

# IMAGINING LIBERTY



**VOLUME 1**

10 AWARD-WINNING LIBERTARIAN SHORT STORIES



EDITED BY GEOFFREY ALLAN PLAUCHÉ,  
J.P. MEDVED, MATTHEW ALEXANDER

## Annotation

From the streets of Cairo in the midst of the Arab Spring to rebellions on distant planets, and from a daring rescue on a seastead-studded ocean to the gallows and grimy streets of 17th century London, here are ten short stories of liberty and revolution. Imagine... a world where independent seasteads and private airship companies keep the peace on the high seas. Imagine... a dying planet ruled by a rigid caste system, but with one last chance to be free. Imagine... a journalist investigating the fate of a government program to match individuals with their perfect mate. These stories are the winners of the Libertarian Fiction Authors Association's first short story contest, following the prompt, "Write a short story that illustrates the positive role of freedom in human life." With 169 total submissions these ten (three winners and seven runners-up), stood out as the top entries from a very broad, and talented field. These original works are as exhilarating as they are thoughtful and imaginative. For more free stories and the latest news about libertarian fiction, sign up for the LFA newsletter: <http://libertarianfictionauthors.com/> (copy and paste into your browser) Cover image courtesy of the Seasteading Institute, licensed under Creative Commons

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**Edited by Geoffrey Allan Plauché, J.P. Medved,  
Matthew Alexander**

## From the Editors

This anthology is the result of a short story contest run as a collaboration between the Libertarian Fiction Authors association (LFA) and Students for Liberty (SFL). It couldn't have happened without the hard work of our fellow editors, the generous donations of LFA members for prize money, and the promotion and organizational help of SFL. Additionally, a wide variety of other people and organizations helped promote the contest and bring in some great entries. From Jeffrey Tucker, to Freedomworks, to AFF, and Robert Murphy, we were fortunate in all the enthusiastic support and assistance we received.

The contest was conceived as an experiment in unapologetically libertarian fiction and was also run in as libertarian a way as possible (prize money was even paid out in Litecoin, in one instance). We hoped that such a contest would attract high-quality writers, with powerful stories to share, that also carried a strong explicit or implicit libertarian message.

In this it was an unqualified success.

The following prompt inspired over 169 authors to submit stories ranging across genre, style, and voice:

“Write a short story that illustrates the positive role of freedom in human life. Whether it’s a galaxy-spanning space epic or an introspective contemporary character piece, we want to see stories that paint the benefits and possibilities of human freedom in sharply compelling brush-strokes.”

From epistolary shorts made up of fictional news pieces, to tales of rebellion on distant planets, submissions were marvelously varied. In fact, the only thing they really held in common was a love of, and even yearning for, political liberty (and a high standard of writing quality).

What you’ll find in this collection are the ten winners (first, second, and third place, and the seven runners up) that managed to deftly combine the universal value of freedom with just plain good storytelling.

We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we did editing and selecting them.

—*The Editors*

# The Coals Burned Low

*Ahmed Khalifa*

Our first place winner, this is a powerful, subtle story set in modern-day Egypt during the turmoil in Tahrir square.

June. The sultriest of months, when tempers flare and the nights burn as hot as the daytime. I found myself, for the first time in four years, descending the familiar hewn stone steps and making my way to the shaded dock below. The houseboat was moored, as it always had been, by the faded antique parking meter almost obscured by a hedge of lavender and mint. I could not see the balcony behind, but I hazarded that it was firmly shut to the murky splendor of the Nile waters. They had always been Philistines in that regard.

Amm Attia, the slight porter with skin like cured leather, had not moved in four years. He sat, as he had always done, in his wicker chair, rolling cigarettes by the light of a kerosene lamp that was the oldest object in the neighborhood. He arose when he glimpsed me, his eyes cloudy with cataracts.

“Who goes? This is a private place.”

I couldn't help but chuckle, and the man's weathered hand gripped the thick stick by his side. He rose and repeated his challenge, the tobacco in his lap scattering in the light breeze.

“And what have the times come to,” I replied. “When a son of the neighborhood is treated like some street thug?”

His body may have withered, but his mind was sharp as a dagger. My voice registered even as the stick clattered to the ground.

“Mr. Ramy?” he said, tottering forward. “It can't be! Mr. Ramy? Or... or is it Avvocato Ramy now?”

I moved forward to embrace him. His head rested against my chest and his crisp white *gallabeya* fluttered around my shins.

“A full Avvocato now, ready to take your money and run,” I joked. “It is good to see you again, old friend.”

Amm Attia stepped back and his eyes travelled up and down. “You've grown, Ramy. You look older.”

“The things you see in service of the law, Amm Attia, they grey your hair.”

His laugh was hearty and punctuated with the cough of a smoker whose tobacco was cut with too much of the black stuff. “They’re all inside, your degenerate scum friends,” he said, waving in the direction of the houseboat. It moved on a bed of molasses, tiny tremors rising and falling in the black of the Nile. “Do they know you’re here?”

I shook my head and stepped onto the gangplank. It felt like an old friend, and familiar steps took me towards the inviting wooden door. I rapped twice and it swung open to the sun.

The sun clapped both hands to her mouth at the sight of me. Her wisps of flame had grown into thick tendrils that crept around her shoulders and down her back. The sun’s face, a smooth oval as pale as its fire was hot. Twin jewels sparkled in greeting; to call them emeralds would be to insult their luster. The sun dazed me and its silence told me I had dazed it.

“Sabah, who is at the door?” a man yelled from within. The sun moved aside in silence, and I stepped into the dingy room.

The seconds stretched on. There were three men arranged in a semicircle on the floor around a tall brass *shisha*, the hose caught mid-pass. Each of them was firmly planted on his own threadbare cushion. I knew them well.

Youssef was the first to break the peace. He pushed himself to his feet with vigor and almost knocked the apparatus to the floor in his haste. His skinny arms enfolded me and his smoke-soured breath washed over me. It tasted like home. “Ramy, you beautiful bastard. Ramy, Ramy, Ramy!”

The other two men stood up. Omar, brawny as an ox, lifted me bodily off my feet. Ismail contented himself with a solid handshake. He had grown a thick bristly beard in my absence. It stretched up to his cheekbones and his eyes looked sunken in contrast.

Youssef fetched him a pillow and tossed it by his own. “Sit, sit. We have much to discuss, Ibn Battuta.”

Omar interrupted him.

“First things first,” the bear said. “We cannot talk unless you are where we are.”

The phrase engendered confused grunts all around until Omar held up the *shisha* hose with a wry smile. I accepted it gratefully, a newborn babe at the teat.



The hash was heady and tasted like handfuls of dry earth. My head spun and I coughed for a long time. Youssef and Omar laughed, clutching their sides.

“Four years have made you as weak as a cat, my friend.”

The world laughed at me and the floorboards breathed. A beard frowned at me. Finally, I regained my bearings and inhaled deeply once again. This time, the smoke stayed in until I wanted it out.

Youssef clapped his hands together. “Where to begin? The drugs, the parties, the girls-”

“You know very well how things are in the United States,” I replied. “The hub of delicious sin. You first, all of you. Tell me about the summer; I expect to hear tales of gallant chivalry and the most heinous moral depravity. Tell me about the girls.”

Omar replied heartily enough, telling me about his new girlfriend, Nadine. She was, to hear him tell it, Helen reborn. Locks of spun gold, eyes like the richest moss, all the phrases the poets spurned for their meaninglessness. I could not help the trembling guffaws that escaped as he regaled us. He was affronted, mockingly so. I directed the question to Youssef and received a shy averted gaze for my troubles. I poked at him again and he remained mute on the subject, muttering about a marked lack of ‘his type’.

“Enough of this useless talk of girls and iniquity,” Ibrahim scowled. He turned to where the sun was standing in the corner by the door. The sun, the radiant sun, had her eyes trained on my face and I felt my face redden. “Sabah. Fetch us some tea, girl.”

The Sabah I remembered would have rolled her eyes and kicked her brother in the back. This Sabah moved towards the tiny kitchen in the back, her eyes lingering on mine. Ismail turned back to us and licked his lips. I averted my gaze, aware as I was of the rules of friendship and siblings of the opposite gender.

“I want to hear about work. You passed the bar?”

I put a hand to my head and feigned a melodramatic swoon. “Please sir, don’t even bring up that horrible time. People say lawyers bring misery but how can we do anything but, considering the misery we ourselves have been put through?”

We spoke at length about our terrible jobs that didn’t appreciate us, our futures that seemed bleak at best and our precious intellects that were going

to waste. Truly, our generation was rife with good-for-nothings. Sabah went outside to ask Amm Attia to pick some fresh mint for our tea. When she opened the door a dry breeze swept into the dank room, scattering ash from the charcoal and sending a cold chill up our spines.

Our grumbling grew more shameless as the hash took control of our senses. Omar complained that the newspaper was never going to let him write anything but fluffy pieces on music and art and festivals.

“Art isn’t fluff,” Youssef said, his voice quiet and his gaze fixed to the floor. He drew his arms tight across his knees. “Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.”

“Those words aren’t yours,” I mocked, jabbing him with the end of the hose and gulping a deep mouthful of brown.

“Picasso,” came the curt reply. “What, you don’t agree?” His eyes followed a speck of ash threading its way across the floorboards.

I laughed. “Why so melancholy, master of mysteries? You’re too young and pretty to furrow your brow like that.” I slapped him on the back for good measure and he managed a weak smile.

The tea came and sat and went cold. Our words came slow and our thoughts slower still, until our conversation was treacle. Sabah sat behind her brother and to the left, still trying to catch my eye out of the corner of hers. The ever-thickening hash smoke made me bolder and I ventured a wry smile out of the sight of Ismail’s prying eyes. She looked away, a demure Victorian miss.

“Enough of this stupor, gentlemen,” I said and got to my feet. There was a chest of drawers in the corner of the room and I made a beeline for it. “It’s time to relinquish your wallets. Poker or blackjack?”

Youssef’s smile split his face, and he took a last, desperate pull at the *shisha*. “This thing is almost out as well. I’ll ask the pile of skin and bones out front to pick up another block of hash.”

Ismail stood up abruptly. He spoke politely but his face betrayed a sour disappointment. “That shall be all for me, I think. Ramy, my prayers for your safe return have been answered. I will see you tomorrow.”

A clamor of protests arose, mine first among them. “Ismail, you have not even touched the hose. Let me at least deprive you of your cab fare in an honest game of cards.” He did not drive, he’d never learned how. It was, to him, unnecessary.

“Our friend has just returned from a long absence,” Omar followed. “It would be the height of impropriety to leave so soon.”

Ismail forced a smile, a tiny insignificant thing, and pulled on a thick black overcoat. “I really must excuse myself. I must be at the mosque first thing in the morning and already I can see dawn approaching. Come, Sabah.”

Omar sighed, resigned. “If you truly insist on this farce, I’ll drive you home.” He waved away Ismail’s protests and turned to me. “I’m sorry. I can’t let a girl take a cab at this hour.”

I told him I understood, that the night was winding down anyway. Would he be okay driving with the hash in his system? He laughed like a bear and grabbed me in a destructive one-armed hug. I let the question lie. I wondered for a moment about my own departure, then decided I could open up my musty apartment in Heliopolis in the morning; tonight, I would gossip like a housewife. The musketeers filed onto the gangplank in an orderly line, where they bid goodnight to Amm Attia and made their way up the stone steps. Or so I imagined, as I made my way to the balcony where Youssef was lighting the first cigarette of a shiny new pack.

His face, when I left it long ago, had been shining with the reckless confidence only youth can bestow. His face, when I returned to it, was haggard and drawn. “Surely you’ve noticed by now.”

The United States had instilled in me a haughtiness that left me angry with myself for not noticing whatever it was I hadn’t noticed. I stayed silent.

“Ismail. Since the elections...” He trailed off. The beard had thrown me off, but I had guessed that it was a fashion statement. That perhaps Ismail was readying himself for hibernation. I had, apparently, guessed wrong.

“He voted Morsi?”

Youssef nodded and took a deep drag. There is something inherently unsettling about the compulsion Egyptian men have, the need to always keep our mouths occupied. I had learned to treat Freud as dated and irrelevant during my studies, but I began to wonder. “That’s not all bad. My uncle-”

He cut me off. “You know me Ramy. You know my views. Do you think it’d matter to me, who he voted for? There’s more.”

He handed me a cigarette. I handed it back. I'd stopped smoking. Cigarettes in the Big Apple were prohibitively expensive, and the habit had faded. Youssef shrugged and went on. He told me about how Ismail had been spending his free time. Shady mosques with bad reputations. Visits to the countryside, and not the picturesque kind. Even visits to the Sinai, which often took a lot longer than they should and from which he returned withdrawn and edgy, disappearing for days on end.

"The things he says sometimes, Ramy, I'm not even sure he realizes what he's saying. Stuff about the Coptic Church, and how they're plotting the downfall of the country," he trailed off, fingering the cross around his neck. The circles we ran in, religious discrimination was not normally an issue.

I was taken aback. Ismail was our friend, and had been for as long as we could remember. This sounded nothing like him. I asked Youssef whether he was sure, whether there could have been a communications mix-up.

He turned to me, fire in his eyes, and viciously stubbed out his cigarette. Which was somewhat theatrical, seeing as how he'd just lit it. "Does it sound vague to you?"

"Point taken." His intense gaze made me uncomfortable, and I turned back to the still goop of the Nile.

"It's not going to end well," he said after a lengthy silence. "Something's coming, something big. He'll be on the opposite side. I can feel it." He looked at me, expecting some sort of reaction.

"Feel it? Really? Doesn't that sound a bit... histrionic?" I regretted the words even as they floated between us.

The contempt drew its way across his face in deep creases. "What would you know," he said, the words slow and deliberate. "About anything at all?"

The burning embers atop the *shisha* had breathed their last as Youssef walked back outside. I took a few fruitless puffs before resigning myself to a sleepless night amidst the earsplitting snores of Amm Attia in his wicker chair.

\* \* \*

I awoke with searing fingers tapping at my skull; a sign that I had not smoked hash in too long. The thick smog of the drugs had not yet evaporated and I struggled to breathe for a moment before fumbling in the shuttered darkness until I found my glasses and my phone. The harsh white light of the screen was almost unbearable, but the ten or so unread text messages had an irresistible pull. My shiny new iPhone was a blank slate, so I had to guess who had sent which message.

*Up and at 'em, faggot* was the first message displayed. The perfect English, the slur so utterly devoid of any actual homophobia. It reeked of the anarchy personified that was my best friend. I saved the number to my contacts and cycled through his four other texts, all colorful variations on the same central theme.

*Your country's awake and you're asleep. Come to Tahrir!* was up next. I hazarded that this was Omar, although I couldn't be sure. Almost no one else I knew texted in Arabic, except maybe Ismail. Whoever it was had sent the message twice, two hours apart. Once at 9am and another at 11, only a few minutes ago. The last two texts were from a restricted number and said only *Don't come to Tahrir*. Cheerful.

I was preparing to stretch my aching back- stiffened from the harsh pressure of the mangy cushions- when a crushing weight landed on my chest. As I focused, the shape extended a hand and stuck a finger in each of my nostrils. I opened my mouth wide, panting for air and swatting blindly when I felt a thick, sweet liquid trickle into my open mouth. I sputtered and bucked the figure off. Youssef arose and collapsed once again, this time in the throes of uproarious laughter. A clatter; a pot of honey fell by his side.

"Your mother was a street dog," I managed to choke out, on all fours, as the last of the honey dripped to the dirty floor.

"You weren't answering your phone, so I came over," he said, as if what he had done was a natural tendency of humans in possession of their full faculties. He stood toying with an errant strand of fabric hanging from a dusty tapestry. The melancholy of the previous night was all but gone. "And now you've had breakfast. Get dressed. We're going to Tahrir."

I straightened up and stopped to consider. I'd heard things, of course. Filtered through the rose lens of CNN and Al Jazeera, I'd heard that the unwashed masses had taken to Tahrir Square once again, this time protesting the hairy ape of an Islamic despot nature had deemed it necessary

to deposit on our doorstep. From what I could gather, it hadn't quite picked up the same steam as last time. "Why?"

"Do you have anything better to do?" He had me there, the cad. I had no one in this country, no one else I'd kept in touch with over the years. My parents were back in the States with my little brother, scrabbling for citizenship. If I passed on Tahrir, I'd have to while away the day in empty coffee shops while the rest of Egypt messed around without me. I didn't like missing out. I acknowledged this fact out loud and got dressed under Youssef's triumphant smirk. Before we left he rummaged through his backpack and fished out a belt with a heavy steel buckle in the shape of a skull; one of the ones we used to wear in eighth grade when heavy metal was social lubricant. He held it out, buckle dangling.

"It's really not my style."

"Self-defense. They search us for knives and batons, but if you get into trouble just wrap it around your hand like so." He demonstrated. "Let the buckle hang and smack the offending party on the head. I call it the Flail. Patent pending."

I stared at him for a moment, not sure if he was serious. Knives? Batons? What had they been getting themselves into? He read my uncertainty and rushed to reassure me. "It's just *keda*, in case. Nothing ever happens but just in case..."

In the interests of expediency, I latched it around my waist and grabbed the other backpack he offered. A quick search yielded snacks, water and a flare gun, the latter again 'just in case'.

\* \* \*

I was wrong. I was unquestionably, undeniably, full-heartedly wrong about Tahrir. It wasn't a shallow shell of the January 25 revolution. It wasn't the pathetic attempt of a dying country to capitalize on the limelight of unscripted fury. It was a party of the most Gatsbyesque proportions. Red clothed the floor and red clothed my eyes as the banners screamed NO at the skies. The incandescent rage of January 25th 2011 was replaced by a will of iron as the Egyptian people heaved and rippled as a single entity. The young came, with toys and coloring books to do their homework in the Square. The elderly came wielding walkers and insulin shots and yet

forward they marched. The men in suits brandished briefcases and huge flags and the mechanics wiped the grease off their hands before leading the harmonic chanting. They had not won a battle- not yet- but already they were celebrating their freedom, flaunting their freedom, wearing their freedom down the trash-strewn catwalk.

And I was in the eye of the storm, surrounded by the people I loved; not my friends, but my people. We travelled to the heart of the Square in single file, hanging on to the person in front to avoid being swept away by the human ocean. Omar took the lead, his burly frame cleaving a path like a bulldozer. Youssef followed, dancing merrily in the shadow of the giant and whooping with the best of them. I had a firm grip on the strap of his backpack and stumbled along with the conga line, stunned by a sheer immensity of character that stirred something dormant within me. Sabah walked behind me, her hands resting light as a feather around my waist and giving me goosebumps with their every fleeting motion. Every so often a strand of red hair fluttered across my face and I felt faint. Ismail came last, his beard out of place among the clean-shaven masses but his smile as broad as any of theirs. He beamed at us and he beamed at strangers and I understood the colossal inexplicable happiness he felt, the same one that threatened to expand through my chest like a balloon and spill from my mouth. We breathed happiness that day.

The hours passed in a matter of seconds. We marched and sang and chanted –*My address is Tahrir until Morsi goes! My address is Tahrir until Morsi goes!*- and simply stood and marveled. For the first time since my return I shed my seasoned-traveler persona. I was no longer the bold Marco Polo, braving the shores of America to bring their light back to my cave-dwelling brethren. I was a sheltered child, hapless but not alone, dwarfed and made insignificant by a proud, battle-scarred people well versed in the art of merry warfare. As drums sounded, their reverberations thrumming through the fast-disappearing light, we collapsed onto a rare patch of grass and regained our bearings. Before long a stooped man with a lined face and a massive sack approached us with a familiar apparatus and inquired whether we wanted to partake.

“*Shisha?* Even here!” announced Omar with childish glee. He handed the man a five pound note and watched him break the Guinness record for fastest assembly in history. As he packed the bowl, Omar stopped him and handed him a small brown block. A fleeting wry grin folded the man’s face

as he began breaking it into bits and scattering them into the tobacco. Ismail caught the exchange and gave a rehearsed sigh. “Must we taint this beautiful moment with meaningless artificial sedation?”

He was summarily ignored, and plastered a sullen look on his face in protest. The potent stuff did not tarry in filtering through us, drained as we were, and soon we were appreciating the majesty of the square on a different level altogether. If it had been red before it was a lifeless carmine whereas now the world was coated with a thick slop of pomegranate syrup, blinding to the eye.

When the hose passed to Sabah, Ismail grabbed it from her hands and shoved it back in our direction. We ascended while the siblings lingered in the mortal plane. In an attempt to diffuse the tension and fortified by the hash, I broached the topic that had weighed on my mind all day. “Ismail, is this where you’d like to be?”

He looked taken aback, then regained his composure. “This is where my friends are, despite what they might be doing,” he said, with a pointed glare at the *shisha*. “This is where I need to be.”

“And your,” I hesitated, “other friends. Do they approve of you being here?”

“I have no orders to the contrary,” he replied neutrally. The conversation ended there, on an uncomfortable note. The word *orders* lodged in my brain and sank to my stomach, where it nestled and germinated.

I became aware of ants crawling over my hands. I glanced over and the ants lengthened and fused, forming a creamy white hand. I followed the hand up and it ended in freckles and a pair of jade moons. Sabah’s hands fell into my own and squeezed. I squeezed back and the lion in my chest threw back its head and roared. My disquiet evaporated and I lost myself in her eyes. I didn’t care if he saw. I didn’t care if he skinned me with a rusty blade. I was lost and never wanted to be found.

My trance was broken by the sounds of a scuffle nearby. I heard raised voices and heard the distinct thump of flesh on flesh, rhythmic and sickening. Omar was up and sprinting before the rest of us could comprehend the chaos. We followed soon after, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Youssef unbuckle his Flail and wrap it around his hand.

The scene was horrific. At least ten men stood around a prone figure on the floor, kicking and screaming obscenities. They were an assorted



bunch, all brown skin and gleaming brown teeth. Eriest of all they all bore broad smiles as the figure writhed helplessly. They screamed “spy” and they screamed “coward” and they screamed “Zionist”. Their cries turned heads and I saw more men, more women, more bodies, pull towards the scene. Their mouths stretched wide with smiles but their eyes were anything but sympathetic. They came with clubs and belts and fists. I saw nothing of the figure itself, only brief flashes of black and white as it squirmed under the barrage. I saw a stick descend on an outstretched hand with a crunch that ran up my spine and the target of the hand, an expensive-looking camera inches away, smashed underneath a black boot. The hand was pale, as pale as Sabah’s, and that was all I saw.

Omar threw himself into the fray with gusto, shoving men left and right. Youssef brandished his Flail but looked sick at the thought of swinging it against these men with whom only moments ago we had been celebrating so buoyantly. I even recognized one, a kind-looking middle-aged doctor whose first-aid tent we’d passed hours ago. His surgical mask was sprayed with sticky red as his fist smashed repeatedly into the bundle on the floor. I launched myself at him, knocking him out of the way and covering the broken body with my own. The action made no sense to me, then or later, but I absorbed the blows as best I could as I screamed at the horde “Stop! What are you doing? Stop!” Those same phrases, repeated, a broken record player paralyzed by shock. A shrill scream rent the air. I saw the doctor pull himself up and grab a shard of broken concrete off the floor, murder in his eyes. I knew how this ended. I knew how far short my bravery fell. I knew my own powerlessness. And then I knew darkness.

\* \* \*

I slipped in and out of consciousness many times. I was vaguely aware of a measured bumping beneath me, a car. Pain spiked throughout my body with every jolt but it was never enough to keep me awake for long. After a while I became aware of a heavy weight against my back, and I turned to find a ruined face with closed eyes. I slept next to a corpse and woke to eyes filled with an existential terror. I caught fragments of the face with every awakening. Once the crushed nose, bigger than any nose had a right to be. Once the grisly left eye, a solid wall of red with only the barest hint

of a pupil. The last time he had about-faced, leaving me staring at a mass of black curls streaked with grey, matted to a massive cut on the back of his head. White peeked out and I became violently sick before succumbing to the night once again.

\* \* \*

I came to to find a broad face etched with concern inches from mine. Omar, looking tired and dusty but none the worse for wear. He gave me some space and I sat up, fighting the wave of nausea that washed over me. I was in the houseboat, sitting on a worn blanket. Sabah stood by Omar with puffy eyes. Craning my neck I could make out Youssef on the balcony by an overflowing ashtray. He always chain-smoked under pressure. It'd be the death of him. I massaged my limbs gingerly, wincing when I felt something sting. Ismail stood a little further back than the rest, his eyes wary and searching. They zeroed in on a spot behind my left shoulder, and I turned to follow the gaze. The same crushed nose. The same ruined eye, shut now. A heap on my blanket's twin. The "spy".

I coughed and the lance of fire pierced my side again. I might have broken a rib. I motioned to the man and waved an inquisitive hand. Omar took the hint. "They were beating him in Tahrir, you remember any of that?" I nodded and he went on. "We dove in, they didn't beat us as much. Most of that," he motioned to me, or more accurately the tattoo of bruises covering the visible areas. "Was one guy, the guy you shoved. They tried to get at him again though, we barely got out. Sabah found a friend of hers, he had some guys. They got us out. Amm Attia's getting us bandages and stuff."

He was interrupted when I winced audibly, caused by the crushing pressure of Youssef's arms around my neck. He'd snuck in and hugged me from behind, and I felt the back of my destroyed shirt moisten.

"I'm so sorry, so sorry for bringing you. This never would have happened if I hadn't brought you, you don't deserve this." He whimpered a while more, all of it incoherent. I shrugged him off, vaguely insulted at how fragile he perceived me to be. He too, looked pretty much untouched except for an ugly bruise marring his neck.

“What now? Tell me something about this guy. Has he woken up?” I inquired. All three of them, save Ismail, shook their heads. Ismail’s stony expression remained unwavering.

“His name’s Benjamin Underhill,” said Youssef. “We found a press pass in his wallet. He works for the Daily News. He’s English. The fucking primates.”

“It doesn’t mean he’s not a spy,” said Ismail. In a heartbeat, the room went from silent to cacophonous. Youssef and I, we called him every name under the sun and then some. We called him a fascist and a nutjob and a paranoid pawn of the Islamists. Sabah called him an insult to their upbringing. Omar was silent throughout.

“The fact remains, you can’t know what or who he is,” he said, unruffled by our anger. “Maybe they saw him taking pictures he shouldn’t have been taking. Maybe that’s why they attacked. His camera’s gone, we don’t know what he was doing there.”

The hours were frittered away on fruitless arguments. I laid out, in the most minute of detail, the American justice system and the concept of innocent until proven guilty, shouted until I was hoarse and still Ismail called me a traitor and an enemy sympathizer. Sabah reminded him of the Prophet’s fairness and morals and his venomous glares silenced her. He refused to hear reason and when the time came, he was the first to leave.

“I need to go,” he muttered. “Meeting.”

“You go,” Youssef hissed. “Go to your brothers. They’ll tell you to kill us before long. Kill us for liking a little red wine with our supper and having the audacity to save a man’s life.”

“You misunderstand us,” Ismail replied, his eyes full of what seemed to be genuine hurt. “We want to protect you, protect the country, protect Islam. These spies, they want to gain your trust to betray you.”

“The man hasn’t uttered a word,” Youssef exploded. “Yet you put words in his mouth and condemn him to die.”

“That’s enough,” Omar said, his voice barely a whisper. “I’ll take Ismail to his meeting now. We should all cool off and we’ll meet here in the morning.”

The silence that greeted him was his cue to leave. Sabah left too, but not before leaning down and giving me a soft kiss on the cheek.

“He doesn’t mean it, any of it,” she murmured into my ear. “Take care of our friend until the morning.”

I asked her to text me when she got home safe. She said she would. Then she was gone.

I was still fuming, but the kiss and the liquid honey of her voice had soothed me somewhat. Youssef had had no such respite and stamped angrily around the houseboat some more. When Amm Attia returned with the medical supplies, Youssef couldn't contain his temper. He yelled at the old man to tend to the wounded Englishman and then to find him some hash before retiring to a corner to sulk.

"I'm sorry Ammo, it's a trying time," I said to the old man as we wrapped Benjamin's various cuts and bruises. We doused everything in iodine and did the best we could resetting his crushed nose. "You know Youssef, he can't handle pressure."

"There's nothing to apologize for," he said. His old hands were nimble with the bandages and even his stitches were decent. He'd obviously done this before. I stopped myself wondering where. "I was in Tahrir myself today. I saw my brothers at the height of their glory, but you stay watchful, Avvocato. They can't control this power they have. This freedom, this recklessness. We are not ready." With that he left me to prowl his alleyways and find the hash.

\* \* \*

Ismail's concerns, he insisted the next morning, were purely those of security, and we believed him less and less as his arguments unraveled. Sabah bandaged Benjamin's battle scars on the floor in the balcony, out of sight, while we huddled in the main room to discuss the wretched circumstances we found ourselves in. Amm Attia had set the *shisha* up before we arrived and only stopped in to refresh the coal every now and then. Omar had the pipe and was taking puffs solely out of a sense of duty, his full attention fixated on toying with the hose and avoiding as much of our conversation as possible. There was no tranquility tonight, no dreamlike discussion of the mundane and the supernatural. The walls did not breathe but stared at us with a foreboding judgment. Our raised voices did not shake them, only deepened their silent sneer.

"You cannot expect me to lay down my life for a *khawaga*, a fucking foreigner," Ismail spat. "Every minute he lies on our floor puts us in danger.

Do you know what will happen if State Security finds him?”

“You brainless sheep of a man,” Youssef roared back. “Have they wiped your mind so clean you believe every pale man is a spy? You don’t deserve the brain God gave you.”

“You see!” Ismail yelled, getting to his feet and whirling on Youssef. “The Zionist scum is already dividing us.”

“You divided us!” Youssef screamed, hurling himself at the bearded man. The *shisha* toppled to the floor, spilling lit coals across the wooden boards. The overpowering humidity quenched their spark in an instant but the crash snapped Omar out of his reverie. He stepped in and encircled Youssef in a crushing bear hug yelling “No! Not like this!”

Youssef squirmed and wriggled, lashing out with feet and hands that whistled inches past Ismail’s impassive face. “You divided us when you said Copts were plotting the downfall of Egypt. You divided us when you joined the band of fucking dogs you call brothers. You divided us! You divided us!”

He finished his tirade in tears and went slack in Omar’s arms. Omar relaxed his grip and moved the fallen *shisha* gently out of the way and Youssef fell to the floor, sobbing. A slim silhouette appeared behind the curtains, framed by a mess of red curls. She parted the thin drapes, letting the cool breeze in, and stepped over to the heaving figure on the floor, crouching down and pulling him to her. She cooed in his ear and stroked his feathery hair. Ismail glared and clenched his fists and I, despite myself, felt a pang of jealousy, quickly stifled. She glanced up at her brother and her steady gaze said ‘Shame on you.’

I spoke. “Ismail. I think perhaps, if you fear for your safety among us, you should leave.” And even as I spoke the words I regretted them, because when Ismail left he would have Sabah in tow. Still, they needed to be said.

Ismail’s brow softened into sad resignation. “Even you, Ramy? I only wish to protect us from the enforcers of this totalitarian state. They will come, in their black cars and with their sticks, and no one will hear from you again.” He paused, letting the full effect of the words sink in. “Is that what you want? For this man, this *Jew* you don’t even know?”

Sabah stood and faced her brother. “Have you forgotten, oh holiest of holy men? Even if he were a Jew this man, and his people, are our siblings. You, who claim to follow Allah so righteously, what know you of the

Quran?” Her expression was inscrutable but the awesome ferocity of the sun bubbled underneath.

“Silence, woman, before I make sure you never leave the house until you are married,” he scowled. My hand inched towards the Flail and I would have struck him then, I’m sure of it, had Sabah not placed a light hand on my chest.

*“Those who believe and those who are Jews and the Sabaeans and the Christians, all who believe in Allah and the Last Day and act rightly will feel no fear and will know no sorrow,”* she recited with closed eyes. “Surait al-Maida brother. Do you remember, or will I have to fetch Madame Abla to hit your hands with a stick again to jog your memory?”

The slap was lightning-fast, the hand-shaped welt rising before Sabah’s eyes could even widen. Youssef leapt from his crouched position, death in his eyes and once again Omar intervened, with more purpose this time. Shielding Ismail, he grabbed Youssef by the wrist and flung him to the ground where he stayed, shocked. Omar then turned to Ismail and guided him towards the exit. The door slammed shut with a deafening crash and we were left to contemplate our mess once again. Youssef sank to the floor, head in hands.

I took Sabah in my arms and held her as her shoulders heaved and still the tears refused to materialize. Silent, dry sobs punctuated by the hardening of her fingers on my back; clenched against the futile reality. She pulled away and I tried to stop her.

“You can’t. Not while he’s like this. Please.”

Her eyes were older than immortality then, dark with the accumulated despondency of eons of human existence. She was wise and in her wisdom she found endless pain.

“I must,” she said, finding her choked voice. “Look after Benjamin tonight.” Then she was gone.

We adjourned to the balcony and spent an hour there as the dawn wrought its pale pink signature across the pitch-black sky. I had forgotten that you couldn’t see the stars in downtown Cairo with the thick blanket of industrial smog. Youssef asked for a cigarette and I obliged. A healthy lifestyle was unsustainable here, where cigarettes were cheaper than bottled water and I lit one for myself as well. Several times he opened his mouth to speak and reconsidered the decision. I would have said something but I owed him an apology and I could not muster the fortitude to deliver it. He

had been right about it all; about Ismail, the country and the war on the horizon. I had seen it all firsthand, and my American-taught skepticism faltered and failed.

I did not spend the night on the houseboat. I had an apartment to see, after all, one that could be a ransacked ruin by now, for all I knew. Youssef would have liked to protest, I knew, but he could not begrudge me the brief respite today, after what we'd seen. I made him promise to check on Benjamin every few hours, to make sure he didn't bleed out or just die. His bandages wouldn't have to be changed for hours yet, so his role was that of a watcher, nothing more, I told him. I stepped in for a hug, a quick squeeze, and found myself engulfed as Youssef held me tight for at least a minute. I was surprised to find his eyes dry when he let go. He was an emotional wreck.

I hailed a cab and we zigzagged our way through downtown Cairo with the precision of a drunken mule. I'd forgotten where the apartment was and I described it as best I could to the driver. It took us three unsuccessful attempts before we finally got the right house. I let myself in, got the mattress as clean as I could and collapsed with only boxers to hide my modesty.

\* \* \*

We found ourselves in Tahrir again the next day and I prayed my thanks that we did because it was the day the dictator fell and the day the sun and I became one.

The day did not begin as the one before it had. This time I was the weight on Youssef's chest, although I decided to forego the honey experiment. I shook him awake and he was dressed in seconds.

"Do you think it's okay leaving him here?" I asked, motioning to the still form of Benjamin on the floor. "He'll probably wake up, right? He's been out for hours."

"If he comes to, he'll find his way home," Youssef said. "He's got everything he needs here if he wants to wait it out. We can't miss Tahrir today. Today's speech day!"

He was not wrong. We stood amidst our brethren and listened to a buffoon of a president make speech after speech, alternately promising us

the world or denouncing us as traitors to the state. He welcomed us all as his children then sicced his followers on us on air. Both Youssef and I had our Flails around our waists in case of trouble but I had not heard from Omar since the previous day. Ismail was absent as well, though this was markedly less surprising. It didn't matter. Youssef and I, we were protected by a human tidal wave.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to face the sun. She flashed a shy smile and I did the math, wondering how she'd found me in a crowd of millions. The numbers fled my head as we embraced. There was no welt on her face, and she seemed to act like the previous night had not happened. I took the hint and joined the cover-up, anything to see her keep smiling. I glanced around as I hugged her, worried he was nearby. He was not. Her skin was hot to the touch and I noted with more than a little satisfaction that the hug she gave Youssef did not last nearly as long. She introduced us to the friends she was with and they were each imprinted onto my mind because one does not forget who one was with then Morsi was felled like an oak tree.

The inevitable proclamation came and cheers rippled through the crowd like waves. Slow at first, they reached a crescendo and both Sabah and I were tossed off our feet and into the seething mass to be heaved from one man to the next, rag dolls. We rode the world's biggest trampoline for some time, and then I begged the crowd to let us down in between snorts of laughter.

I excused myself from the group a few minutes later and she followed, as I had hoped she would. We walked under cover of darkness, through throngs of campers, taking the widest loop we could around our little band of revolutionaries. We held hands and I noticed for the first time that the leather jacket she wore was had tiny birds embroidered on the cuffs. A rich crimson, with shiny orange plumage that caught the light. Phoenixes. I told her she was corny for choosing a red bird as her spirit animal. She told me I was jealous of her immortality. We walked again and I looped an arm around her waist and drew her close. She told me I was forward. I told her I loved her. I hadn't intended to, but she was my sun. The words formed themselves and fought their way out. She told me she knew. She told me she loved me too. We neared our friends and had to disengage, physically at least. My eyes followed the glinting phoenixes as she loped ahead. Youssef saw me approach and winked theatrically. I was still giddy from her last



words and paradoxically, I couldn't stand to be around her much longer. I wanted to preserve the image of her, the willowy leather woman with the bright red hair, telling me she loved me for as long as possible. To do this, I had to leave her here, for now.

I said it was time for me to depart, to a chorus of groans. Youssef said he'd join me, and the group wished us all the best. We hadn't seen the last of them, they promised. We laughed at their wit and bid them farewell.

"What a bunch of tools," Youssef said as we threaded our way through the crowds.

"They're good people you judgmental ape," I replied, grabbing an ear of roast corn off the tray of a nearby vendor and leaving him a pound in its place. I tore into it like I was mad at it.

A cab was found and in short order, we were back at the houseboat. We made our way to the balcony and found a pleasant surprise- the gleaming *shisha*, freshly assembled and waiting only for a coal. Amm Attia came in with a basket of them a few moments later, his smile broad.

"Time to *estebeh*, time to wake up," he told us conspiratorially as he placed the lit coals on its head. We laughed- an honest one this time- and asked him to join us.

"Heaven forbid, men," he said as he held the hose out to Youssef. "I've never touched the stuff. Nothing that impairs your mental state, that's what God says. But please, don't let me make you uncomfortable."

