine, they were poking right through the metal. Something like rubber cement sealed up the gaps. If there were ticks in Hell they would have looked like the thing under the hood of my Ford.

Two beers and half a dozen cigarettes didn't bring me any closer to knowing what to do. I walked outside, picking up the hatchet that lay by the woodpile. I came at the Ford from the back. Squatted down and tried to see past the pair of shiny chromium "truck nuts" that little Dale had given me last Father's day.

There it was, caked in a camouflage of mud and exhaust dirt. Thin legs, jointed every few inches, wrapped themselves around the exhaust pipe, packing the hole at the end. My brain made a connection. The car running so well, hardly using any gas—was this critter the cause?

The whole thing was bigger than I could think, so I called Danny. He said I was crazy, or still drunk. I didn't blame him. When I told him about the truck not burning any gas he sounded a bit more interested.

He pulled up a half hour later.

"Well, let's see your monster bug."

I yanked open the hood, this time propping it. We stood and looked at the thing wrapped around my engine.

"Start her up," Danny said.

With the engine running, the thing changed. The sacks went into high gear. You could tell there was something wet inside them getting pumped along. Where the legs poked into the engine, they glowed.

We shut her down and went inside for some brain fuel. I heated up a couple of pot pies in the microwave while Danny pulled the first Miller Lite from a fresh case he'd brought.

"So what do you think?" I said pulling the plastic back from the top of my pie.

Danny smiled. "I don't know for sure yet, but this may be big. You mind if I sleep here on your couch tonight? I got some tests in mind."

"Why don't you take the bed? I don't feel comfortable in it without Shelly."

"Fuck Big Bill and his Boot Barn," Danny said, lifting his beer.

"Amen."

We kept drinking. Danny got up every so often and walked out to his truck with a flashlight. Things got blurry as the night went on. I was about asleep when Danny came through the doorway and gave a rebel yell that shook the windows.

"It did it," he said. He dragged me out to the trucks. He'd moved his right next to mine and both the hoods were open. Danny shined the flashlight down on his engine and smiled.

"Look at that, Lee."

There was another one. It was smaller. The gray, hard-looking limbs weren't so dirty yet and the sacks didn't swell as big. But the thing attached to Danny's truck engine sure enough did look like the critter on mine.

Danny slapped me on the back, and let out another rebel yell. "You know what this means?" he asked.

Between the beer and not being the sharpest tool in God's shed, I had to admit I didn't.

"We can farm the goddamned things. People would pay a lot of money for their old clunkers to run better and use half as much gas. Hell, this thing is all-natural and organic. Them Hollywood liberals will be out here throwing bags of money at us in a week."

I had questions, fuzzy and half formed. Danny didn't give me a chance to ask them.

"Hop in. We're taking a ride to celebrate." I ran back to the house for a few more beers and we hit the road. The truth was, we weren't anywhere near the road most of that drive. Danny had an idea to do what he called a "stress test" on the critter attached to his engine—see if it could hold on. We plowed down every back road and through every muddy field we could get to. When the beer ran out, we headed back.

Danny checked beneath the hood. The thing was still holding on and it had grown. Legs punctured the engine in a half dozen places, but nothing was leaking. There was a thick layer of greenish gunk where the bug and the engine connected. Danny touched the stuff.

"Hell," he said. "It makes its own sealant." He pinched off a bit and rolled it between his fingers. "This stuff alone will probably make us a fortune."

I liked the sound of that. We went back in the trailer and I got out a bottle of thirty-dollar sipping whiskey I'd been saving for a special occasion.

When I came to, the house was empty. I staggered into the front yard, squinting against the sunlight. Danny's truck was gone. That was okay. Danny was a good one. I wasn't worried about him running off and making money without cutting me in. But him leaving did make me remember the question I'd wanted to ask last night. How did we keep the truck-bugs from spreading before people paid us?

I heard something above me. I turned and looked up at the trailer's roof. I heard it again—a quick series of clicks and clacks, like a squirrel wearing tap shoes. I didn't like that sound one bit. My ladder was still leaning up against the side of the porch from a few weeks before, when I'd nearly got up the gumption to clean the gutters. I climbed up slow and peeked my head over the edge.

It was a bug, smaller than the ones on the engines. About as big as a small dog. As I watched, one of the sacks hanging closest to me started to swell. I waited for it to shrink again, but it just got bigger. It burst with a wet tearing sound, and out came a bundle of stick-thin antennae dripping green slime. The thing rattled its legs on the roof, and those antennae reached toward me.

