

NOV/DEC
2020

TOR.COM
SHORT
FICTION

Bear
Tidhar
Tregillis
Turtledove

This page intentionally left blank.

TOR.COM SHORT FICTION

November – December 2020

ELIZABETH BEAR

LAVIE TIDHAR

IAN TREGILLIS

HARRY TURTLEDOVE

TOR·COM 

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Authors](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Tor.com ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on Elizabeth Bear, click [here](#).

For email updates on Lavie Tidhar, click [here](#).

For email updates on Ian Tregillis, click [here](#).

For email updates on Harry Turtledove, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you without Digital Rights Management software (DRM) applied so that you can enjoy reading it on your personal devices. This e-book is for your personal use only. You may not print or post this e-book, or make this e-book publicly available in any way. You may not copy, reproduce, or upload this e-book, other than to read it on one of your personal devices.

Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: <http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy>.

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Notice

ON SAFARI IN R'LYEH AND CARCOSA WITH GUN AND
CAMERA

Title Page

Begin Reading

Copyright

JUDGE DEE AND THE LIMITS OF THE LAW

Title Page

Begin Reading

Copyright

HAMMER AND TONGS AND A RUSTY NAIL

Title Page

Begin Reading

Copyright

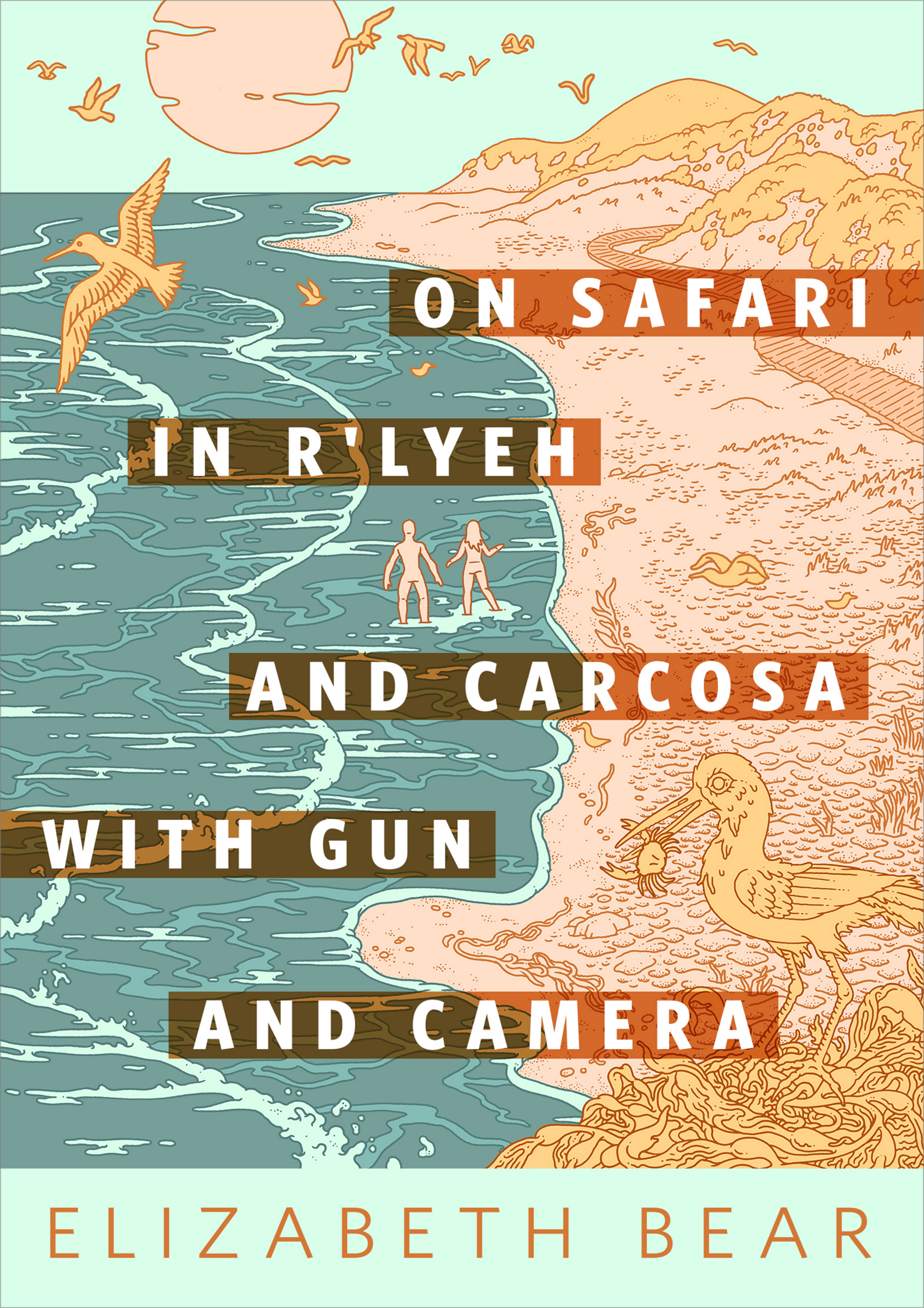
NO PERIOD

Title Page

Begin Reading

Copyright

About the Authors



ON SAFARI

IN R'LYEH

AND CARCOSA

WITH GUN

AND CAMERA

ELIZABETH BEAR

On Safari in R'lyeh and Carcosa with Gun and Camera

ELIZABETH BEAR

illustration by

ERIC NYQUIST

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation if you’d flunked Algebra, Griswold,” Roberts said, racking another shell into his hunting rifle and peering over our flimsy barricade. He was trying to see if the monstrous creatures beyond were preparing for another assault.

I was too busy reloading my 10-gauge to answer, even if I’d wanted to dignify his assertion. Algebra wasn’t the issue here.

Scientific curiosity was. And perhaps having had too much time on my hands.

I had to grant him that this was in every respect my fault. It was only his imprecision of language when it came to apportioning blame that griped me. And if I were being fair, that was probably me engaging in diversion, or sophistry, or whatever the technical psychological term for nitpicking the hell out of something to weasel out of it is.

Whatever: I’d been the one who sent in my spit sample to the online DNA testing folks, and I’d been the one who’d gotten curious about a weird little line item in the results, and I’d been the one who’d called up my old school buddy the geneticist to ask some pointed questions. Which—in my defense!—he’d been only too happy to investigate once his own curiosity was piqued.

And so here we were, on a strange planet under an alien sun, surrounded by twisted, non-Euclidean geometry; pistols at alien dawn with inside-out monstrosities which (presuming our hypothesis was reliable) wanted to eat our faces; and all the while attracting the wrath of dread gods. And it wasn’t even our first trip.

This time, we had been “prepared.”

My GoPro had been smashed by a lucky tentacle, so I couldn’t be sure how good our data was. But we knew where to find the gate to get us home, and we knew how to get there, and I was confident in our ability to make it. Even if we didn’t have my video, we’d have Roberts’s. And I had vials full of biological samples.

I took a deep breath of the curiously thin and unsatisfying air. Everything was going to be fine. Everything was going to be fine.

Probably.

That's a little *Unfathomable Magazine! Tales of Adventure Beyond the Stars* for a quick synopsis, isn't it?

... Maybe I'd better start at the beginning.

★ ★ ★

My name is not Greer Griswold. I'm approximately fifty-two years old. I don't know who my birth parents were, and my adoptive parents are dead. I have never married; I have no children; I have very few close friends. I'm a physicist at a notable northeastern US institution you would have heard of if I named it. I'm not going to, any more than I'm going to give you my real name, because I have tenure but I'm not stupid. Being a woman in a male-dominated field isn't easy, and I've never been terribly interested in Performing My Gender in the fashion that gets you accepted as a mascot by the boys. I've had my share of gross harassment, but at least I'm not pretty. Not being pretty spares me certain things.

I spend a lot of time alone, and I've learned to like it. Despite that, and because of the third fact above, and because I'm not getting any younger, I thought it would be interesting to get some genetic testing done and find out where my ancestors came from. And maybe ... if I had any close relatives around.

Nieces, nephews. Somebody I could will my extensive collection of vintage Hot Rods toy cars to when I'm gone.

It's one thing to embrace your alienation. It's another to wake up on the first day of spring semester classes and realize you haven't spoken to another human being since December 23, and there's only so long you can go on ordering your groceries from PeaPod and scooping up cookie butter with ruffled potato chips in front of Netflix until two a.m.

No matter how self-sufficient you are, when you're middle-aged and childless and unmarried ... you start to hope maybe you're really not as alone in the world as you think you are.

I still might not have done it, if my department chair hadn't stuck his head into my office one afternoon in late August to let me know we had a new faculty member coming on board, and how did I feel about being their liaison during the onboarding process? I note, entirely for the record and apropos of nothing, that I am the only female tenured faculty in the physics department. I note, entirely for the record and apropos of nothing, that I do

an estimated thirty-six percent of the emotional labor in my sixteen-person department.

Female grad students and admins do the rest. And it's not like we're any less introverted and non-neurotypical than the dudes. We're just forced to learn to endure more discomfort in order to have careers.

I gritted my teeth in a smile. I said yes. I waited for the door to close.

I'd gotten myself the kit for my birthday (observed, presumed) and had been ignoring its existence ever since. I dug it out of my desk drawer and unscrewed the lid on the little plastic vial while I was still fuming.

I know those DNA tests are very broad and subject to a certain degree of interpretation. But the results are improving with better data, and honestly not everything in science has to be about *doing science the right way with reproducible results subject to peer review*.

Sometimes science ... or packaged, processed science food, if you prefer ... can be just science-y and fun. Also, it might be useful to know if I had any ticking time bombs in my DNA, medically speaking. Make those family history questions a little less stymieing.

★ ★ ★

Surprise.

★ ★ ★

I was gratified to learn I was nearly one twentieth Neanderthal. That's about twice as much as most modern Europeans, and according to the genetics company, it put me in the ninety-ninth percentile of their customer base.

Those redheaded Vikings had to come from somewhere. And it was nice to think of all that cross-cultural communication and exchange taking place, all the way back to the Weichselian Glaciation.

That was interesting, and fun to think about. But other than the *Homo neanderthalensis* and the Scandinavian, I was a pretty basic New England mix. A little Irish, a little German. A little Broadly South European, which is probably Portuguese. A smidge of Native American or Southeast Asian. And then ...

Undetermined: 10.2%

Ten percent. That's a pretty big error bar there, genetics company that will remain unnamed.

★ ★ ★

Curiosity is probably my defining characteristic. I want to know how things work. I want to know why they work, and what happens if you alter the variables.

Sometimes it's not the variables that alter on you, however.

Sometimes it's the constants.

★ ★ ★

Of course I downloaded my raw genetic data and took it to my old friend Michael Roberts. If academics weren't constantly taking advantage of one another's skill sets, we'd have no topics of conversation at all other than who was cheating on their spouse and who wasn't going to get tenure.

Anyway, Roberts and I went back to undergrad, when we'd been lab partners in an organic chemistry class that wasn't in either of our fields but was required for both of our majors. We'd somehow gotten through the class, despite the lack of any apparent common language between either of us and the instructor. Years later, we'd wound up at the same institution, in different departments in the same college, and I still liked and trusted him.

What I wasn't expecting was for Roberts to call me up at one a.m., voice shaking as he accused me of having a little joke at his expense. "Come on, Greer," he said. "Tell me who you got to put this data set together, so I can mail them a dead badger."

I looked at my phone. Without my glasses, it was just a bright blur in the dark of my bedroom. I put it back to my ear. "That's right off the Real 46 website. If you want, I'll give you my login and you can download a copy for yourself."

He scoffed. "Well, I knew these companies played a little fast and loose, but this result is a mess and a half. Ten percent of the DNA doesn't even match up to the human genome. Did you chew up a tadpole or something before you took the swab?"

"Ew," I answered. "Hey, are you busy tommor—I mean, tonight? I'll buy you dinner and you can tell me all about it."

"Is it going to be sushi?" he asked, guardedly.

"It's always sushi," said I.

★ ★ ★

“The thing is,” Roberts said, hovering a roll of negimaki between his chopsticks, “they should have just admitted they couldn’t analyze a sample this contaminated. It must be chromosome bits everywhere.”

“I did not,” I said, “contaminate the sample.”

He popped the beef and scallions into his mouth and chewed, eyes closing. I leaned away from the smell.

The mackerel and scallops I was eating, on the other hand, were amazing. Sashimi is about my favorite thing in the world, and the pungent deliciousness of the wasabi lit up the spaces in my skull.

“Is it possible there’s something else going on?” I asked. “Not corrupted data but ... a variant or a mutation? Something?”

“Possible,” he said dubiously. “All those Neanderthal variants also really look like an error, though.”

“Maybe the other stuff is Neanderthal variants too? I dunno, isolated genetic pocket?”

“You’re already at two hundred percent of anything we’d consider normal variation.” He sighed.

“Somebody’s got to be on the tail of the curve.”

More negimaki vanished into my friend, followed by sake. I’ve never been able to drink much. My mucous membranes hate the sensation of alcohol.

He said, “Oh, hmm. You know, I remember a story a colleague told me about a Ph.D. student of his whose dis was rejected. Something about impossible data the student kept insisting was verified. It wasn’t at our institution, though. It was wherever he worked before. Miskatonic, maybe?”

“That dis should still be in the special collections, then.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ve got an alumni dinner over there next month. I could pop by the library and see.”

“How is a failed dis going to help us? I mean, that’s not a source I’m going to cite with any confidence.”

He snorted. “Guy was doing some research about whether there were variants not mapped in the Human Genome Project, which was still in progress back then.”

“Huh,” I said.

“Anyway, you want me to check?”

“Can’t hurt.”

“Price of another dinner,” he said.

I had a small octopus in my mouth by then, and was chewing carefully, so I couldn’t interrupt in time to keep him from qualifying.

“Anything but sushi,” he said.

★ ★ ★

Well, Roberts found the mysterious dissertation. And what he found *in* it seemed to unsettle him greatly, though I didn’t understand the majority of his valiant attempts to explain the details. It was all highly technical stuff about chromosomes and variants in a field where my expertise stops at the four amino acids which make up DNA.

In any case, he felt a need to go and have a conversation with the guy who wrote the thing. And he wouldn’t hear of having that conversation without me present.

“It’s your research,” he said, as if it were the last word on the subject.

“First, it’s not research,” I argued. “I’d have to be a geneticist for it to be research. It’s idle curiosity. Second, it’s not entirely just mine.”

“Which one of us spit in the test tube?”

“Which one of us decided to go pull books in the special collections?”

“The results don’t make any sense!”

I let it hang there until he rolled his eyes and laughed.

And continued, “Anyway, I had no luck with a phone. Disconnected. Or email. None on file.”

“Well, that’s that, then,” I said, relieved despite myself.

“I found the guy’s address.”

“No.”

“Yes. His name is Albert Gilman. He’s out on Cape Ann.”

★ ★ ★

The day we picked to go down, it was raining. I drove.

We parked on the sandy verge of a seaside road. It would have been crawling with children, tourists, and boogie boarders on any sunny day during the season. Because it was bleak November and dreking to rival the Scottish highlands, the beach was abandoned and there was plenty of parking.

We got out. I found myself standing by the car and sighing contently. The cool, moist air kissed my face and I couldn’t help but feel the tourists

were missing out. The Atlantic was a planished sheet of titanium under a misty sky, obscuring any sense of horizon. The dune grass was faded straw, the masses of beach roses reduced to barbed stems festooned with fat rubies of rose hips, the only color in the entire landscape. On the landward side of the road, weathered cedar-shingle cottages wore a dull gray sheen that echoed the ocean.

Roberts walked up to a three-quarter Cape Cod-style cottage with a gambrel roof. I trailed him like a dog with separation anxiety.

We stepped in under the little peaked portico protecting the peeling, slate-colored door. Roberts rang the doorbell.

And we waited.

★ ★ ★

A cool breeze lifted the hair at my nape and jingled the pipes of a baritone wind chime. The waves shushed on the sand. From within the house, no sound or sign.

“Are you sure about this?” I whispered.

Roberts started to shake his head. The gesture half-completed, he froze, lifting one finger for silence.

A moment later, I heard it too. A heavy, slow squeak. The sound an old wood floor might make under the weight of a mattress, or a big piece of furniture being slid on a rug so it didn't scrape. It wasn't the step of a human being, no matter how sizeable.

Roberts leaned forward and tapped on the door. The knocking boomed unexpectedly, as if the house were empty of soft things. Fabric, furniture. Human things.

It surprised me so much I nearly fell off the steps, but Roberts was undaunted.

“Mr. Gilman?” he called through the door. “Albert Gilman?”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “Let's go.”

He shook his head stubbornly.

An intercom mounted up in the angle between the wall and overhang crackled and popped. “Who are you?”

Roberts introduced us, and told the disembodied voice what we did.

“Doctor Roberts. Michael Roberts.” I wondered if the person behind the door had already forgotten my name. But then he said, “What the hell is a geneticist doing here?”

“Please, call me Michael. I came to consult you on your research. Can we come in?”

“No!” A pause, in which I imagined I could hear frightened breathing through the static. Then, slower: “Maybe you haven’t heard, but I washed out. Now get off my porch.”

A harsh click as the intercom cut off.

Roberts thumped the door just once and raised his voice. “Albert, Albert, wait! I think you were onto something! I think we can corroborate!”

The intercom again. “Corroborate what?”

“Your research. My friend here did one of those pop genetics tests and came back with some similar results to yours.”

Silence.

“Albert? We can vindicate your results.”

“Oh god,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

I squeezed Roberts’s arm hard. “What do you mean?” he asked anyway. “Who was your research subject?”

A gulping sound, like a swallowed sob. “Me,” he said. “The source of the material was me.”

★ ★ ★

It was a long, silent ride home. Silent as far as Roberts and I were concerned, anyway. But I kept hearing Gilman’s last words echoing in my head, before he shuffled away from the door: “You have to go. You both have to go *now*.”

We didn’t, immediately. But the intercom went dead again, and more creaking following, seeming to move away from the door. Deeper into the house, and silence followed.

We knocked and knocked until the neighbors came out to stare pointedly, clutching their phones. But Albert Gilman would not speak with us again.

We drove away with his silence still hanging around us. Neither one of us seemed willing to break that silence for some time after. Until I pulled up in front of Roberts’s house, and he turned to me and said, “I have to know what’s going on.”

I’m not the only one with a curiosity problem.

“I know,” I said. “But I have no idea where to go next.”

“Yeah,” Roberts sighed, opening the car door. The rain blew in. “Me neither.”

★ ★ ★

Days went by, and I was still at a loss. To be honest, I didn’t necessarily have a lot of time to worry about it, because the semester was closing in fast on Thanksgiving break and finals, which meant the students were as needy and distracting as they always are that time of year.

By the time I felt like I had them halfway squared away and in control of themselves, and like I wasn’t totally abrogating my duty as a mentor and instructor, fate took matters out of my hands.

By fate, I suppose I mean the person of Albert Gilman, who mailed a package to my place of work right before Thanksgiving.

That’s less creepy than it sounds, because Roberts had given him our names and institution, which meant we were only a Google away. And the package was just a Priority Mail flat pack, postage provided by an online stamp service.

I opened it, remembering the Unabomber only after I already would have blown my hands off. *Oh, well*, I told myself. I was pretty sure it was too thin and flexible to contain an improvised explosive device, anyway. It probably just held paper.

Which was what I slid out. A map, water-stained and coming apart at the creases, folded inside out. And some sheaves of notes in an impenetrable hand.

A sticky note on the top of it all said, “Good luck, Dr. Griswold,” in the same difficult penmanship—if you could call it penmanship. The note seemed to have gotten damp at some point. It was creased and wrinkled and smelled faintly of salt water.

When I lifted it, I found more writing underneath. “By the time you get this, I’ll be gone.”

I drove back to Gilman’s cottage with the package on the passenger seat, pushing my luck with the states on the Mass Pike. I could have called the police to check his welfare, I suppose, but the honest truth is I just didn’t think of it at the time. I only thought of getting there as fast as I could.

I parked where we had parked before and scrambled toward the house. The front door stood open. Sand had blown or been tracked in.

It was cold inside, and as empty as the echoes had predicted. The radiators were icy to the touch. The rooms contained just a few large beanbag chairs, damp from the sea air, and a musty mattress heaped with tangled blankets but otherwise unmade.

I approached—I had walked in the open door quite without premeditation, calling Gilman’s name. A few steps away, I noticed something papery, translucent, with a silvery sheen. It was wound among the blankets.

I crouched to examine it more closely. It looked like the shed skin of a very large snake, and I had a wild moment of fear that Gilman had been eaten by a pet python that might be napping the meal off nearby. As I leaned forward, a report like a gunshot scared me back onto my ass, kicking my way across the floor with my heels. I had scrambled nearly to the bedroom door when I realized something had just popped sharply under my extra-wide oxford. (Women with feet like mine don’t wear pumps.)

When my heart slowed, I spotted a tangle of black-green weed on the floor where it had dried and stuck.

Bladderwort.

The air sacs popping under my sole were what had frightened me.

★ ★ ★

I knew it was unethical, but before I left I found Gilman’s desktop—a Windows machine old enough to be a student in second grade—and used an anonymized browser window to back his documents up to my cloud before I left. I had no good excuse. Except I was convinced now that what he had sent me was a suicide note, and that he had sent it because he thought I had a reason to be frightened of whatever had ruined his life, too.

★ ★ ★

For a while I wished I hadn’t stolen the data. Except ... it’s always better to know.

★ ★ ★

The handwritten notes were bad enough, once I invested enough eyestrain to decipher them. But the private blog I had stolen had—God help me—photographs.

This time, I called Roberts at eleven at night. “I need you to come over.”

He was groggy, obviously struggling up from sleep. “Dammit, Griswold,” he said. “I have an early class tomorrow.”

“Come over anyway,” I said. “It’s an emergency, and I can’t tell you on the phone.” *Because I don’t believe it myself, quite frankly.*

“I took melatonin. I really can’t drive.”

“Get the campus bus,” I said. “It runs until one, and the stop is two blocks from my house.”

