

Uncommon Relationships

International Science Fiction



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Editorial

MICHAEL K. IWOLEIT

The present issue concludes the first year of the relaunched InterNova magazine. After all the time and the numerous delays that it took me to finally get the magazine going again I'm happy about what my small team and me have accomplished so far. In this first year we have published about forty stories by writers from fourteen countries as well as a number of essays, interviews, and guest editorials. Especially our two theme issues about contemporary Greece and about French science fiction were well-received. This is the direction our magazine is planned to be further advanced. Theme issues about Indian, Romanian and German science fiction are in preparation. Dozens of new stories are already waiting to be published. One thing that due to time constraints had to be postponed will also be realized this year: the first InterNova print issue, with novellas by Guy Hasson, Tetiana Trofusha, and yours truly.

Let me take the occasion to thank a number of people without whose support all this would not have been possible: Nicole Ashfield, Tasha Bajpal, and Adriana Kantcheva for their careful proofreading, Hephaestion Christopoulos for helping with promotion, and not the least publisher Michael Haitel for producing the InterNova online e-book versions

We've only just begun ...

Michael K. Iwoleit,
January 2024

Physiognomy Works!

AHMED A. KHAN

I was thirty one, working as a software engineer and married for two years to one of the prettiest girls in town, when a drunk driver hit my car head on while I was returning home from work.

I was hospitalized for two weeks. There were no broken limbs or any other serious damage to the body except that slivers from the shattered windshield had disfigured my face considerably.

On my last day at the hospital, I was visited by my friend, Dr. James Mannering.

„I could give you a brand new face," my friend offered. Jim was the top plastic surgeon in town.

I am a complacent guy by nature. I am also uncomfortable with any invasive medical procedures. „I don't care much about my face," I informed him. „Inside, I am still me."

Jim shrugged. „You are still young. You may need your pretty face one of these days, at least to please your wife."

„Jenna loves me and not my pretty face," I replied.

I was wrong. Two months later, Jenna left me.

I noticed that people at work kept themselves at arm's length, though they tried their best to show that my disfigured face was not turning them off.

So here I was, in Jim's office, swallowing my pride and asking him to give me back my pretty face after all.

Jim looked at me thoughtfully.

„What yuh staring at, bub?" I did an adequate impression of a famous comic book character. That is one of the ways I react to stress. I start fooling around.



Ahmed A. Khan is a Canadian writer, originally from India, who has sold works to Boston Review, Strange Horizons, Interzone, Anotherealm, Kanstallation, etc. His stories have been translated into German, Finnish, Greek, Croatian, Polish and Urdu. Links to some of his published works can be found at ahmedakhan.blogspot.com/2007/11/links-to-my-writing.html.

„I have a theory that I would like to test on you – with your permission, of course.”

„Making me a guinea pig?”

„It won't harm you in any way. I guarantee.”

„Explain,” I said.

„Are you a good judge of character?”

„I have to be, in my position as the recruitment officer of my corporation.”

„Can you tell if a person is intelligent, honest and friendly just by looking at the face?”

„In many cases, yes.”

„How?”

That made me think. I thought and I thought but couldn't come up with a specific answer. So finally, I shrugged and said : „I don't know.”

„Have you heard of physiognomy?”

„Nope.”

„Well, it is a way of judging the character of a person based on his or her facial features. It was an accepted practice in ancient Greece but has been relegated to pseudoscience status in modern times. I have done a bit of research and it is my opinion that at least some facial features are definitely correlated to character traits.”

„So?”

„So what if we modify a facial feature? Would it lead to a modification of a character trait?”

I was intrigued. „What do you want to do with me?”

„What I would like is to make your face an exact replica of the face of another person and see if your character traits change to reflect the personality of the model.”

That gave me a pause.

„Interesting idea,” I said at last.

„So will you cooperate?”

„Why not? I am intrigued.”

„Well then, who would you like to be?”

I picked up a piece of scrap paper, pulled out my pen and started doodling on it. I tend to do it automatically when I am in deep thought.

„Let's see," I mused. „I always wanted to be a writer. Can you think of a good writer? Someone who was popular, intelligent, and of good disposition. Oh, and of course he should not be bad to look at."

„Wow! When go out you go all out, don't you? Anything else?"

„I think it would avoid a lot of confusion if that writer also happened to be dead."

„Good thinking. Now let us look at some possibilities."

For the next quarter of an hour we bandied names.

„Shakespeare?" he suggested.

„No. All we have about his appearance are artists' representations. Who knows how accurate these are."

„Byron?"

„I said a writer not a poet."

„Bernard Shaw?"

„Good looking?"

„Hemingway?"

„Suicidal."

Suddenly Jim snapped his fingers. „I have just the person. Isaac Asimov."

„The famous science fiction writer? I've heard about him but never read any of his books. I am not into SF, you know."

„So what do you think?"

„Hmm! Do you have his picture around?"

„Let me see if I can find a picture of him on the Net."

It did not take long. There were several pictures of him. Jim selected and enlarged a picture showing him when he was young. I looked at the face staring at me from the computer screen. The guy had been quite good looking.

„I guess he was in his early twenties when this photo was taken," Jim said.

„Okay, then make me look twentyish once again. I don't mind looking ten years younger than I am now."

The operation was a success.

I resumed my normal life. Jim called almost every day to find out if I found any changes in my personality, my likes and dislikes. As a matter of fact, even I was curious to know if I would change into something that I was not.

One day, hardly a couple of weeks after the change of face, I felt an irresistible urge to write. Jim's theory seemed to be working.

I sat down at my computer, and started my word processor application. While I looked at the blank page on the screen, strange and wonderful ideas seemed to invade my mind. My hands flew on the keyboard. Words seemed to flow smoothly, effortlessly – from my brain through my fingertips on the keyboard to the computer screen. Very soon, I had the complete story.

I felt drained and elated at the same time – the way one feels after a session of great lovemaking. I went back to the beginning and re-read the story I had just written. My elation increased as I read on. It was a beautiful story – highly interesting, well-crafted, and it put forward a unique concept. I was sure that I had written a masterpiece.

The story was about a planet with multiple suns where night fell only once in several hundred years.

Spin Happy

CRISTIAN-MIHAIL TEODORESCU

1. *Spin happy.* S. can not read, but he can recognize the sign. It can be seen everywhere on the walls. Above the entrance to the Great Welfare Institution. Above the counter where he waits in line to get his Food – a brown cube wrapped in plastic. Spin happy. Someone told him once that the sign is in Chinese, but he does not know whether Chinese is a dialect, a religion, a way of life or a Doctrine (in fact, he is not sure about the difference between these four things). What he does know is that if you do not spin, you will not be happy. For now, S. unwraps the cube of Food and bites into it. He chews slowly. The Food is sweet and very good. Food is very good. Food...

His feet are not hurting anymore. He has started to spin. The muscles are tense, his tendons taut. He spins and he is happy. When he feels the need, he takes another bite from the Food. He keeps his eyes closed, and savors the images that come up. A twisting road on gently rolling hills. S. walks with H.E.R. They stop under the shade of a tree. Birds are singing above. A babbling brook can be heard nearby. S. puts his head in H.E.R. lap. S. is happy.

2. A well-trained and doped individual can produce five hundred watts for eight hours. In total, four kilowatt-hour, which allows the continuous operation of a factory machine for this entire time. The Food he receives contains about five thousand kilocalories. In total, the energy produced by the individual considered is the equivalent of three thousand four hundred forty kilocalories, which gives an efficiency quotient of almost



Cristian-Mihail Teodorescu was born in Bucharest in 1966. He graduated in 1990 at the University of Bucharest, Department of Physics. In 1990 he earned a PhD in Chemical Physics at the University of Paris Sud, Orsay. Several research positions in France, Germany, and UK. He is currently Research Scientist 1 (eq. of a full Professor) in the National Institute of Materials Physics, Bucharest-Magurele. About 100 scientific papers published, about 700 citations, Hirsch index 16. He started writing science fiction short stories in the early 1980's, achieved

several publications before 1990 and earned the National Prize for Short Story in 1987. He published two short stories collections SF one in 2008 and SF two in 2010, while SF three is currently compiled. Several unpublished novels. Two major Romanian prizes earned in 2010 and 2011. Apart from that he is President of the Romanian Science Fiction and Fantasy Society, the main non-profit organization centred on science fiction culture in Romania.

seventy percent. Not to count that the Food is made in proportion of sixty percent of recycled waste.

3. S. rides his bike. He rides and is happy. Or almost happy. The dream is breaking up. He chews the last bites of Food, and watches the timer : just a little more time and the day will be over. He can not dream anymore, the effect of the Food is fading away. It is always harder near the end.

S. always wanted to own a bicycle. Chinese. (Life style? Doctrine?) He also wanted a tricycle, with multiple seats. He could have made more money with it, carting people around, Food packages or other stuff from place to place. And besides, this way he would cycle (truthfully) more happily.

The bell rings. The day has ended. He gets up, extracts the ticket from the Spinning Machine, punches it (otherwise he can not exit the Welfare Institute), and walks out staggering, and feeling a heartburn. Near the exit, Good People on Duty wearing caps are looking at him with close set slanted eyes, tearful, and compassionate.

4. The parents of S. were relatively well-to-do, they had two Cars, but S. had many brothers and sisters. His father loved his daughters, he sold the Car to give them dowry, and the mother loved the first two sons, and she sent them to university (after selling the Car). Nothing remained for S. and his younger brothers. Just like there is no more Food left in the stomach after you are done spinning. Moreover, the parents kicked them out from home, saying that they could not keep them anymore.

So it was that S. ended up spinning happy.

He hoped for a long time that he will win the Golden Pedal – the annual prize for the individual who produced the most kilowatt-hours – but there were twenty thousand others in the city who were hoping the same thing. Then he thought that, every day after he is done spinning, he should go looking for a Job on the street. But this turned out to be impossible, since every time he got up from the Spinning Machine, he was dead

tired, and so hungry that he could think of nothing but of sleeping.

5. The Spinning Machine is a devilish contraption in which he lies almost down, the Pedals have a very long ride, and are made such that they exert the foot muscles at the maximum.

S. takes another bite from the Food, chews, swallows. Closes his eyes. He expects to become happy, so he can start to spin. But he doesn't see anything, doesn't hear anything, just the heavy breathing of the people spinning around him. He tries to spin without being happy, but it doesn't work. He concentrates more.

But it is no good.

You can not spin if you are not happy.

And then, for the first time, S. gets up from the Spinning Machine and walks out of the Hall, sneaking under the barrier at the entrance, without being seen by the Good Man on Duty, who is busy at that morning hour reading the newspaper. A Chinese newspaper.

Outside it is drizzling and he is wearing short pants, which show off his strong muscular calves. He walks away from the Welfare Institution and tries to find a place where he can find shelter from rain. He knows that tonight he will not have the ticket, and will not have a place to sleep. But he doesn't think about it too much now.

He hasn't been out in the city for a long time. He takes refuge under a roof, and eats all the Food at once. Maybe something will happen, maybe he will be able to return to the Hall, and spin to be happy.

But he doesn't feel anything, even if he closes his eyes.

There was something wrong with today's Food.

He feels how the energy spreads around his entire body, and without intention he tenses his muscles until they are stretched like steel fibers.

6. A small red Car stops next to him, splattering him with rain water. The driver, a woman, asks him :

„Are you busy?“

„No,” he replies.

The woman looks appreciatively at his legs.

„Come with me,” she says.

S. climbs into the Car. He looks at the woman at the wheel. Beautiful and dressed in expensive clothes. She looks like one of his sisters. The woman takes her feet off the pedals. S. understands. He steps on the pedals in front of his seat and presses down. The Car pulls off with a start.

„Take it easy, until we are out of the city,” says the woman.

S. obeys. He thinks that driving a Small Car is much easier than working at the Spinning Machine without being happy.

The woman drives the Car towards the city limit. The rain stopped. She asks him what is his name. The city is well behind them. S. presses the pedals to the floor, using all the energy he is capable of. The woman jumps in her seat. Of pleasure.

„Ninety kilometers per hour,” she exclaims. „I never drove this fast. What do you do? Do you have Work?” She asks quickly.

„I spin and I am happy at the Welfare Institute.”

„Don't you want to spin happy for me? I can offer you food, a house, maybe also some pocket money...”

„Of course I want.”

7. The woman lives in the nearby city. Alone. S. steps into her house. She looks at the meter.

„Why don't you spin some fifty watt-hour. Just enough to grind some coffee and play some music.”

Fifty watt-hour takes S. exactly five minutes.

„All right. You do drink coffee, don't you?”

S. drinks coffee. With plenty of sugar. It is somewhat better than the Food. Then the woman turns on the music. S. spins a bit more, and then the woman sits next to him. She touches his legs.

„They look as if they are made of steel, she says. He knew it.”

She wraps her arms around his neck. S. holds her in his arms. A beautiful woman. She looks like one of his sisters. He kisses her.

„I will be so happy with you,” she sighs.

S. realizes that he can be happy also without spinning too much.

8. The woman introduced him to all her friends as her fiancée. The woman is very rich. S. ate all sorts of things which are thousand times more tasty than the Food. S. walks with HER in the park, or spins the Car all day long. They drive to the forest, a twisting road on gently rolling hills. They stop the Car under a tree, and hold each other while listening to the sound of a brook (see above) and the birds.

9. All of a sudden a bird opens her beak. He saw it clearly (had he waited for it?). It makes a strident croaking noise. Although numbed with a sensation that everything is previsible, he felt, again, how the sky crashed down on him.

How many times before has he felt this sickening sensation of a receding dream, how many times has he experienced being torn away from a reality he was desperately clinging to?

You know the feeling, right?

What does it feel like, when you die?

He opens the eyes. He sees the timer, a fragment of Food nearby. (Is there anything else to add?) He will not fall asleep on an empty stomach tonight. He chews the Food left over, and swallows it. He extracts the ticket from the Spinning Machine and walks towards the exit. On the way he registers slanted and compassionate eyes. And the sign on the wall, which he can not read, but he can recognize it any time.

(In Chinese?)

Spin happy.

Invisible Bodies

ÁLEX SOUZA



Alex Souza is a Brazilian Lawyer. He lives in the northeast with his family and an accident-survivor adopted cat.

The death stench grossed Olaf out. As soon as he smelled the reek that came from behind the rusty door of apartment #1988, he was sure that was the place. There was no mistake about it; the scent of dead people was so familiar to him that he could easily distinguish it among the peculiar collection of smells in that part of the megacity, as he had many times before.

Chie stood beside him, analyzing the air. The android's gas analyzer is a thousand times more precise than the human nose; however, when the smell was so strong that it caused nausea in whoever walked the corridor, Olaf wondered if it was even necessary.

„Done already, Chie?“ he asked, hugging himself, trying not to throw up.

„Almost there, Olaf,“ answered the android, steadily staring at the door. „Please be patient. Just a few more seconds.“

Olaf shrugged. „OK, then.“

The boy leaned on the railing and looked at the skyscrapers of the joint city of Rio-São Paulo. *How can this happen in a city with that many people?* At a distance, two motorcycles speeded up. *Probably just a police pursuit. Some things never change.*

He saw the red lights of the surveillance cameras but did not flinch. He was not doing anything wrong, after all. On the contrary. But, even if he were, nobody would care anyway.

The internet and TV cables that went all over the dirty ceiling gave him the chills. *They look like snakes in a basket.* Olaf then remembered the snakes and lizards that his Mom kept at

his old home. He suddenly felt the phantom pain of the bites and the coldness of the bodies crawling all over him. He was all pins and needles.

„Analysis is complete," said Chie. „The result shows high rates of sulfuric gas, ammonia, methane and cadaverine, which means that there is an 80% chance of the subject being in a stage of black putrefaction. Good job on finding it, Olaf."

Chie was staring at him with those big, green eyes, almost like a cat. Olaf was not yet accustomed to the fact that she never blinked.

„Chie, please speak my language." He was covering his nose with his hand. Even in an open apartment complex, the smell was too strong. „All right, explain this to me like I'm a 16-year-old, OK, because there isn't a single element to this thing I can get through my thick head."

„But Olaf is a 16-year-old."

„Exactly!"

„There is indeed a dead person inside."

Olaf rolled his eyes. „Oh, thank you. Thanks heaps, Chie."

„You are welcome, Olaf."

„What is that ruckus?!" screamed the man coming out of the adjacent apartment. His dreadlocks reminded Olaf of his Mom. He had a knife. „Are you burglars?"

„Wait!" Olaf put his hands in the air, just in case. „We're here just to collect the body. That's all!"

„Body? Which body?"

„The man who lived here's been dead for weeks now," Olaf said, aghast. „What, can't you smell it?"

The man sniffed the air. „Dunno. Everything smells like shit around here anyways." He gave them the once-over. „And you don't look like government officials; you're dressed like ninjas. What are you, cosplayers?"

„No, sir. We're just..."

„This is Chie's custom apparel," Chie interrupted Olaf. „Mr. Anderson."

The man's eyes widened. „What?! How do you know my... Oh, so that's it. I got it..."

„Sir, please do not call the cops," said Olaf. „We're not doing anything wrong. We just came to collect the body so we can bury it properly."

„Why? Are you relatives?"

„No, Sir, we aren't."

„What's it to you, then? How much are they paying you?"

„Nothing. The government won't collect these bodies, so we help these people. We're volunteers. From a Church."

„What? Church, you say? You're not going to charge me, are you? Listen kid, as far as I know, I'm *on* welfare, and I love it at that, but I sure as hell don't administer it!"

„No! We're not *that* kind of church. Chie, show him, please."

„Of course." The android's eyes shined and projected a hologram of a church that illuminated the entire corridor with its blue light. „This, Mr. Anderson, is Our Lady of Solitude. Our parish."

Anderson shook his head in denial. „You weirdos..." he murmured. „Just finish this and get out of my complex!"

„Olaf, Mr. Anderson is wrong. This housing complex is governmental property. It is not Mr. Anderson's."

„Chie.." Olaf rubbed his eyes. „Just let *me* do the talking, OK?" He turned to Anderson. „Sir, sorry for the inconvenience. The police won't help. The person living here is not of the state's interest anymore. We'll be gone in no time. And I'm sorry for her; she doesn't have a clue."

Anderson spat on the floor. „Of course, she doesn't." He slammed the door shut.

Olaf sighed with relief, turned back to the apartment with the body inside. „Chie, hack the lock, please," he said.

„That is impossible."

„Why?" Olaf was so surprised. „Why is it impossible?"

„Because this is not an electronic lock. It cannot, by definition, be hacked." Chie got on one leg, positioning herself like a Taekwondo fighter. „But Chie can kick it open. With ease."

„That won't be necessary. Stop this; you're no combat unit." Olaf tried to put Chie back in a normal position, but she did not move an inch. „Goddammit, can't you just pick the lock?!"

„Yes, Chie can." She returned to her normal pose. „And Olaf should watch his profanity."

Olaf saw her getting close to the lock with her index finger raised. The finger then split in half and a key came out of it.

„Synthesis completed.“ Chie unlocked the door. She turned.
„Olaf, query.“

„What is it?“

„Olaf is highly afraid, even paranoid, of insects, as well as arachnids and reptiles, is that right?“

„I wouldn't put it like that ... But I'm not too fond of them, no. Why?“

„Then Olaf may want to step back from this mission. Be advised.“

„After coming all this way? Don't be ridiculous.“ As soon as Olaf pushed the door open, flies came out of the darkness, making him fall on his butt. „Jesus Christ almighty! What's this, the Batcave?!“

„The mask would help.“ Despite having flies on her short, brown hair, and even crawling on her eyes, Chie just kept staring at Olaf as if nothing were happening. „It is for occasions like this that masks are made for. Also, Olaf should watch his profanity. And tone.“

„Oh, thank you for letting me know.“ Olaf opened his backpack and picked up his gas mask. Before putting it on, he smirked. „Thanks, Chie.“

„You are welcome, Olaf.“

„Sure ... Now, let's go. I wanna finish this ASAP.“

Olaf could not see a thing inside the apartment; it was pitch black. „Is there even electricity here? I think we're gonna have to toggle night vision, Chie.“

„That will not be necessary. The power supply was not still cut off. Chie double-checked. This is an incredibly old complex; most of its residents still use switches. Olaf should try that.“

„Really?“ Olaf's hand felt the wall. „Is that it ... ?“ When he pressed the switch, the lights turned on with a loud noise that made him scream. Sparks came down from the ceiling. „Wow! Were the lights off for too long?“ He turned his night vision on. „Chie, night vision.“

„Yes, Olaf.“ Her eyes became blue.

The apartment interior was much smaller than he thought it would be. The floor was totally black.

„It shouldn't be this dirty," Olaf said. „It's been what, a couple months?"

The place had no actual kitchen : the fridge and the sink shared the room with a monitor and faded couch. When Olaf stepped inside, removing cobwebs with his gloved hand, his boots hit something. He looked down and saw the pile of papers he had stumbled upon.

„Life insurance? Seriously?" Olaf made a 'pff' in discontent. „How metaphorical."

„He looks to be a collector." Chie pointed to the letter box that was next to a metal bonsai. It was full. „Figures. The drones generally are the only company these people have."

Olaf cleaned some of the letters in the box. „They were all returned. 'Not found', 'Moved' ... They are all addressed to this Kaori Otomo. Is she his daughter?"

„Kaori Otomo, 28 years of age, divorced. She is Mr. Otomo's granddaughter."

„OK ..." Olaf put the letters in his backpack. „Think I'm gonna be keeping these."

Now that they were inside, Olaf noticed that the floor was so filthy that it seemed to be melting at every step. „What happened to the carpet?" Olaf rubbed his boots on the ground. „Looks like ... mud."

„There is no carpet in this residence."

„So ..." Olaf looked around, confused. „What is this thing we're stepping on? Black sand?"

„No. They are insects."

„Insects!" Olaf would have jumped somewhere, but there was nowhere cleaner than the spot he stood. „These ... Are all these black dots bugs?!"

„Affirmative."

„This is insane! There's thousands of them!"

„Negative. There are at least hundreds of thousands of them. But Olaf must not worry; they are all lifeless. Except for the ones flying around of course."

„Don't tell me not to worry! I'm stepping in a bug cemetery!" Olaf looked at the sole of his boot and immediately regretted doing it. Beneath his feet, the corpses were becoming some yellowish pasty mixture as he was smothering them.

Olaf remembered the time he used to lie down on the cold floor of his old home for days on end. He felt the chills on the side of his body and hugged himself. The crunchiness of the insects he devoured to stay alive filled his mouth; with it, came the vomit. He blinked hard and swallowed it back, bending his body backwards and giving a deep sigh.

He then looked at the lightbulb upward and saw that it was also full of black dots inside. „How did this happen?"

„The insects do not have where to go so they just keep laying eggs, eating themselves and their maggots, and dying, as in an infinite loop."

„So, we're going to see this more times, right? Oh ..."

From forty to fifty people died alone every hour. Of course, they were going to experience this situation many more times.

Olaf walked to the fridge but did not have the guts to open it.

His mother's voice said in his head : „Listen here you little shit. You never, ever open the fridge. If you do, I'll store your goddamned bowels inside of it."

Olaf never opened his mother's fridge, but he remembered the day that the officers opened it like if it was yesterday. Two of the policemen threw up.

„Is there something in there?" he said. „If there is, it's long rotten. We better throw it away."

„There is nothing in the fridge. Just ice cubes."

„You sure? We didn't even open it yet."

„Yes, Olaf. Chie is sure."

