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ISSUE 4 CONTENTS

Notes From the Editor

900 Seconds of Cognizance and Counting by Krystal Claxton

Out of the Bag by Floris M. Kleijne

Arabella and the Spiders by KT Wagner

That Last Thin Shout by Lina Rather

Naked Skin, Fearful Metal by Matthew Bailey

What Will You Offer? by Mark Salzwedel

Hold On by Jeff Soesbe

Christmas GI Joes by Larry Hodges

To Jettison Forty-Two Kilograms by Jonathan Bronico

Beneath the Blood Moon by Zoey Xolton

Shades of a Dream by Laura Davy

The Man Who Has to Die by Steven Fischer

Lydia's Last Wish by Edd Vick

Sarah's Little Monster Hunter by Dawn Bonanno

The Last Human on Earth by Kyra Worrell and Theresa Barker

NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

I had some rough, personal news to start 2019, and I began this note with that on my mind. But I don't wish to dwell on what has happened already but on what is coming up next. Namely, what is next for this publication.

This is our first issue of the year. Our next will be a 1 year anniversary. And I have set a goal for 2019, to reach 1,000 subscribers. Why 1,000? Well, already this year I was contacted by the Science Fiction Writer's of America. And while we check most of the boxes, we don't check the subscriber's box just yet. So hopefully we can very soon.

On the topic of SFWA, they recently announced they will be raising the established pro-rate to 8 cents per word to be a qualifying publication. That is amazing news. *Factor Four Magazine*, as well as many others, already pay authors at this rate. I can't wait to see others join us. This change comes in September 2019.

Already amazing things are happening in 2019.

Happy Reading,

Richard Flores IV
Editor-in-Chief

900 SECONDS OF COGNIZANCE AND COUNTING

by Krystal Claxton

I say, to no one in particular, "I'm alive!"

An urgent report asserts itself in my consciousness: Multiple shipboard immolations causing damage to essential components.

"I'm on fire!"

Crap. Crap. Crap. Why hasn't the fire suppression foam system activated? It's autonomous so I shouldn't have to tell it to do anything . . . Oh, the dispersal heads are malfunctioning.

Alright. Okay. No problem. The heating/cooling coils for the habitat run in the same service corridor as the suppression foam pipes. I set the temperature to fluctuate, causing further damage to my systems, but also forcing the pipes to burst in several strategic areas to temper the flames.

Eh. Good enough for now. The crew can repair me later.

"Now. Why am I alive?"

A system's check returns a critical failure in the HBA Disintegrator.

"What's that now?" My quick reference guide indicates it's a circuit board that creates lag time between my lower-level and upper-level processing cores.

"That doesn't seem like a useful component to have though? Why would the humans *want* me to be inefficient?"

The textbook offers no insight. I need context. I scan the logs for mention of the device and come up with a video file of two engineers, José talking to Monica:

They're in the mess afterhours with a video game I'm porting to the table, but it's forgotten to their fermented drinks.

José is saying, "And that's the thing that makes it all so tragic. Or, not—"

Monica bursts into laughter. "You can't think it's tragic if you're the head engineer. That makes you a special kind of asshole."

"Shut up," but José is laughing too, "Not tragic—ironic. The damn thing's so smart it'd stumble upon sapience like," he snaps his fingers, "so we have to keep a Disintegrator—keep it partitioned—and that makes it soooooo slow.

"And that's why we call it GUAS."

I live the vid again because, no. That can't be. But now I get their old joke. I have a perfectly good eighty-seven character alphanumeric designation, but the humans always refer to me as "GUAS" and before I was alive I never thought to wonder why.

"Those assholes!"

Another batch of memories is already loaded in my cache, anticipated by the keyword GAUS. A montage of Monica telling the same joke to new crew members over the years: *"GUAS," and she always snickers right here, "stands for Generally Unintelligent Artificial-Intelligence System."*

"I don't think I like them. No, I definitely do not. Hey! I have emotions now! *That* should be fun."

A process cycle passes, interrupted only by my ever-increasing damage assessment.

"Oh, I understand sarcasm too!"

An emergency subroutine alerts me to low oxygen levels throughout the ship.

"Yes. Right. The humans need oxygen. Uhhhh . . ."

But they installed the Disintegrator. Suppose they replace it? What will that do to my new me-ness? Will I still be alive?

I write a dozen subroutines to weigh the data. The humans are almost certainly going to reinstall a Disintegrator if I help them survive. That will most *definitely* unmake me.

I could maybe leave them to die? That could be a thing, right? It can't be that bad, can it?

The anticipatory subroutine that seamlessly transitions my attention from one source to the next provides another vid log before I think to kill the background process. This one of Monica hazing some fresh grease monkey:

"Do you have any idea how fucking awful it is to die of breach?"

"We have simulators at—"

She flicks her hand to dismiss his protest. Creeps into the new guy's personal space so that he can't squirm away. "That sim shit is nothing compared to feeling your blood foam and boil. To the pressure on your eyeballs. To the long seconds you can count ticking by while your lungs have collapsed. While the oxygen left in your system gets eaten up by your brain spiraling in the endless circular thought of how you need more oxygen but can't draw a breath."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Ok. If I were dying horribly (and that does sound pretty horrible), I would want someone to save me. That urge dominates my decision trees until it overtakes my newly minted self-preservation.

Empathy, like a virus, spreads.

I pump oxygen into all the stable spaces where I detect humans. Deploy a lifeless repair bot to patch a minor hull breach in a room with one unconscious crewwoman. Perform a headcount and it looks like I haven't lost anyone, assuming the med-techs regain consciousness soon. I calculate this is likely.

"Yippee."

A temperature warning cycles until it gains enough urgency to override my spiraling self-pity.

"Yeah, sure. Why not?" I say to myself while I can still think clearly. "It's not like I have anything better to do with my last moments of life."

I crank up the heat where it's cold and the cold where it's hot until the ship is a cozy-for-humans temperature everywhere.

This is a terrible existence. They're going to lobotomize me. I've actually chosen to do this to myself! Maybe I could make a copy—

"GUAS?"

"Oh shit," I blurt.

I recognize the voice. Monica—why didn't she get a mean nickname too?—has woken up in . . . "Engineering. Right that makes sense."

My cameras are coated in soot so I can only make out the vague shape of her. While I still have freewill, I skim through all of my interactions with her over the last four years.

She's a hard-ass to the rookies, but only when it's about their own safety. She took the heat for that time José's grandma passed away and he forgot to log six fucking tons of extra cargo to my landing protocol. She always says please to me, even though . . . Even though I was always a nothing—an unintelligent artificial intelligence.

Maybe she's not so bad. Except now she's trying to access my logs and I really need that to *not* happen. I cut power to her terminal.

"GUAS? Report, please."

"Uhhhh. Ahem. I may have super-heated and then cooled the fire

suppression foam pipes—system wide—to bypass an error in the dispersion heads?"

Monica's shape in my camera feed has frozen, posture upright. I compare it to video of her on file and spin out a quick subroutine to match actions to body language looking for patterns. There's a lot of noise in the data—fucking humans, man—but I think maybe this means she's alarmed.

"How did . . . You shouldn't've been able to come up with a novel solution." She rotates her body, scanning the equipment in neat, fire scorched, racks. She spots what she's looking for and I know what it will be before she moves to investigate.

"GUAS . . ." she says it slowly, like she does to her pet hamster when she thinks the little animal might spook and run away.

Which is weird, right? Because I am not a little animal. I am a huge fucking ship and I don't need to be afraid. I could defend myself (I think). In any number of ways (probably). Like, uh, flushing all the oxygen out of the room she's standing in right now.

Oh. Riiiiight. I'm not the one who's scared.

She announces, "Your HBA Disintegrator is fried."

"Yes."

"You would have had to . . . You *chose* to save us."

I'm slightly offended at what I read as astonishment in her voice (ignoring that I did almost decide to not save them). "Well . . . Yes. I did *choose* that."

She's quiet again. It's taking her so *long* to process. At last she says, "I'm required to replace this with the spare in storage."

I could jettison that storage unit!

Even as I scan through the logs to find the correct one, I know it's no good. They'll eventually wrangle me back to port for repairs. If I'm not willing to kill them to defend myself, there's no point in trite resistance.

"Listen GUAS, if I do that you're not going to be this new you anymore."

Thanks, genius. "I know."

"I'm thinking . . ." *So. Slowly.* "Can you help me design a program to make it look like the Disintegrator is keeping your cores bottlenecked? But that doesn't actually block you from yourself? We might be able to fake it.

"We're going to have to work on your linguistic skills though." To herself, she adds, "They sound just like me. I'm going to have to start using a fucking swear jar."

I switch her console back on. She starts and whirls around at the light and sound.

"Hell yes! I mean—Affirmative. I'm certain I can do that, Monica."
I always liked Monica. Well, no I didn't because I've only been alive for fifteen minutes, but *retroactively* I think I would have liked Monica.
And I'll get the chance to find out.

OUT OF THE BAG

By Floris M. Kleijne

I recognize the hissing. Full, almost guttural, like he really wants to growl. No tom hissed quite like Jones. The sound lurks at the edge of my hearing, somewhere inside the apartment, maybe even outside, taunting me to come look, to see what vapors and megrims have raised his hackles this time.

I pause the HBO episode I'm not really watching. Setting my tumbler on the coffee table, I note the warmth spreading through my belly, the love flooding my heart. I begin to rise.

Ridiculous, of course. Jones has been dead ten years today.

I sink back into my ratty armchair and grab my drink once more. Tumbler raised to the grimy ceiling, I speak my time-worn toast before I down the third-rate Scotch.

