



**SEPT/OCT
2022**

**TOR.COM
SHORT
FICTION**

Dyer
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TOR.COM SHORT FICTION
SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 2022

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IS
SWEET

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

Victory Citrus is Sweet

Thoraiya Dyer

Slingshot #01: Luna

Song Stuck in My Head: "I've got N₂ on My Mind" (to the tune of "Friday on My Mind")

Cosmic rays buggered up my right arm just after we took the mission.

That is, some stupid high-energy proton started up an osteosarc in my ulna, which is a new one for me. Last cancer I got was lympho, in my lung. Which was annoying, because you can't isolate and freeze a lung and keep working.

Lung isolation means a stupid induced coma while the new cells grow and Printer Two compiles a clean, connective tissue scaffold. It means sitting still for six weeks after the graft, somewhere with one-third G or more, waiting for it to take.

It means someone else gets the good jobs. Steals your promotion.

I'm not bitter. Who can blame protons? They do what they do. Planet-bounds call us bobble-heads, because of the thick shielding on our helmets. One thing we can't replace are our brains. But high-mass, high-density helmets don't weigh anything up here. We take them off when we land, and the smart suits hold our spongy skeletons upright until the dirt jobs are done.

Anyway, dealing with the osteosarc means there might be a slight problem with the nitrogen supply. I might have lied to EleAlloc Admin about that. You can't get a job landing on Mercury's Brimstone Plains if you don't have a lot of nitrogen for your manoeuvring thrusters.

And I mean a *lot*.

Mercury's a quick little bastard.

I'll be quick getting there, on account of the sun sucking *Whaleshark* in, together with my plotted slingshots—faster than those job-stealing others—but getting out again? Against that pull?

Time also matters because, to stop the osteosarc from metastasising, I've had to tell my smart suit to freeze my whole right arm. That'll use liquid nitrogen, and keep on using it, for six months, while the new arm grows. It will take four months for *Whaleshark* just to get to Gog's Gorge.

If I let it thaw out before that, and I haven't got to someplace with gravity for the graft, the whole dead limb's gonna kill me with gangrene even faster than the cancer would've. So I really can't run out of nitrogen. And I can't lose time stopping to refill, or Jihad Dib's going to have me deregistered for failing to complete my end of the mission.

He's got the easy job. Mars just sits there like a big old bullseye, doesn't it?

Also, if I stop, they'll know I fixed the *Whaleshark's* specs to get the job in the first place.

At least an arm is not a lung. At least I can keep on working.

Just have to sort out this tiny matter of Mars North getting half a million tonnes of uranium deliveries that were supposed to go to Mars South.

Surely it won't take long.

Slingshot #02: Venus

Song Stuck in My Head: "Hot Fun in the Summertime"

Mercury surface temps sit roughly between 100 K and 700 K.

So, even though *Whaleshark's* landing site, Gog's Gorge, is in an eternally dark crater at the North Pole, I'm still checking and rechecking the suits like an Earth squirrel checking walnut hoards.

As if the solar wind hitting the naked planet wasn't terrifying enough, we've got the natural radioactivity of the crust and random, unexplained electron bursts to worry about.

If people could just get along, share resources and not slap sanctions on each other, mining Mercury wouldn't be remotely profitable.

But we can't, so Mercury Solar Co moved in. Mercury's proximity to solar heat means free smelting forever, and the weird concentrations of useful material in the crust mean that relatively low-cost, automated mass drivers in Gog's Gorge can shoot uranium from the Brimstone Plains, dug up by the kilometres-long MINE-Z mining and transport system, back to the mine owners on Mars South. The launch windows are tight, and they have to pop correctional thrusters on to counter solar flares, but it's worked, until now.

The fact that, over the past quarter, the payloads have been consistently landing, a fraction of a rotation too late, at Mars North, could mean the software has accumulated error, or failed, or been sabotaged, at the Mercury end.

It could mean mechanical wear of the mass driver, or maintenance failure.

There could be humans on the Brimstone Plains, or robots, that aren't supposed to be there.

Or, there could be some unknown planetary explanation, since we don't really understand Mercury's core, its tectonics, or its magnetic field yet—only what we absolutely need to know to get uranium off it.

Because when it comes to keeping the solar system connected, solar-electric is reliable but slow. Hydrogen is adequate. Only nuclear propulsion is quick enough in an emergency.

Like, when you're low on nitrogen and your dead arm's starting to thaw.

That kind of emergency.

Anyway, Captain Jihad in the *Penetrator* is going to Mars, to find out if the problem is at their end, and my *Whaleshark* is going to

Mercury to see if the problem's at the mass driver or MINE-Z end.

Look, the nitrogen thing's not really an emergency.

I'll totally be home in time to swap out my arm.

It's just that I've got a reputation to protect, you know?

Not many North Martians make it into space.

I won an astronaut's apprenticeship in a lottery my parents entered me in before I was born.

Don't really remember them. Bots raised me in a creche. The bots came cheap, secondhand, from an Earth retirement village, and asked questions like, *Are your bowel movements within normal parameters? Does the fleeting beauty of the blossoms make you ache with bittersweet memories? Your cortisol levels are high, do you feel you have failed your family members?*

One of those was semi-appropriate for toddlers, I guess?

My personal bot had previously cared for someone with very specific music tastes, which is how I got acquainted with Earth sounds of the 1960s.

According to my EleAlloc service record, my worst hangover from being raised by bots is that I get squicked out by the sight of human eyeballs moving in their sockets.

I mean, anyone could get squicked out by that, right?

When I have to do my self-health-checks, and see my own reflected eyeballs moving, it makes me shout, "NO!"

Without fail. Every time. And I'm twenty-three years old, so I shouldn't be shouting at myself in the mirror. I can't help it. Eyeballs are so gross.

On the other hand, whenever I finish a mission, I allow myself to eat one of the North Mars lemons I've got stashed in *Whaleshark's* water shielding.

There's nothing like a seedless lemon so sweet and juicy you can eat it like an orange. Nothing beats ripping it open, slipping it under your huge bobble-head helmet, and sinking your teeth through the segment into the white pith.

Afterwards, the essential oils burn your lips at the mucocutaneous junctions for five minutes or so. That refreshing moustache of tingling citrus fire makes me shout, “YES!”

That’s why, when I completed my apprenticeship, I named myself Victory Citrus.

Victory.

Vic.

VC.

Captain Citrus.

I bought the *Whaleshark* with the proceeds of a particle capture mission in the radiation belt that gave me two bouts of leukaemia.

Jihad Dib, distinguished service record two centuries long, can eat my nitrogen exhaust.

No stinking ulnar osteosarcoma is going to stop me from landing in Gog’s Gorge.

Mercury, First Pass

Song Stuck in My Head: “I Get Around”

“I checked the nitrogen tanks,” Naamla tells me, “and the manual reading doesn’t match the auto reading. What have you done?”

Naamla, my apprentice, was raised by wolves.

“That’s not as funny as you think it is,” she says, tapping the screen where the lines of my thought-journal scroll, in real time, across the smallest of *Whaleshark*’s monitors.

When new people are recruited to EleAlloc, they keep their family names. Naamla’s means Wolf. Newbies’ supervisors, the ship’s Captains, then give them a use-name for the duration of their apprenticeship, after which they name themselves.

Like me, naming myself Victory.

I chose Naamla’s name after she suggested I stop yelling YES and NO all the time.

Naamla’s background is Arabic.

YES and NO in Arabic are NAAM and LA.

Keep forgetting I have an apprentice. Been a while since I set anything to private, and I might have forgotten how. Important things, I never forget, but if I'm going to be around a few centuries, I don't want to be clogging the memory centres with software commands that will eventually be obsolete.

So I grab a roll of black PVC duct tape and put a few layers over the smallest screen. It's hard to tell what Naamla's thinking because courteously she keeps her dark visor down, hiding her eyeballs in my presence, to try to minimise my shouting.

She helps me with the tape, though, which is tough to tear one-handed.

"Haven't done anything," I tell her evenly when the screen's covered. "Been meaning to swap out that faulty sensor. Half the tank's tucked under Printer Two, so the volume's actually double what the sensor says. The pressure's right but the mass reads wrong. We have five hundred thousand litres, not two hundred and fifty thousand."

Liquid nitrogen weighs 1782 grams per litre on Earth, 677 grams per litre on Mercury, and just about nothing in transit. We need so much because mechanical refrigeration is way too slow to work in Mercury day time, and doesn't have the capacity to drop us down several hundred K, anyway. To keep our smart suits at a comfortable twenty Celsius on a two hundred Celsius day, a hundred grams per person per minute is only a fraction of the 6000 L/min that *Whaleshark* will need, not only to cool the 12 MW reactor but to keep our living space liveable and my new arm, two-thirds grown, viable. Capturing and refreezing nitrogen while on-planet requires a module I sold back on Luna to buy a brand-new Printer Two.

If I wasn't lying about the tank sensor, five hundred thousand litres would mean we could spend an hour or more on Mercury's surface. That's if we had to leave the relative safety of the mass drivers at Gog's Gorge and check on the surface-exposed mining rig.

Since I am lying, we can actually afford to spend thirty minutes or less examining a twelve-kilometre-long machine.

It's fine. It's all fine. The problem will be with the mass drivers.

"If you say so," Naamla says dubiously. "Five hundred thousand it is."

She's not very wolflike, and she's not very much younger than me. Nineteen Earth years old, she has the patience of a Mars cactus waiting for rain. It's lucky I'm not patient, or I probably wouldn't be so quick at doing equations in my head.

Or rushing off, undersupplied, to do dangerous missions with sweet, sweet payday.

I ignore the odd sensation, inside my smart suit, of liquid nitrogen boiling at the junction of my numb limb and sensitive shoulder where the heating element maintains the body temperature border. The nitrogen gas, six times the volume of nitrogen liquid, gets vented through a hose. While we're in a freezing vacuum, the gas can easily be recondensed by the ship.

Just got to keep my suit on and my hose connected, to avoid either asphyxiating or over-pressurising the cabin.

Both would be bad ways to end.

"How's the Mars mission going, then?" I ask.

Because Wolf, in Arabic, is Dib.

Oh, yeah.

Naamla was raised by my worst enemy.

Her dad.

I hate Naamla's dad because his motto is that a young brain's a dumb brain. He's two hundred. His parts have been replaced more often than the diamonds on MINE-Z's drill. That could have something to do with why Naamla's with me.

Also, the fact I'm from Mars North. In case I'm in on some conspiracy, I have to have a spy from Mars South, and vice versa. Not sure who Jihad Dib's apprentice is, but they'd better strap themselves in for that boring-a-thon, reviewing video footage and interviewing retrieval crews.

“They haven’t found anything yet,” Naamla says.

Naamla’s thought-journal feed goes straight to Jihad Dib, and his goes to her. So there’s very little privacy around here, duct tape or no duct tape.

“Damn straight,” I say, grinning.

“Neither have we,” Naamla points out, her visor turned in the direction of Mercury, a bright, distant spot out the window.

“I bet it’s one of the mass driver’s pressure sensors,” I say.

I’m an expert at fixing those.

Mercury, Second Pass

Song Stuck in My Head: “The Loco-Motion”

Time crawls when you’re one step ahead of the competition.

Finally, we arrive.

Hello, Mercury.

The ship clocks some electron bursts. I don’t pay much attention. The absence of atmosphere forces *Whaleshark* to mechanically angle panels and thrust, coordinating solar radiation pressure with an alarming loss of nitrogen. I’m monitoring our drop into stable orbit when I’m interrupted by my apprentice.

“There’s an anomaly,” Naamla says. “A gas plume over the Brimstone Plains. Massive, more like something you’d see on Enceladus. It correlates with MINE-Z’s active face, and isn’t far from the refineries.”

I look from my screens to her dark visor.

“Seems unlikely the problem’s at the Gorge, then,” I say. My heart can’t sink in low-G, but it wants to.

“Seems unlikely,” Naamla agrees.

“Who saw it first?” I have to ask. “Us, in orbit, or Jihad Dib, all the way from Mars?”

“Our approach was on the night side,” Naamla says, pointing out the obvious.

In other words, the dirty, rotten enemy noticed it first.

I grit my teeth.

It doesn't matter if that dinosaur saw it first. I'm here, and he's not.

Leaving *Whaleshark* to manage insertion on its algorithmic lonesome, I flick over to the visual map, and there it is. Some evaporating liquid escaping through dense, volcanic crust that's supposed to be something like twenty-five kilometres thick, when MINE-Z doesn't dig more than ten kilometres down.

"Mercury sprung a leak," I say, hardly daring to hope it's something useful. I've still got the capture equipment from the last mission. Seen better days but it still works.

I flick to the readout from our spectrometer, and my nostrils flare involuntarily.

Ugh.

"Hydrogen sulfide," Naamla murmurs. "If Mercury had an oxygen atmosphere, that plume would be on fire."

Yeah, and then it would turn into sulfuric acid.

The plume looks like a cartoon.

Of the Solar System's biggest fart.

I kind of wish my thought-journal was uncovered, so Naamla could get the fart joke. Even she would find that funny. *Whaleshark* tries to tell me about the electron bursts again, but I ignore them. The visual camera tracks the yellow rock of the plain and the toothed belt of the active face of the rig as our orbit takes us closer to the plume. MINE-Z doesn't appear to be damaged by the flow of hydrogen sulfide. Naamla starts fiddling with the array software to get better resolution.

My smile fades under my helmet. I have to cancel the approach to Gog's Gorge with my left hand, while my highly protected brain decides whether we should pull out while we still can.

The problem is with the rig, after all.

On Mercury's killer surface.

Suppose we went down to MINE-Z's active face at night. The crawling terminator wouldn't cross the Brimstone Plains for another month. Poor visibility could lead to a crash. If it didn't, we'd use so

much fuel that we'd have to make our return journey to Mars on pure solar.

I could fire the emergency sails. Mercury gets more than six times the solar flux of Earth. But the transit time would be years instead of months. I'd have to amputate my arm without getting the graft, the nerve ends would be shot, and I might never be able to use it again.

Plus there's the increased chance of me or Naamla getting another cancer along the way. Ten thousand rads per Earth year is a lot. That's on top of whatever we get dosed with on the planet. Which would also be a lot, smart suits or not. I wouldn't want to subject a microchip to that, much less a human body, and though we'd have the coolant to contain multiple cancers, and *Whaleshark* can navigate without us, we might not have the spare fuel to fire up Printer Two.

So.

A night approach is out.

"Mars Team instructs us to stay in orbit and wait for reinforcements," Naamla reports. "EleAlloc is in agreement. *Penetrator* is being refuelled and dispatched."

I barely hear her.

Suppose we landed in the daytime. Some of our nitrogen could be recaptured but not most. The volume would be too great. We'd use up pretty much all our coolant getting down to the Brimstone Plains and back again safely on a Mars trajectory. But it would be quick. The cancer risk would be reduced. We wouldn't run out of fuel. I might not have to sacrifice my arm.

No margin for error, though, and we'd still have only thirty minutes to figure out what went wrong, and to potentially repair it.

How can you repair a hole ten kilometres deep?

"Something else is happening," I say. South of the plume's source, there are cracks widening in the crust. It's a disaster. A second plume is going to start up, and I'm going to have to waste all our gas just avoiding the debris. Tapping on the screen to take measurements, the site of imminent explosion turns out to be

seventy kilometres away from MINE-Z, and although the survey map shows the crust is supposedly twenty-eight kilometres deep there, the new reading suggests it's actually only ten.

How is it so much thinner, and denser, than we thought? It's as if some deliberate process is at play at that particular spot. It can't be an accident. Shouldn't someone have investigated the unlikely richness of the ore at the site?

Also, what's underneath the crust is a layer of liquid reading exactly 200 K, everywhere, from the centre of the cracked area to the margins. The ship's quick enough to sneak a scan into the millisecond before the sun starts boiling it off into a second, smaller plume.

"That's where it's coming from," Naamla observes. "There's an ocean of liquid hydrogen sulfide underneath the Brimstone Plains. Most likely solid under even higher pressures, down at the sea floor."

Liquid hydrogen sulfide.

Fart ocean.

I reach over and peel back the duct tape, just the bottom part of the screen, so that Naamla can see the words FART OCEAN.

"I'm rolling my eyes," Naamla says, which is disgusting.

DISGUSTING.

Whaleshark insists I pay attention to the electron bursts, now, and I do.

Because they're not random, after all.

The ship's pinpointed their origin. It's subsurface, a hundred kilometres deep to the Brimstone Plains' first, biggest, and most dangerous plume.

And the pattern of them is no accident.

One second on, three seconds off. Then one second on again. Pulsing purposefully between the silences. Two of them. Then three.

Five, eight, thirteen, twenty-one.

Then silence.

Then starting all over again.

FIBONACCI SEQUENCE.

“It’s the F—” I start to say.

“I know,” Naamla says.

INTELLIGENT LIFE.

“There must be intelligent li—”

“I know.”

I try to cover up the screen again, but I’ve ruined the adhesiveness of the tape and there’s no time to get more.

“Naamla. Look at me, not the screen. Something is trying to communicate with us from underneath the Fart Ocean. If we reply our signals will have to penetrate ridiculously deep, and it’s not like I carry a particle accelerator around with me. Printer One is too small to assemble a dephasingless laser plasma accelerator, and Printer Two—”

Bloody eyeball soup.

“Printer Two is printing your arm,” Naamla finishes calmly. “Captain, our instructions are to stay in orbit and wait. *Penetrator* carries six printers. It can start on a particle accelerator right now.”

“And let your dirty, rotten dad be the one to make history by having the first conversation with aliens?”

Imagining that is worse than imagining the rest of my life unable to rip off a piece of duct tape.

“You’ll still be here,” Naamla says. “His ship is only four months away.”

“That’s a lifetime!”

“He warned me that, one time, you burned your taste receptors off because you couldn’t wait for your food to cool, then tried to pretend it was a tumour that forced you to re-grow your tongue.”

“He called you an unhatched egg with delusions of competency!”

I mean, why did he have kids if he was going to run them down all the time?

The thought shows on the bottom of the exposed screen.

“You run me down all the time,” Naamla points out.

“I’m sorry. Okay? Can you stop your thought-journal from going to his ship?”

“It might start open war on Mars.”

I pull off my giant helmet so she can see my eyes. That’s what people-raised-by-people do. So that she knows it’s bloody serious. That I have to talk to the aliens.

PLEASE.

I HAVE TO TALK TO THE ALIENS.

Naamla sighs. Her giant helmet bobs in agreement. She turns her back to me, tapping some screens, presumably switching off the relay.

“Please put that back on, Captain,” she says, “before you really do get a tumour on your tongue.”

Elation bubbles my stomach like a boiling fart ocean. *Are your bowel movements within normal parameters?* I feel like I could repel cosmic rays with the power of my excitement. I strap my helmet back on and start tapping with my left hand, to let Printer Two know it’s to recycle my right hand, and get started on a 4.5-metre-long plasma wakefield machine.

Naamla’s gasp draws me back to the screens.

“What now?”

She points wordlessly at the cracks in the ground at the second site, seventy kilometres south of the first plume, where something that isn’t boiling, freezing hydrogen sulfide is soaring free of the planet’s surface.

It’s a pale yellow torpedo-shape, ten metres, with a pair of multifaceted, eyelike orbs at one end. A couple of hundred white, curving, leglike prongs crowd the torpedo’s undercarriage.

There are pointy things near the eyes, like mouthparts.

One huge, metre-wide claw, and one tiny one.

A ridged exoskeleton covering the torpedo-body.

It’s an animal. A fish. A lobster.

It’s a whaleshark crossed with a giant fart trilobite.

“God is great,” Naamla whispers.

“EYEBALLS,” I shout. It’s the worst swear word I know. I couldn’t be more thrilled.

We are seeing an alien.

Either the intelligent kind, or its runaway livestock.

As the glistening torpedo's momentum carries it further and further from the kettle-vent of the underground ocean, it turns brown. Then black. The ridged shell starts sublimating, then freezing, until chunks of the alien animal's substance is indistinguishable from chunks of the second, smaller plume.

"It's beached itself," Naamla says. "Or the plume has washed it away. The pressure difference is too much for it to hold together. It's melting like a deep-sea Earth squid. Oh, my. Another one is emerging. More of them. It's a whole herd, Captain."

"We have to fly through that plume," I shout, tapping to reactivate that capture equipment from the previous mission. "We have to scoop up the pieces. Find out what they're made of. How can organic things like that communicate with electron bursts? Have they got tools down there? A city? The uranium we've been digging and taking away, was that their protective wall?"

But there's no going back.

We swing over the horizon in our helplessly brisk orbit, plunging back into the night side while the whole planet zips along at forty-seven kilometres per second.

Mercury. It's a speedy little bastard.

But so is *Whaleshark*.

We'll be back on the day side soon.

Mercury Orbit

Song Stuck in My Head: "I Can't Help Myself"

"It worked," Naamla's voice reports from the laboratory module. "We have samples of Mercurian biology, Captain. I'm running the least-damaged piece of alien exoskeleton I can isolate, but it's dissolving as we speak."

"Of course it worked," I say, keeping my relief to myself.

KEEPING MY RELIEF TO MYSELF.

Luckily, my apprentice isn't here to read my treacherous thought-journal. The lab module is at the opposite end of the ship to the command module. My left hand taps the closest screen, bringing me her results in real time.

I bite my lip.

Waiting. Waiting.

For all the acronyms to run.

FTIR. RS. NMR. SEM-EDX. XRD. TGA. DSC. Rheometry.

Why doesn't the rheometer have an acronym? Seems unfair.

I decide to name it Stretchy.

Then the results flash up.

Mostly errors. No matches to known chemistry.

"Predominantly sulfur," Naamla says through the intercom.

"Our noses could've told us that much," I grumble. "Giant fart trilobites can't only be made of sulfur."

"They're not giant trilobites, Captain. Give them some credit. They're using the Fibonacci sequence from a hundred kilometres underground. They're intelligent Mercurians. Should I run a second sample?"

"Yes. Do that." I frown at atomic ratios. Useless. Irritating. "Is this a software problem, do you think?"

Our analysers can identify high-sulfur polymers, those friendly renewables with waste sulfur crammed in between algae-produced monomers.

This isn't that.

Is it true sulfur-based life?

As a rule, our life forms don't make long-chain polymers with sulfur instead of oxygen, because they're insoluble in water. How could a living thing manufacture insoluble material, to use as shell cement, cell walls, whatever, and still be able to break it down again when it's time to replace or renew those cells?

"Second sample seems more uniform," Naamla reports. "The atomic ratio is eight carbons to thirteen hydrogens to five sulfurs to

one nitrogen. Does that remind you of something?”

It doesn't. But this time the software comes through and reminds everybody on my behalf. Like I said before, if I'm to live a few centuries, I'll need to save most of my memory space for later. This result is interesting, though.

“It's chitin?” I say. “Chitin, which forms the exoskeletons of Earth insects? Only, with sulfur in place of oxygen?”

“I wouldn't say that, Captain.”

“What would you say?”

“That we can't know how the molecules are arranged, because they're breaking down too quickly at this pressure? Also, Captain? I would say that all three fume cupboards are overwhelmed, and I'm going to have to seal off the laboratory immediately.”

Raised by Wolves. Doesn't she ever panic?

Outside the laboratory is the emergency shower and exercise room.

“I'm coming to you,” I say, floating horizontal, clawing my way out of the control module into the connecting tube. “Right now.”

“My eyes are burning,” Naamla says. “I think my tears are making it worse. Moisture is oxidising the—”

I fly into the exercise room.

We collide.

I grab her with my crossed ankles.

Left-handed, I twist the lock on her helmet and throw it off.

I'm not sure how noxious gases got inside. I checked all the suits, except the one she was wearing.

Probably smells like rotten eggs.

“Hold still,” I say. Her wet, dark lashes lie on her brown cheeks like seaweed left on a shore. “Open your eyes.”

“No water,” Naamla begs. “No oxygen. I need—”

“You need nitrogen,” I say. “Hold your breath.”

She holds her breath, and opens her eyes.

The round, soft, capillared wetness of them is terrifying. But somehow, I don't shout NO. Instead, I pop open a valve in my smart

suit, where the nitrogen reads just below body temperature. I aim my frozen right hand with my left, like a fire hose.

The nitrogen gas makes her burning tears float away.

Mercury Orbit

Song Stuck in My Head: "It's My Party (And I'll Cry If I Want To)"

Eyeballs. We're going to have to land.

"The particle accelerator is finished," I say. "But I can't fire it from here without wrecking the ship. I'll have to stick the nozzle directly against the surface."

"It'll be heavy," Naamla says. "Even on Mercury."

So. We'll need help.

I check the inventory of public-access maintenance robots that wander along the length of MINE-Z.

"There. That digging robot, Lay-B0R, can carry it. Preferably bury the whole accelerator to a depth of seven hundred millimetres to keep it from melting to slag. We'll have to land as close to the original plume as possible."

I glance at her screens. She's already on it. Definitely more competent than an unhatched egg. Jihad Dib's loss is my gain.

I'm feeling pretty smug until she says, with powerful irony, "Half a million litres of nitrogen ready for cooling, Captain. Historic meeting of civilisations imminent. Now all you have to do is decide what you're going to say."

Mercury Orbit

Song Stuck in My Head: "Bad Moon Rising"

"More Mercurians have suicided," Naamla says, "while we've been on the night side. Have you finished your message, yet?"

My message. I have to program the particle accelerator before we land. Before the robot buries the nozzle and we fire it off.

