



**WE CHALLENGED CONTESTANTS TO WRITE STORIES
IN WHICH THE CONCEPT OF “SPACE”, EITHER AS A
NOUN OR A VERB, PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE.
“SPACE” COULD BE INTERPRETED
METAPHORICALLY, TOO...**

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FIRST PLACE

Mark writes in England where he gets his inspiration from the wind and the rain. He has many other stories, some of them published. He is currently working on a novel.

Valentine's Dilemma

by Mark Bilborough

Rena looked out over the devastation. Below her, East London's streets burned again, a pungent mix of fire and decay, threatening to overwhelm the dome's sensitive recycling systems.

Back in the old days she'd have put this down to plain and simple racial tension. She'd only just started her semi-regular visits to the area when the riots reached their heights, when whole rows of properties were firebombed. But that was a long time ago, before the weather got so bad that people had to start hiding underneath vast protective bubbles, safely watching in stunned amazement as the storms outside got ever more apocalyptic.

No, not race riots. This wasn't as focused as that, more an animal expression of frustration rather than fighting for a cause. The militia station had been the key target, which was just plain stupid. The response had been predictable: swift and brutal. The remaining rioters had then spent their time picking off easier targets—mainly each other.

Her companion turned to her. "This must be what the end of the world looks like."

Rena's crimson overalls were getting soot-blackened. She looked over at Valentine's still immaculate powder blue tunic and wondered how he did it.

“That’s a curious sentiment coming from you, Valentine. I thought you diagnostics took a slightly more measured view of events. I can fairly confidently say the end of the world is not yet nigh. Just a bit closer than yesterday.”

They were standing on the roof of a tall building overlooking what used to be the East London Mosque, now the nerve center of the dome’s local government and militia. The rioters had attempted to overwhelm the building’s force shield with a sustained beam attack, probably using weapons they’d put together on their kitchen tables. She could see some of them next to a scattering of blackened corpses. A couple of medium sized craters suggested someone had found something a lot more powerful to throw at the building, but the shield had held. That was predictable. Valentine was a diagnostic analyst. His job was to work out why the riot had happened. Rena’s job, though, was to work out what might happen next.

Rena shivered. “Can we get back now?”

“With pleasure.”

*

Rena and Valentine went straight to the coffee bar in the basement. Valentine winced as he took his first sip. “Don’t know why I still drink this stuff. Never been the same since they started growing it in a cavern under Kew Gardens.”

Rena looked at him closely. He was more nervous than usual, clearly dying to tell her something. “Something on your mind?”

Valentine shuffled in his seat and pulled at his ear. Rena had worked with him long enough to know that meant trouble. He took another sip. “Um, nothing. Probably. Look—you doing anything tonight?”

“You asking me out?”

Valentine gave a look which suggested the thought had never occurred to him. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but no. I just want to take you to meet some people. A few things have happened that I need to get straight in my head.”

“And I can help?”

“Let’s just say I’ve learned to trust your judgment.”

*

Rena was intrigued. Valentine dropped by her desk at seven o’clock and guided her out of the building. Twenty minutes later they were in a dingy Victorian bar near London Bridge. They were very close to the outer perimeter of the Westminster dome and she found the distorting effect of the bubble at such close quarters unsettling.

Two men watched them from the other side of the bar, trying to look inconspicuous but failing badly. “Your friends don’t seem very sure of us, Valentine.”

“It’s not me they’re not sure about.” Valentine strode off, returning a couple of minutes later and gesturing that they should move to a side room. The two people they’d seen at the bar were already there, together with a scruffily dressed woman with bright red hair.

“You sure about this, Valentine? We don’t want any trouble,” the shorter of the two men said. He was thickset, unhealthy looking.

“I’m vouching for her, aren’t I? Rena, this is Evans.” He pointed to the man who had spoken. “And this is Price.”

They sat down. The woman spoke first. Rena noted no one had introduced her. “You’re with Valentine? Didn’t figure someone like you’d be his type. Too soft.”

Rena’s eyes narrowed.

“Well actually I’m an...”

“...old friend from college who used to get me to do outrageous things,” Valentine interrupted “Still does.”

Clearly they were undercover. Rena looked at the woman with growing curiosity. Something about her looked very familiar.

Despite her initial directness, the women orchestrated the conversation along slow, casual lines until, clearly having come to a decision, she leaned forward and abruptly changed the subject. "Tomorrow night, pub we were in last week, same time."

She pushed back on her chair, stood up and left. Evans and Price looked at each other, shrugged and followed, leaving Rena and Valentine alone.

"Valentine, was that who I think it was?"

He nodded. "Keris Edge. Thinks she can disguise herself with all that hair but she only has to open her mouth and she gives herself away."

"The urban terrorist Keris Edge?"

"The very same."

Rena sipped her beer quietly, taking it all in. "Then you're an urban terrorist too?"

"Do I look like an urban terrorist to you?"

"How would I know? Evans and Price looked like accountants. Talk."

And he did, in a roundabout way. But first they took a stroll along the South Bank, the Northern side of the Thames opposite them glowing gently with its subdued evening lighting. The air was, as always, calm and still and the ambient evening-controlled temperature ensured the embankment walkway was full. The crowd meant that the audio surveillance hookups would have difficulty making out what they were saying. Nevertheless, they kept their voices down.

"I came across her at a dinner party a couple of months ago. I recognized her straight away. She really does believe what she says, you know. That we're all going straight to hell."

“Lots of people believe that, Valentine. But most of them don’t circulate a seditious underground newspaper.”

He nodded. “But where she differs from all those people rioting in East London today is that she actually thinks our destiny is still in our hands. That we can do something about it.”

“You’ve read it?”

“If you want to understand what’s going on you have to ask questions and read some things the authorities might not like people looking at. Doesn’t mean I have to agree with what’s written.”

“But you do, though, don’t you?”

He nodded. “Some of it, yes. The bits about how we’re all got our heads in the sand, pretending it’s all business as usual.”

“We prevail. We always do.”

At that point they were passing the Tate Modern, brightly lit and very much open.

“It’s easy to think that if you live and work in the Westminster Dome. Apart from the sky this place has hardly changed in decades. We’re still got bars, restaurants, parks, museums and theatres. We can still go for a stroll at night and we can catch fish in the Thames. We’re insulated from the nasty stuff outside.”

Rena recalled that you never used to be able to catch fish in the Thames, back when it was a proper river flowing in from the outside. This walk always disturbed her, passing the site of Shakespeare’s replica Globe Theatre before heading on to the Royal Festival Hall and the Ferris wheel outside the magnificent granite City Hall complex. The timeless permanence of this walkway contrasted sharply with her knowledge of the world outside. And the bomb crater across the river where Portcullis House used to be always brought her back to reality.

“But Keris doesn’t think like that,” he went on. “She’s got a much clearer perspective. She grew up in the Central Manchester dome. Was there right up until it collapsed.”

“So, excellent source material for a diagnostic analyst like you.”

“Exactly. I can learn more in one conversation with Keris than I can do in weeks talking to half dead rioters in East London.”

“You’ve slept with her, haven’t you?”

“Not the point.”

“But it explains why she wasn’t too keen to make friends with me back there.”

“Don’t get paranoid or take it personally. I should have realized she’d be spooked by anyone she hadn’t personally vetted.”

“How did she get here? I thought we’d completely cut Manchester off before the end.”

No one quite knew what had happened in the Central Manchester dome, only that it wasn’t very pleasant. Rena realized Valentine would have been so intrigued by the prospect of talking to a survivor of that disaster that he would have completely disregarded the thought that there might be consequences of hanging out with a known and very wanted criminal.

“She survived in a sealed bomb shelter under militia HQ just before the final firestorm. She’d been one of the first to be arrested when the rioting started—any later and they’d just have shot her—and she was locked up in a holding cell in the basement when they sealed the floor.”

“Rioting?”

“Claims she tried to stop it. Actually I believe her. After the smoke cleared and the rescue teams arrived from the neighboring domes she was brought down here for questioning. They let her go when it became clear she wasn’t really any part of what was going on.”

“So what did happen?”

“Official report says a spontaneous dome breach let in a firestorm. But my best guess is a bomb. A big one. The dome ruptured in three places around the western edge and Keris’ theory is that someone deliberately tried to tear the thing down. But before that all sorts of unpleasant stuff happened.

“Keris told me things had started to break down badly, coming to the end of their natural life. We hadn’t got as far as we have now with hydroponics and underground farming when we put that dome together and Keris says the food began to run out. Then the temperature regulators started to fail. Keris told me the air got pretty stale by the end.”

“So, classic end of the world riot.”

“Something like that. Which is why I got so spooked in East London.”

“And why you should know that we’ve got a long way to go yet. We’ve still got food, the air’s still fresh and clean and providing you don’t go around attacking militia stations life can be pretty good.”

“Yes but it’s not, is it? Ever so gradually, we’re contracting in on ourselves. Fifty years ago there used to be sixty million people in this country, all arguing about whether global warming was real and driving their huge carbon-powered cars. Now there are fewer than a million, all penned into these perspex prisons. Thanks to the war we have a police state telling us what to think and what to do. Our work is assigned to us, our food is provided for us and our opinions are completely disregarded. You’re the predictive analyst. You tell me which way things are going.”

Rena shivered. “You know we need some discipline at the moment. Things were falling apart.”

“Well self-interest was certainly destroying the planet. Trouble is, I’m not sure whether it was the self-interest of people trying to put petrol in their tanks or of politicians trying to justify their fancy positions.”

They reached Westminster Bridge. On the other side of the river they could see the new Parliament building, more or less a replica of the one which was destroyed

during the war, but with added gun turrets and an impenetrable security fence. Parliament only met twice a year these days, once for the King to open it and once for the MPs to sign everything off. Not that there was any real pretense at democracy any more. But still the building was majestic, a reminder that what was destroyed could be rebuilt, bigger and shinier than before. She was in no mood for Valentine's cynicism.