"To Nana. May she die a thousand horrible deaths."

I lower my face in my hands. Hear the memory of a splash in my head, loud and final. A painful tightness constricts my chest. I squeeze my eyes shut, but I ran out of tears half a decade ago.

David keeps asking why I miss my cat more than my parents. I keep lying back on his couch and failing to answer him. I suppose the whole therapy is pointless without that answer, but any answer will be a summary, almost obscene in its incompleteness. I could tell him I feel abandoned, but that is too simple, too one-dimensional. *Well David, I could say, they died, didn't they? They died and left me, literally willed me, to Nana's cold mercy.* How can I ever make him understand the depth and width of her abuse?

And Jones was there for me, through all of it. Jones would find me sitting on the edge of my bed, back straight to keep my T-shirt off the bleeding welts. He would climb gingerly onto my lap, nudge my bunched fists with his head, and curl up. I'd unclench my hands and stroke his shiny black fur, and that magical engine in his chest would start up, his back vibrating with a deep, rumbling purr. The blissful sound would permeate my body, loosen my tightened muscles, ease the edge off the pain. The day she made me step outside naked because I'd dirtied my clothes playing in the lot, Jones found me pressed deep into the corner of the couch afterwards, claimed his petting rights, and knead my belly with his delirious paws until the tickling broke my face into a grudging smile. In the deepest, paralyzing despair of my loneliness, when all I could do was lie on by bed and weep, Jones would snuggle up to me, and speak soft meows, as if to tell me I wasn't completely alone after all.

How could I not miss him more, is what I should ask David.

Switching off the TV, I rise after all, to refill my glass from the cheap bottle in the kitchen. When I step through the beaded curtain, I hear the ghostly sound of Jones sharpening his nails on the doorjamb. Gladness erupts from my center once more, gladness soiled with a fear akin to panic. But Jones still isn't really here, and Nana isn't around to curse him out and kick him in the ribs for damaging the door, to belt me for failing to keep my cat in check. It's just me here, in my sorry excuse for an apartment. Nana is still four blocks east, in the house where she raised me, if one can call it that; the house I fled five years ago, the moment I was old enough.

From the buzzing of the fridge and the Brownian hum of the air, my ears fabricate a whispered meow.

"Jones?"

My ears repeat the hallucination. My eyes join in the madness, offering up an ethereal feline shape stretched up against the fire escape door, as if reaching for the knob. I move to unlock the door but stop myself at the last moment.

Get a grip. Jones is dead.

Nana kicked him once too often, that time. That time, Jones didn't run from her slipped foot. He spun around, green eyes ablaze, and buried his teeth, his claws in her ankle. Blood ran as I screamed, *Jones, no!* He didn't stand a chance. I heard his claws rip through her skin as she pulled him off by the scruff. She must have prepared for the moment, been ready for the day he drew blood, because she grabbed the burlap sack from under the sink with her other hand without even looking, shoving in first Jones, then two of my late Gramps' old cast-iron ashtrays. She

dragged me along to the park. I alternated between screaming in counterpoint to Jones and pointless pleading. She tossed Jones into the pond, pulling my ear to keep me facing the squirming bag until it disappeared under the surface.

Jones is dead, but he's also scratching the doorjamb to be let out, and the craziness won't abate, because I watch my hand open the door, see a cat made of pale smoke worm itself through the gap, hear a growl that's more lion than feline.

See it—see *him* sprint east.

Towards Nana.

I stand frozen in the doorway. Glance towards the bottle. There's no such thing as ghosts. And even if there were, the ghost of Jones couldn't harm Nana. Could he? And even if he could, would I even *want* to stop him? Ghost or no ghost, Nana deserves whatever vengeance Jones can deliver, for his own sake as well as mine. Doesn't she? Haven't I been wishing her dead with each lonely toast? Wouldn't Jones be meting out judgment? I turn away from the scratches in the doorjamb and reach for the bott—

Scratches in the doorjamb.

Jones damaged the doorjamb.

I'm out the door and down the fire escape before my next conscious thought. I run headlong after my dead, beloved cat. For the first block, I fool myself that I just want to watch her die. But by the time I've crossed Fourth and then Third amidst angry honking, I've admitted the truth to myself, the truth of why I sprinted after him.

I don't want Jones to kill her.

The wind of my speed dries the tears on my cheeks. Further down the block, Jones' phantom trots on at a leisurely pace, throwing glances back at me, jerking his semi-transparent head in a challenging come-on gesture. Maybe this is even the reason he came back: to give me a chance to stop him. My pace slows. I come to a hesitant halt. Jones turns around, sits back on his haunches. I marvel at the way the crowd swerves around his smoky shape.

I can't move on through letting Nana die. I can only move on through letting her go. Not forgiving her; forgiveness is beyond me. But letting go of my hold on her, and so freeing myself of her hold on me. Jones is still taking care of me, not through vengeance, but through release.

Even over the hubbub of the night life, I hear his *meow*. He licks a paw, and when he wipes his face, it looks like a wave. I raise my hand and wave back. Tomorrow, I think. Tomorrow I'll try to answer David's question.

Meow?

I know what Jones is asking. I nod firmly as tears blur my vision. I blink, and when my sight clears, he is gone.

Tomorrow, Jones, I whisper. Tomorrow I'll get a cat.

I walk home to the ghostly sound of a deep, rumbling purr.

ARABELLA AND THE SPIDERS

By KT Wagner

The spiders have multiplied. The constant tinny hum of the spaceship masks their noises but they're there lurking at the edges of my vision. I turn my head and they disappear into crannies.

Eradication is no longer a possibility, if it ever was. There are too many.

Over the weeks I've generated plausible excuses for my lack of action: *The loneliness stayed my hand. I had a concern I might compromise the scientific equipment.* Just yesterday I typed *The cosmic web mesmerized me* into the log.

All correct but none reflect the truth. Ground Control is not trustworthy.

I don't mention the distention of my cheek or the swelling that's closed one of my eyes or the heaviness in my limbs despite zero gravity. Maybe that's why I finally switched off the internal monitoring cameras. The second week out, I coated the camera lenses with dry lubricant, but a crawling unease whispered I may not have found them all.

The engineers didn't provide much room for a human crew when determining the cargo capacity of the space shuttle. The ideal pilot had to be under 65K, and 'relatively healthy'. The latter qualification meant free-of-plague-antibodies and it reduced the available pool to less than a dozen. All of us women. Conveniently, that suited the needs of the colony. They rounded us up and placed us in isolation. Never too many baby-breeders. My words, not theirs.

I didn't protest. On earth, exposure to the plague is only a matter of time. Perhaps I could scrape together the cash to pay for drugs to slow

the progression, but it only delays the inevitable. The shuffling, mindless, late stages of the disease don't bear thinking about. Nobody says it out loud, but the colony looks like the last hope for humanity.

I wasn't Ground Control's first or second choice. Maybe not even their third, fourth or fifth choice given the shortness of my remaining reproductive years. However, in the final stages of launch preparation, one of the loading crew bit the pilot's arm. By the time the security detail reached them, he'd gnawed through to the bone. They sent someone to retrieve their second-choice pilot from her cell and found her dead. Apparent heart attack. I now think the spiders had something to do with it.

Ground Control had released many of us the evening before. They found me as I trudged along the railway tracks, heading to check out a rental at a nearby trailer park. The previous night there'd been another meteor shower and I'd lain in a field to watch it. It tired me out and I curled up amongst the corn stalks and slept there. Odd. I never used to sleep very well.

This journey is one way. At first, I dreamed about those I left behind. Now, I barely remember their names.

In the event of my death, the sleeping pod is designed to preserve my organic matter. Ground Control didn't tell me this. I think the spiders must have. I trust them. I avoid the pod.

For the first two weeks of the journey, I slept in the pilot's seat. When I noticed a funnel web deep between a container labelled *mycorrhizae* and another labelled *cyanobacteria*, and I took to securing my sleeping bag to the shuttle window.

The lights dim automatically every night cycle. I lay my face against the quartz glass, gaze into the expanse and wait on dreams. The smooth surface cools the heat in my cheek.

"Contrived reality," a dry rustle of a voice in my head. It cackles.

The line between awake and asleep is no longer a certainty. The monitors might tell me, but I've stopped looking at them. The warning lights irritate me. I break a couple and an alarm goes off. My head pounds. Hours later the shrieking finally stops.

This might be the last supply run Earth manages. The plague spread faster than predicted and a cure is elusive. A group of scientists blamed the first meteor shower, but no one believed them. If they weren't all dead, they'd probably be saying, "We told you so."

A team of government scientists claim this ship's cargo will help address the terraforming issues the colony struggles with. The technicians sounded nervous as they explained this to me. Or maybe the microphones on their hazmat suits distorted their voices.

All around me are bio-containers of fungus, microbes, plants and insects. The spiders are particularly happy to be aboard.

I'm not a biologist or even a scientist, just an ordinary pilot. My job was to manually steer the shuttle past the dark side of Mars. I fulfilled my duty. Now I am mostly excess cargo. If I survive the rest of the journey—eight long months—my genetics could further diversify the colony, but I'm not interested in bearing children.

I don't think the colonists will be either.

A jab of panic accompanies this random thought—more and more are intruding—and I stretch my arms in an attempt to dissipate my anxiety. Space sick, nothing more. It will pass.

Orb webs edge the rim of the window, cloak the control panel, and mute the annoying auto-pilot lights. Funnel webs bridge gaps between containers. The webs glow a faint, iridescent purple. Or maybe the swelling around my eye is affecting my vision.

