

# Tree And Stone

Issue 2

October 2022

QUEER AS F\*



Stef | Jason A. Bartles | Emma Burke | E. G. Condé | A. P. Golub | Paula Hammond |  
Sara Hartje | Corinne Lewandowski | Avra Margariti | Meg Murray | Justin Moritz |  
Cass Richards | dave ring | Ren Koppel Torres | Ramez Yoakeim



# Tree And Stone Magazine

Queer as F\* Issue 2

## Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Patreon and Ko-fi Supporters.....                        | 3         |
| Staff.....   | 3         |
| Letter from the Editor.....                              | 4         |
| United by Corinne Lewandowski.....                       | 6         |
| Fourth by Emma Burke.....                                | 8         |
| The Last Court Necromancer by A. P. Golub.....           | 28        |
| Fluttersome by Paula Hammond.....                        | <b>38</b> |
| Sumerki by E. G. Condé.....                              | 39        |
| I Wish I Didn't Have to Go by Cass Richards.....         | 52        |
| Libre by Ren Koppel Torres.....                          | <b>73</b> |
| Hazmat Hearts by Avra Margariti.....                     | 74        |
| Unbury My Heart by Jason A. Bartles.....                 | 81        |
| Micro-Orbital Lunar Winter Activity 53 by dave ring..... | 103       |
| Ponte Selvaggio by Meg Murray.....                       | 108       |
| Tell Tale by Sara Hartje.....                            | 126       |
| Triangles are Forever by Ramez Yoakeim.....              | 145       |
| Untucked by Justin Moritz.....                           | 154       |
| Cover Artist.....  | 169       |
| Photo Credits.....                                       | 170       |

*"It isn't possible to love and part. You will wish that it was. You can transmute love, ignore it, muddle it, but you can never pull it out of you. I know by experience that the poets are right: love is eternal."*

*— E.M. Forster, A Room with a View*

# Patreon and Ko-fi Supporters

This magazine would be nothing if not for our amazing contributing writers and artists. I want to thank our incredible Patreon and Ko-fi supporters for their contributions.

Rod Mannix

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## Staff

Thank you so much to our First Reader team who reviewed all of the submitted stories!

Rosario Santiago (they/she)

Bryn Jeffery (they/them or xe/xem)

L.M. Cole (she/her)

Rae Sterling (they/them)

Léon Othenin-Girard  
(he/they)

Singano Uachave  
(they/them)

Olivia Skye Murphy  
(she/they)

Ray Miller (she/her)

Keily Blair (they/them)

# Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

I am so thrilled to present the newest issue of the Queer as F\* series! I'm so happy I can provide a platform to queer artists and their incredible creations. I hope to continue to do this for a long, long time.

Queer stories are so important. They can give language to our emotions and identities, make us feel less alone by letting us imagine that someone else, even a fictional character, can go through the same things we do. They can show the world there are multiple ways to live and that we exist whether or not society likes it, and we *will* live on because our stories live on. Each of the works gives voice the power of queerness. We are queer as f\*, and what?

Please enjoy this wonderful issue and I hope you savor the stories as much as I have. I am so honored to host these works. Please enjoy!

Kevin M. Casin

Editor/Publisher



# United

Corinne Lewandowski

**F**iore's tears overflowed as she gazed through the mirror.  
The view of her whole, young world was half-covered by the black cloth.  
Mourners filled her home, milling about her open casket.

Friends and family precariously balanced plates heaped with Fiore's favorite foods with drinks. People varied between crying, laughing, eating, storytelling, and raising toasts.

Fiore's heart skipped a beat.

Her wife Beata slipped a bottle of local cider and a note into her casket.

Fiore pressed closer, in vain, to drink in another view of her beauty, now vanished beyond the cloth she could not touch.

"I'm lost without you!"

Up close, Beata slid into view. She removed the cloth, caressed the weathered frame, and rested her fingertips on the glass.

"This was her favorite," she said, her eyes puffy from crying.

Fiore madly kissed those soft fingertips, chilled from tasting the cold glass and the chasm between their dimensions.

Beata yanked back. Tingling travelled up her fingers and arm. She leaned close, certain she saw Fiore's lip prints.

Invigorated that Beata may well sense her, Fiore kissed the glass again.

A mourner approached and Beata swiftly covered the mirror.



The endlessness of nothingness left Fiore feeling entombed. A blink, or an eon, trudged then the cloth was no longer in place.

The mourners were gone, and Fiore searched for her love.

Warm fingers laced in between Fiore's fingers; lips pressed into her neck.

"Found you, my sweetest love," whispered Beata.

Sorrow engulfed all but two, over the two caskets.

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### About the Author

Corinne lives in the Halifax area in Nova Scotia with her wife and two cats, who are all frequently nicknamed "Little Pirate" as needed. Her most recent published short story, *Only Deities Need Apply*, appeared in *Mythology From The Rock* (Engen Books) where deities hang around a food court trying to figure out which human to help next. Her dedication to eating at all the restaurants mentioned in the story was herculean and involved multiple, yummy trips. Corinne also enjoys making repeatedly poor gardening attempts to coax vegetables out of the garden hoping to get that awesome bounty she got just once forever ago.

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# Fourth

Emma Burke

**M**eteors streak past the observatory windows as my husband proposes to his boyfriend. It's a good omen. The Founders are smiling on the match. It's not often there's a break in the monotony of the stars outside the space station. Nobody lives on Amox for the views.

I record the entire thing on digital, reminding myself that this is the happiest day of our lives before they pull me into the celebration.

Aiden wanted to ask Jaxon to be our third the day he met him. I was ready a couple of weeks ago. We both agreed to wait for the meteor shower. We wanted to avoid the mistakes we made with Sienna. The mistakes that left my right hand bare these past two years.

It's not that I opposed the choice, Jaxon is easy to love, but I always thought I would be the one proposing to our third. That Aiden would be filming me and Sienna. Now he'll have a left-hand husband-ring in addition to the wife-ring on his right, while I'll only add a partner ring to the ring I already wear on my left for Aiden.

Still, it's progress. Jaxon has always insisted on sharing completely, including me from the very first date, clearing all his and Aiden's alone time with me, asking me about my interests and hobbies, taking the time to get to know me in addition to Aiden. He isn't interested in a one-person marriage. He wants us both. Equally. He'll be a solid third leg to the square that the founders describe as the ideal foundations to a complete home.

It's a far cry from the relationships I experienced on Earth where it only became legal to have a right-hand lover as well as a left-hand one a century ago. One's husband and wife were barely expected to be friends, yet alone care for each other. Sharing was more than taboo. It was a prison sentence.

That's why The Founders built Amorn all those centuries ago. It's why I chose to move here despite the hefty import/export taxes imposed by planets with more puritanical moral systems and the fact that it meant never standing under the open sky or drinking fresh water again. It was all worth it for the chance at a true marriage.

Aiden and I met on the trip over. At first, he was a symbol of my old life, a talisman from a place I never wanted to see again. It wasn't until two months into the journey that I realized he was everything I liked about Earth stripped of the bad parts, like a root vegetable plucked from the dirt and scrubbed clean. No hate or bigotry or pollution. Just unlimited sunshine and big cities where I could drop into a museum at a moment's notice.

We were engaged by the time we landed. It was a fast courtship even by Amorn standards. I don't regret it, but sometimes I wonder if things would have been different with Sienna if we had waited. I never thought we'd have another chance, but here we are. Engaged again.

"Congratulations, Cat." Jaxon folds me into his arms as if I'm the one that just proposed. "You'll look like a goddess in your white dress. I can't wait for our wedding."

Our wedding. Not his and Aiden's. Ours. The next step towards our square.

"She didn't even wear white for me," Aiden teases as Jaxon hails a passing hovertram. There's a slight bite to his words, like one of the radishes we grow in our greenhouses. Enjoyable, crunchy, but also undoubtedly bitter. "Anything else you two are scheming?"

The question hangs heavy between us. I refused to wear white to our wedding because I'd picked out that dress when I thought the wedding would include Sienna. Aiden claimed he didn't mind the change in attire, but he's never understood my refusal to have a child when it's just the two of us to look after it. When we don't have our full square.

His eyes are overly hopeful.

"Nothing you need to know about." I purposefully sidestep the topic.

Aiden swoops in for a kiss and I sigh in relief. He doesn't want to destroy our happiness by forcing the discussion. If I'm not ready, then he won't push it.

At least for now.



"Matching set to last time?"

The salesperson ushers the three of us into a set of plush chairs directly facing the glittering glass showcase. There are necklaces and bracelets secreted somewhere in the store, but the center of the room is devoted to the wedding bands. They sparkle on their black velvet cushions like a thousand stars in the sky, a million lovers twirling together in the night.

Two black studded rings, badges of platonic love, are visible on the salesperson's hands as they pull out a tray. They have a good memory, deftly removing the diamonds and rubies from the tray without so much as a glance at my hands or Aiden's. I shove my right hand into my pocket as they reach for the sapphires.

"That won't be necessary."

Sienna was supposed to be the sapphire. Blue as the ocean, full of a light from within, crystal clear and electrifying. That stone cannot represent anyone else.

"We should upgrade." Aiden's voice is soft, as if I am a fragile thing that might fracture and crack.

I want to tell him that I am stronger now, that I'm not that person anymore, but the lump in my throat won't let me. Perhaps he's right about the rings. Aiden and I have done well for ourselves in the years since Sienna left. Our greenhouses feed half the space station. We can easily afford new rings for all of us. Rings that aren't saturated with the memory of old heartache.

"Absolutely not." Jaxon slides his hand into mine and pulls it out from my pocket. "There's no shame in having loved, no matter how it turned out."

He gives my fingers a squeeze, telling me that although Sienna's sapphire might not be there, I'm not alone. Never alone.

Jaxon is the one that reassembled the shattered pieces of me that Sienna left behind. It happened on the anniversary of the day Sienna left. I'd gotten home before

Aiden and the quietness of the empty house reminded me that she wasn't there. Jackson came over planning to surprise us with dinner and found me curled into a ball, clutching the sapphire ring.

I was afraid he'd leave then too, but instead he cradled me to his chest while I sobbed and hiccupped out the entire story. Aiden and I had been so stupid. Two kids from Earth who didn't realize that surprising your girlfriend with plans for a baby was not the way to make her feel included.

The note she left before disappearing off the face of the space station said she didn't want to get in the way of our perfect family. As if we could ever be a family without her.

Jaxon stroked my hair and told me we all make mistakes, that my heart had been in the right place even if I had gone about expressing it all wrong. It was the first time I wanted to kiss him, the closest we've ever been physically.

Aiden still doesn't know how it all went down. All he knows is that instead of coming home to a despondent wife he'd found Jaxon in the kitchen tossing a salad while I was peeling potatoes. He'd wanted to skip dinner and take us both to bed right then and there, but I'd demurred. I had a husband-ring on my left hand after all. It wouldn't be right, even with Aiden's permission. Not until they were married too.

Jaxon had agreed, giving me a peck on the cheek when he said goodnight. I'd already shared my heart with him. The sex could wait until after the wedding.

Aiden and I are one step closer to getting it right this time around. Jaxon has said yes. All we have to do is choose his ring stone. The symbol of what he brings to the relationship.

I glance at Aiden to see what he's thinking. I chose a diamond for him, because he's always been the strong one, and he chose a ruby for me because he said I lit his soul on fire. The sapphire had been an obvious choice too. It was the exact shade of Sienna's hair, and she was always jumping in headfirst, with only her good luck to ensure she landed on her feet. Like an actual cat, she'd had nine lives. Sink or swim, we used to call her.

She always swam.

I should have returned the goddamn thing instead of carrying it around in my pocket like a security blanket. Like the missing piece of myself that I had let slip away in my hastiness.

The rings remaining on the velvet cushion are small but respectable, identical to the rings we wear except for the stones at their centers. I reach for the emerald at the exact same time as Aiden does. Our fingers brush and we grin, holding it up together for Jaxon to see.

"The color of life," Aiden says.

"The color of balance." I hope Jaxon can see how deeply I mean that. "Of healing and second chances and a future full of growth."

"Sold," Jaxon informs the salesperson who industriously begins to pack up the emerald as well as a diamond for Aiden to give to Jaxon. "We'll also need matching bands for me and Cat to give each other."

"A true marriage!" The salesperson beams in satisfaction as they reach over to the smaller section of gem encrusted partner bands and pull out the necessary items. "One more to a full square."

They're happy about more than the extra sale.

This is Amorn. Everyone here loves a true marriage.



"You should stay at our place tonight." I pull the gift box from my pocket and hand it to Jaxon. "This is for you."

I've been waiting all afternoon for the right moment. The keychain is a crystal in the shape of the national bird from his home planet but he's too focused on the key fob hanging off the end to notice.

"We've always wanted a third. Aiden can help you move after dinner." I don't mention that we've always wanted a fourth too. A full square, with all points connected and in harmony. The thought of it makes me nauseous. I haven't been able to look at a girl that way since Sienna. Or any non-binary person that would want to place a ring on both my hands. My right hand still reaches to hold Sienna's.

"You're not coming with?" Aiden's face creases in concern. He grabs my left hand, pressing it to his chest. "I thought now that we're engaged the three of us..."



He's always been a little looser than I am about the formalities of our marriage. He and Sienna had been extremely compatible in that regard, although out of respect for me they never had sex without me. I'm the traditionalist, having read the founders manifesto on square marriage so many times I've practically memorized it. Once I let Aiden put a ring on my left hand, I knew I'd never let another man be with me that way until Aiden had given them a ring too.

Sienna was hardly as religious. She liked me and Aiden and she'd liked sex. Plus, she was damn good at it. At the time it had seemed like enough. Clearly it was not. I'm not making that mistake again. Not letting the heat that's building in my body let me override what we've discussed and agreed upon as a group, together, when Aiden and Jaxon first started dating.

I take a step back but keep hold of Aiden's hand. "After the wedding."

Aiden's face crumples.

Jaxon remains unperturbed.

"Take your time. With everything. I know you want a fourth before any children. I want that for us too. We're pieces of the same puzzle Cat."

My stomach flips over in my gut. Jaxon is not Sienna, he never will be, but this is the start of something else. Of sharing, and communication and mutual respect instead of wild nights and impromptu adventures.

They drop me off at the house on their way to dinner, their smiles caressing me long after they're gone. I have so much to be grateful for, but my ring-less right hand still twitches with regret on the doorknob.

The key I gave Jaxon was made for Sienna.



I wake up snuggly and warm, only momentarily surprised to see Jaxon's brown eyes above me instead of Aiden's blue ones. We all agreed that it was good for us all to sleep in the same bed now that Jaxon had moved from his single pod into our family sized one. There was plenty of space and plenty of groupings spend time this way before the wedding to ensure everyone is compatible.

The smell of waffles and fresh brewed coffee floats in from the kitchen. Aiden is still asleep, snoring peacefully to my right. He's always slept like the dead. Jaxon must be an early riser.

"You made breakfast?"

"I always do. Aiden didn't tell you?" His smile is deep, his eyes hopeful. "He told me you like chocolate chips in your waffles. They're waiting for you downstairs."

They're likely to be the best waffles I've eaten in my life. We only met Jaxon because Aiden insisted on complimenting the chef when we stopped at a tiny diner on our way home from a business meeting. He'd offered to buy Jaxon his own restaurant, with supplies from the greenhouses to bolster the menu, but Jaxon told him he wanted a date instead.

With both of us.

He still refuses to leave the diner, claiming it's because he's not a trophy husband, but I know he secretly likes meeting the travelers that pass through. He loves hearing about other planets, dreaming about one day being able to visit them. He worked as a short order cook on a space freighter for a few years to get the worst of the wanderlust out before settling on Amorn and looking for a couple to join.

Lying here next to him, his hand on my waist, his breath tickling my face, I'm hungry for more than waffles.

"There'll be time to eat later." I reach up and touch his cheek.

He leans in closer, his face a silent question as he traces the line of my mouth with his thumb.

I nod once and he's on me in an instant, pulling me closer and pressing his face to mine. His mouth is warm and sweet, and he takes it slow, giving me the space to savor it. I wait for him to make another move, to try and take off the ridiculously un-sexy flannel pajamas I put on last night because I didn't anticipate this turn of events.

He doesn't.

"Did Aiden tell you how much I like kissing?"

"He didn't need to. We like the same things. I put chocolate chips in my waffles too."

A pleasant warmth tingles its way through my body. This isn't the wild passion I felt with Sienna or the young fumbling love I had with Aiden. It's more like coming home after a long time away. Jaxon may not be my husband, or my wife, but he is definitely a piece of my soul.

I don't know how long we spend kissing, our mouths exploring the strange new sensation, before I hear Aiden give a gentle cough.

"Glad to see you two are getting along." Aiden's eyes are twinkling the way they did when he asked me to marry him, the way they did when he told me he wanted to marry Jaxon. "Don't let me interrupt."

Jaxon chuckles softly and relinquishes my body. A resigned sigh escapes my mouth at his departure. I don't want him to go.

"Cat is right," Jaxon says, backing up after one final kiss. "We should wait. It'll be one hell of a wedding present."

He ambles off towards the bathroom for what I can only assume will be a very cold shower. I wait a few beats for the whir of the water recycler to click on before turning around to face Aiden who is grinning like the Cheshire cat.

"Find us our fourth, Cat." Aiden murmurs in my ear, reminding me of how close we are to achieving all of our dreams. "Find us our fourth so we can all be whole together and you can finally have your square."

Except when I hear 'fourth' all I can think of is a pair of deep violet eyes under a mop of ocean blue hair and a smile that still takes my breath away every time I remember it.



Aiden tries to help me into the elaborate wedding dress I've chosen but he fumbles the buttons so badly we finally both cede to the necessity of calling in Jaxon. For his part, Jaxon spends a full ten minutes staring open mouthed before he deftly finishes the buttons and nuzzles my neck.

"I'd much rather be taking this off you."

"Tonight." I straighten out his collar and give him a kiss on the cheek. Quick. Chaste. The kind of kiss I would give my grandmother. "As soon as you're done marrying our husband."

"You are not getting away with that." His kiss is neither quick nor chaste. "I'm marrying you too, even if some planets will never recognize that."

"Do I need to get you two a room?" Aiden threads his arms through both of ours. "I was all for eloping, but certain people insisted on a wedding and there are 200 people downstairs waiting for us."

"Better give the people what they want." I head for the stairs.

"Cat, wait." Jaxon's voice is pressured, and I freeze mid-step.

Is he having second thoughts?

"Nothing like that." He tucks my arm more firmly in his, reading my mind. "It's only...if you wanted...I thought we might go to Primus for the honeymoon."

Primus was Sienna's planet.

"You have been so generous with me and Jaxon." Aiden comes up to stand next to me. "Even though your heart was still broken, you welcomed a third into our marriage. If you still love Sienna, then you deserve the chance to talk it through with her. However, it goes, maybe you'll be ready to start our family after."

I flip back and forth between their faces, shining and full of love and for a second, I forget the gaping Sienna shaped hole in my heart.

Maybe everything I've needed has been here all along. Maybe triangles are just as good as squares. Maybe this obsession with marrying a fourth, having a child and following the ideal model laid out by the founders is stopping me from becoming who I need to be. Because no love is perfect, but there's always room to strive for better together.

"We are already a family," I say. "I don't care what we find in Primus."



There's a smattering of applause when Jaxon and Aiden kiss but most of the audience is still holding their collective breaths. Their eyes are glued on me. It's time for me to give Jaxon his ruby band.

Neither of us wears a black ring, meaning we're both open to another romantic partner. They've seen the way we look at each other, but they also know I'm from

Earth and was raised in a monogamous society. Some of them remember what happened with Sienna.

I've wanted this for as long as I can remember but wanting a thing in theory is one thing and having the courage to take it in real life is quite another. I watched my parents hide their love for their thirds and fourths for years. I swore that was never going to be me.

"You were always meant to be our third." I place the ring on Jaxon's finger. "Nobody else. It was always you."

A tear slides down his face as he prepares to give me my emerald ring. Aiden is crying too. Whatever happened two years ago, this is where we needed to end up. Aiden and I needed to heal. We needed Jaxon.

"I love you, Cat."

The words are barely out of his mouth before I press my face up against his and kiss him for everything I'm worth. I want him and he wants me and we don't care if the entire galaxy knows it.

The room erupts in cheers as Aiden grabs both of our hands and holds them up for the audience. This is what The Founders built this space station for. This is why we all chose to live here.

We dance so hard at the reception I struggle to extricate myself from the dance floor. Our arms are meteors slicing the sky, our bodies are planets drawn by their own gravitational pull to orbit each other. I'm ecstatic and drunk and I never

want it to end but I pull myself away before the cake cutting and sneak off to the wine fridge.

I've asked the caterer to prepare a bottle of champagne with a pressurized cork instead of the usual hermetic seal. I want it to spill over when the cork pops, to drown us in our happiness, covering our bodies in sticky sweet joy that will dry clear only to be discovered later in the heat of the night.

It cost a fortune, but I was happy to pay it and the caterer was more than willing to oblige.

It's safely stowed on the top shelf and I climb a rolling ladder to reach it. It's cool glass surface tickles my palms as I clamber down, eager to get back to my husbands, when a voice stops me in my tracks.

"Marriage looks good on you Cat."

It's silky and smooth and sets my body on fire with a rush of memories. I'd know that voice anywhere.

I topple off the ladder, champagne bottle still in hand, spiraling towards the floor.

Sienna catches me.

I should wrench myself out of her arms and demand to know where she's been all these years. I should leave without another word. I should apologize for not consulting her about building a nursery. Instead, my traitorous eyes shift down to her hands to look for rings and my heart flutters when I see there aren't any.



She's let her hair grow out from the pixie cut she used to favor. It's now a sleek blue bob that tapers downwards towards her cherry red mouth, highlighting her high cheekbones. I fell in love with those cheekbones before we ever exchanged a word.

My lips part slightly, extending an invitation I know I shouldn't give.

I've had too much to drink.

She kisses me firmly, setting me down on the ladder rungs to free her hands so they can roam my body. Her slick black flight suit hugs her every curve and I desperately want to unzip it and pick up where we left off last time. It's only when she reaches for the hem of my dress that my head clears.

I promised someone else they would be taking off this dress. Someone I love. Someone I married. Someone that didn't leave me without letting me explain or fix my mistakes.

"Sienna, it's my wedding night." I push her away.

"It's Aiden's wedding. Your right hand is gloriously empty and so is mine. I missed you, Cat. We were good together."

She always did like sex. She also has a point. This is entirely within the bounds of my marriage and the law. The only barrier is the fact that I've learned not to be so rash about my decisions when there are two other people in my marriage to consult.

Her fingers are stroking their way through my hair, her mouth tantalizingly close, and I'm falling for her all over again. Fast and hard and deep. Can I survive her

a second time? Can Aiden? Do I want to subject Jaxon to the world of hurt that Sienna will undoubtedly leave in her wake when she leaves us again?

I'm still scrambling for an answer when the door opens.

"Looks like we can cancel the trip." Jaxon's voice is light as he elbows Aiden in the ribs. He's had too much to drink too. "Care to introduce us to your new friend, Cat?"

He's standing in the doorway gleefully smiling at the pair of us. He probably thinks this is a good sign, that I'm finally moving on. Exploring other options. Weddings are notorious for would be thirds and fourths approaching the newly marrieds to explore the possibility of joining.

Aiden's mouth is a round "O" of surprise, but his eyes are burning into mine and Sienna's as if they want to drink us in whole.

"Not a new friend," he croaks. "Sienna, you broke her heart and now you show up on our wedding day?"