Youssef took the hose and inhaled with a passion. The smoke that emerged wrapped around my face like a veil and I suppressed a cough. We thanked Amm Attia and he retired to his post outside. Soon enough we were giddy, giggling like schoolgirls at the patterns that appeared on the walls and dripped like slime to the floors, coating them in hexagons.

I told Youssef about Sabah, and what she'd said. He wished me well, from the bottom of his heart, but worried about Ismail. I told him not to worry. I'd keep her safe. I'd make him see reason. I'd fight for it and I'd marry her.

"That's not the way they do things," he said, and he didn't need to tell me who *they* were. "To them you're an infidel. A traitor. A foreign double agent. It doesn't matter how little sense it makes."

"You talk about him like he's beyond saving," I shot back. "He's our friend. He has been since we were children. You were right, he's changed, but he's been brainwashed."

“He slapped her right across the face, in front of all of us,” Youssef said quietly. “He didn’t care who saw. Can you tell me you felt he was worth saving then?”

I looked away and sought solace in more hash. I needed more, to stave off this attack of reason and rationality. I didn’t need logical. I needed dreamy and the hash obliged. We sank back in our cushions and watched the ceiling melt away.

A faint groaning came from within and we both leapt to our feet, having momentarily forgotten our unconscious Anne Frank five feet away.

\* \* \*

We learned more of Benjamin that night, much more. He’d scurried to his feet like a rabbit that senses the fox closing in, but we’d managed to calm him down. It was our English, I think, that finally reassured him. We fetched him his own pillow and passed him the *shisha*, hoping it would loosen him up. He adjusted the bandage around his nose, winced, and accepted the proffered hose. He smoked like a pro.

He was, in fact, a Jew. His mother was Israeli, his father English. He told us he’d always loved Egypt. He’d studied it in history class when he was a child and found it fascinating. When he became a photojournalist he’d traveled a lot and covered a lot. Infant mortality in China. Modern-day slavery in Mauritius. He’d even been on Gordon Ramsay’s crew covering shark-fin trading in Costa Rica. But once he’d found the job at the Daily News, he never took another international job.

“I never wanted to leave,” he explained. “It was all so overpowering. The country is majestic and the people have the biggest hearts in the world.”

He’d predicted the Islamist rise to power years back. He had watched it all play out, and even attended Brotherhood rallies. He took pictures, lots of pictures, but he felt it wasn’t his place to interfere.

“The English have done enough to Egypt,” he joked. “If you guys wanted the Brotherhood in charge, who am I to say you can’t?”

“Liars and scoundrels, the lot of them,” Youssef scowled. “They clawed their way to power on our backs and they’re clawing at us on the way down too.”

I asked him about the beating. He waved me off.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” he said. “Bunch of nonsense, really. Those people aren’t Egyptian. They don’t represent this country. I should know, I’ve been here ten years.”

I lost it then. I couldn’t hold them back and the tears streamed. To hear this complete stranger talk about his devotion to the country I’d abandoned four years prior, even as rivulets of blood snaked down the wreckage of his eye stirred a burning passion in the pit of my stomach, equal parts love and hate. Love both for this man who dismissed the nearly-mortal beating he’d received as uncharacteristic and the country that inspired him, and hate for those who’d repaid his love with barbaric brutality.

I pulled him towards me and wept at how unfair it all was. He winced—I must have squeezed a bruise. Then, somehow, he found the strength to laugh.

“Get off me, you sentimental sod,” he joked. “We’ve only just met.”

Youssef slapped me on the back of the head and joined him in his laughter. Soon, we were all laughing, clutching our sides and gasping for breath. We took leave of our senses and our laughter boomed through the room, magnified a hundredfold.

It didn’t last long, despite my fervent prayers. Our revelry died down and sober reality set in once again. Youssef told Benjamin the best course of action was to go directly to the British Embassy. The hospitals would be unpleasant and the streets would be downright hostile. It was agreed he would spend the night on the houseboat, under the watchful eye of Amm Attia, and take a cab straight to the Embassy first thing in the morning.

It wasn’t as intimate as I expected, the conversation between us and the man whose life we saved. He was polite, of course, and treated us like old friends, promised us the world and more. Some part of me had expected unabashed gratitude, tearful proclamations of eternal indebtedness and yet here I sat with the red eyes while Benjamin clapped me on the back and told me to ‘grow a pair’. It would have been comical had his nose been pointing in the right direction. As it was, it just made me queasy.

I excused myself, citing a need to sleep in my own bed for a night. They both protested.

“I’ll send Amm Attia out, we’ll set up the *shisha* and play some cards,” Youssef said. “Benjamin, you play poker right?” Benjamin answered in the affirmative and told me I should stay.

“It’s been too long of a day,” I replied. “I need to sleep sober tonight, somewhere with a soft bed. And I need to go to my apartment anyway, make sure everything’s there.”

With defeated sighs all around they let me go. Benjamin pulled me into a hug and told me to keep my chin up, that I was a good kid.

\* \* \*

I awoke with a start to the demonic buzzing of my phone. I checked the time- an ungodly hour- rubbed the sleep out of my bleary eyes and hoped to God whatever it was didn’t require me leaving my bed.

It vibrated again and I somehow managed to unbalance myself enough to fall out of bed. I noticed the pants around my ankles and remember the quaking wreck I had been the night before. Deciding that further movement was futile, I resigned myself to a life on the floor, swiped right and read the text. *Come to the boat. Now.*

I sighed at the melodrama of it all. Three in the fucking morning and he wanted me to traipse halfway across Cairo. I hit the “Call” button and it rang twice before Youssef rejected the call. A moment passed, then my phone buzzed again.

*Come to the boat. Now.*

Tendrils of unease snaked through my stomach. Even throughout all that had happened, Youssef had never been this curt with me. I got to my feet, pulled my pants all the way up and latched the Flail around my waist. It was still early and I anticipated a chill, so a sweater went on over my shirt. One three-touch-tap (phone, wallet, keys) later I made my way downstairs to hail a cab.

The only cab I found- a clunky monstrosity gushing great plumes of vapor- wound its way through the tight streets of Zamalek. We turned onto Abou El Feda Street, where the boat was moored and were greeted with shrill sirens and an ocean of red lights. Fire trucks, police trucks and ambulances swamped the narrow road, making its traversal impossible. I pushed the folded twenty into the driver’s hand and threw the door open. No, no, no.

The smell hit me first, filled my throat and nostrils at a hundred paces. Thick, heavy smoke settled in the deepest part of my lungs, and I forced it

out in great, hacking coughs as I shoved my way through throngs of onlookers. The taste came next, salty flakes of ash and still-alight cinders forcing their way into my mouth, into my eyes, singing my eyelashes and streaking my cheeks. I took the stone steps two at a time and sprinted the rest of the way, stopping next to where Youssef was standing just short of the burning wreck. The roof had caved in and the boat resembled nothing so much as a jagged crater, displaced from its home in some forgotten abyssal dystopia. Flames tasted the air and found it to their liking; they slurped it up greedily. In our silence, what was left of the gangplank came free and fell into the water with a syrupy *plop*.

My mouth made sounds without words, without meaning. Maybe he understood and maybe he didn't, but Youssef answered anyway. "It was Ismail. Amm Attia saw. He had Sabah with him, but I don't think she wanted to be there."

Sudden, implacable rage. I saw it in my mind, as clear as if it had been a TV program. My Sabah, my sun and stars, once resplendent in leather and moonlight, dragged kicking and screaming by the hair by her brute of a brother. My friend. Her brother. My friend. "Benjamin?"

"He is alive, for the moment," said a deep voice from some ways behind me. I turned to find the porter sitting in his wicker chair. He had dragged it against the stone steps where it was invisible to anyone coming down. Even at a distance I could see his fingers trembling as he rolled the cigarette and licked the paper. His left eye was a swollen red mess.

I rushed over and came to my knees at his feet, fingers probing the old man for further damage. "What happened? Are you well?" I was shaking him now, on the verge of tears. He put down the cigarette and took my head between his palms. His good eye softened. The warmth of his hands was reassuring in the crisp cold of the early morning and I felt myself relax against my will. He held me for a few more moments without uttering a word.

When he finally spoke, it was with measured calm. He'd sensed my fragile state; I'm sure, and acted accordingly. "I'm fine and Benjamin is too, praise God," he said, picking up the cigarette once more. "Ismail came last night looking for him. He had men and gasoline and Sabah. Youssef had left not long after you did. When I saw the pickup truck with the men in the back I ran to wake Benjamin and he took my rowboat. The night hid him well. Then I went out back to stall Ismail. And then..."

He trailed off, gesturing to his eye. He lit his cigarette and I pulled one from the pack in my pocket. I took a seat on the rough stone beside his chair and we took it all in; Youssef lost in anguish, the policemen crawling over the scene like fruit flies, the black hole that was the houseboat collapsing in on itself.

I thought of Benjamin, miles away by now. He wasn't safe, far from it. The Brotherhood *were* the city; they embodied its density and the hive-mind of its underground. I had no doubt that if Benjamin was foolish enough to linger in the streets, they would find him and do unspeakable things to him. A futile yearning tugged at me, that perhaps Ismail would come around and renounce his ways. Come out in a grand way to his twisted brethren and denounce them as zealots and gangsters. That Benjamin would make an escape of Bondesque proportions and row past the Horn of Africa to Brazil. Row and row and row until his muscles bulged and his damningly pale skin was slow-roasted to a comforting brown. Impossible dreams. Dreams of a child huddled by his father's wicker chair.

I got a text then, from Omar. I hadn't seen him since the events of the night before. It was short and devoid of unnecessary prose. *I'm so sorry, I just heard, it said, but I cannot be a part of this any longer. My faith will not protect me if I fraternize with infidels and friends of Zionists. I am sorry and take care. Please delete this number.*

I didn't reply. I couldn't. I regretted, then, not paying more attention to Omar's absences. I had no doubt that deep down, there was not a shred of maliciousness in his soul but I had become too wrapped up in Sabah, in Tahrir to dispel the nothings whispered in his ear. I had neglected him and I had lost him, and I could only hope he stayed clear of trouble.

Youssef joined us not long after and we sat for hours. The policemen came and asked their muted questions, a faint buzzing in my ear. Yes sir no sir yes sir no sir. Youssef had come better prepared and paid the appropriate bribes to avoid further harassment. Amm Attia made us some tea, without mint this time. The flames sputtered and died and the coals burned low.

Ahmed Khalifa is an Egyptian student at Columbia University and graduating soon. He hopes this whole writing thing will work out.

# House of Refuge

## *Michael DiBaggio*

This second place-winning story is a tour-de-force set in a rich, imaginative near future of seasteads, anarchic international agencies, and high-seas adventure.

It was four o'clock in the morning when the electronic chime of the boat gong jolted Justin Agnarsson from his hard-won sleep. He blinked blearily at the flashing blue light on the overhead, wondering where and when he was and why he should not just roll over and go back to sleep. The scent of saltwater and the gentle pitching of his bed reminded him that he was on duty, and as stationkeeper he always would be. He slung himself off the mattress and began the mechanical motions of dressing while he watched the small monitor atop his bureau. The video feed from the well dock showed him the cause of the disturbance: a long hulled RHIB run up on the ramp and two stumbling figures in orange rain slicks tying a mooring line. A quick glance at the meteorological panel reported only light rain, a westerly wind of 17 knots and a wave height of only three feet.

'Hardly shipwreck weather,' he thought. He checked a second monitor for distress beacons, but there were none. It had been almost a month since anyone drifted to the refuge in need of assistance, and had it been the middle of the afternoon instead of the middle of the night, Agnarsson would have assumed it was a couple of old salts come aboard to share part of their catch and spin a yarn, and he'd have been grateful for the visit. At this hour, he had no idea what to expect. Out of habit, he took his sidearm off the bureau and holstered it, then finished dressing and ducked out the watertight hatch.

At the station store, he retrieved a medical kit, a gallon of fresh water, and a couple of thermal blankets. "Ahoy, lifeboat. How many souls aboard?" he called into the wall intercom.

He overheard muttering, snippets of a conversation in Spanish. Belatedly the answer came, a man's voice, hoarse and tight. "*Dos.*"

He frowned. That lifeboat was easily big enough to hold a dozen people. When asked in his own inexpert Spanish if they carried any

fatalities, the reply was negative.

Agnarsson climbed down two ladders to the well deck, eyeing the two bodies huddled against the bulkhead. There was a man, tall but stooped, with his arm draped across the back of a younger girl, who hugged her knees and stared sullenly out to sea. Agnarsson guessed that she was 15 or 16 years old. He could hear their hushed whispers punctuated by bursts of sobbing.

He crouched beside them, handing them the blankets and water. “Are either of you injured? Where are you from?”

They shook their heads to the first question and provided no ready answer to the second.

“Should I expect more boats?”

“Just us,” said the man. He was stout and barrel-chested, with a thick red beard and the deep tan of a mariner. Agnarsson judged that he was at least a decade his senior.

“Where did you come from?” the stationkeeper repeated.

“Our home. It burned,” the man answered haltingly.

“I’m sorry,” Agnarsson said blandly. These little tragedies happened often enough that his condolences began to sound rote; it was a hard life living on the sea, and seastead fires were especially common.

“Well, we have food, clothing, and bunks above deck. I’ll try to make you as comfortable as I can until we can get you to land or another vessel. Do you...” He hesitated. He was about to ask if their seastead was insured. There was no question about helping people adrift on the sea, no matter where they came from or what their financial condition was, of course, but houses of refuge like this one didn’t run on good feelings alone. Whatever the answer was, it could wait, he decided.

“Do you have any family or friends I can get in touch with? On shore or at sea?” he asked.

The other man’s glazed eyes flicked over him, stared through him. The girl wept.

Agnarsson nodded stiffly, brushed his hand through his short blond hair. “Let’s get something warm into your bellies, then I’ll show you to your quarters. You can get changed and take a hot shower, whatever you need to do.”

“Thank you, sir,” the man said. Careworn lines around his eyes deepened as he asked, “Have you radioed about us yet?”



“Uh, no, not as yet. You caught me out of a dead sleep,” Agnarsson answered apologetically. “We’re supposed to have a crew of four, but right now this is a one-man operation.”

The castaway seemed encouraged by this news. “Please, sir, I have to speak with you before you make that report. It’s essential. Absolutely essential!”

Surprised by the man’s insistence, Agnarsson found himself nodding. “Very well. The report can wait until after breakfast.”

Agnarsson led his two guests into the galley and sat them down. As he rooted through the pantry, he wondered what the story would be, and whether he’d be offered a bribe for forgetting to make a report. Probably they did not have insurance and didn’t want to be hit with the bill for rescue. Or maybe they were smugglers, attacked by a rival crew, and they didn’t want any word of their survival getting out. Heaven knew there were enough smugglers and privateering operations in the 350-mile-long flotilla of seasteads and platforms known as the Plata Raft, a trade of misery and desperation fueled by the Brazilian-Argentine War. The grim situation ashore suggested other possibilities as well: maybe there was no seastead at all, and they were refugees or even escapees from a prison camp. Maybe they had escaped from the illicit traffic in human beings that still plied these waters. Agnarsson’s employer, Atlantic Littoral, rendered free assistance to war refugees and escaped slaves, but such people often preferred to keep a low profile, fearful of falling back into the clutches of their oppressors. Whatever the truth, the young stationkeeper prepared himself for a grim story. He brewed some coffee and loaded eggs, bacon, and instant potatoes into the AutoChef and returned to the table.

“Let me welcome you to South Atlantic House of Refuge Number 49, or Sweet Surcease, as we call her.” Mounted on the wall behind them there was an ancient piece of driftwood with that name burned into it, the work of the station’s first keeper more than twenty years ago. “My name is Justin Agnarsson. No need to stand on formality, just call me Justin if you like.”

“Thank you, sir. We are very grateful.” The man extended a calloused hand across the table. Agnarsson noticed that it trembled. “My name is Horacio Vietes. This is my daughter, Sandra.”

The dark-haired young woman stared unblinkingly at the floor and pulled tight the blanket wrapped around her, but said nothing.

“You wanted to speak with me before I made my report.”

Horacio Vietes hesitated, folding his hands and pressing them to his lips. At length, he replied with a question. “Is there any way you can see not to report this?”

The stationkeeper arched his brow as if in surprise, though he expected the request. “That would be highly irregular. I’m required to report all arrivals and all disasters at sea. Surely there are people who want to know that you and your daughter are alive?”

“That, sir, is the problem,” said Horacio. “I will be forthright, and leave the decision to your judgment. We were attacked by an Argentine warship. They boarded us without warning, and when I challenged them, they shot at us. My wife—” His voice grew strained again, and began to crack.

Agnarsson winced. There was no doubt what the man was about to say.

“My wife, and my little boy, were gunned down,” he ground out.

“On what cause were you boarded?”

“You will have to ask them,” he snapped, and his red eyes darted angrily. “I left Argentina fifteen years ago. We are not citizens, our home was not under its flag.”

“You moored in territorial waters?” Agnarsson asked.

“No. In the Raft, just as we are now.”

Agnarsson knew that both sides had made threats of interdicting vessels and seasteads in international waters, but this was the first he’d heard of any such action. If true, it was a dramatic escalation of the war. The Plata Raft, like all other high seas traffic, was guaranteed freedom from interference, and there were a lot of other flags flying on those vessels, flags of clades and states alike that would not quietly accept such aggression. It would risk the entry of other parties into the war, a war that was already going against the Argentines. There was only one reason that Agnarsson could think of for them to risk it.

“Mr. Vietes, I have to ask you something in my official capacity as an officer of Atlantic Littoral, and I expect an honest reply. But first, let me assure you that, no matter how you answer, you and your daughter are in no danger of being turned over to the Argentine navy. Houses of refuge are

inviolable under the terms of the Treaty of Tokyo, as well as the Common Accords on Mediation, Extradition, Restitution, and Arbitration. As a matter of policy, Atlantic Littoral does not turn over the custody refugees or survivors at sea to hostile parties. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“Were you knowingly involved in piracy or privateering against Argentina, or smuggling of contraband?”

“Sir, you speak of treaties and the CAMERA accords, but they are just pieces of paper. What word do you give me man to man?”

Agnarsson straightened in his chair. “On my honor, I swear that I will live up to those terms, or else die failing to live up to them.”

Horacio gave a slow nod. “Yes. I helped deliver weapons and fuel to the Coloradan rebels. But my family had no part in it.”

“Your family had every part of it,” Sandra snarled. Her father shot her a sharp glance, but she didn’t heed it.

“I am proud to have aided the *Colorados*. We have nothing to feel guilty for. The *Reconstructos* weren’t satisfied just to murder grandfather and your brothers on land, they had to butcher Mama and Pedro, too. They are the guilty ones!”

“Be silent right now!”

“No!” She turned her fierce gaze on Agnarsson and spoke bitterly. “I don’t care if you call us pirates or smugglers. Unless they kill me first, I will do it all over again. And again, and again, until all the *Reconstructo* filth is washed from the earth! I will fight them with my last breath, and then may I die with my hands around their throats!”

Agnarsson would have been dismayed to hear those words from a grown man, much less an innocent in the early bloom of womanhood. He pitied her transformation almost as much as he pitied the loss of her family. Here was one of the tragedies of war that too often went unremarked, the outrages that transform the innocent into monsters and poison whole generations with hate.

“I am sorry for my daughter’s outburst. I implore you to forget her words.”

“I will not forget them,” said Sandra.

“I am sorry for all that happened to you. Regardless of anything else, firing on a woman and a child in their home is unconscionable,” Agnarsson said. “I must make my report, but I won’t mention anything you just told

me. Not yet, anyway. For now I'll report you as war refugees. That way you'll have some help finding a place to live. Until then, you'll be safe here."

"Please! If you do, they will know where we are. They will come for us!"

"I doubt it. The whole world would come down on them." The AutoChef buzzed, and Agnarsson stood up. "Try to eat something if you can, and then rest. You'll be safe here."

\* \* \*

Agnarsson stood alone on the uppermost deck of the observation tower, scanning the frothy green surface of the Argentine Sea through binoculars. Having emptied its burden on the ocean, the wall of east-moving clouds had desaturated to a light, vaporous gray and begun to break up, allowing the passage of the first direct rays of morning. To the west, the flood lamps on the shadowy bulks of scattered seasteads began to wink out and the masts of more distant vessels became visible for the first time without aid of their navigational lights.

He had dispatched his morning report about twenty five minutes ago, received the reply and standby instruction twenty two minutes ago, and received an electronic query from the Argentine warship *Furibundo* fifteen minutes ago. The message informed him of "coastal security" operations conducted the previous night, and the pursuit of two known illicit weapon traffickers and unlawful combatants, listing Horacio and Sandra Vietes by name, and might these not be the same alleged refugees? Agnarsson dutifully left it unanswered. But now he was being hailed on the ship-to-ship radio. The stationkeeper considered leaving the hail unanswered as well, but he wasn't going to allow them any excuse to "render assistance."

"Atlantic Littoral Refuge 49, go ahead *Furibundo*," he replied in English, hoping that would lend some difficulty to the affair. There was a delay, but he eventually received a reply in the most obsequious English.

"Refuge 49, have sent you electronic bulletin warning of known, dangerous war criminals. Can you please offer confirmation? We are prepared to render assistance, over."

Agnarsson's smile was tight and rueful. "Received bulletin. No assistance necessary. My compliments to your captain and the Argentine Navy for its responsible stewardship of the seas. Refuge 49, out."

Agnarsson wasn't worried. He expected the Argentines to inquire; in fact, he expected them to pester him for much of the day. This was his first assignment as a Stationkeeper, but he had seen similar scenarios play out when he was an ALERT man, and he had been told what to expect by veteran stationkeepers who had gone through the same rigmarole a dozen times in their lives. What he didn't expect, what was nearly unthinkable, was that the Argentines might try to force the issue. To violate a house of refuge was a grave crime under both treaties and customary law. It was an act of piracy, rendering one a *hostis humani generis*—an enemy of humanity—and inviting the most severe retribution that no flag or writ would shield one from. In the 29 years Agnarsson had lived, no life saving ship or station had been attacked by any state or Clade anywhere on earth.

The stationkeeper's more immediate worry was Sandra. Her reaction reminded Agnarsson of his late father, who had fought against California in the Pan-American War. Justin, the youngest of four siblings, was born after the war, and he never knew his father before the nightmares, before the periods of depression punctuated by episodes of drunkenness and spasmodic violence, but his mother did, and she knew a very different man than the one that came back from the Klamath front. She used to tell Justin stories of the old days, of his father's easygoing nature and the unassuming gentleness that won her love. That was before the bitterness at the horrors he'd witnessed—and maybe, Justin dared to think, the horrors he'd committed—ate him alive. Sandra's tirade could have been quoted from Justin's father, right down to the line about wiping their filth from the earth. It even shared the same uncaring—even welcome—recognition that those impulses were self-destructive.

Sandra's words and her rage-contorted face burned in his mind, haunting him like his father's ghost. It was enough of a tragedy for tough men like Horacio and his own father to live with such a burden, but it was intolerable to think of a young woman shouldering that weight. Sandra deserved to finish growing up in a place free from the hate-fueling fear and dehumanizing impulses of war, and, with time, mend her heartbreak. If she could be gotten out of the war, then maybe the war could be gotten out of her.

He had hope for that. Clade Britannia had already taken on refugees from the war, treated them with decency and dignity in Avonshire and St. Helena. They might be willing to take some more. That arrangement could have additional benefits, namely that her father might never see prosecution; the Crown-in-exile had no love for Argentina since the botched blockade of the Falklands last year.

Agnarsson turned around at the sound of footsteps. It was Sandra. She had pulled her wet hair back in a ponytail and was dressed in one of the station's coveralls, too big for her in every dimension. She stepped off the ladder and stood stiffly, her lips pursed. "My father told me to apologize to you," she eventually said, and in crisp English.

Agnarsson realized she wasn't actually going to offer that apology, so he interceded. "I don't know what for."

"Neither do I."

The stationkeeper smiled. "You speak English well, better than I speak Spanish."

"My mother insisted." Her voice took on a hard edge. All her grief had hardened into wrath.

"It was good that she did," he said. "We've settled some refugees on the Isle of Avonshire, far north of here. They speak English there."

"I know where it is," she said. "But we're not refugees. We're smugglers and rebels."

Agnarsson grew annoyed. "That's not your determination to make."

"Whose is it?"

"Mine!"

Suddenly, the ship-to-ship radio crackled again. It was *Furibundo*. Agnarsson held up his hand for silence and took the radio handset.

"Station 49, Corvette Captain Larrea requests the pleasure of your presence for supper. He would consider it a great honor to dine with you. If your duties do not allow you to leave your station, he and a small complement of officers might visit your station, food and preparations compliments of the Argentine Navy."

'Death by courtesy,' Agnarsson thought and almost laughed, only restraining himself for the sake of the young woman that stood behind him. "Please extend my thanks to Captain Larrea and your crew, but I must regretfully decline. I am ill and contagious with little appetite. Influenza, I think. Another time, perhaps."

The Argentine reply was immediate and a little too enthusiastic. “We can send the ship’s doctor to you right away.”

“Many thanks again, *Furibundo*, but that will not be necessary. I must attend to my duties now, Station 49 out.”

Agnarsson replaced the handset and turned to Sandra, eager to reassure her. “This is just a little game they’re playing. They won’t come.”

But the girl did not seem in need of reassuring. Her voice was an intense whisper. “You should have accepted. Let me set the table. I would slit Captain Larrea’s throat with one of your shiny bread knives.”

He glowered at her. “You shouldn’t be contemplating slitting any throats, especially not with a bread knife.”

“You side with a murderer,” Sandra said coldly.

Her words and the look of contempt that burned in her eyes left him stunned and angry.

“You’re a stupid child. If I did, you wouldn’t be here insulting me.”

“And you are a coward! If you weren’t, you would have joined the navy and gone to fight your country’s enemies instead of making beds for drunk fishermen!”

“Just like Captain Larrea did?”

The girl flinched, stunned into open-mouthed silence. Her hard expression softened and shame crept into her eyes, but she’d gone too far to elicit any sympathy from Agnarsson.

“See yourself below deck,” he growled. “I have beds to make.”

\* \* \*

The drone could not be seen, but its buzzing was audible. As the morning wore on, it had gone from overflying the station at low altitudes to hovering in place, hidden somewhere above the light cloud cover. Agnarsson wound up the pressure hose he’d been scaling the deck with and looked over his shoulder at Horacio Vietes. “I wish you’d stay inside. It may be safer.”

“Safe?” Horacio coughed as he discarded his cigarette into the water. “How? You said they already knew we were here.”

“I said that they think you’re here,” Agnarsson corrected him. “And if that drone gets a good look at you, they’ll know for sure. If they have a

submarine drone with a good microphone, they already know because you keep bringing it up.”

Horacio’s voice dropped to a whisper. “They will not give up.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. You and your daughter will be flying north by this time tomorrow.”

“What will stop them from shooting us down?”

Agnarsson looked at him sharply. He was aggravated at having to repeat his reassurances, especially because he was starting to get unnerved himself. The Argentine corvette hadn’t steamed off. *Furibundo*. The longer he saw her circling them, silhouetted against the horizon, the more portentous that name seemed.

“I thought we were safe in my seastead as well, a hundred miles off the coast. That demon has no limits. I wish you had not sent that report. Why couldn’t you have waited a few more hours, or a day?”

Agnarsson sighed.

‘I probably should have,’ he thought. ‘No, don’t start down that road. They’re trying to make you sweat, but you can’t allow it. And what good does it do to worry about it anyway?’ He could not, would not, hand over the Vieteses no matter what.

“I’m going to check if there’s any word from Atlantic Littoral on your pickup. Please go back inside. Eat something, read a book, watch TV. Do anything but worry about this.”

Inside, Agnarsson found what he’d hoped for. There was a communique from Avonshire granting his request for a refugee transfer. A floatplane was to be dispatched tomorrow. For the first time in several hours, he felt optimistic.

Then the ship-to-ship whistled. He was being hailed again.

“Attention Atlantic Littoral Refuge Number 49, this is the *ARA Furibundo*. The two people you are harboring as war refugees are known unlawful combatants engaged in a state of war against the Argentine Republic. By warrant of the President of Argentina, we are charged with taking them into custody and expect your cooperation in accord with the law of civilized nations.”

With one taut movement, Agnarsson grabbed the radio handset and pulled it to his lips. His thumb shook with nervous energy on the transmitter button, sending dead air across the wire. He fought to steady his voice. “This is a house of refuge, and may not be subjected to threats or violence



—in accord with the law of all civilized nations. I am the custodian of war refugees and I am neither empowered to, nor am I willing, to surrender them to a belligerent.”

“Harboring pirates and terrorists is a violation of the law, as well as a breach of trust of a house of refuge. We insist that you surrender these pirates without further delay. If you refuse, you force us to take action to retrieve them.”

It was madness. ‘The whole world will come down on them,’ he thought again, only to realize that it didn’t matter if they did, because by then he and all that was left of the Vietes family would be dead. Agnarsson felt nauseous. He had been so confident, but Horacio was right after all. They had no limits.

“Refuge 49, what are your intentions?” the voice on the radio demanded.

There was only one answer he could give to that. “Go to Hell, *Furibundo*.”

Agnarsson activated the station’s automated defensive systems: two radar-guided 30mm autocannons and a single deuterium-fluoride laser. Both systems were for point defense against small boats and missiles—useless against *Furibundo* unless it blundered in much closer than she needed to, but certainly useful against a boarding party—or the damned drone that had been buzzing the refuge.

‘Assuming that any of them work,’ he thought. Both systems were as old as the station; while regular maintenance was done on them, neither had been test fired in years. Realistically, it wouldn’t matter. He could not fight off the corvette with the paltry self-defense systems on the refuge. What he needed was outside help.

Luckily stationkeepers wielded a formula for such an unlikely contingency, an incantation against harm crafted by lawyers and diplomats. Agnarsson chanted it on the long-range radio, and it went like this: “Mayday, mayday. This is South Atlantic House of Refuge 49, requesting immediate assistance against rogue Argentine naval vessel *Furibundo*. My position is 38 degrees, two minutes, 1 second South, 54 degrees, 37 minutes, 31 seconds West. By my authority as Stationkeeper of an international life saving installation, I hereby issue a general Letter of Marque for the defense of this station against any and all who threaten it.”

He repeated the distress call in Spanish and French, and set it to cycle continuously.

“Chew on that, Captain Larrea,” Agnarsson said to himself. He desperately wanted to believe that he had just called their bluff, that the transmission would force the captain to withdraw. The next message from the ship-to-ship shattered that fantasy.

“Refuge 49, disarm your weapons and prepare to be boarded.”

\* \* \*

“You’ve killed us!” Horacio’s voice was so taut it became shrill. His big frame trembled with anger and fear.

Agnarsson said nothing. He charged the bolt on the CR-10 rifle and rechecked the safety. He wondered if Vietes would shoot him if he handed the gun over to him.

The three of them were gathered in the ‘storm cellar’, a watertight keep in the center of the station, partially beneath the waterline. Behind its armored bulkheads and hermetically sealed hatches were the armory, sick bay, the emergency stores, and a secondary command center from which the refuge’s sensors, radios, and weapons could all be controlled. It could be steered from here as well, though that was of no use now. The refuge, unlike many seasteads, had its own engines, but she moved with all the grace and speed of a pregnant cow; outrunning the swift hydrofoil that menaced them was impossible.

“You killed us!” Horacio repeated. “You locked us in here to die! God damn me! We should have left in the lifeboat!” He appealed to his daughter, his eyes red and filled with tears. “Forgive your father for being so stupid and reckless.”

“You wouldn’t have gotten far ,” Agnarsson said. “Their drones would have picked you off as soon as you left the well dock.”

Horacio punched the wall and roared. “What difference does it make? They will come here and kill us!”

“That remains to be seen.” Agnarsson tried to reflect calm, but his patience and his courage were fraying.

“They will just shell us. They’ll sink the whole refuge,” Sandra said. Her voice and her manner were disturbingly calm.

“If they do there’s nothing we can do about it.” He slung his rifle and turned his attention back to the arsenal, loading a drum of three-inch flechette shells into an automatic shotgun. “But if they were going to do that, I think we’d be dead already.”

Agnarsson tossed a flak jacket and a helmet to each of them. “Put them on and keep them on,” he ordered, then turned to Sandra. “Have you fired a gun before?”

Her eyes glinted. “Yes.”

He thrust the shotgun into her chest. She grunted as she tucked it under her shoulder. “It’s heavy.”

“Yes, well it’s not a bread knife,” Agnarsson said. He moved behind her, pulled the strap across her body and adjusted it so that it bore most of the weight of the weapon. He told her how to brace it and where best to aim. All day long he had schemed to remove the girl from a world of murder and mayhem and now he armed and instructed her on how best to kill other men. The irony wasn’t lost on him, but scruples and idealism wouldn’t save her life now.

Her father looked on at the scene in wonder. “My daughter is no soldier,” he said.

Agnarsson glared at him. ‘Only now you realize it.’ He wanted to give voice to that thought, but the words caught in his throat. He knew that his judgment wasn’t fair, that wars had a way of dragging people in, even those who tried mightily to avoid it, but still he held Horacio Vietes responsible for his family’s peril.

“Hail the ship,” Horacio said, almost at a whisper. He licked his dry lips. “Hail the ship. Tell them that I will surrender. Just spare my daughter.”

“Papa, no!”

“They’ll execute you summarily,” said Agnarsson.

“But my daughter will live. And you.” Horacio sagged visibly. “I have already brought death to too many.”

“That’s out of the question. Out of the question!” Agnarsson yelled, suddenly ashamed of his resentment for the man.

“For God’s sake, what other choice is there?”

Now it was Agnarsson that punched the wall. He turned round fiercely, pointing at Horacio as blood dripped from his split knuckles. “This isn’t just about the here and now! It’s about every man, woman, and child who will ever set foot on a refuge, every innocent huddled in a camp or hiding in

their home! This is about civilization itself. I won't give that away, not in the face of all the bombs and guns on the planet! Because if I do, it won't stop here. There won't be any stopping it, anywhere."

He pushed past Horacio, making for the radio in the command center. He should have had it on already, been listening for messages from Atlantic Littoral or any ships that might come to help. He blew a thick layer of dust off the buttons of the long-neglected console and tuned the receiver to the emergency channel. The loud thrumming and screeching from the speakers startled him, and he switched it off with a groan.

"Is it broken?" Sandra asked. She had come up behind him silently, watching him with other words in mind than what she spoke.

"They're jamming us. They're drowning out the distress call."

"Someone would have heard it already," she suggested.

"Yes," he said stiffly. "Yes, they might've."

"You are not a coward, Justin," Sandra said. "It was despicable of me to say so. Everyone who lives on the sea is grateful for lifesavers like you. You are very courageous, and I am sorry for thinking otherwise."

Agnarsson unslung the rifle and flopped backwards into the chair. He looked over his shoulder at Sandra; she looked absurd in the bulky body armor, cuddling the shotgun.

Sandra walked over beside him. "What now? Do we just wait?"

Agnarsson cocked his head. "What else is there?"

"You're from North America, I think," she suddenly said.

He answered slowly, as if he had to work to stir up the memory. "Cascadia. I was born in a place called Cowichan, on Vancouver Island."

"Did you like it?"

He nodded. "Very much."

"Of course you would. North America is free," she mused. "You can go anywhere. And you can say what you want, and buy and sell what you want. You can make a living without anyone's permission."

"Not everywhere."

"But for the most part. There are governments, but they are small and weak. No standing armies, no secret police. For the most part."

"For the most part, that's true."

"You can't know what it's like here. We weren't so lucky last century. The invaders didn't make it this far, there was no one to burn our capitols and break our shackles. That's what the *Colorados* fight for."

“Convincing me of your politics isn’t going to help us any, Sandra.”

She shrugged. “I’m not trying to convince you. You already know it. You know what things are good and worth dying for.”

“I also know that there are things worth living for,” he answered swiftly. “And I wish you weren’t so eager to die. Or to kill.”

An electronic warning tone sounded. Agnarsson swiveled to the tactical console, saw the radar screen flashing, and then several things happened almost simultaneously. The walls vibrated, shaken by the full-throated roar of the 30mm gun on the deck above them, and then a deafening report rang through the hull, rocking the refuge violently. The camera feed and radar from the deck gun went black.

“They’re shelling us!” Horacio shouted. He ran to shield his daughter and she clung to him.

“No,” Agnarsson hissed. “It’s that damned drone! It took out the gun.”

Suddenly defense laser control toned and a synthesized voice blared: “Engaging target. Engaging target. Engaging- Contact lost.” Short seconds later the station was jolted again, though this blow was much weaker than the first.

“What happened?” Sandra yelled over the commotion. Agnarsson couldn’t answer. All he could see was that the camera feed on the south end of the observation tower had gone dead, while the one facing to the west showed movement: two gray shadows bouncing on the waves, long frothy wakes stretching out behind them.

“The boats are coming,” he said.

\* \* \*

It took more than an hour for the Argentine boarding parties to land and sweep the upper decks of the refuge, and Agnarsson, who watched most of it on camera, found their pace agonizing. They moved painstakingly through every corridor and compartment, turning over beds and tables and ransacking closets. He watched impotently as they set demolition charges on the remaining autocannon turret and rolled grenades into the lifeboats, but not once did they destroy one of the cameras. Whether it was an oversight or done with intent to demoralize the survivors,

he couldn't know, but more than once he saw marines look into the cameras through the eyeslits of their knitted face masks.

And now, at last, the Argentines were at the door. Their time had run out and no one had come to the rescue.

Agnarsson withdrew toward the rear of the room, knelt behind the blockade of heavy cabinets and bunks that they'd turned over for cover and to deflect grenades. He spared a glance back at Horacio and Sandra Vietes, watched their lips move with whispered prayers. Horacio squeezed his daughter's hand and then took up his rifle, kissed her on the forehead, and stepped toward the blockade.

"Stay behind me," Agnarsson said. "Stay with your daughter."

Horacio's eyes did not move from the armored door, which rang with the incessant banging of hammers and grinding of metal. The muffled voices of the Argentines could be heard through the door calling for explosives. "It should be me up front," he said. "I set this in motion."

Agnarsson shook his head gently, patted him on the shoulder. The other man relented and took up his rifle in the corner of the room, his body shielding his daughter.