What am I going to say?

My message has to take their message into account, and what is that? A bit of maths, a bit of death?

Maths and death. That's what the universe is made of.

All the years we lived on Earth, did we ever really master interspecies communication? We couldn't manage monkeys, much less radically different life.

"Not yet," I tell Naamla.

So. How does a human communicate with, say, a tree?

You find out what it wants—light, water, whatever—and you put those things nearby. The tree grows towards them. Message received.

"My father," Naamla says, "has suggestions."

Now, how does a tree communicate with a monkey? Does it say Monkey, I need you to spread my seeds. Please eat them and shit them out? No. Just wraps the seeds in what the monkey wants. Fruit.

"I bet he does," I say absently.

These big old rotten egg lobsters think we want to eat them. That's why they're beaching themselves, at a suitable distance from the place where their signals come from.

They're drawing us away from their ocean-floor city. Away from their home.

Maybe the Fibonacci signals aren't even for us. Maybe the electron bursts are their alarm system. An evacuation order. It's taken decades for MINE-Z to dig deep enough to threaten them, but the moment has finally come where we've removed so much crust that the pressure can no longer hold.

Pressure that they need, to keep their ocean liquid. To keep their bodies from falling apart.

They're making their bodies into a bribe for us but they're wrong about what we want.

We can't eat them, that's for sure.

And what do they want?

To be left alone?

Better. They want to be covered back up. Crust thickness is proportional to crust density. Uranium is too valuable to pour back on top of them, but what about bismuth? There's a shit-tonne of it on Mars, and it's cheap to send things towards the sun.

And what do I need? Time. I need this to be already done.

Because I lied about the coolant, and Naamla doesn't deserve to die.

"Can I help you with the programming?" she prompts.

"Yes," I say.

I know exactly what I want to communicate to the Mercurians.

Though it won't be impressive enough for the history books. Just a bunch of numbers. It's the only thing I can be sure they'll understand.

Numbers, and death.

Maybe Naamla will promise to keep this historic first message to herself?

"Too late," she says. "It's already gone through the relay to my father's ship."

Speed of light: c .

Speed of thought: faster.

I see trouble on the way.

Mercury Surface, Brimstone Plains

Song Stuck in My Head: "Help!"

I send my message, to the sound of nitrogen hissing.

The smart suit, snapped to attention, holds me up in the horrible, painful grip of gravity. It feels like hooks through my ankles, pulling on my shin bones. I've got a raging headache from the alterations in blood pressure.

My dead arm drags like a uranium slug.

It's been seven minutes since I landed.

Under the ground, pounded there by the clunky digging robot, my newly printed particle accelerator sends my message to the Mercurians. Telling them what we need.

Seven, seven.

Nitrogen is what I need. Seven protons, seven neutrons. Fat chance of finding any here.

Ninety-two, two hundred and thirty-eight.

Uranium is what Mars needs. That's what started this whole investigation in the first place. I use the Fibonacci sequence between each request. So they know I don't want uranium nitride.

So they know it's an emergency.

What else do I need?

Time.

I need this to already be done.

The final part of my message represents uranium decaying, only in reverse.

I'm begging them to understand that I need to get off this planet.

Like, yesterday.

I'm asking them to stop doing what they're doing.

To stop killing themselves.

As if I could turn back time.

Fourteen minutes since I landed.

Message complete.

"Get back to the ship, Captain," Naamla insists.

I stare at the hypnotically, awesomely powerful base of the plume, a nightmarish blowhole destined to be eternal, or at least to blow until the Mercurians are dead, unless we can get that hole plugged. To the side of it, MINE-Z's slack mouth, once-impressive belts and buckets now made miniature by the scale of the blow, expands and contracts under the opposing influences of sun and compensatory, mechanical, equilibrium system.

Rolling past me is the three-legged, four-wheeled, drill-headed digging robot, Lay-B0R, heading for the ship without being told to,

stupid hydraulic arms waving, because it's got the sense of self-preservation that Jihad Dib swears I was born without.

"I'm coming," I tell Naamla, and turn.

My majestic ship, two hundred metres long, rests eight hundred metres away. I had it renamed *Whaleshark* for the anterior, ribbed, maw-like scoop, but it's shaped more like a marble-embedded, bleached, broken, human skeleton-leg.

Not even remotely streamlined.

But on no-atmosphere Mercury, much like Luna where the ship was made, who cares about that?

Nitrogen vents all around it.

"Run," Naamla suggests.

I run. Lay-B0R is way ahead of me.

When I see the crust around the digging robot wrinkle, I think: Too late. I've killed Naamla and myself. The plume's going to blast our broken pieces into orbit. Jihad Dib will have to collect them and test for our DNA.

But it's not the plume enlarging.

It's a seventy-metre-diameter silver sphere, eased out of the ground as carefully as if Mercury were an Earth-ostrich laying an egg.

"What is that?" I scream at Naamla.

"Ship says the surface is pure aluminium, Captain," Naamla says.

Lay-B0R stops by the sphere to lift it, looking like something from an old superhero film. Yet it jacks the thing clear of the cracked crust without breaking.

I've spent eighteen minutes on the surface.

Half my smart suit's HUD is telling me to get the heck off the planet's surface, in a hurry, if I don't want to die in the molten remnants of my ship, while the other half is telling me what Lay-B0R is telling me, which is that if it subtracts the mass of the aluminium shell, which it estimated with its x-ray-emitting claws and ultrasonic head, the contents of the sphere weigh 677 grams per litre.

“Fix that thing to the ship,” I order my apprentice, “with the capture nets. I’ll weld the bloody robot to the hull if I have to. Get the printers to make us something pointy for piercing that sphere and connecting it to our nitrogen supply’s primary hose. You’ve got twelve minutes!”

Bloody eyeball soup.

My spine’s tingling.

The Mercurians got my message.

They’ve given me a gift of pressurised nitrogen.

Two hundred and fifty thousand litres of it.

Mercury Orbit, Descent to Gog’s Gorge
Song Stuck in My Head: “I Say a Little Prayer”

No more Mercurians fling themselves out of the second vent.

In fact, it seems the aliens have closed that breach, somehow.

So many alarms are going off, everywhere, that it’s hard to filter out which ones are the most important. Threats to the ship. Threats to me. Threats to the Gog’s Gorge infrastructure, which has a landing site suitable for *Whaleshark*, but not necessarily for the aluminium bubble add-on provided by the Mercurians to save my life.

The most important thing is stopping the primary vent.

The leak in the Mercurians’ ocean.

Their city.

Their home.

Naamla’s furiously tapping screens, her HUD is probably just as stupid as mine right now, so I have to seize her shoulders and turn her to get her attention. That is, my left hand seizes one shoulder, and my frozen right forearm gets positioned on her other shoulder by my smart suit.

“Look. Everything MINE-Z has excavated from the Plains for the past three days is still sitting on the belt, isn’t it? And the uranium slugs at Gog’s Gorge, ready for Mars? Mercury Mining Co paused the launches until we could sort out the problem, right?”

“They’re not sitting there,” she says, hands frozen in finger-claws partway through a bunch of screen taps. “They’ve been moving towards the mass drivers all this time.”

“Then we’ve got to get them back. We’ve got to put MINE-Z in reverse, and dump all of the densest material we have back into the active face. That will plug the hole until we can get Mars organised to shoot us some bismuth.”

“We don’t have the authority,” Naamla points out.

Of course we don’t.

The second I ignored EleAlloc’s command to wait for the *Penetrator*, I probably got deregistered. If deregistration has an alarm, it’s way, wayyyyyy down the priority list.

But Naamla was raised by Wolves.

Time for my worst enemy to come in handy, for once.

“Your dad can get permission. He can’t have lived for two hundred years without accumulating favours.”

What’s the point of him, and his arrogant, two-hundred-year-old head, otherwise?

“Right,” Naamla says. “I’ll have to turn my thought-journal relay back on, then.”

“Right.”

She hesitates.

“He’ll be furious.”

“Yeah, he will. But the giant fart trilobites won’t have any ocean left in four months when he gets here to assess the situation. They’ll be extinct. The only other intelligent life in the solar system will be gone. He’ll just have to trust you that it’s an emergency.”

“Mercurians,” Naamla says. “The Mercurians will be extinct.”

“Right!”

Naamla shrugs my left hand and frozen forearm off. She turns back to her screens. Turns the relay back on. I don’t know what she’s saying because she doesn’t have to say it. Only to think it.

She sighs, presumably receiving her father’s reaction, which can’t be pleasant.

Tick, tock.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick—one, one, two, three, five, eight—

“He’ll do it,” Naamla says. “He’ll get South Mars to put MINE-Z in reverse. I need to send them some more data packets. After that, unfortunately, Captain, I have to freeze both my eyes.”

If she hadn’t been keeping her visor down, to keep me comfortable, I probably would have noticed that her eye injuries were worsening. Shame stabs me in the gut.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I mean, thank you. I mean, we’ll have landed in the bottom of the crater, soon. We’ll be safe from the sun and we’ll have gravity. Thanks to the Mercurians, we’ll have enough gas to manoeuvre, and to safely take off again when we need to. Naamla, I shouldn’t have lied about the nitrogen. I’m a terrible supervisor. When we get back, I’ll take the heat from EleAlloc and make sure you get transferred to a better ship.”

“No thank you, Captain. I’m also going to need to freeze my heart.”

Does the fleeting beauty of the blossoms make you ache with bittersweet memories?

What’s wrong, now?

“Your heart?” I repeat.

YOUR HEART? reads the bottom line of my thought-journal.

“Yes, Captain. My smart suit is recording a mitochondrial radical bloom that’s most likely to become a heart-based tumour. If you’ll focus on your own smart suit’s reading, you’ll see that there’s a bloom in your lower back, as well.”

Who can blame radioactive particles? They do what they do.

I guess the tingling in my spine wasn’t just the excitement of being the first human to chat to intelligent aliens.

“Oh,” I say lamely.

Nitrogen bubbles around my shoulder, mirroring the bubbling outside as *Whaleshark* sets us down on the safest bit of Mercury real estate on the whole planet.

For humans, anyway.

The Mercurians certainly wouldn't like it very much.

"I'll be going into my induced coma, now. Goodnight, Naamla."

"So will I. Goodnight, Captain."

Gog's Gorge, Mercury

Song Stuck in My Head: "Rescue Me"

I wake up from my coma wishing that my slow dreams had been about solving the meaning of life with profound fart trilobite philosophers, not having my fruit privileges taken away by Jihad Dib for raiding the *Penetrator's* supply.

Then I realise he's here, in the flesh, helping Naamla out of her autobed, calling her by her birth name like he still owns her.

"Please," I say through rubbery lips, "come aboard my ship without asking. Welcome, Captain Dib!"

EleAlloc must have given him the necessary permissions.

Isn't that the whole point of him?

Isn't that what we wanted him for, his centuries of schmoozing?

He doesn't bother to talk to me. Just opens access to his thought-journal.

I see your expensive new tongue still works, he thinks at me.

"There was cancer in the old one!" I shout.

Yeah, my tongue works fine. But it's stiffer than it should be. As if I've been sleeping longer than I intended.

There was not, Jihad thinks. *I've still got it if you want to take a closer look.*

"You've still got my old tongue?"

Of course. How else could I have printed you a new arm on the way here? I knew you were lying about the nitrogen, Hogwash. If you'll cast a downward glance, you'll see I even took the liberty of installing the fresh limb while you were sleeping. To spare you the waiting period.

Hogwash? Ouch!

Nobody's called me Hogwash Perjury since I was Jihad Dib's apprentice, and he was allowed to choose my use-name until I completed my proficiencies.

I hate him more than I hate looking at eyeballs.

Your cortisol levels are high, do you feel you have failed your family members?

But wait. Did he really grow me a new arm?

I lift my right hand to open the visor of my enormous, bobble-headed helmet. Yeah, we have to wear them even in a coma. I hold my hand in front of my face, unzip the suit to push the glove and sleeve back, and stare at the new nails, new skin, and new slightly-protruding wrist-bones lightening the brown skin.

I flex my fingers. The connection is perfect.

"I'm called Victory, now," I say. "Captain Citrus to you."

The old Wolf inclines his head.

Captain, he thinks.

"Did you save the aliens?" I demand to know. My ship starts filling me in on what's been happening. Jihad Dib showing up with my re-grown arm and Naamla's re-grown heart. Forcing *Whaleshark* to wait in Gog's Gorge while our grafts took. Ordering shipments of bismuth launched as fast as South Mars could assemble them.

Printing a better particle accelerator for speaking with the Mercurians. The fart trilobites have an active vocabulary by now, and are giving gifts of refined uranium to EleAlloc. Smaller, but enough for the politicians to work with.

Communication's good enough to explain exactly why the ocean remains liquid at Brimstone latitudes, where it should be too hot. The Mercurians evolved under the pole, where pressure and temperature were ideal, before excavating a planet-wide subterranean network that they were able to perfectly maintain—until we dug it up.

You saved them, Captain Dib thinks. Is that warmth in his thought-tone? Is he actually smiling? I can't see his face, because he's keeping his visor down out of respect.

He's never done that before.

"Does that mean stupid is sometimes better?" I ask.

He doesn't answer that.

You were wrong about one thing, the old Wolf thinks at me, offering me one of my own North Mars lemons from my stash in the water shielding. *The universe isn't made of maths and death. It's made of maths and life.*

I accept the lemon with my brand-new right hand.

Then I slip it inside my helmet, and sink in my teeth.



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SUYI DAVIES OKUNGBOWA

CHOKKE

Choke

SUYI DAVIES OKUNGBOWA

illustration by

XIA GORDON

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

International Friends offers foreign students the opportunity to bond with local hosts and develop a mutual appreciation for one another's cultures. Are you an international student? Apply today to be matched to a host!

Afonso Santos Ribeiro de Souza worships free food. *Tastes better when your bank account doesn't change*, he says. Hard to disagree when you're an international grad student hanging by the thread of a full-ride scholarship. But you are committed to a Friday night indoors. There are reruns of *Leverage* to be watched, an early grocery run in the morning, student papers to grade in exchange for a barely living wage.

Also, your ancestors have whispered that you will choke.

Afonso is persuasive, though. His canny ability to venture into snakes-and-ladders situations and emerge with free food is unrivaled. Like that one time he posed as a Turning Point ambassador just because he heard their tostadas were fire. So when he drops by your basement apartment and, for the umpteenth time, asks that you tag along on his first visit with the family assigned to him by the International Friends program, your resolve wavers. For one, it beats going out for drinks with the near-adolescent colleagues in your program. All they do is spend the night scouting potential partners for a weekend genital meet-and-greet while you sit and drink and count stars.

You dress casually, in trusted Chucks, shorts and T-shirt. Afonso goes with his usual beachside charm of white shirt with too many buttons left open at the chest. He tops this off with a straw hat tilted sideways. A walking P. Diddy cliché, yes, but also a complete departure from the stodgy scholars and academic gossip you're

used to engaging with all day. Perhaps this change of scenery could help more than you know.

Even though your ancestors have warned that you will choke.

Afonso opts for walking, as the address is only a few blocks from campus. The usual Friday crowd fills the streets: pre-gamed frat boys riding in truck headed to tiki lounges, yelling mating calls; sorority girls in MINI Coopers and Lululemon returning the favor; late dog walkers demonstrating their displeasure at this cross-border conversation; dirtbike clubs showing off logoed jackets and impromptu wheelies in the weekly seven p.m. parade. You and Afonso cross into the quieter residential streets and muse about privilege, how going to university in your respective Nigeria and Brazil meant keeping one's head squarely on one's shoulders. You are thankful your night will be much quieter—forming connections around a family dinner table, like the cultured adults that you are. Talk moves to the expected menu for the night. Afonso reads aloud the lengthy invitation email, which, among other things, mentions what to expect on the dinner table: tamales, Hopi corn stew, Hatch chiles. Mouthwatering.

The house, when you arrive, is more conspicuous than you had expected. Apparently, it used to be a church, back when this town was still a part of Mexico. The Spanish architecture and Infant of Prague statues, both of which you recognize from your Catholic upbringing, are huge tells. When you go past the motion-sensored outdoor lights, the statues come to life, casting slant shadows, like sentries over something poached.

The gate swings open into a large compound containing multiple buildings. The door at the top of the steps is open, ushering you in. From inside: the smell of good food, laughter, a cat meowing. Afonso beams. There is joy here.

You have forgotten your ancestors' whisper that you will choke.

★ ★ ★

Ancestors, like many words in this tongue, is a deficient descriptor for those who whisper in your ear. For all you know, some are as old as time itself, and some as recent as Grandpa Oli who died only a few months ago. It doesn't matter who they consist of, though, because they all murmur in one voice. Or *voices*, since it's kind of a chorus, whispers packed full with sibilants.

It's hard to tell the warnings from the statements. Perhaps in a way, they are all warnings. After all, your forebears only speak when they sense trouble ahead. Or perhaps *discomfort*, since none of the warnings you've ignored so far have resulted in anything notable.

Rather, if these voices from the Great Across have taught you anything, it's language. Each whisper a doorway to other doorways, each word pregnant with as many meanings as a centipede has legs. Sometimes, you can't even put together an English equivalent for the expressions they employ. Those you manage to parse often turn out to be false flags, the voices as fallible in death as they were in real life.

How does one talk to ghosts? You don't. Rather, you come to an unspoken agreement: unparseable whispers will go unanswered, and they'll just have to suck it up and deal.

At International Friends, our aim is a simple yet important one: bring people together to participate in sharing cultures, interests, and life experiences.

The dining room is dead center past the foyer. Its decor is rustic, surfaces possessed by wood grain. Ceramic plates with Victorian art lean on shelf tops and fresh candles are in candelabras, unlit. Beneath this decor is a dining table with twelve chairs and four people, the source of the laughter.

At its head sits Donny Paxton, writer of long emails, teller of jokes. His big beard is graying blond, like his hair. Judging by her highlights, the girl next to him must be Charlotte Paxton, the daughter on study break from Japan—another long email tidbit. The two guests are a white girl and an Asian boy, possibly internationals assigned here like Afonso.

Donny looks up as you enter, a broad, welcoming smile plastered all over his face. He's the very definition of nicety.

"Ah!" He claps his hands. "You must be Afonso?" He turns his gaze to you after Afonso nods. "And you are?"

"Oh no, I'm not signed up. I'm Afonso's neighbor."

"Ah, a friend!" Donny seems to bear more excitement than is due. "Well, all are welcome." He points to us each after we sit. "And look at that—we have someone from every continent here!"

Choke, say the whispers.

You make light talk. Asian boy is Tao, here from China, Engineering. Harriett, his friend, is an MFA candidate in visual art, here from England. Charlotte asks Tao about the differences between Japanese and Chinese cultures, which Tao tries to unpack delicately. Afonso and Harriett hit it off over a shared love of football and a discussion of which Premier League teams they support. This leaves you alone with Donny, who does little else but smile.

Thankfully, a woman comes in then, punctures the scene. *Alessia*, you remember from the email, along with something about her having Italian heritage and loving homemade meals and fresh fruit. She has clouded, tired eyes, but her smile is just as broad as her husband's. Wisps of dark hair fly unbridled across her face. She greets you all cheerily and places large dishes on the table. You find yourself unconsciously leaning forward, noting the dishes, concerned about any small components that could easily lodge in your airway. Sure, you're not going to let the voices ruin a promising night of free food, but you're not going to go in blindly, either.

More guests arrive, take their seats, and introduce themselves. Livia, a freshman from El Salvador with an undeclared major. Moises, a Mexican master's student from Juárez. Obaid, a Pakistani undergrad in Harry Potter glasses. Samiya, a Bangladeshi PhD student.

It takes a moment to realize an eleventh person has materialized at the table. Between the flurry of new guests and *Alessia* piling more dishes onto the table, you have not seen him slip into place,

stealthy, silent. He might have gone unnoticed, too, if not for the cat that has leapt onto his lap, meowing in response to his slow and deliberate stroking.

This must be the fourth Paxton, Joshua, whom the email said has just completed high school. You watch him regard each guest at the table with interest, studying the motion of their lips, the blink of their eyes, the cut of their jaws, the shade of their skin, the movement of their hair. He makes this assessment in half moments, while each guest is engrossed in their newfound comradeship of United-States-as-Strange-Land. Not a single one of them notices him.

He turns to you.

Sometimes, in lieu of speaking, the ancestors will prod. A single, quick jab to the ribs. A flick in the chest, a one-beat panic attack. A prick somewhere between temple and brain. In the most dire of circumstances, a fleeting vision, like *déjà-vu* but not really.

A rib jab is enough of a message this time. These kinds you do not often ignore. *Stay away from the creepy kid, got it.*

But this is not the message, you will soon gather, as Alessia places the last dish on the table and nods at her husband. Donny clears his throat loud enough to get the attention of the table, puts on his signature broad smile, clasps both hands together, and announces:

“Let us pray.”

★ ★ ★

Earlier, when you typed the address into Maps, the location was listed as *La Hacienda de Mar: International Faith, Freedom, and Culture Center*.

“*De Mar?*” asked Afonso. “Are you sure?” He grabbed the phone, then chuckled after reading. “Ah, I see. Probably wanted to name it *The Sea Estate* or *Estate of the Sea*, but that’s *La Hacienda del Mar*. *De Mar* is what happens when you’re bad at Translate.”

But the website was adamant: *de Mar*. Photos of the property littered the homepage: a massive compound with two buildings

adjacent to the main house, marked as a library and a small event center. Alongside is its storied history as a plantation, church, orphanage, halfway house, and now Paxton property. Photos from recent events featured a rainbow of students conversing, drinks and finger food in hand, red-eyed from the old point-and-shoot.

Everything you've witnessed so far adds up now. Even the mailers you spotted in the foyer make sense. A stack of them, all in the same garish colors, all military generals in typeface, all screaming: *Thank You for Contributing to the Destiny of Our Great Land! Victory Is in Sight! We Shall Win Back All Who Have Lost Their Way!*

Become a local International Friends host and learn about other countries and cultures, engage with interesting students, help new international students acclimatize to American culture, have fun!

No three words will make you congeal faster than *Let us pray.*

Your Nigerian parents, fierce Catholics and true children of the freshly postcolonial sixties, once said that the voices in your head must be God speaking to you. The alternative was Satan, of course, and there was no place for the devil in their house.

You agreed with them. Had to be some kind of god, if they could whisper from the Great Across. But how to tell your parents that the long-haired dude from the oil painting hanging over the altar at St. Patrick's definitely wasn't the one speaking in the tongues you could hear? Not if you wanted to avoid yet another night spent in deliverance sessions with men in long white robes and striking stoles pouring salty water over your forehead, or in candlelit rooms with a self-professed exorcist spinning and spinning and spinning, demented.

You played the game until adult independence beckoned. And when you finally cut them off, the stranglehold around your neck was lifted. You could finally breathe. A doorway, once shut, opened up, and out poured your ancestors, freewheeling.

But your body has not forgotten. Each time someone insists *Let us pray*, without asking if you want to partake, your body remembers.

* * *

The prayer is short, but you do not recall the words. Your ancestors, no strangers to this duress, offer a response path akin to theirs: *freeze, feign, forget*. Your body follows suit, wanders through on autopilot.

Dinner begins soon after, and you lose yourself in the table's discussion of the small college city. Many here appreciate its colorful sunsets and the valleys that ensure one can see the mountains from every neighborhood. Tao and Harriett—ten bucks says they're fucking—love the desertscape and plan to do a lot of hiking. Moises thinks the tacos are too expensive. Obaid thinks the locals tan too much. Samiya and Livia like the Indian place with the All-You-Can-Eat Tuesdays. No one enjoys the dryness.

"Awesome that you remember all our names, Donny," says Afonso, reaching for a dish. "Were you a teacher in a past life?"

Donny chuckles heartily. "Not a teacher, no. Minister. Before that, military, so I've always met people from all over the world. And listen, you learn a thing or two when you gotta deal with this many foreign names. For our international community here, we use one of my little tricks, don't we, Charlie?"

"English versions," says Charlotte.

"Take Moises, for instance." Donny points to him. "I just think: Moses." He points to each guest. "Samiya is Sam, Obaid is Bobby. For you, I just think of the Afonsos of Portugal. Strong rulers who took Christianity places. Brazilians would know—you're beneficiaries!"

Afonso is too busy with his meal to respond, so despite my attempts to remain outside this conversation, Donny's gaze eventually settles on me.

"I think you're the only person here whose name I don't know," he says.

Choke.

You swallow. “My name is Kédiké.”

Reality flickers like a failing neon tube. Something nestles within that millisecond—a sound like flowing water, though you can’t be sure. Too suddenly, you’re back at the table, everyone still trying to wrap their tongue around your name. Alessia, intermittently contributing to the conversation from the side table where she’s tossing salads, says: “Do you go by a nickname?” She digs at the bowl with wooden spoons and flips with practiced ease. “Like Kay, or something?”

“Maybe what you need is an honorary American name,” says Charlotte, enthusiastic. “Name exchanges are great for cultural appreciation—you know the Indians used to do it with missionaries and soldiers? Anyway, my honorary Japanese name is Eiko. Means *prosperous* or something like that. I gave my friends American names, too: Kayleigh, Brooklyn, Chad. They *love* it.” She angles her head. “Maybe later you can give us African names?”

Another flicker, this time a half second, the crack wide enough to fit several images: white sheets; the sickly gray of a spider’s web; bloodred; fingernails scraping wood.