I was lucky. My place is right across from the rugby field and I can walk to work in any weather barring a whiteout blizzard or a hurricane. Roberts had an apartment in faculty housing on campus. He’d given up his house after his wife died, and I worried about him. But he said the social opportunities were better.

I wouldn’t know. I avoid social opportunities except for the departmental schmoozing I cannot reasonably avoid.

He was there within twenty minutes, anyway. He probably could have walked it in fifteen. I let him in and showed him into the living room. I poured him a drink (I kept the bourbon in the house for Roberts) and a cup of coffee without asking, and handed him my laptop after he’d investigated each of them and set them on the coffee table.

Nervously, I started talking before he even clicked through. “This could be faked. I guess. But why would it be? He just left it on his computer—”

He stared at me. “You broke into his *house*?”

“It was wide open,” I said defensively. “Wait, let me start at the beginning. He sent me this. It arrived today.”

The papers rattled as I handed them over.

“I thought it was a suicide threat, and went to talk to him. When I got there the front door was open and”—I sat down heavily beside Roberts and spoke through my hands—“I think he walked into the sea, Mike.”

He nudged the whiskey I’d poured him over in front of me. “If I mix bourbon and melatonin you’re not getting an ounce of sense out of me. Go on, you look like you need it.”

I sipped. The burn clarified my mind and felt like it was going to peel the inside of my throat off. I gulped the whole two fingers and started coughing. How do people *drink* this stuff?

Roberts laughed at me, drank some coffee, and paged through the file. Slowly, the smile slid off his face. “These are selfies. First one dated, what? Two years ago?”

I clawed at the back of my hand, which itched abominably. Psychosomatic. Definitely.

Roberts studied the screen, then studied me. He shook his head and looked back at the computer. My eyes were swimming.

Roberts said, “What’s the document— Oh. *Oh.*”

“Yes,” I said. “He was changing. Into something ... else.”

“Something ... batracian,” Roberts said.

★ ★ ★

“Hey,” Roberts said at about three in the morning. “There’s something drawn on this map, Griswold.”

He held it out to me. I hadn’t really looked at it before, except to determine that it was a large-scale driving map of southern New England. The sort of thing nobody bothers wrestling with anymore in the age of smartphones and GPS.

But there was a circle and a little *x* in gray pencil on it. It had been folded to show the inset map of Martha’s Vineyard, and the mark was just a tiny bit off the coast, out from the wilderness preserve on the long, flat southern edge of the island, which faces the open sea.

★ ★ ★

It’s easy to get a car ferry berth in the off-season, weather permitting, although the ferries don’t run as often after Columbus Day. And I didn’t have any place to be on Thanksgiving. Neither did Roberts. Well, he had an invitation from his daughter out in Ohio, but he said he didn’t feel like traveling. I happen to know he can’t stand his son-in-law, which probably had more to do with it than holiday traffic.

We didn’t talk much on the trip through Nantucket Sound. Unspoken agreement took us out on the top deck, towards the prow. A stiff wind blew into our faces and the swells pitched us up and down, but here in the shelter of the Cape and islands it wasn’t as bad as it might have been. Even so, when we passed into the protection of the Vineyard’s two protruding horns of land—known as East Chop and West Chop for

inscrutable, ancestral Yankee reasons—the sting of wind eased and I breathed a sigh.

We disembarked in Vineyard Haven, driving out of the belly of a ferry as big as a high school into a seemingly inexhaustible river of cars. The island air was brisk and salty. Houses and shops crowded the waterfront.

I wondered for how long this place could be saved. Surely the rising sea would claim it eventually.

There was money here, which might serve to protect it. And I supposed the historic homes, the elaborately painted gingerbread cottages, could be relocated to the mainland or up the hill to high ground, if the expense were deemed sustainable. Although the interior of the island was mostly protected forest. And if a few good hurricanes washed over it, I wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing came out below sea level.

You can't win an argument with the sea.

We drove around the circumference of the island. There were roads through the interior, more or less. But I wasn't certain if they would get us across the island any faster than taking the highway around. And I wanted to see the ocean.

Cape Cod was just visible, a line on the northern horizon. Nantucket was too far over the curve of the earth to catch a glimpse. There's no ferry between the islands in winter.

We'd stopped at the Black Dog beside the ferry terminal for coffee, and also gotten sandwiches for later. I used the paper cup to warm my hands while Roberts drove, and I tried not to be superstitious about folklore and fetches.

Black dogs are beasts of ill omen.

At last, having passed through Oak Bluffs and Edgartown, we came to the turnoff into the wildlife preserve. We parked. We'd have to hike in from this point.

We packed up the sandwiches, though neither one of us was hungry yet. We'd both gorged ourselves at the pie-and-breakfast place in Woods Hole before we got on the ferry. Lightly burdened, me carrying the map, we set out across the dune grass with Roberts in the lead. He frowned over his GPS: an old-school yellow plastic handheld one, because cell phones get intermittent reception in the islands. We were willful rebels against the signs warning us to prevent dune erosion by staying on the path.

★ ★ ★

Before long, we came to the *real* Atlantic. It took my breath away. Lines of waves marched to the open ocean; next stop, Africa. I tried not to think of Albert Gilman out there somewhere with rocks in his pockets, rolling in the deep.

He'd be on the other side of Cape Cod, anyway. Somewhere in Massachusetts Bay. His body would turn up someday, I guessed. Unless his peculiar transformation had been more than merely cosmetic and he'd returned to the deeps like a hatchling sea turtle.

If so, I hoped he'd make it. Lots of hungry things eat hatchlings, and anyone who's been paying attention to the news knows there are plenty of sharks in the waters off the Cape.

★ ★ ★

We made our way down to the beach, which was littered with the detritus of the previous week's storms: derelict limpets; the hulks of horseshoe crabs. We walked the margin for what seemed like a long time. It was hard going. Sand and worn pebbles turned under our boots and when we went closer to the water's edge the waves played keep-away.

There was plenty of kelp and bladderwort mixed in with the wrack, and plenty of small dead things. A few living ones too. I surprised a hermit crab in a conch shell big as my hand, scavenging. It took off toward the water. I let it go. A faint cold smell of decay came in waves, like the sea.

At long last we came in sight of what I took to be the landmark circled on the map. A tumbled finger of heaped stones—perhaps what remained of an ancient jetty, perhaps an eroded igneous spur—pointed into the cold Atlantic.

Roberts stopped. “Wow, I do not want to walk out on that.”

“I will.” I've never been afraid of water, and the sea was not angry. There would be some scrambling, and my boots might get wet. The rest of me certainly would, for where the breakers struck the boulders, white spray arced up, flashing in the pale late autumn sun.

I took my cell phone out of my pocket and wrapped it in a plastic bag from inside my knapsack. And tied the bag closed to be certain it would keep the water out.

Grumbling, Roberts followed me. Middle age comes with its share of aches and pains. I'd been luckier than a number of my contemporaries and was not yet suffering from arthritis or more than the usual complement of farsightedness and achy joints. I managed to keep up with my program of kayaking, swimming, and hiking well enough to be reasonably fit. I was no Roberts—he ran half-marathons, and while he'd never be competitive he was a lanky, not-too-tall sort who still had an eight-minute mile—but I got by.

It was a good thing I wasn't feeling scared, because the scramble was strenuous. I wished I'd brought gloves, heavy ones to keep the wet rock from abrading my hands. The black basalt had awfully sharp edges for being exposed to the power of the open sea, and the line of the finger was steadily ascending. As I walked it, I revised my estimation about the possibility of its being man-made, for I could discern no reason for humans to build a stone pier that rose to a peak out in the ocean. But the tallest rock looked flat on top, and at least the stairsteps lifted us above the spray and the threat of waves breaking over our path and washing us into the battering surf.

We reached the last rock and I revised my opinion again. The stones might have been a geological feature, a basaltic causeway of some sort. And, indeed, the enormous, squat, hexagonal basalt column we found ourselves atop might have formed by natural processes.

But the elaborate carvings marking its surface had not.

The top of the pillar was perhaps twelve feet in diameter, and when I glanced over the edge, I realized we had climbed, incrementally, a good two stories above sea level. I leaned quickly away from the vertiginous prospect, though it bothered me less than heights usually do.

I have never liked them.

As a distraction, I set myself to examining the markings carved into the tabletop-like plateau. I wasn't quite sure what I expected—pictograms, or names and dates carved in an elegant hand—but it wasn't a six-pointed star reaching point to point across the entire enormous Giant's Causeway-style basalt crystal. There was an elegant inscription in the center, in a stonemason's script that reminded me of colonial gravestones.

“Hey,” I said to Roberts, who was standing staring at the sea, “help me clean this off.”

He looked at me as if dragging himself back from interstellar distances. “Pardon?”

I gestured to the star. “Help me clean out this inscription. I want to see if I can make out what it says.”

We set to, and in fifteen minutes or so had the pebbles, sand, and bird droppings scraped away.

Latin?

I read a little Latin—a very little—but I hadn’t expected to find it here. Just one more piece of evidence that the eighteenth century had a higher standard of graffiti.

Roberts came to stand beside me as I leaned over the inscription and read: “*Fer corpus meum animumque mecum nunc Carcosam.*”

The world dropped out from under our feet.

★ ★ ★

Roberts and I hit hard, but not hard enough to hurt ourselves. We clutched each other and stayed upright, and found ourselves gasping up at a streaky, bubbling yellow sky flecked with black, unradiant stars. Not the kind of yellow sky which makes you expect a tornado. Not even the kind of yellow sky which results from a dust storm, or a forest fire. It was—and I say this advisedly—an uncanny color. A distressing color. It made me think of pus and the pulsating bodies of hungry maggots, and not in a good way.

I acknowledge there’s no good way to think about pus. There are probably good ways to think about maggots, if you’re an entomologist.

Self-consciously, I let go of my colleague. I felt terrible: achy and discombobulated, as if I had been fighting the flu.

“Right,” I said. “Well, we somehow wound up here. And we’re obviously talking about some very different physical rules.” I pointed at the pavement.

Roberts blinked at me. “Rocks?”

“Octagons,” I said. “Traditionally, they don’t interlock without small squares to make up the corners.”

“But honeycomb?”

“Hexagons,” I said. “Like the basalt pillar we were on. Your bathroom tiles, those are octagons. With the little black squares between the corners, because that’s how topology works.”

Well, that was how topology worked where *we* came from. *Here*, apparently octagons interlocked.

I hoped my amino acids didn't decide to celebrate by becoming unraveled. I couldn't be sure they weren't already doing so. I felt hungover, wrung out, and like my cranium was full of kitty litter. Roberts, rocking on his feet, pressing a fist into his stomach as if to counter a sharp pain, looked even worse.

Chalk one up for *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*.

"What the hell did you *say*?" Roberts asked.

"*Fer corpus meum animumque mecum nunc Carcosam*," I repeated.

"Sure." If his tone were any more soaked in exasperation it would have been dripping. "But what does it mean?"

"Oh." My cheeks burned from more than the—possibly mildly caustic—atmosphere. "Come with me, body and soul, to Carcosa."

"Hmm. So this is Carcosa." He straightened himself up and looked around. "What do we know about Carcosa?"

"There are some very weird towers in this city. If it is a city. I don't see anybody who might live here."

"These buildings do look like they were drawn by Dr. Seuss on cold medicine. The good stuff, with the codeine in it."

My eye had been drawn by a flicker of movement embedded in the soupy horizon. If you've ever seen bats rise from under a bridge at dusk, or a murmuration of starlings taking flight, you have an idea what it looked like: varying pinpricks flocking in weird, uneasy patterns, stretching and collapsing, spiraling obscenely. It looked more computer-generated than real. I half expected to find it had been projected.

But whatever was flocking rose, and spiraled (obscenely), and rose again. I had the unsettling impression of it casting about, like a hound after a scent. The shapes coalesced into a writhing arrowhead and darted in our direction. I thought at first that they weren't too far off—that they moved slowly, and were small. But then I realized they were bigger than human beings—the wingspans three or four times as long as I was tall—and they were very far away.

Far away, but coming fast, given the distance. Very fast indeed.

★ ★ ★

I put it in the file with interlocking octagons and got on with my life. A life which, currently, involved a frantic search of the surrounding area for someplace defensible.

“Greer,” said Roberts, “have you noticed that those are a lot of moons?”

“I have,” I said, casting about for a roof, a wall—anything that could serve to shelter us from a flying attack. “And they’re setting in front of those things flying towards us. And also in front of the towers and domes of the city.”

“Huh,” he said, in the bland tone of voice people reserve for real catastrophes. “Maybe they’re not actually moons, then.”

“Maybe it’s more topography.” I craned my head back and looked up at the sky. Something was making me nauseated, and I wasn’t sure if it was my strange exhaustion, or the seething yellow sky, or the way everything fit together entirely wrong. “Those flying things look like they have claws, don’t they?”

Just then, they began to swarm around the moons, or lanterns, or hot air balloons lit up from the inside, or whatever the hell those things were. The light shone through their bodies in unsettling patterns, as if through the gaps in the leaves of a *Monstera deliciosa*.

... as if through the gaps in a human rib cage.

“Oh god,” Roberts said, having apparently come to the same conclusion I had. “We could run to the towers.”

“I think they fly faster than we run.” Despite the enormous distances, the creatures were already much closer. I wondered when I would begin to hear the flapping of their leathery wings.

A voice I did not recognize spoke from behind me. “Very astute, stranger.”

I jumped, and turned in midair. Landed badly and staggered, but did not fall. I found myself facing someone—a man, sure. We’ll call him a man. He was naked, and his skin was rubbery black. His features were elegant, idealized. His eyes were gold, without sclera, with slit pupils like a cat’s. The eyes of a lion.

“Who are you?” I yelped.

“Does a trespasser demand *my* bona fides?” he mocked. “By rights, I should be asking you what brings you to Carcosa.”

“Accident.” I looked over at Roberts. He was dumbstruck, with his jaw hanging open. Apparently holding up the conversation was down to me.

And I was doing such a stunning job of it.

“That explains why you are standing here without shelter while the byakhee are rising in the distance, then. Oh, and why nobody has any guns.”

“Byakhee.” It was a strange word, and I rolled it around on my tongue.

They had nearly reached us. I felt my instinctive half-crouch, my readiness to throw my arms up to shield my face. But they broke off and circled, giving me lingering looks at their decomposed-seeming bodies that I could have quite happily survived without.

They made a terrible sound, a kind of gobbling shriek. It pierced my hearing. I slapped my palms over my ears, which eased the pain only a little.

The strange man turned his head toward me. An iridescent yellow reflection ran over his bald, poreless pate from the roiling sky. Somehow, when he spoke, his words came bell-clear through the terrible sound and my attempts to block it. “You really are an innocent. But I can smell your provenance on you. Come, let us advance past this annoyance.”

He held a glossy hand out to me. Gritting my teeth, I managed to yank my hands from my ears. I grabbed Roberts’s elbow with one hand, and the stranger’s fingers with the other.

The stranger nodded. Not to me. To the sky.

The roil increased. I felt as if I were watching one of those sped-up stop-motion films of cloudscapes tearing themselves around mountains. The moons crossed the zenith in spiraling synchrony and set—before the towers, on the other side of the sky. The byakhee whirled like vultures, faster, faster—until suddenly it seemed they were flung wide all at once, racing to the umpteen corners of the sky.

Nausea dizzied me. I doubled over. If I hadn’t been holding on to my companions, I would have put my hands on my knees.

As it was, all my effort went to not vomiting up my shoes.

While I was still gasping, two sickly conjoined suns rose: behind, I was relieved to note, the black domes and twisted, monolithic towers.

I was really astoundingly glad I was not a topologist.

“There,” the man said. He let go of my hand. I did not let go of Roberts’s. “They don’t love the daylight. Where did you come from?”

“There was a basalt pillar along the coast of an island. Martha’s Vineyard. I read some graffiti carved on it—”

“What on Earth were you doing there?” He put a funny emphasis on “Earth,” I thought, but I looked up at the twin suns in the yellow sky again, and wondered less.

I wasn’t sure what to say. Like Roberts, I opened my mouth soundlessly. Unlike Roberts, I closed it and tried again. What came out was a truth I had not even recognized until I spoke it. “I was looking for my family. The carving on the causeway brought us here.”

“To find your family, lost scion, you must look farther to the south than the causeway,” he said, almost kindly. “You turned in the wrong direction.”

“This place—”

“The gods of this place are related to the gods of that place. They are all very old.” He looked at Roberts. “None of them are the gods of your kind. You are fortunate that there are bonds of hospitality of a sort between your colleague’s people and those who dwell here.”

Roberts made a protesting noise. I hid a smirk. The reminder that he wasn’t always going to be first-billed would be good for him.

The stranger said, “Come along then, lost scion, I will help you get home. Follow me. And watch your feet while you walk. Humans find the topography confusing.”

“You don’t say,” Roberts muttered.

★ ★ ★

The stranger led us through ways that defied description, around buildings that seemed to twist into new shapes with every step we took. I felt as if I were walking at the edge of the CGI map of reality, so things flickered in and out and twisted in unlikely ways as the rendering failed and generally made me worry I was going to get stuck inside a boulder or something if I wasn’t careful.

I noticed I had grown hungry and thirsty only when Roberts held out a sandwich—somewhat the worse for wear since we’d purchased it at the Black Dog—to me. He didn’t say anything, and I took the sandwich with a

nod instead of a word. It seemed perilous enough that our footfalls echoed wildly with every step.

I could not have told you how long we had been walking when we emerged onto the shore of a tremendous bay. Roberts, who had continued tensely silent, let out an enormous sigh. My own relief was as sharp. And as short-lived, because a moment later we both noticed the lapping waves were not water but some heavy vapor streaming like fluid between the stones. The stones were jagged, unsmoothed.

There was a smell in the air, autumnal as chrysanthemums but not in any manner floral. The suns were edging toward the horizon on the far side of the lake. The sky and the mist above it were shading to ruddy and orange. The first and darkest of the black stars prickled out around the edge of the firmament.

I shuddered as if a chill touched me. Would the byakhee return with the moonsrise?

“Here.” Our guide pointed to a set of menhir stones, steles carved in alphabets which wavered before my eyes—and not because I needed my progressives updated. “Step into that circle, and speak as you spoke before. You recollect the incantation?”

I nodded. “I do not wish to be transported body and mind to Carcosa, however.”

He spoke over his shoulder, walking away. “You’ll find another word on the stones. It is the true name of the place you wish to return to. This gate will take you there.”

I called after him. “What did you mean, look further south? There’s nothing south of there but the ocean.”

He waved airily and did not look back.

I took a step after him. I might have broken into a run, but Roberts caught my wrist.

I had so many questions. “What did you mean, you can smell my provenance?”

But—with a subtle pop of air rushing to fill a sudden vacuum—he was gone.

“We have to go *back*,” Roberts said.

I stomped my foot like a fifties stereotype. “Fine.” Two steps had us better centered between the upright stones. There were words scribed

here, as well. I spat them out grumpily. “*Fer corpus meum animumque mecum nunc Noepe.*”

Another pop of displacement followed.

★ ★ ★

Astoundingly, I felt even worse when we came through on the other side. I fell—I probably would have gone flat on my face if it hadn’t been for Roberts hanging on to me—and skinned my knee right through my jeans. It turns out basalt has a little texture to it.

Roberts hauled me up again. He looked a little better than I felt, but his complexion was waxy and his hair looked ... stiff, and frayed. Like a sick dog’s pelt.

I said as much.

He snorted. “You’re pretty green around the gills yourself.” Still holding on to my wrist, he led me toward land.

It was a long, cold walk back to the car. Night was coming on fast and a needle-sharp rain had blown up. I wondered how long we’d been gone; it felt like a week. My phone, when I unwrapped it and turned it on, told me it was a little over twenty-four hours.

The ferry wasn’t running because of the storm. We found a last-minute emergency hotel in Edgartown. They were as happy to have us as we were to find them: most people don’t come to the Vineyard in the late autumn, and most hotels don’t stay open past sometime in mid-October.

Sensibly, all around.

The lady at the front desk studied me quizzically. “You look familiar,” she said with a certain hesitancy. “Have you been here before?”

“First time,” I admitted, accepting the key card. I snuck a look at the edge of her computer monitor and was relieved to confirm my phone’s intimation that we’d only been gone overnight.

“Family on the Vineyard?” It might have been a cheerful tone. It might have been a leading one. But it was the sort of question anybody might ask. As so often happens when one has an unconventional upbringing, small talk brought me up short and sharp.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m adopted.”

“Mmm.” Her eyes shifted from me to Roberts. She handed him a key card too. “Have a nice night. You can park your car in the lot around the

corner. Put this on the dash—it's got a map to show you which lot. I'm afraid it'll be a short walk back in the rain."

"I'll go," Roberts said. "It's not like I could be much wetter. See you for dinner?"

I didn't argue for the privilege of suffering a tiny bit more. Roberts could have the moral high ground. There was supposed to be a big tub in my room and I was done in. I would have opted for room service—if a hotel this size, in the off-season, offered it.

* * *

The water helped with the winter itch of dry and scaly skin. I dumped the complimentary bath salts in, and that helped too, though I wasn't sure peach jasmine ginger was really a scent suited to my personality. I scrubbed out the scrapes, including the bits of grit trapped in them, and was relieved when they didn't bleed too much. My shins looked like they were covered with eczema, so I coated them with free body lotion (peach jasmine ginger) before I pulled my muddy, torn jeans back on.

They were what I had to wear, unless I wanted to go see if the Black Dog was still open and pick up some touristy sweatpants.

* * *

We had dinner in one of the four or five restaurants in town that stayed open all winter, and I ate an entire clambake—this place called it "Lobster in the Rough" and it was comprised of a forearm-sized lobster, clams, mussels, linguça, potatoes, and corn on the cob—without any help from Roberts except when I had to fend him away from my sausage. When I found myself picking out the bits of kelp they throw in for that authentic buried-in-a-pit-of-coals-on-the-beach-at-low-tide flavor and dragging them through the remnants of my clarified butter before eating them, I gave up and ordered dessert. The kelp tasted even better than the potatoes, frankly.

I guess interdimensional travel takes it out of you.

Roberts did justice and more than justice to his own food. We didn't talk much: what *could* we say, in a crowded restaurant? But he did look up from his pie at one point and say, "We need to go back and document that."