"They're going to blow the hatch. It's going to be loud, but don't panic." Agnarsson told them. "The second you see an arm or a leg through the breach, shoot it. Remember, they're going to have to come through a small opening one or two at a time, so we have the advantage. We don't need to run around, just stay low and stay behind cover. Sandra? There's no choke on that gun, so for God's sake don't fire from directly behind me, or you'll cut me to shreds."

Sandra nodded, then quickly turned to her father. "I love you, Papa. I'm not afraid."

Those were the last words Agnarsson heard before the world filled with smoke and thunder. The blast wave hit so hard that for a moment of stupefying fear he thought he'd taken a bullet in the chest. But he was still kneeling, still breathing, and his finger squeezed the trigger even before his conscious mind recognized the mass emerging from the smoke and dust as a human body. The body rocked backwards, lost its footing, and fell back through the ragged metal hole in the door that had just become visible. Another body came into view and he fired again.

Bodies. That's how he thought of them as he watched them fall: they were not living men, not the fragile vessels of human souls. At best they

were actors in a play, and the crescendo of gunfire was the orchestra. The rifle at his shoulder was his violin, and each fret of the trigger the signal for another body to drop over. The drums rolled staccato behind and in front of him, the muzzle blasts and the tanging whip-crack of bullets cutting through the air, breaking and ricocheting off the walls. A hand grenade skipped off the cratered floor, bounced back from the barricade and exploded, the crash of cymbals, and then the orchestra went quiet.

No, it went on playing, only he couldn't hear it anymore. He felt the beat go on in his chest, in his vibrating skull. He could taste metal, felt hot blood running down his cheek. He was on his back. He rolled onto his knees, grabbed the rifle and tried to steady his arms enough to swing it into position. There was a short pile of bodies at the breach. Limbs thrust out from behind cover, dragging one of the fallen back through the door. Another grenade rolled in and this time Agnarsson threw himself to the deck. The blast slammed the cabinet back into his side and the metal bit into his arm.

Behind him he saw Horacio and Sandra flattening themselves against the bulkhead as bullets cratered all around them. They were still firing when suddenly Horacio spun like a top and flopped face down onto the deck. Agnarsson groped for his rifle, brought it back to his shoulder and peeked over the rim of the barricade, but he could no longer see the blown open hatch or the stack of bodies. There was smoke everywhere, smoke that seared his throat and made him clamp his eyes shut in pain. He tried to slow his breathing, but he kept gagging. He rolled to his feet to get away from the suffocating cloud but crashed on his side almost instantly. The pain in his right leg was so excruciating that it felt surreal, like it had disconnected his mind from his body; his own scream sounded distant through his burst eardrums. The world spun away vertiginously and he screamed no more.

\* \* \*

The first time Agnarsson awoke, he was gasping for air, and every breath made him want to vomit. His mouth and throat burned unbelievably. Someone in black boots and camouflage fatigues leaned over him. He realized dimly that the man was tying a tourniquet around his leg. The man

moved to push Agnarsson down, but he had already flopped back onto the deck. There was no strength left in him, and he passed out again.

When he awoke the second time, he was in the open air, staring up at the sky and the strange sight of an aircraft's empennage jutting from a ruined wall. It took him a little while to realize that he was on the deck of the refuge, staring up at the observation tower. He was baffled by what he saw until he remembered the drone and the second crash; the laser must have shot it down.

Agnarsson turned his head and looked around. The deck was strewn with rubble and a lot of men with submachine guns and shotguns stood around him. He was on a litter, and his wrists were tightly bound behind the small of his back. Above his knee, his right leg was in agony, but below it, he felt nothing. There was no sign of Sandra or her father. He moaned in pain.

"He's awake!" someone said above him, in Spanish. Another man quickly strode over, cuffed him on the side of his head. "It's all over for you now."

The stationkeeper laid back, kept quiet, and tried not to think. He wished he could pass out again, but he found himself eavesdropping on the conversations of his captors. His ears still rang, and it was hard to hear them distinctly, but he heard a woman's voice. Her words were every bit as harsh and contemptuous as the men around her. Sandra was still alive. His heart could have burst with joy.

'Still alive,' he thought, 'but for how much longer?'

He laid there for what seemed like a very long time until the blaring of a loud horn drew his attention. Gradually, the sleek hull of the Argentine corvette powered into view, not more than 300 yards off the refuge's port side. At first he thought it was coming alongside to expedite the transfer of the boats, but it didn't stop; it accelerated. The marines on deck made a lot of commotion, some asking aloud what was happening, others swearing nervously.

Agnarsson watched, mystified, as a canister rocketed high and straight from *Furibundo's* deck. It exploded into a cloud of glittering smoke. It was chaff: metallic debris meant to confuse radar, and it could mean only one thing.

The horn was blowing again, and over the din Agnarsson could hear the ringing of the ship's collision alarm. The ship rose out of the water,



elevated on the skids of its hydrofoils, the sea churning madly under her hull. Suddenly there was a keening whistle overhead, and all the marines that surrounded him threw themselves to the decks, leaving him an unobstructed view as a volley of flaming darts slammed into *Furibundo*. The missiles struck her amidships, right at the funnel, and that whole part of the superstructure disappeared in a rising ball of fire. When the corvette's hull slammed back into the water, she broke in half. The section forward of the impact kept on moving ahead for a little while before it heeled over, but the aft end reared out of the water until it was almost perpendicular to the surface, and then in another heartbeat it disappeared.

Agnarsson couldn't believe it, and judging by the torrent of expletives that went up from the Argentine marines and sailors on the refuge, neither could anyone else. One of them actually turned to him, his hands folded over the top of his head and his face a mask of confusion and horror. "What the hell just happened?" he asked.

Not ten minutes later the man received his answer as a dark shadow swept over the deck of the refuge. Agnarsson squinted up, instantly recognizing the blue on white color scheme of the zeppelin and the ensign of the Aviation Bond Corporation. Through a loudspeaker, voices in English and Spanish commanded: "Attention Argentine sailors, this is the *MB Etheridge*. Throw your weapons over the side and lie face down on the deck, or you will be fired upon!"

Someone had come to the rescue after all.

\* \* \*

Agnarsson laid a flower beneath the white concrete cross engraved with the name of Horacio Vietes, then turned his gaze down the green hillock toward the gray, stormy waters of Autumnfrost Harbor. "I'm sorry he didn't get to see Avonshire," he said.

"He wouldn't have liked it here. He never liked living on land," Sandra said. "We buried him at sea. Some anonymous person paid for the marker to be put up here. For the rest of my family, too." She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. Agnarsson said nothing.

"Whoever it was," she went on, "I'm glad for it. It makes me feel like they're not so far away."

“That’s good,” he said. “You should stay here, then. Keep them close.”

Sandra Vietes laughed as she pushed the wheelchair back to the paved pathway. “You’re relentless, Justin. Don’t think I didn’t notice you haunting my steps from afar. Everyone is very concerned to keep me from going back to the Raft. Even Lady Samantha checked in on me.”

“You can’t fault me for that. I’m just a crippled stationkeeper, not the class of person that hobnobs with the Marchioness of Avonshire.”

“Except that she’s hosting a dinner in your honor tonight, of course.”

“Aristocrats will make any excuse for a soiree,” he said dryly.

They continued along the path, eventually coming to a spot where the soft turf ended abruptly in a wide, rocky promontory that jutted into the South Atlantic. The pair was silent for a long while, watching the ships motor in while farther off bolts of lightning streaked from cloud to cloud.

At last, Sandra spoke. “Well let me finally put you at ease. I’m not going back to the Raft or Argentina. The *Colorados* don’t seem to need me. And I think I owe you.”

Agnarsson reached across his shoulder and clasped his hand over hers. “I’m relieved,” he said.

Sandra set the brakes on the wheelchair and sat down on the margin of the grass, facing him. “And what about you? Are you going back once you’re healed, or is your job done now that you’ve saved civilization—and a stupid child—from the forces of barbarism?”

“Did I really say all that?” He laughed in embarrassment. “Well, I’m sure there’s always a stupid child that needs saving somewhere. But civilization?” The smile faded from his face and he slowly shook his head. “I’m not sure it can be saved.”

Sandra brushed back her blowing hair, met his eyes, and said, “I am.”

Michael is a Catholic voluntaryist who works full-time as a software developer, but his real passion is writing and world-building. Along with his wife, Shell, he is the co-creator of the Ascension Epoch, an open content, collaborative fiction project released under Creative Commons (<http://www.ascensionepoch.cc>). He will shortly be releasing his first novella, “Copper Knights and Granite Men”, and has another full length novel nearing completion. These works, as well as the

“House of Refuge” short story, are all set in the Ascension Epoch shared universe.

# **A Masterpiece of the Literature of Liberty**

## ***Jack McDonald Burnett***

Winning third place in the contest, this artful story is set in the grimy streets of 17th century London.

Since Laws were made for ev'ry Degree,  
To curb Vice in others, as well as me,  
I wonder we han't better Company,  
Upon Tyburn Tree!  
But Gold from Law can take out the Sting;  
And if rich Men like us were to swing,  
'Twou'd thin the Land, such Numbers to string  
Upon Tyburn Tree!

– *James Gay, The Beggar's Opera*

English was not Madame Graveau's first language. "I read your pamphlets hungry—no, thirsty. Thirsty, like you with my gin!" She winked, having practiced it. I think she meant to be coquettish. "I drink them up, hm?" She pursed her lips and let out what was probably a purr. "Am I your best customer?" She made to nudge my arm, but it was a moving target and her elbow got me right in the temple. The pursed lips formed an O and her eyebrows leapt up and the purr became a gasp... it was all rather exhausting. I gestured that no harm had been done.

Mme. Graveau's tavern had settled into a low murmur. It was the early evening after a hanging day. For hours before and after the mid-day event, the excited, intoxicated noise bulged the walls and windows, threatening to burst. Now, the structure sighed with relief. Mme. Graveau's was, happily for Mme. Graveau, located just off Tyburn Square, four times a year the site of a wondrous, absurd carnival that erupted around London's gallows. All the taverns within a furlong's radius of Tyburn were settling into a low murmur. They all smelled like Mme. Graveau's did also, you can be sure: sweat and breath, beer-soaked wood, spent energy.

“Your best customer,” she emphasized. It was true, Mme. Graveau ate up—drank up—my pamphlets describing the last hours of the lives of condemned criminals. Sometimes, it was difficult to imagine. A woman who owned a tavern would be literate enough, in the language of her customers, to read my work. But there was something surprising about Mme. Graveau, in particular, reading. She seemed too... lumpy.

My best customer, perhaps, but there were many to choose. High born, low born, and in-between gobbled up each *Account of the Behaviour, Confession and Dying Words of the Malefactor [Malefactor], Executed at Tyburn on...* (or such) and tittered about it for days amongst themselves. The *Accounts* had something for everybody.

“Confessions! Warnings, for the children!” I raised an eyebrow I hoped Mme. Graveau didn’t see. “Repentance! Humility before our Lord! How these men die, hm? I mean, they *hang*, that’s how they die, but *how* they die.” There was not, as far as I ever discerned, a M. Graveau. “What is in their hearts, their phiz, do they have messy pantaloons?” I tried not to let my face betray my disgust, for Mme. Graveau did not mean *are they wearing trousers appropriate to the occasion?* Luckily, she had been bent toward my ear. But then she straightened. “But you know, hm? You know what the people like. You write it!” Tousling my hair. Exhausting. And I recalled only once mentioning someone’s *messy pantaloons*, and that time it was critical to my *Account*.

I drained my gin, and looked around meaningfully, as if there were somebody else but Mme. Graveau to replenish me. But no, hectoring first, gin later. “But that is what troubles me so.” Leaning in again, closer than before. “I don’t know how you write it. I mean, you write it here, right here in Mme. Graveau’s. I tell everybody that, you know. Every!” Poke. “Body!” Poke. “But *how* you write it, I don’t know.”

She reared back and pounced on her point. “How you do it without *going crazy*. See people die horribly, then describe it in detail—and don’t lose your charm and cheerfulness.” Wink. I assured her that on every day but a hanging day, I had a surfeit of both. She agreed, ostentatiously. Her fingertips brushed my shoulder, she agreed so much. Laughing, she took my cup with her to where the gin was. I exhaled.

Mme. Graveau believed that writing about death should have made me mad, or hollowed me out, somehow. Granted, I had been at it for twelve years, four to eight hanging days a year, average of six men and women

dispatched each time, carry the one, that was... a lot of hanged men and women. But I was not mad, and I was not *hollow*. I had a license—a press license, from the government—not a mandate. If I got too *hollow*, or too anything else, I could go back to writing out sermons, or, worse come to worse, writing for newspapers.

I bent over paper with a pen I hadn't inked, and looked busy. My cup returned, full of gin again. Mme. Graveau smiled, and retreated. Paying for my gin stunted my creativity, you see. I ran a tab until my published *Accounts* hit the streets. Then, I was flush with cash. By the next hanging day, I was usually whatever the opposite of *flush* is. *Blanched*?

I had not gone mad, as I say, but it may sound like it when I confess: For the first ten, eleven years, I *enjoyed* the stories I was telling. The Popish Plot, the regicides, Grandees, Fifth Monarchists, Millenarianists, Jesuits... There was always a good story to tell about a swinging Jesuit, dreary as you might think them. Educated relentlessly, better read and better spoken than any five Aldermen put together. I was born in the chaotic middle of the seventeenth century of our Saviour's reign on Earth, so unfortunately, I was in school when Charlie was cleaning the place up after his Restoration. But he and his still gave me plenty to do.

To go with good stories, there was a setting out of a writer's dream. Nothing was more sensational than the execution of a traitor. No troupe could ever re-create it. Crowds so thick the people in them would leave covered in other people's sweat, not just their own. Vendors, more in number and more enthusiastic the graver the crime, hawking meats and cheeses on skewers, ales and gin, trinkets, gewgaws and souvenirs; newspapers, sermons, tracts, serialized novels. Objects of Curiosity, experienced for a penny. You had festoonery, drums, trumpets—for a time, the Sheriff would order the trumpets and drums to drown out a traitor's last words. When higher-ups forbade that tactic, he resorted to physical intimidation and discouragement. Many an unrepentant Jacobite's dying words were interrupted by a punch to the kidney.

The crowd could fairly be called a mob, but without the connotation of violence. Very little blood-lust, but what an appetite for spectacle. Cheering and exhorting the executioner. The roar when the cart was drawn out from under a notorious traitor was by my reckoning the loudest man-made sound history has ever heard. And then the shouts, delighted or derisive, in surprise or in horror, as the condemned bounces and jerks and spins, before

suffocating to death—it was all enough to make you eye your fellow man warily for days after, knowing him to be vulnerable to that kind of emotion.

All in good fun, you may ask? Judge me not: I do not condemn the condemned, I only write about them. And I once liked my work.

What had become of the execution ritual since those first ten years of mine, while it shared the superficialities of crowds, shouts, commerce, and executions with earlier revels, was not *enjoyable*. For the Alderman had spent those ten years, when they weren't hanging traitors, decreeing crime after crime involving *property*. Correspondingly, there was lately a surge of crimes involving *things* rather than *principles*—acts criminalized now that but a dozen years ago were not. Corresponding to *that*, some years hence—especially the last two years—the inception of a new kind of criminal, his crime depriving others of *things*, receiving for it the oldest and least appealable of sentences.

Lawmaking can tether public morality to it and drag it from one place to another, much as we might wish it were the other way round. Literate London was becoming as hungry for *Accounts* of petty criminals as for traitors, slowly, but surely. That was good for my purse. But hanging crimes—once exclusively in the sphere of treason, heresy, murder, highway robbery—were now the likes of horse-thievery and pick-pocketing. Behavior that should be deterred, but by death?

There had been a condemned that very day, whose name was James Morneau. His crime had been stealing a pair of child's shoes. Killed for that! Had James Morneau stolen *the child herself*, he would have faced *misdemeanor* charges, so long as he didn't harm her.

It had gone too far. I'd known it for some time, to tell the truth, but seeing James Morneau swing was like a blow to the—

I ducked and sucked in a breath. I'd been struck in the back of the head.

Susan Palmer, the perpetrator, *harrumphed* and dropped herself heavily into a chair opposite mine.

“Someday,” she seethed, as seethes go whilst speaking with a mouthful of fresh vegetables—there was a bowl of them, one of Mme. Graveau's earthenware bowls, of carrots, leeks, and I knew not what else, on the table before me. I swear, it had not been there, only moments before—“I will live in an England where it is *not* appropriate to wallop a girl's ass as she walks by in a tavern.”

I had never walloped Susan's ass. Once or twice, when she demanded it, but she implicitly wasn't talking about that. "You'll live to be 200, then," I said.

"Older," she murmured in reply. "Such a pity that you will cease to be functional, let alone attractive, in one-tenth that time."

My ears turned as red as the beet I saw in Susan's bowl. No, that was a turnip. My ears turned as purple as a turnip. "You think me attractive," I said to my knees, one side of my face smiling. Susan rolled her eyes. I didn't see it, but it was obvious she had. Consider us, though:

I in my fourth decade, married once, wife an ocean away, and never coming back. I missed her often, but recovered quickly by remembering what an idiot she thought me: She had been sentenced to transportation to America for forgery. Those few words sum up an elaborate set of facts she thought all along she was keeping from me. At the end she said she was leaving me of her own accord, to join some second cousin-branch of her family in the New World. I was expected to believe this, notwithstanding that I keep two eyes on the criminal proceedings at Old Bailey to make my living... but never mind. At least she wasn't sentenced to hang—you can be, for forgery—because writing her *Account* would have been awkward.

And then Susan, a beautiful 23-year-old; small, but densely packed; long hair very nearly the red of embers, and ever a-bun; widowed six years; an ass any man would be delighted to wallop. Passionate, determined, more confident than I—more *everything* than I—and fundamentally *good*. She rolled her eyes at things I said? Well, that meant she was listening to them. I would cheerfully suffer the indignity. (I should add that Susan was beautiful *to me*. I had punched a man in the nose once for a remark about her that included the words "horse face," not only to defend Susan's honor, but because the insult was patently ridiculous. Her face was almost round.)

Susan bent down to the surface of Mme. Graveau's heavy, oak table, only her breasts keeping her from a parallel position. She looked this way and that, and saw nothing of interest amongst the other patrons of Mme. Graveau's. In a gravelly stage whisper she said, "James Morneau. Did you see him?"

"Did I see him?" Of course I did. "Susan, yes, I saw him while I was *working*. Where were you?" I reached for the earthenware bowl, and she slapped my hand away.



Her eyes were moist, as quickly and with as little warning as the bowl of vegetables had appeared. I knew her to have a spigot somewhere on her person, for just this purpose. I had not yet found it, despite rather thorough searching, but mark you, it was there.

“I *knew* James Morneau, Mattie.” Sniffle. “Or rather, I know his wife, Jennie. Three dear children, two without shoes to this day—only the littlest one has them, worn down from wear by her brothers...” She continued, but the bit about the children still not having shoes let me know Susan was in the midst of one of her... embellishments. Aye, at one time or another, maybe a year before, James Morneau must have had an unshod wee one, and no other way to shoe ’m. But if “Jennie” and the Morneau family were such objects of her affection, Susan would have put shoes on those children by then, if no-one else would. She had the means, for that, anyway.

Mind you, to draw attention to Susan’s *embellishments* is not to disparage her—so long as one has learned to recognize them, and to avoid being misled by them, where was the harm?

“...So you see, I couldn’t bear to come see it. Oh, Jennie, poor Jennie, she needed so much love and support today, make no mistake, but she had all of her family there, every one. I would not have wanted to be in the way, as it were...”

Not on account of anything Susan was saying, I was aroused to anger—and not for the first time that day. Truth, embellished truth, or something in-between coming out of Susan’s mouth, James Morneau did have a family. He perpetrated his crime to put shoes on a boy’s feet.

“Ask *him!*” Susan reached across the table and struck me as close to the back of the head as she could manage. “Ask him!” she hissed, or as near to a hiss as you can get whilst saying *ask him!* She pointed at a tall, wobbly young man who had loped into the tavern, passed us, and was leaning against a wall, profile toward me, looking confused at Mme. Graveau.

I had not lived 34 years and been married without being able to reach back and tease out what a woman had said even when I hadn’t been listening. Susan averred that perhaps the loping man had been at Tyburn Square today, and would be able to testify to the fact of Jennie Morneau’s oldest children being present, and bare of foot.

Had I said something I was thinking, aloud? It was a tic afflicting me since meeting Susan. The alternative, that she could read my mind, was too frightening to consider.

“Susan, I’ve no doubt your friend”—she sputtered at that description. I seemed not to be meant to know they were acquainted. But I pressed on —“*your friend*, I’ve seen him before, with you, I don’t know what you’re getting excited about! Listen.” She had something leafy green in her teeth. “You and he both advocate for capital punishment reform, correct? Stop! Please. I’ve no doubt *your friend* would tell me James and Jennie Morneau’s boys were shoeless. I’m not naïve.”

Susan looked at me warily. “Naturally, Jennie Morneau would keep shoes off her boys, today, in the shadow of the gallows. She would want London to see, ehm, the *need*, the noble motivation behind James’ crime. Right?” She had relaxed, noticeably.

“I am not suggesting poor Jennie would deceive for the sake of sympathy,” I continued more kindly, “just that, the Morneau boys being barefoot, today at Tyburn Square, would say nothing about the state of their feet on other days.”

I drained my cup, and with it mimed a *to the King!* at Susan’s friend, who then looked confused at me instead. I caught Mme. Graveau’s eye, and she came to collect my empty cup to re-fill it again.

Assuaging Susan when she was agitated had put me in a satisfied mood. She scotched that soon, with relentless discourse on James Morneau’s crime and punishment. Anecdotes about a happier Morneau family, some possibly even true, soon gave way to more abstract expressions of distress. The evil of the Bloody Code: the popular name for England’s relentlessly growing list of hanging offenses for property crimes, together with its application in fact, by the rich, against the poor—the poor having no property the rich would be interested in stealing or damaging.

The power to *kill*, exercised not with utmost gravity, but rather will-ye-nill-he. Lawmaking, a shield protecting the rights and liberties of all Englishmen, instead misused *by* those who wielded power, *on behalf of* those who wielded power, as a sword—a weapon dripping more and more blood each hanging day. James Morneau’s sentence and death had shaken me, and it was clear they had shaken Susan as well.

“...And you, Mattie, *you* are the one who needs to do something about it,” after a time she concluded. Truthfully, Susan and I had had a variation on this conversation half a dozen times before. Today, a picture in my mind’s eye of James Morneau swinging on the gallows—a raucous, cheering crowd—ale gulped, spilt and spit—his barefoot sons wailing—

Jennie Morneau's face in her hands—all of it stirred me beyond the noncommittal, the *someday I'll...*

Still, my press license allowed me to report what the condemned did, said and thought. If I *embellished*, Susan-like, my license could be forfeit. Even if not, if my customers learned they were getting *fiction* for their coins, I could lose them without the help of the Aldermen. They bought novels for their fiction, or newspapers.

But I would not deter Susan worrying about my livelihood. Instead I tested her, aiming to plumb the depth of her conviction—and thereby steel my own. I argued points in which I did not believe, or believed only reluctantly.

I told her that the poor people whose cause she championed could avoid swinging on Tyburn tree by *not breaking the law*. James Morneau could have obeyed the law, and he would be alive today.

“Where does that end, Mattie? The Aldermen could say all must carry at least ten crowns on their person at all times. All you need to do is to obey the law, you say? If you haven't got two ha'pennies to rub together, off you go to Old Bailey.” She had been on an even keel, but began to waver. “Mattie, they *could* make it more difficult to avoid paying for what you steal or damage. They *could* make victims whole, without additional punishment.” Her voice then rose, and I winced. “But that's not what this is about!” She spat: “It's that having so many poor people about offends Charlie's taste!”

I shushed her severely. Only a few nearby in Mme. Graveau's had heard above the low murmur. Only one or two had reacted, both grinning. “Charlie Scott,” I said, loudly. “Her brother-in-law. The banker!” Susan looked chastised, a rare sight.

Very well: I told her that the property of the poor had exactly the status as the property of the rich did, under the Bloody Code. Was that not equal justice under the law? “Equal justice! Let us also tax each red hair on everybody's head, Mattie,” she suggested. I agreed with her before she could slander the King again.

I told her that rich English without fear their property would be stolen or damaged, without needing to spend time and coin protecting it, improved England for everyone—including the poor. Restitution was not a deterrent

to property crime—but the threat of death surely was. We would see that, after there had been enough criminals made into examples.

Susan remained collected. I could see in her fidgets that it was an effort on her part. “How is that different from slavery?” My eyebrows arched. *Go on...* “How isn’t it *worse*, Mattie?” She dropped out of character for a moment. “You want me to convince *you*, correct? Not the public at large, or heaven forbid, the Aldermen?” Yes, convince *me*. It would be my livelihood at stake. “Well, then, I know how you feel about slavery. Slavery uses one person to make things better for another, without the slave’s consent. Right? But execution-as-a-deterrent uses one person—all of him, *ends* one person—to, we are supposed to believe, make things better for others. And as with slavery, it is not confined to just one person—it is a plague upon an entire *class* of persons.” She was right about slavery. Slavery shamed England, and when I thought on it, it made me ashamed to be English.

Whether the comparison to slavery was apt or not, executing the poor, essentially for the crime of being poor, shamed England, too. I was coming to understand that more clearly the longer I listened to Susan. And somehow, she sensed it—that she nearly *had* me.

I managed one more argument, and not my strongest. I said that lenity toward property crimes for so long did not mean that was the normal, moral state of affairs. Perhaps the Code should have been more Bloody all along, and no-one today would think twice? I was smiling by the end, for Susan was, too.

Her rejoinder was that she loved me.

I was astonished. We shared affection, a bed now and then... but this marvelous person *loved* me? *Me*? She rose, came to my side of the table at a trot, the best you can trot from one side of a table to another, and kissed me on the cheek. My cheek had already turned hot as a pie. She struck the back of my head again, then, rather more tenderly than every other time.

It is possible that I echoed her confession of love. My ears were purple, my heart thumping in my chest, my loins stirring, and my surroundings became indistinct to me. I fondly remember Susan returning to her side of the table, crunching a carrot and gesturing for me to hurry up and drain my gin. And then Mme. Graveau taking my empty cup without my even asking, and smiling at both of us conspiratorially.

I knew then that I could, and would, *embellish* my writings concerning the day's hangings, including the *Account* of James Morneau, with the object of reforming the Bloody Code. I knew that Susan's declaration of love was surely an *embellishment*—but she made it seem so easy, and yet so very powerful.

\* \* \*

My *Account* of James Morneau's death was well-received—but much different than I, or anyone, was used to.

In any *Account* for the last twelve years, I would have reported that James had gone to sleep, with difficulty, the night before his hanging, heart overflowing with grief—repentance, regret, fear his Saviour would reject him and off to Hell he'd go, no doubt. He woke briefly when the bell at St. Sepulchre's, next-door, pealed, and the bellman's dismal voice warned him and his fellow condemned that *the Hour's drawing near, that you before th'Almighty must appear*. Heavy of heart, he sank back into sleep, his last. Then a revelation in a dream showed James the way to the Lord: Demonstrate to others the error of his ways, in the earthly time left him. Call loudly for his Saviour's mercy under the Tyburn tree. Be in his soul all repentance and humility. In the morning, James and the Ordinary rejoiced in James' potential salvation, and prayed their way to Tyburn.

There are at least twenty ways to write all this, between you and me, and I had written all of them, at least half a dozen times each. I soon realized that I had been *embellishing* my entire career—my *Accounts* now would be *more* faithful to the truth, not less.

In contrast, James Morneau's published *Account* said that he indeed felt grief, but following a visit from his family—young wife, three young children, two boys bare of foot, all terrified of losing him, anxious and hopeless.

Sleep eluded him, occupied as he was over who would care for them, and how. He had just managed to doze when the St. Sepulchre's bellman tolled the bell, droning his *all you that in the condemn'd holds do lie, prepare you, for to Morrow you shall die, &c.*, which started him awake. He was no violent man, never once (I thought that a clever touch), but the St. Sepulchre's bellman might have gotten him up to it that night.

Surprising himself, he fell into a short, dreamless sleep, undisturbed by further bells or revelations. He was awakened by the Ordinary, whose priestly services James knew he would indeed require, so James spared him as he had the bellman. The Ordinary told James what to say, and exhorted him to be loud about it, so that our Saviour could hear him over the Tyburn mob. James's heart was nowhere but with Jennie and the children, and he doubted he would have the faculties to remember the Ordinary's instructions, but he dutifully assented to his instructions, and accepted the appropriate rites, miserably and already in abject terror.

You get the gist. I then told the story of James's life—something I would have done at least briefly for a notorious condemned, but never for an unemployed barber.

Never in any fights or trouble, not even in the East End alleys where he and the other weaver's sons played all hid and lummelen—active games, no naughts and crosses, no draughts. Orphaned at 12, then apprenticed to a barber; the barber died when James was 16, and James could not afford a new premium; James subsisted by cleaning up, collecting bets and performing odd-jobbery for a vile "sportsman" who operated an underground bear-baiting theatre. He met Jennet Magnon, a weaver's daughter, which inspired James to leave the "sporting life." At 19, James found a barber whose apprentice had left him with three years left in his indenture; James pledged five years in exchange for a reduced premium, to be paid over time. James and Jennie had two boys before James's new barber died, leaving James with dismal prospects once again.

Then, one steel-grey October afternoon, thinking to ask at the apothecary about a job, James made off with a pair of children's shoes a young mother had dropped outside that apothecary. He did so entirely on impulse. The chemist happened to see, from inside, James take *something*—and that James' "body language" was that of someone doing a misdeed. The chemist hurried out to the street, emerging whilst both James and the mother were in earshot, going separate directions on Cable Street. The chemist, certainly with little hope of success, nevertheless shouted for someone to, "Stop! Thief!" The words brought James to an immediate halt on his own, dropping his chin to his chest sadly. The mother happened to hear the chemist, too and started back towards him, he by then summoning her with a waving arm. James shuffled back. The mother saw what he was

carrying, and gasped. This let James know the shoes were hers, and he gave them back to her, apologizing earnestly.

His oldest had outgrown his shoes, and James and Jennie had decided three nights before, setting priorities for their survival, that little James Jr. would go without. The decision, while sound, boiled inside James. Rage against the moneyed class, fate, and whichever of Death's lieutenants was responsible for barbers, had not been productive, and now an impulsive theft had not, either. The judge and jury heard rather more about the bear-baiting operation in court than my readers read in my *Account*, and that was likely the reason he was sentenced to hang by the neck until dead—for about 40 yards' worth of stealing a pair of shoes for his son.

All true, every word. (Promised Susan.) And easily and quickly researched, with the help of Susan and her friends. So what was *embellished*, charitably assuming that the "research" was totally faithful to the facts? This: James's dying words, on the cart under the gallows. One out of every three of my readers skips right to them, anyhow.

Before, I would have reported that the Ordinary looked on kindly as James issued a heartfelt petition for mercy from our Lord. I said instead that he implored our Lord to have mercy—on his poor young wife and family, and to see them cared for, though he knew not how. That part was true. Then he "said,"

Know you that my Fate could be the Fate of any Body with little Ones to care for: I go to Judgment today not for conspiring against the Crown, not for Murder or Highway Robbery, not for harming Anyone; I go to meet our Lord to Day for the crime of being a Father—and of *being poor*. For the Wrong I did in a single Moment of moral Weakness, I have made my Victim whole, as any Christian and Englishman should—and I have regretted my Actions, I have sought and received Forgiveness for them. But the Crown would take more from me, take everything—would *erase* me, and many More like me, rather than suffer my Existence, the Existence of Men and Women born low, tethered to that Lowness throughout Life—that I were born poor, that I led a poor Life, it *offends* very important Persons in the Government. *You* might offend Him next. *You* might swing here next—get you Money and Property and Status as you can, by *any Means*; or you may *die*, like me, upon Tyburn Tree!

Tyburn Square does not quiet down for the last words of a thief, and barely anyone can hear them. Those that did likely preferred my version.

Now, my press license was given to me so I could show London that the government is just, God loves us all, and bad people—criminals—are redeemable, or are dispatched. My *Accounts* of James Morneau and those hanged with him that day strayed far from those purposes. They inspired Susan to such a level of energy in love that I wistfully regretted never having witnessed it before.

The Aldermen had rather a different reaction, in particular to the bit where “James Morneau” exhorts his fellow poor to obtain money, property and status by *any Means*.

They called me to Old Bailey so they might warn me—well, so one of them might warn me—to get back on the straight and narrow. I promised him I would, and then I did not. The next hanging day was three months after James Morneau, and there were at least four James Morneaus hung that day—pitiful souls condemned by a Morneau-like injustice. The number of them seemed to grow along with the number of Susan’s comrades. In sum eighteen souls departed. No-one could have made five of the eighteen out to be sympathetic characters, and another five were rich as Lazarus’ foil: and so in an outright apostasy to my career and license, I did not write *Accounts* of any of those ten.

I, Susan and her friends spent weeks before the executions “researching” the remaining eight condemned, where my “advance” work might normally have started three days before the hangings. As I say, the ranks of Susan’s “friends” had swelled, which made Susan very happy, and Susan made me very happy on account of it.

If James Morneau & *al.* had swelled the ranks of Susan’s like-minded friends, my eight *Accounts* that next hanging day overflowed them. Naturally, Old Bailey noticed this at the same time I did. I had become a voice for the reformation of the Bloody Code, for the laudable cause of equal justice under the law for rich and poor alike. But it was with the Aldermen’s renewed attention to my *Accounts* that I began a war on another front, one closer to my own heart: the freedom of speech of free Englishmen.

\* \* \*



One Alderman had lectured me at Old Bailey after my James Morneau &c. publications. Three together confronted me shortly after those eight *Accounts* went out. It was a more cordial meeting than the first, which had me wary, until I realized I had more power, and that explained it. One bade me sit down, which I did; another offered me tea, for which I thanked him; a third asked after my business, generally, to which I responded, primly. I have no experience being high born, but I have met enough high-born criminals to pass, in a meeting with some of the Court of Alderman, at any rate.

There were three secretaries, one for each man, all scratching like birds during the meeting, and all whispering in their master's ear. Could have been reminders, what to say and what points to make. I sensed it was enemy intelligence—tactics for each one to maneuver around the other two.

In any event, hearing, as I am sure he expected, that my sales were satisfactory to me, the third Alderman bore down upon me more specifically: They were up, far up, were they not? It was true, my eight most recent *Accounts*, “embellished” to tell the stories of the lives of the condemned and to make eloquent speechmakers out of all of them, were brisk sellers. James Morneau's *Account* had sold well, too—not as well as the most recent, but better also than I was used to.

I knew Susan and her friends, not the salaciousness of the material, were responsible for much of this. In me they had found a valuable medium—I amplified and spread their message. More than that, I was their most prolific recruiter. As such, they made heroic efforts to sell and to otherwise encourage the reading of my work. I was pleased. But until my meeting with the Aldermen, I regarded the spread of Susan's cause to be somebody else's bounty, and somebody else's problem. After my meeting, I had a better sense of what I had gotten myself into.

Which Alderman said what for the balance of the meeting is immaterial. What they made me understand, and not easily, with all the scratching and whispering and maneuvering, was that I was stayed from writing any more *Accounts* whilst my conduct was “investigated,” and whether or not my license was revoked, and other remedial measures taken if appropriate, would depend on what actions I took before the next hanging day. One forceful suggestion was that I publish a retraction of all of the eight most recent *Accounts*, identifying them as fiction. Another was providing a list of the names of the “assistants” who had helped me

“research” the *Accounts*; the names of any others who volunteered to “assist” in “research” for the next batch, and the names of whomever were *de jure* or *de facto* “leaders” of these “research assistants.”

In my rare opportunities to speak, I mumbled this and that about my non-involvement (my *de jure* non-involvement, as it were) in any league of “assistants” prowling the London streets researching and selling criminal biographies; about the essential (if not quite *de facto*) truth of every one of the contentious *Accounts*, and about my freedom of speech as an Englishman. Only the last made any of the scratching, whispering and maneuvering so much as slow down, and that only for the odd request that I kindly repeat myself, or the odd chuckle.

As you might expect, I undertook none of the actions suggested by the Aldermen as the next hanging day approached, nor any others in that vein. Susan and her friends, who soon took to calling themselves *Adjoints à la Recherche* as the details of my meeting spread through the ranks, grew even more energized and enthusiastic. *La recherche vigoreaux* began on the criminals most likely to swing on the next hanging day, which by then was more than two months hence. By the time three men and three women were officially sentenced to hang on that day, the *Adjoints* had full stories for me about the six, and enough to work with on six more, had there been a need.

During this time Susan and I had not grown closer, if I am being honest. Rather, we had become familiar to one another in the way spouses often are. (Marriage was rarely discussed. When it was, it was obvious that Susan was too busy, and I left our conversations convinced I was not yet ready. Not for re-marriage, and not for marriage to Susan.) We became more perfunctory. We worked well together, we fucked well together, and we made one another, if not happy, then comfortable—literally, we were comforts for one another, when our days became hectic, overfilled, overwhelming, anxious.

And there was no shortage of anxiety. My press license was revoked a month before the hanging day. Susan convinced me to publish anyway. My friend, Robert Spencer, proprietor of the press which printed my *Accounts*, agreed to go ahead with the publication of the next six—more at Susan’s insistence than at mine. He had been duly notified of the revocation of my license, but was prepared to forget he had or to claim he misunderstood. It was a touching gesture of friendship. Bonds of friendship are strongest, I’ve found, when runaway sales are making one’s business a lot of money.

A league of enthusiastic *Adjoints*, and so much of the *recherché* being complete, notwithstanding, I insisted that I spend time with the condemned in the days before their hanging, and that I must accompany them on the procession from Newgate to Tyburn. The former was accomplished thanks to friends of mine among the jailors, and (less frequently) to disguises. (I was barred from Newgate.) My presence on the parade from Newgate to Tyburn was less a problem: All six of the condemned expressed a wish for me to accompany them, and such execution day wishes are, where within reason, always granted.

The six *Accounts* were attributed to me in print. They sold even better than the previous eight, and created more *Adjoints*. Good news was sparse beyond that. Debilitating fines were leveled at Robert Spencer—his protestations of ignorance ineffective. As often happened under such circumstances, my friend shuttered his doors, probably before paying anything. He has opened a new house, using a new name.