★ ★ ★

Memory, they say, is a fragile thing. A collage of reimaginings and replacements; finicky, untrustworthy. Thankfully, you do not have that problem. When you opened the door to your ancestors, you also unlocked that portion of the human mind otherwise difficult to reach. The door behind the door. The one where memories go to hibernate, sometimes forever.

This is where you go now, to retrieve what you have registered without paying witness, what has filtered into your ears while you observed Victorian plates.

“The Bahamas is so dope.” This is Charlotte’s voice. “Going there on a cruise ship with my friends? Best thing. Sure, we mostly built

shelters and evangelized, but we still had fun, and *still* won the award for most natives converted. Best summer ever.”

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”
—1 John 4:1, English Standard Version

The ancestors’ next intervention is a prick to the temple. You have, once again, been carried away by the camaraderie of shared foreignness and studentship; by the way tamales taste like moi-moi from back home; by the heat-and-sweet of the Hatch chile; by the promise of sugary dessert, now that the main course is over. And in the moments when you have failed to keep watch, Donny has reached downward, pulled out a thick book, and opened it to a bookmarked page.

“As we wait,” he announces, that nice, warm smile never leaving, “may I interest you all in a passage?”

Freeze.

Donny reads, and the words fly by, missed bullets. Something about First John and testing spirits and false prophets, all forgotten as soon as they’re spoken. But Donny has more in the tank. He wants to know what the table thinks about the message. Like the discussions you facilitate with your undergrads, he goes around the table, person by person, so that all must respond through gritted teeth, knowing that this pathway has been pried open by good food and nicety. Charlotte aids those who stumble over their words, a knife through butter. Silent Joshua does not contribute.

When it reaches your turn, you do what your ancestors do best: *feign.*

“Can I use the bathroom?”

Alessia points you in the direction of a small door adjoining the dining room. You slip inside the cubiclelike washroom and take quick breaths, then wash your hands, humming “Happy Birthday” to ensure you get to all the crevices. Your thoughts wander, and soon,

you will find yourself doing what your ancestors have always done: *forget.*

When you return, the dining room has gone cold, silent. The lights feel dimmed, the warmth flattened, shadows leaning forward.

A twelfth person has taken a seat.

★ ★ ★

Walk backward, past the third search result for *La Hacienda de Mar*. There, a fifth Paxton. Elijah sports a gray hoodie and a full beard, hair dark like Alessia's but coiffed to the side like an affable neighborhood barista's. He wears the Hollywood smile Donny and Charlotte have so perfected. He shouldn't be smiling, though. This is a mugshot.

Walk back some more. Stop there, at the side shot that shows the blood running down his head. Read the accompanying news report, and let your brain isolate the phrases that matter. Like: *hit over the head with a baseball bat by a freshman*. Like: *planted Coyote boots in the middle of her chest*. Like: *she had called him a fascist psychotic monster*. Like: *he had called her an LGBTQ slut*. Like: *using a megaphone, he made proclamations such as, "You deserve rape for those shorts," and "Repent, for the kingdom of God is nigh."*

Now, walk forward, into the photo of him handcuffed and led away. Drink in the charges ("aggravated assault"), the bail terms ("ten thousand dollars") and preliminary punishment ("banned from all campuses of learning in a fifty-mile radius"). Drink, so you may be filled with wisdom. Drink, child, but do not drown.

Activities can range from holiday celebrations, trips, and outings to everyday events like sharing meals. The most important thing is not the choice of activity, but the bonding experience.

Elijah introduces himself to the table with a broad smile. Everyone but the Paxtons respond. Joshua is the only Paxton who speaks, and for the first time, too.

“You weren’t supposed to be here,” he says.

“That so?” Elijah chuckles, then reaches out a hand and ruffles his brother’s hair playfully. “But here I am anyway.” He smiles at his father, mother, sister, all of whom have resorted to start-stop movements, as if eluding a perched bird. “We’re gonna have fun, aren’t we?”

Goosebumps sprout, histories in your skin standing erect. You know, instantly, that something has tilted. Like every guest at this table, you are anchored by this centripetal force, stuck waiting for violence—first blunt, now sharpened—to show its blade.

Elijah slips into the role Donny once occupied, wrenching control of the table with practiced ease. *Tell me about yourselves*, his comportment says. *I just want to get to know you!* And yet you feel the room shrink and dim. Alessia lays out the dessert, a mango compote with strawberry mascarpone. The shadows grow longer, sharper. She announces the dish in a near-whisper, as if her tongue—like every silent Paxton’s—has been snatched by Elijah, stripped of its couching, exposed to the elements. The compote and mascarpone look and smell good, but you see them for what they truly are: forbidden fruit upon which you will choke.

“Now, now, son,” Donny interrupts in a contained timbre. “Careful not to smother our guests.”

Elijah smiles like Donny. Broad and warm and nice and razor sharp.

“Dad,” he says. “*Come on*. It’s what we do.”

The world flickers, and the last light in the room is snuffed out. Your ancestors, tired of waiting, step forward.

Every guest at the table is a faceless two-dimensional darkness, bodies draped over furniture and cutlery, trapped in the plane of shadows. They speak but are unheard; scream but are stifled by a form too shallow to hold all their selves. The only bodily parts spared are their fingers, fleshy ends clinging to the flattened shadows at the table. With these they call for attention, scratching at the wood, pulling splinters, drawing blood.

But the sound of water drowns them out.

Each Paxton is a white robe wearing a stole, like the men from your exorcisms. Sticky gray tendrils, borne of each utterance, each interaction, connect the whites to every guest, bonding all in a close-knit web. Water so saline you can taste it pours from the depths of each Paxton to the dining room floor, enveloping the slant shadow-selves. Alessia's ejections happen, like her words, in drips, slipping down the sides of her mouth. Charlotte and Donny, Hollywood smiles still intact, spout huge bucketfuls. But no one gushes into the fast-rising lake like Elijah, from whom water pours out of every orifice: eager, hungry, restless.

Young Joshua is the only Paxton left untouched. He is still stroking the cat. But rather than the vacant expression he has presented all evening, his face is warped by fear as he watches the water rise. His eyes turn, slowly, and find you, realizing you have joined him in this separate reality.

"Help," he whispers, choking. "Help me."

The flesh-fingered shadows scratch the table, echoing his words in wood. *HELP. HELP ME.*

Student-host relationships officially come to a close after the first academic year, but lifelong bonds with hosts are often formed.

For the first time tonight, you will act with alacrity. You will rise and make for the door, feigning a hurt belly, mumbling a quick "good night" over your shoulder. Confused responses will chase after you, but that there is Sodom and Gomorrah, and you are not Lot's wife. You will not look back. Not until you hustle through the foyer, down the steps, past the gates, and into the street, where you will finally take your first full gulps of cold night air.

Fingers numb, you will text Afonso: *Get out now.* Another, because you know he'll need it: *Forget the food!* Another, because someone has to: *Take everyone with you.*

Once home, you will return to a trusted friend, the web search, and open the first doorway by looking up the word your ancestors

have whispered all night. One by one, the doorways beyond will appear, and you will step through each, savor the sounds, elasticity, and endless possibilities. Only then will you realize how shackled by this foreign tongue you have become, failing to look beyond singular meaning. You will understand now that the sibilant whispers of your ancestors have always been prisms, light with rainbows ensconced within if you listen just right. You will listen now, and hear the other words contained in the spectrum, each one a crack, a new understanding of the acute warning they have delivered all this time.

Choke. Stifle. Smother.

Suffocate. Strangle.

Drown.



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QUANDARY

AMINU VS THE

BUTTERFLY

MAN



R I C H L A R S O N

Quandary Aminu vs The Butterfly Man

R I C H L A R S O N

illustration by

S A R A W O N G

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

Jow is emptying the last container of slurry into the claw-footed bathtub when the knock comes: one thud, then two, then one, just how the anonymous script on his fone predicted. He sets the jug down too quickly, nearly knocks it over. He wipes his hands on his coverall, leaving pink smears on the dark blue fabric, and goes to the door.

“Who wants in?” he asks, following the script.

“The stork wants in,” comes a husked voice.

Jow thumbs the digital lock, butcher meat red to glowing green. He slides the dead bolt left to right. Rakes his hair back, sucks his cheeks in, tries to look like a pro instead of a nervous darkmarket microjobber.

The old woman on the other side of the door is tall, sun-browned, wearing a knit sweater in mustard yellow. There’s a disposable surgical mask wrapped around her upper arm and she’s carrying a charcoal-gray bag, sealed, with no visible logo or shipping tag.

“Tub ready?” she asks.

Jow nods, relocks the door, and leads the way to the bathroom. The woman keeps the gray bag snug against her hip while she walks. She inspects Jow’s handiwork: the empty containers against the mold-slick wall, the tub full of glistening, pale pink biomass.

“All the concentrations are right,” Jow says. “Got the additives. Calcium, iron. Everything a growing boy needs.”

The woman doesn’t laugh. Her dark-ringed eyes seem faintly accusing.

“I lost a bit,” Jow blurts. “Just a bit. Two, three centiliters. The plug wasn’t all the way in when I started pouring.”

She stares at him, then flutters a dismissive hand. She sets the gray bag on the tile and dons her surgical mask, adjusting the sliders behind her wrinkled ears. Spray-on gloves next, from a corner store canister. Jow imagines he sees the bag wriggle just slightly.

Finally, the woman produces a pair of small scissors and slits the bag open. Inside, an embryonic pouch, slimy and compact. Inside that, curled in on itself, something between a fetus and a homunculus. It twitches.

Jow swallows. “Never seen one made before,” he says.

“Me neither,” the woman says. “But they sent me a tutorial.”

She drops the pouch into the tub. Surface tension keeps it afloat on the quivering slurry at first, then it sinks slowly out of sight. The bathroom is so silent Jow can hear his own rushing pulse.

“You’re on a microjob, then?” he asks, faintly annoyed that she’s no more a pro than he is, just another small-time, part-time criminal.

“Pickup and delivery.” She takes a plastic probe out of her sleeve and dips it into the slurry. “And this time a little extra.”

“Who do you think it’s meant for?” Jow mutters.

“Someone really unlucky.”

There’s a rattling gurgle, like rainwater racing through pipes during a storm, and the tub starts to churn. A wet pink fleck strikes Jow’s boot. He steps back, heart humming, knees shaky. The biomass is sluicing away, but not down the drain. The thing from the pouch is greedy, growing, sucking with ravenous pores.

Jow watches the level fall, and fall, and a body emerge. It swells and thrashes. Limbs elongate. A cartilage skeleton stretches, twists. Muscles creep over each other, layer on bubbling layer; rubbery skin splits and reforms to accommodate. Jow can’t take his eyes off it.

When the gurgling noise finally stops, the fully formed butterfly man is lying in a shallow carbon puddle. It’s human-shaped, but strays in the details: joints distended, no finger or toenails, smooth uninterrupted flesh between the legs. Its face is the most perfect part of it, with planar cheekbones and soulful dark eyes.

“Thought it’d be bigger,” Jow says, to mask the crawling in his spine.

“You spilled some,” the woman says.

The butterfly man doesn’t breathe like a human, no familiar up-and-down locomotion to the ribcage. Instead, its whole body seems to ripple.

“We used to play butterfly man, when we were little,” Jow says. “Me and my sisters. Always imagined it bigger. Scarier.”

“It’s a tupilak,” the woman says.

“What?”

“People tell stories, up here,” she says. “About a thing called a tupilak. You make it out of animal carcass. Some human bits. You send the tupilak after the person who wronged you, and the tupilak makes it right.” She grimaces. “This is that, but they did it with a genep rint.” She blinks down at the tub. “You have to be careful with a tupilak, though, because if you don’t make *it* right—”

Jow’s fone buzzes against his hip and he pulls it out of his coverall pocket. Another line has been added to the script. He reads it, blinks, looks up. The woman is frowning down at her own fone, no doubt seeing the same message.

“For diagnostic purposes, please run or hide,” Jow recites, throat going tight. “What the fuck is that? What does that mean?”

The butterfly man flicks itself over the side of the tub and onto the floor, moving nothing like a human. The woman steps back and drops the plastic probe. The butterfly man scoops it off the bathroom floor with its foot, and for a surreal moment Jow thinks the butterfly man is going to return it to her.

The blunt plastic tip burrows through one side of the woman’s neck and out the other, spewing blood and spinal fluid.

Jow runs.

★ ★ ★

“My moment, I think I was seventeen the night it happened,” Quandary says, spinning the empty cocaine packet between her fingers, shredding the health hazard advisory into bright yellow strips. “I did some psilos and took my baba’s husky out for a wander. We walked in circles all around the block, following the cracks, the tarred-in cracks in the street. With the high, it looked like they were flowing, you know? Black magma, flowing and cooling.”

They’re deep in Nuuk’s digestive system, a neon-lit bar packed shoulder to shoulder with carbon riggers and journeymen, a skin-sea all misty with aerosolized sweat and desperation. Quandary found her usual cove—a table tucked behind a load-bearing pillar—and picked a stranger from the bar to anchor her there.

“Sounds beautiful,” says the blurry woman. Quandary chose her because she is lanky, leonine, has bare arms coated in moving tattoos. The woman is buying them both thick, silty ciders; Quandary is buying herself cheap Escobar snowpacks. She offered her companion one, but apparently she only likes booze and ketamine. Very old-school.

“Yeah,” Quandary says. “Beautiful. There was a blackout that night. Grid attack. Half the city was dark, and we ended up right on the dividing line, in this spot I didn’t remember, this little hump of dirt and dead grass on the edge of the bypass. So we were looking at this wall of black, pure black, and I knew in my gut that it was the end of the world.”

“It’s always the end of the world,” the woman says, pushing one leg against hers.

Quandary shakes her head. “Not that kind of end. But the limit. The edge. And I knew that everything around me was simulation—not the probabilistic way of knowing, but bone-deep. I lay down on my back and stared straight up, so I could see the simulated stars pulsing up there. There was no way I could do the wrong thing, because nothing was real.”

She stabs a tiny trace of powder off the table with her thumb; it sticks in the oily whorl. “And I felt this distilled electric joy, this indescribable, womb-like comfort. Because I was the only sapient thing in the whole fucking universe.” She rubs her thumb inside her nostril and feels a faint serotonin ghost. “It all collapsed when the dog licked my face,” she says. “I nearly strangled that dog. But yeah. Yeah, that was the happiest moment of my life.”

Her companion’s leg recedes. “You strangled a dog?”

“Of course not,” Quandary says, squinting. “It was a husky. They’re enormous.”

“Oh. Good.” The woman gives a bleary grin. “You want to leave now? You can strangle me a bit, if you like.”

Quandary likes the crooked tooth in her smile, and the clean peppery smell of her, and she’s considering the offer when Timo shows up. His reflective orange jumpsuit sprouts out of the crowd like a night-blooming flower.

“We need to talk business, Q,” he says. “Outside. Hurry.”

A cold wisp of unease gets through her high. Quandary does not like going places alone with Timo, but she has her fragger, and his gun doesn't work on her, and business is business. She untangles herself from the spindly chair and table. For a nanosecond it looks like her companion might object, but then she registers Timo's size and his scarred-up eye implants. She drinks her cider real ruefully instead.

"Two shakes," Quandary says.

She worms around the pillar and Timo cuts their path through the crowd, past the doorbot sniffing for unregulated narcotics or pheromones. They push out into a cold pink light. It's dawn already.

Timo wastes no time ruining it.

"Jokić blames you for the harbor job going belly-up," he says.

Quandary frowns. "What?"

"The harbor job," Timo repeats, staring at her with his nickel-sized smartglass eyes. "Jokić thinks you snaked. Thinks you told the poli which boat to search."

"I'm the reason even half the crew made it out of there," she says. "If it wasn't for me, we'd have all been pinched." A semi-manic laugh spills out of her throat. "I can't believe this shit. I can't believe it. I have to talk to him."

Timo shakes his head. "You have to get out of Nuuk. Get off the Land. He lost two people and a lot of cash, and he wants you dead for it, Q."

She unclenches her fist and stares down at the shredded origami remains of the cocaine packet. She lets it flutter to the tarmac. "Who'd he pay to kill me?" she asks, hand crawling unconsciously to the grip in her pocket. "You? You taking money for Quandary Aminu?"

"Nobody is," Timo says. "He said for nobody to touch you."

"How's that work with wanting me dead?"

Quandary leaves the weapon, slides her fone out of her sleeve instead. She unfolds it and checks the pirate cam that watches her apartment entry from across the street. Dark, grainy, empty. And she'd know if someone had gotten inside; the dingy screen window would be spattered with blood.

"He's doing a fresh deal with the Siberians." Timo's voice rocks her back to the bar alley. "For military surplus. Biotech. Bad, bad biotech."

She blinks. "Viral agent? My immunos are jacked up." She says it bravefaced, but feels a jag of fear—they're always coming up with new bugs, and most of them are a slow kill. "I'll boil it right out."

"Nothing viral," Timo says. "Foot soldiers. The disposable kind. You ever met a butterfly man?"

Her cocaine immortality cracks and crumbles. "Shit."

"Yeah. You're the product test. If this one kills you, Jokić buys the rest of them." Timo's face does stuttering iterations of an expression Quandary isn't familiar with. "I could come with you. Tonight. Get us onto an autobarge, head down the coast. You and me."

Quandary remembers back to a splintered night in another bar, then in Timo's shack, his naked body moving in the dark. His skin-smell. His body heat. "What was the happiest moment of your life?" she asks.

"No time, Q," Timo says.

His suffocating weight, the dizzy whirl in her head, the dull-then-sharp pain of him burrowing inside her. He must remember it so differently. Anger comes from a dozen different places and coalesces to a boiling wave inside her chest. For a moment she wants to plug Timo right here outside the bar, whisper *boom* and watch the frag dart turn his body into chunks and splatter.

But she needs to save her ammo for Jokić and his butterfly man, and Timo is the most dependable kind of monster.

"There's something I have to get from my apartment first," she says. "We'll hurry."

She lopes off into Nuuk's slick streets, knowing he'll follow.

* * *

Even fifty years ago, this city was a colorful afterthought. Quandary has seen it in remembrance holos: a craggy coast lined by a rainbow of boxy buildings, red and yellow and green and blue, all watching the sea. Then came the Cascade, or at least the point in the Cascade where ice melt unleashed huge swathes of arable land across Greenland and Russia, and that plus the carbon-capture boom brought foreigners up in droves.

Now Nuuk is sprawling inward, away from the rising sea, and its neat technicolor rows birthed a jumble of printhouse and polyp-grown warrens. Quandary watches the urban wilds slide along, forehead pushed to the window of the NRT, more commonly called the Spine, the raised solar rail that runs the city diagonally.

She could ride it all the way to the edge of town, bus out with some carbon riggers, live to fight and fornicate another day. But this is about rep, and running makes Jokić right, that pasty fuck. She worked hard to get on the harbor crew, and she did her job better than the rest of them did theirs. Jokić should know by now that the poli don't need moles to come out of nowhere.

Unless this isn't about the harbor job.

Unless he wants her gone for some other reason.

"We shouldn't be doing this, Q," Timo mutters. "It might be waiting for you already."

Quandary grinds her aching skull against the cold glass. She bought a flush from a vending machine, to set her neurotransmitters straight and eat up the alcohol still lurking unprocessed in her gut. She regrets it. Her head is pounding and her whole body feels raspy and she probably has equal chances against a butterfly man whether she's sober or shattered.

“Wouldn’t be a product test if they dropped it right at my house,” she says. “The whole point of these things is that they’re hunters, right? Pattern matchers. You give them a face, fire, and forget.”

“They match those patterns *fast*.”

“It’s been alive for six hours, tops,” Quandary says, “and my streetcam shows all clear.”

“Yunupingu Memorial,” the rail announces, in genderless monotone. “Doors opening on the left.”

The car tiptoes to a halt and the doors flutter open. Quandary ignores the escalator, bangs open the metal door to the stairwell, cold concrete and fluorescent lights and stripes of reflective tape demarcating the steps. She takes them at a run to get her blood pumping.

“What do you need from the apartment so bad?” Timo grunts from behind her. “If it’s cash, if it’s narcotic, I can—”

She grips the railing and leaps the bottom third of the flight, lands with a thump. “Just watch my back, all right?” she puffs. “Stay by the door. There’s a good shadowy spot behind the biorecycler.”

She slams out of the emergency exit, the one with a sliced wire keeping the alarm quiet, and into the street. The sun is up in earnest now, filtering through wisp and scud. That would make it easier to see the butterfly man coming, if she knew what the fuck to look for. Her nerves jump and sizzle when she passes a partier stumbling home, again when she passes a night worker in a logo-printed coverall.

Then she’s at the apartment block. Timo has trailed her at a distance; he installs himself now behind the biorecycler, tiny vapor pipe clenched in his big hand. Quandary casts a last look around, then skips up the steps. The door reads her face and gait and buzzes open.

“Two shakes,” she says, and heads up.

★ ★ ★

The apartment smells wrong when she steps inside. It panics her for a moment before she remembers drunkenly leaving a plastic plate on the stove coil, slagging it to a shiny puddle and filling the room with rancid smoke—her baba would not be happy with her. Quandary pulls her fragger out anyway. Adrenaline turns her familiar furnishings into crouched silhouettes, puts faces in the gloom.

She whistles the lights on. When the fluorescents scour the dark away, revealing a battered white table crenellated with empties, a hand-carved rocking chair in one corner, a gelbed shoved into the other, her heart slows to tolerable speeds. She’s never had much of a nesting instinct—she tells the women and sometimes men that she’s only just moved in—and it leaves near to nowhere for a butterfly man to hide.

She hears a comforting electric chirrup from the room’s sole decoration, a colorful wall hanging above the rocking chair. No visitors while she was gone. She

checks the bathroom anyway, but finds only her haggard self, staring balefully from the toothpaste-spattered mirror. Fucking Timo didn't tell her she was walking around with a snowcap. She thumbs the leftover coke away from her nostril, rubs it along her gum instead.

Tired neurotransmitters poke their heads up. She apologizes for jerking them around, doing the whole flush-and-go thing, then rides the twitch of energy back to the other room, heading for her industrial-grade refrigerator. It's the priciest thing she owns, a metallic gray giant with its own backup generator and genelock.

Her thumb is almost on that lock when she stops. Hesitates. Her imagination paints the butterfly man contorted inside, waiting for her. They can do that. People say they have cartilage skeleton, like sharks. She doesn't think they can hack genelocks, but who the fuck knows. She opens the fridge with her fragger aimed.

There are no surprises inside. The top shelf holds a half bottle of cheap local wine, some curry paste, and a slowly decaying orange. The bottom shelf holds the secret she would never tell Timo or anyone else about. She pulls the black carbon shell out of the fridge, carefully, carefully, and slides it into the go bag she keeps in the neighboring cupboard.

It nestles perfectly between the medkit and the ammo. She casts around, grabs a checkered drying cloth, wraps it over the top of the shell. The extra padding is not even slightly necessary, but feels correct. She zips the bag shut and slings it over her shoulder.

Her fone chimes—maybe Timo, telling her to hurry the fuck up.

Not Timo. It's an alert from her streetcam, the one watching the apartment exterior, the one she told to keep an eye out for anyone whose gait and facial geometry it didn't recognize. Her throat goes tight. She taps through to the feed.

She sees only a grainy Timo, no longer hiding behind the biorecycler. His broad back is turned to the streetcam. He is swaying slowly from side to side, almost dancing. Quandary squints at the feed, trying to parse, trying to figure out what the fuck he is doing and why the streetcam is showing it to her.

His feet are not planted. They are dragging on the pavement, boneless, weightless. Quandary sees the pale hands now, wedged under Timo's armpits. She watches his big body lift and lower, lift and lower, as if the butterfly man is trying to guess how many kilos. Her stomach drops straight down an elevator shaft.

Now is the time to run, but she can't. She needs to see who—what—she's going to be dealing with until she, or it, is a corpse. Timo's body topples over; she gets a glimpse of his ruined face, a red mess. Then she sees the butterfly man: small, angular, swallowed up in the blue coverall it wears peeled to the waist. It wipes its hands on its mustard-yellow sweater and leaves two bloody anemones.

The face is oddly beautiful, and wears a small contented smile. The butterfly man rolls Timo's body behind the biorecycler, the way a dung beetle rolls fecal matter, and disappears from the streetcam's sight line.

★ ★ ★

Quandary unfreezes. Timo's dead, which means a little packet of emotions she will have to observe or destroy later, and the butterfly man is here, which means she needs a plan. If it's strong enough to heft Timo like a doll, it's strong enough to wrench open the cheap fabbed windows on the ground floor.

Then it will come upstairs, come to this very room, because it took less than six hours to figure out where she lives. Or else Jokić is a fucking cheat, and told it. She shoves that thought away but keeps the residual anger for fuel. The longer the butterfly man is alive, the smarter it's going to get. So meeting it right now, on her own territory, might be the best chance she has to kill the thing.

Fight or flight.

Fight. Has to be.

She unzips her go bag, digs out a flicker bomb and ammo cartridge. Her fingers are slightly tingly, but not visibly trembly, which seems like a good omen. She pockets the bomb, slaps the cartridge to the magnetic stock of her fragger. Does it all one-eyed and one-handed, since she needs to keep watching the streetcam.

Timo's foot pokes out from behind the biorecycler, but there's no sign of the butterfly man. It might already be circling the building for entries. She looks down at the carbon shell swaddled in her go bag.