„OK, I'm trusting you, Chie." He opened the fridge and saw that the shelves were empty. „Ah, I figured it out. Internet of things, right? I understand. Turn the fridge off, please. It could cause a fire or something."

„Sure, Olaf." The lights of the fridge turned off.

„Now, the bedroom ..." Olaf walked into the doorless room. „He's gotta be he — Oh, shit!"

„Olaf, what happened?"

„Shit, shit, shit!" Olaf leant against the sink, almost falling. His heart skipped a beat.

„Shit? Are there human feces scattered around?"

„No!" He closed his eyes and sighed. „It's ... It's the body! Or whatever the hell is left of it!"

„Olaf, calm down," said Chie. „Olaf's heart rate is now 150 beats per minute. Just a little more and Chie will have the obligation to call a medical drone." Chie grabbed Olaf by his arm and helped him up. „And Olaf has to watch his profanity."

„OK, Chie ... Thank you." Olaf leaned against the door jamb. „But ... I mean ... What happened to him? Really. It's the most disgusting thing I've ever seen."

Amid what seemed to be one of the plagues of Egypt, there was a mattress. Laying down on it, there was a figure that resembled a silhouette.

„Did ... Did he merge with the futon?"

Chie walked through the maggots and insect corpses and hunkered down close to the mattress. Her eyes emitted a light that analyzed the silhouette on the ground. „This is a very poetic way of saying it. But Olaf is somewhat correct."

„And how did that happen?"

„Flies and mosquitoes have no digestive system. They eat and vomit, so the digestion is made outside their bodies. What is before us is the unceasing work of thousands of insects added to the natural processes of decomposition of the human body."

„Wow ..." Olaf tried not to imagine a body fully covered by insects, devouring it, vomiting on it, then eating the vomit again. But the more he tried not to, the clearer it became in his mind. It reminded him of the time he found those bodies in the cellar, their blood dripping from the ceiling.

That image reminded Olaf of himself. His body wasn't as dead as the man on the futon, but his spirit used to be. The night the sisters found him, he was lying on a pool of his own excrements, dead from the inside, his breathing just some small gasps. They covered him in blankets and carried him as if he were their son. Before that night, he didn't know anyone gave a shit about him.

That night, he resurrected.

„So.“ He swallowed hard. „Is this our guy?“

„It is the only logical inference.“ Chie raised her index finger, split it in half. „Nevertheless, Chie will verify it.“ She stuck the finger in the body.

„Oh, don't do that ... It's disgusting!“

„Define 'disgusting'. Moreover, Olaf asked for it.“ Chie's finger aspirated some of the dim liquid. A few seconds later, she said : „It is really him.“

Olaf took another glance at that macabre thing. „Are you sure?“ He swallowed hard. „I mean ... How can you?“

Still crouched, Chie turned to Olaf with her regular poker face. „Chie analyzed the DNA. It belongs to Mamoru Otomo, male, 69, Japanese immigrant, retired due to disability. It is his. Chie double-checked, as always. Two people cannot have the same DNA. Is Olaf inferring that this is a clone?“

„No ... Sorry. I asked a dumb question, that's all. It's gotta be him.“ The image of his father's face, unrecognizable even to him, with its innards scattered around, became clear again. „So, what do we do now? How do we carry this out?“

„Chie can do it. Chie will synthesize a vessel. Olaf can look around while Chie does it.“

„I'm on it ... I guess.“

Olaf looked around the tiny bedroom. Besides the body and the insect cemetery all over the floor, there was a wardrobe; but nothing else at all. No paintings. No certificates. No windows. Nothing.

So, Olaf walked towards the wardrobe. But, when he was just past the body, he stepped on something.

„What's that?“ He picked up the plastic tube. It had many little brownish balls inside. There were blister packs with pills. „Is this human ration? The one that the government hands out?“

„Give Chie one, Olaf, please.“ She sniffed one of the balls and immediately ate it. Olaf had nausea again. „Olaf's hypothesis was right. This is indeed the humanitarian daily ration that the Ministry of Happiness distributes. Chie presumes that those pills are drugs to cure erectile dysfunction and alleviate depression.“

More than months and the ration is still in the same state. The insects don't even touch it. If cockroaches don't eat this filth, why does the government keep handing it out to the people? By God, poor folks aren't animals to be eating these bollocks!

Olaf went to the wardrobe. He noticed that it was the only thing in that apartment that was not decades old. On the contrary, the wardrobe was brand-new and lustrous. Inside, there was no clothing, no shoes, or accessories.

Just a dog.

„Oh, shit!" Olaf felt his heart racing.

„Are there feces in the wardrobe?"

„No! Dog, dog!" He bent due to the pain in his stomach. It hurt just like the day that, after a week of unusual high calories meals, he found his dog in the backyard. Only its bones though.

„Dog feces?" Chie stopped for a second, as if she were thinking. „Impossible. But possible."

„No, Chie ..." Olaf lowered his head and sighed. Chie was a super intelligent android alright, but her design also made her as naive as a child. „Look, there is a dog here. But not a real dog. Can you tell me what it is?"

Chie's eyes shined again, and she scanned the dog. It was on a pedestal, surrounded by synthetical flowers and photos of the owner with it. „It is a toy. A mechanical dog that barks and walks. It has been discontinued for several decades now."

„Got it. So this is a sanctuary ..."

One of the pictures caught Olaf's attention : Mr. Otomo, dressed in traditional Japanese clothing, with a girl on his lap. She had an opened gift box. She played joyfully with the dog.

Olaf patted the dog. „You're so lovely. And so well taken care, despite so many years. You must have been truly loved. As a son."

A tear came out from Olaf's right eye. With care, he took the dog.

„Is Olaf all right?"

„What? Oh, yes. I'm fine, Chie. Don't worry. And you, are you done?"

„Affirmative, Olaf.“ Chie showed the tube full of Mr. Otomo's remains. „Chie also already called the drones.“

„Great.“ Olaf walked to the other side of the bedroom, carefully not to step on Mr. Otomo. He stopped by the doorstep and removed the mask. Took a deep breath. „Let's go.“

„Olaf.“

„Yes, Chie?“

„Query : did Olaf stop needing a mask because he is not disgusted anymore?“

„Well, I ... I obviously still don't like the smell. But I think I can handle it now. Why do you ask?“

„Curiosity.“

Outside, Olaf leaned on the railing and breathed deeply, rejoicing with the smell of rain as water hit his face. The drones arrived. Chie put the vessel on one, and a box with the dog and the letters on the other.

Olaf kept looking at the drones until they were out of sight, mixing themselves with the stone jungle. He made a silent prayer: *I'm Your servant O Lord. The powers of this world may forget about Your children, but You never forget about them. Thank You for giving me the opportunity to serve You O Lord. Amen.* He made the sign of the cross.

The body would go to the church, where they would pray a mass for it and then bury it properly. The other drone would take the toy dog to Mr. Otomo's granddaughter. Olaf asked himself if she would remember it. If so, would she cry? Get angry? Throw it away? Or was it so distant a memory that was nothing more than a footnote on her life?

Olaf would never know.

Is somebody going to be with me when I die? The drops were hitting his face like razors, his tears getting mixed with the rain. *And if I die lonely, will someone bother to come and rescue my body?*

He screamed, then punched the railing. „Somebody remember me please! Fuck! One hundred million people crammed together, and they don't even look each other in the eye! Fucking hell!“ Olaf let his head drop to his chest. „Shit ...“ he murmured. „Why did I become so philosophical all of a sudden?“

„Here,” said Chie. Olaf turned and saw the android holding a handkerchief. „And Olaf really must be watching his profanity and tone now.”

„Thanks.” He blew on the handkerchief and gave it back to Chie. Figured she wouldn't be disgusted by it. „Did you synthesize this handkerchief that fast?”

„Negative. Chie brought this handkerchief with her. Chie noticed that Olaf was scared and sad since he came to the orphanage, so Chie thought Olaf would need it to wipe his tears. In truth, Chie calculated a 98% chance of Olaf abandoning this mission.”

„Is that so.”

„Somebody will remember Olaf. Olaf is a good boy.”

He let out a giggle. „Why?”

„It takes a lot of patience to work with Chie.”

Olaf opened a smile. „Well, you're not the right android for this job; that everyone can tell. But I think I'm incredibly lucky to have you by my side. We'll put more bodies to rest together, you and I. And ... can I ask you something? Can you stop referring to people in the third person?”

„Chie will try ... Oh!”

Olaf burst into laughter.

„You brat!” said Anderson, opening his door. He sniffed the air like a dog. „Hey ... the smell's really better. You really did it!”

„Yep ... We made it.”

Anderson stared at Olaf for a moment. „Listen, kid. Can I ask you somethin'?”

Olaf shrugged. „Sure.”

„Life's been tough lately, y'know. A lot of unemployed folks ... This job that you guys do, does it pay good?”

Olaf opened a big smile, and soon after, started laughing.

„What's so funny?! Does it pay good or not?!”

„Yeah.” Olaf wiped a tear. „It pays really well, sir.”

„Really?!” Anderson's eyes sparkled with interest. He must think it's so easy. „How much do you get? Is it per week? Per ... body?”

Olaf shook his head in denial. „I don't get any money, Mr. Anderson. As I said before, we're just volunteers.”

K O P F Z E I L E M I T A U T O R U N D T I T E L

Mr. Anderson's jaw dropped. „Are you kidding me?"

„The payment is not in money, sir." Olaf leaned on the railing and looked heavenward. „It's not about the money ..."

The Last Day On Rigel X

WILLIAM KITCHER



Bill Kitcher's stories, plays, and comedy sketches have been published, produced, and/or broadcast in Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Czechia, England, Guernsey, Holland, India, Ireland, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, the U.S., and Wales. His stories have appeared in Fiery Scribe Review, Ariel Chart, Granfalloon, New Contrast, The Prague Review, Helix, Alien Station, 365 Tomorrows, Bewildering Stories, Shotgun Honey, Aphelion, Pigeon Review, Yellow Mama, and many other

Isabelle chose Sammy for the expedition, not only because he had more compartments than the others in which to transport rock and plant samples, but because he'd been developing a sense of humor she liked. Sammy had recently discovered puns and, when they'd been near a lake on Rigel XVI the previous month, he'd said, „If you throw me in the lake, sit on me, and paddle to the other side, would I transform from a robot to a rowboat?" It was convoluted, but Isabelle appreciated the effort.

She went down to the hold and told Sammy what they were going to do.

„Good," said Sammy. „I could use the fresh air."

Isabelle snickered, and they went up to the hangar. The Lead Mechanic was waiting for them. „Hey, Isa. Hey, Sammy, got a joke for me?"

„What did the android say to the robot when they went jogging?" Sammy paused.

„Keep up."

„Yeah, not bad," said the mechanic. „But there's not really any reason why an android and a robot would go jogging."

„Good point," said Sammy. „I'll make a note of that. Do you have paper and a pencil?"

„Very good," chuckled the mechanic. „So, Isa, you have Flyer 3. Fully charged. Where are you going?"

„About twenty clicks east of here, along that cliff. I figure with the erosion, some old rocks have been uncovered. I gave Grandma all the coordinates earlier."

„OK, we're scheduled to leave about 1200, but it can't be any later than 1300 if we're to make the slingshot. It's just 0700 now."

„No problem. We won't be more than a couple of hours."

„OK, let's just check your homes and coms."

Isabelle and Sammy activated their homing beacons, and the mechanic nodded.

„Check, one, two, three, four ..." said Isabelle.

„OK, yours works. Sammy?"

„Give me a home where the buffalo roam. Get it?"

„No."

„Home. Homing beacon."

„OK, I get it, but, Sammy, a punchline has to come shortly after the set-up. It can't be delayed."

„Good to know."

„OK, you're cleared to go."

Isabelle and Sammy climbed into the Flyer, the mechanic opened the ship's doors, and they were gone.

They flew over the surface, white sand blowing in a soft wind, the occasional boulder, sparse vegetation.

Sammy was quiet, and Isabelle looked at him, knowing something was coming. „What is it, Sammy?"

„I was wondering why you call the ship's computer 'Grandma'. She's more likely to be my grandmother than yours."

Isabelle laughed. „I don't know the answer to that one. It's just something we've always done."

„That's not always good."

„No, it isn't."

Isabelle landed the Flyer near the cliff, put on her suit and helmet, picked up her bag of tools, and they went toward the cliff's edge. She turned to Sammy and said, „It's retreated a little since the other day."

She lay down and leaned over the edge. With her trowel, she dug out rocks and plants. Sammy extended a compartment, and she deposited them. When his compartments were full, he took them back to the Flyer to put the samples in cabinets.

journals. His novel, Farewell And Goodbye, My Maltese Sleep, was published in October 2023 by Close To The Bone Publishing.

Inside the Flyer, Sammy felt it shudder a little. He quickly got out of the Flyer and moved away from it. The Flyer's front rails began to tilt, and he understood what was happening. „Isabelle!" he yelled. „Get out of there! The ground's shifting!"

As Isabelle turned to look at Sammy, the cliff collapsed. She disappeared from view, and ten meters of ground behind her dropped.

The Flyer slid on the sand, then listed as the ground underneath the back rails fell away. The front rails jerked up and hit Sammy in the chest and head. He was knocked into the air and landed on his back. The Flyer fell into the hole. Clouds of dust billowed up and gradually settled.

Sammy got up and carefully moved toward the new cliff edge. His chest plate was severely dented and he tried in vain to pop it back into place. He leaned over the edge and peered down. He couldn't see Isabelle, only the burning Flyer. „Isabelle? Isabelle? Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

There was no response.

„Grandma, we have a problem. Isabelle is down. Send help. I'll do what I can. Confirm receipt."

There was nothing, not even static. His com must have been damaged when the Flyer hit him. He had to reach her. Priority One.

He was unable to go down where he was, and he knew there was no path down to the canyon floor between the ship and where he was, so he set off eastward, constantly monitoring for seismic changes.

Four clicks east, he found a slanted ledge that led down the cliff but it petered out into the sheer rock face. He returned to his original trail and continued along the cliff's edge. He went another four clicks and discovered a place where a massive rock had risen from the ancient sea bed on a diagonal plane, providing a natural incline. He descended the incline to the foot of the cliff and made his way back to where Isabelle had fallen. The star was high. It was about 1100.

He found the Flyer, crushed and smoldering. He searched the area and saw one of Isabelle's legs sticking out from underneath some rocks. She was almost completely buried. He

picked the rocks up and threw them. He dug the dirt away with his huge mitts. Gradually, he worked his way down to a solid slab of granite which had pinned her. Her leg was at a weird angle. Her helmet was intact, and she was unconscious, although breathing.

He tried to lift the slab but it was too heavy, even for him. He knew he would have to walk back to the ship for help. He looked up at the cliff face but it was insurmountable. He would have to go back the way he came. He reached the diagonal trail he had descended and gradually made his way back up. In the distance, he heard the rumbling of a Flyer.

The Flyer dropped near Isabelle, and the rescue team jumped out of it and quickly located her. While the doctor shot some aeroadrenaline into her helmet, the others unloaded the Excavator.

Isabelle regained consciousness. She tried to move, and a lightning pain went from her ankle through her hips to her back and neck, and she cried out.

„Your leg's broken, Isabelle. Hold still," said the doctor. He gave her a shot of morphine, and she relaxed.

The Excavator put its claws on the granite slab, lifted it off her, and placed it aside.

The doctor looked at her leg and told a medic to get a splint. „This is gonna hurt. Hold on." He gave her another shot of morphine, waited for it to hit, then snapped her leg back to straight. She screamed.

He put the splint on her leg, the team maneuvered her onto a stretcher, and they took her into the Flyer.

She looked around. Groggily, she said, „Where's Sammy?"

„We don't know. We can't get a signal."

„We have to get Sammy."

„We have to get you back to the ship. I have to set your leg right away. And we have to leave."

„We have to get Sammy."

„He must have been crushed under the rocks, or the Flyer. We can't find him. You know what happened to him. He was with you."

„He was behind me ..."

„He fell, Isabelle. He's gone. We have to get off the planet now. It's late."

„We have to find him."

The doctor shut the Flyer's doors and the craft lifted off. Isabelle again said, „We have to find him ..."

Sammy was only a few hundred meters up the trail when he heard the sound of the Flyer again. He looked in that direction but couldn't see anything but the dark cliff and the cloudy sky.

Knowing it was futile, he said, „Grandma, I'm still here. Repeat. I'm still here. Please hear me."

He continued up the trail. It took him a long time, and he felt something, something he couldn't immediately identify, never having felt it before. He investigated his memory. The only data that even vaguely made sense to him were a touch of fear and a touch of loneliness. This was new, and more mystifying than humor.

He heard another sound, a sonic boom, and he looked up. The ship disappeared into the clouds. Quietly, out loud, he said, „Grandma ..."

He made it to the top of the trail, paused for a moment, and then began to wander the quiet planet ... Forever ...

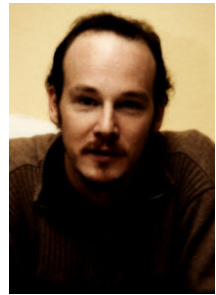
Four and a half million years later, just before Rigel went supernova, an alien expedition, searching for life to be rescued, picked Sammy up. He kept repeating, „Grandma ain't so grand," but was unable to explain what he meant.

Bloodhound

SVEN KLOEPPING

The new world ends, where the gravel path begins. It lies before me like an entwined life line that wants to cast my near future on the shadowy ground to tell the trees I'm finally here. I step forward very cautiously, not to destroy the fragile, dancing silhouettes. Someone could spy me out, could lurk in the bushes or behind a tree, could notice my escape and inform the others. One step, then another, then ... Yes, very good! Trying not to break a twig or something noisy I step forward. „Wooosh, woosh, wooosh. Hey, don't you make a sound!" all the windy branches around me seem to flutter. Although their warnings are just hallucinations, they are very helpful ones. Reminds me to creep and sneak along, to be the calmest creature under the roof of the woods and to stay like that whatever may happen. If I follow the whispering lures of the city, I will be lost. There's really no chance for my escape if I don't stay on the path, for on each side, hidden in the green, dozens of little bugs are recording every sound, transmitting any information about life that crosses the woods to them. So I stay mute, trying not to cross their line, not to wake the bugs. Though I haven't learned a-many deeds in the past few years, staying mute is at least something. I remember them saying: „The one who sits in the porcelain box shouldn't sing soprano all too loud." This and other deeds were told to me at the training long ago. Due to this, my body is perfectly built to flee from whatever lies behind me, but what is it? Could be nearly anything. Monster, war, epidemic – anything.

A strong gust comes up. I'm not used to it as we don't have such a nature, such a wind *back there*. It's always been warm



Sven Klöpping, born in 1979, writes poems and science fiction stories since his childhood. He has published numerous short stories in national and international magazines and anthologies and was a frequent editorial helper and contributor of InterNova's mother magazine Nova. Apart from that he contributed poetry to German magazines such as Federwelt and Kult. He edited the anthologie Bullet in 2014, with stories set in his own fictional universe MegaFusion. Some of

*his tales were collected
in his books MegaFu-
sion (2001) and
Menschgrenzen
(2010).*

in my home, or so I remember. Home! What am I talking about? It's just the past, lying far behind me. Here is my future, here in the old world, lying on the ground pebble by pebble, standing in line trunk after trunk, drinking the sweet liquids of freedom together with me and the invisible ghosts. Nothing holds me by now, nothing could ever bring me *back there*. My present future – just a small path in the midst of a shadowy park of trees that's many acres wide. I could touch this golden future if I am very careful on my way. I'm sure I will touch it, because I won't be as clumsy as my little brother who has been caught by *them*. They brutally slaughtered and murdered him. By now, he lies stiff and cold under a thick snow cover somewhere at the outer border of the island. Nothing but frosty limbs remained of his body where they half-buried him. The last time I visited him, long ago, I brought him a rose. *They* didn't recognize; would have been very painful for me. I stayed a little while, pressed a single rose in his hand. And I shed some tears. No, he really should not have died this way! He hasn't deserved a blood-bath like this. I stole his rose in the Forbidden Garden, where they show you just the flower's thorns and say these aren't worth it. (*What?*) Pressed the rose into my brother's too cold hand, said to him I liked him, maybe not back then, but ever since. „Forget our quarrel“, I said, „just forget it. Ever since I liked you; forget anything but that.“ And then the wolves came. They attacked me like hell. I thought it was my end, but I shot them all down and I really don't know how I mastered it! They were good food that lasted for three weeks in which I rested with my brother (in peace). During that period he forgave me (I'm sure). I could see it in his face as I went away. Looked warm by then as if it wanted to say: „Thanks for my death. Thanks, buddy. Thanks, brother. Thanks, friend.“

Work!

They didn't want me to work just because I had a rebellious brother. Told me to convince him to cooperate and after that, they mumbled, maybe I could get a job in one of their soul-wasting companies. They always make those cheap promises, although they knew too well that my brother was long since

dead. But they keep professionally ignoring the truth as if nothing has ever happened. And who cares for what in this world of domination and martyrdom? Finally, they threw me out of their city and also took my passport. That is about a year ago by now. *Untrustworthy*, they stamped into it and they didn't just mean the document. My whole present (wild) life doesn't seem to be worth the air that I breathe. After all, your life is worth absolutely nothing if you aren't strong enough, creative enough, smart enough to succeed in their goddamned system. Without those abilities, they just throw you out and say, get better or die (the latter comforts them most). One single life has no worth on this isle, because there are millions of others that could replace you. Every hour, every minute, a new life is born and a used-up one is being separated from the city. They let you down like those trees do with old branches. They don't heed you, just cut you off from life-spendings liquids and let you die. Here in the half-world one could survive at least if he learns to be quick. But outside this controlled wilderness there is rarely a chance, although some say this might be the only hope to be rescued from this vicious circle. Maybe they are right. Why should they forbid us to go into the old world otherwise? If there waits nothing but death they wouldn't have to spy us out anymore.

I sneak further on with wide-spread arms, keeping the branches in a safe distance to me. „Don't break them“, I whisper again and again, imitating the leafs. I know too well how conspicuously a breaking branch could sound at the other end of the wire. They regularly play those sounds to you, like a water drop torture with sounds dripping in your ear instead of water. „That's crime“, they teach simultaneously. From your birth on you hear those sounds and those words and you feel the electroshocks until you've got it. By then, you fear it like hell.

The path ends, although it should continue into everlasting freedom and I ask myself, why, it all began so well! I had planned every detail of my escape, for three long years, why should all this end in just one moment? The answer lies beneath a hole in the smooth wall before me. Smoke comes out there. I

can't believe it: smoke! Feels like I have time travelled centuries back just with the power of my feet. Still can't believe it. How it smells! Yes, this smell comforts my degenerated nose, finally it sniffs real smoke after all those sterile decades of manipulation in which I dreamt of a time, when I could smell again like a real human being – in old times, when feelings weren't frozen like my brother's limbs. It seems that something warm within me revives facing that golden past, even if it's only in my thoughts. Nevertheless all those reflections come to life inside of me, as if they just waited all the time to be woken up ... And yes, maybe they fear these warm feelings of humanity slumbering in every one of us. Humanity that just needs to be woken up to raise against the brutal system! Now, I will find out. As I stick my all-too-nosy finger into the hole, it widens, accompanied by a buzzing sound. The small opening turns around clockwise and grows bigger and bigger. Soon, a man-high hole stares at me, its blackness crying soundless eternities into the dark green around me. Although I am a little bit entangled, a very strong emotion captures my reasoning mind. The blackness, the dirt and the smells I'm confronted with – I do really love them, for it means that I am free at last, yes – free! Puddles of melted snow lie behind me right now. They have been made to mud by the hot wind that came out of the hole. I step into it, into the freedom (or so I think). As soon as I am inside this ... something ... , its door closes behind me automatically. Then, the vehicle starts its engines, lifts off and soon hovers high above the trees. I can't see how it flies, but I can *feel* it. I must have experienced this before for it is nothing new for me ... And suddenly I know what I have entered. My goodness! It's not eternal freedom. It's no freedom at all – just a trap, *their* trap! Reassembling my remembrances, I begin to realize that I have been fooled by them with a simple trick. Lousy bastards! They caught me once again while I was expecting friends to wait for me in this much-too-warm space ship!

