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Cover Art: “Celestial Body” by Mariana Palova

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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

I haven't been to any conventions in a long time. Four years to be exact. But this year I've attended three already. Two of those were since we published our second issue.

SpoCon was a great time for me. It is a small convention, so I got a chance to get to know a few people. I also spoke on a number of panels, all with pretty good turnout. We also sold several copies of *Factor Four Magazine* at the market there.

WorldCon was great for a number of reasons. But the greatest in my mind is the MexicanX Initiative that was started by John Picacio. *Factor Four Magazine* used a large portion of our small advertising budget to sponsor one attendee for this initiative. I won't preach politics, this isn't the forum for that, but I will say it was important to me to see a larger representation of the "world" in WorldCon.

I heard amazing stories from the writers, and saw amazing artwork from the artists, that were part of this initiative. Mariana Palova is both a writer and an artist. Her novel *Nation of the Beasts* is in pre-order right now. I've ordered my copy. I was so excited about it, that I almost forgot to talk art with her. I am glad I remembered, because her work is the cover of this issue! It is amazing and I am so happy we met at WorldCon. I am hoping to find some of the other talents I met in my reading queue over the next few weeks.

If the MexicanX Initiative had not happened, I'd never have met so much talent. It left me with this thought, which I leave for you:

We cannot let the lines drawn on a map put up borders in our minds.

Happy Reading,

Richard Flores IV
Editor-in-Chief

A PLACE WITHOUT SEASONS

by Y.M. Pang

In the gloom of the freezer, Shiro dreams of snow. He dreams of bare trees etched like dark embroidery on the white landscape. He dreams of running beside a girl in purple boots, her long braid bouncing behind her. Her laughter is effervescent as shrine bells.

She, at least, he hasn't lost.

Shiro stretches, paws filling the cramped alleyway between the pork ribs and the package of frozen udon. Beyond the walls of his prison, Mother utters a sharp reprimand, Father grunts, and Grandmother lets out a muffled cackle. Then: Asuka, her voice calm but firm. There's a thump, probably plates on the wooden table, then the clink of chopsticks on bowls.

Shiro leaps over the frozen udon—leaps too high, for his head hits the top rack. “Ow!” he yells. He lands on the udon, and sends it skittering off the rack and bump-bump-bumping down the levels of the freezer. Shiro grimaces, tries to rub his aching head with a snow-wrought paw. His paw won't reach. If only Asuka had made his forelegs just little longer... She said he wouldn't look as cute that way; bunnies should have long ears and short legs. At least Shiro's nandina leaf ears are appropriately long.

Outside in the kitchen, the conversation stops. Then starts again, louder and harsher. Shiro can't decipher their words through the thick walls of his prison, but he understands the tone. It's one he's heard countless times, whenever he upends an aging pack of roe or hits himself on the ice tray and lets out an involuntary yowl. Shiro tries, he really tries. He hides in the back of the freezer whenever footsteps approach, unless they have the telltale patterns of Asuka's. He makes himself

unseen if anyone else opens the freezer, allowing them to forget he's here. He's stopped calling for Asuka when he gets bored or lonely, even during hours when he knows she's not in class or cram school. He's long stopped scratching at the interior of the freezer wall, after Mother threatened to throw him out onto the baking July pavement.

Shiro just wishes Asuka had more time for him, like she once had. That's why he is almost relieved that he knocked over the udon. Now Asuka must give him a talking to. Now he has the chance to see her.

He waits a long time before the clinking sounds and voices die down. He can't tell time in his prison, but he guesses it's near Asuka's bedtime when the freezer door opens.

Light floods the shelves, the wrapped meat, the udon package that tumbles out of the freezer. Asuka peers at Shiro. She wears a yellow dress and blue slippers. Shiro still pictures her in mitts and a parka, in those purple boots. At least her long braid is familiar, and those wide eyes that always seem attentive.

Asuka sighs, picks up the udon, shoves it back on the top shelf. "It was an accident—" Shiro begins the same time Asuka says, "I know it was an accident."

They stare at each other. Asuka tries to hide it, but Shiro sees the quirk of her mouth, like she's holding back a smile.

After a pause, Asuka says, "It's Grandma. She's threatening to throw you out again. Says she wouldn't have allowed this if she'd, umm, 'known you'd act more like a furball than a snow bunny.'"

Shiro pads to the edge of the shelf and extends a paw. Hesitantly, Asuka lifts her hand and Shiro rests his paw on her palm. He could already feel himself melting, losing mass from her body heat and the air outside, but he doesn't pull away. It's only for a moment, and he's not losing much.

"I can't stand still all the time," he says. "And I can barely see in here."

"I asked Mom if we can program the light to always be on. She says it's a waste of electricity." Asuka lowers herself to her knees. "I don't know what to do anymore, Shiro. I know you hate it here, and Grandma and Mom and Dad aren't happy either. I feel like a—like a jail warden or something. But I don't know what else to do."

Asuka's eyes sparkle, not with laughter now but with unshed tears. Shiro knows he has no heart, that he is snow all the way through, but he feels her pain like it is his own. He nuzzles his nose against her hand. "Am I such a burden? If so, I can..."

He leaps off the rack. "No!" Asuka yells. She moves to shut the door, then seems to think better of it when she realizes doing so would crush

him. Their eyes meet, Shiro's crimson berries to Asuka's dark, terrified pupils. Standing at the threshold, Shiro feels the heat dappling his frozen fur, feels water droplets emerge. Even after sundown, the apartment remains hot.

"Please," Asuka says. "Don't go. You'll die out there!"

Shiro hates himself for making her cry. Hadn't he promised to be her friend forever, to never cause her pain?

He flicks his ears behind him, feigning casualness. Better make her think it's for him, not for her. "It's so dark and lonely in here," he says. "Like one of your human coffins."

Asuka wipes her eyes, sniffs. "I—I'll visit you more often. I'll tell Grandma you're staying, no matter what, or she has to kick me out too. When it gets a little cooler you can walk around the kitchen a bit. And... and when winter comes, you can finally go outside and it'll be just like old times!"

Shiro moves a step back. Asuka isn't lying. That much he can tell. He may be her burden, but he is also her friend.

"I should've said goodbye to you at the end of winter," Shiro says. Then the words spill out and he couldn't stop them anymore. "That's how the story's supposed to go. I should've melted away with the spring rains, or gone off to a place where you'd never see me again. Next winter you'll make a new snow bunny, have a new friend. Or maybe I'm the only one, the only one that came to life. When you grow up, I'll become a dream—"

"No," Asuka says. "Maybe, in another age... But now we have..." She gestures at the refrigerator, the kitchen, the fan. "It needn't be like that anymore. I can keep you alive. With me." She smiles. "Forever."

"In another age," Shiro repeats.

In another age, he thinks, maybe you would've run off with me. We could go to a place without seasons, where I would be free and you would be free of your family. You would make the sacrifice, in that age, because there'd be no other way for you to stay with me.

But Shiro stares at the trembling Asuka and doesn't say any of this. It wouldn't be fair of him to demand more. Of course she wants her current life, her own comforts, her family by her side. Even if that means he's stuck here.

Shiro leaps back onto the top shelf and curls up beside the udon. "You're right, Asuka. I shouldn't just throw myself at summer's mercy. It's... good to know you still care."

Asuka glances at the clock hanging on the kitchen wall. "I need to go to bed, Shiro. Promise me you won't try to escape? That you'll stay? With me?"

Shiro doesn't bother pointing out that once she shuts that door he wouldn't have the strength to open it again, and his next chance of escape would be when Mother opens the freezer to grab ingredients for lunch. He could race out the door then, but that would mean vanishing without saying goodbye to Asuka, something Shiro couldn't do.

"I'll stay," Shiro says. "For as long as I can, I'll stay."

~

In the gloom of the freezer, Shiro rests his head on his paws. He dreams of rolling down a snowy hill, of scampering up the boughs of a bare tree, of racing a girl in purple boots with her hair pulled back in a long braid.

She, at least, he hasn't lost.

AT LEAST NO ONE ELSE WILL SUFFER

By Dawn Vogel

The king will be dead before the end of this celebration of our marriage.

In the days to come, some will say that I married him, and murdered him, solely for my own benefit. Who else stands to gain as much as the queen, after all?

The peasants, who he scorned, worked to death, and taxed until they could bear no more, will gain freedom of which they had never before dreamed. Though they will still be outside of the castle, they will say, "At least no one else will suffer the anguish we have."

The castle staff, who he ignored, insulted, and abused, will find themselves able to stand to their full height, rather than cowering and creeping through the hallways, afraid to incur his irrational wrath. Though the ruler who comes next may prove unkind, they will say, "At least no one else will suffer the torment we have."

The other young maidens he courted, seduced, and left sullied in the eyes of our grand and illustrious society will feel a modicum of vindication when they hear the news. Though they were not chosen as his bride, they will say, "At least no one else will suffer the indignities we have."

As for myself, I was spared the indignities, the torment, and the anguish, but that does not mean I was blind to my future husband's actions. I observed, I saw, and I took note.

I noted the tangle of dark silver horns that haloed his head like a crown, and I learned what it meant for *sidhe* to wear such a crown.

I noted the way the weather darkened and stormed when he set forth from the castle, and how it brightened only when he returned indoors,

and I learned what it meant for *sidhe* to have such an effect on the skies.

I noted how every animal he encountered shied away, but the birds most of all, who would not so much as land on the highest towers of his castle, and I learned what it meant for *sidhe* to be so anathema to wildlife.

