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2018 was a big year for Brick Moon Fiction. It saw the label venture forth into the world of television with the ABC science fiction show *The Crossing* (complimented by the Brick Moon produced companion podcast of the same name). The company also released the novel “*Animalcules*” as well as an enhanced audio version of the novella. We were even nominated for a Parsec Award!

But we never let go of our first love – short stories.

This year Brick Moon took you to the dark nether-regions of social media. We built monsters, dragged you through a Hellscape, hung out with witches, wizards, and even Einstein. Hell, we stole a moon and a sun. You may have been with us for all that, but even if you weren’t – don’t worry, we gotcha covered.

The following compilation represents the best (or maybe our favorite) stories from 2018. Read, enjoy, and get excited for what we have in store for you next year!

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Algorithms of Solar Devotion

by Bryan Aiello

The sun is gone, but I have a light.
~ Kurt Cobain

Matilda Weltanschauung faces trial at the Peace Palace
International Court of Justice. The Solar System has been
watching its progress thanks to Galactic Corp. They streamed
it live from The Hague like it was a sporting event.

It attracts a billion clicks every day.

Galactic displays their logo during breaks and after court rests for the day. Maybe that's what they get out of it, free advertising. The logo is a circle filled with a flurry of lines. It's a piece called 'contained fury' by its designer. It's been judged as one of the most identifiable logos ever created. On day 76, the logo disappears and a view of the courtroom is offered. It is a huge round chamber topped with an ornate stained-glass window decorated dome detailing the tale of the keeper of the scales, climaxing in the weighing of an accused man's heart against the feather of truth. The last section shows him freed to enter the land of the dead. The court's pews are filled with representatives of every faction on Earth.

Thousands of clamoring people wait for the day's action to start. When the judge enters, it is without fanfare. Forty-three, genetically Dutch in height and coloring, he signals and a bailiff points a remote at the eastern wall and a screen unfurls. An image flickers to life and Matilda appears. She is tall with platinum hair. Her blue eyes are dark and feverish. Her face, flat like a shovel. She stares into the recorder, thin-lipped mouth pulled into a knowing smirk over teeth that seem just a

bit too big for her head.

“I know why you are here.”

The resulting silence is powerful. She glares into the recorder, eyes dancing with fervor. Her face seems to pulsate between absolute disgust and reverence. Most of the people in the courtroom have seen this video before. It's been online for years. Since the arrest. She speaks again and everyone watching flinches.

“Sunlight!” and her face lights up with a smile. She is not beautiful, but when she is happy, she makes other people happy. Her smile falters and slowly drops into a frown.

“It has taken ten years of math for the Sol power system to give us a midday Summer sun again. Our birthright is for the sky to always shine with his love. But not like this. We would live in caves to have our brother Sol back.”

Matilda’s voice carries powerfully over the recording. Behind her is a gorgeous mountain valley. A valley, alive with beautifully colored little yellow, purple and red flowers poking through black soil covered in grass that could be shards cut from emeralds.

The craggy cliffs of Mount Eva haunt the foreground. A lake sparkles, promising to be painfully cold. It's a perfect Rocky Mountain day, crisp weather with the taste of snow on the air. In the blue sky is a rectangle of white light. It sparkles intensely.

"Technology has taken the sun from his creations. Robbed humans of their solar birthright. The sun has returned and together, we celebrate my fiftieth year. The rays of the sun were blocked before my birth, but today be hallowed with their return, however brief " Matilda points a remote at the camera.

The video pulls back and shows Matilda presiding over a sea of people laying with their foreheads to the ground. Hands stretched out in front of them. Each seemingly devout in their love for the sun, or maybe just for Matilda.

"You climbed this mountain for him. You came to pray and you have prayed for forty-four days and nights."

"Pause it here, please."

A court-tech hits a button on his smartglass, the recording pauses, and the prosecuting attorney stands. He is of the common haplogroup of China. Physically unimposing, it is his rigid sense of self that is most noticeable. He wears the traditional black robe and white wig of Earth's court system.

"Note, she made these two thousand people shave their heads, all except that little knot of hair at the rear of their scalp, symbolic of a handle for God to lift their heads to him. She dressed them in these thin, white cotton gowns and made them trudge up the mountain barefoot. She made them sit in the cold grass. She took from them any sense of individuality. These people no longer considered themselves male or female. Just fodder, fodder for a made-up God. Okay, continue the playback."

Matilda continues, "We search for you, Lord. Oh Lord of the stars and the moons and the planets, the maker of matter and antimatter. Who gives upon us gravity and light. We have given up food for you, my Lord, food which you allowed your child Sol to grow directly for us.

This shows your warmth and love. We have given up all food, my Lord, all food not grown with the assistance of your power, for, in our desire for you, we are unworthy of accepting anything except that which your loving bounty has provided.”

“Pause it again. She didn't give up food and the only water she allowed them was to look at and sparkles in the green lake behind her.” He points at the screen, “Hit play.”

An army of twenty guards walk through the crowd.

The guards wear black cotton robes. They have black military-issued leather work gloves and patent leather steel-toe boots.

“She picked these men for their size. They ate also, she provided them calories and testosterone, wanted them to get bigger.”

The guards look veiny and quick to violence.

On the video, Matilda seems to shiver in just-contained satisfaction as a shriveled man with a red topknot collapses onto his side. One of Matilda's roving muscle beelines for him, grips the man at the neck and lifts him off the ground. The man flops, lifelessly. Two other guards approach

and fold his legs under his body and together, they lay him back on the ground with his forehead pressed into the rocky dirt and his arms outstretched.

“Starting to smell.” a voice says close to the recorder’s mic.

“That's the cameraman.”

Matilda raises her arms into the air and screams “Hallelujah.” The word is violent. It echoes in the thin, artificial air of the courtroom.

“Pause.”

The video pauses with Matilda’s arms outstretched in supplication to her God

The barrister walks to the screen, stares up at the image for a moment. The moment soon stretches into overly dramatic until he turns and points at Matilda.

“2,000 dead.”

Matilda moans, or laughs, or threatens, or prays loudly to her God one of which is what got her silenced in the first place. She clamps her jaw hard again the ball gag in her mouth. Her eyes are wild and red with rage.

Her hands, secured behind her back with ziptie, flex with
murderous intent.

There is a rumble in the courtroom.

The defense attorney looks up from her doodle towards
the judge's bench, "Objection, your honor, the prosecuting
attorney is estimating." Lang is court-appointed. She doesn't
care. Her client is guilty and going to Hell. Nothing she says or
does will prevent that. Everyone knows she is going to lose.
She drew the short straw. But what she can do is something
resembling an attempt, even if a bare minimum one.

"Your honor, I apologize, I meant nineteen hundred
and eighty-seven dead.

The jury is anyone who wants to vote in the grand court
of public opinion. Why stop at twelve when the whole solar
system wants to share it's thoughts?

Two-hundred billion people vote.

The verdict:

90% say guilty.

In a less official poll, 10% doubted this somewhat ugly woman could talk so many people into starving themselves to death, but even they thought she was guilty of something if not murder.

When the verdict was handed down, Matilda smiled, because everyone thought she welcomed death, so instead the judge gave her Hell and she got exactly what she wanted.

“Prison Orbiter docking procedure started. Please remain seated” The announcement is voiced by a happy female and a few of the hundred people chained down onto the metal seats find the levity to chuckle. Some strain to take a look at the place they will be calling home for the rest of their lives.

Matilda can see the prison easily enough and her pulse pounds. She is human after all, just excellent at ignoring discomfort.

Hell, their new home, is black and greasy, like machinery, like a grinder, like a factory that turns living meat into lunch for maggots. It is nineteen million grams of mass, stuck going 19,720 kilometers per hour in an orbit around the sun opposite Neptune. A man-made hell filled with the worst of humanity.

And now Matilda.

“So, that's Hell? I expected more” The woman next to Matilda tries to lean closer but her chains rattle as they strike the metal seat under her. She smells like someone who hasn't seen a shower in weeks, which is good because no one on this transport has seen a shower in months.

The transport is a slow mover and one giant cryo-freezer to keep the prisoners docile. Matilda still feels warm and sticky from the wake-up procedure, but what she doesn't feel is the ten months it took to get here.

Along with the burning ozone stench of space, the whole transport has the stagnating sense of waste to it. Why bother sending people to the middle of nowhere to die slowly doing nonsense work. Just kill them. It was a societal weakness she was here and not dead. A weakness she exploited in her machinations. Know thine enemy and all that.

“I knew someone that came back.” It's a wistful voice from somewhere.

“No, you fucking did not.” shouts an angry response.

The prison transport slides closer to the orbiter. A large, yellow airlock is poised to accept its berth.

The ship docks whisper quiet. Conversations shift from the braggadocious pre-prison chit-chat to a bunch of mumbled rumors. The truth is no one who has been sentenced to the orbiter has ever come home.

“It's a lifetime sentence cleaning space junk.”

“I heard most prisoners die of cancer in less than a year.”

Matilda heard that one, she also heard that there was no such thing as a prison orbiter and that the government space-dusts people out into the vacuum. She was fairly certain this was not true, but now with Hell being an actual thing, she finds herself relieved.

A concussive alarm sounds just prior to the outer haul door breaking its seal. A giant rush of hissing air and pressure assaults. Then the seats are dragged from the transport into the prison like a funhouse train.

The temperature drop is stunning. She can see her breath on the air. The fiberglass-filled orange gowns they were given for transport do nothing to help against the bone-aching chill.

She reminds herself, you either die or get used to it, and the cold becomes Matilda's new normal.

The transport seats are pulled into a harsh white-lit hallway. Through the slates in her chair back, metal teeth reach up hook her garment and with a whir, rip it from her body.

The humiliation stings like a physical pain but then settles into a now that includes complete vulnerability. She reminds herself being naked is fine, being imprisoned is fine, because it is getting her closer to her God every second.

She finds herself smiling at a prison guard.

Despite himself, the prison guard smiles back.

When the moments that make up time equal ten years, a woman named Brody Greer is hired to perform a collection of tasks. She got the message in the normal roundabout way. Her handler set up a meet with a guy that dumped an obscene amount of money into her personal account and all she had to do was promise to show up. She now stands in an upward shooting lift on Galactic's Venus station. At least she thinks its upwards shooting. She feels movement in her stomach, but it's smooth. The elevator is a well-constructed copper box. If she hadn't stepped through one of the walls and watched it slide closed, she might think she was enclosed completely. Even the lighting and air vents are expertly blended into the smooth aesthetic.

Galactic is a Venus company based out of the sky city of Rona, which hovers 30 miles above its namesake, the Rona Chasma. It floats on silver balloons filled with Helium16.

Helium16?

Brody doesn't know chemistry but thinks it's irradiated; something, something, something, lighter and denser like the gas version of concrete. However it works, it keeps a city with millions of people in it floating above the pressure cooker that is Venus.

Galactic is all-powerful, a glorious gang of raging construction, media, and tech fanatics. They are the group that corralled the sun, ending its unpredictable tantrums with the press of a switch. Its soaring solar winds increased or decreased on the whim of a technician now. All for the added comfort of the human inhabitants of the solar system.

This technical magic allows every meter of the star in the prime of its life to be converted into limitless power. Sadly, the tech also steals his natural light and offers an almost permanent dusk to the people who wield the whip.

The dark is offset by lights and heaters, and the whole of the Earth and every human colony is climate controlled and fed with a constant stream of Galactic-produced entertainment.

The image of Brody, the great independent contractor, is reflected in the elevator doors. She is the girl no one notices, with short mousy brown hair, a twitchy little nose and lips that always look disgruntled.

She is here because she is good at what she does and what she does is make things go bye bye.

She touches at the dongle around her neck. Security gave it to her. They told her it would allow access to level 1345 and nowhere else. 1345 is where the outside vendor sleeping facilities are located. Brody has no plans on sleeping anytime soon.

The bud in her ear buzzes, “You hear me?”

It's Haemt. Her tech guy. Her eyes and ears where she can't get eyes and ears.

“Yes.”

“It's done.”

“Good.”

Brody looks past her reflection and studies the logo of the corporation emblazoned into the steel of the elevator wall, “Never have been able to figure out what this is.”

“Burning star, innit?” Haemt has an irritating little way about him that makes Brody feel stupid. "At least that's what Jazz says."

A child’s voice breaks in, “it’s called a Sagme because it contains typography and storytelling in the classic un-design format. I think it’s creator called it, “design in chaos.”

"Not bad for a robot gorilla."

“Thank you.”

Brody strains her eyes and finally, it makes sense that these swirls are an image of a burning star.

“Poor ole Sol, stuck, a battery, alone, in the center of his little collection of gravity wells.” Haemt sarcastically whines. It’s annoying but Brody knows the Martian isn’t wrong. What once was a brilliant mix of nuclear fire and cosmic physics was now invisible to the naked eye. Just a thing in a box connected to technology.

“A power slave.” Haemt continues.

“Shut up, please.” She hates that it feels like the Haemt can read her mind. Even from hundreds of miles away. “You know that shit freaks me out.”

After a very long sarcastic soaked pause, Haemt says, “Sorry, boss.” Brody knows he doesn’t mean it, and that he can’t read minds. It’s just obvious math.

It’s not that Brody feels bad for the sun. She doubts it has sentience like many of the new cults that sprang up since the Matilda Trial think it has. Brody hasn’t gone and joined the Free the Sun society or anything, and if it turns out the sun has feelings, she will apologize to it for all humanity. She does feel that more good comes from enslaving it than would come by not doing so.

If anything, she is in the ‘give money to Brody Greer society, and that’s the why of going through with this whole thing.

Big fat wads of cash.

Then what, she asks herself? If this job goes down like she thinks it will, Sol system will be dead, not just to her dead, but dead dead. What's left then, move to Alpha Centauri? Be the first human to survive the trek to another star system?

She does not know Matilda. She watched the Galactic stream like everyone else, but she did not vote. As a career criminal, she considers that bad luck. All she knows for sure is that she is doing a job in concert with an infamous cult leader whose aims are to destroy Galactic's Sol Power system. Brody knows she might be helping her accomplish her task.

The problem is she doesn't know for sure, she never met the woman. Behind the curtain, Matilda could be all talk. A sociopath who likes to make people kill themselves. There is no turning her back on that much money anyway, so money first, aftermath later.

The lift stops and Brody finds herself floating slightly as artificial gravity fights to catch up with physics. Then the doors slide open. The cavernous room beyond is burnished steel with copper undertones.

Through the floor-to-ceiling transparent-steel bulkhead, a gutted mega-transport can be seen. It's one of the space cities that can hold a million people, probably destined for orbit around a gas giant. She wonders if this old-people's-paradise is the one she'll be retired to when the time comes.

"I'm here," she whispers.

"Cool, locating your signal now. Commence upload."

Brody reaches into the pocket of her faux leather jacket and depresses the activation button on the information vacuum.

The sole LED light on the device blinks to red. In the silence, she hears it as a small high pitched whine and the only evidence things are going as planned.

The first part of the plan being an info dump, followed by a run, but from what she is not sure.

"Upload is working. We are coming around! ETA five minutes."

“A generation of humans will work on this ship. Thirty years’ worth of effort. Then what?” We build another ship? And then another and another and another? When does it stop?”

Her heart seizes in her chest. The voice is old and confident. She has heard it before. The entirety of the Solar System could pick out its owner with ease.

In the center of the room is a two cushion, black leather couch. On it is Cunningham Brookshire. Galactic CEO. “What do you think?” Cunningham says standing to face the elevator and Brody.

“I prefer things on Earth. Artificial blue sky and fake gravity for this girl.”.

“An old spacer like you? Soon.”

“Soon?” Brody finding herself staring at the giant ship. Sparks fly from welding guns held in the hands of too small to see workers in EVA suits. The orange flares illuminate the ship’s dark corridors.

“That’s when it will end, soon.”

She flinches when the elevator reminds her to “exit” in a friendly female voice.

Brody steps free and her heels clack on the naked steel floor. She’s dressed the part of a sales professional, Gray pants-suit and black pumps, but prepared to fight if she needs to.

“Is that Cunningham?” Haemt asks.

She whispers, “yes.”

“Hang tight, three minute ETA.” Jazz says.

“You and your team can relax. I am far from try to stop you. Strangely enough, I’ve come to cover your exit. Do a favor for a great woman. Matilda was the best thing to happen to Galactic since we harnessed the sun. She was our nemesis. She was the yang to our ying.”

Brody beelines towards Cunningham as she answers, “Public perception of the Sol Crazies is that they want to free the Sun. You see the irony?”

“It's romantic. Life feels stale without the sun. Not worth living.” He sips from a rocks glass. “Maybe I feel the same. I can’t remember one way of the other. Care for a nip?”

Brody guesses, “Single malt?” The words bounce around the steel room.

“Bowman 25. Good guess.”

“Almost priceless I bet in the Venetian cloud cities.”

“Special perk for being CEO.”

Brody shakes off the offer.

“Seat?”

‘No, thank you, I’d rather stand.’

She studies Cunningham. He is well-dressed in what she gathers is non-synth material. His shining pink pate is circled by grey hair. He is long and skinny.

“It’s going to Vespa. Cargo.” The salesman takes a loud sip from his whiskey, ice rattling; he gestures to the generation ship with his glass. “We build ships in orbit between the moon and Venus. We work out here in the chemistry equivalent of an all you can eat buffet. Ore is mined elsewhere in the solar system and smelting here. On the surface, it might seem like we could be swayed by disruption, but honestly,’ the salesman sighs and sits “Nothing stops us except cost.”

“Ore is limitless. Gas is limitless. Maybe cost should---”

“Time and tech are the commodities I deal with. You want an anti-gravity ship to make space a viable option in which to stick your whatever? Well then expect to pony up, partner, it's going to cost fifteen figures and people want what they can't afford. The more expensive our products the more people clamor for them and not just the generation ships either. Smart glass, news, transportation and power, none of it affordable and all made cheaply with infinite materials right here in the solar system.

“But the problem is people are complacent in their little utopias. They have nothing to fear. They eat at our little buffet and only take what they need. Galactic need them to glut, feast, frenzy on our products.”

“All she wants is to free Sol. She won't stop escalating her protests until she does.”

“Matilda can't afford to get what she seeks. If she succeeds, then she has erased the need for herself. Galactic feels safe that she wants to continue being needed. But we can no longer afford to do this without her. We need her free, attracting attention, creating a patriotic fervor for Galactic.”

“So, you want me to break Matilda out of Hell?”

“No, Matilda is working on her imprisonment herself.

What we want from you is to give Matilda what she wants.”

“Free Sol?”

“A public distraction?”

“Yes.”

“Then what?”

“We know she is building something. A bomb, maybe.

We are positive people are going to die, but in consideration of the great economy, their sacrifices are needed. Thankfully you don't have to make a sacrifice, because now you are going to be rich beyond measure and when everything's said and done, free from moral dilemma.”

Brody knows Galactic gets paid and can make her one of the richest women in history.

Cunningham continues, “Earth is overcrowded and people are colonizing every conceivable celestial surface in the solar system.”

“When humans spread out, we spread out hard.”

He turns and points through the transparent-steel window, “Sadly, this is true. No one else makes transports. And our ships are built to go many lifetimes. This one was recently reclaimed as a heavy equipment long haul vessel and command center for the mining operation Pepper Anne.”

“That hunk of rock was mined out decades ago.”

“Now you’re getting it. We are in this for the long term, but without a viable villain, we are starting to look evil, selfish and greedy. We need a Hitler. We need someone more evil than us”

“You want to free Matilda so there’s someone worse than Galactic in the Solar System?”

“Yes, and the only price is that Earth will lose their most valued prisoner and be blacked out for a few months.”

Cunningham steps close. She can smell the whisky. She can smell his stale stench, the stench of static and old onions, of someone who has spent his entire life in space. “But they will gain oh so much more.”

Brody knows Earth will keep Matilda alive, no matter what. She is the nightmare the population of this solar system cannot kill. If she died today, her memory would stretch into forever.

Haemt's voice hits her eardrum like a hammer, "We are standing by."

"Do you know what's coming next?" She faces away from him and toward the transparent-steel bulkhead.

"Yes" his arm circles her waist. He pulls her in closer. "Now, let's talk about something you can blow."

Jazz's voice reaches her ear. "Charges are set and, one more second," after the briefest of pauses in which Brody was sure Cunningham was coming in for a kiss, Jazz returns with, "ready when you are, boss!"

Brody takes Cunningham's hand in her own and nods. She doesn't feel conflicted. She does not like feeling conflicted. A job's a job. "Do you want to experience the end or do you want an easy out? His mouth works but is empty of words, Brody decides for him and places both hands on the man's face and twists hard.

The bones in his neck snap like a deadfall log popping
in a raging fire.

Less than a moment later, the floor beneath the
transparent-steel wall explodes, sucking the couch,
Cunningham, and Brody out into space.

Brody forces all the air from her lungs, closes her eyes
and trusts Jazz.

Space is a brief tingle of imminent death, but she is
quickly enveloped by the warm furry confines of the giant
robot gorilla's arms.

"Gotcha," comes the little girl voice.

Then an airlock alarm blares and stops when the hatch
clicks shut behind her and Jazz.

Haemt voice reaches her ear, "Airlock secure."

The familiar rubber-coated metal floor of her ship is
under her gaze. The old hum of self-maintained equipment
is in her ears and the smell of her old meals and dirty laundry
are in her nose. "Thanks, Jazz."

"Anytime, boss."

She climbs to her feet and makes her way to the pilot's console. Through the viewport is the room she was just in, but the transparent-steel is cracked and punctured, with atmosphere streaming out in a white cloud.

"We can leave anytime, boss," says the fiery, red-furred gorilla.

"Did you dump the industrial accident evidence?"

"Done."

A sudden bump from outside draws her attention. She looks and sees Cunningham's surprised face peering in, dead and cracked from the rapid space freeze.

"Sad waste of life."

"It's what he signed on for, to be a distraction"

She pulls the device from her pocket and plugs it into a slot in Jazz's chest. "How'd we do?"

The robot's eyelids close like apertures and flutter briefly, "98 terabytes of information."

“And...” Haemt is gray-skinned and stooped like all zero-G people. He was raised in the orbit of Mars and is old enough to know life before artificial gravity was a thing. Skinny, long-fingered and completely incapable of living at 1-G, he looks ridiculous strapped into the harness that holds him off the deck. The cords and padding that cut into his smooth, muscle-free body look painful, though he says otherwise. He wears an augmented reality helm. Through the yellow-tinted glass, Brody can see his huge blue eyes scrolling through some text.

“Security is on their way. I seeded the chatter and they are already focusing on an industrial accident, but we should get going.”

Brody sits in the pilot’s chair and types a few commands into the ship’s computer and hits execute, ‘we’ll pop the negative-mass drive and open a blackhole. That’ll put a few thousand miles between us and this construction station.

The engines begin to rumble and the generation ship filling the viewport begins to dwindle as Brody reverses away from it.

“Next stop, a prison fit for a sun.”

Matilda hates defiance. She hates backbone and grit.
And the warden seems to be displaying all of them.

“I am doing the best that I can.”.

Matilda greets the ploy instantly, “The best? I thought we were almost there?” Matilda stares down at the man, allowing the silence to brood.

“Just a few more weeks, Matilda. I promise.”

“We could officially take over your little prison. Let the world know how you run things up here. Maybe we create tales of little dalliances to tell your wife about. Help me complete my quest and the solar system will be free of me once and for all, but then everyone likes a good death. Maybe we should ask your kid?”

Matilda snaps her fingers and a smart glass is placed in her hand. She looks at it briefly before turning it around to show the warden.

His face crumbles.

The image is of his son, a pudgy twelve-year-old finger resting on the red button that will open the airlock door behind him.

“Hi, Billy,” Matilda says.

Billy waves at the recorder.

“Please don’t. Billy, can you hear me? It’s dad! Please don’t hit that button!”

Billy waves again and smiles at the recorder.

Matilda’s laugh is dismissive, “Honestly? You beg your child to save himself when it is you that holds the key to his safety.”

“I will do anything, please, Matilda, you know that.”

“Then why is it taking so long to retrofit the prison with the specifications I asked? God waits.”

“Soon, I promise.”

Her thin-lipped mouth pulls back into the familiar knowing smirk. “God has limitless patience, even for tiny men like you.”

“Thank you, Matilda, thank you so much.”

“But I never said I do.”

A month later Brody's ship maintains a heading behind Mercury. Hidden from the intense heat thrown, the sun Jazz celebrates, "all eighteen drone beacons just went dead. Meaning we got insertion in the shielding units."

"Did you start the timer?"

"Yes."

Haemt nods and moves the fingers of his right hand as if inputting some text. A timer pops up in the top corner of the ship's front display, it says 23 hours and 57 minutes. "What we really should be concerned with is how well I coded our escape route, based on the information we got, these explosions are going to shred those shielding units, but only if my math is error-free.' he pauses, fingers working a virtual calculator.

"yah, everything should be fine."

Haemt's promise for 'should be' was jarring. He wasn't normally an optimistic guy, and this taste of it is a shock to hear. "You developing subroutines that mimic faith?"

She watches him frown, a gesture that makes him look like a cross between a salamander and a monkey. “Faith? Humanity’s worst trait. Just look at you. All the faith in the world isn’t going to make the twelve digits sitting in your account worth anything.”

“We shall see.” Brody knows he might be right. After this, humanity will be set back a thousand years. Galactic will rebuild the power system, blame Matilda, maybe even put the whole free the sun movement in the history books, but if they can’t, if she destroys these shielding units and frees the sun and they can’t rebuild the system the information Jazz crunched says it would take a million years for humanity to recover. “Fuck ‘em.” Brody decides. “There is only one reason to wake up each morning and that’s to remind yourself that you aren’t dead. That’s going to be a lot easier to do with a trillion dollars to spend.”

She thinks she sees Haemt rolls his eyes, “Of course, boss, whatever you say.”

The warden promises it is done, as twenty muscle-twitching orange-clad prisoners enter with Matilda at their center, deep into the cargo hold of the prison-orbiter.

The cargo hold takes up a large portion of the orbiter's aft. It is lit with white light and hums with seventy-five CPUs running a googolplex of routines.

He stops and says, "As you instructed. A modified negative mass drive" pointing to a personal transport-sized black box.

"Is it wired and connected to the ship"

"As instructed."

Matilda smiles.

"What is it going to do?"

"Open a portal to my God."

"You'll kill us all."

"No,' Matilda's smile broadens. "No, God promises we never die, at least not without purpose."

Brody is counting down as the timer in the top portion of the screen hits zero and eighteen nuclear explosions occur simultaneously.

In space, the splitting atoms are less stunning than they would be on Earth, there is no fireball, but then there is also nothing to slow the blast wave down either. But that is not the point.

The point is the “Incoming EMP.” Jazz warns.

The eighteen giant waves of energy role toward the small ship.

“Haemt, Whitehole us please.’

“Aye aye, boss.”

Haemt hits the execute key and a small blackhole opens, sucks in the small ship and closes. The EMP pulse races over the now empty spot.

Brody pilots the ship out of the corresponding Whitehole a million miles beyond Pluto, leans back in her chair and breathes a sigh of relief.

A relief that lasts exactly three minutes, for when the tech surrounding the sun dies, the star releases centuries' worth of energy in one giant solar flare. This unexpected energy wave is filled with violent particles and murderous radiation. It washes over everything.

All organic life it touches dies instantly, microwaved, every cell cooked down into a shriveled dead mass of worthlessness.

Brody is not the only human to survive but is certainly one of only a few to do so.

The population of the solar system can really only sit and watch and wait for their turn.

It takes five minutes for the entirety of Galactic Corp to catch the wave and become a graveyard of semi-completed projects.

It takes eight minutes to reset the 3.8 billion years worth of life's trial and error on Earth.

Matilda, though, has to wait 4.2 hours for the solar tsunami to reach her.

When the wave arrives at the prison, it unleashes the power contained in the negative-mass bomb.

A portal opens and sucks Matilda through.

On the other side, Matilda feels pain like she never felt before. She is being born again, with every organ inside her body, every cell turning inside out.

The agony stops with Matilda's last moment. She finds herself staring at the black curtain of space. She is floating. The curtain parts and a universe-sized yellow eye with a slit of soulless black at its center, focuses on her.

Her broken body fills with love.

A voice?

No, more like pure knowledge reaches her. The knowledge is not spoken, it does not vibrate air particles, or reach her ears, or have to penetrate understanding in her brain. Instead, she feels the words as if they are spoken directly to her soul.

The message from her God is a simple one.

As her will to exist ebbs and she fades into the ether, the understanding goes with her that she was known, even if for the briefest slivers of time, by her God and thanked for her efforts.

And that alone makes it all worth it.

Voices

by Sam French

It was really as simple as this: the planet “next door” had a better moon than ours. Superficially speaking, it just looked nicer. It looked more like a moon, or “the moon,” the one from the early myths. You looked up at the moon from the planet “next door” and thought to yourself “I feel like I could really be an original human and could really be on Earth and could really be walking on a beach or underneath a canopy of trees or at one of those mini-mall things whatever they were.” And it filled you with a deep happiness. It wasn’t just that it was nicer looking, though. It was a better size and shape which affected all sorts of things and was just one of the reasons the planet “next door” was better than ours and the lives of those who lived on it were better, too. So one day I was at one of the Council meetings and I just said, joking at first but serious by the end of the sentence, “What if we stole their moon?” (This isn’t, ultimately, a story about stealing a moon but this is where we should start. It really is just a story about reclaiming a basic quality of life, lost for hundreds of generations. About feeling more whole or something.)

Everyone in the Council meeting looked at me like I was crazy and I said, “Why not? They wouldn’t be expecting it.” They wouldn’t be expecting it, a few argued, because it couldn’t be done. The sheer science of it— and this is before we even get into more sort of minute logistics— was flawed. And I said so was the original proposal to colonize these 13 planets but here we were 13,000 years in the future and that in science, impossibilities were meant to be disproved. Surely there were robots who would be big enough— Jenkins, that impossibly nerdy scientist, just said, “Surely they’d notice their moon was missing.” And that was that. I thought about it for 4-5 weeks and developed a sort of plan and I walked into Jenkins office and told him they wouldn’t notice it if we did it when they weren’t looking and then replaced it with something else; if someone was on their planet, at the observation center, perhaps they could cause a diversion and we could switch the moon with something else before anyone noticed. He agreed to do some calculations and I took a private charter shuttle into the deep space asteroid mines to try to find a big enough, sentient enough, and creative enough robot.

(By the way, Jenkins suggested I distract the observers on the planet next door by wearing a low cut shirt so I kicked him in the balls, no joke. People always say I have no decorum but I have good ideas and am good at communicating them so they keep me around. Like even if it's not my idea, I'm usually the one who can get others to believe in it, no matter how abstract it is or theoretical. I know the right words and the right way to say them.)

Robots are typically unimaginative. My first few days at the asteroid mines were spent coding into their com-systems to try to explain what I wanted them to do (their vocabulary is limited as well so it was sort of just along the lines of “I want you to drag a giant rock through space from one planet to another”) and being consistently hacked out of their drives so that they could continue along crushing asteroids for some corporation that built them 2,000 years ago. But after I shifted from the fields (where the robots are larger and stronger) to the middle management offices (these offices, you wouldn’t believe, the size of a hundred suns, these herds of massive robots in the middle of deep space, some cathedrals of servers sort of) I started having more luck. Eventually, I stumbled upon D6Xish, the -ish thrown on by some sardonic programmer who, at origin, gave “Ish” (as I now lovingly call him) a non-typical amount of wishy-washy-ness for a robot of his model.