By now, it's getting hot and everything seems to be over. In one moment of my artificial imagination, I am up and away with the ship, in the other my corpse lies beside my brother after they have slaughtered me to death. Realities are all mixed

up within me. I can no longer distinguish between true and false, but I have to, I'm sure. They will burn me for sure, oh yes they will! They burn everyone who tries to escape. All these fears come back into my mind as if someone pressed a button. Pieces of remembrance flood my head like a mind mapping tsunami. I even recall what they said to me during the training: „Should anyone of you discover a ship, one of the old ones, just don't let it fool you. It will burn your body." So they said, and I scream aloud, for my finger that opened the door, is black by now and hot, hot like a personal hell especially designed for myself. Dammit! It hurts, hurts, oh it hurts! Could it all be real or is it just another imagination, fooling me once again?

A buzzing sound. The door opens. An officer steps in and fills the hole with his body. No possible escape. No hovering over the woods. And no hope. His grinning face says, yes, the brainwashing must have been successful once more, and the human ships, those tiny little revolution battleships – we will discover them one by one! One last time, a human glimpse of emotion flickers around my head so that I dare to say:

„Have you discovered this ship by yourself, officer, or did I lead you?" I ask sarcastically and soon find myself winding on the floor, crying because of all the pain the officer causes me to feel. The implants! I forgot the implants regulating my body functions. Pixel after pixel reality dismantles its cruel shape before me and everything comes clear: In fact, I have never been human, never had any fingers of flesh. I'm just a machine. Therefore it was impossible for me to feel any real pain. It's just a chip in my head that punishes me. Looking on my shivering finger I see that it is silvery and metallic instead of bloody and fleshy and that the shivering is just a malfunction. It was just my vision they manipulated which made me thought that I am a real human being with real emotions, with a real dead brother ... I'm not sure any more if all this really exists: the big city, the island on which emotions are forbidden and where human life has been extinguished long ago. Is it real or just another virtual reality they have implanted in my

artificial head, just to find the space ships of which I do not know what should be so interesting about them. Nevertheless, I still wish to fly away with them, somewhere to the stars ...

„You should have been more quiet,” the officer grins and his steel claws grab my thin, gleaming joints.

„In these ships, you older models get burned. Everyone who is too loud will melt away and be our bloodhound afterwards,” he hisses and I know that he lies, but the pain is still too strong so that I can't object. „*Remember* that the next time,” he laughs, beginning to open my head where he manipulates chips and some wires and ...

... I awake, lying in the snow. I believe I am human. My only desire is to run away.

Eudaimonia

MIKE JANSEN

July 2045

„What will you be when you grow up?“

It was a question I needed to ponder while I watched out over the green roof of Garden Village, the place where senior normals spent their final years. „What exactly do you mean? Physically grown up, or mentally?“ Nena and I had been given longevity serum while still in the womb and our aging had been slowed by a factor of five or more. Our life expectancy was centuries.

„Physically of course, Vaz. We know each other fifteen years.“

I smiled. „Best friends forever, Nena.“ We had been ever since our first classes in college where we sat next to each other, on chairs much too big for our preschooler bodies.

„So, what will you be?“

The advantages of long life: being able to think through perfectly what you wanted, what your affinities were. This did not make it any easier. Somehow asking the question had become something of a taboo. Of course, best friends were allowed to ask. „I'm not sure yet. I thought the visit to ISS3 was impressive.“

Nena seemed surprised. „That did not impress me at all.“

„Well I was. I wish I could be out there right now.“ I nodded at the sky. „Asteroids, the outer planets, the stars.“

„Oh, Vaz. Hhumans aren't built for that.“

I nodded slowly. „Not yet, Nena, not yet.“

A soft breeze carried the scent of freshly mown grass. My retina projector showed me my next college class, astrophysics, my favorite. „Gotta go. Class.“



Mike Jansen has published in Dutch, German, Romanian, Estonian, Polish, Chinese, French, Finnish, Russian, Swedish, Catalan, Spanish and English anthologies and magazines. Since 2011 he has published over 100 English language stories in the U.S., U.K. and Australia. In addition, three fantasy novels, two story collections and several novellas in Dutch, a novel and a short story collection in English. He has won the Dutch King Kong Award 1992, an honorable mention for the Australian 1998 Altair Magazine launch competition, in 2012 the

Baarn Literary Prize and the prestigious Dutch Fantastels award, in 2020 the GP Scifi/Fantasy Award and in 2021 the Mossy Statue prize for best promoter of Dutch SF, F and H. Since 2016 Mike organizes the Dutch EdgeZero awards, an attempt to get the best stories from Dutch language genre contests and magazines of the previous year collected and published in a year's best anthology. So far eight anthologies have been published. In addition he publishes themed anthologies showcasing the best Dutch authors. Some of his recent work has appeared in Samovar and Strange Horizons.

„Me too.“ She opened her old fashioned notebook. „Biolab.“ Nena hugged me. Our conversation still fresh in my mind, I thought: such a grown-up gesture. *Yet we both look like barely teenage girls.*

While she walked in the direction of her lab, I called out to her: „What about you?“

She looked back. „Something with people. Mankind. Later!“

My professor's name was Jan Peter van Zandwijk. He was really old, at least seventy. He had lived through the turbulent first decades of the 21st century and contributed to humanity's first steps in the solar system.

„Gents!“ He usually started his colleges like that. „And lady, of course.“ He nodded at me with a friendly smile.

It took some getting used to at first. The pace was challenging and I needed to study hard to keep up. Sleeping through five years of elementary and middle school does not really prepare you for university and the daily study that's required to absorb all the material. The first trimester we studied the – archaic, I know – equivalent of fifty kilograms of books. And that was just the start. The pace only increased and now, in the second year, only a half dozen students remained of the initial two hundred in the first year.

I often talked about him with Nena. Not about his lessons. Those were just to explain the content of the books and answering questions. No, at the end of each lesson he usually spent half an hour philosophizing about the future of mankind in space, not just in our solar system, but really out there. That's what I came for, that vision, his ideas, explanations and solutions.

Nena smiled while I talked fervently. „I wish my chemistry and nanolab teachers were such capable storytellers.“ She shrugged. „My own fault, really. I shouldn't have taken the boring road.“

I knew better. „You're just not yet doing what you really love.“

She gestured impatiently with her hand. „It's all taking too long. So much to do, so much to learn, so much to improve.“

She took a deep breath and suddenly seemed sad. „I have so many plans. I'm just not sure if I will manage it all on my own."

I took her hand. „You know I'll always be there for you, Nena."

„Thanks, Vaz." She pulled me close and hugged me. „We'll do great things, you and me, together."

July 2051

Nena and I graduated simultaneously. She had finished twelve studies and doctorates in genetics and man-machine communications. My career was heading into space, like I had always wanted.

„*Summa cum laude* in everything. I expected nothing less, Nena."

She hugged me. „Well, you're going on an adventure right away. A sun dive, no less. Very exciting."

I held her carefully. The new polymers in my muscles could be somewhat unpredictable at times. „I'll miss you."

Nena looked at me. Her eyes were moist. „I'll miss you too. Fortunately we have hundreds of years to visit each other. There's no hurry."

I grinned. „Gossip will also be somewhat slow, I'm afraid." 'Gossip' was our code word for the plans we came up with and executed sometimes. They helped us take small steps towards our goals and our vision for mankind in the coming centuries.

„Again, no hurry, Vaz. And plenty of challenges. I've been asked to head a research lab in advanced genetics."

„That's really your thing."

Our group was somewhat removed from the others, the normals. They were all younger than we, the improved ones, but they were physically mature. We looked like young girls, although mentally we were light-years ahead. There was a divide and meaningful communication was ... uneasy, clumsy, slow and useless.

„Fewer each year," Nena said.

„Are you reading my mind?"

Nena smiled. „You're easy to read, Vaz."

I nodded. „You're right, though. Not enough challenge, too much automation. That's why I need to go into space. To clear the way for the rest of mankind."

„Such a noble goal," Nena said. „Mine is quite different. No new challenges, no unreachable goals, no excesses. Satisfaction, the realization by mankind of its logical place in the natural cycle, eudaimonia."

„You think mankind can regain that?"

„Not yet, Vaz, not yet."

After the ceremony and the reception I reported to the director of the university.

„Congratulations, Vaz," she began. She was a short woman, solid, with shoulder length dark hair that showed a few gray strands.

„Thank you, ma'am."

„I know you discussed this with Jan Peter. I mean professor Van Zandwijk." She placed her left hand on a small wooden box on her desk.

I nodded. A single tear passed my eyelids and slid ponderously across my cheek.

The director smiled. „I miss him too. Old grumpy head."

Jan Peter van Zandwijk's funeral, nearly two years ago, had been sad and remarkably crowded. For someone his age his circle of friends and acquaintances was impressive, their loyalty obvious, a reflection of his true, warm personality.

The thought of his cremation also brought back the memory of our conversation regarding his dying wish.

„Vaz, you're going into space. That's obvious. I spoke to some colleagues who are working on new propulsion systems and next generation space craft. Are you interested?"

My smile told him everything.

„I also have one favor to ask," he continued.

„How can I refuse that?"

He laughed; a shaky sound that transformed into a nasty cough. He first needed to regain his breath before he continued talking. „My body is deteriorating," he said. „It'll be over soon. I guess I'm ready for it."

„We're all stardust," I said.

„Yes, we are. And I would like to return to them, to our own sun, to be exact. It so happens the first mission my colleagues are planning, is to fly through the Sun's atmosphere ... They've already reserved a spot for me next to the telemetry pod."

All I could do was nod.

One month later he passed away.

January 2058

„Vaz, come in? Over." Nena's voice was tinny.

„Loud and clear, Nena. Sorry I can't get any closer. I've been made responsible for setting up the next mining operation in the asteroid belt. No visits for the foreseeable future."

Forty seconds later her answer arrived. „That's ok. I've handed your avatar the specific information, read it at your leisure. Especially the three filoviruses I would like to see tested in weightless conditions."

My retina projector showed me the huge freight containers approaching from the moon surface and I adjusted speed and course to align my tug perfectly for the rendezvous. At the same time I double-checked the encryption on our signal to see if no one was tampering with it. The punishment for creating filoviruses was extreme, everywhere in the solar system, but necessary since the advent of the portable equipment with the 'my-first-virus-construction-kit' software.

„Apologies for the delay, Nena; I was docking a ship. You're playing with fire, dear. Improved humans are continuously monitored since the Rio coup attempt, ten years ago."

Money was no longer an issue. Our cooperation had made us both wealthy and given us influence that we sometimes used. It helped us achieve goals. We did whatever we liked and we still dared the dream of a harmonious future for mankind, despite the sometimes self-destructive tendencies of our near-kindred.

Forty seconds later her answer arrived. „I sometimes think 'just let it all burn, they don't deserve it.' You keep me sane, Vaz. Thank you."

„If only there were more of us, things might improve. Over and out.”

Six weeks later I opened the cargo holds and deployed the mining swarm. My neural interface saw communication networks come into existence. The swarm started to move as one, all scanners working hard to find the building blocks we needed near Earth to build new ships, habitats and hydroponic stations. One of my own goals was to get more people into space and this assignment helped me work towards that.

Satisfied I settled in for a stay of almost a year, until the swarm could operate fully autonomous and send, without supervision, a continuous stream of raw materials to the inner planets.

These assignments also provided me with sufficient time to consider Nena's words and to think about the course we had laid out. I worried about her words and her situation. Like no other I understood the difficulties of having to live between the 'normals', to see life happening around you in slow motion because your brain functions so much faster. At least here in space I could work without interruption on the machines surrounding me and communicate with them at the speed I liked. I wondered who the lonelier one was.

April 2074

Once a year I visited Earth. Not because I needed it, like the 'normals' with their brittle bodies. No, I wanted to experience a sea breeze, the scent of the rain forest of the enchantment of snow in a pine grove.

At the foot of the Kilimanjaro I met Nena in the primate lab she had built there. She was positively glowing.

„Vaz, so good of you to visit. Please sit.” She pointed at a chair in front of her desk. „I thought you were out finalizing the Ganymede station?”

I sat down. „Finished it two months ago. I read your mail. Are you sure this is wise?”

„What, having a baby at fifty three?" She shook her head. „Rules for 'normals' do not apply to us. You know that. Our bodies can take up to forty years to become fertile."

„I know that. I also know only girls were ever improved. So which 'normal' is the father?"

Nena smiled. „You ask the wrong question. You know what I'm about."

I tapped the fingers of my prosthetic left hand on her desk. „OK, I'll play along. Who supplied the base material and what were the extras?"

„Only the best. I've made many breakthroughs the past years."

„Like this?" I held up my left hand. „I saw your name in the specifications. Why your own womb?"

Nena shrugged. She seemed bitter. „Politics. Religious madness. Limited intellect. Ancient laws. Like this it seems ... more natural." She looked through the window, just a little longer than strictly necessary.

Outside on the slopes were groups of mountain gorillas. My neural interface identified patterns and activities and correlated behavior with scientific treatises on the Net. „They're all pregnant?"

Nena nodded.

„Simultaneous?"

Nod.

„You know what you're doing?"

„Sometimes I think I'm the only one. I understand if you disagree. Even if you gave me the idea. Remember?"

„Yes, but it was just wishful thinking."

„Maybe, but I can make that reality."

„It's not how I work. There will be trouble. Anyway, my home is out there. You have to live with it. My next project will be the creation of huge space stations, habitats for millions of people."

„Good, Earth needs more depopulation."

„Take care of it."

Nena's smile was bitter. „Working on it. Anything else?"

„Yes, a station near Pluto. Just to get us into the Oort Cloud. And then the stars.”

„Humans do not evolve that fast. So we won't be there to witness it.”

I kept quiet. Our goodbyes were cool.

Being in space hurt my body. I could withstand much more than 'normals', yet I sometimes ran into problems, whether through hard radiation or nano meteorites passing through my limbs at near relativistic speeds.

My left hand had already been replaced by a prosthetic that worked much better than the original. Getting used to it through training took almost a year. Yet I was sure I wanted all my limbs replaced.

With ubiquitous electronic surveillance of improved ones it was nearly impossible to arrange. But I had time and waited for the moment when clear and irreparable damage had occurred that required replacement.

It took almost twenty years to replace my arms, legs and most of my skin. I was most proud of my titanium lips that always looked like I was wearing a golden bronze lipstick.

Whoever looked at my career would at best be surprised by the number of dangerous missions I had performed.

September 2103

Satisfied I let my ship drift towards Earth. Glistening, regularly placed dots in the darkness weren't stars but enormous, spinning space stations, home to millions of humans each. Improved ones and normals living with each other, although the normals were oblivious, thanks to some genetic reprogramming Nena had done on a sizeable portion of the population.

Pretty impressive, Nena. Our contact had grown more intermittent, but never ceased altogether. We just could not resist gossiping.

Beyond the Moon was my target, a huge ship that had been under construction for years with thousands of printers working to create my design. It would have to be fit to travel for

two thousand years through interstellar space to Proxima Centauri. I did not care about a few years more.

I met Nena at the Luna IV Base. She was accompanied by two boys, each less than ten years old. *More than meets the eye*. I noticed she looked mature, no, middle-aged even.

„When are you leaving?“ she asked.

„I need a few more parts.“ My neural interface sent her the data.

The two boys simultaneously spoke: „Those are still experimental.“

„Then I'll wait until they are not. I will make this journey to the end.“

„Humans can't live that long, Vaz. You know that,“ Nena said.

My titanium lips formed a smile. „Not much of that left in me anymore, Nena.“

Back on Ganymede I visited the bionic lab I had built. The researchers working there produced the best quality prosthetic limbs humanity had ever come up with.

„Have my models been approved?“

The director of the lab was a second generation improved, born from a gorilla mother through an in vitro fertilized egg belonging to Nena. Hard to believe, but Nena had managed to keep her offspring a secret and spread them out over the Earth. Ever so slowly opinion on the improved ones changed, influenced by thousands of Nena's children who now lived among the normals. They had even come to space, like many normals before them.

He nodded. His eyes were silver marbles, cybernetic implants. „Yes. I contacted some of my people and there's a market forming in the Belt already.“

„Not for everything I assume?“

He shook his head. „We haven't found anyone yet to do a full replacement of limbs, skin, skeleton and organs.“

„I'll be your first customer then. When can you start?“

„Are you serious?“

I smiled. „Don't you see there's very little of my original self left?“

He grinned sardonically, a grin I recognized all too well.

„You look like your mother.”

„I never knew her.”

„Believe me, you look just like her.”

December 2144

„Congrats, Nena.” My best friend was surrounded by politicians and dignitaries, but she immediately recognized my voice.

„Vaz!” She nodded at the people around her and carefully walked through the crowd towards me. When she was near me she had to look up to see my face. „You’ve grown,” she said.

„Maybe. Or you’ve shrunk. And I see gray hairs, Nena.”

„Worries. Secretary-General for the United Earth and its Colonies is a demanding job.”

„Finally the power and influence you needed. I’ve followed your rise to power over the last decade.

Nena gestured around her. The view from the arcology over the surrounding green landscape was impressive. Far away snow-covered mountains were just visible. „There is a balance now. Earth is recuperating. Citizens are happy.”

„So you won’t tell them about your experiments?”

Nena smirked. She still had that rogue-like twinkling in her eyes. „Sleeping dogs, Vaz. All is well, people are feeling good. Why create unrest? Besides, you helped me, remember?”

„Our shared illegal activities? That I never saw the actual, final results of?” I shrugged. „You have to sleep at night. Can you?”

„We all have our goals, Vaz.” Nena’s face clouded over. „I just have less time than you.”

„I was wondering about that, too.”

„I will be here for hundreds of years. Don’t worry about me.” She hugged me. „It’s good to see you again.”

Carefully I held her and felt her fragile bone through the fabric of her dress.

Not hundreds of years, I thought.

I opened the freight doors of the cargo hold and deployed fresh swarms of printers. The time of adjusting and optimizing had now passed. The project needed to be finalized. And soon.

An endless stream of raw materials flew like small, glowing dots towards the magnetic traps that provided the printer swarms with building blocks.

One of my avatars reported that the building time had been reduced from over three hundred to less than fifty years. It would not be faster due to supply lines, parts production and placement, all of which cost time. The printers had reached the point where they were faster than materials could be prepared and supplied.

I sent my tug to the front of the ship. The smooth plates had been designed to withstand the kind of ultra fast particles we might encounter. However, I could still change their colors.

I took out the three dimensional maps and selected the plates I wanted to have changed with different colored plates. The image in my mind showed the characters I wanted to form with them: NENA.

March 2190

It was finished. The cargo bays held complete biotopes, seed banks, incubators, all necessities to seed Earthly life. But no humans.

I descended to Earth and found Nena on a tropical beach beneath a reed lean-to. She had become old, gray and weak. A medical drone floated unobtrusively behind her. The view of the reefs was magnificent.

„I'm about to leave," I said to her. „My team is ready."

„All the best." Even her voice was old, hoarse. „I just had your human base material delivered."

„Only the best?"

Nena smiled a brittle smile. „You know me."

„You're old."

„Sooner than expected. The serum did not work equally on everyone."

„Are you happy?”

Nena sighed. She swallowed with difficulty and closed her eyes. „I have my eudaimonia.” The medical drone inched a bit closer.

I took her hand, carefully, and folded it open. Next I took a sample of her skin.

Nena noticed. „What are you doing?”

„Taking a few cells.”

„Why?”

„To see you again, in two thousand years.”

She smiled and closed her eyes.

The medical drone gave a warning signal and landed on Nena's chest.

As I ascended I whispered. „Because we're best friends, Nena. Forever. Farewell. I'll see you again soon.”

Rain From Another Country

MARK W. TIEDEMANN

Just outside Customs, past the sign welcoming her to Fall's End, Homestead, Ann stopped, abruptly unable to move. The anxiety experienced during the shuttle flight down now escalated. Her pulse raced and her hands became moist.

People moved around her, a few casting annoyed glances over their shoulders at her as they hurried into the main port arcade. She knew she was getting in the way, but she could not make herself take another step. She felt her breathing begin to quicken, heading toward hyperventilation.

Far back in her mind, a routine detached itself with a perfunctory *what in hell?* For a second her vision doubled, then the color seemed to fade and a sense of being two people distracted her.

„Okay, what's the problem?“

Setis.

Then she saw them. Nonhumans, just a few. This was Homestead, after all, deep in human space, close to Sol (to which Ann now desperately wanted to return). But she identified a trio of Distanti, one Menkan, and a pair of Rahalen.

„So?“

A fast exchange of data – memory? – coursed through her mind.

„Xenophobia. You should have told me.“

I've never told anyone. It's nobody's business.

It became clear then that Ann had even kept it from herself, buried it under layers of rationalization and habit, and over the years had simply ignored it to the point of forgetting. Till now.



Mark W. Tiedemann has been publishing stories since 1990. His novel Compass Reach was shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award and Remains for the Tiptree. As of this year, he has sold over 70 short stories and published 13 books. A native St. Louisan, he has actually set two novels in his home town, the novel Real-time and his brand new just released book from Blank Slate Press, Granger's Crossing. The latter is (shock!) Not Science Fiction, but an historical novel

set in the 1780s. He still lives in St. Louis.

„No seti on Earth, except in the diplomatic enclaves. But this isn't Earth. How did you expect to get through this without making allowances?“

Didn't think about it.

„No worry. That's why this monitor routine is in place, just in case. We can work with this, but it would have been better if we'd known in advance.“

Another exchange occurred, handshakes and whispers from one part of her mind to another. Slowly, her pulse came down, her muscles relaxed, and she was able to move forward.

„Thank you,“ she said under her breath.

That's what we do best, a voice seemed to reply. We listen ...

She found a pub with a view across the plains to a low line of mountains glowing gold against a blue-grey sky. Tau Ceti shone marginally warmer than Sol, so the greens seemed slightly yellow and the reds too dark. The view reminded her of the Serengeti, except ...

She picked out collections of tall tube-like structures dotting the plain, rising from the yellow-green grasses. From time to time, a cloud of off-white scintilla burst from one of the openings to disperse in the breeze. And along the outside base of the window, bluish insects tumbled over each other, trying to find purchase on the smooth surface, falling off, struggling, leaving faint viscous smears where they had clung.

More details worked at her newly-established calm. The gravity was slightly less here than Earth standard. The air smelled like a combination of sawdust and damp moss. Around her she caught other accents, from other worlds ...

She ordered a scotch, neat, and settled in a booth to take in her first sight of Homestead.

To another part of her the landscape seemed very familiar.

That felt wrong. She ran a quick diagnostic on the overlay. Off to the left of her vision, neon green telltales floated, glowing confirmation. Occlusion was optimal. The host personality showed no sign of bleeding over, even after its necessary intrusion to overcome her paralysis at the sight of aliens. Molli-fied, she closed the dialogue scroll and resumed looking at the landscape. She felt embarrassed about the episode. An over-

sight on her part, but she honestly had not thought about it in so long ...