His hand is gripping Jaxon's so hard his knuckles go white. His pupils are dilated and his breath is shallow as desire and anger struggle for supremacy on his face. He still wants her as much as I do, but he's afraid to be hurt again, afraid to let Jaxon get pulled into the pain.

"I broke her heart?" Sienna's hands are balled into little fists. "I'm not the one that went ahead and built a nursery like a pair of nesting doves, without even consulting the woman you were dating. You broke *my* heart Aiden. Both of you did."

Aiden flinches, his mouth opening to say something harsh, but I cut him off. This wasn't his mistake, it was mine. He was simply trying to keep me happy.

"I'm sorry. I should have asked you before planning a nursery. My desire to follow the Founders ideal made me blind to everything else around me. But you made a mistake too. You could have at least given us a chance to talk it through."

This is the real gift Jaxon gave me. The ability to confess my mistakes without fear or shame. Because that's how love grows. Through sharing things with each other, both the good and the bad.

"I didn't think there was much to talk about." Sienna's hands clench and her jaw stiffens. "I don't have a functioning uterus and I've been burnt enough by people who didn't want a woman that wasn't part of the ideal child-bearing square."

"Fuck." It is not one of Aiden's more eloquent moments, but I whole heartedly agree with the sentiment.

Fuck the founders and fuck anyone that tries to tell anyone how to love. Isn't that why I came here? To live and love my own way? Only I got so caught up in the minutiae I almost lost it all. Almost watched the love of my life walk out the door because some arbitrary ideal family shape made her think she wasn't welcome.

"I never stopped loving either of you." Sienna's face is pale and the air is thick with her misery. "When I heard you were getting married to your third I had to come see my replacement for myself."

"Nobody could ever replace you." I step over to flank Jaxon's other side. Jaxon, who taught me that to love is to bear another person's heartache without question or complaint. "Sienna, this is our third, Jaxon. He suggested we take our honeymoon in Primus to try and track you down. Because I would happily live in a hexagon if you were in it. Or a trapezoid. Or a circle. Whatever shape you want."

"But the nursery?" She's blinking back tears, her voice wobbling for the first time since I met her. "Don't you want to populate your square?"

"What we want is to live with honesty and mutual respect." Aiden looks to me for approval and I nod. "We'd very much appreciate your giving us a second chance to celebrate what you bring to a relationship rather than making you feel less than for any perceived lack."

"Partners should decide their ideal shape together." Jaxon extends a hand towards Sienna and she takes it tentatively, like a bee approaching a flower. Unsure if the situation calls for honey or a sting.

"Really?" She gives him the thousand-watt smile that pulled me in when we first met. "I know it's a lot to ask but maybe in a week or two, I could park my ship in the dry dock behind your house so we could get to know each other? See if it's a fit?"

"I already know you, Sienna." Jaxon brings her hand to his mouth with a suave bow and she melts like butter on toast. Jaxon has that effect on people. "Cat's been saving your ring since the day you left. I hope after you get to know me, you'll consider taking it."

Sienna's face goes still as she looks at each of us in turn to make sure the offer is genuine, that the partnership will be complete all around.

"No surprises this time." I promise.

Her face is a puzzle I want to spend the rest of my life deciphering as she slips a hand into her pocket and pulls out a ruby ring. "Maybe one last surprise."

---

### About the Author

Emma Burke is a scientist and speculative fiction writer living in NYC. She enjoys libraries, dinner parties and tries to identify every plant she can find in the arboretum. Her work has previously appeared in *Khoreo* and *Augur* magazines.

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# The Last Court Necromancer

A. P. Golub

This is not the sort of story that begins with once upon a time in a royalist past. It begins with you coming here in the dead of winter to disturb my peace and make me tell it.

Don't interrupt me, young revolutionary, you with your would-be coup in need of a leader—a figurehead. Now sit and drink your wine and warm up. My wife will be home soon, and I want you gone before she gets here. I'll not have you bothering her as well as me. Drink! Listen!

You came for a story and I aim to give it to you, but then you'll leave and tell your own tale.

I know, you might have first heard it as fairytale, a myth, a whisper. Yes, those whispers are why you're here, but this story is more than a half-thought piece of memory. It's true. It's our history, with blurred dates and faces and things our current rulers want forgotten.

But you suspected that, that's why you're here.

You should know that anyone can wear a crown. If they can take it.

That's where my story begins.



In the 21st year of Queen Terese's reign, Sofia Aravič was a necromancer in the royal court. You know her now as the last court necromancer, but at the time she was just another one among many, and her skills were mediocre, at best. She had only

managed to cross the veil into death once in her life, had never successfully resurrected a mouse, much less a person, and her attempts to know the future by looking into death were fifty-fifty, at best. But Sofia had one gift that kept her in court instead of out peddling potions and vague fortunes out on the streets: she could make the veil between life and death shine. She could show it to you, in all its beauty. Sofia took her thoughts and moods and painted them glistening in the air for all the court to admire. She could make the veil dance for the living, and could sing grave flowers into bloom. It is said that her voice was where her magic lay.

It was at one such show that Princess Lora, then the heir to the throne and now the object of your quest, fell in love with Sofia.

I could tell you a story of a love that blossomed quickly, like the flowers in spring, and grew strong like that oak you passed outside, the one littering my yard with acorns. This story—of a hopeful love growing in peace—is cut off, half-written. It's a fiction, and it's not the story you came for.

So let us return to Sofia and Lora and the love that happened.



Their love grew against a background of unrest.

This story you know: a small group of necromancers turned the magic that connected them to death against the living. They renamed themselves vitamancers, and you know them as predators, who have broken all bonds with natural death. Yet, in the last years of Queen Terese's reign, it was the living the vitamancers turned against the remaining necromancers. The same people who had spent their days

creating healing potions, casting fortunes, and resurrecting the unnaturally dead as well as they could, found themselves disliked, and then persecuted.

Lies were told, stories were spread, and people were attacked. I say people, not necromancers, because they were people before they had magic, and that should not be forgotten. This persecution, this hate, was a slow thing, a year or two or three (who can tell when the first lie was told as truth?) until it wasn't a slow thing anymore, until famine and sickness made the hate boil over. How do I capture that spreading fear amongst the necromancers of Tielst against the backdrop of these historical events? The whispers and the flights to foreign lands. The empty hearths, and lost friends. The connections, severed.

It wasn't my fear, then. It wasn't my concern, yet.

Lora was—naïve, at best. Privileged. Selfish. Selfish, yes. She lived in a palace, and was isolated from all the outcomes of her mother's policy choices. To her the vitamancers and all their accusations of inequality were foolish, silly distractions from day to day existence. She thought surely, surely, the people would realize her mother was doing her best for them and the vitamancers power would fade away. So, she stepped away from the throne, trusted her mother to make the right decisions. The necromancers would be fine. Sofia would be fine.

There was nothing to be afraid of.

Not realizing it should have been my fear, my concern, is the gravest mistake of my life.

A crown is a promise: to rule fairly and justly.

We did not. And we suffered the consequences.



Sofia told Lora as much, but she didn't listen then. And why would she? At that point Sofia's worst fears seemed like nothing more than nightmares, things sprung forth from a dark and anxious mind. Nothing Lora couldn't fix with a kiss.

But you aren't here for unheeded warnings, are you?

No, no, you've learned since then. As have I. Promises shouldn't be broken.

So it was that same summer when Sofia and Lora held hands in the garden and Lora dismissed her necromancer's concerns, that fear and corruption spread. The queen was accused of being under the influence of the court necromancers. The vitamancers said she sacrificed peasant women into death, cutting the veil open and shoving them through herself. They said she did all this to see a future that was wrong more than half the time.

One by one, Terese sent away the court necromancers.

All except for Sofia, who stayed because her lover willed it so.

I understood the queen's actions at the time. Surely, surely, if we met vitamancers in the middle, they would stop. We could give them something that would buy the remaining necromancers safety. We could put out the fires they had started, and now fed. I know now that our willingness to talk, to work something out was kindling gathered for them. It was a crown they wanted, not compromise. We should not have been willing to compromise with lives. We should not have been willing to compromise by accepting any part of their story as true. This was not something to be solved with a kiss.

This is not a story that ends in justice.

Except, there is a justice to learning you were wrong.



Sofia stayed in the palace as summer's heat lingered on, setting everyone on edge and filling the city with the feeling of waiting, wanting for release. The release of a cool breeze, or the release of violence. More power was ceded to the vitamancers, now ostensibly part of an elected city council. A new development. Democracy, they said. But it was an election secured in fear, and its only purpose was to give them power, not secure a better government for the people. No one was speaking for the people at that point. Not the court, not the crown, not the vitamancers who still fed the people lies and hate.

There were no more veil shows. Sofia said the veil had grown dark, tumultuous. It wasn't worth showing, anyway. There was no more singing, except softly, at night, when she and Lora were alone. Sofia gave up her position and became a common servant in Lora's service.

It was the only way to keep her safe.

Lora didn't realize then, that Sofia stayed to keep her safe. Not the other way around.

Even as things are falling apart there were small moments, still remembered. The way Sofia's dress fell from her shoulders at a brush from Lora's hand. Her scent, floor soap and sweat, as Lora's lips found her neck, kissing against the pale hairs curling behind Sofia's ear.

Lips pressed together in a moment stolen between working shifts.

Hands grasping a heavy, maroon curtain. Slipping behind it to be together—

But that is not the story you came to hear. What you must know is that even as things tumble towards chaos, our impulses tell us to cling to normalcy, to steal those small moments, instead of acting to fix things.

The beautiful and tragic thing as summer wound on into autumn and then into winter, was how so many people, Lora and Sofia included, went on with their lives.

But not forever.

A group bent on nothing but power, will eventually seize it. Promises be damned.

Compromise be damned.



It was a quiet, grey dawn when the coup happened. They called it a revolution afterwards, in the way that the word is sometimes pasted over a seizure of existing societal structures to make it seem as if some great change actually occurred. But no, ministries were renamed, new people were stuffed into old roles, and the world turned on.

There was no revolution then. What happens in the future remains to be seen.

It may not be a bad thing, to repurpose what is. More than a palace would burn in a true revolution and it may not be sustainable against all the beliefs and traditions people, ourselves included, hold dear—no—no don't say you you're different. You're the one looking to set things right by finding a secret princess and placing her on the throne.

There are few things more traditional than that, but I digress.

Lora had stolen Sofia away from the servants' quarters and they'd absconded into an occupied room to spend the night together, away from prying eyes and Lora's mother's morning prayers. That fact might be what saved them both—yes, saved. You didn't come here for a tragedy, did you?

This story isn't a tragedy.

It was the screaming of panicked courtiers fleeing the palace and into the waiting arms of the vitamancers that woke them. The screaming, and the screams abruptly ending.

Lora almost ran out into those waiting arms of death, trying to reclaim some power.

Sofia stopped her. Held her back, hid her behind a curtain. Clutched her close and covered her mouth with one hand as organized armed forces stormed by, searching for a princess they had orders to kill.

Lora's royal power was gone, collapsed in on itself. For what is power, but a promise?

The princess collapsed then, realizing her mother's reforms (such as they were, I know now that they were far too little far too late) had failed and that her mother was probably dead or would be soon. Sofia let her cry, for a moment. The last court necromancer also knew grief, but she knew when it needed to be set aside. Tears still fresh on Lora's cheeks, Sofia tugged the princess up and dragged her from behind the curtains and down the hall, down another hall, and then through a discreet door and into the servants' tunnels. They'd still have to get out of the palace, but these cool, mildew-damp tunnels were safer than the main halls at this point.

Lora wished they could hide there forever.

Twist by twist and turn by turn, through claustrophobic paths that Lora had never tread, they went till the princess lost track of their path. She couldn't have made it out of these tunnels if she had wanted to. And she didn't think she wanted to.

She had been so sure of herself. So sure of order.

So sure her family hadn't broken the promise that kept them in power.

Lora and Sofia stopped in an alcove, for a short break, so Sofia could plan and so the princess could shed a few more tears. Not enough, for the steady settling weight of what was lost. Instead of tears, Lora turned to kisses—never enough to keep anything safe, but enough to make her forget for a moment, how everything was so fragile. Fragile as Sofia's flesh, fragile as the bones underneath.

Fragile as life.

They pulled apart, and there were more tears.

Sofia said there was a small gate in the gardens that lead out to the busy streets beyond the palace. Sofia thought they could lose themselves in the city if they could get to that gate, get to the garden, and get out of the palace.

With those words and one last kiss, they were off again.

This is not a story where plans go right.



The gate in the garden was locked and the vitamancers found Sofia and Lora as they tried to find another way out.

There was no grand monologue, not from our villains, not from our protagonists.

In that moment, the vitamancers might not even have realized they'd cornered the missing princess. What use was explaining why they wanted to seize power, when they had won?

And in that moment Lora lost her ability to speak. There was no pride left. Only stunned silence.

Sofia. Sofia, though.

She acted. The last court necromancer who had always been so bad at magic, reached for the veil. With a surety over her powers, she'd never had before, Sofia ripped it open, and pulled Lora into death.

She closed the door behind them.



This is not the ending of the story, as you know since you are here, but what Sofia did and thought while guiding her princess through death is lost. Whether she understood her magic more deeply than ever before is not known. If she was acting more on instinct than learned skill is lost.

She has never spoken of it.

I have never asked.



The part that matters to you—and to me—is that it didn't end in death.

We found our way out of death and into new lives.

This isn't the story you came for but it's the story you found: one of a steady, slow-growing love, of learning to churn butter and track crops, one of chickens and herbalism (it's a bit like necromancy, Sofia would say, as she plays the village wise

woman) and cattle and establishing a home. Later there were children. This is a story of the strangers who helped two wandering women and never asked questions. This is the story of strangers who became friends. Of summers spent in the fields, and winters telling tales together as the thin wine mulls over the fire and the stew simmers.

This is a story of growing old together.

There's no secret princess for you to find and place on the throne, no necromancer with untold powers waiting in the wings to bolster your forces. Our children are grown with their own families, their destiny is not entwined with yours.

Revolutions aren't about passing a crown around.

They should be about letting go of the past. And with that I will ask you to go. Take this bread and cheese for road, young revolutionary. I wish you well. You have heard my story and here it ends, with you leaving and me waiting for my wife to get home—she's treating our neighbor's toddler, sick with the pox. He'll live. Another tale to be told, much like yours.

You see, revolutions aren't about the stories that have been told, or the one I'm telling right now.

They are about the stories that will be told.

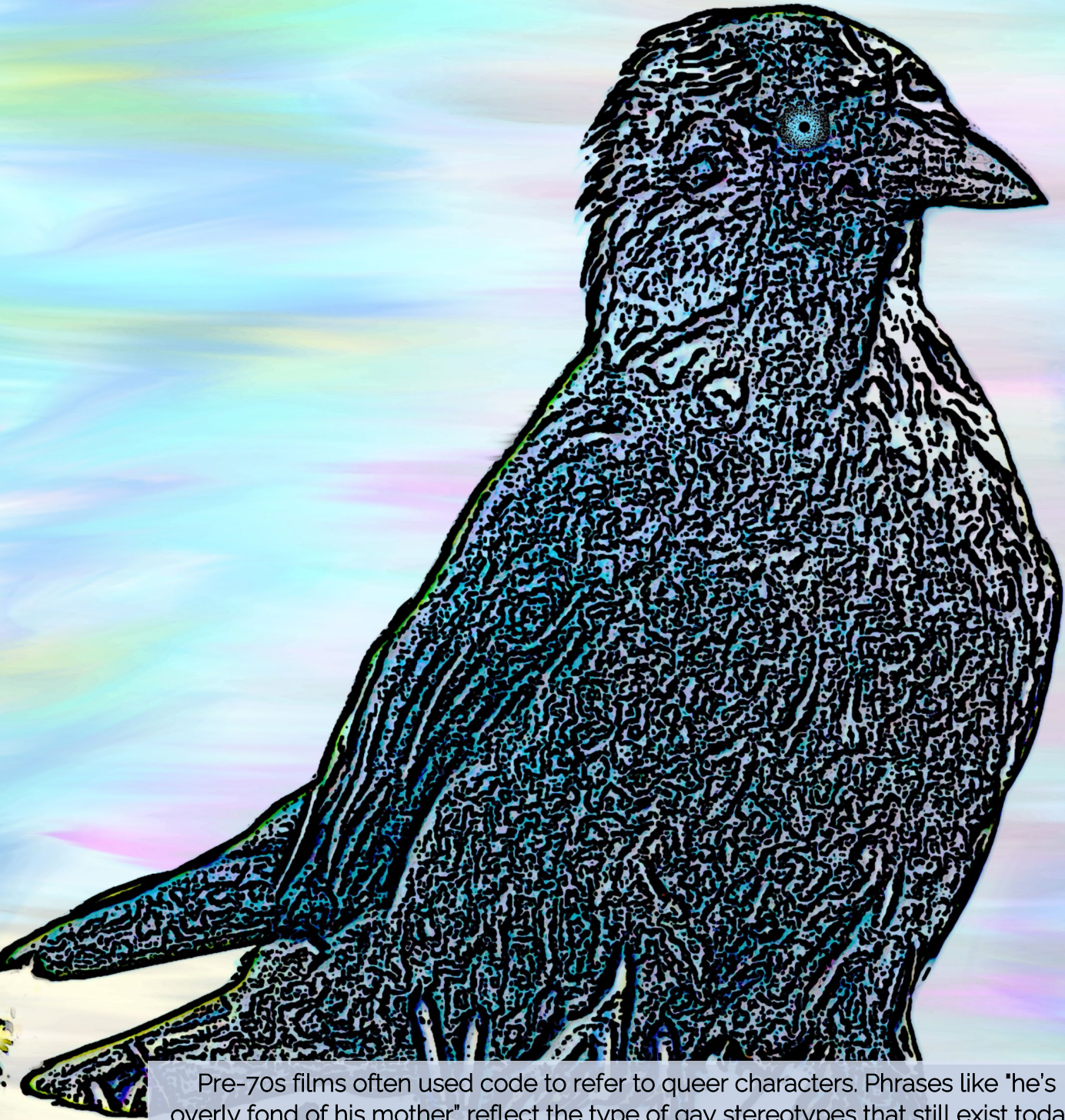
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### **About the Author**

A. P. Golub is a speculative fiction writer residing in central Virginia with their partner and three cats in varying states of domestication. They're a graduate of Viable Paradise writers' workshop and can be found on Twitter and Instagram as @andtcat.

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# Fluttersome



Pre-70s films often used code to refer to queer characters. Phrases like "he's overly fond of his mother" reflect the type of gay stereotypes that still exist today. This art, by Paula Hammond, riffs on two words used as code for queer—"fluttersome" and "jackdaw"—with a rainbow hued jackdaw, striding forwards towards a hopefully less judgemental future.



# Sumerki

E. G. Condé

The world is wet and white as I peel open my eyes. The cold wants to seal them shut, to keep my body in its cruel clutches, but I cannot rest. My ears are ringing. Something is screeching above the din of the winter squalls. Proximity alarm. They've found us. I am thoughtless, still drenched in the sweet musk of tropical dreams as I thrust on soggy boots, as I strap a plastichrome cuirass to my chest and a smart-rifle to my back. I muster my comrades. In short order, we leave the warmth of our shelters and trudge out into the Siberian night.

White whorls eddy in the ragged sky, dappling the jagged outlines of the Kodar mountains with snowy jewels. The front is not all terror and tragedy. There is a beauty here in this frigid wilderness if you permit yourself to see it. I used to think of this place as a frozen purgatory, where lost souls or exiles might go to find quiet, cold deaths. But now I see things differently. This gelid hell is our sanctuary, a last bastion of hope and light in the encroaching dark of our tireless enemy.

In the blue twilight, we march past our shoddy encampment to the front on the Chara Sands, where Commander Vera Ilyich Malinovsky is already waiting for us. Our boots sink in the brassy sand, shattering the thin crust of frost bedding the dunes. I feel as if I am treading water. I strain to keep myself upright against gravity's pull, sinking ever deeper in a sea of sand and snow. My overwrought limbs ache, but I continue, nourished by a font of will that burns as hot and clear as the light of the coming day. With each sinking step, I imagine the grasses of the steppe swaying, I

imagine the homestead and the lakes and the herds of my youth. I see the pastoral life that I yearn to defend with every grain of my being. But I am not as brave as I long to be. I am merely a boy with a gun and a dream.

"Form ranks!" The Commander bellows.

My body obeys, even as my mind wanders. I am like an animal, so conditioned, so molded by the machinery of war that my limbs can be played like cello strings at the slightest command. In scarcely a year, I have become something mechanical and lethal. They've made me into a soldier. I can still hear the radio blaring, on that fateful day, November's seventeenth, the day Russia broke in two, the world in awe, watching, waiting. There I was, a son of the steppe with nothing but hope and audacity to my name, ready to enlist, drunk on the promise of a fragile dream already withering in the shadow of a despotic crown. I was so innocent once.

Beside me, Private Bogdanov shudders. He turns to me, and I steal a glance, afraid that I might never again have the chance to look upon him. I feel flush and breathless as his bright, iron eyes lock with mine. Even now, as emaciated and filthy as he is, I am overwhelmed by his beauty. I want to press my lips against his, I want to retreat to the comfort of his thick arms and boyish smile, but the battle draws near and there is no time. I try not to think of what the Tsarina will do to us if she catches us alive. I try to forget the stories of those like us she branded abominations and executed in the prison camps for committing the crime of unholy love. We deserve better. Private Bogdanov gives me a wink, as if he can read my thoughts. Sometimes I

think he can. Sometimes I think any of them can. Our toil, our shared struggle, is like mortar.

We form ranks, a series of rows and columns, slightly staggered. As I scan their steely faces, wearied, bloodied, and gaunt, I try to remember them as they were in the beginning. Many of them came from the hinterlands, youth, farmers, the downtrodden and disaffected, demanding change, refusing to kneel to the tyranny that sprung up to devour us whole. Others, like Bogdanov, arrived from the heartland and cities, fleeing to our wilderness so that they could love whom they wished without fear of reprisal. I can still remember the pyres where they heaped the "apostates" they used as scapegoats to explain why the world was burning. But it was not God or queers that made the world hot.

It all happened so fast. The permafrost thawed more rapidly than even the most hysterical of the scientists predicted. Then, came the flames, the dust clouds and the superstorms. Wherever the calamity struck, fear rose to meet it. Rudderless and broken, the peoples of the world turned to nostalgia for comfort. They reached back into distant ages, clutching again for the stability of the Crown and the Cross. Dynasties long dethroned were rekindled.

But some refused to cede to fear, to trade liberty for brutal stability. Our revolution began with the seizure of railroads, the hijacking of satellites to mask our movements, and the severing of telecommunications to keep us from being heard or seen by our ever-watchful foe. Under the crimson of the sickle, we rallied to reclaim our country from the neo-monarchists and their newly ordained Tsarina. They came

to Siberia in droves, revolutionaries, heretics, refugees, enemies of the State, to turn our cold quaint corner of the world into a battlefield. And thus, we began a coalition of the scrappy and downtrodden, drone factory workers, herders, farmers, sinners and queers—those left out of her majesty's vision for a new Russian ecclesiocracy. We choose not to bow, for we are the future, and we long to be free. We will avenge the planet they have ravaged, the herds that their greed disappeared, and those of our comrades they have taken and destroyed merely for being and loving contrary to their holy doctrine.

"Marksman positions!" Commander Malinovsky shouted, her voice acrid, strained.