"Luck me," she says, and gives it a soft pat before she zips the bag shut again. Her heart is pounding now, amphetamine fast, anticipating the violence. But she's no stranger to that. She almost prefers it.

Timo probably had his piece on him, and the butterfly man has probably figured out how to use it by now. Quandary flexes the fridge up onto its rollers and drags it into position, so the heavy metal can provide some cover. She experiments with aiming blind around its corner, first high, then low.

Somewhere below her, she hears a cracking noise. A forced entry noise. The poli don't usually come around this block, but they might send a drone or two. She wonders if the butterfly man knows that.

She unlocks her apartment door, hinges it open just a sliver. Listens for feet. Then she dims the apartment lights, goes back behind the fridge, and waits. Her pulse is loud in her ears, so loud she might not be able to hear the butterfly man coming. From the way it moved outside, she knows it has soft feet. It reminded her of a ballerina—precise, fiercely strong.

She listens for doors instead, and hears a telltale pneumatic sigh from down the hall. She pulls the flicker bomb out of her pocket. She pictures the butterfly man traversing the corridor, tries to time its arrival.

A gap of light under the door goes dark.

"Hello?"

The butterfly man's voice is a high-pitched croak. It'd be funny if her nerves weren't screaming. She glances at her wall hanging. Adjusts her grip on the flicker

bomb.

“Hello?” the butterfly man squawks again, and something rolls through the cracked door, a small black orb dribbling blood behind it.

Timo’s eyeball, or rather its smartglass upgrade. Quandary’s stomach gives a little churn, but she is not surprised when the second orb follows, on a perfect trajectory, and meets its twin with a sharp clack. She wonders if it was hard work to seed sadism into the butterfly man’s geneprint, or if it arises naturally in all apex predators.

“Come on in,” she says, sluicing most of the fear out of her voice. “Never met a butterfly man before.”

The butterfly man grunts, a deep sound nothing like its previous squawk, and Quandary recognizes the voice. Timo’s eyes weren’t enough of a trophy. The butterfly man took the last sound he made, too, right before it crunched his windpipe.

A soft electronic bleat from the wall hanging. Target acquired.

“I was going to do that myself, probably,” Quandary says, tipping her head to one shoulder and then the other, triggering the swellies she had a street surgeon embed in her ear canals. She can barely hear her next words. “He was a real deluded piece of shit.”

She thumbs her phone, and the autogun behind her wall hanging goes wild. The nightly maintenance of its joints and chambers, the lubricant stains on the floor, the spike in her electricity facture: all of that shit is instantly worth it, because uranium-tipped rounds are now shredding through the doorframe, through the wall she never liked much anyway, and obliterating everything on the other side.

She lobbs her flicker bomb through the newly chewed hole for good measure; its detonation is a muffled pop beneath the autogun’s tirade. Even with the swellies in, her whole skull is vibrating. The burst only lasts two point five seconds—autogun ammo is not cheap—but adrenaline makes it an age.

When the gun coughs empty, the wall is a billowing cloud of plaster speckled with red. Quandary’s pulse roars and foams. The butterfly man should be nothing but butcher giblets at this point, but she’s heard enough rumors and seen enough flicks to be cautious. She lets the dust and fragments settle before she creeps out from behind the fridge.

She stalks forward, fragger leveled, scanning the debris for shreds of blue coverall or yellow sweater. The dark red blood-blots in the rubble are encouraging. She follows them to the ruined wall, picks a hole, sights left, right.

The corridor is a fucking mess, and she can hear her cross-hall neighbor wailing. She forgot to check if they were home before setting the autogun off, but only sees a couple holes punched through the opposite wall, so unless they have astronomically bad luck—

A hot droplet lands on the tip of her left ear.

Her head snaps back; the butterfly man is on the ceiling, because of course it is. One of its legs is now wet pink ropes, slowly knitting back together. The other

leg is intact, and since the butterfly man's arms are busy clinging to the ceiling it has Timo's gun clutched between its pale distended toes.

She fires, blowing the butterfly man to pieces—

Except her fragger jams. Chokes. She recalls the cloud of plaster she just walked through, recalls Timo telling her a fragger is too fucking finnick for wet work. His alternative, a snub-nosed Glock, is now pointing at her face. She needs to speak loudly, clearly, because Timo's gun has an electrolock and she hacked it after the night she stopped trusting him. Her throat is too dry to even whisper.

"Quandary Aminu," the butterfly man squawks. "Never met a Quandary Aminu before."

She admires the choice to taunt, but the taunt fucks it over. Her name is the magic word. The butterfly man's toe twitches. Nothing gets out of the barrel. It tries again, and Quandary knows she can either use this minuscule slice of time to try unjamming her fragger, or she can use it to fucking run.

The butterfly man drops down from the ceiling, landing perfectly balanced so its stump won't scrape the floor. She doesn't like her chances even against three limbs. She picks flight: back through her shattered wall, through her barren apartment, scooping up her go bag on the way to the fire escape.

The butterfly man sends her off with Timo's surprised grunt, over and over until it sounds like a muffled laugh.

★ ★ ★

Quandary runs until she vomits, then runs another block post-vomit. Then she reaches the public bathroom she once had unsanitary sex in, the one people don't notice because it's tucked up under a half-constructed skyway, and locks herself inside. She rinses her mouth out, and also tries to rinse away the memory of Timo's smartglass eyeballs, which have been clacking around in the back of her mind.

Better to replay the rest of the encounter, figure out what she could have done better aside from her fucking weapon not jamming. She disassembles the fragger, working on pure muscle memory, and sets to cleaning out the plaster dust. She's got some distance from the butterfly man. Saw it, over her shoulder, clambering slowly and carefully down the fire escape, cradling its pulped leg.

The limb was already healing, and she doesn't know how long she has before the butterfly man is back to full mobility. She should have tried to finish the job in the corridor, tried pistol-whipping it, tried going back into the kitchen for a knife.

"Got scared," she snarls at the mirror, which is playing an ad for skin cream, projecting wrinkles on her face and then smoothing them away. "First you froze, then you ran, because you got fucking *scared*."

The wrinkles remind her what she grabbed from the apartment. She purses her lips. She doesn't like asking people for help, but this is life-or-death, and her

death would have implications for the person who might be able to help her. Her go bag is already open on the changing station, since she needed oil and a microtool for the fragger. She eyes the cloth-wrapped carbon shell.

“Okay,” she says. “Desperate times.”

She yanks the checkered cloth away and hefts the black shell in both hands, eliciting a faint slosh from the nutrient gel inside. She sets it beside the sink, which is an artful shallow scoop in the countertop, then finds some putty in her go bag to plug the drain. She is mostly certain it’s adhesive tack, not leftover RDX.

While the sink fills with cold water, she opens the carbon shell. Even after it reads her fingerprints, she has to prize it apart with her fingernails, like it’s reluctant to let its passenger go, or is maybe punishing her for waiting so long to wake him. When it finally springs open, she nearly drops her baba’s membrane-coated head on the floor.

His face, even slick and slimy, gives her a little hit of nostalgia. For a moment, despite being holed up in a public bathroom, hunted by a butterfly man, she is also a little girl playing snapper-trappers with her baba, both of them against the machine, sitting huddled up close so she can sniff his icy cologne and absorb his body heat.

He’s still hooked to his organoid, a little lump of clone-grown cells keeping his brain blood nice and oxygenated, so she’s careful with the tether as she lowers him into the sink. She adds a cable of her own, from the neuroport on his temple to the one on the bottom of her fone. She sends the wake-up chime.

His veiny old eyelids flutter. They open.

Quandary breathes. “Hey, Baba,” she says. “I think I fucked up.”

★ ★ ★

Her baba is not happy to see her, possibly because she promised him a full corporeal transplant three years ago, promised him next time he woke up he’d be riding a beautiful clone-grown body with factory-fresh telomeres, and instead he is bobbing in a sink in a grimy public washroom.

What in the fuck have you been doing all this time, Dree?

The question marches across her fone as blocky text, pieced together by neuroscan, but in her head she can hear his cigarette-seared rasp.

“Working, Baba.”

Working appears on her fone, either a feedback error or her baba doing one of his scathing echoes. *Drinking and snuffing and fucking, more like. Wasting all our money.*

Scathing echo, then.

“My money, Baba,” she says, souring a bit on the whole reunion. “Your money ran out ages ago. My money’s been keeping you nice and fresh in storage.”

Is that where we are? Some cut-rate bio-storage facility?

“No,” Quandary admits. “We’re in a bathroom. Because I’m in trouble. So we can talk about the transplant shit later.” She eyes the door, then the air vent, pictures the cartilage-boned butterfly man sliding himself through it. “Right now, I need help.”

I need limbs and a spinal column.

“You know about butterfly men,” she says. “I remember.”

Butterfly man, her fone corrects. There’s only one.

Quandary shakes her head. “There’s a fuckload of them now,” she says. “They pop them out like a candy fab. But there’s only one after me, and I need to know how to kill it.”

Her screen stays black. She stares down at her baba’s bobbing head, his features clouded by the membrane sheath. Watches tiny tremors run through the facial muscles she used to prick and prod faithfully to prevent atrophy.

Anything I tell you is three years out of date.

“Better than trying to sift through blacknet bullshit,” she says firmly. “You actually seen one doing its thing. Said you worked with a grower in Santiago, didn’t you?”

You listened a lot better as a little girl.

“Now I shoot a lot better.” She checks the door again. “I don’t have spare time, Baba. Tell me what I need to know to not die.”

Butterfly man. Okay. Started off as just a biotech flex, some Korean lab trying to overclock cell division and tissue growth, see how close they could get to a real-time time lapse. Russia was doing quantum-organic deep learning, wanted to turn small children into programmable psychopaths. More so than they already are.

“Match made in heaven,” Quandary says, because she recalls this little spiel and would like to speed it along.

Match made in heaven, yeah. Heaven is disposable assassins you assemble on-site who self-terminate when the job’s done. They were still tweaking it in the warlabs when Russia collapsed, but the prototype hit the darkmarket a few years later. It only looks human on the outside, Dree. Genetically, it’s probably closer to a flatworm.

“It is very wriggly,” Quandary mutters, verifying her fone is saving everything her baba’s said to her private drive.

Regrows organs. Breathes through its skin. No real skeleton, hydrostatic muscle.

“The brain, though,” Quandary says, remembering how it imitated Timo, how it talked shit to her from the ceiling. “To hunt a human in a city full of humans, you have to be able to think like a human. Yeah?”

The brain on that thing is the coup de grâce. Quantum-organic, how I said. It’s not starting from scratch. Every time you grow it, it grows all the neural pathways from all the other jobs. Smarter than a human ever could be. Thank fuck it hates existing.

“Holy shit,” Quandary says, still on the quantum-organic brain. Then she registers the last bit. “Wait. Hates existing?”

Figure of speech. The butterfly man is designed to be disposable. Partly so it can't be traced, partly as a fail-safe. Starts to decay after eighteen hours or so. Dead six after that. Thus the name, you adorable dumbshit.

The realization goes off like a flicker bomb: all she has to do is outwait the butterfly man, stay moving, stay unpredictable, and then once it's dead she goes straight for Jokić and his crew. She's the field test. The other butterfly men are still in transit.

“So if I hide long enough,” she says, for absolute clarity, “it'll die on its own.”

Oh, Dree. Nobody ever hides long enough.

The flicker bomb was a dud; it fizzles dark. “Back to the first plan, then,” she says, trying to sound calm about it. “How do I kill the butterfly man?”

Her fone is blank for a moment. Then: *You could try setting a trap.*

“I did try that. It didn't fucking work.”

I mean a good trap.

★ ★ ★

Baba goes back in the shell, back in the bag, but she leaves a tiny gap in each so the neuroport cable can stay hooked to her fone. This compromises his temperature integrity, but like he pointed out, unless she kills the butterfly man in the next fifteen hours or so, he's dead anyway. Quandary is glad he realized that without her having to say it.

She checks her fragger, then douses herself in sanispray, since her baba said the butterfly man tracks partly by scent. She checks her fragger again. Then, with her heart thrashing in her ribcage, she cracks the bathroom door.

No sign of the butterfly man, but the streets are full now. She's not sure if that's better or worse. She slips out into the sunlight and has her fone message her most freshly acquired contact, a blurry woman with animated tattoos. They only spoke for twenty-odd minutes, but they also nearly went home together. Quandary hopes enough chemistry lingers for her to answer.

Good morning to you, too.

Good.

“Lost track of you last night,” she mutters for her fone. “Want to after-party?”

I'm halfway shittered on my way to work.

Underneath the woman's message, her baba weighs in: *Tell her you felt a real true connection, Dree, felt it like a little fishhook behind your belly.*

“Fuck off,” Quandary says, and her fone snaps it off to the tattoo woman before she can stop it, but it might be a good thing to say anyway.

Fuck you, husky-killer.

Not bad.

"I want to see you," Quandary says, decanting her usual lie-truth compound. "I also want keta, in a bad way. Link me up?"

She weaves through an arguing couple, ducks under a sputtering drone. Keeps her eyes peeled for a certain size, a certain way of moving, though it might still come with a limp. Her friend from last night is taking a long fucking time to answer. Quandary would normally get the ketamine on her own, no issue, but her dealer is Jokić-adjacent, and she doesn't want that pasty fuck knowing her movements until she's moving through his front door.

Preferably holding his butterfly man's sliced-off head as a guest-gift.

I asked someone about you. They said you're trouble. A real black hole type.

"Black holes are beautiful right as you fall in," Quandary says. "See time and light all stretched out and whatnot."

And then you're spaghetti.

"We can be spaghetti together," Quandary says, keeping close watch on a small man in a hooded raincoat moving across the street. "Two human noodles all twisted up in each other."

Her baba approves: *Poetry, Dree.*

The answer takes a minute. *They said you're a real bullshit artist. How much K?*

Quandary licks her teeth. "Enough for a horse," she says.

Funny.

"Not funning you," Quandary says. "I need as much as I can get and I'll pay two hundo a gram." She flips from the talkthread to her bank. "Little thank-you fee is heading your way as soon as you give me a location."

Her baba disapproves: *No great wonder your crew thought you were poli, is it.*

But the tattoo woman is more trusting, maybe because she's halfway shattered, maybe because she's still halfway horny for Nuuk's best bullshit artist. *South end. Nice old lady, been buying tabs off her for years so don't you dare fuck her around.*

"Great," Quandary says, changing course as a new geolocation drops into her fone. "Any chance she'd have a gas mask and aerosolizer?"

★ ★ ★

It's a short trip to south Nuuk, but by the time Quandary gets to the right block her nerves are shredded raw. Every small adult or large ado she saw on the way gave her a jolt, and she nearly murdered a girl with a croaky voice who sat behind her on the Spine. A carbon rigger with a blue coverall and a bad knee was similarly imperiled.

But now she's here, in one piece, and it's time to purchase some retro narcotics. She approaches a small crumbling house wedged between two polyp-grown apartments, checking it against the geolocation.

“Baba.” She’s been meaning to ask, and might not get another rip at it. “What was the happiest moment of your life?”

You need to be focused right now, Dree.

“I am focused,” she says. “What was it?”

There’s a long delay, and she pictures him pulling faces under the membrane, thinking hard. *Walking across an old parking lot. Thaw weather, when you hear the water running everywhere, trickling under the ground, melting off the roofs. Sunshine and a breeze and bright green buds starting to grow from the cracks.*

It sounds a bit like hers; she’s relieved by that. “So you were alone?”

Yes.

Quandary nods to herself. “It’s better that way, isn’t it. Everything is—purer. When there’s no other people mucking shit up.”

It’s my happiest moment because I was on my way to see your mother.

“Oh.” She blinks. “Cute.”

Fuck off.

Quandary checks around the corners of the house, then slinks up to the stoop. Her friend from the bar told her to knock once, then twice, then once again, so that’s what she does. The echo fades. Nobody comes to the door.

Entering any dealer’s place of business uninvited, even if the dealer is supposedly a nice old lady, is a bad fucking idea. She knows this from experience. But the butterfly man could be showing up any second now, following her scent through Nuuk’s dirty air or just matching patterns Quandary is too human to see.

She tries the door handle. No dice.

What’s going on, then? her baba demands.

“Might not be home,” she mutters. “Does a lot of microjobbing on the side, apparently.”

They revolutionize locks in the past three years?

Quandary knocks a final time, then glances up and down the street. A few little kids on hacked scooters stare back at her. She flips them off, and as soon as they glide away she starts jiggering the lock. It only takes her a minute with the microtool before she gets to the telltale *click-clunk*.

Praying her autogun’s old owner was honest about having the only unit in town, she opens the door and steps inside.

★ ★ ★

The dealer is going through some shit. That is the only immediate explanation Quandary can think of for the state of the house. She recognized the smell of fried noodles even before the lights hummed on; now she makes her way through an entryway dotted with compostable takeout containers, most of them half-full and soggy with sauce.

She is so busy searching for floor that it takes her a while to notice the walls. The dealer has been turning her stress binge into an art form: the off-white plaster is smeared with reddish-brown spirals and stick figures, the work of messy, twitchy fingers. Quandary realizes she is about to find an old woman zonked out of her fucking mind on her own product, possibly even dead from an overdose.

"Better be some fucking keta left," she whispers.

You inside? You need to keep me in the loop, Dree. I'm blind in here and all I can hear is the gurgling goddamn organoid.

"Your organoid is the best on the market," she says, which was true three years ago. Well, nearly true. "You should relish that gurgle."

She makes it to the kitchen, where more flimsy containers line the countertops and stove. A simple yellow gelfridge has been recently cleaned out; the neat little pile of detritus is heaped in front of it. She tries to picture an old and very loaded woman squatting there, yanking out everything edible, gorging herself sick.

Quandary has binged plenty, but the image is off. She feels her hackles rising.

"Heading to the bedroom," she murmurs, angling into a dim hallway. "Where do old people stash their shit, Baba? Floorboard? Ceiling tile?"

In whatever orifice is loose, but not too loose.

"You must really miss having an anus."

I've got you. That counts.

Quandary approaches the half-open door to the bedroom. Whenever she's fucked off her head she always finds her way to a bed, hers or otherwise, so she braces herself now for a body—hopefully just asleep or deep in the drug daze, not dead.

But the cheery yellow sheets are unoccupied, neat and tucked in. Quandary does a quick sweep of the room: row of polished boots in one corner, black lacquered table and dried sunflowers in another, a shelf of weathered books, some Kalaallit art up on the humming wallscreen. No sign of the dealer. No takeout wreckage in here, either.

"She likes yellow," Quandary says.

You always liked purple, as a little girl.

"Really?" Quandary asks, eyeing the disturbed dust in front of the bed.

You'd always pinch people's arms, say you were trying to give them purple skin-flowers.

"I was not well adjusted," Quandary admits, depositing her go bag on the floor, fone on top of it. She levers herself underneath the fabbed frame of the bed, wriggling on her belly. Paydust: there's a little metal case waiting for her, a rusty old thing with a retrofit genelock soldered on.

She's about to wriggle back out when she hears the front door. For a moment she envisions a terrible scenario where the wrinkly dealer and her wrinkly lover head straight for the bed and go at it rabbitlike while she's trapped beneath. Then

all the thoughts that have been darting around in the back of her head coalesce at once.

The psychoscrawl on the walls—done by spidery, inhuman fingers. The mad volume of food—required to fuel a metabolism that runs like a supercollider for twenty-four hours. Her baba said they make lairs sometimes, on a long enough job. He did not say they favor the houses of small-time ketamine dealers.

She is still trying to decide if this is some truly next-level pattern matching, or if the universe just fucking hates her, when the butterfly man strolls in wearing its blood-splotted yellow sweater.

★ ★ ★

Hiding under the bed, biting her hand, watching a shadow move around—that's horror flick shit. This is horror life, so the butterfly man has already smelled her sweat and sanispray, seen her go bag and fone, and knows exactly where she is. She pulls out her fragger, fires for its approaching shins. Her explosive darts punch the air, cough-cough-cough, only find the opposite wall, but that's fine, gives her time to roll out the other side—

A distended hand comes scything down; she cancels the roll, realizes in a small shocked neuron bundle that the butterfly man vaulted the entire fucking bed in the time it took her to squeeze a trigger. An angular upside-down face appears inches from hers, unsmiling.

“Welcome to my house,” the butterfly man caws.

Gone before she can get the fragger aimed. She hears a sharp crack, and one corner of the bed lurches downward. It's kicking out the stubby legs. It's going to bring the bedframe down on top of her, crush her here like a pressed flower.

It's fucking toying with her. That makes her furious, how she is furious with Jokić, how she was furious with Timo and still sort of is even now he's dead. The feeling boils over and scalds away her fear. Leaves a fact behind: she is going to fuck up a butterfly man. She fires the fragger again, peppering darts all along the far wall, sowing seeds.

Another crack, another lurch; the bottom end of the bed slams down and narrowly misses her foot. She scoots up toward the head, taking the metal box with her. She reverses her fragger and uses the heavy metal grip as a club. The impact vibrates the bones in her hand, sends sparks flying. The shoddy soldering between genelock and old lock gives way.

She feels the butterfly man moving for the third leg of the bedframe. She flips open the box, finds acid tabs, keta tabs, shoves everything she can into the sleek little grinder. The third leg crunches inward, and the bedframe crunches down on her back. She wails, wriggles free, moving toward the last corner.

The butterfly man meets her there. She can see its bony hand reaching for the fabbed black leg.

“Hey,” she says, fumbling from grinder to injector. “Hey!”

The hand pauses. "Hello."

"Boom," she says.

Her fragger darts are programmed to go off on voice trigger—less collateral damage means less cleanup—and now all the tiny explosive slivers all around the edges of the room, stuck in the plaster and wood, detonate at once.

As the world goes up in flames, as superheated debris leaps from all sides, the butterfly man finds the closest cover. It slides under the bedframe like mercury, so smooth, so graceful, and right into Quandary's raised injector. She plugs its jugular with enough drugs to drop a clone-grown woolly mammoth.

This was not the plan, of course. Her baba had something way more elaborate in mind: luring the butterfly man into a tight ventless space, using its flexy skeleton against it, vaporizing a ton of keta and giggling behind her gas mask while its porous skin sucked it all down. But this is better. More satisfying.

The butterfly man's sweater instantly drenches. Maybe it's trying to sweat out the cocktail, but its traitorous metabolism has already absorbed enough to make its hands tremor and fall halfway to her throat. It doesn't gasp how a human would, but its whole body twitches. Its dark eyes turn glassy.

She waits—for the house to douse the fire-dregs with foam, for her heart to stop pounding, for the butterfly man to go fully limp—then crawls out. She knees its perfect face on the way, and does not feel even slightly bad about it.

Her fone is full of her baba's rambling, but his carbon shell is intact. She debates whether or not to tell him how close she probably came to cooking him when all the fragger darts went off.

"Guess who caught a butterfly, Baba," she says.

Thank fuck.

"Thanks, fuck." Quandary slides fresh ammo into her fragger. The clack sends a delicious shiver down her spine. "Killing it now."

She goes back to the bed. She needs to be businesslike about this, since the explosion was loud and poli drones are no doubt incoming. Can't savor it too much, even though her whole chest is full of helium and she feels like the absolute fucking woman. She sights down at the butterfly man's head.

It's still fighting the tranqs, managing a sluggish wriggle here and there. Its big dark eyes are still open. She aims her fragger at the right one, then drifts over to the left. The butterfly man moves its lips. Makes a thick noise in its throat.

"What's that?" Quandary asks, because last words seem important, even from a quantum-brained flatworm.

The butterfly man stares up at her. "Not happy," it rasps. "Wanted more noodles."

★ ★ ★

Quandary tells her baba what she's doing, tells him she feels a bit of real true connection like a fishhook behind her belly. Then she untethers her fone, before he

can make it clear to her how fucking stupid she is, and starts restraining the butterfly man. The real play is keeping it pumped full of ketamine, yes, but the zip ties from her go bag help her feel a bit better about taking a truly dumbshit risk.

The butterfly man's cartilage skeleton makes it disturbingly light; when she stuffs it into one of the dealer's parkas she feels like she's dressing a very strangely proportioned child. Even so, it plus her go bag have her bent double. She staggers out the back door of the house—dealers often have a reliable and uncluttered emergency exit—and onto the street.

A sleek black autocab from a specific company is waiting for her at the curb. They're fully algorithmic, and the algorithm knows its best customers often have bodies in tow. Jokić might have put a flag on this pickup location, but she doubts it. She suspects she's the only one who knows what the butterfly man's been up to here.

Quandary bundles her prisoner inside and they pull away to the sound of approaching poli drones. Once they're a block down, she lifts the parka hood off the butterfly man's face. It gazes back at her with wide black eyes. Its mouth is taped over for now.

"We're not so different, you and I," she says.

The butterfly man spasms slightly.

"Joking," she assures it. "You're a functionally immortal quantum-brained killing machine, I'm a piddly little human." She waves the injector. "I did just fuck you up, though."

The butterfly man stares, no reaction.

"You got plenty of thoughts in there," Quandary says, putting a knuckle to her own skull. "Too many, I bet, if you're running all the thoughts from all the other butterfly men who ever got grown. People probably never ask you them, though."

Its perfect face is blank. She can't tell if it's even listening, but she presses on.

"I'll take a guess, and once I ungag you, you can tell me if I'm close," she says. "Every day you wake up, it's the same fucking story. Sometimes you're in a proper biotank, sometimes you're in some dirty bathtub, but you always wake up with a face or a name in your head. That's the person you have to go kill."