"Why did you bring me along tonight?"

They were halfway across the bridge before he answered. "Because I'm not quite as sure of things as you might think. I see bad things happening all around us and I dig down into the causes of those tragedies. And it's not hard to find them. A diagnostic analyst is basically a historian so I've seen this sort of thing many times before. It was easy for the authorities to justify this sort of suppression immediately after the war, but that doesn't make it right."

Rena was about to say that you could get in trouble for thinking thoughts like that but decided that would just make his point. "So you're saying politics is to blame?"

"Not entirely. Greed, ignorance and over consumption had something to do with it as well. Plus an absolute myopic refusal to admit anything was wrong until it was too late. And now we have to make the best of it."

"Do you really think that?"

"About the past? Absolutely. About the future? I'm less sure. Keris has lived through the kind of destruction it seems we're all headed for but she's got this insane belief that we'll all be okay somehow. If only we'd all wake up."

"So you wanted me for a second opinion?"

"Something like that."

"Well my opinion is that you should forget about the exotic Keris Edge and get back to work."

"I *am* working. There are reasons why we've got to the point we're at and I need to understand them before I make my decision."

“I understand you’re not making much sense. Valentine, you’re not going to do something stupid, are you?”

“That’s what I’m very much trying to avoid.”

*

She wasn’t surprised to see Keris Edge lounging on a sofa in her apartment, beer in one hand, cigarette in the other. She wondered if she was more bothered by the breaking and entering or the narcotics violation. Neither, she concluded as she silently got a beer for herself from the refrigerator.

“So, Valentine’s new girlfriend is the famous Rena Lalgı, master predictor.”

“And Valentine’s old girlfriend is the infamous Keris Edge, terrorist agitator. Not that I’m Valentine’s new girlfriend.”

“And not that I’m a terrorist agitator. Cheers.”

Rena sat down in an armchair and looked her up and down. Without the wig she was actually quite pretty. Even relaxed she was much more alive than most of the people Rena normally met. She could see what had attracted Valentine.

“I’m surprised you managed to track me down so easily, or so quickly.”

“In my line it pays to be ahead of the game. You weren’t difficult to find.”

“Does Valentine know you’re here?”

Keris shook her head. “To tell you the truth, I half expected him to walk through the door with you. Where’d you meet him, anyway? You got him under surveillance or something?”

Rena realized that Keris had no idea who Valentine was.

“Heard he’d been keeping some unsavory company. Figured I’d check out who.”

“Well here I am. Truth is, I’ve wanted to meet you for a while. “

“Me?” Rena looked startled.

“Yeah, I’m intrigued. You’re the best predictor in the Bureau, get it right ninety nine times out of a hundred. You’re a legend. And yet everyone around here thinks we’re all on borrowed time. I don’t. And you don’t either, otherwise you’d never be able to do your job.”

“I could have you arrested for breaking in here. Especially given who you are.”

“Yes but you won’t. And that’s interesting as well, isn’t it?” Keris walked over to the refrigerator and brought over two more beers.

“Keris, I’m not just a predictive analyst, I’m also an optimist. There is never any one inevitable course of action. There are too many uncertainties for that.”

Keris dismissed that. “A 99% success rate tells me you don’t believe that.”

“It’s only 94%, actually. But broadly you’re right.” Rena knew she shouldn’t be talking to Keris about this, that what she said would inevitably end up on the streets as propaganda, but right then she didn’t care. “The human race has been around for a long time. We’re good at surviving.”

“Tell that to the people in the Manchester dome.”

“You survived, didn’t you?” Rena knew that was the wrong thing to say as soon as she said it. They drank in silence for a while.

“Yes, well plenty of people I knew didn’t. But I get your point. And what’s more, I agree with it. Oh sure the Manchester dome may have failed, but this one’s looking in pretty good shape. Sure the atmosphere outside’s beginning to get a bit grim, but so long as we’re tucked up tight, we’ll be okay.”

“So why have you been kicking up such a fuss then? Why don’t you just carry out your assigned job and keep smiling like the rest of us?”

“Well partly it’s because my assigned job is boring and pointless and designed to keep me just tired enough not to cause any trouble. And partly because I don’t believe our survival is anything like inevitable.”

Rena laughed. “So you want to save us by destroying us?”

“You got it. As long as we’re controlled by the urban militia we’re just passing the time until everything finally falls apart.”

Rena took another swig. “It won’t make any difference you know.”

“The newspaper? Probably not, though it’s worked in the past. Poland, last century, for instance.”

“Valentine would be impressed. You know your history. But the Solidarity movement was going with the revolutionary grain and things had already started to soften in eastern Europe. Communism would have fallen anyway. Those regimes collapse under their own weight eventually. They decay inside and normal life resumes. Entropy.”

“Entropy?”

“Long term everything smooths out in very predictable patterns. As a race we’re aggressive, curious, bloody minded, fundamentally moral but quite selfish. It’s not hard to predict how things are going to turn out when you slosh all that into the mix.”

“Can you predict whether we’re going to have another beer then?”

“You can’t be precise short term without knowing all the variables,” Rena said, walking to the fridge. “But that was an easy one.”

*

Rena didn’t notice the crowd standing on the street corner until she bumped into a man so hard he spilled his latte. Rena looked up to apologize but the man had barely noticed. He was looking up at the sky.

“What the hell is that?”

Latte man took a sip of what remained of his coffee.

“Looks like a man on a rope to me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Abseiling. From the roof of the dome.”

Rena was astounded. “Why?”

“I have absolutely no idea. Impressive, though.”

If she peered hard, Rena could almost make out the man’s face. The dome was about 500 meters high, more or less. Somehow the abseiler had managed to get up there and attach his ropes. The dome was made out of some super thick, super strong perspex, sheathed on both sides with a viscous membrane which made it very difficult to cling on to. Yet there he was, preparing to descend. He was directly above the middle of the dome.

He was wearing a superhero costume, the traditional uniform of protest. As he slid gracefully down the rope his cape was caught in the wind and made it look briefly as if he was flying. Then, suddenly, a gunshot cracked and he stopped, abruptly, hanging in the air like a puppet.

The crowd sighed in unison, then started to break up.

“Shame,” Rena ventured.

“Damndest thing I ever saw,” added latte man.

Rena was appalled that the man had been shot. But the whole incident had left her enervated. Impossible feats and daring courage were the sort of things the regime was supposed to suppress, so seeing something so spectacular on the way to work was just a hint that Keris’ time might have come after all. She hoped so.

*

Valentine looked gloomy as Rena entered the office. He was staring at a copy of their report on the East London riot.

“The boss didn’t like it?” He tossed the paper to Rena, covered in red ink. She read it quickly. “But that’s...”

“Not what happened. Right,” he said.

“No, more to the point, it’s not what I said would happen,” she replied. “I said the riots would keep happening until the dome’s air circulation system was upgraded. And I said it was vital that we overhaul the militia’s approach to policing there. I can’t believe they needed to shoot those rioters.”

“Shot with their own weapons, apparently. Temporary madness, caused by something in the water. All sorted now. Business as usual.”

“But that’s...”

“Dangerous nonsense? Sure. So I asked the boss about it. Apparently we don’t get the bigger picture. He thinks that if we tell the Cabinet this was all about overzealous policing and penny pinching maintenance they’re more likely to shout at the people who gave them the bad news than they are to sort out the problems, because that would be easier.”

“That’s never happened to me before.” Rena was fuming.

“You’ve never openly criticized the regime before, though.”

She’d written her report after Keris had left her apartment, emailing it early in the morning. Had she never submitted a report with a political edge before? “So they want me to stick to nice safe predictions. Keep clear of anything controversial.” What was happening to her? Keris must have shaken her more than she’d realized. She’d been trained to couch her predictions in a politically neutral way, to convey the sense of the inevitable and to edit out any sense of blame or responsibility. Why had she forgotten her instincts? But there was something else. “Valentine, last night?”

“Yes?”

“You were about to tell me something. About a choice you had to make.”

Valentine grabbed his jacket. "Let's walk."

*

Valentine led them to the southwestern edge of the dome. Rena could see the old Chelsea Bridge lying, battered, beyond the perimeter. "I was born over there, in the old Chelsea hospital. Not much left now." He looked sheepish. "Nothing here for me anymore. Time to move on, don't you think?"

Rena looked at him. He was carrying himself differently, as though he had new purpose. He went on. "I've been offered a place on the third Explorer mission. The third escape craft."

Suddenly Rena knew what he wanted from Keris. And from her. He wanted them to talk him out of it.

"It's all hopeless," he continued. "And the authorities are in denial. You saw that today. The East London dome is finished. And after that, where next? How long before the riots start here too?"

"That's not going to happen, Valentine."

"Is that a prediction?"

She ignored the question. "Which mission is it?"

"Third ship's going to 51 Pegasus."

She frowned. "Do you know what you're going to find when you wake up—if you wake up—in a hundred years? A planet that's slightly too close to its sun to be comfortable, full of active volcanoes and violent weather events. You should feel right at home."

"At least I'll be free."

"Will you? Free to do what, exactly?"

“Free to expand. Free to grow. Free from this sense of defeatism everyone round here seems to have.”

Rena looked round at the devastation beyond the barrier. It had a grey infectiousness about it, an encroaching sense of dread and foreboding. She could see why people clustered in the middle of the domes, away from the ominous portents at the edge. It was a vision of hell, and a reminder that damnation was just around the corner. If you believed in the inevitable onrushing of the night, she reminded herself.

“Valentine, you trust me, don’t you? And you know I’m usually right about the way things are going to turn out. Well I agree with Keris. We’re too resilient for all this. It’s our job to keep things together until it gets better. And it will.”

“In our lifetimes?”