I drop to all fours on the wet sand, bracing my smart-rifle in the crook of my shoulder before settling into a familiar prone pose. We guerrillas are like little corsacs, hunting our prey in the quiet dignity of night. But not today. Today *we* are the hunted, *we* are prey. Something in the Commander's voice suggests tragedy is on the horizon, but I am not alarmed, because tragedy is always just a breath away for us. Mortal fear has become a sustenance more potent than our nutty ration bars.

"Incoming!" The Commander whimpers. She consults her handheld scanner, flipping through the screens with determination and freezes in disbelief.

"What is it, Commander?" I ask, my voice crisp, resonant, despite my fatigue.

"No life signs on infrared scanners," The Commander reported. "Whatever is coming, it isn't human."

Above us, the heavens shudder. Densely clotted clouds buckle, then unravel, as something descends upon the valley. I watch the velvety curls of moisture unspool, giving way to a dark, triangular vessel. Its searchlights cut through the glittering veils of newborn snow, soaking the spindly crystals with phosphorescent hues. In denial of the danger before me, I retreat to the realm of memory; wintry scenes from my childhood, roaring fires, the festive lights of the Kazan Cathedral on the day we broke fast to celebrate Christmas. The remembered aromas, faintly spiced and sweet, remind me that I am hungry. Given the ration shortage, I might as well be fasting. But these memories are a comfort nonetheless. War is easier if you have something to fight for, something to return to.

Don't run, I tell myself. It's a mantra. Sometimes it helps. Sometimes it keeps me brave. But there are some days where I cannot help but flee from the gunfire and the gore. Am I a coward? Or am I just a human keen to survive? No one said revolutionaries had to be fearless. Bogdanov forgives me every time. I want to be as brave as him, but I know I never will be. Beside me, my commanding officer sighs coarsely.

"They mean to bomb us then?" I ask, searching for cover in the dune field.

"Negative, Lieutenant," Commander Malinovsky says, referring to her scanner. Her ruddy face seems more weathered now, her cropped, buzzed hair, somehow grayer. "It appears that the rumors are accurate. The Tsarina has purchased Chinese conscripts."

"Conscripts, eh? I'm not afraid of Chinese steel," my Bogdanov, the burly comedian of our lot, says with a chuckle. "Or is it plastichrome now?"

"You should be," I want to say, but don't. The others laugh and I join in, indulging in this moment of solidarity, for morale is as scarce as our rations these days. He catches me staring at him, I think he sees my fear, I think he shares in it too, but I say nothing. Instead, I recall the night we met, in that derelict training lodge at the base of these steely mountains. Where we ran drills and ran laps and made love in a warm bunk, the wind clawing through the valley as it was now. They say love makes warriors loyal to one another, they say it was the secret to the Spartans' greatness. I like to think that what we have makes us invincible.

"When all this is over," Bogdanov says to me, "let's take that holiday in Borneo."

"I dreamt of it again last night," I manage above the roaring something tearing across the sky. "You were with me at the beach, burnt to a crisp. Redder than a—"

The world tremors. I am as still as the mountains when the dropship emerges. Its engines screech, their cries audible above the roiling blizzard. I draw breath to slow my thrumming heart, trying to forget the rumors of the many-fronts of the Sino-American cold war. Tales of technological monstrosities of the cruelest sort—mechanical perversions designed to extinguish all trace of the human spirit from combat. The ship swoops down at us like a bird of prey, only to pitch upward at the last second. The bay doors lurch open and its payload tumbles down with the coruscating snow. A dozen plummet toward us, spheres of polished ivory, their descents eased by silky parachutes that resemble sails. I clutch my rifle, aware that I

am trembling, from the fear or the searing cold or the cumulative fatigue of months of hopeless guerrilla strikes against the Tsarina's forces.

"Bogdanov!" I say, but he cannot hear me. The capsules make landfall, splintering the ice with riverine cracks where they fall.

"The pupae, they're opening!" Private Bogdanov observes, fear snuffing out his earlier bravado. Pupa, that's what they're calling them now. I want to comfort him, but time is different during combat. Seconds feel like centuries.

"Hold your fire!" Commander Malinovsky says, defiant as ever. "We'll need a coordinated volley to break through their armor."

Something stirs in the nearest pod. A steamy brume billows up from the crater it has bored in the golden dunes. Silently, the white sphere unfurls. Like the gossamer wings of an insect, layers of shimmering, liquid polymers burst into novel alignments. A chrysalis begins. I know what is happening, but I refuse to believe that such technological sorcery is possible. Pearly sinews twist and thread into durable shapes. Molten strings of polymer congeal and snap into preordained sockets. Programmed matter. Plastichrome; harder than steel, as light as spider silk, etched by nanoscopic printers into jagged, sinuous shapes. Exoskeletons contort into ghoulish silhouettes above the snow.

One turns to me, and I see glassy spheres dock into ocular slots in its rude cranium. I gaze into those empty orbs, the soulless eyes of a Marionette. An apex predator. They rise silently from their spherical wrecks, hideous simulacra of their

human makers, only taller. They walk like men, but are more precise, their gait so synchronized and fluid that I am enthralled. It is as if they are meant to bewitch us.

"Remember, comrades, we are true soldiers," Commander Malinovsky bellows, "those things out there are just dolls on strings."

Dolls on strings. Soulless pawns. They lack our fire, our spirit. But is our spirit enough? Malinovsky seems to think so. But she seems incapable of fear. Perhaps she has lost everything worth losing, or perhaps she feels she died long ago. I clutch my rifle tighter, closer.

"Borneo is probably overrated anyway," Bogdanov says to me, chuckling with pain that makes me want to weep.

"Definitely overrated," I say to him, smiling. But he is not smiling. The fear, the despair, the fatigue, seem to have finally taken hold of his face, which is no longer warm. He is now as cold and chiseled as the stone massifs looming beyond.

"Mikhailov," He whispers to me. "I don't regret anything. Not a damn day of it."

"Neither do I," I start, repositioning my rifle and my pulse flutters. I have the desire to run like I did when we engaged the Tsarina's 115<sup>th</sup> legion, but with Bogdanov beside me, I feel braver. "Let's show these things what we are made of."

"I'll keep you safe," Bogdanov says to me, eyes scanning the horizon.

"I know."

My voice breaks as I speak, because I understand what will soon happen. I reach a hand out to Bogdanov and he reaches back. Though we are gloved, I feel his



warmth. In a single gaze we exchange the decades that might have been. We imagine our lives together out in the rolling plains, our future when the last shots have been fired and Siberia is free at last. I imagine him old, hair graying, waist thick without drills or sit-ups to keep him lissome, until I cannot, until I see no future at all, until all I see are the titanic silhouettes of the Marionettes converging upon us.

The sand tremors with their approach, their massive heels shattering the ice as they advance. Broken by fear, Bogdanov unleashes a volley of golden seekers, smart projectiles that find their targets in circuitous arcs. Over the shouting of my commander, we watch the pellets ricochet off the pearly armors of the automata as they fail to penetrate their dense carapaces. Then there is despair. I hear the tortured voices of my comrades, I see some of them abandon their posts, wailing. The Marionettes do not hasten, as if their slow shamble is a deliberate gesture meant to amplify our terror.

Our demolitions expert, comrade Volkov, rushes in to meet them, a belt of thermobaric grenades dangling from her hand. The stilted shadows of the automata shroud her as she hurls the payload. The valley shrieks as carmine flames plume over the sand, baking the silica into beds of wiry glass. Volkov is barely visible in the thickening smoke, but I can see her face, incredulous, wrought with fear. From the dark, *they* emerge, unscathed. One of the mechanical hulks raises its arm, which terminates in a serrated jag rather than clasping digits. Volkov freezes. Through black billows of smoke, scarlet blood spurts and bodies drop in gored heaps on the vitreous sands. The plastichrome butchers are silent as they cleave and crush and kill

with inhuman precision. My comrades' screams echo in the valley, as if the mountains refuse to let their memory be extinguished.

The Marionettes crush the last of Volkov's explosives with their taloned feet. Flames sprout everywhere but the shockwave is delayed. I fail to brace myself in time. Then there is blinding bright as I am hoisted by a molten force. My limbs flail to slow the fall, but the thud is hard and devastating as my face meets frozen sand. A tooth slips from my parched gums. My rifle pricks my ribs. Something crunches. I think I have broken one, but I am still alive. I still breathe. My mouth tastes of hot iron as the blood pools. I turn my aching neck to search for Bogdanov, as if seeing him will give me the strength to continue.

When I find him, I want to look away, but I cannot. He is shattered. Scarcely human. Gone. And then there is pain. Sundering agony. And I am weak and I am hungry and cold and perfectly still and devoid of purpose or will. I want to submit. I want to rest. They march, their plastichrome feet crunching the snow as they advance. With every ragged breath they are nearer to me and I want to surrender, I want to let go. I want to go wherever Bogdanov is. I want to crawl to him and wrap myself in whatever is left of him. Until I hear my name, and somehow, I am standing, somehow, I obey, like a marionette on a string.

"Get up, comrade Mikhailov."

A bloodied Commander Malinovsky materializes from the smoke to clasp my shoulder, "I'm giving you the order, so you can flee and feel no shame in it. Now, get

out of here!" She coughs, and I can see that she is maimed, that her time in this world is swiftly coming to an end.

I smile at her, as I did the first time we met, a year prior. There I was, the son of a shepherd, radicalized by the Novemberists' broadcasts. We were so much younger then. She asked me if I knew how to fire a smart-rifle. I shook my head, saying that the only violent thing I knew how to do was scare sheep. We laughed together then and I remember the warmth of that laughter, the innocence and purity of it. She grabbed my shoulder with one hand and clasped my chin with the other to reassure me that she could make a Streltsy out of anyone. And here I am, a year later, a Streltsy indeed.

"Bogdanov," I say, at last, "he's—"

"I know," Her eyes well with tears.

"You," I say, sensing she was more to say, sensing that in my moment of grief she is ready to tell me what she has long hidden from us. Her pain and suffering.

"Me too," She says, "Her name was Katarina, and she was stubborn and fierce and irritating and perfect."

I start to wheeze, "How?"

"Gunned down from behind by drone fire," Malinovsky muttered. Her eyes are sparkling. The ice within them thawing at last. "It was a cruel and unceremonious death. She deserved better. She deserved a soldier's death."

The vale tremors as the Marionettes near.

Malinovsky clears her throat, grabbing my arm, "but you're still here - you can still have a future. Flee now while there's still a chance"

I nod, remembering Bogdanov's goofy smile, the crook in his shoulder where I used to rest my head, the sweetness of his skin, the tambor of his laugh. For a moment I imagine what my life might be without him, in a wooded cabin beyond the reach of the Tsarina, in quiet exile, but the taste of blood in my mouth reminds me of the enemy's cruelty.

"No," I say to her, and to you, now, in this viscast, "we are the November revolution. We are the hope and the rage of the Sickle."

Spiny shadows engulf me. I load my rifle. "If these Marionettes are the future of warfare, then we should give these soulless husks everything we have."

Commander Malinovsky's eyes darken, but I see her smile again, radiant, defiant, as they approach, crushing sand and snow and bone with every step.

"Because in the end we might just be a memory." We turn together to face the automata that blot out the horizon, "A spark...a seed."

I lift my rifle, "And as our blood stains the sands". I take aim, "we sow the future because even a single seed can sprout a forest."

"Do you still remember how to scare sheep?" Commander Malinovsky asks me, and we cackle with laughter as they meet us on the battlefield.

We open fire and then there is light. One by one, the eyes of the Marionettes are igniting, celadon beacons that herald our destruction. But beyond them, a

brightness diffuses into the vale. Twilight is giving way to a softening pall of blue that we of the steppe call *sumerki*, the light that follows the great darkness, the fiery birth that comes after the cold of death. Our future. Our dream.

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#### **About the Author**

E.G. Condé identifies as a Cuir (Queer), Boricua (Puerto Rican) man. His fiction appears in *Anthropology & Humanism* (2020), *Reckoning* (2022), *If There's Anyone Left* (2022), *Solarpunk Magazine* (forthcoming 2022) and *Stelliform Press* (forthcoming 2023).

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# I Wish I Didn't Have to Go

Cass Richards

As soon as she reached her empty bedroom, Seychelle felt her legs start to buckle from under her. Using the wall as support, she struggled to reach the corner and let herself fall on the dusty floor. Feeling feverish, her heart and mind racing, she tried counting in her mind as she took a deep breath in.

*1...2...3...4*

And exhaled slowly.

She knew she shouldn't have come back to her parents' home but, for some reason, hadn't been able to think straight since she had found her way outside the Facility. Since she had opened one of the main building's doors and had found herself out in the open, all she could feel was the burning eyes of cameras and drones lazily patrolling the skies looking above the city.

She felt her anxiety rise again and resumed her deep breathing, now focusing her attention on the small clumps of dust that were rolling around in her former room, disturbed by her presence. For some reason, she remembered the day when she was maybe six or seven years old when she had typed "are dust bunnies alive" online and had found out that they were, in fact, made of various debris all tangled together. From that moment on, she had always carefully picked them up to analyze them and catalog their content. On that day, however, they just looked dead and grey for they contained the rubbish of a life that was now over.

She sighed deeply, feeling somewhat calmer, and wiped her sweaty forehead with her red hoodie sleeve. She then took out her phone, which felt heavy, slippery and somewhat dangerous between her trembling, clammy fingers. She turned it on and, despite her fear of it being tracked, opened the texting app, took a deep breath in and tapped Amrita's name-

*Please... Please...* she thought, feeling her heartrate accelerate again.

- and loudly exhaled when she saw that her last texts had remained unanswered.

*Shit.*

She felt her vision blur and an increasing tightness at the back of her throat as she read the messages she had sent Amrita in the hours before she was taken away for her final Scan.

*Sunday 8:05*

*Amrita it's me. Seychelle. I hope you didn't delete my number already.*

*8:06*

*I know I've been selfish and scared. But I need to talk to you.*

*8:07*

*I don't know how to put it, but you're the only one who can understand what I'm going through.*

8:12

*I put a letter in our secret place. I really want you to read it. Please text me if you can get to it.*

10:43

*Have you found the letter? I really need you to read it.*

11:00

*Please. It's important.*

11:30

*Please, Amrita. Get that letter and read it before I am completely gone from your life. I don't have much time left.*

11:50

*Please, I hear them coming me for the Scan. I don't think I can go through with this. I need to know you'll read my letter when I'm...*

She scrolled her unanswered messages several times, not wanting to face how utterly lost she now was, with no idea of what she should be doing next. Despite what she had done to Amrita (for her own good, as she had told herself many times), she still had had a little spark of hope that their relationship had meant something



and that there would be a message, something, anything, waiting for her rather than this sudden void of loneliness and a slight ringing in her ears.

*What now...* she thought as she looked around the empty bedroom.

A car passed by outside, humming loudly. Seychelle got on her knees and looked through the blinds, wondering if there were people, somewhere, actively looking for her. She knew that what she had done was considered illegal and yet, she wondered how many people actually escaped the Transfer Station when they had paid for it.

She looked up at the clear sky and noticed a few drones going about their business, some of them carrying packages. Then came the shrill call of a police car, coming from somewhere in the distance and she felt a prickle at the back of her neck. The walls of the room suddenly seemed to be closing in on her, with no way out but the door.

*I can't stay here...* She thought as she swiftly got up and wiped her sweaty hands on the front of her jeans. She walked to the door, the same one that her parents had always asked her to keep open and, one hand on the handle, took one last look at the room where she grew up.

*Goodbye again, room. Thanks for the memories.*



She found the letter exactly where she had left it, in the rusty, makeshift mailbox of her childhood treehouse. When she took it out, she found that it was

warped and damp, like the various remnants of her and Amrita's childhood that were still sprawled among the heavy-duty planks of the treehouse's floor. She opened the envelope, took out the letter and held it like an old, precious parchment and found that she could still read it, despite the water damage.

*Dear Amrita, she read.*

I know you hate the way I write... but no matter how many times I tried to rewrite this letter I keep ending up with something that sounds like I'm an old spinster. I guess I've read too many of those spinster novels... or that I actually have the heart and soul of a spinster. Trust me, I tried to be funny and light (like your texts, you know, the ones) but I just... can't.

Anyway.

First of all, I wanted to say that I am sorry for not answering your messages. I didn't want to lie to you by saying things like "my parents are keeping me busy, preparing me for the big "Transfer" because you know as well as I do that, because of where we're going, I won't need my stuff anymore.

In fact, as of today, nothing remains of my present self but my own body and the clothes I'm wearing... and my phone, of course. I literally had to go through our garbage to find this piece of paper and this pen. Everything else was sold, given away, or destroyed, leaving nothing but shadows on my bedroom walls and that damned echo that you hate so much. Yes, I even had to get rid of my 80's fantasy posters!

She smiled to herself as she pictured her room and Amrita's 1990's counterpart. Waves of bittersweet nostalgia swept through her mind, like the smell of burning wood that announced the end of Fall.

She continued to read.

Can you picture me on the bare floor, my bony body hunched over this paper as I am scribbling this to you? Can you imagine me in that room (the one in which you sneaked so many times) emptied of all the material things that, in a way, used to be "me"?

I actually cried yesterday when, after mine was cleared of everything and when I had to destroy all of your letters. Yes, I *did* scan them and sent them ahead of us, but it's just not the same without the impression of your pencil on the paper, the idea of your nail-bitten fingers touching it and, yes, that intoxicating shampoo scent of yours that sticks to everything you touch.

Did I ever tell you it reminded me of the ocean?

Of all things, I wish I could have taken *that* with me to Cyrta.

She turned the page carefully and looked at the sky. Even though she had no idea where Cyrta was, she tried to imagine her mother, father and brother and herself, now pure data rushing through the vast emptiness of space, unaware that she was there, still on Earth. As much as she tried, it felt inconceivable that there

could be two versions of her: one that was on her way to Cyrta and her present, confused fleshy self.

*I guess that's why there can't be two of me,* she thought.

She sighed, now feeling isolated and vulnerable, as unwanted questions about lodging, food and money started to skim the surface of her conscious thoughts. She thought about her data-Self again and how she was safely traveling in the darkness with her family, blissfully unaware of the danger her other Self was now experiencing and started to regret her impulsive decision.

She continued to read.

Anyway, the sudden absence of these traces of you around me now feels like a... cold emptiness inside my heart. Your absence in my life is like a void I need to fill by imagining telling you these things and talking to you one last time.

My dear Amrita, I wish I was six months older so that I could tell my parents to "fuck off" with all their Cyrta plans. I wish they had waited another six months so that I could actually make my own decisions. I feel like they did it on purpose, to trap me with them... But then again, if I had a daughter, would I want to leave her behind, never to see her again? Probably not.

So, yeah, I can't really blame them for their decision. I guess I'll blame society then, and this randomly chosen age of twenty-one to let us be our own selves.

But this is not what this letter is about.

Amrita, I wanted you to know that I blame myself for pushing you away when you wanted to be there for me. But more than that, I blame myself even *more* for never being able to really enjoy our time together, and for my constant complaints about our relationship. Today, as I am writing this, I only wish I could go for one last walk with you in that creepy, gnarly forest behind your house, or watch one last episode of one of your stupid 90's sitcoms, laughing with you at the bad acting and rant about all those lame stereotypes!

You know what? I also wish I could spend one last day *doing absolutely nothing* with you.

Can you believe I'm actually writing this, when all I actually did was complain about us never doing anything adventurous together?

A warm breeze glided through the trees, shaking the leaves like clapping hands. There was already a hint of Fall in it, even though it was still months in the future. It would be another Summer and Fall before her data-self and her family would wake up on Cyrtia. There was something pleasant about the inevitability of those thoughts, compared to the uncertainty of her own fate. She realized that she really wanted to experience another cycle of Nature and that, if that were to happen, she would do her best to enjoy every moment of it.

My Love, I am *so* sorry about everything I said, and how selfishly I acted when we were together. I know how much I hurt you every time I said that my life was

boring and that I hated it. And yet I remember how excited you were for me when my parents said we were leaving for Cyrta, even though you knew we would never see each other again, and that our story had to come to an end. I know the news must have broken your heart and yet, there you were, with your bright, star-like eyes burning with joy for me. Even now I can't understand how someone can be so selfless as you've been with me. I'm now realizing I never really deserved any of it...

Gosh, I feel like a total cliché! A go's sitcom cliché? You tell me.

But now I am terrified, Amrita.

Since my parents told me about the move, about the Transfer, I can't stop hearing that awful jingle in my head, teasing me: "New planet, new home, new you!" and it *terrifies* me. I know I made a lot of people jealous when I announced that we were leaving, but if only they knew how quickly I would trade places with them. I don't understand how anyone can be so excited about the idea of being uploaded, transformed into data before being cast across the galaxy and downloaded back into their clone.

Worse. I'm terrified about the scan itself, and something they don't really talk about (although I think my parents may know about it, since they've been super evasive): what will happen to my body, to theirs and my brother's, once our scans are complete?

Do you know?

I've done research, but it's not clear. It's as if everybody knows, but no one really talks about it. I know that I'll get scanned for half a day or so, that I'll be uploaded, and that I'll wake up, seemingly instantaneously, on Cyrta in a new, cloned body... but what will happen to the body that is mine, here on Earth? The one being scanned?

Amrita, I'm afraid the scan is going to actually kill me. The real me. And that a copy of my Self will be sent to a body that will also be a copy.

Does that make any sense to you?

They keep telling us that by scanning our Selves we can live forever and travel across the universe, but I don't feel that way because... well, they don't actually "remove" your Self from your body, right? The scan is not removing anything to put it somewhere else. They are just... copying you and sending that copy away to travel between star systems. In other words, the person waking up on Cyrta will only be a copy of my mind in a copied body, thinking it's still me, but it won't be. Not really.

Seychelle looked at the houses and silvery buildings that, in the distance, rose like spears above the tree line. She tried to imagine people going about their lives, unaware of her own situation. She then tried to imagine her parents as they would, in eighteen months, wake up in their new bodies.

What would they say, what would they all think of her?

She then tried to imagine herself waking up on Cyrta and being told that she had escaped the Facility before being caught and terminated (because as far as she knew, that was now the only way for her cloned self to be imprinted on Cyrta). How would her other Self react to an escape she didn't even remember? To the thought of her original body being destroyed? She tried to imagine what it would feel like to know that she had physically died, but couldn't conjure any clear emotion. As far as she was concerned, she was born on Earth and that made her the one and true Seychelle. Since the "Cyrta Seychelle" would only be an imprinted clone, she would be a completely different person, and therefore unpredictable.

She continued to read, the words she had written now echoing her thoughts.

Amrita, as much as I try, I cannot believe that I am actually going to continue my life with my family on another planet because I don't see any sort of continuity between this "me" who is writing to you, who loves you and misses you so much... and that clone who will wake up almost a full light year away on Cyrta.

I am terrified because I am now convinced there is no eternal life for anyone and that I'll be, in fact, killed after I am scanned, and that my present consciousness will cease to be, my body discarded... while another Seychelle will wake on Cyrta believing she is utterly and completely me.

I know how crazy it sounds, but I also have this terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that she will also love you exactly the way I do and that, by loving her, you will be in love with someone else, and that I will be replaced.



So here I am, laying in anguish in an empty room, writing to you because I think you will understand. But also, I think, because there is something in me desperately trying to survive through this letter, and maybe through you.

She heard a buzzing sound and saw a drone coming her way. She ducked away from the window and let it pass. More than ever, she realized that she needed to talk to Amrita, to see her, hug her. Reading the final part of the letter, she now felt as if she was talking directly to her.