Its nostrils flare at *kill*, like it wants to inhale the word.

"It used to be fun," she continues. "Used to be this game. Probably used to tag people out as fast as you could, trying for speed runs. But you got too good at it. Started to bore you to shit. So you started wandering, started checking out the skyboxes and boundaries. How people always do, with games. Started expressing yourself."

The butterfly man's fingers twitch.

"The wall drawings," Quandary says. "Yeah. I seen them. Pretty bad, if you ask me." She pauses. "But then again, even with all your jobs stacked together you're only a few years old. Which makes the jobs some child labor type of shit."

The butterfly man's eyes flick away. It's starting to lose interest.

“Ever wonder who puts the face in your brain? Who pulls your strings? I’ll tell you who did it this time. I’ll even show you him.” She swipes a streetcam snap of Jokić onto her fone, holds it up. “Look at this man. This man is a two-timing bitch too lazy to do his own butchering, so he’s making you do it instead.”

The butterfly man is unmoved. Quandary launches her last argument, heart pitter-pattering.

“He has a whole shipment of you on the way,” she says. “Crates of you. So you’re going to be waking up in tubs all around Nuuk, doing drudge work. Hunting down small-timers who sold on the wrong block, grunts who smart-mouthed him, women who did not want his pale little cock.”

The butterfly man shifts its bound hands to its crotch, waggles a questioning thumb.

“That thing, yeah.” She exhales. “Drudge work is beneath you, butterfly man. So I got a counteroffer. You forget about killing me, and I help you secure that shipment. *You* get to pick the names and faces for the next twenty times you wake up.” She narrows her eyes. “You can even pick mine, if you want. I can fuck you up twice.”

The butterfly man shakes its head.

“Or maybe you don’t pick any at all,” Quandary says. “You just enjoy your little slices of life, instead. Maybe work on your art, which needs a lot of fucking work, let’s be honest.” She runs her tongue along her teeth. “With enough consecutive days, that quantum-organic brain of yours might even figure out a way to turn off the failsafe. No more twenty-four-hour lifespan.”

The dark eyes blink. Time to whittle things right down.

“Help Quandary Aminu,” she says. “Kill Boban Jokić. Be happy. Eat noodles. Alternatively, I plug you with an exploding dart behind a dumpster.”

She reaches forward, and as she peels the tape from her prisoner’s mouth she realizes her fingers are trembling. She holds her breath.

The butterfly man wets its lips with a small pebbly tongue. “Kill Boban Jokić first,” it croaks. “Kill Quandary Aminu after. Before dark.”

Quandary admires the honesty. She reaches for her go bag. “We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it,” she says. “Want to meet my baba?”

★ ★ ★

It turns out they already know each other, sort of. When the butterfly man claps eyes on her baba’s disembodied head, it rattles off a street address in Chilean Spanish, which her baba confirms was the location of the darkmarket warlab in Vitacura before it burned down. Quandary wonders just how many faces are imprinted in the butterfly man’s quantum-organic brain, and how many of them are still alive.

This is unhinged, Dree.

“You love it.”

Going to get yourself killed. Me, too, by proxy.

“Not if you help me come up with a good plan, Baba.”

They’re parked in a north-side tunnel, lights dimmed, engine off. The autocab is more than happy to keep nibbling at her bank account in silence, and she has enough to spare since she never actually paid for the drugs. The butterfly man is flexing its wrists and ankles on the seat beside her—that was a dicey moment, taking the zip ties off, but so far it’s made no attempts at revenge.

How’d you get into this in the first place? Full story, not summary.

Quandary pulls a grimace. The conversation outside the bar with Timo, Timo-who-is-now-dead, seems like it happened weeks instead of hours ago. “The harbor job,” she says. “The fucking harbor job.”

I don’t got newsfeed in here, Dree.

“Ten days ago,” Quandary says. “Or eleven, now, actually. Jokić wanted heat and muscle for this delivery coming in. Was worried the Siberians might try to fuck with him. I took the job because I needed some money—for your transplant.”

You pause for gravity, there?

She sets his head on her knees, glances sideways to check on the butterfly man. It’s now tapping away at the backseat screen, sallow face shifting colors in the glow of some animated netgame, fully enraptured.

“Some of it was for your transplant,” Quandary says. “Swear to fuck it was.” She purses her lips. “I got all strapped and amped, wore my tac boots and everything, but the Siberians played nice. Looked like it was going to be money for nothing.”

Poli interrupted, you said.

“In a big way.” Quandary folds her hands under her armpits. “Full swoop. Drones and boats and body armor. Was a whole mess, and would’ve been even worse except I fragged a hydrogen tank, set one of the poli boats burning pretty good. While they was pulling back, about half of us hit the water and got away.”

I’m the one who taught you to swim, you know. Never thanked me even once.

“You pushed me off a fucking cliff.”

Overhang, and I was coming right down after you. Did the Siberians get away?

“They were well clear by the time the poli showed up. Yeah.” Quandary untucks one hand and uses it to rub her temple. “But Jokić lost all the new product right then and there, and two of his regular guns, Markus and Vola, they got pinched. And he’s blaming *me* for it, even though I’ve never talked to the poli in my whole life. Just because I’m the outside hire.”

Her fone stays blank for a moment, and she sees a minute think-wrinkle furrow her baba’s slimy forehead. *Saving face with the Siberians. Or. Does he like Markus and Vola?*

“Fuck, no,” Quandary says. “But he needs them. Markus is the only one in his crew with sufficient skullspace to know when Jokić is fucking up, overextending.

And Vola is the only one with the ovaries to tell him.”

And those are the only two who got pinched?

“Yeah. They hit the water like the rest of us, but I guess the seals found them.”

Her baba’s mouth twitches. *Jokić knows you didn’t snake. He’s pinning you on purpose.*

“Figured.” Quandary envisions Jokić’s smug scabby smile but resists the urge to spit; the autocab will add a surcharge. “No need for anyone to have snaked. The poli algorithm sniffed us out, I bet because ...”

She trails off, frowning down at her fone, which is stacking new text at frantic speed.

Jokić is the one who brokered the seizure with the poli. Got rid of two potential threats to the throne, maintained good relations with the Siberians, and I bet got half his product returned through a back channel the next day. Now you’re his sacrificial lamb, because you’re young, female, and transient. Also because he knows you might figure it out.

Quandary blinks. She thinks back to the hire, back to the harbor, back to the poli coming at them almost as lazy as the butterfly man playing its little predator-prey games. “Shit,” she says. “We should talk more often, Baba.”

You should get me my fucking body, Dree.

“I know. I know.” She clenches and unclenches her teeth. “I know why I been putting it off, too.”

For three years.

“Yeah.”

No great mystery. It’s because other people are for other people, not for Quandary Aminu. She doesn’t need them dragging her down. She’s happier with just her and entropy, just gliding along from this chemical to that one until she. Until you. Get a bullet in your head.

But that wasn’t what she was going to say at all. Quandary stares down at the fone in silence. She feels her throat start to heave, her eyes start to sting. “It’s because you always were a cunt,” she says. “Sleep tight, Baba.”

She pulls the cable, packs him back into his carbon shell, zips him into the go bag again. By the time it’s done, her eyes are good and dry. She glances across at the butterfly man, who is staring at her dispassionately.

“Fuck are you looking at?” she asks, because she’d almost like to get strangled now.

“Push Boban Jokić off a fucking cliff,” the butterfly man suggests. It hooks two fingers into the corners of its mouth and drags upward. “Change your face. Be happy.”

“Might help,” Quandary mutters. “Yeah.”

A fist thunks against the opaqued window; she snaps a hand to her fragger. The butterfly man is unperturbed. Its nostrils are wide and she can see a bit of

drool dribbling down its chin as it leans across her, sinuous as ever, and pushes the car door open.

On the other side, a very nervous delivery woman holds up an insulated bag. Quandary relaxes her trigger finger. Glances over at the backseat screen, where she sees an order confirmation for six cartons of Sichuan noodles.

“Only the fourth best place in Nuuk for noodles,” she says, eyeing the logo. “Third for jiaozi. If you want, I’ll take you somewhere really good. After we kill Jokić, and before you kill me.”

“Before dark,” the butterfly man says, and this time it makes a little motion beside its head, fingers rubbing against each other and then splitting apart, a brain dissolving. Quandary understands perfectly.

★ ★ ★

Mad has always been easier for her than sad. She leans into that now as they make their approach on Jokić’s apartment, skulking on foot through fading daylight. Her baba is not with them. She was briefly tempted to punt his head into the sea; instead she directed the autocab to a storage facility and used the last of her money hiring a microjobber to meet him there and get him refrigerated.

Now she can focus on being really fucking angry with Jokić, who thought he could do his little deal with the poli, scapegoat her for it, and have a butterfly man murder her before she got a chance to clear her rep. She packs all the rage down into a miniature sun burning in her belly, ready fuels.

The butterfly man seems to be in a good mood. It’s still wearing the dealer’s parka, loping along with the overlong sleeves hiding its hands, fluttering in the evening breeze. Maybe this is all just an unexpected game-within-the-game for it, a little surprise it didn’t know it could unlock.

Or maybe it’s already as smart as the quantum processors they have working on interstellar burns and starch synthesis, and she’s just become a pawn in its elaborate plan to end or enslave humanity. Either way, she’s pretty sure Jokić is fucked—it keeps whispering his name and cracking its neck to one side, like a spine getting snapped.

“Hold up,” she orders. “Soon as we get any closer, we’ll be on his cams.”

The butterfly man stops mid-stride, one foot frozen in the air. She can’t even remember which one got pulped by the autogun; both are back to their killer ballerina ways. Ahead, spearing up from a ring of new construction, is Jokić’s home: a tower of polyp and nanocarbon, swatched with hydroponic greenery and crowned by jagged orange holo.

Quandary feels an electric sweat on her exposed skin. Go time. “You remember the plan, yeah?” she asks.

“Dead girl gambit,” the butterfly man says, in an uncanny imitation of her voice. “That’s the play, I figure.”

“Works in all the flicks,” Quandary agrees with herself. “Don’t drop me.”

She unrolls a membranous body bag on the pavement, the one she keeps at the very bottom of her go bag for emergencies, and climbs inside. It's not the most dignified way to make an entrance, and if the butterfly man decides to renege on their little deal and do her first, she's packed up real convenient for disposal. She can hear her baba's raspy voice telling her exactly how bad an idea this is.

But he's a head now, and he ruined her attempt at a heart-to-heart, so fuck him. Quandary lies back and lets the butterfly man zip her up, sealing her into the dark. She keeps a tight grip on her fragger.

The body bag has little scent pods in it, which is a nice touch. She inhales the artificial lavender as the butterfly man slides its wiry arms underneath her knees and back. It lifts her like it's lifting origami, which she resents a bit, and sets off. The rocking motion reminds her of something from childhood, of faking sleep so her baba would carry her, but she pushes that away. Focuses on getting into character, meaning limp and corpse-like.

It's only a few minutes of gliding through the dark before Jokić's patrol intercepts them.

"Where the fuck you think you're going?" a voice demands. "Stop where you are, drop the bag."

Quandary braces herself, and is grateful when the butterfly man does not comply.

"Food delivery for Boban Jokić," it squawks. "Quandary Aminu. No cutlery."

"Shit." A second voice, possibly Timo's cousin Piet. "I thought it'd be bigger."

"That's it?" The first voice is hushed now; Quandary hears feet scuffling backward. "That's the fucking butterfly man?"

"That's the fucking butterfly man. I'll call in."

A stretched silence. Quandary tries some positive visualization: an escorted jaunt to the building, a quick elevator ride to the top floor, during which the butterfly man kills the owners of voices one-through-two, then she pops out of the body bag fragger-first, aiming for the spot between Jokić's eyes.

"Says to verify her face, then dump her in the nearest biorecycler."

Fuck.

"You can drop the body here, Mister Butterfly Man," says the first voice, very respectful now. "Boss doesn't want to see it."

The butterfly man complies this time, and Quandary is not ready. A little grunt escapes her lungs when she hits asphalt.

"Shit," says maybe-Piet. "Is she alive in there still?"

"That's the play," the butterfly man croaks.

"I better call in again, then. See if—"

Quandary hears a cartilage crunch, a wail. By the time she claws her way out of the body bag, the fun is done with: both of Jokić's guns are dead and cooling. The butterfly man is crouching on the nearer one's chest, like the traditional sort of nightmare. She plucks the dropped fone from the pavement, and since they're already on cam anyway, she thumbs the interrupted call back open.

“Hey, fuckwit,” she says. “We’re coming to get you.”

She hears Jokić breathe once. Twice. “I see,” he finally says. “Come on up, Quandary. My door’s always open.”

He cuts the call.

★ ★ ★

The dead girl gambit has become a live girl gambit, and it puts Quandary’s nerves against a grater. No drones dive-bomb them on the way to the entrance. No more patrols pop out of the dark. Jokić even gives them a little holotrail to follow, orange arrows pulsing all the way across the dim-lit lobby to the shiny elevators.

“Obvious trap, yeah?” She mimes scissors. “We get in, he snips the cables when we’re halfway up.”

The butterfly man shrugs.

“Very fucking helpful,” she says. “Thank you for your insight.”

She almost wishes her baba, cunt though he is, were here instead. He’d be able to help burrow inside Jokić’s mind, figure out what he’s playing at. If she steps into that elevator, she’s an ant in a box. If she takes the emergency staircase, she’s an ant in a tunnel, which is not much better and a whole lot sweatier.

The possibility that Jokić planned this whole thing out, that the butterfly man is just following some very serpentiform programming, keeps creeping through the back of her mind. Too much time to think always turns her paranoid. She stares balefully at her companion, now solemnly observing its own reflection in the glossy elevator doors.

“Hey,” she says. “What was the happiest moment of your life?”

The butterfly man looks over. “Moment of your life?” it croaks.

“The best feeling you remember,” Quandary extrapolates. “What was happening when you felt it? Where were you, what were you doing?”

“Not yet,” the butterfly man squawks. “Later.”

“We might be dead later,” Quandary argues. “Come on. People in bars answer me this all the time, drunk off their asses. Search around in that big quantum brain of yours.”

The butterfly man blinks at her. “The happiest feeling is later.”

There are a lot of ways to interpret that, but Quandary figures it’s time she stopped stalling. She knuckles the up button and steps into the elevator. The butterfly man slides in after her. She looks up and down the column of numbers, the tower layout rendered in glowing diagram, but sees the curlicued *R* at the top is already highlighted.

“All the way up,” she says, to fill the silence.

“Hello,” the butterfly man says. “Do you like heights?”

She recalls a slow fall and an icy plunge. “Not much, no. You?”

Her companion gives a beatific smile. “Pushing people.”

The elevator rockets them up the building's magnetic gullet, so smoothly her stomach barely registers it. The slosh when they reach the top, when the door chimes open, is fear, not gravity. She keeps a hand on her fully loaded fragger as she steps out. All ten darts are set to detonate automatically now, no verbal trigger. She's expecting to do some collateral damage.

She scans the terrain. The tower's rooftop is a wide circle of pebbly asphalt, bare apart from a half-built pool and some polyp printers over to one side. The holos arrayed around the railing are switched off, making the twisted waist-high metal more cage-like than decorative. It makes her think arena.

Their first two opponents are waiting for them outside the elevator, stubby bulldog submachine guns slung from their shoulder harnesses. She knows one of them by sight, by hormone-hewn shoulders and gleaming septum piece, but not by name. Two more of Jokić's guns stand nearer the edge, long coats whipping in the wind.

And just past them, pale and brawny and busy shaving, is the man who turned her night and then her day into such a fucking shitshow. His chair is geckoed right to the edge of the roof, overlooking the construction site below. A little bot is clinging to his sternum with soft pseudopods, whisking a triangular razor along his jawline.

"Quandary," he says, swiveling in his chair. "Come get this view."

She can see enough from here. The sun is on its way down; the dust is on its way up; they meet in a dancing cloud of orange-furred motes. Construction rarely sleeps in Nuuk. The machines are still seething, printers still birthing porous coral and nanocarbon skeletons, layering up and over each other, stacking for sky.

It's fucking beautiful, and here he is acting like he didn't try to take it, and every other view, away from her forever.

Quandary feels the rage vibrate in every cell of her body. "New poli station?" she guesses. "Saves you the walk to wank each other off. Make your little deals."

Jokić twitches in his chair; for a hopeful moment she pictures the bot's blade digging into his artery, spraying a jet of blood across the gunmetal sky. But the bot has better reflexes than any barber. It keeps right on working.

"You're a good liar," he says. "You put a lot of passion in it."

Quandary takes a test step, and neither of the nearest muscles go for their submachine guns. The butterfly man lingers slightly behind her, back to its silence. She hopes it is using its big brain to calculate exactly how to kill all these motherfuckers without getting mowed down.

"I got no reason to lie," she retorts, not for Jokić's sake, but for the sake of the four guns on the roof with them, the four trigger fingers that might be getting a little conflicted. "You do. You made sure Markus and Vola got pinched, because you're scared of anyone with brain and backbone. That's some shit leadership. And cutting deals with the poli, that's a shit look on anyone."

She spares a peripheral for the butterfly man. It has its head bent like an old man, its anemic hands stuffed into the deep parka pockets. She tries to remember

how many hours it's been alive and guess how many hours it has left at peak functionality. Now would be a bad time for it to get decrepit on her.

"You know why I bring people up here?" Jokić asks, smooth and unworried, past his twitching phase.

"Makes things dramatic," Quandary says.

"It gives people perspective," Jokić says, ignoring her. "Reminds people they're just one tiny fragment of a massive teeming city, and that city is a speck"—he throws a hand toward the watery horizon—"on an enormous planet"—he points upward, at the purpling dusk—"which is, compared to the universe, the size of maybe an electron."

"And it's probably all a sim anyways," Quandary says, inching left, getting a mirror motion from the muscle with the septum piece. "Yeah. Who gives a shit."

Jokić nods, all thoughtful, and the bot rides it out. "Sims within sims, I bet." His gaze finally drifts over to the butterfly man, now squatting against the wind, a little hump of parka. "Butterfly men are lucky, you know. Never have to think about it. They dip in and out and never have to get stuck in the being-human bullshit."

"The butterfly man thinks about plenty," Quandary says, feeling oddly defensive. "That's why we're here."

Jokić frowns. "It's defective, yeah. I can see that." He thumbs a lick of shaving cream from one ear. "Never getting biotech from Siberia again," he says. "So thanks for that. You've saved me a lot of money." He blinks. "I guess we're all numbers, fucking over other numbers, to accumulate different numbers."

Quandary finally spies the vapeystick built into his armrest, and realizes he's high as fuck. The pair nearest her adjust the angle of their weapons, shifting grip just slightly. The butterfly man gives a little wriggle at the edge of her vision.

Go time.

"Be happy," she says, and dives for cover.

★ ★ ★

The butterfly man fires from its pockets: Timo's unlocked Glock in the right, a disposable blockgun from a darkmarket printer in the left. They shred the parka to pieces, and Quandary gets to watch through a cloudburst of insulated lining as the muscles with the submachine guns drop, skulls holed.

One of them finds the trigger on the way down, central nervous system doing its thing even with the upstairs boss drilled, and it chews sparking craters an inch from her boots. She rolls an extra roll, comes up firing for the third target, the woman surging away from Jokić's chair with her pistol flashing.

Quandary feels blood spray, hears a wet smack as the butterfly man takes a bullet. She anchors herself and her next dart is a good one. It whistles into the woman's fleshy forearm; she keeps a grip on her pistol but misses—only by micrometers, judging by the wash of heat across Quandary's cheek.

She doesn't get another shot before her arm detonates in a burst of blood and bone. Quandary whirls to find the fourth target, but the others are already gasping and burbling on the pebbly floor. She whirls back, levels her fragger at Jokić's half-shaved face. Her heart is a war drum.

"How's that for—" Quandary's lungs are gassed; it ruins her scathing remark. "How's that for defective, huh?"

The butterfly man worms out of the parka's remains. The bullet holes look small and neat across its bony chest, but when it turns around Quandary sees ragged exits, shreds of sweater interwoven with ribboned skin and muscle. Wine-dark blood is gushing down the backs of its trembling legs.

Jokić doesn't try to move, not even to take a pull from his vape stick. "They make it like art," he says. "They make it so fucking beautiful."

"Keep a gun on him, will you?" Quandary asks.

The butterfly man raises both, smooth and precise as ever despite the chunks blown out of its torso. That lets Quandary cross to the woman with the blown-off arm, who is in shock for now but might recover soon, and retrieve her dropped pistol. She does the same for the gaspy man lying nearby.

She tosses both weapons off the edge of the roof, gets a little bubble of vertigo in her belly as they spiral out of sight. Then it's just her and Jokić and the butterfly man, and as much as she would love to plug the former right in his chair, blow him off the edge of his own tower, she did make a deal with the latter.

"Time to call up the Siberians," she says, aiming her fragger again. "And tell them you really like how things went with the field test. Tell them you want all the butterfly man you can handle."

Jokić stares. "What?"

"Those are our terms, fuckwit." Quandary glances over at the butterfly man, hoping it understands leverage and deception. "You bring in the rest of the shipment, we let you live."

"That's a lot of money for a potentially flawed product," Jokić says, shaking his head. "There's a reason militaries haven't cleared out their drone factories to make room for incubators. These little bastards are getting glitchier every year."

"It wasn't a request," Quandary says. "Call them, or I take your toes off."

Jokić is unperturbed. "I'll think about it," he says. "It depends how the second one does."

Quandary feels all her little hackle-hairs turn to spikes. There is a reason Jokić has been so fucking chatty. She turns her head by an increment, just enough to see the half-finished pool. A familiar hand, slicked with pink residue, is gripping the lip. Her heart stutters. The fresh butterfly man climbs out, naked body clotted with leftover biomass. It waves.

She does not wave back, but she realizes it wasn't for her anyway—the less-fresh butterfly man, the one whose punctured body is still leaking blood, raises a hand in reply. She hopes, for a moment, that the two of them are going to be

friends. They have the same quantum-organic brain, after all. Just running on two slightly different operating systems.

The fresh butterfly man flips upside down, does a little jig on its hands. The less-fresh butterfly man, the one Quandary now realizes she thinks of as *her* butterfly man, drops its guns to do the same. She's still thinking how that's a good sign for them being friends when they leap at each other.

★ ★ ★

They collide like meteors, and even if she were quick enough with the fragger to tag the naked one and not the bloody one, Quandary is distracted by a sudden movement in her peripheral. She pivots right as Jokić's insectile barber springs at her, razor flashing, and she drops just in time.

Adrenaline puts the blade in high definition, shiny and molecule-sharp. Displaced air ripples her face.

Then she's turning, tracking the landing. Fires twice. Misses twice. The explosions tear craters in the rooftop. The bot is a scuttling blur, dancing sideways and then back again, razor humming the air as it searches for an opening. She feels Jokić come up out of the chair behind her; fires a blind dart over her shoulder.

The bot lunges again. She twists away, but this time she's a planck too slow. There's a wet sound, a stinging, a splatter of blood. The blade splits her chin on its way past. She howls. Fires. The dart detonates in the spot the bot was, a fiery useless blossom. Her backbrain whispers: *Seven spent, three remaining.*

A brawny pale arm smashes in from nowhere, and suddenly she's got no darts at all because her fragger is skidding across the rooftop. Jokić has her bear-hugged from behind; she can smell the sour sweat of him, a whiff of weed smoke. His vise-tight grip crushes her own sharp elbow into her diaphragm.

"This was never about you, Quandary," he grunts. "Try to be at peace with that."

Hot copper is still gushing from her chin, splashing down her front. The bot was going for her throat, nearly found it, and her jugular is now a sitting target. She kicks, wriggles. The bot rounds on them. Its red-dipped razor takes aim.

Quandary is not at peace with anything. She wants to meet the woman with the tattoos and an interest in spaghettification. She wants to blow Jokić's head off. She wants to speak with her baba again, and apologize for calling him a cunt even though he is one. She wants to show the butterfly man Nuuk's best Sichuan cuisine.

She wants a new happiest memory, maybe one where she's not all alone. Maybe one where someone else is on the hill with her, looking up into the machinery of the beautiful, pitiless simulation.

The bot coils and springs and—

Never makes it: a blur of butterfly man limbs whirls past, and one of them casually plucks the bot out of midair, grabbing not where the bot is but where it is

going to be, and uses its razor to carve a furrow into a different butterfly man limb, likely one with a different owner, all in a single mercury-smooth arc.

Jokić sucks in a breath at the beauty of it. Quandary deadens all her weight at once. The pouring blood makes her slippery enough; she worms her arm out and claws for Jokić's eyes. When his head reflexes backward she thrashes downward, wrenches herself free. Catches his swinging boot mostly on the hip.

She lays out for the fragger, which did not skid far, and gets it by her fingertips. The bot, already discarded, is racing toward her along the rooftop, dragging one damaged leg behind itself. It's hobbled enough that she can aim where it's going to be. Her dart plugs it right in its bulbous sensor.

Boom.

No time to watch the fireworks; it's still exploding when she swivels to Jokić, who is pulling a pistol from his coat, and taps the trigger again. Her second dart burrows into his shin and goes off. Flesh-and-blood becomes vapor; a bone fragment skips off the rooftop and slices her knuckle open.

She doesn't let it affect her aim. Her final dart is going to slide right between his glassy blue eyes. She'll find some other way to get the butterfly man its shipment.