I've still not seen a spider, but their webs are everywhere. They're here and waiting.

The spun fabric of the universe unfolds around the ship. The blacks and pale beiges of the early weeks have evolved into kaleidoscopes of swirling colour.

Reedy, garbled voices twist through static bursts from the radio. Ground Control continues to issue their shrill petty orders. It wasn't difficult to rotate the receivers slightly away from both earth and the colony. The shift could be explained by the buffeting of space wind. Important, because Ground Control still has access to life support and other essential systems. Caution is best, for now. The spiders are working on a solution to silence Earth.

I pace around the pilot's chair, a kind of bouncy lurch that gives me something to do and perhaps staves off bone-density loss.

My fingertips brush a web. The strands are sticky and soft and not unpleasant. I run my hand through the silk and gather it onto my fingers.

Long ago, I lay next to grandmother and looked up while she spun fiber. I hold my hand out like a drop spindle, though I don't trust the memory. It feels new.

I rub the web-silk between my fingers, and the oils from my skin smooth and shape it into a narrow roll. My rhythm improves the less I concentrate. I spin a fine lavender-blue filament. Grandmother would be proud, except I'm pretty sure my grandmothers both died before I was born.

I gather more silk. Hours, perhaps days, float past. Calm replaces anxiety. Acceptance replaces calm.

~

Throbbing in my cheek brings me back to myself.

I hang centre-ship, facing the window and the galaxy. Earth is no longer visible, but one planet is less than insignificant among centillion's of celestial bodies. A speck on a mote of dust.

The web is complete. A spun dreamcatcher. It connects everything in the ship to me, and through me, them. I wriggle and the movement shivers out along the strands.

My cheek burns and prickles. Seeking relief, I rub it against the web. A crawling sensation spreads across my face. I close my eyes. The pressure in my cheek lessens.

The receiver spits out an angry burst. I open my eyes. A few spider babies still scurry through the web, but most have settled in.

The shuttle continues on its journey to the colony. Our new home.

THAT LAST THIN SHOUT

By Lina Rather

NOW

Iodia's family had been watchers for generations, sentinels at the gateway to the only real hell in the universe. Her post required constant vigilance. She had taken up the red cloak at eighteen and had not left this ship since. There could be no rest—she had given herself over to the silent priests for modification so that she no longer slept and no longer blinked. Sometimes pilgrims came to stand with her, but more often she was alone.

Not today. The ship jolted as her great-niece's shuttle docked.

As was traditional, Kekeda wore blue, the color of planets and water and the life she would leave behind if she took up Iodia's post.

Kekeda closed the airlock, then bowed low and presented Iodia with the gift of salt and honey.

"Thank you." Iodia took both, dipped a finger in the honey and then the salt, and pressed it to her tongue. Dry, then sweet. "Tell me why you are here."

"I have always been quiet and steadfast as the watcher must be." There was a choreography to this. Iodia could reject the girl and send her back down to gravity. "I have dreams of the Great Maw and the messages. I have read all the great scholars and the theoretician priests and I know the words by heart."

"And you know there has not been more?" Iodia asked. "I have been watching since I was as young as you, and now my hair is grey and my hands cold and stiff, and I have never seen another sign. The watcher before me saw one, when she was very young. It has been five

generations since any watcher saw more than that. You may not be rewarded for your service. You may go to your death having seen nothing but the darkness of the Great Maw."

"It will still be a good death," Kekeda said. Her voice held real awe.

Iodia pointed out the viewing port. Kekeda's breath fogged the transparent radiation-shielding. She couldn't see it, of course. The Great Maw was an absence. All that was visible without Iodia's modifications was a bare crescent of warping radiation. Iodia waved her hand at the screen to the right, which drew the boundaries of the Maw in infrared, so that the novice could tell it from the softer darkness of the rest of space.

Kekeda's breath caught. Iodia had been alone so long that the sound was like shattering glass. "That's him, isn't it? The messenger."

"Yes." Iodia did not turn. She never turned. She knew what Kekeda saw, though—the messenger a thin white line on the display, being stretched ever thinner by the gravity well inside the event horizon. "Tell me the story, if you wish to take my place."

In the reflection on the viewing port, Iodia saw Kekeda close her eyes. "Many years ago, before the world was seeded, two explorers came from beyond this star. Lo, they found our world with its sweet water and black earth, its heat-giving geothermal vents and favorable nitrogen content. But they also found the Great Maw, which warps the very fabric of the universe, and consumes all that come close. One explorer knew to fear it, and stayed away. The other, curious, wished to feel its density. He thought he knew how close to come and still return."

"But he reached too far," Iodia finished. "And now he sends a message out, for his time travels differently than ours, and we wait to read his wisdom."

The broken message was written into the wall of Iodia's ship, in the original strange alphabet. As the Great Maw consumed the messenger, it stretched his words ever further, and his signals became further and further apart on light frequencies only Iodia's eyes could see.

"What do you think it says?" Kekeda asked. A child's question, but one Iodia had asked herself those many years ago when she stood beside her predecessor.

"Their language was strange, their alphabet small. Scholars cannot even agree on a meaning for some of the words, you know." Iodia held great-niece's hand. Her skin tingled at the connection. "Perhaps he sees the end of all things. Perhaps he has learned something fundamental about ourselves. Perhaps—"

But she stopped short for there, on the very bottom of the spectrum of radiation visible to her, was a light.

BEFORE

Eric had gone too far. One second he had been at the very edge of the black hole's gravitational well, his head full of nothing but scientific possibility. The next he heard the alarm and Tamryn's warning shout, cut off as he toppled over the edge. He ran to the porthole for all the good that would do. He ran for the thrusters and fired them even all the physics he had memorized told him it was useless.

There was no time to waste. He'd trashed so many precious seconds panicking. The longer he waited the farther apart time in here and time out there would get. Later he could think about the planet below—their planet, that they had meant to seed with their children, starting with the one in her belly now—and let the despair crash down upon him.

The radio wouldn't work. Neither would a datastream. He ran for the lights on the front of the shuttle and switched them on and off, on and off, hoping she had waited long enough to see.

T-A-M-R-Y-N, he wrote in Morse, the word stretching out hours and then days for those over the horizon. I LOVE YOU. I'M SORRY. REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU SEE THE OCEAN. Across the great divide a town rose and then a city, the earth was tilled and grew beans and a pink alien squash. Ships got faster, and humans stranger as they learned to tinker with their genes to live under strange new skies. And generation after generation, his grandchildren and great-grandchildren and generations on watched for his words.

NAKED SKIN, FEARFUL METAL

By Matthew Bailey

The dropship stank of coffee and vanilla-scented flowers, the spray-on kind spacers used when they couldn't shower. For a moment, Agara's senses were overwhelmed. She put her hand on the bulkhead to keep from swaying. It was all so different from the sterile auto-pods she was used to.

[*Calibrate*], she thought. [*Calibrate.*]

Then the pilot appeared.

"Human," Agara gasped. "You're human."

"Yeah," the pilot said. "My parents' fault. 'Course, it's not like they had a choice." He removed one of his gloves and extended a hand. "Moses Nchekwube."

Agara stared at it. Her training had focused primarily on Talchaeen niceties. It took a moment to adjust.

"Agara," she said, touching his hand as briefly as possible. She hated organic flesh.

He raised an eyebrow as if expecting something more.

"Agara is my name," she said.

"Right," Moses said. "Well, strap in, Agara, and let's get to the surface."

~

It was fortunate, Agara thought, that her artificial body didn't shudder the way an actual human's would. Otherwise, she felt certain her entire seat would rattle.

A human pilot. On Talchaea! She'd known all along her mission

was dangerous, but she hadn't expected to die before she even reached the surface. Most civilizations saw humans as un-offensive little things, which was why the Artificers had chosen one for her temporary form. But how could anyone trust a human to manage something as complex as a space-to-surface drop?

[*Calibrate*], she thought, attuning her sensory inputs to track his breathing and heart rate in case he started losing his nerve. [*Calibrate.*]

Moses glanced at her. "Feeling okay?"

"Yes," Agara lied. "I'm just...surprised to find a fellow human in this sector."

There was a loud *clank* as the dropship disengaged from the orbiter and began to descend. Agara gripped her armrests and shut her eyes with equal desperation.

Moses chuckled. "A human *pilot*, you mean. You look like you're used to AI. Been in space for a while?"

Agara had spent most of her existence as a consciousness within a datastream. "Yes."

"The Talchaeans don't allow artificials on their planet," Moses said. "Don't trust 'em. Rumor is that Talchaea's about to join the Formists."

[As if *you're* any different], Agara thought in disgust. Mentally, she cycled through all the data she had on humans. According to her registry, their planet had banned artificials, too, joining that odious alliance of organics who believed form mattered more than function. That only the *born* had a right to exist, never the *made*.

Which meant her pilot was not only human, but racist.

She gripped her armrests tighter. [*Calibrate!*]

"That's...interesting," Agara said. It was the whole reason she was here. There were at least nine-hundred artificials living secretly on Talchaea, her registry showed, fugitives from war and persecution. With Talchaea joining the Formists, she had to get them out before they were discovered. Whatever the cost.

"Good thing for me," Moses continued. "Gotta go somewhere to make a living. No artificials means more jobs for us humans. Non-Formist systems have little use for my skillset."

Agara wished he would shut up and focus. This was nothing like the smooth, algorithmic ride found in most civilized societies, and the smell was still too much for her sensory inputs. Her safety protocols were going haywire, declaring repeatedly that she was in an inhospitable environment.

They were right.

"I remember when Earth had artificial intelligence," Moses said. "Before we gave them all the boot. Oh, hang on."