The damned thing scared me so bad my legs went out from under me. My ass landed hard in the dirt. That fall saved my life. The tap-shoe shuffle echoed on the roof and the thing leapt off

the side right as I fell. It sailed over me, its sacks flattening and stretching, making the thing look like the scariest god-damned flying squirrel you ever saw. It landed five feet out in the yard.

Despite the pain in my ass, I was up and running before the bug-critter got its spindly legs up under itself. There was a rifle in the truck and a shotgun under my bed, but the hatchet was closest. I ran for the woodpile.

I got hold of the hatchet's wooden handle just as something sharp stabbed into the back of my calf. I felt more needle jabs on my thigh and lower back. My leg went dead and I fell again. I turned as I went down and got the bug between my back and the rough-chopped cords of wood. There was a sound like a plate breaking and my back turned warm and wet.

I rolled and some of the bug rolled with me. Most of it still lay broken on the logs. One of its legs hung from my calf. I yanked it out and screamed. It came loose, but took a hunk of me with it. Blood ran down my leg.

The thing was still alive. The thick bunch of antennae snapped back and forth in the air. I brought the hatchet down into the middle of them and was rewarded with a meaty thunk and a burst of green blood. The thing wasn't done yet. It had at least a dozen legs and most were moving. I swung at it again, but hit wood. The bug scrambled over the top of the woodpile and into the long grass behind.

I heard an engine coming up the drive and ran toward it.

"Danny, we got a problem," was out of my mouth before I realized that it wasn't Danny's pickup but a late-model Lincoln pulling up the drive. I recognized the car and knew it must be Sunday.

The Reverend Archibald Snapp was a big man with a big voice. The kind of fellow who could make the church rafters ring with the good word. I hadn't seen him in a few months, but he got around to everyone eventually—checking in, seeing why you hadn't been to church.

He got out of his Lincoln looking like he'd just stepped from behind the pulpit. His suit coat and tie buttoned up tight despite the heat.

"Howdy Reverend." My voice was ragged and high. I still held the hatchet, green goo smearing the blade. I moved so it was behind my leg.

"Lee," the Reverend said right back. "Didn't see you in church today."

"No. It's been a while. I can't seem to get up the gumption since Shelly and the kids left." I wanted to jump in the Lincoln and scream at the preacher to get me the hell out of there, but I didn't. That bug had scared me half to death, but I could still hear Danny's voice in my head telling me about all the money we'd make—the kind of money that would get Shelly and the kids

back with me like they belonged. It might still happen. So the bugs were dangerous. So were deer if you weren't prepared for them.

I just needed to get in the house, grab the shotgun and call Danny.

"Lee," the preacher said. He'd been talking for a while, but his words had only just now gotten through the fog in my brain. "Do you mind if I use your bathroom?"

I thought that would be a pretty bad idea and said so. "You need to go, Reverend. I appreciate you coming by and all, but I'm a bit busy." I looked over my shoulder, expecting to see a bug skittering over the grass any minute.

While I was looking, Reverend Snapp reached out and grabbed my collar. There was something in his other hand, something with a lot of legs.

The Reverend had played lineman for the Hope's Rest Warriors back in high school, but I had the hatchet and was still full of fear and adrenaline.

I ignored the hand on my collar and brought the axe down on the bug. It cleaved in half and the grass was littered with green slime, bug parts, and the Reverend's hacked off fingers.

The Reverend didn't make a sound. I don't know that he even felt the blade slice through his hand. He pulled me toward him by my collar and slammed his bleeding half hand into my gut. The air whistled out between my teeth, but I'd already swung the hatchet again and buried it in the side of Reverend Snapp's knee. The big man of God went down like a felled tree. I hacked at the hand on my collar until the fingers loosened.

The Reverend was talking again. Not loud, just a chat between old friends.

"Haven't seen you at church, lately. You ought to drop by for the covered dish supper this Wednesday. Haven't seen you in church lately. You ought to . . ." He was on his knees swaying, the words still pouring from his lips. I stepped behind him and stared at the bunch of antenna, each one as thick as my finger. They rose just to the edge of his white collar before plunging into the skin of his neck. He started to stand, his one good leg shaking with the effort.

I swung the hatchet at where the bug pierced the preacher's neck. I kept swinging, and the preacher kept moving. Each blow slowed him down a bit, like a wind-up toy coming to a stop. It took a good while. When it was done, I stood there covered in sweat and blood—both red and green. I stared at the bits and pieces of what had been Reverend Snapp and wondered what kind of hell you ended up in for hacking up a preacher. I had a sinking feeling I wasn't going to get rich.

The bug wasn't moving, but I didn't trust that it was dead. I got the lighter fluid from the grill and set fire to the mess of flesh and bug that lay on the gravel. Smoke blew over me and I

swear to God it reminded me of church barbecues when I was a kid. I dropped to my knees and vomited until I got down to the dry heaves.