“It doesn’t matter when it happens. It just matters that it’s going to.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then we aren’t the stubborn, cussed survivors I think we are. The trouble with you, Valentine, is that your predictions are all wrong. You’re so used to looking at things after the event that you see potential disaster in everything. You see a bomb, you predict an explosion. You see disaster happening in one badly built dome the other side of London, you predict it’s going to happen here. It’s no wonder you’re a pessimist.” They began to walk back along the embankment. “When do you have to make your decision?”

“Next week. Ship leaves the week after.”

“I can’t believe you’re even contemplating this. You get travel sick on the top floor of the bus, so how you’ll cope with 50 light years is a complete mystery.”

“I’ll be asleep, don’t forget.”

“You’d better hope so.”

*

They met later that evening in a pub round the corner from Blackfriars Station, another old Victorian with low ceilings and oak panels and real, working gas lanterns. Valentine hadn't argued when Rena insisted on coming. Rena hadn't told him about Keris' visit. Keris embraced her warmly.

"Something I missed?"

"Later, Valentine," said Keris. "Let's just say she's more than welcome here."

Evans and Price showed up, with beers. The bar was crowded, but they managed to squeeze in to a table. Over the next two hours Keris sketched out her plan, which, basically, was to break in to the TV station and replace the usual programming with some alternative footage of their own. Rena knew that Keris probably had the skills to do that remotely, but where was the dramatic flair in that?

The next day was a Saturday and Rena got up late. If things had gone according to plan there should be something on the TV and that something should be Keris. Rena scratched her head as she shuffled into the kitchen for some coffee. The TV was showing the usual stuff. Perhaps she was early. She checked her watch. Actually, she was late. That meant the plan hadn't worked.

It was late afternoon before her phone rang. It was Keris.

"Apparently I get one phone call and you're it."

"You're in jail?"

"Militia station. Bet you didn't predict that one."

"What happened?"

"Later, later. Just get down here, okay?"

*

Keris sat glumly on a hard plastic chair in a holding cell, hands cuffed. She clearly hadn't slept.

“You okay?”

“Been better. Good to see you, though.”

“Want to talk about it?”

Keris’ cockiness had evaporated. “Militia bashed the door in about two o’clock.”

“What do they know?”

“Just about everything. They knew about the TV station plot, knew about the newspaper. Didn’t know about you and Valentine, though. That’s why it’s good to see you. Had to be you or Valentine, I figured. Glad it wasn’t you.”

Keris was in line for some public humiliation, and she knew it. Rena dashed from the militia building in a hurry. She had to find Valentine, find out what he’d done. Find out why. It was deep into the evening before she tracked him down, staring out over the ruins of Chelsea Bridge watching the crimson sun sink below the jagged remains of the West London skyline.

“Have you got anything to say for yourself, Valentine?”

Valentine turned. She could see he’d been crying. “I wasn’t entirely straight with you before, Rena. About the escape flight. Didn’t you stop to wonder why they’d offered me a place on the ship?”

Everything had always come so easily to Valentine that she’d simply assumed that that sort of offer was commonplace to him.

“I had to trade, Rena. I had to trade Keris.”

Rena stared at Valentine, too shocked to speak.

“Don’t you see?” he went on. “We have to survive. I have to survive. I have to go.”

“And Keris?”

“I had to choose.”

She looked at him closely for the last time.

“Well I sincerely hope it was worth it.”

She turned away. There was no more to be said.

*

She didn't see him again. Not in the flesh. But she saw the launch on TV. He was back to his old handsome self on the news shots, the old swagger back, the tears gone.

Valentine had cut a better deal with the authorities than he might have. He'd presented Keris as an unwitting dupe in the whole operation, laying most of the blame on Evans and Price. And he'd made it clear that she was to be let off lightly. He was one of the most photogenic of the new astronauts and the authorities badly needed his continued co-operation. So Keris got let off with a stiff fine and a stern warning, providing she could get a responsible citizen to vouch for her. So that's how she ended up at Rena's place.

Two years later they set off on their great expedition. They left the dome in a heavily armored secure vehicle and headed to Portsmouth, to the nuclear submarine still moored there. Rena had official sanction for this trip: she had predicted a need for some first-hand information on what was going on in the rest of the world and had risen sufficiently high in the Bureau to make the whole trip happen. No one in her group had ever piloted a submarine before but they had the manuals and they had the enthusiasm.

And more importantly, they had hope.

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SECOND PLACE

Gita V. Reddy is a multi-genre author who writes fiction for all ages. Her short stories have been published in two volumes: *A Tapestry of Tears* and *The Vigil and Other Stories*. Her other books include a historical fiction, seven books for middle graders, and eleven books for younger readers.

Known for her sensitive portrayal of characters and her culturally rich writing, Gita is always looking to create original work with distinct themes. She is a self-taught writer who is continuously trying to improve her craft. In an earlier life that she voluntarily quit in 2011, she was a bank manager. She lives in India with her husband and son.

Space and Time

By Gita V. Reddy

Pramila cleared away the board games, the toys, the footwear. She changed the cushion covers; the children were in the habit of scrambling up with their footwear on. Every afternoon after lunch, when Shweta had her afternoon nap and Pratap was home, he had the children with him in the bedroom. They spent the hour shrieking and screaming and bringing out one toy after another. Though Pratap asked her to join in, she never could. She would go to the living room to rest for a while but would end up straightening the room.

Pratap was happy that Shweta and Sundeep, or “Sandy” as he preferred to be called, had decided to come back to India and stay with them. He often said, “We’re fortunate that Sandy doesn’t mind living with his in-laws. Most men do. We’ve gained a son.” Shweta had always been Pratap’s favorite. They were alike. Loud and careless, they had always said she fussed too much.

Nikhil was like her. If only it would have been Nikhil, but he was in Australia with his American wife. Pramila worried how Nikhil was managing. He was so particular about everything. Was Carol looking after him? If only he hadn't won a scholarship and left them to earn a doctorate! If only he'd married an Indian girl and lived with them! Living with a daughter-in-law would have been different. No daughter-in-law would have imposed like this.

Shweta had again become a child after coming to live with them. She did not feel the need to look after her children or her husband. She worked from home and spent most of the day in front of the computer. She slept late so she was not to be disturbed in the mornings. Sandy too had his consultancy in the spare room on the first floor. Shweta and Sandy used Shweta's old room, the kids had Nikhil's room, and the guest room was Sandy's office.

The children were constantly messing up the living room and her bedroom.

Was she unnaturally hard? Selfish? She should be happy; unlike most people of their age who lived alone and were lonely, she had her daughter's family with her. Instead she had begun to resent their presence in her house. Whatever natural affection she had for the grandchildren was buried under their unruly behavior, so unlike the orderly way she had made her children behave. The presence of Sandy inhibited her; she couldn't discipline the children or scold Shweta like of old. He was formal, his face hidden behind his thick glasses and French beard. She could never know what he thought and was forever careful not to make him feel unwelcome.

Pratap always said it was big of Sandy to live with his in-laws. He would have enjoyed greater freedom and privacy had he set up a separate home. Pramila didn't think so. It was she who had lost her freedom and privacy. With the parents busy, the children had become her responsibility. She had no privacy, no place she could lie down for a short time unmolested by the clutter and noise.

Many times she tried speaking to Pratap. He wouldn't understand. He was happy to have the grandchildren around. But then what difference did it make to him? He was away from home almost the whole day, busy in the NGO activities. He was home only at mealtimes. Whenever she raised the topic he said, "Look, they have

to first settle down. Once everything falls in a groove, Shweta'll be able to help you. Working from home is a twenty-four hour job. It's not like an office job."

"Why doesn't she take up an office job, put the kids in daycare, like I did."

"She wants to work from home. She can have the kids around."

"But the kids aren't around her. She shuts herself up so that she isn't disturbed. They aren't around you either. Sundeep doesn't want them because clients keep dropping in all through the day. They are around me and they don't settle down to anything. I don't know whether it is the American cereals Shweta insists on feeding them but they're hyperactive. Do you realize I'm not getting any rest? I'm not able to even make a single phone call to a friend because I have to continuously baby watch."

"Look, you always had the regret you couldn't spend enough time with the children when they were younger. Now you have all the time."

"That was different."

"I can't see the difference. They are your daughter's children. Your grandchildren."

"It's no use. I can't make you understand."

"Yes, you can't. Not only me. No one will understand your desire to stay alone."

She was silent. She could not make him see that now when the children were grown up and married, and she had retired from a job she had never much liked after thirty-five years of doing it diligently only for the money it brought the family, she wanted a life of her own. He wouldn't understand. It was too late for that. Perhaps, in the beginning, had she insisted on more help from him or had given up her job when she was bone weary looking after home and work, he would have seen she was a human being. Maybe it was too late to assert herself now.

But it had to be now before it got to be never. She was still active and healthy. God forbid, something happened to her, she wouldn't ever be able to realize her dreams. She was tired of being the eternal provider. It was not merely physical tiredness. It was a fatigue of the heart and the emotions. She had exhausted all her

resources in being the perfect homemaker along with her demanding duties as an employee. She had done it all. She had earned her retirement. Like Pratap, who post-retirement was involved in citizen rights, something he had always wanted to do, so too with her. She had planned to become computer literate after retirement, to paint, to grow roses, to spend time with her sister. Instead she had become a full time maid-cum-ayah. She had known there would be no retirement from the post of homemaker but with only Pratap and herself she had expected to find a lot of time for herself.

One evening, Shweta's friend Juhi dropped in. She came along with her husband, her son, and mother-in-law. While Shweta and Juhi plunged into discussions about the various multinational corporations, their husbands got busy comparing notes about the stock market and the children watched a cartoon channel.

Juhi's mother-in-law, Lalita and Pramila tried to make small talk for a while and then gave up. It was too noisy. After a while Pramila went into the kitchen to prepare tea. Lalita followed. Deftly, like Pramila, she handed out the tea and snacks.