Worse, much worse, was to have someone dear to me jailed on charges arising from her leadership in acts of sedition against the Crown. Shortly after the latest six *Accounts* hit the streets, I dutifully sought out Mme. Graveau to settle my bill from my most recent “creative period.” I was shocked to learn that she, Mme. Graveau, had been arrested! I was stupefied. It seemed she did indeed “tell everybody” that I wrote at her tavern—and of late, I soon learned, she told them why my work there was so important to liberty and to all free Englishmen, not just criminals. The ranks of the *Adjoints* swelled just as much because of her recruitment efforts as because of my writing—more than, I would admit. It was she who had been behind recruiting *me* to the effort—and I was embarrassed to learn that my “assistants” really considered themselves *adjoints à Mme. Graveau*, and it was she, not I, who in truth coordinated and directed their *recherché*. (The French nomenclature now made more sense.)

My amazement and indignation distended steadily as I learned more about Mme. Graveau, and before long it rose to fury. Mme. Graveau had never encouraged a single word said against the Crown—let alone uttered one herself. Her enemy was the Bloody Code, not the men who enacted it, nor even the men who induced them to enact it. She wanted *allies* at Old Bailey and Westminster, not enemies, for the love of God. Take all that as given, and her persecution was nothing more than an attack on the freedom

of speech—a right engendered by that same loving God, and inuring to all free men and women in England.

I wrote and caused to be published tract after tract, four in one month, defending Mme. Graveau (and her *Adjoints*), agitating for her release, and promoting her message about the evils—*unforeseen consequences*, as Mme. Graveau would have it—of the Bloody Code. I found houses to print the first two, and printed the others with my own coin, leasing a press at night from publishers deliberately uninterested in what I was doing. I was putting the money I saved on Mme. Graveau’s gin to good use.

As the weeks passed, my fear grew that I would be jailed next. The *Adjoints*, some of the life wrung from them by the loss of Mme. Graveau, were on tenterhooks themselves. But I was their leading indicator: Surely, if I were not yet arrested, they were safe. Even so, there was a palpable sense of resentment from “my” assistants that Mme. Graveau resided at Newgate, and I in my home.

I followed with keen interest both the proceedings against Mme. Graveau, and the approaching hanging day. I had the freedom to split my attention so, for no fewer than three *Adjoints* enthusiastically offered to direct the *recherché* for the eleven *Accounts* that would come out of Tyburn next, as well as to draft them—subject to my review and revisions. I was grateful for the assistance. My efforts were no closer to freeing Mme. Graveau, but I intended to work harder, not less.

Mme. Graveau herself would not allow me to become discouraged. I visited her often at Newgate—I had moved heaven and Earth for dispensation to do so—and never once did I find her anything but confident and cheerful. Once, in a fit of hopelessness on my part, I railed against God, fate, the government, and my own impotence. I might convince a thousand people she should be freed immediately, I cried, but if none were Kings or Aldermen or Sheriffs, she might still hang. Her stoic reply was unforgettable: “I might hang, but you create a thousand yous? *Mon cher*, you make a thousand yous and *England* may endure until Kingdom come.”

That was why I thundered and raged in print and, increasingly, in public speech: I was sowing seeds. With hard work from many others, and much time, and a favorable environment, those seeds could become shoots, roots anchored in the soil, striving toward the sun, to the benefit of England and Liberty herself. Mme. Graveau would rather have been around to see

those shoots burst into the sunshine, but if that were impossible, she was at least happy to be there at the beginning.

I saw much less of Susan than had been the case six months before. Mme. Graveau was to be tried just three days after the hanging day, and I was working 20 hours per day, and sleeping the other four. She asked me once:

“Mattie, which would you be doing, if you could only do one?”

I was distracted, and didn’t quite understand. She explained—that is to say, repeated, more slowly—that she wanted to know which, of Mme. Graveau’s persecution or the poor English to swing at Tyburn, I would devote my efforts to, if I had to choose only one.

“Mme. Graveau,” I said, almost before she was done “explaining.” She was silent. I felt compelled to explain *myself*—for Susan always had that effect on me.

“Susan, this is England. Free men and women have the right to speak freely, harm they no-one. It’s fundamental. It’s the bedrock under England. Without it, there *is* no England.” I suppose I babbled. My wits were strained taut.

Susan was not in a mood generous enough to slacken her line. “They took Mme. Graveau away *so that* we would renounce her cause! Matthew—you’re letting them win! Mme. Graveau would lash you black and blue!”

I retorted that I had seen and spoken with Mme. Graveau quite often of late, and that in reality—a state with which Susan-land had evidently cut off all diplomatic ties—Mme. Graveau encouraged me heartily.

“*She’s the one in prison!*” she shrieked. “*Of course* Mme. Graveau is grateful for your work on her behalf. *If she were here*, and not there, she would choose *us* every day of the month!”

I made a frustrated, derisive noise. She made a frustrated, angry noise. I went on, “you ask me to *imagine* Mme. Graveau is free. Mme. Graveau is *not* free. *Imagining* that she *is* free renders your hypothetical meaningless. Susan, if they can jail her for advocating her position, your position, my position—for you seem to suffer under the illusion that we all want three different things—they can jail *anyone* for *any* position. Any argument they disagree with they can win not with persuasion, but rather by force.

“You once compared execution to slavery. I thought it was an exceptionally weak device at the time, but I was too smitten to say so. But

you like it, so: How is jailing and possibly killing someone for the things they *think* and *say*, which harm no-one, not *worse* than slavery?”

Her lips made an O and her eyebrows arched—Mme. Graveau made that face when she hurt me; Susan made it when I hurt her. She turned and left me.

\* \* \*

The bell next door is tolling, I am running out of space, my eyes hurt, and my fingers! Stiff as iron bars, and the skin on the sides is shredded, maybe gone for good.

My three *Adjoints* wrote the next hanging day's *Accounts*, and published them under my name. By then, not *all* of literate London was demanding the Bloody Code be repealed, but many were newly conscious of the evil it *could* be put to, and open minded. Enough that the Aldermen pledged reform. A pledge from an Alderman to change things is like a bottle of gin offering to pay for itself—but in the end, we had shook loose the tethers from public morality, held lawmaking down and tied it up instead, and as I write, I have hope that the former will drag the latter along with it in the months and years to come.

I was arrested for sedition, on the same day that Mme. Graveau was found guilty of it. She was sentenced to transportation. I hope someone forewarned America.

I had many visitors at my eight-foot by ten-foot cell of stone at Newgate, at first. *Adjoints*, well-wishers, sympathizers. Never Susan. The visits dwindled, in number and in length, and became a trickle. Other than from the Ordinary of Newgate, determined as he was to save my soul.

I was found guilty by a jury that, if I had to guess, believed martyrdom would be my wish, the cause of capital punishment reform being so dear to me. The guaranty of a trial by jury is another stone in the foundation of England. Someday, soon, we are going to need a stone that guarantees trial by a *smart* jury. I was sentenced to hang.

I was philosophical as my hanging day approached. It was a stupor from which I was only roused by the increasing frequency of visits by the Ordinary, and by the newly regular appearance of all three of my—Mme. Graveau's—former *Adjoints*-turned-authors. All three were now planning to

publish, without a license, *Accounts*, the condemned to be apportioned among them, by them. Except for me. All three wished to have a hand in drafting my *Account*, saying they planned to make it the fiercest, most persuasive, most devastating one yet. There was talk of publishing it in my name, but I scotched it, saying that they ought to shout to the sky that it was their work, if it turned out as well as they thought it would. My career did not stand to benefit not at all. Theirs would.

Once the *Adjoints* became authors, I believe their thoughts about freedom of speech began to more closely resemble my own. I have even enjoyed intelligent conversation and debate with them on the possibility the Aldermen will someday overturn the press licensing law itself. (With citations to Milton!) During our conversations, I encouraged them to identify and consider ways to promote freedom of speech alongside their other reform goals. Without the one, I said, no others were possible.

I was delighted that they all wished to contribute to my *Account*, and that they were so ensconced in their new roles. I *enjoyed* the idea—to come full circle—that my last hours and words would live on, in what the *Adjoints* were convinced would be a masterpiece of the literature of liberty.

The Aldermen enjoyed it not. I have had it today from a source I have utter faith in, and then again confirmation from another, unrelated source: News of my—Mme. Graveau’s—*Adjoints*-turned-authors’ plans for my *Account* has been quick to spread. Talk that it would indeed be attributed to me persists, some even positing that I *would* write it myself—my greatest work, published posthumously. Those details aside, though, the expectation is my *Account* will be the best-selling one yet, by furlongs. My customers clamor for it, literate London anticipates it with breath bated—and the Aldermen fear it. I am to be carted along in the procession to Tyburn tomorrow. I am to be hooded and noosed. And then I am to be pardoned. By the Aldermen’s reckoning, this will stifle any “masterpiece of the literature of liberty,” while putting the fear of God—and government—in me. It is without a doubt the best possible outcome for them.

It is certainly high on the list of good outcomes for *me*, even if, as I expect, my pardon is conditioned on my agreeing to transportation to America. Even so, as loathe as I am to become a martyr of any stripe, I am in equal measure disappointed for the cause of freedom of speech. There will be no official censorship tomorrow—all they have done is to eliminate the market. Yet they will have jailed me for months for what I, an

Englishman, believed, and said. For my advocacy on behalf of England and some of her best, as well as some of her worst. All of this while committing no treason nor heresy, slandering no King, in fact harming no-one: and the only good that will come out of it will be my life. I am sure Liberty considers that a fine kettle of fish, indeed. Perhaps I can make it up to her in America.

On one hand, I would have been pleased to learn of my new lease on life closer to nine days ago. For the more I thought about it, and the longer I was awake nights as the date of my execution approached, the more definitely I did not want to leave my story in the hands of others. A friend here at Newgate was kind enough to procure for me a saddler's awl—by order of the Aldermen and the Sheriff, I am denied paper, pen, and transcription by visitors—those nine days ago; and I have been carving this *Account* onto the stone surfaces of my cell since. My right hand may never recover—and it could have spent those nine days helping gin to my lips.

On the other hand, now there is an *Account* that will, in all likelihood, survive me—perhaps not as fierce and persuasive a one as it might have been in other circumstances, but nonetheless. It will not be read by many, but perhaps it is right where it needs to be, where the right people may read it. That they may see the lengths to which remarkable persons, alone or as soldiers in a greater effort, will go on their behalf, as condemned prisoners and as English men and women. That they may learn that belief, together with commitment, saves lives, reforms unjust laws, and keeps England free for their progeny. This *Account* will not restore their personal liberty, but it may restore their hope.

Jack is an attorney and freelance writer in the Atlanta area, originally from Chicago. New to fiction, his nonfiction work has appeared in such diverse publications and venues as *Mortgage Lending Compliance Alert*, *American Builders Quarterly*, *Economic Opportunity Report*, and *Puck Daddy*. Jack is Associate General Counsel for a mid-size, privately-owned technology company. His first novel, *Surfeit: A Space Western* will be published in the fall.



# The Choice

*Alyssa Altadonna*

In this imaginative tale a member of the enforcer class on a distant planet is forced to make a desperate decision.

What makes something worth living for? What makes something worth dying for?

On Iamos, the fourth world from the sun, the answer was simple. It was the only solution left, really, to a dwindling people on a dying world. The answer was what the *geroi* had given us, and there was no questioning it.

*We live for each other.*

It was a phrase uttered reassuringly, a balm for souls worn raw by the devastating realization that our planet's magnetic field had simply *stopped*, that there was nothing left to hold our atmosphere intact, that we had somehow gone too far and pushed the planet too hard and now there was nothing left for us. It was the key to our survival. It was the end of chaos, panic, uncertainty. We no longer had to wonder or live in fear of the unknown. The *geroi* had given us the Progression, and they had given us the solution. If we followed them, our species would survive. We had to, because we lived for each other.

There was another side to that phrase, of course. The implicit other half that few conceived of and none dared speak aloud. That was, of course:

*We die for each other.*

This was something that I hadn't considered much growing up. All my life, I knew only one thing: I existed for the good of the collective. The certainty that our lives were bound to one another meant that we each had a duty, a contract to fulfill. I knew my responsibility was to contribute to the good of the Society, and if I upheld my end of the bargain, I was guaranteed security and relative comfort. That was all that mattered to me, then.

I was born several years after the Progression—when the old government had been replaced by the *geroi* and the castes—but I was lucky enough to have been born a *patroin*, a member of the elite class, as opposed to a common *plivoïn*. I never knew my parents. With the Progression had

come the eugenicists, dictating who was allowed to reproduce and when. As with all the other *patroi* children, I was raised by the collective, not by an individual family.

From an early age, I was groomed to be an Enforcer. Although it was a position of honor and prestige, the plain fact of the matter was that the Enforcers did the *geroi*'s grunt work. The *geroi* made the laws, and we ensured that they were followed. We were the tax collectors, the police, the soldiers, all in one. We kept the *plivoi* in their place, and we kept the *geroi*'s hands clean.

When I reached adolescence, I was apprenticed to an officer—Ketros—who taught me everything there was to know about the job I'd been assigned. And I was the best he'd seen in a long while. It didn't take me long to gain quite a reputation among the Enforcers. I was earmarked for an officer position as soon as I completed my training. The *geroi* were known to lavish wealth and prestige upon those officers that met with their favor, and even as an apprentice, I had that. There was a bright future awaiting me, and I knew it.

I was nearing the end of my apprenticeship the day that Ketros and I were sent out to that farm in the valley. It was not long after I'd been moved from Valos, the town on the Outside where I'd been raised, to the new city the *geroi* had built in the blue glass dome. They called it Bright Horizon. The citidomes always had names like that, inspirational titles meant to arouse hope when there seemed to be nothing left to hope for.

By that time, construction on Bright Horizon was nearing completion, but life was still livable Outside, albeit barely. The *patroi* had long since settled into the safety of their subterranean villas, where the thick rock walls provided an extra layer of protection against the deadly solar radiation of the world above; and, after a long process of applications and screening, the eugenicists had finalized their admittance list, hand-picking the most promising *plivoi* workers to be given the gift of life in exchange for service to the Society. Their less worthy, less *useful* peers, on the other hand, would be peacefully euthanized. It was a sensible solution, far preferable to the slow death by suffocation and exposure Outside.

Ketros and I were the ones who got to deliver the verdict of life and death to the *plivoi*. It wasn't a pleasant job, of course, but it was necessary. It was my duty.

The once-fertile valley the farm was nestled in had become almost a desert, I noticed as Ketros and I rode our *gurzas* down the slopes of the surrounding hills. The air that whistled through my nostrils was dry and bitterly cold. I could see a narrow strip of green bisected by a tiny trickle of a stream that was all but gone, leached away by the vicious winds that sapped more of our atmosphere every day. Parched, dead shoots, remnants of failed crops, checkered the rusty patchwork of ground.

At the foot of the hill, I touched a finger to my earpiece, pulling up a holoscreen outlining all the details the System had about this case. The System was the very heart of Iamos. It was more than a computer system, had become much greater than that centuries ago. It was linked into our nervous systems, responding to our thoughts, manipulating our hearing and our vision. It knew the thoughts of every living being on Iamos, networking our brains inside and out. It connected everyone on the planet, ensuring that the Contract was fulfilled and alerting the Enforcers of any deviation.

We were nearly upon the farmhouse when a middle-aged woman hurried out to greet us. She seemed nervous, rubbing her hands on her pant leg. “*Kyrios, Kyrin,*” the woman said with a shaky voice. “You honor us with your presence. My partner and our apprentice are out in the field right now, but they’ll have seen your *gurzas* and should be here shortly.”

“Very well,” Ketros replied, sounding bored. “We’ll wait for them inside.” He didn’t wait for her to invite us in; a *patros* needed no invitation from a *plivoïn*. As I followed the enforcer inside, I thought I spied a shadow of movement behind the dirty glass of one of the windows of the house. I watched it with narrowed eyes momentarily, then continued through the door into the front room of the small abode.

We remained in silence for a few minutes, Ketros seated in a dingy armchair with an expression of marked disinterest on his face; myself perched on the edge of a creaking woven fiber stool; and the *plivoïn* shifting anxiously from one foot to the other as she stood deferentially in the doorway. Before long, we heard the clamor of footsteps hurrying up the front walkway, and the door flew open. An older man—surely the woman’s partner—hurried in, a cloud of red dust in his wake. “*Maetrin,*” the man gasped, short of breath, “Enforcers—”

“Yes, I showed them in,” the woman cut him off, trying to conceal the anxiety in her voice. I looked between them with interest; it seemed these

*plivoi* were trying quite unsuccessfully to conceal something from us, although what they could possibly want to hide I couldn't begin to guess.

A moment later, another man followed the first through the door. Though he was also coated in rusty dirt, I realized after a second glance that this one was very young, an adolescent, maybe half a year older than me—it was difficult to tell, he was so filthy. This would be the apprentice. He seemed much more composed than his elders. He took me and then Ketros in with a quick movement of his gray eyes, and stepped forward, placing three fingers over his brow.

“*Kyrii* Enforcers,” he said smoothly. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“I won't take up too much of your time,” Ketros replied, getting up from his seat. “We're here on behalf of the *geroi* in regards to your petitions for admittance to Bright Horizon. After a thorough review process conducted by the eugenics council, the *geroi* have decreed that admittance will be granted to your apprentice, Eos.” The two older *plivoi* exhaled in relief, and the man smiled reassuringly at the boy until Ketros added, “However, they have, unfortunately, opted to deny your own petitions—”

The woman blanched, her already shaky knees buckling beneath her. As her partner rushed to her side to support her, Eos stepped forward angrily. “There must be some kind of mistake!”

“No mistake,” Ketros responded, pulling up a holoscreen and rotating it to show the young man. The names and images of the two farmers appeared, both with the word “denied” printed evenly below. I wasn't sure if the young man could read, but he seemed to get the gist, if his scornful glare was any indication.

“But, *Kyrios*,” the older man protested faintly, “we've served the Society faithfully our whole lives. This farm was once the most productive in all Valos—”

“Correct,” Ketros agreed, “Once. However, you must agree that you are now past your usefulness to the collective. Although Bright Horizon is one of the biggest citidomes on Iamos, there is still only a limited amount of space. Food production is going to rely on new agricultural methods, not traditional farming.” Ketros' voice was flat as he spoke, aloof and rehearsed. He'd given this speech a dozen times before, and he'd give it many more times before we were through. “The *geroi* greatly appreciate the contributions you have made to our people and our planet, but surely you

must realize that, if we are to survive as a race, sacrifices must be made. This is your end of the Contract. Your time has come.”

At this point the apprentice interrupted Ketros’ monologue with a very loud and vehement curse. I gawked at him in shocked incredulity. Never in my life had I seen a *plivos* talk back to a *patros*. And this one didn’t just argue, he was hurling obscenities. His nerve might be admirable if it wasn’t so damned stupid.

As I looked on, stunned, the apprentice raged, “So what are you saying? You’re just going to abandon them out here to die? Because of their *age*?! Maetrin and Phados get to smother to death out here with no air while even the oldest of the *patroi* live in comfort, safe in their precious domes?!”

“You need to watch your language, young man,” Ketros snapped, his disinterest quickly replaced with hard fury. I noticed his hand had slipped down to the holster on his hip.

With a smooth motion I stepped between them, determined to keep the situation in hand. “We will not be abandoning them to the elements,” I explained, my voice level and firm. “In fact, in recognition of their years of service to the Society, the *geroi* are offering them the option of a peaceful death by euthanasia,” I glanced over at the elders, who were looking resolutely at the floor, “which can be scheduled at your convenience.”

Eos spluttered wordlessly at me for a moment, then asked, “That’s supposed to make it better? Giving them the option to get put down, like *animals*?”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re so upset about,” I reasoned. “The *geroi* granted *you* admittance to the dome.”

“I don’t care about that,” Eos spat at me, and I doubled back in surprise. “Maetrin and Phados—”

“I have to say, Boy, I’m a little concerned that you keep calling them that,” Ketros interrupted acidly. “You must have been born after the Progression. You know we don’t use those words anymore. There are no parents on Iamos. None but the *geroi*.”

The expression Eos gave Ketros was almost pitying. “I wouldn’t expect a *patros* to understand,” he growled. “*Patroi* don’t understand things like love or loyalty.”

This time, when Ketros reached for his holster, the farmers saw it. “No, please!” the woman begged as, simultaneously, the man shouted, “Wait!” and thrust himself between the Enforcer and Eos.

“Eos, stop this,” the woman was saying to her apprentice, her voice full of emotions that I couldn’t comprehend. “It doesn’t matter what happens to us. He’s right... we’re past our usefulness. But there’s a place for *you*, Eos.”

“But what about—” Eos began, and the woman sucked in her breath, a panic-stricken noise. I looked at her, my curiosity mingled with suspicion. Eos’ eyes flicked to me for just a heartbeat; then he finished, as if it was what he’d meant all along, “—you and Phados?”

A glimmer of movement out of the corner of my eye. I jerked my head around just in time to see the shadow disappear back into the hallway. But this time, I knew what I saw. My words rose above the agitated voices of the *plivoi* and Ketros.

“Who was that boy?” I asked.

Everyone froze. The two farmers’ age-lightened skin paled considerably. For the first time, as Eos’ eyes raked over me, I thought I saw a tinge of fear replacing the anger in them.

“What did you say?” Ketros asked.

Eos held my gaze for a long moment. His gray eyes seemed to be pleading with me, begging me not to repeat my question.

I looked away from him.

“I saw a boy in the next room,” I answered, looking only at Ketros. “The records show that the only residents in this household are these two —” I gestured to the farmers, “—and the apprentice, Eos. So. Who was that boy I saw?”

One more moment of silence; and then, abruptly, Eos yelled, “Run, Nikos!” He hurled himself away from us and into the next room.

“Stop!” I shouted, launching after him. Behind me, I heard Ketros fumble with his holster as one of the farmers—I don’t know which—slammed into him. There was a crash, and then the explosive sound of the weapon firing. I didn’t waste my time to turn and see what happened. I simply tore after Eos, the muscles in my legs pumping as I ran.

Eos was already through the rear door of the residence, a cloud of red silt swirling through the air in his wake as he raced across the field of dust that stretched behind the house. Ahead of him, a little boy of about four or five years was running for his life, and the much taller Eos had nearly caught up to him. I darted across the field after them.

The boys were fast, but I was faster. I was almost upon them when Eos glanced over his shoulder at me. Without warning, the apprentice changed direction, slamming his body into mine.

The force of the impact knocked the air out of me, and I tumbled head over feet across the hard ground. Eos' weight pinned me down. I lashed out with my feet and felt a kick connect with the side of his face. He recoiled. I struggled out from under him and started to run after the boy once more, but Eos swung his own leg around, tripping me.

With me down again, Eos struggled to his own feet and, as I rose, he drew back his fist. I tried to swerve out of the way, but I wasn't fast enough, and his punch slammed into my jaw. The impact was so hard that the world flashed. It took a few seconds for my vision to correct itself. That was just enough time for Eos to wrench my arms around behind my back, twisted painfully, and hold me.

I furiously stomped down, grinding my heel into the top of his foot, but his thick boots prevented this from having much of an effect. I was enraged. This *plivos* scum should never have been able to get the better of me, an apprentice Enforcer, the best in the city. But then again, most never would have tried. I supposed that fact alone had lulled me into complacency.

The younger boy was long gone by now. All that remained of him was the cloud of dust that was already disappearing in his wake, the wind quickly blowing away the tracks that he'd left and covering them with a layer of rusty silt.

"What do you think you stand to gain?" I spat disdainfully. "You're not going to get away from us. Ketros is armed. He'll shoot you before he lets you escape."

"Yes, but you won't get *him*." Eos nodded in the direction the child had run. "I can promise you that."

"What is so special about that boy, that you're willing to sacrifice everything for him?"

"He's my brother," Eos answered without hesitation, "and that's something else a *patroin* wouldn't understand."

But I did understand, immediately. Those people in there, the ones that Eos was so insistent upon addressing as his parents... they had broken the eugenics statute. They'd violated the most sacred tenant of the Contract. *They'd had a child.*

I was astounded. I didn't know how they could have done it; every person on Iamos—except for partners the eugenicists had selected for reproduction—was on mandatory birth control. It was in the very water we drank. I wondered dimly if the farmers had stumbled across some kind of water source that the *geroi* were unaware of, didn't control.

But *why*? The Society had adopted eugenics for a purpose. The planet was *dying*. We simply didn't have the resources to sustain an uncontrolled population. It was a sacrifice that everyone had to make, for the good of our planet and our people. And the repercussions for defying the law were dire. I couldn't fathom why anyone would put themselves at such a risk for something so... *foolish*.

I said so aloud, and Eos laughed derisively. "Because it was their *right*, Enforcer."

"It was *not* their right," I argued. "It's in violation of the Contract."

"The *Contract*," the apprentice spat. "That precious scheme that none of us ever signed up for but all of us have to follow. You know, Enforcer, it's not really a 'contract' if both parties don't agree to it."

"What would your alternative be? Death? Do you think any of us would be here right now if we'd had a choice about it? There can be no *choice*. The Contract is the only way."

"That's what the *geroi* want us to believe. The Contract is what gives them their power. If everyone thinks that there is no alternative, they get to keep it."

I'd twisted around enough that I could see him over my shoulder. Eos wore an expression of condescension on his face that I knew mirrored my own when I'd first laid eyes on him, when he'd come in the door covered in dirt and grime. He went on, "I saw you back there, looking at me like you're so much better, when the only real difference between us is the names the *geroi* call us by. The *geroi* took away your free will same as mine, but you act like they've given you some great gift just because you get to call yourself a *patroin* instead of a *plivoain*."

I turned away from him, closed my eyes, but he kept right on talking, his insidious words clawing their way inside of me, poisoning me. "You can go ahead and play their little game, but not me. I *choose* not to let them control me," Eos hissed in my ear. "Every person is born with the right to *choose*. No person has the right to take away someone's freedom. They can



try. But there will always be those who fight back. Phados, Maetrin... me... we chose to fight back. Because we'd rather die than give up our freedom."

While Eos was talking, I'd felt his grip on my wrists loosen. He didn't seem surprised when I wrenched away from him, twisted away, fists raised. He just looked at me, somberly. Waiting for my reply. Waiting to see if his words had affected me, or if he'd lost his fight.

"That's enough." I heard Ketros' voice from a distance. Both Eos and I turned and saw him standing in the doorway of the home, his weapon raised. "It's over, Boy."

Eos said nothing. He simply walked back into the house. He didn't speak again; not when we found Phados' lifeless body sprawled across the floor of the front room, Maetrin weeping quietly over it. Not when we led the two survivors out to our gurzas, hands bound. Not one word, the whole long way back to Bright Horizon.

When we were back at the dome, Ketros and I were relieved of the charges, and Eos and Maetrin were taken into custody to await their sentences. I knew the pair of them would be dead before the end of the week. My stomach lurched abruptly at the thought that this fiery young man had had a chance at survival, and had thrown it all away.

I refused to look at him, but I felt Eos' eyes on me just before they led him away. He never spoke, but I still heard his voice ringing in my ears, echoing over and over.

*Freedom.*

\* \* \*

I tried to put the encounter out of my mind, but it kept creeping back unbidden. Eos' words kept echoing through my head, treacherous as a snake. *Freedom. Choice.* Those lofty concepts seemed so inconsequential when compared to the all-important need for *survival*. Regardless of the sacrifices it entailed, I couldn't fathom how anyone could find death preferable to life.

One other thing was bothering me, as well, and that is what ultimately brought me to the highest levels of the citidome that night. Here—without the ever-deepening buffer layers of rock or mudbrick that shielded most of the city, where the threat of solar radiation was at its greatest—was the

place the *geroi* locked the dissenters. Those who violated the Contract, who could have no hope of appeal. Who would serve the collective greater with their deaths than with their lives.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt warm on Iamos, but the air in the upper levels was bitingly cold, far more than I was accustomed to. Even with my insulated clothing and the System regulating my body temperature, I felt goosebumps dance across my flesh. I sucked my breath in through my teeth. It was a wonder that the prisoners didn't freeze to death up here. Perhaps some of them did. It had never occurred to me to ask.

My presence in the prison was not remarked upon. The ranks of the Enforcers in Bright Horizon were not particularly numerous, and we each had a variety of assignments that took us everywhere in the citidome. The System recognized our genetic code, so no doors in the city were closed to us.

I found Eos huddled in the corner of a dingy cell, curled tightly in upon himself. He didn't move when I entered, and I half wondered if he was already dead. I nudged his still form roughly with my foot; eventually he stirred and looked up at me blearily. After a moment, his eyes came into focus and he realized who was standing over him. He tensed immediately.

"Enforcer. What do you want?"

"The truth," I replied. "Earlier, when you said that there were other alternatives besides the Contract. What did you mean?"

"The truth is subjective. Do you want my truth, or the *geroi*'s?"

"Just answer my question."

His gray eyes held mine; my gaze didn't falter, and finally he dropped his own. He sighed. "All I meant was that there are other alternatives. Other ways to survive that don't involve all of us handing our lives over to the *geroi*."

"Such as?"

He rolled over on his side, looking away from me. It was a very child-like gesture, and it made me realize how young he really was. How young we both were, honestly. I was only halfway through my seventh year, and he couldn't be much older. It seemed grossly unfair, suddenly, that he was going to die before he'd ever really lived.

*But have you really lived, either?*

"It's just a legend, really," Eos interrupted my thoughts. "A rumor. But... there's talk among the *plivoi*. That maybe the *geroi*'s scientists were

wrong. That maybe there really is a way to stop the atmosphere from depleting. That maybe Iamos can be saved after all.”

I was confused. “But if there were a way to stop this, wouldn’t the *geroi* have tried it?”

“If the planet were saved, there’d be no need for the *geroi* anymore,” Eos pointed out.

My legs felt weak, and unconsciously I sank to my knees on the floor beside him. “Surely they couldn’t,” I protested. “I mean, they say it themselves. They remind us every day. ‘*We live for each other.*’”

“Do we, Enforcer?” Eos asked, his tone made it clear that this wasn’t really a question. “Or do we live for the *geroi*?”

I must have known the answer already, deep down. If I hadn’t had my doubts, I never would have come here tonight. Eos’ words in the desert would not have affected me. Perhaps I knew all along, in my heart of hearts, that the *geroi*’s promises were too good to be true. Still, I couldn’t stop the question that spilled from my lips next: “How do you know?”

Eos sighed, rolled over, sat upright with his back against the mudbrick wall. His eyes stared unseeingly at the ceiling. “I don’t know. All I know is that I want to try. Because this life the *geroi* are giving us now... it’s not a life. How can it be, when we have no power over our own fates?” He closed his eyes. “There’s only one thing in this world that we have, Enforcer, and it’s our own lives. I won’t let another person control mine for me. If I can’t choose how to live or who to love, I’d rather not live at all.”

I could hear air moving through the halls outside, and another chill ran across my skin. I shivered, pulling my knees up into my chest and holding them tightly. Then I asked, “Your... brother. Your parents. You love them?”

He didn’t look at me. “Yes.”

*Love*. That was another word that didn’t have a place on Iamos anymore, along with *freedom* and *choice*. Things worth living for. Things worth dying for.

“Where do you think your brother is now?” I asked idly. I half expected him to not answer, since the response could lead the Enforcers to Nikos’ hiding spot.

But then he spoke, softly, barely audible. “There’s a place... just a legend, probably. It’s called Elytherios.”

I repeated the word, uncertain I’d heard him correctly. “That’s in the old language, isn’t it?”

Eos nodded, a crooked smile playing at his lips. “It means ‘freedom.’” When I simply looked down, he continued, “It’s a safe haven for refugees, a place the *geroi* can’t find. Supposedly the renegade scientists went there first, the ones whose research violated the teachings of the *geroi*. It’s a secret valley, hidden deep in the Petrodoi Mountains. And,” he moved his eyes to me without moving his head, a sideways glance, “I know it sounds crazy, but they say the scientists found a way to make the plants grow again. And if the plants grow, then the atmosphere... they might be able to heal Iamos.”

I shook my head. “It can’t be real. If there was a way to fix Iamos, surely the *geroi* would...” I trailed off at his scoff, switched tactics. “Either way, if such a place existed, surely we would know about it! The System has the planet catalogued, there’s nowhere they could hide an entire city.”

“You’d be amazed how easy it is to trick a mind that’s become so reliant on the System.”

I stared at Eos, bewildered. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He smirked. “It’s just something I heard one time.”

I sighed in exasperation. “So, that’s where you think Nikos is now? Elytherios?”

Eos’ lopsided grin faded. “I don’t know where he is now. The plan was for me to take him there myself, and that Maetrin and Phados would meet up with us later. We knew that there was no hope for Maetrin and Phados to get into Bright Horizon. Even if they had, there was no way they could have kept Nikos hidden. But we didn’t think the Enforcers would come this early. We thought for sure the *geroi* would wait until after the harvest.”

I stared down at my toes, feeling guilty in spite of myself. It was ridiculous that I should care about the plight of this *plivos* and his family of lawbreakers, but...

I did care. I couldn’t help it. I cared.

*We live for each other.*

“Do you really think that Elytherios exists?” I asked at last.

Eos didn’t answer for a long moment. When he finally spoke, he didn’t meet my eyes. “Yes.”

I sighed, gnawing uncomfortably on my lip. Here it was, then. Something I’d never wanted, and never asked for. But realizing that it was *mine* filled me with an unexpected spark of life; it was as if I’d been sleeping all these years, and I had been suddenly, rudely awakened.

I had a choice.

\* \* \*

Getting them out of their cells and, then, out of the dome was no small matter. I was lucky, I supposed, to have been trained with the Enforcers. Seeing without being seen was one of our specialties. Silently moving in the shadows was another, and planting false evidence was a third. I was skilled at all three. Maetrin and Eos were scheduled for execution in the morning. A small tweak to the System meant simply that the records showed the execution had already been carried out. Between the upsurge in euthanizations and the routine execution of dissidents, two nondescript *plivoi* would never be noticed. For all intents and purposes, they would be dead.

If I had faith in one thing, it was my own abilities. No one would connect me with this disappearance, if they noticed it at all.

The stolen *gurzas* breathed laboriously in the thin air as we stood in the shadows outside Bright Horizon. I looked up at Eos, and he down at me.

“Will you be able to navigate without your earpiece?” I asked finally, feeling a bit pathetic. I wasn’t skilled at farewells; until now, there was no one I cared about enough to say goodbye to, honestly.

“We’ll be fine,” Eos reassured me. “The *patroi* would probably be scandalized to hear it, but we *plivoi* are far less reliant on the System than the rest of you. We’re better at surviving than you give us credit for.”

I laughed feebly, glancing over my shoulder for any signs that the other Enforcers were onto me. Maetrin had moved her *gurza* to the edge of the dome’s shadow and was watching me, her gaze heavy with mistrust. I knew she didn’t believe my offer of help was genuine. I couldn’t blame her; I had been, after all, responsible for the death of her partner, if nothing else. If I hadn’t alerted Ketros to Nikos’ presence, none of this ever would have happened.

I’d had a choice then, too. My whole life, I realized with a twinge, had been full of little choices, and I’d never noticed it. I’d chosen to follow the *geroi*. I’d chosen to enforce the Contract. Choice after choice after choice.

*Is that what freedom means?*

“You’d better hurry,” I said, “before the Enforcers catch you.”

Eos nodded and guided his gurza towards Maetrin's. I watched him, and thought, *I hope you find Elytherios.*

Then Eos paused, turning back to face me. "Enforcer," he began hesitantly.

"It's Marin," I corrected. We'd come too far for him to address me by my rank any longer. Besides, the title no longer seemed to fit me.

That crooked smile again. "Marin, then." He looked anxiously at Maetrin, then back at me. "You don't have to stay here, you know."

I stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending. He nudged the gurza forward, close enough that his words could be heard by no one but the two of us. "You've come this far," Eos said. "It could be all that's waiting for us out there is a cold death in the mountains, but... you have a choice."

Another choice.

In Bright Horizon, I led a life to be envied. My apprenticeship was almost complete. Under the *geroi*, I would be guaranteed a life of comfort and security. Wealth, prestige, anything a person could hope for would be at my fingertips. My birthright.

What awaited me out there? We'd be chasing a fairy tale. More likely than not, Elytherios didn't even exist. The odds were a million to one that there was nothing waiting for us in those mountains but death.

And freedom.

I closed my eyes and saw my future unfolding before me in two different directions: one a long, straight road, even and safe; the other a short, craggy trail leading to nowhere. To even consider it was complete lunacy.

But it was a choice.

I pulled out my earpiece. It was the one thing that bound me to the System—to the *geroi*, the collective, the Contract. For an odd, disjointed moment, it seemed I was holding my very life in my hand, and I looked down at it in wonder.

Then I dropped the earpiece to the ground and crushed it beneath my heel.

"I choose freedom."

Alyssa Altadonna graduated from Sonoma State University, where her studies in history taught her two important lessons: People Like Power and Trust No One (But Especially Not

Government). She lives in western Oregon with her family and assorted pets. You can visit her online at [altadonna.dreamwidth.org](http://altadonna.dreamwidth.org).

# **Nuclear Bomb Freedom**

*Claude David*

This runner up ingeniously combines news reports and social media posts to craft a compelling story of near-future spaceflight.

## **Barnsley student makes major science breakthrough**

BY LEWIS SMITH

MONDAY 8TH NOVEMBER 2021

**LOCAL TEEN science student Julia Rampersaud announced a long sought-after breakthrough in materials science.**

Julia, of Grove Road, Millhouses, is making waves in the global science community after her doctoral adviser accidentally leaked news of a recent discovery made by the young engineer.

Preliminary lab tests have shown the material, a kind of carbon nanotube, to be strong enough to support a cable that can reach nearly halfway to the moon. Such a material has been the holy grail of material science for more than sixty years. Julia made the discovery after more than a decade of research into the nature of cable dynamics and molecular bonds.

“I just want to go to space,” she said.

Julia is looking to license this incredible material and hopes it will go into production by the first quarter of 2022.

\* \* \*

## **ASTRONAUT MAKES ASTEROID FLYBY**

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — American astronaut Tom Evans completed the first manned flyby of an asteroid on Tuesday. The first stage in plans to begin mining and colonization efforts by Tokyo-based firm Senji Aeronautics, millions watched live as Evans successfully performed tests proving the possibility of human-based asteroid missions. Three robots



were left on the surface of the asteroid to gather data which will be used by the firm in future manned missions.