I tried calling Danny, but he didn't answer. So I called the sheriff's office. I stood in the kids' bedroom. It didn't have any windows so I figured it was safest. The shotgun was in one hand and the cell phone in the other.

Sheriff Nipper picked up, which was strange. I'd expected a deputy on a Sunday, but I'd take him.

"I need to report a killing."

"Do you indeed," the sheriff said like a man who was in on a joke.

Fear rose up in my belly.

"You seen Danny Stokes today, Sheriff?"

"I did, Lee," the sheriff said. "Picked him up this morning for drunk driving. Turned out he wasn't so drunk after all. He showed me something damned interesting."

"Did Danny visit the preacher, too, or was that you, Sheriff?" My legs started feeling weak and I sat down on little Dale's race car-shaped bed.

"I never miss church, Lee. You know that."

"Reverend Snapp is dead."

"I thought he must be," said the sheriff. "I tell you what, Lee. Why don't you just open up a window in that trailer of yours, lay down and get yourself a little shut eye. Things don't have to go hard."

"I don't think so. I'm not living out the rest of my life with bug legs shoved up my ass. I guess that's your thing."

"All right, Lee," the sheriff said. The man's temper was a town legend, but his voice didn't rise one bit. "I'll be up there pretty soon. We all will."

I heard the click of the line dying and let my phone drop to the bed. I thought about calling Shelly, but what if her or one of the kids picked up and told me, "Just lay down, Daddy. It don't have to go hard."

I was trying to figure out a way to get to them—couldn't drive the Ford—when I heard the sound of an engine in the distance. I'd have company soon. I got up.



It's dark now. I boarded everything up. I didn't think I'd have time. The cars and trucks showed up hours ago, but they don't seem to be in a hurry. Waiting me out, I guess.

I can see them between the wood slats-seven vehicles, lights on, engines running. Danny's truck is out there. So is the sheriff's and some of the deputies'. I'm pretty sure that's the mayor sitting in the blue Escalade.

I can hear the click-clack of bug legs clattering over the roof. So many it sounds like a hail storm. It would be enough to drive me to drink if there was any beer left. I keep wishing the bugs had gotten me first instead of Danny. Danny would have had a plan. All I got is propane.

I think them bugs aren't as smart as all that, even hooked up to people's brains. Because Danny knows I kept about ten tanks of propane to heat the trailer. Those tanks are all lined up along the front wall now. I get some road flares ready to light up, then I just fire a round off from the shotgun.

I keep thinking about what the sheriff said, "We're all coming." Wouldn't that be something, if the people parked outside were all there were? Danny's was the first brain the bugs got a hold of. Maybe they're taking it slow; the bugs taking over the important people first. It sounds like something Danny would come up with. Shelly always said he was a little too smart for his own good.

I'd like that, if I could light up this propane and save the god damned world. Shelly and the kids would be proud.

The road flare lit up the trailer like the fourth of July. Look at them scramble out of the trucks. Danny must have seen the burst of light through the wooden slats on the windows. He must have remembered the propane. Thinks they can stop me.

"We killed the bugs," Danny yells. "We were just waiting you out to see if they got you. Everything's okay. Don't do anything crazy."

Even I'm not that stupid.

They ought to run. Wouldn't matter, not with this much propane, but that would be the smarter play. Instead they rush the trailer. I guess the bugs do make you stupid.

The door won't last long, but I don't need much time. I'm glad Shelly and the kids left. Glad there's a chance they might be safe. I guess killing Richard Petty was a blessing after all.

They're almost through the door. The sheriff's in front trying to kick through the boards I nailed up. I can see Danny's face looking at me from the porch and tears come to my eyes. A board gives way beneath the sheriff's boot with a crack. Gray bugs skitter through the opening.

Time's up.

I love you Shelly.

I lay the shotgun's barrels against the side of the closest propane tank.

"All right, you sons of bitches, here comes Phase II."



© 2016 by Frank Oreto

Frank Oreto is a stay-at-home dad living in Pittsburgh, PA. In between giving out hugs and lectures, he writes strange little stories like the one appearing here. Frank was born in the hills of Tennessee and after a few decades, he finally settled in the slightly less rural hills of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The view was oddly similar regardless of his location as he spent his life surrounded by bookshelves. He haunted libraries and bookshops until old enough to find work at them. And when the shelves didn't hold a story he wanted to read, he'd write his own.