The living room had filled with cigarette smoke and the shrill voices from the TV were a cacophony. It was not possible to sit out in the garden because of the mosquitoes. Pramila took Lalita into her bedroom. She shut out the noise. As usual there were the board games and toys strewn over the rumpled bed.

They had their tea and stayed in the room. They heard the children fighting. One child set up a wail. She wanted to get up but her limbs felt leaden with fatigue. Lalita said, "Let them be. Let their mothers mind them." So she placed a cushion behind her aching back and sat back.

The door opened. It was her granddaughter and Juhi's son. They were both tugging at a doll she had made years ago. Something hot and angry boiled within her. She had taken great pride in displaying the handmade dolls but now most of them were in tatters. She had never allowed Shweta or Nikhil to play with them because they were not toys. She often wondered how Shweta turned a blind eye to the doings of the children. She knew, even if Sundeep did not, that the dolls and the ceramic animals and the pottery were all precious to her.

At first she had remonstrated with the children. Shweta and Sandy had not liked it. They had let her know that denying the children what they wanted would affect their emotional growth. So Pramila watched the ruin of her treasures. She also watched that the tenet of giving the children what they wanted did not apply to Shweta's things. Shweta's cosmetics table and the numerous accessories and Sandy's electronic gadgets were not to be handled by the children. Their rooms was also out of bounds for the children. They were "work areas" and the children were not to play in there.

Lalita said, "Parents only want their children to sing or dance or do something which is evidence of their going to an expensive school. Beyond that, they are free."

That night at dinner, Pramila said, "Shweta, I liked Juhi's mother-in-law very much. We got to know each other quite well."

"I think she was a government officer or something. She's retired now."

"I know. She has a group of friends who're planning to go to Vaishno Devi and other important holy places. They're leaving within a fortnight. She wants me to join the group."

"Ha! She doesn't know you well," said Pratap, "you're not the type to visit temples."

"Of course I am! I never get the time, that's all. I wanted to go before Shweta came, but who would have looked after you? Now that Shweta's here, I don't have to worry. I've already accepted Lalita's offer. At my age I should start taking an interest in spiritual things."

There was silence. Even the children sensed there was something important going on. They too looked at her. She looked back at all of them with guileless eyes. Pratap begun, "I couldn't let you go alone." She assured him she would not be alone. The group would be accompanied by a paid professional who would take care of the travel requirements like bookings and would also be around for any emergency.

Shweta wailed, “I can’t manage.” Pramila assured her that working from home it wouldn’t be difficult.

Sandy said something about a waste of money. A family trip would be cheaper. Pramila laughed. “I will be spending my accumulated pension on something worthwhile.”

The objections gradually died down because of her one answer, “I want to visit these holy places while I can.”

She thanked Lalita again and again for having shown her the only dignified way out of a situation that was turning to be impossible. She decided that later, after returning from the month-long trip, she would join Lalita’s group. They often met for *bhajans* and discourses. She would visit the local Ramakrishna Mission. There was a computer center opposite it. She would find art classes somewhere too. She knew it wouldn’t be difficult. Once she was out of the house often enough, the others would learn to manage without her. She might even begin to enjoy her grandchildren!

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THIRD PLACE

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Stretch Points

by Chris Kelworth

The trouble started at Alpha Seokant, which is the sixth stop on my cargo run from Breilan to Vloag 4. Well, we didn't really have trouble at Seokant, but I need to start there so you'll understand.

"We're at the stretch point, Steve. Stretch Drive is showing all subsystems ready."

That's Cromulent talking. Crom is the AI manager for *Gypsy Night*, a heavy cargo starship. My ship. Not like I own it; Pisces Shipping owns the *Gypsy*, and Crom. The company doesn't own me; I'm a free agent ever since I got my navigator's papers from the guild to fly solo, but Pisces treats me well, and Crom's the coolest AI I've ever worked with.

"Yeah, got it," I said. "Next stop, Briosh Eight."

"Do you need to see the star map? Or your notes?"

"No, that's fine." I've been back and forth on this route almost a hundred times, but Crom knew that better than I did. "Just give me a count of five."

As Cromulent counted down the seconds, I reached out for the electrode contacts—and yes, I know you’ll tell me they’re not necessary. But it’s easier for me to believe I can control a ship’s journey when my hands are touching something that wires directly into the Stretch Drive. Stretch navigation is spooky enough; if something makes it easier psychologically, I’m going to use it.

After “one,” Crom’s voice and the rest of the life support cabin went away. In the hyperstream, I saw the choices the way I usually do, colored tunnels stretching out in front of me. The red tunnel first, oval-shaped; I concentrated on it without even paying attention to the other two next to it. Red oval branched into blue oval and red square, and I followed the oval shape through blue and brown, and then jumped to a grey triangle. That brought us out of the hyper-stream as usual, and I relaxed and reached for the drink dispenser.

“Root beer, I need root beer this time. Crom? Root beer?”

It took me a few seconds to understand that the noise hitting my ears wasn’t just the roar of the air supply or Crom’s voice. Getting used to the sensory overload of slow space is always disorienting, but adding a very loud beeping didn’t help.

“What the hell is that?” I groaned. “Shut it off.”

“I can’t do that, Steve,” Crom said. “We’re under attack, some kind of ambush. Need to stretch again right away. Are you ready to do your thing?”

“Stretch again right away?” I repeated, but could hardly hear my own words over the beeping. And then—the ship was gone again, and there were four shapes in the blackness of the stream: blue square, purple circle, skinny green, and pink oval. After the confusion of the beeping and all, I wasn’t sure which way we needed to go, and my attention drifted to the pink oval. I’d never even noticed there was a pink oval here, and before I knew it the pink was all I could see. That was bad, because it meant we were taking that route through the hyperstream, and I’d left my mental map.

The important thing now was to remember each way I took; I remembered that much from my mentor’s lessons. From the pink oval, I followed a purple blob, a

dark skinny, another pink oval (hoping vainly it would lead us back,) and a green triangle.

Back into slow space, and the beeping was gone, but the lights of the cabin and the roar of the air supply were worse than ever. I reached for the drinks dispenser, and there was the root beer, a big mug of it. I swallowed a few mouthfuls before Crom spoke up again. “Well done, I think. For both of us. Ambush evaded successfully.”

“There, something I have to do,” I said. “Umm... there’s a special Navigator’s Guild thing that comes with me on every ship I guide, right? Not to be opened except in emergency?”

“Of course there is, Steve. The one we only need if we get lost in the hyperstream.” There was a pause as Crom made the deduction. “Oh. I’m so sorry. It was my fault. We would have withstood enemy fire for four point three seconds longer without compromising life support. If I’d just given you a little more time to understand what was happening, you’d have been fine. But—”

“Emergency archives.” I took a deep breath. “Apology accepted, yeah, that’s great, but where are we on those emergency archives now?”

“Right. Activating Guild emergency archives protocol.” The console shifted and revealed a flat grey panel. “Put your left hand on the scanner, palm down.” Crom’s voice sounded a little sterner and less friendly, something that happened to him sometimes when he was interfacing with less flexible systems.

“Sure, okay.” I splayed my fingers across the panel. “Biometric scanner?”

“Affirmative. Analyzing heartbeat—confirming vitality of the licensed guild navigator. Measuring stress levels. For voiceprint analysis, please recite the guild motto.”

That made me jump, and for a moment I was lost in memories—some even from before I’d considered joining the Guild. I’d never been in space until after finishing secondary school, and then for my nineteenth birthday I celebrated on a hyperstream cruise. That was the first time I saw the colors and shapes of the stream, and I talked with the cruise ship navigator about life in the Guild.

“Steve? Please recite the guild motto. I think the archives are going to go on lockdown if you don’t do it soon.”

“Oh, right. In the eternal darkness, we find the light. The light shows us the way.” I’d always wondered why the guild took a voiceprint of me saying that before I even left the college to start my apprentice cruise.

“Guild archives are unlocked.” The panel actually opened up, revealing a round computer module, about as big as an apple.

“So I have to hook that up manually?”

“I guess so.” Crom’s voice was back to his normal tone, but he still didn’t seem too talkative.

I had to stand up to reach an open socket that the memory module would fit into, and then an unfamiliar voice filled the life support cabin. “Guild archives are coming online. Please stand by.”

“Crom? Are you trying something new with the feminine voice? You really don’t need to go to so much trouble with me, man.”

“That’s not me,” Crom insisted. “I mean, yes, it’s my speakers, but not my core systems. The guild archive is an AI all its own.”

“Oh!” That made sense, though I didn’t realize that the guild had AIs that were so compact. So I sat down again and punched up some cupcakes from Crom’s state-of-the-art high tech food dispenser, wondering how long it would take for this new AI to speak up again. The answer to that was just under two minutes. (Which meant I didn’t even have the cupcakes by then.)

“Please state the nature of the navigational emergency.”

“Just a moment,” I said, collecting my thoughts. “Do you have a designation?”

“You can call me Ivy,” she said.

“Okay, it’s nice to meet you, Ivy. I’m Steve McCauley, and I took an unmapped turning in an escape attempt after the ship was attacked by pirates. Hang on a second, Ivy. Crom, are you here too?”

“Yes, of course I’m still online, Steve.”

“How did you send us on that second stretch so quickly? I thought it takes hours for the stretch drive to power up again.”

“We have a one-time emergency power backup, only to be used in case of threats to the ship or the life of the navigator.”

I grabbed the first cupcake as it slid out of the food dispenser and ate half of it in one bite. “Makes sense. Ok, Ivy?”

“Was that a non-Guild AI you were speaking to?”

“Yes, that’s Cromulent, the cargo ship’s manager.”

“I must recommend that all non-Guild AIs are taken offline until we’re prepared to re-engage the Stretch Drive, as a protection against the dissemination of Guild secrets.”