"With GoPros," I agreed.

He nodded. “And guns.”

We finished our food and went back to the hotel.

★ ★ ★

I hadn't thought I would sleep, but I had reckoned without the combination of exhaustion, the enormous meal, and the hypnotic flicker of the Edgartown light along the horizon outside my sea-facing window. It's a beautiful place, Martha's Vineyard.

What a pity if the rising oceans do eventually wash it away.

I dreamed of undersea tourists gliding through the waters of the North Atlantic, no longer rich and murky with nutrients but as gorgeously transparent as any less fertile Caribbean sea. Their flippered feet kicked lazily, a dream of sunrays shining past them to illuminate the ruins of Oak Bluffs, of Tisbury, of Edgartown far beneath. They passed over Menemsha, a tiny hamlet whose industries are fishing and movie memorabilia—*Jaws* was filmed there—and I thought about the *Boston Globe*'s breathless coverage of the great white sharks that had returned to Cape Cod with the rebounding harbor seal population.

I guess they got the last laugh. If sharks laugh.

I was awakened by a cautious tapping sound sometime after midnight. I scrambled into some clothes—I hadn't brought anything to sleep in, and I wasn't about to expose Roberts to my dishabille—and opened the door a groggy, tousled inch.

There was no one in the hall. I checked twice. You know how it is when you're sleepy. I closed and re-latched the door, and was about to decide I'd overheard somebody else's assignation when the tapping came again.

My room had a balcony to go with its water view. This hadn't been relevant to my objectives when I fell first into the tub and then into bed. Now I walked toward the sliding glass door, and the shape outside it that I could glimpse, every few seconds, limned in the glow of the Edgartown light. I felt as if I might still be dreaming. I felt no fear, just a curious attraction to the glass, as if I stepped up silently to the partition keeping me from some dangerous animal in a zoo.

Except I was the one in the cage, wasn't I? Trapped inside this boxlike structure, while the creature out there stood comfortably in the rain

sheeting down its pebbled neck and shoulders, in the light reflecting dark green as kelp from its wet, gleaming hide.

“Hello,” I said, as I pulled the sliding door open. Rain and wind whipped around me. The vertical blinds rattled like knives in a drawer. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“We’ve encountered each other before,” the creature said in an awkward croak. “Well, after a fashion.”

It stepped inside.

★ ★ ★

“I met Albert Gilman last night,” I told Roberts the next morning. The rain had stopped, and we had taken our coffee up to the cold, exposed roof of the Chappy Ferry terminal. There were two ferries, and each could take about two cars at a time. They went back and forth across the narrow channel between Martha’s Vineyard and Chappaquiddick in a kind of square dance, each bending wide and reversing as they passed one another like partners swinging on the parquet. “He came to my hotel room.”

Roberts blinked. He sipped his coffee and looked away from the do-si-do-ing ferries. “That’s a hell of a conversational opener.”

“He’s gone a lot farther than he had in the documents he sent us,” I said. I glanced down at my own hand, and picked a thread of skin loose from a sunburned-looking patch by the base of my thumb.

“Oh,” Roberts said. He looked at me, mouth thinning. “Oh.”

“He wants me to come with him. To visit his people.”

Roberts nodded, as if knowing what I was going to say next. He looked at me, and kept looking.

I said, “Our people.”

Even if he had expected it, it still led to a long pause. “Is it safe? I mean ... you can come back?”

“Yes. I can come back. He gave me a ... a talisman. Until I’m better adapted to the pressure, and breathing water.”

“A talisman. *That* sounds like science.”

“It sounds like bullshit.” I choked on it, and laughed. But once I got it out, everything behind it followed in a hurry. “But maybe there is some science behind it. Maybe there’s science we can learn.”

“Maybe.”

“If I go will you wait for me?”

He laughed, this time. Forced, but not false. “It’s your car, Greer. I’m not going to steal it.”

“I’ll pay you back with a Nobel Prize in physics,” I promised.

“I’m a geneticist!”

I rolled my eyes so hard I gave myself a headache.

“*Frog people*, Michael. Have you been tuning in?”

* * *

The waves curled around my thighs. Albert stood beside me as I stared out into the Atlantic. I touched the amulet on my breast. “You’re sure about this?”

He croaked laughter. “I’ve never been sure about anything in my life,” he said. “But the salt water does help with the itching.”

“But. What do they want with me?” *What will they want from me?* I couldn’t ask him that. He wouldn’t understand.

“To welcome you to the family,” he said. “Once you’re ready to come live with our people full time, you’ll find a whole society. You’re one of us, and your children will know who they are from the start.”

I shook my head. “I’m past all that.”

“Some of the elders you’ll meet today are older than the Constitution,” he said. “You’re barely a teenager.”

I blinked at him. It was hard to tell, but I think he grinned at me.

We dove.

I knew the water was cold, but it didn’t feel cold. Albert was a shadow alongside me, drifting deeper and deeper, while the light grew dimmer and greener above. It was my dream, but the sea wasn’t lifeless. There were still clouds of plankton in the water; there were still schools of silvery fish darting away from us.

We swam down, and down. My lungs grew tired from the stress of moving water in and out and in again. My chest muscles ached as if I had been coughing for days. I envied Albert his gills. I touched the folds of my own throat hopefully: no luck.

Well, it would happen in time. I had grown confident, or perhaps resigned.

We descended. The pressure should have been unbearable, but it didn’t even make my ears pop. I wondered if I would need to fear the bends on our return. I did not swim as strongly as my companion. He

would kick once with his flippers, then glide and wait for me to catch up to him.

I touched the talisman on its cord. I was pretty sure its help was the only reason I managed to stay close to him, even with Albert going easy on me.

Albert spoke as we swam. I could understand him, but I could not reply. He asked questions, which I could not answer; it turns out it's not easy to make your vocal cords vibrate when your trachea is full of ocean water. The metallic salt of the sea filled my sinuses.

Albert asked if I was afraid, and said he had been. He'd been terrified. The language he spoke wasn't English, but I understood it as well as if it were. Another gift of the talisman? Or something intrinsic in the instincts in my unclassified DNA?

I didn't know. I'd find out, though. I was a scientist, and I was going where no scientist had both gone before and come back from. It wasn't my field but that didn't matter. I didn't have the attention to spare from curiosity to waste on being afraid.

★ ★ ★

I was not sure what I had expected, but an entire glorious undersea city wasn't it. An entire glorious undersea city existing in what should have been utter blackness, bioluminescing among the convolutions of deep-sea corals I had not even realized existed in the North Atlantic, swarming with large, pebble-skinned, sociable people.

★ ★ ★

They wanted me. They were interested in me.

They welcomed me, froggy eyes blinking, webbed fingers reaching out to touch my hair. They were curious and interested, and I was curious about them, too.

I could feel Albert's concern: he hovered close and tried to shield me from the swarm of fishy, froggy people surrounding me. Englobing me. Presenting me with pretty shells and glowing bits of coral. Albert waved them away, but I got the impression they didn't trust his judgment enough to let it override their own.

I felt like I was suffocating, and it wasn't just the water in my lungs. I kicked away, knowing it was futile. They were bigger and faster. They

belonged here.

I didn't belong anywhere.

★ ★ ★

I burst through the surface, gasping as if I had been holding my breath, thick salt water scouring my throat as I choked it up. I cast about, looking for pursuit, but I was alone except for the steady flash of the Edgartown light over the dark water. I should have been shuddering violently, but the cold didn't touch me.

Just as I drew a relieved breath of air, something big broke the water. I kicked myself around, expecting to feel teeth or clawed flippers—

It was Albert.

I was surprised to realize that I recognized him. I hadn't thought about being able to tell the frog people apart: I'd just assumed it would be impossible.

Bad scientist. No biscuit.

"You ran away," he said, his voice resonating through the water as his throat expanded.

"It was a lot of people," I answered, and salt water got in my mouth. Under the circumstances, his system was clearly superior. "I'm not good at people."

He held out a flippered hand. At first I thought he wanted me to take it, but I realized he was pointing back toward the horizon and the flicker of the lighthouse. In the east, the night was fading. "Do you want help getting home?"

"That's not my home," I said, and stopped myself before going any further. "Yes," I said. "I mean, yes. And if I haven't ruined things, I'd like to talk to you again."

"Sure," he said. "I've missed being around scientists."

★ ★ ★

Everybody expects something from you, and it's rarely for you to be yourself. It's your job to put everybody else first. To take care of them.

Well, I'm tired of it.

No computers under water. No particle accelerators. No—to judge from what Albert said—scientists.

I'm not sure that is the place for me, either. I'm not sure the place for me exists.

★ ★ ★

The thin gleam of pale beach grew wider against the horizon. We talked as we swam, and I realized I was a better swimmer than I had been. I'd never been a *bad* swimmer, but now my body seemed to work with the water rather than against it. I mentioned it to Albert, and he croak-laughed deep in his throat pouches and said, "That's only going to keep happening."

"So I'm turning into a—I mean, I'm changing, like you." Sand gritted under my flippers. I stood up. Waves broke around my thighs.

"Turning into a monster, you were going to say?" He loomed up beside me, half again my height and twice as broad, green-black hide camouflaged against the green-black ocean. "Look, what I've learned since I changed ... we've been living peaceably alongside you Yankee assholes for generations. And you people come down and blow up Jeffreys Ledge and Stellwagen Bank every time you notice us."

There we were, standing on the beach in November, yelling at each other through the rain. At least it would keep the beachcombers indoors. "Aren't you one of us Yankee assholes, at least in part? You seem much more comfortable with the change than you did in the diaries you sent me."

He turned and started walking away from the light. It was only a couple stories tall, and it sat right on the beach, surrounded by a low stone patio. I followed along behind him, my own gait less of a shamble.

For the time being.

"I've had time to get used to it. And..." Water splashed off his hide as he shook his froggy head. "I like the community. They ... take care of each other."

"Sounds a damned sight more humane than academia," I deadpanned through chattering teeth. Now that I was out of the water, I was starting to get cold.

He croaked what I could only assume was laughter. "Well, I didn't even have that, after ... after I flunked out. Also, I know *you* never bombed Jeffreys Ledge. I'm sorry about that crack."

"It's okay," I said. I reached out—reached up—awkwardly and patted his shoulder. "When did we bomb Jeffreys Ledge? Isn't that where the

whale watch boats go?”

“Nineteen twenty-eight,” he said. “But our people live a long time. Most of the ones you just met—”

“Briefly.”

“—remember.”

“Oh,” I said, doing math in my head. So most of them were more than ninety years old.

Most of us.

I remembered what he’d said about the Constitution.

“We’re here when you’re ready,” he said. “I should go back now.”

“What if I’m never ready?”

“You can’t avoid the sea forever,” he said. “It can outwait anyone.”

★ ★ ★

I returned to the hotel room. I took a hot shower. I still didn’t have dry clothes, but the room had a bathrobe. I put it on, and I went and rapped on Robert’s door. He opened it and stared at me.

“Do you have coffee? Or tea? I’m cold through the bones.”

“You’re back,” he said.

“For now,” I said.

He held the door wide. “Come in.”

★ ★ ★

How many physicists actually get to *go* to the stars? And pioneer a completely new field of physics? So, I’ve found an inexhaustible research subject.

And my family.

When I’m ready to deal with having a family.

If I’m ever ready to deal with having a family.

The ocean is big, after all. It might be a good place to be alone. Or maybe the Boston Aquarium needs a physicist. Or Woods Hole: is there such a thing as a deep-sea marine physicist?

There should be. I can always collect a few more degrees if it makes me more useful.

Why are my people in hiding?

I’m going to be the first frog people visibility activist. You see if I don’t. After all, it looks like, barring accidents, I’m going to live a very

long time ... barring accidents, inside-out monstrosities eating my face, or dread gods, I should say. But I'm tougher than humans are, and a firefight on an alien world against flying abominations is all in a day's work.

I have tenure. I should have time to do a lot of science. And I imagine I will have a lot less to worry about from certain coworkers as my *claws* grow in.

In the meantime, I also have some hypotheses to prove about gate technology, and the biology of byakhee.

Which brings us back, I suppose, to Roberts and me, the flimsy barricade, and the need to get back to our gate home right away.

I racked my shotgun and met Roberts's eyes. "In the immortal words of David Bowie," I said, "I'm ready."

We were going to be fine.

This story is for Marissa and for John.



Copyright © 2020 by Elizabeth Bear

Art copyright © 2020 by Eric Nyquist

JUDGE DEE

AND THE
LIMITS
OF THE
LAW



LAVIE TIDHAR

Judge Dee and the Limits of the Law

LAVIE TIDHAR

illustration by

RED NOSE STUDIO

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

1.

The sun had long set over the distant mountains, and the night world was still but for the two small figures trudging silently under the moonlight. One was tall and thin and moved with a precise energy. The other, smaller, kept hurrying to catch up behind. They wended their path over a dirt road threaded through the fields, earth beaten down under the tread of farmers' feet.

'There is a village up ahead, master,' the smaller figure said. 'If you are in need of feeding.'

The taller one said, 'One must feed out of necessity, not greed, Jonathan.'

'Of course, master.'

Jonathan peered ahead. He was grateful for the moon, for without its light he would find it hard to see, unlike his master. Too often in the moonless nights of their passage he tripped and stumbled and, once, would have fallen into a ravine had not his master interceded.

'A lesson lost on many of the young ones.' The master stopped, scenting the air. 'The postulant feeds from fear and hunger; the novice from greed; the lay vampire, if he has reached that far, feeds for it has learned to accept its nature. Not too little to starve. Not too much to bring about one's own destruction. Do you understand?'

'I ... yes?'

The master smiled. The smile tore his face in two, revealed his sharp white teeth, reached nearly to those clear and ancient eyes which saw the cruelty of the world long before his companion's birth. How many decades – centuries – the young assistant never asked. Jonathan was human, and warm-blooded, and young. And his master was Judge Dee.

The master had found him in circumstances Jonathan did not care to dwell on. There had been murder, fire, the flash of swords, the smell of blood. He was buried under a pile of corpses. He would have died.

Then the master appeared out of the night, pulled Jonathan out effortlessly from beneath the pile, carried him to a cave in the hills high above, and restored him to health. He cooked and fed him chicken broth. In all his time, later, with the master, Jonathan had never seen a vampire cook.

His nature was apparent. And Jonathan had seen, had known vampires were in the world. He had not known the judge's plans for him, but he could guess.

Yet the judge proved him wrong.

This is what Judge Dee said to him:

'I will not kill you, for you are not my prey. I will not turn you, either. I make no vampires, and you will live and die a mortal man. Perhaps you'll thank me for it.'

His tone of voice then made it clear the judge was not used to being thanked.

'Then, what?' the boy had asked.

'I need you for a task. That's all. Show me the way to the lord's keep, the one who sacked your village.'

Jonathan was afraid then. His mind shied from the nightmares he had witnessed.

'No,' he said, 'do not ask me for that.'

'I,' the Judge said mildly, 'do not ask.'

The Incident at the Hell of Black Rock, as Jonathan, later, in his private journals, titled their adventure, was one that often haunted his dreams. He no longer slept in the night, of course. But nightmares, all the same, came to him when he slept.

The judge, as always, had carried out his task. He passed judgement. And, having concluded his task, he went on his way.

The boy, perhaps not knowing where else to turn, followed him.

And the judge, though he made no comment one way or the other, allowed it to be so.

Now they were two, and travelling the long night, which is all the nights of the world joined into one, and they were companionable. And Jonathan could hear laughter in the distance, and smell meat roasting on coals. And his stomach growled.

'Well, if you are sure, master...' he said.

Judge Dee sighed. 'I suppose we could make a short stop,' he said.

2.

The inn was warm. The fire burned. Jonathan sank his teeth into the roasted flesh of a pig. Blood poured down his chin. He stuffed a chunk of bread into his mouth. He took a gulp of red wine that dribbled down onto his dirty shirt.

Judge Dee, wrapped in his cloak, his fingers interlaced where his hands rested upon his chest, sighed again.

‘You eat like a vampire,’ he said. It was not meant as a compliment.

‘I am hungry, master,’ Jonathan said. He tried to calculate how many days now it had been since they last stopped. He had subsided on dried cheese and even drier apples for two days now. His master could be kind, when the mood took him. But, a follower of the ancient Greek philosophy of Asceticism, he often forgot other people were weaker.

‘Well, mind your manners, Jonathan. And wipe your face. Eat slowly. Enjoy each mouthful. You never know if it won’t be your last.’

‘Yes, master,’ Jonathan said. He tried, he really tried. He was just so *hungry*.

It seemed a prosperous village. The road inn was well-lit and the stables full. The houses seemed clean and well-maintained. A group of Carmelites sat at one table, a gaggle of traders from Venice and Genoa at another. Jonathan stared at the two serving girls, who must have been the landlord’s daughters. Judge Dee stared at the traders. There was a certain similarity in the companions’ twin attentions.

‘Are you sure you won’t feed, master? You must eat, as all beings must eat.’

The master smiled. He did not smile often, but his young companion brought the expression to his face more often than others.

‘I see your hunger is for more than food,’ he said.

Jonathan blushed.

‘They *are* fetching,’ his master allowed. ‘Though they’re hardly likely to be impressed by your table manners.’

‘Yes, master.’

‘Eat,’ Judge Dee said, dismissing the issue. ‘We should be on our way. The road is long and the case before us is somewhat peculiar.’

‘How so, master?’

Judge Dee frowned.

‘You,’ he said, addressing the traders.

‘Us, sir?’

‘Know you of the Valle di San Filippo?’ Judge Dee said.

The traders exchanged glances.

‘Pleasant enough, sir,’ one of them allowed.

‘Good tomatoes,’ another said.

‘Tomatoes?’ Judge Dee said.

‘And strawberries, in early summer.’

‘I see,’ Judge Dee said. ‘And the Castello d’oro?’

‘Oh, no, sir. You don’t want to go there, sir. Very bad...’ The trader paused in a search for words.

‘Climate?’

‘Yes,’ the trader said, with some relief. ‘Very dark *climate*, sir. Most unpleasant.’

‘Castello dell’orrore, sir!’ another of the traders said.

The master smiled politely at the pun.

‘The Castle of Horrors, master?’ Jonathan said. That did not sound very nice. But then, following the master involved what passed for horrors on a regular basis, and fresh strawberries almost never.

‘The castle of gold, Jonathan,’ the master said. ‘And it is—’

‘Our destination?’ Jonathan said. He sighed and finished the last of his wine. One of the serving girls turned and flashed a smile at him, but he was no longer paying attention.

‘Of course it is, master,’ he said.

3.

The Castello d’oro perched on the side of the high hill and was built in the new Gothic style. It was a style favoured by Benedictines, with groin vaults and clustered piers, and the walls were stout stone. The moon rose over the castle as Judge Dee and his human companion climbed the steep approach.

Below them the valley lay in darkness. Overhead, Jonathan saw bats circling in silence under the light of the moon. A black raven stared at

them from the bare branches of a gnarled tree. It was disconcertingly quiet, and the only sound in the night was that of Jonathan's breathing, Jonathan's footsteps on the stones.

The master, of course, made no sound.

They came to the castle gates. Jonathan panted, for the climb was arduous, and the master did not favour rest stops. The master raised his fist and knocked on the gates, three times. The sound broke the night and echoed over the valley, and somewhere in the distance a dog barked.

The gates creaked open.

There was something theatrical about this, of course. But also something practical. There was a *reason* vampires favoured hilltop castles, and it was the same reason the Romans had built *castelli* in their time and why Europeans embraced castles after the fall of the Carolingian Empire. It was defensive.

So vampires liked castles, and they liked the gates to ominously creak, and they liked the floorboards to make a sound when you stepped on them and, in short, they wanted to be well informed in *advance* if anyone, especially people with sharp sticks, were approaching.

So the gates creaked open. Four black-clad figures stood guard, holding burning torches. Their faces were bare. Jonathan saw the unnatural pallor of their skin. They flashed sharp canines in a smile that was a warning.

'Who dares disturb the silence of this castle?' they said in unison.

Judge Dee stared at them without expression, and one by one the young vampires closed their mouths and turned their eyes away.

'I am Judge Dee,' the judge said. He spoke quietly and coldly and the four vampires rocked in place as though hit. A bird cried overhead. A bat fell down from the skies and when it hit the cobblestones it turned into a man. He wore a dark robe and glittering gold rings upon his fleshy fingers, and his hair was slicked back and oiled. He had the cruel bitterness of coffee.

'Master Dee,' the vampire said. 'I bid you welcome. Come, come! You must be parched. I am Baron Guido.'

'Indeed?' Judge Dee murmured.

'You are here even sooner than we'd hoped.'

'I travel light,' Judge Dee said.

More bats fell from the sky. They too transformed. The baron, it seemed, had surrounded himself with a whole coterie of young, recently turned vampires.

‘These are all your offspring?’ Judge Dee said. It was clear from his voice what he thought of such a thing, and the baron turned even paler than he had been.

‘Mine and my brother’s,’ he said. ‘But I can assure you, they are heedful of the Unalienable Obligations, and are below the Stated Limits of Excess—’

‘They must feed prodigiously.’

Baron Guido did not reply. The judge, too, said nothing more. At last the baron turned and led the way. Judge Dee followed their host and Jonathan followed Judge Dee.

They went into the castle. It was gloomy, for vampires require little light, and Jonathan had trouble making out the numerous paintings that hung on the walls.

‘I see you have a Cavallini,’ Judge Dee said. Jonathan knew of the master’s fondness for the new painters.

‘Do I?’ Baron Guido shrugged. ‘They all look much the same to me.’

‘And a Gaddo Gaddi.’

‘Who?’

‘You do not appreciate art?’

‘These are just things,’ the baron said, ‘they are there to be owned.’

‘I see.’

The judge once more fell silent. They arrived in a large hall. There were even more vampires there, and some human familiars, but they were few. More numerous were the vampires’ prey. Jonathan felt his stomach turn. The vampires feasted carelessly. Blood stained the rugs and floor. A human corpse lay rotting in one corner of the hall. No one had sought to remove it.

The judge took it all in. He was an ascetic and a purist, and he looked on such displays as vulgar.

But they were not against the code of law.