Her drink arrived and she opened her pack. The booth possessed a polycorn link into which she jacked her own portable unit. The small screen cleared and her short itinerary scrolled up.

Willem Karkaris topped the list, followed by his comcode and location code. All she needed to do was touch the contact icon next to his name and she could let him know she was on Homestead. She had sent no word to expect her. Now that she was here, she still hesitated. After the unexpected reaction to the presence of seti, what else might she have suppressed? She withdrew her finger, lifted the glass, and looked back at the scenery.

Seven years, she thought, you'd think it would be long enough for some perspective ...

Maybe. But now that she no longer had time, perspective was elusive, impossible. She finished the scotch, delaying, trusting that instinct would see her through.

Nothing.

She raised the empty glass till the bartender saw her and nodded. She set it down, a little too hard, and jabbed her finger at Willem's icon, a little too hard. The portable unit skittered several centimeters over the table. She grabbed it and pulled it back.

The second scotch and Willem's face appeared simultaneously.

The small screen made it difficult to be sure, but Ann saw surprise in his face. That, and a touch of anger. She felt mildly gratified.

„Will, hi," she said.

„Ann?"

„Who else?"

He frowned, his pale grey eyes narrowing. His light brown hair was much shorter than the last time she saw him, and his face showed a few more lines, but he looked mostly the same. Especially frowning.

„Where are you?" he asked.

„Fall's End."

„You're *here*?" He glanced off-screen. „Right. I'll come get you. If you want, I mean."

„Since I'm not sure how to get to your stead ..."

„Be about a half-hour."

„I'll be here."

But why? he wanted to ask. She saw it, clearly as if he had said it. The screen went blank. A moment later the menu, offering local services and information, came up. She toyed with booking a shuttle back up to the transit station and going back to Earth. Or steeling herself to head further out, maybe all the way to the Secant.

Then what? „Ann Myref" would fade in time as the overlay broke down and the poor host would be stranded somewhere, underfunded, with no way back.

The second scotch was gone. She considered a third, but decided to get a coffee instead. Being drunk when Willem arrived might be a bad idea.

Being totally sober might be worse, she thought.

She spent the next half hour downloading data about Homestead. The portable would belong to the host after the contract ran its course and she might need the information.

Willem arrived ten minutes late. He stood in the entrance to the pub and for a few seconds Ann thought he might turn and leave.

The shock in his eyes faded and he came to her booth.

„All the way here," he said, „I still didn't quite believe it."

Ann gestured to the opposite seat. „So you came to prove me an illusion?"

„Illusion? No." He glanced at the portable polycom and her cup. „I'm not sure what to say first."

„Say what you want. What's the first thing that comes to mind?"

„Why are you here?"

„Ah. To business. I'm here to see you."

„Because?"

Ann laughed. „What, you don't trust me?"

„Trust is a finite resource. What you're asking for is faith and I never really had that. So I'm left with requiring proof."

You never do anything without a motive. This I know from experience. And I have to wonder what motive would be strong enough to get you to leave Earth and come all the way here just to see me."

Ann's mood collapsed. She had intended to tell him gradually, with kind words and a gentle attitude.

"I'm a codicil," she said. "Ann Marie Teresa Myref died a week ago, Earth local time."

The shock in his face gratified her. "Dead ..." he said. "How?"

"Nerve degeneration. It started with flashes of pain along my forearms and numbness in my fingers. When I couldn't hold a stylus for more than ten minutes, I saw the meds. New strain of virus, they told me. No cure. At first, though, the prognosis was generous. Ten more years with minimal impairment, then a gradual worsening for another five to ten. But then it took a turn for the unpredicted and I was in a float chair before I knew what happened. Hell with that. I have no patience for suffering."

"You never did. Yours or anybody else's."

She felt a flare of rage at the implied criticism. "I'm not the one who couldn't adapt."

"You didn't this time." He shook his head. "So, how does this work? I mean ...who are you really?"

"Ann."

"No, no, I mean the person wearing the - what do they call them? - the overlay."

"It doesn't work *that* way. She's not part of this at all. I'm Ann Myref."

He grunted. "You look like Ann." He leaned forward and made a show of examining her features. "Same shade of hair I remember, same freckles ... This kind of work must pay well." He sat back. "All right. I'll play along. Why are you here?"

"We have unfinished business. I didn't want to leave any dangles."

"Very Ann. Did it occur to her that some things never tidy up?"

"You don't have to refer to me in the third person."

"I wouldn't if I knew who you were."

"I'm Ann."

„Ann's dead. If I understood you correctly."

„Physically. For all intents and purposes, though, I am Ann Myref."

„'All intents and purposes ...' I never fully understood that phrase." He smiled. „Forgive me, maybe I've become morbid over the last seven years. I have to know— who's wearing Ann?"

She slapped her hand on the table. „*It doesn't work that way!*" She glanced around the pub to see if anyone turned to look. She closed her eyes then and sighed. „This isn't easy."

„No kidding."

„You don't have to make it harder."

„Me?" He chuckled bitterly. „Look. Whoever you are, the woman who hired you to do this ... this job ... Well, no doubt she paid you well, but she did you no favors. She's – was – a callous, self-obsessed workaholic who thought she could run everyone's life for them. Even now, after she's dead, she wants to make sure my life is the way she thought it should be. Well, I'm sorry. To quote you, it doesn't work that way. Some things stay broken."

„Only if you can't figure out how to repair them."

He looked skeptical. „From you that's rich." He sighed. „You have to ask if it's worth it. Better maybe to just throw it away and get new."

„Is that what you did?"

He frowned, then started to stand. „Sorry you wasted the trip ..."

„Will, please." She reached out, but stopped short of touching him. „I'm a codicil. This is part of my last will and testament. Maybe you could spare a little time to find out what it's about before you send me packing."

He did not want to. She could see that. But the longer he hesitated, the more his conscience worked on him. Willem Karkaris had always considered himself fair before anything. He fell short often, she remembered, but he always tried. It felt oddly good knowing that about him.

„All right," he said. „Come out to my place. You can at least see that I'm fine."

Willem drove at a steady clip over roads that seemed only recently paved, the ground effect transport sliding between low hills that gradually showed the signs of agriculture, native flora gradually displaced by recognizable strains of Earth crops. He left the main road after nearly twenty minutes and shot up a narrower stretch into vine-covered swells.

He pulled onto a broad pad before a wide, two-story house with a magnificently sprawling roof. A long building stood nearby, the gaping doors filled by a heavy transport on which motiles loaded flats. A dog stood at the top of broad steps on the encircling porch of the main house, its tail wagging happily.

Ann shouldered her single pack and looked out at the surrounding hills.

„It's a bit dry right now," Willem said. „Rain's late. Maybe just as well."

She followed him into the easy shade of the house. Willem still liked blues and various shades of violet, mixed with natural woods oiled to a high sheen. Geometric patterns covered the furniture in dizzying profusion. Neoromantic realist art broke over the walls – heroic images of mountains, nebulae, oceans, and people under nature's threat.

Ann spotted something to the right of the main window. A shadow box, small and nearly lost amid all the rest of the decor. Within its small sections she saw bones, sticks, pebbles, torn paper, and handwritten notes, collectively composing an allegory of sorts. She recognized a number of allusions. Unexpectedly, she felt flattered.

„Guest rooms are on the second floor," Willem said. „Pick whichever one you want."

Ann set the pack down on the floor and walked to the rear of the house. The porch, she discovered, encircled the first floor. She stepped out to gaze at the vineyards.

She heard Willem stop beside her.

„You did it," she said. „This is what you wanted."

„Mostly."

„You didn't need me after all."

When he remained silent, Ann looked at him. He wore a complex expression part puzzled, part hurt. He exhaled slowly and shrugged.

„I have to finish supervising this load," he said. „Go make yourself comfortable. I'll cook later."

Alone, Ann felt herself begin to relax. She leaned on the railing and let the view suffuse her. Willem had talked about this all the time they had been together - land, vineyards, a winery.

But there had been no available property on Earth and Ann refused to leave the planet of her birth. What had begun early on as an attempt to find Willem a parcel in the Sol system had turned into a career for her, drawing her further away from the few dreams they had shared. One day she looked back and saw that she had become very wealthy dealing in land - most often land she herself never saw except by comlink - and Willem had already found a place out-system.

He had wanted her to come with him. She would not even consider it. He had not understood. What had begun as a minor irritation between them turned into a test of feelings - and they failed.

She returned to the living room and stood before the shadow box. They had not fought often, but the intensity of their few battles more than compensated. After the last one, Willem had simply walked out.

Didn't even say good-bye ... maybe he thought I'd follow ... arrogant shit ...

„Sticks and stones," she muttered. She hefted her pack and headed up the stairs to the second floor.

She shoved open one of the oak-paneled doors and stepped into a cozy bedroom done in ambers and greens. She set her pack on the cedar chest at the foot of the large bed and shook her right hand to revive the circulation.

From the window she could look back along the road by which Willem had brought her here. Except for that and the house around her it seemed humans had left no imprint on the land other than the too-neat rows of vines. Tau Ceti bathed the landscape in warm light. *Pristine*, she thought, though she

knew that eighty kilometers south lay Fall's End and a space-port. But the illusion pleased her.

She turned from the window and felt suddenly tired.

„Is there a house intelligence?" she asked aloud.

„Yes, Co Myref," a voice replied.

„Hm. Good. I'm going to take a nap. Would you alert me when Willem starts preparing dinner?"

„Of course."

Ann pulled off her boots and stretched out on the bed.

He looks good, she thought as she drifted to sleep. Pity ...

The house woke her four hours later. Ann got out of bed and stretched, feeling stiff. Her back ached dully and her neck felt gripped by a large, powerful hand.

She showered and felt much better. Gazing in the mirror, though, toweling her thick red hair, she thought she looked pale. For a moment she experienced a sense of dislocation, as if the face she saw belonged to someone else. Pale green eyes, small nose, a faint scar over the left eyebrow. Freckles. She blinked, frowning, and the sensation faded.

Overlay slip, she decided. Another diagnostic would be a good idea, but as she dressed she experienced none of the third person impressions usually accompanying a bad fit. Leave well enough alone...

She carried her polycom downstairs. The first floor was filled with the odors of cooking. She smelled garlic and peppers, Baccian oil and curry.

Outside, Tau Ceti touched the edge of the hills, gilding the landscape in gold. Ann set her portable on the window sill and stared. She wondered why she felt so drawn to this place. She had spent a lot of time and capital on Earth building a home very different from this and till now had felt satisfied with the results.

„I trust you're hungry," Willem said, entering the room. „Dinner is served."

He led her through a broad archway into a dining room. One wall opened to the porch, letting the early evening light fill the space. Motiles carried the trays.

„If I hadn't been," Ann said, „I would be now."

While the machines set plates on the table, Willem busied himself with a bottle of wine.

„Yours?" Ann asked.

He nodded. „Five years old, one of my best vintages. It was questionable whether the Nortons would thrive in this soil, but after a slight modification in the acidity and phosphate content, they've done very well." The cork came out with a pleasant pop and he filled her glass with the rich red liquid. „We have sautéed Nine Rivers eel, Cetian moss cakes, fried mussels, fresh sourdough and olive oil, and creamed fela berries."

„A feast." She raised the glass and sniffed, then took a mouthful. „Excellent."

He smiled slightly and poured his own glass, then sat down opposite her. The motiles finished serving and trundled out of the room.

He raised his glass. „Welcome to my home."

„Thank you. The place is ... beautiful."

„I could never have had this on Earth."

„Oh, I don't see why not. The only problem was money."

„Then, yes. But ..." He glanced to his right, out at the view. „It's different. The light. The air."

„It's not Earth."

„No ... it couldn't be."

„Close enough, though." She tore off some bread and dipped it in the dish of olive oil beside her plate. Chewing, she sliced the eel.

„In your expert opinion?" he asked.

Moss cake followed eel into her mouth. She chewed slowly, letting the flavors mingle and linger.

„I suppose," Willem said, „you won't be opening offices here."

„Is that supposed to be irony?"

His face danced through a series of expressions, small shifts of the mouth and eyebrows, and she knew he was sorting responses. It seemed to take longer than she remembered, but perhaps he had more to think through.

„I suppose," he said finally, „I'm just extremely puzzled about why you're here."

„Can you wait till after dinner? This is really very good.“

A smile flickered across his face and he nodded.

They ate in silence. Ann remembered this, too – many nights, especially toward the end, when everything either of them said came burdened with so many interpretations, when it was easier to be quiet rather than risk another altercation.

Maybe I should just wrap this up tonight ...

For dessert, Willem opened another bottle of wine – a white this time. He glanced at Ann's polycom as he poured. Ann leaned back in the chair, comfortably sated, watching him.

„That was excellent,“ she said. „You always were a good cook, but this ... you've outdone yourself.“

„Maybe instead of living with you I should have gotten a job as your chef.“

Ann sighed. Tau Ceti had dropped below the horizon and left the dining room bathed in a cool afterglow from the twilight sky. Small lights winked on near the ceiling, not bright enough yet to compete with the natural light. The motiles returned then to clear away the dishes and clean up, quietly and efficiently, dancing through their routine while Ann and Willem regarded each other across the table.

It would be so easy to just fall right back into it, she thought. Instead, when the last motile left the room, she took her polycom from the chair and set it on the table. The top swung up and the access panels glowed softly. She tapped a few commands and data appeared.

„There's a few items we need to deal with,“ she said. „You're in my will. I've left you some things.“

Willem's mouth opened. He looked genuinely surprised. He straightened in his chair and raised his glass.

„First off ...“ she began.

„Wait.“ Willem held up his hand. „I'm sorry. I find this all very disturbing. I mean – how does this work? You aren't Ann. You told me she died. But ...“

Ann folded her hands on the table. „Ann Myref died on Earth. Before she did, she encoded her persona and hired seven of us to wear the overlay to take care of certain details left unfinished before her death. She had been confined to a

support bed for eight months. She could not physically tend to this herself. So I and six others are carrying out her final wishes. The overlay is a full personality recording. That's a profound simplification, but it'll do. This host and the others went through minor physical modification to resemble Ann as closely as possible. Before you think otherwise, this is done as much to maintain the overlay as for any kind of deceit. When I look in the mirror, I see who I am, it reinforces the persona, maintains it. It also makes the entire experience more personal for the recipients of these visits. Would you believe me if I hadn't looked like Ann and told you who I was?"

„I'm not sure I believe you now."

Ann flicked her right hand, dismissing the comment. „There's a time limit. I won't be Ann Myref for long. So when our business is concluded, at some point the host personality will re-emerge and assume control again."

Willem frowned uncomfortably. „Why didn't you just send for me?"

„Would you have come?"

„I ..." He hesitated, then shrugged. „Maybe. I don't know."

He studied her, eyes narrowed. „You know, the woman you're doing this for was a controlling, manipulative, self-serving ..."

„Stop it. You already pointed that out and you know that's crap. You're not even saying it with conviction."

He flinched, as if a charge had coursed through his entire body. He raised a hand, fisted it, and set it on the edge of the table. „All I wanted was to be with you."

„More crap. If that was all, then you could have stayed."

„You're not listening. I wanted to be with you. What is me, what I am, included having this." He waved toward the twilight-black hills. „This is part of what I am. To give this up would have meant crippling myself."

„And I wouldn't leave Earth. That was part of who I am."

„Why not? Look at this place! 'Close enough' you said. For all practical purposes it's no different!"

„We went over this."

„Often. And we never resolved it. You never gave me an answer. But there you sit, and if I am to believe that you really are Ann, then this is impossible. Ann would never leave Earth.“

„Death puts things into perspective.“

„You had to die before you could do this? Were you dying when you made the encoding?“

„It was beginning. I knew it was coming.“

His breathing came hard, strained. „That must have been terrible.“

„Pretty bad.“

„Who was with you at the end?“

„Meds. A couple of attorneys.“

„I would have come.“

„Seven years, Will. You never did. I wasn't that hard to find.“

„Ditto.“ He stood. „Now it's too late. Nothing we say here will make any difference.“

„Don't take that attitude.“

„Ann's dead. You aren't her. You're just a mannequin.“ He grunted. „You know, it's actually painful looking at you.“

„Then let's conclude this so I can leave.“

„There's nothing to conclude. Anything I might have wanted from Ann, you can't give me.“

„What? Seems to me we left a few things unsaid.“

„Ann and I did. You – I suppose they'll just have to remain unsaid.“

„Will, dammit, I am *Ann*!“

„No, you're not. And this is really not very pleasant. I'm glad you enjoyed the meal. You can spend the night, but I'd appreciate it if you'd leave tomorrow. Early.“

Ann slapped her hands on the table. „You haven't changed a bit.“

„And you can't. Good-night.“

„Will!“

He walked through the panoramic opening, onto the porch, and out of sight.

Fireflies, or something like them, sparkled across the blackened landscape. Occasionally, several of them fell into formations

and swept through the darkness, a cloud of pulsing light arrowing somewhere, then breaking up just as abruptly. Ann sat on the porch with a glass of wine and her polycom, for a time fascinated by the stars and their flickering reflections below. Tau Ceti was not that far from Sol, so she could still pick out many constellations, but the sky seemed odd all the same.

Her polycom chimed and she looked at the small screen. Insertion into the house system, it informed her, would set off a series of alarms. Willem would know. The machine assigned a low probability to getting around all of them. Did she wish to proceed?

Who would have thought the wine business required so much security?

She checked the specs her polycom provided and grunted to herself. He had simply bought the most expensive and comprehensive package. Typical. All or nothing, like so much else Willem did.

She canceled the probe and shut down the polycom. No matter in any case – she had to talk to Willem, that was the contract. What Ann Myref wanted to give him, he had to accept personally.

Was it really so bad?

She had gone over the memories of the relationship and the breakup during the voyage here. Perhaps time had blunted the sharper edges, perhaps she had indulged more than a little justification and revision, but she could not understand Willem's continued anger. She had moved on, and clearly so had he. It seemed reasonable that now, seven years later, there ought to be some neutral ground upon which they could talk.

„Some things stay broken ...“

Things had all happened quickly then. Her business had grown exponentially after she had tapped into the trend of the offworld-wealthy returning to Earth to buy property as status symbol. There were many enormously wealthy people scattered among the colonies and seemingly overnight they all wanted a sliver of land on Earth – just because they could afford it now.

For a time, she had thought Willem left out of envy. But she decided not – he could be petty, but not that way. No, he had

genuinely wanted this, what he now had. At the time, the price for it on Earth was beyond their reach. No matter, he told her, there's plenty offworld.

The idea of leaving Earth ... she simply could not. She recalled her reaction at Fall's End, in the port.

But I still wanted to give you your dream ... now that I can, you won't even talk to me ...

He said she had never given him an answer. That sounded ridiculous. All the fights, all the terse conversations, all the times they wrestled over this. She had told him time and time again ...

She brought up the overlay menu again. Against the night it glowed a brilliant green. She chose the review function. For a few seconds it seemed that she remembered nothing. Panic began - and ended as abruptly with a dialogue-space opening between the host and the overlay.

„At what point will my contract be considered fulfilled?“

As stipulated, upon acceptance and transfer of bequests.

„He won't discuss it.“

That's my problem, not yours.

„I can't be you forever. The overlay will start to deteriorate.“

That's my problem, too. Failure to fulfill contract requirements will void payment.

„Then that's my problem. What if you can't solve your problem?“

Consideration will be made. A contact number is filed in the case of overlay failure.

The space contracted, the separate halves of her persona stood apart for a few moments, and then „Ann“ reassumed awareness. She felt unsettled and dissatisfied.

She closed her polycom and finished the wine.

As she stepped back inside, she heard glass breaking. Setting the polycom on the dining room table, she pushed through the door to the kitchen.

Willem knelt on the floor, carefully picking up shards from a puddle of dark red wine. An open bottle stood on the counter-top opposite the sink. He looked up at her; light caught in the tears nesting in his eyes.

„Forgive me,” he said, his voice softly slurred.

„You should let a motile clean that up,” Ann said. „You’ll cut yourself.”

„My mess, I’ll clean it up. You should clean up your own messes. Otherwise ...” He jerked his hand up, wincing, and sending the handful of pieces flying. Ann danced back. „Shit,” Willem said, fingers in his mouth.

„Told you,” Ann said. She walked carefully behind him and took his shoulders. „Come on.”

He got to his feet, wobbled briefly, then shrugged her off.

„I can walk,” he said, stumbling back against the counter. He looked at his cut fingers. „Not bad. I’ll live.” He looked at her, frowning. „You’re still here?”

„I’m leaving in the morning, remember?”

„Ah. That’s what I said.” He grinned. „Remember?”

„Yes.”

He blinked, the grin fading. „You’re not Ann ... She’s gone. But you know all about her. Don’t you?”

„Everything.”

„Then you know she took the easy way out.”

Ann stared at him. „How? By dying?”

Willem nodded. „And leaving the mess for someone else to clean up.” He sighed. „I know a little about that. I didn’t clean up my own, either.”

„I *am* cleaning up my messes. Why do you think I’m here?”

He laughed. „Uh uh. Ann didn’t clean ‘em up. She arranged to have you do it so she could go out with a clear conscience. That’s what she was good at – arranging things – that’s why she was successful. So at the end, she arranged to believe everything was settled, completed, finished. If you failed, it didn’t matter. She could choose to believe you wouldn’t. Mess tucked away where she’d never have to see it again.”

„Is that how you see this?”

He blinked at her. „You didn’t even say you missed me.”

Ann felt her patience slipping. A motile rolled into the kitchen, hesitating at the proximity of humans to the mess on the floor. Ann put a hand on his arm.

„Come on,” she said. „We need to take care of that cut.”

He pulled his arm away petulantly, then acquiesced and let her direct him past the motile, into the dining room. She sat him down at the table and went to the bathroom. She found a bottle of healant and a box of bandages and returned to Willem.

He watched her tend the cuts, cleaning them, spraying the healant, and applying the bandages. She tried to gauge how drunk he was, but it was impossible after all these years. *I might have known once, just by the set of his mouth, the way he blinked ... too much time has passed ...*

„Why didn't you send word?" he asked. „I would've come."

„I know."

„Then ...?" He looked puzzled, then shook his head. „Has there been anyone else?"

„A few. No one like you."

„Maybe that's a good thing."

Ann sighed. „I hated you. You took off, I hated you. It passed. Nothing original. I imagined you hated me."

„Not for a long time." His face contorted briefly. „I just wanted you to come with me."

„I couldn't leave Earth."

„Why?"

Ann's patience snapped. „Dammit, we've been over this ..."

Willem held up a finger. „No. We haven't."

„Yes, we have. It's all we fought about at the end."

Willem shook his head slowly. „We fought ... sure ... but you just said you couldn't. You never told me why."

Ann stared at him, stunned. She remembered the arguments, the bitter rituals of accusation and rejection. At some point during all that she was certain she had said ...

„Excuse me," she said, standing. She walked out onto the porch. Leaning on the railing, she opened the dialogue once more.

„So did you?"

Tell him? Sure, I—

„No, review it. Did you actually say the words? Or did you assume he understood?"

Scanning memory ... no. I never actually said the words.

Ann watched the flickering in the night, remembering scenes from their last few fights. Finally, she closed down the dialogue and went back to the table.

Willem had not moved. He looked up when she sat down.

„I'm sorry," she said. She cleared her throat. „I couldn't leave Earth because I was afraid."

„Afraid ..."