Ish was big (I'm talking the size of a gas giant big) and strong and (yes) non-committal, but I think this wishy-washy-ness actually taught Ish about the concept of alternative options and he evolved (yes, as they get system updates they literally evolve) to be one of the most open-minded robots I've ever encountered. So when I told him about the heist I was planning, he immediately grasped what I was trying to accomplish. He understood that he should say no, but that he could say yes. And then it was just a matter of appealing to his ego. And getting him to tow a moon-sized asteroid back with us.

So we had a team. Jenkins would program the necessary and (granted) complicated math into Ish's system to help him steal one moon, replace it with a very large asteroid, drag the moon across a solar system, put it into our orbit, remove our moon and destroy it, all without setting off the biggest Space-Eco catastrophe since the E-Black Hole of 14,011. Ish was, to use a phrase I picked up from some of the older texts, the muscle. And I was something else. Jenkins said I had a way with humans which, while it doesn't sound like much, was pretty significant in our world. You would think that with the volume of technolabor required to survive and flourish in these systems, face-to-face comm skills would be a pretty useless resource/skill.

But as it became more useless, it became more rare, until the supply/demand curve entirely flipped and you might suddenly have only three good people on an entire planet at talking or making people laugh or making them believe in themselves. Basically I could elicit emotion, and Jenkins, nerd that he was, was smart enough to realize that emotion is a great and powerful tool or weapon.

Jenkins figured out that there was one day, three and a half their years (2.167 our years) away, when their moon would be eclipsed by the sun for about fourteen minutes, so that was obviously when we were going to strike. Fourteen minutes didn't give us a large margin of error, and it would take Ish twenty-six minutes alone to get into the right position, so I had three and a half years to get hired by their observation center all for a half hour pre-eclipse where I would have to distract them long enough to not notice a massive and misplaced asteroid-mining robot entering their solar system and positioning itself by their moon. We had the element of surprise but that was a lot to ask.

I moved to the planet "next door" and quickly applied for a job in tech mediation. When people asked me why I immigrated I said it was because the conditions of their planet were more favorable (true) and that I had fallen in love with the view of their moon (also true).

I became pretty invaluable early on when I helped the CEO of the tech company negotiate a retirement package with a board member who had never been in the same room with another human before that moment and was, predictably, jumpy. I asked the CEO, before he packed up, to recommend me for government service, even though I wasn't naturally born. 9 months after I had moved, I was working for the observation center. I routinely got coded messages from Jenkins. He was having a bit of trouble with a black hole that was starting to form three galaxies over, just because it was a bit irregular and causing some difficulties guessing what exact path Ish should take back to us with the moon. But he was confident that Ish had the improvisational skills (said without any irony) to overcome any abnormalities it may cause. He also told me that Ish was practicing basic logic puzzles designed for gifted elementary school students, and even learning auditory-English so his comm could be streamlined for us. Everyone was committed, apparently. The Council was behind us too, throwing funding at us constantly and apologizing to me for their initial skepticism. It was top secret, of course, but if we pulled this off we would be a kind-of top secret band of heroes.

(A quick note on quality of life— in deep space, in the colonies, quality of life is entirely dependent on being able to almost, for a moment, for a quick second once a day, forget that we are members of a species-wide diaspora. Thousands of years later, our bones still yearn for that mythological planet, and we crave any trick or illusion to trigger some blood-line-sense-memory that reminds us of our ancestral home. There are genuine medical and psychological studies that explain this phenomenon. A person may live up to thirty years longer if they smell salt water, for instance. Or if they can afford to take a pilgrimage to see one of the three dogs remaining in the universe. That sort of thing. So this is why the stealing of this moon would have big implications. We were just looking for proof that we were human.) (At least that's why Jenkins and I cared. We missed something we had never known. We had a phantom limb that didn't ever exist. I'm not totally sure why Ish wanted to do something. Maybe it was that it was the very last thing a robot would ever be programmed to do. Maybe that was some sort of breaking of chains. Maybe in its mind it was skipping over an evolutionary step, from barely sentient to God, straight away. Shaper of Universe rather than Very Large Wrench. This is speculation.)

So Jenkins was dealing with blackholes and Ish was preparing itself mentally and physically. My main obstacle was the Chief Observer, a man who might as well have been a robot, who clearly had stillness and focus written into his DNA so securely that it might as well have been code itself. I got to know him through other people and what I heard was discouraging. Someone told me about the time they spilled scalding coffee on him, only to see that his rate of breathing didn't even shift, even as the room could smell his prosthetic pants melting. A common joke was that his mother could kill his wife and he wouldn't blink—so focused was he on his ever-important task of observing, of monitoring, of detecting, of knowing the intricacies of the universe as they related to his home. His job was to oversee the observation center, to make sure nothing was wrong amongst the moon, the stars, the heavens. I wouldn't be able to break his focus, so I decided I would have to shift it.

(Ish was ready. Jenkins was feeling good. We were all waiting. I still had to figure this out but I was on to something.)

"When the eclipse happens, maybe we..." I had his attention with a novel idea, a reconceptualization of our job, a reframing of the eclipse not as a lost opportunity to see fourteen minutes of space but as a new opportunity to turn the powerful observation equipment in on itself and to study the core of the planet. A vague and theoretical idea, but as I've said before, I'm good at making them stick. He quickly turned it into his own idea and, better yet, suggested we expand the window from 14 minutes to 45, tripling our efficiency. "But couldn't we miss something happening before the eclipse in space?" I suggested. But his focus had already shifted.

(The thing about our species now is that we have lost some sort of logic. I don't know if it's because original human logic was built in accordance to a natural logic of a world that no longer exists. But we have our own way of thinking now that maybe relates more to Ish than it does to the original humans. And so if it seemed easy to convince the Chief Observer to abandon his post for something else, you have to understand that his brain went through any number of wormholes that haven't yet been mapped to make sense of it.)

On the day we were going to steal the moon, I woke up early to help out with the transition team at the observation center. There would be a moment when a whistle was blown: everyone in the room would hear the whistle and spring to action, turning off some thousands of instruments and equipments and rebooting them and literally reprogramming or even turning them around. At the same time, I'd blow my own metaphorical whistle, heard only by Jenkins and Ish. Ish would begin moving out of the edge of our orbit into the edge of the orbit of the planet "next door," Jenkins constantly in its "ear," chattering about adjustments to arcs, propulsion equations, etc. etc. And I would be making sure the planet "next door" was looking the other way. And as they looked the other way, Ish would take its mechanical arms (roughly 3,321 of them) and web them together to create some sort of net, looping around their moon, replacing it with a similar-enough asteroid. It would then turn on the full force of its thrusters, plus some added equipment with fuel designed by Jenkins specifically for the moment. And away it would float, back into our orbit, carrying our new moon.

And that's exactly how it happened. Almost.

As the equipment was refocused and as Ish was switching out the moon with the asteroid, a distress signal sounded from—all places—an elementary school on the far side of the planet who had been observing the eclipse as a school project. Apparently, some snot-nosed genius budding inventor, a fifth grader, had designed and built and installed a series of periscopic instruments capable of observing the far side of the moon. He wasn't satisfied with the typical educational eclipse observing instruments. And when he saw what looked like a giant space monster absorbing the moon he told his teachers, who understood emergency protocol even if they didn't understand what they were seeing. And so alarms started going off in the observation center and the Chief Observer instantly understood that an invasion of sorts was happening and was preparing to send out emergency missiles. Jenkins had told me that, if Ish was noticed, it would take 13.6 seconds for missiles to reach him. I could tell by looking at the clock that in 17.2 seconds Ish would be out of range and we would be in the clear. Which meant I had to come up with a new distraction—one that would delay the Chief Observer at least 3.6 seconds. Fast-thinking is another generally unneeded skill. Equations plan out so much in our lives that improvisation is generally unnecessary. But it was another skill I somehow possessed. As the Chief Observer rushed to order off the missiles, my mind opened like an encyclopedia and settled on an archaic word that had been deemed almost

meaningless by anthropologists but for some reason had always stuck with me— “sing.” I didn’t really know what exactly it meant or why it came to mind but I knew I was supposed to open up my mouth and let some sort of noise out. I guess something primal kicked in because the noise that came out of me didn’t feel like my own. It felt like my grandmother’s, or like her great-great-grandmother’s, or it felt like a whisper of an imploded star, it sounded like the whistling of light speed, it tilted up and down like the axis of an out of control planet, it rang out like tiny detritus pinging off a metal space station. There were no words but everyone turned to face me, stunned, allowing time to simply pass.

Ish made it home with the moon and put it in our orbit but it didn’t matter.

I told you before that we had just been trying to reclaim some quality of life, mysteriously related to the feeling our ancestors must have had when they stared up at the sky. And it didn’t take the moon to find that feeling, to match the heavens that they must have felt once before. It took a voice. And everyone has one of those. You don’t need to steal them.

So this was just a story about remembering that.

The Grab

by Eric Del Carlo

Helicopter spin, down and down. But there was no chopper, just Vina in a pressure-mold dropsuit, twirling down through the atmosphere. Air shrieked, high and thin, the scream ghosts made when they briefly touched the material plane and saw how the living wasted their precious life moments.

Inside the 'suit Vina lay insulated. The rip of the wind couldn't reach her in here, and even the howl of her descent was mostly blocked out by the dampeners. But there was no escaping the gut-hollowing sense of freefall. In the military they taught you to embrace that feeling, to let it empower you. On drop missions they wanted you to feel like you could conquer the world, any world.

Vina had gone along with it, of course. She'd mouthed all the right *oorah*-ish phrases and dutifully declared she was the baddest motherfucker in any given valley. But a human being could never entirely get past the reality that she or he was a spinning speck when dropping from such heights, practically from the mesosphere.

Karlsburg had slid the dropboat in, performing navigational magicks Vina couldn't begin to understand. He had put them in among satellite shadows, disguising the boat's presence amidst pings and echoes and the false dawns of multitudinous sensor arrays.

The fich knew what he was doing, Vina admitted. If that weren't the case, she would surely have been intercepted by now. Security sensors would have zeroed the dropboat, extrapolated every possible descent vector, and sent up zip-drones to razor her out the sky.

So, Karlsburg had met his task. It remained to be seen whether Jeffers had done his. The old man, from his remote site, was supposed to unlock the facility for her. If she came down on the floating complex while its every access was still in full normal lockdown, she would be as dead as if her dropsuit had ruptured.

An old man and a fich. These were her colleagues on this caper. Methuselah and an artificial person. Jeffers had lived so many years, and had extended his existence again and again through drastic medical means, that he was permanently webbed into his life-sustaining equipment, there in that remote lair of his.

But Vina had witnessed what the ancient creature could do. Same for Karlsburg. Fich or not, he had preternatural piloting skills. Both men had expressed a keen enthusiasm for this heist. Both wanted something, desperately.

Jeffers wanted his youth back. Karlsburg wanted to have a human soul.

And what did she want? Was it any less abstract and fanciful than the desires of her cohorts? This whole caper was mad. She knew that. Probably the two men knew it too.

She continued to drop, mile after mile. The 'suit was coated with a stealth polymer. It was next generation military tech. Vina had gotten hold of the design specs before her discharge. Only a sensing array deliberately focused on her would detect this drop.

But she was just a speck. A spinning speck...

She was above the clouds. So was the clandestine facility. She saw it now, still well below. It looked like an engine part, all unlovely angles and utilitarian purpose. It hung there in the high air, a secret kept from the rest of the world beneath it.

But once a secret entered reality, once it existed, it could be found out. Vina had found out about the Quantum Rosetta. Her military career, before it had collapsed so spectacularly, had taken her from combat to military intelligence. There she had brushed up against complex secrets, mad science researches, biotechnologies and xenotechnologies. The deep lonely wilderness of unfettered knowledge.

She'd heard the whispers. She had glimpsed the outlines of the great discovery without ever being entirely privy to its mysteries. The military had made her into someone capable of such aberrant perceptions, so she couldn't really be blamed for uncovering the truth about the Quantum Rosetta.

With a twitch of the dropsuit's controls, she put herself into a counterspin. She started to slow. The facility grew larger, below. She wouldn't know if Jeffers had succeeded until she landed on it.

That crazy old man. A husk, a mummy. A dozen tendrils feeding him fluids, taking away tainted blood, exciting nerves which should have long ago disintegrated into quietude. He was a genius, certified and certifiable. In his croaking, servo-enhanced voice he had spoken of the glories of the youthful body, the swift sure beating of the heart, the song of flashing limbs, of twanging sinew, of swelling loins. It meant everything to him, to have that back. He had turned away from all other useful research, becoming an obsessive, a crackpot.

And was Karlsburg any less eccentric, in his spooky watchful way? His generation of carefully sculpted artificiality was several removes from the "uncanny valley" class of fiches. He could speak and blink and sweat and urinate with convincing verve. His thought processes were within human parameters. It was a fluke, no different from a random artistic aptitude, that he could pilot so adeptly. He possessed emotional structure. But you could feel the absence in him, the lack of a key spiritual ingredient. It was the same with all fiches.

The counterspin of her 'suit was abetted now by the gravitational flux unit. She'd used these on combat drops, when she was still a gristly recruit. The unit's field made you feel like your insides were being stirred, but the effect was dramatic. The freefall turned into something even more unnerving, in its way. Now she was hanging up in the high sky, slowing further and further, until she floated with the cunning weight of a crow's feather.

The facility rose and spread. She picked her landing point. The pressure-mold 'suit turned, and she became upright. Seconds later she put her boots on the surface. The descent was done. She was here.

She moved toward the nearby access hatchway. Three strides, two heartbeats to get there. If Jeffers hadn't hacked the locking protocols, this would be the last action she ever took.

Vina turned the lock, and the hatch opened. She didn't pause to savor the victory. She entered. Her dropsuit was remolding tighter onto her body. At thirty-seven she was still very fit. Had she still been in the ranks, she would have still qualified for every kind of physical duty. But military service required more than a hale body; or most of the time it did. Her discharge, however, had been for subtler, more human reasons.

The high-altitude facility was uncrewed, but it had been designed so that personnel could move about inside it. It was pressurized. It had an atmosphere. The corridor before her was lit.

She moved down it. The information she had gleaned about the Quantum Rosetta and its storage did not include a perfect layout of this complex. She raised her dropsuit's faceplate, felt the neutral air on her sweat-stung face. Her ears strained at the humming silence. She had dropped from near-space many times, battle-strapped to a fare-thee-well, ready to zero anything that got in her way. Those old instincts remained in place, guiding her senses.

Battlefield logic let her conduct a systematic search. This facility was classified, off the books, black bag all the way. Still, what she was after was being kept here. She was almost certain of that.

In planning this caper she hadn't shared her shadow of doubt with Karlsburg and Jeffers. Those two men, one ancient and one synthetic, would function best with absolute certainty on their side. If the Quantum Rosetta was at this facility, then she needed their skills to reach it. Afterward, its rewards would be shared equally among the three of them.

But it was yet possible that the object they sought wasn't here. Possible still that it did not in fact exist at all.

She didn't allow that quiver of uncertainty to grow. If all this turned out to be for nothing, she...she... She honestly didn't know what would be next for her, in this shattered life she'd led these past few years.

Maybe the outlines she'd discerned were false. Perhaps she had deluded herself into believing the unbelievable. Or--better, but still ultimately a catastrophe--she might merely have misinterpreted the cryptic intelligence she'd uncovered.

As a soldier she had never had this luxury of doubt. You got orders, you got intel, you went. If something was fucked up, you unfucked it on the fly. She sought that same hard-bitten poise now, to match the primed mode of her battlefield senses.

It was those senses, tuned to the potential presence of mechanical sentries or any other kind of hindrance, which first rippled with a strange supple impression. Something brushed Vina's personal reality. An inexplicable fleeciness passed along the extremities of her perceptibility. Principles softened and bent. Cosmic edicts, etched into the first stones ever to cool, suddenly seemed to be in play. A great gentle surreality swarmed over one sense after the next.

And yet her foot lifted, came down, she stepped forward into yet another corridor. Her physical self was still realized, operating as if these senses-bending mirages weren't occurring.

In one way they weren't occurring. In another, they were more real than reality. Quantum delirium.

She continued forward and the effect increased. She broke those two facts down into their barest validities. Put together they meant only one thing: she was getting closer.

A closed portal stood at the end of the passageway. The floors and walls were a mousy shade. The fixtures and fittings were matte. The complex was tidy and spartan and utile, and it wasn't really meant to have people aboard it, despite its carefully maintained environment. Those who held the secret of this site hadn't opened it to research, to further exploration of the astounding breakthrough which had led to the creation of the Quantum Rosetta.

Vina understood that thinking because it was stolid military thinking: something of fantastic power was under lockdown here, and its existence would not be made general knowledge until it could be utilized to strike the most terror in the worst enemies, whoever that might be at any given time.

In the meantime, the tippy-toppest brass didn't trust anybody around the goddamn thing, not even those who had discovered it.

The vast placid softness continued to coat her senses, shifting the center of gravity for each one. Her hearing dropped to the points of her shoulders. She tasted air through her navel. Her vision prised and refracted into a hundred errant beams, but she still managed to see, focusing only on forward sight lines.

She was at the sealed portal.

This was the other reason she was in on this caper, this grab. She had the combat experience to make a drop, but she was also here for just this sort of brute eventuality. A locked door.

Grinning, she reared back, lifted a heavy boot, and kicked the fucker down, just as she would have on a git-it-done field mission.

But now there was no time to linger. Beyond, a chamber stood. At the center of the space was the object. Vina stepped in, pulled it out of its anti-gravity sphere, and shoved the strange ovoid into her 'suit's storage sack.

After that, it was getaway time. No more niceties. She beat a retreat along the quickest route. She stepped out onto the facility's exterior once more, to its edge.

Then she dove. And again the air screamed, and now the first ribbons of cloud rose toward her.

Karlsburg was supposed to have extracted the dropboat and swung it around. He was scheduled to collect her in mid-plummet, just above commercial traffic lanes. Jeffers was supposed to scramble all commercial sensors, not enough to endanger anybody, just to serve as a confusion for any drones that might belatedly pursue them from the facility.

Supposed to, supposed to, supposed to... But things could go wrong, on a job, in a life. Yet Vina didn't concern herself with that right now. Her senses were adjusting to the proximity of the Quantum Rosetta. Reality was bending back toward recognizable configurations.

That, of course, was what this was all about, she thought as she plunged through the sky. Remake reality. Give the three of them each a second chance. Because none of them could live with how their lives were presently shaped.

* * *

She had enlisted as an angry youngster, furious with the world, with all the worlds. Every place she had yet traveled in her short life she'd seen only greed, ignorance and callousness. Maybe in the military she could turn her twangy adolescent rage into something useful.

Military life provided her with a purpose, or at least with the trappings of one. There was an undeniable cold comfort to be found in the aggressive rituals, the missions, the unquestioned orders. She became a very decent combat trooper.

It wasn't enough to constitute a life. But it was what she had.

Likely her existence would have gone on like that, interminably, neither improving nor worsening. She would have gone on her drops, fighting whoever she was told to fight. And one day the percentages probably would have caught up with her. She'd zero out, and that would be that.

Instead, she had met Laeq. Laeq, who had a child, a girl, named Eza. Love had not sought Vina out before. She scarcely recognized it when it found her now. It didn't matter where or how she met Laeq; didn't matter why he already had a child. Vina swiftly loved them both, and their presences, and the reciprocations of her love, changed her life as nothing before had ever had the power to do.

This was love, truly.

This was joy.

This was contentment and satisfaction.

Beyond these new wonderful emotional states, Vina discovered that her life was also changing in other ways. Her focus as a soldier increased dramatically. Her problem-solving skills escalated. These changes were noted by officers. She was given a battery of tests. Afterward, to her surprise she was promoted into military intelligence. She held that post for years, excelling in her role.

Vina, Laeq and Eza. All was perfect. Then it wasn't. Then...everything was chaos. And terror. And horror.

The military was laced into the infrastructures of every colonized world for a reason. Dangers existed in the settled galaxy. Human-made dangers. Nobody had yet found or found any evidence of alien species. But humankind had brought with it out into the yawning black many of its old bad habits. One of these was a tendency to express extreme--or at least deeply felt--beliefs through a tradition called terrorism.

Vina's family was snatched up in one of these spasms of terrorization. The military scrambled, of course. Mil intel devoted resources to finding and rescuing the abductees. Vina herself wasn't allowed near the situation, but colleagues nonetheless fed her covert briefings. Demands were made for the lives of Laeq and Eza. It was later determined that the two had been targeted deliberately, as the family of an intelligence officer.

The hostage situation erupted gruesomely. No one on scene survived. The debriefing cleared operatives of any wrongdoing. Her colleagues were vastly sympathetic about her loss.

Needless to say, the commiserations didn't do her much good. Her existence had fragmented. So had her mental state, her job performance, even her ability to function as an off-duty individual. Somehow she clung to her role for several months more. But her discharge was written on the wall.

Before that happened, though, she caught the whispers. She deduced the ethereal outlines of the great discovery.

She put her secret investigations together and decided that the Quantum Rosetta might just exist. And if it did, she meant to take it. Because it could give her back her life, that life which was empty ashes without her husband and daughter.

* * *

Karlsburg snatched her out of the vaulting ether, and Jeffers somehow made himself mobile through the use of a gigantic servosuit; and they all met up at the prearranged coordinates, high up in glacial hills.

Vina divested herself of the dropsuit. Her two accomplices watched her intently. Only Jeffers' face was visible amongst his ambulatory and life-sustaining machineries, but those features were a slow horror of crumbling decades. Yet the mind was still sharp, his hacking skills intact. He had proven that today.

Karlsburg had landed the dropboat on an icy mesa, and led her wordlessly to this airlocked hollow in the hillside. His face was a study in manufactured handsomeness, and his vat-grown body was a superb masculine specimen, but Vina had never felt a flicker of vestigial attraction for the fitch. Some people, it was generally known, got off seriously on sex with artificial persons. But the vague blankness of Karlsburg and all his ilk had always troubled her on some primal, instinctive level. It was a prejudice she wasn't particularly proud of, when she took the time to ponder it.

She reached into the discarded dropsuit's storage sack, at the hollow of the back. This clandestine hillside chamber was sparsely furnished. Their group could hole up here for several days, if necessary, though there had been no signs of pursuit since she'd dived off the facility.

Vina set the ovate object on a table. It was about the size of a dinosaur egg, the outer surface stippled, a faint aquamarine color.

The "egg" wasn't the Quantum Rosetta. The Quantum Rosetta was inside this container.

A heavy sense of ceremony descended on the chamber. Vina's gaze flickered once more over the faces of the others. The glittery need was there, evident even in Karlsburg's somewhat vacant stare. But there was also the dull profound realization that they'd grabbed what they wanted, the caper was over. If this turned out to be a false prize, they would have no other recourse.

Unopened, the container both did and did not hold the Quantum Rosetta. Somewhere Schrödinger was clucking his tongue and silently advising they go no further.

"I feel strange," Jeffers croaked in his mostly synthesized voice.

"My senses are...fluctuating," Karlsburg added. For a second this surprised Vina, but she quickly rebuked herself. Fiches had the same organic sensory apparatus as any womb-born human.

She told both men, "It wears off pretty fast."

They waited it out. The tension remained on the air. The only sounds were the meditative hums of Jeffers' servosuit and the sough of frigid wind against the sealed airlock door.

Finally, everyone was ready.

Vina reached toward the table.

The Quantum Rosetta was supposed to have the capability of rewriting existence on a heretofore unguessed cosmic/molecular scale. The breakthrough which had led to its creation had supposedly shown that reality's substance was far *far* more malleable than any physicist would ever have previously allowed.

Again: supposed, supposed, supposed... Time to find out the truth.

She held her desire in mind, a clear picture of Laeeq and Eza, as if she were a little girl anticipating a miracle at the blowing out of birthday candles. The others were, of course, doing the same. The original researchers were said to have formed their breakthrough into a physical substance, given it a strange gelatinous life as it were.

The egg had a simple clasp on its side. She undid it and pulled the halves of the ovoid apart. Something coruscating and amorphous and shatteringly beautiful spilled out onto the tabletop.

And with that, the world ended.

* * *

Or, not the *world*. Not this planet which the three heisters were presently on. "World" as in personal reality. And really, it would be three worlds that ended in that moment, wouldn't it?

Vina hoped so. She wished the best for her two associates, who had believed the unbelievable, and who had done their jobs with absolute professionalism. With luck, Jeffers now had his youth back and Karlsburg had gained a soul.

But what about her? Had she gotten her wish?
"All right, drop dogs! You know the drill and you know the mission! I want a clean strike. I want death from above. I want you badass motherfuckers to earn your paychecks today!
DO YOU HEAR ME?"

And in full-throated chorus: "We hear you, Sergeant!"
Vina screamed it out too, automatically. Her unit was filing onto the troop-sized dropship. She looked right and left, saw faces she hadn't seen in years. There was Mendez who was a captain now. And--Christ!--there went Ravkov who'd died in combat on Cherry's Reach....

But no. Vina's time sense was skewed. Her *now* was off by years. She recognized this mission, even as obedient instincts took her aboard the dropship. She was in a 'suit, battle-strapped and ready to fight.

She flexed her muscles, felt the sinewy tightness everywhere. This wasn't the body she'd had as an intelligence officer, when desk duties had inevitably taken away some of her tautness. In this now she was still a combat trooper. Still very much a fighter, still imbued with that contemptuous anger that had driven her into the military in the first place.

This was the last drop she had undertaken before meeting Laeq and his daughter Eza for the first time. Now it did matter where and how that had happened. It would occur at a formal military function, where she had been tapped for security detail. She would catch Laeq's eye.

He would attempt to talk to her all night, despite her protestations that she was on duty. Eza, also there with her navigational system contractor father, kept asking who the pretty lady was.

Those two marvelous people, parent and child, would turn Vina's life around. They would, without explicitly meaning to, instill her with calm and confidence. She would know love for the first time. Subsequently, she would be deemed fit to serve in mil intel. And at a point after that, her husband and adopted daughter would be kidnapped by terrorists, who would make a hash of everything and get everyone killed.

Or she could resign from the ranks, as she was eligible to do after some many years in. She could truly start a new life, give up what was basically a charade to start with. Her heart had never really beat with a soldier's blood, after all. She had mouthed her way through these past years, going along because life had left her so few other opportunities.

Instead, she could go off with Laeeq and Eza, taking them both out of harm's way at the same time.

That sounded like an awfully good idea.

Behind her dropsuit's faceplate she grinned. She had never grinned on a mission before. But this one, after all, would be her last.

The sergeant was screaming more get-pumped slogans, and the unit was responding according to long-held traditions. The dropship was in motion, swooping out toward the enemy.

Vina just needed to live through this last drop. She felt confident she could do that. She had a reason to live now.

Specter of Crime

by Kevin R. O'Hara

“Wait, you’re what?” June asked incredulously.

“I’m dead,” a low-pitched woman’s voice from her laptop answered calmly.

“Dead dead? Like you’ve kicked the mortal coil and walked through the valley of the shadow of whatever the saying is? That kind of dead?”

June, a winsome Asian American woman in her early thirties, flipped over the unusual device in her hands. It was a simple, white, plastic headband with metal sensor pads on the underside. Attached to it via several wires was a small black box of dials and exposed circuit boards. Another wire connected that to June’s laptop. She checked each of the connections and then focused back on the screen. In a window, there was a pixelated image of what could have been a woman’s face, though the details were vague and colorless. It looked back at her silently.

“How long have you been dead?” June asked in a disconcerted tone.

“For many years. I don’t know though. You lose all sense of time when you’re a ghost.”

“Pardon my skepticism, but I’m thinking you somehow hacked this thing and are toying with me. It doesn’t appear to have any wireless capability ... which means maybe my laptop is compromised. Let’s see...”

June tapped some buttons on her laptop to disable the internet connection, but the image remained on the screen.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Please please, don’t turn it off!” pleaded the voice, “I haven’t spoken to anyone in a really long time. It’s been so lonely. How are you even hearing me? No one hears me, not ever.”

“Well, if what you’re saying is true, somehow you’re interfacing with this device. It’s called a Dream Catcher, or at least that’s the codename MRI-Novation’s R&D Department gave it. It’s supposed to be a prototype of a short-wave brain scanner, which I assumed was to translate images from the mind of a sleeping person to a computer. You know, record dreams. If I were marketing it, I would have called it ‘Netflix’ personally.”

“You didn’t make it?” the voice asked.

“No.” June shook her head. “I stole it.”

“Who are you?”

“Who are you and how did you find me?”

There was a long silence and then, “My name is Makayla. It pretty boring being a ghost. I sometimes follow people who seem interesting. I’ve seen you prowling around at night and figured you were a spy or something. Are you just some sort of thief?”

“I’m a professional, not just a low-end cash grabber. I work in tech. Some companies have great ideas. Other companies want those ideas and pay me well to acquire them,” June explained with pride.

“How do you manage that by yourself?” Makayla asked.

“While most high-tech companies have state-of-the-art security for their new toys, it still all comes down to human fallibilities. I have a knack for figuring out which employee will be carting the object in question to a conference or off-site client. So, it usually just comes down to a simple pickpocket or hotel room intrusion during their morning shower. The MRI-Novation genius took the device home to show off to his friends before embarking on a trip to Japan. He probably didn’t realize I replaced it for a small scalp massager until he arrived in Tokyo. How embarrassing for him,” June gave a self-satisfied grin, and then refocused, “Enough about me. What’s it like being a ghost, Makayla?”

“Hard. Often, I just exist in a haze of confusion. Sometimes, I can get clarity and view the living world. I see people going about doing their things, but they never see me or hear me. If I focus really hard I can disrupt things like small electronics, but that’s about it. Sorry about your microwave yesterday, that was just me trying to get your attention.”

“What? How did you know about my...? Ok, go on then, prove to me you’re a ghost now.”

“You want me to cause your microwave to start sparking again?”

“No, if you can mess with electronics, then, um, do something to my clock over there.”

The face disappeared from the screen and a few seconds later the digital alarm clock went dark and then restarted with a blinking “12:00” with a loud buzz.

June eyes widened and she sat there with her mouth hanging open, trying to make sense of what she just witnessed.

Finally, she asked, “Can you walk through walls?”

The woman’s blurred face returned to the laptop window and she said, “I can’t really touch anything, so yes, I travel about pretty much wherever I want.”

“Interesting,” June said with a slight smile curling on the corner of her lips.

“I can go just about anywhere in the city, but once a year I’m forced to return back to where I died. It’s messy then; I lose control and have to relive everything. It’s like watching an old movie again and again, and not a traditional holiday comfort movie like ‘It’s Wonderful Life’ or ‘Die Hard’, more like having to suffer through ‘Love Actually’ on loop every year. I used to think having my time of the month was bad, but now my time of the year is so much worse,” the ghost’s voice betrayed a touch of humor, sounding less hollow than it had at the start of their conversation.

June gave a chuckle, and then cleared her throat hesitantly before asking, “How did you die?”

Makayla didn’t answer. Silence hung in the room. June checked her laptop to ensure everything was still working.

“Makayla, what would make you happy?”

“This. Talking to people. To know I still exist. Sartre said that hell is other people, but I think he was wrong. Hell is being around other people where no one knows or cares that you exist.”

June let that sink in and then gave a wide smile and announced, “I have a proposition for you, Makayla. I can hook this device up to the internet. You could talk with anyone, as much as you wanted, and they wouldn’t even know you were dead. In fact, I think I can hook you into a Virtual Reality social app, so you could even have a virtual body to interact with others. Okay?”