Judge Dee was a judge. He passed judgement. Vampires did not have many laws but the ones they had had been codified for millennia. And sometimes there were disputes. In such cases a judge could be sent for. This was one such case.

Baron Guido took a seat upon a garish gold throne engraved with bats. He was that sort of vampire. He sipped blood from a golden goblet. He gestured expansively to the judge, at the human subjects chained to the floor.

‘Please, drink,’ he said.

‘Tell me why I am here,’ Judge Dee said.

The baron’s face twisted in an expression of hate. His red eyes flashed.

‘It is that *bitch!*’ he said.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Lady Isabella of the Shroud,’ the baron said. He pointed a long, thin finger with a nail like a blade. ‘She killed my brother.’

‘I see.’

‘For three centuries there were two of us who ruled Castello d’oro. Well,’ he said, ‘I mean, the current structure is obviously new, one tries to keep with the times. But my brother and I have ruled in this region for centuries. I am Guido and he was Enzo, and we are of the blood of Árpád.’

‘The Conqueror of the Carpathians...’ Judge Dee murmured. ‘He has not been seen for well over a century. His seat on the Council remains vacant.’

The baron waved a hand. ‘He sought the high mountains and solitude. Much as my brother and I did. We have lived undisturbed here in this pleasant place. Our nearest blood-neighbour was Sir Mattia of the Valle di San Filippo. A boorish oaf, but peaceable enough till his demise.’

‘Oh?’

It was funny, Jonathan reflected, not for the first time, how often vampires styled themselves barons and dukes and earls and sirs, for all that the titles were entirely self-applied. But he knew these were the exception to the rule. Many more vampires were destitute, living in the shadows of urban centres as little more than rats, or hid away in the countryside as poor hermits.

‘Some twenty years ago, Sir Mattia fell for a mortal woman by name of Isabella. In truth this sort of thing happened every few decades. He was something of a *morto di figa*, if you know what I mean. He liked them warm and willing, for some reason.’

‘I see.’

‘Only this time, the stupid oaf *turned* the bitch. He made her his vampire queen! And six months later he was dead.’

‘Oh? You suspect foul play was involved?’

‘My brother and I did, at the time. Of course we did. What else could it be? But we had no proof. And it was not our manor.’

‘I see.’

Jonathan had noticed before the judge’s interrogation technique. He said little beyond meaningless little prompts. He let the speaker implicate themselves. He listened to the silences between the words, and the absences behind them.

The baron said, ‘She styles herself Isabella of the Shroud. A month ago, my brother paid a neighbourly visit to her keep. He never came back.’

Baron Guido stared mournfully into the distance.

‘She murdered him,’ he said.

4.

Early on in their acquaintance, and after the Incident at the Abbey of Eternal Dusk, Jonathan finally dared ask Judge Dee about the law.

The judge had just risen from his slumber. Unusually, he had fed. There was a crimson glow to his usually pale skin.

‘The law?’ he said. ‘The law is simple.’

‘How so, master?’

‘Vampire kind do not have any real law,’ the judge said. ‘We follow not the human codes. We kill, much as a lion kills or an eagle. So we do not view the killing of humans as murder. Of course, we do not have to kill to live. But one follows one’s nature, and oftentimes the true joy is in the hunt and the consummation, more than in the meal itself. Does that make sense?’

‘I suppose,’ Jonathan said. ‘So what *do* you judge, master?’

‘The first law,’ the judge said, ‘is that not all vampires are created equal. A vampire is endowed by their progenitor with certain unalienable conditions. Chief amongst these is the condition of eternal undeath.’

Second, the condition of living forever in fear of exposure. And third, the condition of living eternally in the pursuit of prey.’

‘I see,’ Jonathan said, who didn’t.

‘To be allowed to roam the earth, one must obey the law. The Council I serve is thus instituted among vampire kind, deriving their powers from the just fear of the governed.’

Jonathan looked at him expectantly, and the judge sighed.

‘To put it simply,’ he said, ‘any of our own who poses a threat to our existence must be harshly judged. These are the laws: that a vampire may not reveal the existence of other vampires. That a vampire may not create an excessive amount of offspring. That a vampire may not kill another vampire without justification or valid excuse. And the fourth law: that a vampire must obey the rulings of the Council.’

‘They are rules of survival?’

‘Exactly, Jonathan. To draw attention to our existence is punishable by death. To generate offspring so that they run rampant and draw attention to our race is punishable by death. To murder another vampire without sufficient reason is—’

‘Punishable by death?’

The judge smiled. ‘Not necessarily. Vampire murder is not uncommon, and would not usually concern the council. A predator may kill another predator, after all. But in certain circumstances...’

5.

There were clauses and sub-clauses, of course. Humans *could* be told of the existence of vampires, for instance. But only as familiars or servants. And there were whole branches of the *Pax Lamia* of which Jonathan was ignorant. But the ones the judge shared with him that first time were the major ones.

Now they trudged their way away from the Castello d’oro and down to the neighbouring valley. Under the moon the judge moved like a wolf. The fields were fragrant and the earth was dark and wet and it was good. Jonathan helped himself to an apple and the apple was sweet.

‘What did you make of the good baron?’ the judge asked.

‘He said he suspected Sir Mattia was murdered by his queen.’

‘And...?’

‘And he and his brother did not summon a judge then.’

‘No,’ Judge Dee said. ‘They did not.’

‘My guess is they were quite happy with the older vampire’s death. A young bride, and freshly turned ... It would be easy enough to arrange for her to follow her husband into the dark.’

‘And...?’

‘Take this valley for their own?’

‘Indeed, Jonathan,’ the judge murmured.

‘The baron and his brother made numerous offspring. They must strain at the limits of endurance for the local human population.’

‘Yes...’

‘Gaining control of the Valle di San Filippo would more than double their domain.’

‘Indeed,’ the judge said. ‘And what else did you surmise?’

‘I thought the idea of a neighbourly visit somewhat suspicious,’ Jonathan said.

This time, the judge almost laughed. Clearly he found the idea preposterous.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘Here we are.’

Jonathan looked ahead. The keep of the Lady of the Shroud rose just ahead, a tall and rather charming-looking building in the Romanesque style, brightly lit against the night.

It was in stark contrast to the baron’s abode.

They approached. The gates were closed and once again the judge knocked. This time, however, only a small door opened by the side of the gate, and a human servant stuck out her head and blinked at them.

‘Oh, hello,’ she said.

‘Is your mistress home?’ the judge inquired.

‘Depends who’s asking,’ the servant said. ‘No offense, sir. But the hour is late and you are—’

‘I am Judge Dee.’

There was a crash from inside the keep and the servant jumped, then withdrew. A moment later the gates opened. A small, solitary figure wrapped all in the traditional black stood in the moonlight awaiting them.

Jonathan stared. She was lovely, he thought. Like a rose that had been plucked in the peak of its bloom and then preserved, forever, in ice. Her face was pale and her eyes were red and when she smiled her incisors were sharp and long.

‘I bid you welcome, Judge Dee!’ she said. ‘Word of your wisdom has reached even here, in this remote and lonely valley. Please, come. To what do I owe this pleasure?’

Which, Jonathan translated silently in his head, really meant: what the hell are you doing in my house, and how much trouble am I in?

The judge inched his head.

‘You do me kindness by your invitation,’ he said. He stepped over the threshold and Jonathan followed. The vampire queen took Judge Dee’s hands in hers. She glanced into his eyes, though not for long. The judge’s gaze could be discomfiting, even to another vampire.

Perhaps *especially* to a vampire.

Then the lady surprised Jonathan by greeting him, too. She took his hands in hers and her hands were ice cold, as though she had just emerged from the grave.

‘Welcome,’ she said. ‘What is your name?’

‘It’s ... It’s...’ he stammered. ‘Jonathan, my lady.’

‘Jonathan,’ the lady said. ‘That is an unusual name. Where are you from?’

‘England, lady.’

‘You are a long way from home!’ the lady exclaimed in surprise.

‘The boy is with me,’ the judge said shortly, before Jonathan could stammer some more. ‘Now, may we—’

‘Of course. Excuse my manners.’ The lady released Jonathan’s hands and smiled. ‘The last... *visit* I’d had rather unsettled me.’ Her shrewd eyes examined Judge Dee. ‘Is that why you are here?’

But, of course, she knew. She led them in. To a pleasant house smelling of crushed rosemary and sage. It was warmly lit. Human servants passed silently. There was little art on the walls but even Jonathan, with his untrained eye, could tell it was exquisite. The lady led them to the main hall, where the ice sculpture of a large swan was on display. Jonathan was startled. Ice was expensive and hard to come by.

He also noticed the absence of any other vampires.

‘Do you need to feed?’ the lady said. ‘I could summon a suitable candidate—’

The judge waved off the offer. ‘Perhaps later,’ he said – much to Jonathan’s despair. He sat down and the lady did likewise. Jonathan perched himself in a corner. He was used to being neither seen nor heard.

‘You are here about the Baron Enzo?’ Lady Isabella said. ‘He was a pig, and his brother still is.’

The judge nodded. ‘I have met Baron Guido,’ he said.

‘Then you know I speak truth.’

The judge inched his head.

‘Tell me what happened,’ he said – almost gently.

6.

It was later, and it was night again. Which meant the castle was awake, the torches burning, and pleasant music filled the halls, and pleasant scents of fresh roses this time, and cooking for the lady’s human servants.

Thankfully, one such servant appeared just then to deliver upon Jonathan a sumptuous plate of roasted pig and bread and cheeses, and Jonathan fell on the food as though starved. Travelling with an inhuman vampire, Jonathan often reflected – one equipped, such as he was, with an inhuman appetite – was often taxing on his human companion, and there were many a night when Jonathan ate little if at all. So Jonathan ate when he could, and now, as always, the judge watched him with something like fascination.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘what did you think of the lady’s story?’

Jonathan wiped grease off his lips and waved a gnawed bone in the judge’s general direction. Judge Dee’s face looked almost pained at the sight.

‘She’s a sweet lady,’ Jonathan said.

‘A *sweet lady*?’ the judge said.

‘Sure, yes. It must be hard, even for a vampire queen, against the males of the species,’ Jonathan said. ‘And for one so recently initiated into the brood, too. The brothers planned to prey on her perceived weakness, and got a nasty shock for their pains.’

He sucked on the bone and tossed it carelessly on the plate before tearing a rough chunk of bread to soak the fat up with.

‘My verdict,’ he said, ‘is not guilty.’

‘She’s a *vampire*,’ the judge said. ‘Vampires are *always* guilty.’

‘You do not believe her?’ Jonathan said.

The judge interlaced his fingers. ‘To sum it up,’ he said, ‘the good lady Isabella claims Sir Enzo attacked her in her castle, and that – more by luck than any skill of hers – he died.’

‘Impaled on a silver-coated cross,’ Jonathan said.

‘Indeed.’

‘A strange thing to keep in a vampire castle.’

‘Not so strange if you aim to repel other vampires from invading your domain...’ the judge said. ‘Come. Let us take a look at it ourselves. Have you finished your supper?’

Jonathan, with a rib halfway to his mouth, stared mournfully at the judge.

‘If it pleases you, master,’ he said miserably.

7.

The lady’s crypt was lit in the traditional way. Fat candles guttered and spluttered and cast misleading shadows over innocent-looking yet deadly contraptions.

‘Mind the trapdoor,’ Lady Isabella said carelessly as they came in. ‘It leads into an oubliette.’

Jonathan, with one foot raised over what appeared to be just another part of the floor, froze. The judge stepped smoothly over the trap, then hissed when a piece of black cloth slid down from the wall to reveal a cross.

‘Chiara, Alice!’ Lady Isabella cried. Two human servant girls materialised almost instantly and covered the cross again.

‘Another one of your ... protections?’ the judge said. He almost sounded irate.

Lady Isabella shrugged. ‘My husband’s, mostly,’ she said. ‘I got used to it. In truth the oubliette has not been used in decades and I have always

lived here peacefully, myself. At least, until the unfortunate incident with the baron.'

'He came *here*?' the judge said. 'To your *crypt*?'

The lady nodded. 'Where best to attack? It was just before dawn, and I was at my weakest. He was an elder vampire, and I only newly turned, as you can no doubt tell. There is more human in me than vampire. Lucky for me, the room had been designed for just such an eventuality. I'm afraid Baron Enzo himself triggered the mechanism that plunged the silver cross into his heart.'

'Dangerous things you keep about you,' the judge said.

'To live as a vampire is to live in ever present danger,' the lady said.

The judge inched his head.

'What will happen to me?' the lady said. 'Will I be sentenced? I did not cause his death, Judge Dee. I am an innocent.'

'No vampire is ever innocent,' the judge said, and the lady turned even paler than she was, if such a thing were possible.

'Then you have passed your judgement?' she said. 'And I am found in breach?'

She fell to her knees. Presented her white neck to the judge.

Jonathan swallowed.

'Then put an end to me,' the lady whispered.

The moment lengthened. Abruptly, the judge turned on his heels and left the crypt.

'Postponed,' he announced, as he crossed the threshold.

Jonathan leaped after him in his eagerness to escape that place of death.

8.

And that should have really been that, Jonathan thought. He stood with his master at the top of the castle, watching the moon in the sky. Dark birds flew against the white surface of the moon.

'Where is the corpse?' the judge said.

'The corpse, master?'

'Of this Baron Enzo,' the judge said.

‘Would it not simply turn into dust?’ Jonathan said.

‘Perhaps,’ the judge allowed. ‘But he was not very old. There should be a corpse.’

‘Even though a cross, and silver, were both used in his death?’ Jonathan said.

He watched the dark birds fly against the moon. They seemed to be growing in size.

‘Perhaps.’

‘Did you ask the Lady Isabelle?’

‘I did.’

‘What did she say?’

‘That it had turned to dust.’

Jonathan mulled this over.

‘So...’ he said.

‘So?’

‘Do you think she’s lying?’

‘She strikes me,’ the judge said, ‘as either a very innocent person or a very good liar.’

‘...And no vampire is innocent?’

The judge, almost, smiled.

Jonathan watched the birds fly against the moon. Though they weren’t flying against the moon any longer. There was a whole cloud of them and it was descending rapidly, onto the castle—

He let out a shriek he was immediately embarrassed by, but the skies were full of bats.

9.

Jonathan did the thing Jonathan did best.

He hid.

Of course, one could hardly hide effectively from a vampire. And the bats, as they came down in a black cloud over the castle, metamorphosed effortlessly back into what were most certainly vampires. Jonathan saw Baron Guido and his men.

And, had they in mind to murder Jonathan specifically, they would have found him.

But they didn't come for Jonathan.

They came, very clearly, for the Lady Isabelle.

Instead, of course, they found Judge Dee.

Jonathan watched the battle from his hiding place. He could make little sense of it. Things moved too fast. Shapes blurred and wolves became bats and bats became men and men died, horribly, at the hands of Judge Dee. Vampire soldiers burst into flames. Vampires bled and vampires *dried* and vampires, most certainly, vampires *died*.

Judge Dee was old. These young bloods were nothing to him. He moved so fast Jonathan never saw him, only the bloodied aftermath.

At last there were only two on the roof of the castle.

The judge, standing still.

Baron Guido, with an ugly round object in his hand.

'This is no matter for you, Judge!' he shouted. 'This is between me and her!'

'You are uncouth,' the judge said, 'and discourteous.'

'She has to *pay*!'

The baron brought the ugly object up into the air. The moonlight caught it. Jonathan held his breath.

The baron's brother's head dangled from the baron's fingers by the hair.

An ugly, wizened thing it was.

'She *sent* it,' the baron said. 'This is a declaration of war. So step aside. This is not your business.'

The judge stood still. He watched the baron and the baron's brother's head.

'...Interesting,' he said.

'Step aside!'

The judge regarded him without expression. Then moved to let the baron pass.

'By all means,' the judge said.

10.

They heard the baron move throughout the castle. Jonathan heard curses, thumps, a door being broken down.

Then a scream.

Then it was quiet again, and only the moon shone down on the castle. Jonathan shivered, for the night was suddenly cold.

The bodies of the baron's men lay all about them.

The judge merely waited.

Presently there was the sound of light footsteps.

Jonathan turned.

She was very pale in the moonlight and her eyes were red and so were her fangs. She bowed her head modestly to Judge Dee.

'Have you passed your sentence?'

'Where is the baron?' Judge Dee said.

'Sadly he fell to his death,' Lady Isabelle of the Shroud said.

'His death?'

'My lord's oubliette. I had it done up recently. With spikes.'

'Coated in silver?'

'I believe so,' she said.

Jonathan shivered again. The lady came to him. She took his hands and her hands were warm, as though she had just fed.

She gazed into Jonathan's eyes.

The judge said, 'You would wish to claim his castle for your own?'

The Lady Isabelle said, 'It is time the Castello dell'orrore regained its true name, now that at least some of its horrors are, well...' She kicked one of the dead vampires who littered the ground. 'Gone,' she said.

The judge said, 'My authority does not extend here. There is no judgement when there is no one to judge.' He nodded to her. 'My lady.'

'Judge.'

The judge turned. 'Come, Jonathan. Let us depart.'

The lady said, 'You are welcome to stay the n—'

'Thank you, no. Jonathan?'

'Master, but, I do not understand—'

'Well,' the judge said, and though he spoke to Jonathan his eyes, Jonathan saw, were on the lady, 'you are only human.'

The sun had long set over the distant mountains, and the night world was still but for the two small figures trudging silently under the moonlight. One was tall and thin and moved with a precise energy. The other, smaller, kept hurrying to catch up.

The Valle di San Filippo lay far behind at their backs.

‘She will have thirty, forty years at best of peace,’ the judge said. He had been silent all this while. Jonathan was merely grateful for the basket of food one of the lady’s servants had slipped him at the gate on their departure. ‘I wonder, is it worth it?’

‘Master?’

‘Her hands were cold. But there was ice. Her lips were red, her face was pale, but there are creams and powders that can do such things. Prosthetics for the teeth. And so on. Still. It is a dangerous game to play.’

‘Master, she is *human*?’

‘She kept the brother’s head and sent it to Guido when the right time came. She took a desperate gamble, you see. She knew a judge would come and yet she didn’t cower but turned it into opportunity. What a woman!’

The judge stopped. He turned to Jonathan.

‘She couldn’t hope to ever beat the baron and his men. Not on her own. You noticed the absence of other vampires. One cannot gift what one does not have. She had no army, no weapon but her mind. She needed help. She saw me for the fool I am.’

Judge Dee laughed. It was an awful sound. It was the first time Jonathan had ever heard the judge laugh.

‘She lured the baron to attack when I was present. She used me as her blade.’ He put his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. ‘Humans never cease to surprise me,’ he said.

A small black bird fell down from the sky then. It landed on the judge’s arm.

Judge Dee reached and unchained a small metal capsule from the bird’s foot. The bird cawed, once, and took back to the air.

Jonathan sighed. He thought longingly of a hot bath and a warm fire and sausages frying in a pan. He thought of the lady back in her castle. He wished her well. He wished her peace.

The judge unrolled a tiny piece of parchment and studied it silently, then put it away.

‘Come, Jonathan,’ he said. ‘It seems we are needed in Genoa.’



Copyright © 2020 by Lavie Tidhar

Art copyright © 2020 by Red Nose Studio

IAN TREGILLIS



HAMMER AND
TONGS
AND A **RUSTY**
NAIL

A WILD CARDS STORY

HAMMER AND TONGS AND A RUSTY NAIL

IAN TREGILLIS

illustration by

MICAH EPSTEIN

T O R
D O T
C O M

“Call Darcy.”

The voice was faint but crystal clear, in exactly the way Mordecai Albert Jones sometimes imagined would presage the creeping onset of dementia. He paused in dismantling an Imperial LeBaron land yacht, straining to listen past the fading shriek of torn metal. But the scrapyards were quiet; he heard only the thrum of a chill spring wind and clinking of chains somewhere nearby. With a shrug, he tore the junker’s hood down the middle like a piece of tissue paper, extracting the mercury switch from the trunk light.

It was getting difficult to find spare mercury just lying around these days. Many of the heavy metals, really. Either they were valuable, and people stole them—like the platinum in old catalytic converters—or toxic, and over time manufacturers had stopped using them. He couldn’t begrudge a change from the old days that was so much better for the environment, but it meant a growing portion of his diet had to be ordered from sketchy suppliers in eastern Europe. For some reason, a lot of strontium had flooded the market after the horrific events in Kazakhstan. But he wouldn’t touch that stuff with a ten-foot pole. Never would.

“Gosh dang it. Call DAR-SEE.”

Mordecai paused again, his prize pinched between thumb and forefinger. That was definitely a voice. Louder this time. Actually, two voices. It sounded like somebody was having a conversation with a mentally challenged robot.

“Okay. Dialing the pharmacy.”

“No. *DAR-SEE*.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

The first voice started to giggle. “Doll Carcy.”

“Shall I search for car seats?”

Mordecai glanced at the glass bulb in his hand, its thimbleful of mercury gleaming in the sunlight. Consuming heavy metals was how his ace kept him strong, his bones unbreakable, his flesh impervious. The

unusual diet had certainly never seemed to be deleterious to his health. Strontium was better, but increasingly difficult to get without a high tax in moral compromise. Mercury would do in a pinch. But now, listening to the faint surreal conversation unfolding around him, he remembered *Alice in Wonderland*. Lewis Carroll's Mad Hatter was supposedly inspired by the mercury poisoning that commonly afflicted hatters of his era, something to do with making felt. *Hmmm*.

"Tall horsey—aww, nuts," said the giggly voice. Something plopped to the dirt a few yards from Mordecai, kicking up a cloud of dust with a muted *crack*.

Okay, that wasn't a hallucination. Or if it was, Mordecai was already too far gone to worry about it. He walked a few strides and picked up a phone. Fractures spiderwebbed the glass screen.

"Hey there, fella."

Mordecai held the phone to his ear. "Yes?"

More giggling, but it didn't seem to be coming from the phone. "Any chance you could call someone for me? It'd be real swell of you."

That voice ... there was something vaguely familiar about it. Which, Mordecai supposed, did nothing to rule out a delusion.

The wind kicked up, and with it, the creak and rattle of chains. "Oh, cripes."

Aha. Yes. He'd definitely heard that voice before. It'd been a few years, but Mordecai remembered now. He looked up.