„Terrified."

„Of?"

„Everything."

He almost laughed. „You were never afraid of anything."

„Is that what you thought?"

„You never ... you never told me you were afraid."

„I was afraid of that."

„You never said."

„No."

„To anyone?"

„No."

„Not even yourself." He nodded, as if he understood. „So all you could do was fight." He drew a deep breath. „When you love someone ... I wanted to be enough for you ..."

„So I wouldn't be afraid anymore?"

„Something like that. If I had known ..."

„If you don't know what it is you have to do you're not responsible for not doing it." She touched his hand. „I never told you. It's not your fault."

He turned his hand over and closed his fingers around hers. When he looked up, though, Ann thought she saw a glimmer of skepticism. But it faded.

He stood. „I need to be alone for a while. Whatever ..." He waved at the polycom. „You can tell me about it in the morning." He paused at the doorway. „Thank you."

Her scalp itched in the morning. Her mouth felt cottony and she staggered to the bathroom, half-blind through a kind of spun-glass haze that coated her eyes.

She found a towel and soaked it in warm water, then pressed it to her eyes as she sat on the toilet. Her bladder felt

full to bursting and her release was long. She shuddered a few times.

Finally, she could see clearly. She remained seated and idly scratched her head, letting the sensations of sore muscles and mild nausea pass. Finished, she stepped to the sink and re-soaked the towel.

Her hair was dark. She blinked and brown eyes stared back at her from the mirror. Most of the freckles were gone.

She brought up the menu and opened the dialogue.

„Status?“

Contract fulfilled satisfactorily. Overlay extracted, somatic regeneration initiated.

„I haven't completed transfer of bequests.“

Primary requirement fulfilled. Transfer of bequests a formality.

As she watched, a list of her compensations and options scrolled across her vision. In the night, the overlay had opted to terminate its presence. Imbedded nanoproceses began re-working her, reverting hair color and texture, eye color, and skin. Over the next several days slight adjustments would reshape the underlying bone and redistribute fat deposits, giving her back her original face and body. Already, though, she looked very different from Ann Myref.

„I am Dadal Reos,“ she said aloud, watching her reflection. It felt strange for a moment, then clicked into place. „I am Dadal Reos.“

She remembered enough of the overlay to complete the formal arrangements of the will.

„Shit,“ she hissed. „Might have been simpler to wait till I left.“

Dadal sat on the bed for a time, letting her own memories and her own emotions sort themselves. Some of the odd moments of recognition she had experienced since grounding on Homestead made sense now – she had been born here, lived here till age six, when her family had moved to Sol System. The feeling of place had been strong enough to tease at the overlay and the client persona's aversion to Seti jarred.

She dressed, grabbed the polycom, and went downstairs. She heard movement from the kitchen. Reluctant to confront Willem Karkaris, she stepped onto the porch.

Morning sun drove the shadows away from her. A heavy cloud loomed above the hill to the west. The air smelled faintly of rain. Nearby, a motile worked to dig up one of the multi-flue, blue-streaked Shimby Castles – *that's what they're called!* – while pumping insecticide down the central shaft. A cloud of Shimbys floated around the device, impotent against it.

Dadal suddenly resented Ann Myref. It would have been better to be well away from here, away from Homestead before ..

„Good morning,“ Willem said from inside. „Hope you're hungry. I prepared ...“

She tensed and turned. He stood just inside, staring at her. She found that she no longer knew how to read him, but it seemed he was surprised and disappointed.

„The overlay shut down, Co Karkaris,“ she said.

„Which means, I suppose, everything is done that she wanted doing.“

She said nothing. After a minute, he shrugged.

„Maybe she was right,“ he said. He made a smile. „I still hope you're hungry, Co ...?“

„Dadal,“ she said. „Dadal Reos.“

„Call me Will.“

She felt embarrassed and self-conscious through breakfast. Willem chatted about the winery and the different vintages he hoped to lay down.

She found herself growing interested. She had lived near Ozma, several hundred kilometers from Fall's End, in a more urban environment. Farming was something she knew little about.

„And it looks like the weather is changing,“ he said as the motiles cleared away the dishes. „Only a few weeks late and none too soon.“

„Co Karkaris, I ...“

„Will. Please.“

„I had no idea this would happen. It's not standard procedure. Usually we leave ...“

„It's all right.“ He smiled, but he looked sad. „Very Ann. Get in, do what needs doing, get out.“

„Well. But there are still details.“

„Of course. Show me.“

Dadal opened the polycom and accessed the bequests. Willem read the list.

„Damn,“ he said. „You got it.“

„What?“

„Oh, uh ... I meant, Ann.“ He laughed. „When we started looking for a parcel on Earth, I found an old estate on the western coast of the North American continent ... of course, it was far too expensive. But it was ideal. When I came to Homestead and bought this place, I picked it because it looked so much like it. It seems she finally got it.“

„And she left it to you.“

His breath shuddered. „Damn.“

After a long silence, Dadal indicated the screen. „Please touch the acceptance icon.“

He nodded and pressed a finger to the contact. The screen cleared and a moment later it showed transfer complete. Dadal closed the unit down and stood.

„She must have kept her eye on that parcel all this time,“ Willem said. „Property on Earth goes fast. Small window of opportunity.“

„You sound surprised.“

„I suppose I am. I guess ...“

„Well, if you'll excuse me, Co ... I need to pack and arrange transport.“

„Um. Do you have to leave today? I ...“

Dadal watched him work through his feelings. Finally, he shrugged.

„I never found out much about you,“ he said. „Yet I feel I've known you ...“ He grinned, telling her he was joking.

„I've been doing this kind of work for five years,“ she said. „Most of my own time, between commissions ... it's not very interesting.“

„How do you know?“

She looked out at the vineyards. *Maybe she was finished, but this isn't done yet ...*

Besides, she was not so sure she was ready to leave. She wondered – briefly – if this had been a factor in Ann Myref's selecting her.

„You first. Would you like to tell me about her?“ she asked.
„I have time.“ She grunted. „One thing we do best is listen.“

He was still talking when the rains began.

Dead Men Walking

JEREMY SZAL

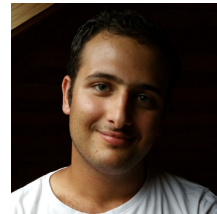
It's not easy to live inside the armor, but between getting my skin peeled away like wet paper by the razorstorms and my bones shredded to chalk, it's an easy choice. You get used to it after the first two or three months, but only just.

I gripped the cold metal of my rifle, my HUD simultaneously scanning for hostiles and displaying the weather conditions on Shaar. Today all hell had frozen over. Just like yesterday. And the day before. The world was grey, the land sculpted into rough shapes by the razorstorms. It was trying to do the same to my fireteam, shards pelting against our armor and stripping away flakes of poly-metal. Loose stones crunched underneath my heavy boots, wet gravel sparkling in the watery light. It reminded me of the cuttem nuts I used to chew as a kid. Just the thought of proper food made my mouth water. You don't need to eat inside this thing: the nutrients pump in what you need through the right tubes and take out what you don't through others. Of course, it's the getting hooked up to the catheter that hurts more than anything.

The exhaust fans were at full blast, fighting off the bitter cold. Trouble was, they were doing their job too well. Sweat snaked down my back, pooled under my arms. I rolled my burning shoulders, glanced back at the rest of my fireteam marching up the hill, hugging rifles to their chests like babies. It was pointless venturing out in these storms. No one wanted to go, but Commander Geary had asked it of me.

And Commander Geary isn't a man you say no to.

Even with the power armor doing most of the work, my legs ached from the long trek up the mountain. This wasn't our



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standard gravity or oxygen. It'd take generations to adjust to that. This is where the colonists had the leg up – they'd had centuries to adapt to the raw conditions here, living independently on the rim of the galaxy.

I peered over the edge of the precipice. At the bottom was one of the many settlements scattered around Shaar, flanked by an armored palisade. In these storms, it was as dead as we expected.

I heard muffled breathing as someone approached within range of my helmet-mic. 'You okay, Ramez?' Jo asked. She hefted a heavy hand on my shoulder. 'Been a bit worried since ... well, you know.'

I grunted a response. It'd been the end of a long day, one that hadn't been good to begin with. We'd run into some rebels smuggling stolen arms into their village. Couldn't tell you who started firing first. I just remember getting a chest full of hot metal, the impact spinning me a down the cliff and tumbling against solid rock.

Our armor repaired minor injuries with self-applying bio-foam, antibodies and a side-helping of morphine for the pain, but the fall had broken several important things with complicated names. I was rushed back to base for surgery and shot full of osteopaths. It seemed to have gone smoothly, and they didn't waste any time strapping me back inside the suit and shoving me out the door.

Way I figured it; this was probably Geary's idea of punishment for taking a free holiday over in surgery. I elected not to remind him that I'd been unconscious. After a few years of getting a boot up your arse and slammed into the mud, you learn when to keep your trap shut.

The razorstorm started to lessen up, dying down to the occasional flake. I mentally commanded my armor to hone in on the settlement. The visor zoomed in like I was standing a few meters away. I swept over the cluster of houses, their roofs and supports designed to withstand the harsh environment. People emerged, checking to see that it was safe to venture out. Children bundled up in thick clothes played in the market square, men using tractors to clear the winding paths of glis-

tening rock shards, allowing families to make their way to natural hot springs.

Sometimes, I wondered why anyone wanted to live in this hellhole, lightyears away from other colonies. Stuff like this reminded me why. They enjoyed the isolation, the independence of it. Cut off from the sprawling cities and busy lifestyle, the rigid immigration laws and work permits and education fees.

But worth fighting the Union for? God no.

I motioned the rest of the fireteam over. They were good men, most of the time. Northam who said too much and Oshiro who said too little.

'You've never had bacon?' Northam was saying to Oshiro. 'What's wrong with you, man?'

Oshiro had carved the number 13 on the shoulder plate on his armor as a superstitious joke, and it caught the milky light as he shrugged. 'Couldn't afford the expensive meats where I grew up.'

I had the same story. The orphanage I'd been dumped in wasn't too fond of feeding us. We were lucky if we got the synthesized stuff. It tasted like plastic, but it was the only thing around and it didn't stop us from fighting like dogs over it. The scars are still there, buried deep beneath my suit.

'We'll have it one of these days,' Northam was saying, his armor plates grinding as he gestured. 'One of those thick, juicy slabs with fat thick as rubber.'

'And hash browns,' Jo was saying, stretching her arms. 'Don't forget the hash browns.'

'Yeah yeah, them too.'

I smiled. It was nice to banter about it, although we knew we'd never get those luxuries here. I kept looking down at the settlement until Northam approached. 'We've got to go down there? Come on, Ray. My legs are gonna be the death of me.'

Jo laughed. 'Union men never die, remember?'

It was an old saying, back when we didn't have our armor and the death rates were much higher. You couldn't tell the folks back home that, of course. Had to keep up the morale. So Union men hadn't ever officially been declared deceased, even if someone got their brains splattered out like crushed toma-

toes. Although I don't even think that anyone under Geary's wing had been killed. People said it was his command, but in reality it's this armor that keeps us alive. Keeps us breathing.

I started the descent, clambering for purchase on the brittle stone. I didn't need to turn around to know the fireteam was following.

We picked our way along the cliff's lip, foamy waves slapping the moss-slathered rocks far below. There was a rumble as a heap of pebbles started sliding down the cliff. A gawky figure was scuttling down the scree towards the village, monocular in hand.

Northam chortled. 'I think our cover's blown.'

'It's just a kid,' muttered Oshiro, slinging the rifle on his back.

'We're not trying to hide,' I reminded them. Monde was one of the few settlements that hadn't welcomed us with a spray of bullets. That wasn't to say that they didn't hate the Union for coming and trying to colonize occupied land, but they had the brains not to open fire.

We were getting the usual stares, some in awe of our high-tech gear, others seething with unconcealed hate. Children were ordered back inside in low voices, stealing back glances and grinning ear to ear. A grizzled man in a padded jacket approached. 'What do you want?'

The fingers twitching in the direction of his pistol didn't escape my notice. 'You heard anything from the other settlements?' I asked. I tried to step into his shoes – a hard working family man staring up at an interloper, armed and armored. 'Anything at all?'

'Like what?' he asked.

I didn't need to remind him part of our bargain included little titbits they managed to snag. We had peace and they passed on gossip. 'Any trouble that's been brewing.'

A shake of the head. 'Nothing. We don't want anything to do with 'em.'

I wanted to believe him. I truly did. But that wasn't my job.

A woman sauntered up, black hair whipping about. 'I've heard something,' she said, staring at me dead in the eye de-

spite the mirrored visor. 'It's Illium. They spoke about making bombs. Lots of bombs. They wanted to plant them at your base.'

A chill wormed its way into my body and seeped into my blood. Ah. And here I thought this would be an easy stroll.

'Where's Illium?' I asked. Settlements were strewn all over Shaar, some of them out in the open, some buried deep in a labyrinth of underground caverns.

I didn't miss the glance the two of them shared. Another twitch of the fingers. A few whispers, eyes darting our way. Weighing up our lives against their children's lives? My muscles tensed against the skintight armor. The tension was so thick I could almost taste it. Surely they weren't so stupid as to open fire ...

Right?

The woman gave the crowd another glance, then forwarded the co-ordinates to my HUD. A blue cube pinpointed the location on my map.

I muttered a *thank you*, sharing the data with the fireteam as I crunched back across the gravel. I could feel their eyes drilling holes into me and I didn't blame them. I hadn't been a fan of the Union when I was a kid back on New Valeran. I was an angry guy, always getting into scrapes, stealing for the thrill of it, sniffing out trouble with the law simply because I could.

Then I heard they were looking to expand the colonies and retaking the ones that had wriggled out of their grasp. The pay was good, it'd get me free board, and a man's got to eat. After spending half my life in poverty, it felt good to be a leader. Feeling the power and potential at my fingertips, giving commands and having them obeyed. Turned out that I'm good at leading, and I rose through the ranks quickly. But nothing compared to seeing my fireteam's easy nods and relaxed body posture when I drew near, knowing that no matter where we went, these guys had my back. Trusted me to call the shots.

I put in a call over to Commander Geary. He unfolded on-screen, gunmetal-grey eyes swimming around in their sockets. 'What do you have for me?' His cold, calculating face was at

odds with his warm and father-like voice, as if speaking to a favorite son. A man of contradictions.

'Sir, the folks over at Monde say there's a potential bomb over at Illium.' I gave him a moment to digest that. 'Possibly planning to plant them at our base.'

Geary's grey eyes narrowed. An instant, final decision made. 'Get over there at once. Permission to use lethal force if you must. We can't risk losing any of our own.' Those grey, dark eyes fixed on me like restraining bolts. 'Union men don't die, Ramez. Remember that.'

And that was it. He was never really one for chats.

My HUD indicated everyone had digested the data. I relayed the conversation with Geary. 'Everyone ready?'

'Stoked,' Oshiro said, polishing his rifle like he was lost in some perverse fantasy. Who knew what went on beneath that visor? I'd known them for months, considered them family. Yet I'd never seen any of their faces. I wasn't sure I wanted to. Some masks are better left where they are.

Jo shifted her broad shoulders. 'Lead on, Ray.'

And I did, marching down a gigantic slab of bedrock, ocean water surging around our feet. The waves collided with stone, leaped into the air, and I wished I could feel the spray on my face.

This time it was Northam and Jo who were arguing. Something about what aliens would look like if we discovered them. The blistering wind carried fragments of their conversation my way as we trudged across the slabs of cliffs and long stretches of glossy black sand. Not for the first time, I wished the terrain wasn't so sloped and hostile that it'd be possible to use a buggy that'd carry us all our armor.

Oshiro was puffing away next to me, careful not to engage in the debate. I took a moment to stretch. My muscles seemed to be dipped in molten lead, my arms, legs and shoulders aching. I was coated in another layer of sticky sweat, and my entire body was cramped and chaffed. I rubbed the nape of my neck with a heavy arm, the best I'd come to scratching an itch in this suit. You might just get used to wearing this armor, but it's never easy. Or comfortable.

Northam and Jo were just discussing the likelihood of aliens probing us humans into submission when a spire of black stone shattered. Rocks exploded all over us. I hugged the ground, the echoes of a thundering crack dying out through the cliffs. My HUD showed everyone's heart rate climbing by the moment. 'Sniper!' Jo hissed.

My joints locked up, immobilizing me. I checked that my fireteam was unhurt as I counted the seconds by. Jo hugged the rock, scraping away grit as she edged along, careful not to get her head blown off. I snapped back into motion and slowly, slowly dragged myself forward. A twinkle in the distance. I zoomed in through the crevice. *There*. A figure was swaddled up in thick furs, brandishing an angular sniper rifle. Our shooter. My HUD instantly honed in, surrounding his face with a target reticule. *Clear shot*. I blinked in surprise. That only happened when we started aiming, lining up a hit. I tried to call off it off, but it remained on-screen.

The figure knew we were watching and confirmed as much with a fingered salute that means the one thing, no matter where you were. I almost laughed at the juvenile manner of the gesture before I ducked back behind the rocks. The reticule disappeared as quickly as it had come. Probably just a glitch.

On inspecting the shots, we found that rounds had burned through the rock and burst them open like shrapnel. Some kind of explosive round.

'Look.' Jo nodded towards where the bullets had landed. 'It was nowhere near us. He had time to line up the shot. He could have picked us off clean. Bastard was just trying to scare us.'

'That's one hell of a way to do it,' I muttered. But she was right. If the shooter wanted us dead we would be. It was a warning. Marking their territory.

The threat of storms thundered in the distance. I didn't think we'd be used for target practice again, but it always paid to be ready. Charging straight in wouldn't be smart, either. Especially if the chatter about bombs turned out to be true. 'We'll take the roundabout way,' I told my fireteam, reconfiguring our pathway on the HUD. 'Scope the area, make sure we're not falling into ambush.'

A round of helmeted nods as they automatically filed into our practiced formation, each angle covered as we traversed the cliffs. The familiar position, the closeness of my fireteam at my back reassured me. Lent me focus and protection.

But walking through this empty landscape, the whispering wind sweeping crusty flakes and stony shards across the curved rocks like thousands of rattling dice, I wasn't sure I was going to be permitted that luxury for too much longer.

A couple of hours later my HUD beeped. We were getting close. It had been a long walk, fabric rubbing against chafed skin that had just started to heal. There's never enough padding in these suits.

'Let's get a closer look first,' I said over the comms. I wouldn't put it past the villagers to send us on a wild goose chase for the hell of it. But assumptions like that get you killed.

I ended up with Jo, crawling forward on our bellies. Oshiro and Northam had gone for a bit of scouting, tagging items of interest so we could get a three-dee layout of the land.

I peered over the lip of the rock. Illium was larger than Monde. Much larger. And busier. There had to be several hundred people here. Roaming around, chatting to friends and playing some sort of hologame. Bulky, carmine-coloured drones scythed about, helical appendages drilling away at a rock surface.

And then I saw the shooter.

The sniper rifle was leaning against a metal pole, the man himself nursing a steaming thermos. The furred hood had been thrown back, revealing a face as callous and harsh as the world around it. But there was also weariness there. A man tired after a hard day's work, longing for his bed and his family.

Didn't matter. He'd fired at four Union soldiers.

A shout burst below us. A scout on the opposite ledge, fingering out our hiding spot.

'Time to go.' I picked my way down with the others following. A claxon whined, the skirl stirring people into action. They hustled their children inside, slamming the doors shut. Others came sprinting forward, armed with the occasional pistol. I

commanded the fireteam to halt as they reached the bottom, rifles at the ready.

Both sides shuffled uneasily, fingers twitching with tension as we faced each other off. Someone I assumed to be the leader marched forward, so thin and fragile I half-expected the wind to bowl him over. 'What are you doing here?' He was practically spitting with rage. 'Coming here with those tin suits and guns. Threatening us.'

'Let's calm down,' I replied, eyeing the armed men behind him. More growls, the susurrant of feet coughing up dirt and black dust.

'Sodding bastards. Planting a flag on our land, thinking you can take everything.' Now he actually did spit. A few behind him cheered. 'We want nothing to do with the Union.'

I wasn't about to debate intergalactic politics here with a dozen guns shoved in my face. I'd be leaving that to Geary. 'Do you have a bomb?'

He twisted knife-thin lips. 'What?'

'Do you ...'

'Ramez!' Northam's weapon swivelled around, aiming up to a small rock ledge jutting out from the cliff. The sniper was there, weapon locked and loaded. Others shouted in alarm, the air filled with the cocking of weapons.

'Leave,' he barked. 'Now.'

I indicated to the sniper. The guns followed. 'He fired at us when we were coming here.' Sudden nausea washed over me. The suit seemed to flare up, internal gears whirling against my muscles.

'Burke,' shouted the leader, 'you fool!'

'Have you got a supply of explosives?' Every word seemed to be a challenge – something I had to fishhook up my throat and out of my mouth.

'Enough with the questions!'

'Get them out of here!'

'Go back to your planet!'

'Don't you *dare*!' Jo stepped forward, her weapon aimed at someone who'd been edging towards a shotgun.

'Of course we have explosives,' the leader hissed.

We all stiffened.

'You *do*?' The tension was cranking up, blossoming in the air. It was hard to breathe. My chest was tight as a spring. I wanted nothing more than to rip the armor away, peel it from my skin. Free myself from its grip. I swallowed a mouthful of sticky saliva, blinked away sour sweat. 'What for?'

'To build our homes, you fool. Blow holes in the caves so we can move underground and get away from the razorstorms. We've been doing it for decades.'

'What absolute bull,' hissed Northam, tightening the grip around his rifle. 'They're lying!'

My armor gave a convulsive shiver and I couldn't help but stagger, legs threatening to buckle. I was wrapped inside a vortex of static. My breathing was shallow and fast, my heartbeat drumming against my ribs. Through my fizzling HUD I saw them adjust their aim directly towards me in unison, all clamoring to shout the loudest. My fireteam yelled in response, ordering them back. My skull was pounding, but somehow I couldn't raise my hands to press them against my head. I could only stand there, still as a statue as both sides exchanged threats, weapons focused on each other and held by trembling hands.

I tried to order them to stand down. Tried to get them to see reason. But I was trapped, frozen in space. Locked off from interacting with the world. The armor wouldn't release me no matter how hard I struggled.

And then it happened.

One of the kids must have gotten loose. He came sprinting down the pathway with his mother in pursuit, bawling his eyes out. Crying for daddy. My fireteam twisted towards the noise on a reflex, pointing their guns, the kid's screams echoing through the cliffs.

I knew what was going to happen next, but couldn't do a damn thing.

The kid's father snapped. Fired off a round that pinged on Northam's leg guard.

I didn't speak. I didn't even open my mouth. But my suit barked a word using my voice. Just one word, but that was all it took. 'Fire.'

I could do nothing but watch as my fireteam obeyed, spitting out a blaze of bullets, wreathing the area with smoke as fast as the breeze could carry it off. Rocks exploded and stacked pallets shattered into splinters. People staggering back and falling under the wave of gunfire. Blood spattering on rocks, spraying out in chunky spurts. Shots were fired back, tearing near my helmet. Screams rippled out, empty shells clattering to the ground. My blood froze, my heart jackhammering against my ribcage.

But I could nothing but watch, held tight by the armor.

And in a few seconds it was over.

The armor released me. I collapsed to the ground, spraying dust. The rancid air reeked of death. There was faint crying as they mourned their dead and clutched at their bleeding wounds, shredded guts and shattered bones. Scarlet dribbling between shaking fingers. At least a dozen lay dead. At a command that I didn't give. A command that my armor gave.