\* \* \*

### **SPACE ELEVATOR COMPLETED**

SINGAPORE (AP) — After eight years of construction, the world’s first space elevator finished construction seventeen kilometers south of Singapore. The US-German-Singaporean project required funding from the two superpowers and the creation of a new special shared sovereignty zone in Singapore. The United States and Germany have each dredged new sovereign territory off the coast of Singapore in cooperation with the Singaporean and Philippine governments. US and German settlement is set to open on Monday.

\* \* \*

### **Rampersaud Walks on Moon**

London (AP) — For the first time in sixty-four years, a human set foot on the moon. Trillionaire philanthropist Julia Rampersaud landed on the moon a mere six months after the completion of the space elevator she had helped design.

“Next stop: Mars!” Rampersaud said as she lowered her boot to the Lunar surface.

\* \* \*

### **Senji Aeronautics Board of Directors Authorizes \$1.8 Trillion Asteroid Colony**

(Source: Senji Aeronautics)

Tokyo (Japan) — Mar. 3, 2035 — The Board of Directors of Senji Aeronautics, Inc. today announced the terms of its seventh series Unsecured Straight Bonds, all of which will be issued and offered in Japan.

Issue amount 175 trillion yen.

\* \* \*

### **Manned Mission Headed For Asteroid**

LAGRANGIAN POINT 1, Earth-Moon Orbit (AP) — Senji Aeronautics launched its first manned mission to land colonists on an asteroid today. The asteroid lies in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. The astronauts, including Captain Tom Evans, are expected to arrive on the asteroid after nine months of travel, where they will begin construction of the first permanent manned asteroid colony.

\* \* \*



**Tom Evans** @cpt\_evans

Good to be back in space. Let's show those asteroids who's boss.

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### **Senji Will Open Singapore Elevator Market**

TOKYO — Buying appears to have run its course in the Tokyo market, with the Nikkei Stock Average ending Monday down 3839 points, or 0.23%, at 163,987.24.

Japanese stocks had been trading up on news of international agreement in regard to special sovereignty zones to coincide with the proposed Brazilian space elevator. But Japan's benchmark stock index entered negative territory on the view that Senji Aeronautics, Inc., Japan's largest aeronautics firm, would no longer need the use of a space elevator with the construction of its asteroid and moon mining operations.

Aiko Nakano, head of investment information at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley Securities pointed out that the impact on Japan of the new space elevator will be smaller than originally expected as Senji is expected to scale back its lease on the Singaporean elevator during its renewal negotiations next year.

\* \* \*

## **BREAKING NEWS: ACCIDENT REPORTED ON ASTEROID MISSION**

TOKYO (AP) — In a press conference minutes ago, President Nakamura of Senji Aeronautics, Inc., the world’s second largest aeronautics provider, announced that its manned mission to the asteroid belt had collided with an unknown object and was irreparably damaged. The crew are alive and well, but the ship’s engines have been damaged beyond repair and the ship is now flying off course into empty space.

Vice President Yamamoto was quoted as saying: “There is no hope for rescue.”

\* \* \*



**Julia Rampersaud** @JuliaRampersaud

@cpt\_evans I can come get you.

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\* \* \*



**Tom Evans** @cpt\_evans

@JuliaRampersaud I sure would appreciate it.

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## **RAMPERSAUD: I CAN RESCUE THEM**

LONDON (AP) — In a press conference this morning, billionaire English philanthropist and engineer Julia Rampersaud announced that she had developed the technology to rescue the astronauts stranded in space on Senji Aeronautics’s failed asteroid mission.

“All I did was design the ship,” Rampersaud said. “The technology has existed since the nineteen-sixties. It’s quite simple, really. We detonate a nuclear bomb instead of rocket fuel. The more powerful explosion will propel my rescue ship to more than five times the speed of the runaway mining ship. It’s literally the only way to move fast enough to catch them. I’ve been working on the design with my team in secret for years as part of a hypothetical robotic mission to Proxima Centauri. I have the ship’s design finished. I can be ready to launch in six months. It’s a tight window, but I believe I can retrieve the astronauts before their supplies run out and return them safely to earth.”

She added: “Now, who wants to give me the bombs?”

\* \* \*

### **SENJI RESPONDS**

TOKYO (AP) — Vice President Yamamoto of Senji Aeronautics, Inc. spoke this morning in response to Julia Rampersaud’s comments yesterday. He stated that his company could not condone the use of nuclear weapons, regardless of the circumstance.

\* \* \*

### **SENJI PRESIDENT FOUND DEAD**

TOKYO (AP) — President Nakamura of Senji Aeronautics, Inc. was found dead in his Tokyo home this morning after an apparent suicide.

\* \* \*

### **INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO SPACE CRISIS**

LONDON (AP) — World leaders spoke out today in opposition to Julia Rampersaud’s plan to rescue the stranded crew of the Senji Aeronautics asteroid mission.

US President Martha Lebowitz: “Not possible. As everyone knows, such a thing violates dozens of treaties. No country on earth is allowed to

hand over a nuclear bomb to a private citizen. It's just not happening. All due respect to Misses Rampersaud, but there's no way we can allow her to take a nuclear bomb onto the space elevator or detonate one in Antarctica. No way."

President Lebowitz chose not to respond to a question asking if it would be possible to take a nuclear bomb to Antarctica if Julia Rampersaud paid for the operation to be carried out by a special UN task force.

On a recording released by an anonymous source, UK Prime Minister John Green said: "We can't even own knives and she thinks we're going to give her nuclear bombs?"

Dr. Jamal Thomas, head of Environmental Studies at Stanford University said: "It's too dangerous to send a bomb up on the space elevator. The only other way would be to blast off from Antarctica, but we'd have to evacuate our researchers. The damage to the ecosystem would be too great. Antarctica is the world's greatest nature reserve. We can't risk that to save the lives of people who chose to go on a dangerous mission. They knew what they were getting themselves into. It's tragic what happened to them, but the cost of rescuing them is too high."

\* \* \*

### **RAMPERSAUD AND FAMILIES RESPOND**

LONDON (AP) — Julia Rampersaud and the families of the astronauts of the Senji Aeronautics asteroid mission made a plea to world leaders today in a press conference held outside Rampersaud's London home.

"The world is going to have to acknowledge that nuclear bombs are tools, not just weapons. They have legitimate uses, especially in the case of space travel. We've long believed that nuclear power is a useful tool that we shouldn't shy away from. I ask the world to extend this same courtesy to nuclear explosives and allow me to rescue the victims of this terrible tragedy."

\* \* \*

## UN SAYS NO

NEW YORK CITY (AP) — Actions spoke louder than words at the United Nations General Assembly this week. While the chat on the floor may have included the stranded astronauts and Julia Rampersaud's bold plan to rescue them, official business was carried out with no mention of Rampersaud's request.

\* \* \*

## RAMPERSAUD ARRESTED

SINGAPORE (AP) — Julia Rampersaud was arrested in the special shared sovereignty zone outside Singapore today. She was taken into US custody. She is suspected of attempting to carry fissile materials onto the space elevator. A prototype of her nuclear propulsion craft was found last night during a raid of her company's Bristol research facility. The craft's components were stored inside shipping containers ready to make their way onto a transport ship bound for Singapore.

\* \* \*



**Tom Evans** @cpt\_evans

It has been a pleasure serving with this crew. I wish you all a fond farewell. This is Captain Tom Evans signing off.

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## CREW OF ASTEROID MISSION DEAD

TOKYO (AP) — The crew of the Senji Aeronautics Inc. asteroid mission were reported dead today. The crew's supplies had dwindled in recent weeks. In a state of confusion, mission commander Captain Tom Evans accidentally opened the craft's airlock this morning, killing all on board. The craft's monitoring equipment will continue to provide valuable scientific data into the future.

Claude David is a shut-in from Philadelphia who now lives alone on a homestead in Montana with his six cats, three snakes, and pair of goats named George and Gracie.

# Government Cupid

## *Oliver Fisher*

This next runner up is a brilliant satire of a certain president and a certain “affordable” act.

### *The Case for the Partnership Act*

The first time I called Stu Patter to set up an interview, he thought I was a prank caller. I had him call my desk number at *Daily Post Magazine* to verify that I wasn’t joking when I said I wanted to interview him for a neutral, unbiased article about the Partnership Act.

“I’ve done interviews before, mind you,” he explained to me, “but it’s been years since the last one. It seems everyone just wants to forget about the Partnership Act.”

Stuart Patter, the seventy year old former Yale Law School professor and retired Director of the now-defunct Bureau of Partnership, lives in a comfortable suburban neighborhood in Reston, Virginia, about thirty miles outside Washington, D.C. “I just had to get outside the Beltway after I resigned,” he says in a tone of world weariness. “I’m really much more a man of the people than most people would think.”

Stu was an amiable interlocutor, well-spoken and charming. As soon as his wife (a pre-Partnership Act find, he tells me without a hint of irony) returned with a glass of white wine for each of us, he launched into his account of the Partnership Act.

To hear Patter tell it, the Partnership Act of 2019 was a good-faith effort to solve one of mankind’s biggest ongoing problems. “You can look at the public health numbers yourself,” he insisted.

“Single people comprise 43 percent of the adult population of the United States. Single people commit more crimes, kill themselves more frequently, live shorter lives, make less money, and have worse health than people in a relationship. If they’re not violent, single men just sit around on the couch watching football, wasting their time instead of becoming



productive members of society. Meanwhile, single women complain to everyone about their lack of dates and eat tubs of ice cream, burdening the health care system. It's horribly inefficient."

Warming to the subject, Patter fell into the pitch that now sounds so familiar to us. "If you said 43 percent of the country was suffering from a curable disease that ruins lives and imposes a huge cost on the economy, everyone would agree that distributing the cure to that disease should be the country's highest priority. The only reason people hesitated to cure the disease of single people is that there's an outdated Western cultural taboo of individualism, of invincible lone cowboy types who can do everything themselves, including finding their own mate through dating."

Stu laughed, seemingly genuinely though the thought had to have occurred to him thousands of times in the past. "There's a tremendous waste of assets in the sorting process of dating. Money spent on online dating only scratches the surface. Men and women, often poorly educated, put themselves into debt buying extravagant cars, perfumes, and makeup simply to attract a mate. Then there's the psychological cost of failed dates and loneliness, manifested in bills paid to psychiatrists and late-night rentals of romantic comedies. Our team of economic analysts estimated direct and indirect dating costs at roughly \$710 billion every year. Meanwhile, attractive people derive all sorts of unfair benefits because they're attractive. Studies repeatedly show they are advanced faster in their careers and make more money for the same work. Billions of dollars are spent on drinks bought for attractive people at bars every year. Is that fair? Hell no it isn't."

He grew a touch more somber. "Now, the economic case for the Partnership Act was always the most convincing part for me because I'm sort of a wonk about these things. But there's also the moral case. Dating is one of the most social things we do. Don't we always introduce single friends to each other and serve as a 'wingman' at bars? Shouldn't everyone have a wingman?"

\* \* \*

There was much truth in Patter's pitch. By 2014, fifty one percent of marriages ended in divorce and over forty percent of individuals of

marriageable age were single, seemingly destined to be old maids forever. Surely, a society as affluent as ours could afford to ensure that no one died alone.

The Partnership Act promised to mitigate the economic harm of singledom, provide companionship for the single, and level the playing field for the unattractive. The Act had three main components: subsidized exchanges on which single people could find partners, mandatory minimum requirements for partners (so-called “Adequate Partner Requirements”, or “APRs”) to ensure no one was paired with a bad partner, and the individual mandate requiring each citizen to be in a relationship or pay a fine.

Introduced by the President in her 2018 State of the Union address, the Partnership Act took a full year to wind its way through Congress. Stalwart members of the President’s party still insist that the concessions needed to secure passage of the bill fatally weakened the overall concept.

Rep. Nancy Polenta, the firebrand from San Francisco, is particularly touchy on the subject. “The President thought she could get bipartisan support if she went for exchanges instead of a single matcher service. If the federal government could just do the matching, you wouldn’t need an individual mandate or all those messy exchange stories. The experts could sift through the data, find the right matches for the right people, and boom, problem solved.”

Resignedly, she looked out the window of her Capitol Hill office and said, “Look at China and India. They’ve had arranged marriages for millennia. We’re the last civilized country that lets people risk living without a partner. And the best we could come up with were the federal exchange and the mandate—half measures doomed to failure.”

### ***Adequate Partner Requirements***

The signing ceremony for the Partnership Act took place on January 27, 2018. The President surrounded herself with supporters, each of whom lobbied furiously to be among those closest to the popular head of state. One person who did not need to lobby to be there was camera operator Jim Leonard.

“Just another day on the job, as far as I was concerned,” Leonard told me in his living room in Silver Spring, Maryland. “I remember the

President laughing, all smiles. I remember her looking right into the camera, right at me, and saying, ‘This law is for the single people. If you’re happy with your partner, you can keep your partner.’” Leonard gave a bitter laugh. “What a crock of shit.”

The mandatory minimum requirements set by the Bureau of Partnership reflected the consensus opinion of an expert panel of psychologists. On the basis of decades of work and research into relationship counseling, they came up with a list of attributes they considered necessary for a successful relationship.

One psychologist on the panel was Clyde West, a distinguished professor from Princeton. I spoke with him by phone because he didn’t want to disclose where he lived. “Too many bitter types out there might threaten me if they knew where I lived.”

West had done extensive research into the correlation between travel and divorce. “A couple where only one partner travels frequently for work has a 64 percent chance of divorce,” West explained. “The decision to include a cap on partner travel as part of the mandatory minimum partner requirements therefore reflected the best scientific knowledge available at the time.”

And what of the allegations that members of Congress, lobbied by major tech companies, had pressured the panel to adopt the less-travel requirement in order to generate more sales of telecommuting equipment?

“There’s no truth at all to those allegations. We did consult with members of Congress and brief them on our work. They expressed their opinions to us, but we would never have put the requirement in if it was not scientifically supported.”

Scientifically supported or not, the less travel requirement took a toll. Many couples broke up because one partner could not reduce his travel and, therefore, could not satisfy the partner mandate. Others quit their job to fulfill the mandate, but went stir-crazy in less stressful work, leading to still more break-ups.

Jim Leonard, the White House cameraman, was one person who could not satisfy the mandate. “I had to work hard to get this job. I started out in this business as a boom-mic operator at a crappy infomercial studio. You know the one where there’s a lady in black-and-white who can’t break an egg without stabbing herself until she gets the Easy-Break 2020®? I was the one who held the microphone over her head. But I did my job, did it

well, and ended up at the friggin' White House. Then I married the girl from the Easy-Break 2020® ads.”

I asked if he thought the travel put a strain on his marriage. “Hell no. I’d bring back a present from everywhere I visited, and when I came back, it’d be like we were like newlyweds.” A sigh. “But the mandate said I was no good. I told Sharon we could pay the fine, but she said she didn’t want to be breaking the law. But I think she really got concerned that she was married to someone that experts thought wasn’t good enough. So we got a divorce.”

When I relayed Jim Leonard’s story to Professor West, he was skeptical. “That’s possible, but it’s not our fault he and his wife acted irrationally. They could have paid the penalty and gone about their lives. The law is strictly amoral: we don’t care if people choose to pay the penalty instead of getting married. It’s not our fault when people put too much emphasis on following the mandate. All we can do, as people of science, is render our best judgment.”

One influential person who took Leonard’s story far more seriously was the President’s former political director, David Axenbar. A prominent supporter of the law, he claims that he spoke out early and often in internal meetings about the need to loosen the Adequate Partner Requirements.

“I was reading the headlines and watching the top stories on the news,” he tells me over dinner at the Monocle, a clubby restaurant on Capitol Hill. “The APRs were just killing us politically. Every day there’d be another story about some guy offing his wife because she was going to leave him because he flunked the APRs, or some lawsuit alleging corruption in the setting of the APRs, whatever. When I brought that up in the planning sessions, people kept telling me, ‘Don’t worry about it, the expert panels know what they’re doing, the wingnuts are just blowing the divorce stories out of proportion and the media wants whatever story they can get.’ But the news never got better.”

Axenbar was fired from the President’s team by the end of 2019, when the political toll of the Partnership Act was becoming clear. Axenbar claims he was unfairly made the scapegoat, though other senior administration officials claim that he had been just as gung-ho as everyone else about the Act when it had been passed.

Supporters of the Partnership Act maintain that the number of divorces brought about by the partner requirements pales in comparison to the

number of relationships saved or created by the Act. Over coffee at a cafe in Farragut Square, Ezra Clyde of the Wonkytonk blog heatedly told me, “Overall divorce rates plummeted following the Partnership Act. The Act created or saved over fifteen million marriages. And of the people who got divorces, how many were actually happily married? Probably not many, according to the science.”

### *The Partnership Mandate*

Even staunch defenders like Ezra Clyde admit that the partnership mandate was the most legally controversial part of the Partnership Act. Every adult in the United States had to provide proof that they were in a committed relationship heading toward permanent commitment, which normally meant marriage, but could also incorporate less traditional monogamous relationships.

As Stu Patter explained it, the basic rationale of the partnership mandate was to ensure the quality of the dating pool. “I talked this issue over with the President many times. She was skeptical at first. ‘Isn’t it heavy-handed to *force* people to date?’ Well, maybe, but viewed another way, the people who don’t go out on dates are *forcing* other people not to be able to see them. And when those young invincibles eventually decide that they want to date people, they will further weaken the quality of the dating pool by siphoning off the most attractive people who selflessly entered the dating pool. The only way you can ensure that the dating pool remains strong is to get those young invincible attractives into the pool as soon as possible. Hence the partnership mandate.”

While Patter had a reasonable case to make on the economics, the constitutionality of the partnership mandate was hotly contested. Within a year of passage of the Act, the case had run through a few different federal circuit courts of appeal and obtained different judgments. Some courts held that Congress had no constitutional authority to force individuals to enter into relationships. Others held that Congress had power to levy the fine for individuals who didn’t fulfill the mandate under its taxing power.

Charles Friedman, a constitutional scholar from Harvard, maintains that the case was an easy call from the beginning. “Any reasonable person would concede that Congress has the authority to force people to pay taxes.

If Congress wants to raise taxes through a fine on single people, there is no particular reason they can't do that."

But what of the argument that the original meaning of the taxing power meant raising money for revenue purposes, not for regulatory ends like forcing people to date?

"Rubbish," Friedman scoffs. "That would be absurdly limiting. There is no one true 'meaning' of the taxing power. It means what the country needs it to mean. A court striking down an important law on the basis of the naive idea that words have a fixed meaning would be the height of irresponsibility."

The Supreme Court ultimately agreed with Friedman by a vote of six to three. The majority opinion held, "When the legality of an economic law of national importance rests on an ambiguous clause of the Constitution, we will not substitute our opinion for those of the voters."

The legality of the partnership mandate was thus rendered clear by the highest court in the land. The actual mechanics of enforcing the mandate proved to be more intractable, however. The Bureau of Partnership developed detailed methods to prove commitment to a relationship that satisfied the Adequate Partner Requirements. Affidavits were merely the first step. Receipts for joint meals, ticket stubs for nights at the movies, pictures of the couple together, or even transcripts of romantic conversations could be offered as evidence.

Patter, the former director of the Bureau of Partnership, quickly assured me, "No one had to submit any particular piece of documentary evidence. If they wanted their conversations kept private, a couple could send in a picture of them playing Pictionary, or a selfie of the two of them watching a sunset. The important point was that every person had to be contributing to the pool of acceptable partners."

In practice, the mandate proved to be easily subverted. While attractive single people may not be a majority of the population, they are a discrete (and very popular) interest group. The most beautiful people in the country descended upon Washington to lobby for votes, forming coalition organizations such as Band Against Bad Economics (BABEs). Suddenly, elected representatives throughout Washington were spotted around the city with extremely attractive dates. Within days, the mandate fine was lowered from \$5,000 per year to \$100, dramatically undermining the usefulness of the mandate.

But what about the marriages “created or saved”? How many of those were marriages of convenience to satisfy the partner mandate? How many of the marriages would have occurred without the law? And how does the federal government measure marriages “saved” by the partner mandate?

Clyde explained it to me with a knowing smile. “The whole point of the Act was to increase the number of marriages. Suddenly, critics of the President care why people get married? Isn’t that awfully convenient?”

### *DateEx*

Opponents and supporters of the Partnership Act argued bitterly over the Adequate Partner Requirements. They followed the progress of the partner mandate cases through the American legal system. One thing that brought both sides together, however, was the hapless federal dating exchange, DateEx.gov.

Rep. Nancy Polenta rolls her eyes when I bring up DateEx to her. “They ought to put those programmers on trial. DateEx was a criminal joke. We put billions of dollars into the Partnership Act. My sister ended up being matched with a crossdresser who just happened to have also said that he liked Coldplay.”

The exchange was meant to be the most efficient method of gathering all partners together and guiding suitable people to each other. To that end, the Bureau of Partnership worked with their expert panels to develop a foolproof set of criteria to match people based on related interests. Then, using information on consumers obtained through advanced Internet traffic data and profiles generated by data brokers, the Bureau of Partnership would give each user three choices each week: a Gold, Silver, or Bronze match. Naturally, the Gold option was meant to correspond to the exchange participant calculated to be the most likely match-up; the Silver option was the second-most likely; and the Bronze the third-most likely.

In order to satisfy the partner mandate, the individual participant would either have to certify that she was in a relationship heading toward serious commitment or go out on at least one date each week with the Gold, Silver, or Bronze option of that week.

The system seemed eminently rational. Experts making the decisions, supplied with a wealth of information beyond the dreams of the most

pervasive marketing firm, running a market populated by every person within the reach of the American legal system, thanks to the partner mandate.

The dating model generated for use on DateEx.gov was one of the most complicated behavioral models ever devised. It factored in hundreds of variables, from television viewing preferences to height to cuisine preferences. The model attempted to account for what individual users claimed to think was important, modifying the algorithms themselves to cater to the users' needs.

The result was a monument to bureaucratic hubris. The website itself did not work for two months, resulting in panicked postponements of enforcement of the partnership mandate. Once the website was up and running, it was clear that the models were completely inadequate to the task of matching people up correctly.

The system sparked literally millions of absurd anecdotes, running the gamut from hilarious to absurd to terrifying. One twenty-five year old man's Gold match in his second week on the exchange was a ninety year old woman who happened to share his love of Thai food and the television show *House of Cards*. A thirty year old woman found herself on a date with a mental patient (who had gnawed his way out of his restraints and escaped from his institution) because he had also recently watched the movie *Casablanca*.

I asked several of the technicians who ran DateEx.gov (the poorly chosen URL of the exchange) to explain how they coded the exchanges based on the psychologists recommendations. None of them wanted to give their names. One programmer (let's call him "Mike") sat in my car and talked to me for an hour, so fearful was he that if someone saw him talking to me, they might eventually figure out after this article was released that he had been part of DateEx.gov.

Looking out my car window on a rainy night, Mike said, "My friends at work would all joke about how we'd program DateEx to match us with supermodels. The sad thing is, we never actually did anything like that. We were pros. I had worked at Google for a decade before coming to DateEx. Co-workers had been at Facebook, Microsoft, you name it. We had consultants from OKCupid, Match.com, and the other private dating sites. We were a dream team. And, sure, we all wanted to help the President with



her big domestic initiative, but mostly we just wanted to help people be happy.”

Mike’s story largely checked out. While there was some corruption among the DateEx programmers, the system was far too complicated to easily game into getting hot dates for the programmers themselves. Corruption within the exchanges came mainly in the form of lobbying to have some factors weigh more than others in the matching algorithm.

For example, one programmer argued vociferously for the inclusion of a question to female users: “How expensive is your perfume?” The answer would factor into the algorithm by increasing a female user’s “femininity” variable if she purchased expensive perfume. Generally speaking, the higher the “femininity” variable, the better the male dates the woman would end up with. DateEx users quickly realized that fact, and the word spread through online forums: start buying more expensive perfume (or lying about it, which would still create the expectation among the general population that perfume was important).

The programmer who came up with that question now works for L’Oreal.

But, according to Mike and other DateEx programmers, the fatal flaw of DateEx was not the dozens of little bits of corruption that worked their way into the matching algorithm. The enterprise itself was too ambitious.

“Life just ended up being more complicated than we had considered, y’know? It’s one thing to design a site for people who want to date, but we had to predict and model the hopes, dreams, and preferences of 300 million people. They themselves don’t know what they want romantically, and we suddenly had to understand each U.S. citizen better than they understood themselves.”

### ***A Problem Unsolved***

Supporters of the Partnership Act still point fingers at each other, trying to figure out where the law went off the rails.

Rep. Nancy Polenta assured me, “If we hadn’t let that stupid BABEs group weaken the partner mandate, the Act would be looked at today as the greatest success in the history of the country.”

Ezra Clyde scoffed at that idea when I raised it to him. “The technicians didn’t implement the exchanges correctly. The mandate and the adequate partner requirements were carefully crafted, we just couldn’t get the ball the last five yards into the end zone when it came time to build DateEx.”

David Axenbar vociferously argued, “When the Adequate Partner Requirements were causing so many disastrous news stories, it doesn’t matter what else was going right in the Act.”

While the supporters argue about what could have made the difference, it seems clear from the outside that each of the three pillars of the Partnership Act—the Adequate Partner Requirements, the partner mandate, and DateEx.gov—failed to achieve their objectives. The ultimate repeal of the Partnership Act came in 2020, just in time to take the issue away from a hungry opposition that might otherwise have defeated the President’s reelection bid.

The President has set an ambitious agenda for her second term, one that many of the people I spoke with support. However, a clear theme emerged when I asked my interviewees what advice they’d give for future projects like the Partnership Act: “Don’t take away what people have and replace it with what you think they want.”

I asked Professor Patter about that notion as I was on my way out of his house. He gave me a tired smile. “People say they don’t want change because they’re irrational and risk-averse. You want to know why the Partnership Act failed? It wasn’t the APRs, the mandate, or the exchange. It was the people.”

Oliver Fisher is a freelance writer of political satire, and a firm believer in boating safety. Handsome and debonair, Oliver flouts the rules and gets results. His work has been featured on numerous websites and publications, some of which have been reputable. He currently lives on a luxury paddleboat in the Tidal Basin.

# The Rescue

## Jaylan Phoenix

A rip-roaring space opera with not a little humor, this story explores the boundaries of law on a giant worldship.

My head throbbed and I felt like steaming shit. Which, coincidentally, is what it tasted like I'd swallowed. It felt like I'd been on a six-day bender, up to and including my inability to remember where I was and how I'd gotten there. "Paige," I said through numb lips, "what day is it?"

*It is April the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2567 EHT*, came the polite reply in my mind. When Paige was being polite, it sorta had the opposite meaning. Also, she gave me the date in Earth Historical Time, which she only did when she was forcing me to think. I did the mathematical equivalent of morning coffee and converted the date to 406.113 P.D.—that's Post Diaspora. The Free City-Ship Nebula had been flying through space for over 406 annums.

***If I could interrupt your laying around and perhaps prompt you with more information, you might be interested to know that you're currently in a fight and have taken a blow to the head. While I'm working to mitigate the concussion, if you insist on continuing to take hits, there's only so much I will be able to do.***

Well, that explained a lot. I managed to pry open my eyes and focus my vision. Now I remembered—I'd insulted the ogre. He was a particularly ugly one, after all. Sure, ogres, orcs, trolls, they were all fuck-ugly, but this guy took the prize. He was covered in tufts of knotted, nappy brown hair. He'd braided the hair on his head, though it was no cleaner. That broad, flat head sat on less neck than usual for his kind, his bulging shoulders looking like a heavy-armor exosuit, and likely just as strong. In his big, bear-clawed mitt of a fist was a homemade maul, a big chunk of steel—ripped from who-knew-where—attached to an almost-five-foot-long shaft of lightweight carbon nanocomposite. It looked rather effective as he lifted it over his head and sent it rocketing down for another chance at my melon.

"Shit!" I uttered as I rolled to the side. Paige had been doing good work while I remembered how I'd gotten there, so I was able to dodge

without any nausea from my concussed head. I sprang to my feet before the ogre could extricate his blunt instrument from the hole it had torn in the floor. I could hear the bartender cursing at the damn changeling tearing up his place.

In its 406 annums, the FCS Nebula had never come into contact with aliens. Instead, some of us became them. About a hundred annums out from Sol, our forefathers had encountered a device of some sort floating in interstellar space. No one remembered exactly what it was or what it looked like, except maybe some of the elder Feyn, but everyone knew what happened when our idiot ancestors took it onboard. A plague was released, a mutagenic retrovirus that altered the infected's DNA. It became a ship-wide pandemic and before it was stamped out, nearly half the population had been changed into something no longer human. The three separate, and entirely new, species were collectively referred to as changelings.

The hulking, ugly changeling in front of me finally managed to yank free his bludgeon, spinning to send the chunk of steel's momentum toward my head. I ducked it easily, muttering to myself as I did. The barely uttered phrase sent a wash of heat over my right hand, invisible except for the rapidly rippling air around it. I tried to focus the heat, force it into a knife-like blowtorch about my fingers, but the power—both physical and will—was just not there. I must have taken a hell of a blow to the head. *C'mon Paige, I'm workin' here!* I thought, frantically.

***You're in a bar fight, Link. I'm working to keep you alive,*** she groused.

My embedded sarcasm factory may not have been able to improve my hand of fire, but since she was already working hard repairing my bruised—but otherwise magnificent—brain, she did give me a little perception boost. As the ogre brought the maul back in for another horizontal strike, I was able to step back out of its reach and find the perfect moment to shove it with my left hand, throwing fuck-ugly's balance off, which had the effect of bringing his upper body slightly farther forward. I stuck my superheated right hand into that ugly face, igniting his coarse hair, monstrous eyebrows, and bristly, overgrown Fu Manchu. Howling in panic, the ogre began swinging his maul indiscriminately, flailing in every direction.

“Oh, shit!” I exclaimed articulately. I grabbed a pitcher of what I thought was beer from a nearby table, where a trio of lynix sat watching the now-too-thrilling show, and threw its contents at the raging brute. But, since

the pitcher held a half-gallon of some caramel-colored spirit instead of beer, the raging brute quickly turned into a raging fireball. “Shit again!” I yelled, flinching from the whoosh of heat.

Now in full panic, the ogre dropped his weapon in mid-swing—the maul went flying, narrowly missing another patron before embedding itself in a framed and autographed poster of a mostly naked Feyn model—and ran pell-mell right into an upright metal beam. The reverberating clang of skull on metal was immediately drowned out by the swoosh of fire suppressant from a multidirectional nozzle on the ceiling. Fire was a serious hazard when you lived on a ship the size of a small moon in the middle of the deepest, blackest space.

*Subtle*, Paige remarked.

“I aim to please,” I replied, forcing my eyebrows back down in an attempt to look as though I’d meant to do all that.

*When you aim, that is.*

“Picky, picky,” I muttered as I began rifling through the ogre’s pockets. He was wearing the thick, multi-pocketed cargo pants issued to the Nebula’s heavy maintenance staff. A mangy-looking lynix—not affiliated with the well-groomed group to whom I owed a drink—tried to sneak up on me as I searched the ogre’s possibly-dead body. I didn’t know if he was an associate, or just a concerned citizen who didn’t like the idea of looting the dead after a bar fight gone too far. I was leaning toward the former given his unsavory look.

Either way, keeping my eyes on my task, I pointed a finger straight at him—a finger that buzzed a high-pitched warning that ramped up like a turbine gaining speed. “Don’t try me, pussy. I’ll make your mangle an appealing alternative.” The ear-piercing droning was actually harmless beyond the pain it caused his sensitive lynix ears, but he didn’t need to know that. The lynix, named after an old Earth wildcat, were fierce and prideful changelings, but this one seemed to know the better part of valor and, with a swish of his dingy gray tail, went back to his seat.

A little more rummaging finally produced what I was looking for: a small, folded-up notepad. I didn’t power it on right there in the bar—breaking its encryption would be a more delicate task suited for a quieter moment with Paige—but I was sure it held the lists of names, dates, and locations I was looking for. I slipped the device into the inner pocket of my jacket and made for the door.

“Hey!” the bartender shouted. “Somebody’s gonna pay for this damage; I don’t care if you are a mancer.” He had balls, making demands of a technomancer, I’d give him that. It wasn’t *my* fault the ogre had tried to pound my head into a lumpy paste—okay, maybe it was a little—but I decided it wasn’t really the barman’s either, so I flicked a finger at his POS screen, which dinged as a large sum of credits scrolled onto the display.

“Thank you, sir,” he called as I left his dump of a bar.

“Paige,” I said as I briskly traversed the halls toward the nearest lift, “those credits came from the ogre’s accounts, right?”

***Do you think we’re running a charity here? Of course they did. Mostly.***

\* \* \*

My apartment was an inconspicuous walk-up in Lower Foreton, a working class part of the ship. The door slid open soundlessly as I approached, but I knew better than to accept its disingenuous invitation. Even the most thorough biometrics could be duped. Locks were there to keep the honest, well, honest—my wards were what would keep out the dishonest.

I ran a hand up one jamb and down the other, releasing a series of shortwave radio pulses and hypersonic bursts. If anyone crossed the threshold without properly dispelling, for lack of a better term, my added protections, they would be met with an unfortunate series of mishaps. I wasn’t a complete barbarian; the slaving monster, wreathed in flames and coming out of a vast darkness to greet their arrival, was merely an illusion. The burning, star-bright wash of plasma it would emit if they didn’t run, however, was quite real.

The door slid closed behind me as I walked into the living room. I pulled the notepad out of my pocket and tossed it on the couch before removing my short jacket. I folded it and placed it on the dresser just inside my bedroom. The heavy, rubbery shirt came off next. It could be somewhat uncomfortable at times, but it was also better than nanocomposite armor, and didn’t inhibit my connection to the environment so important to my abilities. The thick, backswept spikes of my bronze-tinted hair clattered

softly as the shirt brushed over them. Silico-polymer gel kept them hard as bone until I willed otherwise.

That taken care of, I returned to the couch, quickly scanning a few messages as they floated in the air in front of me. I flopped down next to the notepad, flicking a finger absently toward the entertainment center to cue up a playlist. The music stopped as soon as it began, and I looked up, a questioning scowl on my face. Paige was projecting herself between me and the monitor, hands on her hips. She appeared younger, more like she had when we were fifteen, which meant she was feeling insecure, worried. My oldest friend. Shit, my only friend.

Technomancers were rare for many reasons. For one thing, very few people had the genetic and neurological compatibility needed for the implants to take root. For another, the process needed to begin when the subject was a small child. The delicate weaving of nanotech into the nervous and lymphatic systems had to grow into place along with the biological tissue. Few parents were willing to commit their children to such an existence so early in life.

And then there was the AI pairing.

Most people would commission an AI assistant as an adult and raise it into maturity to suit their needs and personality. A technomancer's AI was different. It didn't merely link to the owner's devices; it lived and grew inside their own minds, part of them down to the very core of their psyche. Its personality developed alongside the technomancer's. Paige was closer to me than any sister, any lover, or any friend. We'd been through a lot together. We kept each other sane.

She furrowed her brow, looking for all the ship like a petulant teenager, wispy blond hair in her face. **"That wasn't being more careful. We've talked about this, Link."**

"The guy came after *me*," I protested.

**"You provoked him. There are other ways to get what you need besides starting trouble."**

"So, what, I should have asked nicely? 'Please, sir, can I have the evidence I need to shut down your illegal smuggling operation?' I'm sure that would have worked."

**"You could have challenged him to a drinking contest and rifled through his pockets when he passed out. I could have increased liver function enough to keep you on your feet."**

“The guy weighed as much as three of me. And there’s no way I’d drink anything they sold in that bilge hole.”

Paige, realizing we were fighting, broke eye contact, wrapping her arms around her middle and looking down. I hated that she was always the one to defuse the situation. It was part of her programming, and I abhorred the reminder that as sentient as she was, as full of spirit and desire, hopes and dreams and all the things that made her a person, there were some things in which she didn’t have a choice. With her looking like a vulnerable young girl, the whole thing was damn near heartbreaking.

“Hey,” I cooed. “Paige, I’m sorry. You’re right; I should’ve used my head more and my mouth less. I went in there like a pulse driver, and everything looked like it needed pounding.”

**“If that ogre had hit you three millimeters lower on your skull, we probably wouldn’t be having this conversation. It was too close, Link. If you die, your troubles are over, but where does that leave me?”** She flopped down on the couch next to me, though the cushions took no notice of her holographic presence. **“I get backed up to an AI server and have to go on without you. I get bought by some asshole and have to keep the books straight for his shitty little plumbing business. I’d be me, all my data and algorithms intact, but the best part of me, the part that makes life worth living—I can’t make a backup of you, Link.”**

“I know. I love you, too, Paige.”

No, I wasn’t in some kinky, pathetic relationship with my AI. It had been known to happen, but that was a path to madness for a technomancer. I loved Paige like a sister and a best friend in one. That didn’t really begin to describe it though. Like I said, we were closer than all that.

**“We gonna hug this out? You need a tissue? Tampon?”** The shit-eating smirk on her holographic face was priceless. I couldn’t help laughing, and could feel my heart beating now that the constricting emotion had drained away. I also noted her avatar was back to normal, matching my late twenties age.

“C’mon,” I said, picking up the notepad. “Let’s get this thing cracked open so I can tell the captain I’m making progress.”

She sighed for effect. **“You seriously need to get laid.”**

“Just cause you like to watch. Perv.”

\* \* \*



While there were trams spanning the length and breadth of the ship, I preferred to walk as much as possible. Travelling to the bridge at the extreme upper level, however, required time in a lift or two. In fact, from the lower levels where I lived to the bridge level was a five-minute lift ride. At this late hour, I had the rising cab all to myself. I leaned back against the wall, my eyes closed, taking a quiet moment to just listen to the hum of the cab and think of nothing. On a ship that housed twelve million people, quiet was a rare commodity.

The lift emitted a soft tone, its doors sliding open, and I stepped out onto the bridge of the FCS Nebula. It wasn't as fancy as it sounded. Sure, there was a large holo projection of the ship in schematic form, data points flashing all about, in the center of the room with several smaller workstations laid out around it. But since most functions of the ship were controlled by virtual intelligences—a VI was much like an AI, but without the sentience—the bridge wasn't exactly a buzzing hive of activity.