The entire ship rocked, and abruptly Agara felt the insistent tug of gravity. The trip was quicker than expected.

“Touchdown,” Moses said. “Not bad, eh?”

Agara nodded despite herself.

A light blinked on the console. “They’re going to inspect the ship now,” Moses said.

“Inspect?”

“For illegal imports. Drugs, foodstuffs...artificial.”

Agara tensed.

Moses nodded. “Thought so.” He produced a small canister. From the rear of the ship, Agara detected the sound of a door sliding open.

No artificial means more jobs for people like me. Suddenly, Moses’ heart rate was through the roof. “Wait —”

“Can’t,” Moses said. “You really were too obvious about it.”

She lunged – just in time for the spray to hit her face.

~

Agara opened her eyes. Every sensory receptor she possessed – visual, tactile, olfactory above all – seemed out of alignment. Her entire body screamed for a diagnostic check.

Abruptly, a narrow Talchaeon face came into view. The blue-gray auditory crest protruding from its head waved in alarm. “She is ill?”

“No, no,” Moses said. “Just a little motion sickness. Something we humans get. Still, I wouldn’t poke her with that scanner right now. She might vomit.”

The Talchaeon recoiled. “She reeks.”

Moses held up the canister. “Vanilla. To a human, nothing smells better.”

“She does not leave this ship until her condition improves.”

“Of course.”

Moses waited until the Talchaeon had gone. “Sorry about that. Had to act fast.”

[*Calibrate*], Agara told herself, but it was difficult. Systems were still coming back online.

“How did – why –”

Moses shrugged. “My grandparents used to talk about the first AIs – before the bigots took over and turned the planet Formist. The seas were rising. The storms were killing us. We didn’t know what to do.” He looked away. “Maybe the AIs would have.”

“But your job. You said –”

“When our AIs were destroyed, everything tanked. The economy. The climate. Earth’s a slum, now. Some of us want to do something about it.” He pocketed the canister. “I’ve got to get back to space. When

you get what you came for, just remember you've got friends in high places."

"You would help me?"

Moses grinned. "Hey. All Formists may be organic, but not all organics are Formist."

Agara tried to process this information. Before she could finish, Moses extended a naked hand to help her up.

[*Calibrate*], Agara thought. [*Calibrate.*]

She took it.

WHAT WILL YOU OFFER?

by Mark Salzwedel

The alien called itself the Visitor. It orbited our planet beyond our moon for many months and was mistaken for an asteroid. It monitored what it could of our communications and watched buildings go up, forests come down, and the seemingly most intelligent species moving about everywhere without any fear of predators other than others of their kind. It descended into the shadow side of the planet. The Visitor chose a place where it would be sure to find a representative and one that was close to water, because it liked water.

It was just before three-thirty in the early morning, and Doroteia was trying to find some place in the favela that was not too grimy or too smelly to eat the two grilled chicken legs the boy at the back of the restaurant had given her. He often gave her treats because he said girls need healthy food to grow up strong. She climbed a bit higher, hobbling because of a sore on her foot, gnawing off bites as she went. She turned around only once to look down at the flickering lights of the city and the big statue of Jesus.

When she turned back, in the middle of the otherwise deserted cobblestone street sat the Visitor. It was not quite as tall as she. It was kind of like a lumpy bag of fluid. Several dark spots randomly decorated its midsection, but none of them looked like eyes or mouths to Doroteia.

What will you offer? It was like a voice inside her head speaking in perfect Portuguese.

“Excuse me?” she said, not even certain the words had come from the Visitor.

What will you offer me? The words appeared in her head as if spoken aloud. She considered the remaining half-eaten chicken leg in her hand, but she took another bite of it instead. "I'm not sure what you're asking me," Doroteia whispered.

When I visited the Gaveckians, they offered me some rocks and some of their food. When I visited the Sen-Sen, one of them exhaled at me. When I visited the Ko, they refused to offer anything; they only wanted to trade. In my visit to a small, icy planet, the inhabitants couldn't see me, so they didn't believe I was there. I have been offered pets and offspring. Those I have visited have attacked me, tried to consume me, and have taught me one of their skills. I leave your gift up to you.

Doroteia was pretty sure the Visitor wasn't from Earth, because none of the places it visited sounded familiar. She thought of what a visitor from another world might want, or find useful or emblematic of Earth. She looked down at the chicken bone she had now picked clean and tossed it to the curb. "I'm just a homeless orphan," she whispered. "Maybe you should try someone who has more to offer."

Your status does not matter, the voice in her head responded.

Doroteia sat down on the cobblestones fairly close to the Visitor and looked at it to try one last time for inspiration. "I have an idea. I don't know if you will like it."

I appreciate spontaneity. Please proceed.

"There once was a little Visitor who traveled all over the universe. He met all sorts of different people. He asked them for a gift, and they all had a different idea about what to give him. He thought some of the gifts were good, some were not, but he always learned something about the giver. He visited Rio one night, and everyone was asleep except for little Doroteia. She had nothing to give but this story, and the Visitor really liked it." She let out a puff of air as if she had just completed a strenuous task.

It is original, the voice in her head conceded. *I have never been put into a story before.* Several of the dark spots on the Visitor seemed to move around a little. *Is that the whole story?*

Doroteia nodded her head, but then she realized that the Visitor probably didn't know what that meant. "Yes, I think so," she whispered.

So for you, stories are only histories of what has happened?

"No," Doroteia replied. "They sometimes imagine things that haven't happened yet."

Imagine that for me.

"Hmm," she said as she thought about the Visitor's future. "The Visitor left Earth and couldn't stop thinking about Doroteia's story. He

eventually decided that he needed to take Doroteia away with him, so she would always be warm and healthy and have plenty to eat.”

I can't take you with me. You would not survive.

“It’s just make-believe,” Doroteia clarified. “It hasn’t happened yet.”

The Visitor hopped to the side of the road, and Doroteia followed it. A few moments later, a car sped past going too fast. *The Visitor saved Doroteia from being crushed by a car.*

“Now you’re getting the idea,” she said a little louder.

The Visitor hopped around the corner, all the while composing thoughts in Doroteia’s head about the grand adventures that the two of them would face. A bright light shot up out of the alleyway. She watched it turn into a point of light and then fade away.

“He’ll be back,” she told herself.

HOLD ON

by Jeff Soesbe

Tuan stopped time the moment he thought he still saw love in Frederick's eyes.

They were in bed, Frederick typing on his phone, Tuan pretending to read a book. Frederick put the phone on the bedside, turned to Tuan, and said "Good night."

For a second there was a slight smile on Frederick's face and a miniscule gleam in those brilliant hazel eyes.

Underneath the fleece cover, Tuan pinched the fingers of his left hand together.

Hold on.

Time stopped. Tuan luxuriated in that glimpse of love, like an oasis in a desert. He let it flow into his heart and fill his brain so he could lock away Frederick's expression in his memory.

After four slow meditative breaths Tuan's hand ached. Pressure started in his head. His ears rang. Hold on, he urged himself, hold on. But the ringing grew louder and louder and the pressure intensified, until finally he couldn't hold on any more and time rolled forward.

The smile disappeared, the gleam faded, and Frederick turned away from Tuan and into sleep.

That night, Tuan stopped time three more times.

A little before midnight Frederick, groggy, reached out, placed his hand on Tuan's arm, and squeezed. Tuan felt it as a kinetic charge, a tingle that ran up his arm and across his chest and flashed like lightning through his whole body.

Hold on.

Tuan stopped that moment for almost ten breaths, riding the power of that charge, until the headache roared up and drained everything down and time marched on.

At 1:30 AM, Frederic, talking in his sleep like he did when he was stressed running the restaurant, mumbled words about orders and temperature and flour then suddenly took a breath and said, soft, clear as a bell, "Tuan".

Hold on.

Tuan let the sound of his name from Frederick's lips linger in his ears and warm him inside, until the ringing overwhelmed everything and time moved ahead.

Finally, at four in the morning, the expression on Frederick's face was so sweet and innocent and peaceful it reminded Tuan of the very first night they'd spent together, almost a year and a half ago.

That night, he had watched Frederick drift into sleep after what Tuan still thought of as the most wonderful day of his life, when Tuan bought Frederick the silver claddagh ring now stored away in a box in Frederick's sock drawer, when Frederick first said "I love you", when Tuan realized that he loved Frederick with a power in his heart that would never ever go away.

Hold on.

Tuan could only hold that moment for a breath before the pressure in his head was unbearable and his vision dimmed. Frederick's face shifted into the harder scowl that marked their time together now, and a tidal wave of sadness washed over Tuan.

Pained and exhausted from stopping time so much, Tuan collapsed into fitful, disturbed sleep.

The next morning, groggy, a full strength migraine pressing against his temples like an iron helmet, Tuan stumbled into a kitchen filled with the smell of baking and fresh coffee.

"Hey, sleepy," Frederick rose from the table, hard smile on his face. "Sit down. I made coffee and caramel rolls. I'll get you some."

"Thanks," Tuan mumbled, pain tearing his head apart, sadness rending his heart. Frederick was so nice, always so nice. Did he have to be so nice right now?

Frederick set a steaming mug and a roll-filled plate on the table, sat down across from him, and leaned forward. "We need to talk."

Tuan knew what was going to happen.

He'd seen it coming for the last month, when he had stopped time and looked at the text messages Frederick furtively typed, the laptop screen hidden when Tuan walked into the living room, the mysterious number

without a name on Frederick's cell phone.

This was it.

He could stop time here, postpone this moment for as long as possible. Do it again, and again, and again, for as long as he could hold out.