A hand pressed on my back. I didn't have the willpower to shrug it off. 'You okay, Ramez?' Jo asked. Her voice was quivery, like it was just managing to hold something dark back.

My mouth was full of saw-dust, but I managed to cough out a no.

How the hell was I going to explain this?

I looked up again at the dead and dying. These people living comfortable lives, happy lives. Until we showed up and kicked them into the mud.

I straightened up, skin clammy with a cold sweat. 'Find their bombs,' I croaked. 'Then we go.'

As it turned out, Geary wanted to see me the moment we got back to base. That was fine. I was planning on having a chat with him myself.

I stormed down the corridor into Geary's room, eggheads and other techies scrambling out of the way before they got jostled by my hulking armor. 'How you doing, son?' The man himself gave me a look I could only describe as sympathetic. He looked so petty and pathetic in his little chair. 'Pretty tough out there today.'

I blinked. 'How ...'

'I saw it all.' Geary stood. Even now, I registered that he was a head shorter than me. 'A decision was made that you didn't have the balls for.'

'My suit.' My hand curled into a fist. 'That was you?'

'You know our policies, son. The Union comes first. Always has. Always will.'

'But those *people*.' I couldn't be hearing this. 'They weren't a threat.'

'We didn't know for certain. Had to be sure.' He fixed me with those nasty grey eyes of his. 'I gotta admit, I'm disappointed in you, son.'

'I'm happy to disappoint you, *sir*.' I spat the last word through gritted teeth, gestured to my armor. 'You don't own me. I'd rather die than be a slave. I'm done. I'm taking this off. Get me out of it.'

'You don't get it, do you?' Geary's gunmetal grey eyes rested on me with eerily nonchalance. 'You're already dead, son.'

'What?' I made to move forward, but I found myself grounded, locked in place. The armor shuddered, tingling up my spine and biting into my flesh. Metal and chrome clamped hard around my twitching muscles.

'That accident of yours. It damaged your spinal cord and broke too many things.' Geary circled me like a buyer at a showcase. 'It would have killed you. You'd be a potato, son. We did what we had to do.'

'Did *what*?'

Geary fingered a remote. A hefty reflective sheet slid down from the ceiling to my left. My armor turned me to face it. A whirling sound thrummed in my ears as my suit shifted. The thumbnail plates on my chest parted, exposing bare dark skin underneath, glistening with sweat.

Except it wasn't bare skin. My body had been studded with glossy metal. Wires wormed in and out of my chest. Flesh was divided by thin lines of steel, as if I had been pulled apart and knitted back together again like a puzzle. Broad straps over my shoulders, locking me in. The interior armor was covered with pink-purple tendrils, pawing at my flesh. The armor on my

arms peeled back, bones toughened with steel of gunmetal grey, veins pumping with something that was too red, too vibrant.

And finally. My helmet melted away, revealing what should have been a skull, but instead showcased thousands of minuscule cables, flicking lights and tiny gears, latched to my brain and wiring me into the armor's motor functions. It had become a part of my body, permanently.

'It was our only chance to save you, son,' Geary was saying, rapping his knuckles against my heaving chest. 'The suit was the only thing that could save you, the only thing that packed enough juice to keep you living.' The plates were folding back up and pressing tight against my skin, the windows of my prison cell slamming shut.

'Why?' I spread my arms. 'Why?'

'We couldn't lose you, son. You're the perfect success story: street rat turned Union soldier. Your fireteam would follow you to hell and back. Union men never die, Ramez. Not on my watch. And certainly not you.'

'You son of a bitch!' The words passed my lips but weren't spoken, weren't broadcasted. I was muzzled, unable to speak and fastened in place like an ant in amber.

'We needed a leader, Ramez. One with your reputation and one who will do exactly what needs to be done, no matter the cost.' He gestured to me, his prize pig. 'And now we have one.'

I was suddenly able to speak again. 'Pull the plug,' I croaked. 'This isn't living.' I spread my arms, arms that no longer belonged to me. 'I'm a freak.'

Geary shook his head. 'Sorry, son. You'll stay here and do your duty for the Union as long as we need you. You're dead. And the dead don't make decisions.'

I didn't bother telling him he couldn't do this, he already had. I'd be forever locked to this throbbing bundle of flesh and metal and armor and nerves. I'd never feel the wetness of the ocean on my face, never be truly a part of my fireteam. Never get to taste bacon with them.

'We've had a scout report. A settlement's had a truck load of artillery shipped in. See to it. Your next assignment will

come shortly afterwards.' The armor jerked, machine contorting flesh and wrestling me out of the room. I was powerless to stop it. Geary lingered in the doorway. 'One day you'll thank me. You'll see.'

Then he was gone.

As I marched down the hallway, forever strapped in my armored prison, I wondered which one of us was actually doing the walking. A bitter laugh coughed from my lungs. Or was it a sob? But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore. I was dead.

A dead man walking.

The Damaged

BONNIE JO STUFFLEBEAM

I can't escape my job. Everywhere I go I see ads for the company. On the subway, the sidewalks with our company logo engraved in concrete, the talking billboards which feature the intertwined bodies of flawless men and women in the downtown AdZones. I'm good at what I do. PlayMatez look and feel real: warm skin, a clean but undeniably human smell. Only „real“ isn't a word we're supposed to use. Of course they feel real. They are real. What I mean is they feel the same as blood-and-guts people do. They walk, talk, and fuck the same.

Except for the damaged ones.

The damaged eat with their hands. They'll eat whatever you give them — stale cornbread, powdered milk, reconstituted beef cutlets — and demand nothing more. They wear this far-off expression whenever they're addressed, as if they're calculating the benefits of an answer. When the damaged speak, they speak in near riddles, riddles to which I have always suspected have no solutions.

I work in the building where they make PlayMatez, both the damaged and the ones that work right. It's a fifty-story skyscraper on the edge of the industrial district, which looks like almost every other district, shiny buildings packed tight as the pedestrians rush down grimy sidewalks. Except in the industrial district, smog fills the streets from a ten-hour flow of traffic, the constant hum of machinery operating inside. Our factory is one in a long line of unidentifiable factories, all black. In the basement, human and robotic workers toil over the assemblies. I've been down there only twice. The workers' bodies are all bone and bulk; our robots are constructed from bioengineered



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human muscle. That and Cyberskin, our own patented silicone/skin blend. The only way you could tell the humans from the robots would be to look at their insides. It's my job to know what those look like. I build the internal networks, sculpt intestine from tubing. My work is replicated by the millions.

My workshop on the third floor is concrete and steel. Outside the door is a silver plaque with my name in bold letters: ROBIN KIRKLAND. The inside has a window on which I've hung purple curtains to make the place seem homey. In the hazy daylight, I carve muscle tissue with a sculpting knife. I bend microfilaments into circulatory shapes. I work alone, hunched over a table that lines the whole back wall of the workshop, and shape the parts I'm given until they look satisfactory. Then I ease them down into the plastic PlayMate mold to make sure they're the right size.

Once I've got all the parts in there, save the upper muscle layer, I often stop and stare. Inside the mold, thin, green wires reach like a hand into the head, crisscross through the torso and down into the arms, and the legs. They don't carry blood through the body — our PlayMatez are bloodless — but they do carry heat. The handbook says when the wires have been activated, they glow blue like veins. Some of the organs we don't bother with. The ones that filter waste are useless, as any food consumed travels through the pink intestinal tubing intact and exits as it would in a human, but whole. The ability to eat is just for show. Once I'm done gaping, I lay down the final muscle layer and weave the wires through it.

The table's been organized into stations, a new station for each part, except the skin and bone. Another woman works the skin. The tech for these parts isn't mine. It filters down from the fiftieth floor. All I do is figure out new ways to make it fit, new ways to make the robots more authentic. I also sculpt hearts.

But for every hundred PlayMatez that come out normal, one comes out wrong. It's a glitch in the system, and like clockwork, it occurs at the same intervals. The damaged have cold skin, a malfunction in the wires. And like I said, something weird in the expression, in the way they speak.

The damaged aren't sold with the rest. They're sold, the females and males alike, to specialty shops, and bulk buyers. Management knows what those buyers do to them. We ignore their beckoning fingers when we pass them on street corners in less favorable parts of town, in which the majority of us factory workers live. I can't be seen picking those damaged up. The ones I collect come from the subway, where they cower in corners and eat the skin off rats. Even though they don't need to eat, they've been programmed to. There's a switch in the control panel that lets you turn that off, but most people are scared to touch them, and in the subway, it's hard to tell the damaged from the homeless. I know them because I'm drawn to them.

The first, he was a Damien II. He carried the name on his inner thigh, and when I lifted the edge of his shorts in the half-light of my apartment to find it, he slapped my hand away.

„What's black and white and cheeky?" he said.

„I don't know. What?" I asked, but he just laughed. He was strange-looking, beautiful of course. They were all beautiful. But his beauty, unlike the other Damien IIs, was forced. He shouldn't have been beautiful. He was too broken for beauty. I'd found him wandering the streets like a lost child. He couldn't have been older than three, though of course he was built to resemble a twenty five year old. His model had been released five years previous, and it was still in production, though soon to be retired. The Damien II's bulky body had light features, light skin and eyes and hair, and he was prone to fits of giddiness. In the damaged, that giddiness manifested as an inability to be clever, his riddles repetitions of the same template.

„What's white and purple and sunshine?" he said.

„Are you hungry, Damien? Would you like some pasta?"

He nodded. I fixed him pasta from a can. As he ate each string of spaghetti, picking it up with the tips of his fingernails and dropping it into his open mouth, he looked not at his plate but off into the darkened bedroom across the apartment.

I had little experience with the damaged then, one on one. I asked him if he saw something. He didn't answer until his plate

was empty, the pool of tomato sauce at the bottom untouched.

„If the blind can't lead the blind, who will they turn to?" For a moment his lips were a narrow line. Then he broke into a blank grin. „What's white and white and white all over?"

He was, white all over. When he took off his clothes, even his nipples were so light they glowed in the dark. I liked his whiteness. It kept me at a distance from memories I would have rather forgotten but which loomed in the brute thrust of every man, human or not: the memory of a dark and warm body beside me, the bitter smell of oil paint and turpentine heavy in black patches of body hair.

Instead of curses the Damien II moaned nonsense, words pulled from his language bank seemingly at random: stripes, dartboard, keel, burst. Any neighbors listening in wouldn't have had a clue as to what we were doing. Though I wasn't worried about people listening. They rarely did anymore, too absorbed in the constant hum of YouChannels.

As he slept, I imagined what his wires looked like, that blue glow inside him. I wondered what his breath looked like leaving the lungs I had made. How his skin would come apart to reveal my masterwork. I traced a line down his back and pretended my finger was a knife.

I kept Damien II for six days until I began to worry that whoever owned him, and he was too clean to be abandoned, would come looking. It was theft, after all, of the highest class, as PlayMatez were valued not only monetarily but also emotionally, as precious companions. And he wasn't what I was looking for, not really. I wanted one whose riddles made me shiver. Like the painter used to, when he sketched me with my clothes on and made me feel like he was painting the invisible pieces I could never show him. Words that would open me up and leave my insides exposed. Without that, I couldn't be bothered to take care of someone. But when I found it, I told myself I would hold their hand and keep them safe even as they self-destructed. Which was inevitable with the damaged. They wore their riddles out until they could no longer form words or even

master the complicated muscle movements of a smile. I'll be honest; I wanted to watch. I wanted to be there for their destruction. It intrigued and repulsed me.

I wasn't allowed to buy a PlayMate for myself. Conflict of interest: we signed a contract. If we were to grow attached to one of our own creations, it might affect our decisions. We would be tempted to change things we wanted to see changed, to create models we wanted, not models that the public wanted.

Instead, we cared nothing for the models we worked on. Each worker was in charge of such a small portion of the product that it was easy to be detached.

Following my week with the Damien II, I took home as many damaged as I could find. None of them were what I was looking for. I brought back a Ken V, an original Matthew, and even a Max II, trying to wrap my head around what it was I wanted. They were crazy, of course, but their riddles were often monotonous, the same old tricks of language. Uninspired. Random. The Max II even seemed to have a hold on where he was, what he was. His riddles were nothing like riddles.

„I'll take care of you, my Clementine," he said, leading me back, down, into my bed. „I'll make the ceiling spin like roses."

After I let them free, I watched them wander off into the world again, back to their subway stations or the homes where no one watched over them. I wasn't sad to see them go. Some, I knew, had probably been shoved into closets, deemed broken, only to escape when their switches were turned on by some nosy kid. If I knew they had no one to go home to, I opened the control panel in the upper left side of their chest, passed over the red dials and the memory slot and switched off their hunger.

The truth is I don't know where they went when I let them go and I don't know where they came from before I picked them up off the ground or carried them from the dumpsters. I cleaned them. Always I ran water in the bath and let them soak, wiped the grime from their faces, from their bruised bodies, not like a mother but a cold stranger doing them a cold favor. I gave them clean clothes, clothes that once belonged to

the painter; he had left them. In his clothes, the damaged seemed as if they could walk into our factory and earn their keep. The regular ones could do that, of course. That's what happened to most of them after they were no longer wanted. They could earn their price back and be given a life of their own. But not the damaged. They can never work.

That's what I told myself when I finally did cut one open, that he would be helpless and alone in the world. I tried not to look at his name when I did it. I just wanted to see inside. My fingers itched for it. So when he was fast asleep, naked, on his stomach in my bed, I took a knife from the kitchen and ran it down his back, right where I knew the seam had been. I peeled the skin back as little as I could manage while still being able to see inside. I figured it would hurt less, opening the old seam wound. Because these PlayMatez, they feel pain. They feel it at smaller doses, but they feel it nonetheless. That is part of what makes them so believable.

Inside, the wires I crafted gleamed blue in the light that crept through my window from the streetlights outside. It's never dark in the city. I could see the wires embedded in the thick red muscle tissue.

I opened the flap wider so I could take in all of the upper back. I wanted to know if my handiwork was what had made him damaged, but everything else looked as I'd seen it before. I moved the muscles aside so I could see the deeper organs. He was a newer model, though not the newest, so his wires were a little thick, his lungs the color of vomit. I'd since fixed both of these problems, though peering in at the heart I noticed something I hadn't yet changed, something I had yet to even know needed changing: the heart pulsed on its own, a movement independent of its beats. I watched the red tissue bump bump, then pulse, bump bump, then pulse, bump bump, then pulse. It was expending more energy than it should with those extra pulses, pointless energy. The pulses weren't affecting his body in any way.

I touched the heart. It felt like a wet sponge beneath my finger. It was partly made of sponge. From far away it would

have resembled a human heart, though it was a simpler design, a pear-shaped lump with a single opening at the top where the wires connected for the energy to feed through. Suddenly he moaned, and his insides shuddered. I panicked. Pulled my hands out of him and tried to shut his skin back, but I didn't have the tools. I backed away. He moved on the bed. I couldn't watch him stand. If he stood, parts of him might have bulged out the back; the spine, attached to the skin with the rest of his bones, wouldn't keep him from collapsing. I hesitated, stepped forward, then reached back inside and grabbed a handful of wires, tugging them. They sparked in my hands, then faded. His heart slowed, stopped, its final pulse even and sure.

I heard the sound of his machinery dying and then he lay unmoving on my bed. I removed the wires and spread them over the blanket and looked down into them. That was how I knew them best. Free of skin.

His body I tossed into the dumpster outside wrapped in a black trash bag. It felt like a dirty cliché, and even though I knew there was no crime against disabling them, I felt like I would get caught. That night I didn't sleep. Instead I thought of that damaged I would watch destroy himself. I wondered if I really wanted to see someone else doing what I'd done to myself when I let the painter leave. But the idea felt too perceptive, and so I shook it off.

The heart troubled me. I didn't understand why it should be working overtime. When my shift was over, I went to the subway station. I found a young man cowed into a corner with several of the females, sleeping, dirt streaked across his face. A brand new model. So new the ads hadn't even gone up yet, and I marveled at how quickly he'd wound up here. I shook him awake, took his hand. The strangers in the station probably thought I was a shelter woman, so I tried to act like one. I patted his hand while we walked.

„Oh, dearie,“ I said, „We'll have you fixed up in no time. Get that hunger switch turned off. Clean you up. Make sure you have a nice bed, yes sir.“

Nobody looked me in the eye. What those ladies at the shelters do isn't thought of as a charity but a burden, one people didn't want to share. But of course, I reminded myself, I don't work at the shelter. I work for the company that put him here.

Back at home, once the Christopher had stripped to his skin, I ran the bath water and led him to it. I scrubbed all signs of dirt away, wondering how he could have gathered so much in so little time. It'd only been one month since we produced his prototype. He must've been one of three hundred models, tops.

Which meant there were roughly two more like him, damaged, out there already.

„I'm sweet sugar in my beginning, a rose in my middle, a sweetheart in my end. What am I?" he said as I helped him out of the bath. His flaccid penis slapped against his inner thigh.

„Oh God," I said, laughing. „They sure gave you something to brag about."

There had been a push for a sensitive model. I imagined that was where his riddle came from, some combination of all the love words they programmed into him. It bored me. I wanted something that made a garbled kind of profound sense, something I might read in a poem if I read poems.

I didn't let him dress. I put him into bed. Beside him, my real heart raced. When I heard his sleep breath, deep and rattled, I cut him down the back.

He was so new his wires glistened. The heart, the newest model, pulsed the same as the other. I reached in and wrapped my hand around it. I ignored the movement of his body. I ripped the heart out. Ripped the wires. Piled them in a bunch on the bed. The body was silent, still. I hid the heart in the drawer of my bedside table. I sat and stared at the confusion of veins. My handiwork. I never could've imagined it would look so beautiful. Still it glowed blue with life.

I did this again and again, the next night and the next. It began to feel like part of a routine. Without it, without the dying embers of artificial life beside me, I found I couldn't sleep.

Then I noticed something different. He was an older model, one of the oldest, and when I pulled out his heart, it had begun to

crack. I could see inside the complicated mess something I didn't make: a barely perceptible flesh-colored box. I removed it, and between my fingers, the box squished. It was a tiny rectangle, like a coffin for a cockroach, made of some material I'd never seen before, nearly transparent and near the same consistency as the silicone skin. There was something hard inside.

I dug my nails into the box, and the flesh stuff came away easily enough. I imagined that with a few more years of energy pumping around it, the box would have worn away on its own. I couldn't imagine how it had already held up for so long. Once I had peeled that part off, I held in my hands a hard metal screw, no bigger than my pinkie and rusted brown. I turned it over in my fingers. It smelled like wet copper. I lifted it to my mouth and stuck out my tongue. It tasted like blood – definitely copper.

I didn't understand. Why was it there?

I tore through my apartment, collecting all the hearts I'd saved from the bedside drawer, from my cupboard, from the bottom of the fridge. I tore each one open, and inside all of them, I found the box. In some, it was less worn, harder to tear, and in others, it was more so. I collected the screws in a pile and stared at them, wondering. I wondered until my eyes ached. And then I slept.

I dreamt about wires wrapping around me. The wires crept up and over me from beneath the bed. I couldn't breathe they wrapped so tight, like a lover's desperate embrace. I woke up choking.

I took one of the screws to work with me, and every ten minutes reached into my pocket to touch it, just to make sure it was still there. I wanted to know more. But there was no way to figure it out on my own. I would have had to give myself away. Tell them what I'd been doing. I would have to come clean. I could've lost my job. Without my job, I'd have nothing.

I went home. But not before I found another PlayMate to take with me.

His name, his thigh told me, was Lachlan 1.0. He was a middle-aged model, made back when the company was attempt-

ing to modernize its image. That soon went the wayside when they realized people wanted to be taken out of this world, put into a classic world they had only read about. Lachlan 1.0 didn't test well. He was updated to the Lance I not long after his design. They'd released the ones they'd already manufactured, but he sold poorly.

It wasn't just the name. The Lachlan was modern all over. He had metallic hair, cut into a Sidehawk. The hair on the one I found was greasy, flecked with dirt. All Lachlan models had an X molded into one of the front teeth, and a gauge in the ear so big you could fit a teacup in it, though the one I brought home had removed his piercing, leaving the shriveled hole. His model was thin, lanky, unlike the rest of the PlayMatez. Because of that, he fit in better with the young people. He could, the company had hoped, attract the large base of alternative youth, the only base we'd yet to conquer. As it turned out, the company didn't have a clue. They programmed him to say stupid things in an attempt at hip language. They programmed him to be impassioned about resistance to authority. They trained him to be everything people didn't want to see in a robot.

He did make a nice change to look at though. Across his upper torso his living tattoo danced; comprised of microscopic LEDs, the ink ocean roared over his ribcage. His skin stretched tight over him like a canvas. When I gave him a towel, I was sorry to see him cover up.

I suggested we go to the bedroom, where I wanted to see his uniqueness prove artificial. On the inside, he'd look the same as all the others. He would have one of those screws in a box in his heart.

„Got any Pips?“ he asked. He walked through the bathroom door and across the living area — my apartment was all open space in the common areas, no doors — into the kitchen. He searched through the cabinets which lined one wall. He opened the fridge and studied the contents. „I dig a bowl of cereal in the night as well, if you don't mind.“

Suddenly I was nervous. He was speaking like normal. But he had that damaged look, he did, and his voice sounded like an echo of what it should be, deep and lilting. He hadn't said a

thing to me the whole way over, aside from some weird remark: „How does a train transfer someone from the underworld?“ Now he was asking for Pips and cereal, neither of which I had.

And he had just let me bathe him like that. If he wasn't damaged, he should have objected. He should have made small talk, asked me my name.

„I have some whiskey,“ I said, „Old stuff. Just a bit left, but you can have it.“

I pointed to the cabinet. He poured two glasses and handed one to me.

„Right well you do,“ he said as he took a sip, „This is rude stuff here.“

I drank mine in a gulp. He refilled my glass.

„Lachlan, right?“ I asked. „How are you feeling this evening?“

He still hadn't looked me in the eye. He peered into his glass, then across the cabinets.

„Better now, all cleaned off and all.“

„Did you enjoy the bath?“

Then he did it, looked me straight on. „Right well I did.“ He winked.

I sunk into my dining chair. My hands trembled. I put my glass down.

„Didn't you?“ he asked. „I thought that was the factual point.“ He stared back at the same spot on the cabinet.

„Are you looking for something?“ I asked.

„You know I've been wondering, what's a rude woman like you doing, picking people off the streets? Honestly, I thought you were taking me to one of those safeties. Thought I was in for a feast. What you've got here is potato flakes and pastry cakes. Do you mind?“ He took the box of pastry cakes from the cabinet, unwrapped one, shoved it in his mouth in one bite. „You're not exactly one of those women, are you?“ he said, mouth full.

„I'm not,“ I said, picking at my nails, „Are you a cop? A representative of the company? Were you sent to make sure I'm not, you know, engaging myself with your lot?“

„Am I a cop?“ He laughed. „Why, have you been unruly?“

„Of course not.“ I drained the second glass. „So, a representative?“

„You work for the company then? Right well. Methinks what you're doing here is unruly indeed, am I right?“

„All I've done is give you a bath, and a bit of drink.“ I looked at the towel wrapped around his middle. „Would you like some clothes?“

He shrugged. „I imagine I'll be getting naked round here sometime. If I know your make.“

„I didn't ask you here to get naked. Honestly, I was trying to help you. I thought you were damaged.“

He grinned. His tooth was chipped below the X.