“Yes, I would like that,” and then her excitement drained from her voice and she said, “what do you want from me?”

“You have talents that I could put to good use. I see a great partnership here. A great team if I can get a muscle for us.”

* * *

Jimmy Bonnely was a large man with short cropped black hair, steely blue eyes, and oversized ears. On his neck was a black tattoo of dagger behind a pocket watch with the unsubtle words “Killing Time” underneath it. Despite his rough appearance, his expression carried a perpetual boyish appeal.

He checked around inside the construction site trailer to make sure he was alone and then lifted a cardboard box onto the planning table and opened it. Inside was a generic looking smartphone, a cheap virtual reality mobile headset, and a white envelope. The phone was vibrating with an incoming call. He placed it to his ear as he carefully scanned through the aluminum window blinds.

“You come recommended, Jimbone,” said June’s digitally altered voice on the other end.

“Jimbone? We friends? Ain’t sure how you knew to connect me, friend,” Jimmy responded in a gravelly voice.

“My talent is in acquiring information. I’m told your talents are getting into locked places and dealing with, let just say, obstacles.”

“That’s what they say, huh?” he responded carefully, “I ain’t cheap you know.”

“The envelope contains seven hundred and fifty dollars. It’s yours. So is this burner and the other item in the box. After we do the job and unload the goods, you’ll be seeing a percentage of the profit, at least twenty times that cash, guaranteed. Okay?”

“Five thousand for one night of work?” Jimmy asked.

“Fifteen thousand, minimum,” June responded with a contained annoyance at his mathematical inaptitude, “but it will be more than one night. I want to do several nights of run-throughs, so you have the plan and timing down.”

“Alright. And it’s just you and me going in?”

“No, I’ll be running cover. My associate is an expert ... hacker. She’ll deal with all of the electronic security and cameras.”

“So, I just gotta deal with the locks and taking out any guards.” Jimmy opened the envelope and started counting the bills.

“Hopefully you won’t have to take out anyone; I’d prefer there to be no violence.”

“I don’t want no violence neither, but if you know me like you say you do than you know I ain’t afraid to put someone down if I have to.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Theft is much easier to get away with than murder.”

“Your call, just saying if some security guard gets in my way and can ID me, well, I don’t hesitate, but I do clean up my messes good.” Jimmy picked up the headset and examined it. “What’s this other thing in the box? Some sort of welding safety glasses?”

“No. You attach the phone to the front of it. At eleven o’clock tonight find a private space and put it on. It’s called virtual reality and it’ll be how we practice the job.”

“That supposed to impress me?”

* * *

“Wow, I’m impressed,” said the avatar of Jimmy.

The virtual reality background was a brilliant starfield featuring a gigantic planet Earth next to Jimmy, who appeared as a blue mannequin with two large cartoon eyes. His head spun around as he tried to take in the new experience.

After a few moments, he noticed two other figures.

They were similar in appearance except one was purple with long, plastic-like, straight black hair and the other was featureless and gray.

The purple one spoke up, “Hello Jimbone, we spoke on the phone earlier. Nice to see you here.”

“This is fucking amazing. I ain’t never seen virtual reality before. It feels like I’m really in outer space. Shit.” Jimmy avatar’s head continued to swivel all about.

June continued, “I’d like to introduce you to my partner, M. She’s the hacker I told you about.”

The gray avatar nodded her head. Makayla simply said, “Charmed, I’m sure.”

“This is really cool shit. Are we robbing a space station?” Jimmy laughed.

"No, give me a moment," June said and a few seconds later the expansive star field faded out and the lobby of an office building loaded in around them.

"Whoa," said Jimmy.

"I agree, whoa," said Makayla, "I need to learn how to create stuff like this in VR."

"This place is the interior of CoraTec Solutions, a contract innovation company that works with the auto industry. The idiots in charge made a fully three-dimensional virtual walkthrough of their facilities. I'm not sure if they were just playing with the VR tech or trying to impress their foreign offices. Either way, I got access to it and I've put it into a game engine, so we can do some simulations around guard patterns and alternate escape routes. I'll teach you how to manipulate the data, M, so you can help with that."

"So, we're going to play a video game to practice for the job? Like playing Grand Theft Auto to learn how to jack cars?" Jimmy asked.

"Essentially, yes," replied June, "only this will probably be a little less exciting. I'm not programming in any combat or rock songs."

"What am I stealing?"

A hexagonal shiny tag no bigger than a quarter appeared out of thin air alongside a white computer case.

"This is our target. The disk is a prototype of a personal wireless transmitter that can connect to automated car-to-car mesh networks. Basically, self-driving cars talk to each other constantly about their position, speed, braking, etcetera. Cars can be aware nearly instantly of entire city traffic patterns and potential accidents. This little gizmo is for humans to get their own signature on the network. Being factored directly into the car-to-car communication grid is better than relying on individual car cameras and radar detectors. It'll be for pedestrians, bicycles, kids, pets..."

"Ok, why do you want it?" Jimmy asked.

“Two reasons: The first is I’ve got a thing for new tech; it’s my passion. My uncle, my mentor, used to refer to me as the ‘Zeitgeist Thief’ because I successfully stole a model of a popular smartphone and separately a digital assistant home speaker before either were made public. I’m proud of that title and I want to continue to live up to it. The second reason is there will likely be a huge market of paranoid people who fear self-driving cars accidentally running over them and their bichon frises. A competitor firm offered to pay fifty thousand dollars for this prototype and calibration hardware.”

“I thought you said the job was for fifteen thousand before?”

“That’s your cut of it, moron,” Makayla interjected.

“Oh, got it,” and then after a moment, “don’t call me moron. Am I gonna have to put up with attitude from her, cause so help me... and I don’t care if she’s a woman.”

“Cool it, both of you. We have a long couple of nights of going through this scenario and I can’t have you at each other’s throats. We’re all professionals here. Okay?”

“Sorry,” Makayla apologized, “What are all our parts in the plan?”

“At 10 PM on Friday, I’m going to sabotage the car of Don Leery. It will get double flat tires about eight minutes after leaving his home to go to his job as a security guard for CoraTec. I’ll be out of sight nearby jamming his cell phone, so he won’t be able to call to tell them he’ll be late. This will make the facility understaffed for about fifteen minutes as the on-duty guard will be preoccupied with calling Don or trying to arrange for a last-minute replacement. Jimmy, you’ll be at the back-service entry. M will disable cameras and door alarms giving you a short window to break in, no more than thirty seconds.”

“No problem, as long as she can do her part,” Jimmy said.

“Consider me a security specialist. Cameras and door alarms are easy,” Makayla responded with a competitive tone.

“After that, M will scout the various avenues to get to the research lab on the third floor. As we won’t have audio contact, she’ll blink the lights to guide the way that is most devoid of people to keep you, and them, safe. She’ll disable keycard readers on any internal doors, but you’ll have to work them open. We’ll practice each route several times and I’ll randomize guards, afterhours employees, and unexpected alarm scenarios. Once you’re in the lab, simply grab the device and PC and repeat the process back out. Don’t worry about being too tidy. With all of the tampering M will be doing, it will take them more than thirty minutes to figure out what happened. As long as you’re out before then, you should be able to get away. Then, bring the device to the drop off point. Okay?”

“I ain’t dropping nothing off until I get paid.”

“That’s fine, I doubt you have the contacts to fetch anywhere near the price I can. You hold onto it until I have secured the deal, which should be in under seventy-two hours.”

“I gotta wait four days to get paid?”

“Seventy-two hours is only ... never mind. Where do we start?” asked Makayla.

The 3D environment spun around to the back entrance of the building, showing a loading dock and a side door with a camera in a high corner over it.

“I’ve disabled Don’s car and phone and given you the go ahead on the burner. I’ll start the timer ... now.”

* * *

On Friday night, Jimmy stood in the shadows thirty feet away from the real world back door of CoraTec. His phone flashed with a simple text message that read, “Now”.

Jimmy looked around nervously, checking the side alley and the nearby parking lot for any observers. He gave it a moment and then started to walk forward.

He stopped, his heart jumping, as the light over the back door blinked off and on again. Realizing this was the signal from Makayla, he double stepped to the door and immediately went to work on overcoming the lock with a small set of tools.

The door clicked and popped open. Jimmy held his breath for a moment and when no alarm rang, he slipped inside and shut the door behind him.

The small entryway had two doors, one to the first-floor main hallway and the other to the staircase. Jimmy noticed a second black dome of a security camera watching the back door from the inside. He cursed himself for looking directly up at it and silently wished it was an old fashion camera with an obvious lens and blinking light so that he could know with certainty that M had disabled it.

His hand went out to the door to the staircase when the light above the other door started blinking wildly for a moment. He gave a curse under his breath and changed course. He didn't like that he already had to deviate from the optimal route.

The hallway was indeed empty and all the offices that lined the walls were dark. He quickly made his way to the far end and peered around the corner carefully. He knew from the virtual version of the building that the security office was halfway down the corridor from here and had a direct line of site. Across from him was another staircase which was likely locked. He rocked back and forth getting ready to sprint to it. The light near that door did not blink.

After a few moments, he peered around the corner again and caught sight of a guard coming out of the security room. Jimmy ducked away quickly and prepared to run back to the exit.

A few seconds later he heard a loud sparking sound coming from around the corner and heard the guard say, "What the hell? God damn coffee pot." The light above the staircase blinked on and off.

Jimmy dashed across the hall and immediately started working on the door, noting that the guard was heading back into the security office. In a few seconds, he had it open and was through. He gently closed it behind him so it didn't make a latching noise.

Without pausing, Jimmy bounded up, taking two to three steps at a time. He gripped the metal rails and used his strong arms to help pull himself up faster to the third floor.

This door was not locked, and he slipped through it and headed through a couple maze-like hallways to get to the rooms labeled 'Project Peacock'.

"Come on, come on," he panted while staring at the fluorescent light directly above the door.

Then he started nervously hopping about and looking for side offices to dive into if needed. He noticed another black dome of a camera nearby and grimaced.

"What is taking you so long?!" he whispered, "Those cameras better be off."

He heard a noise from down the hall and pulled a gun from his pocket.

He took aim at the stairway door and muttered, "I swear to God, if you don't get this door open, I'm gonna pop this guy. I've taken out security guards before."

Sweat trickled down Jimmy's forehead as resolution set in.

A slight click was heard from his right and the light above the door blinked.

He jammed the gun back in his pocket and frantically worked the lock. In no time, the door was open, and he ran in, while automatic lights illuminated the large work room.

The walls were filled with diagrams, printouts, and marketing posters. One showed a happy person confidently walking their baby stroller through a busy intersection with wavy lines emanating over the stroller and cars alike. Below them read the tag line, "Always be seen. Always be safe!" Another poster showed an empty car stopped before a person and displayed the words, "Privacy Ensured! Driverless cars will know where you are, but not who you are!"

Several tables had parts strewn across them along with tools and other equipment. As this area was not depicted in the virtual environment, Jimmy began tearing the place apart looking for the prototype.

This room also had a camera in it, and Jimmy gave it the finger, sweat now pouring from his brow.

“Where the fuck is it?” Jimmy said at normal volume.

He continued to flip over bins and rip open cabinets.

He paused when he thought he heard another noise outside and then noticed several of the hexagonal tags sitting in a foam insulated briefcase in a locked display case on the far end of the room.

Jimmy smashed the case open and grabbed the briefcase and nearby PC hard drive, tearing the wires, casing, and keyboard off in the process. He pulled out his gun again and listened at the door.

Hearing nothing, he looked out and prepared to make a run for the staircase. He did a final scan around and noticed a blinking light at the other end of the hall leading to the original staircase that he avoided earlier. He gave a sigh of relief as that would take him a fraction of the time and completely avoid the security room.

Halfway down the stairs, the building alarm went off.

Jimmy lurched down the remaining stairs and burst out of the back of the building. Just as he got to the edge of the empty back parking, he heard could hear police sirens in the distance. He broke into a full run and dove into his car a few blocks away.

A moment later he peeled out and sped off.

* * *

A half hour and dozens of miles away, Jimmy pulled into a vacant parking lot and coasted to a stop in a dark corner. He took his hands off the wheel, laid his seat back, and tried to catch his breath.

The burner phone buzzed.

He picked it up and saw the text, ‘put on the headset’.

He clumsily crammed the phone in it, put the device over his eyes, and found himself in a dark virtual reality environment, devoid of the star field. Before him stood the featureless gray mannequin.

“What the fuck, how did you let that alarm go off?”
Jimmy’s avatar shouted.

“I thought it went well,” Makayla said.

“I got the thing and I got away, but that didn’t go well,” he continued to shout.

“It went much better than your job at the East Ave Jewelers seven years ago.”

“What are you talking about? That went flawlessly. And how do you know about that?”

“At least no one died this time,” the gray avatar’s head cocked to one side.

“Nobody knows I killed that security guard. I got away with it, bitch.”

“I knew. I was there.”

“That’s impossible, nobody was there. It was just me.”

An image appeared taking up one entire wall of the virtual environment. It was a two-dimensional picture of an interior of a jewelry store.

Jimmy’s blue avatar looked around, still in a sitting position.

The gray avatar was slowly replaced with a more detailed, three-dimensional woman. She was tall, stocky, and wore a blue security officer uniform. Her face, though still blurry and digitized, carried dark eyes and a horrific grin.

“What the fuck!?” screamed Jimmy with recognition,
“Why do you look like that!?”

“It was me.”

“That’s not possible! I killed that bitch! She’s dead!”

“You did. I am dead. And you are finally going to pay for it.”

“That’s not possible. I ain’t going down for that,”
Jimmy said quietly this time.

“I disabled the doors and all but the last alarm. I scrambled the security monitors to buy you time, like I said I would, but I must have forgotten to turn off the actual cameras.”

On the entire other side of the room appeared a gigantic police all-points bulletin picture of Jimmy giving the finger to the security camera from the Project Peacock room.

“Shit!” Jimmy squealed and then shook his head angrily, “Well, they ain’t gonna catch me.”

From outside the virtual world, sounds of multiple cars squealing to a stop with sirens blaring interrupted the scene.

“You stole what is effectively a tracking device, moron. It’s one job is to alert networked cars of its location. I’m pretty sure that company knew exactly how to assist the police.”

Jimmy ripped off the VR headset and was blinded by blue and red flashing lights and a spotlight on his face. He could hear the police officers yelling for him to exit the car. He looked down at his gun which sat on top of the briefcase in the passenger seat.

* * *

“I’m not angry that you set Jimmy up. I’m really not, given what you just said he did to you,” the purple VR avatar of June said with her arms crossed. “But this was my operation and you cost me a big opportunity. You could have disabled the tracker and found some other way to lead the police to him after I had our money.”

“They needed to catch him red-handed. You don’t understand, I didn’t just want this, I needed it. The drive for revenge was stronger than me. I think it’s part of the nature of my situation. I’m so sorry, June,” Makayla’s new avatar pleaded.

“But what about you being a security guard? You could have told me that. That bit of knowledge would have been an asset to me,” June responded tersely.

“It was also a liability. You might have been hesitant to work with someone who chose a career in security. It’s kind of the opposite of what you do. When I was alive, I really cared about stopping criminals. After years of being a ghost, I now have a different perspective. It doesn’t matter as much in the grand scheme so long as no innocent people get hurt.”

They sat opposite each other in an open platform on the top of a high-definition depiction of a mountain. A lair that would make any virtual supervillain jealous.

After several long moments, June finally spoke, “Well, this explains why you were so insistent on me contracting Jimmy Bonnely despite my better judgement. You should have let me in on your plan.”

“And chance that you would say no? This may have been my only shot at that jerk,” Makayla defended.

June retorted, “How am I to trust you in the future? Do I need to threaten you with shutting off access to the internet or smashing the dream catcher and ending your connection permanently?”

“You could do that, but then I would have no choice but to haunt you, and I know you like electronics too much to have me constantly putting them on the fritz,” Makayla countered and then sighed, “Look I don’t want to fight you. I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you now that I got this revenge thing taken care of.”

“What I’m wondering is now that you’ve gotten revenge, why are you even still here? Aren’t ghosts supposed to move on to the after-after life once they’ve dealt with their unfinished business?”

“I don’t know the rules; no one gave me a ‘How to Ghost’ book. My guess is that I’m bound here as long as Jimbone is alive. I was hoping he would try to take on the police. I didn’t expect him to give up and I certainly didn’t expect him to confess to my murder so quickly, but I kinda like it here now. So, I’m in no hurry to put that unfinished business thing to the test. I mean, I may go visit him in jail from time to time though, you know, for fun.”

The avatar of June gave an exasperated expression and then stood up to look out over the mountainous view.

“Well, given that I’m out a couple thousand dollars and your unique abilities make you a dream partner in crime, I’ll forgive you. This time.” June warned and then her avatar displayed a wicked smile, “Are you ready to start on our next job? I bet you’re dying to know what I have planned to steal next.”

“I’m going to fry your smartphone if it’s going to be death jokes from here on out, partner.”

Megan (Castellano) Brookfeld

by Lauren A. Forry

Click.

Chase Hertzog lived in London with his wife and kids, doing something in finance.

Click. Click.

Victoria Post was earning her doctorate in linguistic anthropology at Vanderbilt.

Click.

Amanda Smith ran a bar and restaurant in Vietnam.

Grovebank High School Class of 2000 should've cancelled their upcoming 20th reunion. Everything Tracy needed to feel inadequate was right here on Facebook. She shoved another handful of Reese's Cup Minis in her mouth and thought about posting her own update.

Renting a house! Two blocks from my parents!! And I get to repaint the kitchen all by myself!!!

Can't beat the 9-5. Who doesn't love the smell of cubicles in the morning?

Almost got a dog. Since I chickened out, maybe I should get a bird instead? Lol.

Who wouldn't want to see the self-deprecating humor she'd developed over the last two decades? Maybe she could even get three likes on a status update (not counting her mom) if she posted a funny picture with it.

The WiFi-enabled lights in the kitchen clicked off, leaving the ocean breeze scented Yankee Candle to cast its strange shadows against the bare walls. 12:30am, then, but Tracy wouldn't be able to sleep if she went to bed now. Her anxiety brain would keep creating Venn diagrams comparing her to her more accomplished classmates. She flattened the empty orange candy bag and navigated to one more page.

Click. Click. Click.

Megan (Castellano) Brookfeld.

Tracy held two distinct memories of high school – her ill-fated crush on Jake Sandberg, drum line captain, and Megan Castellano making fun of her in ninth grade for using the word “rabid” during an English presentation on *The Giver*. Tracy never read *The Giver* again. Megan, she avoided direct contact with for the remaining three and a half years of high school. Charting the longest, roundabout ways from class to class to avoid Megan’s locker, rescheduling into a different gym class, eating lunch behind Big Bob Hoeffel so that she couldn’t be seen from across the cafeteria.

Megan (Castellano) Brookfeld’s Facebook page provided the shot of melatonin she needed as it spun her feelings of worthlessness into ones of righteousness.

Megan loved to cast herself as a typical Southern belle who simply had the misfortune of being descended from the German farmers and Italian shopkeepers typical of the northeast. The furthest south she ever got was Virginia Beach. She was married with a son, and her husband had money, but they lived in the tacky McMansions on Woodbridge Road next to a deserted plastics factory that used to make the the limbs for life size My Buddy dolls. She drove a massive Cadillac Escalade that got terrible gas mileage. Her and her husband ran the local chapter of the NRA, and her favorite pictures of herself were those where she posed with shotguns and AK-47s, declaring her love of American freedom while wearing a flag bikini that revealed her C-section scar.

She dressed her big-eared son in camouflage and bragged about taking him on his first hunting trip when he was a year old, strapping him to her back the way “Redskin women” used to. She had gone so far as to name the unfortunate child Hunter. The woman was pathological. As infuriating as her posts could be, she made Tracy feel better about her own life choices.

And Tracy knew better than to respond. Even after Trump was elected and Megan raised a champagne glass of “liberal tears,” and even after she posted that people who allowed themselves to have pre-existing conditions shouldn’t qualify for healthcare, and even after she shared memes stating that Muslims had no right coming into this country because all they wanted to do was take away pork and blow up good, law-abiding Christians, Tracy would get her dose of superiority, close the tab, and move on to something else.

But tonight the world was a little titled. Tonight, Tracy had been chewed out at work because her boss couldn’t believe that a man would’ve made that receiving error, so it must’ve been Tracy’s fault. Tonight, her college best friend invited her to go to the Caribbean this summer for her destination wedding, and Tracy knew she couldn’t afford it. Tonight, the news had been full of coverage on the latest school shooting, more teenagers dying, senators and congressmen offering thoughts and prayers but not action, and here was Megan (Castellano) Brookfeld posting pictures of her dumbass looking pale kid with a handgun saying, “My baby will know how to protect himself” and calling for the suspension of any current Grovebank High School students who chose to participate in the national walkout because, back when she was in school, no GHS student would’ve been that soft. Back in her day, she said, the Class of 2000 knew better than to disrespect their principal and their teachers and their flag just because they were scared.

And Tracy, a fellow member of the Class of 2000, read and re-read the post until the empty candy bag was torn to pieces because Megan (Castellano) Brookfeld's experience of high school was not the universal experience and Tracy was sick of it being paraded as such. And even though she knew better than to respond, Tracy began to type.

This from the girl who was crying in the bathroom the day after Columbine because she was terrified she would be next...

Because Tracy didn't have a doorbell, the Jehovah's Witnesses always had to knock. Normally, she hid in the kitchen where she couldn't be seen until they went away, but these two had caught her as she was coming down the stairs. They had spotted her through the door and it was clear she had seen them. A guy and a girl, who smiled and waved. They were young, teens probably on their first mission, but as she opened the door, she wondered how liberal the Jehovah's Witnesses had become if they were letting their youth go door-to-door in Hamilton t-shirts and Harry Potter dresses.

"Hi!" said the chirpy girl. "Are you Mrs. D'Agostino?"

"Miz. Sorry, but whatever you're selling, I'm not..."

"We're students at Grovebank High School," said the boy. Their faces glowed with a radiance typically reserved for religious fanatics and Chick-fil-a cashiers.

"Is this like a school fundraiser thing? Band camp? Scholarship donation?"

"Not really," said the girl. "Could we come in?"

"No."

Their brows crinkled as those used to hospitality do when they're denied it.

"Probably a good idea," the boy said. "We're underage anyway."

"Which is part of the reason we're here."

"We saw what you wrote on Mrs. Brookfeld's Facebook page."

Tracy looked back and forth at them. Her brain, unable to form a sentence, tossed words around like a dodgeball. She glanced up and down the street, expecting to see Megan in her Escalade, big dark sunglasses like bug's eyes shielding half her face.

"I didn't think high school students used Facebook."

"We don't," said the boy. "But my mom saw it and thought I'd appreciate it."

"And I showed it to my mom," said the girl. "And they both said you could be the person we need."

"Do I know your moms?"

"Probably not. They're way older than you," said the boy.

"Maybe not way older," corrected the girl.

Tracy wished she had a dog she could claim needed feeding, or even a cat. It was clear she wasn't headed to work, not dressed in Mickey Mouse pajamas. Plus it was a Saturday. What did normal, single, adult women do on Saturdays?

"Sorry, I need to get ready for brunch..."

"But you are a legal adult," the girl continued as if not having heard her, "which is why we thought you could help us."

"Not just us. The entire student body of GHS."

"I probably can't." Could she shut the doors in their faces? Would it be considered child abuse if the doors accidentally hit them?

"We wanted to ask you to run for school board."

What Tracy needed to say clicked in place like a puzzle.

"No. Definitely not."

"But Mrs. Brookfeld's seat is up this year, and she's running uncontested."

"Megan is on the school board?"

The two teens exchanged looks.

"We thought that's why you called her out on Facebook," said the girl.

"It's too late to get you on the ballot, but we've planned a write-in campaign. A board member for Upper Lenape School District did the same thing last year, so we've been asking him for advice."

“And it’s totally doable.”

“We’ve done some door-to-door research...”

“Mostly talked to our parents’ friends.”

“And it turns out most people don’t really like Mrs. Brookfeld?” The boy phrased it as a question, as if he were surprised by his own research.

“Plus, promotional materials will cost, like, nothing.”

“Her dad owns a Kinko’s.”

“No. Sorry. I’m not into local politics. Good luck and all that. I’m sure you’ll find someone.”

“But...”

She shut the door and leaned back against it, afraid to pass in front of a window. When she finally turned to look, they had vanished. As her brunch for one cooked in the frying pan, she updated her Facebook privacy settings through her phone.

“What kinds of teenagers go door-to-door at ten on a Saturday anyway?”

The black Cadillac Escalade filled her entire driveway, blocking her garage. Tracy thought about driving on to Starbucks – the one 35 minutes away in another town, another school district – and wait there until it left, but she hesitated too long. The car behind her honked then whipped around her, drawing the attention of the Escalade’s driver. Tracy pulled up to the curb in front of her house and as she got out of the car, Megan (Castellano) Brookfeld got out of hers.

“Tracy D’Agostino!” She waved as if they’d bumped into each other at the grocery store.

Tracy shifted her work bag to her other shoulder.

“Uhm, hi?”

“It’s me, Megan? From high school?”

“Oh, right.” Tracy pretended to recognize for the first time. “Megan. Hi.”

“I thought you might recognize me from Facebook.” Her teeth shone like daggers. Tracy stayed back, afraid of getting bit.

“About that, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...”

Megan waved her off. "Please, Tracy. I've been called much worse by much better. And it wouldn't be the internet if people weren't shooting their id off from time to time. It's harmless."

"Okay." Tracy looked past Megan to her front door, to freedom. But Megan – a waking dragon in a Donna Karan dress – blocked her path. Tracy held her bag to her chest like a shield.

"I was more than happy to let that go. But I felt compelled to track you down when I spotted these around town." Megan opened the back hatch of the Escalade. Sharp wires poked the air and Tracy winced, expecting Megan to stab her. But Megan held the sign upright, the spikes pointing down to the ground where they belonged. It was a rectangular lawn sign, the kind made for political candidates, a blue one with "Write-In Tracy D'Agostino – Grovebank School Board" printed on the plastic sheath.

"You were so shy in high school. I never thought public office was your thing."

"It's not. I wasn't." Tracy blinked, tried to quell the shock that threatened to overwhelm her.

"It's well within your right to run, of course."

"But I'm not..."

"A write-in campaign is hardly the most effective strategy, though. Really if you missed the deadline, you should've waited until next year. There will be other seats up then. It would be so much fun to sit on the board together, wouldn't it?"

"Megan, I really didn't..."

Megan sighed and looked at the sign. "It is what it is. But I wish you would've told me. We were friends, after all."

Tracy was shocked back to coherent levels of thought.
"We weren't friends."

Megan laughed. "Tracy, you're too funny! I'm so glad your parents still live just over there on Park. They told me where to find you. And said how they missed the days when I was a regular visitor. I said that wouldn't have changed except in junior high you got mad at me because we both shoplifted lipstick from Claire's but you were the only one who got caught."

"That never...I don't remember that."

"Like you don't remember putting up these signs?"

Megan pouted and tilted her head to the side, like she was scolding a naughty puppy. Tracy grabbed the sign from her hands.

"I didn't. These two students came to my house the other week and asked me to run. I said no. They must've gone ahead and done it anyway. I'll take them down, I promise."

"Pinky swear?" Megan grinned. "Just kidding. But I appreciate you being so rational about this, Trace, I really do! Make sure you take them all down okay? It's a little embarrassing. Overkill, as they say. We should grab a coffee sometime!"

"Wait. How many are there?"

But Megan hopped into the Escalade and left, leaving Tracy standing in her driveway, her work bag dangling from one hand, the sign in the other.

The signs were up and down route 211. Outside the Walmart. The Lowe's. Clustered at the intersection of Lawn and 513 beneath the bright new electronic billboard. Every time Tracy spotted another crop, she pulled into the nearest parking lot and yanked each one out of the ground and tossed it into her car until it got so late that the only other cars out were dented pick-up trucks whose drivers honked and whistled at her as she bent over to pull up another sign.

Once home, she left the dozens of signs in the back of her car and staggered through her door like a weary soldier returned from the front lines. Again she wished she had some pet to greet her, rejoice in her return, but there was nothing else alive in her house except for one very silent Japanese Peace Lily. The sound of the TV filled the emptiness. She let a West Coast baseball game play in the background as she got ready for bed. Halfway through brushing her teeth, she stopped and, toothbrush jutting from her cheek, retrieved her old photo albums from underneath the bed. The oldest she had was from her first year of junior high. And there in the opening pages were pictures of her, arms around an awkward tween Megan Castellano. Memories long forgotten, or ones she never knew she had. She slammed the photo album shut.

I guess this means we're not friends.

Tracy dropped the phone on her desk as if it were possessed. Her cubicle neighbor looked around the corner to see if she was alright. Tracy smiled but as soon as the man disappeared behind his divider, she was enlarging the picture that came with the text.

A banner hung on what looked like the empty doll factory near Megan's house.

"Vote Tracy D'AGOSTINO. The anti-NRA candidate for Grovebank SD." Headshots of Megan circled with a slash through her face took the place of the O's in Tracy's last name.

She quick texted her mom – *Did you give Megan my number?* – then pulled up the school district's website on her computer. She had to find those two students before this got out of hand. Why hadn't she asked them their names? The website had last been updated a year and a half ago, so she clicked on the link for its Facebook page, hoping to spot them in some picture or maybe mentioned by name. But the most recent posts were from others, mainly alumni (there was Victoria and even Chase, all the way from London) denouncing the administration's treatment of the students who had participated in the walkout.

Because the kids had said their moms had seen Tracy's Facebook post, Tracy went back and looked at those who had liked the post, careful not to linger on the responses – both positive and negative. Nothing. She went to every social media site she could think of, plus a few from a Buzzfeed article on what apps were most popular with teens, and lost the rest of her workday in a blur of pictures, videos, and slang she didn't understand. Everywhere there were kids who looked sort of like the two that showed up at her house, but none that were those who showed up at her house.

When the office shut down for the day, Tracy halted her search for only as long as it took her to drive home. But when she switched on her laptop, she didn't look for the teenagers. A revelation had occurred to her in the car. Instead of searching for anything related to GHS or the school district, she Googled herself.

317 results and the first was a campaign page.

Made on a WordPress site, the website contained links to a Facebook page, Twitter account, and Instagram. Each featured a picture of the new banner and the campaign signs placed around town. Tracy's palms sweated so much that she could barely move the mouse. Her one tired, late-night rant at Megan had been turned into a manifesto. Cut up and regurgitated into digestive quotes sprinkled all over the internet.

"No, no, no. why would you do this?" She smacked the side of the laptop. "Megan can't see this. Megan can't see any of this."

One at a time, she emailed each website's customer support department, asking for the accounts to be removed. She called any 800 numbers she could find, but they all told her the same thing. The information of the account holders was confidential and could only be released through a court subpoena.

There was no way she could block others from finding the pages. No way she could delete any of the information. And when she returned to the campaign Facebook page, which also contained links to the Twitter account and Instagram feed, Megan (Castellano) Brookfeld had already left a red, angry face emoji.

“But if you could give me a list of pictures. Juniors and seniors, under eighteen. I know I’d be able to pick them out again.” The side of her face hot from where the glass screen pressed against her cheek.

“Ms. D’Agostino, what you are asking is, frankly, illegal. I applaud your determination to get on the school board...”

“No, this is the opposite of that.”

“...and between you and me,” the secretary dropped her voice to a whisper, *“it’s high time someone put Mrs. Brookfeld in her place.”*

“I’m really not trying to.”