He was not of the *sidhe* at all, but rather was something else, a charlatan, playing on the beliefs of the people of his kingdom, and using their fear to rule them. A dark sort of *sidhe*, known as *dorcha*.

There was, however, one thing that could stop him.

Gold.

My father placed my dowry before the king, for even kings who have chosen their brides receive a dowry from her family. He gave the king everything we had—nuggets of pure gold, mined from far beneath the earth, at great peril to my family for generations.

The king would have rejected it, could he have done so without invoking the wrath of our grand and illustrious society. For to turn away a gift, freely given, is a sin of the worst sort. Instead, the king gave the chest only the most cursory of glances and waved for it to be taken away, to be added to his voluminous coffers.

I watched his discomfort until the gold had left his presence, and I knew the source of his downfall.

And now, it is time. Again, my dowry is to be brought forward. There is nothing he can do to stop this, as it is part of our traditions. This time, I carry the chest, filled with gold.

My dress is long, pooling around my feet. My slippers are so tight that my feet feel cold and leaden. The chest is the heaviest thing I have carried in my life, heavier even than the weight of my heart as I approach the king. Who could blame me if I were to trip and spill the contents of this chest onto his lap?

But I do not wish his death to be deemed an accident.

I will be known as the queen who murdered her husband with her dowry, the very gold that the *dorcha* despise because it brings such life to the *sidhe*.

And at least no one else will suffer.

SHACKLES

By Adam Fout

Stepping from a spherical white craft that rests at the top of a gentle hill, the being that looks so achingly human points with fingers the color of earth. The pink light of the closest dozen suns reflects off each nail, skin the color of fresh pine needles absorbing sunshine from stars like gemstones in the sky—emerald, sapphire, ruby, amethyst, morganite. It stares across the undulating sea of grass with eyes like the ocean, brushes back jade hair the wind has whipped into its mouthless face. The sky is blue, and the grass is tall, and the wind whispers with life, and the being points.

The being's companion climbs from the craft, waves a seven-fingered hand, watches the vehicle dissolve from vision, turns to its companion, follows the pointing finger with eyes like stars, gazes for a moment, nods. It, too, is an amalgamation of forest and earth, hair the color of fresh soil hanging to its knees, shades of green weaving together on flesh covered by garments that fade in and out of reality, blinking in slow patterns, bursting with energy.

Where the first being has pointed, two massive trees grow on a hill, trees thousands of meters tall, dozens wide, trees like starships, obelisks of life thriving in a sun-filled land, ancient bastions standing against the horrors of infinity. The being lays a hand upon its companions skin, and wordless understanding flows from one mind to the next. The companion turns, and they lock eyes, and ancestors carried for ten thousand years in strands of molecular memory scream from DNA prisons, but their screams are word-filled, and these beings that carry within them the vestiges of a species tortured by language, an old species aching with the

corruption of word and thought, these voiceless beings wonder at the cacophony that rises within, and from it flows no understanding, and so the shrieks are ignored, and they turn eyes like frozen seas to the great trees, and they walk.

Each step propels the pair a meter into the crisp air, where they hang for almost a full second before settling like a feather to the lush grass. The suns glisten overhead, and three moons that swallow half the sky dash from horizon to horizon in the time it takes the two to reach the trees.

A hundred meters from the massive trunks, the two hold hands, gazing up at the colossal, duplicate crowns of foliage above, their eyes untroubled by the cacophony of light. A breeze blows, and despite the incredible mass of suns in the sky above, the wind is cool, and the grass thrives. They stare at leaves so far from the soil on which they stand that assuredly they must flutter in vacuum, leaves they could use as sails were this place to have a sea, and they wonder, wordless, at the twin titans.

There is quiet for a moment, and then an ocean of color and light shimmers over the trees. The breeze dances around them as they stand, unmoving, minute after minute, ancestral fury groaning at the wordless intention murmuring in the pair's blood.

After a while, a song begins to rise. Singing creatures crawl from crevices scattered across the gargantuan trees, trees with roots that delve to the heart of this tiny moon, primeval trees that knew ancientness before our world was born. The creatures are echoes of a clinging past, a fusion of type and shape and form, unions of separate things joining for something greater, something more elegant: Fur-covered rodents with leaves where ears should be, eyes like agates; insects formed of rainbow and stardust and curling vine; feathered things with voices like the ringing of golden bells and feet like black roots; hanging beasts with green tendrils for tongues, tails of soft fur, flashing scales of oiled bark.

The song of the creatures is a lullaby of eternity, a requiem of the infinite, and the melody surrounds the companions and fills them with spirit and essence, and they yearn to dive into the river of time and inevitability, into the flow of fate and being that has drawn them inexorably to this world, this fragile moon so close to the black, ravenous jaws that ache to swallow all light and leave green things in darkness.

As in a dream, the song swirls around them, and the tones are made manifest on wind that is itself filled with the life of this place, and a figure forms from light and wind, a body of thin glass and starlight, a thousand sparks racing up and down its alien outlines, and the crystalline being gestures with limbs of three to apertures that have appeared in the heart of each tree, and the companions ignore the cries of despair that

boil up from the legions within their blood, and their clothes blink into nothingness, and each walks, separately, to a hole in one of the trees, and the cavities swallow them with greed.

The song changes now, alters, deepens and widens, the pulsing of stone hearts, the beating of primal drums in the roots of mountains, and the creatures dash for closing holes all across the trees, and an iridescence rises from the thick, brown bark, a glow that pierces the wind-creature of glass, that shatters its thin existence and outshines the tens of thousands of suns concentrated in the heart of the galaxy, here, around this minuscule moon.

A rumbling begins now, and deep in the trees, the green beings lay each in cocoons of silk and branch and radiance, and the creatures surround them, crooning their primordial, sorrowful song, and the song vibrates throughout the inside of the trees, dancing upon walls of moss and bark and brilliance, walls of green things and twinkling things and dark things, and the superfluous bodies of the two, the shackles that tie them to this plane, are suddenly shot through with a radiant, golden light, and their veins and arteries sparkle and blaze behind green skin turned clear, and the light flows like a wave throughout the dusk inside the tree, and moss and bark and all the creatures of space-anchored matter and time-fettered reality shine with a radiance holy and horrid and endless.

The light fills the hearts of the trees to bursting, and with a flash, the trees surge and disintegrate and explode, and tiny bolts of energy fly from them, dance between the close-packed stars, glide across the mouths of the ravenous ones, fracture into a billion pieces as they skate across death and come out the other side, fly with the song still echoing in their hearts, fly into the black abyss that surrounds this place of fathomless dark and eternal brilliance, fly and disappear into the night.

And somewhere unreachable, in the little curled places hiding in the breaths of atoms, the companions wake, and they reach with arms the length of universes, and they grasp each other with hands like galaxies, and a joy fills hearts made of black holes and suns, for they are free now from the icy death that shadowed their bodily forms, free of the tyranny of time, and they whirl and spin like bubbles in an endless sea, and they burst from the skin of reality into a deeper existence, and they pass from the place where story and knowledge can follow, pass into the quiet places of the dark.

THE LOST GOD-WARRIORS OF DHUJAPUR

By David VonAllmen

Women and men run beneath the legs of thirty-foot god-warrior statues, in fear and horror, to hide away in the center of the city. There, they might live a few moments longer, while the black demons' tusks tear through their neighbors. They haven't spare breath for prayers to the sandstone likenesses of lion-headed Randhitra and Bhudyavi the six-armed archer and their three score of brothers and sisters.

Only Rajeev runs forward, his chin barely up to the bellies of terrified adults flooding past, rushing their children away to strongholds that offer no refuge. Why do they bother to flee? There is nothing to do but beg protection at the feet of the god-warrior figures, hope that wherever they may be now, the saviors of legend might hear the people's prayers and return home.

"Someday, a child will find the lost god-warriors," Rajeev's mother told him every night as she folded a cotton blanket under his chin, "for only children can see the dream world with awake eyes."

And every night Rajeev forced a smile and carefully said nothing as his mother recounted the myths of the god-warriors. Or were they ancient scriptures? Or perhaps bedtime stories, meant to do nothing more than amuse drowsy babes?

Rajeev's neighbor, a boy just a few years older than he, shrieks his throat raw as he sprints past. How much worse his fear would be if he knew just how close the demons were to his heels. The beasts, each a different jumble of leopard claws and crocodile teeth and bull hooves,

share only the midnight black of their fur and the devilish orange of their serpent-slit pupils.

Rajeev's uncle, running in a blind panic, knocks him to the hard dirt. His uncle always said the god-warriors were nothing more than mortal men whose tales grew tall over the centuries. He ignores the statues in the race to hide himself. He has no faith that true god-warriors ever lived.

Rajeev's schoolteacher snatches his wrist and yanks him to his feet. She taught that the god-warriors were banished to the lightless depths of the coldest sea for their pride. She doesn't believe the god-warriors can help them now. She drags Rajeev away from the statues. He twists from her grip and runs.

"Nature is where the dancing fire of life is strongest," Rajeev's mother told him every day, as she led him by the hand through blazing green forests and alongside meditative rivers. "But only children, so recently reborn from heaven's realm, are able to see the spirits who live here."

Rajeev would only nod, hoping she wouldn't ask so he wouldn't have to lie. But she always asked.

"Can you see them? Can you see the spirits and the godlings?"

Rajeev would nod again, because he didn't want to disappoint her.

"The god-warriors wait on the highest peak of the mountains for children to come find them. Maybe it will be you who brings them back to us."

Rajeev could not ever nod or smile at this, the muscles of his stomach were always clenched too tightly.