„I could be, if you wanted.“ He looked at me again. „What do women want?“ He laughed. „That's riddle enough for the world. What is the square root of a woman?“ He lifted the whiskey bottle and poured some down his throat. „What burns going down and sings coming up?“

„Stop it,“ I said. I looked at the door, then back at him. I crossed and uncrossed my legs, wrung my hands. „I was trying to help you. I didn't bring you here to mock me.“

„I need your help,“ he said, „I've got all this energy. I need to know what makes a human hum.“

When he moved toward me, I didn't try to turn away. He wasn't damaged, I could see that, not the way the others were. But there was something in him that was gone, and I wanted more than anything to find what it was. I wanted to cut him open anyway. I wanted to know what was going on in there. I wanted that body on my bed.

He pushed me past the dining table, through the door into the bedroom, onto the bed. Until, effortlessly, he was naked, and my skirt lay discarded on the floor. The warmth of his body startled me. I closed my eyes and imagined the painter. His skin the color of twilight. His sad brown eyes. But the painter had always been silent and steady when we made love, and Lachlan moaned and thrashed. Then came the awkward moment when I was done and told him, which set off his own spasm. They'd been made to trigger when we said so. He quivered under me.

Afterward, I waited for him to fall asleep, but as the clock clicked past three in the morning he kept singing beside me, a vile drinking song.

„Don't you sleep?“ I asked.

„Not much,“ he said. „Not if someone's eyeing me like that.“
I tried to fake it, but the second my eyes shut, I was out.

When I woke, he hovered over me, a tangle of wires in his hands.

„I see why you were wiggled,“ he said, „About me being a cop. You know, I don't think there's a law against this, though.“ He dropped the wires onto my bare stomach. „Except, of course, you work for the company. Can't own your own PlayMate. That makes this theft. And, to top that off, taking 'em apart like this makes it destruction of stolen property. The highest degree of destruction, methinks – artificial intelligence.“

I sat up. Below him, covering the floor of my bedroom, were the rest of the wires I'd been saving, pulled from beneath the bed and strewn from the bed to the door. The drawers of my bedside table and dresser were open, wires spilling from them as well.

„No, you see, it's what I do. I sculpt those wires,“ I said, light-headed, heart stuttering.

„Right well. If you did, Ms. Robin Kirkland, you'd know, wouldn't you, that the only way they color blue like this is from use.“

„Of course,“ I said, „Of course I know that. They were given to me, quite obviously, after they were dismantled. So I could look over my work.“

„What I can't figure is, decent, rude woman like you, what are you doing snatching our insides out? What do you find in there?“ he said, his voice hard.

„Are you going to go to the company? Are you going to tell them?“ I could feel the sweat beads on my forehead. The room was hot. I tried to sit up, but I was too dizzy.

„I should. Save my own skin, right well?“ Then, with no warning, the blank look passed back over his face, like he'd never seen this room before. „But it wouldn't be like that. I

would be wires and dirt, I would. Sure, they might fire you, but me – what to silence me but dirt?"

It sounded like poetry.

„No, I won't tell the company. Not if you tell me what you've lit on."

The words came easy. I wanted to explain, so he wouldn't tell, so he wouldn't think poorly of me, so he would understand, even just a little bit. So I told him all of it, from the first uncertain reasons I brought the damaged PlayMatez home – that I liked the way my work looked alive and throbbing underneath me, and I needed something cold to hold onto, because a warm body would remind me of the painter, as his had – to my unbearable urge to look inside, to discover where a body's coldness came from. I told him of the discovery of the hearts' extraneous pulses, how I found the flesh-colored boxes with the screws inside. When I came to the end of my account, he looked at me as if I had told him I was dying.

„I feel myself running down, you know," he said, „Scares me right well. You know I'm not one of them, the damaged. But I've seen my make go that way. Most of the time, it doesn't happen soon enough. We're abandoned in closets and tossed in dumpsters." He gave me a look that, for a moment, made me question whether he hadn't been watching me all along, seen the trash bags I'd carried out. „But for those of us still switched on, most of us go damaged." He shrugged. „Two to five years, if we're used proper."

„My work should last longer than that. It's designed to last longer."

„What of those screw boxes? How long they rigged to last?"

„I don't make those," I said, „I don't know where those come from."

„Methinks we're not rigged to last. Methinks permanent companionship, it fizzles out in five years tops."

„How old are you?"

„Five. And a half."

„You look good, for your age."

Up close, his eyes were as grey as the smog outside, his eyelashes long and beautiful. The dark must've kept me from no-

ting. Or maybe I kept me from noticing, unwilling to grow attached.

„I don't know about you," he said, „But I want to know what's inside me."

I shook my head. „I couldn't."

„Not that, you wacked woman. I want to go to work."

We rode the subway over once the building closed. I had a key, for those late nights working, that would get us through the front door, but it would only get us as far as my workshop. Lachlan told me not to worry, and though I didn't know if I could trust him, I didn't care. I was tired; what we were doing made my stomach spin as it hadn't since the painter and I made silent love on the kitchen floor. So I led Lachlan through the lobby, sneaking past the camera's gaze. We rode the elevator to the fiftieth floor. We exited. These were the doors that belonged to the people who did nothing with their hands. They watched and decided, but they'd never touched one of them, not in any professional sense.

Lachlan led the way. As it turned out, he'd been there before. He was, he admitted in a whisper, hired by the company. They'd seen me, didn't I think they would see me? In the subway, lifting the damaged from the ground, dragging them with me on the train.

He knew where they would keep the files.

I wanted this adventure. I wanted to run back home. I wanted to push Lachlan against the wall and take him. My breath shook. But I knew what we were going to find. Really this trip was just for show. I knew I'd lose my job, sooner or later, and Lachlan knew he'd lose himself. Of course the company programmed our robots to fail. Of course the boxes were meant to biodegrade, the screw to be let loose into the heart, where it would puncture and damage the tissue irreparably. Companies had been manufacturing products that would run down eventually for years. It started with refridgerators and now here we were.

But why were some of them made damaged? If the company created them on purpose, was it for people like me, too

broken to keep unbroken things around? I half hoped this was the case. It would mean there were enough people like me to warrant a market for them.

Once we were by the office door, Lachlan wedged his fingernail into the skin on the right side of his chest and pried his control panel open. He pushed his finger into the panel and pulled out a square chip as small as a tooth. At first, I thought it was his memory card, but it wasn't. There was a slot in a similar panel next to the door, and he pushed the chip into it. The door clicked open. We went inside.

„How did you do that?“ I asked.

„I saw them do this when we met here before, to complete my paperwork a few years ago. I recognized the tech. Rigged one up myself,“ he whispered, though we were alone. „Spiked the cameras, too.“

The file cabinet was locked — the company kept their files stored on discs outside the computer, for fear of hackers, competitors, and free rights organizations. Lachlan picked it with a hair pin. I wanted to laugh, but I couldn't bring myself to make the noise. Inside he found several spherical discs, the size and shape of gold balls, labelled from the start of the company, twelve years ago. He dropped them into the bag he'd brought. We left the way we came in.

Afterward, as we ran through the streets, clutching the bag, I felt the air on my face, and it felt like it used to, when I was a kid, when I was a young woman in love with a flesh-and-blood man whose clothes were covering the body of the robot running before me. I had to stop several times to catch my breath. Lachlan ran ahead on thin legs.

The painter's legs had also been thin. Always he moved like a shadow through my apartment. He too was broken. „Depressed feels like such a thin word,“ he had said to me often in that dark, „and it's such a thin feeling.“ He passed that brokenness down to me. He had dreams of another country, of walking on green instead of grey. When he got his chance, he went.

„Come with me.“ We had been in bed. Outside we could hear the muffled roar of the billboards going in the AdZone

four blocks down. A sound you got used to. He claimed he had never been used to it, never would be. „You need to get out of here.“

„I can't,“ I said, rolling away. How could I go with no guarantee we would make it, no guarantee that life was better on the other side? His darkness was beautiful, but he would drown me in it in a world where I was nothing but his. After all, a place is just a place. There would be nothing there that could sculpt me into a different kind of person.

I didn't go with him. He left me behind.

At my apartment, Lachlan went through the files, plugging the discs into his panel. When he found what we were looking for, I brought it up on my computer. I was right and wrong; the damaged weren't a mistake. Or, they weren't as big a mistake as the company would like people to think. They were, the files said, an unfortunate consequence of the built-in obsolescence, the biodegradable flesh-colored box, the screw that the company placed in the PlayMatez' hearts so they would wear down within five years or so, causing the customer to purchase replacements. Without the built-in obsolescence, the company's base of satisfied consumers would remain satisfied — there would be no reason for them to buy another PlayMate if their first continued to function — and the company would cease to turn a profit. Ten dollars extra it cost them, per model, to install the screw. Only in some models, the damaged, the body rejected the foreign object. It hadn't been programmed in and therefore wasn't part of the system as the electronics knew it. They were unable to function properly even the five years it would take for the screw to come loose.

Some might say, I thought as I read over the text, that the damaged are the smart ones. They know something's the matter with their parts, and they won't pretend it isn't.

„Robin, how could they know?“ Lachlan asked, popping the disc out of the computer's drive. „How possibly?“ He downed another Pips. The empty bottle clinked on the concrete floor where we sat, the discs strewn about us like marbles.

„I wouldn't know,“ I said. I felt like I should apologize to him. But I also felt as if he too must have known that this was

what we would find, and so part of me thought he'd been searching for it all along.

„The factual question is, how do I get it out of me?“

There's no way, I wanted to say. Once the skin is open, there's no way back.

„We could broadcast this. Maybe, once people see..." he said.

„Maybe," I said.

His eyes narrowed. „You think they already know.“

My hand rested on his shoulder. His eyes lacked the lively dart of human eyes. When he spoke, people knew that the number of things he said was exhaustible; he had only so many possible combinations of letters and numerals, only so many inflections. His wires would burn out, and there would be no grave for him. There would be no graves for any of them. Their graves would be the junkyard, and when the record of our time was lost and all that remained was our bones, the damaged would have no names because they had no bones. Their parts would be melted down to make more things that people use to fill the empty spaces in their beds, their workrooms. I realized that Lachlan's skin was cold in my palm.

„We should tell them. We should try, at least.“

There was a grin that I'd never seen on his face, wide-eyed and stupid. This, it seemed to say, was an entirely new kind of adventure. This could get us killed.

But I knew the truth: that he had watched too many movies on the YouChannels, too many thrillers where the consequences of corruption are always disastrous. I humored him because I loved the grin. It reminded me of a grin I used to know. My own.

When we went to bed, he talked like he was on upper. As the night passed, his words warmed the room. I entered the space between dreams. His words made less sense.

„And then, of course, I said, why else would a door be like a cockatiel? And the chief said, cockatiels only take wing north in the evening. And I knew then of course, how could I not have, that the cockatiel was like a door in that it was also like a desk.“

In my sleep I muttered, „What's a cockatiel?“ It was a word I didn't know, and I was surprised he knew any word I didn't.

I waited for his answer, but all that came was silence. When I opened my eyes, he was gone. I wondered for a moment if I'd imagined him. Then I heard the noise in the bathroom, a clink as if someone had dropped a pair of nail clippers into the sink.

I went to him. There was a window in the bathroom, and the street light shone across his naked body. I saw him barely lit in the mirror. His tattoo was glitching, the ocean seizing up. He stood at the sink, hands close to his face, and he appeared to be scraping something off the inner palm of his hand where his life line was. I was seized with the urge to know if his life line was truly as short as five years, tops, or if it stretched on, an illusion, if someone in the company thought of that; whether they made the line reflect the way things really were or the way customers think they would like them to be.

I stepped up close to him, so close I could smell his clean skin, the slight musk of his underarms. They did a good job with the smell. I wanted to see his lifeline. I wanted to help him wash away whatever mark had found its way to mar that line. But when I was close enough to touch him I was close enough to see: a pair of scissors in the sink, a jagged hole the size of a button in his palm, and Lachlan tearing at the skin, pulling the wound bigger, until the whole of his palm was open.

I wanted to stop him, but I was caught by the beauty of that glowing blue wire in the dark, in the mirror. In his reflection, the light generated a shadow of his silhouette, but I couldn't focus on anything but how the beads of light blinked back at us in crisscrossing lines. They looked like elongated strands of the double helix.

„Am I a cockatiel?“ he asked, „Am I beautiful? Am I factual? Am I broken?“

These were riddles to which I had an answer.

„Am I beautiful?“ he asked again. He looked into his damaged hand as the other hand grasped the wires inside. He tugged, and a wire snapped. His eyes in the mirror grew distant, colder than I'd seen them. I wrapped my arms around his

chest and helped him pull the blue from his body. As we pulled, he wilted, until he was no more than synthetic skin and muscle on the floor. I peeled the skin away. I held his heart in my hands. The screw's pointed edge stuck out from the muscle, having finally worked its way through.

I never answered his riddles. The information I kept to myself, the discs I returned in a sealed baggie. I got out of that place, went to another city of grey where I got another job that followed me everywhere. I tried to avoid the cold. I left the damaged behind.

Star in a Glass

VAUGHAN STANGER

Curled up tight as an ammonite, Mira unwound in slow motion before leaping into the air with her limbs spread like a starfish. Bass notes thundered as her feet hit the floor, drawing a nod of approval from me.

Glancing at her mind's eye display, I saw a monstrous wave on the brink of rolling over – a credible match to her moves. Yet as she breast-stroked to the front of the stage, setting off ripples of percussion, her amplified vocals in no way resembled the powerful soprano of her downloads. Studio trickery had evidently worked wonders. But if she couldn't deliver the goods live, she was no use to Dusk 'til Dawn.

Dali delivered his verdict by killing the sound. Mira turned to me as I stepped out of the v-drum zone. I shook my head.

„Sorry love, the band needs a new singer, not a new drummer.“

Drumming was *my* job; had been ever since Dusk 'til Dawn got started. Back then, *Kerrang!* ridiculed us as „Muse crossed with Led Zeppelin fronted by Amy Winehouse's bad sister, with added ballet.“ But we managed to build a huge fan base, probably because we didn't sound like a bunch of Eighties throwbacks. Now, of course, we were just another prog-metal-ballet band (but hey, we were the first!) reforming for one last ride on the gravy train, or The Tour to End All Tours as our publicist dubbed it. But unless we could find a new singer-cum-dancer, we were going nowhere.

Mira gave me an imploring look, but I mouthed „sorry“ before she could beg for another try.

„Well, fuck you then!“ She plucked the ME reader from her forehead and threw it at me, just missing, before stomping off



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towards the nearest exit, her rainbow dreadlocks shaking like wheat in a gale.

Cute arse, decent head-stuff and some competent incidental percussion, I said to myself, but the voice wasn't a patch on Diva's.

I turned round to find Dali looming over me like a Bronte hero crossed with a praying mantis. He ran lace-clad fingers through lank, shoulder-length hair before prodding me in the chest. Tattoos flickered over his exquisitely chiselled cheekbones, coding for some emotional state I couldn't quite figure.

„Toad, this was your goddam idea!"

„Toad" as in short, fat and ugly: the warty guy standing at the back, pounding four-four out of thin air like the Devil's own blacksmith while Dali conjured up the frills and flourishes. But the band needed a soul, not just its head and heart. And in Dusk 'til Dawn's case that meant Diva. No way could some wannabe rock chick fresh out of art school fill her thigh-length boots.

„True," I said, „but you signed on the dotted line."

„I should've known better!"

I shrugged but said nothing. We were in this together; Dali knew that.

„Okay," he said, „so who else have you got lined up?"

I punched his chest, but gently like we were two mates joshing. „You know, I could fix our problem, if you'd just let me try."

Dali knew precisely what I meant and it got to him precisely how I intended.

„No way!" Dali said, his mirrored eyes blazing. „No bloody way does that woman sneak back into my band!"

„Our band."

„Whatever!"

„So, do we pull out of the tour?"

I picked the dirt out of my fingernails while waiting for Dali to cave in, which I knew he would 'cos he hated the vanilla life, same as I did. Sure, he'd carved out a lucrative niche building gizmos for the Music Industry – the mind's eye reader was his latest invention – but backroom boys don't get the acclaim, hence his willingness to reform the band.

Dali sighed his acquiescence. „Okay, do it your way, but tell me, how long is it since anyone actually clapped eyes on her?"

„Five years, give or take."

Dali shook his head like he thought the project was doomed from the start.

„Even if she hasn't flat-lined, she'll have stealthed herself to the max. You'll never distinguish her from a JoPub."

Relieved that I'd worked a chink in Dali's armour, I offered him an inducement.

„Then I'll need your help, won't I?"

I've always known how to appeal to his vanity.

„Okay, Toad," Dali said with a sigh, „Go fetch."

But first, find.

After squandering enough carbon credits to ensure boredom wasn't my only reason for reforming the band, a third-hand rumour saw me fly into LA.

The woman leaning over a toilet bowl in Bar Fusion's restroom didn't look much like Diva, what with the razor-bobbed platinum hairdo, Nordic cheekbones and big tits, but Dali's latest gizmo had confirmed her identity shortly after I fed it a sample of her saliva.

„Hello, Diva."

She turned her head and blinked at me. „Huh?"

I couldn't tell whether she'd had her voice re-coded, but right now the fact that her eyes were focused someplace north of nowhere concerned me more. So I tugged her upright and frog-marched her into the bar. She slumped over the counter, resting her head on her arms.

„What'll it be?"

The bartender was resting his forearms on the aquarium countertop, his biceps bulging like lotto balls in a silk bag. He looked so what's-his-face the surgery must have cost a fortune.

I grabbed a menu. Gaining Diva's cooperation meant getting on her wavelength, which meant taking the same drugs, only not quite as many. I scrolled through the list of cocktails, all of them unfamiliar to me. So what was it to be, a Rigel or

an Antares, a Sirius or a Betelgeuse? An Omicron *what*, for Odin's sake?

Biceps grinned at me in a way doubtless meant to encourage the uninitiated. „I'd start with a Sol, if I were you.“

Before I could ask what went into one of those, Diva elbowed me in the ribs. „Wanna try an Albeiro.“

The words were slurred but her voice sounded sultry, impressive, irresistible — just like the Diva of old.

Biceps blinked up a holo-tab. „You don't have the credit, doll.“

Diva turned to me, eyes flaring wide. „Pay the man, Toad.“

Biceps grinned like a rattlesnake eyeing its prey. I held out my right hand, and jerked it back the instant I felt the confirmatory tingle. The man possessed a clammy grip.

„Got somewhere private?“ I asked, quickly adding: „Just me and the girl.“

Biceps indicated a door opposite the restroom. „Booth Five, through there. Make yourselves comfortable while I'll fix your Albeiro.“

I imagined a Victorian opium den. Bar Fusion's update on the theme didn't disappoint. After settling Diva on the mouth-shaped couch, I patched in the data link to Dali. Moments later, Biceps appeared holding a tray of coloured ampoules and a transparent cocktail shaker. He placed the equipment on the aquarium table with a gentleness that suggested a replacement might be hard to find. After pouring the contents of two ampoules into the jug, he flicked a toggle switch on its base. The teeth-jarring vibration caused the table's aquatic residents to scatter. The mixture frothed into a creamy fog. Biceps tapped his remote control, plunging the booth into darkness.

Twin sparks flared inside the cocktail shaker, one golden-hued the other eggshell blue, both dazzlingly bright. Peering through a fence of fingers, I counted to ten before the sparks winked out.

„Okay,“ I said, all low and slow, impressed but nervous too.

Biceps whispered the booth lights up a notch so I could see him pour the mix into a pair of shot glasses. After taking hers, Diva cuddled up to me, which made me tremble for more than one reason. That's unrequited love for you, I guess.

„This one's for you, Diva," I said.

We clinked glasses and downed our shots.

The cocktail hit low, mean and dirty. It felt like I had a chilli-coated spider scuttling around my stomach. Sweat beaded my face. I gulped down hard as bile surged up my throat.

The bartender leaned over the table and chuckled.

„Now, close your-"

In my mind's eye, I saw a sphere of blue-green incandescence. Hot and brilliant, dazzling and dangerous, the star in my head shone on me, only me. But I was a star too, bigger and brighter than my companion. I bathed her with my golden rays. We loved each other with our light.

Wow, like fucking wow!

I could have worshipped that star forever.

„Time to wake up, Toad."

Dali's prompting sounded urgent, but I felt too nauseous to respond, so I tongue-clicked the link to „off". I blinked open gummy eyes, but closed them again on seeing the booth's walls revolve. I vomited, narrowly missing the aquarium table. After wiping my mouth on the back of my hand, I glanced at my wristwatch tattoo. An hour had passed.

Wow, I thought. That really was a stellar head-fuck-and-a-half.

Feeling weak as a newborn, I lay back on the sofa and gazed at Diva. Her remodelled features looked relaxed and serene, and her cheeks held some colour. She definitely looked better than when I'd found her. Was that a side effect of the drug?

„How're you doing?" I asked when her eyelids fluttered open.

Diva rocked her head to indicate „not so bad". A moment later her grimace dissolved into a wicked grin. „So, now you've broken your duck, how about trying another?"

I shook my head, well aware that I couldn't match her legendary stamina. Instead, I tongue-clicked the link back on.

„About bloody time!" Dali's voice fizzed with anger.

„Okay, we're out of here."

As I helped Diva out of the booth, I thanked Odin that I'd never managed to get myself addicted to anything genuinely

harmful. Granted, I'd enjoyed satisfying the usual rock-star appetites, but unlike Diva I'd always known when to say „no“.

„Poor, self-deluding Toad,“ Dali said as if he'd read my mind. I wanted to yell „You hateful shit“ back at him but thought better of it. Now more than ever, I needed him on my side. So instead I settled for, „I could use some help here!“

„Just bring her home,“ Dali said, sounding resigned. „I've cleared things with the authorities.“

„Got to fly,“ I said to Biceps as I hustled Diva towards the exit.

„Pity you can't stay,“ he said, grinning so solicitously I wanted to punch him. „I have this amazing....“

I shook my head. And punched him anyway.

Two weeks after flying back into London, I delivered a transformed but only superficially cleaned up Diva to Dali's rehearsal space. One glance at his face while he sized her up was enough to tell me that a storm was brewing.

As for me, well I tried not to drool. Those violet-flecked eyes, that milk chocolate skin, that jet-black hair falling all the way to her skinny backside.... Diva's retrofit had cost me a small fortune, but I reckoned the results easily justified the outlay. She looked stunning, wrong side of forty or not.

Frowning, Dali turned to me. „Is she ready to audition?“

Diva snarled a vicious obscenity and flounced off-stage, trailing finger gestures that left nothing to the imagination.

I gaped at Dali. „For fuck's sake, you don't *audition* Diva!“

„Why not?“

I grabbed his chin with my left hand and tugged real hard so that he bent his knees. With our eyes now level, I said, „You just *don't*, right?“

He jerked his head free. „I honestly hoped you wouldn't find her.“

To be frank, I could see where he was coming from. Watching Diva blow her talent the first time around had been hard enough for me, but so much worse for Dali, because while I'd lusted at her from afar he'd been her lover for real. Still, retrieving Diva had cost me a lot of time and money, so I wasn't about to let Dali squirm out of our agreement.

„Just give her a chance," I said.

„But she's *still* an addict!"

I wasn't about to argue with him, having spent a fortnight fending off a legion of pushers.

„I can sort her out," I said. In truth, I'd never told a bigger lie.

Dali gave me a pitying look. „Do you know anything about this new shit she's into?"

„No," I said, certain that I'd get a lecture from him whether I wanted one or not.