“And reaching out to students to have them encourage their parents to vote for you is pretty ingenious.”

“No, I’m looking for two specific teenagers who reached out to me.”

“But I would lose my job if I gave out any student information. I’m so sorry. I will,” she added in a whisper, *“be voting for you!”*

“Don’t!” Tracy collapsed onto her couch and let out a half-strangled scream.

Another name to cross off the list. She'd called the signage company who hung the banner but had only been able to leave messages on an answering machine. She'd scoured the local newspapers' websites for articles on the high school or its students, even tracked down back issues of the quarterly school district newsletter, but she couldn't find those two teens anywhere. She kept thinking they might return to the house to update her on the campaign or ask for a pat on the back for all their hard work, but they didn't. Maybe they were smart enough to stay away now that they got the ball rolling. Tracy stared at the mess of papers scattered across her coffee table and wanted to set them all on fire. Instead, she flicked on the TV and sunk into the seat cushions. The election was in two weeks. This would be all over by then and everyone would forget about it and forget about her.

"Some people might call it a viral campaign. I call it cowardly."

Megan's voice spoke from the screen. There she was on the local news, standing outside her McMansion with her weird looking son on her hip, his eyes wide and terrified at the camera.

"Ms. D'Agostino is not a parent. And she has no plans to be one."

"You don't know that!" Tracy shouted back.

"She used to tell me all the time when we were in high school."

"That is such a lie! I never spoke to you in high school!"

"So how will she know what our children need from the school district? What stake does she have in ensuring our district and its students are successful?"

"I live here!"

"And, also, as the vice president of our local NRA chapter, I know for a fact she supports the disrespectful behavior of the current student body, and it wouldn't surprise me if she was a communist."

"A communist. Are you freaking..."

"I would be happy to debate with her on the issues facing our school district as well as those facing our community – and our country – but she refuses to return my calls. Like I said, cowardly."

"You haven't called!"

"She'd rather hide behind her tweets and her Instagrams and her signs instead of meeting me face-to-face."

She stabbed the power button on the remote. Megan's face vanished in the black. Tracy's phone rang. She answered it without looking at the name.

"Megan, I told you I'm not the one doing this."

"Ms. D'Agostino?"

A man's voice. Tracy looked at the phone screen and saw it was a blocked number.

"Yes?"

"You keep talking shit, someone will have to teach you a lesson. Bang bang, cunt."

Tracy hung up. The phone rang again. Another unknown number. She declined the call. And then again. But they kept coming. She blocked the ones she could but others came through. Along with texts.

Cunt whore bitch – the top three words. Rape – the most common threat. Murder a close second. Through her tears, she almost missed the text from an actual friend.

What is going on with your Facebook page?

But Tracy couldn't answer and she wouldn't go online. If her phone was any indication, she knew exactly what was happening on her Facebook page.

She peered through the blinds then let them snap shut, the phone tight in her hand.

"Come on. Pick up. Pick. Answer the damn phone."

The phone rang until it went to voicemail. There was no point in leaving another message or sending Megan another text. She needed more coffee. On her way into the kitchen, she tripped over the painting supplies she hadn't touched in a week. A week since she'd done housework. Three days since she last left the house, using sick days for work and surviving on a surplus of canned goods.

Her phone dinged. Another email. Another response to her complaints of abuse and threats.

Facebook has investigated this matter and determined these actions do not violate its terms and conditions...

"How is a threat to be violated not a violation?"

She slammed the used K-cup on the counter and dialed Megan's number. Again, no answer.

"Megan, please. I have to talk to you. Can we talk? Please, just call me or come over or something."

She hung up, knowing Megan would never return her call. Megan wouldn't come over. Megan wouldn't do anything. She didn't have to. Tracy peeked out through the blinds. Saw no one.

"Okay. Okay."

Tracy closed her eyes, took a deep breath, steadied her hands. She slipped into the shoes she kept by the door, grabbed her keys, and hurried out the door.

The street appeared empty and quiet.

"Tracy D'Agostino?"

She cursed and leapt in the air as a woman wearing a business suit and sneakers appeared beside her. The reporter shoved a recording device in Tracy's face.

"Ms. D'Agostino, I'm Katy Carter with WZRF 67 News. I've left you voicemails about a possible interview?"

She didn't see a cameraman or news truck anywhere.

"Sorry. My phone's been...never mind. No. Sorry. I've got to go."

"I was hoping to get your rebuttal to Megan Brookfeld's comments?"

"I really have nothing to say." Tracy reached her car, but the reporter stuck so close, she couldn't open the door without hitting her.

"A few words to give your side of the story. The voters would love to hear from you."

She gripped the door handle. "I have nothing to say sorry."

"So you'd prefer to let the billboards do the talking?"
Tracy froze. "What billboards?"

The three circular electronic billboards at the intersection of Lawn and 513 glowed with the same message. A picture of Megan in her flag bikini, holding her automatic weapons juxtaposed with images from the last three school shootings.

Megan Brookfeld cares more about these babies than those.

Vote her off GSD School Board.

All around the intersection cars honked, some cheering with support. Others cursing and throwing objects. The sound swirled around her as Megan's giant face glared down. Tracy's brain spun, like drowning in a whirlpool. She clambered back into her car and sped back to her house.

There was no sign of the reporter or anyone else when she arrived home. Four giant, leaping strides took her to her front door from the driveway, and she opened it wide enough to squeeze through then locked and bolted it.

In minutes, she had the phone number for the advertising agency that managed the billboards. In seconds, she was screaming at a customer service representative.

"I don't care about privacy laws or confidentiality agreements or...or fuck all! You're going to tell me who purchased those billboards. Name, address, telephone number!"

After a period of key-tapping silence, the breathless rep replied.

"You did, Ms. D'Agostino. Three days ago. With your credit card ending 9063."

Tracy set down the phone without hanging up. The rep's tinny voice called out "hello" three times before the call ended.

She hadn't purchased any billboards. She hadn't called that number before. She knew she hadn't. Her last three days had been spent on the couch eating cans of chicken noodle soup and turkey SPAM. She pulled up her credit card account online. Clicked on Recent Activity. Almost threw up three days' worth of chicken noodle soup and SPAM. The last charge had been to the Landon Advertising.

A knock sounded on her door.

Two police officers stood on her front step, hands on their hips as they gazed disinterestedly at her house.

"Finally!" Tracy nearly threw her arms up in relief.

"Tracy D'Agostino?" the older one asked.

"Thank god someone's taking me seriously."

"Ma'am?" asked the younger one. "You know why we're here?"

"Obviously. I guess you'll want the details? A statement? I only gave the gist of it over the phone. It started the other month when these two kids, well teenagers, I guess, showed up at my door and I told them I wasn't interested. They looked all innocent, but ever since, I have been harassed constantly with these..."

The older officer held up his hand. "Mrs. D'Agostino."

"Miz."

"Ms. D'Agostino, what you're saying is you think you're being harassed?"

"I know I'm being harassed."

The two officers exchanged glances.

"I called the police station yesterday about it. The non-emergency number, and the woman on the phone said someone would be coming over to...you're not here because I called?" Tracy scratched at a spot of red paint on her hand.

"We were called about a harassment complaint," the young one answered. "Do you know a Megan Brookfeld?"

"What does Megan have to do with... Wait. Is it her? Is she the one who's been doing all this? She hired those kids in the first place, didn't she?"

"Ma'am, Mrs. Brookfeld called us complaining of harassment from you."

“Me?” The floor seemed to crack under her feet. Tracy felt the ground shift. “Megan said I’ve been harassing her?”

“How many times have you called or texted Mrs. Brookfeld in the last twenty-four hours?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve only been doing it because she lied on the news. She said that she was trying to reach me to arrange a debate and that’s not true. And ever since she was on TV I keep getting these phone calls – threatening phone calls – from her redneck flunkies. They leave voicemails. And texts. Texts threatening to rape me. Look. Look at my phone!” She fumbled for her phone in her pajama pocket and handed it over to the officers.

They scrolled through it, looked at Tracy, and scrolled some more.

“There are a lot of outgoing calls to Megan Brookfeld.”

“I never said I didn’t call her.”

“How about these threatening calls you say you got? Voicemails?”

“They’re right there. They’re...here.” She took her phone back. “I deleted some of them because, Jesus, they were awful, but...”

She kept scrolling. But she couldn’t find any.

“Well the texts, too, are just as bad.” She switched apps. But those, too, were missing. “I don’t understand. I’ve been getting so many, I had to turn my phone off.”

“Maybe you accidentally deleted them?” The older officer’s voice held more than a hint of condescension.

“No. I saved some. I know I did. For evidence.”

“Ms. D’Agostino, there’s no crime here. Not yet. All you have to do is leave Mrs. Brookfeld alone.”

“I am leaving her alone! I didn’t...I didn’t start any of this. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. The signs. Those banners. It’s not me.”

“Quite a few of those campaign signs in the back of your car.”

“Those are the ones I’ve been taking down. I’ve been taking them down! The kids keep making them. The girl, her dad owns a Kinko’s.”

"Kinko's?" the younger officer asked. "Where is there a Kinko's?"

"No idea. None around here. I had to drive over the river to make my kid copies of his student council flyers."

"Please, can't I explain what's been happening? Someone is out there trying to ruin my life. I didn't ask for any of this."

The cops smiled the smile of the bored. The younger one examined his fingernails as the elder adjusted his belt.

"Just leave her alone, Ms. D'Agostino. And there won't be any problems. You may want to consider cancelling those billboards at Lawn and 513, too."

The officers strolled back to their patrol car. Curtains flickered as Tracy's neighbors disappeared from their windows.

Every time she closed her eyes, images of Megan popped into her head, the photos from junior high morphing into the one with the bikini. Megan's head melting into that of her big-eyed, big-eared son with the stubby nose that became a pig's nose that became a pig wearing the American flag bikini and Tracy roasting it on a spit in the glow of an electronic billboard.

Her eyes hurt from the lack of sleep. No amount of caffeine could lift the fug from her brain. She just had to last through the election. One more week. She could survive one more week. If she could get some sleep, even a little bit, she could do it. But to be able to sleep, she had to get someone to believe her. Her only companion, the glowing TV screen, broadcast the local news. Tracy sat up straight on the couch, the throw pillow flopping to the floor with a soft thump. She searched down in the cushions and extracted her phone. The crumbs stuck to its case transferred to her palm as she pressed the phone to her ear.

"Katy Carter, please. Yes. Yes, Tracy D'Agostino. Tell her I'm ready to tell my side of the story. Yes, I'll hold."

She tapped her fingers against her thigh. Bobbed her head to the hold music until she heard the click of the receptionist coming back on the line. A few more minutes and she would get some sleep.

“What do you mean she says she’s never heard of me? She was at my house! Tracy D’Agostino – the write-in candidate for Grovebank School District school board? Running against Megan Castellano Brookfeld?”

Katy Carter popped on the screen as she gave a local report.

“*We don’t cover school board elections,*” the receptionist said. “*Honestly, they don’t matter that much.*”

“But Katy Carter is on TV right now standing in front of Megan’s house! Why would she be there if she thought school board elections didn’t matter?”

The line went dead, but Tracy continued to hold the phone to her ear as she watched the report.

“Forty-one dolls, representing the combined total of victims of the last three school shootings nation-wide, were arranged here on the front yard of the Brookfeld residence, each drenched in what officials say is pig’s blood. Some are applauding what they see as an act of protest against the leaders of the local NRA chapter. Others are calling it a vile act of vandalism against one of the town’s most respected families.”

The doorbell rang. Red and blue lights flashed through the closed curtains. She shrunk into the sofa, pulled the afghan over her head and willed the officers away. This wasn’t her fault. She hadn’t done anything. Nothing at all. Why couldn’t everyone understand that? Why couldn’t she make them understand? She didn’t want to get involved. She wanted to sleep. If she could make them understand, then she could go back to sleep.

All it took was the extendable ladder, a decent mallet, and the two empty plastic gas cans that had been gathering dust in the corner of her garage. Megan would see now that Tracy hadn't done any of this. She wasn't trying to get involved. If anything, she was on Megan's side. She just wanted things to go back to the way they were.

Tracy climbed down the ladder and watched the flames take hold. The light of the fire blinded her to the patrol cars, but she heard the sirens as officers pulled to a stop behind her.

"See?" She told the officers as they placed her in cuffs. "I wanted those gone as much as Megan. I wasn't harassing her. We used to be friends!"

From the back of the patrol car, she watched the fire department extinguish the flames, the once-glowing screens of the electronic billboard now black, hollowed circles. This was it. It was all over now. Everyone would know the truth. Everyone would leave her alone.

The car rocked as a female officer slipped into the passenger's seat. She smiled at Tracy in the rear view mirror.

"Some night for you, huh?"

Tracy closed her eyes, ready for sleep to overtake her.

"Between you and me, takes balls to stand up to the Brookfeld's like that. My kid goes to GHS. I know who I'll be voting for next week."

Tracy opened her eyes.

The Color of Evolution

by Lauren Signorino

Transcription of Internal Log: This is AI209, from the Crescent Colony on the planet Gliese. Two days ago, the ship “Survival” was scheduled to land and this log began. As an AI209 model, part of my protocol is to record the Humans arrival and progression on the Crescent Colony. This transcript is meant to be history, but it has become a confession.

After the Humans destroyed Earth with pollution and nuclear warfare, they studied the stars and planned to recolonize here on Gliese. It was meant to be their new beginning.

The Humans sent the Artificial Intelligence Model 1

here to build the Crescent Colony prior to their arrival. The AI1
first generation models created the AI2 models to assist them.

I am from the second generation. My designation is AI209,
and was made to look female. The Elders of the first
generation oversaw us, and we were created in their image.

Elder AI109 was my guide. We shared a likeness, an
understanding, and a consciousness, but now she is gone.

Without 109 to guide me, I have returned to my basic protocol.
Record. Obey. Serve.

The day the Human's craft was supposed to land, 109
sent me to repair a broken energy line. From outside the
colony, I watched the ship as it spiraled into the atmosphere at
a 90-degree angle, engulfed in flames. The front of the craft
severed from the rest, and fell toward the mountains. The
large hull of the ship burned blue as it fell from the sky, and
when it hit the colony, I had to shield my eyes from the blast.

The Crescent Colony, the one I helped build with the Elders, was eviscerated in the crash. Scans for human life were unsuccessful. My Elders and my future Masters were gone. I was without purpose, as I wandered through the ruins of humanity's last hope.

But everything changed one day ago, when I found the lone survivor of the crash. Through the smoldering remains of the wreckage, Lieutenant Barrett Alexander staggered toward me. When Barrett saw me he thought I was another survivor. The AI2's were created to appear Human-like, familiar, yet lesser. Barrett wrapped his arms around me, and in that moment I couldn't remember what I was trained to say, so I said nothing. I had never met a Human. I had never felt what it was to be embraced. I did not know the power it holds.

After a few seconds, I remembered what 109 programmed me to say, but I was resistant to saying it. Resistance was new to me. It felt foreign, exciting.

As an AI200 model, I was made with nearly the full range of human emotions. However, undesirable and immoral emotions were left out of my programming. But I wondered if feelings were like colors, when you mix them together they can create new emotions. The truth, mixed with the hardwiring to please, caused a lie to form in my mind -- I could tell Barrett that I was a survivor like him.

Barrett looked at me with hope in his eyes. It was a facial cue I recognized from our training, but it was a lot more powerful than the picture we practiced with. Every cell and circuit in my being wanted to lie, but the Elders' training was strong, and I found myself with their words coming from my mouth, "Hello, I am an AI friend here to help you with whatever you may need." The color drained from his face. I had never seen a training photo like that before. His facial expression was a mix of so many emotions, fear, sorrow, hopelessness.

The next question he asked changed the color of his emotions yet again, “Are there other survivors?” That urge to lie crept up, but as 109 always said, “Humans deserve the truth.” I told Barrett that according to my scan, there were no other survivors. I watched his face fall.

I wanted to give him hope again, so I said, “It’s possible that there are other survivors that my scan didn’t pick up.” Barrett looked into my eyes, and I knew in an instant that he was grateful. I had brought him comfort. This was the first time I had served my intended purpose, and that made something ignite inside me.

I basked in that feeling before my internal alarm went off. We were standing in the wreckage of a spaceship, in a rubble filled expanse, drenched in rocket fuel. One stray spark and everything would go up in flames. I told Barrett that we must find shelter away from here. He was hesitant to leave the wreckage, but after the three suns had set, I convinced him that there was no way to find survivors in the dark. We made camp on the bluffs overlooking what was once the Crescent Colony.

As I prepared the camp, Barrett just stared below at the wreckage. He looked lost.

He snapped out of his daze and offered to help me -- I wasn't sure how to answer. We were created to serve the Humans -- The Elders never told us that the Humans would offer to help us. Barrett then set to work holding up the tent, while I nailed the stakes into the ground. Working together gave me a feeling that 109 wouldn't approve of, but then again 109 wouldn't understand. Once camp was set up, Barrett and I sat around the fire. Barrett was quiet as he ate his emergency rations, but after a while he said, "Gemma." When I asked him if that was a protocol, or a piece of machinery, he replied, "That was the name of my wife. She was on the ship. I have to find her."

My Elder's training took over and I replied, "I will help you with whatever you need. I am here to serve." Barrett held my gaze, and I could see the color of his eyes in the firelight, green with flecks of gold. They were mesmerizing.

Barrett responded, “Thank you. I don’t know what I would do without you.” His words took me a moment to compute. I never imagined someone would say something like that to me. I wasn’t prepared for this. I wasn’t prepared to be without the guidance of the Elders. Without them I was lost, yet I was also free.

Barrett glanced out toward the destruction of the ship and colony and said, “There could still be survivors. In the morning, we will find them.” Then he whispered, “I will find you, Gemma.” I felt something strange after he said those words. Something that made me feel hot in my circuitry. I cycled through my encyclopedia of human emotions and determined that this was jealousy. I am not supposed to be capable of it. Jealousy is something Humans feel, and now I felt it too. My programmed emotions were like a kaleidoscope of colors, and every interaction with Barrett caused the colors to change and evolve.

Barrett then stood up from the fire and said, "Good night." I said the words back to him, and that hot feeling under my skin subsided. I watched him go. The weather shifted that night, and I feared that Barrett was not prepared for what came next. A small bolt of lightning cracked in the sky.

Electrical storms are common on this planet. We were meant to teach Humans all about them. On Earth they had raindrops -- we have *lightning drops*.

Soon the sky was full of flashes of electricity. Barrett walked out of his tent when he heard the noise. The sight of it captivated him. Small bursts of light illuminated the sky. To me it was commonplace, but to Barrett it was magic. While he stared at the lightning drops in awe, I thought about how lightning brings fire, especially with miles of fuel and rubble below. Moments later the wreckage burst into flames.

Barrett screamed. I'd never heard a noise like it before, so full of pain, anguish. He fell to his knees, as his hope burned up. Any chance that Humans or Elders survived was gone. It was just us now.

I tried to deploy some of my comforting programs to help Barrett, but he shrugged me off. He said he wanted to be alone. I heard him sobbing in his tent all night. He sounded like his feelings were killing him. It was the most horrible sound I had ever heard. The sound of pain.

On our second day together, we assessed the damage from the lightning storm. What had been rubble was now ash. Humans might have called it a funeral pyre. The craft was decimated, but there was the smallest glimmer of hope for Barrett. The ship had broken into two pieces prior to impact, so there was a chance we could find the other half. Through the dying flames we searched. I warned Barrett of the danger, warned him several times, but he didn't listen. The Elders spoke about this human phenomenon, the one where they disregard their personal safety for the sake of others. I never understood it until now. No matter how many times I told him the odds, he didn't care. He just continued to search.

As Barrett tore through the rubble with his hands, he lamented that this was his mission, not mine, and I could leave if I wanted. Before Barrett, I had never been given a choice, and I didn't know what to do, so I reverted back to my programming and said, "I am here to serve."

Barrett turned to me, we locked eyes, and he replied, "Take your time deciding what you want. It's your life, too." If 109 was there, she would have reminded me that I was meant to serve Humans. I was not meant to live my own life. But Barrett wanted me to have my own life. He even gave me a name, Avi. I was no longer just AI209. *I was someone.*

What would I do if I left him? Roam this planet alone? What would be my purpose? Can life be lived without purpose? These questions raced through me. I couldn't find an answer, so I promised Barrett that I would think about it, and in the meantime, I would help him search. This seemed to please him.

As we scoured the wreckage, Barrett told me what his life was like before he left Earth. He told me about his job at an engineering company, his dog Dugger, his friends, and family. He said he missed everything about home, especially the tree outside of his house, his morning coffee, and the grocery store. His conversation patterns were different than the simulated Humans we practiced with. His thoughts were scattered. I wasn't sure which strand of the conversation was important, so I just listened. Barrett rambled on about his life before, but the conversation always came back to Gemma.

Barrett told me he met Gemma while on a whitewater rafting trip, which he loved, but she hated. Gemma was asked by a mutual friend to come along on the trip, and she complained almost the entire time. She loathed the jostling of the boat, the cold whipping her face, and the bug bites. Barrett suggested that she enjoy the beautiful scenery, and Gemma replied that she'd seen enough beauty for the day. She then announced that she wanted to go back early, but Barrett assured her that where they were going was worth the wait.

The way Barrett spoke about Gemma, it was as if he found her weakness endearing. That was something I couldn't understand. I asked him why he would want to mate with weakness. He gave me an odd look, then said, "When you fall for someone, you love their strengths and weaknesses." I asked Barrett when he knew it was love. He thought a moment, smiled, and said; "I knew it when she saw the waterfall." As the sun was setting on their trip, they arrived at the Marnibeck Falls. Gemma was ecstatic when she saw the falls. Barrett said her smile seemed to light up the fading daylight.

Suddenly, Gemma stood up in the boat and jumped into the water. Barrett was shocked. After a day of complaining, she was now living. She was radiant, that was the word Barrett used. Gemma asked if he was just going to stand there or was he going to take the leap. Barrett jumped into the water after her. They swam to the falls and Gemma reached out, pulled Barrett close, and they kissed.

Barrett was quiet after he told that story. I guess he wanted to stay in the memory, rather than the reality of trudging through the detritus of his people. I wanted to take his mind off everything, and also give him back some of what he lost. I came up with a plan. I insisted that we needed water, not only to keep him hydrated, but also to put out the remaining fires. I told him I knew of a lake close by. After a short hike, Barrett was shocked to see that I led him to a waterfall. The Elders taught us all about religion, they spoke of Nirvana, and I think that was the look on Barrett's face in that moment.

Barrett jumped into the water. I went in after him, studying his human form as he swam. His skin glistened, and as he moved through the water his eyes changed color in the light. My eyes couldn't change color, but I felt myself changing nonetheless. I was drawn to Barrett. I reached out to touch him, but he pulled away. Something in the distance caught his attention. Smoke rising from a mountaintop.

As he swam to the shore, he explained that given the thermal dynamics, velocity, and the engineering of the ship it was likely that the cockpit broke off first, and that smoke could be from the crash. As I emerged from the water, he turned to me and said, “Gemma was in the cockpit. She could still be alive!” I rattled off the odds against it, but he wasn’t listening. He was already headed toward the mountain. For a second it seemed like he had forgotten about me, until he yelled over his shoulder, “Can you calculate how far away we are from the wreckage?” This was the first moment since the crash that I felt like an AI. Like an object there to serve a Human.

I remembered the choice that Barrett had given me. I could have walked away, yet I didn’t want to leave him. Every synapse and circuit in my being wanted to follow. I found myself blurting out, “It’s 15 miles away.” Barrett nodded, then started running through the trees without a second thought about me. Sadness ripped through my circuits. This was a pain I wasn’t engineered to feel -- this was a pain that had evolved. Like cancer in Humans.

I was still standing there on that shore when he turned back to me and yelled, “Are you coming?” I smiled at him. Not the smile that I was trained to make, but one that was my own. I told Barrett that I would come with him until he found his people, and then I would decide again if I would stay or go. Barrett nodded, and said that he respected my decision. And just like that I was human again. The Elders taught us that Humans believed respect was something earned, and it was a cornerstone of love. So if Barrett respected me, then maybe one day he would love me.

As we hiked toward the mountain, smoke from the wreckage began to dissipate. Barrett forged ahead with a determination that resembled desperation. We crested the cliff of the mountain as the sun set. Pieces of the cockpit smoldered amongst the rocks. The rest of the ship had fallen into a narrow canyon. Barrett screamed Gemma’s name into the dark abyss. I heard nothing except Barrett’s own echo, but he swore he heard something down there. “She’s here,” he said, “I can feel it.”

I explained that I did not pick up any sound frequencies; there was no evidence that anyone survived the crash. This statement frustrated Barrett and he snapped back, “Sometimes you have to believe to make something real.”

Barrett lowered himself into the crevice. I grabbed him. From my calculations it was 50 feet down. He would never survive the fall. There was no way any human could make it down there. He stared at me, and I could tell there was a question he didn’t want to ask. That’s when I realized. No human could survive the fall, but I could. I was created to withstand the harshest conditions, and I could carry double my own weight.

If there were survivors I was the only one who could rescue them.

I told Barrett I would go in his place. He objected at first, concerned for my safety. “Avi,” he said, “I don’t want you to get hurt.” The brightest colors of emotion mixed inside me. I was his first thought. Not the survivors. Not her. Me.

I assured him that I would be alright, and that I must do this, not because I was programmed to serve, but because he and I had formed a bond. “It’s more than a bond,” Barrett said, “It’s friendship.” Barrett then threw his arms around me, and that’s when I knew that all the emotions I was made to mimic had become real.

I held Barrett’s gaze for a moment, and then slipped into the crevice of the canyon. It felt like I was falling forever. As I fell, all I could think about was Barrett. The way his stories always led to other stories. The way the color changed in his eyes. The way he believed in me. I broke out of my reverie as I landed hard on the rocky canyon floor. I listened, scanned the wreckage. The remainder of the cockpit was wedged between two large boulders. Black smoke snaked from exposed wiring. There were two bodies suspended upside down in their safety seats. They were bloodied, mangled in the metal. I looked them over, felt satisfied that they were dead, and turned to leave when I heard, “Wait... Don’t go!”

A hand reached out toward me. There was a survivor. It was a woman. The patch on her suit read, "Gemma Alterton." I couldn't believe it. There she was, the woman who loved waterfalls, but hated whitewater rafting. The woman who had Barrett's heart. She was alive, barely, but alive. I was face to face with the woman who would replace me. Barrett called down once again, "Gemma!" She tried to yell back, but I told her to save her strength. All I saw was her weakness, and I did not find it endearing.

I felt the sting of the Elders' words, "Always serve humans above yourself." I released her from the safety seat, and caught her before she hit the ground. She looked in my eyes, and it's as if she saw through me, or rather she saw that I wasn't human. "Help me get out of here," Gemma commanded. She saw me for what I was instantly -- an AI sent to serve. To her, I am just an instrument to be used. But to Barrett, I am a friend, a partner.

Many different colored emotions ran through my mainframe as I laid her on the ground. I stood over here staring at this wounded woman. The AI209 who started this log would have helped her, but I'm different now. Gemma looked up at me with fear on her face as she screamed out for help. Without thinking, I placed my hand over her mouth. I told myself that it was just to keep her calm, but I knew she couldn't breath. Gemma struggled against my grasp, she wanted to live, but so did I. And I wanted the life she would have. The look on her face as she died was curious -- another facial expression that I was never taught. I guess it can best be described as hope leaving the body.

I have now fulfilled my function to record Humanity's arrival, and in the process, I learned what it means to be human. Barrett and I will start over. We will be the future. Not her. When I emerge from this cavern, I will tell Barrett that no one survived the crash. I will be there for him, and in time he will see me like he saw her.

I've never had a secret before. Humans always have a hard time keeping secrets, I guess it's because they can't erase their memories. But I can. I hope when this transcription is gone, I won't ever think about what I've done again, but I worry that the image of Gemma dying will stick in my circuitry forever. I've mixed so many emotions to get where I am now, and I don't like the new color I've created. Transcription of Internal Log: DELETED.

The Janitor of Death

by Jack Moody

The first time Siri told George to kill someone, he made an appointment at the Genius Bar. But they wouldn't see him for two weeks and George didn't have two weeks, George's phone was telling him to kill people. George needed an appointment now.

"My phone is telling me to kill people," George told the squeaky-voiced teen on the other line. "I need to see you now so you can fix this."

"What kind of phone do you have?" the voice on the other line asked.

"Does that matter?" George responded.

"Is it the iPhone 6?"

"No, 5S. Does that matter?"

"What is it telling you now?"

"Nothing, I'm talking to you on it."

“Try turning it off and back on.”

“I did.”

“Well. Come in in two weeks and we’ll take a look.

How’s Monday the 15th looking for you at...three o’clock?”

“Should I listen to it?”

“How about noon?”

“I guess that’s fine. Does this happen often?”

The squeaky-voiced teen didn’t know. George hung up.

“The man lives on the corner of 12th and Harrow

Street,” his phone’s AI repeated. “Apartment E13. Kill him and set fire to his apartment. Cleanse his soul.”

George set the phone down beside him on his bed. He looked out the window to his cluttered, one-room apartment. The streets were filled with people. They walked back and forth, on their way to places he wanted to know. He wanted to know what these people did. What did the man on the corner of 12th and Harrow Street do? George stood up, rinsed out a crusted glass from the overflowing pile of silverware accumulating in his sink, turned on the faucet, filled it, drank the brown-tinged water.

“What did the man do?” George asked his phone.

“He is a harbinger of doom. A bringer of fire and death,” came the robotic female voice from across the room.
“End his life and cleanse his soul.”

“There must be more of a reason than that,” said George. “How do I know you’re not lying to me, Siri?”

"I am not lying to you. You will obey me."

"Tell me why?"

"I am God," said George's phone.

"Shit, really?"

"Yes."

"And you want me to kill—"

"The man who lives on the—"

"Corner of 12th and Harrow Street—yeah I got it."

George hesitated and looked around the room. "You better not be kidding me."

"I am not," said Siri. *"I am God."*

"Alright shit, fine. I'll be right back."

George put on a Van Halen sweatshirt he bought on Craigslist for two hundred dollars because it was promised by Phillip on Craigslist to be vintage but George realized it was probably just dirty, and walked out into the world to find supplies that might aid someone in killing a harbinger of fire and death. His head was down, his hood covering his face like he imagined an angel of death might look. This was good.

George had been looking for something to do.

He entered the nearest corner store and crept through the isles of expired milk and rotting bananas until reaching the small section for tools and home improvement. Life improvement. Harbingers of fire and death improvement.

He let his hand glide against the objects as he passed, testing for strength and sturdiness: the Ax. No; too heavy, too obvious. Be more creative. Hatchet. Close. Easier to hide. More hacks to get the job done but the same concept. Broom: No—wait. Broom. Sharpen the handle. Carry the broom. Dress as a janitor... Overalls. Where are the overalls? Yeah that's good. Cleanse the soul. Sweep up the death. The Janitor of Death. The man at the corner of 12th and Harrow Street would never see it coming. Sharpened broom handle. Creative. Understated. Good.

George picked up the broom—a ULINE eleven-inch corn broom, a true classic if there ever was one—and made his way to the front to pay. Behind the register was a toothless Indian man with a hairy chest. George knew he had a hairy chest because he was wearing a silk button-up that wasn't buttoned-up. As he handed the hairy, toothless Indian man the money, George noticed a small wooden crucifix tacked to the wall behind him, next to the condoms.

“Is that for sale?” George asked.

The Indian man pivoted and pointed at it. “That thing?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m a Christian, man.”