Wally Gunderson hung thirty feet overhead, splayed across the face of an electromagnet. The breeze had it swaying like a carnival ride. "Call my friend and tell her—" The metal man broke off in a giggling fit. "—tell her it hap, it, it happened again, would ya?"

He sounded drunk, which seemed a little out of character for the ace known as Rustbelt. Not that Mordecai knew him particularly well. They'd been on TV together, kind of, more than a decade ago.

Mordecai frowned. "Are you okay up there? Is that healthy for you?"

It was difficult to read the expression on the iron face. But something about the set of the steam-shovel jaw suggested mild relief. "Whew, you're real. It sure gets confusing up here."

Yeah ... he didn't sound right. Poor kid needed help.

"Hold on," said Mordecai. He set the damaged phone on a stack of tire rims, and the mercury switch atop it. He leapt atop the crane arm holding

the magnet, and shimmied to where Rustbelt hung helpless as a pinned butterfly. Mordecai flipped around so that his knees were hooked over the chains, wedged his hands under Wally's shoulders, then braced his feet against the magnet.

"Oh, they gotta cut the power or I'll be up here all day, ya know." Another gust set them twirling like a lazy pinwheel. "Wheee!" said Wally. "I'm kinda strong but—"

"Ready? One-two-three!"

Mordecai yanked on Wally's shoulders. The joker-ace clanged free. Mordecai launched himself into a backward summersault and landed on his feet.

Wally face planted in the junkyard's oily dirt. "Oof." He lay there for a moment, silent and still, which Mordecai found unnerving. But then the metal man rolled over, saying, "Holy smokes. You're *really* strong." He winced, rubbing his shoulders. It sounded like two cast-iron frying pans scraping together. Wally now sported a pair of perfect handprints pressed into the metal.

Mordecai winced. "Should I take you to the hospital?"

Wally saw his frown. "Oh, don't worry, fella. These bruises'll go away in time. Tick tock." Another giggling fit took him. "Hickory dickory dock."

The stack of steel rims toppled over. The nearest bounced across the dirt to clunk against Wally's legs. He laughed, pantomiming the exaggerated movements of steering a car. "Vroom, vroom!"

More rims followed. And an ominous creaking came from various piles of junk and scrap metal, as the taller ones began to sway toward the temporarily magnetized metal man like flowers seeking the sun.

"Let's get you out of here." Mordecai grabbed the broken phone and the mercury switch. "You said there's somebody I can call for you?"

★ ★ ★

Wally lay sprawled on the concrete apron of a repair bay as if making a cement angel, belting out the Minnesota Rouser. Loose tools—wrenches, screwdrivers, and a cordless drill—dangled from his arms, chest, and face.

A pickup truck pulled up on the street adjacent to Mordecai's motorcycle shop. The woman who emerged from the driver's side stood

practically half of Wally's size; she cast a disapproving eye over the expired meters of the other cars on the street. Her passenger was clearly too young to drive. Mordecai didn't have daughters, so it was hard to judge, but he'd put her at about twelve or thirteen.

"RAH, RAH, RAH, FOR SKY-U-MAH! RAH! RAH oh hi, Darcy." Wally's head lolled sideways as if his neck were pneumatically actuated and had sprung a leak. The look on his face (Mordecai decided most of the heavy lifting was done by Wally's eyes) went from a carefree looseness to something a little more focused, almost tender, when he looked at the tween. "Hiya, kiddo."

"Hi, Wallywally."

He reached up to touch her face. Mordecai winced, but the girl didn't recoil from the iron fingers. Wally was surprisingly gentle despite his current state.

She asked, "Did you get stuck again?"

"Yeah."

"Ugh, *Dad*." She rolled her eyes.

Dad. Adoption? Wally definitely hadn't been a father when he was on the show. If he had, then that other contestant, the winner (What was his name? Jamal ... Norwood. He died in Kazakhstan. Mordecai had read about it in the paper. Very sad.) never would have gotten away with his claim against Wally. Not that a guileless kid like Wally ever really had a chance on that stupid show. (Unless the adoption was a response to the accusations on *American Hero*. Now *that* was an ugly thought. Also difficult to square with the young man who up and turned his back on TV to go defend helpless strangers halfway around the world. But...)

The tween said, "You have to warn people before you go wandering into scrap yards. Darcy told you."

"Yeah, I did," said the driver. "I feel like I was pretty clear on this."

"Sorry, Darcy. I forgot." Wally started giggling again, but then his demeanor turned on a dime and he looked ready to cry. "I broke the phone you gave me," he sniffled.

The new arrivals shared a look. Darcy said, "Ohhh, super. It's weepy Wally."

"Guess he was up there a while," said the tween. "Watch out for your credit cards." She shrugged, pulled out her phone, turned slightly

translucent, and floated out of earshot, her toes dangling a few inches from the pavement.

Darcy placed her hands on her hips and frowned at Wally moaning woozily on the ground. “You always know how to show a girl a good time on her day off, don’t you.”

Mordecai felt bad about not letting him inside, but it had been a job getting him to the shop, and it seemed a bad idea to bring Wally anywhere near the computers. He opened the screen door and stepped outside.

“You must be Darcy.” He smiled, extending a hand. “I’m Mordecai. I’m the one who called you?”

“Thanks for the call.” As she shook his hand, her gaze darted to the sign over the door. He could see the gears turning. And yet, she didn’t flinch from his handshake. Sometimes people did, even if they didn’t mean anything by it. Just a natural self-preservation instinct, he supposed, when you’re meeting somebody who is, quite possibly, the strongest ace in the world.

“Hey, are you—”

Mordecai shrugged. “Yeah. I’m him.”

“Wow.” Darcy nudged the metal man with the hard toe of her shoe, making a *gong* sound. It wasn’t a kick, really, and was perhaps even mildly affectionate. Or, at least, within arm’s length of affection. “Hey, dingbat. Do you even realize who rescued you?”

“My pal from the junkyard? He’s, really really strong.” Wally sniffled. “Do you think we’ll ever see him again?”

“Oh, for crying out loud—”

Mordecai said, “It’s fine. Will he be okay? I gather the magnet kind of...” He tapped his temple.

“Yeah, it always wears off.” She glared at the prone ace. “*Eventually.*”

Mordecai lifted Wally to his feet. Then the tween came back, slipped her phone in a pocket, and took one of Wally’s arms from Mordecai. It was touch and go for a moment, but she and Darcy managed to keep the metal man upright without getting crushed. The unlikely trio wobbled toward the pickup; Mordecai opened the tailgate for them. Loading unconscious Wally into the pickup bed was another job, owing to the magnetism. Mordecai wondered how Darcy and the tween would have managed on their own.

Wally's eyes opened. His gaze cast about, and then he focused on Mordecai. "Harlem Hammer."

Mordecai dipped his head in acknowledgment. He didn't exactly love that title, but he'd let it slide. Poor kid had a scrambled brain.

"Thank you," said the metal man.

★ ★ ★

Jube, the walrus-joker who had owned and run the corner newspaper stand in Wally's part of Jokertown since long before Wally's card turned, gave him a friendly nod. "Wally Gunderson. Haven't seen you in a while."

"I've been feeling kinda crummy the last few days."

The day after his magnet misadventure, he still wasn't feeling like himself, so he'd asked a favor of his friend Michelle. Ghost (Wally had given up using her real name, Yerodin, otherwise she bristled, and when she bristled she played with knives) was getting the better end of the deal, a sleepover with her friend Adesina, who could fly. It made him feel like a lousy parent, but then, in his addled state, if he'd tried to be a parent to Ghost just then, he would've done a real bad job, and felt even lousier.

"Sorry to hear it. How's the little one?"

"Oh, gosh. She's good. So good. Yeah..." Wally paused, looking for a natural way to turn the conversation. "Real good. Um, hey, speaking of all this stuff, do you happen to know a real strong fella who's got a motorbike fixin' store up in Harlem?"

Juberaised his bushy eyebrows to the point it looked like they would disappear under his hat. Wally had asked him about it once, and remembered it was called a porkpie hat, though he still didn't know why.

"Mordecai Jones? Of course I do." Jube's wire-brush mustache twitched into a frown. "Oh, Wally, tell me you're not tussling with him. I know you can take care of yourself, but Mordecai, you're not in his class. He'd ball you up like so much tin foil."

"Tussling?" It was Wally's turn to frown. "Oh, you mean *fighting*. Heck no! Gosh. No, he did something real swell and I want to say thanks," said Wally, hoping Jube wouldn't pry for details. If pressed, he'd end up telling the whole story. Truth, he often felt, was like steam. It always leaked out eventually. Especially from himself, who in that regard was little better than a rusted-out teapot.

Jube looked relieved. “Everybody knows Mordecai or, at least, knows of him. But he generally keeps a low profile. I recall he was a little more active back in the old days, though I think even back then he was never entirely keen on the adventuring ace thing.”

Jube paused to make change for a joker woman with kaleidoscopically shifting paisley patterns on her skin; she bought gum, cigarettes, and a copy of the *Financial Times*. Wally thought the pink newspaper was kinda neat.

“He’s never been a regular customer,” Jube continued, “not being a Jokertown resident. But I do see him once in a while. Loves the *Times* crossword puzzle, that one.”

Wally perked up. “Oh, that’s super. Thanks, Jube! I know the perfect thank-you gift. Heck, one time I even went in disguise as the president of a crossword puzzle club.”

Jube stared at him, unblinking. “I ... How’s that?”

And just like steam, the story started leaking out. Wally was proud of this one; he considered it one of the more clever ideas he’d ever had. “It was back when all them folks were getting snatched. Remember that? Well —”

“Mr. Gunderson!”

A man in a tan suit waved at Wally across the street.

“Aw, nuts.”

Jube rubbed a sleeve of his Hawaiian shirt across one tusk. “Friend of yours?”

“Not really. But he sure acts like it sometimes.”

The man, who appeared to be a nat (though Wally tried not to judge people on their looks), dodged traffic to join them. He was quick on his feet; despite crossing against the light, he didn’t get a single horn honk or finger. Wally hadn’t known that was possible.

“Mr. Gunderson. I wonder if you’ve given any more thought to my suggestion?”

“Uff-da.” Wally sighed, running a hand across his face (*grind, clang*). “Look, fella, it’s nice of you to think of me, honest, but I’m just not the kind of guy for politics.”

Wally got more than his share of politics with his work for the Committee. So much so that sometimes he wanted to quit and spend that time at home with Ghost—the large amount of time he spent out of the

country had been a knock against him during the adoption process. But he never did quit the Committee because it was kinda his fault it existed in the first place. And sometimes it did good things.

Though it wasn't entirely steady work. As he'd once told his friend Jerusha before she died, the only thing he was really good for was wrecking stuff. Which is why he had been so glad to get the offer to do demolition work for Mr. Matthews's company, Aces in Hand. That wasn't steady, either—it wasn't every day somebody needed a building torn down—though it had picked up recently.

Jube's eyebrows did that thing again. "Politics?"

Tan-suit man gave him a wide smile, nodding like his neck was one of those paint-can shakers at the hardware store. "Morlock-and-Eloi is stepping down from the city council. There's going to be a special election to fill the empty Jokertownspot."

Jube, who knew the neighborhood better than anybody, shook his head. "This is news to me. Why's she quitting?"

Tan suit shrugged. "Illness, I gather." He looked down, shaking his head the tiniest bit, the way people do when they hear that the friend of a friend's cousin's pet died and don't want to seem callous.

"You seem to know a lot about J-town politics."

"Randall McNath, Joker Anti-Defamation League." Tan suit gave Jube a vigorous handshake. "A pleasure. Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Jube." Jube chuckled. "You're clearly already acquainted with Mr. Gunderson. So you don't need me to tell you that he'd be a fine representative for the people of Jokertown."

He always said things like that. It was nice and all, him being so concerned about the neighborhood, and a member of the Joker Antidefathingy, and not even a joker himself. But just because it was flattering didn't mean it was true or, frankly, very well thought out.

"Well, it's real swell of you to say such nice things, but I tell ya, buddy, I wouldn't be a good fit." Wally looked at Jube for support. The walrus-man was staring at Wally hard, his eyebrows low over his eyes. "Right, Jube?"

Jube fiddled with a pile of magazines, absently squaring and re-squaring it. "The more I think about it ... It doesn't sound so crazy to me, Wally. Nothing against Morlock-and-Eloi, of course, salt of the earth that woman, but if I had to be honest, she was never quite the same after the

fight club took her. And you'd probably be the most honest guy to ever stand for any public office."

"Aw, nuts. Not you, too?"

Jube shrugged. "I'm just saying."

Mr. McNath launched into his paint-shaker nod again. "Exactly! So am I." He turned again to Wally. "As a member of the Committee, you've traveled around the globe, trying to make things right for people. But on the city council, you could do the same for your friends, your neighbors, even your family. Like your work for the Jerusha Carter School—which I applaud, by the way. Little acts of betterment every day, without people shooting at you. It's getting merchants to shovel their sidewalks promptly, not stopping genocides. It's improving signage for school crossing zones, not dodging Exocet missiles in a border dispute."

Wally frowned. "The genocide stuff is important, too."

For the first time since he crossed the street, Mr. McNath stopped fidgeting for a moment. He just stared. But a moment later he was nodding again. "Yes, yes, of course it is. So, think of the city council as in-addition-to, not instead-of." He sure talked fast.

But he was sorta convincing, too.

★ ★ ★

As an apology for ruining her day off with the mess at the scrap yard, Wally took Darcy out to breakfast. Hollandays was her favorite place for sit-down morning food, and he often felt the need to apologize for something, so they were regulars. The food wasn't too bad, though the corned beef hash didn't come with a slice of Spam on the side the way his dad did it back home. But that was okay.

Their table was quiet but for the clinking of silverware in his hands and the occasional crinkle of folded newsprint. Darcy always read the paper while she finished her coffee.

She sipped, then clinked the cup back into her saucer without looking away from the paper. Once again, their server seemed to appear out of thin air, swooping by to replenish Darcy's nearly-full cup. The service was particularly attentive today: because Darcy would have to go straight to the precinct from the restaurant, she wore her uniform. Wally wondered if maybe she'd timed it that way on purpose. People got real nice when they saw the badge.

He spread boysenberry jam on another piece of toast, then used it to mop up the last of his eggs Benedict. He could never remember what it was called, but he liked the fancy yellow sauce they poured on top of the eggs. He had the impression it might have been invented there.

Darcy sat up, sloshing coffee. “What the hell is this?”

Wally started. The stainless steel butter knife in his hand dissolved into a fine orange powder. “Oops,” he said, scattering rust across his plate, the formerly white tablecloth, and her coffee.

Looking for their server, he said, “What is what?”

Darcy held the paper up between them, smacking it lightly with the back of her fingers.

He leaned forward, squinting. “Oh, yeah! I forgot all about that. Neat, huh?”

She glanced at the paper again. “You forgot that you’re running for city council?”

Wally caught their server’s eye, pointed at the rust on the table, and the remaining silverware, and shrugged, mouthing, “Sorry.” To Darcy he said, “I mean, I forgot to tell you about it. Only Ghost knows. Oh, and Jube. And that real nice fella who suggested it in the first place. And now you. And I suppose all the people who see it in the paper. But it’s only”—he checked his watch—“seven-thirty in the morning. So you’re one of the first.” He grinned.

Darcy placed the folded newspaper over her plate. “Okay. Walk me through this. You hate politics.”

So he explained the whole thing. He liked the way it made him feel, helping people. Everything the Committee did got so complicated, no matter how obvious and necessary it was. And his other job was just work. It wasn’t a cause and didn’t have a goal, except to make money for Mr. Matthews.

After he finished, Darcy asked, “Did this ‘real nice fella’ give you his card?”

“Nope.”

“Did you ask for one?”

“Nope.”

“And you weren’t the least bit curious about who he was or why he sought you out?”

“Nope.” She watched him as if waiting for more. So he added, “I figured he’d heard about me. Maybe from the other parents at school.”

“But if you wanted to talk to him again...”

“Oh, I see him all the time lately. We just keep running into each other, like, one coincidence after another. Crazy!”

“Uh-huh. But if somebody wanted to go talk to him, how would she do that?”

“I’m sure he’s in the phone book. Oh! I remember now. He works for the Joker thingamajiggy.”

It took a while to unravel that, but she eventually figured out what he meant. He didn’t understand why she was getting grumpy about the whole thing. After all, her job was all about helping people. He said as much.

At that, her expression softened. She put her hand on his arm. “Hey, I’m not trying to rain on your parade. You’re a really good guy and I know you’d take working on the city council as seriously as you take raising your daughter. And thanks to you she *probably* won’t grow up to be an axe murderer. You’d pour your big stupid heart into it. And probably drive people crazy and maybe, just maybe, do some good along the way. But have you really thought this through? The city council in New York City is a world apart from the city council in Mountain Iron, Minnesota.”

“Back home that was Mr. Lacosky, the principal, and Mrs. Pikkanen, who owns the gas station and bait shop.”

“See, that’s exactly what I mean.” She squeezed his arm before withdrawing. “Are you sure about this?”

He thought it over. “Yep.”

“Then I wish you the very best of luck, and I hope the people of Jokertown will soon be fortunate enough to have you in their corner.” She picked up the paper again. “And anyway, your opponent is completely off her nut. So that’s another point in your favor.”

“Opponent?” That made it sound like a boxing match. He didn’t like that. He’d had the impression there wouldn’t be anybody else. Truth be told, that had been no small part of the appeal of running in the first place. The eggs Benedict turned a little bit sour in his stomach.

Wally leaned across the table, giving the small item in the paper a more careful read-through: **Local Activists Throw Hats into J-Town Council Race**. He wondered which of his hats he’d have to give up. The

fella in the suit hadn't mentioned that part. He also hadn't mentioned Jan Chang, who was listed as another candidate for the empty Jokertown seat.

"You know her?"

"Oh yeah. She once accused me of using parking tickets as a cover for attaching extrajudicial GPS tracking units to prominent citizens' cars without a warrant. Said I was working to usher in a one-world-government junta by making it possible for the Illuminati drones to know exactly where to find and kill those same prominent citizens in a 'decapitation strike.'" Wally didn't understand any of that. Darcy raised her cup as if to take a sip, then saw the rust floating on it, and put it down again. "If there's some crazy claim going around, Jan is probably behind it. Everybody knows better than to believe her, of course."

That was sad. It made him feel sorry for this lady.

Darcy balled up her napkin and tossed it on the table. "The more I think about it, I'm almost looking forward to the round-table forum. Between you and her, it'll be one for the record books. I wonder if my DVR can record public-access cable."

He missed most of that. "What kind of table?"

"I mean the candidates' forum." Darcy ran her finger to the very bottom of the little two-inch piece about the special city council election. "There's a list of events."

So there was. He sighed. "Aw, cripes."

* * *

Mordecai was popping the fuel tank from a 1960 Moto Guzzi Cardellino when a battered, rust-splotched Impala came to a noisy stop (squeaky brakes) on the street nearby. Mordecai knew from the parking job that it wasn't Darcy behind the wheel. Plus, she didn't seem to be the kind of woman who tolerated unfixed fender benders and naked Bondo.

Wally blinked in the sun, looking a bit confused, as if he didn't remember being here a few days ago. He definitely had been, as the cracks in the concrete floor of the repair bay could attest. He took a few steps toward the shop entrance, then froze, looking up. He turned in place, head craned back, presumably searching for magnets. Wiping his oily hands with a rag, Mordecai went to the office.

Rochelle, who managed and kept an eye on the front of the shop when Mordecai was working (though it had been a very long time since anybody

had tried to rob the Harlem Hammer), turned as he entered. She indicated Wally behind the counter, the shifting of whose jaw suggested a smile.

“This gentleman is here to see you.”

Wally waved. “Howdy! You probably don’t remember me, but I was here a few days ago. I’m Wally, by the way.”

“I remember. You seem to be doing better.”

“Gosh. I was in a jam and you sure helped me out.”

Mordecai shrugged. “You clearly needed help. I’m glad it worked out and that you’re okay.”

Wally offered his hand. Mordecai moved to shake it, but then he realized the metal man’s iron fingers were curled around something. A frayed tuft of green ribbon dangled from his palm. “I brought you this to say thankyou for pulling me down and being so swell about it. Here.”

He turned his closed hand over Mordecai’s cupped palms. The ribbon had been used to bundle together a collection of mechanical pencils, click erasers, and ball-point pens. A mismatched collection, but new and nice.

“Uh. Thank you. But it really isn’t necessary.”

“I heard that you’re a crossword puzzler fella, so I thought, what does a guy who does crosswords need? Pencils! And then erasers, too.” Wally pointed at the click erasers. “But then I also thought, he seems like a sharp one, and I heard sometimes real smart people even do the puzzles in pen. So I got them pens, too.” He pointed again, elaborating, “In case you do the puzzles in ink, see.”

Rochelle, turning red with the effort not to burst out laughing, excused herself. As she headed for the break room, Mordecai said, “Thank you, Wally. This is very nice—”

“Oh! I forgot the extra leads. For the pencils, you know.” Wally fished around in the breast pocket of his denim overalls and retrieved a little plastic cylinder.

Mordecai took this, too. Wally seemed to be waiting for something, so he said, “You know what? I’ll use them every day. I haven’t missed the daily puzzle in years. Thank you.”

“You betcha.” Wally looked around. “Sure is a nice fix-’em-up shop you got here.”

“Uh, thank you.”

“You know, I was in that scrapyard the other day because I sorta accidentally rusted up the handlebars on this other fella’s bike. He got

kinda sore about it so I was looking for a replacement...”

Mordecai laughed. “Hey, that’s what we do. If you have the model information, leave it with Rochelle, and have the owner call us.”

“Oh, that’s swell! I’ll pay, ‘cause it was my fault.” Wally beamed. Or seemed to. (Damned if it wasn’t tricky, reading that metal face.) But he didn’t appear in a hurry to go anywhere.

“Would you like a tour?”

“Gosh, that’d be neat.”

So they went through the side door into the repair bay containing the partially disassembled Moto Guzzi and the ghostly scent of gasoline. “Neato,” said Wally, not really looking at anything. Speaking over the radio, which Mordecai hadn’t bothered to turn off and which was now playing something from the Dave Brubeck Quartet, the joker-ace said, “Um. So, hey, fella, this’ll sound nuts, but did you know we’ve met before? I mean, before the other day. Years ago.”