My dear Amrita,

I don't know if we'll ever speak again, considering the distance that will be separating us. Maybe we will but I want you to remember that the person who will be writing to you, remembering you, may not be exactly me because that person, writing to you today, will have most certainly died.

But whatever actually happens... Whether I truly die or not, I want you to know that I will be thinking about you when they put me to sleep before the upload.

It's stupid and corny, I know, but I'm telling myself that if you're the last thing on my mind when I die, this memory of you will travel the galaxy and, hopefully, you will be the first thing that the other Seychelle will think about when she awakes. Hopefully, she'll love you better than I did.

My sweet Amrita, I think it's time for me to go. I don't think I'll have time to write again, at least not in this life, and definitely not on this planet.

I love you, Amrita, and I am sorry I didn't get to spend my last days on Earth with you.

Yours always, from my last breath to my first, from the Earth to Cyrtia,

Seychelle

She folded the letter and put it back in the box, feeling empty and hopeless. She had no idea what to do next, or where to go. All she wanted was to curl up on the floor of the platform and rest, for this treehouse was now the only place where she felt safe and, somehow, close to Amrita.

She turned her phone on, checked the unanswered messages again and texted the last words of the letter as a final farewell.

*I love you, Amrita... and I am sorry I didn't get to spend my last days on Earth with you.*

Her heart loudly dropped in her chest when three little dots suddenly appeared on the screen, disappeared, then reappeared again.

She held her breath, waiting for a message to pop up on her screen.

'''

*Seychelle? Is that you?*

*Yes! It's me!*

*I don't understand, how are you writing this?*

*I escaped the Facility after they scanned me.*

*You WHAT?*

*Yeah, I know...*

*But now I don't know what to do.*

*How on Earth did you escape?*

*I thought the place was secure.*

*I guess they assume people don't leave.*

*I mean I literally walked out.*

*Just like that?*

*Well, I did steal a nurse's uniform.*

*That's so badass.*

*Yeah well now I'm screwed, so...*

*Seychelle. I can't believe it's really you.*

*It's really me.*

*So what happened to "a memory of you traveling the universe"?*

*What? You read the letter?*

*What do you think?*

*But it's still in our secret spot.*

*Well it was more secure than bringing it home.*

*Yeah. Makes sense.*

*So, what's the plan?*

*The plan?*

*Oh my God, S.*

*You didn't think any of this through, did you?*

*I guess not...*

*Why did you have to write a letter?*

*You could've called.*

*I don't know...*

*It's very pre-Internet 90's so I thought you'd like it.*

*After you dumped my ass?*

*I guess I was always afraid of how you would react.*

*A letter was easier, especially after I was gone.*

*Yeah. Right.*

*Amrita... I'm sorry.*

*I know. You said it 15 times in your letter.*

*I guess I was afraid.*

*Of what. The Transfer?*

*Yeah.*

*And afraid of seeing you one last time, I guess.*

*What do you mean?*

*I didn't want to put you through that.*

*Oh, so you wanted to protect me.*

*Cute.*

*But I don't need protecting.*

*I know.*

*So tell me why you really cut me off.*

*What do you mean?*

*Come on, S.*

*I know you didn't want to hurt me.*

*But that's not all.*

*I mean I hope it's not all*

*I...*

*Yes?*

*I guess I didn't want to feel hurt.*

*You mean you couldn't live without me?*

*Yeah. Something like that.*

*Your letter was so beautiful, Seychelle.*

*Why couldn't it have been like that when we were together.*

*I don't know.*

*You know how hard it is for me to say things to people.*

*It's always been easier to write.*

*I know.*

*Even now, you're writing to ask for help instead of calling.*

*That's not why I texted you.*

*So why did you text me?*

*I texted you because...*

*Please, S. I want you to say it.*

*I need to know it's going to be worth it.*

*I texted you because I love you.*

*Because I need you.*

*You? Seychelle? You need me?*

*I know they're probably going to catch me anyway.*

*But I want to see you one last time before they do.*

*I want to hold you, to kiss you, to tell you how much I love you.*

*Wow... You're actually making me blush.*

*I wish I could see that.*

*Yeah well. I'm still mad at you.*

*I would be too.*

*It literally took a Transfer.*

*And the idea of DEATH for you to tell me those things.*

*I'm sorry. I love you, Amrita.*

*I love you too, S.*

*So, what's next?*

*I don't know... I don't have a plan. Remember?*

*LOL*

*What?*

*Nothing. You're adorable*

*Impulsive yet introverted.*

*Sue me.*

*I'm going to be in so much trouble for this...*

*What do you mean?*

*I hope it's going to be worth it.*

*Amrita. What do you mean?*

*You're so hot too, so it's not like I have a choice.*

*Why did you have to be so hot?*

*Amrita, stop that!*

*I guess I'll tell them you bewitched me.*

*AMRITA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

Then, just like that, Seychelle's consciousness left her phone and focused back on the real world where she had just heard a familiar voice, say "bewitched me" right before the words appeared on her screen.

She looked around, slightly confused. The warm breeze was still blowing, rustling through the leaves, and a hyper-plane was cruising at high altitude, the glow of its engines like a hot, white star. When she heard the voice again, coming from somewhere nearby, she recognized it and everything felt bright and light again.

A backpack was thrown onto the platform and, a second later, Amrita's face peered from the edge of the treehouse floor, her large dark eyes like pools of shadowed stars.

"Honey I'm home!" She said with a smile.

"You found me..." Seychelle said, feeling the tears well up again as she realized how much she had missed those eyes and the slight gap between Amrita's front teeth - her diastema, a word that, to them, had always sounded like some kind of jewelry.

"Your parents are going to be *so* pissed at you. It's the ultimate *Home Alone* situation..."

"What?"



Amrita rolled her eyes and sighed as she helped Seychelle get on her feet.

"S. if we're going to be on the run together, you're gonna have to try to understand my 1990's references"

"Okay. But maybe not now? I mean I can't exist here and on Cyrtia. There are probably people looking for me-"

"I know. In the end, there can only be one..." Amrita said, dramatically.

"Was that another quote?"

"Whatever. Let's get you somewhere safe, shall we? But first..."

Amrita opened her arms and Seychelle instinctively let herself fall forward and into her lover's warm embrace, knowing, without the shadow of a doubt, that she had made the right decision and that the Cyrtia Seychelle would understand, and hopefully, envy her.

She took a deep breath of Amrita's shampoo-scented hair and thought of the ocean and of distant places. She then looked up at the sky where she knew her other Self would be travelling for the next eighteen months.

"I guess that right now I'm the only physical Seychelle in existence. At least for the next eighteen months, right?" Seychelle said.

Amrita pulled away from her and gently stroke the side of her face with the back of her hand, sadness in her eyes.

"I don't think that's how it works, S. They'll get you. Eventually."

"Yeah, I know... But it's not a reason not to make it count, right?"

"Then let's make it count. Fuck you, other Seychelle," Amrita said as they held each other close, feeling as one again.

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### About the Author

Cass Richards (they/them) is a francophone writer from Toronto, Canada. Their most recent stories in English have been published under various pen names in *Interzone* (upcoming), *Metastellar Magazine*, *Cloaked Press's* anthology "Winter of Wonder", *JayHenge Publishing's* anthology "Phantasmical Contraptions & More Errors", and others.

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Bio in "Photo Credit" page.

# Hazmat Hearts

Avra Margariti

It isn't your own idea to start online dating, but Andreas', your handler's. He says you should put yourself out there, make some human connections. You don't feel entirely human, at least not most of the time, but he's right. If anything, isolating yourself in your new shoebox apartment makes your condition even more volatile.

The first date is in a waffle house, everything painted a sunny yellow and smelling of syrup and egg yolk. You're in a form-fitting hazmat suit, courtesy of Andreas. You're mostly safe now, they say, mostly not-poison, but you can never be too careful, right? The rest of the patrons don't seem too bothered by you. A couple of kids asked if you'd pose for a photo, earlier. Most people just ignore you, and you guess there are weirder things than a former lab subject going on a date.

Your face is still visible through your clear head gear, but the world feels far away, as if observed through a submarine's periscope.

Jesse, the boy sitting across from you, wears athletic wristbands, but they do little to hide the raised scars spanning the length of his arms. Some of the scars are scarlet, fresh, while others have faded to thin, pale lines on his skin. This is no lab scientist' handiwork; you suspect Jesse has done this to his own self.

He holds your hand over the table. Skin on insulated nitrile glove.

"It's okay," Jesse says as he points at your facepiece. "You can take that silly thing off."

"The radiation will harm you," you say, because part of your agreement with Andreas and the rest of your team of handlers was being truthful about your condition.

"I know. It's okay," Jesse repeats hungrily. His eyes have a sharp shine, like light glinting off the edge of a razor. "I want this."

You pull your hand away, tell him you can't, you won't.

His anger—his change of tactics—is instantaneous. "I don't need you anyway," he says and spits at you. The glob of mucus and saliva lands on the bulged glass of your facepiece.

You dip a napkin in your water glass to clean your vision, and by the time you look up, the self-destructive boy has stormed out of the diner. The cutlery set on his side of the table is missing a knife.

Two plates of golden waffles arrive, the vanilla ice cream pooling inside the chessboard squares. The waiter looks at you with pity. You pay for both orders but eat neither.



Your next date is with a girl named Annalise. You are prepared to answer any questions she may have, like how you can drink liquids in your hazmat suit (through a fine pipe attached to your wrist that travels all the way up your mouth) or how you go

to the toilet. You're prepared to be asked, "What's it like being a semi-famous ex-lab subject?" and to answer, "That's a fourth date kind of question."

What you're not prepared for is Annalise's portable ventilator, or the oxygen-carrying tubes attached to her nose.

Between sips of hibiscus tea and tiny pecks of jam scones, Annalise says in her wispy cirrus-cloud voice, "As you can see, nature has already beaten you. I can't get cancer if I'm already dying from it."

When both of your dainty rose teacups are drained, you ask her over to your apartment.

Between kisses, you don't mention the too-sweet taste of her mouth, and she doesn't comment on the metallic traces your kiss leaves behind.

"Are you sure about this?" you say when she pulls off her shirt and untangles her nasal tube.

Her laughter turns into a wheezing cough midway. "I don't exactly have anything to lose."

Annalise says she tires easily, so you take things slow, lying on your colorful patchwork quilt—you're not into white or minimalism, not since the lab. You touch, breathe in sync, laugh a bit, touch again. Skin on skin.

On the second date, you're hopeful. You wait at the same teahouse as last time, but hours pass and Annalise doesn't show up. Your milk tea grows cold. The sun paints your wrought-iron table in orange tiger stripes. You text her again and

again, but there's no response. Tears blur your vision, because you know, of course you know. The waterworks keep coming, and you can't even dry your eyes through your bulky head gear. At closing time, when everyone has gone, the little old lady locking up her shop asks if you need her to call someone for you.

"There's no one," you whisper, voice raspy through your breathing apparatus.

"What was that, dear?"

You don't reply. The world is submerged in murky water, or maybe you are.



You avoid dating after Annalise. Andreas visits your apartment once a week as scheduled, to oversee your medical tests and psych evaluation.

"She was sick," Andreas says. "Cancer doesn't discriminate. I should know—it's wiped-out half of my family. You shouldn't blame yourself for what happened."

"Maybe I *am* poison," you say, buried under a mound of blankets. Maybe the staff at the underground laboratory were right, keeping you locked up for your own good and everyone else's.

"You're not poison," Andreas insists with wide-eyed conviction. "Poison is something to be avoided. You have so much to offer. Anyone would be lucky to date you."

You nod toward the hazmat suit he always wears around you, the irony of his words. He becomes quiet then, his eyes sad behind the fishbowl glass. He busies

himself with his needles and vials as he takes blood and tissue samples from you in order to measure radiation levels. The prick of the needle hurts. You cling to the pain, which makes you think of Jesse and his scars.

"I'm sorry," Andreas says as he bandages your arm. He always apologizes afterward, unlike the doctors at the lab. "I'm so sorry."

*Why are you apologizing? you want to ask. Don't you know I deserve this?*



You lose track of time for a while, similar to when you lived in the lab, when you were called Radium Girl and the days and weeks and months bled into years, bled like you did on a silver examination table as nameless, faceless scientists tried to figure out what you are, *why* you are.

The next time Andreas visits, he says, "I've found you someone. A new potential date."

"I'm not interested," you mumble against your pillow. It reeks of sweat and giving up.

"Just give them a chance. Do it for me."

You don't feel like trying, but Andreas has always been kind to you when no one else was and advocated for you when you were allowed no voice. He's the whistleblower who exposed to the world the scientists' crimes against you and your fellow nameless, faceless subjects. He helped you find this apartment and take the first steps toward freedom, toward normalcy.



So, you agree to go on another date.

His name is Ektoras. He texts to say he's already in the movie theater when you arrive. You're late, nervously clutching a coke in your gloved hand. Some black-and-white French film plays across the large screen. When the projected image turns white, the dust motes in the viewing room swirl, alight. You think you won't be able to find him, but your worries are unfounded. The theater is almost empty. Even if it were full, there's not a chance you'd miss him.

You make your way down the dark aisle, toward the glowing figure at the front row.

"I've been waiting for you," he says when you've settled on the burgundy velvet seat beside him. He doesn't sound angry you're late, but awed that you're here at last.

You both stare straight ahead at the screen. The movie is reflected on the curved glass of his facepiece. You steal glances at him every time he sips his drink through the wrist-attached tube of his hazmat suit. His skin, like yours, is luminescent in the dark.

When he catches you staring, his smile is even brighter.

You burn with a million questions. Had he been told his entire life there was something wrong with him, so he tried to find out whether he was beyond saving? Did he sign up for the research like you did, then regret it right away? Did the scientists at the lab hurt him, too? Tried to weaponize him?

Did they call him Radium Boy until he nearly forgot his own name?

You touch Ektoras' hand when the movie is almost over, to make sure he's really here with you. Your fingers interlace. Nitrile glove on nitrile glove.

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### About the Author

Avra Margariti is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Rhysling-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. "The Saint of Witches", Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is available from *Weasel Press*. You can find Avra on twitter (@avramargariti).

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# Unbury My Heart

Jason A. Bartles

I had never lived long enough to see how Ell's curly hair flopped in the breeze. Even from this distance, he was easy to spot in a crowd. Not just because he was taller than most. Or because of the glimmer of sunlight that bounced off the bronze-plated armor that covered his shoulder. It had nothing to do with the tight-fitting tank top, the intricate floral pattern, the bit of chest hair, or the way his cobalt shorts hugged his slender, dark thighs. Fine, maybe it did have something to do with that. But mostly, he stood out because, as he lifted his eyes from his phone, he smiled. He didn't pretend not to see me or go back to doom-scrolling even though I was at a distance. He straightened his back, tucked his phone into his pocket, and ran his fingers through his hair. His lips formed the first in-person words to pass between us.

*Hello, Charlie,* he said breathlessly.

I responded with a hetero head nod. If we had been closer, I might have greeted him with a *hey man* in a tone an octave deeper than my natural voice. So many of us had perfected the tactic of tucking our queerness deep inside a copse of masculinity or a thicket of nerd. Even after years of pruning away the prickly outer layers, a fist bump could still blossom unexpectedly during a new encounter.

At twenty, it was excusable. But at thirty, well, just kill me now. My finger brushed the boxy, purple reset button grafted onto my forearm.

Before I could press it, Ell waved me toward him. I reminded myself that we had worked hard to perfect our run and make it to a first date. Better to test out whether we would be as compatible in the flesh as we were online. And I really did want to meet him. I waved back, adjusted my glasses, and allowed an eager grin to push its way to the surface.

I scanned my wrist at the entrance. The Harbor Park beer garden charged a hefty twenty obols for entry. The light shone green against my pale skin, and a chime confirmed my payment. The drink line was long, even for a Saturday afternoon, so I squeezed past couples and friend groups crowded around picnic tables. Seagulls squawked near trashcans, and children giggled as they paddled by in swan and duck boats. Ell greeted me under a flowering pergola at the water's edge.

"I got you a shandy," he said.

"You're so dumb." I rolled my eyes as I accepted his playful offering.

"Don't want you getting drunk too fast."

"You know me," I said shaking my head. The first pic I had sent him was one of me struggling to open a barely hard lemonade, which I didn't particularly care for, but it was the best I could scrounge up on day one. Ell, clever rogue that he was, always replied with a pic of him casually sipping an expensive whiskey, as if it had been common loot among all the rubbish. Later that night, however, I was the one who sent a gibberish message. I swore it was auto correct, and not drunkenness, but it became our little joke.

"Cheers to us!" He clanked my glass, and the lemony foam sloshed over the side. I hunched down and licked the glass from bottom to top to catch it. I remembered, mid-slurp, that I was in public, standing next to the hottie I had been crushing on hard, and not sitting on the other side of a screen in my walled-in patio curating images and words. I froze and found Ell fixated on my froth-covered tongue.

I reached for the reset button. It wasn't designed for this. It was serious—an escape hatch for life-and-death scenarios. But right then I wanted nothing more than a game over screen.

"Oh my god, Charlie, I'm obsessed with you." Ell laughed so hard the other patrons turned to stare. He placed his hand on my upper arm and gave it a squeeze. The silicone prosthetic was warmer than I had expected. And silky smooth except for the ridges that replicated his original fingerprints. The touch of his hand, his bare skin on mine, blurred the outside world. It brought the two of us out of the background and into twenty-twenty.

I withdrew my fingers from the oval recess in the button. Maybe this would be the day we finally made it to the happy ending. A kiss at sunset. A sleepover that lasted until Monday morning. A string of heart emojis five minutes after he left for work.

"I've forgotten how to act around real people," I said. I made a goofy face and took a drink like a normal person, then tried changing the topic. "Did you know that summer shandy hops vines are not actually used to make shandies?"

"I did not," he said, humoring me.

"They're mostly decorative, but they'll choke out an entire garden if you're not careful."

"Weren't you growing those a while back?" He gestured to let me know I still had a little foam on my face.

"Yeah," I said, as I wiped my mouth. "They're rhizomes, like poison ivy. I was hacking away at them for hours trying to uproot them."

As I rambled on, I noticed Ell's gaze drift beyond me, and I took it as a sign to shut up. But then a panic spread across his face. "Fuck, get down!" he shouted.

Automatic gun fire and screams rattled the air. Ell pulled me in tight. The shandy puddled around broken glass at our feet. He activated the shield on his cyber-arm, and we crouched down. Tucked inside his embrace, he smelled like sandalwood. I could feel the beating of his heart against my ear. But it wasn't supposed to be like this. We shouldn't be this close until the stars had spread across the night sky, when we would be wrapped in his bed sheets, collapsing onto one another, and holding hands until we had recovered enough energy to shower off. Instead, we were being forced to play a role written by someone else. Each bullet thudding against his shield cast him as the hero and me as the outdated damsel in distress.

Even before I caught sight of the black and blue stripes on the passing trucks, I knew who it was. Whenever I let my guard down, whenever I thought I could maybe, just this once, enjoy a day of unfettered faggotry, the Intrenz Boyz appeared. Their

only motivation was to wipe us out, to erase us from this playthrough and pretend we never existed.

They had us surrounded. There was no exit that didn't lead to an execution, and Ell's shield was wearing thin. I had used up my escape portal earlier in the day, and there were no more power-ups in my pack.

I looked up at Ell. He was holding back tears.

"I'm sorry," he mouthed.

"Me too," I replied, as more Intrenz Boyz rode in on jet skis.

"Next time."

"I'll do better, too. I promise."

He held me tight, while bullets sparked on his shield. I slid the reset button forward. It sprang back into place, and the world voided out.

*Would you like to play again?*



Ell handed me a shandy, and we clinked glasses. It took us a handful of runs before we both survived long enough to meet again. This time I restrained myself and allowed the foam to splash the dance floor.

"Nice job," said Ell.

A plus one bubble floated off the top of my drink. Both of us followed it with our gaze, and when it popped, we were left staring at one another. The disco lights

traced lime green and watermelon lines across his cheekbones. His warm, brown eyes stayed locked on mine, and as he smiled, he reached out and caressed my beard.

Permadeath was a bitch, but at least Ell and I got to retain our memories with each reset. The map was always the same. Philadelphia, 2022. But the location of healing crystals and the nature of the threats changed with each reboot. During hundreds of runs, I had recognized certain patterns, learned to avoid penalties for social awkwardness and made decisions informed by probabilities, instead of reacting on the fly. The learning curve was steep, but in recent runs, we almost always lasted until the weekend.

This time we sought safety in a gay bar. And this time, we would finally kiss. On every run so far, something always stopped us dead in our tracks, as if a little queer peck in public threatened to destabilize the entire world.

"Are you sure this is a gay bar?" asked Ell.

"They had rainbow flags outside," I said.

"Something's off," he said, looking around. "Like it's been sanitized."

"Did you not notice the floors?" I pointed to his foot. He peeled his shoe from half-dried liquor, and an empty cup tumbled past us.

"Not clean. I mean, like it's more of a gay-themed bar than a gay bar."

"It's just early," I hastened to assure him. "There's a gaggle of gays and lesbians over there. Within an hour, we'll be two anonymous faces in the crowd. You'll see."



He grabbed my waist and pulled me closer. His hips grazed mine, and we swayed with the rhythm of the remixed pop anthem. I slipped my hand under his tank top to trace the muscles of his lower back. I closed my eyes, drawn to the scent of honey and tobacco, but our lips never made contact. I felt Ell pull away.

I surveyed the room for potential threats. A few more queer folks, a straight girl accompanying her gay best friend, and a woman wearing a sash and a cheap tiara had recently arrived. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Ell, I realized, only wanted to finish his drink. He set our empty glasses aside and returned to me, closer than before, closer than we had ever been. Hands gripped shoulder blades and plunged into back pockets, while we danced on our own in the middle of the club.

Ell was more skilled than me, so I usually trusted his instincts. He had come out the gate running and snagged that permanent arm upgrade on our first run. Meanwhile, it had taken me multiple attempts just to get to the end of my block. I had been mauled by feral cats, run over by a car backing down a one-way street, and bashed for removing the lawn chairs used to reserve a residential parking space. But I learned the ropes. These days I could navigate Passyunk Square like a pro.

The trick was communicating where we would rendezvous. Ell lived in Fishtown, a few miles northeast of me. Taking the bus or driving was a sure way to meet a fiery death. So, we spent weeks developing a coded language. If I simply texted him the emojis for water droplets and an icy snowflake, every Rita's and John's

would be surrounded by Intrenz Boyz within minutes. Each symbol would have to be once or twice removed from its literal meaning.

Some of the early attempts had been disastrous. A bullseye and a headstone intended to lead us to Bury the Hatchet—an axe-throwing range where Ell thought we might acquire some handy skills—directed me straight to the Halloween section at a Target. I got bored waiting, opened a bag of hard, sour apple candies, and had to hit the reset button as I choked.

Interpreting the signs was a high stakes game. Today's message, however, seemed too easy. I wanted to believe it was because our connection had grown so deep. A cigarette emoji plus a pink flamingo and lumber meant "Meet at Woody's." To my surprise, there were no fascist hordes waiting on Thirteenth Street to restore the social order.

"I'll be right back," said Ell, after a few songs, and he headed for the restroom.

I walked to the bar to order us another round. While I waited, the woman wearing a tiara crept beside me. I gave her a head nod. She slapped my ass, took two steps back, eyed me up and down, and wagged her finger at me.

"You're so fierce, qween," she said.

"OK," I said and turned to look for a bartender to rescue me. I never knew how to respond to statements like that. I was just wearing a t-shirt and shorts, and I was about a week overdue for a haircut.