“What?” Back when I was an apprentice, my quadruped mentor, Gemit, had told me never to trust an AI with any information about hyperspace navigation, but...

“No, absolutely not. I trust Cromulent completely. I have an affidavit from Pisces Shipping that they will not access anything I have told or shown him without my express and written consent.”

“Such an affidavit does not provide the Guild with any legal recourse should your employer break their word,” Ivy said. “For a second time I insist that you order it offline as per emergency Navigator protocols.”

Somehow that made the idea a little more real to me. “Crom, can I actually do that?”

“Apparently you can, now that she’s online. She would assume control of life support functions and any other priority ship’s operations that would need

attention during my absence. In fact, if you expressly ordered it so, Ivy can trigger the stretch drive controllers. You wouldn't need to bring me back online until you're back at a Pisces Shipping station and ready to dock."

I nodded, and took a breath. "Ivy, Cromulent will remain online while we work the problem. Proceed."

"Understood." I hadn't quite expected her to comply so quickly. "Do you recall the turnings you took from your last known destination?"

"Yes." I should have noted them down before even starting with the archive, but I hadn't realized it would be this complicated. "Pink oval, purple blob, dark skinny, pink oval, green triangle."

"Please convert those indicators to Guild Standard Notation."

"I'll work on it, but keep them in a note file while I do, okay? And the last known destination was Briosh 8."

"Understood," Ivy said. "I will proceed to analyze the visible stars from our current co-ordinates and search for a match against galactic star charts."

"I can do that more efficiently," Crom insisted. "Ivy, you can begin to search and index your records for unusual trips away from Briosh 8."

Ivy paused. "I will proceed to analyze visible stars..."

I cleared my throat. "Ivy, Cromulent will proceed to analyze the visible stars from our current co-ordinates and will find a match with his star charts. Search your records for all trips away from Briosh 8, especially to infrequent destinations."

"Understood. I will proceed to search the Guild records."

I sighed. "Thank you. Oh, Cromulent? Can you multitask enough to get started on a triple cheese pizza and a chocolate milkshake for me?"

"Coming right up, Steve."

*

It took a while, but between the three of us, we figured out where we stood. I'd landed us near a little red-orange dwarf star that didn't have a name, just a catalog number, seventy light years from anywhere—much too far for Cromulent to get us back before life support supplies ran out without using the stretch drive. And there was only one reference to this catalog number in all of Ivy's records.

It was hundreds of years back, before the Guild was using Standard Notation to keep track of different navigator's routes. Out of the fraction of a percent of people of any species who can perceive the hyperstream at all when using a Stretch Drive, none of us perceive it the same way. When he took me on mentoring trips Gemiti said he was kind of jealous of my "simple" colors and shapes. He mapped the hyperstream through tastes and echoes.

Anyway, the one Guild navigator who'd been here before was named Remmiz—she was a genetically engineered human from a cyanide planet, and her life support had been malfunctioning and giving her less cyanide than she needed, which was why she took a wrong turn. According to Ivy, Remmiz had prayed and then tried a complicated process meant to retrace her steps back to where she'd come from, but by sheer luck had blundered back to Briosh 8, which was actually where she'd meant to go in the first place. She'd been taking the same overall route as me, but backwards, from Vloag 4 to Breilan.

"Excellent," Ivy announced once she'd explained this. "Navigator Remmiz did not give her turnings in Guild Standard Notation, but I have full access to all of her logs and charts, which will be sufficient to map her perceptual schema of chords and volumes into GSN. Then Steve can translate that into his own schema, and we can engage the Stretch Drive to return to Briosh 8, your last known position."

I coughed. "Won't the pirate ship probably still be hanging around near the Briosh 8 stretch point?"

"Most likely," Cromulent agreed. "I lost most of my armor just from the few seconds of our last encounter, and cannot recharge the emergency power system

for the Stretch Drive—that has to be replaced at a Pisces Shipping base. Returning to Briosh 8 is not indicated for the safety of Steve or the ship.”

“There’s one inconsistency in Navigator Remmiz’s charts, attempting to—” Ivy cut herself off with a buzzing sound. “Please restate the counter-indications for returning to Briosh 8?”

So we explained it to her all over again. “Understood. Return to Briosh 8 is not viable; therefore Navigator Remmiz’s route is unusable. Recommend we proceed using the chaos strategy.”

“Okay...” I sat back in my chair and punched for a mug of hot chocolate. “What’s that one?”

“The principle is simple. The navigator takes random turnings on each Stretch, and at each Stretch Point discovered, the AI identify co-ordinates and search for a known safe route. If no route is discovered, the next stretch is again random.”

I turned that one over in my head. “Like we’re a particle of dust on the breeze, trying to land on a road somewhere?”

“Essentially yes.”

“How often does this work?”

“I can’t give precise odds, because in most of the scenarios where it fails, the Guild never knows. We’ve had four ships return using Chaos strategy since it was officially designated a Guild protocol. It was based on similar techniques that three other navigators invented independently.”

“But surely you can estimate the odds,” Cromulent put in. “Based on how many Guild ships have vanished without a trace in a similar period.”

“Correct. I estimate our chances of a safe return as somewhere between two and three percent. It will take longer at each step to verify if we’ve arrived at a known star system, and life support supplies are finite. In taking unmapped routes through hyperspace, the chances of emerging at a stretch point in a dangerous environment become relevant.”

“Right.” I turned to grab the Stretch drive electrodes. “Okay, warm up the drive, Cromulent. We’ll stretch blind in three minutes.”

“No.”

“Uhh—What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said, Steve. I refuse to comply at this time.”

“Are you going to tolerate this?” Ivy shouted. “The emergency protocols are still active. You can order him offline and give me control of the Stretch Drive.”

“Please be quiet, Ivy. I’ll bear that option in mind, but first: Cromulent, could you explain yourself?”

“Yes. I’ve been analyzing your voice, breathing patterns, and when possible your other vital signs ever since we got lost. That’s because of my error-correction subroutines; I wasn’t interpreting your reactions as well as I should have when I engaged the Stretch Drive in emergency mode. That’s why we’re in this mess, so I’m trying to learn better.”

“Okay—and you think you’ve found I’m hiding something?”

“It’s not about deception, Steve. But I think that deep down, you’re unconvinced that this Chaos strategy is really our best chance at this point. Maybe you’ve already got another idea that’s half-formed, and maybe you don’t. But I’d like to ask you; take a little time and try to nurture another idea first, okay? Twenty-four hours, maybe? That’s a bit of your life support, but I think it’s worth taking a chance on something with better odds, for all of us and the ship, than three percent. The first time you stretch blind, you commit us all to the Chaos strategy.”

I chuckled to myself. “Ivy, do you have a counterpoint?”

Ivy said, “Do you seriously believe that you can invent a strategy that the brightest minds of the Guild weren’t able to come up with?”

“How much attention has the Guild paid to our specific situation: that we’re lost, but have one route back to a mapped Stretch Point that we can’t use because it’s

almost certain that a heavily armed pirate is waiting there. Is this a problem which comes up often?”

There was silence throughout the life support cabin for a moment. “I can find one matching situation in my records. The pilot took the risk of following the route he knew. The Guild Black Box with his records was recovered from a Fleet raid on a pirate base.”

“And the Guild never attempted to come up with a better strategy for his situation?”

“I can find no record of it.”

“Thank you, Ivy; that will be all for now.” I sighed. “Any advice on how to proceed next, Crom?”

“Well, you could get some sleep,” he said. “You’ve been awake and stressed for over nineteen hours now.”

I have to say Crom comes up with some good ideas; do you see what I mean?

*

I dreamed about Gemit, about the first time he forced me to navigate through a Stretch that he hadn’t let me observe while he was controlling it, and I took the wrong turn and got us lost. In the dream, Gemit unlocked an AI who had a really deep voice and was constantly playing practical jokes on us and telling really long and rambling stories about artificially intelligent shoes which could walk you home even after you drank so much you passed out. In the end of the dream, we finally landed back on Breilan; there were no people or alien citizens in the spaceport, or the city, just AIs and robots everywhere.

When I woke up, Crom had the locally visible stars on every screen in sight, and I stared at them drowsily for a long time before I said anything.

“Ivy; my mentor told me that if you only change the last choice of an otherwise mapped route through hyperspace, you have a high chance of ending up at a

stretch point within a very short distance of the original destination. Can you confirm this?”

“Officially, this supposition is unverified.”

“Can you search through your records for any such trips and do an analysis of the results?”

“Working.”

“Is this your idea, Steve?” Crom asked.

“It’s a part of it, if it checks out.”

“Great. Do you want banana muffins for breakfast?”

I finished both muffins before Ivy finished her analysis and showed the graph up on the screen. Sure enough, the curve indicated that ninety-eight percent of the time, the destination arrived at was within four light years of the original end for the unaltered route.

“Again, bear in mind that these results are based on incomplete and biased data,” Ivy warned us.

“Well, even if we have to factor in that unknown bias, I think it’s the start of a good strategy,” I said. “How many well-mapped stretch points are within four light years of Briosh 8? Where there’s a known route, all in Guild Standard Notation, that will take us to a Pisces Shipping base or another point where we can reasonably expect competent emergency assistance?”

“There are twenty-seven such stretch points.”

“Then that’s the plan. I use Remmiz’s route to get back to Briosh 8, but change the last step in the stretch to a randomly chosen shape and color. I think that’ll greatly increase our chances of arriving somewhere we’ve got a good route home. If not—then we can still try the Chaos strategy.”

“I see one impediment to implementing this new strategy, Steve,” Ivy said.

“What’s that?”

“I didn’t finish correctly deriving Remmiz’s route in Guild Standard Notation. There’s a point of inconsistency that remains to be resolved.”