Rajeev scrambles up the base of Pranjura's statue, demons snapping at his ankles. From this height, he sees his mother, standing motionless as neighbors streak past and demons bear down on her. She calls his name, a cry of anguish loud enough to be heard even over the stampede of feet and shouts of fear. Rajeev must turn his eyes away from hers, tears of shame clouding his vision as he looks up at Pranjura. The god-warrior, her eagle wings spread to take flight, gazes into the distant hills, as if he were beneath her notice.

Now, surely Rajeev's mother will realize that her son is without spirit sight. In her last moment of life before the demons gouge out her intestines, no doubt she will finally see what a simpleton and a fool he is, screaming and crying for the god-warriors to return to their city, pounding the edge of his fist against Pranjura's sandstone calf until the stone cracks. And the crack spreads. And a shell of stone falls away, revealing brown skin beneath.

And Pranjura steps forward, her sword cutting down the first demon as an unholy screech of terror leaves its lips. Pranjura's brothers and

sisters shed their coverings in great explosions of rock and dust. The thousand beasts recoil like a wave, trampling over each other in their attempts to escape.

Rajeev sits in the sandstone rubble and laughs and thanks the high gods. His mother stands untouched, mouth and eyes wide with disbelief.

Rajeev was never able to find spirits in any tree or stream. His imagination went no further than seeing the god-warriors in the faces of their own statues.

But his mother will never have to know that.

CONTINGENCIES

By Sarah Hogg

“What’s your password, Commander?” the Ensign pleaded. “I can avoid the collision, but the controls will only respond to your password.”

The Commander was silent for a moment. Her lacerated body heaved on the fractured floor. Then she whispered his name, ragged breath scraping over the word. The Ensign took in the gravity of what she’d just revealed. Every time she passed through a secured door, every time she logged into her work station, she had said his name. In every log book, every account compendium, even in her private journals, his name was the access key. With one word, with his name, she answered the question that had haunted him through years of longing for her. Because romantic relationships between officers were strictly prohibited, this was the only form of love she had dared to express.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” he lamented.

Her eyes opened a bit. The bloodied corners of her lips lifted in a faint smile.

“Your safety more important,” she managed.

For one moment of bliss with her, and he would have endured every stripe the Master Punisher laid on him. But she had made the choice for him so that now, and only now, he would know the full weight of her love.

The endless possibilities of what might have been, of what should have been, permeated his imagination. Permutations of choices unfolded and aligned, a kaleidoscope of alternate endings.

In another reality, she might have chosen to reveal her love despite the cost. In yet another reality, she might have had him killed to be rid of

the risk. He might have scorned her and turned her in. She might have lost her ship, her freedom, her life. Or they might have known freedom and bliss.

In this reality, pieces of the battered ship and crew littered the deck. Warning lights flashed around them indicating imminent collision with the asteroid. But her password, his name, could still save them.

“I’ll steer us away from the asteroid,” he said, dropping her hand.

The weakness that consumed her limbs had obviously spread. She nodded feebly, and her blood-matted, russet locks stuck to her forehead. Her eyes closed again, and he wasn’t sure if she had lost consciousness.

The endless mutability of contingencies haunted his steps to the console. Alter-realities beckoned to him. She might not reject him in all of them. He spoke his own name to the ship, and it responded, lurching hard to the left. The asteroid glided by their starboard windows. He exhaled, and relief coursed through his veins, releasing pulsing pain from the cuts and bruises his urgency had allowed him to ignore.

The asteroid had passed, but danger had not. Most of the crew were dead or dying. There was only one way to save them, to save her. The command was on the tip of his tongue. His fingers ached to key it into the system. He glanced down at her. She moaned.

“We’re clear,” he said, kneeling and lifting her hand once more. He pressed it to his lips. “Now I can save you and the crew. I know the command.”

Her eyes opened in panic. She shook her head.

“No,” she rasped firmly. “No.”

“But you’ll die. I can’t let that happen. I can’t go on. I can’t—”

She squeezed his hand. “No.”

“But in an alter-reality, a place where those bastards never found our ship and shot us, you could survive.”

“Wouldn’t be myself, not this me. I chose you. Made all these choices.” She gestured vaguely at the deck. “Start over. Keep the ship. Live.”

She coughed, her whole body spasming. He dropped her hand again and stood. In the infinite number of possibilities of life on this ship, he was unlikely to find another reality where she allowed herself to love him. He surveyed the splintered deck. The bodies torn by plasma fire, the pierced hull fretted with shards of beams, the bones of the ship and its crew exposed. There was no future for him here.

He stepped back to the console. His name gave it life. He entered the command and dropped the ship into a hyper sublayer drift. Realities swirled by like comets with long silver tails. Here in the space between realities, the Ensign could change the future for the captain and other

crew members. He had no way of controlling their destination, but anywhere was better than this ruined place.

Glancing around the deck, he noticed that he was the only conscious person. With any luck, the crew would adapt to the new reality instantly. He alone would carry the weight of their past. Gritting his teeth, he completed the command, choosing one of the silver comets at random. He returned to his place, kneeling beside the Commander's motionless body.

"I love you too," he whispered as she exhaled a rattling breath.

The ship shuddered, engulfed in a deafening roar. Then silence and stillness. He opened his eyes and saw her boots pointed at him. He lifted his head. She was intact, her freckled copper skin unmarred by any trauma. She frowned down at him. The unshattered crew looked on from a perfectly whole deck. The command had worked.

"I just condemned you to the airlock. Why are you smiling, Ensign?"

"It worked," he said laughing, tears in his eyes. "The command. I saved you."

She squinted in apparent confusion and kicked him in the stomach. The no longer decapitated Officer of Arms and the now unscathed Master Punisher dragged him to the airlock. It didn't matter. The sight of her unharmed body was worth the price of any crime he had committed in this reality. She strode to face him as they lifted him to his feet.

"Thank you for your service, Ensign. You are relieved of your command." She ripped the stripes from his coat. Leaning close to him, she asked, "Do you have any final words?"

She cocked her head to the right with a raised eyebrow, exactly as *his* Commander had done. Her nostrils flared wide in frustration, and she tapped her boot to the same aggravated rhythm *his* Commander had done when she felt overwhelmed. Her kinetic energy had always been her biggest tell. Perhaps she was still *his* Commander. He seized the chance.

"I *know*," he whispered, meeting her speckled hazel eyes. "I know my name is your password. I know, and I love you too. That is all."

He saluted her, and she flinched, blinking several times in rapid succession, visibly shaken. The men shoved him through the security door. Taking a deep breath, he focused on the round window next to the airlock. He could still see her. Just before she released the exterior doors behind him, he saw it in her eyes. A tiny spark of love with a hint of rebellion.

She turned and sprinted to the console. It was only a few seconds before the blood vessels in his eyes burst and his limbs were paralyzed in hypothermia, but he felt the pull of the sublayer drift dragging him to another reality just before his heart gave out. In the infinitely shifting

vicissitudes of choices made and denied, perhaps one of the alter-realities would allow enough freedom for some Commander to openly love some Ensign. But it wouldn't be him.

EXCHANGE

by Katherine Quevedo

When I got to Mario Reyes's dorm room, I heard him scuffling around, opening and closing drawers as if he had a girl coming over. I smirked as I knocked. If he'd seen my room, he wouldn't have bothered cleaning.

He opened the door. "Hello, Leland," he said. "Please come in." He never spoke in class, but his English was pretty good for an exchange student. His skin was caramel-colored even in the fluorescent light, and his thick, dark hair hung in waves past his ears.

"You can just call me Lee." I followed him in. "So where are you from, again?"

"Ecuador."

"Oh. Quito?"

He shook his head, looking half amused, half irritated, as if I'd conjured a weary inside joke. Probably everyone around here guessed he was from Quito. "I am from Puerto Ayora, in the Galapagos Islands."

"Oh, yeah. Darwin, right?"

"Yes."

I flung my backpack onto his bed and stepped back as it bobbed on the mattress. A waterbed.

Then I noticed the teal plastic seaweed scattered among his bookshelves like houseplants. He'd forgotten to shut one drawer, which held a small plastic castle designed to look carved out of coral. The color had smudged and worn off the edges, as though handled often. No wonder he was such a loner.

"Um, seaweed?" I said. "I take it you're majoring in marine biology. It's like an aquarium in here."

"No, no, a terrarium," he said quickly. The word sounded poetic in

his accent—short vowels, rolled and flipped R's. "An aquarium would have water. There is no water in here."

"Except in your mattress." I nodded at the waterbed. "Does the school know about that?" Waterbeds weren't exactly standard in the dorms.

"Of course," he said. I raised an eyebrow at him. He nervously brushed his hair back on one side, where I glimpsed a pearl earring nestled in the helix of his ear before a dark wave fell forward again and hid it. "Actually, I am a music major."

"Music?" I plopped myself on the sand-colored rug. "Why are you taking upper level bio?"

"Personal interest."

I laughed.

He didn't. "May I play some music while we work?"

"Be my guest," I said, grabbing my backpack and fishing through it. I glanced up and caught him frowning his brow in confusion at the phrase. He must've thought I'd extended him some sort of invitation. "I mean, music sounds good," I said. "It'll help us power through this paper so we can start thinking about winter break."

He smiled, started up a playlist, and joined me cross-legged on the rug, carefully avoiding his waterbed as though not to draw any more attention to it.

His taste in music ranged from instrumental pieces that made me feel like I was at a Renaissance faire, to the latest pop hits with hypnotic beats and simple lyrics. All melodic, though. I'd expect nothing less from a music major. Then something else caught my attention, something I didn't expect from his major: his impressive knowledge of amphibians.