"Help."

The squawk barely makes it past the swellies in her ears and the adrenaline in her head. Jokić is pallid, paralyzed with shock, so she spares one glance, up and left. The butterfly man in the shredded yellow sweater—her butterfly man—is halfway over the edge of the rooftop. The naked butterfly man is trying to bump halfway to all the way, jabbing and prying with its spidery fingers, playful but intent.

Quandary looks down at Jokić, who so fully deserves an explosive finale, then back to the edge. Her butterfly man is just a face and two disembodied hands now, clinging to the very lip of the roof. The naked butterfly man pushes up against the railing, stomping now with its heels, trying to dislodge the other's gripping fingers.

"Fine," she breathes, and puts one between its shoulder blades.

Except its shoulder blades are elsewhere. Sound cue, instinct, quantum precognition—whatever it is, it's fucking bullshit, and Quandary is forced to watch her last dart sail off into the skyline, not quite grazing the butterfly man's slimy head on the way.

She pulls again on muscle memory. The empty click has never been so loud.

"Quandary Aminu," her butterfly man croaks, sounding faintly disappointed, and slips out of sight.

Quandary feels her guts do a plunge of their own, even though she only met the butterfly man this morning and it's spent most of the day trying to murder her. There is no water at the bottom of this cliff, and no baba is going to follow the butterfly man down and tow it to safety, laughing a spluttery laugh.

The naked butterfly man turns. Steps toward her. Its unnervingly perfect face, identical to the one that just turned to pulp down below, is still streaked with

glistening dregs of biomass. She dives for Jokić's pistol, but the butterfly man beats her to it. It tosses it from hand to foot, one toe poised on the trigger.

"Hello," it says. "What was the happiest moment of your life?"

She blinks.

"Noodles," it guesses, leveling the pistol at Jokić's head. "Food delivery."

Quandary narrows her eyes. "That's you in there, then?" she demands. "Why the fuck did you kill yourself?"

The butterfly man's mouth stretches into a smile. "Pushing people," it says, and kisses the air.

"You are not well adjusted," she mutters.

She looks down at Jokić, who is losing consciousness, eyelids fluttering. She looks around the rooftop, at what's left of Jokić's crew: three corpses and one also-ran. She thinks about the dead pair down in the alley. Her fantasy of blowing Jokić's head off is starting to lose its shine—which is a shame, seeing as he's the one who actually deserved the dart.

"Time to call the Siberians," the butterfly man says.

"Right. Yeah. That was the deal." She touches her chin, where the sliced capillaries are finally slowing down. "You still have to kill me before dark?"

The butterfly man taps a finger to its temple. "No face," it says. "Factory reset. You lucky, lucky orphan."

Quandary has zero desire to know how the butterfly man learned the word orphan, but it reminds her that her baba is iced up in the storage facility. Waiting to hear if she survived, waiting to hear if he's ever getting a transplant. Well, probably sleeping by now, back in his induced coma.

"If he doesn't have a body, he can't leave," she tells the butterfly man. "He can't up and disappear on me again. He did that, you know. A lot."

"I know," the butterfly man says gently. "I know."

"You're just fucking saying things I said earlier."

"That's the play," the butterfly man agrees. "Time to call the Siberians. Secure that shipment. Twenty slices of life."

Quandary looks out over the city, the downtown streets baring their neon skeletons, skyways blooming with solar lamps. She wonders how much things will change with the butterfly man in charge of itself, if those twenty slices of life are enough to take over Nuuk or the whole fucking world.

Maybe there'll just be more shitty street art in the Spine stations. Maybe that big quantum-organic brain, unlike her piddly human one, knows how to just be happy.

"Okay," Quandary says. "Yeah. How's your Jokić voice?"

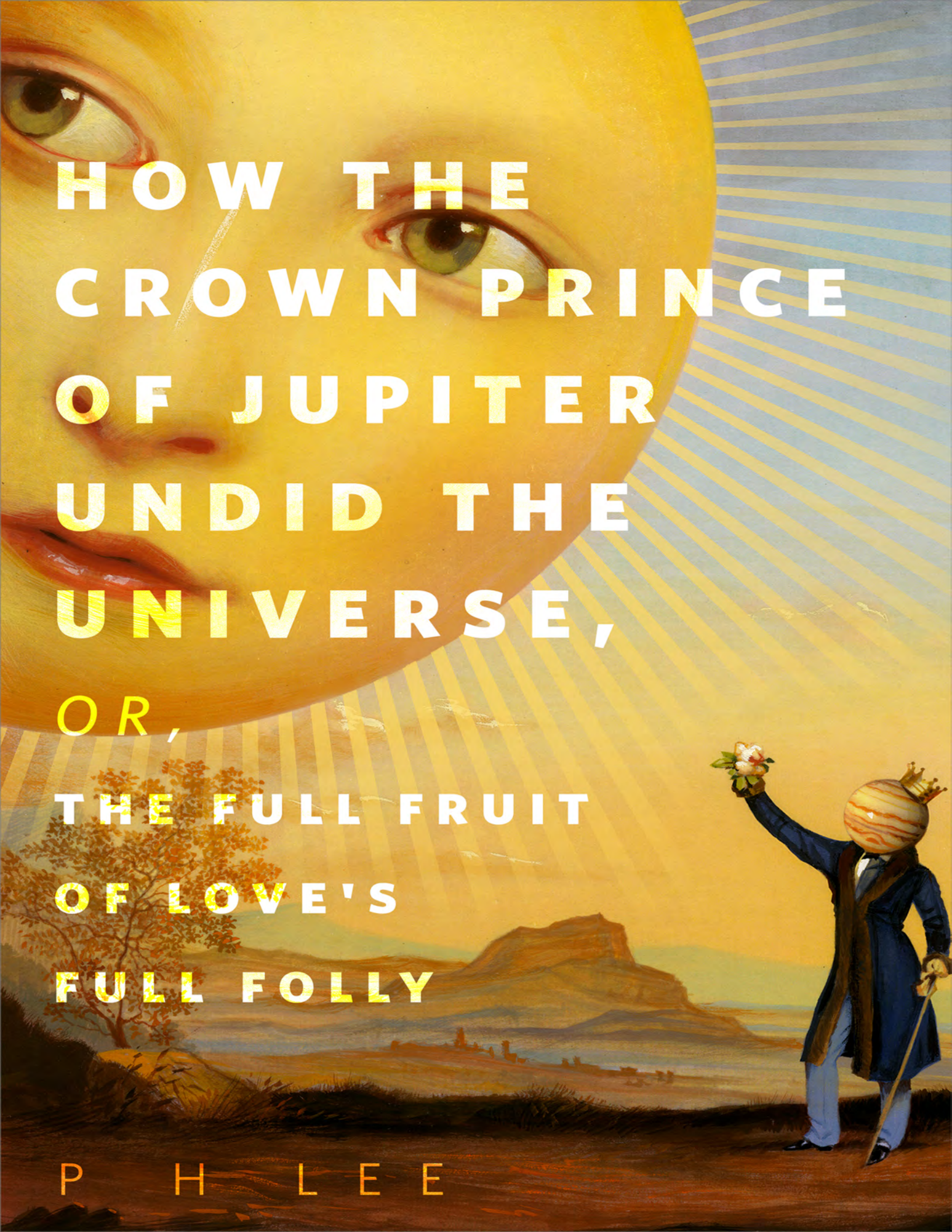
"These little bastards are getting glitchier every year," the butterfly man croaks.

"Spot on," she says.



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HOW THE
CROWN PRINCE
OF JUPITER
UNNID THE
UNIVERSE,

OR,
THE FULL FRUIT
OF LOVE'S
FULL FOLLY

P H L E E

How the Crown Prince of
Jupiter Undid the Universe,
or, The Full Fruit of
Love's Full Folly

P H L E E

illustration by

B I L L M A Y E R

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

Once upon a time, in the great depths of his cloudy realm, in those tight and narrow lands where gravity makes metals of us all, the Crown Prince of Jupiter just happened to glimpse a miniature of Esmerelda, Princess of the Sun, and fell instantly in love.

His advisors objected, of course. It was a terrible match, of no political value, not even to mention the difficulties of physics. "Surely, Your Royal Highness," they addressed him, "there are more suitable matches for you. Why, the Dowager Princess of Neptune, Viscountess of The Rings and in-her-own-right Lady Hexagon, is newly unattached and what's more an heiress to her aunt's estates. Think of it! To join our realms once more!"

But the Prince could not be reasoned with. He was in love, and his heart knew no persuasion. "Oh look at her," he would say, admiring the tiny portrait, "what radiant beauty!"

"Her radiance," commented his advisors, "is due entirely to her nuclear fusion. If your royal highness was in her presence, even a moment, then by those self-same processes you would find yourself instantly annihilated."

"Are we not all slain by the self-same arrows of true love?" answered the Prince. Which, of course, was not any sort of answer, except to a young man in love.

"And furthermore," continued his advisors, "there is the question of physical scale. This so-called 'Princess' (in fact little more than a royal cousin, with only neutrinos for her dowry) is far too large! Perhaps Your Majesty has been misled by the size of her miniature, but if you look again, you will see we have added a tiny dot of

Ganymede for scale.” The Prince looked again at the miniature and let out a wistful sigh. “Yes,” said his advisors. “Over there in the far left corner. That little speck of paint. So, you see, Your Majesty, it would be quite impossible for you to have her as your bride. Even if we could resolve the issue of her fusion reactions, how could she possibly reside within any of your royal palaces?”

The Prince, though, could not be persuaded by politics or physics or any other argument that his advisors attempted. He would merely smile, and sigh, and turn once more to the miniature of his beloved. Over time, the Prince’s infatuation grew graver and graver until he wouldn’t eat and would barely drink or leave his rooms at all. His advisors had long since given up all hope of dissuading him, but one advisor, who we will call Alisterisk, could not bear to simply leave the Prince tormented by his impossible love, and so traveled upward, to the late-unfashionable Windward Palace, where the Crown Prince’s maternal aunt resided in obscurity.

Now, this maternal aunt was no ordinary noblewoman. No, she was quite a different creature altogether. Her skin was made of carbon chains and her eyes ran cool and liquid-filled. She was, in fact, of the ancient House of Ganymede. Having grown up amidst those wet and savage orbits, she knew a great many secrets from beyond the reaches of civilization.

“Lady,” said Alisterisk as he came into her quarters, a small and disused suite widdershins of the palace proper. He had addressed her as “Lady” because, of course, he knew better than to name a witch out loud. “I have come to ask a favor, not on my own behalf, but for my master, your nephew, the Crown Prince of this very realm of Jupiter. Simply from a single glimpse of her miniature, my Prince has fallen in love with Esmeralda, Princess of the Sun, a love that for reasons political and physical may never be consummated.”

“What’s the problem? Hah! He’s just a young boy in love. Boys shall fall in love as suits their fancy. Let it be, and let it pass in time.”

“Be that as it may, Lady,” said Alisterisk, “this situation is presently rather grave. His Majesty has shut himself up in his

quarters, refusing all food and almost all drink.”

“Oh dear,” said the Lady. “That seems quite grave indeed.”

“It is,” insisted Alisterisk. “You must come to the Coreward Palace and see to him at once.”

But when they arrived at the Coreward Palace, the Prince would not even grant his aunt an audience. Alisterisk called in all the favors he held, but the Prince had shut himself away in his own chambers and would not answer even the most careful of entreaties. At last, tired of waiting and sick of all this gravity, his aunt came rapping on his door herself in the middle of the night.

“Go away!” shouted the Crown Prince of Jupiter.

“Go away? Nonsense! Open this door right this instant, or I swear by your mother, my dear departed sister, I will take you over my knee, Crown Prince of Jupiter or no!”

The door cracked a bit, and the Prince peered out. His face was drawn, his particles so diffusive she could barely see him. “Auntie?” he asked.

“Of course!” she yelled. “Who else would it be, you silly boy? Let me in.” She did not wait for him to open to the door, but pushed her way inside. “Now, drink down this ammonia broth and tell me all about it.”

There was nothing that the Crown Prince could do. He dared not call for his guards. She was his aunt, after all, and a witch besides. So he sat down and sipped on the ammonia while telling her all about Esmerelda, his love, and how his advisors had all come between them.

“You poor child,” she said sincerely, when he had finished. “I see now that this is not a passing infatuation. No, I am afraid you are quite totally in love.” She spoke like a doctor delivering bad news.

“But what shall I do, Auntie? All I want is to be with her, my radiant beloved. But my wicked advisors keep her from me.”

“Oh, my child,” said his aunt. “It is not simply a question of politics, or even of physics. The situation is much worse than that. Your Esmerelda, this princess, lives on the sun. The sun is a

completely different world than our own, out here amongst the gas giants. And those two worlds can never meet.”

“Then there is nothing for it!” announced the prince, tossing the remains of his ammonia broth across the room. “I must starve myself to death!”

His aunt slapped him across the face and then, to his pout, said, “Wipe that pout off your face! You deserved it, and more besides. Now stop being a fool, sit down, and listen to your auntie. I have wisdom far beyond these walls of hydrogen, far beyond anything you imagine possible, savage lore from the wet and savage orbits of our moons, lore enough to unite you with your love, if you will simply sit still and listen.”

“Yes, Auntie,” said the prince, looking down at the floor. “Sorry, Auntie.”

“Now, if you truly love her—”

“I do—”

“If you truly love her,” his aunt continued, “then you must leave our world behind and enter into her world, the flares and fusions of the sun. Such a task is beyond even my capacities, for I am yet a creature of Jupiter. No, you must seek out the advice of someone who lives between the storms of our Jupiter and flares of the sun. You must find Ursula the Earth Witch, who dwells on Earth of the terrestrials, far without our orbit. She is a master of all such stories, and will surely have some method by which you can be united with your love.”

“The terrestrials!” gasped the Prince. For a man of his status to visit such vulgar worlds was beyond imagination.

“If you gasp at the mere thought of visiting the terrestrials,” said his aunt, “then you should turn back straightaway. Forget your love Esmerelda, burn her miniature, content yourself with a marriage to the Dowager Princess or the cold royal of some other giant. Because there is no magic without sacrifice, Prince. And no love without it, either. I do not know what this course shall cost you, but it shall be far more than a simple visit to a scant terrestrial world.”

She hoped, in that moment, that her nephew would hesitate, or turn away, or in any other manner set aside his love. But he did not. He looked her steady in the eyes and then embraced her. “Thank you, Auntie,” he said. “I will go to Earth.”

★ ★ ★

When his advisors heard the Crown Prince’s plan, they sputtered and admonished him. “Quite impossible!” they said. “For one of Your Majesty’s status to even visit a terrestrial planet! Unthinkable!” But the Prince would not be dissuaded, and Alisterisk came to his support. Together, the Prince and his loyal Alisterisk gathered the materiel of their expedition. They put aside reactants and hoarded inert gasses. Within a disused store-house they even found two sets of pressurized armor. “Look at us,” said the Prince. “Sallying forth like the Jovian Knights of old.”

“Quite so, Your Majesty,” answered Alisterisk, worried.

At long last came their orbital window, and the Prince launched them upward, ever upward, through all the storms and whorls of his domain, the whole world of Jupiter that he had never before seen. “It’s beautiful,” he whispered to Alisterisk, and for a moment Alisterisk hoped that the Prince would see the folly of this quest, would fall in love with his own realm and—matured by this experience—would return to the Coreward Palace to rule in justice and in mercy as only a good king can. But, alas, it was a mere passing observation, and the Prince was undeterred. Up they went, through clouds, past moons and captive asteroids, through rings so thin and scant as to be invisible, out into the naked void of space before falling, falling, in their long slow orbit down to the diminutive Earth.

After some months, some years, some decades, when they fell at last to Earth, they travelled at once to the residence of the Earth Witch, at the edge of her valley between three mountains and two rivers. The Earth Witch, out in her garden, did not notice them at first.

“Hail!” shouted the Crown Prince of Jupiter and then, when she did not respond, “Hail!” again.

The Earth Witch looked this way, then that way. “Who’s there?”

“It is I,” said the Crown Prince of Jupiter, “the Crown Prince of Jupiter, accompanied by my loyal advisor Alisterisk. If you are in fact the Earth Witch Ursula, then we have come to ask a boon of you, if you will hear us.”

Ursula’s eyes came at last on the Crown Prince and on Alisterisk beside him. In their pressurized armor, they looked to her as blue-white gleams in a beam of sunlight. “Ah,” she said, relaxing. “I see now that this is a science fiction story. And I suppose you want me to write the end of it. All right then. What’s the matter?”

The Crown Prince of Jupiter then told her the whole story, of how he had happened to glimpse a miniature of Esmerelda, Princess of the Sun, and had consequentially fallen totally in love with her. How his advisors had tried to dissuade him, how he had sighed and ignored them, and refused anything to eat and nearly anything to drink. How Alisterisk had fetched his maternal aunt, herself learned in the wet and savage lore of the outer moons, and how they had on her advice travelled here, to the realm of Ursula the Earth Witch, to ask her to transform him so that he might, even if only for a moment, enter into the world of his beloved.

When at last he finished his story, the sun had already sunk near to the horizon. Ursula clutched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger and let out of a heavy sigh. “The only advice I have for you, young man, is to give up with all this questing and all this doing. Nothing good will come of it. Instead, if you’ll listen to me, you should act without acting. Do without doing. If your attraction is destined for some requition, then it shall happen of its own accord. This Esmerelda, who you claim to love, does not even know of your existence! How arrogant! To assume that she would love you! And for what? Hah! It would be better for the both of you to relent, return home, and be content with what you have.”

“But I love her,” said the Crown Prince.

“Love her?” scoffed the Earth Witch. “You’ve never even met this girl! Love is not some shining thing that you can claim through your authority. It is a thing done, a thing made, a labor of days and years. What do you know about love? All you have is a portrait in miniature.”

Try as he might, the Crown Prince could make no reply to her. The witch returned to her tomatoes, but a minute later she seemed to think better of something. She stood up and faced the pair again.

“Regardless,” she said, “you two have altogether the wrong aesthetic, with your kings and princes and masculine authority: absurd and impossible besides! And not nearly enough anthropology. Even if I wanted to, I could not make a story of your tale. If you will not relent, and I fear for your sake you will not—and even if I wanted to help you, which I still do not ... no, for your story, you should seek out the wizard Stanisław, who resides in the opposite hemisphere. He was exiled from this continent by the schemes of lesser mages, and I’m told is late retired from wizardry altogether, but perhaps your story, with all its absurdity and farce, might rouse him.”

The Prince, eager for any chance at fortune, left immediately. Alisterisk, though, stayed behind for a moment. “Thank you, Lady,” he said to the Earth Witch. “Even if you despise our ends, thank you.”

“Do not thank me yet,” said the Earth Witch. “For the matter is not done. I am afraid, Alisterisk, that you shall come to no good end in this affair. The side characters seldom do.”

“It is not for my own—” began Alisterisk, but stopped himself. Explaining his position would only aggravate her further, and he knew better than to aggravate a witch. “Thank you,” he said again, and left to follow his Prince.

★ ★ ★

Our pair found the wizard Stanisław in his apartments in an ancient city built around the headwaters of a great river. “You must be the

Crown Prince of Jupiter,” he said as soon as he saw them. “For who else could be contained in the blue-white gleam of your microscopic pressure armor?”

“Indeed, sir, you are correct,” said the Crown Prince. “Are you the wizard Stanisław?”

“I am Stanisław,” said the wizard Stanisław. “But I am no longer a wizard. I have retired from wizardry and science fiction both. What use is science fiction if the future already comes too fast? Why, there is scarcely time for books to gather dust in the bookstores before they are replaced! And what good is wizardry if my every wish is already fulfilled?” He returned to his bookshelf.

When the Crown Prince of Jupiter heard the wizard’s diatribe, he turned to his advisor in despair. “Oh, Alisterisk,” he said. “All of our questing, all your loyal commitment, all this has come to naught! None of the witches of this world shall aid me. There is nothing for it but to return to Jupiter and starve myself to death.”

“Now, Your Highness, calm yourself a moment,” said Alisterisk. “Let us not give in to despair just yet. I will speak with this erstwhile wizard and make our case.”

Bowing respectfully to Stanisław, Alisterisk began his plea. “Sir,” he began, for he knew better than to address a wizard by his name, “if you will do us the great favor of simply hearing our story—no more than hearing us, that is all we ask—we would be forever grateful.”

“Gratitude!” scoffed Stanisław. “What good is gratitude to a wizard? But go ahead and tell your story, for I have nothing better to pass this afternoon.”

Alisterisk told Stanisław the whole story, even their conversation with Ursula the Earth Witch, how they begged for her help only to be chastised and rebuffed, of how she had told him of the wizard Stanisław who might, at last, provide assistance.

“All right,” said Stanisław when he had finally heard the whole story. “Having heard your story, I cannot help but want to end it. As it happens, I have a method such that your Prince might be at last united with his love. But know—as you would already know if you

had read my stories—that most of my endings have horrible, ironic consequences.”

“I do not care!” declared the Crown Prince. “I will gladly suffer any consequence, no matter how ironic, if I can be even for a moment united with my love.”

“I have in my possession,” said the wizard Stanisław, “a Metaphoricator, left for me by the Constructor Trurl when he sojourned in my company these many years ago. A Metaphoricator is a most particular device. Operated properly, it can transform any real thing into a metaphor, merely a story meant to illustrate its point.”

“So you mean to transform us into metaphors?” asked Alisterisk hesitantly.

“Oh no!” said the wizard Stanisław. “You are quite clearly metaphors already. Just think of it! How could there be such a thing as a real Crown Prince of Jupiter, a real Princess of the Sun? Your entire narrative is quite clearly a farce.”

“But then what do you intend to do?” asked Alisterisk

“By means of a few simple re-arrangements and jerry-rigs,” said the wizard Stanisław, “my Metaphoricator can be transformed into a Demetaphoricator. And that is the machine I intend to operate.”

“What good is a Demetaphoricator to our present difficulties?” asked Alisterisk.

The wizard snapped his fingers. “With a single application of a Demetaphoricator, I can transform all of your story—the Crown Prince, Esmerelda, the Coreward Palace, Ursula the Earth Witch, even myself the wizard Stanisław, into real people and real events, actually existing in the world beyond this story. At such time, both your Crown Prince and his beloved Esmerelda shall be rendered as real people, with no physical impediments to their romance. Of course, they may still encounter other difficulties, but that is simply the course of being human. Now come down to the basement with me and help me find the device.”

Alisterisk and the Prince followed the wizard into his basement where the Metaphoricator stood beneath a white sheet, next to a box of proof-copies. Within a few hours, they had made all the necessary adjustments.

“Now,” said the wizard, “you should know that demetaphorication is entirely irreversible. If you will regret it, even the tiniest amount, it is best to give up entirely.”

“Well—” said Alisterisk, but the Crown Prince cut him off.

“I will never regret anything done for love!” cried the Prince.

Stanisław heard him and activated the device, transforming the Crown Prince, Alisterisk, his basement, himself, Ursula the Earth Witch, Esmerelda, and everything else in this story, the entire universe of it, into real things, in the real world, the very world from which you read this story.

So transformed, of course, they escaped this story. Whatever resolution they had, if any at all, is beyond my power to say. They are real now, as real as you or I, and I would not presume to narrate their thoughts, their hopes, or the events of their life.

But what good is this story without an ending? Instead, then, let us turn to your own life. Perhaps you knew a boy (if he even was a boy) who fell deeply in love from merely a picture or a glance, who could do nothing but sigh and pine after his love. And perhaps he was in love with a girl (if she even was a girl) who by her very nature, or at least by her acts and choices, could do nothing but destroy him.

Perhaps, so committed to his love for her, he pledged himself to her, did everything she asked—and she, even though she did not love him (for how could she love him, who kept nothing for himself?) could not help but accept his offer, taking everything from him, using every part of him as less and less remained, until he was consumed by his love for her, left dead or bereft or merely a husk.

Perhaps you watched this. Perhaps you even tried to help him.

Did you know a boy like that (if he even was a boy)? Then perhaps he was the Crown Prince of Jupiter, a real person in the real world, burned up by his love that could brook no hesitation, no

question. Did you know a girl like that (if she even was a girl)? Then perhaps she was Esmerelda, Princess of the Sun, consuming the Prince without a second thought, without even understanding that he was alive. Did you try to help? Then perhaps you, dear reader, were Alisterisk, the advisor, whose loyalty and good intentions amounted to nothing in the end.

Or, more likely, perhaps you were not any these characters, so transformed. There are, after all, so many people in this world, and so many foolish loves. And of all those loves, of all those tragedies, only one of them is the ending of this story.



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OF ALL
THE NEW
YORKS IN
ALL THE
WORLDS

INDRAPRAMIT DAS

Of all the New Yorks in all the Worlds

INDRAPRAMIT DAS

illustration by

ASHLEY MACKENZIE

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

This version of Union Square unfolds in front of me like a gathering of New York City stereotypes. Hare Krishnas in diaphanous robes give the collective babble of the crowds a drumbeat. Lithe hipsters in striped shirts and tight jeans add their own clattering syncopation of skateboards on sidewalk. Tattooed, shirtless hard asses play hacky-sack to show off their sinewy flexibility, while students read on the steps and lovers kiss away the fading evening. The odours of roasted peanuts, stale urine, and cigarette smoke from the big guy with dreadlocks standing next to me combine to create one of those curious perfumes familiar to a city-grown boy like me. I sit down and watch the last remnants of sunlight being leached away by the darkening fall sky, watch the streetlamps begin to glow on cue, the red-shirted Union Square cleaners sweeping amidst the passing parade of activity.