Aha. So *that’s* what this was about. Mordecai wanted to hash this out even less than he wanted to chow down on a barrel of accursed Kazakh strontium. But even though he could see the slow-motion train wreck coming from a mile away, he felt powerless to avoid it. Even the strongest man in the world couldn’t change the path of a loaded freight train once it was barreling down the tracks. Not without hurting a lot of people. He sighed.

“On the TV show.”

“Oh. You do remember *American Hero*.” The metal man’s tone of voice suggested he hoped nobody remembered.

“I sort of regret doing it. I thought I’d have more opportunities to mentor younger folks.” Mordecai figured he had a good thirty years on Wally.

“I wish I’d never been on the show at all. But I’m still glad I applied to be a contestant. I mean, it was exciting at first and all, and I suppose that without it I wouldn’t have the life I have today, with a daughter and all.” Wally trailed off. “If not for the show, I’d be working in an iron mine right now.”

“I bet you’d be good at that. You certainly have the, uh, look for it.” Did they still use steam shovels? Mordecai didn’t know the first thing about mining. He supposed that nowadays everything was diesel or electric.

Wally took a deep breath. Rivets creaked when his chest swelled. “The thing is, that fella who won? He said I said some stuff I didn’t say. So I just wanted to say that I didn’t say the stuff he said I said.”

And there it was. Way back on the first season of *American Hero*, Rustbelt had been eliminated from the contest (“discarded,” ugh) after being accused by the eventual winner, Stuntman, of hurling a racial slur at him.

Mordecai closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. Wally seemed decent. Guileless, at the very least. Mordecai remembered the incident, and the flap at the time, and his doubts about the accusation. But the show’s producers had latched onto the narrative twist—it was manna from heaven for people whose livelihoods involved spinning plotted drama from pointless contrived interactions—and that was that. So Wally had gone off to Egypt to defend the helpless, taking a bunch of contestants with him.

But people were complicated. You could never truly know what lurked in somebody’s heart. And Mordecai was so damn tired, furiously tired, of the “I’m not racist, *but*” types.

When he opened his eyes, Wally added, “Honest.” His skin made a grinding sound and even threw a couple of sparks when he drew his fingertip in a little “x” across his chest.

Mordecai’s gut told him Wally was sincere. He wanted to believe it, at any rate. So he made a decision. Surprising himself a little bit, he said, “Let’s watch the clip, then.”

The shop had several laptops for pulling diagnostic codes from bikes a lot more modern and sophisticated than the Moto Guzzi. And Rochelle had dragged their credit card processing into the twenty-first century with a wireless network. So, after wiping the worst of the grease from the nearest keyboard (an inevitability in a repair shop), Mordecai started searching for, “american hero season 1 clips rustbelt stuntman.”

It took a bit of digging to find the desired needle in a haystack of manufactured drama. But after a few minutes he landed on a listicle titled, “The 15 Most Shocking Moments on *American Hero*, Seasons I-IX.” Merely reading that made him cringe. He could feel his crossword skill leaking away.

He clicked **play**. The screen filled with slickly edited footage of Jamal Norwood, aka Stuntman, scrambling to get somewhere ahead of Wally.

Mordecai recalled nothing of the hokey weekly challenges, only that they were uniformly inane. And, like this one, often loud. The as-televised segment showed the two aces coming close, Rustbelt's jaw moving, and then Stuntman whirling toward the cameras, releasing his hold on the Jetboy statue that had been the object of the hunt. Faintly, over the hurricane whoosh of the helicopter, he could be heard screaming, "Did you hear what he called me. What kind of racist shit is that?"

Mordecai turned up the volume as high as it would go and hit replay. It took more than one rewatch, but Mordecai eventually convinced himself he might have heard a barely audible "n—" coming from Wally.

He turned. "Well?"

"I called him a knucklehead." Wally's gaze went to the cracked floor. "It wasn't nice of me. He, just, gosh, that fella was being so mean. I guess he got under my skin. Maybe he did it on purpose."

Sadly, there would only be one side to this story, as Jamal had given his life in the line of duty, working for SCARE. But Mordecai felt confident that if the man standing next to him was one thing, it was sincere. On balance, he decided, his gut reaction from way back then was affirmed.

"Yeah. I figured as much."

Wally deflated like a rusted-out lead balloon. "Whew. I'm so glad."

Mordecai closed the laptop, eager to get back to work. "Worry no more. Go forth and keep doing what you're doing."

"That's actually what I wanted to ask you about."

Good heavens, there was *more*?

He nodded at the laptop. "I thought that was it."

"I thought maybe there'd be no point without clearing up the TV stuff first."

Jerking a thumb at the disembodied fuel tank, Mordecai said, "I do need to finish this today, so..."

"I'm running for city council so I need a campaign manager," Wally blurted.

That took a moment to sink in. "I'm sorry?"

The younger ace explained, in a not particularly eloquent but thoroughly transparent way, about a special election in Jokertown.

"Well, I'm flattered. But, for one thing, I abhor party politics, and for another, obviously I don't live in Jokertown." Mordecai spread his arms,

indicating the shop and, by extension, the neighborhood around it. The spot where they stood was miles north of J-town.

“Nope.”

“Then why ask me?”

“Because you do crossword puzzles and I ... don’t. It’s, you know, there are some people who do puzzles and some who don’t. I’m not the kind of person who knows stuff like”—Rusty gestured at the bundle of pens—“I dunno, the French word for ‘beret.’ But I bet you do.” He sighed. “I want to do a good job. But I also know I’m not the sharpest fella. People don’t think I understand that. But I do.”

Despite his better judgment, Mordecai found that admission genuinely touching. And he had no doubt Wally would do the utmost for his constituents. Maybe he wouldn’t have such a healthy skepticism of political games if the players were more like Wally.

“I’ll need to think about it. But first, tell me what role your daughter will play in this campaign.”

“Ghost? Nothing! I mean, she knows I’m doing it, but that’s it. It’s got nothing to do with her.”

“It will until the election. And after, if you win.”

“No it won’t. Not ever.” Wally shook his head. “She was one of them ... have you ever heard about them child soldiers? When she was pretty young, some real bad people exposed her to the virus and then they gave her a knife and taught her...” He shuddered. “It’s not what she is, but it’s what they tried to make her. They made her do some bad stuff. Real bad. So I figure, gosh, she’s seen so many bad things in her life. She’s still just a kid, I guess I’m saying, and if I do one thing in life it’s make sure she never again gets wrapped up in grown-ups’ baloney.”

Mordecai never would have guessed the eye-rolling phone-obsessed tween he’d glimpsed a few days ago had been the progeny of a war zone. That spoke volumes about her resilience, but also spoke extremely well of her father.

What the hell. Wally wasn’t exactly a born front-runner. He needed a mentor. And how difficult could it be?

“Good answer,” he said, offering his hand. They shook.

“Cripes,” said Wally, wincing. “You’re strong.”

★ ★ ★

Ghost was haunting the kitchen when Wally emerged from his bedroom. Normally this alarmed him: when she sleepwalked, it meant she'd been having nightmares about her early childhood again. Sometimes Wally had to go through the apartment, count all the knives, and, occasionally, apologize to the neighbors. (She didn't have many friends for sleepovers. Bubbles and Adesina were *real* understanding.) He tensed: she was holding something long and thin. But after rubbing the sleep from his eyes he saw it was a paintbrush, not her favorite stiletto. He relaxed.

"Whatcha doing, kiddo?"

When Ghost was deep in thought, the very tip of her tongue stuck from the corner of her mouth. Like it did now. The kitchen smelled like paint.

She leaned over the table, arms outstretched as if she were going to hug her craft project. "Don't look! Not yet!"

"Okey dokey." He turned his attention to the coffee pot which, once again, he'd forgotten to set the night before. He resolved to be more organized. If he got on the city council he couldn't be the kind of guy who forgot to make coffee. He'd have to be the kind of guy who remembered coffee and made sure everybody got some, if they wanted it, but also made sure the people who didn't like coffee got something else. Like tea, or milkshakes.

He figured the city council was like that.

Once he managed to get a cup filled he rummaged under the sink for the SOS pads and lumbered into the bathroom. He kept the door open so that he could keep an eye on Ghost, balanced the coffee on the vanity, and set about inspecting himself in the mirror for signs of rust. Every blemish got a quick scrub with lemon-scented steel wool.

When finished, he called out, "Can I look yet?"

"Wait!" He heard the scraping of a chair, and Ghost blowing on something. "Okay. You can come back now."

She floated in the middle of the kitchen table, holding a large piece of poster board in her outstretched arms. It was blank and almost too big for her. But then she spun in mid-air to show him the other side. She'd written

GUNDERSON CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS

in puffy glitter paint.

"Oh my gosh. You made this for me?"

She bobbed up and down.

“Well now it’s official, isn’t it? This is super.”

It took a bit of rummaging to find a hole puncher and a good length of yarn, but Wally had it hanging squarely over the kitchen table by the time Mordecai arrived. The dripping had mostly stopped by then, although the “S” in HEADQUARTERS looked a little smeary.

In response to a firm but unaggressive knock, Ghost drifted across the apartment, settled on the floor as she rematerialized, and opened the door. Mordecai stood outside, holding a valise.

“Good morning, young lady. I believe we’ve met. I’m Mordecai.” He offered his hand. Instead of taking it, she curtseyed (where in the heck did she learn that?) and stepped back, motioning him to enter. The boards creaked under him. Wally was glad their apartment was on the ground; he was hard on floors, too.

“You helped Dad. I’m Ghost.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Hi, guy!” Wally waved from the kitchen.

Mordecai joined him, gaze flicking back and forth between Wally and the sign hanging over his head. For a moment, the look on his face got real hard to read. But then he said, “You, uh, have some...” and gestured at his head.

“Nuts.” Wally tore a paper towel from the dispenser. It came away from his forehead smeared blue and stippled with red and green glitter.

He pushed out a chair for Mordecai. But the other man took one look at it and said, “I’d better stand. That’ll break if I sit in it.”

Wally stood. “Here. Take mine. I got the same problem sometimes.” His chair was reinforced. “I insist.”

Once at the table, Mordecai got down to business. From the valise he produced a sheaf of papers, a laptop, and one of the pens that Wally had given him.

“First things first. I went to City Hall yesterday to file your intent-to-campaign form. Here’s the receipt for your check. I can send you a digital scan if you’re doing your campaign accounting electronically. Or should I just give these things to your accountant?” In response to Wally’s blank look, he added, “Or maybe you have a dedicated file for expenses?”

“Oh, sure.” Wally thought about it for a moment. Then he reached over and pulled the empty cookie jar off the counter. “Stick it in here. This’ll

work.”

When the crinkling stopped, Mordecai cleared his throat. “Given this is a low-level affair, I think it’s unlikely that anybody is going to come back later and demand to audit your campaign books. Not for something that’ll run its course from start to finish in a few weeks. That kind of thing is usually reserved for big campaigns with official fundraising organizations. And even if there were enough time for the entire process, I’m guessing you don’t want to go through the hassle of filing for a 503(c).”

Wally didn’t get the joke, so he just nodded. “Anything more than 100 sounds pretty expensive.”

“Uh-huh.” Here Mordecai gave the cookie jar a meaningful glance. “Nevertheless, and just in case, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to use an accounting system that’s a little more official. If you see what I mean?”

“Oh, sure. Good thinkin’, pal!”

Wally slid the jar closer and, using Ghost’s paintbrush, covered the word “cookie.” Then in red glitter paint he wrote “money” on the lid. He beamed at his campaign manager over the newly created and very official Money Jar. “I knew you’d be the right fella for this job.”

“Time will tell.” The next set of papers Mordecai produced was fringed with about a dozen yellow adhesive tags. “Okay, speaking of the financials, next is your conflict of interest statement and disclosure forms. By signing these you’re asserting that you don’t own or are invested in any ventures that would directly benefit, financially, from your being on the city council. In other words you’re not doing this to secretly make yourself rich.”

Wally could understand the need for this. He’d seen first-hand dictatorships where the folks in charge got rich while their people had it real real bad. He stole a glance at Ghost, bobbing in a corner as she played on her phone.

“That’s easy. Where do I sign?”

They were still going through the disclosure forms when Darcy arrived, phone to her ear. She gave Ghost a wink as she entered, saying, “Yes, I’ll hold.”

“This is quite a sight,” she added, and then to Mordecai, “Nice to see you again. Welcome to Wonderland.”

Mordecai gave her a friendly nod. “Ma’am.”

She sniffed. “It’s ‘Miss,’ thank you very much.”

She helped herself to a coffee cup and, filling it, said, “Yes hi good morning, I recently met one of your staff members and he gave me his card”—this she punctuated with a meaningful glare at Wally—“but I’m afraid I lost it. If he’s there could you put me through to a Randall?”

Mordecai tucked the signed disclosure forms away, and replaced them on the table with minutes from every city council meeting of the past eighteen months.

“We don’t have to go through these right now, but it would be a very good idea to study them. They’ll give you a good sense of how the council operates, what the major issues have been, and where the various councilors come down on those issues. You’ll see who work with, and against, each other. Knowing the lay of the land will give you a leg up.”

“Holy smokes,” said Wally. The stack was over an inch thick. There sure was a lot of reading to do.

“Oh, by the way, I think this will help when you’re reading those.” Next from the valise Mordecai produced a little booklet titled *Robert’s Rules of Order*. “City council meetings are run according to a particular method,” he said, tapping the booklet. “It’ll seem strange at first but you’ll get the hang of it.”

Wally leafed through the booklet. (Rules for holding a meeting? Gosh.) “Huh. Meetings of the Committee are done differently. People just yell at each other.”

Meanwhile, Darcy listened to a voice that was only faintly audible to Wally in bits and pieces. But whatever she heard, it made her face twist up in confusion. “Are you sure? Huh, that’s so weird. I could have sworn he said his name was Randall. Can you hold on a sec while I check to see if I jotted it down correctly?”

Then she cupped her hand over the bottom of her phone. “Psst, hey, Mr. Politician, what was this guy’s name? The one from the JADL?”

Wally concentrated. “I’m pretty sure it was Randy. Or Randall? Yeah, that sounds right.”

Darcy frowned and, still looking at him, uncupped the phone. “Well, ‘Randall’ is what I scribbled here. Would you mind checking one more time? Please?”

Wally’s wristwatch started to beep. “Aw, heck.” Across the apartment, he called, “Hey, kid, we gotta go,” and across the table he said, “I’m real

sorry, fella, real sorry, but I gotta take her over to the school. Her scout troop is selling cookies. Fundraiser for a camping trip. Ghost volunteered to help unload the truck.”

“No I didn’t,” she objected. “You volunteered me.”

Wally winced. She’d been “volunteered” for the experiment that killed all of her friends and turned her into a killer ace, too. “But you’re excited to go camping, right?”

“I already know how to live outdoors.”

Yeah ... she did. Wally was pretty sure that nobody else in her troop could survive in the jungle on her own for weeks. Maybe he’d chosen the wrong activity for her.

“I’ll only be gone half an hour. Promise.”

Darcy, still on the phone, nodded, mouthing, “Of course.” Mordecai said, “This sounds important. You guys go. I’ll keep working on your calendar while you’re gone.”

* * *

After the door closed behind Wally and Ghost, Darcy looked up from her book. “I have to say, you deserve an award for how well you’re taking all of this in stride.” She nodded at the Campaign Headquarters sign and the Money Jar.

“It’s definitely an interesting challenge.”

“Well, Wally’s lucky to have you on his team.”

“What about you?”

“You mean why didn’t I step up and offer to do what you’re doing? Two reasons. First, I’m a cop and there’s this thing called conflict of interest. Second, I didn’t want to.” She pointed at the Money Jar. “That’s pretty much exactly how I figured this would go down.”

“That’s not very supportive.”

“Don’t get me wrong. Wally is probably the best human being I’ve ever known. But he can be a lot.”

Mordecai sighed hard enough to make his chair groan. She wasn’t wrong. “I’m getting that.”

“But he’d fight tooth and nail and rivet for his constituents. It really is too bad he’s going to lose. And that is where my job will come in.”

“Lose?” Mordecai scoffed. “Miss, I have not *begun* to flex these yet.” He curled his arms, making his legendary muscles bulge until the stitching

in his shirt sleeves complained. Even the floor creaked.

They shared a laugh.

★ ★ ★

The campaign strategy discussion continued over a pile of take-out containers. Darcy had sprung for the meal and, after Mordecai explained to Wally how it was a good idea to categorize things, the receipt had gone into the Money Jar with “campaign contribution: Darcy” scrawled on the back.

Even when he didn’t understand everything, Wally never wavered in his attentive listening. Mordecai could tell he was taking it all very seriously. He found that encouraging.

Working down the checklist on his laptop, Mordecai said, “Okay. Next item. While I was at City Hall, I called up all the other intent-to-campaign forms that had been filed.” Mordecai pulled up a digital scan he’d taken with his phone camera. “The first and, as of yesterday afternoon, so far only other person to join the race is a Jan Chang.”

He turned the screen around so Wally could see. There was no photo but the forms, of course, had her address.

“I oughta go introduce myself.”

Darcy shook her head. “That’s noble, but I know from direct personal experience with her that it won’t go over the way you’re expecting.”

“I sure would like to shake her hand. Just so she knows me and knows I won’t be mean or anything.”

(“Yeah, but what about her,” Darcy muttered.)

“I think it’s a great idea,” said Mordecai, surprising them both. “Perfect way to set the tone for the next few weeks. And because you’re the one taking the initiative, it makes you look good. Even better that you do it informally, without a press release, so people can’t accuse you of a publicity stunt. It’s just two people shaking hands and promising a clean fight. Like boxers before a match.”

“Yikes!” Wally shook his head. “I’m not gonna punch her or nothing like that!”

“Well that’s even better,” said Mordecai, standing. “And if we walk over there, you can meet and interact with your future constituents along the way.”

“Oh, most of ‘em already know me.” Wally clanged a knuckle against his forearm. “I’m the metal guy.” He paused for a moment, the look in his eyes momentarily going distant. Then he returned from wherever he’d gone. “Ooh! That should be our slogan! ‘*Vote for the Metal Guy.*’”

“Hmm. Let’s not settle on it just yet, in case we have other ideas we like. But I’m glad you’re thinking about slogans. Now you’re thinking like a politician,” said Mordecai. “We should settle on one in the next day or so, so we have time to get it printed on your signs.” He nodded at the Money Jar. “That’ll be another campaign expense, by the way, and one of your larger ones.”

“I hope the jar is big enough.”

“But anyway, the people of Jokertown might know and think of you as Rustbelt, founding member of the United Nations Committee for Extraordinary Interventions—”

“Gosh, I’d forgotten the whole name.”

“—and Rustbelt, champion of the Jerusha Carter School, and Rustbelt, local dad.”

(“And Rustbelt, menace to parking meters,” said Darcy.)

“But they don’t yet think of you as Rustbelt, city councilor. That’s what we want. When people think of you, we want them to associate you with the guy who’s going to listen to their concerns. The guy in their corner.”

“Okay, but like I said, I ain’t gonna punch nobody.”

“That’s for the best, I think.” Mordecai zipped his laptop into the valise. “Let’s hit the pavement, team.”

They were almost out the door when Ghost, who had ridden the subway back with her troop leader, said, “Wallywally, your special hat.”

“Cripes, I almost forgot! I got the perfect thing for being a politics guy.” He disappeared into his bedroom and emerged a moment later with a gray silk top hat perched on the iron dome of his head. An elastic chin strap hooked under Wally’s jaw kept it from sliding off. “Snazzy, huh?”

Mordecai looked him up and down. The combination of denim overalls and opera hat was undeniably eccentric, but it wouldn’t merit a second glance in Jokertown.

“You know what?” Darcy said, her mouth curling into a rare smile. “I kinda love it.”

★ ★ ★

The seven-block stroll to Jan Chang's brownstone took forever because Wally—to his credit—embraced his public debut as a candidate and paused to shake practically every hand, foot, fin, frond, trunk, tentacle, cilium, stalk, pseudopod, antenna, mandible, gill, and claw they passed on the street. (It did go a little more smoothly once they convinced him to stop bellowing, “*WALLY GUNDERSON FOR CITY COUNCIL!*” every thirty feet.) And he chatted with anyone and everyone. But it was a pleasant spring day, and the cherry trees on Bleeker sweetened the breeze with a blizzard of white petals.

While Wally discussed PTA drama with a fellow parent from the Jerusha Carter School, Mordecai turned to Darcy.

“So. Police officer, huh?”

“Mmm-hmm. The thin blue line, that’s me.”

“What’s your beat?”

“If that’s your roundabout way of asking if I work the Jokertown precinct, the answer is yes. And it’s okay to call it Fort Freak. Everybody does. But it’s not okay to call me a meter maid, even though everybody does that, too. I’m a parking enforcement officer.”

Quietly, watching Wally converse with a person who had the head and neck of a giant earthworm and what appeared to be a humanoid body covered in mackerel heads, Mordecai said, sotto voce, “An endorsement from your fraternity would be a boon for his campaign.”

“I saw this request coming from a mile away.”

“Well, what are the chances? He seems to know lots of people. Does that include your colleagues?”

“Oh, everybody at the precinct knows Wally. Maybe not in the way you’d prefer, though.”

Mordecai started. “You’re not telling me he has a criminal record? I can’t believe that.”

“No, but you should know that for a period of time his list of parking citations was the stuff of legend. Relax, they’re all paid now. I made sure of that. But you know how after he got magnetized you were reticent to bring him inside your shop? Well, let’s just say our budget for paperclips and hard drives went through the roof the last time he visited the precinct.”

“Oh.”

“People still talk about it.”

“In a funny reminiscence kind of way?”

“No. More of a ‘I had to let my perp walk when we lost all the witness statements’ kind of way.”

“So—”

“They’re endorsing Chang. At least until somebody less batso comes along.”

He’d been running the campaign for less than two days, but that stung. “And you?”

“I can’t campaign for Wally inside the precinct any more than I can anywhere else. But we have a few weeks. I’ll work on them. I can change some minds between now and then.”