"Don't you mean, Ohhhkur—" she tried to roll her *R*s but failed and ended up spitting a little instead of popping her tongue at the end. I wiped my brow. The strain caused her to cough. It was embarrassing for her.

"Maybe don't do that?" I suggested.

"I'm just trying to have a good night, lighten up," she ordered. Then she walked away in a huff. Now I remembered why we all stopped coming to this bar.

"Good, you're back," I said to Ell.

"Still no drinks?"

"No, let's just go dance."

I took his hand, and he followed me to the dance floor. Before I could turn around, his arms had climbed like snapdragons around my shoulder and waist, and we fell into a single motion in the laser-lit darkness. We waited and waited and when the beat finally dropped, the smoke machine shrouded us in a dense, white cloud. I felt Ell's lips near the top of my ear, then on my cheek, under my chin, and finally he kissed the side of my neck. A chill ran down my spine and took root in my pelvis. I felt like the ground had dropped out from under me, and as I turned to face him, hundreds of helicopter seeds were spinning vortices around us. Ell had activated a levitation charm. We floated above the dance floor. He leaned in, tilting his head, and closed his eyes.

Ell's tongue unlocked my lips like the final key in an escape room.

As we made out, I peeked and caught sight of his smile. He seemed so happy that I feared, between flashes of the strobing light, it had all been a ruse. But each violet flicker set my doubting mind at ease. For this little moment, it was just Ell and me.

Our weightless bodies grew heavy as the rain, and the white cloud dissipated. The whirling seed pods and the tips of our toes landed gently on the floor.

"That was nice," Ell said.

"It was." I smiled, and Ell leaned in for another smooch.

Before he could, I noticed the woman in that cheap tiara glaring at me from the doorway. I was prepared to shrug her off again as yet another hetero who comes to a gay bar to gawk and judge, but this was more aggressive than normal.

"There they are!" she shouted. On her signal, a flock of bridesmaids, twenty, maybe thirty or more, all wrapped in chicken feather boas and wearing plastic jewel encrusted sunglasses, pushed their way inside.

"Get them!" shouted one of the bridesmaids. They surrounded Ell and me as the bass rattled our bones.

"How dare you embarrass our friend on her special night," said another.

These self-appointed allies had ventured out of the burbs for an edgy night in an inner-city gay bar. They had left their children at home, under the watchful eyes of the Intrenz Boyz who had fathered them, and now they were accusing us of not accommodating them. In their minds, we were nothing more than marguerites to be

ripped apart, petal by petal, to foretell whether they would be loved or not. We were only of consequence insofar as we helped them fulfill their princess bride fantasies.

The flock grew angrier the longer Ell and I refused to play the stereotype. Their accusations devolved into un-ironic cries of *you dirty skanks*. They pinched our waists, threw lemon wedges at our faces, and rammed their skinny, plastic tumblers toward our bottoms. Ell and I backed up against the blinking squares of light on the side wall. Our silhouettes, failing to fend them off, fell to the floor. We were being crushed as the bridesmaids in the back demanded their pound of faggot's flesh. I gasped for air, sucking in over-sized t-shirts and polyester sashes. My arm was trapped, but through it all, I felt Ell's hand. His fingers scrawled a love note as they inched their way down my bicep, around my elbow, and finally landed on the purple switch. The weight of the material world fell away.

*You and your boyfriend are dead. Would you like to restart?*



When the world reset and I awoke in my bed, I tried to convince myself that the darkest timelines were behind me. No matter how miserable my previous lives had been, I needed to believe that Ell and I would soon find our way out of this procedural death labyrinth. We felt we were making progress, but no end point had yet to reveal itself. And we had grown impatient. The summer sun roasted piles of uncollected garbage and fired up our libidos. After so many meaningless deaths, and one kiss interruptus, Ell suggested a more direct approach.

"Let's rent a room and spend the day in bed," he texted me in coded language.

"See you in an hour," I responded without hesitation. The days for playing coy and bashful were behind us. We had been forced to wait too long. No more cute dates. No more disappearing photos. We would throw caution to the wind and speed run toward a hook-up.

I arrived at the first hotel we tried.

There was a knock at the door. I checked my hair and teeth in the mirror before turning the latch. It was the bellhop.

"I regret to inform you that your partner has passed," he said in a robotic tone.

"I knew this wouldn't be easy. What happened?"

"He called a car. The driver was intoxicated. They crashed. Ell died. The driver lived. The driver learned a valuable life lesson due to Ell's sacrifice."

I flicked the reset button on my arm, and we chose a different hotel.

"No driving!" I texted him.

"Yeah, dumb mistake. Be there soon," he replied.

He inserted the key card in the door, and before it closed behind him, he began unbuttoning his shirt. I ran my hands across his pecs, and with my tongue, I traced the scars and puckered skin where metal met flesh. He pulled my shirt over my head and forged a trail that led to the elastic band on my jock. We fell onto the lumpy mattress. I laid on my back and watched his reflection on the ceiling as he straddled me. Just as Ell leaned his head back, the mirror cracked, and a shard of

glass severed his neck. My finger slipped across the bloodied reset button, and Ell looked at me in horror as he slumped off the side of the bed. I wiped my hands on the tattered bedspread and flicked the button.

On the next run, Ell pushed me up against the wall. The light switch dug into my back, but it didn't matter. With one hand behind my head, he slid his other hand down my shorts, and his breath pushed into my lungs. The cycles of our bodies had become one continuous loop. Unable to remain still, I flipped us around and held him to the wall. He made a muffled sound as I tried to feel the back of his teeth with my tongue, until he shoved me away. Maybe that was not the best technique, I thought, and opened my eyes. His body deflated, sighing in frustration. The iron had caught fire and flames were now licking the textured wallpaper in mock imitation of Ell and me.

"Were you ironing your t-shirt?" he asked in exasperation.

"Come on, no," I said.

Ell rolled his eyes, and I reached for the reset button. I flicked it. Nothing happened. I flicked it again, but we still stood here. I coughed as black smoke replaced his breath in my lungs.

"It's not working!"

"Let me see that." He lifted the panel below the switch, pulled out a small, grey cartridge, blew on it, and clicked it back in place. "That should do it." The world reset.

"Did you unplug the iron?" he said bursting through the door.

"I triple-checked." I pointed to the iron tucked safely in the closet. "And no mirrors on the ceiling," I added as we made our way to the bed. There were no loose paintings, no lamps to electrocute us, no discernible threats. I piled up pillows behind my head and took off my shorts. "Did you bring protection?" I asked.

"Went out of my way to get it." He pressed a button on his cyber-arm. It released a glass cartridge that held a yellow-and-black-striped bug. He opened the case. A swallowtail caterpillar inched its way across the bed and mounted itself on the bedpost. Its little body began to writhe and pulsate, peeling back its skin as it grew big enough to encase both Ell and me on the bed. Our bodies hardened into a chrysalis, and within its protective shell, we consumed one another like butterfly-building enzymes.

*Finish him!*



Ell raised his sweat-beaded forehead from my chest. We knew that insisting on our happiness would spark a backlash, so we steeled ourselves for a gauntlet of pain and suffering. The protective chrysalis stretched and cracked, releasing a flurry of swallowtail butterflies into the room.

We hopped in the shower to rinse off. When I stepped out of the tub, I slipped on a used condom, hit my head on the sink and bled out. Reset.

We dried off, got dressed, headed for the elevator, and clicked the reset button while plummeting down the shaft. Next time, we took the stairs. An



earthquake toppled the building and trapped us inside under tons of concrete and rebar. Reset!

We stepped outside the lobby, and a bullet intended for me hit Ell between the eyes.

A bullet intended for Ell hit me between the eyes.

Hit me in the chest.

In the neck.

The kidneys.

Testicles.

RESET goddammit!

"We have to find a way to stop this," said Ell, seconds before he became possessed by an evil demon and revealed my darkest secrets on social media.

"It's not possible." I was suddenly overcome with regret, repressed my homosexual longings, and turned into a gay-bashing bully.

"The cartridge," he said.

"What about it?"

"Pull it out."

Between one burial and another, I popped out the cartridge.

Two hooded bodies kidnapped me in broad daylight. Ell reached out but only managed to snatch the cartridge from my hands as I was stuffed into the trunk of a sedan. Onlookers ignored my high-pitched screams, and later Ell identified my bloated corpse at the morgue.

*Your decaying flesh will forever be remembered as a symbol of failure.  
Wouldn't it be easier to give up now?*



"Taking it out doesn't work," I said as I walked toward Ell. We met at the Singing Fountain on Passyunk. It was always deceptively sunny in this grisly rendition of Philadelphia. The surrounding streets were crowded with husbands and their stroller-pushing wives. There was likely an Intrenz Boy or two disguised among the NPCs.

I sat down across from Ell at the chessboard table.

"I guess not," he said.

"Nothing works, Ell. There's no way out."

"Hold on now. I've got an idea. I bet I can access the program via your arm console." The act seemed pointless, but I let him try anyway. He plugged in his tablet and trawled millions of lines of code for ideas. The breeze whipped up a light mist from the fountain. "Look at this. Every forking path eventually leads toward an execution or an accidental death. There is no discernible end game here. Just a world that resets whether you press that button or not. It's mostly decorative, a symbolic reminder of the shape of the world."

"See, you're just proving my point. Our lives are literally programmed to be like this."

"Charlie—" he said, shaking his head.

"And who's to say we deserve anything better?"

"Charlie, no, listen to me. It's just a lazy convention. We can write a way out."

"It's more than that! How many more times do you want me to watch you be dismembered? How many more times can you throw dirt on my casket?"

"That's not the point." He sat back and crossed his arms.

"That's exactly the point, Ell!" I stood and turned to walk away from him. I wanted to run away and hide my tears and spare myself the future miseries that would derive from the axioms on which our lives were predicated. But I stopped. We couldn't allow ourselves the luxury of a big fight right now. This world would not grant us the space and time to break up, become better people, and reunite by some twist of fate. Leaving now wouldn't resolve anything.

Ell took my hand and brought me back to him. "I know," he said gently. "I can't go through that again either. But it doesn't have to be like this."

"Let's blow it all up then!" I shouted. From every angle, accusing eyes and snapping teeth concentrated on us.

"Not so fast. We might just blink out of existence permanently if we did that." Ell tussled my hair, which did not calm me down, but it did satisfy the general public

long enough to buy us some time. "You know, I was thinking about those summer shandy hops vines."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I scowled with impatience.

"They're rhizomes, right?"

"Yeah."

"I was thinking I'd model a rootkit on them. Then I could strike down into the source code and plant a quickly multiplying node. It could choke out the old conventions, while covering new ground with green possibilities."

"You think you can pull that off?"

"I helped get us this far, didn't I?"

I couldn't say no to him. But if this was going to work, Ell would have to act fast. He deactivated the reset button to hack into the editor function, so all bets were off. He conjured up code with utmost precision.

Meanwhile, I confronted a horde of CEOs selling Pride merch to bankroll their donations to transphobic politicians. I fended them off with regulation spells, but they countered by packing the empty benches on the plaza with right-wing judges.

"How's it coming over there?"

"Just a few more seconds, and—it's done!" Ell disconnected his tablet, and the CEOs hopped on their Trojan unicorns and rode away. Sensing a radical change in their world, the judges and passers-by retreated as well. Ell and I were left all alone.

"What now?"

"I think we just wait a few seconds. There's just one more thing."

"Do I want to know?"

"It's the reset button. That function was so deeply entwined with the permadeath features that I couldn't salvage it. This is it for us. We'll live our lives through. One final run, come what may."

I clicked frantically on the reset button, but nothing happened as it sprang back into place. "No, no, no, put it back," I said. I had grown so accustomed to living in this looping state of constant crisis, and the reset was the one thing I clung to more than Ell. As long as I had the chance to start over, I could get back to him. Without it, one wrong move, one fatal illness or accident, and he would be gone forever.

"It's too late, Charlie. I had to destroy it."

He cradled my head and my apprehension, as I sobbed into his chest. We had lived through countless runs that always led to his gruesome death or my own. The longer we persisted, the more the world stacked the odds against our happiness.

"It's ok. We don't need it. Look how far we made it in this world."

Ell offered me a hankie from his back pocket, and I blew my nose.

"Look over there," he said, pointing at the Singing Fountain.

At its base, the concrete showed evidence of stress. Seconds later, tendrils poked through the cracks and wiggled as they searched for surfaces to mount.

Honeysuckle and bunchberry flowered over the fountain's plastic foliage. Swallowtails flocked to the nectar, while bees spread pollen across South Philly and beyond.

Ell grabbed my hand. "Are you ready?" The plaza floor bulged beneath our feet, as his rhizomes dug through the bedrock and launched a million shoots.

My throat refused to form any words, so I just nodded yes.

"Where should we go first?" he asked with that familiar smile, that concentrated look he gave me the first day we met in the beer garden. In that moment, I understood what he had been saying all along. This wasn't our last chance. No. That had never been a possibility before.

"Any—" My throat was still strained. The unknown was terrifying. I squeezed his hand, gathering the nerve to venture into an unpredictable future with Ell. "Anywhere you want."

Chartreuse matted the buildings, and saplings lined the streets. In mere seconds, they grew into robust trees, casting shadows on the sun-dried sidewalks. The new growth in our city suddenly granted us some relief. This was our first real opportunity to forge a path for ourselves. I leaned in for a kiss to inaugurate a true beginning for us.

He winked at me and said, "I know the perfect place."

And off we went.

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## About the Author

Jason is a queer SFF writer, a professor of Latin American literature, and a first reader for *Flash Fiction Online*. Originally from West Virginia, he now calls Philadelphia home. His fiction has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Little Blue Marble*, *Metaphorosis Magazine*, and *Utopia Science Fiction Magazine*, among others. He is also a contributor to *The World's Revolution: Gaia Awakens* series, and currently he is writing a queer fantasy clifi novel for that same series. Follow him on Twitter @jabartles.

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# Micro-Orbital Lunar Winter Activity 53

dave ring

## It's Time to Reconnect with the Past: RETRO SÉANCES

Thanks for subscribing to our micro-orbital lunar winter activity newsletter, <FirstName HiveNumber>! Filling time through the lunar winter can become dull without exciting activities to liven up the months of dark days. Break up the doldrums with this daring retro occult activity!

Did you know that, throughout the First and Second Neo-Victorian Wars, wartime rituals that centered séances were commonplace? Squad captains would gather their soldiers together to contact the otherworld in preparation for battle amidst the stars. Only in recent years have séances been returning to favor amidst the hive. However, it is still possible to utilize the tools of those long ago generals for the purpose of connecting with spirits. Keep reading to learn more!

### Supplies

Use this opportunity to borrow more than sugar from your neighbors! In order to hold a retro séance, you need a few willing participants and a number of important objects. Asking hivemates with a healthy suspension of disbelief, or those with ancestors connected to the military, can improve the séance's chances of success.

**Pro Tip!** Make sure you hire a sitter; retro séances often have an adult flavor and it would be inappropriate to expose children to the intensity of the experience.

Other materials you'll need include a flat surface to gather around, a candle for every participant, something to offer the spirit you are hoping to speak with, and some tertiary safety materials like fire-retardant sprays, canisters of sea salt, and water-based lubricant.

### How to Hold a Retro Séance

To hold a retro séance, and increase the chances of contacting a spirit, follow these steps:

1. **Assemble the Participants:** We recommend that you reach out to at least two other hivemates within walking distance of your cell. No fewer than three people should attempt a retro séance, as the spirits summoned can be unpredictable and having at least two physically-capable participants nearby to subdue unwelcome guests is essential.
2. **Choose a Medium:** A successful séance often results in the possession of one of the participants by your otherworldly visitor. It can be helpful to designate this person ahead of time, so that they have had an opportunity to hydrate, stretch and otherwise prepare themselves for hosting. If you're not sure who is most suitable, have a quick conversation amongst your hivemates to ascertain who has had the most agency while dreaming. Lucid dreaming has often been linked to successful spirit channeling.
3. **Use the Right Surface:** A flat surface to gather spectral energies is essential for a séance. While spare tables are in short supply in the hive, it can be helpful to improvise an alternate surface from that supplied with your cell. Circular tables are perhaps best suited for genteel ancestral ghosts, while square surfaces often result in ill-tempered poltergeists. Regulation hexagonal tables will still function, of course, but the sacred geometry of sixes appears to be keyed towards an erotic sublevel of the first, second or fourth hell, and often will result in the séance devolving into an orgy of calisthenic proportions. Unless that is the desired result, of course, in which case you might want to check out our networked appendices for *15 Sensual Tips to Most Amplify Your Demonic Intercoital Stamina* (free with your subscription to this micro-orbital lunar winter activity newsletter).
4. **Set the Table:** Place your offering in the center of the table. The type of offering is believed to influence the nature of the otherworldly visitor that you summon. We often recommend a fragrant baked good or soup, as the steam is meant to be comforting for those otherworldly guests that miss human sustenance. Please note that, when using a hexagonal table, we have observed that the pistil and stamen arrangements of floral offerings often correspond to the interests and appetites of the demonic energies called forth.
5. **Light Candles:** Retro séances are rarely successful without the warmth and light of at least one candle, and if you follow our instructions by utilizing a subchant routine which you can purchase from us for a low by-orbital fee, the séance will abruptly cease when the last candle has been snuffed.
6. **Create Some Atmosphere:** Turn down all ambient light sensors and manually pause all feeds, including subaural routines.
7. **Join Hands:** Seated around the designated surface, you and the participants should all join hands or otherwise form a continuous connection. Those who

can't or prefer not to hold hands can use a silk rope or cord as a method to achieve this connection, or conduct the séance within a salt circle.

8. **Summon the Spirit:** After securing the séance space with a circle of some sort, the summoning can begin. The actual words are not important, so much as chanting or silently thinking them in unison. Please note that poltergeists are rarely worth the novelty and it is very difficult to get your deposit back if the hive learns the reason for the destruction of your cell.
9. **Wait for a Response:** If no response comes, repeat the chant until an otherworldly guest arrives. Encourage your participants to quiet any skepticism they might be feeling, because that will hamper the séance's occult energy.
10. **Communicate:** If and when a spirit responds—either by rapping, or some other means, or through the medium—communicate in whatever manner feels most appropriate. If you accidentally or intentionally summon a demon from an erotic sublevel of the first, second or fourth hell, be very mindful of how you frame your statements, because the demon will interpret this as consent. Communication can be hard, especially if your cell is located in one of the more conservative hives, but we expect that you'll find conversing with the spirit world to be thought-provoking and fun!
11. **Greet the Spirit and Set Boundaries:** It is expected that you'll ask the spirit simple yes and no questions at first, especially as the otherworld guest is situating themselves in their new host. Ask the spirit for one rap to communicate no, and two raps to communicate yes, for example.

**Pro Tip!** Demons from erotic sublevels of the third hell are significantly more powerful and are bound not by *stated* consent but rather by your unstated *wishes and desires*. This has proven incendiary amongst participants who were not aware of their colleagues' individual erotic desires as well as those with self-destructive thoughts. These demons can be identified by a number of traits, including wings in excess of the typical two dozen, bifurcated double phalli, and/or labial dentata with full rotational capability.

Those inexperienced in demonic coitus, as well as those with expressed masochistic tendencies (even as mild as thinking "That woman could step on me"), are encouraged to immediately cease any retro séance during which the medium manifests any of these visual signifiers.

12. **Communicate Directly:** If a spirit chooses to speak through the medium, you may ask any kind of question. A séance allows for getting to know the otherworld in new and exciting ways. Don't be afraid to step out of your

comfort zone. The ancient soldiers took this time to bond with each other and grow closer before facing adversity. What better way for you and your hivemates to pass the interminable lunar winter than to try something new?

13. **Maintain Control:** While you won't have access to the safety equipment of the First and Second Neo-Victorian Wars (*Editor's Note: Check out our special full-color fold-out—complete with an artist rendering of a demonic neural brimstone saddle—and instructions on how to make a model anti-spectral hyperthermal artillery cannon!*), by negotiating carefully in Step 11, you may set up verbal agreements with your otherworld guests. If the séance seems to be getting out of hand, you can end it by extinguishing all of the candles and/or utilizing any safe word that you have established with your otherworldly guests early in the session.
14. **End the Séance:** When you're done with your visitation, thank the otherworldly guest for their time and ask them to leave. If they are unable or unwilling, you can break the circle and/or extinguish the candles.

Hosting a retro séance can be an exhilarating and fulfilling experience. When hosting your own, be sure to follow these steps in order to yield the most positive results. If for any reason Step 14 is unsuccessful, consider fleeing the room and taking shelter in any nearby building that still has an intact historical spectral shelter. These buildings typically have enough of the vintage synthetic lead-salt weave in the walls that the otherworldly guest will be unable to cross the threshold.



For additional ways to pass time during the lunar winter, check out our twice-orbital supplements *Tarot Today: Fun New Rituals for an Inescapable Future*, *Must See TV: Retro Media and Ancient Secrets of the Twentieth Century*, and for residents of solo hives, *Modern Principles and Occult Practices of Auto-Erotic Asphyxiation*.

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### About the Author

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# Ponte Selvaggio

Meg Murray

Before the sea swallowed the secluded town of Ponte Selvaggio, Marcy and I enjoyed it twice a month for dinner. We visited on Sundays during the warm season when the town put on fairs in the steep, narrow streets. Sometimes we ducked into tiny alleys behind upscale galleries where we kissed, ignoring the sweeping views down to the shining sea. That was five years ago.

In the summer of 2049, we were evicted from our apartment in the city. We heard on the news that the government issued a non-mandatory evacuation of the vacation town, which really meant that no more aid would be allocated there. Not many permanent residents were left anyway. The news report showed waves crashing up the cliffside. Tiny houses—blue and orange and fuchsia dots abandoned by their wealthy owners—were pulled down by the ocean's hungry grasp. The turquoise waters of the Emerhenian Sea forced the business owners to finally abandon their village shops. Marcy wanted to take advantage of their misfortune.

"One person's misfortune is another's chance to eat," she often told me in those desperate months. I wasn't sure if I agreed, but I couldn't resist seeing the town one last time.

Ponte Selvaggio, advertised as a ritzy seagirt village, was connected to the mainland only by a thin isthmus bridge with a tunnel carved in the style of an aqueduct to give it an old world atmosphere. With breathtaking views, it was full of

danger and romance. No access by air. No access by water because of the steep cliffs. Water was the problem in the end, of course.

The last Sunday in June that summer was too hot, and the celebrations were long gone. But we went. Marcy drove me in her banged-up convertible along the twisting shoreline. The apple red coupe barreled into the hill under the arch of the aqueduct bridge at the land's end. The car shot out of the hill on the other side, and her foot collided with the brake pedal under the small town speed limit laws. A salty sea breeze and the scent of lemon groves filled the air.

"*Ponte Selvaggio*," I recited from the welcome sign as we drove into the heart of the village. "*Escape from the world*. Quite a lofty motto they had."

She didn't respond. I sighed, thinking of better times. Before I had to leave school to find work. When the village restaurants were still open. When we had money for food. Before we sold all our nice clothing.

A few pedestrians meandered between the closed cafes and boutiques. Probably locals from the higher cliffside homes who'd hiked down to find treasures left in the shops. Or tourists like me, who came to see the last days of a luxury legend. I wanted to see the transformation of exclusive resort village to ghost town. I wanted to watch it crumble away into the ocean. I felt guilty for my curiosity as I gawked at the boarded up doors and windows.