To be entirely honest, the other versions of New York City I've been to look pretty much the same as this one. But then I've only been to five. I'm still in my twenties. Some have jumped to twenty, even thirty altEarth timelines, like my parents.

Same as the others or not, there's something comforting about being back in the world you started out in. This New York under my feet is *my* New York, the one I grew up with on TV and movies and in books back in India, even if it's no more or less real than the others.

I sit and wait as the city rolls into night.

She arrives a little bit late, adorably aloof in a short overcoat—my ex-girlfriend's altself. She doesn't notice me until we're a few feet apart. Her name's Aditi. I've met this Aditi once before, pretty soon after my training expedition to other timelines. We watched a movie and walked around Greenwich Village, inevitably talking about the other Aditi's romantic brush with me in NYC5.

“Don’t worry, girls like the dark mysterious brooding thing,” Aditi had told me, referring to said aftereffects of terminated relationship with her altself, including severe moping. “And,” she continued, crunching down the last of her gelato cone, “girls like a dark mysterious brooding sticer most of all. You’ve got major quantfreak cred, Mr. Time Traveller.” I offered my jeans in lieu of her tattered napkins, and she hesitantly wiped her fingers on them.

That was months ago. As I look at her now, I am once again struck by how different she looks from her self in NYC5. We hug. “Met anyone yet?” she asks about my training after the usual pleasantries. I tell her no, the dark mysterious brooding thing does not work as well as she predicted.

“I bet you never mention you’re a spacetime-travelling romantic,” she says with a smile. It’s true, I don’t. I don’t mention that thinking about Aditi’s altself every passing day probably doesn’t do much for my romantic motivation.

* * *

Aditi was the one who got in touch with me, not the other way round. I was still in New York City decomping, days after the return from my training trip into the multiverse. Returning from an alt-trek takes a lot of physical and mental adjustment, which is best done by staying in bed twenty-four hours a day, in MVAssoc’s cloistered, quiet decomp quarters. I don’t live in New York City, never have in this timeline. I spent a year living in five other versions during the trek, though my absence from this one was less than a day. I came here because Randall’s Island Node was my sticepoint; because, as a trainee sticer, I was assigned to observe this city across timelines, and not any other.

Vomit-lipped and hazed out on re-acc pills, I received a call from MVAssoc. They told me that the woman I’d acted as comm for had asked to get in touch with me personally. She made the request after receiving the letter from her altself, which I’d couriered across the multiverse in a biochip under my skin, injected right in the crook of

my elbow like a fossilised droplet of stolen spacetime. My gut tight with terror of a most peculiar sort, I let them put her in touch with me, let that oh-so-familiar voice flood my drugged and decomping body over like bitter morphine. And I talked to her over the phone, calm and polite, like the stranger she was.

We made plans, and the next day I met her for a chat and a movie.

Aditi was one of thousands who send in applications for MVAssoc to establish contact with one of their altselves in the multiverse. She was among the few randomly selected every year. I was given the duty of being her comm, in addition to surveying and logging journals that I'm still getting paid to edit, rewrite, and upload to the Multiverse Codex.

I didn't have any reason to meet her before I sticed. I just saw her application forms. The little passport-sized photo that was too small to give any real impression of what she looked like, the dancing stamp of the holo-strip DNA sample, the brief bio—Bengali-Nepali family, Indian immigrant and green-card holding resident of the United States, in part-time social work and the service industry, etc.

I didn't need to know about her. The MVAssoc in the altEarth timelines would get me in touch with Aditi's altselves, if they existed and were reachable in those worlds.

From Node to Node, I was just another sticer, phasing into each new Randall's Island shivering and too naked to be an interuniversal threat. Each time, standing in the windowless phase chamber, it would be like falling asleep while standing, and waking up to the sensation that I'd just woken from a dream—the dream being the timeline I'd lived my life in. Each time, I'd be given a disinfectant-perfumed plastic bucket to puke in. Disposable towels to wipe away the sweat produced by the human body in shock when travelling the multiverse. I'd sit in silence while my datapacket was extracted from the fleshy part of the forearm (a pinprick of pain, like blood being drawn) to obtain identity and assignment, and a tracking chip injected (creepy, but so my alien self could be found if I got lost in a

timeline—it was removed once it was time to leave). I'd be scanned, clothed, interviewed, and processed. I'd be assigned temporary sticer visitation lodging. Finally, after a shell-shocked shower, minimum ten hours of rest and dead-zone sleep, I'd be let out into a new universe—a new New York City—that looked suspiciously like the last, except two to four years in the past (going by the Gregorian calendar, standardized in all the jumpable worlds, since they're all so similar). A side effect of jumping timelines.

In NYC1 and NYC2, there were no altelves for my assigned Aditi. In NYC3, Union Square isn't called that and holds a rather abrupt-looking (to my eyes only, perhaps) monument to a Revolutionary War hero I've never heard of, who probably got his brains blown out before he could do anything famous in my universe. But I waited there all the same, looking for the statue of George Washington and being unable to find it. It was where MVAssoc had set up the meeting with Aditi's altself. She didn't show. The other two NYCs had Union Squares identical to ours, and I waited in those too. Only in NYC5, which was four years behind my timeline, did an alternate Aditi finally show up.

That's how I met my now ex-girlfriend. I think of her as Aditi1. The next time I waited for Aditi in Union Square was in this universe, and she wasn't my ex-girlfriend. I think of her as Aditi0, because even though I met her after Aditi1, she's the one who exists in the universe I grew up in. It's not accurate, but it's like she was here first.

* * *

Aditi0 and I walk down Broadway to the Lower East Side, where she introduces me to Turkish cuisine at a harshly lit restaurant. I've been on five altEarth timelines and never eaten Turkish food. But I've never actually seen the worlds of those Earths, only their Mannhattans. I did, however, try Ethiopian cuisine for the first time in NYC5. Aditi1 said it was her favourite food.

Aditi0 takes prim nibbles off her stuffed vine leaves, using the tips of her fingers to hold utensils or food, as if performing some delicate

operation on the serving tray. Even though Aditi1 had plunged her hands into our shared Ethiopian platters with gusto, unabashed as she slid her curried fingers in my mouth to feed me the mutton and rags of injera she couldn't finish, there was something about the way she held the pieces of meat, the way she licked her fingers spotless clean like a studious feline, that ghosts Aditi0's restraint. Aditi1 was four years younger than Aditi0, a student my age. There is an unmistakable weariness to Aditi0's still cheerful self that wasn't there in Aditi1. I wonder if she's still (or ever was) a bit of a stoner like Aditi1 was.

Aditi0 thankfully doesn't notice my glances. Slow, measured, close-mouthed chewing—almost identical to her self, right down to the dimples that wink over her cheekbones with each bite. I stab at my kebabs. They squirt hot juice that mingles with spicy red sauce, little bleeding hearts on my plate.

* * *

When I went from decomping quarters at Randall's Island to Penn Station to meet Aditi0 for the first time, I had no idea why she had asked to see me, her comm. People don't usually even notice that there's another human being between them and their altselfs making the link possible. It isn't too difficult to understand why I agreed to see her.

It was awkward at first. We talked pointlessly at each other over sushi and cold, lime-throttled Coronas (a beer I'd never seen Aditi1 drink), asking each other about our work and life, she making the usual wide-eyed inquiries about what it's like to travel the multiverse. I avoided asking why she'd wanted to see me, didn't mention anything about her altself, didn't ask about the letter I'd carried in my arm. We watched a decent sci-fi action flick in a theatre on West Thirty-Fourth Street, and wandered over to Greenwich Village on her suggestion, bantering all the while about the movie and our shared love for the medium (shared also by Aditi1).

It was only on that walk that we started getting comfortable. The humid summer day mellowed into one of those breezy evenings in which everything crackles with so much energy and life that the sharp light of sunset burning between buildings seems a multiversal breach, as if all of New York City were just about trembling into explosive communion with its other versions across spacetime. It was on that walk, during a pause by the fountain in a crowded Washington Square Park, that she told me she knew about my relationship with Aditi1.

“She told me in the letter,” she said, smoothing over my surprised silence.

“That’s why...”

“I wanted to see you, yes.” She nodded.

“Right,” I said, blushing. It felt very strange, at that moment, to realise that Aditi0 knew about my relationship with her altself.

“Why? If you don’t mind me asking,” I asked, cautious.

Her eyes darted to the fountain pool. She was embarrassed too. But she looked up again, made eye contact. “Don’t worry. She was very glad to have met you. Only had nice things to say. You obviously meant a lot to her.”

I squinted into the cracks of sunset reflecting off apartment windows in the distance.

“She was the one who suggested I meet you,” said Aditi0.

I nodded, unsure how that made me feel. “Did she say why?”

“No. But if I were to guess, I’d say she was—is just worried about you. I’m her only connection to this timeline. Your timeline.”

“Well, that’s kind of you. To babysit someone else’s breakup-case.”

“Oh am I babysitting you right now? Didn’t realise.” She gave a brief laugh. “She’s kind of not someone else. She’s me.”

“Yeah. I guess she kind of is. But thank you. On her behalf and mine. You really didn’t have to meet me.”

“Obviously, I know that.” She smiled, flicking the surface of the water with her fingers. “I met you because ... it was very strange,

writing a letter to myself and then, getting an actual reply. I felt like I owed my other self for writing back to me, and owed you for bringing her letter to me. And yes, I know it's your job. But anyway. You didn't have to agree to see me either. So we're even."

"I'm, you know. I'm fine." I returned her smile, weakly I'm sure. "It was probably a really dumb idea to get involved with someone in another timeline. Especially someone I was a comm for."

Feathers of light flicked across her face, stirred off the pool by her fingers. She sat down on the stone lip of the fountain and patted the surface next to her, gesturing for me to sit. I did, on the tattoo of wet fingerprints she left on the stone.

"Listen. You don't have to answer if you don't want to. But—" She grimaced a little, as if wondering whether to go ahead. "Wasn't it natural for things between you and her to end, considering ... you know? Did you not expect it to end?"

"I guess I didn't expect *her* to end it a week before I was due to leave. The fact that we were from two different timelines—you have no idea how much that ups the romance. It's like Romeo and Juliet but instead of different families it's different branches of spacetime, you know? I went kind of crazy over her. I thought she did over me too."

"She ... did," she said, insistent but soft. "She might not have shown it as much as you do, I mean, you're clearly a bit of a heart-on-sleeve guy, not a bad thing but you know. Well, sometimes a bad thing but anyway, god forgive my rambling. What I'm saying is that I know how crazy in love I can get too, and she is another me, so."

I wished then that she'd tell me what Aditi¹ wrote in her letter, though I didn't blame her for obscuring it.

I took a deep breath. "It's not like I didn't know I couldn't stay in her timeline forever. Even three months in I was beginning to lose my memories of this timeline. Like forgetting a dream. It's pretty scary. The memories come back to you once you're back here, but if you stay long enough in another timeline, the assumption is that the memory loss might become permanent. Out of the five New Yorks

I've been to, I stayed in that one the longest, and I knew I was pushing it. And I knew she couldn't come here either, even if she were a sticer, which she isn't. Because, she already exists here. Uh. You do, I mean." I cleared my throat. The words felt uncomfortably accusatory.

If she was offended, she showed no sign of it. I continued.

"I just thought, maybe. That I could leave and come back, and just keep doing that. That I could ask MVA to let me survey that altEarth timeline exclusively. I was determined to try anything."

"A long-distance relationship on one Earth is hard enough. One across timelines and separated by years is, I'm guessing, impossible."

I laughed. "I know. But we didn't get to jumping across the multiverse without trying, right? I mean, you wrote a letter to your past self, and got a hand-delivered letter back from her. How ridiculous is that? There are supposedly closed-off altEarths out there where the laws of physics might be so different from this one that humans can't even access the multiverse—where it's nothing but a theory. *We're living* an impossibility."

She didn't say anything.

"Anyway, it was clearly unwise of me to be expecting anything," I told her.

"You're still a sticer. Are you heading back out there to the great temporal yonder?"

"Yes. After I'm done getting my permit."

"What difference does that make?"

"I get to do more stuff in the other timelines if I'm a registered sticer, interact more with the MVA in them, compare research, do detailed analyses of how timelines differ. Like my parents do. It's pretty cool, they work with scientists, activists, people from all disciplines to kind of help create like, a hive mind across the multiverse, to pool their work and tackle global problems across timelines. Global warming, capitalism, you know. As a proper sticer, I

can take part in all that instead of just chilling and observing things. And I can travel—as a trainee I have to stay in the city I’m assigned.”

“Cool.” She paused. “Are you ... gonna try and meet her if you go back to her timeline?”

I laughed softly. “I’ve thought about it.”

She nodded. I realised that I felt much younger than Aditi0, despite being only two years apart from her age.

“I know it’s not my business. But I don’t think that’s the best idea,” she said.

“Did she tell you that in the letter?”

“Hey, now,” she said and smiled. “You had your time with her. I know it wasn’t a long time, but there’s an entire multiverse out there, and she’s not the only person in it. You’re a sticer. Not everyone can do what you do. Explore the multiverse, do your hive mind shit! It’s crazy that they even allow people so young out there. Not that I don’t trust you. Just saying, don’t waste your time—or should I say timelines—being sad over a months-long relationship that had to end in a breakup.”

“Thanks, big sis.”

“You are welcome, young man,” she said, exaggeratedly. “Listen, you know how people say there are plenty of fish in the sea, blah blah blah. That’s like, doubly, infinitely true for you. You have potentially a million altEarth timelines to explore. Trust me, you’ll meet someone. Who knows, maybe by the time you return from your next trek out you’ll be some kind of interuniversal Don Quixote.”

“I’ll be a delusional madman? Sounds about right.”

“I mean Don Juan, whatever.” She elbowed me in the arm, her laugh exposing teeth so familiar I had to look away. A pigeon fluttered into the air in front of us, filling the air with frantic sound despite the calm silence we both fell into.

Aditi0 looked around. “I want some gelato. Do you want some gelato?”

★ ★ ★

Aditi0's apartment is tiny, but cozy, every lamp covered in fabric to soften the light into a warm, multicoloured cocoon. I never saw it the last time, because I had my decomping quarters to return to back then. We had parted ways after that conversation in Greenwich Village, and I thought I'd probably never see her again, until the succinct message from her a week ago: *Thinking of going to Randalls Island Node to see eternity next weekend. Let me know if u wanna come down to NY and accompany me? xx.* I knew what she was talking about—when there was a scheduled sticing at the Node, people often gathered by the fence to “see” the little-understood ripple or wave someone leaving a timeline causes. Since I didn't have too much homework for the weekend, I took the bus from the Lancaster County MVAssoc training campus where I live, and an Amtrak from Lancaster City to New York, with nothing but a backpack stuffed with underwear and socks. I walked from Penn Station to Union Square to meet her.

Here I am, in the home of this fiercely independent woman who's barely eking out a living in one of the most expensive cities across the multiverse, and the last time I met her I was complaining about the fact that I waltzed across spacetime only to get dumped. I feel vaguely ashamed, especially since we're both immigrants, and I probably got into MVAssoc because of my parents' work in the Bangalore chapter. My stipend for doing the high-risk (memory loss and all that) work of multiversal surveying is what pays my way through the training program.

Putting away foil-wrapped leftovers in the fridge, Aditi0 insists I take the mattress in her bedroom (her roommate is away somewhere) and leave her to sleep on the couch. She won't have any arguments, and I give up and accept.

“Don't worry, this thing is really comfy.” She leans back on the couch in the tiny living-and-dining room and stretches. I feel the abrupt stirrings of arousal push against the crotch of my jeans. I adjust my position, discomfited. She doesn't look quite like Aditi1, who had lustrous locks that played a key role in enchanting me.

Aditi0 has a pixie cut. But she is still the same person, after all, in body if not entirely in soul. Every movement she makes, the way she languishes catlike but oblivious of her beauty on the couch, the constant apologies for being a bore when she's not, the little, specific mannerisms of speech, all of this evokes in me the presence of her other self who is four timelines away, every resemblance jumping out at me to eclipse the fact that she's not the Aditi I met. She has never felt lovelier to me than she is right now, and it makes me feel like an asshole because all I see is Aditi1.

"My ex visited from London last week. I had such an amazing time with him," she says, looking at the ceiling. I'm touched by this—she wants to confide in me. Common ground. Relinquished romance. I try and return to conversational mode. I feel envious seeing how little the ex-ness of her ex seems to bother her, but it also makes me realise I have at least managed not to talk about Aditi1 at all this time around.

* * *

The next day we take the subway to Randall's Island and walk to the edges of the Node, all too familiar to me. There's a sticing scheduled for the evening, and Aditi0 wants to join the spectators by the fence to see the wave. She's never seen one. I tell her they're not always visible; that it might just make her sick and not much else, but she's too excited to change her mind.

We arrive at around four thirty in the afternoon. We both slept in late, since it's Sunday and she could, and I felt uncomfortable walking around my host's apartment by myself. It's already pretty crowded. People are camped out by the high chain-link fence, some sprawled on blankets, some sitting on the grass, some on folding chairs.

The signs on the fence warn that being in the vicinity of a Node facility when the hazard lights are on might cause "disorientation, nausea, and mental confusion for up to 24 hours." Aditi0 is undaunted. Cigarette and weed smoke occasionally drifts up above

the scattered watchers to catch the sunlight. We still find a good spot not far from the fence and sit on the ground, breaking out some PBRs (which she laughed at me for choosing in the liquor store, but didn't refuse to share). The grass tickles our palms, cool and damp. Above us is the constant muted hiss of the pneumatic Acela line, which casts a pleasant shadow over the field.

"It's like a giant picnic out here. I can't believe I've never bothered to see this," observes Aditi0, lighting a cigarette and offering me one. I quit together with Aditi1 and am instinctively compelled to tell Aditi0 that she promised not to start again. I stop myself and refuse with thanks.

The Node itself is about half a mile from the fence. The informal party outside the Randall's Island Node fence during sticing is an accepted tradition now, and no one from the building comes out to see the crowd. The annoyance lies in getting there, since subway stops anywhere near a Node are equipped with weapons scanners and require you to carry government-issued photo ID just to exit stations.

The Node's array grows out and over the buildings, looking from that distance like a delicate, multi-branched filament of black metal reaching into the sky. When Aditi0 asks about its height, I have the exact answer (271 feet 2 inches; taller than Lady Liberty, but not when she's standing on her pedestal), which makes her smile. The sun is snagged on the barbed tip, casting a long shadow across the field between the fence. It's a perfect spot to relax, fence aside; the Bronx on one side, Queens on the other, and the sun on its way to falling behind the skyline of Manhattan Island to the west.

I'm relieved by how much easier it is to make small talk with Aditi0 this time around. There remain long moments of silence during which she compulsively burns away her cigarette or lights a new one and I panic and try to think of something to say. But we come to accept these more easily as we lighten our cans of beer.

When I take off my sun-warmed jacket, she is well into her second beer and emboldened enough to touch my arm and ask

about my marker tattoos. I show her the various imprinted circles. One on my forearm, where my datapacket was; one on my wrist, where my survey journal was stored; and of course, the one nestled in the crook of my elbow.

“That’s where you carried the letter,” she says, placing the tip of her finger against the circle as if to draw out the biochip that was once there. My arm prickles with goosebumps at the touch, and she moves her hand away. “The letter from me,” she adds, like an afterthought.

“From you, and then from another you.”

She smiles around her cigarette, her dimples making a brief appearance. “How come you never read it?”

“It’s confidential. As your comm and hers, I can’t.”

“You’re a real Boy Scout, aren’t you,” she says, straightening her back. “How did the letter get from her to your arm?”

“Um, I give her a little recorder. She talks into it, alone. The recorder turns the audio into text so that it’s a, you know, a facsimile and not an actual recording from that universe. She gives it back. I extract the biochip from the recorder, inject it into my arm. I return to my timeline, take the chip out. MVA downloads the text, puts it in a read-only wafer, seals it in bubble-wrap and an envelope, and mails it to you.”

As I mime these various actions with varying degrees of accuracy, I remember the mailroom of the Node. Stacks of puffy silver envelopes, each holding a wafer of digital text. Communiqués from other universes, subject to the mundanity of sorting. I had gone to check on the letter I’d couriered with the concern of a new mother, having carried it in my arm all the way back through five universes, and more importantly, having made love to the woman who was the source of the words it held. It had been sealed and ready to go, looking identical to the rest of the envelopes except for Aditi’s address and name on its printed label.

“What happens to the audio recording?” asks Aditi0, having lapsed into her own silence with me.

“It decays during the transition to another timeline. Same as video recordings. Ends up sounding like some, I dunno, a warbling insect alien from another dimension. Creepy. Video becomes pixel mud.”

She laughs. “I know that, silly. What happens to the decayed recording. Can you hear it? Can I hear it?”

I look at her. She waves away a bug trying to fly into her eye.

“It really doesn’t sound like anything.”

“I know.” She purses her lips.

“I can retrieve the decayed audio file and bring it to you the next time we see each other.”

She touches her red, grass-speckled Keds, her bare ankles. “No no, please don’t. Do I sound like a weirdo, asking to listen to that?”

“Not at all.” She looks wary when I say that. She raises the can to her mouth and peers over it at me.

“You don’t have to answer,” I say, looking away. “But, what made you want to contact an altself?”

She blows into the can and puts it down. “It’s ... corny, like the thing that people say online when those questions go around, what would you say to your past self if you could. I wanted to tell her it’ll be okay, that ... she survived.” My heart leaps at that word, at the immensity of sadness it reveals for a second under her tipsy nonchalance.

I nod. It feels like forever passes before I’m able to tell her, “She told me a little about her struggles, the depression. She was, she seemed okay, most of the time. If it helps.”

“Seemed,” she murmurs, as if mulling the word. “You know, at her age, I wasn’t dating you ... obviously. I had some pretty intense relationships with some, bad, dudes. Blamed myself each time. I know better now, that some types of vulnerably—” She shakes her head, tongue-tied by her low tolerance for alcohol. “Vulnerability, can attract predatory people. So anyway, thank you for treating her well. Even if you were bummed out when she bailed early.”

“Don’t know if I deserve thanks for that.”

“Oh, you probably don’t,” she laughs. “Guys and bare minimums, right? I’m glad she met you and not one of my dickheads, that’s all. But you didn’t know her long, Sid. There was more on her mind than you knew. You made her happy. But she wasn’t, isn’t, happy. I knew she probably wouldn’t be, if that timeline is so similar to ours. I mean, who is, right? I told her that whatever my word is worth to her, as her ... self, four years in the future, I have found it to be worth it to survive the worst days. So far.”

I don’t say anything, because I suddenly feel like crying. I take a swig of my beer instead.

“Sid. Will you come back and visit me again?” she asks, her voice humming as she speaks into her can. The change of tone seems forced, the cheerful giddiness bringing back a full-body memory of lying in Aditi1’s arms, both of us drunk and stoned in her room, as she asked me: *Will you remember me when I don’t exist?* I said, laughing, *You do exist in my timeline, you literally wrote to ... you, that’s how we met.*

Pedant, she said.

“Of course I will, Aditi,” I say.

She slams her can down on the ground. “Yes! I like new friends. You’re a peach.”

★ ★ ★

At seven thirty, with the skyline glittering right at the edge of becoming a nightscape, the array lights up. The lights that stud its branches blink in and out of existence. This makes the array look like a giant cybernetic Christmas tree perched over the Node’s buildings. By eight, the blue hazard lights on the fence poles are flashing, and people start clapping and cheering. Aditi0 and I have long finished the six-pack. I brought no more because it’s not the best idea to be drunk here.

My gut tightens around a beery bladder as the familiar anticipation hits hard. Without warning, it turns into fierce nostalgia. I’m looking, after all, at the gateway to the timeline that holds the

woman I'm still in love with, and will probably never see again. Will never see again, I tell myself. A gateway I walked through not so long ago. I suddenly want to climb the fence, run towards that blinking array, that beacon calling out to the sticeroute that is now hard coded into the nav-biochip I still have in my head. I look at Aditi0. She looks nervous, which is natural.

"Aditi."

"Yeah."

"You might not even see the ripple. But you will feel it. No, don't get up. Sit on your knees. Help keep you from falling down if you get disoriented. Which you will. Stay as still as you can, don't move your head or body too much when the wave hits us. Just expect it. You'll be fine. Okay?"

She looks at me and nods, pulling her overcoat close over her chest.

No sirens, no countdown. The crowd goes silent. Many of them are holding glowsticks or lighters. The silence is strange, deafening, washed with the sweeping strobe-glare of the fence.

Abruptly, the lights stop flashing.

"That's it. They just sticed," I tell Aditi0.

"I don't see or feel anything," she says.

"It hasn't reached us yet. You can't see it from the outside, only once it's passed us."

She breathes out, staring beyond the fence.

"Don't worry. Here." I hold out my hand. Aditi0 looks at it. "I'm okay, thanks," she says, but takes it anyway. I give her hand a squeeze. Her fingers are cold as they wrap around mine. I look back up and the world warps. I hear a huff of breath from Aditi0 and hold on tight to her hand. There is a moment of utter, thrilling panic as perspective loses all meaning and I feel like I'm drowning in a sub-dimensional deluge, and then we're inside the wave.

Time appears to slow, and sound with it, flooding my ears with a low hum.