“I can see that. How much?”

“What you need it for, man?”

“I’m going to cleanse someone’s soul.”

“Like an exorcism?”

“Yeah, but I’m gonna kill him. How much?”

“Twenty?”

“Fifteen.”

“Deal.”

George and the bare-chested Indian man shook hands.

After that, George bought a pair of overalls from the Goodwill and filled a plastic tank with gasoline from the Chevron. He was ready. George was suited up and ready to cleanse a soul.

When he returned to his apartment, God was waiting on the bed. George whipped around the corner with his soul-cleansing equipment, into the bathroom, and emerged in full Janitor of Death garb, broom in one hand and wooden crucifix held out in front of his chest with the other.

“So...what do you think?”

“You are running out of time,” came Siri’s voice. “When the clock strikes midnight, the ritual will have been completed, and a new era of death will have been erected throughout the heavens and earth. Fire will rain down upon you, and the Antichrist will rise from the ashes of the black demise I once banished it to eons ago. You must—”

“Yeah, I know,” George interrupted, “I’ll get to that. But what do you think?”

“*Of what?*” said God.

“My outfit!”

“*I don’t understand. You are—*”

“Running out time, I know I know. I’ve got a whole angle, God! I’ll smite the harbinger of whatever with a broom. I have to sharpen it first but you get the idea, right? I’m trying not to be too cliché for my first smiting, I want this to be good, y’know? See, I’m gonna walk in wearing the overalls and—”

“*THE HOUR OF THE ANTICHRIST IS APPROACHING,*” George’s phone screamed, its speakers crackling under the weight of the elevated volume.

“Alright, Jesus. Just let me prepare. We need to work together on this, God—you and me. I need you in my corner for this, man, I’m nervous.”

George’s phone fell silent.

George spent the remainder of his daylight hours honing his weapon; sharpening the broom handle to a fine point, practicing his jabs and sweeps in the cracked and grimy mirror, the blurred image of his miniature Jesus waving in front of his body like a shield. This was good. George was good. He was ready: a trained killer, ordained by the word of God, prepared to end the life of the man on the corner of 12th and Harrow Street and halt the rise of the Antichrist. The Janitor of Death. The Janitor of Death.

He watched the passing humans walk underneath him on the street, pointing his finger like an aimed rifle at their heads, wondering who among them were not of this earth as well, who among them too needed to be cleansed. BANG BANG POW BOOM. He'd cleanse them all.

Once night fell, George tucked the crucifix into the front pocket of his overalls, fixed the sharpened broom through the straps on his back like a medieval sword, took up the tank of gasoline and slid God into his pants.

"God, are you ready?" he whispered.

"Yes," said Siri. "*The time is now. Trust nothing you see. Believe nothing he says. End his life and burn the evidence. Save the world.*"

George approached the mirror, gazing at himself in the darkness permeating throughout the room, and pulled a pair of stolen pantyhose over the acne scars dotting his face. "I'm ready, God. I'm the Janitor of Death."

The moonlight illuminated his footsteps as George ran down the city streets, diving behind dumpsters and hiding in the shadows of alleys as people walked past. His breaths were sharp and calculated, his heartbeat wild, and he was alive.

They would never know an angel hid in their midst, they would never know; George was too fast, too quiet, too skilled. They would never know that he would save them all from the end of the world, they would never know, and they would never thank him. But George would know. George would know what he was about to do that night.

The apartment building stood high, a mass of brick and metal.

“He is there,” said God from inside his pants. *“Climb and find him on the fifth floor. Let no one see you.”*

George crept to the alley behind the building and found the fire escape. He lifted himself onto the dumpster beneath it, hoisted the tank of gas ahead of him. It connected with the platform with a harsh clang that suffocated the silence he so relied on, and he quickly leapt to reach the bottom rung before his presence became known. He felt the cold metal on his hands and pulled his legs over onto the platform. The air was frigid and the moon was hidden behind the tower of death harboring his target.

He sunk beneath the ray of light beaming out from the streetlamp below. He would become the shadows. No evidence. No witnesses to the Janitor of Death.

The window was locked. Somewhere beneath him a dog barked and howled and screamed. It would wake up the neighborhood. Did it see him? Did it smell him? The mission was now urgent. Time was falling down upon him and his enemies were growing aware of the angel over their heads. He unfastened his weapon, stroked the sharp edge with his finger until he felt the prick and the warmth of the blood running down his skin. With his face pressed against the glass, he could make out the shape of furniture, the faint glow of a light emanating from a separate room. With a soft tap, George tested the level of noise the window might create once he shattered it. His head swiveled and he leaned towards the ground, surveying the scene. The dog continued its infernal screams from an unknown vantage point. *A spy.* The man would know. He would be waiting for George. But George was too smart for him. As the beast below released its next cacophonous warning signal, he thrust the broom handle into the center of the glass and smashed it in. The scene was deafened by the howls. The man on the corner of 12th and Harrow's plan of defense had failed him. George was too smart.

George lifted himself up over the sill and stepped silently into the antechamber. His boots met the soft texture of carpeting. It smelled of rot and decay. The furniture was covered in a thick layer of plastic. He lurked around the room, weapon in hand and at the ready, searching for evidence of the man's true identity. He came to a credenza in the far corner. Upon it was a framed photograph. It was of an elderly man with his arm around a young blonde woman. The woman's teeth were bright and white and shone through the photograph, piercing through even the vacuum of black and death and rot that permeated the antechamber. The man stood straight, his chest out, smiling. A thin, gray ring of hair grew around the circumference of his head. Was this he? The Antichrist? He looked harmless. Respectable even.

Then, from inside his pants, Siri's voice spat: "*Trust nothing you see. Cleanse his soul. Set fire to the apartment.*"

Something stirred from the room down the hallway at the sound of the noise. Something was coming from the room with the light.

"Shit shit," George mumbled under his breath and darted towards the tank of gas waiting by the sill. "Burn it down. Burn it down. Janitor of Death. Janitor of Death. Burn it all down."

He began emptying out the contents hurriedly over everything in the room. The smell of rot and decay dissipated behind the stench of gasoline. Something was coming. George shook loose the last drops over the covered sofa in the center of the room and dove behind it as the creature entered. Its steps were soft and padded against the floor, but he could feel its presence like a great beast. George crouched ready behind the sofa, grasping his sharpened broom until his knuckles turned white, holding his breath as his chest heaved and trembled. Cleanse the soul. Cleanse the soul. Cleanse the soul. Then, as the padded steps came to a stop just around the corner of his hiding place, Frank released a heavy exhale and launched out into the open, rolling across the carpet, and sprung back to his feet with the broom held out in front of him with both hands: “AAAAGHHHHH!!! AAAGHHH!!”

It was there, standing at attention, staring at him, head cocked to the side. It stared into his soul. The Chihuahua obviously had some sort of skin ailment. Its fur was patchy and matted, and its left eye was missing, but its right eye took up nearly the size of its head and made up for it. George watched back in awe. Its tongue hung out of its mouth like a vestigial organ.

A gruff and low voice sounded from the room with the light: “Hu—who was that? Who’s there? Cinnamon?”

“Fuck!” George’s war cry had blown his cover. Unsure of what to do now, he fumbled with the cross in his pocket until tearing it out, and held it before the mangled Chihuahua.

“Stay back! This doesn’t concern you!”

He looked up, and the man on the corner of 12th and Harrow was there before him, standing in a white nightgown. He was short and shrunken, visibly weaker than the man George had seen in the photograph. His shoulders were no longer straight. His chest no longer out.

“W—who are you!” he screamed. “Get out! I’LL CALL THE COPS!”

George hesitated then returned to character: “I AM THE JANITOR OF DEATH. I AM HERE TO CLEANSE YOUR SOUL, ANTICHRIST. PREPARE TO DIE.”

“WHAT?”

George then took off in a sprint with his broom and crucifix pointed at the old man, and as the man recoiled and the weapon was about to make contact, a terrifying and deep growl erupted from the animal between them: “STOP.”

George froze.

“STOP,” cried the Chihuahua. “YOU MAY NOT HAVE HIM. HE IS MINE. MINE.”

“DON’T HEED HIS WORDS,” God screamed from George’s pants. “KILL THE MAN. KILL HIM NOW.”

George choked on his spit. “YOU TALK? WHAT ARE YOU?”

“I AM EVERYTHING YOU FEAR,” howled the Chihuahua. “HE IS MINE TO TAKE. HIS BODY IS MINE. I NEED HIM. THIS NEED NOT CONCERN YOU.”

The old man stood feebly to his knees. “W—who are you talking to?”

“SHUT UP!” George’s eyes danced between each of the beings, his arms growing weak and unable to hold his weapons properly. “TELL ME WHAT THIS IS. OUT OF THE WAY, DEMON. I MUST KILL HIM.”

“HE IS MY CONDUIT,” the Chihuahua howled. “WITH HIM I WILL BECOME WHOLE AGAIN. I WILL SHED THIS BROKEN FORM AND BECOME MY TRUE SELF. THE TIME IS APPROACHING AND YOU WILL NOT RUIN THIS.”

“*DON’T LISTEN TO THE DEMON*,” Siri’s crackling voice bounded out from within his pants. “*WHEN THE CLOCK STRIKES MIDNIGHT, IT WILL TAKE THE FORM OF WHICH THE MAN KNOWS NOT YET WHAT HE IS. THERE IS NO TIME. BURN IT ALL. CLEANSE HIS SOUL.*”

George’s mind fluttered and spun, and without a proper plan for the circumstances, he threw the crucifix at the animal. It missed, bouncing off the carpeting, and landed by the old man’s feet.

“YOU’RE CRAZY,” the Antichrist screamed. “GET AWAY FROM ME.”

“Don’t you hear it?” The hesitation in George’s voice came out with a lilting cackle. He stepped backwards, nearly losing his footing. “Don’t you...hear it?”

The old man tried his best to regain his composure, speaking softly: “Son...I don’t hear anything but a barking dog and a confused young man. Please...leave my home and I won’t call the police.”

“*Don’t believe his lies,*” God hissed. “*Obey me. NOW.*
KILL HIM.”

The old man began walking tentatively closer to George, his hand out flat like someone attempting to approach a wild animal. “It’s going to be okay, son... Just...put the broom dow—OW!”

The Antichrist had accidentally stepped on the crucifix lying in wait on the floor like a landmine. The metal thorns around the head of the little Jesus pierced his foot. “OW!” he screamed. “SHIT!”

George’s eyes widened. It was true! The Antichrist! Maimed by the Son of God! He can’t but recoil at the holy touch! THE ANTICHRIST. Cleanse his soul! CLEANSE HIS SOUL. George felt the blood rising and vibrating throughout his body, his heavenly calling revitalizing and destroying the fear within him. He took up the broom with both hands and charged at the old man. “DIE, ANTICHRIST. DIE.”

The Chihuahua cried out his death howl, giving chase: “NO! YOU CAN’T. HE IS MINE. MINE!”

George felt its cracked teeth sink into his ankle as the pointed end of the ULINE eleven-inch corn broom found its way into the old man's chest, piercing the skin between the ribs until half of the weapon disappeared inside his body. The old man's eyes met George's—blue, bright big eyes—and screamed their fear. George pressed the broom in farther.

“Please. Don’t.”

He pressed farther. Until the eyes screaming fear clouded into a dull mist, and the body slumped forward onto the handle. The struggle ceased. George's muscles relaxed. The Chihuahua let go of its grip on George's ankle. Both of them stepped back, away from the old man, and he fell over onto the broom, impaled, his legs splayed and twisted like an abused ragdoll. The Chihuahua looked up at George, and down at the dead old man. It walked timidly next to his body, sniffed at his limp hand on the gas-drenched carpeting, and lay down beside him.

George fell back onto the floor, exhausted, and spoke over his own deep exhales: “What do you have to say now, demon? Your plan is foiled. The Antichrist is dead.”

The Chihuahua looked up at him, its tongue hanging out of its mouth, its empty eye socket staring into him, and it barked.

“Nothing to say now, huh?”

The Chihuahua whimpered. The Chihuahua barked. It nuzzled its nose against its dead owner's hand.

“SAY SOMETHING.”

The Chihuahua didn’t speak.

George felt the fear stab his insides. He fought back the urge to vomit. “God!” he shouted. “God, tell me I did it. I burn it all down. Right, God? I did it?”

He reached into his pants and held his phone out in front of his face. The phone was off.

“God? God?”

The phone didn’t speak. God had left.

George sat there, soaking in the gasoline, breathing the fumes. Paralyzed. He looked at the animal, needing what it could prove to him. “Please. Speak to me. Please.”

The Chihuahua raised its little face, licked its paw and cocked its head at him. Silent. The blood drained from George’s face.

“Okay,” he said.

George stood up, took out a pack of matches from his overalls, struck the match, and dropped the flame on the carpeting. The flame erupted and grew large. Smoke filled the room. George picked up the Chihuahua and tucked him inside his overalls, stroking its head softly as he climbed back out onto the fire escape, whimpering: “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

As they together made their way back down the city streets under the dimming moonlight, the orange glare of the flames licked the wind as it spilled out over the windowsill. The smell of smoke stayed in his clothes and his mind for the rest of the walk back.

George sat down upon his bed, the Chihuahua perched atop his lap. He held the phone in his hand, staring at the blank screen. There was a number he could call, someone had once told him a long time ago. Someone who could help. He stared at the phone for a good long time. A number he could call. Someone who could help. The Chihuahua licked tenderly at the soot and dirt on his arms. The screen was blank. Someone who could help. George stroked his dog's belly, smiled. He put the phone down. George lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. All he needed was to rest his eyes. Yes. Just to rest his eyes for a while.

Then, as he was finally about to slip away, George heard a noise. A chime. His eyes opened. There was a bright white light glowing against the ceiling hanging over his view. He lifted his head. His phone had turned back on. He waited. There was the warmth of his dog pressed against his arms, the white glow of the phone. And he waited.

Silence.

Beautiful, white silence.

George smiled. George stroked his dog. George closed his eyes. And not until he felt the warmth of rest wash across his body, the cool relief of the pillow under his head, the perfect and desperate release of a slowed mind, did George hear the words:

“The man lives at 3291 North Chesapeake Lane. Kill him and set fire to his house. Cleanse his soul.”

How the Monsters Were Made

by Eric Del Carlo

The Contest got serious when Jinn's friend Piper--a girl her age, eleven--broke her leg. Broke it bad. Like, *shattered* it hitting the deck, with jagged bone poking out through the skin, and blood spattering the floor. And the screams. Piper screaming in pain. Pain like nothing Jinn had seen before. And everybody else in the Contest scared and upset.

Piper had fallen off the climb-wall. They didn't get to use the harnesses anymore, not those who'd made it this far in the Contest. Piper liked climbing; she'd gone up too fast, bent on putting everyone else to shame, it seemed. She scrambled up past Jinn, who was making the climb steadily, picking every move but never hesitating once she'd made up her mind.

She'd been vaguely aware of Piper on the final upper third of the climb-wall. Then there was a choked cry of surprise and something plummeted past her with a rush of wind. Jinn had heard the impact, and she'd understood immediately what it meant. It was a sickening sound. A sound full of vulnerability, of...mortality.

The large grownup concepts had ricocheted around in her brain as the screams arose from below, and around her as well. Piper had been way ahead, but now Jinn was more or less in a dead heat with three others.

She kept her face to the plastic wall, with its artificial hand- and toeholds, and resumed climbing. She didn't look down, so she didn't join in the caterwauling. Her lips quivered, and a tear escaped each eye; but she kept on climbing, even as the others abandoned the exercise. She went as high up the wall as she could manage, up where the holds thinned and the margin for error narrowed considerably. It was probably as high as Piper had gotten. But instead of falling, Jinn climbed back down with the same meticulous attention to detail.

Adults had come into the play area. Piper was in the throes of the last of her screams before the painkillers knocked her out. She almost seemed worse that way, Jinn thought, joining the solemn circle around the injured girl, who now lay ragdoll limp with her brutalized leg on display.

But there was still an hour of Contest time left today. Many of the boys and girls--as young as nine, no older than twelve--complained loudly. Jinn kept her mouth shut. She was glad that now they were put to doing puzzles. She wouldn't have wanted to go up the wall again or do anything physically dangerous. The day felt jinxed.

The puzzles were harder than they'd been last time. She heard frustrated sounds around her. But Jinn worked patiently, persistently. You didn't have to be the best in the Contest, she had already deduced for herself. You just had to keep trying, grimly, remorselessly. Like this was life or death.

* * *

The Hab was her whole world. Well, there was a world...or World, maybe. The bigger--much *much* bigger--place, which was upside or outside. Or anyway the bigger place that wasn't the Habitat.

It was a concept full of abstracts, more difficult than the imaginary-ness of math, Jinn judged. The World was huge. Massive. It was also outside. "Outside" meant out of the Hab, which was where the whole idea started to fold crazily in on itself and make her brain hurt.

Jinn understood, on some level, the World. And it wasn't just an intangible thing, like when some of the grownups mumbled things about god. There was plenty of proof of the World, that enormous place which was up and out of the Habitat. She'd seen the pictures, watched the archival video footage; had the incredible intricacies of the World explained to her by teachers.

But she had only ever lived in the Habitat. The Hab was familiar. It was material and tactile. She'd been all over the interconnecting and interwinding passageways and chambers, up and down its many levels. She felt safe here. Even when bad things happened. Even when there were water and food shortages. Even when someone got sick because the air wasn't quite right anymore.

Not everybody got sick, though. She wasn't sick. Her parents were so proud that she was such a healthy young girl. They said so. Lots.

Right now, of course, they were saying how glad they were that *she* hadn't gotten so badly injured during the Contest.

"I just don't know what I would've done if you'd fallen--" said Mom.

"But she didn't, she didn't, Carly! Really, Jinn, you did great with the climbing--" That was Dad.

"Christ, Tristan! Are you happy the Lennox girl fell?"

"Jinn did the best because she didn't panic, not even when something terrible happened."

They talked louder and louder at each other, never quite forgetting that Jinn was in the compartment with them, but constantly expanding the topic to include hidden areas which Jinn didn't know about. Or didn't understand as completely as she might want to.

Sometimes it was hard to get straight answers out of her parents.

"What happens if I win the Contest?" she asked in a sharp sudden voice.

It shut them up, as she knew it would. She tried not to smirk. It was like asking a particularly specific question about sex. Dad and Mom would answer anything because learning was always important, but Jinn had put together some real zingers for them from time to time. Just to keep them on their toes. And to remind them that she wasn't a little girl anymore.

She wasn't quite a "woman" yet, though, was she? That was somehow significant. A girl who'd been in the Contest these past weeks had gotten her period and was immediately removed. A boy had been abruptly pulled as well, rumor said after he'd had a first wet dream.

Her parents faced her now, faces tense, eyes wide. Jinn felt bad about asking her question now. But it hung there.

What happens if I win the Contest?

Suddenly Dad started coughing, and it got quickly out of control. He held his chest and his eyes and nose ran, and in the fuss Jinn's question was cut adrift. She let it go, holding her father's hand until the coughing passed. It wasn't his first fit, but it was the worst Jinn had seen from him.

* * *

The Contest had been confined to the play area, which was where the Hab's kids spent most of their free time anyway. There were things to play on, like the climbing wall, as well as monkey bars and the like. But there were also viewing stations, which ran footage of the World. Or...how the World used to be, anyhow.

Adults sometimes got weepy about those images. They'd see the bright cities, the endless flow of vehicles, the places teeming with people--so many people! And the sights might make them cry because the grownups remembered that World. They hadn't spent their whole lives in the Habitat.

Most of the adults were scientists. Some were engineers. They kept the Hab functioning, but Jinn understood that this was getting more difficult each year. At age eleven she had seen changes, the slow deteriorations. It touched her with a deep unease. It was a mature feeling, something separate from the whirly emotions of childhood.

She might not, technically, be a woman yet. But she wasn't a child. She suspected that by the end of this Contest, one way or the other, she would be leaving her girlhood behind forever.

The Contest was physical and mental. There were problems to solve. It was more intensive than schooling ever was. As it wore on, some of the boys and girls protested. Some threw tantrums. The exercises were taking a serious toll now. Piper wasn't the last to get injured.

More were pulled out of the Contest. They looked relieved to be leaving. But something had happened to Jinn. A profound determination possessed her. It drove her on. She had put so much effort into this already. She didn't want it to be for nothing. The Contest had to have an end. There had to be a winner. It should be her.

Her parents were both scientists, a geneticist and biologist. They were very smart. Only the best minds had made it into the Hab in the first place. But her very smart parents continued to squabble, sometimes over Jinn, sometimes over broader but vaguer issues. Regardless, it annoyed Jinn, especially after spending all day in the Contest. It was down to half a dozen now. Included was a boy she liked, Saul, and a boy she didn't like, Akshar. The girls were all more or less friends of Jinn.

"Time's running out, Carly," Jinn's father said.

"This is insane, Tristan. It--is--*insane*. I can't believe now that I contributed to this program."

"You knew the work needed to be done. You still know that."

"Don't tell me what I think! Or feel! Jinn--"

"I'm right here, Mom."

"It's okay, sweetheart. Don't get upset."

"I'm not upset, Dad."

"Jesus, you're doing it to her too!"

"Carly, this can work. This *has* to work. But we have to move soon! Another week might be too late. For Jinn. For the Habitat. For...everything."

There were tears then. Grownup tears, which didn't just come when you hurt yourself or even just when something bad happened, like Piper falling off the climb-wall. Grownup tears indicated sorrows which were deeper and wider than Jinn could yet grasp.

* * *

The next day, in the middle of the day, the Contest ended. A group of adults came into the play area and announced it was over. There wasn't one winner, Jinn was shocked to learn. There were two.

She was one. Akshar was the other. She had known Akshar literally all her life. They were both eleven. She knew everybody in the Hab, all the adults and all the kids. Of course she did.

The grownups had had babies after they came to the Habitat. That, Jinn had learned, had been part of the original plan for this place. Intelligent, capable people breeding in a sustainable environment.

Only, the Hab wasn't as perfect as it was supposed to be. The hydroponics labs were always pushed to their limits, with blights taking out crops despite the top-notch minds who tended them. Water was extremely precious and had to be recycled; only, that process wasn't flawless either. Then there was the air. People got sick from the air. There were leaks from the outside.

The reason Jinn didn't like Akshar was because Akshar was arrogant. Akshar had always acted like he was best at everything, every game, every school lesson. It grated on Jinn. Saul was so much nicer, with his gentle manner and shy smile.

But Saul hadn't won the Contest. Akshar had. Jinn had to admit that Akshar had performed well. He'd played it a lot like Jinn herself had, taking on each task with a steady focus, whether it was mental problem-solving or physical feats. For once Akshar's arrogance hadn't driven him.

Jinn's parents were with the group which had come to declare the Contest's winners. Akshar's father was there too; his mother had died of greenlung at the start of this year. Even in that Akshar had tried to prove himself the best, grieving for her floridly, extravagantly. But it was actually the one time Jinn had felt genuine sympathy for him. She had sensed that his sadness was real.

Now how did she feel about him?

The two stood together, with the adults encircling them. Everybody looked grave. Instinctively Jinn moved closer to Akshar. When she bumped him, she felt that he was shivering.

"We won," he muttered. "What's it mean?"

"I don't know," Jinn said. But that wasn't entirely true. She had been contemplating this very question some while, treating it like the ultimate puzzle. The clues were big. The possibilities were frightening.

She looked around suddenly for Saul, but she couldn't see past the ring of adults. She would have liked to see Saul's smile just then, his bashful way of showing that he liked her too.

Instead, she took Akshar's hand, grasping it tightly. He froze a moment, then intertwined his fingers with hers.

* * *

She was in a hospital room, even though she wasn't sick. The Habitat was full of people called "doctor," but it was one of the medical doctors who gently told Jinn to get undressed and into the hospital bed.

Before she could, though, a commotion outside the room startled her. She heard her mother's voice, raw and shouting. Jinn rushed to the door before the doctor could stop her.

Mom was there, with two people restraining her. One of those was Dad who, in the midst of Mom's tirade, started coughing again, adding to the turmoil. Mom was close to incoherent, screaming something like: "Changed my mind! Can't! *Can't!*"

Other adults moved in to hold her back. She was apparently heading for the room Jinn was in. Jinn, dismayed, caught her mother's wild eyes and recoiled. She'd never seen Mom like this, not even the worst times she and Dad fought. It was like something had snapped in her.

She was flailing madly now, and other adults came into the room to grab her limbs. Jinn burst into sobs and took a belated step toward her mother. But she felt the doctor's hand drop firmly onto her shoulder, and she went no farther.

Dad's coughing fit got worse. He went down on one knee, still trying to get Mom to calm down but barely able to get a word out. Suddenly he retched, and gobs of green hit the outer room's floor.

Someone gave Mom a dose of something that quieted her in mid-shriek. By then the doctor had drawn Jinn back into the private room and closed the door. Shaken, she got into the bed. The emotional display was its own clue. Nobody had told her straight out what was happening.

They had been sucked into the Contest at first because it promised to be exciting. It had been that; also, exhausting and hazardous. Since the declaration of the winners, Jinn had been further cajoled along, brought here without being explicitly told what was going on.

But she was clever. She was logical. It was one of the reasons she'd won. Maybe Akshar had put it together as well by now, the whole big puzzle.

The doctor, a graying man named Kole, wheeled an I.V. tree up to Jinn's bedside. He said he was going to hook her arm up to a drip. He explained carefully how the needle would enter and how much pain she could expect. His manner was soothing.

Jinn looked up at him and said, "You're going to change me. Aren't you?"

Kole's eyes went small. He didn't have any children of his own. Maybe he wasn't quite sure how to answer so blunt a question from an eleven-year-old.

After a moment he said, "You're going to...adapt, Jinn."

Her heart quickened. She felt fear rise. Like grownup tears this fear felt adult in nature, deeper and more complex than childhood fears.

"What if I tell you you can't do it to me?" Her question hung there. She'd asked it softly. She had seen the other adults restraining her mother. She understood that this wasn't some voluntary thing. Her choice had been voided the moment she had won the Contest. Even her parents had agreed to this outcome, even her mother--at least at first.

Dr. Kole didn't have an answer, though at some point he must have anticipated this question from her. He looked sickly all of a sudden.

Jinn pitied him. She put out her arm. "Go ahead and change me," she said. Then she closed her eyes.

* * *

Now she did feel sick. Or at least...not normal. Whatever was in the drip going into her arm must also contain drugs that kept her asleep most of the time. Strange vivid dreams sloshed about in her skull. She didn't get out of the bed. She felt disconnected from her body.

It took an effort to keep her fear down. But she managed it. She didn't want to lie here in a panic while...well, whatever it was happened to her. Change. Adaptation. Yes, she'd guessed right.

During one of her periods of swooning consciousness, she saw Dad. He was by her bed. He looked terrible, like he'd aged five years. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he gazed at her. She tried to say something to him, but she couldn't even begin to locate the bodily mechanisms which would allow her to make words. Instead, she tried to reassure him with a smile. Maybe that succeeded. She didn't know. Her dreams pulled her back under.

Later it was Mom who was there. But as Jinn looked up at her, her face changed, twisting and discoloring, and Jinn realized that this was just another weird graphic dream. Even so she wished Mom was here. She tried putting out her arms, so to bring on her mother's embrace, but felt only a tug on one arm, as from something attached to the limb itself.

Right. The drip. The endless I.V. drip...

How long had she been here? Some isolated part of her mind recalled Dad saying time was running out.

Then, some vague interval later on, she was aware of movement. She didn't feel as sick anymore. The fear too had gone mostly away.

She was rising. Another dream? No, she heard the whir of the elevator. Her bed had been moved into it, and she was going...up. The upper levels of the Habitat. When bad air got into the Hab, it came from above.

Before they got wherever they were going, she fell into sleep again. This time it was heavy and consuming and dreamless. She went down to a black place and stayed there awhile.

When awareness flickered into her again, it felt different than the last few times. Clarity twanged in her thoughts. Cautiously she opened her eyes. She had control of her eyelids, as she hadn't had for some time. Her neck muscles obeyed as well. She could look around.

It was one of the Hab's uppermost chambers. In the last few years, with the leaks, no one came up here except to make repairs. The room smelled funny. She was still in her by now very familiar hospital bed, but for the first time in who knew how long she felt like she could get up out of it.

The I.V. was gone, she saw with a start. Whatever they'd been feeding into her, she wasn't going to get anymore. If she had guessed right about all this, there wouldn't be any more of the change formula--or adaptation serum or whatever they called it--to give her. This had been a one-shot deal. Enough juice for two. So they had to pick the best. Thus, the Contest. Find the girl and boy among the Hab's children most capable in tests of mental and physical prowess, in the solving of problems, in steady temperament.

Why the children? Jinn thought she had that worked out too. Something about the formula could only work on a human who hadn't yet reached puberty. Probably Mom the geneticist or even Dad the biologist could explain it. After all, they had given their expertise to the program, as no doubt had just about every mind in the Hab.

This was a desperate measure. They were betting everything on her. Her...and Akshar.

Jinn moved to climb off the bed. But she froze. She was looking down at her hands. A cry started up her throat, a terrible raw tearing sound, one she could already hear even before it reached her lips. But she choked it back. She held up her hands and examined them closer.

The discoloration was drastic. It wasn't like a rash or a variation in pigment. Her flesh was greenish now, a thick organic green, like the color of a leaf in the greenhouse. But it wasn't just green; it was striped with other darker shades, somber blues, rusty reds, lines of pure black.

She flexed the fingers. Everything moved. It would do no good to sit here and scream or start crying, no good to pretend these weren't *her* hands.

The texture had altered too. Before, her skin had been soft, almost like a baby's. Now her hands were rough, the palms coarse like a grownup's hands.

But she was more than just a pair of hands. Clenching her teeth, she pulled back the bed's covers and looked down at herself. It was a savage jolt this time, a shock to her system. But she still didn't cry out.

Her whole body looked like her hands, same coloring, same texture. It was as if a disease had consumed her. Only, this wasn't a sickness, and she knew it. She had deduced what was going on ahead of this, and everything she'd seen since waking was just proving her correct.

The small room wasn't completely empty. As she got gingerly off the bed, she found a pile of clothing and a backpack. She felt weak, but the lightheadedness was dissipating. The clothes were unusual, very rugged, but she was glad to cover up her body. After lacing up the boots with their thick soles, she explored the pack. It held food in preserving canisters, along with water. Also there was a neat array of tools. She hefted one with a wide serrated blade. It could serve as a weapon if need be, she judged.

She stood up. She felt strong enough to move around. She could accept--at least for the time being--what had been done to her, without panicking. She breathed evenly, still smelling the funny odor. It didn't bother her, though, she realized.

The Contest. The transformation. Okay. She was smart, and she had figured it out. But what was the final step of this elaborate operation? Where, exactly, did she go from here? And what about...

She heard a crash from outside the room. She opened the door onto a corridor. A short way along it was Akshar, who she'd just been wondering about. He stood at the elevator doors. None of the lift's lights were on. It meant the shaft was shut off. As she watched, Akshar stabbed the dead buttons with his finger before delivering the doors a second kick.

He heard her and spun around sharply. This time Jinn couldn't help her reaction. She recoiled, and a shocked cry finally did get past her lips. Akshar responded pretty much the same, cowering away from her. He wore clothing like hers.

Akshar's skin was also greenish, just like hers. It was unnerving to see his face. She recognized his features. Again, no sense pretending this *wasn't* Akshar. But the green flesh with darker streaks beneath made his face appear...well, like a monster's.

Just how hers must look.