When the town was thriving, I felt like a real grown-up going on a dinner date there. We'd put on stylish outfits. I had a few evening dresses, some with glitter threads. Marcy preferred wearing skirts which she usually bought at vintage stores. She had to borrow nice tops from me because all she owned was t-shirts, and it

thrilled me to loan one to her. Even if she complained about uncomfortable fabric or too many ruffles. I knew she really loved me when we started sharing clothes. After leisurely zigzagging along the serpentine roadway with the convertible top up, we'd dine on a restaurant's veranda under a string of outdoor lights and gaze at the panoramic sunset view with the terraced landscape behind us.

On that June Sunday, we drove the entire main stretch to where a loop in the highway forced cars to turn back into the rows of shops and restaurants. At the dizzying cliff edge of the switchback curve, a sign normally stood with the name Linger Longer Road. But the pole was bent over. Vandalism maybe. Or a car wreck, though I didn't want to picture how the damage had been done.

"The sign's gone," I said, hoping she'd remember how she used to joke about the road's dirty sounding name.

"What sign?" She turned the wheel sharply to ride the curve back into the village. The tires of the battered convertible clung to the well-worn road.

"Never mind." I swallowed my disappointment that her mood wasn't improving as we drove through the place where we had our first date. She was always cranky when we had to siphon gas to fill the convertible. I'd thought the extra gas would be worth it to salvage something of the happier days we'd had there. I wanted to pretend our trip was purely for pleasure, not necessity.

We couldn't go on an evening date. It wasn't safe anymore. We'd have to loot in the daytime with the other respectable downtrodden folks. We couldn't risk running into the type of people who showed up to ransack the stores and bars after dusk.



She drove slowly past the restaurant with the terraced hillside behind it. She brought me there at the end of our first summer together. The restaurant's veranda was empty now. I pictured us sitting at the table with a sunset in the distance. The imaginary Marcy picked up the hand of an imaginary me and pressed the palm to her cheek.

"What will people at school say?" I'd asked. "A grad student and a professor..."

"They'll say, 'Aren't they lucky.'"

"I don't know..."

"They won't fire me. And if they do, screw 'em. I want to be with you. Nothing else matters. It's us against the world, Brenda." The words of her ghost echoed in my ears as the car rolled past the restaurant. *Us against the world.* I looked over at her in the driver's seat. She was right; she wasn't fired for dating a student because her entire department was closed down last year.

"We could try the restaurant," I said to the side of her face.

"The restaurants were probably the first places scavengers went to," she said without glancing back at me. "So, let's go further in."

"Okay." I looked back and forth on the village streets for any other places I recognized. The rumble of the car's motor ricocheted between the buildings, which stood like gravestones marking the long gone residents. "Hey, isn't that where they set up the fruit stands during the street fairs? And the baker had a booth on the end. Oh, those lemon tarts were to die for. You would eat five or six. Then chase them with champagne."

She scrunched up her face. "And we'd dance all night like the world was ending."

I wanted to laugh, but a small piece of my heart broke away and flew out of the convertible. We left behind bits and pieces of ourselves all down the road. She turned a corner to drive in an alleyway. I wondered if it was the spot where we'd had our first kiss. She pulled out onto another side street of vacant shops. The bright red car rolled along slowly as we peered into each store.

"This looks like a decent spot." Marcy parked the car at a jewelry boutique, the outside painted an optimistic pink. The storefront glass was smashed. Leaves and dust covered the previously flawless window displays. "The shop has probably been picked clean, which means we can take our time in the upstairs residence."

"Remember when we came in here once?" I asked. "And you said that after you got tenure, we'd come back and buy the most expensive earrings?"

She shrugged and frowned. Another fissure in my heart began. A memory that flitted away, dropped to the dusty road and dissolved. I stepped out of the old convertible. Down the street, a group of teenagers kicked bottles as they walked. The ringing of the glass skipping along the curb mixed with the distant sound of laughter from the teens. An elderly man paced on the opposite sidewalk, taking no notice of us or the teens. With cleaner clothes, he could have been one of the rich Ponte Selvaggio proprietors. I shifted my backpack onto my shoulder and followed Marcy through the jewelry store's broken door.

The decor inside was beautiful—*had been* beautiful. The cases were destroyed and the floor was a layer of glass and dirt, but the ceiling was immaculate.

It featured a Renaissance-style mural between four chandeliers. The walls were pink. Teal columns lining the entire shop matched the large sign painted on the back wall that declared '*Ponte Selvaggio's finest jewelry craftsman*' in teal cursive letters while emerald-blue waves swooped underneath and a white seagull was frozen in flight above. Our boots crunched over glass.

"Marcy, remember the ceiling? It's incredible."

She stopped and stared up. "An amateur reproduction at best."

"Well, of course, I don't think it's *authentic*. I just thought you would appreciate the effort, Miss Art History Professor."

"You mean Ex-Professor," she said with a sigh. "And I don't care about that shit anymore. If no one else is going to care, then I'm not going to waste my time caring."

"Some people still care."

"Not the people who paid my salary. Not the kids coming into college these days. Not the people in charge of scheduling classes. When the world is drowning, no one cares about art."

"I meant /still care, okay?" I hated the rising anger in her voice when her old job came up. I shouldn't have pointed out the ceiling. "And I'm sorry."

"No, /*m* sorry. I'm just hungry, you know?"

"I know," I said.

"Damn, come here." She stretched out her hand to take mine.

"It's still you and me against the world, right?"

"Sure," she said. We held hands as we crossed to the back of the debris-filled store. The seagull sign must have been painted long after the last of the seagulls flew

around the town, which seemed a bit morbid to me. I remembered the pictures of the last dying seagull pairs on their failing nests. Pictures we were shown in elementary school. Every one of them gone now. Another notch in Darwin's belt, in the endless entries of extinct species. Now the town itself was going the way of the seagulls before it.

"The staircase is back here," she said, pointing.

"Shouldn't we look on the floor here for any rings or bracelets that fell when the thieves busted the place up?"

"Let's check for food in the apartment upstairs first." She grinned. "Then we can comb for any leftover diamonds on our way out if we have time."

"You're making fun of me, aren't you?" I asked, watching her smile. I stared at her lips like a lost person in the desert watches an oasis, skeptical but hopeful.

"I just think it's cute that you apply yourself fully to anything you pursue. Even trying to be a criminal. You want me to give you an A."

"Hey, I earned my A's. I did all my coursework."

"Yes, Brenda. You always complete your work." She squeezed my hand before letting it go. "Come on. Let's scrounge."

"I can't stop thinking about the seagulls."

"Seagulls?"

"Yeah, the seagull painted on the wall here. It reminds me of the trips we'd take to the southern peninsula. Me and my parents and Joshua."

"Hmm, them," she said, her voice muffled as she walked away from me up the stairs.

My older brother told me stories of the vacations we took when I was a baby. A few pictures survived in an album that I found in Josh's apartment after he died. My brother, at age eight or nine, floating in a swimming pool on a blue inner tube. Another of him poised above the water, waving to the camera, goggles awkwardly covering his eyes. I'd tried to imagine my mom or dad behind the camera telling him to smile.

Our footsteps echoed on the bare wooden staircase. "Josh was old enough to remember when the gulls swarmed around the tourists at the shore," I said to Marcy's back. "The air was filled with them, squawking for crumbs. Mom never let him throw oyster crackers or crusts of his bread because she hated the way the birds fought each other over the food."

"I guess we're like the seagulls now," Marcy said.

"People everywhere fighting for food and shelter? Or do you mean the two of us are like a dying pair of birds?" She didn't answer. We entered the upstairs studio apartment. Despite a stale, musty scent, everything appeared tidy. A queen mattress on the floor in the far corner. A small kitchen, a couple of wooden chairs at a table, and a wall of windows looking out on the encroaching sea. "It's decently clean," I said. "No one's been up here to rob it yet. We're definitely going to find something useful."

"Hope so." She crossed into the kitchen. She started opening the cupboards while I walked to a bookcase under the picturesque window. On the shelf, I found a framed photo of a group of people at one of the upscale restaurants. Probably the store owners and their friends from the town. Climate refugees now. If the rising water had been this drastic five years ago, they may have successfully petitioned the

government to help with their relocation. But the tax funds for that were dried up after the hurricanes of '47 and no one else from Ponte Selvaggio could receive aid.

"I feel kind of guilty for stealing from these people," I said.

"Brenda." Marcy tilted her head. "Nothing here will belong to anyone when it's underwater. You know?"

"I know, but what if the owners still live here?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You saw the shop. These people aren't coming back. Are you going to help search, or what?"

I scanned the bookshelf for anything valuable, but only found a light layer of dust on old books and ceramic fish figurines. A few feet away in the kitchen, she banged cupboards open and closed.

"Aha! Pasta linguine, mi amore?" She placed a package of dehydrated noodles on her palm and gave me a slight bow.

"I wish we could cook them here," I said.

Her smile crumbled away and she threw the noodles into her backpack. She opened the fridge and slammed it shut quickly. "Disgusting. The power's been out for a long time. Eating anything in there will kill us. Hmm, maybe we should eat it, actually. Poison ourselves. All this work to get here and we've got one package of ramen? If we don't starve tonight, then we'll starve next week."

I held back tears as I tried to decide how to steer Marcy away from her dark thoughts. "We can't give up yet. There are more buildings to search."

"Let's just get what we can and get out of this phony town before it sinks into the ocean."

"Doesn't any part of you miss the time we spent here?"

She stomped across to the apartment's bathroom. "This isn't the same place it once was. I hate seeing it destroyed and empty. We're just sifting through crumbs here." She held up a tube of toothpaste she'd found before tossing it into the bag.

"Okay, let's just get what we can and go home."

"Home?" Her voice cracked. "We're living in the car! It doesn't matter where we drive back to tonight. We don't have a home, you know?"

"I know!" I said, hating when my voice matched her volume. I turned away from her and stared out of the large window at lines of lemon trees and gnarled olive trees on the cliff below. Silver wisps of moss draped over their branches, and they looked like the ghosts of trees that had suffocated under dry tinsel decorations. Breaker waves surged at the foot of the trunks, eroding the ground holding the roots. How long until it would all be washed away and the trees fall forward into the water?

"I don't want to do this anymore," she said behind me. "It's too hard. There's nothing left for us. Anywhere."

"We could stay here, I guess. Wait for the tide to come and take us into the ocean." The fissures inside me built up more pressure.

"I don't want to be trapped here."

"What are you saying, Marcy?" I wished we'd never come.

"Stop being irrational. Let's just get back to the car."

I spun around. "I'm not irrational! You can drive me as far north as you can and drop me off. I'll hitchhike until I find someone to give me work."

"You can go walk yourself straight into the ocean, if that's what you really want." Marcy slammed the bathroom door and started back to the stairs.

I was trembling, like I'd waited so long for us to break up that I'd become a tight bundle of tectonic plates, ready to burst wide open. "I mean it!" I yelled after her. "I don't think we can do this together anymore."

Marcy stopped on the staircase and looked back at me. "Fine."

She threw me away with one word. That's all she gave me in exchange for five years. *'Fine.'* A cruel word. A non-answer.

I followed her through the decrepit jewelry store. We said nothing to each other. No jokes about looking for diamonds. No talk of buying earrings. There was shouting outside.

"Brenda!" She ran over the broken glass. The group of teenagers from earlier sat in the red convertible. The engine sputtered to life and the driver pulled away from the curb. They accelerated far past the speed limit as we ran out of the shop.

"Brenda!" she yelled again as the car disappeared where the dusty highway curved sharply away. "That was everything we had."

The dust left behind from the stolen car made me cough. Sweat dripped into my eyes. I doubled over, coughing and crying. I fell to my knees. We're finished. We're really trapped now. I beat my fists twice on the ground. The sharpness of the pain in my hands was almost a relief.

Marcy picked up a small rock and threw it across the street into a window. The shattering of glass continued as she did it again and again until falling onto the road next to me.



I put my bruised hands onto my knees and started screaming. I screamed until I didn't recognize the sounds coming out of me. I yelled at the teenagers for stealing our car. Yelled at the town for crumbling away. Yelled at the ocean for coming to take it. Yelled at my parents for dying so painfully slow. Yelled at my brother for getting sick and dying so painfully fast.

I yelled at Marcy for giving in to despair. And yelled at myself for the same. My hands were numb. My throat raw. It was quiet for a moment, then I heard her laughing beside me.

"You're wild," she said through delirious laughter.

"Why are you laughing? We've lost everything."

"We still have our backpacks."

"*All* we have is our backpacks," I said.

"Hey, our luck had to catch up to us eventually. Our misfortune is their--"

"Don't say it--"

"--chance to eat."

I groaned. "What is going on with you?"

"What about you? I think we've both cracked."

"Marcy," I whispered. "I don't really want to leave you."

"I know."

We hugged, sitting in the dirt, covered in sweat. I imagined the tiny bits of memories in the town rolling towards us and gathering themselves into my heart again. Our frustrations had burned up and dissipated like the settled dust kicked up from the car.

She stood up and brushed off her jeans. "I remember when we were here. At the jewelry shop. I remember telling you I'd buy you earrings."

"You're just saying that."

"No, look at this place. How could I forget this ridiculous pink building? Look at the purple trim and hideous copper gutters. Those shutters upstairs were fluorescent orange before the sun faded them. That window..."

"What about it? You remember it's encrusted with diamonds?" I looked up at the pink front of the jewelry shop. The triangle dormer over the smashed front door pointed at the clear, sun-bleached sky. The dusty square of an unbroken upstairs window looked out over the street.

"No, Brenda, look at the window on the second story. Do you remember seeing that from the apartment? There might be another room up there. We only saw the back part."

"But there wasn't any other room."

"There has to be. Come on. Let's go back up."

"What's the point? You said yourself, we can only find crumbs. It's hopeless."

"Brenda." She grasped my shoulders and picked me up from the road. "We're not the seagulls."

I stood weakly, letting her hands on my shoulders hold me up.

"I know how awful things seem now," she said, "but we still have each other. You and me against the world, okay?"

We hustled inside, over the glass shards and past the seagull painting. Back upstairs, we found no obvious door to a second room. Finally, pushing on the wall

panel next to the bathroom sink, Marcy let out a jubilant squeal. "It's here! Oh my God, cans and boxes and it's all edible."

She handed me a box of pantry foods, looking into my eyes with the first signs of joy that I'd seen all summer. We took a quick count of all the food in the storage room as we hauled out box after box.

"We're going to be alright," she said. "I'm sorry I was so angry before. I want to keep you safe, you know?"

"I know." I carried the last box of food to the small kitchen. She followed me, putting her arms around my shoulders. We stood together and stared through the picture window at the blue, sparkling sea.

"Maybe we could hitchhike farther inside the state," I said. "Away from the coast. Remember when we had to evacuate for Hurricane Emma? We were bussed to that shelter in an old high school. What was that town called?"

"There probably aren't any jobs there either. Even for a professor and a grad school drop-out willing to do menial labor. I doubt anyone would hire two homeless women. No housekeeping jobs. No line cook jobs. The tourist season is over for good in this state. Money's gone elsewhere."

"Yeah," I said, walking away from the window. I opened the top drawer of a small dresser next to the bed and found a collection of neatly folded clothes. "I think the town was Saint Cloud or Mount Cloud or something," I murmured as I held up a short green dress made of a delicate shiny fabric.

"Sleeping on cots really sucked," she said.

"But it was better than the car. I've missed having a real bed to share with you."

We stared at the queen bed between us.

"Let me make you dinner," she said. "Try on that dress. It looks too big, but we can pin it with something."

The last time I'd worn a fancy dress was our final dinner date in Ponte Selvaggio. We couldn't afford it anymore, but she insisted. Secretly, I'd collected matchboxes from every restaurant we'd gone to on our dates. I never knew how much they'd come in handy for lighting candles after the power company shut off our services. I fished a box of matches out of my backpack and threw them to Marcy so she could set the table for our romantic meal. We didn't have to think about the future for a while; just make ourselves a little vacation home on top of a plundered shop in Ponte Selvaggio.

After dinner, laying together on the mattress, we kissed like we were happy again, like we were safe again. People yelled somewhere in the distance, and we worried other scavengers would come around. We snuffed out the candles. We walked the rotten fridge across the floor and pushed it down the stairs to block anyone from coming up. Later, in the daylight, we cleaned the fridge out so the smell wouldn't bother us, but we kept it on the stairs to prevent anyone from finding us at night.

There was enough canned food hidden away in that little room to keep us both alive for weeks. Too much to carry back to civilization, especially without a car. So we stayed.

We escaped from the world. Cold refried beans and dry ramen aren't fine dining, but the apartment was comfortable. We tried to boil water over candles to drink and to cook with. The town seemed completely evacuated after two weeks. We picked whatever lemons and olives were left on the trees. Soon though, the water was too high for us to venture into the hillside groves.

I had a recurring nightmare about my parents. They were taking pictures of the ocean. Their backs were to me, and I couldn't see their faces, but I felt it was them. I called out, but they wouldn't turn. They kept taking pictures, and I saw that seagulls flew around their heads. I shouted at them to run, thinking the seagulls were attacking, but then the birds picked up my parents and lifted them away in the sky just as the ocean swelled, covering all the land.

"It's time for us to go," I said one evening as I watched the waves swallowing the olive trees on the hill below.

"I know," Marcy said. "We've used up most of the rations anyway."

The next morning, we fit the last of the food into our backpacks and started the long hike out of the town. Crossing the isthmus bridge was surreal as the rising Emerhenian Sea was nearly up to the edge of the road. "Goodbye, Ponte Selvaggio," I said.

We hitchhiked inland. A family let us squeeze into the back of their minivan. We gave them packages of ramen as payment.

Two months later, we watched the ocean take out the aqueduct bridge. We saw it on the news. From TV screens inside a coffee shop, video of the village showed the mountainside crumbling as it was consumed by waves. Helicopter

footage recorded the last of the brightly hued villas, built on the towering bluffs, covered by water swirling around the craggy rocks. I scanned the water for a hint of our pink jewelry store oasis above the hill of fruit trees, but never saw it. The weather forecaster waved her arms dramatically as she clung to the edge of the helicopter flying over Ponte Selvaggio as it sank beneath the waves like a modern-day Atlantis.

We begged for money on the street to get by. Over the next year, we made our way farther north and found jobs picking lettuce and spinach in wide, hot fields.

The smell of lemons brought back the memories of our blissful few weeks when no one else on Earth existed but us. Memories of our happier days—meeting at the university, dates in Ponte Selvaggio, and being stranded there in our stolen vacation home—kept us going. As long as we had each other, we could work together to get what we needed to be safe. We could endure. Us against the world.

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#### **About the Author**

Meg Murray (she/her) is a queer writer living in Colorado with her spouse, four children, and rescue dog. Her work has been published in *Solarpunk Magazine*, *HyphenPunk Magazine*, *TL;DR Press*, and elsewhere. Find her on Twitter (@megmurraywrites) and online (megmurraywrites.com).

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# Tell Tale

Sara Hartje

Adventure was a word full of richness and promise, exotic as the flavors of off-world dishes Weston sometimes cooked for their guests. Ria's longing for it was constant, always there in the background, steadier and more reliable than the pulse of her half-synthetic heart.

It was ironic, she thought, that her physical and metaphorical hearts were so at odds. As much as she wished to experience the worlds the inn's guests came from, or the cities on her own planet, she was tethered. The ancient biogen hub in the basement, synced to monitor and correct her heart, was the star constraining her orbit to the edge of town.

Someday, Ria would change that. Someday, the money she placed in the inn's vault, each a small piece of a dream, would add up. Another year, if everything went smoothly, and she'd have enough to contract an implantation specialist to give her a fully internal heart system. Then she would seek every dream in every location she wished.

But for now, she continued to run the inn her father had run before her. And in place of adventure, she filled her soul with stories.

It was the perk of the job; a continual flow of people meant a continual flow of stories. Growing up, Ria had pestered countless wealthy guests for tales against her father's exasperated attempts to divert her attention. It hadn't been until he died



when Ria was nineteen that she reined herself in. As the inn's new and very young proprietress, her position required more sophistication and reserve.

It didn't mean she stopped asking—she just added more polish. After so many years around the wealthy, she'd learned to emulate their manners when it suited her. When guests found unexpected refinement in such a rural town, they were usually charmed and softened enough to relinquish their tales.

Each guest had a new story, a new experience, a new adventure to share. Which was why she knew their recent arrival's story had to be worth prying from the woman.

"She doesn't give you the creeps?" Nina wondered, her brow furrowed as everybody helped Weston prep dinner.

Ria laughed, tossing a peeled potato into the pot. "I mean, she isn't very interested in small talk, but she's always polite. I wish all our guests managed that."

The woman, Doran, had arrived the week before, softly asking if it was possible to exchange work for five weeks of lodging. They could spare the room while they were in the early spring off-season, and they needed the extra hands more than Ria wanted to admit.

But the staff had expressed reluctance about Doran. It could've made sense—nobody unvetted had ever stayed so long—but a few admitted that their hesitance was harder to explain.

"I'm glad for your certainty about her, Miss Ria," Weston said as they shucked corn. "You interact with guests more than I do, so I'll follow your judgment."

Nina made a noncommittal sound. "She's at least useful, I suppose."

That was true. Over the past week, Doran had demonstrated a remarkably varied set of skills for somebody with the appearance of a privileged background. She hauled dirty linens from rooms and brought clean ones back to Eliza. She patched the storage room's roof before helping Nina reorganize the items displaced by the leak. She even fixed the sixth burner on the stove. Weston had been so ecstatic that they asked to create something off-menu to celebrate.

As Ria finished the potatoes and left to check on Doran, she thought about the discrepancy between the staff reaction and her own. There'd been no unease for her; Doran felt familiar from the moment she stepped into the inn, regardless of how impossible it was for Ria to dredge up any memory of her.

When Ria stepped into the storage building, Doran was half inside the delivery truck's engine. The truck had been out of commission since earlier that year with mechanical issues that cost more than the vehicle was worth to fix, leaving the inn's staff to rely on their personal cars to haul deliveries and luggage. They were all holding their breaths hoping Doran would find some miracle way to fix it.

Doran stood, wiping a forearm across her brow to push away loose honey-gold hair. Ria tried desperately to drag her eyes away from the long line of Doran's throat. "I think I can do it."

That managed to catch Ria's attention. "Seriously?"

"If you'd let me purchase a few things, yes. It should be fairly inexpensive," Doran assured, considering the truck again. "As long as you're okay with the fixes not being strictly by the manual."

"Of course. It's better than nothing."

As Doran closed the hood, Ria's focus was already shifting. After so many years around the wealthy, she noticed the money in the tailoring of Doran's clothing, the smoothness of her hands, the tones of her speech. She couldn't make sense of those details when combined with the breadth of Doran's skills and her lack of funds to pay for a room.

When Ria said nothing further, Doran turned to look at her. Her dark eyes were guarded. "What is it?"

The question that hummed in Ria's thoughts since Doran first entered the inn finally spilled past her lips. "Do I know you?"

Doran stilled. It was the sort of motionlessness that shed attention, that made her seem to waver into the landscape. A not-entirely-human stillness, Ria thought, though that was common enough in the decades since hyperlight travel took off. She tucked the observation away.

"Why would you think that?" Doran asked in return. Not a yes, but not a no.

"You seem really familiar," Ria admitted, again taking stock of Doran's features. "I thought it might explain why I'm comfortable around you, but the others aren't. I can't remember seeing you before, though."

Doran turned back to the truck, knocking a foot against the tire. "I've come and gone a few times," she said eventually. "I never stayed, but perhaps you saw me."

"Perhaps," Ria allowed. Her curiosity strained, urging her to prod at Doran's vague answer in hopes that she could coax something interesting to fall out. "I should've warned you upfront, but there's something else you have to do while staying here."