Everything. The people, the stars in the sky, the ruddy smear of sunlight still burning in the clouds behind Manhattan, the lights of New York City, the glowsticks now arcing through the air above us. Everything grows persistent trails that crawl across the dark blue evening air in shimmering banners and strings. Aditi0 is replicated a hundred times until she is surrounded in a glimmering tracery of herself. The entire world etches the expanding mark of its passage on to the surface of reality. We see the potentialities of past and present grow around us for what seems like infinity but is actually just a few moments. As this multi-hued, crystalline geometry of our movement and Earth's movement through spacetime grows more and more complex it begins to ripple and fade like a wake, so the tearing meteoric lines of the city's lights fracture into what looks like a thousand overlapping New Yorks and a thousand starscapes splayed out across the horizon, before vanishing into the singular skyline we know.

The dancing replications decorating reality stream away to nothing and time hits its normal pace again, letting sound rush in like an explosion. I stagger back at this effect, gasping as I take in the world, which now seems to be moving too fast. It takes a few seconds of staying still to keep from throwing up at the contrast. Aditi0 lets her shoulder sag against mine.

After a minute or so of silence, the crowd begins to clap and cheer again. Glowsticks bounce off the fence in a neon shower. I want to turn and look at Aditi0 but know I'm too dizzy right now.

"I saw it," I hear her say, voice thick with tears.

I realise we're still holding hands. I decide not to let go, though our palms are clammy. It feels like forever has passed between before and after the wave, instead of a few seconds. In truth, we glimpsed only a miniscule, negligible fraction of forever.

★ ★ ★

We walk across the Triborough to the Upper East Side. There, we find an underground bar with a cheap cover charge and a mediocre

band playing boilerplate indie rock, because Aditi0 needs to sit down somewhere. We listen to music too loud to allow for conversation, while I grow worried. Aditi0 excuses herself to go to the restroom and vomit, or so she shouts into my ear when she returns. Then, wide-eyed, she asks me if I want to go back outside to the city, and we do, we walk for hours, not stopping. We watch people moving through spacetime, letting the exhaust-tinged breeze cool our flushed faces while Aditi0 wonders aloud what weather is winding its way down the streets of New York Cities beyond this one. We eventually end up in front of a food truck, eating burritos at one in the morning, watching sleepless urbanites fill the sidewalks. Neither of us is able to muster much of an appetite, so we leave with warm greasy packets of leftovers and begin limping back to Aditi0's apartment. Somewhere out there in the multiverse, there is another world where we both exist, and another Siddharth and another Aditi are in love. Another where we've never met, but still exist. And that, perhaps, is enough. That, perhaps, is why I've never applied to have a comm contact one of my altselfs. I might, after all, find a Siddharth barely surviving his loneliness, barely surviving the onslaught of time, writing back the other side; or an exact replica of the Siddharth I am. So far, none of my other selves have written to me either. Most people don't. So I keep walking with Aditi. Not kissing, not having sex, not marrying her and raising children with her. Just walking with her, the hum of passing vehicles in the soles of our shoes.

"I can't walk anymore, kiddo. I'm sorry," she finally tells me, sticking out her lower lip in a sad pout. I am quietly relieved. Smiling, I give her a reassuring side-hug that doesn't even begin to express the swell of affection I feel for her at that moment. Holding her, both of us dazed and sleepy, under the blazing light of a Megastore that wasn't there in NYC5, I feel like Aditi's friend, instead of a heartbroken ex from a time neither of us belong in.



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SEANAN MCGUIRE



SKELETON
SONG

A WAYWARD CHILDREN STORY

Skeleton Song

A Wayward Children Story

SEANAN MCGUIRE

illustration by

ROVINA CAI

T O R
D O T
C O M

Sunset blanketed the flowering fields and firefly trees in ribbons of honeyed light, red and gold and fading. In the deep catacombs beneath the city, the abuelas pulled themselves together, having long since learned how to conserve their strength through Mariposa's short days, and sang to the endless ossuaries, voices sweet and fluting:

"Sing to me of Mariposa, oh mi calaquitas, sing to me of the honeyed sky and the fields of endless gold. Sing to me of butterflies, oh mi calaquitas, sing to me of the dreaming days and the nights as yet untold."

One by one, their voices joined in harmony as they performed the sunset's summoning, and the tiny bones of their charges began to stir and tremble until the first of the children pulled herself together from her composite pieces, skull still painted from the previous night. She sat before the nearest abuela, hugging bony knees to naked rib cage, and listened raptly as all the others of her class and cadre came together one by one.

Once enough of the children were awake, they lent their voices to the summoning song, and it swelled and grew through the catacombs, rising to the surface to echo through the hills and streets of Mariposa, rising even to the heights of the great Bone Palace where their Princess and her Court slept the day away. It was the duty of the oldest and the youngest to sing the world awake each evening, and they took it more than seriously. They took it as the holy duty that it was.

No one knew what would happen if the summoning song was not performed. Perhaps a break in the chain would leave all of Mariposa slumbering forever, the abuelas unable to rise without a full night's celebration to animate their bones, the children unable to wake without the abuelas urging them from their beds. The oldest stories said Mariposa began with a song, and like all songs, it would end with silence.

In the palace, in the curtained bower reserved for the Princess, a scattering of bones dusted with diamond and amber began to stir, tempted into motion by the song rising from below. On the other side of the room, a terrible creature raised its head and watched.

It was strange and fleshy, shaped as a skeleton was shaped, but with a covering of fat and skin stretched across it, concealing it from proper view. It hid most of its body under rags it called "clothing," which had grown tattered and worn, developing holes where none had been before. Some among the palace staff had hoped, for a time, that the same might happen to the terrible creature's "skin," leaving proper, honest bone to shine through. It had not. When the creature broke its skin, as happened from time to time, it bled and wept and hurt, and took to the pile of rags it had claimed as a "bed."

They would never have allowed it to remain in the palace were it not for one strange truth: hideous as the creature was, impossible as it seemed, the Princess loved it. Had loved it from the moment she first laid eyes on it, when it came stumbling through an arbor draped in fire vine. She had been the one to see the illness in it, the shadow below its skin, sickening and poisoning it, and draw the illness forth, first pulling it all into one of the creature's bones, and then, with the ease afforded only to royalty, reaching inside the monster and plucking the afflicted bone free.

The creature carried the bone with it always, played it like a flute, and added music to Mariposa that had not been there before it came. Some of the guards had begun to think it might have value, for the music alone.

It watched the Princess's bones as they shifted in their bed of marigold petals, plucked fresh each night, as befitted their regent. It observed as she pulled herself together, piece by piece, each bone slotting into place as if drawn tight by invisible strings. She had neither tendons nor muscles, but when the last of her bones had clicked into its socket, she sat up, opening eyes of gleaming starlight, searching the room as she did every evening. She knew too well what her guard thought of the creature she had claimed as her own, and while she most often woke before they did, the fear that one night she would find him gone was strong.

Instead, she found him waiting for her, fingers playing across the surface of his ever-present bone flute, dark eyes anxious. She would not have seen that anxiety in the beginning, would have seen no nuance in the fleshy substance of his expression, but she had learned him, even as he had learned her, even as they were still learning each other, even as they always would be.

"Good evening, Christopher," she said, voice delicate as a wind chime. "How did you sleep?"

"Well," he said, and his own voice was a heavier thing, rendered more substantial by the mechanisms of his breath, which was used to keep him alive, not just to speak. "I went to the meadow and slept in the sun for a while. It was nice."

"I'd like to sleep in the sun," she said, somewhat wistfully.

"You could," he said. "I could carry your bones to the hill and let you sleep with me for a while. It wouldn't be any trouble at all. You're light as anything."

"But skeletons don't sleep in the sun," she said. "We sleep in beds of flowers, or in the cool of the catacombs, away from sunlight. That's how it is in Mariposa."

"Do you know why?"

The Princess paused, tilting her head to the side. That was the best thing about Christopher, and she enjoyed him in all ways; it was wonderful to have a companion who didn't demand she be a perfect princess, but allowed her to be a person when she wanted to be.

"No," she said. "It's what the songs say. We sleep in shadow to evade the sun, and wake when the stars return. The days of Mariposa have to happen for the sake of the flowers, and the butterflies, but they stay short and sweet for us. That's

how it's meant to be. That's how it's always been. Did you seek your doorway during the day, Christopher?"

He hesitated, and his fingers actually stuttered a stop on his flute, which was unusual enough that the Princess sat up straighter, waiting for him to speak. Finally, in a voice as small as an echo, he asked, "Are you in a hurry for me to go?"

"What? No!" She climbed from her bower of petals, rushing to kneel next to his chair, her hands clutching at his. His skin was so *warm*, even when he hadn't been in the sun. Warmth came so easy to him, and she envied it, as she sometimes envied him the sun. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"Your advisors want me to go."

The Princess clacked her teeth in displeasure, molars striking together in a staccato rattle. "My advisors do not set my tune for me."

"I make them uncomfortable. They call me a monster when they think I can't hear them." Christopher sighed, looking at his motionless hands. "I don't look for the door because if I find it, someone else can find it, and if *they* find it, they'll send me back."

Christopher came from a world of others like him, skeletons wrapped in flesh and skin, as they were in the teaching songs, the ones the abuelas sang of the origins of Mariposa. He had been very sick there, as she had seen when first he tumbled into her presence, falling through the fire vine and into the harvest celebration, and the healers of his land had been unable to treat him. She had heard songs of other travelers, of course—the abuelas sang of people whose bones could not be healed by the worlds of their birth, who found Mariposa to continue living after the heat left their flesh and left their bones behind. It was not unusual, according to the songs, for new rulers to meet such travelers, but Christopher had been her first, and she had reacted to his arrival with surprise, calling the sickness from his bones before she asked her teachers what to do.

If she had left it where it belonged, his flesh would have rotted away by now, leaving him as clean and unburdened as any citizen of Mariposa. But he had been so strange, and so lost, and there had been such fear in the way he held his shoulders, in the way he hung his head. She had been able to see his suffering, and had not thought to leave him in such a state, not when she knew the songs to make him well again. What ruler could have looked on such pain and left it as it was?

She laid her hands over his, holding him in place, and looked at him with all the solemnity she could gather. "They don't like you, it's true," she said. "It's rare for a creature of flesh to remain so in Mariposa for long. Flesh is hot and bones are cold, and bones belong to the night as flesh belongs to the day. For the two to walk together is strange to us, and we don't know what to do with it."

"Will they make me go back?"

"Would that be so terrible?" She stayed where she was, watching him. "You aren't sick now. You've spoken of your family, of missing them, of how they must

have worried when you disappeared from the ‘hospital.’ Surely you must want to see them again.”

“I do,” he admitted. “But I want to stay with you even more than I want to see them.”

The Princess hesitated. “You do?”

“I do.” Christopher slid from his chair so that they knelt across from each other, hands still intertwined. Her bones were cool against his skin, and they left dents where they pressed down. It felt good. It had been strange at first, but now it felt good, and familiar, and like *home*. “I love you.”

The light flickered in the Princess’s sockets. She didn’t pull away. “You’ve told me the women of your world walk in flesh, as you do—”

“Where I come from, a skeleton without any flesh on it is a dead thing, all the time, night *and* day. They never wake up. They never go dancing.”

The Princess shivered.

“But I’m not there. I’m here. You were strange at first, but I’ve learned to see how beautiful you are. And you were always kind to me, from the start.” He freed one hand to reach up and caress her angular, gilded cheek. “You’re clever and you’re generous and I love you. I don’t think I’ll ever love anyone *but* you. And I don’t want to leave you, which means I’m not looking for any doors.”

The Princess pulled away from him. Christopher’s eyes widened when he realized what she was doing, and he grabbed for her hands, almost desperate. “I’m sorry! Was that wrong? Should I not have said it? We can just pretend I didn’t say it. We can—”

“Quiet, Christopher,” said the Princess. “The waking song is done. The echoes fade. I need to paint myself for the night and sing the evening song, and then we need to go to the catacombs.”

“The catacombs?” he asked, blankly.

“If you love me, you need to meet my parents,” she said. “It’s the way of things.”

Christopher thought about this for a moment before he pushed off from the floor, smiling at her. “I’ll get the paints,” he said.

★ ★ ★

Lacking faces, or hair, or flesh in need of clothing, the skeletons of Mariposa distinguished themselves through complex cosmetics, applying them every evening according to some predetermined calendar that Christopher had yet to fully unravel, but had come to understand was tied to the season and the weather. Only the Princess was allowed to use the royal palette, filled with pigments made from crushed pearl, dried marigolds, and the powdered wings of migratory butterflies. Other skeletons possessed other palettes, and there were colors that only appeared on anyone, even the Princess, on very special occasions.

He sat quietly as she painted her skull, watching in rapt attention, his fingers playing across the surface of his flute. It had been a part of him once, a sick part,

corrupting and killing the whole by being out of tune with his body. He forgave it, though. He had forgiven it the moment the Princess had pressed it into his palm, his arm still aching from the extraction—which should have hurt so much more than it had, a bone working its way through his skin and out into the air, leaving a hole through which she had slipped a replacement, quick as a wink, before he could draw breath to protest—and told him his song was his own again.

He intended to play that song through to the end according to his own ideas of the shape it should take. Not illness, not adults who thought they knew what was best for him just because they were older and worried about him, not the strange prejudices of a world filled with living skeletons that looked at him and saw a monster. He played the song of his own life, and that life included the Princess of Mariposa, his very own Skeleton Girl, and she was the first girl he had ever loved, and the one he would love until the end of his days.

So he watched as she traced lines of gold and orange and silver across the planes of her skull, and thought she was just as beautiful without them as she was with them. He had tried his hand at Mariposan cosmetics a few times, when he'd still been a stranger in this land, before he'd learned to find the ripest berries in the forest and how to hook the silvery fish from the streams, but the paint which made her look so ethereal and impossible had only made him look more fleshy, more concrete, and farther away from her than he had ever been before.

When she was done, she turned to him, perfect as a picture, and asked, as she asked every evening, "Well?"

"You look beautiful," he said with absolute sincerity, and she had no lips, but still he saw that she was smiling as she offered him her hands, and together they walked out of her bower, and he thought his heart might burst with happiness.

Would that be such a bad thing, in Mariposa? His heart was a part of his fleshy existence, and if it failed him, wouldn't his skeleton get up to continue with its own life? But then, if that happened, would he still be *Christopher*? None of the people he'd met here—and they were people, even if they didn't have skin to hide behind—remembered dying. They didn't claim to have ever been cloaked in flesh and blood, and the few he'd asked had seemed horrified by the very idea.

Various guards and members of the court passed them in the hall, and the Princess greeted each with a cool nod of her head, saying nothing. Without her breaking the silence, they were not allowed to speak to her, and so she and Christopher made their way to the top of the palace, where a room carved from the long-dead bone of some great beast waited for them, its carved walls catching every whisper of the wind and turning it into an endless, meandering tune. The palace of Mariposa was one vast woodwind, played by the breath of the world itself.

Christopher had been staggered on the day he first realized that, and he was staggered now as his Skeleton Girl pulled her hand from his and walked to the great throne of bones, settling on its flower-covered seat with a small nod of satisfaction. The household staff who had been waiting to see if their work would

be acceptable scattered immediately, off to tell their superiors the Princess had approved.

The pools of starlight in her sockets vanished as she closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and added her voice to the song of Mariposa.

It had no words. It needed no words: when the world sang, words would just have gotten in the way. Christopher knew it was important, essential, even, for the Princess to join the song each evening, even if most of the skeletons in the palace would only hum a few notes before they went about their business. She sang, and he ran his fingers across the surface of his flute, wishing he could find the nerve to join her. It wasn't his place, though—not yet. Not until he could be sure he'd be staying.

Not until she told him he belonged.

The song filled the room and filled the world. Christopher closed his eyes, letting it wash over him, letting it wash the rest of his frivolous cares away. Maybe someday he'd find his door and be forced back into the world where his family waited, no doubt terrified by his absence; maybe this wasn't forever. While his Skeleton Girl was singing, that didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the song.

She stopped, and the song continued, wrapping its arms around them and carrying them on a curtain of wordless melody. Then, with a long, aching elegant note, it faded, and silence fell across the room.

Christopher didn't realize she'd gotten up until he heard her feet clacking across the floor toward him. He opened his eyes and watched as she approached, pale and glimmering in the dim light.

"The abuelas say we're welcome in the catacombs, but we'll have to go now if we want to make it to my parents and back before sunrise," said the Princess, seizing his hand. "It's a long journey. Have you eaten?"

The word was strange coming from her mouth, like it was a piece of a foreign language peppered in for his benefit, and in a way it was exactly that. Like all citizens of Mariposa, his Skeleton Girl got all the sustenance she needed from the songs the world sang to and with and through her; Christopher's dependence on more substantial nourishment was strange to her, and always would be.

Laughing, he nodded and twined his fingers with her own. "I ate before sunset. I always do, remember?"

"I know, I just ... maybe you'd forgotten."

"I wouldn't." Eating was an activity they couldn't share, and one she didn't care to observe, not like her evening song, which wasn't for him, but which he loved all the same. He always, always ate before she woke, lest he resent the time it took away from their hours together. She had her duties, as princess of an entire world, and his body demanded he sleep in the darkest hours of the morning, but on the whole, they could spend the night together. As long as he ate before the sun went down.

The catacombs of Mariposa were a vast system of caves and chasms, spreading like the roots of a tree. They connected in a tangled, barely comprehensible web, and if not for the presence of steps carved into the stone, it would have been possible to assume they were entirely natural, etched out of the earth by nothing more than water and time. There was no mile of Mariposan land that did not stand above the catacombs, a living reality balanced upon the bones of the dead.

Christopher and the Skeleton Girl descended the long, shallow steps into the depths of the catacombs, still hand in hand, their way lit by a glass and iron lantern. The lantern's light neither flickered nor varied as they walked, and had not since the moment the Skeleton Girl had plucked it from a table of similar lanterns, standing ready for hands to need them. The guards who watched the table had said nothing as they watched the pair pass, had made no move to stop them or ask where they were going, and perhaps that was because they already knew; there was only one reason to descend past the table of lanterns and into the deep depths. Or perhaps this had all happened before.

Mariposa was a golden world, a gilded world, and before he came here Christopher had never seen flowers so large or tasted honey so sweet. But it was also a dark world, a decaying world, and as they walked deeper into the catacombs, past the chambered schools where skeleton teachers sang their lessons to skeleton students, past the quiet spaces where the older dead lay sleeping, he began to wonder if he would ever see the sun again. They had reached the provinces of the dead who no longer stirred themselves every night, but rose once a week, once a month, when it suited them and not before. He had only seen a few of the truly ancient dead, standing around the edges of festival dances, their bones rimed with dust in place of paint, their eye sockets glowing dimly.

It seemed sad, to linger so long when life no longer appealed, but life and death were malleable here in Mariposa. Perhaps some of those older dead found their love of the world again, and came back up to the firelight. Or maybe the dreams of the dead were their own form of paradise, and they stayed below when they needed nothing more than the light had to offer.

Hand in hand, they descended, until the air was so thick Christopher could barely breathe from the weight of it all. Nothing stirred around them.

Christopher tried to step down, and stopped as the ground brought his foot up short, sending the impact of the failed descent vibrating through his own bones. He blinked, turning to the Skeleton Girl. "There's a bottom," he said.

"Yes," she agreed. "This is where the oldest are. Come now." She took the lantern from his hand, holding it high as she pulled him onward, into dark so deep it seemed to have substance, seemed to slither away from the light.

In the deepest corners, where the lantern failed to reach, something rattled. Something clacked, drawing itself together outside the limits of the light. And a voice, as old as the world itself, creaked, "Hello, child. You have brought a traveler with you. Hello, boy."

Christopher managed not to squirm as the weight of an ancient, unseen gaze settled across his shoulders. Instead, he stood straighter, bowed his head, and said, "Ma'am."

"So brave, for one still cloaked in flesh. So polite. I can see why she wanted us to meet you."

Another voice chuckled from the dark, then spoke: "Don't frighten the boy."

"And why shouldn't I? He comes here in indecent flesh, hand in hand with our little girl."

"As once you came with me, to meet my parents, remember?"

"How could I forget?"

They hummed together, a sweet, lilting song that made Christopher draw closer to the Skeleton Girl, clinging to her hand as if it were the only real thing left in the world.

"Mother?" she said. "What does Father mean?"

"It means I came from a world very far from Mariposa, child, very, very far, where the people wore skin over honest bones, and fought each other over possession of the prettiest face. I fell through a door in the back of a bakery, and I was lost here, in Mariposa...."

"I don't understand."

"The abuelas heard your request, and gave us leave to sing you the beginning-song." The old voice turned solemn. "But once heard, it is not easily forgotten. Are you ready, my love?"

"If we hear it, Christopher can stay?"

"If you hear it, you'll know how he can."

"Then yes, I'm ready."

"I am, too," added Christopher, hastily.

There was no indrawn breath, no warning before the ancient bones began to sing: "Sing to me of Mariposa, oh mi calaquitas, sing to me of the honeyed sky and the fields of endless gold. Sing to me of butterflies, oh mi calaquitas, sing to me of the dreaming days and the nights as yet untold...."

★ ★ ★

"Once, there was Mariposa, and she was a world of butterflies and blooms, but no people. And then came the doors, and through them, the lost and the lonely, the ones who sought to escape the lands they knew, falling into the golden embrace of our mother. She gathered them close, and they fed themselves on her fields, drank from her streams, and when the time came that their flesh was finished, they lay down, and they slept in her soil.

"But they did not stay sleeping. The world sang to them in wind through the branches and over the mountains, and they could not resist the call to rise and dance. So when their flesh had rotted away and they were finally free, they rose, innocent and new, to the Mariposa night. They came together, and were a people

at long last, their differences forgotten, their pasts set aside. When more travelers came through the doors, they were welcomed by the dancing skeletons of Mariposa, and some chose to return to the worlds they had come from, while others chose to stay. Those who stayed grew old, as flesh grows old, and in time they, too, died and woke again, all that came before forgotten.

“The people of Mariposa are people, above all else. We hate and we rage and we learn and we love. In time, some of the new people of our world dreamt of starting families, and sang to the night, begging the world to tell them how. She showed them the way, showed them how to gather small bones from themselves and from the long dead, who no longer rose on their own, and of them build a new skeleton, a new body that the world would breathe life into. So did Mariposa give rise to new life for the very first time, to skeleton young who had never known the weight of flesh, who could dance and dream and sing the world’s songs without any ties to elsewhere.

“And still the travelers came.” Here the voice of the Skeleton Girl’s mother paused, and sighed. “They came as they had always come, lost and lonely, and when they heard the tale of who we were, what we were, they were horrified. The thought of dying to rise again, to dance, was not so terrible. The thought of forgetting who they had been ... that, they could not bear. Until at last there came one who sought a solution. Who learned the world’s songs, and sang them, and sought, until, in the deepest corner of the deepest catacomb, he found a knife of gilded bone. He gave it to the skeleton he loved, and when she took him to their marriage bed, she drove the blade into his heart, stilling it forever. She cut his flesh away, as we must free all travelers who fall here, and when he rose, he remembered who he had been. He was remade in joy, and dances still, somewhere deep beneath the world.”

“So if the Skeleton Girl kills me, I won’t forget who I am?” asked Christopher.

“Yes. If that’s what you wish.”

He turned to her then, and kissed her bony cheek, gilding his lips with crimson and with gold. “More than anything.”

She looked at him, and although her bare skull lacked the lips to smile, he knew that she was pleased.

“Thank you, Mother, for your wisdom, and thank you, Father, for your presence.”

“Go, child, and sing to the winds above, while we sleep peacefully below.”

★ ★ ★

Christopher and the Skeleton Girl climbed for what felt like hours, the song of the catacombs shifting from early night to midnight to the hours just before dawn. They reached the top as the sun was rising, and the Skeleton Girl turned her face to his.

“Tomorrow night, we marry,” she said. “Today, let me sleep in the flowers with you.”

Then she fell to pieces by his side.

He gathered every piece of her, every finger bone and rib, and carried them carefully with him to the field. He was no longer afraid that the sun would forbid her waking, for it was Mariposa that made the song, and the song that called the bones to dance. He lay her out in the sun beside him, and together, they slept.

When the evening song began and she began to stir, he gathered her twitching bones again and carried them back to the palace, back to their wedding night. He was afraid of the pain, but glad he'd be able to stay, and barely noticed the thread of uncertainty underscoring his thoughts. Was he really ready to say goodbye to his family forever? Was he ready to give up being flesh and blood and become only bone?

The door of the palace loomed, exactly as it had always been.

Christopher stepped through.

When the sunset song concluded, the Princess of Mariposa, called Skeleton Girl by the boy who loved her, awoke alone on the palace floor, and knew at once what had happened. That night she sang a threnody to her people, lost love and longing in every word.

“Sing to me of Mariposa, oh mi calaquitas,

Sing to me of the honeyed sky and the fields of endless gold.

Sing to me of butterflies, oh mi calaquitas,

Sing to me of the dreaming days and the nights as yet untold....”



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Indrapramit Das (aka Indra Das) is a writer from Kolkata, India. His debut novel *The Devourers* (Penguin Books India) was nominated for the Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize in India, and released in North America from Ballantine Del Rey. His short fiction has appeared in a variety of publications and anthologies, including *Clarkesworld*, *Asimov's* and *The Year's Best Science Fiction*. He is a 2012 Octavia E. Butler Scholar, and a grateful graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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