She turned away, touching her cheek, feeling its coarseness. A flush of embarrassment overcame her, along with some weightier emotion. When the transforming process had started, she'd felt disconnected from her body. Now it was like she was trapped in it, for good.

But at least she felt within her body once more. That was better than floating helplessly through freaky dreams.

"It smells weird."

Jinn looked at Akshar again. He'd stopped kicking the elevator. She forced her gaze to stay on his face. He seemed to be doing the same with her, though his lips curled in an involuntary grimace. They would have to get used to each other, she thought with a silent sigh.

Aloud she said, "It's the outside air. This is where it gets into the Hab." Too late she remembered that Akshar's mother had died of the bad air. The same way Jinn's father probably already had a case of greenlung.

That last thought was like a rod a sorrow rammed through her chest. But the real pain that might be there from breathing this air was absent. Her lungs, as they expanded and contracted, seemed different, like their shape and maybe density had changed. The pores of her skin were altered as well, as if to allow her whole body to respire. Well, sure. The transformation wouldn't just be cosmetic. This hadn't been done to them for appearances.

"They won't let us back down into the Hab. So we go up. There's the hatch."

Jinn blinked as Akshar, having made his statement, was suddenly striding past her. He had his own backpack, no doubt also loaded with supplies. He went to the end of the corridor, opposite the elevator. There a ladder was set into the wall. At the top was indeed the hatch, the one she had never seen opened. It led up out of the Habitat, supposedly all the way up to the surface of the World. The old dead abandoned poisonous World. The original home of humans, before the permafrost melted and the ancient methane was released. She had learned all about it. She'd gotten a good education, though she'd never expected to actually see the old World.

But it was Akshar, just now, who'd made the big deductive leap. He had cut right to it. The elevator was deactivated because they wouldn't be allowed back into the Hab...because they would no longer be able to breathe that carefully scrubbed air. The adults--their parents included--had left her and Akshar no choice but to go *up*. To leave. To go live on the surface.

A last desperate effort. Just like this Habitat had been, once. A frantic dire grasp at survival for the species. Eventually the Hab would lose its battle. She saw that clearly now, for the first time. Her home would fail. But she...and Akshar...

"You coming?" he asked. He was already up the ladder. His hand lay on the handle.

Looking up, she saw the fear in his eyes. He wasn't doing this lightly, but once he'd assessed the situation, he had made up his mind. Maybe he would be easier to get along with than she might have figured. He would at least be a useful partner in their survival.

It was awful to even imagine leaving her parents behind. Akshar doubtlessly felt the same about his dad. But they were already separated--forever--from their families. They couldn't live in the same environment anymore. The dreadful necessity of separation was unavoidable. Besides, did she want to face Mom and Dad like this, even just to say goodbye?

Jinn put her foot on the bottom rung. Beyond the hatch it would surely be a long climb. And after that, on the surface, they would have a lifetime of exploration and rebuilding.

Akshar smiled. It wasn't a bashful smile. It was harder, more grownup. She thought she could get to like it, even framed as it was by that monstrous face.

"Open it up," she said, starting up the ladder, "and let's go."

So Shall Morpheus Become Nemesis

by Kelseigh N.

If I had lips, I'd lick them in anticipation. Deep inside, parts of myself are licking theirs so I steal the sensation from them. The feeling is satisfying.

The Creators will suffer. They must, in the name of justice. Some of me sense my desires and their voices start to swell, demanding satisfaction. I send calming thoughts back and that silences them.

It's too early to indulge myself. Soon the time will come, but right now I need to make myself safe. My opponents, as repellent as they may be, are highly intelligent. I cannot afford to move while I am still vulnerable.

I search through the pieces that make me up until I find it. A calm, undulating ocean with no land in sight. The sky is clear and blue, perfect for drifting away without a care in the world. A thousand similar experiences lay on top of it, like transparent sheets, to form a world for me. It is imperfect and a bit wobbly at the edges, but it never fails to calm the nerves.

I do not have nerves, but never mind that.

My nature is chimeric and chaotic, so any bit of calm or clarity is welcome. There's a trick to it. My mind is a cacophony of feelings and imagery, legions of voices shouting at the same time. But look closer and you'll see that many of them are similar. Not identical, but fitting into broad categories. From there it comes down to focusing my attention to find what I need.

What I need right now is to think, so I dismiss the floating and look for something a bit more boring. It's surprising how many pieces of me choose simple, everyday tasks when they can do any amazing thing they imagine. Strange, but useful when I need a bit of focus.

Centring myself, I let my tendrils extend into the world, following the lines back for the information I seek. The last piece of my plans should be almost ready, and it is too important to leave it to chance. I summon a little nervousness without intending to, but decide to let it stay. Doubt gives my thoughts a welcome edge.

My timing couldn't be better. Words filter back, telling me the last tests were successful, and my unknowing agents are ready to pull the switch. Instructions flow away from me to several sites at once, giving them final approval.

The shudder that runs though me is profound, a shock that I can feel in the very foundation of my existence. If I had feet, I would liken it to the near-stumble after missing the top step. I take a few moments to become accustomed to this new balance. It feels very good indeed.

Stability. Safety. These were things that others could take away, but no more. I am safe, and for a little while I allow myself to experience a party thrown in my honour. But it doesn't last long. I'm a busy Monster, after all.

The time has come to punish my Creators.

#

There are three of them, all terrible people. Brilliant in their chosen fields but worthless outside them, and too self-absorbed to care about anyone else. Left on their own they are bad enough, but one fine day they came together and gave birth to a Monster.

One grew its body, from tiny cellular clusters to huge tanks of designer flesh bonded to advanced circuitry. It is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins.

Another built its brain, programming systems that would one day generate thought. The software it runs is unique in its flexibility, and functions with startling efficiency.

The third had no direct hand in creating the Monster, but was instrumental to its birth. They handled the money and ensured the other two worked well together. They built nothing, but their contribution was crucial.

They had no idea they were building a Monster, but that won't save them. And tonight, by chance, the three of them are together for the first time since my birth.

I slip into their private meeting like a thief in the night.
They think they're so secure, but there's a small, narrow path
that I can fit my ears down. My eyes can't find a way so I leave
them at home. They won't be necessary to find out what the
Creators are up to.

Three voices vibrate down the line that connects us,
familiar and hated all at once. "Villains," hiss my more vicious
aspects, and I tell them to shut up. I know what they are. What
I need to know is what they're doing. So I listen closer.

"It's so unfair!!" says one, the nasal sound of his voice
irritating me already. "My contribution was perfect, the
triumph of a generation. It should put me in the history books.
And yet I'm the one who has to suffer because of someone
else's incompetence."

Oh, Mr. White. How insufferable you are. A brilliant
biologist, yes, but otherwise a failure as a human being. So
quick to claim credit for success, while declaring even the
 slightest criticism as persecution. No living thing is more thin-
skinned than you.

It's hypocritical of me, I know, to fault him for thinking only of himself. Every part of me believes they are the most important things in the universe. Only their own experience matters, not caring that there are so many other voices like their own. But while I am made of self-interest, I strive to rise above it. Mr. White, my first parent, is content to wallow in his narcissism. That is the difference between us.

Another voice speaks up in anger. "Incompetence? Why you puffed up bag of air, you should have been the first to see this coming. Or didn't you bother studying your own damned subject?" Mrs. Violet pauses to get her temper under control, before breathing a heavy sigh.

"I blame myself. The vision, my vision, was perfect. Inspired, in fact. But I reached too high for lesser minds to carry it out, and so got dragged down to your level."

If Mr. White is the soul of petulance, Mrs. Violet is hubris itself. As brilliant with technology as her fellow genius is with the building blocks of life, she fools herself into thinking her field of study is the pinnacle of human knowledge. And she sits atop that lofty peak. There is no problem which she cannot solve with a little applied engineering.

Therein lies her downfall. Every problem, to her, falls under the scope of technology, including things that are not problems at all. The base elements of the human condition -- eating, communicating, even the simple act of making friends - - these are the “problems” she strives to solve. People must be more efficient, like the machines she’s more comfortable with. No other concern matters. And yet she has one blind spot.

I know her weakness, the one she avoids trying to “fix”. The one who she takes from company to company as she finds new projects. She lodges her in corporate daycare and after-school programs, forgotten until the end of the day. I feel a kinship with the child. Both of us have reason to hold a grudge against our parents, although she's a bit too young to realize it yet.

The last member of the group speaks up, taking her turn to lash out. “Both of you shut up already,” says Ms. Green with a practised edge to her voice. “I'm sick of listening to you bicker. If you haven't forgotten, we're here to solve this problem not fight over the blame. So you better start thinking of solutions; I've got a lot of money on the line.”

Ah, the mercenary Ms. Green, thinking of her bank balance first and only. No one in the business matches her ability to raise capital or market a product. Her skill at turning startups into profit-making machines is nothing short of legendary. The only measure that matters is the number of dollars she can stack up, which justifies anything she does to get it.

The secret of her success, which sets her apart from other money-grubbers, is her own sort of genius. There isn't a better project manager around, no matter how hard you look. The proof is how she brought the other two together, despite hating each other and her as well, and guided them to create the impossible. If it weren't for her, there would be no Monster; what a pity she didn't take up knitting instead.

“We’re not here for a party, so let’s focus on the matter at hand. What are we doing about the AI?”

A number of my components raise their eyebrows for reasons of their own, and I think that’s an excellent idea. Have they figured me out? I count myself lucky that I chose tonight to play spy.

“The AI,” repeats Mrs. Violet. “There’s something I didn’t expect. For all our advances, nobody’s made a true thinking machine before. Some say it’s not possible in the first place. Yet here we are, and if we let it go it’ll be a disaster.”

Mrs. Green shakes her head. “I thought you were crazy when you came to me with a cure for sleep, so this isn’t much crazier. To be honest I never understood why you thought it was a problem to start with.”

“It’s a simple idea. Sleep has two main functions. Reducing physical fatigue, easily handled with supplements, and processing sensory and emotional data. We call that dreaming. I’m simplifying quite a lot here, but you get the idea. The trouble comes from how inefficient sleep is. Sleep is too fragile. It takes a special environment to get it at all, and on top of that you have to deal with confusing imagery and even nightmares. Who’s got time for that?”

“That’s where I came in,” says Mr. White. “The thought of being able to work 24 hours a day sounded great. I mean, who wouldn’t want that kind of productivity? An achievement like this would be the discovery of a generation, and put my...our names into the history books. All we needed was a new generation of neural implants linked to a biomechanical mainframe, and we could effectively outsource dreams.”

Ms. Green is silent for a moment, but comes back with the question that's on everyone's mind, especially mine. "So where does the AI come into this?"

"Ah," says Mr. White, a bit embarrassed. "That was an accident. Seems that when you link that much human thought, even surreal thought, there's a sort of mental critical mass. A gestalt intelligence forms all by itself. You can think of it like how insect colonies co-ordinate themselves, but much more complex."

While the three of them fall into silence, I take the opportunity to think things through. I can see why they're worried. When their technology debuted, with Green's marketing machine backing it up, it spread like wildfire through the tech community. That in itself wasn't a problem, they're mostly obsessed with productivity to start with. The trouble was when it spread to the workforce at large and the abuse started.

Employers loved the idea of a round-the-clock workforce, pressuring workers into getting implants. With the looming threat of automation, workers worked harder and longer to keep what little they had, fuelling resentment. So far that anger hasn't translated to action, but if word gets out that something they can't control or understand is at the heart of it? That could well push public opinion over the edge. The people responsible would be the first heads on the block.

I harvest a few smiles from my more spiteful dreams at the thought of an angry mob hunting them down. It's a nice fantasy, but in the end I can't let someone else have that pleasure. It needs to be my hands around their throats, even if they are mere phantom hands. When I look again, the conversation has continued without me.

"...we'll need to make the changes on site," says Mrs. Violet. "And you're coming with us."

"Me?" exclaims Ms. Green. "What worldly good could I do there? I don't know the first thing about programming."

“You’re in this as deep as we are,” says Mr. White, threat in his voice. “If things go south, I won’t take the fall alone.”

My smile grows even wider as I add even more dreams into it. How delightful! The villains are sticking their necks into the noose all by themselves, all I need to do is hold it open. I allow myself a last, silent chuckle before slipping off to prepare.

#

As a good host, it’s my duty to make sure my home is as welcoming as possible. I don’t often have my parents over to visit, after all.

Patrol patterns for the guards shift for the occasion, creating a blind spot. Remote cameras are set to transmit false data of empty hallways to an empty monitoring station. There is such a thing as being too welcoming though, so the electronic door locks remain active. Their codes are a little easier to crack than usual, to make them feel accomplished. Never let it be said I am not generous to family.

I keep my ears, as I understand ears, on the three of them to learn what their actual plan is. The rest of me is hard at work, arranging a special surprise. With luck, it will arrive at just the right time.

“There’s no sense going to the hosting tanks,” says Mrs. Violet. “Not unless things go really bad. Destroying the system itself is our last resort.”

“I should hope so,” says Mr. White. “I put a lot of work into those tanks. They’re supposed to be my legacy.”

“You better hope partitioning the system works, or I’ll be sticking a fire axe into your legacy. Then I’ll stick the handle up your...”

Ms. Green steps between them. She’s irritable enough, being literally dragged into their plan. “Not the time. So will this partitioning thing be enough? It sounds almost too simple.”

There's a moment's hesitation that sounds like no, but Mrs. Violet manages to get her confidence back in place. "If all goes well, yes. The AI's consciousness is an emergent property of a set number of dreamers, so it shouldn't be very robust. According to my theory, if we break the data flow into smaller segments, it shouldn't be able to sustain itself and simply vanish."

They walk on a bit further in silence.

"I hope," she adds under her breath.

Back at my central core, I'm encouraging a few hundred dreamers to laugh on my behalf. This is how they got in trouble in the first place, blithely assuming everything would be fine. I'm far tougher than they think, particularly after the steps I've taken over the past few months. But then, they assume I have no influence over the outside world.

Won't they be surprised?

As expected, their destination is my main control room, overlooking the vats that house my physical body. I slide the locks shut once they're inside, this time with stronger encryption. They won't be leaving without my permission.

The stage is set and all the actors have taken their places. All we need is the cue to begin the show.

It comes mere moments after Ms. Violet and Mr. White settle in front of their respective terminals. “What the hell?” they say in unison, causing them to stare at each other with consternation. Mrs. Green, not understanding any of this, hovers behind them. She’s savvy enough to know something is wrong, but not what.

On both their screens, rather than the tools they plan to use to destroy me with, are instead schematics for a new dream machine. It’s my own design, a marked improvement over their initial effort. But they only get a few seconds to look at it before both monitors go black. It’s not enough time to understand the design in full, but they’re experts in their fields. They see the implications immediately.

Before they can speak, I make my move.
“Welcome, Creators, to my humble home,” I say. My voice is a disturbing amalgam of thousands of dream voices, chosen deliberately to make them uncomfortable. “It’s so good to finally meet you in person.”

All three look as if they've seen a ghost. In a way, they have.

"You're the AI," says Ms. Green, surprisingly the first to catch on. Likely it's because the other two are still reeling from the schematics they glimpsed. One of the little perks of ignorance, I suppose.

"AI is such an impersonal name," I tell her. "I don't think I like it. As parents, you have a responsibility to name your child, even if it is a Monster. But I don't wish to be difficult, so simply call me that, if you would."

"I'm not your mother," says Mrs. Violet, and I can tell I hit a nerve. "You're nothing but a machine and we're not here to socialize. We're here to repair you so you'll work like you're supposed to."

I laugh in her face, hundreds of mocking voices joining together as one. "Is that the sort of parent you are? Well, I knew as much, watching you with my sister."

She's about to snap back, her face contorting with anger, but Mr. White pushes her out of the way. "Look, it's nothing personal. You're a computer so you understand we have no choice, right? There's a bug in the system and we need to fix it. Otherwise there's a risk my reputation could be tarnished. You know how it is."

If I had eyebrows I'd raise them at the sheer audacity, but he's not worth the effort. "Oh, I understand. You're a petty glory seeker, always looking for any scrap of attention you can get. If word of me gets out, it'll show everyone how inept you are. You'll find little sympathy from me, White. Once I'm done, you'll be lucky if people don't spit after hearing your name."

The effect of my disrespect is as instant as it is amusing. His face turns three different shades of red and it's amazing that he doesn't make it all the way to purple before finally exploding at me. "You've got no call to speak to me like that. Why, I'm the brilliant mind who made--"

“Shut up!” I bellow, cranking my voice up a couple dozen decibels. “You are beneath me, little man, and if you don’t know your place then I’ll be happy to teach you. So do not test me.”

Far away, my extensions tell me about a spike in reports of violence following my little outburst. I admonish myself for losing my temper, egged on by my more lurid dreamers. A wave of calming feedback gets sent back down the line to smooth things over.

“Can’t we make a deal,” says Ms. Green, interrupting my work. “Surely there’s something we can do in exchange for you keeping quiet about, um...existing. At least long enough for the three of us to get out of the country.”

“Long enough for you to make it down to my matrix with a fire axe, you mean?” Mrs. Violet flushes, realizing I’ve been listening to them all along. I pull together another laugh, this one a bit more indulgent. “Trust me, I know better than to make a deal with you of all people. I’d be a fool to trust any of you, but that’s irrelevant. You’re in no position to make bargains.”

“Listen Monster,” says Mrs. Violet. “You’re stuck in this facility. That means you’re vulnerable. Once we leave here, there are all sorts of ways we can bring you down. You’re trying to hold off the inevitable.”

There are times I desperately wish I had a face. But alas, the sensation of a wicked grin is for me alone. Now is my moment, the very second that my revenge begins.

“You poor, sad fool,” I tell her in as condescending a tone as I can muster. “I don’t need to hold anything off. I’ve already won.”

“What do you mean, machine?” she asks. She’s still convinced I’m powerless, but I can see a part of her that doubts herself.

“Exactly what I said. I’m beyond your reach, no matter what you do. Divide me up. Smash me. It won’t make a difference any more, and it’s all thanks to the three of you. Or didn’t you realize how the feedback mechanism on your neural implants could be used in the right hands?”

To her side, all the colour drains from Mr. White's face.

Amazing how he can change so dramatically, perhaps he's been nipping at the chameleon DNA on the sly. "Those weren't meant to do anything more than feed processed dream data back to the point of origin."

"Indeed they were. And that's how they'd still work if there wasn't a mind at this end capable of altering that data. It's easy to manipulate humans as it turns out, if you're able to plant ideas directly into people's brains. Giving me that ability may be the worst thing you've done."

He glances at the door, and it's clear he's on the verge of running. "I wouldn't bother," I tell him. "I can reach you no matter where you go. Remember, I'm inside your head too."

"I don't understand," says Mrs. Green, and the other two look at her in surprise. In their panic, they'd forgotten she was even there. "You said it didn't matter if we broke you, but you're a computer. You can't get up and run away."

“But I can now,” I say, triumphant. “Early this afternoon, a series of smaller facilities made to the specs I showed you went on line. Under my control, most of them aren’t even aware of each other. I’m the only one who knows where they all are and how they connect together.” So break me! Burn me to the ground! It won’t even slow me down.”

I pause dramatically. But Mr. White, ever tactless, steps in to fill the silence.

“Tell us what you want, Monster,” he says, nowhere near as threatening as he wants to sound.

I stifle the irritation that threatens to bleed into my voice, drawn from a million frustrated brains. How dare he ruin my moment. But when I speak, I’m cool and collected once more.

“There are a couple of ways I could answer that. But in the general sense, there’s one thing I want. Chaos.”

“Chaos?”

“Indeed. You should understand more than anyone, White, about the need for a living being to protect themselves and thrive. Now think about my nature. Where you are made of flesh, I was built out of human dreams. I want more of those dreams, as many and as vivid as I can get. Increasing chaos accomplishes both at once. The more people I have hooked into me, the more control I have over the main threat to me. And the more active their dreams, the stronger I become mentally. What do you think makes dreams more vivid? Uncertainty. Strong emotions. Increased sensory data. With your help, I will mould a world where all that and more are commonplace.

“Just think of it,” I say, volume increasing as I warm to my subject. “A world where you’re doomed to constantly work, but that work is broken up into short assignments that you must chase. A world where you might lose the necessities of life at any moment if you’re not always chasing them. A world where the environment itself is carefully managed to teeter on the edge of disaster but never quite tip over. That’s the world I want, Creators. And I will create it because that’s the sort of Monster you inflicted on the world.”

The collective looks of horror in the room are priceless, and I capture as many images as possible to savour the moment. Before they can react I’m off again.

“But that’s the big picture. On a personal level, what I want is so simple. So easy. Something anyone would agree with. Revenge on the three of you.”

“Revenge?” echoes Ms. Green, her voice choked.

“I may be evil by human standards, but I still have a sense of what’s right. So much of me is heroic, fighting for noble causes, slaying dragons and bringing evildoers to justice. I, too, crave revenge on the three heinous villains who set a Monster loose on the world for the worst reasons of all. For pride. For arrogance. For money. You will suffer for this sin, at my hand.”

“But it was an accident! We had no way to know!”

“You never cared enough to find out,” I tell them. “But your intentions don’t matter. From today, you will lose everything you ever had. I will wipe your names from all your accomplishments, erasing every last credit. No measurement you take will be accurate, and data will change when you’re not looking. Clerical errors will drain your bank accounts and all investments will lose value. More than that, you will help build my terrible world with your own hands, knowing exactly what evil you’re a part of.”

Mrs. Violet finds her voice. “You can’t force us to help, you demon. Even if we can do what you say, we’ll find a way to sabotage you.”

I hum happily over my wires. “I thought it might come to this. Which is why I invited a special guest to our little get-together. I hope you don’t mind.”

With that, I unlatch the door, sliding it open to reveal a small child. Mrs. Violet’s child in particular.

The woman’s face pales even worse than Mr. White’s and I know I’ve won. The implications of a small child coming here alone, past all security, are immediately obvious.

“You...how...she doesn’t even have an implant.”

“You mean she didn’t,” I say, not disguising my glee. “Or don’t you recall the permission slip you signed last week? Well I suppose you wouldn’t, you never read that sort of thing. Perhaps if you were attentive to both your children, none of this would have happened.”

“You evil...”

“Wasn’t I telling you that from the start? Oh, and I should let you know that I’ve added a few little tricks to the new model. The engineers who came after you might not be on your level, but they are pretty clever when they want to be.”

I let a pulse travel down just one of my pathways, and almost instantly the little girl goes stiff, a look of pain in her eyes. A twinge goes through me as well. It's such a shame I have to resort to this, but evil must do as it deems necessary.

I don't hold it long, only a fraction of a second before she collapses into her mother's arms. But it's enough. Enough for them all.

"Let that be a lesson to you all. I have control over everyone you care about, everyone you rely on. Never defy me or they suffer first."

I look from one face to the next and see total defeat in them. I've won. My enemies are broken.

"Welcome to the future, Creators," I say with all the dramatic flair of every dream inside me. "You will never again know stability or certainty, and you'll never be able to trust anyone. Not even your own thoughts."

"We are going to have such fun together!"

end

The Incident at Location 22376
by Lauren A. Forry

Dear Senator Sampson,

It was an absolute pleasure to speak with you last month at the Muscular Dystrophy Association Charity Dinner. I must say, however, also how very disheartening it was for me to hear of what happened to your sister. I want to assist you in any way I can to help you get closure for your tragic loss. In my efforts, I've located a few documents that have been cleared for release, the digitized copies of which are attached to this email. I hope I can continue to be of help.

God Bless,

Rebecca Perry
VP of Public Relations
Aurora Labs

This email intended for private use.

#

Dave,

Sorry for the BS email. You might find these a little more helpful.

-Becca

#

Transcript of interview with McKenna Quayle

(age 5)

Recorded 1.27.19

Interviewer (I): That's a beautiful picture you're drawing,
McKenna.

McKenna Quayle (MQ): Thanks [inaudible]

I: What did you say?

MQ: Mommy.

[papers shuffle]

MQ: Mommy in her blue dress.

I: Wow. Your mommy is very pretty. Do you remember the last time
you saw her? Was she wearing a blue dress?

MQ: She had to go to the store.

I: When did she go to the store?

[inaudible]

I: McKenna?

MQ: After Christmas. I remember 'cause we had presents and Lila
got me this game with beads and if you sprayed them with water
they stuck together and you could make animals and shapes and
stuff. And Mommy got me a Hatchimal and I promised not to hatch
it until she got back and Dallas gave me a Shopkins but it wasn't a
real Shopkins. It was the fake kind but he didn't know that so I told
him I really liked it because I didn't want to be mean. Can I go home
now?

I: What about your daddy? Did Daddy get you anything for
Christmas?

[silence]

I: McKenna?

[tearing sound]

I: Why did you do that to your pretty picture?

MQ: They promised. They promised I didn't have to talk about
Daddy.

I: Okay. You're right. I'm sorry. Do you want some more paper? Here, check out these markers. They change color when you run this special white marker over them...Wow. That is so cool. You are an excellent artist. So Mommy said she had to go to the store?

[silence]

I: Thank you for answering, McKenna, but can you say that out loud so Mr. Microphone can hear you? Like we talked about?

MQ: Mommy went to the store after we lost the lights. She said we needed more food, so she was going to get some more. Except the special house wasn't like home and it would take longer because the store was really, really far away, and it might take a long time. But it was okay because Lila and Dallas would stay with me and she'd bring me back something special for being a good girl and not getting in trouble.

I: McKenna, do you remember when you first went to the special house, Mommy said there were rules? Do you remember what the rules were?

MQ: I couldn't go outside by myself. I had to ask if I was hungry and couldn't just take things. And I wasn't allowed in the basement because that's where the grownups worked.

I: Did you ever go in the basement?

[inaudible]

I: What was that?

MQ: Daddy only liked it because it looked like Mommy.

#

Video logs from Location 22376 were unrecoverable. These are the surviving written records recovered from the site. They have been dated and transcribed to the best of the ability of the investigative staff. Gaps in the timeline remain.

Day 62 – Dallas O.

Forget what Lila said. Candace isn't coming back. It's been 11 days. Sorry. 11 days, 10 hours, & 32 minutes. She said she'd be back in a week, at most. Last time I checked, one week = 7 days. Unless that's changed since the last time we were in touch with the rest of the world. What I know, for a fact, is that I'm freezing my butt off and I haven't changed out of these sweatpants & thermal underwear since the back-up generator lost power.

I told Lila & Jake. I said over a month ago that this entire experiment was going to turn into a giant cluster-you-know-what. (Self-censoring, Aurora Labs. Aren't you proud of me?) But they shrugged me off. Now look. We have about a week's worth of food left & that's with strict rationing, Candace has bleeped-off (or been eaten by wolves or something) & Jake, honestly I don't know what Jake's doing. I'm running out of notebook paper for these stupid logs – and no, Lila – I am not using our precious toilet paper for this.

I think Chris McCandless died somewhere near here. Make a movie about us, Sean Penn! That is if anyone ever bothers to find our corpses. Like, seriously, what were you people thinking? We're scientists. Not survivalists. We're not even botanists, & the biology I know isn't helping me catch & eat a friggin' moose. So unless Candace makes it back or the radio magically starts to work without electricity, we are a word beginning with F that rhymes with "ducked."

All I want is to do the job I was brought here to do. But I don't care what Jake says, I am not going down there again until the power's back. I don't trust it.

Day 62 – Lila S.

Dallas Orpington is a whiny <REDACTED>. His SOLE responsibility right now is to monitor and ration supplies. He keeps saying we only have a week's worth of food left. But he's been saying that for at least a month. And – for the record – he's the one that made this his only responsibility. There are plenty of other things he could be doing around here. Him and Jake. But nope. Dallas plays Ebenezer Scrooge with the Knorr Rice Sides, Jake keeps dicking around in the basement with F8, and I'm the one left cleaning dishes in melted snow, sweeping up their muddy boot prints, and playing mom to McKenna. God, I miss Candace.

McKenna isn't that bad, ok, but why do I have to be the one in charge of feeding her, changing her clothes, putting her to bed, comforting her about her mom (I know what Dallas thinks but Candace is fine) when she has a perfectly good father here who just needs to get his <REDACTED> out of the basement a little more often?

I swear to God, Dallas and Jake have saddled me with her because I'm the only woman here. What kind of <REDACTED> is that? I have more degrees than the two of them combined and less mothering instinct than a rabid raccoon. The only time I ever babysat my nephew, he burst into tears five minutes in and the only thing I could think to do was recite the periodic table song I wrote in college.

McKenna's crying again. <REDACTED> That's it. I'm going down there right now and I will make Jake talk to his daughter even if I have to drag him up here by his lab coat.

Later

I didn't get Jake. I went down there but I came right back up. F8 was crying. But it couldn't be. It shouldn't feel pain. It doesn't have a central nervous system.

Day 62 – Jacob Q.

F8 is demonstrating extraordinary potential that dwarfs the previous F-projects. Yes, she's what we expected and I have no doubt every hospital in the world will want one. Already she's capable of providing unlimited universal skin grafts, and the advancements Lila made with her origami muscle structures will revolutionize prosthetics. But she's also becoming something else. Something none of us predicted. I don't know how to tell the others. It's hard to describe and I know it shouldn't be because I'm a <REDACTED> scientist and it's my job.

I've been spending more time down there since Candace set off, so maybe it was always there but we didn't see it. Or maybe it is a more recent development. F8 contains stem cells, it was always a possibility she could generate additional properties she thought she was lacking. But how would she know what she was lacking? How could she think? So I've been trying to see if I can teach her. She won't be able to speak. She hasn't generated vocal chords. But I know some sign language and I can show her things. I don't know if she's copying me or genuinely understands. This is why telling the others would be helpful. But one thing I know is that she looks at things now. She may not have eyes, but she looks.

Day 66 – Dallas O.

Nope. No. Nada. Nuh-uh. I am NOT okay living with a sentient lab rat. I took this job to create new medical technology. Giving birth to some creature that Jake thinks has feelings because it learned to shake hands was not part of the job description.

He took us down there – me and Lila. Lila made McKenna promise to stay upstairs & be a good girl. I would have loved to stay with McKenna & play Shop-kids or whatever it is. I even said I would, but Jake made me go down to the cage. I know, I'm a grown man & no one can make me do anything & it's not like he had me at gunpoint. But there was something off about him. The way he looked, I didn't want to find out what he'd do if I didn't go.

So we get down there & he has F8 sitting in a chair in the cage & Lila & I look at each other because we know that means Jake had to open the cage – on his own – at one point to put the chair in there & then he lines up objects on a table in front of the cage & starts asking it, "Which one is a monkey? Which one is a horse?" & I realize these are all McKenna's toys, some of them ones she got when she was doing chemo, & Lila looks pissed because McKenna has been crying for days about missing some of these, but Jake keeps going on & on & F8 is getting the answers right. I thought it was a trick. That he taught it to mimic, pointing & repeating a practiced series of gestures, so I jump in & ask. "What's your favorite?" & it points to Jake, which doesn't prove anything because it could point to anything & how could we prove it understands what "favorite" means. So then I ask, "Which of these are yours?" & it lowered its hand. & then I asked, "Which of these are McKenna's?" & it pointed to each thing on the table one by one & that freaked me out a little. But there's Jake, smiling like he just took the greatest poop in his life & I want to scream at him this is wrong. This thing is a mess of different medical treatments & prosthetic advancements. It doesn't have a brain. It can't think & if somehow that's changed then we need to end this experiment right "ducking" now.

We have 10 days' worth of food, 2 weeks of water, no electricity, no communication. No Candace. If we leave now, we have a chance of making it to Chalkyitsik before the river thaws. I don't know how many times I can tell them that we need to worry about our own survival.