He dictated whole sections of our report off the top of his head, while my fingers flew over the keyboard to keep up. The few times he consulted our textbook, it seemed like an afterthought, a courtesy for me. And beyond his raw knowledge, his phrasing sounded poetic, like his accent. Philosophical, even. Maybe he'd call it musicality. Not sure what our professor was going to think, but I didn't care. I liked it, so I included it.

Eventually curiosity got the better of me. I paused the music, and he jerked at the sudden silence.

"Mario, sorry, I just have to ask. What's with all this—terrarium stuff? How do you know so much about amphibians? You have gills or something?"

I didn't realize I'd meant it seriously until I saw his earnest, trusting eyes. Perhaps he wasn't a loner by choice. He raised his hand and swept back his hair. This time, not distracted by the pearl earring, I glimpsed a shadow just beyond his earlobe. A trick of the light? Then his hair fell

forward again.

We stared at each other for a few seconds, then his eyes widened and he lurched toward the remaining open drawer and slammed it shut. He sank back onto the rug.

I cleared my throat. “The Galapagos Islands are pretty far,” I said. “You must get homesick.”

His eyes grew misty. “Yes. But after graduation, when I return home, I will bring your music with me.”

We sat in silence for a moment.

“You know,” I said, “if you need somewhere to stay during the holidays—we have a guest room. And a pool.”

With focused eyes and a tight mouth, he studied my voice as I spoke. Nothing more than the movement of air across vocal cords, the proper positioning of tongue and jaw, and millennia of natural selection at work. But so much revealed in it. Mario searched my face as though expecting I’d referenced an inside joke he wasn’t part of. I hadn’t.

Finally, he beamed at my offer. Music to his ears.

THE ASTOUNDING LIFE OF PENNY WU

by D.A. Xiaolin Spires

Penny Wu hails from the ISS. No, that's not entirely true. Scratch that. She did once hail from the ISS, where she was born, but now she drifts in space, her eversuit recycling her waste and returning it to her as oxygen and food. Moisture and nutrients conserved. She could live like this forever. The suit zaps her muscles, exercising them. It keeps her alive, telling her when to sleep, when to wake up and alerts her of danger. There's not much danger here in the wide expanse of infinite darkness and even if the suit beeps, she can't do really much about it, seeing that her propulsion's broken.

So, she drifts. Yet, she doesn't want to call herself a drifter. It sounds too much like a vagabond. Like she lost control of her suit and is now coasting. Which is what she's doing—the frayed parts of the tethers skimming the void behind her like a tail, attest to that. So, is that what she wants her bio to say? That she did once hail from the ISS, born and raised in a lab, like a chicken? That she was out with the suit when the meteorites hit?

She shakes her head. It feels stiff, like everything else in her body, even if it's maintained by the caretaker suit. *Did once hail. Did once make a life for herself on that station.* No, she doesn't want to say that. She doesn't like the past tense. It makes her feel like she's an artifact, a faraway object, kept behind glass for peering at. Even if her face is perpetually behind the dome glass of her space suit. Even if there's no one to read this bio for her memoir. Even if this recording she's talking into just careens along with her, into the abyss. Even if all of the ISS is gone now, struck by those tenacious bits of stupid, impassive rock that finds survival to be a zero sum game and that they need to take out all

competition, even organic intelligence.

She likes to give the meteorites agency. She likes to give everything and everyone agency, most of all, herself.

Yes, yes, she is in control of her life, her bio. She will make what she wants of it. But, how does she fit her whole life into one hundred words? And does merely evoking her residence mean anything at all? They wanted it in writing—does talking into this microphone even count as writing? And who cares anyway? They're probably gone. She doesn't know for sure, but one look at the destruction she was flying away from and—her heart aches thinking about it again.

This is her chance at finishing her memoir. She has written all the entries, careful, day after day, the collection of her exhibition-like existence. They found a nice holopic of her for the cover. One without tubes and needles and prying appendages. One that leaves out all the camera drones floating about her, capturing her every move. All that's left is to write the bio, sign it and it's off to the cyberwave press. Maybe they'll be able to find her again, that they're alive and thinking of her, ready to capture her like a giant claw and finally append that bit that seals her being into her nearly-finished piece of work. Her own monograph of herself. Her magnum opus. Her *pièce de résistance*.

The bio. *My bio*, she thinks. *My bio for my book*. It's the garnish to the *pièce de résistance*. The most important garnish, the one that makes the entirety of the aesthetic composition come together. Her stamp of being *the creator*. Maybe she still will be published, to be memorialized in hyperink. But, maybe they published it anyway, that they wrenched control from her hands, from her lips making the recording. Maybe they took over her life, wrote a blurb about how she spent her days wandering the ISS halls, floating along, exercising, breathing, tending to the garden. How she had no specialized skills unlike everybody else but was the experiment herself.

She's sick of being the one subjected. She at once craves and yearns to be the object of attention, her life to be held in the hands and read (because isn't that what she was always made to do, fulfilling her life prophecy of being always under scrutiny?) and at once sick of not being able to control the terms of that. The words keep flowing from her mouth. *If you saw me from afar*, she mutters, *if you were some omniscient being watching me from the haze that is this blackness of space* (like the billions of eyes upon her in constant surveillance and observation, she thinks wryly), *you'd just see my mouth moving, talking, talking*—as if the sound of her voice inside her suit would give her legitimacy. Of bringing her identity and a sense of being. She has lost a lot of that now—that sense of existence, even if her existence has always

been a joke, a show pony, a metaphor for the future and any other kind of symbolic thing that doesn't really exist. Except in the abstract, except in secondary layers of meaning for humanity, or for mankind.

Derivative. She is a derivative of life, not made of it. She laughs. If they only saw her now, drifting, drifting. *Stop using that word. I'm not a drifter.* But, she is. She just courses along, hoping, waiting that she is making one giant arc, that she'll orbit back home. *Home*, she laughs. But, maybe. Maybe she will. And the one hundred words she commands, that tells people who she is, will make it back to her people, as distanced as she is from them, physically and emotionally—that she will still take the reins on her life and curate it for them to see.

Penny Wu is a fierce astronaut who maintains command of her suit, she lies. Penny is the daughter of stem cells, no, Penny is the culmination of human existence, a brand for the future. She enjoys cooking with food packets, sniffing flowers at the conservatory and playing air soccer. Like any other ISS resident, she likes a good drink, which means she likes to pitch globules of juice in the air and chomp onto it, while being careful not to 'spill,' aka turning the larger globule into smaller floating orbs of liquid. She's especially good at drinking that way. Sometimes, she just likes to stare out the window and hope for the view of passing cosmic objects, which comes quite rarely, the singular activity she can still partake in now. She champions equal opportunity, advocates hope above all and cares about the fate of her people. This is her first publication.

A SALAMANDER'S WISDOM

by Rebecca Birch

It didn't hurt much, dying. A sharp, bitter taste when my teeth broke the red berry's skin. Tingling on my tongue and the insides of my cheeks. A sudden tightness in my chest.

No, dying didn't hurt—not near as much as living while my daughter wasted away and I could do nothing to save her. I couldn't face it again. Not after losing her father.

A rush of warm wind kissed my skin and I opened my eyes. I was no longer lying on the frond mat with sleeping Kaili's small hand clenched in my own. Instead, I stood barefoot on a field of smooth, black stone, hummocked from the heat that formed it and still pooled just below the surface.

"Old woman sent you?" said a voice near my feet.

A salamander waited there. Its molten skin flowed in shades from amber to blood, save its legs, which were as black and motionless as the stone on which it stood.

"She said I'd find a cure for my daughter."

The salamander tilted its head. "Those her exact words?"

"She said I'd find what I needed most." And, if I were quick enough, I might return before death took me forever. "Do you know where to look?" Stone and sky stretched as far as I could see.

"Haven't been able to move from this spot since my legs cooled."

The wind gusted, blowing away little, invisible parts of me, like ash on the breeze. How much more time did I have?

I chose a direction at random and loped over the blackened ground, watching for something—anything—out of place. A flower. Some lichen. Even simple dirt. Anything that might save my Kaili.

"Won't find anything that way," the salamander called.

I veered to my left, picking up speed.

"Not there either."

I glared back at the molten creature. "You said you didn't know where to look."

"Didn't ask where not to."

My hands clenched, nails digging little half-moons into my palms. "All right. Where should I *not* look?"

"Left. Right. Up. Down."

"That makes no sense."

"Doesn't it?"

Another rush of wind, no longer warm. I wrapped my arms around myself, but couldn't hold all of me together. My skin sank beneath my grasping fingers as if I were hollow.

I dropped to my knees. "She's dying. Please. Help me."

"Mine was dying, too, and now she's gone." Stone crackled and hardened, stretching to cover the salamander's abdomen. It regarded the newly formed crust with a weary gaze. "I looked in all the wrong places. Don't make the same mistake."

All right. Not left, right, up, or down. Where else did that leave? It was so hard to think through the hollowness within me.

The hope that had driven me this far guttered with the wind. *Within me*. It was the only other place to search, and I already knew the landscape in my heart was even more barren than where I stood now.

"There's no cure here, is there?"

"No," said the salamander. "There's no cure."

Kaili was going to die. Alone. Afraid. No one to hold her close. To tell her she was loved. To soothe her into her last sleep, as I'd done for her father, before I understood the staggering loneliness he left behind when he was gone.

"I have to go back. How do I go back?"

"You find what she sent you here for. Quick, before more of you blows away and you're as trapped as me."

What she'd sent me for. What I needed most.

I'd taken the old woman's poison berry—that last, desperate hope—because it was easier to risk my own death than face watching Kaili breathe her last. Because I was afraid of my own pain. But that wasn't what she needed. She needed her mother to be strong.