“Okay. You’re our woman on the inside.”

She shushed him. “Don’t say stuff like that. It’s like catnip to IA.”

Wally’s interactions with passersby dwindled a little as they neared Jan’s place. Halfway down the block, he waved at a familiar figure descending the stairs to the basement of a brownstone. “Howdy, Jube!”

The walrus-joker paused in the act of unlocking the door. He spun, hiding something behind his back. “Oh, well, hey, look at that, it’s Wally Gunderson.” His gaze flitted between Wally and the doorstep of the neighboring building. Under his breath, he added, “On this street.”

“What are you doing here, buddy?”

“I, uh, live here,” said Jube, eyes scanning the windows of the neighboring building. The drapes twitched. He reached for his door. “Well, good to see you, I’d better—”

Darcy stepped forward. “Jube, one moment, please,” she said in what was clearly her cop voice.

The walrus turned again, tipping his hat to her. “Afternoon, Officer Ackerman. Didn’t see you there. Well I’m sure you’ve got places to be—”

She spoke over him. “I believe that on Monday of this past week, you and Mr. Gunderson together encountered a person who expressed enthusiasm for city council politics. Is that correct?”

“Yes—”

“I don’t suppose you recall his name.”

Mordecai had to admire her technique. Everybody knew Jube never forgot a face or a name or the tiniest crumb of gossip. By indirectly challenging this, she hooked him by the pride. He stopped inching toward the door. “Of course I do: Randall McNath. From the Joker Anti-Defamation League.”

She frowned. “Are you absolutely certain?”

Jube looked pained. “Come on.”

“Thank you for your help, citizen.”

He glanced at the neighboring house again. “Well, if that’s everything —”

“Enjoy your day.”

Jube spun for his door, unlocking and opening it at the same moment his neighbor’s door swung open. A woman wearing extremely thick dark glasses stormed onto the stoop of the adjoining brownstone. Jube’s shoulders sagged.

“A-*ha*,” she declared, pointing at him over the railing. “I knew it. I *knew* it. I caught you red-handed.”

Wally looked at the number on the mail slot, then compared it to the number written on his arm in puffy glitter paint. “Oh my gosh. Are you Miss Chang?” There was a brief grinding of metal when he scratched his temple, as if trying to remember something. “Oh, hey, I know you! You were in Texas with all them band kids. Me, too!”

The newcomer ignored him, anger focused on the walrus. “I knew you were spying on me for the enemy camp.”

Mordecai raised his hands in what he thought would be a supplicating gesture. “Whoa, hey, we’re not—”

“I won’t be threatened.” Little arcs of electricity leapt the gap between her teeth when she raised her voice, exhorting random passersby to take out their phones and record her assassination. “They can’t get all of us!”

“—enemies,” he finished quietly, backing away.

(Darcy said, sotto voce, “I warned you guys.”)

Jan saw Darcy and, finally, Wally. “Oh, I get it. I get it. I see what’s happening here. The NYPD cites me for some made-up offense, the paper injects me with their subcutaneous tracking technology, and then *he* watches me through the holes in the walls, reporting every move until the time is right to take me out. Then they install their robotic minion—”

(“Hey,” said Wally.)

“—and before you can say ‘Annunaki overlords’ the rest of the city council has been mesmerized. Then, boom! Rents spike up to a thousand dollars per square foot while economy-destroying tycoons chew up our neighborhoods and turn us into hyper-abstracted financial instruments in a gigantic spreadsheet somewhere.”

Jube asked, “Why would I have to watch you if they’re already tracking you?”

Good question, thought Mordecai. But, having read the room, so to speak, he kept this to himself.

“Well, the joke’s on you, Jube. I’m installing steel plating over the drywall. Every inch.” She tapped her temple. “Try drilling through *that!* Ha.”

Wally stepped forward. “Gosh. I think we got off on the wrong foot. I just wanted to introduce myself and say—”

Though he was twenty feet away, she shrank from his outstretched hand. “I won’t fall for that. You think *I* don’t know that *they* know that awalking Faraday cage would be the perfect assassin for *me*? Ha.” She leaned forward, sniffed the air, then retreated against the wrought-iron bannister, where the snap and crackle of corona discharge filled the street with the metallic stink of ozone. “What’s in that microsyringe, Mr. ‘Wally Gunderson’?” She raised her gloved hands and waggled her index fingers in the air when she said Wally’s name. “Polonium? Weaponized anthrax? Xenovirus Takis-H? Yeah, that’s right, I know all about strain ‘H.’ Or maybe it’s something special cooked up by your reptoid shadowmasters in Majestic-12.”

“I don’t know what any of those words mean, ma’am.”

“Stooges never do.” Jan stepped inside. “I’m sweeping for bugs after you leave, so don’t bother dispersing your aerosolized drones.” Then she slammed the door. A fading glow of St. Elmo’s Fire limned the door.

Silence, like the fading echoes of a thunderclap, enveloped the street.

“Cripes,” Wally sighed, effectively summarizing the encounter.

Darcy nodded. “Yeah. Definitely recording the forum.”

Wally noticed the package behind Jube’s back. “Hey, whatcha got there, fella?”

“What, this? Nothing.”

“It looks like a sign. Hey, you know, I’m gonna have some signs printed up real soon. Maybe you could...”

Wally trailed off when Darcy laid a hand on his arm. She pointed at the windows of Jube’s brownstone. All but one held a sign reading

JAN CHANG FOR CITY COUNCIL

Wally's shoulders slumped.

"Don't take it personally. And she's really okay most of the time. It's just, since the city council thing..." Jube shrugged. "I can't keep replacing my appliances."

★ ★ ★

Wally lay in bed, reading the city council minutes that Mordecai had acquired.

It was slow going. He didn't read real fast, for one. And for another, everything the councilors said involved quorums and motions and seconds and points of order and yeas and nays, so he had to keep *Robert's Rules of Order* in one hand and the minutes in the other, practically reading both at the same time. It was like a different language. But he kept at it. He had to know this stuff.

He soon noticed that Jan Chang appeared frequently in the public comment sections. She used a lot of terms like "amortization," "Bohemian Grove," "credit default swap," and "Illuminati." He'd found he needed a dictionary on the nightstand, too, to piece through the meeting minutes, but even this didn't help with a lot of what Jan said.

He paid particular attention to the places where the councilors for Jokertown spoke up a lot. In addition to Morlock-and-Eloi on the council, there was Mark Benson, whose dentist's office was just down the street. When it came to Jokertown issues, he and M&E usually agreed, though they'd been on opposite sides of a debate over something called the Annex Nine Phase Two Redevelopment. Whatever it was, M&E had been dead-set against it. Vocally so.

Overall, she seemed to have taken seriously her responsibility for Jokertown and its residents. Too bad she'd gotten sick.

★ ★ ★

"It's as if he doesn't exist."

Mordecai bent steel pipes around a frame, listening to Darcy. One advantage his repair shop had over many others was that he could bend all the metal by hand, thus faster and cheaper than shops that had to use torches and hammers. It was also the only motorcycle shop in the city—and the only establishment in Harlem, period—with a **WALLY**

GUNDERSON FOR JOKERTOWN sign in the window (“*THE METAL MAN WITH THE METTLE TO SOLVE YOUR PROBLEMS!*”).

“Maybe the JADL fired him,” he said. “That would explain why he’s not in their phone book.”

“No.” Darcy shook her head. “I went down there. They’d never heard of him. And you don’t think that’s weird?”

“If he really did claim to work there...” Mordecai conceded the point. “Yeah, it’s weird.”

“At first I thought Wally had misremembered—”

“I can understand how you might have thought that.”

“—but then Jube confirmed what Wally had told us.” She was pacing now.

“It’s not as if this Randall person, or whatever his name is, actually committed a crime. Just to play devil’s advocate, all he did was convince Wally to run.”

“First of all, are we really sure that’s not a crime? And second, he did so under a false name, claiming false credentials. Honest people don’t do that.”

“Well, sure. I’m not saying it isn’t hinky. But I don’t see the play here. Wally is honest to a fault. It’s not like they’re installing somebody who can be bribed.”

“I don’t have an answer for that yet,” said Darcy, “but here’s the really worrisome thing. Not only did he give Wally and Jube a false name, he up and disappeared after Wally joined the race. Wally said he kept running into this person. But in the past week? Vanished.”

“Maybe he doesn’t live in J-town, either. Like me.”

“Then why does he give a toss about who represents it? And why claim to work for the JADL? Because it opens doors in Jokertown. Even people with compound eyes can read the papers and watch the news. Many places in the world, jokers don’t have it very good.” She stopped pacing. “I am telling you, as a cop, something doesn’t smell right about this.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of it. Or you will, anyway.” Mordecai paused in bending another pipe so he didn’t have to speak over the groan of distressed steel. “Wally’s lucky to have you looking out for him.”

“It’s why we make the big bucks, you and me. Speaking of which, dare I ask how fares the debate preparation?”

Mordecai winced.

★ ★ ★

The candidates' round-table forum was held in a community room of the local library and sponsored by the *Jokertown Cry*. The paper had wanted to use the auditorium of the Jerusha Carter School, which was larger and had better facilities, but Jan had refused on the grounds that Wally's relationship with the school offered his agentsample opportunity to install psychotropic agents in the HVAC.

Tables had been angled at the front of the room so that Wally and Jan could face both each other and the audience at the same time. At Jan's insistence, she and Wally were seated as far apart as the width of the New York Public Library Jokertown Branch's Xavier Desmond Community Room would allow. Something about Wally's body acting like a "subharmonic refractor for ionospheric HAARP beams."

Ghost and the others sat just behind the moderators' table. Wally waved at them. A stand mike had been situated in each aisle, for the public Q&A portion of the forum. The moderators' table didn't have a microphone, owing to its proximity to Jan and the pretty lights under her skin.

Near the back of the room, a technician fiddled with a digital video camera on a tripod. Wally tugged at his hat's chin strap. Looking at the camera made it tighten, like it was trying to choke him.

He recognized a few parents from the Carter School. Mrs. Trelawny gave him an encouraging smile. Leaning against the rear wall, maybe so that his bulk wouldn't block the camera, was an out-of-uniform Officer Bester, one of Darcy's coworkers. A cryptic look passed between the two police officers; Bester shrugged at her. If she had convinced others to attend, Wally didn't recognize them.

Mr. McNath hadn't come. That was a bummer. He'd been such a fan of the campaign, even before it started.

Jan's supporters had turned out, too. Wally didn't see Jube anywhere, but three of her fans sat in the same row as Ghost, wearing JAN CHANG FOR CITY COUNCIL t-shirts. He knew the slightly rubbery guy on the end; Mr. Ruttiger had been one of his fellow chaperones during the band trip to Texas. Wally tried not to look disappointed. It woulda been nice to have more people on his side of the aisle. He'd called Bubbles but she

was down in Brazil, doing a fashion shoot in Rio de Janeiro and fighting forest fires in the Amazon. It felt crummy wishing she was here instead.

Maybe he should've worn something other than his John Deere overalls. Wally tugged on his top hat again, glancing at the camera. Gee whiz, he didn't like being on TV.

"Relax," Mordecai said. Ghost gave him a thumbs-up.

The room was approximately a third full at ten minutes after the official starting time of the event, so the fella from the *Cry* stood up and addressed the crowd. He introduced the candidates and explained the format of the discussion. He had what looked like spider legs for arms. Wally couldn't remember if he'd seen him around the neighborhood, but then, he didn't subscribe to the *Cry*. Or any other paper.

Maybe he shouldn't mention that.

The moderator took his seat and opened a binder. "We'll begin by asking the candidates to describe briefly their motivation for seeking a seat on the council, and why they feel they are better suited to serving the people of Jokertown. Mr. Gunderson?"

Mordecai had anticipated the forum would begin this way, so he'd spent hours over the past few days helping Wally practice what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. His campaign manager had insisted that Wally's motivations were "above reproach" (a good thing, Wally learned, after consulting the dictionary on his nightstand), so all he had to do was practice the delivery.

Don't be intimidated by the audience, Mordecai had said. *Just pretend everybody in the audience is naked.*

Wally remembered that now, and blushed. The chin strap pulled tighter still. And had they turned up the lights, too? It sure seemed warm.

A camera shutter clicked. The moderator cleared her throat. "Mr. Gunderson?"

"Yep. I mean, 'Yes.'" He took a deep breath. "I, uh, figure lots of you know me, but maybe some don't. I wasn't born here, but this is where I've made my home. I have a family and I pay taxes and all my parking tickets, all of 'em, even though, gosh, it sure was a lot of money—"

A frantic motion in the front row caught his eye: Darcy drawing the edge of her hand across her neck while Mordecai rolled his index fingers around each other in the little gesture they decided would mean "move on."

“Anyway, when I’m not here in Jokertown I’ve traveled all over the world with the United Nations trying to help folks who need it. Like the jokers in Egypt some years back, and some folks in East Timor, and those poor kids in the place that used to be the People’s Paradise of Africa” (Ghost betrayed no reaction) “and a buncha other places, too. But sometimes the help people need isn’t facing down tanks and bullets and bad guys. Sometimes it’s fixing potholes or making parking meters that don’t break so dang easily.” (Darcy rolled her eyes at this digression.) “That makes people’s lives better, too. On the Committee, we come and go and sometimes I don’t get to see how what we’ve done made things better for the folks living there. But this is where I live. And I’m not going anywhere.” (Mordecai wrote that part.) “I like making a difference in people’s lives. I’ve done it around the world, and I will do it here, too. If I can survive getting machine gunned in a war zone, I can survive city council meetings.” (Hold for laughter. Mordecai wrote that part, too.)

After polite applause, it was Jan’s turn.

“Okay. We don’t have all evening, so I’ll give you the executive summary. Guys, my visual aid, please?” The trio with JAN CHANG t-shirts slid a long cardboard tube out from under their seats. Mr. Ruttiger stretched like a rubber band, bobbing over the moderator’s table to hand it to Jan.

She said, “I’ve been tracing the secret currents of power in this country, and in this city, for years. At tremendous personal peril and cost, I might add. So, why am I running for city council?” Jan asked, sliding something from the tube. “I think my research speaks for itself.”

With a flourish she unfurled a large sheet of butcher paper. It was full of little pictures, handwritten phrases, and newspaper clippings, all connected with different colored pieces of yarn, like a tie-dyed spider web. The diagram-collage thingy had a few large labels written in capital letters and circled in black magic marker: FEDERAL RESERVE, MK-ULTRA, BILDERBERG GROUP, REPTOIDS, PAUL MCCARTNEY/WALRUS. A tangle of yarn connected these to each other and to dozens of smaller labels on the poster: *mortgage-backed financial instruments, water fluoridation, Jokertown city council, chemtrails, 2008 recession*. Wally didn’t get most of it, but the tangle was real pretty, like the cat’s cradles that Ghost sometimes did on her fingers.

“Wow,” said Wally into the sudden silence. “Was I supposed to make a poster, too?”

Jan held the butcher paper aloft until only her fingertips were visible, awkwardly angling it toward the camera. From behind the poster, her slightly muffled voice added, “By the way, everybody in this room is now a target. That’s the curse of knowledge. But they can’t get us all!”

Then she lowered it again. “When I’m on the city council, I’ll...” She cast about, looking for something. “Guys, my prop.” They passed a pair of scissors to her. Little arcs of electricity danced between the open blades as she raised her voice. “When I’m on the city council, I’ll cut this Gordian knot spun from generations of middle-class financial subjugation!” And with that, she set about sawing through the thickest tangle of yarn. Maybe the scissors weren’t sharp; she gave up after a moment and tossed them on the table, saying, “Well, you get the point.”

Wally couldn’t tell if the applause Jan received was as confused as he was, but it sounded like about the same amount as he got. He figured that was a pretty good sign.

“Also,” she added, “rents are too damn high.”

The audience really liked that. Somebody even whistled.

As Jan re-rolled her spiderweb poster, Wally noticed one of the little text bubbles hanging off *Jokertown city council*—a scribble of red ink wedged between yarn-tags labeled *polio vaccine* and *Count of St. Germaine*—read *Ann. 9 Phase II Redev*. Something about that seemed familiar, but he couldn’t say why.

The moderated portion of the forum mostly focused on issues before the city council, and a few hypotheticals. (Moderator: “Numerous cities across the country have passed ordinances banning single-use plastic grocery bags. Some support this move on environmental grounds, but retailers argue this raises their costs, which are then passed to consumers. Candidates, where would you stand on this issue?” Wally: “Well, them plastic bags don’t look so nice in the spring when the winds blow and they get stuck in trees.” Jan: “Retailers’ plastic bags usually derive from various ethylene polymerizations including high-density or HDPE, low-density or LDPE, and linear low-density or LLDPE. All are highly stable with extremely long lifetimes to degradation, meaning they stay in the environment for decades. Beyond the immediate environmental risk, however, the military-chemical-industrial complex infuses these items

with synthetic hormones that are easily absorbed through the skin. These hormones are capable of permeating the blood-brain barrier to attack the pituitary gland, where they prime the victim's brain to receive the transmissions hidden in digital television broadcasts." Wally: "Gosh.")

Then the moderator opened the floor to questions from the audience. The first was addressed at Jan:

"You make a lot of unverifiable claims, so it's hard to know if what you're saying is true. You're very vocal about being targeted and having your life threatened. Why should I vote for somebody who sounds so paranoid?"

"You want evidence of the conspiracy, right?"

Her questioner nodded, then returned to his seat.

"Okay. The evidence is sitting right in front of you." Jan removed her gloves, waggling her fingers until little arcs of electricity danced between them like the science stuff in the old black-and-white Frankenstein movies. "Some of you call me 'Sparkplug.' Don't you think it's odd that my only opponent in this race is a metal man? A metal man whose body functions as a natural Faraday cage?" The more she spoke, the louder her voice, and the brighter the arcs between her fingers. They appeared between her teeth, too, as she built to a crescendo. "A metal man who is, therefore, completely immune to my abilities? Who better than a metal man—who, by his own admission, has ample experience with combat and regime change—to assassinate me?"

Wally, trying to remember all that complicated wordy Robert's Rules stuff, jabbed a finger in the air. "Objection, your honor!"

Jan cocked her head, peering at him through her thick sunglasses. "Do you understand we're not in court?"

"Oh." He lowered his finger.

The next question was for Wally. The lady at the microphone read her question from an index card.

"You've repeatedly emphasized your association with the United Nations Committee. Yet you were absent from recent events in Kazakhstan, arguably the greatest humanitarian crisis since the Card Sharks released the black trump. How do you respond to those who accuse you of abandoning your colleagues, and who say that Aero, Doktor Omweer, and many others might be alive today if you had joined the fight?"

Silence, heavy as a wet wool blanket, fell across the audience. It was as though the air had been sucked from the room. (“Whoa,” Ghost whispered. “That escalated quickly.”)

Jan’s supporters in the front row looked at each other and shrugged. Both Mordecai and Darcy turned in their seats, craning their necks to get a look at the questioner.

(Jan scoffed. “Kazakhstan was a false flag.”)

Wally tugged on his chin strap. It felt like the elastic was cutting through his jaw. The strap snapped. He removed his top hat, placed it on the table, lowered his head, and ran his hands across his face. He knew people didn’t like the grinding sounds his body made sometimes, but he needed to process the question.

Not because he hadn’t wondered the same thing himself. He had. But because he couldn’t answer the question without bringing Ghost into it. He chewed on this, looking for a way to keep his personal promise to himself and his vow to Mordecai without dodging the question.

The *snick* of a camera shutter punctuated the silence. Somebody coughed. People started to whisper to each other.

Wally raised his head. Everyone was watching him.

“Nobody knew what was going on over there. Not at first. It took a few days before people understood how bad it was. And by the time I heard about it ... I, uh, I got scared. See, I’m responsible for somebody, you know? Maybe you are, too. Well, my person, she doesn’t have anyone else. And I worried, gosh, what if I go and I don’t come back? What happens to her? Now, those fellas you mentioned, I didn’t know them much but I think they were good folks. Thinking about ‘em and all the others makes me sad. But if they didn’t make it back, I wouldn’t have, either. Sometimes making the world better means keeping it from getting worse for just one person.” He looked at Ghost, who sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “I know I made the right choice.”

Darcy broke the ensuing silence. “Holy crap,” she said, and clapped. Mordecai joined her. Wally didn’t really hear the applause, though, because he was busy watching Ghost.

The forum concluded soon after that. Mordecai scooted over to shake Wally’s hand, followed closely by Darcy.

“You did a fantastic job. You should feel proud.”

“Thanks, fella,” Wally said. “You sure helped me out. All that reading, oof, it was tough, but...”

Reading. The meeting minutes.

As he watched Jan pack up her visual aids and props, Wally suddenly remembered where he’d seen something similar to the weird abbreviation on her poster.

He raised his voice over the hubbub of people chatting, putting on their coats, and bumping into chairs. To the moderator, who was finishing up his notes, Wally said, “Hey there. Are we allowed to ask you questions, too?”

The newspaper guy blinked. “What?”

“I was just wondering something. You asked us about all sorts of city council stuff, but how come you never asked us about Annex Nine?”

Darcy frowned. “What the hell is—”

Jan’s poster tube clattered on the floor. The sparkly lights under her skin went dark, like somebody had flipped a switch. “How do *you* know about that?”

★ ★ ★

Mordecai and Wally were hunched over the kitchen table, aka Gunderson Campaign Headquarters, when Darcy burst into the apartment, weaving a sheaf of papers like a pennant.

“I’ve got it. I’ve got it.”

She plunked the papers on the table. “Check this out.”

Mordecai did. The top half of the stack comprised financial disclosure forms, like the one he’d helped Wally fill out. The bottom half pertained to a company called Twenty-First Century Retail Group. Flipping through these pages, he glimpsed the SEC logo.

He showed Wally. “‘SEC’ stands for Securities and Exchange Commission,” he said.

Wally nodded. “Sure.”

“They’re like the police, but for banks,” said Darcy.

Wally nodded. “Sure.”

“I know how to pull disclosure forms,” said Mordecai, “but how did you get all this other stuff?”