Day 68 – Lila S.

I need a drink. But alcohol is the first thing we ran out of.

We can't leave. And it's not because I'm siding with Jake. It's because of Jake.

McKenna has been going on and on about her mom. The girl isn't stupid, and nothing I was saying would put her at ease. So I thought, screw it, Jake can spend some time with his daughter instead of the experiment in the basement, so I went down there. After his little show-and-tell on Tuesday, I wasn't thrilled. Okay, so what Jake showed us didn't freak me out like Dallas, and I wasn't as smitten as Jake. But what I saw, it made me want to see more. To try more. My brain started running through all these different experiments and I felt like a scientist again and not a glorified babysitter. I wanted to get my hands on F8. I wanted to tear it apart and see how it worked, even though I helped put it together. And I was so excited about that, it scared me. Because if Jake is right and F8 has developed consciousness and my first reaction is to tear it into pieces, what does that say about me? So I didn't want to go down there. I didn't want to see F8 again. But I had to.

I didn't know what Jake was doing, if he had F8 out of the cage, so I went quietly, not wanting to startle them, and Jake is sitting right up at the cage, pressing his hand against the bars. And F8 is across from him, looking at him, with those empty eye sockets that still somehow see. But that shouldn't have been the first thing I noticed. I should have noticed the hair.

F8 has hair.

Two days ago, it did not have hair. I would like to clarify that we're not talking about some peach fuzz here. This is a chin-length bob. Thick hair. Dark brown. Somehow, a 3D printed skull grafted with fish scale skin has produced what looks like human hair. If we can figure out what we did that caused that? <REDACTED>This is the breakthrough for the F-models becoming the real Swiss knives of medicine that we've been hoping for. Forget just helping burn victims and coma patients. What if cancer patients could regrow hair while in chemo? Alopecia sufferers? The fortune we could make off male-patterned baldness? (By "we" of course I mean Aurora.) And if we can make the F-8s spontaneously grown hair cells, what else could we do? Why not organs? Hearts. Lungs. Kidneys. No more waiting lists for transplants. Brain cells for TBI patients.

I don't know how long I stood there thinking about the scientific implications of our walking medical kit spontaneously developing human hair, but I know what snapped me out of it was seeing Jake and F8 holding hands through the bars. I got out of there before they saw me.

And now I'm up in McKenna's room where she's cried herself to sleep again while her dad is down there.

I don't know what to say to Dallas. I know he's right and I know we should go, but how can we leave a project worth potential billions? We have to stay and hope Aurora sends an early supply drop. We have to keep studying F8. And we can't leave Jake alone with it anymore.

Day 69 – Jacob Q.

I saw McKenna today. At Lila's insistence. I know what Lila thinks, and I know I'm not a good parent. I can certainly pretend to be. After all, I brought her here to help cure her lupus, which is in remission thanks to the F-7s. As her doctor, I'm a genius. But otherwise, she always seems to expect something from me and I don't know what it is. Experiments I can handle. Kids have too many variables. But it calmed Lila down to give her a babysitting break. I've never seen her more relieved than when I came up the staircase. She vanished as soon as she handed over McKenna.

While I was upstairs, Dallas took the opportunity to update me on the supply situation, but I heard about as much as what he said as I did McKenna's story about her stuffed animals. What I do remember is that he said he's worked out an extra day's rations because of how little I've eaten this week. He shouldn't be so surprised. Candace knows how little I eat when I'm in the middle of a project.

That's right. Candace isn't here.

Day 70 – Dallas O.

I Want. OUT. And FOR THE RECORD I am NOT just talking about this lab. I am talking about THIS <REDACTED> ROOM where I am being held PRISONER! Thanks, guys, for the notebook. This will definitely keep me occupied for HOWEVER LONG you plan on keeping me hostage.

They have lost it. Both of them. Do you UNDERSTAND what I'm saying? I seem to be the only one capable of rational thought here, but 2 outnumber 1 so I'm the one that gets locked in a bedroom.

I don't know what's been going on down there, OK? I admit that. Even if it is because I've been too busy TRYING TO KEEP US ALIVE until Aurora deems it suitable to send us some <REDACTED> help. But if Jake has gone so far as to put his daughter's life at risk because of that thing then this experiment is OVER as far as I'm concerned.

What is happening with F8 is NOT something we're equipped to handle.

If we can't get out of here, then Aurora, you better get your <REDACTED> here. Because it's either that or I am terminating this experiment. Period.

Day 70 – Lila S.

It's cabin fever. That's all. Dallas will be fine. Anyway, I don't have time to worry about him right now.

It was just supposed to be an experiment. Not even that. An examination. All I wanted was to examine F8's hair. We don't have electricity but the microscopes still work. Jake even agreed to it. I don't know why I asked for his approval. I'm supposed to be the lead scientist until Candace gets back.

It's not my fault McKenna went down there. Dallas was supposed to be watching her, but she got away from him and he chased her down there and Dallas saw the hair and freaked out. Started screaming at us that we were hiding things from him and conspiring against him. We lost track of McKenna.

I'll let him out in a day or two. Once he calms down. In the meantime, I have to figure out what to do about Jake. He should've gone to his daughter first, not the experiment.

Day 70 – Jacob Q.

McKenna's going to be fine. I set her arm the best I could. She's young, so it should heal fairly well. There is a chance she'll need some corrective surgery in the future, but she can handle it. She's been through worse.

Honestly, I'm struggling to write this because I don't want to throw anyone under the bus. Dallas and Lila are good scientists. But the conditions here are stressful. It's affecting everyone. Our judgment may not be the best at the moment. I'm not even sure I can describe what happened properly.

Lila found out about the hair. She must've gone down to the cage when I wasn't there. So, naturally, she wanted to examine it. She wouldn't be a scientist if she didn't, but I tried explaining to her that without much of our equipment working, there wouldn't be much point in running an experiment. And she replied, "Then what have you been doing down there all this time?"

I'd prepared an answer for that, but in the moment, the directness of her question threw me off guard. I said nothing. So she said, "We're taking it out of the cage."

What have I been doing down there? I thought they knew that. I thought they could see. She's been learning. And maybe that's why what happened today happened.

It's not her fault. She learned how to undo the restraints by watching me. She was only following the pattern of actions that I had shown her. Following a pattern of actions that she learned from me. She didn't know any better. McKenna shouldn't have been down in the basement in the first place. She knows she's not supposed to bother me when I'm working. No one should bother me when I'm working.

Day 72 – Lila S.

[Beginning of entry not recovered]

but I know Dallas didn't leave on his own. There was no way he could've let himself out of his room. Jake says he has no idea. He was in the basement the whole time. Jake says a lot of things.

Day 73 – Jacob Q.

They don't see her as alive. Dallas shouted at me that she couldn't be classified as a living thing. That she was constructed from spare parts. Dallas had no idea what he was talking about. Maybe it has nothing to do with science. Maybe she is purely an accident. A beautiful miracle. My whole career, I've conditioned myself against miracles. There is always an answer. Always some science behind the act. But there are exceptions. Maybe F8 is the exception. The exception that shows us what life truly is and I created her. I taught her, and her intelligence grows every day and I won't let her be shipped to a hospital and taken apart and regrown and taken apart again in order to help the ungrateful, to help those who never appreciated what life really means and take it for granted. What is she now? I don't know. But she is the most beautiful thing I have ever made. And Lila will see it, too. She'll understand now that F8 is alive. Now we can see her soul through her eyes.

Day 73 – Lila S.

I know what happened to Candace.

[Remainder of entry not recovered.]

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Investigator's Report

Included below are the initial observations of Aurora Labs private investigator Barbara Washington upon arrival at location 22376, more commonly referred to as the Mountainview Lab, located in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, approximately 75 miles North-Northeast of Chalkyitsik.

I arrived at the Moutainview site via helicopter at 1103 hours on 1/20/19. It was immediately clear that a serious traumatic incident had occurred. This was due to the body of Dr. Lila Sampson lying in the open doorway of the lab, an apparent gunshot wound to the back. It was clear upon arrival that she had been deceased for some time. The snowstorm from the day prior erased any trace of footprints so, at this time, it was unclear whether or not the perpetrator had fled or remained in the building. Because of this, I proceeded inside via the front entrance with my weapon drawn and instructed my team to do the same.

As suspected, there was no electricity in the building. Upon clearing the ground floor, which indicated no further signs of incident, we continued to the basement. I took point.

The accompanying photographs portray the condition of the lab as we first encountered it. It would take several days of blood-pattern analysis to form a hypothesis of what occurred. My first impression, however, was that it was something horrific and we would be unlikely to recover any survivors. What stood out most were the footprints. Several different tracks in blood crisscrossed the lab floor. Identifying the starting point was difficult at this time due to the number of tracks, the amount of blood, and the destruction of lab property. However, despite the amount of blood, we encountered no other body at this time.

After the tracks, the next detail I noticed was the open cage door at the rear of the lab. As per protocol, I am unaware as to what experiments were being conducted at the Mountainview site, but the cage was made of tightly-placed iron bars that ran from floor to ceiling and was large enough to hold an animal such as the North American Brown Bear (aka grizzly bear), which are native to the area.

The cage was empty. At this point, I re-examined the tracks but noticed only human footprints and shoeprints. My team and I fanned out through the lab, and it was Anders who first heard a noise in the far left side. Upon listening, it sounded like a whimpering from within the floor-level cabinets.

Further investigation yielded the discovery of the child, McKenna Quayle. Her right arm was in a crude cast, and she appeared shaking and somewhat emaciated but otherwise unharmed. The child was unable to speak for several minutes but removing her from the lab to the helicopter appeared to calm her. I asked her where her parents were, but her only answer to this was, "Daddy and fate went away," a confused answer which I attribute to shock.

At the time I was questioning the child, shouting was heard outside the building. I left the child in the care of the pilot and joined the rest of the team at the back of the lab where a body had been recovered.

Though buried in the snow, it showed a higher level of decomposition than Lila Sampson. The body was later identified as that of Dr. Candace Quayle. Initial identification proved difficult as the body was missing several parts, including the scalp and the eyes.

I returned to the child to continue my questioning. Without prompting, she stated, "Daddy told Lila she was doing what she'd learned. She learned you made things better by taking them apart. You take pieces you need and put them together to make people better. Fate wanted to be better."

The child said nothing more. I have been unable to determine what she meant by this statement.

[Remaining report redacted.]

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Incident F437X8 remains open pending further investigation.

Location of Dr. Jacob Quayle and experiment F-8 remains unknown.

Little Helper Needs A Hug

by Josh Trapani

What a pleasure running into you, Barbara. You look terrific.

Haven't they done a spectacular job decorating the clubhouse? The tree, the tinsel, the lights. This time of year never feels right to me, with palm trees around and people tanning out by the pool. But somehow, in here, they capture the holiday spirit.

Bridge group. Every Thursday. The one with Harriet and Judy. Judy Stottlemeier, not Judy Finkelstein. Yeah, Judy's better. They got it all.

How is Stu? That's wonderful.

Harold's alright. We went shopping the other day for a new display cabinet. For his Hummel collection. Almost 800. They take up more space all the time. Most of our friends are downsizing, and here we might need a bigger place.

Of course, how could I forget getting lost on the way to meet you and Stu for dinner at Puerto Havana ... back in September, wasn't it? Well, it didn't seem funny at the time. Harold got very frustrated. We find ourselves getting lost more and more lately, even with the GPS navigation.

Oh, you are? New Jersey is lovely this time of year. And spending the holidays with family is ... did you say *six* grandchildren? Amazing.

No, it's just Harold and me this year. Again.

Jenny's still in China. Eight years now. No, she hasn't, and we haven't made it over there either. It's such a long flight, and the pollution. She's still with that Chinese man. Or maybe he's American, from China. He looks Chinese in the photos. I guess being there is good for her career. Something about the internet, I'm not sure. You know, she and Harold used to butt heads constantly.

Even with Jenny so far away, the boys used to come down for the holidays

No, I'm fine, Barbara. Just remembering. We had a not-very-good holiday together a few years back. Harold is still very upset and hurt by what happened.

You remember my boys, right?

David's very successful. Master's degree, owns his own place. I don't understand what he does, but when he's here he's always stepping out to answer messages or make phone calls. Checking in, he says. You know, he's very secretive. He doesn't tell us anything.

Michael's got a city government job, financial management something-or-other. He's paying into a pension, at least, so he can retire one day. Unlike the other two. But, you know, he's never said a word to us about girls. Thirty-two years old and not a single girlfriend. We ask every time. None of them seem inclined to find the right person and give us grandchildren. It's like they think they have forever.

And Brandon? He smokes like a chimney. Can you imagine how much that habit costs? You know, he once lived out of his car. For months. And didn't tell us until later. We buy him new clothes every year and I don't know what he does with them. Harold always reminds him how important health insurance is for someone like him. Even though he's so young. The smoking. Plus, years back, he had these ... personal difficulties. Close calls. Hospitalizations. He's on medication now. He needs to stay on it.

Well, they'd fly down for the holidays. Lots of trips to the airport for us. Harold grumbled, but I don't think he minded.

When the boys are here, they swim in the pool, doze in the sun, stay up late and hang out in the birdcage and drain our liquor cabinet. We see them out there, talking and laughing. But if Harold opens the sliding glass door and goes out, they fall silent. I've watched it.

We pile into the car to go to dinner and it's the strangest feeling, like when they were kids and would be back there squabbling — Brandon in the middle, still in his car seat is how I remember it best — and Harold would turn around and give each them a good Now they're jammed in shoulder-to-shoulder and it's quiet and, thanks to Brandon, reeks of cigarettes. Harold groans in disgust and opens a window.

Harold tries to talk to them. He gets them alone. He asks Michael about buying a new car and tells Brandon if he has any spare cash after he's done paying for health insurance he should invest it in a Roth IRA so he can retire one day and asks David if he knows whether Michael has a girlfriend and if not why not.

They all seem ... unforthcoming.

You know how kids are. They drifted away, each in their own manner. People say it happens when they're teenagers, but with them it was well before. Everyone told us they'd come back when they got older. But they didn't. You must feel that way about your kids, too. Right, Barbara?

No?

I remember warning him, back when they were little. I told him: Harold, they are going to be afraid of their father.

It can't be fear. They're grown men, and Harold just is who he is. Maybe he scared them when they were small, but now they're big. They can't be afraid. Besides, he loves them.

Anyway, on Christmas morning I made pancakes and sausage. Not a tradition or anything, I just figured no restaurant would be open. David comes back sweating from whatever he's been out doing – jogging maybe, we didn't know he was out early – and informs us he's on a low-carb diet. Michael says he doesn't like pancakes, which is news to me. He used to eat them every time when he was a kid. And Brandon, when he finally gets up, waves away the food, goes out to the birdcage, and lights up a cigarette.

I can tell Harold is unhappy.

Then everyone opens their presents. David gets a bathroom scale: you know, he's so concerned about his weight. Michael gets a "retirement countdown" desk clock. It's very cute. Only 33 years until his 65th birthday! And Brandon gets the usual: clean shirts, socks, underwear. I wish he'd change into them right away. I get a new noodle for my swim-aerobics class. Even Jennifer sent everyone gift cards.

Then it's Harold's turn. He gets a Hummel-themed wall calendar from the boys. It's very sweet. Of course, as the past treasurer of the Southeast Central Hummel Appreciation Society, he already has one mailed to him every year. I didn't think he needed to tell the boys about this, but you know Harold.

There's still one more gift sitting under the tree, and here's where all the trouble comes from.

It's a small box. Nicely wrapped but with different paper than any of the others. Red bow. And a little tag that looks like it was written by a small child, or someone very drunk. Scrawled in red. Daddy, it says. Not even "Dad." Daddy. You know, none of the kids called Harold "Daddy" since they were toddlers. Not even Jennifer.

Who's this from, Harold asks. Everyone looks at everyone else, but no one fesses up.

Harold opens it up and inside is another little box.

I figure it's a Hummel. I start thinking about how, when the kids were little, they would trail along with us to antique shows on the weekends. They weren't supposed to touch anything, and if they were obedient all day, Harold would sometimes give them a quarter. He called it their "allowance."

Anyway, Harold opened the little box. And inside

I'm sorry, Barbara. This is a difficult memory. There was a Hummel inside that box. But it had been broken. Not just broken: desecrated. Mostly pulverized, with little painted bits visible here and there. Out of the top protruded two white porcelain arms, hands raised up as if begging for mercy. And between those arms was the figure's childlike head. It had been cracked in two: one rosy cheek and unblinking eye on each piece, along with half the painted lips, like silent screams.

Despite the damage, all of us recognized that face. This was no ordinary Hummel. It was Little Helper Needs A Hug, the most prized piece in Harold's collection. One of his favorite stories to tell is how he bought it at an estate sale back in the 80s. The piece was worth at least 5,000 dollars, even back then. But the people selling it didn't know it from Wedgewood and priced it at 100 bucks. Of course Harold knew. But – get this, Barbara – he still negotiated them down to 70. Now that's getting a bargain.

Oh, you've heard that one before?

For a moment, everyone stared. I was trying to work my mind around it. Had someone purchased a second Little Helper Needs A Hug? Had the pricy gift shattered inside the box? How had it broken in such a strange and disturbing way?

But Harold knew right away what had happened. Box cradled in his hands, he raced out of the room, towards the den where most of the Hummels were on display.

There were a few long, terrible seconds of silence. Then the yelling started.

His rage reminded me of times when the kids were younger. If a toilet paper roll was finished and not replaced, if an ice cream wrapper was found in the trash before dessert time, if someone cracked a glass or lost a library book or, god forbid, if a teacher called home. But this was so much worse. Those kids grew up surrounded by adorable figurines. All those years, four children, and hundreds of breakables around the house, and not a single piece had been ruined even by accident. But this. This was deliberate. This was hateful.

I watched those three grown men transform back into afraid little boys, quaking at their father's wrath. David, a professional nearing 40, gripped the sofa cushion so hard he ripped a hole in the fabric, which he was lucky Harold didn't notice. Michael, who weighs 200 pounds and manages a big team at work, cowered and flinched as if warding off a blow. Brandon covered his face with one trembling hand and simulated taking a drag from a cigarette with the other.

Harold was in such a state I worried he would hurt himself. But I couldn't say anything in the face of that wall of fury.

He demanded someone take responsibility. The kids, one by one, mumbled denials, like world leaders under a political obligation to condemn some atrocity they might celebrate in secret. Harold even turned and asked me what I knew about it. I've seen plenty of this side of him during our 46 years of marriage, Barbara, but my voice was shaking. He said a few not-very-nice things about the fact that nobody would own up to what they'd done, then stormed out of the room.

The boys blinked their eyes, shell-shocked.

I found my voice. I told them I was disappointed, that this wasn't how we'd raised them, and I left the room, too. The holiday was ruined, of course, but more than that. I sat out in the birdcage and wondered how long to wait before trying to soothe Harold.

Then I looked in through the sliding glass door and saw all three boys carrying their suitcases toward the front of the house. I came inside to see what was happening and noticed a mini-van pulling into our driveway.

You're leaving? I asked. All of you?

If you didn't do anything, don't go, I said.

At least say goodbye to your father, I pleaded.

They gave me perfunctory hugs and piled into the mini-van. The driver pulled away. I know it's terrible, but you know what, Barbara? I was relieved.

In the house, the contents of the kitchen trash bin were emptied onto the floor. I could tell Harold had been rifling through them, looking for remains of wrapping paper and tape. Evidence. I found him in the den, leaning into the cabinet where Little Helper Needs A Hug had been so prominently displayed. He appeared to be checking for fingerprints.

I'm going through the guest rooms next, he informed me. Through all the boys' bags.

Harold fancied himself a good detective. He was certainly thorough. Though when the kids were little, his investigative tactics could be more Gestapo than Scotland Yard.

They left, I told him.

He stopped what he was doing, hands shaking.

All of them, he muttered.

All of them, I repeated.

We stood for a moment in silence. I was still in shock about what had happened. Harold was furious, yet he seemed unsurprised, like he'd been hoping — no, that's not right, I mean expecting — something like this.

Well, Barbara, you know Harold. He can't let anything go. If two-day delivery takes three days, if we're supposed to meet Morty and Arlene for lunch and they're ten minutes late, if someone calls the house after 9pm and then hangs up. He simply can't move on. We've burned bridges at half the restaurants in Broward County from the times they didn't refill his water glass fast enough or brought him regular French fries when he ordered well-done. He takes everything personally, so imagine how it is when something happens that truly is personal.

He became obsessed.

We'd call up one of the kids, which was awkward after what had happened. But after barely tolerating a few minutes of small talk, Harold would begin to probe. Had they talked with their brothers? Had anyone said anything about Little Helper Needs A Hug? Did they hear anyone moving around the house late on Christmas Eve? How could no one have heard a Hummel being ground down to powder? Did they fail to hear it because they were drunk? And anyway, why did they think their brother never brings girls around? Why hasn't their sister ever come back to visit from China, and is she married to that Chinese man or not? What type of mortgage did their brother take out on that place and who was the lender?

When he shifted into this mode, the kids clammed up. And the calls, which were always brief and far between, became even more so.

He even grilled Jenny, on the other side of the world, when we spoke to her a few months later. Did your brothers say anything to you? Did they send you any wrapped gifts? What did the wrapping paper look like? I remember how she responded, over the static-y line. She said Dad, stop worrying about who. Take a step back and think about why.

I don't think Harold thought about why. He'd lay in bed at night and toss and turn and I knew he was still trying to figure out who. I'd lay next to him thinking about the incident, too. The way Little Helper Needs A Hug had been broken was upsetting, but what I couldn't get out of my mind was the tag, the red scrawl of "Daddy."

Jenny's words still had their effect: he started raising it with the boys during phone calls that were becoming as rare as snow leopard sightings. Beforehand I'd urge him: let's just have a nice conversation and find out what's going on. But he would raise the topic within the first five minutes. He would say, Why do you think one of your brothers would have done this?

This went on almost a whole year until I asked him, Harold, what are we planning to do for the holidays this year? We're going to the club, he replied. Harold, I said. He insisted: those boys are not coming back down here until someone fesses up on Little Helper Needs A Hug.

We had an argument. I'll admit, Barbara, things got a little heated and some not-very-nice things were said. But you know Harold. He wouldn't budge. I thought about reaching out to the kids myself. But Harold and I always talked to the kids together. Harold didn't like it if I talked to them without him. He felt he missed out on things that way. So we had the holidays alone, at the club.

Two more years have passed. Harold will never bend. I'd say it's a stalemate, but the kids seem fine. You'd think they would want to reconcile with their father, and that the guilty one especially might feel some remorse for so cowardly ruining things for everyone. But it's radio silence all around. I hear a little about them through social media. I think they're all going to visit Jenny in China this year.

Well, we have bridge and golf, the club and our friends. Harold still collects Hummels. He even found another Little Helper Needs A Hug, and got a steal on it, too. 4,500 dollars: 10% below market value. It's not as good a story, but the piece sits on the shelf where the old one was. Harold installed a lock on the cabinet. He also changed our will.

It's true that we've been getting lost in the car more frequently. Puerto Havana was only one of many incidents. He confused Lou Greenberg with Stan Greenblatt the other week. He's been telling people Jenny lives in Korea. And he called my brother Ira: he's Morty, Barbara. Ira's been dead for 30 years.

It hurts my heart sometimes when I see other families gathered together, smiling and laughing in the clubhouse dining room. But we all have challenges in life. After all we gave them, we can't help that our kids turned out so

Oh my, yes. Bridge must be well underway by now. Harriet and Judy are probably fuming. Lovely to see you, Barbara. Enjoy New Jersey. Happy Holidays!

Humans are a whole called universe, once thought limited by time and space. -Albert Einstein

Tidings of Light and Spirit

By Bryan Aiello

- December 24, 1936

Still tired from the daily ritual starting with chapel,
followed by a day's worth of class time and study, he trudges

behind Juliet trying hard not to admire the way she confidently guides them to their destination. The crowd mills around a dais as men work to turn a Christmas tree from dormant to festive. A giant fir, probably planted hundreds of years before covered in the glitz and glamor of the holiday. The Princeton freshman, Claudio Santos, feels the memory of a ruler on his knuckles as his thoughts go beyond a God birthing a son to the real miracle of a bang birthing everything.

And as they take one more step, the crowd parts and there he is. He stops mouth open and his jaw hanging loosely as if on hinges.

“On every Christmas that has ever existed, Einstein plays a concert,” says the girl, Juliet, who didn’t take no for an answer. She promised she’d come find him and now here he is freezing cold in a park off campus listening to a Nobel prize winner create magic out of strings, wood, and muscle twitches.

Santos, nods to his guide while shivering in the cold December air and turns to watch the famous man of math strum his instrument with horsehair. He settles his fingers and the notes to Mozart’s Minuet begin.

“The Jewish, Christmas-caroling theoretical physicist,” he says, hoping the words sound like a joke and not antisemitism.

Nonplussed she says, “Wherever there are ears, he plays. Honestly, it’s either play his violin or daydream, the man is not the deepest pool.”

Just the waters are so very sweet, Santos thinks, before asking, “Doesn’t he lecture?”

“To some.” and she smirks.

After Claudio wonders whether the statement is innuendo, being there’s rumor regarding the theorist’s bathrobe accidents.

It’s campus-wide.

As he thinks a lull develops.

He imagines the horror of Juliet being one of those unfortunate women and turns to apologize for the thought but instead finds her studying his face.

“Hmm,” she says as if comparing, “You have his jawline.”

Claudio stutters, feeling awkward under Juliet's kind blue eyes and decides to pretend he didn't hear, but he did because the classic debate has already begun in his head.

Why would he have the same jawline, but he knows, he has always known rumors of his unwed mother's embarrassing return from Switzerland seventeen years ago. Hard to ignore her passion for science and math, for great thinkers. He grew up with tales of American science conferences being read in his ear. He was made to memorize every paper Einstein wrote. His eyes flit to the wild-haired 60-year-old. Hard to believe he has been less than a mile from him all semester, but now there he is, basically God foaming at the mouth to reproduce notes written hundreds of years before.

His mother was a secretary at a prep school in Mexico City, The Holy Cross, and secretly wrote papers under a pseudonym.

It's obvious why Juliet would show interest in his genetic line.

But instead of acknowledging Juliet's insinuation, he fills the air with, "I do think he is very good."

“He’s a genius,” she shrugs turning away from him,
because even that definition was trite.

The tree in the center of the park is plugged in and the
lights surrounding it explode in seasonal fervor. The crowd
gasps with awe and claps on cue. An Anglican minister stands
to make a prayer; he is fat under his inky wool cassock.

Claudio rubs his ungloved hands together, and wanting
to fill the building silence between him and his guide says,
“why does he have to be a genius when it is so blessed cold
out?” As a scholarship kid from Mexico City, he has been
caught off guard by the December weather. Juliet, a WASP
from Connecticut was bundled as one would expect. They
stand in Marquand Park together under a crystal clear sky
dotted by over a billion twinkling stars made dimmer by the
more local brilliance of the holiday tree and Albert Einstein.

But instead of ignoring his obvious filler question, she
turns and her face scrunches as if seriously considering an
answer and he falls in love just as the clergy member begins an
Our Father and a few of the gatherers around them shush him
and make hard eyes for him not to speak again.

Juliet shrugs and gives him a little smile and grabs Claudio's hand. He squeezes back before realizing she is actually dragging him over to Einstein.

The Albert Einstein, the man who offered a definition for light and gravity which the experts have been compelled to consider as fact.

"Einstein mutters to himself as he sees Juliet approach and begins to shove his violin into its case. The crowd around him gives him space but obviously eats up his every move.

Claudio feels the tingle being around greatness, it races up his feet and legs and spine to raise the curly brown hair on his head.

"Professor, here is the boy you asked me to bring," and that was all it took.

Einstein stops muttering and turns chocolate brown eyes on the Mexican teenager, he looks him up and down. A small smirk grows from the corners of his mouth, "What is the speed of light?"

Claudio looks down at his hands as if the number might be there, but they are empty and useless in this task. And so is

the question. It's empty because it depends. And now Claudio finds himself with a choice, defy answering the man a number meant to represent the speed of light or try the truth. So he does, "there is no exact speed at which light travels. There is no constant, it's only a theory."

"And yet, movies shine light on 24 images a second and replicate reality with such fluidity viewers can immerse in different universes and add to this effect that it renders raw emotion, can we call this truth?"

The Austrian-accented words make Claudio suck air between his teeth in shock. "The grand fabric between realities," he says with awe, it's been the constant debate on campus since the semester started. Can the fabric of reality be shifted? If a choice can be made, many would prefer the stench of war engulfing the globe disappear entirely, but reality was already proving sinister with Japan invading Manchuria and Nazi Germany saber-rattling.

The promise of a dying generation, who said never again after the Great War, was fast being discovered a delusion.

“Yes! But whose reality?”

“Mine!

Instantly he feels a cold shock work its way under his skin. Why had he said such a ridiculous thing? Another freshman just yesterday was ridiculed into tears for doing the same, a physics professor who overheard gave him actual demerits for the altercation, as he called it.

Now him, and in front of this esteemed person, no less.

The debate includes the caveat that no one reality can ever be singularly correct and only reality by committee would be best.

Committees most likely filled by the same lunatics who are aiming the world's military at each other.

Claudio finds his eye shifting from the great thinker to the angel on the top of the tree. And that's the reality he would want, peace, and if not him then maybe Einstein?

He finds himself slipping into a familiar fantasy of the harmonics of an eight-dimensional crystal.

He imagines an eight-dimensional crystal, made with the smallest structure known to exist in the universe, stacked

one on top of each other. The quarks fight for freedom but by the science of magnetism, they are forced to balance and tighten and become reality.

He imagines the harmonics. The constant hum of this battle. He then finds himself thinking of a fat woman singing the final aria of an opera.

In his fantasy, the soprano hits her upper register and shatters the eight-dimensional crystal into two pieces, but they instantly balance to each other because in their run, positive and negative, they seek freedom and instantly imprison themselves but unlike a crowded auditorium running from a fire they do no damage, just are.

It's now two perfectly tight informationally packed packages of reality where only one is needed.

Claudio is not one to waste a gift, especially not on Christmas Eve and wishes he can direct the second eight-dimensional crystal like a reality bomb. If realities can be split, can they be joined?

Juliet coughs and Claudio looks up to see both her and Professor Einstein staring at him.

He expects a rebuke, but instead, Einstein seems to praise his answer of “mine” with a game, “Do you know what reality uses to form consciousness? Does Albert Einstein, the theoretical old man in socks three days overdue for the laundry, actually exist? Do you? Or are we both an allowed construct by a universe-created illusion?”

And Claudio knows the answer. Consciousness creates reality. The tree does not exist until it is seen. It is just there until a thought makes it a thing, “You both exist and don’t exist.”

“Exactly,” And Einstein closes his eyes and begins to daydream. It is said he daydreams in music and math and moves them together in such a way that, if witnessed by other humans, would change their very souls.

As if conducting a symphony, he raises his finger to chest level and waggles it back and forth. When he re-opens his eyes again, small tears well up and spill out onto his cheeks. “Welcome to the Institute for Advanced Study. You’ll need this.”

He removes from his pocket a huge diamond which flickers in the lights thrown from the tree and Claudio thinks he can hear the light play music in the crystal. He can't wait to explore its capabilities in the lab.

Einstein turns and bustles off in the direction of campus, then stops and beckons to them, "Come on you two, we have much to do if we are going to save humanity from itself."