"Courage," I said. "I need courage."

Deep within me a new ember kindled, licking through my limbs, filling my emptiness with newfound strength. Warm wind swirled around me. The edges of my vision swam.

The salamander brightened briefly, melting back the edges of its

blackened skin. "Well done."

My own world tugged at me like a fisherman's line. "Wait," I cried. "Is there any way I can help you?"

"Send your daughter my love," said the salamander, its voice growing dim. "All that I could not give my own. I will be content."

I woke with a gasp, the bitter taste of the old woman's berries still lingering on my tongue. Kaili stirred beside me. "Ma?" Her breathing rasped.

I propped myself on my elbow and smoothed her black hair. "I'm here, Kaili."

Kaili rubbed her eyes and curled up against me hovering on the edge of slumber.

"I love you and I'm with you." I kissed her damp brow, the flame of my love a shield against the darkness and the fear, and blinked away tears. "Always."

Her lips curved into a smile I felt against my chest. "Always."

It might not be for long, but these were the moments I would remember and treasure. And maybe, just maybe, Kaili would find her father waiting for her on the other side.

THE RED GODDESS

by Melanie Rees

My Red Goddess first died in front of me when I was six. The tiny wooden men with red heads brought her to me. She sat on the dry lawn and cackled a hearty laugh that set my heart ablaze.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Mack," my voice quivered with excitement.

"I'm Kardla." Her cheeks flushed as rosy as the sunset. Her hair flickered like wisps of candle light in the breeze. And before I could tell Kardla how much I adored her, Dad approached waving a hessian sack in his hands.

"Get inside!" yelled Dad.

"I'll return," she whispered to me.

Return? Where are you going?

"They fear me." She crackled upon the grass. "And they should."

I don't.

"I know..." her voice trailed off as Dad held the sack over her amber head, choking her.

"Dad, what did you do?"

He grabbed the scruff of my t-shirt and dragged me away from the sooty black mark that was once my beautiful goddess.

"Mack, are you insane!" he yelled.

I guessed love was a kind of insanity, but Dad never understood.

~

At university, I met her again. I spent a glorious night watching my goddess dance on twigs and logs piled high. Drunken teenagers surrounded her naked body. She twisted and turned in ways no man could imagine possible. Jealousy grew in me, but as other students

passed out, I sat and waited for our chance to be alone. As the night deepened, she faced me. Me alone. Wild eyes, wild hair and lips that would put Snow White to shame turned in my direction.

"Hello again, Mack," she spluttered, inebriated from too much alcohol forced down her tender throat.

I approached with the naivety of a boy never touched and rested my hand upon her heart. Her warmth radiated through me, but it did not hurt.

I missed you, Kardla.

"I know," she whispered and held me tighter.

We danced as if we were the only two on this earth until I could stand no more.

When I woke, some stupid boy with stupid glasses was drowning her with buckets of water. Her head lay in the ashy mud, the light fading from her glorious eyes. She glanced at me.

"They fear me," she hissed with her last breath.

I turned on the murderous four-eyed boy and smashed his glasses into his face. I defended her and the university expelled *me*. Like Dad, they didn't understand.

~

"Run!" Older and wiser now, I know everyone hates her. She must flee.

The orange halo surrounding her supple body deepens to a divine scarlet. "I'll crush them this time. We will be the last two standing on earth." Her raspy tones echo deep within my chest until I can feel my ribs shudder with every heartbeat.

"There are too many." My hands grip the steering wheel until my knuckles throb. "I can't see you die again."

Pain fills her amber eyes. "For you."

She brushes her fingers through rank fields of wheat. A gusty hot wind excites her, gives her life, and then she is sprinting, flying up the hill.

I follow in my car up an old dirt track towards an ironstone ridge. I would follow her to the end of the earth. I would drink the entire ocean so she could leave this land if she wanted.

Her voice crackles as she wraps her arms around a gum tree and climbs high. The eucalyptus scent clears my head and fills my heart. I climb the tree and embrace her warm touch. For a moment, I am lost in a haze.

Wailing interrupts us: a monotonous high-pitched squeal that saturates my ears.

I drop from the tree and brace myself as a truck approaches. Its red flashing lights blink menacingly. I glance up. She leaps with a ballerina's grace from tree to tree, trying to flee the truck.

A stocky man disembarks and strides towards me. He barks orders to other men inside the vehicle.

He is a devil in yellow overalls. His hard hat obscures his horns, but it cannot conceal the loathing in his eyes. He wants her dead. The other men that pour out the vehicle, dragging hoses and knapsacks, want to drown her.

"I guess our time is up again," she whispers.

"Mate, get out of here! It's not safe," the chief yells over her beautiful voice.

"Defend yourself," I plead with her. "They want to hurt you."

"What the heck are you yapping about?" asks the chief.

The other men shoot her with their fire-hoses. The water knocks her from the tree branch. She lies on the ground; her eyes bloodshot; her ruddy complexion begins to fade. Her agile flight is reduced to a sombre limp as she struggles across the ironstone towards the truck.

Kill them first!

For a moment, it looks as if she hears my warning. She rubs her back against the truck leaving a sooty trail of hatred, before turning on me. Her approach dazzles me. My face flushes with lust and longing. She knows the end is near, and in her dire time of strife, she wants to be with me. Only me.

Before she approaches to say goodbye, someone drags me away and takes me to the local town hall where everyone has fled out of fear of my beautiful goddess.

I wander down the street, and light a cigarette to console me.

On the edge of town, the old football oval is dry and lifeless. I flick the cigarette onto the grass and see her ignites again giving the world life.

"Mack." She spreads her arms wide, touching every blade of grass, inviting me to her.

I approach and relish in her sizzling embrace. Her touch is warm, but she will never harm me.

She climbs twigs and leaves, fence posts and trees. They think they have won, but like a phoenix, I will make sure she keeps rising from the ashes.

APPLES FOR THE FUTURE

by Jamie Lackey

My older brother Samuel stood in the center of town, beneath the spreading branches of our spirit tree. The limbs dipped low from the weight of the apples, and the leaves cast heavy shadows across his face. I stood with everyone else in a rough circle around him, clutching our father's hand.

The village wise woman stepped forward and handed Samuel a short knife. He held it between his teeth and jumped for one of the lower branches. An apple tumbled down and landed at my feet.

Samuel scrambled up the tree, and selected one of the higher branches. He sliced it off cleanly with the knife. He climbed back down slowly, careful not to damage his prize.

We all stood in absolute silence, waiting. I held my breath.

Samuel carried it into the sunshine, then thrust the cut end of the branch into the ground. Nothing happened for a long moment, then the branch withered and crumpled to the ground.

Samuel's shoulders slumped. Someone behind me sighed and swore. My father wiped away a single tear.

I picked up the apple at my feet.

~

Samuel skipped a flat rock across the lake. "I don't think I can stay," he said. "There's this disappointment in everyone's face when they look at me."

"It's not your fault that the spirit tree is sick," I said.

"It's bearing more apples than ever," he said, sending another rock skipping across the water. "It doesn't look sick."

"You're not the first one whose seedling died." I picked up a rock and

handed it to him. I was useless at skipping rocks, but I prided myself on finding the smoothest, flattest ones for him. "It's been years since one grew."

"But I'm our father's son. People expected more of me. And I disappointed them."

"It'll disappoint them more if you leave."

"But I won't have to face them."

~

Our mother had made the best apple pies, and I made one for Samuel before he left. I'd tried her recipe again and again, but no matter what I did, it never turned out quite right.

"It's still good," Samuel said, as he helped himself to a third slice.

"But it's not the same."

He patted my shoulder. "It doesn't have to be."

~

Seasons turned, and it was fall again. This year was my turn. In just a few hours, I would stand among my people as an adult. I stood on the lakeshore, turning a flat rock over and over in my hands.

I whipped it at the water, trying to mirror the flick of Samuel's wrist.

The rock cut into the water like a knife and sank out of sight, leaving only ripples behind.

~

The town gathered around the spirit tree. This time, my father stood alone.

The wise woman handed me the knife. It was heavier than I'd expected.

"Go on, child," she whispered. "Make your father proud."

I reached up and picked an apple.

Trees that grew from seeds would bear different apples. Our spirit apples knew no equal. Any apple that grew from a seed would surely be inferior.

I cut the apple in half and tipped a seed into my palm.

The wise woman reached for my wrist, but my father spoke, his voice hard. "This is her moment. Don't interfere."

I knew that he wanted me to climb up into the tree, to cut a limb, to see if it grew. But he'd defend my decision to do otherwise. Just like he let Samuel leave.

I walked into the sunshine, plunged the knife into the ground, and dropped the seed in. I patted warm dirt over it and sat back.

A seedling erupted instantly. In moments, it was taller than me. I laid a hand against its smooth bark.

"It's done," my father said. "Let's get home."

~

The looks that everyone gave me weren't disappointed. They ranged from wary to hopeful to angry. I ignored them all. I baked pie after pie until I found a recipe that I liked as much as I'd liked my mother's.

It was different. But that was okay.

That fall, my apple tree bore fruit. The apples were smaller than the spirit apples, and a paler red. My fingers trembled as I picked the first one.

It was crisper than a spirit apple, and not as sweet. Tart juice dripped down my hand as I ate it. A slow grin spread across my face. I wondered how they'd taste in my pie.

~

The town gathered around the spirit tree. There was a festive spirit in the air, and the three children who were coming of age clustered together. "I bet my apples will be the sweetest," my daughter whispered.