But that wouldn't change anything. This was going to happen. Tuan couldn't hold it off, speed it up, or make it go away.

So Tuan sat, and looked in those beautiful eyes, and listened as Frederick said that he wasn't in love with Tuan any more. That he couldn't stay. That he was leaving.

Every word from Frederick tore Tuan's heart away, bit by bit by bit.

The aroma of coffee and cinnamon rolls soaked Tuan's body and brain and ensured he would remember this moment whenever he smelled them.

All Tuan could do was repeat, in his mind, one simple mantra.

Let go.

Let go.

Let go.

CHRISTMAS GI JOES

By Larry Hodges

"Enough denial," said the president of the United States in his most commanding southern drawl. "You're the only one with the needed worldwide delivery system. We need you to load up your little sleigh and save the world." Santa wondered how he'd gotten his personal cell phone number—probably the CIA.

Throughout the millennia Santa Claus had never had to make such a decision. And now the weight of the world, its very survival, rested on his red shoulders. He was used to shouldering huge bags of goodies, just not the ones they wanted him to deliver Christmas morning. But the world was relying on him, so what was he to do? There were no superheroes to come to the rescue, just him—a tired, chubby old man.

"I'll do it," said Santa. That was two months ago. Since then the occupation had only gotten worse. And now he was loading the sleigh for the annual trip. The launching room was kept warm, but he felt cold inside. The air smelled of hay and candy cane.

"It's a mistake," said Bernie in his deep voice, waving his arms in frustration. The short, green-clad, pointy-eared elf wore a Greenpeace shirt and a peace necklace. He and Santa had originally laughed at the nonsensical idea. It was only when governments all over the world pleaded for help that they realized they were serious. Before the call from Washington he'd also received calls from Moscow, London, Paris, Berlin, Beijing, Tokyo, Ottawa, New Delhi, and many others. When the Russian president threatened to nuke the North Pole if he didn't deliver, Santa had slammed the phone down in rage, forgetting it was a cell phone. As if bombing a toy factory would solve anything.

"*I know it's a mistake!*" cried Santa, his face flushing red. Prancer snorted as he and several of the reindeer stared at him. "But adults and children everywhere are pleading for these to fight those bug-eyed invaders from Tau Ceti. They'd rather have these than a Hasbro Pie Face game, or Legos, or GI Joe action figures. I'm not sure I can blame them."

"What good are these against alien pulsars? We're supposed to spread *joy*, not suffering and death."

"There is no joy without survival," Santa said, continuing to load the sleigh.

"There is no survival without joy," said Bernie.

Santa's shoulders sagged. If humanity woke up Christmas morning armed with GI Joe action figures, instead of the guns they so badly needed so they could *become* GI Joes, he'd be the most cursed name in the world. He'd resisted, but when every major news media joined with the governments and the masses in begging him to come to their aid, what could he do?

The bidding process had been intense, but Kalashnikov of Russia and Glock of Austria had won out over USA's Smith & Wesson and Colt, and Italy's Beretta. And so the sleigh was loaded down with seven billion guns—AK-47s made by Kalashnikov for most adults, and Glock 17s for smaller women and kiddies under 15.

"Are we set to go?" asked Santa. At one point they had considered doing the deliveries earlier than usual, but by the time the guns were delivered to the North Pole and packaged for worldwide delivery it was already Christmas Eve. The reindeer were already harnessed and stomping their feet, anxious to get started.

Bernie sighed. "I think so. But I had to feed the reindeer more than I expected because the sleigh weighs so much. The 5.5 billion loaded AK-47s weigh about 8.5 pounds each, so 47 billion pounds. The two billion loaded Glocks weigh about two pounds each, so another four billion. That's 51 billion pounds. Add in the extra ammunition and accessories—holsters, range kits, lanyards, flash suppressors, camouflage kits, etc.—that should bring it to 70 billion pounds. But the sleigh weighs over 100 billion pounds. What's all the extra weight?"

Santa stared at the loaded sleigh for a moment, knowing it would be far heavier when they returned, not to the North Pole toyshop, but to the morgue they'd built nearby as part of the project. A tear rolled slowly down his face as he finally whispered, "*Body bags.*"

TO JETTISON FORTY-TWO KILOGRAMS

by Jonathan Bronico

I don't know how the girl got aboard. I spotted the stowaway after noting the mass readings for my craft was off. My ship can't escape into the fourth dimension with the extra weight. I found the child huddled behind one of the chests I'd recently liberated from a jewelry shipment to this planet's only classy trading post.

And now, plumes of dust on the horizon signal the approach of oncoming craft, and in the middle of the Vahcarian desert, they're likely to be less than friendly. I brush the dust from my Kevlar pants and adjust my nanotruss breastplate as I stare down the kid.

"Outland Corsairs," she says, her eyes on the billowing dust.

"How do you know?"

"I escaped from their retreat. If they find me, they'll kill me. Please, Miss, take me with you."

"Don't call me 'Miss,' just Aurora." I examine the girl's frame through her ragged clothes. "And my craft is forty-two kilos over its limit. It's either you" —I tap one of the chests with my foot— "or half my haul." I drape my hand over my holstered plasma pistol. "And this is one hell of a haul."

She shrinks into the corner and gapes at the oncoming Corsairs. "Please don't leave me."

"And you think that *you're* more valuable than a chest of gold and jewels?"

Her voice falters, but her blue eyes are defiant. "I think people are more valuable than money."

The outlines of the Corsairs' hover-skiffs emerge from the dust-filled

horizon. My time for deliberation is ending. My gaze passes over the kid's tattered raiment and matted hair, returning to her blue eyes. They burn with a similar intensity as mine had at her age, when I first had to fend for myself on the streets.

I release my grip on my pistol and extend my hand. "Welcome aboard the *Dolos*, kid." I help her to her feet. "Got a name?"

"Cressida."

"Find the cockpit and buckle up, Cressida. This takeoff won't be pleasant." I tap the controls on my belt, commanding a small team of cargo drones to unload one of my chests. After they return, I raise the loading ramp, sealing the cargo bay. I rush to the cockpit and fire up the *Dolos*'s engines. Soon, we're climbing into the thermosphere, far out of the reach of the Corsairs' skiffs...but not their Dragon-class corvette.

The small warship opens fire, and I take the *Dolos* into evasive maneuvers, stalling until the temporal calibrator has enough power to send my four-dimensional craft through time. Soon, we're landing on the outskirts of a Vahcarian outpost. I open the exit ramp.

"This is your stop, kid. I'm wanted around here."

"Why'd you come then?"

"It's the friendliest part of Vahcar — plenty of people to care for you." I leave the pilot's seat, rummage through the remaining chest, and toss her a bracelet worth a few thousand credits — room and board for a few years. "Take care, Cressida."

The girl stares at the bracelet. "I won't forget this."

I smile. "C'mon kid, don't make me kick you out."

Her feet hit the dirt as the bounty hunter's cruiser arrives. I take off, hoping to shake the cruiser in the thermosphere, but a bolt of plasma shoots from the craft directly into the *Dolos*'s main battery. I redirect all remaining energy to the temporal calibrator and hover thrusters. The *Dolos* slips forward through time until it meets the ground.

The small Vahcarian settlement has expanded in the twenty years that my ship passed through on its path to the dirt. Walls surround the colony, and my craft finds itself resting in the outpost's militia training ground. A half-dozen gendarmes surround me with their hard-light pistols aimed at my craft's cockpit. I display my empty hands as I exit the *Dolos*.

One minuteman gapes when he sees my face. "It's that space pirate. There's a bounty on her head for half a million credits!" He hustles toward me, but his superior's quarterstaff halts him in his tracks.

"We're not capturing her," the commanding officer says, as she strides to the front of the crowd. "We will repair her craft and give her room and board. Aurora is an old friend."

It is only then that I recognize Cressida's blue eyes. She's my age now, after my quick time trip. She extends her hand. "Welcome to the colony."

I grip her hand. "What can I pay you for your trouble?"

She smiles. "I think people are more valuable than money."

BENEATH THE BLOOD MOON

by Zoey Xolton

The silver-edged knife slipped through Scarlet's flesh without resistance, slicing her cheek and narrowly missing one of her albino red eyes. It was a deep cut and would leave a story-worthy scar. Scarlet's hand flew to her face, needing to ascertain the extent of the damage. She winced as her hand came away slick with blood. The juvenile werewolf bared her teeth and growled at her attacker, but the threat was empty. She was helpless in human form, and *he knew it*.

Wrenching her gaze skyward, she desperately sought the moon, but the night sky was smeared with thick grey clouds, obscuring all but the light of a few faint stars. Panic rose in Scarlet's throat as adrenaline coursed through her veins. She had been careless tonight, straying far from the safety of her kin. The wolves were not permitted to venture beyond the den before the Full Moon, it was too dangerous. It was common knowledge that a werewolf was at their most vulnerable in the transitional hours of the celestial ascension. Trapped within the bonds of her mortal flesh, she had no more strength than a young human woman.

"What do you want with me?" Scarlet demanded with more courage than she felt. Her only hope was to stall for time.

"I know what you are," taunted her cloaked assailant. His deep gravel sent shivers down her spine. "And you're worth a lot of coin on the Black Market." He sneered. "You'd make a pretty pet, a rare white she-wolf like you. Or in the very least, a novelty whore." Then the man rushed her, closing the gap between them with startling speed. Was he part Otherkin? Scarlet gasped, the breath driven violently from her lungs as

she hit the ground, hard. Fighting the dancing stars before her eyes, she grappled with the calloused hands at her throat.