Three people, all human, sat on bridge, but only two were watching the ship. The third was the Captain's secretary. I flashed her a bright smile as I strode across to her desk. I also tried, probably unsuccessfully, to keep my eyes from dropping to the tight front of her tastefully low-cut sweater.

"Good evening, Annise. You look lovely as ever. One of these days, I'm going to take you away from all this tedium," I told her with all the charm I could muster.

"One of these days," she replied, her smile beatific, "I'm going to throw myself out of an airlock, Mr. Milenko."

That part about all the charm I could muster? Relative term.

"The Captain's waiting for you," she finished professionally. She pressed a button and the doors to Captain Rominger's office slid open.

***She's really coming around to you, stud,*** Paige taunted as I entered the office. ***Another hundred years, she might even go out with you.***

I ignored her, focusing instead on the Nebulan flag that took up the entire rear wall of the Captain's office: a hand holding a torch on a field of black, its flame a stylized sun surrounded by eight differently colored orbs. Liberty holding aloft the planetary system that birthed our people. I knew I was a verbose smartass—an *asshole* if you asked the right people—but never let it be said that I was anything less than a patriot.

Which was why I was here, why I worked for the ship's captain. In the government of the Free City-Ship Nebula, the captain was an elected

position on the same level as the president. A Libertarian Republic, the Nebula's constitution was based heavily on the original one used by the old United States of America before the Dim Ages. Where they'd had three branches of government, we had a fourth, the Naval. It ran the ship's security, law enforcement, and the ship itself. It was a fourth check on the delicate balance of power that held back the dangerous, ravaging beast that was the result of putting men in charge of other men.

"Mr. Milenko," the Captain said by way of greeting, "please have a seat." His smile wasn't *unfriendly*. I knew he liked me, or at least I thought he did. He'd let a bit of almost fatherly affection slip out here and there. But I also knew he wasn't sure of me, yet. Captain Rominger was a man who greatly valued honor and discipline and trust. His esteem was not cheaply earned.

"Hey, boss. How's it hanging?" There might have been a reason the Captain was still unsure of me. He wasn't the only one who held me to high standards, however. I wanted to be good enough, useful enough, to overcome the deficit of my attitude and earn his respect anyway.

To Rominger's credit, he managed to stifle the grimace this time. It probably didn't hurt that I placed on his desk the notepad I'd taken from the ogre last night. The screen was on and scrolling through some of the more interesting bits.

"This is where they've been storing and transferring their contraband?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." I gave him that sir as a freebie. No need to immediately negate my accomplishments. And it was an accomplishment. In a Libertarian society, contraband was hard to come by, and thus cracking down on it was even more important. Most anything was fair game, so long as it didn't deprive anyone of life, liberty, or property through force or fraud. Repurposing stolen materials as counterfeit goods qualified as both force and fraud. "I think you'll find everything you need there to cramp these guys' styles."

"Good work, Milenko," he said, leaning back. "I'm sensing a *but*, though."

"Perceptive as usual, boss. Paige and I found a couple of anomalies. Here," I tapped the screen, stopping its automatic scroll on one entry, then flicked my finger, sending the list scrolling faster than most eyes could read, then tapped it again, "and here."

“Anomalies?”

“They don’t fit the pattern. Small shipments that don’t seem worth the trouble, a different nomenclature for the entries, and the kicker, tougher encryption.”

“I take it you want permission to investigate these further.”

“I do, Captain. Also,” and this was the part where I thought I was pushing it, “I’d like to ask that you hold off on stopping the main smuggling operations while I look into it. I don’t want them tipped off.”

Captain Rominger leaned forward, rubbing his salt-and-pepper eleven o’clock shadow and scanning the bits of data I’d pointed out. “Granted,” he said, just as I’d decided he was going to say no. “But I won’t hold off forever, so move quickly. And Link, try not to set anyone else on fire.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir.” I hurried out of his office before he could change his mind.

\* \* \*

The ledger I’d given the Captain was more than just a record of shipments, meetings, and storage locations; it also contained similar logistical data for the coming week’s operations. The next shipment transfer that matched the few anomalous entries I’d noted was scheduled for that following evening, which gave me just enough time to finish a project of mine. Well, okay, it was a project of Paige’s that I was helping with. But it was *for* me, so whatever. Either way, it meant obtaining the last component, a rare element called Barsoomium. One of the only stable elements above 100 on the periodic table, it got its name from a centuries-old story where Mars, the planet it was first synthesized on, was called Barsoom by its inhabitants.

Regardless of the element’s nomenclature, I needed a chunk of the stuff, and damn was it expensive. Fortunately, I had a supplier who was willing to get me some. He’d agreed to meet me over coffee, something else that was going to cost me a pretty credit. It still had to be naturally grown—and by naturally I meant on real plants, even if they were genetically modified to grow on a three-dimensional latticework and produce a massive number of beans. Any naturally grown foods were bound to be expensive due to the resources required, particularly space on a garden deck.

The café—no other name, since it was the only one—was located in the ritziest part of the ship, a small residential/commercial block in the central open-air hold. It had a whole classical pre-Dim-Ages style going on, with outdoor tables that had individual fabric domes over them. I took a seat under one and waited for my supplier to arrive. An attractive young Feyn waitress came to take my order. She had dark maroon hair cut in short spirals around her pale, exotic face. Her large, dark eyes had me lost for a moment before I remembered her question.

“Hot cream tea, please,” I ordered. Tea *could* be artificially synthesized, so I could better afford it, even if a cup of the cream tea—brewed in a rich, creamy syrup—was as much as a gallon of the stuff they sold at the store. I’d order Marlin’s coffee when he showed up.

***Hey, Link, I think she just gave you the eye,*** Paige told me.

“She’s just fishing for a tip,” I countered, putting my ankle across my knee.

***Oh, I don’t think so. That smile was real; all the facial muscles were engaged. There were also some interesting temperature fluctuations in her skin. Play your cards right, and you might be able to give her more than just the tip.***

I laughed. “Paige, you’re a perv. And a killer wingman.”

***I’ll be a miracle worker if I can prevent you from blowing this.***

“We’ll see. Business before pleasure, however.”

My supplier approached through the midmorning crowd and took a seat opposite mine. Marlin was one of the Feyn, like my waitress—and yet not at all alike. In the same way there were three different types of brutes, the male and the female Feyn were almost two separate types of changelings. Marlin was old, very old, possibly one of the first generations of changelings. The waitress would never make it past twenty-five or twenty-six. Marlin was tall, too, nearly seven feet of gaunt, grayish skin and bones. The waitress, who was coming over to take Marlin’s order, was maybe five-three, and though her build was very slender, it was more human than that of the man who ordered the most expensive cup of Joe on the menu.

I watched her tight posterior as she walked away and tried not to think about how fleeting her life would be. Did the long-lived Feyn men weep over their mayfly sisters and lovers and mothers? Maybe not. After all, there were plenty more—the females outnumbered the males fifty to one.

“I was able to obtain the amount you require,” Marlin said by way of greeting. That was another difference between the Feyn sexes. The women were usually friendly and outgoing, often working in the service and entertainment industries. The men, not so much.

“Why aren’t you a senator?” I asked him abruptly. “You’re certainly old enough.”

While the female Feyn were often actresses, singers, servers, or call girls, the males were more often professors, business leaders, or senators. The Senate was composed entirely of Feyn, their long years and value of wisdom and intelligence making them ideal, steady hands on the tiller of state. The House of Representatives was made up of a mix of the other three races: brutes, lynix, and humans.

Marlin, not one to share personal details, grimaced at my question but answered anyway. “I would not be able to live as I’m accustomed on a politician’s salary, and I am not that patriotic.” Elected officials were truly civil servants; they were paid enough to live in comfort, but not in luxury. “Or perhaps I am too patriotic,” he said as though he genuinely wasn’t sure, “and don’t believe I would be adequately suited to the task.”

It was not unusual for a male Feyn to know everything about everything except himself. Some of them had a nearly pathological lack of ego, which is not to say that they couldn’t be conceited or selfish in their own ways.

“Yes,” Marlin continued after a moment’s reflection, “I am sure it’s the latter option. Oh, thank you, dear.” The last he said to the waitress who set down his criminally expensive latte. She smiled demurely—not at all like she’d smiled at me—and continued on her busy rounds.

“Well, let’s not have you dipping below the lifestyle to which you’re accustomed, then,” I told him. “If you’d like to confirm the transfer of funds, I’m ready to take possession of the Barsoomium.”

“Of course,” he replied. From the inner pocket of his impeccably tailored jacket, he produced a small notepad and tapped briefly on its surface. “Excellent,” he said once he confirmed I’d indeed paid him what he’d asked. From another pocket, he drew a small cylindrical canister about the size of a tall saltshaker. He couldn’t open it without contaminating the Barsoomium, but I trusted it was filled with what he said it was. The old ones valued their reputations. They were all rich, so their standing was what was truly important to them.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” I said in a tone that made clear what we both knew: he was raping me on the price, but there was no one else I could trust to get it for me aboveboard. I held out my hand, which he gazed at a moment, judging its dubious cleanliness, before shaking.

He finished his coffee in a last, long sip, closing his large eyes to savor it, then left. The waitress came by a moment later with the check. I tried to ignore the total at the bottom of the little screen, instead focusing on her name at the top. Sashia. A little shudder ran through me, connecting that sexy name to what I imagined her body looked like under her uniform.

**Well, do something about it,** Paige said, guessing at my thoughts. She couldn’t read my mind, but she did know how my body reacted to that little wave of lust and knew me well enough to interpret it.

I sighed, having no confidence in my luck with the ladies. But when she came back to collect the check and ask if there was anything else I needed, I screwed up my courage and asked if she was doing anything that weekend.

“I’m sure you get asked that a lot,” I immediately hedged. “I don’t mean to be ‘that guy’ so—”

**Shut up, shut up, shut up, moron,** Paige was shouting in my head.

I hesitated a moment, about to tell Paige to shut up right back. It was the best thing I could have done.

“Not all that much,” Sashia responded. “And I *am* free this weekend. Let me give you the link to my comm.”

**Already got it,** Paige said smugly. I’d have to have a talk with her about hacking comms, the bad girl.

\* \* \*

“Careful,” I said, biting my cheek. “Slowly. Slow...”

**Milenko Calhoun Archov, if you do not shut up and let me do this, I swear to God I will give you a facial tic for an annum!**

“Ever hear of multitasking?”

**I am multitasking. Like a motherfucker. Now shut up and watch.**

I put my elbows on the workbench and stared into the vacuum chamber. The Barsoomium had to be integrated into the device Paige and I were making without the air contaminating it. The vacuum chamber had a

pair of robotic manipulator arms inside it, and not only was she handling the physical materials, but she was also carefully controlling the electromagnetic fields within the chamber.

She drew the powdered Barsoomium out of its container with a combination of electromagnetic and sonic pulses, gently heated it, then using gravitonic fields, compressed it into a dense, solid rod approximately the size of my thumb. The rod was then slid into a shielded casing which Paige sealed with a similar technique. The hiss of air entering the vacuum chamber as its valve was released was mirrored by my own exhalation.

***Your turn.***

I flipped open the lid on the vacuum chamber and snatched up the sealed rod. It was unnaturally heavy for something that fit in the palm of my hand. Sliding my chair farther down the bench, I took in my other hand a larger cylindrical section of a dark, burnished alloy. I dropped the Barsoomium charge into the cylinder and welded it shut with my finger. That bit of alloy and nanotube circuitry had been milled to lock seamlessly into place on the end of a collapsible carbon nanocomposite shaft we'd built previously. The whole thing, when not collapsed, was exactly 1.4 meters long. A staff.

“So, you wanna test this thing?” I asked.

***Could I stop you?***

I grinned. “Nah.”

I secured the staff upright to the workbench with a vise grip before walking a number of paces away. Then I thought about what was going to go on inside that staff and took several more steps. From my pocket, I withdrew a gleaming white orb not unlike a billiards cue ball. It interacted with the ship's gravitonic fields that kept everyone from floating off their respective floors, using its own fields to augment and direct its momentum. We'd made good credits with it once upon a time in the bars before Paige boosted its power by an order of magnitude.

“Turn it on,” I requested.

Immediately I could feel the draw of power as the staff sucked energy from the room's wireless charging fields. It was the same energy used to charge most electronic devices on the ship, as well as my own abilities as a technomancer. It was drawing quite a bit of power, enough for me to be able to feel it like a wind across my skin.

Cocking back my throwing arm, I took aim at a space just behind the head of the staff and threw with all my strength. That strength was magnified by the ball until it was a white streak rocketing across the room. There was a low, quick, whirring noise as the ball came even with the staff and was suddenly flying in a different direction. It pinged off an adjacent wall, crashed through a rack of tools, ricocheted off another bit of equipment, and nearly took my head off as I ducked before it embedded itself in the wall behind me.

“Shit yeah!”

*What you said, only eloquently*, Paige agreed.

“I must admit, Paige, I was skeptical when you came up with this idea, but damn if it doesn’t work.”

*The laws of physics don’t lie, Link, even if they don’t make any sense to you.*

Despite Paige’s jab, I knew mostly how the staff worked. The mechanism around the Barsoonium used masers—basically a laser within the microwave range of the electromagnetic spectrum—to cool the Barsoonium down to an inconceivably cold 100 picokelvin. At that temperature, matter behaves in a way that’s not at all normal. The Barsoonium, that cold, with just the right current running through it, was capable of warping the higher dimensions around it, effectively altering the plane of any kinetic energy passing through the field.

I couldn’t stop grinning as I released the staff from the vise grip and spun it around before swinging it in a lunging strike. We’d built it with heavy impacts in mind, so not only was it a defensive tool like none other, but it could be used to bludgeon an opponent as well. As though that weren’t badass enough, the extreme cold caused a frosty mist to emanate from the staff’s tip.

“You’re the best, Paige. Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

*Don’t worry, no one ever does*, she said with her customary modesty.

“Of course not. Now, what do you say we go find out what’s so special about our smugglers’ unusual shipments?”

\*\*\*



Back on Earth, there was a pastime called spelunking. Wherever the surface was rocky, there were caves, tunnels, and caverns eaten into the Earth by running water, and adventurous people sometimes explored these cave systems. I don't know if one would call me adventurous, but what I was doing could be very closely compared to spelunking.

**Left**, Paige guided, though the map she overlaid on my vision made it unnecessary.

"Great," I muttered, since left meant more cramped spaces.

The area in which the secret cargo transfer was being held was deep in the bowels of the ship, in unused space. While the FCS Nebula held a population the size of some of the largest Earthbound cities, the founders had great foresight and built it with room to expand. There were whole sectors of the ship that were empty and unoccupied.

Aft was an excellent, if frightening, example. The whole aft section of the ship had been left as room for expansion, until something horrible happened. Not long after the changeling epidemic, some sort of disaster, the nature of which has been obscured by time and once hotly debated, caused a huge portion of the ship to become toxic, uninhabitable. That section was permanently sealed off from the rest of the ship. No one goes Aft. But it was another, smaller empty section I was headed to.

The reason I was spelunking through maintenance shafts and between decks was that the smugglers had chosen their location carefully. More carefully than usual, which was what had me so intrigued. Any normal path in or out of the area could be easily watched. While I possessed the ability to bend light around me and effectively cloak myself from visible detection, there were ways around that. So instead, I was sneaking in through the cracks, almost literally as I wedged myself between two enormous conduits.

"It's tighter than a Feyn's sphincter in here," I grumbled in a whisper.

***Your capacity for crudeness knows no bounds, does it? You're like an adolescent romantic poet.*** Paige highlighted a sector of the map that floated in my vision. ***It's just through here, Wordsworth.***

After a little more crawling and climbing, I finally came to a narrow vent that opened into a larger room. I reached out in front of me and "pinched" the virtual map in my vision, manipulating it to get a better view of where I was in relation to where the exchange was taking place. The room I was looking into, along with several others, was on a sort of

mezzanine level, which looked out over a larger space where I was likely to find what I was searching for.

The vent grate was welded in place, but a few nanites I smeared around the edges were able to loosen those bonds enough to let me yank it off the inside of the wall. After some of the spaces I'd just traveled through, shinnying through the vent wasn't an issue. Once in the room, it was almost an ecstasy of sorts to stand up and stretch. I also took a moment to straighten my clothes and retrieve my staff, collapsed to the length of a small baton, from under my jacket.

***That wasn't so bad, was it?*** Page needled.

"I'd say that's the last time I let you talk me into something like that, but let's face it, we both know better." I took a swipe at some powdery substance caked on my pants. "I think a dust bunny tried to hump my leg."

***Be glad for the action. And make a little more noise while you're at it.***

"Right," I whispered, "cause you're not already running noise cancellation."

I did proceed with a little more stealth as I made my way from room to room, looking for a good vantage point from which to observe the exchange. Paige's ability to broadcast opposing sound waves to cancel out whatever noise I made wasn't perfect. A sensitive ear could sometimes pick up the difference between silence and the cancelled sounds.

As I moved, I tuned the sensitivity of my own ears, listening for the faint sounds of voices. The composite material the walls and floor were made of, however, were part of the ship's overall soundproofing. Without it and other measures, large ships would thrum and resonate with the sounds of engines, people, and machines—a background cacophony that could be damaging over the long term to both hearing and sensitive equipment. In this case, though, it meant I wasn't likely to hear echoing voices despite the emptiness of the space. Not until I got clo—.

***Link!***

Paige's shouted warning came just as a body slammed into my back and drove me to the ground. It was hard to say which was more surprising, the blow or the fact that whatever had hit me was so stealthy that Paige missed it until too late. I wriggled and writhed, trying to turn myself over, because the only thing more dangerous than being on your back with an enemy on top of you was being on your belly with an enemy on top of you.

I caught a glimpse of a figure straddling me, a voluminous hood and robe obscuring any details about my attacker.

I didn't have time for a better look as I could feel several sharp points attempting to drive through my armored shirt. I sent a jolt of electricity through my skin powerful enough to send the assailant scrambling backward. Leaping to my feet, I flicked my staff to extend it to its full length. My attacker hissed and dove back at me, swiping with whatever handheld weapon was under the sleeves of his robe. I blocked one strike, then another with the staff before I managed to get it behind his feet and sweep them out from under him. I assumed it was a him, because, while not as large as any brute, he was bigger than me, so probably male. I slammed the butt of the staff down at him, but he was already gone, rolling away and flipping to his feet, all in complete silence.

I switched my vision through infrared to ultraviolet, but the deep hood still kept his face hidden, though I did catch a glimpse of bared fangs. The tail that swished angrily behind him was my second clue. I was fighting a lynix. It was time to throw him off balance. I slammed the butt of my staff into the ground again, whispering to Paige, "Flame on." In perfect harmony with me, she projected holographic flames that shot from the base of the staff in a line across the floor, flaring up in a cascade of fire as they went.

It wasn't real, but he didn't know that, and so he dove to the side to avoid immolation. I took a chance that he was right-handed and would dodge that way, and it paid off when he couldn't evade my already swinging staff. He did manage to shift enough that I cracked him in the shoulder rather than over the head. Either this lynix was tough, or I was a bigger wuss than I thought, because the blow didn't faze him in the least. Rather it put me right where he wanted me as he ripped the staff from my hand and flung it into the next room.

"Nice kitty," I said, patting the air in placation as the lynix stalked around to stay between me and my staff. "Have a doggy to play with," I growled, throwing my right hand out to the side—a little showmanship never hurt. Paige followed right along with me, providing a projected beast, canine in shape and larger than life. It growled and slavered and lunged at the lynix, who jumped up and kicked it square in the nose without a shred of fear. That was not part of the plan, and I was impressed at the balls this guy had. As the holographic illusion passed through him like a ghost, the jig being up, he turned his attention back to me. The failed scare tactic had,

however, given me enough time to cloak myself to the visual spectrum and dash past him.

I don't know how he sensed me, but the lynix was on my heels as I scooped up the staff and turned. I was too slow and he bowled me over again, claws digging at my shirt, shredding my jacket as we fell. I thought perhaps I was experiencing a moment of heightened perception, because we seemed to fall for longer than we should, until I realized we'd gone off the ledge of the higher rooms.

And then we landed with a thud that drove the air from my lungs.  
Right in the middle of the smugglers' super secret meeting.

\* \* \*

As I lay there trying to convince my battered lungs to take in air again, the lynix crouched above me. He threw his hood off with a sharp shake of his head, skinned his lips back from impressive fangs, and hissed at those gathered around us. I didn't have to look to know they were there. Paige was already displaying over my vision a micro-frequency radar scan of their numbers and positions, as well as an overlay highlighting any weapons they had.

There were eight men in the room, all human except for the troll. On one side stood the scaly brute and two humans who, if the long crate next to them was any indication, were with my smuggling ring. The troll carried a heavy metal pry bar; the other two were drawing stun batons from under their jackets.

They would be less of a threat than the other five, who were better armed and better dressed. I assumed they were employees of the buyer. Four of them were wearing clothes made of the same armorized material as my shirt—expensive stuff—and the fifth had on an impeccable suit and a greasy toupee that Paige highlighted in a different color than the weapons. I'd have laughed out loud if all five hadn't been carrying pulse pistols. Pulse pistols fired a powerful burst of concentrated sonic energy that traveled through the air and hit you like a solid slug. They were safe for shipboard use since they caused very little damage to inanimate objects, but the shockwave they sent through a person's water-laden body and organs could range from disorienting to fatally disruptive after a few shots.

There was a still moment wherein the lynix turned his head, his slow hiss a menacing promise that encompassed both buyer and seller alike, then all hell broke loose. The lynix was suddenly amongst the well-armed buyer's party. The dull whump of pulse pistols discharging, and missing, were punctuated by shouts as the nearly six-foot cat flowed like water and struck like thunder. Here was something I'd heard of, but never seen in person—a Felis monk. They were something of a cult among the lynix and combined the rigorous discipline of Zen Buddhism, the sense of impending cataclysm of doomsday preppers, and the secrecy of the old pre-Dim Scientologists.

I watched in awed terror as the monk closed his jaws on a man's throat. He then swung that man around to absorb the impact of his fellow's pulse shot before thrusting both hands out to send him, sans throat, flying into yet a third hired gun. Blood splattered as the monk spit ragged flesh from his mouth and ducked another pulse shot. From his low crouch, he pounced at the man in the toupee, but a brave bodyguard—or whatever kind of hired help they were—leapt in his path and was bowled over instead.

***That's enough gawking, Link. This was your party to crash, remember?***

“Right,” I wheezed resolutely, air finally agreeing to reenter my lungs. Since I wasn't keen on getting anywhere near the carnage of the Felis monk, I turned my attention to the sellers. One was smarter than the others and was already running for the exit. I fished from my pocket the gravitonic cue ball I'd used to test the staff earlier and got my feet underneath me. “Oh no, you don't!” I whipped the ball sidearm, like skipping a stone on one of the shallow reflecting pools in Grand Park. The spin from my throw imparted a gentle arc to the ball's accelerating flight that sent it around the other two sellers to crack sickeningly against the fleeing man's skull. Like the trick billiards ball it was originally designed to be, it ricocheted off the man's head, bounced off the wall, and flew spinning through the air to slap back into my waiting palm.

“Fancy a game of dodgeball?” I asked the remaining two. Of course, the scale-covered troll, unworried by anything I could hit him with smaller than a forklift, grinned. “Riiiiight,” I said to myself, unenthusiastically. I flung the cue ball, hoping to catch the brute in the eye, but he just ducked a little and the ball clacked harmlessly off the thick plates on his skull. A sort

of coughing, grinding noise was coming from him, and I realized he was laughing at me.

I sent a wash of heat over my right hand and, since this time I wasn't diverting resources to repair my dubiously important brain, I was able to focus it into a cutting blade of plasma. We'd see who was laughing through the cauterized hole in his throat as soon as I—

For the second time in maybe ten minutes—or eight minutes and forty-three seconds, as Paige later pointed out—I was hit from behind by the enraged Felis monk. I think I only survived because I was merely in the way. The monk bowled over me, a ragged growl coming from deep in his chest as he charged straight for the troll. The brute held the big metal pry bar in one rough-scaled fist and swung it like he was swatting a bug. I stayed down and watched as the monk checked his charge, a brief stutter in momentum, then barreled into the troll.

Even though the troll was two feet taller and had likely a hundred pounds on the monk, he was still rocked by the blow. And when he tried to shove back, the monk used that extra weight against him, grabbing his arm and flipping him onto his back. The troll tried to roll away and get to his feet, but the lynix scrambled onto his ridged back and locked his arms and legs around the brute in a vicious chokehold.

The last human standing, a scrawny, pock-faced young man with a cruel grin on his face, tried to sneak up on me as I watched the monk and the troll struggle. He had his stun baton held high, ready for a downward blow. My hot plasma knife snuffed in the impact with the monk, I powered up the staff and angled it so its field of effect intersected the baton as it fell. As the weapon passed through the field, its direction changed at an acute angle, wrenching it from the man's grip. Unfortunately, the baton hung from a lanyard around his wrist that kept him from losing it entirely. By the time I got to my feet, he'd fumbled it back into his grip and was driving the end of it toward my midsection. So I let him.

The impact of the baton's end in my stomach wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't that hard either. He'd expected the weapon's electric charge to do most of the work. Hot tip for those who may consider it: you cannot electrocute a technomancer. Electricity flows through our bodies more freely than blood. I just looked at him as he continued to press the stun baton into my abs, not realizing it wasn't working.

“Hmm,” I said wryly. “Kinda tingles.” Then I reversed the flow of current, increasing it fifty fold to overload the baton and cook half his arm in a high-voltage shock that sent sparks and him flying—and probably stopped his heart.

I turned in time to see the troll regain his feet, the Felis monk still wrapped around his back and throat. The troll charged frantically at the nearest wall, spinning to try to squash his attacker between the wall and his scaly bulk. The monk, at the last second, dug two clawed fingers knuckle-deep into the troll’s right eye and yanked, causing the brute to spin all the way around and slam face-first into the wall. The lynx leapt free at the moment of impact.

I winced. In my head, Paige let out a, ***Goddamn.***  
Then it was just the monk, myself, and Paige.

\* \* \*

I held my staff in front of me as I gathered a massive amount of energy. The lights dimmed. I could feel Paige redirecting resources to properly store so much power, using my whole body like a supercapacitor. She was probably also expending a bit of effort hiding that sort of drain from the computers that monitored the ship’s power grid.

When the monk charged, I channeled that energy through the staff, building a hyperdimensional field that was way too dense for the lower dimensional space it was crammed into. If the idea behind a technomancer held true—that sufficiently advanced technology was indistinguishable from magic—then this was big juju. The hyperdimensional energy field collapsed under its own kinetic weight, releasing a shockwave of pure force which hit the monk just before he hit me. He went skidding and rolling across the floor to end up sprawled against the wall, half on top of the downed troll.

His bell was well and truly rung, and by the time he shook some focus into his jade-green eyes, I had the burning cold tip of my staff pressed against his chest. Frost formed in the loose weave of his robe. His nostrils flared as he drew in a sharp breath, then sniffed again. Those bleary green eyes, like emeralds in the cream, gray, and ash swirls of his face fur, suddenly widened, focusing on me.

The Felis monk made a thoughtful growl deep in his chest and sniffed a third time. “I do not believe we are enemies,” he said, his voice smooth and purring.

I withdrew the freezing tip of my staff from his chest and offered him my hand. “No,” I replied warily, “I don’t think we are.”

The monk took my offered hand, more as an acceptance of the gesture than out of a need for help. He looked around. “I thought you were a sentry, but you do not smell like any of them, so perhaps we share a similar purpose.” He gestured to the charred arm of the man who’d tried to prod me. “I did not do *that*.”

“That wasn’t part of my purpose, as you put it,” I told him. “My *purpose* was to skulk about and find what these people were up to. I needed to know what was so special about their particular cargo.”

“Cargo?” the lynix growled. “These men are traffickers in children. Slavers.” He spat on the unconscious troll.

My head whipped around and my eyes, inexorably, fell on the long crate in the center of the room. I felt my jaw loosen and I kept it closed only by a herculean effort. Nothing could be done for the curdling in my stomach.

***Oh, God, Link,*** Paige said, horror in her voice. ***You have to open that crate.***

The Felis monk was already moving toward it. I followed closely. He grabbed the lid, dug his claws in, and tried to pry it off by main force. But it was solid nanocomposite and sealed tight. Paige was already scanning it when I tapped his arm.

“I got this,” I told him. Paige highlighted a panel in one corner. A swipe of my finger across its surface sent it retracting into the lid to reveal a lock screen. “What do you got, Paige?”

***It’s isolated. No wireless access and no I/O ports. Wouldn’t be much of a lock otherwise. Touch it.*** I did, nanites from my fingers worming their way through the touch screen to form a connection between its systems and mine. It didn’t take another second for the crate to let out a thump as the locks disengaged. The lid lifted, then slid back out of the way.

The eyes looking up at us through midnight-black hair were frightened, tear-strewn, and defiant. She was Feyn, and young. Mid-teens? It was hard to tell with them. There was certainty on her face that we were



there to hurt her. When her eyes fell on the monk, his muzzle still in a half-snarl of anger, the thin skein of defiance in her almost broke and fell away.

**“You’re okay, sweetheart. Don’t look at them.”** It was Paige, doing something she almost never did, projecting herself in public. She leaned over the other side of the crate and smiled down at the Feyn girl. **“I know they’re ugly, but they won’t hurt you.”**

The monk was somewhat confused by Paige’s sudden appearance, but as his flaring nostrils told him no one was really there, he seemed willing to accept her holographic presence. The girl didn’t have a lynix’s sense of smell, though, and reached for Paige’s hand only to pass right through it.

**“Sorry, girl,”** Paige said, wincing. **“This pretty face is just a projection. But Link over there is real, and he’s a very close friend of mine. If you’ll let him help you out of this crate, I promise he’ll keep you safe.”**

I extended my hand over the crate and held it there, letting her make the decision. After a moment’s hesitation, she grasped my hand with her left one. Her right hand wrapping around my forearm, she hauled herself up to stand in the crate, shivering in a thin white shift that barely covered her. The monk quickly shrugged off his robe and handed it to me. I wrapped the over-sized garment around her, then helped her step out of the shipping container she’d been locked in for God knew how long.

She was staring at the monk, and perhaps he was worth a stare. He wore a simple shirt with no sleeves and breeches that tied at the knees, but it was the swirls of darker and lighter grays in his fur that commanded attention. The eddying shades of charcoal and ash and cream created the subtle suggestion of broken stripes around his arms, legs, and shoulders. Even his face seemed to be striped without having obvious bands.

“Who are you?” she asked. Her voice was deeper than I expected, a dulcet tone that would likely mature into something smoky.

The monk bowed his head. “I am Eighth Tiger Xian.”

***Tiger is the highest rank among the Felis monks,*** Paige told me. Her projected self didn’t move at all as she spoke inside my mind. ***There’s only ever twenty of them at a time. If this guy’s the eighth, you’re lucky to be alive.***

“Thank you, Xian,” she said, hugging his robe tighter around herself. “And Link?” I nodded confirmation, and she turned to Paige. They were the

same height, but I suspected Paige had done that on purpose. “You’re an AI?”

“**I am. I’m Paige. What’s your name, sweetie?**” How she managed to say those last four words without sounding condescending, I’ll never know. Had I said them, it would have come out like I was talking to a toddler.

“Alexa,” she whispered. Her large, indigo-hued eyes had just fallen on the mangled bodies of the men who had been there to take her. Take her where, and to whom, I very much wanted to know. Alexa’s gaze went to Xian’s hands, which were crusted in drying, dull-red blood.

“They will not hurt you anymore,” the big monk rumbled.

“There’ll be more,” she said. “There will always be more.” She was a female of the Feyn, a child and yet middle aged. They all grew up so fast before withering in their prime, but at that moment, she sounded older than all of us.

I, too, stared at the men scattered about, rage boiling in my gut as Paige called Ship’s Security to come clean this mess up.

Theft, smuggling, and defrauding consumers, these were all fairly serious crimes, but human trafficking and slavery was a whole new ballgame. I knew my history; humanity had once embraced slavery, and then for a long time afterward it lingered like a chronic disease, a fungus in the shadows. But this ship was founded and launched on the ideal of purest liberty. Slavery in any form was anathema here, the vilest crime imaginable. If convicted, anyone connected with this ring had a one-way ticket out the nearest airlock.

As we led the young Feyn girl away, I vowed that I’d be there to hit the button for the buyers. Because, make no mistake, I was going to find them.

R. Jaylan Phoenix, 35, is a huge geek. He’s managed to parlay that into good stories ever since his high school days, when he probably should have been paying attention in class. He lives in North East Florida with his wife and a cat that’s too smart for anyone’s good. In addition to being a libertarian, he is also a quasi-objectivist (or whatever you’d call someone whose philosophy is equal parts *Atlas Shrugged* and *Stranger in a Strange Land*).

# **If Pigs Had Wings**

## ***William Alan Ritch***

A teenager on a distant planet yearns for real freedom.

My parents almost caught us at it again last night. My sigpair, Hank, and I were up in my room when they came home ten kilosecs early. Immediately we switched the light, moved the bookdiscs, and adjusted our clothes before they shifted through the door and...

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Hank says I should start at the beginning. OK. My name is June Bulmer. I'm 442 Megasecs old, and in the fourteenth form. And I'm a groundhog stuck here on New Bohemia!

If you're listening to this diary and not familiar with Federation worlds, New Bohemia is an "Artists' Colony". Which means we export the official art for the Federation. Everyone here is supposed to be some sort of artist, musician, dancer, whatever. There are some transient Fed workers here who maintain the automated equipment and do the stuff that the computers can't. They're not Bohemians so they don't count. Of course the Jeffersonians run the spaceport here, like they do everywhere else.

That's where I was yesterday for my ComServe. I was on the grunt run when the Free Spacer's ship landed. At first, I didn't know what it was. It was like the sound of a million gears grinding against each other coming from somewhere in the sky. Looking up from the hovercart, I couldn't find the source of the noise. Odd. When a Jeffrey ship lands you don't hear anything until it's less than a kilometer from the ground.

I searched the cloudless sky for several seconds while the horrible sound got louder. Finally, I spotted a strangely colored ship warping the atmosphere as it descended. I still couldn't see it very well, but it wasn't like any Jeffrey ship I'd ever seen.

The noise was so deafening that I did not notice her standing next to me until I felt a small hand touch my shoulder. I looked down to the short brunette at my side. Alicia. Unable to talk we just stood there looking up at the sky. Just like the day we first met.

That had been on my second day of ComServe. When we start twelfth form, the Council issues us students ComServe assignments. Nothing very

complicated. At the port, we mostly delivered afternoon snacks—nothing that couldn't be automated. But then, as Hank points out, ComServe is to teach us Duty and Humility. Where would the community service be in letting a robot do something we could?

As the only twelver assigned to the spaceport, I had been given the grunt run. None of the older students like driving the hovercarts out to the mechanics. They prefer serving the Admins, the Planet Hoppers and the SecPols. They're all indoors, in clean, climitized rooms. The grunts are outside where the ships are.

Although at first I had been excited, I rapidly got discouraged. The mechanics were rude. They called me a lot of slang words I'm sure were insults, like "groundhog." The heat was stifling, as was the stench of the lubricants. Then I saw a ship launch.

When a ship goes up, nothing stands still. It's not so much the noise; Hank says the old rocket engines were much louder. With these modern ships the only real sound is the sonic boom about four kilometers up. No, it's more the wind, rushing to follow the ship upward, pulling with it all the heat and smells, leaving a brief patch of crisp air, tingling like after a thunder shower.

I left the hovercart to stare up at the fleeing spaceship. *How beautiful*, I thought. I must have said it aloud, because the mechanic next to me remarked sarcastically, "Yeah, just like a giant bird."

"No," I said to her without moving my eyes, "precisely unlike one."

A moment of silence passed before she said, in a much warmer voice, "Alicia DuBarry. Never call me a grunt and we'll get along fine. I'm a mech."

"June Bulmer," I returned, "and don't call me a groundhog."

We both stood transfixed at the departing ship, waiting for the tell-tale green-shift smear as it hypered away. I never wanted to see a launch from indoors again.

The noise from the landing ship stopped abruptly, interrupting my daydreaming. "They've cut the drive and are landing with just the a-grav," Alicia explained.

"What is it?" I asked. "It's so small, and I don't recognize the markings." The ship was a tenth the size of any Jeffersonian ship I'd seen. And it was dirty. All the Jeffey ships were polished until they gleamed. They have flags and banners and insignia on their sides. This ship was

scorched and scored. I could see different colored layers of paint peeling off.

“It’s not one of ours,” Alicia answered. “It must be a Free Spacer.”

A Free Spacer. In the universe beyond New Bohemia there is this three-way game between the Federation, the Jeffersonians and the Free Spacers. What I understand is that the Free Spacers and the Federation hate each other, but both use the Jeffies as go-betweens. This sort of interstellar politics isn’t taught at my school. I’ve picked it up from my Forbidden political conversations with Alicia. And from Hank.

“It’s landing near the hanger,” I said.

Alicia shushed me. She was listening to her CommLink. “I’ve got to go,” she said excitedly. “They’re calling in all the mechs to work on the Spacer’s ship. What an opportunity!”

I offered to take her in the hovercart. “It’ll be faster than walking.” And it was a good excuse to get closer to the Spacer’s ship.

Well, a hovercart is faster than walking, but it’s not faster than running. Oblivious to the whining fans of the hovercart, Alicia and I talked about the Free Spacer. Although she had seen her share of them, she had never been inside one of their engines.

For the past two forms, Alicia and I have been best friends. Or least as best as we can be considering she’s almost twice my age, and the Jeffies aren’t supposed to fraternize with us Feds. I never had anyone to *talk* to until I met her. Unlike my parents, she understands why I worry about how things work instead of how they look. Alicia has surreptitiously taught me all she can about ships, their engines, and how they’re put together. I talk with her about my failed attempts to fit into Bohemian society. And my fear of being shipped off like my cousin Lee. We’ve even talked about our problems with sigpairs.

The hanger is easy to find—you can see it from all over the port. It’s an enormous green geodesic dome built to house any Jeffrey ship that could land on New Bohemia. It’s the largest single building at the port, maybe even on the planet.