Her cousin rolled her eyes. "Well, maybe mine will be the biggest."

The third child, the first of his family to come of age in our town, just laughed at them. "I'll be happy as long as mine grows."

I smiled as I handed my daughter the knife. The seeds always grew.

BECOMING THE MORRIGAN

by Deborah L. Davitt

They never see her coming.

The drug dealers and muggers, thieves and rapists, pickpockets and procurers—they all think she's prey. She's only been picked up on camera once. So we saw her as *they* did: an unassuming figure, fur-wrapped against the frigid night of this moon, nine hundred light-years from Earth. Vorla fur, mark of an off-worlder; the creatures swim distant methane seas, their fur so dense, that not even this hellhole's chill could bite through it.

Her face? Covered by a silvery mask, protection from the gelid air. She seemed carved from shadows by ring-glow of the gas-giant. Limned by the perpetual auroras of our skies.

I saw her enter a dark alley. Figures rose from behind trash bins, knives in their hands. Wherever humanity goes, there'll always be those who want more than they have. Who find it easier to take than to earn.

It's not my job to judge them. Just to take them off the streets once they've broken the law. "I take this an assault, and we need to find the perps?" I asked the captain as I watched the video.

Captain Adachi laid a green-skinned finger to her lips. While she'd taken gene-mods to make her glow in the ice-light of the rings, I'd only opted for a dark-adaption mod, myself. I preferred to see in the shadows left by the system's red dwarf, not to be seen. "Watch."

On-screen, the woman *blurred* as assailants closed in around her. Arms spread out from her body like a star's corona, flickering, incipient, there and not there. In each hand, a sword like glass. She bent at the waist in three impossible directions at once, as if two other bodies

conjoined with hers, each as incorporeal as smoke. And she danced like a shadow among flames, like a statue of Kali come to life.

And when the dance ended, men lay dead, and she receded from the camera's field as if she'd never been.

My mouth fell open.

"You weren't wrong," my captain said. "Multiple homicide. Find her."

Weeks passed without another sighting, but the bodies piled up. Each of them frozen to the ground when we found them—no surprise, given that when we pass behind the gas giant, temperatures drop low enough that oxygen threatens to rain.

But what caught the medical examiner's eye was the eroded quality of the cuts left on the bodies. "These aren't swords," the doctor muttered. "This wasn't left by steel or glass. The cells are lysing, disintegrating, but there's no actual *cut*."

"Doesn't matter what the weapon is. We can't tolerate a vigilante," my captain pointed out, half-heartedly. The woman might be making our jobs easier, but even the honest colonists were frightened.

Then again, mass murder tends to promote fear.

I knew we'd never catch her with drones or cameras, so I set out on foot. My dark-adapted eyes reflected the night as I walked empty alleys, searching for my quarry.

It was the sound that alerted me, a susurrant like an indrawn breath. I turned to see her flow around the corner towards me, the eyes of her mask devouring light like black holes. I raised my hands, not drawing my gun. "I'm with colonial security. My captain would like to speak with you."

Her head tipped to the side, bird-like. Then one word. "Why?"

Her voice, harsh and rough as a raven's, somehow brought back memories of Earth, of autumn days filled with sunlight. "You've killed people. We frown on that."

"Murderers. They approached me with ill-intent."

"I don't judge. That's for magistrates around here."

"And that is why so many here commit crimes. Even among you guards."

A shadow behind her moved, holding a gun. An officer had followed me from the station. "Get your hands up."

"I've got this," I cut in. "No guns needed." Images in my mind of wounds that hadn't been cuts, had never bled. Dancing swords in hands that weren't there.

She laughed. "*This* one has taken money from the smugglers to look away as they carry the flesh to other worlds. You don't know that yet.

But you will.”

And she bent at the waist and unfolded herself. I could see it clearly this time—three bodies, four arms each. As the gun fired, she dissolved, flowed around each bullet.

Thud of impact as the bullets slammed into my chest, throwing me into the wall. Distant pain, heart hammering in shock. I slumped, watching as she danced around the officer who’d followed me. As her blades lashed him like the whips of some ancient fury, I realized what they were. Pieces of time, splinters of reality. She didn’t cut with crude matter, but with lines of entropic force that caused cells to disintegrate on contact.

I struggled to retain consciousness as she approached me. Raised one of her hands, and time flowed backwards, the bullets pulling themselves from my chest. My body knitted, the pain fled. “Who are you?” I whispered.

“I do not surrender myself, even in so much as my name,” she rasped. “But if you continue my work, I’ve no need to remain.”

She touched my hand. It stung.

And then she was gone.

I sat at my desk for three hours, trying to write my report. The officer who died? Irregularities in his bank account. Payments. *Pay-offs*.

She couldn’t have known. Except she knew that I *would* know.

I spread my fingers against the desk. Felt something cold form against my palms. Wavering swords of ice, waiting to be grasped out of the past. Out of the future.

Judging isn’t my job. Except if I take up her cause, she won’t return. People here will be safe from her.

But not from me. And I don’t have the right, do I?

Part of me wants her back. To explain everything. But I suspect that I’ll see her only again if I misuse her gift.

And if so, I’ll never see her coming.

THE SPACE BETWEEN OCTOBERS

By Wendy Nickel

We always meet in October, though it takes me years to ask why. By that time, he's already come and left a dozen times, never aging more than a day, though I do, year by drawn-out year.

"I don't know how it works," he says as our feet crush fire-red leaves beneath us, as he tucks my hand into the crook of his arm and presses it close to keep it warm. "Does it matter?"

Does it?

This much I know: One day he is here. The next he is gone, and I'm left with another year without him.

I know this as well: He's known me less than a fortnight. His love for me is still new, still unexpected and surprising and fresh. He's a child with a new toy. A puppy with a bone. I worry his interest will wane.

I've known him for over a decade, and I've gone through all the stages of affection: from obsession to doubt, from disappointment to elation, from jealousy to anger to sorrow. I even tried to forget him once — a useless and heartbreaking endeavor. And so, I've hurried here to meet him again today, clinging to something that feels real, even in the months between.

We'd met in this park, amid the joggers and dog-walkers, among the red-leaved maples of the fall.

"I'm an actor," he'd told me, which I'd known was a lie. His eyes are too honest; they give him away. Still, it took me some years — days, for him — to convince me that his history was real: that his "costume" was the clothing of his time.

Today, he wears a cravat the same shade as the autumn leaves, and I

wonder if he did that on purpose. Were the leaves that same hue here last October? There's so much that I don't remember.

What I do remember: That first day, we spent on the park bench where his shadow had materialized beside mine. The book I'd been reading was forgotten when I'd looked up and seen him there.

"Is this your bench?" he'd asked, and I'd been so bewildered, I'd laughed.

"I'm pretty sure it belongs to the city."

My city is a hundred years older than his, though he claims that at its core, it's still the same: still full of wide-eyed optimists who want to make a difference, in whatever small matters they can. He sees it in my eyes, too, though my plans change so much while he's gone — from one course of studies to another, and job after job after job, never quite finding where I fit. Yet rather than discourage him, my day-by-day (year-by-year) contradictions only seem to endear him more.

"I'm seeing you blossom in an instant," he says as we skip rocks across the pond. "A time-lapse film of your life."

He takes my left hand and runs his thumb along the finger where I'd once worn another man's ring. No words are exchanged, but I know he remembers; for him, it was mere days ago when I told him whatever we had was over, and just one day later when I admitted I'd been wrong.

We order tea at the same café we always do, though its name has thrice changed in that time. We stare out the window at the children rushing past, and I know what he'll ask before he says it.

"Have you thought about what I asked you?"

He doesn't need to say more. I've been thinking about it for a year.

Leaves hop along the sidewalk, and I wonder at the age of the maples, if there are any whose arching branches he'd recognize from his time. I wonder if his autumn smells the same. If *I'm* the reason he's here, and if I left, would he still come?

"I've thought about it." I take his hand in mine.

"Does that mean that you'll join me?"

"Come on," I say when my lips won't form the words I want. "We still have time left tonight."

Sunset turns to starlight and he wraps his peacoat around me, which smells of comfort and lye. The hours tick down as we walk through the city. As I silently say goodbye.

We stand before the clocktower at midnight. It's become a habit, to listen to the tolling as I watch him fade away. Tonight, though, he grips my hands as they ring out. My heart pounds in time with its clanging.

"Will you come?" he asks, an echo of last year's plea. "If you can?"

It'd taken me a year to clean out my apartment. To work up the

courage to quit my job.

"I'll come. If I can." It's a guess, a hope, a superstition maybe, that I could cling to him and be brought along with him as he leaves. But I have to try. To give a fair shot to whatever we have — a shot uninterrupted by gaps. Unbroken by the months of a year. Unseparated by centuries.

I take a breath. The clock strikes twelve.

The final toll echoes in my head. Buses and SUVs rush by. My hands are suddenly cold and empty. I stand before the clocktower, alone.

In the morning, I'll renew my apartment lease.

In the morning, I'll call to beg for my old job.

In the morning, I'll dry my tears and press onward. I'll carry on, somehow, some way, across the space between Octobers.

MURDER, MARTYR, MAYBE

By Shannon Fay

You can always spot the moment someone recognizes you. It's like seeing a train change track in their brain, all their attention now barrelling towards you, the wide whites of their eyes shining like headlights.

It has happened again right now, mid job interview. The interviewer, Irene, stares at you with a mix of wonder and fear.

"Weren't you on that telly program..."

"Simon Locke's 'Mind Trapped.' Yes, I was." You could deny it but a simple Google search would prove you wrong. Maybe it doesn't matter-you're already known as a killer, why not add 'bald-faced liar' to the list? But even if you don't have much you still have your pride.