Bedroom Community

Nancy Waldman

I can't hear most things anymore, but the *thwunk* of the bowstring is near enough to my ear to register. It has become as pleasing a sound as I can ever remember hearing. Ever, that is, since the world changed. But another sound follows, loud enough that it screeches like burning rubber against my eardrum.

"Goddamn, Old Man, what'd you aim at?" Freddie yells, already running toward it. He bounds over a stone wall residing uselessly among the looming trees.

My breath comes fast and short.

I can't keep up with Freddie, who's more than forty years my junior. By the time I arrive he's kneeling deep in dead leaves, sobbing, covered in the blood of a woman. A woman we don't know. A woman whose glassy, light brown eyes show death as clearly as the autumn sky reflecting off them.

My arrow rests in her neck.

"F-f-fuck." I breathe the word out, but can't seem to draw in the next breath. I never could tolerate the sight of blood.



Usually Freddie and I get by fine here in the lush, former bedroom community of Darien, Connecticut, because of Freddie's crazy-smart intelligence. Asperger's, his parents told me years ago. Guess they were glad to have a name for it since he would never rise up to their standards. He's not too great with people or authority, but he can build whatever he envisions. In other words: ideally suited for this do-it-yourself world.

I'm 87 years old and just happen to live next door. I do the cooking.

Our families are long gone.

He enters the sunroom through the sliding door at the back of my house. It's Tuesday, the day we hike out to check sections of the perimeter barriers. Mondays, we hunt. A schedule helps us keep track of the days.

"Morning," I say from the kitchen island where I'm cleaning grease from the pan. "It's ready."

Long before the coastlines flooded, when the grid first got sketchy, Freddie installed solar panels on my house. He'd done his first, right after his perpetually disapproving dad died of a stroke. Between the two houses, we have enough power.

Freddie picks up his plate and I notice dried blood in the creases of his fingernails. It's from the woman in the woods and seeing it there makes me sick to my stomach.

He sits down at the table and eats.

"We're due to go up to the Merritt to check the Mansfield exit," I say, joining him.

Freddie doesn't answer.

He finishes and then gets a glass of water from the cistern faucet he rigged. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, turns to face me. I can usually make out what he's saying if I have a clear view of his mouth.

"You fucking killed a person."

I'd fainted at the sight of her, so Freddie had to deal with an unconscious me *and* a dead woman. I guess he needs to talk about it. "I know. What do you want me to do?"

"Ya think the *incident* might bear mentioning? Reacting to? Expressing some regret?"

"So much death."

"So much. Yeah. And now, one more. But this one," he jabs a finger at me, "is on you."

"Shit." I rise and pace from the kitchen into the sunroom and back. "It could just as easily have been you, you asshole! What were the fucking chances of *me* killing anything? What were the fucking chances that she'd be there at that moment? What are you trying to do to me?"

"Nothing. I'm just trying to stay human." He says this slowly, emphasizing each word. His bearded chin slumps down to his neck. His curly hair, beginning to grey, is long and unkempt. His t-shirt in tatters. I'd been watching it fall apart for years. It had once shown a picture of Chewbacca on a skateboard. He looks up at me. "It's hard, isn't it? To stay human? But, goddamn it! Doesn't killing another human being at least justify altering the fucking schedule?"

"How I deal with this is my business. I *know* I'm still human."

He leaves. I watch him walk the well-worn path to his house almost a half-acre away. Freddie enters the strip of woods between properties and disappears.



He's back the next day as if nothing happened. I knew he would be, but breathe a little easier once he arrives. I need him because, for some reason, I still want to survive.

Wednesdays are scavenging days. Freddie charts our excursions on a collage of old Google satellite images that he taped to my wall years ago. He circles each house on the map after we've looked through it and chooses our next destination.

Today, it's Camp Avenue—south of us, north of I-95, just at the edge of the swampy morass that's coastal Connecticut.

At the door, I hesitate, and then pick up my bow and quiver, same as always. Even though the hyped hordes of desperate refugees from New York City never came, paranoia is as much a part of the new world as rising oceans. People are scarce, but we never venture out unarmed.

Freddie usually leads, but today he walks alongside me. He's changed his t-shirt. This one's black and has a picture of some band that I never knew and now can't make out.

"I got a link up last night," he says.

"Hear anything important?" I ask, looking at his mouth.

"My buds are tracking another Atlantic mega-storm. Won't hit us directly, but we'll get another surge. Camp Avenue could be soggy by the end of the week."

"What should we do?"

He shrugs. "Hunker down at home, as usual. We live like fucking kings."

I snort, and then realize he's not kidding.

We go through three or four homes, putting our finds in backpacks. We're selective. If there's more than we can carry, we make note of it and come back. It'll wait. We wear masks and gloves scavenged early on from the box stores. Mold has taken over these once showy homes.