Usually a calm place, the hanger was alive with a flurry of activity around the Spacer’s ship that betrayed its location. It looked like every mech in the port was there. In their dull orange coveralls they looked like Autumnbees buzzing about a hive. However, the hot, dry wind reminded me it was still summer.

A SecPol stopped my hovercart. I saw a clutch of SecPols, all surrounding a wizened, old man with white hair and a stubby white beard. Now Hank always tells me that when I see SecPols I should get out, but I was fascinated. In addition to the gray uniforms of the Federation I saw a few sky blue ones. It took me a few seconds to realize these were Jeffrey SecPols. I wasn't even sure they existed.

The old man wasn't wearing any kind of uniform. He had a bright multi-color shirt that danced in the wind. His pants were dark blue and looked substantial and rugged. All this was over some kind of form-fitting space suit.

He turned his oversized head back and forth like a radar dish. Then he spotted me. I don't know why, especially with Alicia next to me. Where I'm gangly, gawky and, let me be truthful, flat, she is full and curved, with just a hint of plumpness. I keep my orange-red hair cropped short, otherwise it's thin, wiry and unruly. Alicia's long black hair always seems composed. Maybe he looked at me because I was the only one in a school uniform. Maybe he liked my freckles—or my eyes. Hank tells me my eyes are bright as emeralds.

The Spacer's stare was intense, like he was evaluating me. Sweat pasted my clothes to my body. I was aware of my slightest curve. I suddenly felt embarrassed and inadequate. Even when I'm naked with Hank I've never felt so—so sexual. And then he winked at me. I turned away quickly.

The SecPol admitted Alicia to the circle of mechs and sent me on my way. It was just as well. My shift was over and I had to hurry to make it to my afternoon sculpting class.

Which was a bore. My parents are both painters, so naturally they wanted me to be a painter too. Unfortunately, I just don't have their color sense, so I'm stuck learning sculpture because my psych evaluation said that I had “excellent three-dimensional visualization and digital coordination.”

At least I fared better than my cousin Lee. He had failed all this classes and he was evaluated and sent to an ag world where he was horribly mangled in a harvester. Hank says that the Federation doesn't bother with safety on farms because replacement operators are so cheap.

We were modeling in Plasteel, which you work with your hands like clay, but is not as messy. As usual, I was not paying attention. I felt the

warm ooze of the Plasteel as I let myself think about the Free Spacer landing. I wished Hank had been with me at the spaceport to see it.

I worked the Plasteel into a sphere, and then chopped in half with my u-knife.

Henry Rankin was the only good thing that happened in painting class last form. He was modeling for us. All the students have to take turns modeling for the art classes. I was just lucky that he had shown up in mine. Mostly I don't notice the models. Hank was different. I hadn't been able take my eyes off him. I thought he was human perfection.

I formed the Plasteel into several long cylinders, hardening them with freeze-gel. I attached the cylinders to the hemisphere.

I had willed him not to notice me. Trying to hide my painting, I attracted his attention. He looked at my work, took a deep breath, and told me that it was terrible. I wasn't expecting honesty. I agreed and detailed everything I thought was wrong with the painting. He laughed his deep, good-natured laugh. It was at that point that I fell in love with him.

I continued to work the Plasteel. I formed section after section of long, curved, flat panels, hardening each as I finished. The addictive, sweet odor of the freeze-gel made me smile.

Hank's a lot nearer Graduation than me—in twenty-second form. Mom and Dad want to tell me that he's too old to be my sigpair, but they can't come right out and say it since we're both still students. He's listened to a lot more instructional discs than me. He can even read, something that's Forbidden until twentieth form. Despite that, he's teaching me how. My folks say he's a bad influence on me. They're right about that.

When the panels were finished I stuck them together. Then I added loose Plasteel, shaping around the framework.

We've spent many nights on the hill near the spaceport staring up at the stars, the sharp blades of grass jabbing into our bare skin, watching the ships come and go. Federation citizens aren't allowed much space travel. We're supposed to stay on the planet where we're born, unless we're ordered somewhere else. I've tried to talk to Hank about all my doubts and fears but he really doesn't discuss things with me. He's just offered me solutions to my problems. Some of them were pretty drastic.

It came to me as I was heating one of the Plasteel sections to remold it into a different shape. Hank and I had talked about this before. I didn't need

to fit in. I could leave. Hank and I could leave. Surely that old man would take us with him—as refugees. Maybe we could give him something.

Then I remembered his stare. I remembered the way he looked at me. If that's what he wanted, well, I could give him that.

One of the instructors came over to evaluate my progress. “Better, June, better,” she said. “I like your use of the transverse line, and the curved surfaces are most intriguing. It's still a little mechanical, but at least it's not another one of your spaceships. Don't be so representational. Remember: the important thing is to express yourself.”

She left, scribbling on her grade-pad. I hadn't been paying attention to what I was molding: the Free Spacer's ship. I had been expressing myself. I put a few finishing touches on it and slipped it in a stasis bag. *This* project I would show to Hank.

Hank was late when he came by my house. We were supposed to go to a porno party at one of his friends' houses. I was so excited about the Free Spacer and the thought of escape that I just wanted to stay at home with Hank and talk about that. My folks were at an exhibit opening, and wouldn't be back until late.

“You haven't seen a porno cube before, have you?” he asked.

“No,” I replied, reluctantly, “but I've heard all about them from the Council.”

“And you *always* believe the Council don't you?” he laughed. “You're the one who wants to live with the Spacers. Don't you think you should learn something about them?” Everyone knows that the Free Spacers make the porno cubes. I relented.

We went to Robert's house, since his parents were away. Someone else brought the porno cubes. I wondered how they got them. The Council carefully monitors our cultural influences. I had asked Alicia if the Jeffies distributed them. She had said they were so worried about their treaties that she doubted it. One of the kids at school told me that the Spacers beamed the porno to us using gravity waves from a singularity. Right. Even Hank was not much help. He just said that any controlled substance automatically creates a black market.

At first I felt out of place at the porno party. It was all a bunch of older kids, at least four forms ahead of me. My discomfort vanished as I watched the cube.



The way the Council talks I expected them to be badly made, with abysmal acting and no production values. Nothing could be more untrue. In contrast *our* cubes look two-dimensional and monochrome.

Everything looked real—believable. In less than half a kilosec, I felt that I was no longer watching a cube, but instead peeking into someone's real life. The story was about this asteroid miner who was found dead floating in space. Then an “assessor” was hired by the miner's partners to determine who killed him. After interviewing tens of people, the assessor determined the culprit and, in a dramatic confrontation, killed the murderer in a derelict space station.

I'm not sure what was supposed to be wrong with what we saw. Why does the Council forbid these cubes? Robert insisted it was due to the propaganda. Perhaps this cube was atypical, but I failed to see any propaganda whatsoever.

We all talked about the cube for several kilosecs. Where did the assessor get his authority? Why would anyone solve crimes if he weren't a SecPol? Why did the partners hire him—why not just contact the Security Police?

Our discussion ran longer than the actual porno cube, and was just as much fun. Hank told us to compare this discussion to any of the organized conversations we had in school after one of the cubes that they made us watch. Those discussions were always so dull, filled with long silences while we waited for the teacher to hint at what we were supposed to say. Here we could all be ourselves and say what we really thought.

Emboldened by this, I casually mentioned what I had seen at the spaceport. A brief moment of silence preceded the deluge of questions. Some of the students had heard about the ship, others knew nothing. When the din quieted the only new thing I learned was that the old man I had seen was the spaceship's sole occupant. I never realized you could operate a ship by yourself.

When we got back to my house it still wasn't very late, so Hank insisted that we have a reading lesson. He carefully removed the bookdiscs from his jacket and we began.

Usually, I'm the one that wants to start the reading lessons. That night I was distracted. All I could think about was the Free Spacer taking us away.

“You’re daydreaming again,” Hank said in his beautiful deep voice. No wonder he was training to be an opera singer. I even loved the way he told me I was wrong.

“It’s possible,” I insisted. “I know a way to get into the hanger—and then on board the ship.”

I was beginning to convince him when I heard my parents activate the door. Ten kilosecs early! We weren’t ready. I quickly switched off the light. Hank and I tore off our clothes and hid the bookdiscs under them. I threw a glass of water at Hank so it would look like sweat. We hid under the covers as my parents came up the stairs. We hoped that the covers would hide the fact that we were still wearing our underwear.

Hank and I were kissing as Mom and Dad shifted through the door to my room. I sat up a bit as I said hi to them so they could see my breasts. For once I was glad that I don’t need to wear a bra yet. I didn’t have time to extricate myself from one. Hank said “hi” too, and they frowned a bit as they acknowledged his existence. There was that little embarrassing silence before they apologized for interrupting us. We forgave them and promised to see them in the morning for breakfast.

When the door shifted shut behind them we got out of bed, stripped away our underwear and carefully concealed the bookdiscs. We fell together on the bed, laughing and relieved. I’m sure it sounded like we were still pairing. Good.

Well into the night we planned our escape. I convinced Hank that I could at least get us into the hanger, if not all the way to the Spacer’s ship. It was worth a chance.

When we ran out of plans, we paired. Since last form we’ve been pretending it, because I was always hesitant, and Hank was always understanding. That night I was hesitant no longer. The possibility of our escape had excited me, and I initiated the pairing. I could tell you, in intimate detail, what I felt, how I acted—I remember each delectable second; but a girl has to have *some* privacy.

This morning, I know I must have gone to school. I just can’t remember anything about it. I thought only of the spaceport and our escape.

Getting into the port was no problem. The Jeffies are used to the students swapping ComServe days. We put our chops on the roster and stepped through the force membrane and into port. We did a few turns on

the grunt run, in a pattern calculated to bring us by the hanger at a mech entrance.

I parked the hovercart near the showers. We were several kilosecs away from a shift-change, so it was deserted. Rows of the dull orange coveralls stood waiting for the next shift. We found two that fit and quickly put them on. I took a tub of lubricant and smeared it on our coveralls and our exposed skin so we would look like we'd been working. I was used to the smell. Hank curled up his nose and made a face. He knows how to make me laugh.

A few SecPols stood guard at the Spacer ship. Following Hank's lead I sauntered past them with my head held high. We were proud mechanics here to do our job. We didn't salute them or anything since grunts are mere civilians. The SecPols acted like they didn't notice us, but they did notice the lubricant. I don't think they were checking any mechanics, because if they had to talk to them they had to smell them.

Once past I began to panic. What if we were caught? What if there weren't room for us on the ship? How could we communicate with the Free Spacer? Did he speak our language?

Hank must have noticed my hesitation. He grabbed my hand and gave it a little squeeze. That was all I needed. I buried my fears.

We followed a group of mechs into the ship. It was as dingy on the inside as the outside. Many of the lights didn't work. As we walked along a corridor I noticed some of the interior panels were missing. The most surprising thing was the smell. We were near the galley because the smell of food was overwhelming. I caught whiffs of spices and oils that I could almost identify.

We had planned to hide in the cargo hold. What we found was better. The pantry was large and packed with food, stored in rows. You could open its door and not have a clear view of the back. No one should come here until after the ship launched.

We waited there, reading bookdiscs, until I couldn't hold my bladder any longer. Night had fallen and it had been kilosecs since I last heard any mechanics working on the ship. I motioned my desperate need to Hank and he nodded in agreement.

The head was easy to find, not far from the galley. Hank let me use it first, then I stood guard while he was inside. It's one thing to pair with someone and quite another to stand around and watch them pee. I paced

back and forth. I was about three meters from the head when I heard something.

So I'm not a spy. So I'm no good at this. I didn't know someone was sneaking up on me. I didn't know until I heard her say, "Turn around!"

"Alicia?" I shouted, warning Hank inside the head.

"I knew you would do this, June. I knew it when I saw the ship land." She was obviously tense and uncomfortable. Sweat poured from her dark face. There was something in her hand—some sort of a weapon.

"You knew?" I found it hard to breathe. My brain started spinning like a rotor. "How? I didn't even know then."

"I've been listening when you talk to me. I know you aren't happy here. Can't be happy here. But I can't let you go."

"Why not?" I asked as I backed away from her and moved to the left. "You're not a SecPol." She followed, keeping her weapon trained on me. I had to get her back against the door to the head.

"Please," I continued. "You're one of the few people that understands me. You know that sooner or later the Council's going to figure out that I'm no artist and I'll end up like Lee."

"You don't understand," she pleaded, her hands shaking. She had the weapon and she was the nervous one. I had the cool resolve of desperation. "Things are very strained between the Federation and the Jeffersonians right now. Your SecPols didn't want us to let this ship land. They certainly didn't want us to fix it. Now, if you escape it could be the spark that blows everything up."

I moved a few more centimeters to the left. "I can't go on living here," I said to her softly. "If you won't let me go, you'll have to kill me. You've got to decide between your country and your friend."

The head was directly behind her. I yelled Hank's name. The door, old-fashioned and metal, flew open and sent Alicia sprawling. Annoyingly, she held on to her weapon as she rolled across the floor. Hank threw himself on top of her and tried to wrestle it away from her hand. He was twice her size, but still no match for her speed and skill. Alicia kicked straight back, knocking him a couple of meters away. Then she aimed her gun at me.

I've heard about time slowing down. Her thumb jammed down on the butt of the weapon, her forefinger moved toward a red button on its grip. She looked straight at me and said one word: "Down!"

I threw myself to the grungy floor. A particle beam zipped past my ear as I fell. I felt the tingling in the air as it passed. My head jerked back involuntarily and I saw the target of Alicia's beam. A Federation SecPol collapsed to the floor, his hand clamped on his gun and his head a charred mass.

Rolling toward the corpse, and fighting the urge to vomit, I pried his still warm fingers from his gun, then held it tightly in my hand. I glanced back at Alicia who was furtively searching for more SecPols to shoot.

Hank was still breathing hard from where Alicia had kicked him. Blood drained from his face as he stared at the dead man. The smell of the burnt flesh filled the corridor.

"Now that's what I call a welcome."

I swerved. Instinctively I pointed my new possession in the direction of the voice.

"Sorry, Captain," Alicia said to the Spacer as she lowered her gun. "He was going to shoot..., I couldn't..."

"No need to apologize, He *was* gettin' to be a damned nuisance." He spoke in a strange accent that I can't mimic. Alicia told me that Spacers spend their lives acquiring and developing accents. They think it gives them character.

"You can drop the 'captain' too," It's just O'Malley. It's a good thing you Jeffies fixed up my ship." Then he added under his breath, "charged me enough for it, too."

"Nice shot," he continued. I think we can salvage the uniform. Now help me get this thing off him."

Alicia complied like she was on autopilot.

"And you, boy! Stop pointin' that thing at me. I get kinda nervous with the safety off."

He was talking to me! I lowered my pistol, doubly embarrassed.

"I'm a girl!" I retorted.

"Yeah?" he drawled suspiciously as he and Alicia stripped the corpse. "Yeah, I can see that you're a girl now. Wait a minute, you're the cutie I winked at yesterday, ain't you? I didn't know I was that irresistible."

I tried to explain things. O'Malley listened intently, but stopped me before I got very far. "That's enough. Heard it all before. Seen enough Federation worlds to recognize the pattern. I'd be honored to take you outta

here. Later, when you get a job, you can pay me back for the transport. Now let's get your boyfriend here into this uniform."

"What?" I screamed.

"We've got us a sticky problem. The Feds sent a SecPol up with me and they expect to get one back. They ain't gonna look too carefully at who comes *out*—"

"No!" I stopped him. "Hank's coming with me. I love I him. I won't leave without—"

Hank squeezed my hand. My voice stopped working. A cold blast blew across my heart. Somehow I knew each word before he spoke. "No," he said, "O'Malley's right. I fit in here well enough. I don't *need* to leave, the way you do. And I don't think I have the courage you have to go."

I wanted to argue with him. I wanted to tell him that I would be with him forever. The words died stillborn. He knew there was nothing I could say. I knew it. Everybody knew it.

"Don't mean to shorten this farewell, but time is pressin'. If Hank here's any good at all, he should be able to lose himself outside before they start noticin' him."

"I'll help you," said Alicia slowly, "I know this port—"

"Hold on, Missy. I don't think you understand the temperature of the fire you've jumped into. The Feds don't take kindly to folks fryin' their Security Police. The Jeffies ain't so hot about it either. They don't have my enlightened attitude."

"You want me to come with you?" she asked, amazed.

"There's the girl. Always wondered what it would be like to expose a Jeffrey to a little *real* freedom. Now let's get a-goin'. I won't be happy 'till I'm in hyper, well away from this sink-hole."

Getting Hank into the uniform was a lot easier than saying good-bye to him. I could barely watch him walk away from me through my tears. I suppose his subterfuge worked. The Jeffies towed us out to the launch site without question.

I continued crying through the launch. There's no sense of motion at all, until you hyper. Alicia sat hugging me as she stared out the viewport.

"You should have killed me," I whimpered, my tears soaking her lap. "I'll never see him again. I shouldn't have left."

"Stop that," she ordered. "You couldn't have gone on—even with Hank. You know that, don't you?"

I nodded. “Will I ever stop hurting?”

“I won’t lie to you. No. But each day will dampen the pain a bit. You’ll never stop missing—” her voice began to trail away, “loving—him. I know.”

I sat up next to her, drying my tears as best I could. Alicia smiled abruptly. She squeezed my hand, pointing to the beautiful pink and purple of New Bohemia receding beneath us. I was surprised to feel a little homesick.

“Look at my little groundhog now,” she said. “You’ve sprouted wings.”

I felt a tiny glow beginning inside my breast. “What the hell,” I giggled, “is a groundhog?”

When William Alan Ritch was in third grade he made the mistake of looking beyond the school library’s 500s section—with its books on rockets, dinosaurs, and chemicals—to the books with just an “F” on their spine, to read his first novel: *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* by someone named Heinlein. He was captured by the glory of the imagination and subverted by the subtle, but radical, political philosophy. Since then he has written and had published a handful of short stories, as well as several audio plays and stage plays, including several musical comedies. He is currently the president of the Atlanta Radio Theatre Company where he and large cadre of enthusiasts are trying to revive a moribund art form.

# What You Don't Get About Freedom

*Wendy Rodriguez*

This tech noir tale follows a gumshoe from the Free Zone as she explores the statist and brutal Old Towne.

The gangly kid nearly toppled off the bar stool as he blurted the joke's punchline. "He walked through the door. His hot-and-cold running secretary lay, writhing on the couch. 'Next time, open the door before you walk through it, Big Boy,' she said."

Laughter burst from the bar stools on either side of him. Instead of laughing at his own joke, the kid checked out my response.

I sat in a table by the bar with a full-court view of his face and a 'come-hither-already' smile on mine. I forced the smile wider and considered undoing one more button on my blouse. I'd been flashing my assets for an hour now—a long, long hour.

*What an idiot, I thought. You never draw attention to yourself in Old Towne. Never.* And then I cut the kid some slack because that's what he was... a kid, and so far out of his depth, he was drowning, even if he didn't know it yet.

My eyes flicked across the laughs perched at either side of him. Nasty pieces of burly work. They'd arrived a few minutes after the kid did, and they'd marked him at a glance as an undiluted newbie. No one in the bar missed the pricey blue jeans, the toothpaste grin and the tentative darting of his baby blues. While I'd been working the angle, the laughs sat and chatted, plying the kid with liquor and feedback, waiting for a chance to roll him in the alley. The bartender picked up, too, I could tell, but he wouldn't try to stop it. That's the Old Towne way.

"Welcome tourists," I muttered into a glass of watered-down scotch.

My name is Mac, short for MacKenzie. I'm a restitution gumshoe for the Property Dept. of the Blumenthal Recovery Agency in Free Zone 12, which used to be Santa Monica. It was the last Zone to break free of what used to be Los Angeles, and now is Old Towne—at least, that's what freeziens like me call it. Old Towne is a sleazy armpit into which I crawl only when business drives me there, and the kid was my business tonight.



Fourteen hours ago, at first crack, I was in the kitchen with a breakfast of coffee and news when Blumenthal himself called me.

“Mac,” his face flashed onto my kitchen wall. The Brooklyn lilt of his squawky voice was as good as coffee to perk you. “T-R Corp. had a break-in last night, and they need fast service,” he declared without prelude.

“I’m your gal.” I’d been a Blumenthal gal for two years now and it was time to move up the chain and eat better. The Property Dept. returned stolen goods to victims and lassoed the perp to work off expenses, including agency fees. But violent crime was what sizzled and really paid. I stowed the e-book of news headlines, downed the coffee, and gave Blumenthal my full.

“Yah, yah. I’m putting you *and* Chang on the case.”

It was SOP to double-up agents for cases with pressure-cook timing. But I didn’t like it. Whichever one got the redress would get the fee and a company leg-up; the loser got expenses. I didn’t like Chang either, and it was personal. Chang was bad news on a slow news day because he was so good, and dead unscrupulous. He was willing to do things I wouldn’t and that gave him advantage. But he lacked two things I lived on... instinct and big tits.

“You’ll work separately, of course,” Blumenthal added. My rivalry with Chang was office gossip.

“So tell me about the case, Murray.” I walked from the kitchen into the parlor where his paunchy face filled another wall

“Grand Theft A-6,” he spoke quickly. “Its a gizmo to print chemicals via 3-D. I don’t have to tell you how commercial that baby is... hospitals, pharmacies...”

“Not to mention drug users.” *The addies... what a market.* “But chemical printing is years away.”

“Yah, yah. I mean, no, no. T-R’s almost ready to market but the prototype was snatched about nine hours ago. We need it back pronto before anyone can reverse engineer and cut into T-R’s marketing plans. They’re hoppin’ mad and they’ll want blood if they can’t cash in on the monopoly moment.”

The Free Zone’s only patent law was “keep it to yourself” or use a confidentiality contract. Good luck with the last one. The monopoly moment was the launch period before contracts broke down.

Blumenthal ran on, “Details of the case and the deal are on your computer right now. Tick, tick, Mac. I need this eight hours ago.” His face blinked off.

Thirty minutes later, I exited the elevator of my apartment building and hit the bright sunlight of Free Zone 12, not stopping to scan the ocean from the Pacific Palisades, like usual. The ocean’s one of the only things left that still impresses me. A kid who lived somewhere in the same high rise operated a java stand by the front door. I never remember his name but his best cup is the best for blocks so I grabbed an espresso on the run.

“Thanks, Mac,” he grinned lopsidedly at the over-payment in his hand.

*Smart kid, remembering customers’ names.* I hailed a passing jitney that sported the bumper sticker “An armed society is a polite society.” I jumped in and told the driver, “The L to Old Towne, please.”

He paused, using the rear view mirror to glance back at me. “Are you sure, miss?”

At 5’2”, with large brown eyes and short brown curls, people always take me for younger than 25. Sometimes they get protective; always they underestimate me. That was almost as valuable as big tits.

“I’m sure. It’s not my first time.”

The jitman shook his head in muted disapproval as he gunned the engine.

I used the backseat time to go over the info I’d downloaded onto my wristwatch. Some things were clear, some weren’t.

The clear ones? T-R Corp. had knock-down security which meant whoever got past it was better. There weren’t many who squeezed into that profile. Also clear: the perp was headed to Old Towne where stolens were fenced or openly sold on the white market with the cops bribed to be blind. There’d hardly be crime in the Free Zones if Old Towne didn’t open wide for bad traffic. *This one’ll be fenced*, I decided tentatively. I’ll have to double-up on careful.

Old Towne authorities stuck it to freeziens in any way they could. Even after a decade, Towners remembered the guerrilla warfare and corpses of secession. Old Towne had let the zones go only after bodies stacked high and no one surrendered. A lot of bodies belonged to Towner families, and I almost didn’t blame them for hating us. They hated Towner authorities, too, but freeziens didn’t arrest you for feelings and words. The authorities did, if they were the wrong words, the wrong feelings. And, so, it was easier to

hate us. Especially since Old Towne authorities stoked the emot; freeziens were a valuable outlet for the hate.

But it was more than secession. Townies hated the prosperity of the Free Zones. They'd bet we'd collapse into anarchy in the bad sense. Our smoothness slapped predictions out of every Towner mouth that'd tasted the sweet prospect of our collapse. That's what Towners hated most. The Zones surged with wildfire energy and burst with goods that Towners only dreamed of as their streets decayed under their feet. If Old Towne authorities let people leave, the malice might end with a snap. But Towners were trapped behind massive walls and check-out points, patrolled by drones and armored guards who shot anything that moved in the neutral zone.

As the jitney dodged in and out of traffic, I pulled my mind back to the proto. The big question: did the perp still have it? Of course, there could be a direct buyer who contracted the theft, not a fence. *Hmm... that's about as likely. But who has the kind of spare c...*

"Tourism?" the jitman broke my thoughts.

"What?... oh no, no."

Tourism brought big bucks to Old Towne. Parents showed kids what the old days were like with taxes on meals, everyone watching, and I.D.-ing by cops; strange how a police state can become nostalgia. Businessmen went to Old Towne to sell goods and use cheap labor because, well, a market's a market. College students slid in on a lark to slum it in dark bars where the air was dangerous. Others came to buy the few things made illegal in the Zones, like other human beings.

"Business then?" the jitman's voice tightened. A lot of unpleasant businesses took place in Old Towne.

"Yep. Mine and not yours."

He dropped me off without another word at a stretch of asphalt with a huge white "L" painted in the center. The platform was open to the wind on all sides. To the East, the distant skyline of Old Towne sliced upward from the massive walls surrounding it. Between it and where I stood lay the neutral zone—a three mile stretch devastated from the fighting years ago. No one built there, no one went there except on the tram that ran in a constant loop between. What had been blocks of home and business were a flat extension filled with the trash, rats and broken stone that separated Old Towne from Free Zone 12. I turned my back on it.

A frequent-travel pass was in a cloth bag strung over my shoulder inside my blouse where pickers wouldn't find it.

I walked to the only structure on the platform—a large booth cornered near the neutral zone.

“Good morning, Miss.” A young man with a ginger beard and the uniform of the Roget Defense Co. looked up at me from where he sat behind the booth. “Here for the L?” he asked needlessly.

I nodded, and reached under my blouse into the hidden bag. His eyes opened as a bit of woman flesh showed. “Any reg changes since last month?” I asked casually.

“Nope. Old Towne's supposed to issue a new list of prohibits in a few days, but none yet.”

I threw my I.D. on the booth's counter and emptied my shoulder bag of prohibited items that I knew by heart. Along with my wristwatch, I put everything but the I.D. into the large envelope he offered. I labeled it with my name before sealing the top and handing it back to him.

“You'll need I.D. to claim this,” he said, turning away to put the envelope in a maze of slots behind him. When he turned back, I tapped my Blumenthal I.D. on the counter.

“I wonder if you can help me, I mean, as a professional courtesy,” I smiled with shoulders pulled back to emphasize my assets. He noticed the emphasis and remembered the flash of flesh. I grabbed the moment to retrieve a list of known hackers and their photos from the shoulder bag, “Has one of these people taken the L today?” I asked.

Ginger beard reluctantly looked down. “Yes, this one,” his forefinger landed on a photo. “Early. And, from the questions he asked, he's an Old Towne virgin, poor kid.”

“Thanks.” I memorized the tapped name and face.

“Maybe I'll be on duty when you get back,” ginger beard ventured with an inquiringly raised brow.

“I'll look for you,” I lied.

An L-tram hovered in from the neutral zone and ended the need for more talk. I coyly declined his offer to escort me “on.”

Ten minutes to cross the zone and forty minutes to clear Old Towne customs was the time it took, even for frequent travelers. More if you weren't. I settled into the grimy seat and scanned my ‘companions’ without real interest. Fewer and fewer people were traveling the loop these days,

and I wondered how long it would be before travel restrictions were clamped down. *Even tighter ones*, I sighed.

The tram slid into motion. Blackened stone, rotting wood and weeds began to stream by the window. I'd grown up in the neutral zone... before it was *that*, of course. I'd played in streets that didn't exist now and I lived in buildings that were crumbled to shards. I couldn't recognize them now under the towering weeds. Hell, why did I even try? But I always did. I always had to pull eyes away from the nightmare landscape between Free Zone 12 and Old Towne. Memories stabbed my throat. I was a fool to scan the rubble for signs of anything familiar. It wasn't there. I wasn't there, anymore. I could travel the non streets now only by tram and only with Old Towne permission.

Customs. I'd dumped the list of possible perps with ginger beard and I was squeaky with compliance on everything else but no one slips past the grilling and groping of the OTA agents. No one enters without a blast of X-rays that show you down to dental fillings and underwire bras. Everyone gets tagged with a tracker I.D. that broadcasts every step you make in Old Towne. For all of that, the crossing was easy this time with no strip search or back room interro.

That had been two hours ago. Now I sat in a stinking bar, sipping watery alcohol. I endured the privilege of staking out a perp who was plopped among Old Towner alkies who wanted to forget they were trapped. A few of them still stared at the obvious freezien kid who'd invaded their turf; one glared at him with unmasked hatred; one sneered at me and licked his lips. Ignoring the lip-licker, I undid that other button on my blouse, made eye contact again with the kid, and waited for the inevitable.

The laughs on either side of him broke off as the perp got to his feet and turned toward me. One put a restraining hand on his arm but the perp shrugged it off and crossed over.

"You are almost done with your drink," he stated the obvious.

He stood grinning at the booth's opening with two double Scotches in his hands. Between nerves and the courage of the alcohol, his body swayed slightly in place. "I asked the bartender what you were drinking," he was proud of his cleverness. Sparkling blue eyes matched a thicket of blond hair, both of which belonged to a face that barely shaved.

I responded properly to the attempt at charm. "Well, aren't you the gentleman?" Someday I'd mistress a Southern accent and *really* pull off

lines like that.

He set one glass in front of me, his hand trembling. *How old is this guy?* The date by his name on the list made him 19... but that couldn't be right.

He inclined his head toward the booth's empty side. "May I?"

"I thought you'd never ask. My name is Sharon Garcia," I lied.

"Gordon Lake," he told the truth.

"What exactly brings you to Old Town, Gordon?"

"Oh, curiosity."

"It killed the cat," I stated flatly.

He looked up from across the booth and locked my eyes. The smile and sparkle flickered off and on in surprise. It wasn't a response he expected. Blood crept upward into his cheeks as he stuttered, "W... Why are *you* here?"

I dropped the lying. I needed to know about the 3-D chemical proto, and time, well, "tick, tick."

"I'm here because of you, Gordon. I work for the Blumenthal Recovery Agency which works for T-R Corp. and we are anxious for the return of a certain item."

Blood filled the rest of his beet-red face. "I'm listening," he finally managed.

"T-R will waive financial restitution in exchange for reasonable but non-negotiable accommodations from you."

"I'm listening," his voice cracked on the answer.

"First, they want the proto back. They want all info on anyone who knows about the proto. Any money you've made, you hand over to T-R who hands it over to me as a fee."

His right hand went up to a breast pocket on his leather jacket.

"Not now!" I said through gritted teeth, then smiled because the laughers at the bar were watching.

"As part of restitution," I continued speaking and smiling, "T-R wants you to provide a detailed report on how you got past their security. They want you to walk them through it... and, I mean, step by step, repeatedly. Then you'll sign a one-year contract to visit all their facilities, test their security, and correct any other snafus. They'll pay you a living wage, which means a pittance above starvation. At the end of the year, you're on your

own. Are you clear on the terms as I've described them?" I waited. No response.

"I need you to confirm you understand the terms," I insisted softly.

He seemed frozen. One hand shot out abruptly, hoisted a glass of scotch and swallowed it in one gulp. I didn't realize he could turn any redder. "They won't prosecute?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Agree to restitution, and there's no need."

Lake signaled the bartender for another drink. When it was in his hands, he said, "I don't have the prototype." He downed the second scotch and choked on it.

"Slow down, kid, it's going to be a long night." I was starting to feel sorry for him but business is business. "Where is it?"

He raised a hand to signal the bartender again, and I grabbed the fingers midair. I slid my full glass across the tabletop, and repeated, "Where is it?"

"With the highest bidder," he replied.

"And the name would be?"

"Don't even try going to the Old Towne police," he ignored the question. "They're paid off to protect me, to protect him."

"I never go to Towner police," I stated. "And if the deal's complete, why are you still in Old Towne?" *Even he can't be that dumb.*

"The man needed to check out the..." he glanced around the bar, "the package before paying me the second half. But..." another glance, "I have a bad feeling about the... the client," he told the truth again. "I wouldn't mind getting out while the getting's good."

"Yah, well, that's the thing about crime. You don't move in the best circles." The tone was more sarcastic than I intended so I switched back to a professional one. "Tell me about the deal, and talk fast."

He did both.

I heaved a deep sigh and placed a reassuring hand over his cold one. *This is one sorry excuse for a criminal.* "Let me tell you what really happened," I said.

"No." I raised a hand to cut off the protest gathering in his face. "I believe the words you spoke but they mean something different than what you think. First," I curled down all but one finger, "you didn't make a 'killing'. The man paid half the money in advance because the whole price tag was bargain basement on discount day. Second," another finger

retreated, “If it checked out, then you’ll be dead as soon as the door closes behind you tomorrow morning.”

His jaw dropped open.

“The man won’t risk your talking. Third, you’re alive right now because, if the device doesn’t work, he needs to beat the information out of you.”

About half-way into the explanation, blood left Lake’s cheeks. “I’ve gotta get out of here,” the sound cracked in his throat.

“We will, we will,” I said soothingly. “But we’ll get the proto first.”

“I can’t go back there!”

That was loud enough for the bartender to hear. “Calm down, Gordon. Tell me where the proto is and everything will be fine.”

He swallowed the last of my drink. “Like I said, it’s with a businessman named Cal Alsace.” He slammed the glass down loudly and looked into my wincing face. “Oh, you mean the ‘where’ where. He’s in a hotel on the strip but he’ll be flying out tomorrow morning after our... meeting.”

He gulped. “After he kills me.”

The strip was Sunset Blvd., the only street on which cops slammed real crime because tourists and the rich needed to party and swindle away their evenings in safety.

“When does he expect you?”

“After dawn.”

“You and I are going to be rudely early,” I stood up in the booth.

“You mean now?”

“Tick, tick. We know where the proto is and you know how to crack security. We go, you grab, we leave.”

He shook his head to clear it, and stood up.

“Oh, one last thing,” I paused before moving toward the door. “The guys on each side of you at the bar? They’re going to follow us to the street and try to jump you. Let me handle it. And don’t look at them as you leave.”

Lake blinked, and headed straight for the door. Outside, away from the front window, he collapsed in panic against the wall of the neighboring building and vomited.

“Collect yourself,” I ordered. “We’ll get this done and we’re outta here. I’m very good at what I do, and you are too.”



I hauled him by the elbow down the garbage-lined block and started to cross the street. The two laughs were on the other side. *There must be a back door. There's always a back door.*

“Let me handle it,” I stressed each syllable, turning my head to confirm he’d heard.

A flash of pain at the back of my scalp hurled me to the pavement and into unconsciousness. Before slipping under, I heard a familiar voice say one word.

\* \* \*

I woke up on bags of trash in a side-alley with a sharp pain bringing the stink of the place into focus. A rat with shining red eyes bit into the flesh of my left hand as his encouraged companions scurried closer. It wasn’t his first bite. My blood was pooling on the filthy alley surface. The rats halted in place, then scattered as I lurched my torso into sitting. The burst of agony in my skull drove me back down. I glanced around but the alley was lit only by a glow from the street I’d tried to cross. I couldn’t see through the shadows but I heard claws against cement. I couldn’t stay, and I couldn’t move.

I patted my side and groaned in relief. The shoulder bag was there. I fumbled through it until fingers hit the hard, square box with adrenalin, antiseptics, antibiotics, pain killers... all the medical necessities. I groped out the syringe of adrenalin and one of antibiotics and shot up as best I could with shaking hands. The pain needed to take care of itself; the morphine-mix would make a bad cocktail in my veins. Energy slammed me awake and sitting up almost worked this time, except for the dizziness that sent the alley on a circus ride. I sat up slowly.

None too soon. More rats had gathered, red-eyed and edging close to my feet. I kicked out, and they spilled into darkness. I hoisted myself carefully and baby-stepped it to the yellow glow of the street lamp, testing my legs and shoulders as I went. Nothing broken or painful beyond use. As for tomorrow? Another matter.

I leaned against the street lamp and remembered the last word I’d heard before passing out. “Loser!” I knew the voice.

“Damn you, Chang.” *Son of a bitch of pervie asshole.* I had to think. Chang had Lake. I checked my cell phone for the time. He also had a twenty minute lead. “Damn you, Chang,” There was no space to play catch-up. “There’s only one card left to play.” *God, I hate doing this! I’ll get back at you for making me do this, Chang.*

I punched another number, spoke into the phone, and hung up. Then I retreated to the same stinking bar for another watered-down scotch. After wiping it off, I settled on a stool near the front door to wait. *Chang is lousy news on steroids.* I couldn’t predict if he’d do the straight redress or take the proto himself, killing the kid in the process, of course. *Probably do whatever the odds favor,* I concluded.

“Idiot!” I said out loud, and the bartender glanced over with a spark of interest that quickly died. I repeated the word to myself, directed at myself. It came from realizing that, *The laughs were there for the kid **and** for me.*

Eight minutes later my trump card arrived. The bartender stiffened in jerk reaction when the overweight cop tossed open the door with a bang. The bartender relaxed when the packed uniform stopped at me.

“MacKenzie Jones,” the cop stated. It wasn’t a feat of deduction. I was the only woman left in the place.

“I.D.” he demanded.

The cop held my driver’s license close to his florid face to read it through the dim light, then threw the card on the bar counter with a snort of disgust. “We’ll talk in the squad car.”

Outside, he pushed me abruptly down on the car’s hood and ripped the bag off my shoulder.

“Don’t move.”

I heard the bag’s contents hit the pavement. There wasn’t much to hear: a change of clothes, the depleted medical kit, a cell phone, some credits, a set of duplicate keys. Two metallic clicks came as he opened and closed the kit.

“I didn’t peg you for an addie,” he said with another snort.

*Ah... the syringes of morphine,* I realized. Then all thought stopped cold as his ham hands slid the length of my body, patting each inch, feeling each crevice. For all of that, the frisk was quick and impersonal.

The shoulder bag landed on the hood by my head. “Get in, and start talking,” he said, crossing in front of the car to the driver’s side.