“Um, I’m a *cop*?” She pulled up a chair. “At first I thought there was nothing to her ranting after the forum. But I kept thinking about what Jan

said about some kind of real estate swindle, so I went over to the detectives' desks and asked around. Franny Black has been keeping tabs on these guys. If he's right, they are into some shady stuff."

She nudged Mordecai aside and used his laptop to pull up an image of the board of directors of Twenty-First. Five men stood in a conference room. The four with crew cuts were so bulky they must have been sewn into the suits. They flanked a more stereotypical business type at the center of the picture: tan suit, perfect hair, dead-eyed smile full of blinding white teeth. Probably normal-sized, but he seemed a child beside his juiced-up business partners.

"Recognize anybody?"

Wally's lips moved while he studied the photo. Then he pointed at the guy in the middle. "Oh, hey! That's the fella from the Joker thingamajiggy. Randall whatshisname."

Darcy relinquished control of Mordecai's laptop. "His name isn't Randall McNath. Or, at least, that's not what he called himself fifteen years ago. Meet Patrick Wilhelm Howard. He's rumored to be the best three-card monte dealer the five boroughs have ever seen." She shook her head, looking at the boardroom photo again. "Same game, larger shells. I swear, the pair of balls on this guy."

She split the stack into two piles, and tapped one.

"Annex Nine is a wholly owned subsidiary of Twenty-First Century Retail Group. It was spun off six months ago as the overseeing contractor for a major construction project. Luxury high-rise condos with built-in retail space, the usual gentrification crap. Of course, there's no room for that anywhere in Jokertown..."

"... Unless you knock down a few buildings to make room for it," Mordecai concluded.

Wally asked, quietly, "Did I do something wrong?"

Darcy put her hand on his shoulder. It was the most affection Mordecai had yet witnessed from her. "No, Wally. Not even close."

"We might not like it," Mordecai sighed, "but the tear down/build up cycle you're describing is pretty common."

"Annex Nine, Phase Two is Our Lady of Perpetual Misery. And much of the rest of that block."

"Oh." Mordecai whistled. "That's ... bold."

"Bold enough to require some back-room dealings."



Wally crouched in the cosmetics aisle of a drug store, the only place from which he had a clear view of the street and the roadster that Darcy said belonged to their guy. Mordecai and Darcy got to enjoy a bright spring day sitting at a sidewalk café because Randall McNath or Patrick Howard—Wally was a little confused on that point—didn't know them on sight.

A shopper sucked in his breath to slither past.

“Howdy!” Wally whispered, offering a hand. “Wally Gunderson for city council.”

So it went for a couple of hours. Then:

“Holy smokes! That's him. That's him!”

He wished they had brought walkie-talkies.

But it didn't matter, because Darcy and Mordecai were already on the move, sauntering up the street as the man from the photograph unlocked the car. Wally felt bad about lurking in the store all afternoon, so he got in the checkout line and bought a neck massager, compression socks, and a jar of vitamin C pills. By the time Wally got outside, the guy was too busy yelling at Darcy to notice him.

“I've broken no laws. I'm leaving now.”

He reached for the door handle, but Wally's campaign manager was faster. Mordecai leaned forward, wrapped his arms around the hood, picked up the car, and walked it across the street to lay it gently across two of the drug store's three angle-in parking spots.

That done, he flagged down Darcy. “Officer? Excuse me, officer? I think this car might be parked illegally.”

She made a show of checking the license plate and looking for a parking placard. “My goodness. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, citizen.”

“You can't do this,” said McNath. “It's entrapment.”

“Actually, it's not,” she said, brandishing a wheel lock. Wally had known her to boot cars even when she was off duty. It had even happened to him, before they were friends. “Nobody enticed you to park illegally.”

McNath moved to intervene, but Mordecai gently laid one fingertip on his chest. “Speaking of enticement, I think you know my friend here.”

Mordecai jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Wally waved. “Hey there, fella.”

Mr. McNath looked unhappy, but he recovered quickly, launching into that paint-can-shaker nod of his. “Mr. Gunderson! Well this is a bright spot to the day. And may I say congratulations on your city council campaign? I’ve been following the coverage in the *Cry* and I am just tickled knowing the people of Jokertown will soon have you as their most passionate advocate. And perhaps when you’re on the council you’ll be in a position to do something about these rogue elements of the law enforcement community.”

“Okey-dokey. But how come you lied about working for the Joker antithingy? You work with them real estate guys.”

McNath cleared his throat. “Well, you see, public advocacy doesn’t pay the bills—”

“Now you tell me,” Wally said. This wasn’t going the way he thought. But, as usual, Mordecai had his back.

“How will your fellow directors of Twenty-First Century Retail Group react when they find out you confessed to poisoning Morlock-and-Eloi as retaliation for her stance against Annex Nine Phase Two?”

The poison was a guess, but a good one, apparently.

Now McNath looked scared. “You wouldn’t do that. You can’t! They’re all tied up with the Brighton Beach crew. Alexandrovitch, my god, he’d pull my head off.”

Wally frowned. “But did you? Did you hurt M&E?”

McNath looked around as if seeking an escape path. But finding himself sandwiched between Mordecai and Wally on the sidewalk, and with his car immobilized, there was none. McNath’s shoulders slumped. “Please, don’t tell them you heard it from me. Please.”

“Judas priest,” said Wally. “That’s rotten.”

“Phase Two seems like it would be controversial,” Darcy added. “How fortunate for you that my other city council representative was on-board with the project.”

McNath shrugged. “Mark Benson is a major investor in Annex Nine.”

A look passed between Darcy and Mordecai. Wally didn’t understand. “What?”

Mordecai said, “Think back to all the forms you had to fill out.”

Wally concentrated. Politics was hard. “So ... this other fella who represents Jokertown ... and who argued with M&E about Annex Nine ... It’s like he had an extra money jar. A secret one that nobody knew about.”

Mordecai smiled. "Exactly."

"Huh." But now that Wally was thinking in politician style, he couldn't stop. "But I still don't get it. How come you were so keen for me to run in the first place?"

McNath hemmed and hawed. Mordecai loomed closer to him. Wally knew Mordecai wouldn't hurt a fly, but McNath didn't.

"Two reasons. We knew that hiring Aces in Hand for the demolition phase of the work meant you'd be involved. That would give us leverage against you. But we didn't expect to need it, because we thought you'd be easy to trick. We'd slip Phase Two right past you and finally get the vote we needed to proceed. You're not somebody known for looking deeply at things."

"Yeah, I guess so." It hurt, but not much. Wally already knew this. That's why he'd gone to Mordecai in the first place. "But you didn't know I have these guys! Holy moley. I sure am lucky."

Wally pulled a flyer from the pocket of his overalls and tucked it on McNath's windshield. Then he knelt on the asphalt and touched the wheel lock. As it dissolved into rust, he said, "Don't forget to vote on Tuesday."

★ ★ ★

Though he wore his politics top hat, Wally was uncharacteristically quiet on the walk back to Campaign Headquarters. Mordecai felt bad for him. When McNath told Wally to his face that he was a dimwitted patsy, he might as well have been kicking a puppy.

Wally broke his silence as they neared the apartment. "I guess Jan was right."

"About the Nazi UFOs piloted by Satanic reptilian Freemasons from the hollow earth? Probably not." Mordecai shrugged. "But about the real estate stuff, yeah."

"Gosh. People should be nicer to her." Wally's shoulders slumped. "Does all this mean I have to drop out?"

Darcy laughed, hooking her arm through his. "No, you dingbat."

"It means that after we head over to the *Jokertown Cry* and explain how you and Jan both uncovered evidence of Benson's illegal enrichment scheme," said Mordecai, "there will soon be *two* open spots on the city council."

Wally thought this over. “I guess I’d better work on gaining her trust, then.”

“You’ll be quite a team,” said Mordecai, feeling immensely satisfied.



Copyright © 2020 by Ian Tregillis
Art copyright © 2020 by Micah Epstein



HARRY TURTLEDOVE
NO PERIOD

No Period

HARRY TURTLEDOVE

illustration by

SCOTT BAKAL

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

isn't the way I meant to tell this story (and, as a matter of fact, I don't think this is exactly the story I intended to tell), but there you are--life is like that sometimes, when something perfectly clear to everybody else is perfectly opaque to you, so for instance after a bad breakup you're crazy for a couple of years and all your friends can see it plain as global warming but to you the world seems to grow a knife-edged, brutal clarity it never had before, which makes you go out and do stupid things you think are smart: for instance when your new squeeze picks up a book you know you also want you go and buy your own copy and she thinks you don't love her because aren't the two of you a unit and don't you have things together but in fact that's the furthest thing from your mind since you're still crazy--to you, it's only a sensible insurance policy so you can know you will still have the goddamn book if after five or ten or fifteen years you go through another breakup, which will do you no good at all when forty years later you try to explain your reasoning--if it is reasoning--to the grown daughter you have on account of you and your new squeeze didn't break up after all, since that grown daughter, who by then has been through some breakups of her own, knows only too well how crazy they make people and wonders why you didn't listen to your friends when they told you you were nuts; and that makes you want to quote Robert Burns at her--you know, the bit about Oh wad some power the giftie gie us/ To see oursels as others see us!, only for one thing there ain't no such power, and for another thing she knows it as well as you do--probably better, truth to tell, since her breakups are fresher and less scarred over than yours--and for a third thing you try to put on a Scots burr, of which you own what must be the worst in the whole entire complete world, which sets her to giggling helplessly, only that turns out not to be all bad since once she's done giggling she's willing to let you change the subject (fair enough, as you proved you didn't know what the fuck you were talking about before), the trouble being that you have a bitch of a time figuring out what to say next without sounding like a stupid old far or trying to sound like

somebody her age instead of yours, which is only another, more pathetic, way of sounding like a stupid old fart, and so you clam up--often the smartest thing a stupid old fart can do--but even that doesn't work, because when you don't say anything she blames you for refusing to communicate with her, not understanding how there can never be any real communication across generations since you've been to a lot of places she's still on the way to, places you would spare her from if you could but you know you can't because the only way not to go to those places of sorrow and sickness and tiredness and wearing down and graying and wrinkling and sleeping badly for too many good reasons is to die before you get to them, and that still feels like the short end of the stick to you, even if it feels less so than it did ten years ago and ever so much less than it did twenty years ago, and so you sit there, not communicating, and you remember trying to explain to your mother why you and your ex were getting a divorce, and you remember most of all her pained and utter incomprehension, and you realize that noncommunication across generations isn't a one-way street but two-, and remembering sitting on that couch in the house where you grew up, the couch you sat on when you were not only a young man but also a little kid, does a Marcel Proust on you, so suddenly, graying and wrinkling and sleeping badly be damned, you are your young self again (inside your head, anyway--your daughter totally misses the transubstantiation, which only goes to show neither one of you was a Catholic to begin with), wondering how the devil you and your ex might have made it click after all since it wasn't one of those messes when you look around after the first fire of lust fades a little and you wonder what the hell you were thinking but more like a near miss where you can't help thinking if only you'd done a little more, if only you'd tried a little more, everything would have been fine and your life right now would be, um, well, different, anyhow, and, naturally, wondering about how your life would be different now also cycles back to how you could have made it different back then and turned the near miss into a bullseye, but you can't help concluding that, in this world as it is/was, nothing was gonna save the two of you, which makes you ponder what kind of world as it isn't/wasn't might have produced a setup where you and your ex did click, and that, by easy stages, leads back to her father, a dour old Finn with the coldest gray eyes in the world, eyes cold as snow, as glaciers, as superconducting helium II, a man who always

looked at you as if he had you square in his sights, as no doubt he did, because, when he was young back in the old country, uncursed by graying and wrinkling and what-have-you, he flew obsolescent Fokker D-XXIs for the Finnish Air Force against the Russians during World War II, his part of what he always called the Continuation War, and, dour as he was, you learned from him some things you sure didn't know before you started hanging around with his daughter, like for instance that Fokker, whose name you associated with the Kaiser and the Blue Max and World War I, was still in business a war later, and that Finland--however reluctant your ex's dad was to admit it or even acknowledge it--fought on the same side as, if not exactly side-by-side with, Hitler and the Nazis in World War II, and, since you're wondering about what would have happened if your own life had gone differently, you also start to wonder about what might have happened had the war gone differently, and if, had you and your ex grown up in a Man in the High Castle world (you're watching it on Amazon Prime and you keep claiming you'll go through the book one day, only you know down deep you'll never get around to that), you would have been enough the same to remain recognizably yourselves but at the same time different enough to get along when it counted, although how likely is that really when you're Jewish even if you're as far from frum as it's possible for a shrimp-fressing, cheeseburger-chomping, ham-scarfing dude to be, and in a world where the Nazis won you'd be persona super-duper non grata or, odds are, no more than some bone meal and half a bar of soap and a puff of smoke up a crematorium chimney, so you look around for some other way to change the world that maybe doesn't involve Jewnocide and you think about how things might have gone if, instead of Hitler having made his conquest stick, Napoleon beat him to the punch by a couple of lifetimes, as Napoleon didn't hate Jews unless they got in his way and he hated anybody and everybody who got in his way, which made him an equal-opportunity hater--a very modern-sounding cat indeed--but then you recall that your ex's mother's side of the family came from somewhere in Germany and that French armies rampaging over the countryside on the other bank of the Rhine would have scrambled her ancestry like a couple of Grade AA extra-larges stirred in a hot pan, which means, never mind whether you would have been you, she sure as Shinola wouldn't have been her, making your chances for a happily-ever-after with her pretty Johnny Rotten (not that those chances worked out any

too well in this best--only?--of all possible worlds), a reflection that makes you cast your memory back there, Lord, to a righteously long time ago, brother, when the Mongols rode out of Central Asia and all the way into Central Europe, looting and killing and conquering as they came but then breaking like a wave full of froth and dribbling back to the east, and you try to imagine what would have happened if they'd stayed instead because that sure would have spawned a whole 'nother world, one in which your ex's gene pool wouldn't have got splashed by Frenchmen cannonballing--or just balling--their way into it, but one where you your very own self might not be around at all because, alter kacker of an Ashkenaz that you are, your founding fathers would not have gone east, old man, if going east meant Kahns running into Khans coming in the opposite direction, which puts a Mongol triumph out of the running for producing lasting happiness between your ex and you and makes you, stubborn, overgoddammededucated bastard that you are, crank the mental--and boy, it seems mental in more ways than one--Wayback Machine another millennium and a few centuries deeper into the past to contemplate how things might have looked if you weren't Jewish because Judaism perished from this earth when the Seleucid Greeks whaled the snot out of the Maccabees rather than conversely, a whaling that also would have produced a world where Jesus wasn't going to be born whether through the intervention of the Holy Spirit or otherwise and your ex sure wouldn't have been the attenuated Lutheran she was, so you wonder if the two of you could have been happy when you followed Zeus while she worshiped Wotan, but, of course, religion hadn't been the problem between the two of you--you'd quarreled over utter mundanities instead, things like keeping the checkbook balanced or at least up-to-date please and whether to stay in and read or go out and party and if you could get naked and screw without arguing about it for half an hour first, and you have the bad feeling that even if she painted herself blue with woad before she got naked the arguments wouldn't change one little bit, which makes wiping out the Chanukah menorah ever bit as hopeless and futile as everything you've come up with before that, so you decide to go deep, to throw a no-shit Hail Mary (not the right choice of words under the circumstances, but whatthehey, whatthehey) far into the past and imagine what the world could have been like if some band of early Homo sapiens wandering up out of Africa through the Middle East hadn't turned left at Anatolia, gone

into Europe, and wiped out the Neanderthals they didn't interbreed with, instead leaving the continent to their beetling-browed close cousins to use and abuse as they pleased, your assumption being that Neanderthals weren't total dopes and could in time have learned to lie to and cheat one another at least as effectively as Homo sap., and what if, now--or rather, in the much more recent past--your analogue with the high forehead had got involved with your ex's Alley Oop equivalent (who, chances are, would still have been a blonde, since that may well have started up in Neanderthal DNA), but you know somewhere down deep that she would still be on your case because you didn't slay enough antelopes to support her in the style to which she wanted to become accustomed, while you'd be sneezing and popping antihistamines all the time on account of the sabertooth kittens she insisted on raising, and it's sad, isn't it, when you can destroy all of history and a good-sized chunk of human prehistory without dreaming up any way you and your ex might have made it in the long term, which of course is a mug's game anyway, since you're much happier with the gal you found after you and your ex broke up than you ever were with her, and since you and your current squeeze have squabbled less in your forty years together than your ex and you did in a bad month, but still, she was your first love, the one you were gonna live happily ever after with, and you're the kind who can't stand doing anything--anything, hear me?--wrong, which makes you try one more Gedankenexperiment, casting your mind back across 65,000,000 years to the very end of the Cretaceous and out into the black, airless depths of interplanetary space, where, with your mystical and borderline divine powers (don't get carried away--remember, this is just a Gedankenexperiment), you change an oncoming asteroid's track a wee bit so it hurtles past the Earth instead of crashing into it, with the result that the dinosaurs who won't evolve into sparrows and hoatzins and rheas and parakeets don't vanish in the impact and its aftermath, there being no impact now, and we have Mesozoic without end, amen, where mammals are little furry nuisances instead of the big furry nuisances they eventually become for real, and where dinosaurs--scaly, feathery dinosaurs--are the ones who get intelligences; continuing the Gedankenexperiment, and in fact getting to the point of it, you speculate about what might have happened if one of those intelligent dinosaurs, a male whose ancestors hatched near the eastern edge of the Middle Sea, happened to meet and try

to pair-bond with a female whose ancestors came from the northwestern part of the main continental mass while both of them were living in whatever intelligent dinosaurs use for a city on the western coast of the lesser continental mass, a city with a climate much like the one the male's ancestors were accustomed to, and you wonder whether that male and that female might have found some way to get along, but then you sigh because you fear she wouldn't be thrilled with the way his feathers were dropping out of the display patches on his elbows, while he wouldn't jump up and down with glee (if evolved, intelligent dinosaurs did jump up and down with glee) at the way her tail was storing adipose, and you come to the mournful and melancholy conclusion that, regardless of what you do to the world and its past, there is no period, no period at all, you can change that gives you any real chances of making a go of it with your ex, and that makes yet another Gedankenexperiment, this one dealing with altering the Cambrian Explosion, pretty pointless when you get right down to it, so you don't bother with that one, instead using what dribs and drabs of mental energy you have left to meditate upon your blessings, which are manifold and include a woman who loves you and--better yet--puts up with you and whom you love back (which you do, despite the Gedankenexperimenten), kids who can still stand you though they've known you their whole lives, grandchildren still too young to be disappointed with you, and a career that could have been better but you bet your bippy could have been worse, which is as much as almost anybody can say and more than most people are lucky enough to be able to say, so the best thing you can do is count those manifold blessings upon which you've been meditating, but somehow you can't do that yet, not right now, Jack, because you realize, fretfully, This

END



Copyright © 2020 by Harry Turtledove

Art copyright © 2020 by Scott Bakal

About the Authors

Elizabeth Bear shares a birthday with Frodo and Bilbo Baggins. This, coupled with a tendency to read the dictionary as a child, doomed her early to penury, intransigence, friendlessness, and the writing of speculative fiction. She was born in Hartford, Connecticut, and grew up in central Connecticut with the exception of two years (which she was too young to remember very well) spent in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, in the last house with electricity before the Canadian border.

She's a second-generation Swede, a third-generation Ukrainian, and a third-generation Transylvanian, with some Irish, English, Scots, Cherokee, and German thrown in for leavening. Elizabeth Bear is her real name, but not all of it. Her dogs outweigh her, and she is much beset by her cats.

Bear was the recipient of the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2005. She has won two Hugo Awards for her short fiction, a Sturgeon Award, and the Locus Award for Best First Novel. She is the author of the acclaimed *Eternal Sky* series, the *Edda of Burdens* series, and coauthor (with Sarah Monette) of the *Iskryne* series. Bear lives in Brookfield, Massachusetts.



Lavie Tidhar is the World Fantasy Award-winning author of *Osama*, *The Violent Century*, the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize-winning *A Man Lies Dreaming*, and the Campbell Award-winning *Central Station*, in addition to many other works and several other awards. He is also the author of the Locus Award nominated *Unholy Land* and debut children's novel *Candy*.

Lavie works across genres, combining detective and thriller modes with poetry, science fiction and historical and autobiographical material. His work has been compared to that

of Philip K. Dick by the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*, and to Kurt Vonnegut's by *Locus*.



IAN TREGILLIS lives near Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he works as a physicist at Los Alamos National Laboratory. He is a member of the George R.R. Martin Wild Cards writing collective and the author of *The Milkweed Triptych*, *Bitter Seeds*, *The Coldest War* and *Necessary Evil*.



The author of many science fiction and fantasy novels, including *The Guns of the South*, the “World War” series, and *The Case of the Toxic Spell Dump*, **Harry Turtledove** lives in Los Angeles with his wife, novelist Laura Frankos, and their four daughters.



You can sign up for Elizabeth Bear updates [here](#).

You can sign up for Lavie Tidhar updates [here](#).

You can sign up for Ian Tregillis updates [here](#).

You can sign up for Harry Turtledove updates [here](#).

**Thank you for buying this
Tor.com ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

Sign Up

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on Elizabeth Bear, click [here](#).

For email updates on Lavie Tidhar, click [here](#).

For email updates on Ian Tregillis, click [here](#).

For email updates on Harry Turtledove, click [here](#).



Science fiction. Fantasy. The universe.
And related subjects.

*

More than just a publisher's website, Tor.com is a venue for **original fiction, comics,** and **discussion** of the entire field of SF and fantasy, in all media and from all sources. Visit our site today—and join the conversation yourself.

Table of Contents

Cover	1
Title Page	3
Copyright Notice	5
Table of Contents	6
ON SAFARI IN R'LYEH AND CARCOSA WITH GUN AND CAMERA	7
Title Page	10
Begin Reading	11
Copyright	42
JUDGE DEE AND THE LIMITS OF THE LAW	43
Title Page	46
Begin Reading	47
Copyright	66
HAMMER AND TONGS AND A RUSTY NAIL	67
Title Page	70
Begin Reading	71
Copyright	113
NO PERIOD	114
Title Page	117
Begin Reading	118
Copyright	124
About the Authors	125
Newsletter Sign-up	127