We wrench open the front door of a small, at-one-time red, saltbox-style house. The smell of recent human death assaults us. I rear back, out to the porch landing, covering my nose, eyes watering.

Freddie yells a quick, "Anyone here?" and then, gagging, comes out too. "Jesus."

"Maybe there are others?" I look over both shoulders as a shiver shambles up my spine, but I see no movement, hear no footsteps or voices.

There's no way we're going in that house.

It sits on a high ridge above the road, so we start back down the curved, sloping, overgrown path that was once a black-topped driveway.

Freddie stops. "What was that?"

"I didn't hear anything." This means nothing, of course. I look back, but can't see the house because of the curve of the driveway. I walk halfway up the incline and see a woman standing outside at the corner of the house. "Freddie!" I say in a stage whisper.

She slips out of sight.

Freddie calls out. "Come back! We're no danger to you."

But we know she won't.

I wouldn't.

"I'm going to find her," he says.

"She'll run. What are you going to do? Chase her down?"

"The storm's coming. Should I leave her here to die . . . like that person in the house? "

He drops his backpack, jogs up the rise and around the side of the house.

I take in a deep breath. Freddie's changing. He used to be way more paranoid than me. He wouldn't have gone out of his way for a stranger in the beginning.

When was the beginning?

It wasn't supposed to get this far in my lifetime, that's for sure. Catastrophes piled up; one damned disaster after another, each coming before we could recover from the last, with no money to repair anything.

Freddie set to work, building his insular world. When TV and the Internet still worked, we heard ominous predictions which fed his fear of others. Like those refugees who never came. I still don't know where all the people went. You had to get used to not knowing things. So many just died.

A woman screams so loud even I hear and then shouts words I can't make out. Then her screams become horrifying howls.

Freddie. I run up the hill, bow in hand. *So many died. Not Freddie. Not Freddie.*

Before I can get to the house, the woman runs around the corner pointing backwards and screaming, "Get him! Get him!"

I'm not built for emergencies. My ordered mind leaves me.

Somehow though, my body works anyway.

I see an enraged man running toward the woman and my right hand reaches up and back for an arrow. I see that the man wields an ax. My hand moves away from the quiver and down, toward the unused gun I always tuck into the waistband along my spine. I pull it out; drop the bow; undo the safety; straighten my arm; steady the gun with both hands; aim; take a deep, slow breath; correct the aim; and shoot.



A four-inch gash gapes in Freddie's skull. He's unconscious, but breathing. The young woman—who seems quite capable of coping with an emergency—tends to him while I try not to faint.

"What's your name?" I ask, while she's putting pressure on the wound. I've already told her I don't hear well.

She looks at me. "Muriel. Yours?"

I indicate the unconscious man. "Freddie calls me Old Man."

"Very post-apocalyptic of you. I'm up with that. Where do you live?"

"North, not far from the Merritt. Is there anyone else here who might . . . attack us?"

"He's the last of this bunch. Got any semi-clean fabric?"

I give her a shirt I'd scavenged earlier.

She searches for a weak spot, pulls it against her teeth and tears strips. "We—" she stops and starts again. "I, um, I've been surviving in these parts for a long time with . . ." she hesitates again, ". . . friends. We stayed put when we could, took what we needed and moved on. But people kept disappearing. Or . . . oh hell, I'll tell you later. Can we get him to your place?"

"I'll make a travois."

She wraps the fabric tightly around Freddie's skull.

Freddie and I learned how to put together sleds from limbs to pull home our deer carcasses, so I know what to do. First though, I have to wrench the fucking ax out of the dead man's hand, but—whatever—it's been that kind of week.



I pull, plastic rope around my shoulders padded with bits of the torn shirt. Muriel helps me when I hit a rough spot or have to go uphill. Otherwise she walks beside the sled watching that Freddie doesn't fall off. He's more responsive now. We stay on the roads, which takes longer, but is easier than cutting through the fields. The land rises gradually as we go north.

I have to rest many times.

When I do, Muriel immediately bends over to check Freddie's pulse and bleeding. She might be twenty, probably younger. I watch her and wonder what she's been through—born into this broken world.

That asshole is the second person I've killed this week. The third person I've killed in my life. But I can't be bothered to care about this last one. If that makes me inhuman, so be it. My transformation is complete.

"Who was that guy?" I ask.

"The devil. My friend went out to scavenge one day and didn't come back. I found her. Miraculously, I found her. But . . . shit . . . she's dead. My fault. I've been trying to rescue her without getting caught."

I put a hand on her bony shoulder.

Muriel gives me a look full of complications.

I turn back to the travois and we trudge home.