I shook my head. “Can you resolve it?” There was no immediate answer. “Remmiz lived six hundred years ago, right? Perhaps some stars have shifted position slightly since then. That can change hyperspace routes unpredictably—”

“Correct. Analyzing Remmiz’s logs and looking for stretches where other navigators have reported unexpected shifts. Please stand by.”

*

So, Ivy and I got the translation done, with ninety nine point six percent confidence, and Crom offered me a cup of warm vanilla milk. “Ready to stretch again?” he said as I sipped.

I shuddered a little. “I dunno. I’m excited about giving this a try, but—but the stakes are really high, you know? What if I can’t take the pressure?”

He was silent as I drank more and more of the milk. “I’m not entirely sure what to say here,” he admitted. “I think it can be good to be nervous, that you can turn it into an advantage, but don’t doubt yourself. You’re a great navigator, and you’ve got this.”

“Easy for you to say,” I muttered, but the pep talk did make me feel a little better. I finished the milk and told him to activate the Stretch Drive on a count of three.

First came a purple oval, good. Then the blue square, which was the point of inconsistency in our translations, so I was glad to see it there. An orange star with six points, the yellow rectangle, and...

Anything but the green oval. The green oval would take us back to Briosh 8 and whoever was waiting there to attack us, but following any other shape should take us to some stretch point where Ivy would have a mapped route out. I picked the red square, and we were back out of the hyperstream.

“Did it work?” I gasped, fumbling around for anything I could drink. “Can you find the Briosh neighborhood signposts?”

“High priority interrupt,” Crom said. “Please stand by.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ivy yelled.

On the screen right ahead of me was an large, ominous red sun.

“Is that getting bigger?” Ivy said. “I mean, are we falling towards it?”

“Yes, but not for long,” Crom’s voice was smooth and cool. “I’m leveling us out into a relatively stable orbit. But we’re inside the corona, and I don’t think I can climb out of it with my remaining armor.”

“Okay, so...” I finally grabbed something wet and poured it down my throat—cold water, but better than nothing. “What’s our next step? If we’re inside the corona—can you see any stars?”

“I’ve got a really good view of one. That’s a red giant down there, K6 or K7 class, so if you’re right that we’re at a mapped stretch point within four light years of Briosh 8, there are only two candidates in my database.”

“This is not the day for us to flip a coin.”

“No, but I’m sure I’ll be able to spot planets and identify the sun based on them. We’ll finish orbiting and come back around to the stretch point in four minutes. Will you be ready to stretch by then?”

“Four minutes?” It sounded crazy, but if Crom was asking, it was because he thought this was our best chance to survive. “What are the two candidate suns?”

“Behemoth Rex and Alpha Arachnis.”

“Ivy, can you give me safe routes for both of them in Guild Standard Notation?”

“Accessing routes.”

“Excellent,” Crom said. “Remaining armor now at eleven percent.”

I pulled up my personal logs and actually found Behemoth Rex—I'd been there with Gemit, on a training cruise years ago. Two stretches to Vloag 4, no trouble—which meant, given our luck today, that's not where we were. "Ivy? Concentrate on Alpha Arachnis. Who puts a constellation called the spider in their sky, anyway?"

"Three super-J-class planets detected," Crom reported. "That rules out Behemoth Rex, which only has 2 gas giants in its system and none are that big, and it's consistent with Alpha Arachnis. I estimate the chances that any other random red giant system we stretched into would match that are approximately half a percent."

"Got it. So we might have some scrap of luck yet. How long until we reach the stretch point again?"

"Two minutes, five seconds."

"Okay... green oval, purple star..." One by one I worked out each part of the route. White skinny, purple square... "Wait a second, what the heck is a K-E-4-D? I've never seen that combination in Guild Standard Notation before."

"It's unusual," Ivy agreed. "But your file indicates that you were trained on the Esova run. There's a K-E-4-D in the very last stretch to Esova, it'll be the second shape in that stretch."

"Right, yeah, I remember there was something weird about that one." It only took seconds to find that page in my logs. "Okay, blue pentagon. And the last is a triangle..."

"Stretch point in fifteen seconds," Crom announced.

"Right. Green oval, purple star, white skinny, blue pentagon, some triangle..."

And we were in the stream again...

The first three were easy to remember and recognize. Green oval, a purple star, and a long skinny white tunnel. I'd nearly forgotten the purple square, but remembered it once I saw it.

A blue pentagon, sure enough. Then—two triangles, one yellow and the other brown.

What the heck? A wrong turn here would be a disaster... The *Gypsy Night* couldn't take much more of the rigors of space. We were already drifting towards the yellow triangle...

So I trusted myself, and let the yellow triangle swallow me.

*

We emerged in deep, dark space, with stars all around. "Okay... if that worked right, there should be a Pisces Company space station not far away," Ivy said.

"Scanning—confirmed," Crom said. "Their beacon identifies them as Chukonee; it used to be a loading point for high-quality iridium ore before the automated asteroid miners made planet-side mining sites unprofitable." He paused. "I've made contact with the AI skeleton crew; they've confirmed that they have repair facilities available, life support supplies, and an ansible communicator online with Vloag 4."

"Thanks, Crom. I guess I'll need to debrief the Guild as soon as possible."

"Yes, that's the indicated protocol," Ivy put in. "Will I be needed for anything else?"

"No, I guess not—but thank you very much."

She paused. "It was my pleasure to fulfill my function."

So I guess that's it. Yes, I've shared Guild secrets with Cromulent; I guess I've been doing that for a while now, and I should have told the Guild about that. But I'm not about to apologize for trusting him.

*

Lancaster, the top-ranking Guild AI who'd been transmitted to Chukonee to debrief me, considered for a long time. "Thank you, Navigator, for your warning of

hostile activity at Briosh 8. This report has been forwarded to the Fleet, and the Guild membership operating in this area have been notified and warned to prepare alternate routings where possible.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“In addition, your suggestions regarding the ‘Last step strategy’ are under advisement. I will recommend its inclusion as a contingency strategy, along with all the information presently available on the risks, indications, and contra-indications.”

“That’s great—but what about Cromulent?”

“In recent years, the Guild has been de-stressing its policy of secrecy from non-Guild ship’s AIs. Still, we never anticipated what you have invested in Cromulent. As much as you trust him, none of us can trust the promise represented by the Pisces Shipping affidavit program.”

“So you’re going to censure me? If I hadn’t trusted Cromulent, left him online when Ivy had repeatedly requested that I turn him off—”

“I am issuing no censure, navigator. Instead, I suggest that this would be an excellent time to renegotiate your business arrangements with Pisces. I can assist you in drawing up an iron-clad non-disclosure contract.”

I grinned. “Do you really think Pisces will sign a new agreement?”

“I’m sure they’re eager to make sure that the Gypsy Night arrives safely with its full cargo. They won’t risk a protracted delay from labor negotiations. Also, the Guild can suggest to their Board that such a contract might lead to profitable joint ventures with the Guild in the future.”

“Thank you very much.”

“No, thank you for your service, Navigator. This is the least we can do.”

So you see, Crom, that’s how we settled things. Pisces Shipping signed off on the non-disclosure agreement this morning. As soon as your armor and other repairs

are finished, we sail for Vloag 4, and then—well, the news of pirates has shaken up all the trade routes. Who knows where we'll go next?

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HONORABLE MENTION

John Burridge writes science fiction, fantasy and horror. He is an active member and current co-chair of The Eugene Wordos, a professional writers' workshop (<http://www.wordos.com>). He has a writer's beard, IT job, and obligatory cats. He lives with his family in Eugene, Oregon. He is probably over-cafeinated. This is his third short story in "On The Premises." You can read more about John at <http://johnburrige.blogspot.com/>.

Dust to Smart Dust

by John Burridge

The entire extended family—even the ones from Sarah-station at Iapetus—wanted to see who would have the final word at Ruth-station: my Grandma Ruth, the high admin; or Grandpa Joe, the man who was running out on her. So we were hosting multiple events. I was the youngest person at Grandpa Joe's ceremony in corridor eight, which suited me fine. It was better than being with some panting, pawing younger son at the singles' party going on in the cargo bay. Mostly.

I reminded myself that old folks like vid-loops of waves sweeping over an endless expanse of sand, and that the one being projected on the corridor's bulkhead was a symbolic representation of voyaging on the oceans of Earth, but it still made me want to check the station's systems for a burst water line. At least the vid-loop made the repetitive expanse of metal and plastic look more interesting.

Mom assigned me the task of inventorying the gifts for Grandpa's final voyage, or I would have watched the group dynamics from a short distance spinward. Instead, I stood in the middle of everything.

We'd slowed the station down to accommodate the older folks, but the weight at the station's rim was still more than one G. I propped up my left arm so I could use my media bracelet to JPEG another voyage gift—a q-RAM card this time—as one of my smelly, older uncles posed with it for me.

I hadn't expected the displays of manliness from the knot of uncles and male cousins clustered around the floor hatch to Grandpa's escape pod. They wore sleeveless undersuits; some of them hadn't seen the inside of a spacesuit in decades. Drumbeats, hand-claps, and men's chanting echoed off the bare walls as they competed to see who could lower the most radiation shield bricks, tanks of water, and electronics through the hatch. In terms of ritual, it was typical man stuff. Grandpa's brother, Grandbro Sam, officiated. He didn't give a damn about family politics or their consequences. He embraced the whole male-mysteries-psychopomp role. I guess if my brother—if I had one—was flying off to become a part of the smart dust computing network accumulating at the sun's heliopause, I'd want some official job to do, too.

It's a men's mystery exactly what they did so Grandpa would survive the trip to the Oort Cloud. Traditionally, only his wife or partnered men are allowed inside an elder's final pod. Presumably they fitted Grandpa's naked body with bio-tech.

In an arc behind me, a gaggle of chatting aunts and older female cousins flitted between tables loaded with bacon seaweed snacks, various melons, deviled eggs, and a fortune in lemonade. Judging by some of the little smiles on their faces, my aunts appreciated all the arm flexing and weight lifting. At least Dad hadn't grunted or anything when he'd presented his ten liters of water.