Irene shudders. "I would never go on that show. The things he makes people do..."

Locke's 'immersive reality TV/social experiments' are all the rage with their pop-psychology and dark take on human nature. Last year when you heard they were looking for participants you thought it might be fun, but the show's producers told you that you hadn't made the cut and wouldn't be in the show.

That was a lie. The cameras were rolling on you from the moment you signed the release forms.

Your episode had been about how easy it is to kill someone.

"You must have known it was all a set-up," Irene says, almost pleadingly. "You must have known that it was just a bunch of sets and actors."

"No. I really believed my only choice was to throw that old lady onto

the train tracks." The words come with the easy grace of a thousand repetitions.

Irene starts gathering up her papers.

"Well, thank you for your time. We'll let you know."

~

"Simon?"

"How did you get my home number?" He sounds exactly like he does on TV, if perhaps a bit tetchy.

"I need a job, or some money so I can start over in another country. No one here will ever hire me. They only see a killer."

"You didn't actually kill anyone-"

"You ruined my life!" you shout. "How can you just... *dismantle* people, and... never see how bad things get... never..."

You find yourself unable to draw air into your lungs. Simon calls your name over the line. As you sink to the floor he walks you through something he calls 'box breathing.' You feel like it might be just something he pulled out of his ass, but it works. You graduate from airless gasping to clutching your phone tightly as you sob on the floor.

Simon sighs.

"I've given you a gift. Use it." He hangs up.

~

This time the interviewer is a guy named Bret. It's early on when he gives you 'the look.'

"You were on 'Mind Trapped,' right?"

"That's right." Mentally you are already gathering your things. Bret just grins.

"Awesome!" He wheels his chair out from behind his desk to sit closer. "How did it feel when you killed her?"

"I didn't..."

"Sure, you didn't *actually* knock-off the old bag, but you thought you did, right?" Bret shakes his head. "I've always wondered how it must feel. I'd never do it, of course. I'd be risking all this!" He gestures to his corner office before bringing his attention back to you. "But you've already crossed that Rubicon, right? Hey, how much?"

"How much what?"

"How much for you to kill my fucking idiot brother-in-law?"

You stare at him, feeling something ice over in your bones. You realize that no matter how hard you try, no matter how good you are, you will never get your life back.

Bret laughs.

"Oh my God, the look on your face! You thought I was serious!" He chuckles and meets your gaze. "But seriously, how much?"

His smile is wide but his eyes are hard.

~

You wait on Simon's back patio. When he opens the door to let his pug out you are there, gun in hand. Fear and disbelief flash across his face: '*Am I really about to die while my dog takes a shit in the garden?*'

"Hello Simon. Can I come in?"

"Sure."

You step past him and he slides the door shut.

"You were right," you say. "You *did* give me a gift. How can I ever repay you?"

Simon sits down at his kitchen table. "This isn't what I meant."

"Really? You showed me that I was capable of murder. So, yeah, thanks for teaching me that about myself." You raise the gun.

"I showed you that you are stronger than that," Simon says. "That the next time you were faced with a no-win situation, you'd know you had the power to chose something else."

You take a deep breath (four counts in through the nose, hold for four, four counts out through the mouth).

"You're not a killer. You haven't killed anyone," Simon continues. "It was all pretend. But if you kill me, then I *will* have turned you into something you're not, and do you really want to give me that satisfaction?"

He smiles but it's overshadowed by the fear in his eyes.

The gun is still in your hand, trained on Simon. His pug paces at the door.

If you pull the trigger, you can have your revenge on the man who has ruined your life. The cops might talk to you but you're far from the only one with a grudge against Simon Locke. You'll have a new job, killing for rich bastards who are too cowardly and lazy to do it themselves. You will become the murderer everyone already believes you to be.

If you put the gun away and walk out, Simon might call the cops but somehow you don't think he will. You'll continue to be buffeted along in life, side-eyed by people who tell themselves that they would never sink to your level. You will only have your belief in yourself, the slim knowledge that you aren't a murderer, to keep you afloat.

Simon sits, waiting. You make your decision.

PARTITIONS

by Robert S. Wilson

“Honey, can you take out the trash?” The moment the words slip from my mouth I realize my mistake.

“Sure.” Devin gives me a solemn smile and rushes over to the trash can next to the refrigerator, opens the lid, and begins pulling out the white plastic bag. I’m immediately jarred from the fantasy now and I try like hell to hold onto my smile (exactly why, I don’t know) as I mentally will the Lifeline file to end. As it does, the spotless shining kitchen from my artificial reality fades into a shimmering grayish flicker and I’m left sitting lonely and forlorn at the foot of our—I’m sorry *my*—maple-finished four poster bed.

It hasn’t been *our* bed for six months now. Not since, without warning, the real Devin moved his things into the guest bedroom across the hall. I can’t say I blame him. After all, by that point, I was already regularly spending more time with Other Devin than the man I married a decade earlier in meatspace.

I feel a flash of guilt at the renewed realization of this and then just as quickly a thin slimy layer of resentment replaces it when I think about Devin’s own LifeCraft *buddy*. In my head I’ve dubbed her Caroline Not. But I’ve never heard him call her by any other name than simply *Caroline* which leads to awkward confusion sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night to hear him passionately call out *my name* from across the hall.

I get up from my bed and step over the growing pile of clothes strewn across the floor. I wonder if Devin’s room is equally dirty. He always claims he is the cleaner one. Maybe he is right. Maybe not.

I walk out into the open house and down the hall into the kitchen to find him sitting at the table, devouring a bowl of Fruit Loops. He stares grinning at nothing, eyes bulging and glazing over the content of some doubtlessly infantile Lifeline feed like some giddy overgrown adolescent. I ignore him and take out a couple of eggs from the fridge. I happen to remember the end of my Lifeline session and glance over at the overflowing trashcan to my left.

Worthless. I'll have to do it myself again.

When I spin around to grab a bowl from the cabinet I nearly knock right into Devin who is now standing, Lifeline device no longer dangling from his inner ear. A moment of awkward silence oozes and pulsates between us and then we manage to make our way around each other without a touch or a word between us. *Good. It's better that way.*

~

On Monday, after work, I pull the car into the driveway and get out in a rush toward the mailbox as rain patters all around me. I pull out the pile of envelopes and magazines and stash them inside my coat and head inside the house. It strikes me as odd that, for once, Devin's car isn't blocking my spot in the driveway—isn't here at all yet. I shake the rain from my coat and hang it up and the bundle of mail falls scattering to the floor. I curse and bend down to pick it up when I notice the name on the return address on one of the letters staring face-up at me.

Jeffery Stinson: Family and Divorce Lawyer

A sinking icy anchor drags my stomach down below sea level. I tear open the letter and skim the cold lifeless legalese for what I know I'm going to find; Devin's filed for divorce. I feel a million things at once, remember a million little moments starting from the day we met and leading up to now. In an instant the solid rigid paper in my hand shatters months of virtual happiness, passion, and... something else I can't quite put my finger on.

Those experiences, those fantasies of who I wanted Devin to be... are laid bare to me now. In all their selfish plasticity. I get up from the floor and go straight to the bedroom. I scramble for the Lifeline device on the computer desk and with fumbling fingers, I put it in my ear. My hand hovers over the LifeCraft icon for just a hair of a second and then it double clicks on LifeShare instead. Once the Lifeline's gray formless interior has fully bloomed up around me, I begin recording and let my mind focus on that solitary moment of fear and memories all tangled into one big overwhelming emotional knot.

I nearly burst with the force of it. The ice and fire and tug of it. But it's important I get every ounce of joy and fury. Every nuance of love and loss.

When I'm done and the experience is rendered into billions of ones and zeros, I feel my physical body tense up, tears sliding down my face, and I take a long deep breath. My inner self within the Lifeline holds on to the file with gray featureless hands and then releases it. The file shoots away into the gray void as if pulled from a powerful vacuum and within seconds it's just a shrinking pinpoint blasting through empty space.

A notification scrolls up from below, letting me know my file has reached Devin's inbox and in that second in time I feel just a glimmer of something I haven't felt in nearly three years.

Hope.

TIME WAITS FOR ONE MAN

By Aeryn Rudel

“Okay, so you’re immortal?” Nadine set her iPhone on the table and pressed record.

“I won’t register on that,” said the man seated across from her. He was tall and thin, with a sharp nose, a wide, clear brow, and eyes so brown they were almost black. She wouldn’t call him handsome in the classic sense, but there was an indefinable allure about him.

“Oh, why not?” Nadine said.

“I am not entirely sure, but it seems to be part of my... condition. Technology newer than a few centuries doesn’t work particularly well around me.”

Nadine put her phone away and pulled a legal pad and a pen from her bag. “Okay, we’ll do this the old fashioned way. Start from the top. You’re immortal.”

The man sat back and sipped his wine. “That is accurate. I cannot die.”

“How do you know that?”

“You witnessed that automobile strike me, and yet here we sit.”

Nadine would never forget the incident. She’d come out of the Seattle Times building and saw a man crossing the street. He didn’t see the Lincoln Navigator racing to beat the yellow light. She’d called out a warning, but too late. The SUV plowed into the man and threw him thirty feet, where he landed in a heap of twisted limbs. People raced over to help, but the man climbed to his feet before anyone reached him and sprinted away. She’d searched for him for a month.

When she’d tracked him to one of the many homeless tent cities in

Seattle, he agreed to talk to her for a meal.

She sipped her martini. “Well, I saw something. That’s why I tracked you down.”