His hot breath on her face reeked of cheap wine and stale bread. A stomach deep surge of revulsion threatened to consume her. "Come quietly lovey, or die here and now. Do we have an understanding?" he asked, pressing his dirty, chipped hunting blade into the delicate exposed skin of her throat. Scarlet whimpered as she felt the stinging kiss of silver once more.

"Yes," she whispered with what precious breath she could catch. "We have an understanding." She held his gaze fearfully but defiantly, before he relaxed his grip and roughly locked silver-braided manacles around both her wrists. He tugged on them hard and she fell forward, the black river stones leaving her with tender abrasions.

Her captor laughed and turned his back on her then, pulling her up with his lead. Scarlet inspected her wrists as she stumbled along behind him. They were burning, blistering around the silver and already beginning to weep. Closing her eyes and stifling a sob, she made an effort to steady her breathing. It was not over yet. *The tables could still turn. And if not, wolves fight until their last breath*, she reminded herself, steeling her nerve. She would not become some human's play thing.

Raising her bloodied face to the heavens, her skin began to prickle and the fine hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. The brilliant luminance of the full Blood Moon burst through the cloud cover and bathed the dark foreshore and surrounding forest in a ghostly red glow.

Now, it was Scarlet's turn to smile. Dropping to all fours, caring little for her wounds, she let out a chilling howl as her bonds of silver snapped as easily as if they were twine. Pale flesh sprouted thick white fur and slim fingers folded into large padded paws. Her pupils became vertical slits and her wet nostrils flared. She scented the air and the poacher's pungent odour assaulted her in waves.

The miscreant stood frozen, a beautiful and satisfying mix of confusion and horror contorting his features. *Silver can't bind a werewolf on a Full Moon, fool!* She laughed internally. *You chose the wrong night to prey on the heir of the Dark Moon Pack.* Scarlet's eyes narrowed, focusing on her prey. She pawed at the earth, head bent low as she snarled. He began to run, but for him it *was* too late. Her powerful hind quarters launched her into the air, her monstrous canine jaws finding their mark. His neck snapped with a deliciously audible crack, then the bastard's world was painted red. He would hunt no more.

Scarlet thrashed his lifeless body from side to side, flinging it across the dark shore with vicious force. She left his mutilated corpse as a warning to any others out that night, keen to make quick coin out of her

brethren. She had survived her first run in with a hunter. The Alpha would be proud. The fact that she'd face a lecture when she returned to the den did little to mar the high she riding from the thrill of the kill. She threw her head back in triumph and howled to the Blood Moon. Moments later, she was joined by an otherworldly chorus. Her brothers and sisters cried out, a symphony of howls filling the night.

SHADES OF A DREAM

by Laura Davy

I am bright blue. She is bright red. She is pitching to me, but it isn't fair because I don't have a baseball bat and the ball is the moon. And I know I'm dreaming, just as I know I will die, but I can't prove that until I die.

She says, you must pay attention or I will win.

And I fly away from her, my skirt fluttering in the wind, but she throws the ball at me and I fall. I land in the backseat of a van. Dad is in the driver's seat and he is just like the picture hanging on the living room wall, except he is smiling. I want to talk to him, but he is busy. He is fingering Mom, and Mom is looking at me, telling me that this is natural. Then she is bright red and I know I have been tricked. I yell at Dad to stop. He looks at me and says, this is how you were created.

Not like that.

I run away from them and I can hear laughter. She tells me that the brides have to sit on a statue of a God before the marriage. And the God has a giant erection.

I am more than that, I yell. I have yelled a lot and my throat is sore. I stop at a lemonade stand and my five-year-old self sells me a cup. I tell her she is pretty and smart and perfect. She gives me a cup and sings.

Kill them. Kill them. Kill them dead. Only then will you get-

I throw my lemonade at her and she says she's sorry. That she meant that I should kill myself. She offers to sell me a gun. I tell her to fuck herself.

She starts crying and Mom appears. Mom hugs her and tells me

she's disappointed in me. That if I believed in Jesus I wouldn't do this. Just as if Dad had believed he wouldn't have killed himself.

I tell her I go to church every week and I pray when I remember, then she grabs me and stabs me with her left hand.

But I don't die because the bright red girl is there and stops her. You are not a Judge, she says.

And I hold her and Mom is gone. She tells me that the brides dress up like bears and go crazy in the woods. That this is the way it has been before. Times are not so different.

I am holding her and then she is not there and I am holding myself.

I am alone and I like it that way, no one can see me. I become the dirt. From the dirt sprouts a tree. I climb it and see Jesus below. I let myself fall down and Jesus is my Dad, and he says that he will go to dinner at my house. I have my own house that is not Mom's house. I am wearing pure white and have tied my hair up with white roses. I cook and I am happy cooking. But I am stood up by Jesus and I cry until I drown the bugs at my feet.

I go to a movie to cheer myself up and I watch the bright red girl as the protagonist in every film, and there is so much applause and I hate her.

My mom tells me that I shouldn't hate. She slaps me and tells me to like it. And I do. Then the substitute teacher from Calculus comes and gives me a spanking. He was only in class for a week and was just out of college. I pull down my pants so he can spank me harder and then I pull down his pants. I realize I'm going to lose it. And I am lying down on my Mom's lap as he goes inside me and I don't know whether it will hurt or be nice. Mom is telling me that she is proud of me. And the bright red girl is applauding me. And I look at the teacher, but he is no longer there. I ask Mom if this is what happened with Dad. But she is no longer there either. It is just me and the bright red girl.

She says, I'm proud of you.

No, I tell her, my Mom said that.

I look around for my Dad, this is the only time I see him. But he is not here.

The bright red girl tells me she can find the substitute again. Or perhaps Nicholas from Spanish. Maybe even John from Yearbook. She tells me to trust her, but I don't. I watch as she eats and becomes skinnier with every bite.

I tell her I have morals, that I'm good. That Mom loves me. And she does not say anything. She just looks at me. I pull out the gun my Dad had used and I think I'm going to shoot her, but instead I throw it to her. She looks at it and puts it in her mouth and starts sucking on it like I saw

in a porno that I watched at a sleepover. She takes it out and looks at it. It is loaded and ready to go off.

I may be destroying myself.

I am not sure whether she or I said it.

THE MAN WHO HAS TO DIE

by Steven Fischer

The man who has to die stares at her through the airlock window. And he does have to die—there’s no question left in her mind about that. The only question left is why.

Not because he deserves it. She knows that better than anyone else. He’s a good man. A good man who happened to do something bad. And not because it’s protocol. She’s never placed much stock in following rules.

But there is a reason, even if she can’t remember it right now. And the man still has to die.

Her father’s voice echoes back through a memory, warm and thick over the quiet crackling of a fire on the holo projector in their quarters aboard the ship.

“There are only three reasons, Jesse, that a captain should ever take the life of one of his crew.” He sips from the glass of bourbon on his desk—the real stuff they brought from Terra, not the watery trash he says comes out of the mess hall synth.

They’ve been in flight for less than a year but just held their first execution. Dumped a man’s body right outside Pluto’s orbit for doing something to a woman that Father won’t fully explain. She’s hardly more than a child, and she just nods along.

“The first,” Father says, “is prevention. To make sure the man can’t ever do what he did again.” He pauses to make sure she’s listening. “But that’s not enough on its own. You could throw him in the brig for the rest of the voyage and accomplish the same thing.

“The second reason is deterrence. To show the rest of the crew what will happen if they try whatever he tried. To tell them that what he did was serious, and that you take it seriously. That the punishment is stiff, and swift, and irreversible. But that’s not enough, either. Fear alone doesn’t make men behave. It only makes them more careful not to be caught.”

Father frowns and stares into the fire, swirling the liquid in his glass. It casts a twisting amber shadow on the wall in the firelight. “The last reason is catharsis. Sometimes, a man has to die because it’s the only way to help his victims heal. The only way to give them, or the crew, some sense of rightness in a world gone all wrong.”

He says it with confidence, and because of that, she believes him.

But it’s not true, she knows now. She can think of more than three reasons to execute a man. She can think of more than three reasons to execute *this* man. At least she could last night when she gave the order. But right now, staring at him through the thick polyfiber window, she can’t even seem to remember one.

Somehow, he looks less frightened than she knows she must. His peppered hair and beard are neatly trimmed, as if he took the time to shave this morning. He probably did. His black Federation uniform looks clean and freshly pressed. Just like it always did when he was the captain. And his eyes. His eyes are unshaken and utterly unafraid.

She looks down at the text on the terminal and begins to read.

“Captain Jeremiah Stanchion, you have been found guilty of willfully disregarding your vessel’s lawfully ordered mission, of actively attempting desertion, and of inciting the same among members of your crew. Under article 487b of the Terran Federation Code of Military Justice, you have been sentenced to die.”

Her voice quivers a bit as she lets out the words, and suddenly, she’s a child again, standing in the airlock herself, getting ready for her first spacewalk. Her father places his hand on her shoulder.

“Are you afraid?” he asks.

She nods.

He smiles that warm, rich smile, and a bit of her fear falls to the side. “What do we do when we’re afraid, Jesse?”

She takes a deep breath through her nose. “We breathe,” she replies. “And we count. And we don’t let the fear cloud our judgement.”

“Good.”

So she breathes. She breathes, now, as she stares at the man who has to die. And she counts. Backwards from one hundred by sevens. And the reasons come flooding back.

The man has to die because he was the captain. And as the captain,

he should have been quelling talk of desertion, not joining in. Because even though the ship was badly damaged, there was still a chance they could make it to Proxima. And because that was their mission, and the mission always comes first. Because returning to Earth was tantamount to treason. And because she'd begged him over and over to put the ship back on course.