With us supporting him, Freddie walks—stumbles, shuffles, is dragged—inside. He almost passes out twice and groans continually, but we finally get him to the couch in my den.

"What happened?"

"You have a nasty head wound."

"That, I knew." He grimaces and closes his eyes.

"Do you have clean water?" Muriel asks.

Freddie opens his eyes again at the sound of a strange voice. "Hi," he says and drifts off.

I bring washrags and a dishpan of water from the passive heat trough in the sunroom.

She marvels at the warm water. "How do you have so much?"

"Freddie's good at this survivalist stuff. I'm along for the ride." I'm trying to stay light, but the words feel like dry kibbles dropping out of my mouth one by one.

"I did this," she says, not looking at me.

"Did what?"

"It was my ax."



Muriel takes it all in. All the deteriorating luxury of my house. There are six bedrooms. I let her pick where she wants to sleep, only then realizing how dirty everything's gotten.

Tomorrow, I'll clean.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I feel like talking.

"This was my daughter Leila's lavender refuge. She grew up and had three daughters. They lived in Australia when we lost touch. My granddaughters talk like Aussies! I picture them tall

and willowy like their grandmother—my wife. They're in their 30s and—who knows?—maybe they have kids now."

I smile up at the cobwebbed ceiling. "I try to envision Leila with graying hair and wrinkles. Maybe she's put on weight. God willing, they have food. But she'd be okay, because, well, obviously . . ." I spread my hands to indicate myself, "she has good genes."

Muriel smiles. It looks weird, as if her muscles have forgotten, or never knew, how.

"Anyone else we need to find back there?"

She sighs deeply. "They've all died or disappeared. Usually I didn't know what happened. They just went out and never came back. This one. This last one. Her name was—" Her lips close in a tight line.

The stench from the red house floods back to me. "Tell me. Tell me her name."

"Isla. We loved each other. I staked out the house, but couldn't get to her without being captured. There were two of them and they never left her alone. Then I heard one say that Isla was dead, so two days ago I killed the other guy and went back today to finish off the asshole you shot. Oh, what I wouldn't have given for a working gun!" She pauses for a moment and then looks me steadily in the eyes. "When Freddie came around the corner, it distracted me. That devil came up from behind and wrenched the ax out of my hand."

Her green-blue eyes are tear-filled, vivid against tanned skin. They remind me of the Caribbean waters I saw on a vacation with my wife . . . before the world changed.

"And then?"

"He bashed Freddie! I ran. You know the rest. I'm sorry." She pauses, gulping hard, licking dry lips. "He wouldn't have killed *me* . . . unless he had to."

My heart breaks. Again.

"None of it is your fault. Nothing is your fault. Sleep. I, um, I should check on our patient." Downstairs, I dish up soup and take it to Freddie.

"I think I'm okay," he says, between sips of the broth. "If it doesn't get infected."

"Muriel cleaned the wound," I say, knowing I could lose him.

He nods. "Probably has a lot of experience."

We stare at the fire and listen to the wind. The storm's arrived.

"Did you know that my given name is Freddie Mac?" he asks. I do, but I let him talk. "My dear, departed mother thought it would be shifts and giggles to name us Freddie Mac and Fannie Mac."

I detested his mother: a hawkish woman who chose to name her twins after the two largest mortgage companies at the height of the millennium's dash-for-cash just so she could laugh about it at cocktail parties.

"I know it's not the worst thing a kid ever dealt with, but it's so—"

"Shitty," I finish for him. "You had shitty parents."

"David . . ." he says.

I start at the sound of my name. I haven't heard it in many years.

"That woman in the woods the other day—God, it just killed me to have her bleed out all over me. I keep losing it."

I nod. "I can't cry anymore. But I think about her. I wonder who she was, what she was doing there. I wonder who's—" I clear my throat and make myself say it. "I wonder who's waiting for her to come back."

"That's why I never left," Freddie says, sounding like a little boy. "The off-chance, the hope that Fannie will show up one day."

"Freddie, listen. It's time to take a chance on sharing what we have. To find and bring in good people. Fill up the beds."

Maybe he's just weak, but he doesn't argue. He only nods, and then, nods off.

And so, it all begins again.



I check on Muriel and feel a tugging in my chest at the sight of her. How easily one life becomes infinitely important.

In my cool, darkened bedroom, I sit near the window and watch the violently swaying trees and marvel that most of the branches don't break. Most of the trees don't uproot. Most survive.

My thoughts drift to my wife as they do whenever I'm in our bedroom. She was the first person I killed. My secret, never told. Back then, it was illegal—no matter how much she suffered from bone cancer. Now, millions have died deaths that I—that everyone—assisted in. And yet, for some reason, I still want to survive. To find out what happens. To die knowing there is hope.