A cautious beat passed. "Which is?"

"I can't travel." Ria glossed over the pain the admission inspired. "So, I ask people to share stories."

"And you believe I have stories to share?" Doran wondered. Something new settled into the keenness of her eyes. Curiosity, Ria realized, like an echo of her own.

Ria nodded. "I think you have a library worth of stories."

Slowly, Doran smiled. It wasn't as full as the polite smiles she'd given before, but this was unmistakably authentic. "An interesting conclusion," Doran mused, her own fascination now obvious. "I've always sought stories as well. If you can join me while I purchase replacement parts, I'll tell you about Ancleet before the supernova."

"We don't have other guests coming with reservations," Ria said, grabbing the keys to her own car with a grin. Eagerness brimmed inside her, ready to spill into the cracks Doran had finally revealed. "Eliza can manage the desk for a bit."



An easy rhythm settled into place. Doran worked through the wish list of tasks the staff always talked about doing but never found time for. It eased enough of everyone's burden that Ria suddenly found herself with *free time*, a luxury that had been absent since before her father's death.

Although Doran seemed puzzled that Ria sought her out, she accepted her company in their gaps between chores. The prim professionalism between them thawed like frost-crisp grass in the morning sun, their working agreement softening into an easy companionship.

Once Doran started telling stories of her travels through the galaxy, it was like a dam crumbled until they flowed out of her, at least one every day. Some were small, a candy for Ria to tuck beneath her tongue as she went about her work: the bioluminescent fish market from pre-war Ti; the fire dance of the lost We'un people; the blinding glimmer of Vehle's diamond moon when it shattered. Others were longer, patterned carefully over multiple days, weaving threads of wonder through Ria's thoughts until Doran tied the strings into a whole.

"What about your home?" Ria asked, loading supplies into the fixed truck. She noticed the distance to Doran's stories; they were things she observed, but not things she was part of. "Do you have any stories from there?"

"I have no home," Doran said, voice bland in a way that was too careful to be genuine. "I've never remained anywhere long enough to have one."

"Seeing so many places must be exciting," Ria probed.

"Yes."

"But difficult," she continued. She considered the flatness in Doran's eyes, the rigid line of her lips. "You aren't happy, are you?"

Doran looked at her sharply. "Why do you say that?"

"Am I wrong?" Things were comfortable between them, but perhaps she had overstepped.

Doran took a deep breath, fingers fluttering over the lid of the box. "No," she finally admitted, the word almost a sigh. "I'm not sure I even know what that feels like."

Ria recognized the expression that pulled Doran's features; it must paint her own every time she acknowledged how trapped she was. Maybe that was what Ria saw in Doran—a kindred spirit, somebody who also longed deeply for something out of reach.

She didn't think when she set her hand over Doran's.

Something in that simple contact froze Ria, a tripping electric hum buzzing under her skin. All the brightness it filled her with just made the shadows it also threw

were darker. Not only giddiness raced with the tingle up her arm as caution lit her like a match; the chime of her aerotab was a redundant alert to her unsteady pulse.

"I'm sorry," Ria said, jerking back her hand. "I shouldn't have presumed—"

"It's fine," Doran murmured before she picked up more boxes and set them in the truck. "I doubt you'll do it again."

Ria would have dropped it, but Doran's tone was so precisely constructed, so suddenly guarded. Unease that had never existed between them yawned through the fissure of that moment. "Why?"

"You felt it, didn't you?"

There was no need to ask what Doran meant. "Is it something from your non-human heritage?"

Doran stopped again, and that stillness was back. "What do you know of that?"

"Just that there's something," Ria said softly, hoping to soothe. "I noticed a while ago, but I didn't want to pry. I figured you'd tell me if you felt like it."

"And you've still sought me out?"

Ria shrugged. "What difference does it make? I serve all sorts of people out here."

When Doran spoke, the breeze nearly torn away her small voice. "You can only say that because you don't know."

"Maybe." Flexing her fingers to dislodge the warning that had climbed up her nerves, she stepped closer and reached again. It helped that she was prepared for the warring reactions as her fingertips settled over Doran's hand. "But I don't know, and I won't demand that you explain."

The careful construction of Doran's expression shattered. "You might regret that."

"Oh, another regret to add to the list," Ria said dryly, rolling her eyes. "However, will I manage?"

A pained laugh bubbled passed Doran's lips. As Ria shifted to pull her hand away, point made, Doran caught her fingers and threaded theirs together. "Then I guess I might as well follow your reckless lead."

When the light caught in Doran's eyes, sparking like garnets as she smiled, Ria floundered. Whatever lingered of the warning fled; all that remained was warmth that marched up her throat and across her cheeks.

As they walked back to grab another load of supplies, hands still linked between them, Ria figured that warmth was likely a sort of warning, too.



Five weeks. Ria knew from the beginning that Doran would only stay that long. She knew it when she marveled at the work the woman accomplished, and when she fell into the plushness of Doran's stories like they were a down comforter, and



when she thought there was no danger in allowing the spark between them to warm her.

She had been wrong.

The spark caught like wildfire in the neglected tinder of her heart. For all the worldliness and knowledge Doran exuded, she seemed as unversed in this as Ria—if not more so. Where Ria felt flustered by the new thing growing between them, the fact that Doran was now cautious and unsure inspired her with unexpected courage.

So she led in this new dance—an arm slipped around a waist, a head rested against a shoulder, a hand carded through hair. Doran's expression would catch somewhere between distant assessment and immediate wonder every time Ria reached for her or when Ria allowed her to reach back.

Still, there were lines her boldness could not buoy her across, at least not without Doran moving to meet her. It was fine that she hadn't. Time was so precious and even the flare of this joy was bright. That fifth week, in whatever way it unfurled, would have to be enough. It was all they would get.

But the days slid away too quickly. Ria thought this would be like her beloved stories, one in which she, finally, got to be a character as well. She would enjoy the whirlwind of everything she felt and then tuck it away like a note, something she could pull from her memories to look back at after Doran was gone.

That had been arrogant. She knew that, now, as they sat together on the bench behind the inn, hours after Doran finished her final story. They'd both

acknowledged the need to go back inside—Ria still had responsibilities to complete, and Doran needed to prepare to leave in the morning—but neither moved. Ria's arm, threaded around Doran's, had long since fallen asleep.

She wouldn't leave, not when Doran held her hand so gently between both of hers. There was no longer any hesitance in the gestures Doran initiated. Ria wondered where they'd be if they had another week, another month, another year. Maybe nowhere, she knew, realistically. But...

"You could stay." The words were fragile, almost as unsubstantial as the air Ria used to speak them, but the sentiment was heavy enough to break the lingering peace.

Doran didn't look at her. "I wish I could," she said, but the denial was there, spilled into the spaces between her words.

Ria nodded and pressed her emotions deep, deep down. They went into the same place where she put all the other dreams she half-knew would never bloom. "I'll prepare some supplies for you to take."

"I have my own—" Doran started, but Ria lifted a hand.

"Let me do this much," she insisted. She forced a smile to her lips as she untangled her arm and stood. Staying out that late was only prolonging the inevitable; it wouldn't make it hurt any less if she faced reality later rather than now. "Then you can take something of me along on your next adventure."

She turned to go inside. With any luck, she'd hold the tattering pieces of her heart together until she got to her suite. As she reached for the door, though, Doran pulled her back.

"You need to leave here," Doran breathed as her warmth encircled her, pressing her face into the crook of Ria's shoulder.

"I can't." The pounding of her heart reminding her of why with every labored beat.

"You've always wanted an adventure." The crush of Doran's arms bordered on painful, but it was grounding. "Why won't you take that for yourself?"

Ria closed her eyes. She could imagine it, had imagined it, every beautiful, wild thing in the galaxy spread before her. "I want to. But I *can't*."

Before Doran could protest, Ria pulled away. She tugged the neckline of her shirt, and even in the darkness, the puckered surgical scars littering her chest were clear. "I've been saving for a new heart, one that'll let me go to another world." Ria gave a weary laugh. "Or even to another town. But right now I'm stuck with this, and that means being stuck here. No matter how much I wish to go."

"That's why you can't travel," Doran said slowly as understanding slid into place.

"Yes." Ria searched her face. "That's why I have to stay near the inn. At least for now."

Doran stepped away. She ran a hand through her hair as she paced, panic slipping through her usually reserved features. "You're actually trapped here."

"Nothing new," Ria said, but her levity fell flat. Regardless of how she tried to stay calm, Doran's energy stained the air.

"This is different," Doran insisted. "Something's going to happen, Ria."

Ria frowned. "What're you talking about?"

"There'll be an accident at the inn tomorrow," Doran said, sharp and hopeless. "And you need to be gone to avoid being killed when it does—but now I realize you'll die regardless, if your life is tethered here."

Ria stared at Doran, this woman who had always been so softspoken and gentle. "What?"

"You asked me, once, why I was so disconnected from my stories." Doran shook her head with a bitter laugh. "I was relieved when you only made that connection and didn't notice how everything I spoke about was dead or destroyed."

Ria froze. She thought about what Doran had told her, the tales she wove, all of it covering vibrant places and people—and all of them gone.

"You asked if you knew me. You said I was familiar, and I am, in a way. To the others as well, only they knew to be uneasy." Doran took cautious, measured steps closer. "I wondered why you weren't. It must be because of this," she said, fingers ghosting the scarred space beneath Ria's clavicles. "Because a piece of me has been with you from the moment your life began."

Ria's blood was sluggish regardless of her tripping heartbeat. "What're you saying?" she whispered, but that wasn't the right question. Watching Doran, it rose to her lips—a question she said she wouldn't demand. "What are you?"

That inhuman stillness settled over Doran, but Ria realized now that she had been wrong. This wasn't just the indication of mixed blood. This otherness, all-encompassing enough to trigger instinct, was different.

Doran dropped her words into the silence like stones into still water. "I'm a herald, or a harbinger." Her tone was as distant and empty as the space between stars. "The living face of an inescapable force."

The recognition skittering at the edges finally slid into place, a key turning a lock.

"Death," Ria breathed.

Of course, that was the answer, regardless of the absurdity, the impossibility. She felt it now that she saw the truth of it. Death had always been at her side, tracing her steps through the path of her life. Sometimes farther away, like in the lull after she received her new heart. Sometimes, like when the fuse to the biogen hub blew, so close that the space was no more than a breath. Doran was right; after having such a constant companion, why would she not feel familiar?

All of Ria's declarations now seemed like the foolish ignorance of a child. The warnings had skimmed her, there in her staff's unease and the caution that filled Ria's mind the first time she touched Doran's hand. She overlooked it in her determination

to prove that she could, even though Doran had suspected from the beginning that it couldn't last.

*"You can only say that because you don't know."*

"You're death."

"Yes, and no," Doran said eventually. For a moment she was far away. "This form is meant to collect a different sort of harvest."

"And what's that?"

Her smile twisted with irony. "Stories."

"Stories," Ria echoed.

"You feel trapped, wishing for something new and unknown," Doran replied. "How trapping do you think endlessness feels? Don't you think similar problems might have similar solutions?"

Somehow, even as her mind buzzed at the impossibility of this, Ria still didn't feel the terror she knew she should. "That's why you wanted to stay at the inn. Even locals come there to socialize and chat." When Doran nodded, Ria gestured to her. "But why are you like this?"

"Lived stories are best," she replied, glancing at herself. "This form helps provide a point of reference."

"And was I a point of reference, too?"

Doran's features softened so that the pain shone through again. "No. This was for me. Just this facet of me." When she looked away, her weariness held the weight of centuries, millennia. "Although I should have been more careful when I knew the ending."

"You told me to leave, though. So, the ending can't be set," Ria reasoned. "Otherwise, I should die here with everybody else regardless, right?"

Doran turned away with a noise of frustration. "You are one life. What difference does it make if a grain of sand is misplaced?"

Ria's thoughts spun so fiercely she could hardly get them to settle long enough to stitch together. If Doran could choose to spare her, Ria had to hope it was possible for her to spare the others, her staff who were like family, too. "And you're only here for stories? That's all you need?"

"Ria, what does this *matter*?"

"What if I could be more than a grain of sand? What if I could be a gem?" Ria wondered, pushing past the arrogance of her presumptions. "Could I take the place of everybody who should die here?"

When Doran shook her head, brow drawn, Ria pushed forward. "I've listened to countless stories from everywhere across the galaxy. How many do you think I hold now? Hundreds? Thousands? And I've always wanted an adventure." Even though her pulse stumbled, she managed a wry smile. "What bigger one is there?"

Doran lifted her free hand to touch Ria's chin, gently tipping her head back into the wane light of the moons. "You're afraid," she said, thumb pressing against a tear as it slipped down Ria's cheek.

She hadn't realized she was crying. "For the people. Not of you," she replied. Even in the uproar of everything else, that was still true. Ria thought of her staff, so willing to follow her regardless of their own worries, and the stream of people who filled the inn.

Swallowing, she stepped closer until she could lean her forehead against Doran's. "I know it's too much to ask. But if what you've said means you care for me at all, rather than saving me, please let me save them."

Every sound silenced, and the shadows closed around them like an embrace. Doran's eyes were as deep and dark as a void and just as unreachable, all her warmth hidden beyond a distance Ria could never hope to cross.

When Doran's eyes finally slid shut, she let out a long, slow breath. The hand still against Ria's face sank back into her hair. "Very well."

Relief swelled in her chest before Doran shifted, pressing her lips over Ria's like the sealing of a pact. Suddenly she understood why Doran had neared but never crossed this line; under that gentle pressure, Ria tripped and shattered, everything within her flung across the spread of the cosmos. The flare of her spirit was at once too big to be contained in her frail, mortal form and too wavering and fragile to fill this immensity. She would blaze and then flicker, sputter, extinguish.



A kiss of death. Ria was lost, her senses overwhelmed, torn in every direction, every plane, every reality.

And then there was Doran's other hand against her cheek, an anchor to moor her spirit. There was the warmth of her mouth, gentle and seeking. A kiss to call Ria back.

The songs of night birds pushed against the silence like the lapping of a tide. Somehow Ria was still standing, dew-chilled air caressing her bare legs as she tried and failed to drag her eyes open. Her heart thundered and thrashed behind the cage of her ribs, her pulse singing in her ears, and yet her aerotab was quiet. No warnings. No errors.

Everything was the same, and nothing was.

"You bartered stories," Doran breathed into the fragile space between them. "And I will collect. But I don't want the tales of others. I want yours."

For a moment, Doran's fingers settled over Ria's heart. "I can only offer rest—not adventure. So, seek that now, and live now, and I will come for your stories in due time."

Her presence withdrew. Ria pressed her hand over her chest, trapping the fleeting heat of Doran's touch beneath her palm. In the stillness, the pulse of her heart, strange and new and strong, rushed with the reliability of a timepiece. Ria smiled, throat constricting against a laugh that was almost a sob, as she finally opened her eyes upon the first weak blush of dawn.

In every heartbeat she felt the echo of Doran's words, each heavy with portent—and promise.

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#### **About the Author**

Sara Hartje is an asexual writer who gets to play with words in her personal and professional life, where she works as a school-based occupational therapist. She's deeply moved by the vastness of space, the way humanity seeks to see itself reflected in all things, and the perfection of baked goods.

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# Triangles are Forever

Ramez Yoakeim

I arrived home to find it empty aside from Liam Rout sitting in the living room like he owned the place. Instinctively, my hand went to the weapon I no longer carried. Rout didn't seem concerned. "Relax, Keziah. It's only a hologram. My meatsuit is in no condition to travel, and you're not taking my calls."

"If you wanted to die this badly, you should've turned up in the flesh."

Rout chuckled before it turned into a wheezing cough. Even if he really was this close to the end of a Cycle, why incorporate *that* into a hologram? "You know very well I'm not talking about swapping meatsuits. I want out," he said, once his breathing steadied.

Once real-time mirrored neural maps and rapidly matured clones made the irreversible loss of human consciousness a rare oddity, death and dying became taboo, aside from the Al-Nuri clan. What we once meted out by commission became a gift we bestowed only on the worthy among those who sought it. A couple of decades ago, I wouldn't have refused Rout, but I'd given my word to leave that life behind, and where I come from, a woman's word is her bond. "You can't force me to kill you, Rout."

Rout shrugged. "It's just a question of finding the right motivation."

A shiver shot up my spine, and I told my proxy to call Bahlool and Jed. Seconds passed without a response. "What have you done?" I growled at the hologram.

"Your husbands and kids are safe," Rout said, a self-satisfied sneer distorting his pale, drawn face, "and they'll stay that way if you do as I ask."

"For the umpteenth time, *I don't do that anymore.*"

"You're still an Al-Nuri," Rout said, before adding meaningfully, "as is your line. You have three girls, right?"

"Leave my kids out of this," I said, my hands bunched up into fists, as if I could punch photons. "There're hundreds of clan assassins who'd gladly take your commission, why me?"

"You're the best. Why shouldn't I have the best? I'm not starting another Cycle. I can't bear the idea of a new meatsuit, another century or two, only to repeat it all over again. I've had enough. It's time I died by your hands, Keziah Al-Nuri, one way or another."



I dug my bugout bag out of the backyard and was at the front door when it swung open. My daughters—Adara, Nabeela, and little Raesa—rushed in, shrieking playfully and chasing one another ahead of my husbands. Jed was too busy corralling the kids, but Bahlool saw me wide-eyed and frozen by the door and did a surprised double-take.

"You're back," I stammered.

"So are you. The note said you'd be gone a few days," Bahlool said as they closed the door and noticed the backpack I'd dropped behind it. Their eyes alternated between the olive drab bag and my stricken face, their frown deepening with each turn.

Jed noticed the standoff from across the room. He walked closer, saw the bag, and turned to face me, lips pursed, head tilted, arms akimbo. "Keziah Al-Nuri, what were you about to do?" he demanded. "Did you send us away so you could leave? Why bother? Sweetie, if you wanted out, you only had to say the word." A raised eyebrow and one hand finger snap rounded out his defiance. Bahlool grunted their concurrence.

"That's not what's happening here." I reached out to both of them. Jed swatted one hand away. Bahlool side-stepped the other.

It wasn't my first family, nor would it be my last. With open-ended lifespans, till-death-do-us-part stopped being a viable option, but in that moment, nothing mattered more to me than my husbands and girls. "Let me explain." I told them about Liam Rout's determination to die by my hands, an obsession that pre-dated our union, and his latest ploy, leading me to believe he'd abducted them and the kids.

Bahloul's thick eyebrows nearly met. "You thought we'd been kidnapped and you decided to run?"

Jed wasn't as circumspect. "I fancied knowing you well, Keziah. A killer, liar, and all-around scoundrel, but I never figured you for a coward."

"I'm doing it for you." The words tumbled out in a torrent. "Once I'm gone, Rout won't have a reason to target you or the girls. You'd be safe."

Bahloul scoffed. "You didn't arrange the limo, hotel, private shopper?"

I pursed my lips and shook my head.

"What about the azaleas?" Jed said. "Who else would know I love azaleas?"

"I didn't send them, babe."

"Figures." Jed sucked teeth, "Didn't seem like you. It was ... romantic."

I smarted. I had no idea my husbands felt that way. How did we get here?

"Why didn't you call the police?" Bahloul asked.

"Why indeed." I shook my head. I expected that sort of question from Jed, not from Bahloul. "When was the last time they sided with a woman who looks like me against someone like Rout? I have to disappear, at least until he's given up or picked another Al-Nuri."

"You can't leave, we need you." Jed sniffled, choking back tears.

The girls had gone silent watching our tense standoff with wide, expectant eyes.

Jed saw them and wagged a finger at me before Bahlool gently pulled down Jed's arm. "Not here," they said and quietly handed Jed the bugout bag before corralling us both toward our bedroom. From the hallway, they exhorted the girls to clean up before dinner, promising ice cream with sprinkles for desert. I almost objected to feeding them all that sugar but bit my tongue, exhaling instead with enough force to flatten a row of straw houses.

Bahlool closed the bedroom door behind us and turned to face me. "You're not abandoning our daughters."

Jed dropped the bag by the door. "Nor will you break your vow to us."

"You promised your past would stay in the past," Bahlool said.

"You swore you'd be a new woman," Jed added with that one-two punching rhythm they'd grown far too proficient at delivering.

"Now, prove it," Bahlool said, nodding affirmatively to themselves.

"What am I supposed to do?" Normally, I didn't care when they ganged up and shut me out, if it meant they weren't bickering with one another, but this wasn't such a time. "It's my job to keep this family safe, but I can't be here to protect you all the time. What if next time, Rout kidnapped you and the girls for real? If he does, I'll do anything he asks to get you back. Anything at all. He knows that."

"I'm not raising my girls with a killer," Jed said with finality.

"Keziah, we all agreed to leave our pasts in the past when we decided to start this family," Bahlool said. "Leaving isn't the answer, nor is breaking your vows to us."

"What's the alternative?" I demanded angrily as Jed opened the door to find Raesa standing in the corridor looking lost and scared. He scooped her up with a forced little chortle and hurried away. I hung my head.

Bahloul turned me to face them by the shoulders, lifted my chin with an impeccably manicured forefinger, and stared me straight in the eyes. Quietly, almost whispering, they told me we'd figure it out together, as a family.



Eliminating the few backups of an ordinary person's genome and neural state is a tedious, laborious task. When it came to Liam Rout's multiplicities, it was damn near Herculean, even for an old-hand AL-Nuri like me. I spent nine weeks shuttling between bioclinics and databanks, but by the end of it, the only remaining instance of Rout's essence was the corporeal one ailing at the end of a Cycle.

At Rout's idyllic estate, a robot ushered me into an opulent leather and mahogany study reeking of floor wax and antiseptics. Sloughing in a wheelchair with a tartan blanket over his legs, Rout wheezed awake as the oversized door thudded closed. He tried to speak but issued a gurgling croak instead, which devolved into a wheezing coughing fit that raked his whole body.

What drove anyone to this masochistic sort of insanity, I'd never know. Perhaps we lose our will to live when the last impossible peak is crested, or perhaps it was little more than nature's ultimate palladium, buried deeply in our germline, for species circumventing its evolutionary guardrails.

Rout eventually managed to speak. "You've come to release me."

Though I'd been raised to venerate death, I'd never imbue it with as much longing as Rout had. It had to be the dying body yearning for release, I decided, its terminal secretions clouding Rout's thoughts. I had no doubt he'd feel differently wearing a young, vibrant meatsuit, or even inhabiting a vivid sim of the sort he made his vast fortune peddling, but I hadn't come to debate philosophy with him. We were well past all that.

"Are you ready?" I asked with more compassion than I thought myself capable of, given what he'd put me through.

Rout nodded slightly, his thin bloodless lips stretching at some private joke in his head. "Your fee's on the desk."

When I drew nearer, he whispered, "thank you," and reached for my hand, perhaps to shake it, but couldn't muster the energy to do more than brush my palm with ice-cold digits arthritically frozen in a claw.

I leaned over and pressed a sedative infuser to his neck. His eyes flickered open at the touch but soon drooped again. I dabbed his clammy hairless head dry with a foam-cloth and slipped on a scanner's wispy net. When it finished, I steeled myself, recited an ancient prayer the meaning of which no one remembered anymore, and aimed a disruptor between his eyes. I didn't hang around to watch the energetic electromagnetic field unbind his body, one cell at a time, eventually turning it into a puddle of simple organics. I picked the anonymous credit coin off the desk and left to face the tempest awaiting me at home.