“That vehicle shattered my spine, destroyed multiple internal organs, and fractured both arms and one leg. You saw that.”

She shuddered. “I thought you were dead until you got up and ran off. How is that possible?”

“I do not remain injured, even fatally, for long.” He took another pull from his wine glass, and his eyes became cloudy, far away. “This is quite good, but nothing compares to a Constantinople sweet red from around 1150.”

“Wine you had nine hundred years ago, huh?”

He laughed. “I know; it is hard to believe.”

It was more than hard to believe. It was damn near impossible. “Okay, let’s get back on track. You survived this car accident, but that kind of thing happens. It’s freakish, but it happens. So why would I believe you can’t die?”

He frowned. “You’re a good reporter; you found out what happened to the driver of that car.”

She swallowed. “I tried to interview him, yes.”

“And why didn’t you?”

“He’s dead. Two weeks ago a semi-truck ran him over and dragged him nearly two miles.”

The man’s frown deepened. “I didn’t want that to happen. It has been some time since I lived in a big city, and I am forgetful of its dangers. That man paid for my mistake, but that’s how this works.”

“How what works?”

“Look at this.” He parted his black hair—remarkably clean for a man living in a tent on the street—exposing his forehead. There was a scar there. No, a brand, a letter maybe, but from a language she’d never seen.

“I don’t understand. What is that?”

“Angelic script. It’s the reason I’m still alive, and the reason that poor man who hit me is dead.”

Nadine had heard a lot of bullshit stories in her ten years as a reporter, but there was a sincerity here, an apathy toward her opinion of the situation that gave her pause. Still, a man who miraculously survived what should have been a fatal injury made a decent story unto itself.

“May I have another glass?” he asked.

Nadine signaled the waiter. “Another glass of the red, please.” When the waiter left, she said, “Okay, if you’re immortal, why are you living on the street? Why aren’t you fabulously wealthy?”

“A good question,” he said. “The truth is simple. I am cursed to

wander, to never settle anywhere for long. One cannot build an empire of wealth with such a transient nature."

It was plausible if you bought the rest of his story. Of course, the rest of his story could be proved easily. Nadine decided to call his bluff. "Okay, listen, I carry a gun in my purse. Let's go somewhere quiet and you can demonstrate your immortality."

He recoiled. "Have you not been listening? If you shoot me, you'll see I'm telling the truth, but then you will pay, horribly."

"Because someone will shoot me?"

"Yes, or worse. Anyone who harms me has the same harm visited upon them seven-fold."

That reminded Nadine of something, but she couldn't put her finger on it. "Then we don't have much to go on."

"There are other ways I can convince you," he said, his eyes suddenly eager.

"Yeah, how's that?"

He leaned over the table. "Let me tell you my story. You can write it down, make a book out of it. A long book."

That intrigued her. Even if he was full of shit, it might make an interesting story.

The waiter brought the wine, and the man took a sip and nodded approvingly. "All I want in return is more of this." He waved his hand at the restaurant around them. "Wine, good food, company, and you get a story no one has ever heard."

"Okay, here's what I'll do. We'll meet three more times, and you can have all the wine and food you want on my dime. If after those three meetings, you haven't provided me with anything I can believe or use for a story, we part ways. Deal?"

"Deal." He extended his hand, long fingered and strong. She shook it.

"Okay, first things first. What do I call you?"

He smiled again, but there was sorrow in his eyes, old and powerful. "You may call me Mr. Adamson."

DEATH REMEMBERS

By Brynn MacNab

The bartender gestured toward Death's empty glass. "Another one?"

"No. Just about time for me to be going." Most people never even noticed Death, at least not until he came for them. Maybe there was a special dispensation for bartenders. This one had mentioned his name on several occasions, but Death couldn't be bothered with details like that.

"Is it the guy?" the unnamed bartender asked.

The guy. Jonas Holbrook. His fat face flashed across Death's memory, as crisply detailed as if it was happening again, right now, the shock and fumbled apology, the grabbing of his clothes, the fleeing past a man paralyzed in the moment of betrayal, a man unable to do what he should have done to his rival right then and there.

"Probably not." Death stood. "But it will be sometime." The full flask stowed in one inside pocket of his leather jacket swung against his emaciated ribs.

Outside, the sun was white and glaring. Death ducked his head and hunched bony shoulders. The filth and noise of the city eddied around him, never quite touching him, sliding away from the cold hole in the world that he was. That power—the cold, the distance—came from the scythe, folded up in his jacket. The fire in his belly, half liquor and half hatred, propelled him. The tugging pressure of a soul awaiting its release told him which way to go.

Someday the pressure would lead him true, and he'd stand over the man who had ruined his life, the face seared into his mind with a clarity that every other memory had long since lost. Jonas Holbrook. A blue-eyed man, soft-featured, gentle. Not a man he would have ever thought

to fear.

Of all the Deaths who could be called, he knew it would be him. It had to be. He'd waited all these years.

Today he walked through wide hospital doors, down a shiny-floored hallway and into a room with a machine that beeped, an antiseptic smell, and a nurse just turning to leave.

He stepped aside as she passed, her features already blurring into sameness. She didn't see him, and he didn't bother to see much of her.

The old woman in the bed looked at him.

"Matthew?"

He opened his mouth to say, *no*.

Yes, said something in the back of his mind.

"Matthew, what are you doing here?"

He pulled the collapsible scythe from inside his jacket and extended the handle. "Ma'am," he said, "your time has come."

Early on, he had started out by softening the news, but any '*I believe*' or '*it seems*' had only begun arguments. He was their Death, not their counselor.

He could see her soul, translucent, beginning to lift up out of her body. He took a good grip on the scythe.

"Matthew." Her soul faded back, nearly re-submerging under her flowered hospital gown. "What are you doing here? And you look so thin."

"I'm Death," he said, gesturing with the scythe.

"Oh." Her face, growing more familiar by the second, creased in disappointment. He hadn't thought about the people he had known. Not for a long time. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought you were my brother Matthew."

That's how I know her. She had been much younger, of course, when he had left them. But it was her. Her name danced just out of his reach.

He shifted, feeling awkward. "No, I guess I am Matthew. Death is more of a title."

Her wrinkles shifted again. Tears welled in her eyes. "Oh, dear," she said, reaching for the nurse's call button. "I think they've given me too much of something."

"No, really. After the crash I was lying there, bleeding, ambulance wailing too far away. But the Death who came to collect me said they had an opening. Somebody had just quit, left them short-handed. I wasn't ready to leave the world."

"We thought you were trying to die. The way you drank after Leah left you..."

Leah. A name—and a person—he'd successfully forgotten. He

grimaced.

His sister peered at him. "You look terrible, Matthew. Don't they give you anything to eat?"

He wished he could remember her name.

"To think you've been watching over us all these years." She smiled, laying her head back against the pillow. "The priest thought you might have gone to hell. He said the way you died looked very bad for you. But I knew you were our guardian angel."

He felt himself flush with embarrassment for the first time in decades. "Well...not exactly. I've been waiting for Jonas."

"Jonas?" She frowned. "I don't remember any of *our* family named Jonas. Was he a good friend of yours?"

"The opposite."

But she wasn't listening. Her eyes began to mist again, in that annoying way old people sometimes had. "Do you remember the summer we spent at Aunt Julie's farm? I'll never forget jumping into that lake after a long hot day. Or the smell of the hay in the morning."

"I've forgotten both of those," Death said quietly.

"Well, that's all right. What about the reception at your wedding, when Grandma danced with the minister? Remember how she laughed?"

"No."

She shot him a glance. "All right, you do one." When he was silent, she prompted, "Go on. We only have a few moments left before I have to die, as well you know. And I'm hooked up to wires and I hurt all the time, and you're dead. We may as well enjoy reminiscing. It's all we've got left, isn't it? What about the Christmas you and Leah spent at our house? I think you saw my Nadine's first steps."

"I don't remember that, either. I forgot that you had a child. I don't even remember your name."

She pursed her lips.

"It's not my fault. I'm Death now."

"Huh."

"Don't say, 'Huh.' It's true."

She fumbled around and found the remote for the bed, then slowly raised the head to put herself in a sitting position. "All I can say is, I hope this Jonas has been worth it."

"Jonas Holbrook," he said. "You remember. The man Leah left me for." Maybe Matthew should have shot him, instead of drinking himself to his death on a roadside and then waiting around so long. *Is he worth it?*

"Oh, *him*. Isn't he dead yet? I thought I outlived everybody. But I did lose touch with Leah."

Has he been worth it?

“My name, by the way, is Margaret. And you should have remembered that, and you should remember it in the future.”

He put his hand against the flask in his pocket. He needed another drink, or several. He’d forget her name by nightfall. He’d forget this had ever happened. He’d remember that he had to wait for Jonas.

“All right, I’m going,” she said fretfully. “You should go with me, you know. I bet the rest of the family is waiting.”

With that she closed her eyes, folded her hands over her stomach, and resolutely waited.

He stared at her. *Stubborn Margaret*, he remembered someone saying. His mother, had it been?

Sure enough, after a moment her soul began to float up out of her. He remembered himself, his job. She floated above her body, watching him from transparent and much younger features. Tethered at the toes. He lifted his scythe, and cut her free.

Another coldness came into the room, like the chill he borrowed from his scythe but deeper, and stretching farther away. He could feel it, behind her soul, drawing her. For an instant she hesitated, looking toward him. She lifted a hand as if she’d reach for him. Then she smiled, and turned.

I hope he’s been worth it.

He hasn’t, Death answered. He leaned his scythe against the hospital room wall, and stepped up into the air, into the cold place as it closed.