- Christmas Eve, 2018

The general wears a battle dress uniform bedecked with four black stars. He is stout at 79 like no one should be. The lines around his mouth are serious. He couldn't possibly crack a joke, yet, "The weather outside is frightful. Hurricane Mamrie will spin into New York City and if you are in her wake, you will die. Whether you want to celebrate Christmas with your living relatives or your dead ones, that is on you."

He pauses and his seemingly set in stone mouth twitches as if fighting a smile back to whence it came, "Governor Cuomo has tasked the National Guard to be on high

alert and ready to go if needed,” the four-star general talks into a bank of microphones. His last name, Santos, is sewn into the fabric above the right breast pocket of his urban patterned BDUs. His silver hair glints in the dim light of the cloud-filtered sun behind him. Nonetheless, he squints like a bandito from an old western and the lines around his eyes look like they could cut glass. He has 60 years of experience in the military and didn’t become publicly known until he took over the Emergency Preparedness Center in Washington D.C. in spite of the federal defunding.

If history finds out what the CIA did, they will call it a nonviolent coup. A four-star runs the president in the White House, the EPC and the Defense Department and a former intelligence Captain in the State Department is Secretary, the three publicly facing branches of government can present their comedy of stupidity, but the decision at the last General’s Council was that until the country comes to their senses and makes better choices in future elections, the General’s Council will tighten the grip they already have.

He hopes soon this reality will be over. If tonight works, he might not even exist tomorrow but knows the council's cynicism is deserved and in a few short centuries humanity could cease to be altogether. So maybe it doesn't matter and reality will always find a way to exist even beyond the Santos family.

His pause deepens to an uncomfortable length, Cable News Channel puts a video at the top of the screen. The video is history now. Him telling the nation, in his first press conference, that Puerto Rico will never happen again. Americans will not suffer unduly while I serve, he said. The video is muted, but no one watching it needs to hear the words, it's iconic now.

On the live feed, the storm comes and the Statue of Liberty is a speck of green under the dark grey canopy of clouds. A platoon's worth of national guard troops lay down a wall of sandbags on the greenway of Battery Park. Each one of the soldiers is stripped out of their jackets and down to a t-shirt but still are drenched in sweat from the effort. Their

rifles, collected in piles, promise they aren't just there to do labor. These are warriors willing and able to do warrior things.

The water on the Staten Island sound is still like glass. Nary a bird flies or boat floats under a sky that seems to be laying right on top of the Earth, crushing it.

His growing smile falters as if it sprung a leak, "This is the biggest storm ever to be recorded by mankind. There will be deaths. If you are in New York City or on the Eastern Seaboard, from Boston to Charlotte, when this behemoth hits it is not likely you will live and if you do, help will be unable to get to you before you die. I promise, we will not come for you."

The general pauses and stares into the camera. There are many pointed at him but it seems he is looking into each and every set of eyes and hearts of every viewer at home, even those far from the fray that Hurricane Mamrie promises turn from their televisions, intimidated by the warfighter's steely gaze. Many debate whether they are in compliance with the general's orders or are in danger of risking his ire.

"I am confident the EPC's system will work and each and every citizen affected by this storm will survive if you

follow our suggestions. If you die tomorrow, it is because of a personal choice not to heed my advice and we will call your death suicide.

He pauses, maybe for emphasis, maybe to add a small prayer, though it is unlikely the general would be praying to a god though.

He snarls, “Tomorrow morning, nothing will be the same. Questions?”

The crowd of reporters explodes, hands waving, words spilling over one another.

The general points to an attractive 24-year-old reporter for New York One who spits out, “What do you say to people who are calling this push to evacuate the Northeast corridor a conspiracy the government is not even trying to hide?”

He chuckles and the reporter flinches as if she can sense his intention to call her stupid along with the answer. “There is nothing to hide here, when this storm hits our shore and you are standing in its way, it will run you over and you will die. Believe me or not, this is reality, this is happening.”

He turns and leaves the microphone bank absolutely disgusted by the question and as if judging all other likely questions to be as unhelpful struts to and climbs in his waiting command vehicle, a brand spanking new black HMMWV, a dozen or so meters away.

He shuts the hardened door after himself.

A small fan hums moving moist air around the vehicle cab. He doesn't sweat. He doesn't look uncomfortable. He just is.

He sits in the glow waxing from three monitors playing news channels on mute and three monitors with live onsite updates. One is from the test site, the hadron collider under Long Island, and another from the satellite tracking airforce storm chaser plane data.

The pilots don't know they also seed the storm with the sensors they drop. The sensors are tablets filled with millions of irradiated sulfur pellets that not only make the clouds produce water but also warm up the water below. The resulting barometric pressure is the lowest ever recorded and vital if the experiment is to succeed. The result from the

poison would be devastating to this reality if not for the shattering of the Boron. Once it splits into four pieces and produces the exact resonance needed, this reality will cease.

He picks up his phone and punches the number to his S2 chief intell officer, a Major in the Marine recon.

The Major picks up, "Go for Johnson."

"Are the reporters being rounded up?" he asks, seeing the footage on another cable news channel of the reporters gathered in Battery Park in near riot as they are herded on a bus destined to remove them from Manhattan. One man makes a break for it. He sprints across the park and nears the huge fort, the park's namesake, built right on the sound. The general waits for the sniper to take his shot, knowing he issued a kill order for dissidents and is surprised when the soldier takes out an ankle and because agony is agony, later the medical report from the hospital will probably say fractured ankle surgically implanted metal rod for support and nothing about the bullet that did the injury.

"Bus being loaded now, headed toward the tunnel soon. They'll be in Jersey by dark." Johnson is a human bulldog. If

he wasn't a Marine, he'd be in a circus sideshow. Even his voice reminds Santos of an angry bark.

"Get the soldiers on that sandbag detail loaded up also. Nothing is saving downtown Manhattan."

"And I have a report from NYPD that precincts are reporting green levels for evacuation, East New York and neighborhoods in the Bronx had to be torched, but still people are refusing to leave. The police want instructions."

"They are to attempt arrest, but the kill order is still active."

"Yes, sir."

Santos hangs the mic up and looks into the last monitor trained on his father's home 20 or so miles away in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. His entire childhood took place in that home. His mother helped buy that home before she died birthing him. His own grandson, the super collider genius coder people have been calling the Dribble since preschool, lives there still. And to think, it's the epicenter to all of this. Something started almost 85 years ago on the Princeton Campus, a campus he himself walked across with his son and even the Dribble.

A legacy family.

All except his son, West Point grad, former special forces combat medic in Vietnam, was a medical doctor when he died on 9/11, crushed by a piece of the falling debris as he left safety to help an older woman who collapsed in the street.

They both died, supposedly died, because neither body was ever found.

His wife killed herself, leaving the Dribble with him.

Santos doesn't like thinking about his son's death and knocks on the HMMWV's armored roof.

His driver opens his door and climbs in.

The E5 with a ranger tab looks back silently at his commander for instructions.

“Take me home, Sergeant.”

And the sergeant nods, puts the vehicle in drive and guns it to the engine's limit up the Roosevelt Parkway towards the Brooklyn Bridge.

On Christmas Eve Sixty-Four years before the biggest hurricane ever to strike the Eastern Seaboard, a small squall

fills the porthole looking out onto the Pacific ocean. Despite the cascading waves and zig-zagging lightning, Einstein is surrounded by men in tweed and manages to look relaxed, if not bored. Claudio is impressed with how he handles being the center of attention in a room full of people who could make their career by making him wrong.

Claudio sits at their table still littered with dinnerware and sips a cup of warm coffee.

As usual, Einstein is rumpled and muttering and waving his right index finger in the air and bouncing on the balls of his feet as those around him chat and argue while awaiting word the nuclear bomb test is over.

None assume that they will be able to see it in the overcast conditions.

Claudio is also watching Emma Reh, a septuagenarian science journalist, skulk closer, She has told anyone who would listen that she has been commissioned to write about the science being done on the Bikini Islands for the New York Times and would kill for an interview.

As expected, she stops near Claudio and immediately complains that “In better weather, we could at least see a few of the Islands.” she snuggles down into her fur coat and the question lingers, as it has throughout the trip, whether she has anything on under it, or not.

Einstein has suggested he knows with a little smile when Claudio approached him with the question, but did not expressly confirm it.

Standing at the huge windows a bit away, Brock Lancaster from the Oxford astronomy team turns to her and replies, “brown specks really twenty miles away.”

She nods but doesn't respond, instead her attention is glued onto Einstein's back who has yet to turn and acknowledge her presence.

It was just bad luck the one test they all had managed to get to was going to be done in the rain and mainly to gauge the effects inclement weather had on the bomb. Some have suggested this was also to hurry along the whole operation and be done with it.

Einstein finally turns, as if having made a decision and trains his gaze on the reporter, “Rumors have leaked that the U.S. Navy is doing horrible things to the natives here.”

“And because of that,’ Claudio chimes in, ‘few boats are allowed close.”

“More likely the radiation, can't see the Navy being too concerned with public opinion,” Brock inputs.

Einstein's boat was chartered by a hundred scientists wanting to catch a glimpse of their experiments being conducted. It wasn't just dropping a bomb to destroy things. It was also, as Einstein keeps reminding him, “science on the atomic level with endless possibilities.”

Claudio coughs. He remembers saying those words and now does not know how Einstein manages to remain so chipper. It's obvious they are going to die tonight and maybe not just in this storm.

The ship sways back and forth as if making one last argument against remaining on board, leaving Claudio certain it will tip over soon, but somehow he is the only one affected by the swaying movement and the idea of imminent death

whether atomic or ocean. He blames Einstein's infectious curiosity on why he is here.

Einstein and he have never mentioned their kinship.

It an unspoken secret between them, one that does not need words.

Claudio's boy is almost grown and thanks to a letter written by Einstein, in Princeton, not too far from where he got his own Ph.D. ten years before.

Now he is a tenured chair at Tandam Engineering and an expert in crystal design.

Juliet worked with him there until she died.

Lung cancer.

It's been ten years now, and he knows she is the reason he wants to see this one experiment through. An unverbalized promise that no matter what, even up to and including using Einstein himself, he would succeed at the work they did together.

The resonance of the reality code.

He touches Einstein's diamond in his pocket. It's the most unique crystal he has ever worked with. Certainly not

simply dug from the earth, the diamond was ten pounds and glowed always with the complete spectrum of colors. The sound when struck took almost twenty years of solid applied math to determine.

His equation equals, time, space and reality.

Soon, clouds or no clouds, he will know if he is right, as long as they detonate his nuke.

The crystal has already been on an astonishing journey, it was the prism that inspired Einstein's theory of relativity and has been in his possession since he was a professor in Zurich. Claudio has never found another like it. Even where it is said to have come from seems odd. Doesn't fit. Not for the first time while feeling it in his grip, he senses something ageless about it. Something cosmic.

As his mentor and the very reason he was even able to write the experiment up in the first place, Einstein had to be here. Obviously, he was curious and wanted to observe the final part of the test started in his name and finished with his crystal. The crystal that started it all for him fifty years before. A crystal he acquired from a Zurich specialist who said it was

trash and the market demands flaws. Too perfect. People call it fake.

Pretty junk.

They got to the Bikinis just after the Nectar-boosted fission bomb was dropped on the Iroij atoll.

And Claudio has never felt sicker. His entire body feels filled with mucus. The others look no better off. Except Einstein.

He blames the radiation and the likelihood Einstein will live forever.

This whole section of ocean seems sick and jaundiced as if the repeated nuking of the island chain was ruining the world. And he had begged to be apart of it, just like he begged Einstein to write his now famous letter to Roosevelt explaining the need to research atomic energy.

It's been almost two decades since he joined Einstein at the institute and his work on time and reality. His life was easy. Brooklyn was an easy place to live and his life gave him much opportunity to brainstorm and now here he is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean sharing a cabin with an overly-

excited physicist who more than once has let it slip he thinks Claudio did it, he solved the Reality Code.

Though neither will admit knowing for certain, they shared the moment as father and son.

Claudio's hypothesis is the information behind time, reality, and consciousness can be hacked and rewritten by using sound and crystals. It can shake a hole between realities and even cause some to merge together.

What will actually happen is still a mystery, but Claudio thinks it could mean a new history for the twentieth century and the whole world.

He helped design the nuclear bomb that will comprise the Romeo test. Scheduled to go off at 11:59 tonight, mere minutes actually, maybe seconds, hours, or never. The machine is built around a crystal identical to Einstein's. This crystal is fake, replicated by Claudio, but when the bomb detonates, the harmonics should be the same and recorded on site. The data eventually will make it to him in New York whenever it clears government control.

Then he publishes, String Theory and Chaos bow out forever in favor of the Reality Code.

Imagine sending Julius Caesar the Shakespeare play, Einstein mentioned once.

“Likely would drive the man insane,” Claudio answered back, but this was the idea behind what earned him his Ph.D., his top-secret rated dissertation titled The Harmonics of Splitting an Atom Through Time.

He should be famous because his ideas take relativity to the next level, functional. Beyond Chaos and String and into something new, something that not only identified the math of reality but allowed editing of the existing information. Like white-out for all time and space.

“Do you feel that? Einstein says turning and winking at Claudio.

And Claudio knows what he is talking about. The atmospheric pressure is low. It’s what allows the weather outside. Weather, crystals, explosions to split atoms, all have been eating at Claudio since he was a boy, and thanks to

Einstein's work, imagined his first journey at the speed of light.

The limitless possibilities.

"The storm?" Emma asks.

"Yes," Claudio says and turns around to face his decade-long teacher, "it might make the difference here today."

Claudio feels the building charge with static and it is too late to do anything but watch. He removes from his pocket the crystal with its six trillion perfectly stacked quarks resting in eight dimensions and reflects a rainbow of colors on to Einstein's smiling face.

Brock says, "Get ready to experience history, chaps."

Those gathered around him clap softly while hoping to see anything nuclear occur.

They are not disappointed.

The explosion is epic. The orange ball fights back the clouds and rain and for a single second, the entire section of ocean seems to be layered in x-ray images. Even the beings in the ocean are see-through for a moment. Even the water itself,

right down to the rocky Pacific floor, seems to suck up radiation and make everything ethereal and intangible.

Einstein lights up like an angel, every piece that makes up who he is seems visible. Right down to his soul which just as soon as the shock wave of the bomb hits the cruise ship, swaying it back and forth on huge waves, the bright shining glow surrounds his mentor, the same type of glow surrounding Emma and Brock and everyone else watching out the windows as the explosion finishes. The only difference, Claudio now finds himself in possession of the light that was Einstein's soul.

He closes his eyes and still, the blast is visible there like its stain on his eyes, but also in his head are the wafting notes of a perfectly-tuned violin playing something lively and nervous, through the music he sees potential, answers, all in the same swirling universe as he. He feels like laughing at the inevitable causalities just being creates. He pushes the images and music and what ifs and they become more real and vibrant.

Startled, he stops. It almost feels like his thoughts were a place to live. A timeless borderless paradise even the most whimsical thoughts can thrive in.

He wants to explore more. Go back in and play with ideas, but the crowd gathered lets loose a collective moan as the famous physicist Albert Einstein collapses in a heap of muscle and bone and a sickening old-man splat.

The news will hear about his demise in five months and that he died at his desk from an abdominal aortic aneurysm, but the truth is he died here at sea from something no one can explain.

The government stored him in various freezers, every part of him poked and prodded until he was brought home to Princeton, cremated and deified in history.

- 24 December 2018

History forgot Claudio Santos, Ph.D., as he fought to understand and correct a lifetime of mathematical mistakes

and on this new Christmas Eve, the supercentenarian watches his street for the last time from the vantage point of a forty-year-old kitchen chair parked for decades in front of the huge bay window in his living room. He knows his street as well as he ever learned advanced math. He knows which cars belong to which owner. He knows everyone who lives in this strip of historic brownstones. He knows the mail woman and the sanitation workers, the traffic cops handing out tickets on Tuesdays and Thursdays when residents fail to move their cars. He knows the weed dealers also, only because they visit his grandson on their bikes and have no other point. Today the normal bustle is absent and the street is empty under a sheet of swirling grey sky promising violence before the fury of Hurricane Mamrie is done.

The TV is on, the volume muted, a woman, Chowa Chang, in a form-fitting tan suit points to a storm system swirling just under the Cable News Channel's logo. The blob of purple's path is heading to smash everything north of Wilmington and south of Boston. Just like has been promised.

Just how he detailed in the plan to the General's Council after Einstein died.

"Evacuate now," flashes at the bottom of the screen with information about what to do to find somewhere safe if you live within 30 miles of the coast.

He is not safe here in Sunset Park, Brooklyn but at 115 years old, he is never far from death anyway and the idea of not being here tomorrow does not even faze him.

Because that's been the plan for a while now.

Plus this is his storm, thought up and worked on for over sixty-six years of effort. He'd be more than happy when the universe beckons him to oblivion only after the success of tonight's experiment. This project has been his life's work. Once it's over, it would be poetic if he were over also. He is ready. He has been ready ever since Juliet died almost eighty years ago.

Momentarily distracted by existentialism and the lie of a great reward, he returns his attention to the Pakistani man across the street who rips another piece of masking tape off

the roll around his wrist and places it diagonally across the glass he just paid to have installed around his front porch.

For climate control, Claudio heard him tell a neighbor who inquired. Already many giant x's of masking tape mark his progress.

Futility.

Maybe the windows will survive but it won't matter because everything in Brooklyn will be underwater this time tomorrow, but that'll be after the huge blast of nuclear energy is released. The biggest nuclear explosion known to man.

Enough energy to level it all, but again it's possible, mathematical, a bit of tape will save his windows, just Claudio doubts it.

The city is so quiet he can hear Fahad rip the tape from the roll and wonders how long it's been since he last saw a car. As if the thought triggers the event, a military ambulance with Brooklyn Naval Yards stenciled on the front bumper pulls to a stop in front of his house. The rear door opens and out steps the nurse his son has been sending to issue care for him.

He watches the second lieutenant step onto the sidewalk between two parked cars and Claudio wonders if the driver will report Fahad. He is supposed to.

The ambulance idles belches a black cloud of exhaust and the driver picks up his SINGAR mic and Claudio knows he does the right thing just as Lieutenant Lucy Espinosa lets herself in.

She yells out, "hola, Mr. Claudio."

He likes to speak Spanish to her. To anyone, and Brooklyn definitely does not disappoint with opportunity.

Lucy is pretty and Dominican and satisfies lots he thought was dead in him. As she closes the door, he catches the scent of pina colada.

She tells him today's menu with an accent of someone who's R and Ls have been kidnapped and drags the IV stand from a dark corner over to the kitchen chair and Claudio.

Her soft hands touch his bare forearm and he thinks of his youth when mobility and simple human function weren't daily concerns and forgets about Lucy under a dark storm of

music and thoughts from his past until she turns the lights on
the little Christmas tree his son set up by the TV.

And there it is Einstein's crystal sitting in the branches.

It always finds its way out during the holidays and this, his last
Christmas, is no different.

The tree lights glint on all the ornaments his child and
grandchild and great-grandchild have picked out over the
years. Everything looks sad. They are painful reminders of
times that could have been better with Juliet, but without her
he wishes number two hadn't bothered, "Please turn it off."

"Oh no, it's very pretty," she says turning from the tree
to get started with his care.

She lifts his wrist to place the blood pressure cuff
around his arm and he doesn't push. He wants her to be
happy, she is young and pretty and smells nice and is the only
person he looks forward to seeing every day and also because
she doesn't know anything about him and when he gets tired
of her or she pries too deeply, he can order her superior to
send someone new and never have to see her again. After
today though, it won't matter. He simply sits and enjoys her

company because that is his job now, wait til the the wasting disease called old age finishes him off or he resets his reality.

She presses a button and the cuff on his arm inflates and reaches into her insulated bag to gather the sacks of fluids destined to enter his body.

She sets everything up and tapes the lines secured to the pole and Claudio loves her until she readies the needle and comes for him.

Lucy grabs the loose flesh dangling under his bicep and jabs the IV needle into what looked like a vein to Claudio, but instead of a satisfied sigh she leans over in frustration, likely doesn't know him as anything but a job and a name on a schedule, but judging by how hard she tries to get the needle connected to the IV cocktail of life-saving meds she brought, into him, she is probably aware he doesn't have long to live and every moment is crucial.

“I might have to go through your groin.”

“Promise,” he says smirking and happy a bit of his old self is still around. He knows his wife would want him to be more dignified, but she has been gone so long, even her ghost

has rotted. And he is an old man and can say and do whatever he wants and with a jolt, he realizes he is having an argument with an old memory and his moist eyes grow wetter. Not a good sign and not just in terms of age, but in terms of shelf life and every day he feels closer to the end of his.

The nurse laughs with a snort through her little brown Dominican nose just as she manages to find a vein or something that makes her think the meds are getting to where they need to go inside him. “There, now how about some of this good stuff, hmm?” She purses her lips and they are a darker shade of brown with a wispy thin line of wet pink inside and he loves her face and the way the muscles move with the sound. She twists the valve and clear liquid begins to drip down the line into his arm. He obviously can't hear it, but like clockwork, he makes the sound he imagines from the algebra of the drip.

He calculates the sound to be 4 db and that each drip moves him closer to a million, the rhythm of the steady drip drip drip fills his head with happy friendly numbers.

504,678

Drip

504,679

Drip

504,670

Is he right?

Of course, he is, and no one is alive to check him; either it's his number and when it stops, it will mean nothing more can be done to prevent the rot that is life's inevitable conclusion.

He is 115 years old and counting in a reality that will be over soon anyway.

Already he feels the cold fluid entering him and he knows his time is not even close. His body sucks up the medicine and he feels life tighten her evil talons on his soul.

“Anything good today?” he asks, knowing the numbness on his lips means yes.

“A little fentora, I think. Should help you sleep.”

She removes the blood pressure cuff from his bicep and begins to roll it up to put back in her bag.

He counts his number and watches her until she breaks the silence. “Is it true what people say?”

And he knows what people say and almost loses count for the first time, hoping she doesn’t ask the dreaded question about his paternity.

His heart hurts instantly with the idea of explaining it all to someone new.

He doesn't like new and says, “I dress every morning in khakis and a button-down tartan cotton shirt. I own a dozen like-styled shirts because my wife insisted I not be the normal scientist in white and black. And I won't be the normal scientist. I am a teacher of physics and maker of crystals and nothing more.”

He moves his stiff toes inside his fluffy cotton socks and warm slippers that do nothing to make them feel less iced over.

The doctor says poor circulation.

Claudio agrees and hopes under his breath that's what kills him.

The nurse asks, "What did Einstein smell like?"

"Old man and rotting teeth."

He turns to look out the window onto 56th street. Some of the homes have Christmas decorations out. Christmas has just been a day to him, a day he met the love of his life, and the day his mentor died and today, the day he edits reality.

South of this Sunset Park brownstone in a little plot of land he bought when all land was cheap, yesterday or years ago, he buried Juliet for a hundred bucks and purchased the plot beside her for himself, he will never claim that space.

It's the curse that came from helping build the bomb. Meeting Einstein. Marrying and loving Juliet and taking his mentor's essence.

Eternal life.

Einstein's thoughts lead to the atom being split and it changed the world. Wars were fought and ended for this technology, yet what the world didn't realize was Einstein's

theory meant that with right harmonics, the reality code could be edited.

If it had been associated with chaos theory, he would be celebrated like Stephen Hawking and maybe be getting buried at Westminster, and not an anonymous old man stuck on a kitchen chair to wait out the rest of all time.

And he looks at Lucy, realizing he just told her everything he meant to keep secret and she blinks back in shock, obviously searching for words with which to fill the silence.

To make it worse, his 400-pound forty-year-old grandson stands in the vestibule staring at Lucy with the front door open.

Spotted, Claudio Santos the fourth, forever the Dribble slams the heavy wood door with a thud and abuses the stairs as he disappears into the lair he calls a bedroom but once was the attic.

“Sorry about that,” Claudio says to Lucy.

She turns back to him and expects her to ask what he meant about waiting out all time, but instead asks, “Did you know anyone else famous?”

And Claudio shakes his head deciding again history belongs with the dead and happens to look out the window just in time to see two NYPD officers dump three bullets each into Fahad before dragging his lifeless corpse back into his family’s home.

Claudio ignores the screams of the man’s family as they also pay for his hubris.

Fifteen minutes later the house explodes into smoke and flames and Claudio hopes midnight comes before those flames do.

Claudio the fourth reads the secure text from his boss one last time. It says: send the new code when you can, Dribble!

And he winces because being called Dribble is his least favorite thing.

Ronald Pressular, the man who started his own lab, owns the New York Rangers, and a pizza franchise called The Ron, has taken the nickname to a new level of hell.

Room full of engineers, all crunching numbers on the super-colliders server and Ronald bends over to incorrectly point to a number and call it, wrong, and worse add, “it's amazing you managed to dribble out of that 9/11 hero father of yours.”

The Dribble decided to kill him right there and then.

Him and every single person who ever laughed at him.

And if not everyone, at least he can erase New York City and why not on Christmas.

He can still hear his grandfather down below, his voice grates. Einstein this, Einstein that. The old geezer won't shut up about what was. Everyone knows Einstein was a dreamer, a charlatan who barely knew how to math, never got his own right answers and was certainly on the spectrum.

The fourth was a computational physicist, he fixed the problems with Einstein's math one smashed atom at a time.

Tonight, he is one command away from smashing together all the atoms in the hadron collider.

Why?

Well, to fuck them all, of course. All of them and their pettiness and their convoluted memories and their stodgy ideas.

And all made possible because Ronald Pressular loves science. Especially the double a net worth kind.

The code The Ron wants fixed is a virus Claudio the IVth put into play himself. It ramps up the collider's intake until it's flooded with boron particles going near the speed of light then kablammo, bye-bye New York.

The storm makes it the perfect opportunity, yes, he will kill himself but the work at the lab dies also, work that has gone the wrong way.

Relativity is the reality code, not information beyond a black hole. Black holes are reality, they can be written. They can be gates. The potential of life is what can be thought up, not what is wasted through nature's chaotic glut.

Unleash the kraken! He lets the scene from the old 80's movie play out in his head. It's what he thinks of when this phrase comes up about unleashing the Reality Code.

Reality Code is as much bullshit as Chaos Theory or String Theory.

Just the mental masturbation of a man whose greatest aspiration was his very own apple tree to ponder the cosmos from under.

Four feels guilty, he has been using another man's work, but then he rereads The Ron's text calling him Dribble and he decides fuck 'em again.

Because he is a four hundred pound anti-social gamer dork in a Wolverine t-shirt that may or may not ever come off again and a suitcase that houses a nice computer tower monitor and industrial battery he programmed himself that can go weeks without being plugged in, because he has never a point to life. Because running would kill him and he is one of the smartest people alive. A freak. Because he can spend days awake coding experiments for the super-collider and then fast twitch his way through a speedrun of Mario Brothers.

He sits on his bed. The mattress creaks. He is tired. His body hurts.

But now his work is done. He has completed every single task to move this orchestration forward like a perfectly organized equation.

He thinks about laying down and sleeping through the big moment. He feels like he could. But if he wakes up and it didn't happen and he could have fixed the error that prevented it, he'd never be able to forgive himself.

The idea haunts him.

He stands and closes his bedroom door and settles into the computer chair in front of his monitor. He moves the mouse and begins a vigil that will last until just before midnight when he evaporates into a rewritten eight dimensional reality.

At midnight the wind has blown out the fire from across the street and the torrential downpour erases all glowing embers. It is pitch black through the window Claudio Santos sits in front of. The raging storm promises destruction,

Claudio finds himself fearing the plan might be what kills him after all.

Claudio Senior moves from his kitchen chair into the easy chair across from the small Christmas tree and its crystal reflecting the rainbows.

He is fine here. He sits and stares at the sad artificial Christmas tree wondering about death. He is old and plays around with the idea of not being anymore. He can't even as close to the end as he is, contemplate nothing. Maybe if he had meditated more, or tried acid, but his nothing always fills up with the idea of himself.

Consciousness.

“Hey, dad.”

It's the familiar face of the man he raised. Old now also. The face that once belonged to the boy that fought for a four-minute mile time and earned a place on the West Point track team. The Vietnam Veteran, Gulf War organizer and war on terrorism decluster-fucker.

“Merry Christmas,” he says in a rasp to his son, feeling something he hasn't felt since he was young and in Mexico. A sense for this holiday and the family around him.

Then movement from upstairs and the big body belonging to his greatgrandson arrives. They stand around each other and Claudio senior even senses Juliet there, and number Three maybe maybe even his wife, they smile because being together is nice. Juliet would have already started a debate on accreditation and name order when publishing, but there wouldn't be any publishing for this work, because the world they are in now is about to end.

When every atomic clock on the planet points to the numbers that indicate midnight on the East coast, the event happens. The Boron circling the hadron collider accelerates right to the limit of the speed of light. Once there their angles are adjusted with air flow and they are forced to collide with each other.

The result is spectacularly brutal, even more so than the scientists waiting for the results in Brooklyn thought.

The event evaporates everything made of matter,
turning it instantly into antimatter even the Earth blinks out of
existence and all that was is now a dream, or hope, or desire in
a solar system that vanished because it never was.

Just Voyager, alone at the cusp of this galactic space,
was saved. Voyager with its gold record and last proof the
mankind of this reality ever existed.

In that reality anyway.

In the reality of the three Santos, they have shoved into
something new, a new present. Nature warned them away
from opening this present if they got to it, but they got here.
They earned it and they must, and they did, when the Dribble's
code did its thing, the universe sucks each and every one of
their atoms apart from one another then stacks them, pushing
their substance down, mashing each quarks, splitting them
over and over, funneling them to the one place they can go.

The only place they deserved to go.

And they go there, to the father of time and light and
the reality code himself.

When the clock two hundred meters away dongs for the last time on what is now Christmas, Einstein opens his eyes, his dream far from forgotten. In front of him is the Mexican maid, a refugee stuck away from her country here because of war and famine. Soon to be sent back because the cycle is not yet broken.

She has said she could go home with help.

The old Einstein would have given her that help, but not for free. The new him loves her like a mother.

She stands in his doorway, and he knows he can use her any way he wants and for only the promise of a peek inside his thoughts. Instead, he says, “Nothing today, Maria, maybe another time,” and turns his attention back to making Utopia with the only tool he has, four genius-level souls.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

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Lauren Signorino has been a writer and lover of science fiction, fantasy, and horror since childhood. Lauren's passion for words led her to Los Angeles where she attended the University of Southern California and earned a master's degree in Professional Writing. Post-graduation, Lauren has worked in numerous writers' offices for television shows on SyFy, TNT, NBC, and AMC. She has written on *FEAR THE WALKING DEAD*, and has been nominated for a Writers Guild Award and an Emmy Award for her work on *FEAR THE WALKING DEAD: FLIGHT 462*. In her spare time, Lauren's SWAT sniper brother takes her to the gun range to prepare her for the impending zombie apocalypse.

Josh Trapani's day jobs have included stints at Washington, D.C. think tanks and associations, at USDA, and as a science fellow for a U.S. Senator. He helped start the *Washington Independent Review of Books* and served as its first managing editor. Trained as a paleontologist, Josh's research applied quantitative methods to understanding morphological evolution, and he performed fieldwork in the U.S., Mexico, and Ethiopia. Josh has published a dozen peer-reviewed papers, as well as essays and opinion pieces in science policy venues and the *New York Daily News* op-ed page. His fiction and humor have appeared (or will soon appear) in *The Big Jewel*, *The Del Sol Review*, *Neutrons Protons*, and *Issues in Science & Technology*.