The undulating turquoise water and pearlescent white sand amplified midday's radiance to a blinding, uniform glare. I squinted and fought the warm drowsiness threatening to envelope me. Not helping my quest for alertness were Bahlool's arms tightening around



my waist and Jed's hands caressing my bare arms and shoulders. Unfazed by the blaze, Adara, Nabeela, and Raesa frolicked and shrieked as they chased one another through the surf.

"Quite the coincidence, Rout's Cycle ending on its own the moment you arrived," Bahlool noted to a derisive scoff from Jed. At least he stopped pawing me.

I'd told them I didn't have to kill Rout after all, and so long as a sim of his final neural state continued to run in a sandboxed partition of my implants, he remained technically alive. Though not what I'd consider a fulfilling life, I fared no better on my end. Having Liam Rout haunt me for the rest of my days was a steep price, but worth it to keep my family and my vows intact.

"I'm hungry," Nabeela squealed, seemingly angry that her three parents hadn't somehow anticipated the need before she had to voice it.

In an instant, Jed jumped off the sand and ran to the water's edge to muster the brood. Rout stirred within, chafing at his confinement as he watched my life through a read-only sensory feed. "It never occurred to me raising children could be this much fun," he noted ruefully.

I ignored him and got up to follow. Bahlool made no move to join us. "Are you coming?"

"In a minute, I want to catch some rays," Bahlool said and stretched on the sand outside the umbrella's shade. My eyes traveled over their swarthy body from head to toe as I pretended to brush the sand off my limbs.

Bahlool noticed and chuckled. "What's going on in that devious mind of yours?" Despite squinting against the glare, their eyes sparkled, and a smile brightened their bearded face.

"Who? Me?" I responded, confused.

"As I live and breathe, Keziah Al-Nuri. You're leering," Bahlool accused, mockingly wagging a finger at me. Their smile took a mischievous turn, and the voice came huskier. "Like we're meeting for the first time."

Suddenly, alarm blossomed in my mind, but before it could crystalize into a coherent thought, I found myself tumbling down a dark rabbit hole, mute, deaf, and blind.

"Just thinking how lucky I am to have so much to live for," Rout said through my lips.



"So, Rout gets all googly-eyed over Bahlool, while I slave away in the kitchen to feed your children," Jed grumbled, twisting his lips and half turning away from me. On the other side of the bed, Bahlool shook the frame with their laughter. I shot them a disapproving glower and snuggled closer to Jed, spooning him, desperate to avoid any discord, now that tranquility had at long last returned to the Al-Nuri household.

"Look at the three of us. Who wouldn't want to ogle us?" I whispered into Jed's ear between nibbles on his earlobe.

After a pregnant pause that saw Bahlool and me hold our breath, Jed gave a short, delighted giggle and turned back to face us. "I feared he'd immediately identify his own sim software." Jed's eyes gleamed, empathy warring with voyeurism. "He does seem happy."

I kissed Jed's back, between his shoulder blades. "Rout thinks he bested me and rediscovered his zeal for living. I'd call that a win for all involved."

"Let's just hope he doesn't take it out on us when he discovers he'd been conned," Bahlool said. "No sim is good enough to fool someone forever."

"By then, I suspect, he'll be so overwhelmed with relief, his gratitude will offset his anger," I said, raising my voice over the sound of the girls' shrieks barreling down the hallway towards the bedroom door. "At least, I hope it will."

Jed jumped out of bed and slipped on a mauve kimono matching the one he wore in the sim. "If it doesn't?"

Bahlool groaned and pulled on some underwear in anticipation of the imminent stampede.

I shrugged. "I could always turn the sim off."

Jed and Bahlool gave me a synchronized dirty look and opened the door to our offspring.

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### **About the Author**

Ramez Yoakeim writes about many things, many of them grim, but mostly he writes about hope. At one time or another an engineer and educator, these days Ramez devotes himself to solving problems, wherever he encounters them. Find out more about Ramez and his work at [yoakeim.com](http://yoakeim.com).

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# Untucked

Justin Moritz

Content warning: sexual harassment, attempted sexual assault

**Author's note:** I came up with the idea of this story several years ago when I was dealing with what I now recognize as gender dysphoria/body dysmorphia. Particularly, I was struggling with the idea that a large percentage of our society operates on defining someone based on their genitalia, regardless of how they identify. After coming out as non-binary this year and getting more confident in the type of stuff I like to write, I decided to take my original concept and make it grosser, but also sexier. Influence-wise, I hoped to combine late-in-life coming-of-age tropes with elements of the romance, body horror, and erotica subgenres. I believe that while this combination could be a tough sell to certain markets, it successfully navigates the difficult boundary between acceptance of one's body as a trans person and sexual desire/repulsion to be a genre-bending piece with strong social commentary.

By the third date, I worry I look like a prude kissing Ivan goodbye on the step of his brownstone. His fingers linger. Delicately, I bring my hand up to his mouth. He kisses each of my knuckles goodbye. His blue eyes declare: *I would kiss every inch of you, if you just allowed me to bring you upstairs.*

"I should get going," I say, squeezing his hand adieu.

But his fingers do not slacken, his voice serious as he says, "Did I do something to offend you, Emma?"

Beneath the warm glow of the nearby streetlight, he appears impishly handsome, stubble covering his jawline and the coppery curls of his hair shimmering in the light. I should go, yet I remain drawn to him, saying, "You want me to stay?"

"Of course, I want a beautiful woman like you to stay," He says, pulling my hips towards his own. I resist just enough that we aren't quite touching.

I wish a cab would pass by at that very moment, an excuse to break free from his spell. But the street is silent. No one walking their dogs or drunkenly staggering

home from the bars. It is just Ivan and me. When he kisses me, I can't help but allow him to slide his tongue into my mouth.

Caught up in the moment, Ivan presses his body against mine in the brick entryway, the stiffness of his erection digging into my hip. I try to think of anything but how sexy he is. As his hand stops groping my breast and slips down my body, the reality of what he's about to discover disrupts my pleasure.

"Ivan...wait..." I whisper as he slides his hand up my leg. He recoils as soon as he feels the rigidness of my penis throbbing against his palm. Red-faced, he paces across the stoop. I try to comfort him, saying, "I told you I was trans, Ivan."

He sucks air through his teeth, spitting out venom upon exhaling, "I know you did, Emma. I just...I just assumed you had it taken care."

"Taken care of?" I reel back, the hurt audible as I reply, "I was upfront about this, Ivan. It's not that big of a deal."

"Not that big of a deal? How am I supposed to look past something that noticeable? It's bigger than mine for Christ's sake." Ivan pushes past me, digging in his pocket for his keys. I know then that I should leave and never talk to him again, but there is the matter of my penis, no longer confined in a way that he finds palatable. He hisses, "You know how much of a turn-off a girl with a dick is?"

So, my penis becomes undeniable, snaking its way free from my underwear despite the finesse of my tuck. It slithers down my leg, curling like a viper beneath the fabric of my skirt. My penis isn't like other penises. It's bizarrely muscular, thick blue veins siphoning blood from my body to enable the cursed thing to move on its own volition. Before I know what's happening, my vision blurs from the lack of blood

in my brain. The wretched organ stretches beyond its perceived capabilities, a noose of veiny, corded flesh that catches Ivan around the throat. As it constricts about his throat, I desperately try to ease it back into my body, but every movement applies more pressure to his windpipe till Ivan collapses against the stoop. My mutated cock goes flaccid as I look at his body, a necktie of bruises around his throat, busted capillaries turning the whites around his eyes a bloody red.



When I arrive back at my apartment, the first thing I do is grab the pint of frost-dusted cookie dough ice cream, chipping away at it as I delete every dating app off my phone. But before I can finish the task, I find myself once again swiping and imagining a white-picket fence and two-and-a-half kids based on four photos and a shitty bio that reads *I never know what to write for these things*. I can't help but be a sucker for love.

"This can't happen again, Emma," I mumble, then create a Google search for extra sturdy chastity belts.

The world I stumble upon is one that both fascinates and frightens me. Evangelical purity culture overlaps with painful, pleasure-inducing BDSM. Searching for the perfect device, I ponder the benefit of leather or steel, of padlocks or combination dials. But by deciding to cage my penis, I am acknowledging its undeniability. The dysphoria is nauseating.

I refine my search for belts specifically for trans women. The results are much narrower, but eventually I come across a website covered in pink frills and boutique graphic design that draws my eye to an assortment of gender affirming BDSM toys.

Their signature chastity belt is a piece of art made of curved steel that both tucks and shapes the penis, creating a look reminiscent of a woman's external sex organs. But I freeze when I look at the price tag. \$900 for the thing that would solve my problems. Almost the price of a month's rent. A rent that I already struggle to pay.

Settling for a cheap leather substitute, the image of Ivan's corpse is seared into my eyelids each time I blink away tears. I pay \$20 for rush shipping as I shovel the melted ice cream down my throat.

When I'm good and sick, I pull down my underwear in front of the mirror, recreating the moment in high school where I realized my penis wasn't like everyone else's. Carefully, I fold my anatomy backwards, squeezing my thighs shut to create a silhouette that is smooth and recognizably female. But then I part my legs, my penis appearing massive as it falls back into place. Then I repeat the process. Concealing my wretched anatomy between my legs, letting it fall, and with each repetition, it becomes until it's touching the floor, snaking around my body as I sob. Just the sight of it is enough to cause me to vomit onto the floor.



It's impossible to style a chastity belt. What was once form-fitting and pleasing to the eye suddenly appears bulgy, the device concealed beneath my skirts bulky like a soiled diaper. Even the loudest pattern can't hide the fact that beneath my clothing is a device of medieval proportions. My phone dings, a groan escaping my lips as my friends ponder what bar we'll be drinking and dancing in till the early hours. I type quickly before anyone has a chance to protest: *It doesn't matter, as long as it's*

*dark and crowded.* I slip on a loose black dress that won't draw the eye and order a Lyft.

As soon as the driver stops outside the club, a line of spiky haired Jersey Shore wannabees greet me with catcalls and wolf-whistles. The bouncer motions me into the club with a beckoning wave like he's backing in a truck full of fresh meat.

Inside, I'm comforted by the darkness. The flashing lights concealing patrons in momentary blackness, leaving one's dance partner to focus on the sway of their hips not the bulk concealed beneath their cocktail dress. I'm greeted by my friends with a vodka tonic shoved into my hand.

Sobriety smothered beneath the weight of well liquor, I ask, "Shall we dance, ladies?"

But my cis friends are hypnotized by handsome men with open tabs. There is no suitor asking what I'm drinking. As a kid, I was a sissie without a leg who was chosen last for kickball. As an adult, the heterosexual male clocks me as the unideal mate, my femininity not quite to their taste. But two drinks are enough to give me the confidence to dance alone.

I love the anonymity of dance floors. The undulating, grinding bodies not quite separate. An arm belongs to no one, a swaying pair of hips part of the collective. Bad remix after remix blasts from the overhead speakers, so when a familiar song comes on, everybody belts out the words, wild as we dance beneath the flashing lights.

Then I see a pair of hazel eyes and a strong jawline that makes me bite my lip. A total Fuck Me, Daddy staring right back at me. He walks towards me with a



shoulder thrown out, the crowd parting at the sight of his tatted beefcake arms. He wraps his arm around me and commands, "Dance with me, baby."

I agree, but I do so with caution, hyperaware of the distance between us. But the way his big hands seem to support every vertebra of my spine as they run down my body is dangerous when mixed with alcohol. I let him pull me close against my better judgement.

The music smothers any chance of him hearing me as I say, "Let's take things slow."

The daddy's hand tightens around my inner thigh, pushing up my skirt as he holds me firm. I try to playfully push him away, but the higher his hand climbs, the more desperate I become. The chastity belt feels tighter the more we drunkenly struggle. I'm disgusted with myself, my body unable to differentiate his forcefulness from consensual masculine domination. Genuine discomfort indistinguishable from fantastical bliss.

My penis goes rigid as his fingers skim the leather chastity belt, his eyebrows rising with curiosity. The belt digs into my waist, the seams aching as my body no longer obeys my will. I try to push the man away, to shout over the sound of the speakers, to create a scene that will draw me into the safety of a group of pissed-off women ready to beat down another creep hunting the dance floor. Before he has a chance to grope what lies beneath the belt, I feel the sudden absence of it around my waist, the sound of leather being shredded audible even against the music.

The creep stumbles backwards. Shock registering on his face as blood gushes from his eviscerated fingers. He screams, "You cut me."

I bolt from the dance floor, retreating to the sanctity of the dark hallway of the club's restrooms as blood spills down my leg. A line snakes out of the women's, ladies applying lipstick and wiping away mascara tears without putting down their drinks. Any other woman would simply ask for a tampon or a pad, the shared urgency of unexpected leakage being enough to bypass the queue. But the women stare at me, clocking me much too fast and turning their backs to whisper even as blood drips down my leg.

Dysphoric nausea wells in my belly as I rush into one of the empty stalls in the men's room, which smells of vomit and sex. I hike my skirt up and sit down on the toilet seat, some man's piss soaking into my thighs.

What lies between my legs isn't a penis, it's a monstrosity. A weapon whose only purpose is to maim and ruin. But I suppose that is what a penis is in the first place. I take my phallus between my forefinger and thumb to pull it free from my blood-slicked thighs. A jolt of pain stops me. Blood isn't the only thing holding the organ stationary. Along the underside of the organ protrudes a half dozen chitinous spines like the quills covering a porcupine's back.

The more I fret, the more blood spills onto the floor. My thigh aches as I push into the tender skin, forcing one of the sharp barbs free from the meat of my leg. I can't help but to sob as I look at this new feature of my anatomy in the dim light. "Oh fuck, oh god."

The more agitated I become, the further the spines extend. I take a deep breath in, then try to force one back into my body; however, the barb is sharp to touch, unwilling to retreat beneath the skin. Looking at my unique adaptations, I am

reminded of how an animal when frightened will do anything in its power to defend itself, expressing violent and desperate manners of self-defense. As disturbed as I am, I can recognize that this transformation is a defense mechanism itself. My penis may be something I wish I could be rid of, but while I'm stuck with it, it itself is a way for deterring men whose allyship only goes as far as the bedroom. The thought relaxes me, the row of spines retreating into my body.

I pull my dress down, throwing the stall door open as I wipe the smeared mascara from my eyes. But in the process, I run smack dab into a body that doesn't budge. The shock of it cracks my composure, the tears spilling down my cheeks as I look up a face that is much too pretty to be seeing me crying. The man's chiseled features immediately soften as he sees the mess of my face, stuttering out, "I'm so sorry, miss."

He reaches out to touch my shoulder on instinct. While his touch is tender, his hand immediately retreats upon realizing that he's touching a stranger. I push by him as he shouts, "Are you sure you're okay, miss?"

I stop in the doorway, unable to stammer out a response, yet unable to leave. Again, he speaks, his voice so soft and level that I am comforted by the calmness of it, "That creep out there started screaming that some girl cut him, but if he made you cry, that'll be the least of his worries...because, because I'll make him learn what his fucking teeth taste like."

I sniffle, turning back to him and saying, "You're sweet for a stranger in a disgusting club bathroom. But I should run before the police are called."

"They're already here. They sent me to check the bathroom before my shift is over."

"Fuck."

"There's another exit," he murmurs, "I could show you."

"I need a fucking drink."

"I think I have an answer to that problem too," the stranger says, beckoning me to follow.



We retreat to a hole-in-the-wall where the lights are dim and the glasses are dirty, but the drinks are cheap. When I sit at the bar, all I can mutter is, "A couple shots of vodka"

The bartender lays out three shot glasses, sloshing liquor over the bar mat as he overfills them. I down them without worrying about the liquor dripping down my wrists. All I want is to reach a point where I'll forget what happened.

"What's your name?" I ask before I throw back the final shot.

"Looks like you won't remember it anyway."

"Looks like you don't know how to be memorable," I reply, smiling so my joke isn't lost to him.

"Billy," He says, taking a swig of a beer.

"Really?" I shouldn't laugh, but I do.

"What? Never met a grown man named Billy?"

"Never met one so handsome. I'm Emma." And with that his hand reaches across the bar, fingers gently circling about my wrist to lift it from the counter. I stare

up at him, my heart fluttering with the question: *is this fate, or is the booze just turning this stranger into a dream boat?*

"You just put your hand in someone else's beer." Billy lets go of my hand as a blush warms my cheeks. I turn away, trying to hide this embarrassing admission of my attraction by tucking a lock of my hair behind my ear. But beer still dripping down my hand, he bridges the space between us to push the strand out of my line of sight.

Now I can see him unfettered. His eyes the amber color of honey, his voice just as slick and sweet. His touch is tender, his expression curious, leaning in ever so slightly to ask me more and more about myself. It's that sort of instant connection that I always thought was just something that happened in movies. The longer we talk, the more I can feel the bartender's eyes on us, neither of us nervous enough to wave a hand for another drink.

"Think he's getting ready to kick us out?" Billy says, his thumb tracing loops around my knuckles.

A line now snakes out from the bar's front door, bodies squeezing closer and closer to us as the bouncer waves them in.

"Guess I was paying too much attention to you to notice it got busy," I say.

"Talking to a beautiful woman like you really makes this shitty bar less shitty, but it's getting late," Billy says, his hand lingering atop mine.

"I don't want to say goodbye."

"Maybe we don't have to?" A sheepish grin on his face, his eyes say only one thing: *what about my place?*

"There's something you should know about me first—" I protest, the uncomfortable truth resting between my thighs.

"—Nothing you could say would make me change my mind about wanting to spend more time with you." Billy says, throwing down a couple tens as he tries to shepherd me to the door.

Billy leads me through the crowd with his shoulder parting the bodies around us, his mannerisms gentle as he guides me onto the sidewalk. His kindness is arousing, his company exactly what I needed, but I know I should do anything to stop this before it begins. I picture him as dead as Ivan, his body bleeding like the creep's in the club, but I let him hold my hand and lead me into the night anyway.



His apartment is impressive, not a wall without a painting nor a cushion without a throw blanket in sight. But I avoid soft surfaces, tiptoeing from corner to corner as Billy pops open a bottle of wine. I guess what I'm looking for are red flags, but considering how well-decorated his apartment is, my bet is Billy knows that you shouldn't include such noisy displays.

I wish I knew how to bring up my transness, but there's never a right way to go about it. A text message creates a buffer that can serve as a wall behind which one's opponent can hide and slug vitriol. A reveal over dinner can leave you with the bill as your lover slips out the bathroom window. But to present one's most precious secrets aloud in the moments before a hot, sweaty tryst, that's like pinning a sign to your chest that reads MURDER ME.

"I spent too much money on that couch to have my guests stand on their feet," Billy says as he gives me glass of wine before flopping onto the sofa.

I stare at his slumped form, my eyes unable to glance away from the inch or so of hairy belly peeking out from beneath his too tight shirt. Finally, I sit down a foot or so away from him, just close enough not to raise concern.

"You weren't this quiet at the bar," Billy mumbles, looking away after a long, silent beat, "Is everything okay?"

I take a deep breath, fingers crossed that I won't regret this as I say, "You seem like a really nice guy, and I would love to go to bed with you. Hell, I'd love to go to bed with you, then take you to breakfast. But the thing is...well, I'm not exactly like the average girl you bring home from the bar. If I unzip my dress, it's not going to fall to the floor and reveal all smooth curves. Billy, I'm trans."

"I mean I didn't want to assume, but I had my suspicions," Billy says, reaching out to cradle my chin in the palm of his hand. "I enjoy you for you, Emma. Whatever you're scared of me seeing, it isn't going to make me change my mind about that."

I want to protest that he's speaking too soon, but he's looking at me with those honey-slick eyes. I'm a fly drawn in by the sweetness, trapped beneath the syrupy weight of his presence as he presses his lips against mine. I kiss him back hard, as if the ferocity of it will force the memory of my confession from his mind. But then he's on top me, his thighs pressing up against mine, his hand groping at my breast as his mouth explores the perfumed skin of my neck. Everything is happening too fast, but before I can ease him off, I hear the tearing of fabric.

"Fuck, I'm so sorry. I'll pay for the dress," Billy apologizes, inspecting the impromptu slit running up the length of my dress.

But the tear is the least of my problems, the barbed protrusions of my penis carefully concealed by the crossing of my legs. *He isn't going to hurt you, Emma. There is no need for this reaction.* I take a few deep breaths, the most dangerous parts of my anatomy easing back into my body as I motion for him to come back and kiss me.

Everything Billy does is right, his body responding to mine in just the right ways. Hands move slowly down my spine, flirting with the prospect of my legs. Kissing me with just the right amount of tongue. I undo the button of his jeans, his face showing no sign of embarrassment as I look upon his erect penis. Billy pushes up my skirt, gently kissing around the curve of my knee, his lips inching their way up my thigh.

The closer he gets to my penis, the more in my head I become. I picture the beige couch we sit upon stained with blood; his moans replaced by the sound of desperate screaming. Billy eases up, looking up from beneath my skirt. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No...it's just that I've had men be disgusted by my penis. They promise me I'm a beautiful woman, but as soon as they discover it, they seem to change their mind. They look at it like it's monstrous."

Billy peels back my skirt, his eyebrows raising in an exaggerated manner, but quickly fall back to a neutral expression. We both laugh at this as he says, "Looks like a penis to me. A sizeable one, but that's never stopped me before."



Billy kisses me, then disappears beneath my skirt. I flinch as he touches it, the organ growing more and more noticeable as his fingertips ease it into his mouth. I watch as he slips off his boxers, clearly enjoying pleasing me as he masturbates. When I close my eyes, succumbing to the bliss of Billy's actions, all I can picture is Ivan dead on his stoop, the daddy and his bleeding fingers screaming.

Billy suddenly reels back, my eyes fluttering open to see my penis curling up the length of his arm. Before I can say anything, Billy relaxes himself, easing his arm free, but continuing to embrace my anatomy as he takes it both hands. He falls back onto the couch, his muscular legs pulling me on top of him. He kisses me before he whispers in my ear, "I want you to fuck me, Emma."

"I don't want to hurt you, love," I mutter as he grabs for a bottle of lube hidden in the coffee table drawer.

"Give it to me. I can take it."

So, I do what he says, and his moans are a choir proclaiming again and again: you are not your anatomy.

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### About the Author

Justin Moritz (They/He) is a non-binary writer of queer horror, ranging from grotesque camp to societal filth. Raised on true crime and horror movies from way too young of an age, their work tends to explore the terror of living as a queer person in modern times, while adding a speculative twist. Currently based in Austin, Texas where they're pursuing an MFA in Screenwriting at the University of Texas at Austin, they hope to help expand the types of queer representation seen in horror via prose, screenwriting, and academic writing. You can follow them on Twitter at @jeepers\_justin.

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# Cover Artist

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## Biographies:

Paula Hammond ("Fluttersome"; page 39) is a professional writer & digital artist based in London, England. Her fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and a British Science Fiction Association award. Her photography has featured in numerous magazines and non-fiction books. She reads too much and sleeps too little.

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Ren Koppel Torres ("Libre"; page 74) is a Jewish Chicano artist and the editor-in-chief of the Latino literary magazine *Alebrijes Review*. Named a winner of the 2022-2023 National Poetry Quarterly, Ren's work is published/forthcoming in *diode*, *TIMBER Journal*, *Apogee*, *Lumiere Review*, *COUNTERCLOCK*, *Writer's Digest*, and elsewhere. He served as a member of the inaugural Austin Youth Poet Laureate cohort and currently serves as the Managing Editor for the interdisciplinary arts collective INKSOUNDS. His forthcoming chapbook *CaldoPoetics* is a collection of poems about soup.

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