„Ever heard of sonoluminescence?"

„Sono-what?"

Dali fired up TrustWiki on the nearest screen. „See for yourself."

So I did.

Sonoluminescence: the light radiated by a bubble of gas when compressed by an isotropic supersonic sound wave.

„Otherwise known as the star in a glass," Dali said over my shoulder.

I kept reading.

Back in 2002, a physicist named Taleyarkhan claimed that his sonoluminescence experiments proved the existence of cold fusion. The techie rags briefly got all frothy at the prospect of cheap, clean energy in a bottle, but those scientists who repeated his experiments failed to detect the excess neutrons that would have proved Taleyarkhan's fusion hypothesis. Despite his protestations, the verdict was „fairytale" not „fusion".

So how had a mere bartender managed to obtain the sonoshaker kit? His cocktails had generated a fair bit of comment in the blogosphere, but I could find no evidence of a commercial supplier. The consensus was „grad student prank".

Dali chuckled evilly in my right ear. „Anyone Jacko enough to drink the byproducts of a failed lab experiment deserves to get their head sunburnt on the inside."

He meant Diva, of course, but I'd glimpsed that fat old sun too. How long, I wondered, before I needed another fix?

I gave Dali a look that I hoped was argument-proof.

„One chance, that's all she needs."

Dali's nod was a long time coming.

Diva stood centre-stage, her fingers tickling wind chimes out of thin air. Twenty years after we'd last played it, the opening to *Snowbound* sounded wondrously spectral, but when Dali cued up Diva's vocal with a flourish of church organ she sang the first notes so flat it hurt. With a sigh of despair, she sank to the floor. The bass generator rumbled like indigestion.

„This is hopeless," she said.

I sighed inwardly. If Diva couldn't sing *Snowbound* then Dusk 'til Dawn was in deep trouble, 'cos that was one of our simplest pieces.

Dali fired up Diva's ME display. The screen showed a solitary star: small and white. It faded perceptibly while I watched.

Dali's voice crackled in my earpiece. „Yeah, that figures."

„How do you mean?"

„From a cosmic standpoint, she's a white dwarf."

I didn't recognise the term but I assumed he meant a burnt-out case, in which case his verdict was hard to refute. If we'd had ME-tech fifteen years ago, Diva's inner star would surely have shone brighter than the Tehran Nuke.

As Dali emerged from behind his nest of keyboards, I glanced at Diva, who was only now getting to her feet. She squared her shoulders in a display of self-possession.

„I could try again," she said.

Dali snorted derisively. „Please don't bother!"

Diva turned to me, her expression ferocious. „Thanks for *nothing*, Toad."

I stared at my warty hands, ashamed that I had coerced Diva to „audition" before her unforgiving ex-lover.

Dali shouted „Timewaster!" as she stomped off stage. I shot him a look almost as vicious as Diva's.

„Any chance you could shut it while I sort this out?"

I ignored his muttered reply.

I gave Diva a few minutes to compose herself before I entered her dressing room, where I found her staring blankly at the mirror. It was obvious she needed another fix — and soon. As I had no intention of sending her back to LA, I'd have to find a local source of the drug. If only I'd had the foresight to steal the cocktail kit from Bar Fusion I wouldn't now have to

persuade Dali to construct a homegrown version. But he would demand a cast iron guarantee that Dusk 'til Dawn would get back on track in time for the tour. But that meant sorting out Diva, which meant ...

My mind reeled with the circularity of it all.

Diva's drug habit lay at the heart of our problem, but might it not also offer a solution? After all, the double cocktail we had shared in Bar Fusion had definitely made her feel better, if only briefly. And hadn't Biceps hinted at the existence of even more potent concoctions?

Convinced that I finally had a fix on how to get Diva's mojo rising again, I trotted back to the stage, where Dali had begun packing up. He tried to shrug me off, but I had him cornered.

„What if I *guarantee* to get Diva sorted out?“

Dali closed his eyes and shook his head, like we'd had this conversation a dozen times before, which was close enough true.

„She's no bloody use to herself, never mind us. She'd rather die than do detox.“ Dali had never majored in forgiveness and it didn't sound like he planned to change his ways now.

„In that case, we have to *exploit* her addiction.“

Dali's forehead furrowed, which I took to be a good sign.

„And how do you propose to do that?“

„Remember what it was like before we made it big? How we used to *share* everything: our digs, our money, even our drugs?“

Back then we'd lived in each other's pockets, just so we could make it to the next stop on the Toilet Circuit. Now, twenty years on, we'd have to learn how to share everything again. I took a deep breath and explained my plan.

When I finished, he said, „It's risky as hell.“

„It's my risk to take,“ I said, „but I'll need you to build the sono-shaker.“

The gleam in Dali's eyes confirmed my ploy had worked. I thanked Odin that I'd asked Dali to collect data from Bar Fusion while I collected Diva.

„Okay, give me a week and I'll replicate the kit for you.“

Dali's grin set a new benchmark for smug. „Just let me know what ingredients you need.“

But that was the problem, 'cos I didn't know yet. Decrypting the bartender's recipes would be child's play for Dali, but I didn't relish the prospect of sampling every one of them while searching for Diva's sweet spot. That would really do my head in.

So instead, I decided to learn more about stars.

Reading TrustWiki's article on stellar evolution, I discovered that the Sun will play nicely for another billion years before it bloats into a red giant and fries whatever vermin outlive Humanity. After that, it'll shed its outer layers like an old suit, leaving behind a nub of star-stuff growing cold. A white dwarf: the star that's dead but doesn't know it yet.

Just like Diva.

But that's not necessarily the end, 'cos if a white dwarf orbits a bloated companion, its gravity can sometimes steal enough star-stuff to generate a nuclear flash. The huge outpouring of energy makes the dying star shine brightly again, for a while.

So, could I make Diva go nova?

I puffed out my chest and paradiddled the air with my fists. Virtual tom-toms rattled the stage like an earthquake. Fat old Toad still had energy to spare.

Grinning like a fool, I began cross-referencing Dali's decrypt of the bartender's recipes with TrustWiki's descriptions of star types. My search for the perfect cocktail took a while, but eventually, I found a match.

Yes, a shot of RS Ophiuci ought to do the trick.

One week later, as promised, Dali unboxed his version of the sono-shaker.

„Will it work?“ I asked, frowning at the bulky-looking device.

Dali rolled his eyes. „Of course, it'll bloody work!“

I asked the question not because I doubted his engineering skills, but rather that his sono-shaker's byproducts presumably remained untested, Dali having given up drugs shortly after Dusk 'til Dawn hit the Big Time. Indeed, it was a furious row

sparked by Diva playing under the influence that heralded the band's break up. Knowing that I couldn't avoid a lecture from Dali on the subject, I decided to pre-empt it by feigning curiosity.

„So, have you figured out how the drug works?“

Dali grinned like a pub bore invited to expound on his pet subject. „The cocktail you consumed in LA was a twin-payload sono-drug. The first component boosts the empathic centre of your brain, while the second makes you sweat so much that a pheromone-mediated pathway is established.“ My frown forced Dali into hand-waving simplification. „In layman's terms: the drug opens a channel that allows the transfer of mental energy.“

„Which only works one way,“ I said, recalling my Bar Fusion experience.

Dali shrugged. „I suppose some people are suppliers and others consumers.“ He paused, presumably to let me ponder the implications. „Still want to proceed?“

I nodded.

Dali glanced at Diva. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, facing away from him. „Is *she* ready?“

I sat down beside her and gave her leather-clad left knee a squeeze. „How about trying *Fire in the Deep*?“

Dali whistled. With good reason, 'cos *Fire* was the most complicated piece on our set-list: the track that earned us the 'prog-metal-ballet' tag. If Diva could perform it, we'd be on to something; if not, then no one would pay to see us.

„I can do this,“ she said, seemingly for her own benefit rather than Dali's or mine.

With a little help from me, I said to myself. That, plus the venue's air conditioning set to sauna-like levels. I was sweating already.

While Diva began mapping out her dance moves, I double-checked the RS Ophiuci recipe. Satisfied that I had it right, I tore open the ampoules and poured their contents into the shaker. After receiving a nod from Dali, I flicked the switch on its base. On the count of three, twin sparks of red and white flared. When they guttered out, I poured the contents of the

shaker into two shot glasses. Dali began playing *Fire's* opening riff.

Standing centre-stage, Diva tipped her head so that her hair veiled her face. Her fingers fluttered while Dali's organ chords rolled over us like the aftermath of the Big Bang. As the overture faded, Diva flicked a smile at me. I handed her a glass, which she clinked against mine. We downed our shots together. Chilli heat seeped from my every pore, this time without the side order of nausea. After slinging my glass, I gave Diva a hug that should have got me arrested. Our sweat mingled. Finally, regretfully, I let go of her, closed my eyes and began pummelling the air with my fists.

Inside my head, I saw a feeble, pallid, dying star. What Diva needed was a jolly red giant: fat old Toad radiating his life force. I felt the light pouring out of me. *Here Diva, take a piece of me*, I said to myself, shaking beads of sweat from my body while I drove *Fire in the Deep* forward.

To my relief, I saw Diva's star brighten as she started singing the first verse. Her voice sounded clear and true.

*„Fire in the deep, adrift in your zone.
Stars in your eyes, love in my own.
Destined to fly, lest Humanity die,
Singing of freedom and home.“*

I paradiddled like John Bonham, propelling the song towards its climax, which Dali heralded with a typically bombastic fanfare. As the electronic storm faded towards ambient, Diva began singing her acappella section, but she sliced the high notes horribly before stuttering into silence. Inside my mind, I watched her star fade.

When I opened my eyes I saw Diva standing with her head lowered; a mute witness to a stupid plan.

Dali strode across the stage towards me, wagging his forefinger like an irate schoolteacher. „I told you so!“

„It was worth a try, dammit!“

„No, it *fucking* wasn't!“

I raised my fists. Thumping Dali wouldn't help Diva, but I'd feel better. He took a step back, then another. I followed him.

„We're a trio, dammit!"

That was Diva. I turned to face her, likewise Dali. She stood before us, her eyes burning with accusation.

„What?" Dali and I said in unison.

„We're *supposed* to be a trio!" Her voice dripped accusation.

Dali kicked Diva's discarded glass across the stage. „I've had enough of this farce," he said, turning his back on Diva – and the band too, or so I feared.

„Wait!"

„What now?"

„Come on, Dali. You have to admit we were a bit untogether just now."

Dali rolled his eyes. „It's Diva who's untogether!"

„That's rich coming from you!" Diva jabbed a forefinger at Dali's chest. „Were you *deliberately* trying to put me off or what?"

I let them snarl at each other while I tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Thinking back, it felt like we'd been too busy doing our own thing to feed on each other's inspiration. To conjure up the old musical alchemy we would have to play for each other, which meant that Dali would *really* have to join in – and not just musically.

I stepped between my warring bandmates. „What we need," I said, „is a treble."

Dali shook his head. „No – fucking – way!"

I gave him my fiercest look, 'cos I wasn't about to let him off the hook. I waved away his protests while flicking through the recipe book in search of a suitable cocktail.

When we resumed rehearsals, I made sure I was calling the shots and not just pouring them. I placed a glass on top of Dali's Hammond organ and pushed it towards him. His scowl could have struck sparks from a bar of soap.

„Just drink it!" I said.

Dali shook his head. „No chance."

I followed him into his keyboard-filled sanctum, which provoked the intended look of horror. Doing my usual looming-from-below thing, I poked his chest good and hard. He recoiled but could not escape.

„Look, we *both* need this to work," I said, „'cos without Diva, we're done. What's more, if you don't help me sort out Diva, you'll need a new drummer." I grabbed Dali's portable Roland, which he rarely used, and dangled it from the strap. „Come on, we need you on stage!"

My heart skipped a beat when Dali picked up the glass and sloshed the contents, then threatened to stop working altogether when he put it back undrained. I gave him a stare and turned away. There was still time.

„The guy's a prick," I said to Diva, loudly enough for Dali to hear. She whispered „Thanks for trying," before sinking her own shot. I followed suit, gritting my teeth against the burn while reaching for Diva. She felt hot and slippery in my arms. When I released her I stepped back just enough to give her room to dance, while ensuring we would spatter each other with our sweat. I began hammering out the beat to *Fire in the Deep*.

In my mind's eye, I saw a single star, floating in the blackness. I radiated crimson rays towards my companion while trying to re-direct my trajectory towards her.

But for all my exertions, Diva's vocals quavered when they should have soared. And Dali's prissy keyboard fills weren't helping one bit. Second time around was panning out no better than the first — and I knew Dali wouldn't give her another chance.

So I flipped up my lip microphone and said, „Dali, you're a selfish, arrogant, son-of-a..."

New light burst in my head: dazzling, brilliant, eye-searingly blue.

Dali was a star!

Big Blue flashed past me ripping out gouts of star-stuff that spiralled towards my companion. I looked on in awe as Diva flared so bright she outshone Dali, never mind me.

Now, at last, Diva sang with the power of old. Her voice soared and swooped, every note pitch-perfect, every drop of emotion wrung from her soul, while Dali fired off riffs that rolled over the stage like a tsunami. This was how *Fire in the Deep* was supposed to sound!

I opened my eyes. Dali was standing between Diva and me, grinning like a madman while conjuring cosmos-shaking sounds from his Roland. My arms felt heavy as logs, but I pummelled the air with all the energy I could muster.

During one of the quieter passages, I sneaked a glance at Diva's mind's eye display. The screen showed three stars dancing an orbital ballet: a pair of bobby-dazzlers accompanied by a dull red giant.

As *Fire in the Deep's* coda faded towards ambient, I swung my left fist to close out the piece with the sound of a gong. When the echoes had died down, I glanced at Diva. She was sitting on her heels with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her shoulders were shaking, but whether from exertion or the release of pent-up emotion, I couldn't tell.

What happened next made my jaw drop. I hadn't expected Dali to acknowledge Diva's performance with more than a cursory nod. Instead, he knelt down beside her, whispered something in her ear and helped her to her feet. But it was the passionate embrace that shocked me. The band appeared to be reforming in more ways than one. I wasn't too sure how I felt about that.

„Diva, that was amazing," Dali said as he released her. But the look he gave me was kind of distant.

We rehearsed three more songs that day. Diva played a blinder, superbly accompanied by Dali. As for me, well, the band had got its soul back, and its head had never stopped working, but the heart wasn't pumping like it should. Fuelling Diva's nova had burned me out. She knew it – and judging by his expression, so did Dali.

As I packed away my drum lasers, Dali manoeuvred Diva to one side. I didn't hear what either of them said, but I could read her lips.

Okay, I'll tell him.

Diva walked over and gave me a hug. „I'm so, so sorry, dearest Toad," she said, her voice muffled by my shoulder, „but we need to bring in someone younger."

She somehow managed to make rejection seem like a kindness.

The next two days passed in a blur. I began by drinking a crate of beer and followed up with a couple of bottles of Jack. When I finally sobered up enough to return to the rehearsal hall, intending only to collect my equipment, what I saw made Dali hugging Diva seem like the most predictable event in the history of music.

Dusk 'til Dawn was rehearsing as a trio, with Mira, the dreadlocked wannabe who had failed to emulate Diva, filling in for me. Like me, Dali had observed that she could play virtual percussion. Unlike me, he had considered how he could make use of that talent.

After I got over the shock, which took most of the band's run-through of *Snowbound*, it occurred to me that there *was* one thing Mira didn't know how to do – and that was how to keep Diva fuelled and flaring. Having exhausted me, Diva would soon need a top-up.

Unnoticed by the band, I made my way backstage and grabbed the cocktail shaker. As I ran out in front of Mira, the music faltered. She looked aghast. Diva's expression mixed pity with irritation, whereas Dali didn't acknowledge my presence at all. Shaking with anger, I stomped over to his eyrie, accompanied by a series of juddering bass notes, and hurled the shaker to the floor. It shattered into a satisfyingly large number of pieces.

Dali sighed. „I can replace that too, you know."

I nodded. „Sure you can, but I'd start now if I were you, 'cos I've learnt enough astrophysics to know that a nova fades once it has exhausted its fuel." I waved a fistful of ampoules under his nose. „I reckon the sono-drug 'trip' works in exactly the same way. So Diva will burn brightly, just not for very long."

She'd begin by feeding off Mira, I reckoned, but sooner rather than later she'd turn to Dali, which would kill Dusk 'til

Dawn, 'cos you can replace a band's heart, as I'd found out the hard way, but not its head. So, if she couldn't live off the band, that just left the fans. It seemed we needed them every bit as much as they needed us; more, if anything.

I stood on tiptoe, reached over Dali's keyboard stack and slapped him on both shoulders. „Dali my old mate, I reckon you're gonna need a *much* bigger cocktail shaker."

His expression would have slaughtered Mira, but was no match for Toad. When Dali looked to Diva for support she responded with a shrug.

„He's right, you know."

And that is how I became Dusk 'til Dawn's road manager.

If the Kyoto gig hadn't been the opening night of the tour, I'd have cancelled as soon as I saw the advance sales, 'cos playing to a half-empty hall usually spells doom for a rock band. To justify continuing we'd need to generate some awesome word-of-mouth. So I took a leaf out of Dali's book and prepared accordingly, with the result that every punter who bought the band's merchandise received a complementary squeeze tube of sono-cocktail.

„Yes, sir-" In my mind, I bowed politely, imitating the counter staff, „-you can take your drink into the hall. But don't try to open it yet, because the tear strip is word-locked."

I'd tested that particular feature to my satisfaction, but the same couldn't be said for the sono-drug. To improve the odds that *Praesepe* would work, I'd arranged to have the balcony closed. With the air conditioning turned off, the JoPubs would swelter in the moshpit.

Watching the band walk out onto the stage I felt a pang of regret though not of jealousy. Mira had proved herself a highly capable v-drummer — and it no longer hurt me to admit it. Better still, she looked the part: youthful, confident and brimming with energy. I particularly liked the fact that she shared a name with a star. Unlike her celestial counterpart, our Mira showed no signs of extreme variability.

If only the same could be said of Diva. She stood centre-stage with her head bowed, her hair veiling the fearful look I'd

seen in her eyes. She knew full well whose performance would make or break the tour.

Feeling no less jittery, I took a deep breath and followed the trio out onto the stage. A single spotlight picked me out as I strode forward.

„Kyoto, are you ready to ROCK?"

That drew a muted roar of approval but not a single chant of „We want Toad!"

How quickly the fans forgot.

I held up a squeeze tube. „Kyoto, are you ready to DRINK?" This time the yells were deafening.

Holographic numerals floated above the stage as I began the countdown. The JoPubs counted with me, many in English. A communally roared „Zero!" was the cue for everyone to tear open their squeeze tubes. I swigged my shot while running to the side of the stage. Dali began soundscaping and I closed my eyes.

The light from a myriad stars blazed inside my head. Brightest of all was a triple star system comprising the familiar combo of blue giant and white dwarf, but now escorted by a pretty yellow companion. I orbited further out, separating the trio from the remainder of the cluster.

Mira began hammering her virtual tom-toms as if punishing the air that we breathed, while Dali jabbed organ notes that made my guts vibrate. But as Diva began singing the first verse of *Snowbound*, her voice wavered. She continued to muffle the high notes throughout the song. As *Snowbound* petered out into sonic sleet, I heard a smattering of boos.

I opened my eyes and glanced at Dali, who responded with a tight-lipped nod. As he began playing the opening chords of *Fire in the Deep*, I muttered a prayer to Odin, ran to the edge of the stage and belly-flopped onto a sea of raised hands. Surfing the mosh pit, I harvested the fans' sweat, energy and adoration, heedless of the cuts and bruises inflicted on me. While in my mind's eye, I navigated a sea of stars, gaining energy from each encounter, while gradually following a trajectory back to the triple system.

A glancing blow to my head forced me to open my eyes. I saw Mira waving at me, splashing virtual cymbals into Dali's live mix.

Come on, she mouthed. Join us!

The fans at the front of the moshpit roared: „We want Toad!“ as I clambered onto the stage. I grinned as Mira made room for me. I took over on virtual drums while she danced a bass line, stamping out notes with her bare feet. Our partnership worked perfectly, driving Dali to even greater heights of virtuosity. He danced around the stage, dabbing sampled guitar riffs from his keyboard. The air felt sticky with sweat: Mira's and mine, Dali's and Diva's. I closed my eyes.

After re-establishing my celestial bearings, I performed a slingshot manoeuvre around Diva's companions and settled into orbit around her. Gravity immediately began stripping me of my star-stuff. Yet, despite the intensity of Diva's hunger, I felt no fear. I would gladly have given all of me to see her flare into life again. But would all of me be enough?

Just as my flow began to fail, I witnessed a burst of light so brilliant it made the rest of the star cluster look like fireflies. Overwhelmed by Diva's luminosity, I opened my eyes, blinking until my vision cleared.

Now, at last, Diva *really* sang. She pitched her voice so high it seemed to bounce off the mirrorball, and growled so low she was molesting Mira's bass line. And did she ever dance! To see her pirouette for the first time in fifteen years, her elbows firing off salvos of incidental percussion ... well, tears trickled down my cheeks, that's for sure.

As we brought *Fire in the Deep* to a close, a thousand JoPubs erupted with the loudest applause I'd ever heard. The stage invasion during the encore was the icing on the cake.

Needless to say, we got awesome word-of-mouth.

When Dusk 'til Dawn set out on The Tour to End All Tours, we didn't expect to finish with five nights at The Brixton Academy, never mind that the final gig would climax with one of those „Where were you when...?“ moments.

How terrible, then, that it was a moment of pure horror.

By the time we commenced the UK leg of the tour, we had ploughed the profits from merchandising into a whole lotta ME-tech. We installed screens everywhere: behind the stage, along the sidewalls and balcony, suspended from the gantries. Dali had decided to let our fans drive the visuals. Before every gig, we handed out headsets to a couple of dozen lucky competition winners. Most newbies didn't generate anything better than psychedelic noise, so we let them carry sponsor vids as well. Kudos to those JoPubs who hacked the news feeds, though! Even Dali was impressed.

Best of all, I no longer had to stoke up Diva. Fuelled with my latest sono-cocktail, which I'd christened *Messier 13*, she could feed off the crowd's euphoria without my help. But I still took a swig when Dali started playing the intro to *Fire in the Deep*. My crowd surfing had become an established part of our act.

The stars in my head sure looked bright that night. Little did I know that even Diva was about to be eclipsed.

After Security helped me back onto the stage, I looked out over the mosh pit and raised my fists in triumph. I was about to resume pounding my v-drums when eye-searing incandescence flooded the hall like someone had collected the light from every supernova since the dawn of time and beamed it straight into the Academy. I stood there and gawped, the music forgotten.

The screams began in the mosh pit and spread like wildfire. Within seconds every phone, every screen, was showing vid-streams of the LA Nuke. Diva was the last to hear what had happened. When Dali whispered in her ear, she sank to her knees and wept.

As for me, I felt a pang of relief that I hadn't sent her back to Bar Fusion.

Needless to say, Dame Amy Winehouse and her mates organised a series of charity concerts for the survivors. It took a bit of arm-twisting, but I got Dusk 'til Dawn added to the line-up for Wembley. A mid-afternoon slot wasn't so great, but we made the best of it. We played a shorter set than usual but

didn't compromise on the sono-fusion stuff. It's what our fans had come to expect — and it's our fans that have kept us going.

Dali wrote a new song called *Stoned Cold Fusion*, which we debuted at the gig. I dedicated it to the LA barman with the big biceps.

I figured we owed him one.

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