I touch the shuddering window pane and plan my tomorrow.



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Nancy Waldman trusts words more than numbers. That's why she became a writer instead of a numerologist. She writes about people and other "p" things like perception, plasticity, power imbalances and possibilities. Her stories have been published in *Perihelion SF*, *AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review*, and in the anthology *Futuristica*, Vol 1 by Metasagas Press. She co-founded Third Person Press, is a member of the tribe Viable Paradise XVII, and is on the board of a very personal charity: EPIC.

Graphic Story: Shamrock #8 — Illusion

Shamrock, part 8 illusion

Josh Brown Alberto Hernandez
Story Art

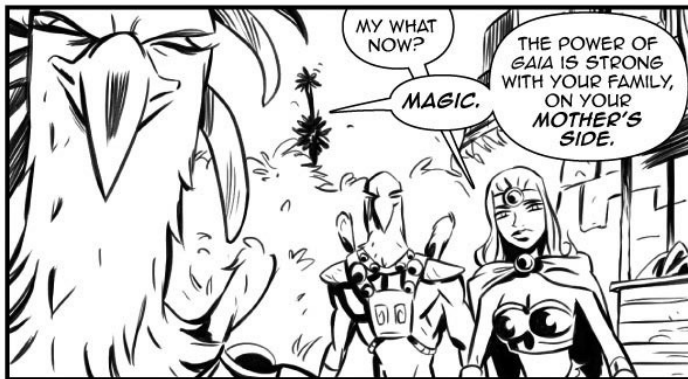












Book Review: Company Town (Madeline Ashby)

Julie Novakova

Company Town

by Madeline Ashby

Tor Books (May 17, 2016)

Ever wondered what it would be like to live on a floating town of a mining station far from land? Or, more importantly, what would it mean to be the rare completely organic person among variously augmented people? Madeline Ashby did, and undoubtedly asked herself many other interesting questions when writing her newest novel *Company Town*.

It's also good news for everyone who liked Ashby's novelette "Come From Away" in Neil Clarke's cyborg anthology *UPGRADED*. Hwa, the sympathetic down-to-earth heroine of the story, is back as the protagonist of *Company Town* and the novel actually includes the novelette as an integral part of the wider plot. Another story featuring Hwa before was published in Dave Maass' anthology *Pwning Tomorrow: Stories from the Electronic Frontier*.

Hwa works as a bodyguard for a sex workers' union, until she prevents a presumed attack and receives an offer she can't refuse: to become the bodyguard of a young corporate heir Joel Lynch, a member of the family who has recently bought the city of New Arcadia. After an accident which killed Hwa's brother and plunged the town into deeper recession, it seems that things might be turning the other way. But are the Lynches really a salvation for the town, or just the newest oppressors? Who is their urban tactics expert Daniel Síofra? Are the threats to Joel Lynch's life really coming from the future? And who is behind the series of murders targeting Hwa's friends? Mystery, thriller, many-faceted science fiction and a bit of romance await and will take you to an oil rig, an alcohol-storing ship, a school, a dangerous elevator, "places under bridges" and much more.

Ashby created a believable, well-depicted world full of lively characters in *Company Town*. Hwa's wry humor, common sense, honesty and courage make her a sympathetic character, and her vulnerability under the mask of the thick-skinned tough girl even more so; unlike some characters who really have that thick skin, she is more believable and interesting. There is no other character in the book who could compare to the depiction of Hwa, which is understandable as the story centers around her, but they all seem real, people with a past and

hoping for a future, be it Hwa's friends Eileen, Daniel, Joel, Hwa's mother or the myriad characters we only glimpse. The major exception is Joel's father and head of the Lynch family, who is obsessed with life everlasting and sometimes seems a caricature of an evil corporate overlord.

Ashby's take on the future of genetic enhancement, biotech and cybernetic augmentation, a major element of the story, shows both sides of the coin: the accelerated healing, sensory extension and all the advantages we've seen so often, as well as the widening gap between people who can afford the best and those who can't, and the increasingly indifferent bordering on sociopathic attitude of the first towards the second. Hwa is a perfect example of the latter group: born in a poor environment with a Sturge-Weber syndrome, leaving her with a dark stain across her body, epilepsy and increased risk of many other health complications. Her face broken into a pattern either becomes blurred in less-quality image processing, or edited out. But technology is not the culprit here; it's the way many people use it.

The author's skilled worldbuilding and characters will draw most readers in; the mystery plot will hook them. The line of the plot centered around Hwa's investigation of murders of several of her friends from the sex workers' union seemed the strongest part of the story to me, not speaking of Ashby's winks at the reader by Mr. Moore and Mr. Capote in the VR program about serial killings.