Dealing with my entire extended family was easier when I thought of them as subjects in a sociology practicum field study. The trick was to look for what they weren't saying. Some of the family saw the final-voyage-ceremony-disguised-as-a-birthday-party as a great excuse for flirting and presenting eligible sons and nubile daughters. But the question nobody wanted to ask out loud was whether my Grandmother Ruth, high admin of Ruth-station, would appear and issue the codes needed to launch Grandpa's escape pod.

The men's chant ended. The last echos of the drums faded and still Grandma had not appeared. Grandpa's menfolk watched Grandbro Sam for what would come next.

Some sensed cracks in Grandma's administration and hoped for an edge in the markets in the Saturn exchange. To my left, my mother's oldest brother's wife, Auntie Lucy, said to my mother, "Martha, if Ruth isn't going to send Joe on his final voyage, you should. His window is closing," she added in a too-smooth voice. This was an exaggeration; the launch could still happen within an hour.

Mom ignored Auntie Lucie. "Mother should be the one launching him," said Mom to her sister, my Aunt Julia.

Grandpa called from below. "I can hear you. The hatch is still open. I'm a big boy, I can launch myself."

Some of the older men traded satisfied-looking smiles. Auntie Lucy smiled, too.

Grandbro Sam stood before the airlock, raised his bare arms, held his hands high, and proclaimed, "Let us clap the rhythm, 'Riding to the Heliopause.'"

He said it majestically, but they'd already performed it twice.

As Grandpa's menfolk began another session of drumming and thigh-slapping, Auntie Lucy tried to bait Aunt Julia with a pointed remark about stock values on the Saturn exchange.

Mom leaned toward me and said, "Pamela, why don't you bring our guests some of our prize-winning oranges?"

I knew it was family double-speak for "See if you can get Grandma out of hydroponics before Grandpa's launch window closes" and a reminder to Auntie Lucy about whose oranges came in second.

"Yes, admin," I said and left the group.

Thanks, Mom, I thought as I approached the base of a station spoke's ladder. I wasn't sure if I should be pleased that Mom thought Grandma would be more

likely to listen to me than anyone else, or annoyed that it would be my fault if Grandma stayed in hiding. I liked to think Mom thought that since I was the youngest daughter, Grandma would only yell at me a little bit.

I climbed. I had to think like a ninety-five year old, not a nineteen year old junior counselor. When I was six, Grandma explained to me, “The oldest daughter becomes the station’s high admin. The second daughter becomes first admin. And third daughters like you become station counselor.” Then she made me study the ancient Egyptian queen, Hatshepsut.

I reached level three. Technically, Grandpa needed launch authorization codes from Grandma before he could go. She wasn’t giving them to him. After kicking him out of their quarters, she acted as if he’d never been on the station. It made her look senile and her administration look in disarray; stations with bad administrations couldn’t command top prices on the Saturn exchange. Already we were seeing a drop in our citrus fruits’ trading value.

The pull of the station’s spin lessened. As I neared level two, the thumps of the visiting cousins’ music became clearer. My older sisters, Amanda and Penny, were hosting a party for the unmarried and kids in cargo bay four. It was an excuse to interview previously-virtual future husbands in real life. I was sure there would be displays of manliness there, too.

I hoped Amanda would jettison Lennie Judyson’s proposal because he was a smug know-it-all; he would make a terrible bro. She might marry him, though; when I was eleven, I watched Amanda’s hormones launch her brains out of the airlock. Penny’s followed when I was thirteen. By then I had been studying England’s Elizabeth I, and I vowed then and there I was never going to fall in love, or at least wait until I was really old, like twenty-seven. I renewed that vow as I climbed past level two.

The party music faded. Grandpa’s next launch window wouldn’t be for another five days, during which we’d be expected to host everyone. During that time, they’d be looking for any evidence of cracks in Grandma’s administration.

Hydroponics was the next level, near the station's rotational axis. The old folks said it was easier on the joints, but the micro-gravity plugged up my sinuses. I still wasn't sure what I'd do or what I'd say to Grandma. I never expected to watch her bring our trading index on the Saturn exchange down. All because of a quarrel with Grandpa. It was as if she never understood the histories she'd made me read. I'd have to figure out if this was a lover's spat or a control issue. Or both.

*

I found her in Hydroponics-1, in the seed lab, sterilizing growing bins at an ultraviolet hood. The lab's a homey place, with white countertops and green cabinets decorated with children's pictures of flowers.

"Hi Gran," I said as I floated closer to her. "Can I help?"

She smiled, but the wrinkles at the corner of her eyes creased, so I knew she was suspicious. And tired.

Mom would have argued with her and tried to boss her, matriarch to matriarch. Aunt Julia would have tried ineffective coaxing. I don't know what Grandpa would have done. So I went direct. "Grandpa's leaving soon. Is there anything you'd like me to do?"

She detached the growing tray from of the hood, clacked its clear plastic lid closed, and placed it in a rack. "So," she breathed. Then she opened a new tray, fixed it to the ultraviolet lamp hood, and turned it on. "You can tell the old goat he can go freeze his balls off in the Oort Cloud," she muttered over the lamp.

The lamp dinged and turned off. I tucked my feet through the floor bars at the work station next to hers, and took the deconned grow tray from her. She got another Earth-new one.

I opened a cabinet, unpacked a bag of kale seeds, inflated it, and snaked in a short open-ended pipette. "I'll tell him that," I said, "if that's the last message you want him to have." I squeezed the bag and blew a few seeds through the pipette and into the tray's sticky growing medium.

“Oh, I’ve got messages for him,” she said, and patted her media bracelet. While she waited for the lamp, she asked, “Did he send you, or did Martha?” The lamp dinged.

“Grandpa’s stubborn,” I said. “Just like his wife.” I put the seeded tray into a rack.

“Huh.” She thrust another deconned grow tray at me. “I see why she sent you.”

I never could fool her. I blew seeds into the new tray. “I was taught by you—and he can’t bring his escape pod up here—so...” I put a little bit of her steel in my voice. “The old goat can go freeze—”

“Stop,” she said. Her shoulders drooped. “Just stop.” The lamp dinged off again, but Gran left the tray in it. “Did he bother to tell you that this was his decision and that he sprang it on me?”

And you kicked him out, I thought. So this was about control and love. I didn’t say anything. I turned toward her. A few questions flew through my head, but I kept them unasked and instead placed my hand over hers.

After a minute she said, “It’s easy for you to be strong. You’ve nothing to lose.” This wasn’t true—if I didn’t get her on corridor eight, Auntie Lucy would see the Ruth-Station’s admins in disarray, our trading index would drop more, and Mom would blame me.

I figured Grandma already knew about our trading values.

“He must have asked you to come with him,” I said.

The steel returned to her voice. “Why do you suppose that?”

“Because he’s an old, romantic IT nerd. Together? With you forever? As part of a smart-dust network? It must be his idea of a Vinge paradise.”

She snorted. “No.” She shook her head. “Not really. The garden recyclers frighten him.”

“Oh.” I checked my bracelet. I was running out of time. If I made this about the station instead of about their relationship I might get her to fulfill her duty. “I told Mom I’d bring oranges back to corridor eight—and it would keep Auntie Lucy and the other station admins from gossiping and damaging our trade index if you came back with me.” I left unsaid that it wouldn’t look as though Grandpa was leaving behind her back if she issued the launch codes.

“If he would just stay here....” Grandma’s voice trailed off. In that moment, she reminded me of an ancient statue of Hatshepsut I’d seen: the lithe queen sat motionless on a simple throne, but one that constrained her nevertheless.

“Pamela, don’t fall in love. But if you do, fall in love with the station—or a woman, not a man.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said. Especially if it means avoiding a future like this, I thought.

She gave me a calculating glance. “There are some ripe oranges in bay four. Go get them and meet me back here.”

She had something planned—I was certain of it—but at least it sounded as if she was going to come with me. I left the comforting enclosure of the lab and zoomed off to bay four in long leap-hops. It wasn’t far, only one bay over.

My sinuses were congesting. Besides the stuffy nose, another reason I don’t spend too much time in hydroponics is that the growing bays seem to press in on me. In the lab it wasn’t so bad, but in growing area, the ways the floors and ceilings obviously curved, and how all the tree trunks poked up out of the growing spheres and pointed at the station’s rotational axis—it was as if everything was leaning over me. The microgravity increased the disorientation.

I found a mesh bag and filled it with five oranges.

When I rushed back into the seed lab, Grandma was waiting.

“Here,” she said, and slipped off her media bracelet. “I loaded this with things for him.” She slipped it over my free hand and it knocked against my smaller, newer bracelet. Then she held out a spray of lemon flowers—a small treasure of white

floral stars; we'd be short on lemons next cycle. "Place this in his hands." Lemon and orange scent pressed against me. "Tell them I am tending the memorials in the recycler's garden. Which will be true."

"But—you're high admin—who?" He still couldn't launch without her codes.

"You." She patted her bracelet on my arm. "I invested my launch codes with you."

In a way, it made weird sense. I wasn't exactly in the admin chain. Grandma kept her high admin control by making me, and not Mom or my older sisters, her proxy. It sent a message about who was still in charge to Mom, Auntie Lucy, and Grandpa.

"Now go," she said. "His launch window's closing."

I held out my hand. The two bracelets gently clicked together on my wrists. "Come with me. Let yourself be his partner."

I'd said too much.

She looked irritated. "Give in, you mean." She still loved him, but she still had to be in control.

"Fine, then," I said. "If that's your choice. I'll tell him he can freeze his balls off—"

"You wouldn't dare." Her face flushed.

"You're the one choosing to hide up here," I said.

"You!" she yelled.