I slid into the front passenger’s and checked out my bag. *All there.*

“Start talking,” he repeated brusquely as the car doors locked with a snap.

“Cal Alsace paid the police to protect Gordon Lake and he’s been kidnapped on your watch,” I repeated the phone call of fifteen minutes ago. Interestingly, I’d been put through to the ‘right’ cop in a flash.

He blew a heavy breath out through his cop teeth. “I drop the kid on a bar stool, set my monitor to track,” he muttered to himself. “I leave for 10 minutes...”

I’d been in the bar for close to an hour, watching Lake, and there’d been no sign of a boy in blue. But I thought it best not to mention that fact. Besides which, the cop was rehearsing a story, not talking to me.

A question crossed his face. “What’s this to you?” he demanded suspiciously. “What do you know, and why do you care?”

Most of what I told him was true with the lies being omissions. No mention of Blumenthal, though. My type aren’t popular with his sort.

“I care,” I finished, “because I’m Gordon’s girlfriend.”

The cop snorted again. “I was with Lake, remember; you’re way out of his class. Try again.”

“He’s come into a lot of money.”

That motive he believed. He switched topics, “Daniel Chang’s the dick from Blumenthal’s?”

*Yah, in both senses of the word.* I nodded.

“I hate those restie dicks,” his eyes narrowed. “I love to arrest them... just in custody for an hour, that’s all I need. One hour.”

He thought a moment, his punched-in nose wrinkling with effort. “Why? Why’s Chang after the kid and why were we paid to protect him? How come he’s so special?”

*Ah... so Alsace muted up about the proto. Smart move.* I shrugged. “All I know is you were supposed to protect Gordon until there was some ‘done deal’, and now he’s gone.”

“Not for long. Describe this Chang.”

I described the asshole down to a mole by the mouth and a fire tattoo on his left wrist.

The cop fished a cell phone out of his pocket. “Mike, it’s me. I need you to do a solid. Yeah, a track and retrieve that you do yourself... no going through channels. You need to find this son-of-a-bitch fast ’cuz, I bet you

snake-eyes, he's headed for customs..." The cop read off the description, spelled out the name, and listened for a moment as Mike spoke.

"Yeah, well, he won't be alone so pick up the right asshole, and don't hurt either one until we're sure," the cop paused for Mike's response.

His eyes darted at me, and away. "Okay," he said, ending the call.

"Alsace wants you, too," he gunned the motor to kill conversation. We headed toward the strip... fast.

I knew the meaning. Alsace wanted no loose ends, no loose lips. Once again, I'd become a liability.

The second call came as we pulled into disabled parking in front of the Strip Hilton. "Yeah... okay, okay." The cop hung up.

The car doors clicked open. I sat in place until a ham hand grabbed my upper arm—grabbed it rough—and tightened as it yanked me out me out onto my feet on the pavement.

"Inside. Move," he ordered, maintaining a blood-stopping grip.

Cal Alsace's suite was on the 15th floor. A hulking man opened the door as soon as the cop rapped it with his knuckles. A hand on my back thrust me through and I fell down to thick carpet. From my knees I could see three rooms—a sitting room, a bedroom and bathroom. I raised my head and a sprawling view of the Hollywood Hills came at me through a sliding window that opened on a wrap-around balcony. In front of the window, a diminutive man leaned back against a large metal and glass table. The gigantic man closed and locked the front door behind us, then stood in the entrance hallway with his arms folded over a massive chest.

Cal Alsace stood straight up at the same time I did. Time to give him a once over: a tiny man in an immaculate suit with a pinched face made longer by his receding hairline. *The mouse that roared.*

Alsace jutted his chin and asked the cop, "The girlfriend?"

The cop nodded and said, "I frisked her... the bag, too. She's clean."

Alsace's narrow eyes sized me up, too. They went up and down again, pausing at my half-buttoned blouse, before he shook his head. "That's a damn shame," he said, smiling almost wistfully. The smile died, "Where's Lake?"

He cop talked, "On his way here, with an escort. We found him ten minutes ago."

Relief sagged Alsace's shoulders. "Excellent... at long last." He tensed again. "And the Chang asshole?"

“Waiting for me in a holding cell” It was the cop’s turn to smile.

“Good.” Alsace’s eyes lingered on the curves in my blouse. “Wait for Lake down stairs and bring him up immediately. Get that: *immediately*. Then, get lost.”

“What?” the cop blurted. The hulking man took a step in his direction.

“You heard me. You were a babysitter, a goddamn babysitter, that’s all. And you managed to screw it up!” Alsace crossed over to the cop, tilting his head up to glare in his face. The hulker stood directly behind Alsace, glaring into the cop’s eyes. “I won’t be seeing your face again, and you’ll never get a private assignment in this town, again. I’ll see to that. Get used to living on your piss-ant salary.”

The cop’s jaw moved like he was chewing food.

“Now get out of here, get Lake, and get lost.” Alsace spit out. “And if you hurt him...” he let the meaning dangle.

After the cop left, Alsace turned to the hulk. “When the kid comes...,” he began.

The hulk cut Alsace off with a quick shake of his head. He pointed his chin in my direction.

“You’re too easy to forget,” Alsace stated. He grabbed my arm and dragged me to a chair by the metal and glass table. “Stay put,” he ordered, and retreated deep into the hall by the door, where the two men hunched together in whispers.

My heart stopped. On the table to one side of me was the proto, sitting out in the open. I gawked then shut my mouth, and checked if they’d noticed. They were lost in talk. *Apparently I am easy to forget*. I leaned back and peeked around the back of the proto. *It’s still there*. With eyes glued on the whisperers, without moving the rest of my body, I slid one hand behind the proto, searching the surface with my fingertips until... *That’s it!*

Alsace glanced in my direction but saw nothing.

It was the hulk whose head jerked up as he demanded from the hallway, “What are you doing there?”

“Nothing,” I spread my hands innocently in front of me.

“Sit over there,” Alsace pointed to a chair across the room.

I obeyed. A minute later, the hotel door burst open, Lake was thrown inside, and the door slammed shut as fast as it’d opened.

“The machine doesn’t work,” Alsace said without preliminaries. “The prototype doesn’t work. Make it.”

“You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?” Lake’s voice cracked.

“Not if it works,” Alsace lied.

Lake looked at me with deer-and-headlight eyes.

I stood up and crossed to him. The hulk moved to block my approach before I could reach Alsace who glowered at Lake’s side.

“Now or nothing,” I called loudly, hoping the kid would pick up the meaning.

He did. Lake drove his fist into Alsace’s face with a stunning force that *had* to come from desperation. The kid just didn’t have the muscle otherwise.

The hulk’s head snapped in their direction, and I sprang. I drove three syringes of morphine-mix as deep as I could into the thick neck. I thumbed the plungers down. He grabbed my arm with a violence that would break bone but it was too late. With a roll of white eyes, he collapsed to his knees from the motion. An instant later, he was out cold, lying on the carpet beside Alsace.

I stopped Lake from crossing to the prototype.

“No need,” I opened my shoulder bag and flashed the contents. “We’re outta here.”

“Spare no speed,” he agreed.

I shook my head. “We are walking slowly, hand in hand, like we’re young love on a date. When we’re off the strip, then and only then do we spare nothing.”

The cop wouldn’t be checking Lake’s tracker, I knew that. And, as long as Alsace and the hulk were down for the count, we stood a chance of slipping through customs in about one hour from now.

“How’d you....”

“Wait ’til we’re off the strip,” I cautioned.

Twenty minutes later, we were. Words gushed out of Lake as I waved down a cab. “How’d you know what to take from the prototype?” he finished with the question.

“The diagram was in the case papers. All T-R ever wanted was the control module. I mean, without its brains, the proto is just a hunk of scrap metal worth about 20 credits.” A cab pulled a U-Turn and headed to the curb where we stood. “Say nothing else until we are in the neutral zone,” I

ordered. "Answer every question customs asks with one-syllable. Volunteer nothing. Try to play as dumb as you are."

"Where to lady?" The cabbie looked like everyone's bored grandfather.

"The L. How long will it take?"

"This hour? About 30 minutes," he replied.

"Make it 20 and I'll double the meter."

We made it in twenty. Customs was almost deserted and an easy go again. Lake's stuttering worked to his advantage.

I paid for private seating at the barred ticket booth that was guarded by an armed OSA agent. A few minutes later, we boarded the tram. Other than an old woman sprawled and sleeping, the L was empty. We settled into a screened off section at one end.

"I have to ask you..." Lake began.

"Neutral," I reminded, and gazed pointedly out the window, ignoring him. A few minutes later, the overhead lights blinked yellow for 'neutral'. I switched on the white noise generator and punched a number into my cell phone. "On board," I said before hanging up.

I turned toward Lake. "OK. Now..."

I interrupted his opened mouth "...but I want an answer first. Why doesn't the machine work."

"It does."

I shook my head. "I know when people lie. Alsace wasn't. Why doesn't it work."

"The activator is not obvious."

I blinked. "You're telling me they didn't turn it on."

Lake shrugged. "It's the most common mistake people make."

I never laugh but I made an exception. "Ok," I said after it'd passed. "What do you have to say?"

Taken aback, he searched the palms of his hands for words before stating simply, "I'm afraid."

Reassurance wasn't my long suit. After a long pause, I reluctantly asked, "Of what?"

"I'm going to jail, aren't I?"

*Is that all?* "No one's going to jail," I assured him. "T-R wants the proto back and a pound of your flesh besides. You'll work 'round the clock for a year at janitor's wages and, at the end of it all, it's 50/50 whether

they'll offer you a job at what you're worth. It'll depend on how much competition there is for your... talent." I returned to staring pointedly out the window.

He ran a tongue over his dry lips, "I want to believe you," he croaked. But Chang said I had to leave with him because the Townie police would throw me in a work camp. That is, if Alsace didn't kill me first."

*Chang. A pleasant thought. I bet he is being whipped to puree right now by a certain cop who's taking out his humiliation.* They couldn't hold Chang for much more than an hour because bringing real charges meant explaining too much. And no one wanted *that*. But the cop'd been right about one thing. *An hour should do it...*

"It's not that I don't believe you," Lake was still talking, "but it's hard to believe T-R won't, you know... I'm afraid."

He leaned toward me from the opposite seat, his face lit up by the overhead bulb. For the first time, I saw how black the smudges were under his eyes. His hair sprawled across his forehead, making him look even younger than in the bar.

I sighed and leaned back in my seat. "Don't be. I *am* telling the truth. Your work environ will be something short of hell for the next year and, then, you're a free man. With a record. But the record'll show you came back to make restitution. I'll be sure it says you came voluntarily."

"I don't get it. In Old Towne, I'd be in work camp. Chang said..."

In for a credit, in for a pound. "Chang told the truth for a change. The system would've stuck you in a hole and drained everything you were for years. When there wasn't much left, it would've spit you out on the streets with branded hands and a paper trail that told everyone you were second-class. For life.

"That's something no one gets about freedom," I said. "People get to make mistakes and not be destroyed. In the Free Zones, you make good your mistakes and you get a clean slate. Or close to it. Freedom doesn't destroy people for their flaws. It lets flawed people recover, make amends and do better next time. That's what no one gets. The perfect don't need freedom as much as the flawed do because we're the ones who are trying to figure it out. We stumble over the system, whatever the system is, because we need to find where the limits are. But freedom doesn't kill its rebels... what it does is teach them about consequences."



I sighed. I don't like opening up, but too late now. "That's what freedom means. You can fall on your face over and over, and as long as you pay the price of standing up, you get to be on two feet. That's restitution. It's not just for victims. It's for the perps as well. No one gets that. Restitution teaches consequences." I added in low tone, "And it can be a type of redemption."

Lake thought for a long moment. "I'll have a record?" he asked.

I blew out a breath that resembled a laugh. "In your case, it'll be a credential. You're the guy who got past T-R security and stole the unstealable. I'd like to have your salary three years from now."

"But a record for life?"

"A lot of us have one. That's part of consequences."

"You?"

"Why d'you think I'm a restitution gumshoe?"

"So you...?"

I cut the question off by raising my hand. The sharing was over. "MYOB," I said.

"What?"

"Mind your own business."

Silence. For the remaining two minutes of the trip.

The tram glided quietly to a stop at the Free Zone 12's L platform.

"I'm still afraid," he said, reluctant to unbuckle the seat belt.

"You should be. The next year of your life isn't yours anymore... not like it was before, and that's frightening. But even you know that's fair." I unbuckled and stood up, tired of talking.

The tram door slid open and revealed two men suited for business, wearing dark sunglasses and grim expressions. A T-R escort for the valued 'employee'.

I exited first and handed the proto module to one of the suits. He slipped it into a pouch in the lining of his jacket, and I glimpsed a Colt automatic strapped to his shoulder. Nothing unusual. Most freeziens carried.

"Will I see you again?"

Lake was behind me. I gave him an encouraging wink, "Stranger things have happened. And I'm not hard to find."

The two suits parted to make a space that Lake filled. As he walked away, I said, "Good luck, Gordon" but I don't know if he heard.

Time to go home.

My name is Mac. I'm a restitution gumshoe who's made mistakes and paid for them. I know what freedom means because I needed it once. I needed the second chance that comes from paying off a debt. I'm standing on two feet and no one messes with my life because I'm a free woman and decent human being.

# Processing Power

*Richard Walsh*

This cyberpunk dystopia explores the question of what true freedom means.

Lux Cordero stepped on to Guthrie Station, a high monorail platform overlooking the edge of the downtown Minneapolis Urban Zone. The station was deserted and nearly abandoned, derelict and dirty, a layer of leaves accumulated along the heavy fencing that surrounded the platform; what few intact trash bins remained overflowing with refuse.

His tail, the man who had been following him since boarding the train at the NeuroSys campus, would know better than to depart here as well, for doing so would force a confrontation both wanted to avoid.

Lux considered his options for completing the trip to Seven Corners. His destination, Serenity Clinic, would close to visitors within two hours. He could use the labyrinthine skyway system to continue the trip on foot, though he knew this might take more time than he had. Or he could descend to ground level and find a way across by car.

The street outside the station was dark and cold, shadowed by the rows of towering buildings. Even in the middle of summer little light made it here, and now, late in the day in the autumn, it was already twilight. A press of pedestrians pushed him forward when he stepped from the outlet onto the sidewalk.

Lux eased to the edge of the pack, to the brackish region between the crowded sidewalk and the slow movement of cars and trucks and bicycles that packed the street. He raised his hand. A nondescript car slowed and pulled toward him. Its driver probably weighing the risks of picking up a passenger who looked like Lux: stocky, short hair beneath an old knit cap, a military issue jacket over an oversized prosthetic right arm.

The driver sped on when they made eye contact. Lux looked every bit the down-on-the-luck veteran, and he probably didn't want to risk finding out how down-on-the-luck Lux really was.

Two cabs rolled by, but Lux didn't hail either of these; both were officially licensed city cabs. They ran twice the price of what they were

worth, and hiring them meant logging in and effectively calling out his current location to anyone paying attention on the net. Assuming his tail, or his employers, knew where to look.

Another car pulled from the traffic and slowed to a stop. It was a two-seater, barely enough space behind the seats for a suitcase.

The driver leaned over the passenger seat. “Car?” he said.

“Seven Corners,” said Lux, destination the traditional affirmation in the black market of hired cars.

“700,” said the driver, and Lux opened the door himself. The price: another implied affirmation.

“We’re cousins,” said Lux. Their shared story.

The driver was a thin man, gaunt with sunken eyes and dark, thick eyebrows. He looked at once menacing and emaciated. His complexion was olive, not much darker than Lux’s; but Lux immediately, unconsciously, began comparing him to the countless national enemies who perpetually threatened the North American Union. Could this one be from South Asia, where nuclear war between states had cast a hundred million refugees out across the world? Or Latin America, where Lux had lost his arm, and where NAU forces still fought an insurgency of narcoterrorists in the jungles of Oaxaca? Or the Middle East, where two centuries of interference and provocation had bred generations of martyrs?

No matter, anyway, for commerce in the shadow of the city’s innumerable regulations had brought them together, for this 20 minute trip, as voluntary associates. Any ideological disputes or national conflicts set behind them in the name of a transaction that benefited them both.

The river crossing was thick with police, both civilian and military. The driver relaxed his posture and handed over his permits casually to the uniformed teenager who demanded to know their business. “We’re cousins,” he said lazily, and Lux leaned over to nod his agreement.

Probably the boy checking the permit knew less about national origins than did Lux, and he waved the pair through. Two turns of clogged traffic—police cars, cabs, bikes—and into the old West Bank district. They pulled before a block of towers overlooking the bend in the river: Seven Corners, the oldest, most derelict, urban block in the district. Massive, rectangular, mixed-use structures, connected by a web of skyways that crisscrossed like neuro pathways between synapses.

Lux scanned in a 700 amero charge to a paychip and passed it to the driver, who verified the balance and nodded his thanks to Lux.

In all, the co-travelers had exchanged six words.

\* \* \*

“Welcome to NeuroSys.” That had been the greeting of Lux’s employer, Nels J. Hansson; according to the plate outside his office the Division Controller of NeuroSys Finance and Reporting. “I hope you enjoyed the trip up the river.”

Lux had enjoyed the trip, though he had enjoyed more than that the half hour alone in the NeuroSys park before the corporate guards had roused him. It was a rare treat in the congestion of the urban center to have quiet seclusion outdoors.

“It’s not a trip I make much,” said Lux. “Don’t have enough friends in high places, I guess.”

Hansson squinted at him from across his desk, as if assessing how much of this was bluster. Then he laughed.

“High places,” he repeated. He slid an old-fashioned paper envelope across to Lux. “Open it. You’ll find documents and photographs related to the disappearance of my brother, Horace.”

Lux paged through them, making sure to surreptitiously capture whatever images he could using his implanted heads-up gear. The less he had to rely on this paper the better.

“Horace was not well loved,” said Nels.

“You think that has something to do with the disappearance?”

“It might. His politics were radical. He couldn’t hold down a job.”

“And he was an addict,” Lux said, seeing a couple of arrest documents and the address of a treatment center in Seven Corners.

“You picked up on that?” said Nels. “That’s right. Adagio.”

“Common enough addiction.”

“Very few people know about that clinic, however. Given how much this would embarrass my family, we have to keep a very tight lid on his admission there.”

“But he got out?”

“Or was helped.”

“Why would anyone help Horace escape a rehabilitation clinic?”

“That’s what I need you to find out.” Nels slid another envelope over the desk: two cred cards, marked for 20k ameros each. “Those are for expenses. You’ll get your full fee when you find my brother.”

The monorail station on the east side of the NeuroSys campus overlooked the river. It was running fast now; white peaks marked where the water tumbled over stones or old boats or collapsed construction. Lux stuffed his hands in his pockets and waited for the train.

Nels had not thought to offer him a helo-shuttle back to the city.

The train had stopped at the string of tech firms situated along the Mississippi north of the city: nanotechnology and genetics and neurohacking. The city planners had called it a “technology corridor,” though it was now half-empty and dilapidated. The best companies, the most cutting edge tech, had moved to corporate microstates in the Andes or offshore, to man-made islands in the middle of the ocean.

The commuters were a somber lot, each looking down into their own heads-up displays, reading or watching vids; none making eye contact or engaging their fellow citizens. Lux scanned their faces casually, noting who was watching whom. One looked away as he turned; a young guy, wearing conspicuously clean attire: freshly pressed, no evidence of a day in the office. This man had been starting his workday, not ending it. Lux’s tail.

\* \* \*

The back steps of the street level entrance into Seven Corners were dark and stank of urine and sweat. The cameras here appeared dark; even in the dim reflected light of the stairwell the inner lens was shut. No one was monitoring these.

Lux pulled up the building plans on his HUD and located the clinic. It was a small facility, occupying just one floor on the east side of the tower. When he arrived, the door had a small, nondescript plaque that read SERENITY CLINIC in generic script.

The waiting room was dimly lit, the floor’s tiles smudged at the edges where foot traffic hadn’t worn away the dirt. The dull sheen of neglect hung over the room; every surface in need of cleaning. It was not a place

someone would come to detox, an appearance which seemed deliberate, given the anonymity of its patients.

An attendant spoke to him through a small speaker behind a wall of bullet-proof plastic. Her look vacant; her voice monotone, like the artificial voice assigned to a computer 100 years before. Her name, Carolyn, embroidered on the right breast of her smock.

“We close in twenty minutes,” she said. The waiting room was empty. The attendant appeared impatient with him, though her voice didn’t betray it.

“I won’t need that long,” he said.

“How can I help you?”

He had removed the small clipping of Horace he’d received from Nels. He slipped this through a slot in the divider. Carolyn took it absently, but her eyes widened when she read the name.

“I’ll have to page my supervisor,” she said.

“Before you do that,” Lux said evenly. “This will go easier for me—and for you—if you can just let me in to see his room.”

“I really shouldn’t.”

“If you page your supervisor it will mean a formal report.”

This gave her pause. He meant paperwork, and she didn’t seem the type to enjoy paperwork.

“What do you need to see his room for?”

“He and I are friends. I just want to pick up some things he left behind.”

“Some police were already here,” she said.

“Is that right?”

“On account that he’s a terrorist.”

“Yet now he’s on the loose.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” she said.

“I didn’t say it was. Just let me see his room for ten minutes and you won’t have to answer any more questions.”

She paused again. Then her hand disappeared beneath her workstation and the door to his right slid partially ajar. He pulled it fully open and stepped through.

“Room 49,” Carolyn said. She pointed down the corridor to Lux’s left. “The entry code is 9010. Be back in ten minutes.”

The hallway was equal parts hospital and hotel. There were notes of hospitality, like small sitting areas with vid monitors showing sports or tabloid programs. But these were marred by disrepair: threadbare carpet; small trash cans, full to the top with loose debris; the smell of disinfectant that betrayed the underlying corruption more than treated it.

Lux released the lock to room 49. Inside it was dark, but as he closed the door behind him and turned on the interior light he heard shuffling from within. He turned toward the noise, raising his right arm instinctively.

At that instant the attacker was on him, first striking Lux in the arm with a handheld truncheon and then tackling him against the door when the blow failed to do any damage.

They rolled to the ground. Lux swept his foot beneath to reverse their position. His bionic arm, awkward at times with fine motor tasks like handwriting or needlecraft, was stronger than anything a flesh-and-blood opponent could bring to bear. Lux postured up over the attacker, grasped him around the neck, and jerked his body, striking the back of the head three times against the floor in quick succession.

His attacker went limp in his hands.

It was his tail. The pressed shirt and clean haircut. The man Lux thought he'd lost at Guthrie Station. He had somehow known Lux's destination and beaten him here.

Lux pulled him into the adjoining bathroom and rifled his pockets. He was carrying a gun and a badge: "Agent Samuel Moreno, Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Narcoterrorism." Lux left the badge and pocketed the gun.

Moreno wasn't carrying anything else. No paperwork. No leads. It would probably all be on his embedded splinter, the chip behind his ear implanted in all NAU citizens at birth. Lux pressed behind Moreno's right ear. No heartbeat, but Lux felt the telltale bump of a splinter.

Lux returned to the sleeping quarters. Browns and tans, heavy wooden furniture, and a painting fixed to the wall of Earthrise taken from Apollo 8. A striking bit of optimism and wonder in the dreary, clinical setting.

He tried the armoire and the dressers. Horace had left some things behind, but, as Carolyn had said, someone had already gone through them.

Lux scoured the scene, checking through the shirts and shoes, gently paging through the books on the night stand. He found a pile of handwritten notes, scattered across the small desk; apparently memoranda of group



meetings, an assignment to help Horace identify and describe the emotions of his experience at the clinic.

Horace despised his fellow patients—“inmates,” he called them in the notes—and blamed his family for his admission in the clinic. He referred to “NJH” throughout: Nels J. Hansson. The notes also alluded to a plan to escape; an accomplice by the initials MDM.

Lux browsed the folder of image captures from the documentation Nels had given him. MDM. Morris McDonald. The men’s uncle. A research doctor and a former senior executive at NeuroSys, though other information on him was scant. He had left the company several years prior.

Lux switched to his wider net connection and sent a query to Artemis, a hacker who specialized in deep, discreet skip tracing. “{morris d. mcdonald}” was the full text of the communiqué. Artemis would perform the search for their standard fee and deliver results when he had them.

Within the bedside stand Lux found another bunch of handwritten notes: a clump bundled together and pressed into the back of the drawer. These notes were more desperate than the others, more paranoid. In them Horace complained that NJH was having him tracked. That he was being followed by government agents. Lux thought of the corpse in the bathroom.

He returned to the body in the bathroom and stood over it for a half-minute, then knelt down beside it. There was a rigid edge in the soft tissue behind the ear, where the splinter was embedded. It was a patch that, in full light, would be slightly discolored; skin grown over it.

Lux flipped up a tiny needle point from the ring finger of his bionic arm and coaxed it into place where he thought the splinter’s port would be. He eased it through the skin and felt it meet resistance at the edge of the splinter. He adjusted the angle and probed again, this time penetrating the port of the splinter.

The hardware was encrypted, of course, and the files, too; but Lux knew a workaround he could exploit to extract the data until he had the time to decrypt it. He navigated the splinter’s operating system in his HUD via the chip’s primitive interface. He searched for a clunky antivirus application typical of splinters 20 years ago, when Moreno would have received his.

Then, backtracking through the static channels of the hardware’s architecture, Lux found himself in a vault of backup files the splinter generated for cases like this: when the device was no longer transmitting it created backups of everything, in case it went into full shutdown.

Lux copied the cache, rendered as little leaves of paper, into one of the deepest encrypted repositories in the hardware of his arm.

He unplugged and made his way from the room, wiping down whichever surfaces he remembered touching and turning off lights behind him. The code to enter the room worked to exit as well. He let himself out, turned right in the hallway, and went in search of a rear exit; a utility or emergency egress that would circumvent his original route into the clinic.

An unmarked door along the corridor led into a maintenance room; in the back, a small hatch out into a stairwell. Before exiting, it occurred to him to fire up a decryption program for Moreno's files to run.

Artemis chimed back as Lux returned to the street outside Seven Corners. Morris McDonald was a doctor and a businessman, a former executive at NeuroSys, which Artemis described as a "prominent brain science firm." His was a common enough name, but Artemis had added parameters for location, and then for criminal record.

Though McDonald had never been convicted of any crime, he had been charged twice: first in the circumstances that had led to dismissal from NeuroSys, and then more recently. Both times for the same crime: kidnapping. Both times, logged into the admission records of a local police bureau, and both times the file closed and sealed without further note. How Artemis had located the files, Lux didn't inquire.

The search had also turned up three addresses associated with Dr. McDonald: his residence, a standalone home in the posh Edina enclave; an adjunct professor's office at the University hospital not five miles away; and an unofficial rental space in Corbeur Tower, another building in Seven Corners.

It would not be a long walk to Corbeur Tower. The sun had set and a light snow was falling. Street traffic was still heavy, but the cold wind had driven pedestrians and bicyclists inside. The skyways that crossed between the skyscrapers were aglow in the snow flurry, silhouettes of pedestrians contrasted against the black sky overhead. Lux hurried across the corner of an intersection through the press of cars. One honked, though whether at him he didn't know.

The decryption program had completed by the time Lux entered the high, old-fashioned marble foyer of Corbeur Tower. The program had delivered several hundred of Moreno's files for analysis. Keywords

appeared in his most recent communications with his superiors: their orders, his responses, and—most importantly—code names.

“Catfish” was Horace Hansson, the target of Moreno’s operation. He’d been tracked by “Zapata,” the codename for Moreno. Catfish was lured out of Serenity Clinic by “Farmer”: Dr. Morris McDonald. But lured where? And why?

Then Zapata had gotten wind of “Bloodhound” and begun tailing him, too. Bloodhound was apparently Lux’s codename, and it was clear to him now that Moreno wasn’t working for Nels Hansson after all. That he’d never been. In the cascading packets of orders and responses, never did Nels appear once, whether coded or otherwise.

Within Corbeur Tower Lux located McDonald’s space on a chart in the building directory. The elevator that arrived was carpeted and musty. Long ago it had been a luxurious ride 110 floors up, but now it was somewhat harrowing; the car shuddered as it accelerated up and then shuddered again as it decelerated to a stop.

Lux rode to the floor below his destination and departed there, intending to approach the room from the opposite side. The hallway here was dark. Outdated sconces illuminated dimly by after-hour settings, a means of energy conservation. Every third was burnt out. Two of the fixtures had been pulled from their mounts and hung, limp, like marionettes’ hands, from the wall. One surveillance camera watched the hallway at the elevator landing, another midway down the hall. Both were dark. Unmonitored. Theater. Like most of the surveillance cameras in the police state.

He walked down the long hallway to the emergency exit at the end and jacked into the low-tech monitoring box with the net-tool of his arm. He easily disabled the alarm and pulled the door open. These stairs were pitch black. He flipped on a small lamp on his arm and ascended the stairs two at a time.

The hall he emerged into could have been the same as the one he’d left one story below, from the dim lighting and dusty artificial plants to the neglected light fixtures and the inoperable security cameras: like a mind-warping image of stairs circling up and down upon themselves; the hallucinogenic vision of a Mesoamerican snake eating itself.

He padded down the threadbare carpet, counted the office numbers until he arrived at his destination: an unlabeled office door. It could have

been a janitor's closet, but for the small metal decal of the office number on the door jamb and, he noted as he approached, the pinhole of a tiny camera mounted directly above.

He kept walking, barely slowing his pace, hoping that whatever was monitoring the other side of that high-tech camera hadn't noted his interest.

The hallway continued back to the elevator landing. He hit the call button and stood, thinking and waiting for the car to arrive. The door opened. The car was empty. Lux leaned in, punched the button for the ground floor, and stepped back into the lobby. He retraced his steps to McDonald's office, staying close to the same wall as the camera. When he was within a meter of the door he extracted a length of transmission wire from a storage slot in his arm. This he pressed against the door and slid up to the slot that housed the camera.

He inserted the opposite end to a wireless hub in his arm and initiated a very tight search for nearby signals. Immediately, the search picked up the signal of the camera, lightly encrypted, transmitting its findings to some nearby relay. He hacked the signal easily and checked first the view: he saw himself, but just a shadow; a dim blur on the margin of the image. A ghost on the margins of the perceptible world.

He locked that image in place and placed the transmission to loop it indefinitely. That blur would be the only thing an observer would notice until the image was rebooted. He retracted the wire and moved in front of the door. It was nondescript, dark-stained wood, but the lock's hardware, like the camera, was more sophisticated than its surroundings warranted.

When he hacked in, however, the encryption barrier was surprisingly minimal. He deployed a quick executable to penetrate the outer shell of the program and breach the barrier from within. He watched the visualization via his HUD. The program easily eluded the lock's clumsy security measures. But something was wrong. Lux realized, too late, as the barrier opened, that this was too easy. That it was a snare within a trap. Bait disguised as an obstacle. An ambush within the lock.

A flash of light erupted before him, and then two concussive bursts of sounds in the artificial environment of the operating system. Lux was only lightly tethered to the bot he'd just sent behind the lock's security measures, but it now pulled him in, toward an impossible black void beyond, to an expanse of empty virtual space. He switched off the bot, the bit of code that had switched from tool to tractor beam in a nanosecond, but too late.

Another concussive burst exploded before him. A dizzying spinning spiral of white and black. Then nothing.

The cheap visualization of the heads-up display was worthless before the onslaught. Lux lost consciousness, overtaken by infinite space. The vast emptiness surrounded him, the pressure of it squeezing his temples. He could feel his blood pounding, though he was now disembodied, detached from anything physical, trapped within the nightmare of an endless abyss.

When he came to, his HUD still off, he was seated in a reclining position in front of a window overlooking the dark strip of the river and the University campus beyond. Straps held him down in his seat. He strained against them, tested their tension. His bionic right arm was paralyzed and numb, locked in place behind him.

The lights were down, and he could see the room behind him in the reflection of the great window. A silhouette outlined immediately behind his chair.

“Welcome,” said the figure, a man. “You are my strongest catch yet.” His voice quivered. “I’ve had so many bums. So many vagrants. Burnt out. Crazy. Weak. But you...”

“I’m strong,” said Lux, pressing against his restraints again.

“Correct. Now stand.” The belts around his arms released.

Lux swung his feet to the floor and turned to face his captor, trying to pull his right arm free. But it refused his command, and he lost his balance. He fell to the ground in a heap.

The man leaned forward. He was tan and athletic, though the wrinkles about his eyes betrayed his age. It was Morris McDonald.

“Stand up,” he said. His voice quivered again. Lux realized he didn’t have the use of either arm: his right arm was not under his control; it was wrapped behind his back, its cybernetic grip holding his left wrist in place. “An elegant restraint, no?” said McDonald as Lux struggled to his feet. He took Lux by the arm and shoved him toward the back of the room, toward a doorway.

“Why did you come here?” McDonald said.

“Looking for a friend.”

“You’ve nearly found him. What’s his name?”

“Hansson. Horace Hansson.”

The doctor paused. “A unique specimen,” he said. “My nephew. The authorities provided me access for free. Addled, slightly, as they all are. But

he was useful for my work.”

“Your work?”

“You are half machine, so you’ll appreciate what I’m doing here. A hundred-fifty years ago, a computer the size of a warehouse had a fraction of the power of what today fits on the tip of your finger. Yet with all that power, that raw muscle, that remarkable speed and calculation, we’ve never even approximated those less quantifiable, human elements: emotion, empathy, intuition. It’s not all math, they tell me.”

He pulled back the sliding doors, revealing the room behind with an understated flourish. Lux saw boxes. Perhaps two dozen, by his quick count. A wall stacked high with metal compartments, a tangle of wires emerging and twisting and running together to a port in the floor.

“Boxes,” said Lux.

“Now see behind the curtain,” said the doctor. He flipped a switch and the panels covering the front of the compartments slid aside. Within each floated a quivering, pulsing human brain. Each suspended in a clear, viscous fluid.

“My nephew, Horace, was petulant. Careless. The Bureau connected him to some narcotraffickers. Or terrorists. Or both. Given our family’s prominence it’s easier for them to simply disappear him than bring him to trial.”

McDonald shoved Lux farther into the room, and to the right he saw an operating table beneath a bright light; a case of instruments next to a robotic lift.

“My gain. Such a specimen.” McDonald pointed to a similar crate, next to the operating table. “Addled, as I said, but still strong.”

He turned Lux and pushed him toward the table. All those abductions but the doctor had clearly never had to take on a victim at full strength.

Lux shrugged off the power in his right arm with a simple toggle. The bionic element went limp and in turn released his left arm. The doctor hesitated for a split second, surprised by the unexpected weight that suddenly rested in his hand. Lux stomped down quickly on his foot and then, knowing before it happened the doctor’s reaction, threw his head backward, landing it square against his face.

He turned and grabbed the doctor by the throat before he could fall backward. McDonald’s eyes widened.

“I’m not going to kill you,” said Lux. “They just paid me to find Horace.”

But they hadn’t paid him to ignore whatever else he found. So Lux strapped the doctor into his chair and made him watch as he smashed the brain machines to pieces one-by-one. Saving only Horace Hansson’s.

The others, he hoped, now released from that abyss he’d just briefly glimpsed. The State might sacrifice some for the greater good, for the research of a madman in a highrise laboratory; but these two dozen, at least, were finally free.

Richard Walsh is a part-time writer, and full-time husband, father, and accountant. He lives with his family and a pack of basset hounds in the suburbs of Minneapolis, and stays active with local politics, roleplaying games, and light (very light) jogging. Richard is the coauthor of *The Adventures of Seamus Tripp*, an action series for readers of all ages, as well as other short science fiction.

# Afterword: The Importance of Libertarian Fiction

*J.P. Medved*

“Politics,” Andrew Brietbart famously said, “is downstream from culture.”

Libertarians all want to live in a more free world, where the life, property and unique dreams of the individual are respected and inviolable. But to get from here to there, far too many libertarians focus on making *political* arguments. They write position papers, explain statistics in economics essays, and argue the nuances of gun control online.

And this political focus, while necessary to make our societies more free, is not *sufficient*. It may not even be all that effective.

Study after study has shown the most effective way to convince people of your position is not through argument or detailed, logical explication, but through *stories*. Through connecting with people’s belief systems directly, on an emotional level.

When presented with a sympathetic main character on the screen or the page, we more easily accept their beliefs as plausible and understandable, because we tend to project ourselves into the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings as we experience the story. Chip and Dan Heath, authors of the seminal business book *Made to Stick*, reference a study in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and conclude that “attitudes formed by direct experiences are more powerful, and stories give us the feeling of real experience.” There’s a reason accomplished businessmen and politicians pepper their speeches with anecdotes.

But for a movement that owes so many converts to a single story (Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*), libertarians have been remarkably slow to adopt fiction as a technology for spreading their message.

There’s no reason this should remain the case.

And, thankfully, there are signs it’s changing. With organizations like LFA, Liberty Island, and the Agorist Writer’s Workshop popping up, and with the growing success of self publishing as a method for circumventing



the statist cultural gatekeepers of the traditional publishing houses, a genuine ecosystem of libertarian fiction is starting to develop.

Through new works like LFA member Matthew Alexander's [Withur We](#), Mike DiBaggio's [Ascension Epoch](#) series, or my own [Granite Republic](#), we're not only inspiring existing libertarians to envision and work for the freer world of the future but also, hopefully, reaching new readers with a message of liberty that resonates with them on a visceral, emotional level.

For libertarians to have success politically, they first need to engage with the deeper values and beliefs individuals have culturally. Stories and fiction are our own first step into that wider conversation. We hope you'll join us.

*Join the LFA for free.*

<http://libertarianfictionauthors.com/join-the-association/>

## More Great Libertarian Fiction from LFA Members

[\*Withur We\*](#) by Matthew Alexander  
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For even more see the full [\*list of libertarian fiction\*](#) at:

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# Acknowledgments

A great many thanks go to everyone who helped us throughout the process of promoting the contest, selecting, editing, and finally publishing these stories. A special thanks to Geoffrey Allan Plauché for his creation of the LFA with all the wonderful collaboration that has made possible. Thank you as well to the members who donated for the contest's prize money, and to our SFL counterparts who were so involved in promoting and managing the contest and entries, David Deerson, Monica Lucas, Nicole Lough, and Kara LaRose.

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