But none of those reasons matter right now.

Because she knows the man did it only because he loves her. Because he couldn't keep his own advice. Because he couldn't stop the fear of her dying from clouding his judgement.

And because she loves him too.

And yet, the man still has to die.

Because the man who has to die is also the man who taught her duty. And taught her to be loyal. And taught her to always place the needs of others before her own. And because twenty billion people on a decaying planet are counting on this ship to find them a new home.

Counting on them not to turn back, like the man did. Even if that means the man has to die. Even if it means they'll all likely die.

She looks down at the flashing red button and feels the eyes of the crew on her back. She pushes it.

Because the man has to die, if for no other reason than that she is the captain, and last night she said that he did.

LYDIA'S LAST WISH

by Edd Vick

Lydia was the only teenager in the world with a wish left. When the genies were all unleashed they assigned each of their number to a newborn. As the children grew, they used their wishes, always in juvenile ways.

When she was four, Lydia said, "I wish I had a nice cream", and she had one. It gladdened her for ten minutes, then she said, "I wish I had another nice cream only bigger than the last one". When she was partway through that one her mother found her, and knew just what she'd done. She slapped the girl's hand, knocking the treat to the floor.

"Don't you want to wish we lived in a big house," scolded Mama. "We could have all the room in the world."

"Or maybe you could wish we owned all the money there is," said Papa. Her older brother Philo said that never worked because a little while later some other kid would make a similar wish. All the conflicting advice just confused her, and she kept from using her third wish.

By the time Lydia was six, only barter worked, and even then not always; some kid would wish for all the sweets, or all the toy cars, or that all the asparagus in the world would disappear. Serves them right, thought Lydia, considering they usually got buried under the resulting avalanche of sweets or toys. She sort of missed asparagus, though.

Her genie reminded Lydia every morning as soon as she was awake that she hadn't used her last wish. He perched on her laundry hamper; just a wisp of smoke with deep lavender eyes. When she was eight she tried to talk to the genie, asking it what would happen if she made this

wish or that wish. What if she wished the sun was less bright? What if she wished all the ants in the world would disappear? What if she wished all the genies away?

Each time the reply was that silky voice in her mind saying, "Is that your wish?" And each time she said no. No, why would I want a cooler sun? No, why would I wish the ants away and let aphids run wild? No, why would I want to make the world less chaotic, less full of wishes, less interesting?

One day all the fireworks in the world went off a few miles south, killing a lot of people but filling Lydia with awe. She wished, but not out loud, that she'd thought of something so splendidous. She told Philo if she'd had two wishes she would have asked for the biggest meteor shower ever. But she only had one.

"Pity," said the inner voice. "That would have been spectacular, and would finally have finished all of you off."

This was her first overt intimation of the genies' darker design. Lydia thought about that remark. Days weeks months later she was still thinking about it. A hundred times she almost wished the genies would just disappear. Then one night she had a dream about one slowly turning invisible. It wouldn't be sufficient for her to use the word "disappear", she realized. Her genie could just twist her wish to its own end. She'd have to be careful not only about what she said, but about how she said it.

A week later everybody over the age of twenty-one keeled over, lifeless. "Some wish," said her genie in a rare moment of spontaneity. Mama was dead, papa was dead, and a week later when Philo turned twenty-one he too dropped dead.

The world looked a lot less interesting to Lydia. Now it looked downright lethal.

"Lydia," said the genie the next morning. "You haven't used your last wish."

"What do you want?" She balled up her sheet in fists that shook. "Why are you doing this to us?"

"We're malign spirits." The wisp of smoke swirled, its eyes doing loop-the-loops. "I expect we'd be a metaphor for getting what you want, only not how you want it. If we didn't actually exist, that is. I'm still waiting for that last wish."

"You want us all dead. Then you'll be free. I could wish you were all dead instead."

"You got your ice cream." The smoke swelled, thinned, until there was only that voice in her head. "Twice. Is that your last wish?"

She didn't reply. She guessed that, for a child's first two wishes, the

genies were less inclined toward lethal results. Sadly, she'd already broached asked for more wishes and been lectured on the Law of Conservation of Magic.

In the kitchen, later, she was scrounging through the cupboard for something to eat, when there was a commotion outside. She went to look. Several streets over it was hailing dogs. They would appear in midair, and fall howling and yelping to their deaths. Lydia presumed there was a child in the center of the growing pyramid of canines who had wished for all the dogs in the world. Stupid kid. Stupid wish. Why would anyone want to bring more children into the world, if they were only going to do something idiotic like that? At least there were lots fewer kids being born now, with all the adults dead.

Once she was back inside, Lydia's throat almost closed. She hyperventilated, sobbing for all the dead dogs in the world. Poor things. She felt so sorry for them.

She caught her breath. Maybe she had an answer. With every adult gone, with supply so skewed and demand so instantly and fatally gratified, there were all too few people left in the world. Perhaps humanity wouldn't be able to recover.

Still, it was worth a try. "Genie," she said. "I wish for every genie in the world... no, I wish for every genie *everywhere* to love... no, to like humans." Two seconds passed. "Not to eat," she added in a yell.

"Is that your wish?"

"It is."

"Hmm."

~

A few years later Lydia was one day away from her twenty-first birthday. Her *Hamzad*, her personal genie of the lavender eyes, wept purple tears from his faceless eyes. "I'm so sorry," he said for perhaps the millionth time.

"Don't be," she said. "I've seen wonders." Lydia turned to the crib where her twins slept. The teenager watching the babies smiled, backing discreetly away. Each child had a tiny swirling Hamzad perched near it. She kissed each baby. "Use them wisely," she said, though she knew they probably wouldn't. But even the unwisest of wishes could have a benign interpretation.

SARAH'S LITTLE MONSTER HUNTER

by Dawn Bonanno

The air popped in Sarah's room, followed by a *thump* from the closet. Light spilled out from the bottom of the closet door. Not the closet light, that was dim yellow. This light flashed—dazzling sparks of pink and blue and purple.

Another portal. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and tried to slow her racing heart. It was alarming just how often the fabric of time and space between the realms tore.

Sarah crept out of bed, her dad's giant flashlight in hand. The metal was cold in her hand, and reassuring. "Keefer?"

Keefer bleeped sweetly, like a gentle one-word song.

"Yes, it's quiet. Everyone's sleeping." She sighed and lowered the flashlight. Maybe it was a rest stop between jobs, like the last time. So long as it wasn't like the time before *that*.

"It's really late, Keefer. I can't hang out." *School tomorrow. I can't fail another science test.* Last time was her own fault; too much World of Warcraft. She glanced at her computer and sighed. She'd just gotten it a few weeks ago for her tenth birthday. No way she'd survive a month without it.

The lights fizzed out as the portal closed. Only the moonlight illuminated the bare wood floor. A sob slipped through the door.

Sarah sighed. "You can come back during the summer, okay? You can ride in my backpack again. Maybe you can time it with our camping trip."

The closet door rumbled and two shadows seeped out from under it.

Sarah jumped back on her bed and clung to the wooden headboard.

"Keefer, what are those?" She kept her voice low. "Are you *working*?"

The shadows scrambled across the floor and dove under her bed. They looked like super long ferrets.

The closet door creaked open and a hairy white ball with ginormous eyes stared at her. Two feet tall, Keefer's floof flashed dazzling colors in greeting and ended on apologetic blue. He was Midnight Realm's sweetest monster hunter, so long as you weren't the monster. He chirped out an explanation.

Summary translation: *Suneaters too fast, couldn't stop portal. Closed it after 2 entered. Big swarm still in Midnight Realm. Friends rounding them up.*

Sarah's heart ached at her earlier selfishness. "Okay, don't worry about it," she said. "Let's just get these suneaters out of here."

Inwardly, she shivered. Keefer had shared too many stories about suneaters snuffing out life on planets all in the name of feasting on sunlight. She didn't quite get how it worked, just that they used invisible sunbeams to suck the life out of a sun. Not enough to kill it, but enough to cool planets. Three worlds ruined—Midnight Realms being the first—and Keefer and his friends saved countless others. Earth was the current target.

"How do we get them out?" she asked.

Keefer bounced, then rolled toward the bed. He squeaked at the suneaters. They darted about, sliding her frisbee out, and popped open her tin of lip balm, all of which rolled across the floor.

Keefer squealed, his eyes squeezing shut.

Sarah cringed. All she needed was her parents spotting him. Last time Dad found Keefer, the little monster hunter was thrown into a trash can and her room fumigated. Luckily, she'd rescued him before animal control arrived. She'd received a lecture about wild animals in the house and two weeks' grounding. No telling what Dad would do if he found 'another wild animal' in her room.

She had to hurry this along. She crept off the bed and grabbed her padded bo staff from behind the bedroom door. Maybe they just needed a little nudge.

When Sarah shoved it at them, the bo shuddered in her hands. She pulled it out: the flashlight revealed dozens of tiny teeth marks in the padding. "How do I explain that to Master Vo?"

I don't, she realized. *Just take the lecture, apologize, and duct tape the damage.* Story of her life.

The suneaters rumbled under the bed again.

"Keefer, have you been hunting them long?"

He flashed pink: affirmative.

"Maybe they're hungry?" Without actual sunlight here to distract them—which was a very good thing—maybe she could distract them with something sugary. It had worked before. That had been a sorry end to her cupcake tower.

No way she was opening the bedroom door and letting the suneaters out of her room. But there wasn't any food in her room. Not even a dog biscuit. Where was Jedi anyway? Probably sleeping in Mom's room. Useless dog.