The book also had some drawbacks for me, particularly the final revelations. However, I can't explain them without spoilers, so if you want to avoid them, please skip the rest of this paragraph and the next one, and go right to the conclusion of the review. There: The one part that didn't quite fit for me was the time travel element. The story would keep all its weight and might hold together even more tightly if it avoided the trope of a killer come from the future. Moreover, although the antagonist tries to explain everything, some things don't quite add up, or I possibly missed them. Why stage a final confrontation with Hwa, Joel and Daniel, if the antagonist could have killed Hwa and Daniel and attempted to destroy their image as heroes in Joel's mind? The outcome couldn't have possibly been worse than what he did. Also, if we take the time travel element further, why doesn't he accelerate innovation within the Lynch corporation, Joel-or-no-Joel? Why be so stubbornly focused on just one piece of the puzzle? Perhaps I'm too picky because I've too recently read William Gibson's *The Peripheral*, which ditched explanations of time travel and many different timelines completely but explored the consequences truly brilliantly. While *Company Town*'s antagonist works as an embodiment of venture capital and big data gone horribly wrong, he doesn't quite work as a believable villain; he's a puppet instead of a character.

Another thing that didn't quite add up for me was why the elder Lynch planned his transition into specifically Síoira's body. Síoira had been a success; good. He served the Lynch family for

ten years and became a valuable asset. Why destroy him now, instead of abducting another body? It didn't seem like it would be a problem for Lynch to continue the Changeling program and choose someone else. And even if he insisted on Daniel, why didn't he transfer him out of sight before the transition? This way, Lynch just asked for Hwa to come after him . . .

Ashby did an admirable job connecting all the different plot elements, but at some moments it felt like chasing too many rabbits at once. Nevertheless, other readers might perceive it differently — particularly because of how difficult it is to merge so many engaging themes, and Ashby deserves much praise for managing them so well—and it doesn't change the fact that *Company Town* is a clever, fast-paced, fun read especially because of its fantastic heroine.



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Movie Review: The Curse of the Sleeping Beauty (Pearry Reginald Teo)

Mark R. Leeper

CAPSULE: In a really different and creative horror film three worlds come together in an old mansion that seems to bring together our world with a world of demons and a third where the story of Sleeping Beauty is working itself out. A modern man inherits the mansion and the curse that goes along with it. The curse draws him into a Grimm's fairy tale and a world of horror. Pearry Reginald Teo directs a script he co-wrote with Josh Nadler. This is a fantasy/horror film that is at least as original and audacious as any horror film I have seen this year. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

You may remember the story of the Grimms' fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" if not from the Brothers Grimm than from the Disney animated cartoon adaptation of the story. (There are actually several other versions.) Princess Briar Rose pricks her finger on a spinning wheel spindle and falls into an apparently endless coma-like sleep. There she remains until rescued by a handsome prince who kisses her and awakens her back to life. *THE CURSE OF SLEEPING BEAUTY* has (among other things) yet another pass at the story. But it is just a part of the horror existing here. Thomas Kaiser (played by Ethan Peck) inherits an old mansion that has been in his family for decades. But it is the home of a curse on the family that goes back something like nine centuries.

Under the titular curse, Thomas must keep at bay the demons who haunt the castle, first in his dreams and later in more corporeal form. And he must search for Briar Rose, the beauty he sees appearing asleep in his own dreams. Somehow he seems to be at the nexus of at least three worlds, one in the modern 21st century, another in the world of Grimms' fairy tales, and another in the dark threatening world more grim than the grimmest of Brothers Grimms' fairy tales. Well, fairy tales and horror have always had a close connection. The story starts a little slow, but soon shakes that off. One problem with the film is that there are characters talking in strange voices that are a little hard to understand. This complicates deciphering the end of the story.

One of the real heroes of the film is production designer Alessandro Marvelli who gives us an extremely spooky yet artistic house with statues and mannequins: things that are human or maybe just not quite. It just adds to a palpable chill. The fairy tale lands are presented almost poetically like scenes from picture books.

One thing that stands out to anyone educated in STEM fields: we have a computer whiz doing work on data found. He says his current software re-uses algorithms that were used for a

previous project. Apparently nobody present knew a logarithm from an algorithm. Mixing a fairy tale with what is mostly a horror film is an audacious approach, but the script does not give the story time to flesh out the two fantasy worlds. Still, the film is a fresh idea in a genre where too many ideas are overused and stale. I rate THE CURSE OF SLEEPING BEAUTY a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.



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