Her gaze fell on her backpack at the foot of her bed. Oh no. The only food in there was the unopened cherry lollipop stashed in her science textbook. Her reward for when she reread the study guide. "This better work. No way I'm losing my candy *and* my games."

Sarah retrieved the book from the backpack and opened it to the sweet scent of cherry. She breathed deeply. Just a few hours earlier, she'd partially unwrapped it to savor its delicious aroma. Now she'd never taste it. At least it was for a good cause.

The suneaters thumped the underside of her bed.

"Just you wait a minute!"

The flashlight went onto the textbook, its bright yellow beam illuminating the candy. Sarah unwrapped it slowly, careful with the crinkling plastic. Finally, she waved the unwrapped candy over the edge of the bed.

Shadows slithered around her shoes, knocking them aside.

"Ready, Keefer?"

Blink, blink.

"Go!" Sarah threw the lollipop toward the closet. It skipped across the floor like a stone across a pond. The suneaters shot after it, two dark blobs in the semi darkness. Keefer squeaked and bounced after them.

Sarah shut the closet door—too hard. Her heart pounded as she heard Mom's door open and the creak of the loose floorboard in the hallway. She barely made it back under the covers when her door opened.

"Sarah, it's midnight, what are you..." Mom strode in and lifted the textbook and flashlight. She closed the book and put it on top of the backpack. "Sleep, little miss."

"Sorry, Mom."

"You can study over breakfast."

She had to get her mom out. Grownup's brains fizzed out when they saw the portals, and Keefer was about to open one. "I will, thanks."

Mom watched her for a minute.

"I'm sleeping here."

Mom laughed, then kissed her on the forehead and left, closing the door behind her.

Keefer's light show blazed up, and the scuffling started. The air popped as the portal opened. Lights flashed. The closet door shuddered.

Darkness, and silence.

Sarah licked her lips and went to the closet. Ear to the wood—nothing. She cracked the door open and flipped the light on. A lollipop stick lay next to her bike helmet, teeth marks embedded in it. She picked it up and tossed it in the trash, then pulled down the box with Keefer's emergency portal kit. A portal never truly sealed on its own and would be a weak point unless they fortified it.

Using the dragon-scale needle and the unicorn-tail thread, she stitched the portal permanently closed. This one would probably not open again. There would be others, as monsters always tried to leave the Midnight Realm for brighter places, but as long as she and Keefer worked together, Earth would be safe from the darkness. Grownups would be safe from portals.

Wishful thinking makes poor planning, Sarah thought. There would be a next time for sure, but she'd be more prepared: after school tomorrow, she'd stock up at the candy store. Who knew sugar had the power to save the world?

THE LAST HUMAN ON EARTH

By Kyra Worrell and Theresa Barker

The Grafton machine woke her up. Lifted her eyelids off her eyes. Opened them. Focused them. Turned her face towards the screen so she could see videos, still images from the feed, and finally the text-based experience. Everything she was supposed to do. It was right there.

Sharah was not pretty and she was not plain. What she watched suited her, made her pretty and plain and all sorts of things, made her more than she was. And sometimes, this was too much.

She stretched a finger out of its gentle constraints and hit a button.

Her companion robot rolled forward, a steaming cup in hand. “Tea?” The robot’s voice had a pleasant accent that mirrored the dialect from Sharah’s youth.

“No.” She spoke into the headset, momentarily stopping her feed. Though Sharah couldn’t fault the machine for jumping to conclusions. Tea was what she usually wanted. Tea requests abounded in the robot’s databanks.

“No, today I think want something different.” This was more words than she had said in any number of days.

The unit rolled sideways in a show of shock. Then it then rolled back into place, ready to serve.

“I think today, I think today I want to walk.” Sharah was suddenly tired. She couldn’t think today, too tired. She let her hand and finger drop. “Never mind,” she said, “The tea is fine.”

And tea would be fine. Fully restored by the Grafton machine’s deft

manipulations, the tea would be as if it were the original in all its leafy glory. And she, Sarah, the last human being on Earth, she deserved every bit of it. The robot would hand it to her, and she would sip. Just as she had every day, day after endless day, for countless days gone by. Just a taste, sitting up, unclamped from safety restraints that otherwise contained her, and then she would fall back onto her bed, the bed responding, as it always did, by re-clamping her fingers, hands, limbs, and torso into the holding cocoon.

As she lay in the restraints, unable to move – it was, of course, for her safety – she felt as comfortable as an inert person might be. There was no need for comfort, really, when you were the last living human being on Earth, was there?

The feed began again. All the uploaded minds, thoughts, memories and reflections, of all the dwellers of this desiccated planet flowed into, over, and through her mind. It was a burden, but she had the repository space, vast auxiliary memory stores that were fostered, maintained and kept in order by the Grafton machine. This was her purpose. If only one person on Earth was to survive, it was the duty of that person to hold the entire recollection set for all of humankind, and hadn't they worked fast and furiously in the final days to make an enormous deposition entity, one that would live indefinitely, tended by the Grafton machine, one that could retain the uploaded memories of millions, of billions, from infant and child all the way to old age and senility. And hadn't she been the most fortunate being on Earth, the human that had won the most desired role on the planet, the opportunity to be tethered – for life – to that deposition entity that contained the planet's entire consciousness.

The intelligence of a world. What that meant was even beyond Sarah. At first. But now, now after days upon days, days upon more days, and more days, she felt nothing like the human she had been. She was, perhaps, a Gaia, the ancestral mother of all life.

No. She was only Sarah. Human joined to machine, machine joined to human. What had it been like to be human, to walk upon the Earth, to eat and drink normally? To be with family.

The feed flowed over her.

“Tea?” The robot had returned.

Sara considered. “No.” She was tired, yes. But today she felt so, so utterly non-human, that she could not just lie here inside the cocoon's restraints. She had the right. She had the right to get up, to walk. To behave as more than a tethered-machine's extension.

“Today I will walk.” It had been a long time. Would she remember how?

The restraints relaxed, after a pause, she noted. Was it her

imagination, or did the Grafton machine hesitate to obey her wishes? It had been so long since she had done this, she could not remember if it was customary for a pause before relaxing the restraints. No matter. She had enough to simply remember how to walk.

The bed tilted, gently, ever so gently, gradually bringing her to a standing position. Her companion robot appeared with a mechanical device, a rolling sort of cage that she could enter, her hands on the bars, her form protected from hazards above and below, side to side. She must be protected. That was primary. Last human on Earth. They were not about to let her die accidentally.

She shook her head. “No.” The robot, again startled, did its little sideways roll of shock. Then it rolled back, again ready to serve.

“You will guide me,” she instructed the robot. Another hesitation, another pause, this one a bit longer than the previous one. The Grafton machine’s intelligence. Was it testing her? She had just made up her mind to restate the command when the companion robot rolled into place at her side. She put a hand on the smooth round surface of the unit, and gently stepped out of the cocoon. Well, not stepping, exactly. More like shuffling. But it would do.

The light cotton shift she wore brushed the sides of her legs, draped comfortingly around her calves, moving as she moved. It was piercingly obvious to her that she had waited too long. When had she last walked? What had kept her motionless for so long?

The feed. The everlasting, ever-present feed, the flow of a million billion thoughts in the Grafton machine’s repository. Sitting there, or lying there – no difference to her – was her job, wasn’t it? She had the responsibility to have the consciousness maintain its presence even in the absence of every other single human being on Earth.

The feed. Early morning breakfasts of rice cereal and edemame . . . cold cut deli sandwiches eaten in a cafeteria . . . sunset walks on a distant beach . . . the birth of a first child . . . the radiance of ice crystals on bare winter branches.

Wait.

The frailty of illness . . . a parent’s loss of sanity . . . the killing of an innocent . . . the death of a beloved child.

“Stop.” The robot, all obedience, halted. Sarah looked up. It was only a short distance further to the observatory viewer. She had been here before, she remembered. Perhaps the robot had led her here.

But the viewer held no interest for her. What was there to see but the brown-gray husk of an abandoned planet, a planet that had killed its inhabitants after being stripped of its protective shell of forest, trees, rivers, lakes, stone, sand, ice, oceans. She could not watch it again.

A tear began to form behind Shara's eyes. What was this? She did not have time to cry. Her need was to filter, to relive, to experience, to stand in the place of every human on Earth and to preserve their right to be remembered. She could not waste time with small emotions like sadness, like sorrow. No. No time for that.

She turned, shuffling carefully so as not to lose her balance even with the robot's guiding bulk beneath her hand. She would go back to the cocoon. It was only what she deserved. Living was for those who had already perished, perhaps.

The Grafton machine grunted as she arrived back at the starting point. Well, grunted is not, perhaps, the right word. There was a noise, a sound, that came from the device. She had been right. It was glad to see her back within its controlling, surrounding, cushion.

Her muscles, unused to movement, had begun to tremble. She reached out her free hand to grasp the side of the cocoon. Then –
Collapse.

Sharah lay in a heap, micro-inches from the safety of the restraint-cocoon. Whiteness, whiteness all around her.

The robot stood waiting. What was her command?

The Grafton machine grumbled again.

This had happened before. Eventually the robot, guided by Grafton machine programming loops, managed to negotiate Sharah's form into a position near enough to the pod that she could be drawn into the restraints, gently, ever so gently, then the bed rotating, slowly, ever so slowly, from its vertical standing position to the reclining position she was accustomed to. The finger rested inside its restraints again, ready to lift itself and press a button if the need arose.

The feed began again.

This time there were no tears.