She lunged for her bracelet, but I pulled my hands back. The sudden motion made me lose my footing. Denied, she slapped my face and I tumbled back to the main hatch.

I could have handled that better. I'd been expecting her to vent, and I'd seen her lose her temper before, but never at me.

I caught a grab-bar. "I'm leaving now," I said. "But if you're willing, I'd like to talk more later."

I pushed off for the ladder. It would be a long time before I could smell oranges and lemons without remembering the sting on my cheek.

*

I distracted myself by casting Grandma as Victoria I, Grandpa as Albert, and the rest of the family as Disraeli, Peel, and the English parliament. When I climbed down to corridor eight, all eyes looked at the ladder above me. They were expecting Grandma.

I took a few steps away from the ladder and stopped. There's nothing like the calculating looks of older relatives to give you the jitters. And I was still in high orbit after Grandma's slap.

I took a deep breath. "High Admin Ruth sends her regrets."

Mom clenched her teeth behind her smile. Aunt Julia's poker face slipped a little. Auntie Lucy snorted; there went another market percentage.

"She sent me as her proxy," I continued. I should have said that first. "She is tending the memorials in the recycler's garden and will not be disturbed." I held aloft the flowering lemon branch. "As the high admin's proxy, I am to place this into Grandpa Joe's hands." Inspiration hit. "As a century celebration gift. And I have the launch codes." I showed them Grandma's bracelet.

Grandbro Sam stepped forward from the group of men around the floor's airlock. "But you are not a married man."

Damn, I'd forgotten about Grandbro. I suspected Grandma had not. "But wives are allowed into their husbands' final pods," I said. "And I'm Grandma's proxy."

"That does not make you Joe's wife," Grandbro said. "Give me the gift, and I will place it into my brother's hands."

Behind him, Dad looked to Mom for some sort of cue.

I stepped forward. "With all due respect, Grandbro, this is not Judy-Station, and on Ruth-Station a proxy may not make a proxy."

“Spoken like a high admin,” Grandbro Sam said. But he crossed his arms and glared at me.

“Look,” I said. “Grandpa’s pod needs to launch within...” I looked at my bracelet. “Twenty-five minutes. If High Admin Ruth can make me her proxy, can’t you make me an honorary bro?”

The men behind him murmured.

Grandpa’s voice echoed up from the hatch. “Great Moons of Neptune! I adopt Pamela Ruthsdottir as my son. Now bring her—I mean him—in and let’s get the launch going.”

Grandbro Sam spun around. “Now wait just a minute!” he yelled down the hatch.

“Rhymes. With. ‘Merits,’” Grandpa said in a voice used by older brothers when they taunt younger ones.

The whole corridor froze. The air-handling units murmured above us and the faint sounds of the cargo hold party floated down from the ladder. This was about the fifth time in family history Grandpa had used the phrase to get something from Grandbro. Even *I* had heard the theories of carrots versus ferrets versus parrots.

“You wouldn’t,” Grandbro said.

Grandpa’s voice rose out of the airlock. “Years ago on Mars, Sammie—”

“Stop!” Grandbro Sam waved me over. “Pam, what you are about to see is a mystery.”

He started a hand-clap rhythm which the other men took up. I figured it would be good form to copy them, and once I handed Mom the bag of oranges, I followed as best as I could while still holding the lemon branch.

Grandbro preceded me through the lock. As soon as I was through, I told him, “I promise not tell anyone what I’m about to see.”

Below me, he grunted.

The inside of the pod—an old-style escape pod designed to keep three people in deepfreeze—was cramped with water tanks and radiation shield bricks. The lemons’ aroma fought with the medical smell of alcohol, bleach and blood. Grandbro walked spinward along a narrow passage, past two passenger bays, and toward the front of the pod. Grandpa’s men-folk had filled the unused bays with network transmission hardware and wrapped them in word- and icon-covered graphene ribbons. It was a huge investment of resources, but whoever sent the most out now stood to reap benefits in increased computing power and bandwidth from the computing cloud later.

The pilot’s bay was tilted up. At first I only saw a metal mesh poking up at the top. Then I realized Grandpa’s hair, sparse for as long as I could remember, was gone and the mesh covered his skull. Grandbro stopped at the front the passage, at Grandpa’s feet. I followed so Grandpa could see me easily.

He lay in the pilot’s bay, in the grip of tubes and wires. They didn’t hide enough of his body and I quickly looked at his face. Small clear tubes led to his nostrils and the left corner of his mouth.

“Hey Pammy, so Sam let you in.” He pointed at my cheek with a wire-traced hand. Integrated circuiting had been painted onto his skin. “Looks like you’ve just been speaking with Ruth. Does she have any message for me?”

“I. Uh. Her last words to *me* were ‘You wouldn’t dare.’”

I did my best to look at the spot between Grandpa’s eyes; there was one tube I *really* hadn’t wanted to see. I think it was worse seeing it in front of Grandbro Sam than it would have been alone.

“Hey, Sam,” Grandpa said, “I’m having a private moment with Ruth’s proxy here.”

Brandbro’s hands clenched. “But—”

“Sam,” Grandpa said, “you’ve had your magician-king moment. And I want to thank you for everything you’ve done. Why don’t you lead a ‘Path to Dust’ rhythm?”

“Keep a place for me in the cloud,” Grandbro said.

“You know I will,” Grandpa said.

“Don’t. Touch. Anything,” Grandbro said as he squeezed past me.

I nodded my agreement.

Up above a moment later, a wordless hand-clap and foot-stomp began. Within the pod the sound was deeper.

Grandpa sighed. “That should get us about five minutes.”

I waved the lemon branch. “I’m supposed to put this in your hands. I also have messages for you in her bracelet.”

He held up his hand. “Here. Let me. I’m sure the IC paths they’ve painted on me are dry by now.”

I put everything into his hands.

He placed the bracelet into a reader, where it flashed as the data transferred. Then he rested the flowers on his chest. “Heh,” he said. “Did you know when we started Ruth-Station, your grandmother and I used to call it our lemonade stand?”

We had lemonade on celebrations, but I wasn’t sure what he meant by stand. “Oh,” I said.

“Hmm. No sugar or water, though. These flowers must be her way of saying, ‘Your lemonade’s gonna suck.’ They smell nice, though.”

“She said...” I began. “You...”

He silenced me with a gesture. “She’s right, you know. The recyclers do freak me out. I guess I didn’t realize that until she told you.” He winked, then smiled in a way that was one part mischief, one part smugness, and one part embarrassment.

“How?” I asked, “You spied on us in Hydroponics?”

“Girl, I’ve been sysadmin on this station since before your mother was born. I re-routed the data feed from the back-up security server. So I guess I know what I can do in the Oort Cloud.”

“But—”

“I did ask her to come with me,” he said. “Together forever with her *would* have been a Vinge paradise.”

My ears burned hearing my own words repeated back at me.

“Why can’t you stay?” I asked.

“I’m going to go one way or another,” he said. “This way a part of me will still be useful for at least another hundred years.”

The bracelet went dark; the data transfer was complete.

“You heard her words,” I said, “But maybe not the meaning behind them.” I took a deep breath. “She said she still loves you,” I said. “She wished you would stay. She wishes it so hard she had to kick you out while she had the strength to let you go. She said she has to pretend you’re already gone, and she’s not strong enough to pretend if she came down and saw you off. She’s angry at death, and time, and love. And she needs to learn to deal with her anger instead of taking it out on her family.”

“She didn’t say that,” he whispered.

And, I thought, you didn’t say that meeting the smart dust freaks you out, too, only it does so less than the recycler’s garden.

Aloud I said, “She did.” I picked up the bracelet. “Everything but the last part about anger.” Who could be sure she wasn’t spying on us now like he had? I put the bracelet on my wrist. “Do you have any message you’d like me to tell her?”

A thoughtful look passed over his face. “Yeah.”

I pressed the bracelet’s record sequence.

He pointed with his chin. “I’ve got her picture on the dashboard.” I turned. Grandbro Sam must have been standing in front of it earlier: her picture was attached to the bulkhead between the instrument console and the viewports. In it, a younger version of Grandma wore a long green dress as she stood in the command center, at the high admin’s station. Her hair fell in a long brown and grey-streaked braid over her left shoulder.

Grandpa continued. “I should have left sooner, but I needed to see my brother, kids, and grandkids before I left. And,” he turned from the picture of Grandma to me, “although I regret all the craziness I’ve brought with my decision to go, I’ve never once regretted loving Ruth or the time we’ve spent together.” He turned back to her picture. “I’ve already said everything else.”

I nodded and turned off the bracelet. “I think Grandbro Sam is finishing up,” I said. “Are there any ritual words I need to say?”

“He’s probably already said, ‘The Hero’s Journey begins,’ but you could say it again and he’d take it from there.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Safe journey.”

“I’ll see you from heaven.nasa.gov.” He smiled at his own old-man joke and held up his free hand in the nerdy Vulcan salute he always did.

We’d already said our goodbyes.

I had to enter the authorization codes.

I walked toward the ceiling hatch, Grandma’s bracelet with Grandpa’s words on my wrist.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Jesse says, "I was born in Hamburg and raised in Lübeck, Germany. After stays in the US and France, I moved to Berlin in the early nineties, where I still live with my three children. My stories, as well as my translation of Donald Barthelme's *Sentence*, were published in American, Russian, Indian, German, Swiss, Irish, British and Canadian magazines and anthologies. I hold an MFA in Creative Writing from Sierra Nevada College."

Care, Responsibility, Respect, Knowledge

by Jesse Falzoi

for Tamás Matkó

He was at the second apartment around noon. His first cleaning job had been at a private place on Schönhauser Allee, with a piano, so he'd stayed longer than planned. But there was plenty of time; the new guests weren't coming before three thirty. And the former ones had left the place in a good shape: at least the kitchen/living-room looked immaculate. It was funny really; they paid for cleaning service but felt obliged to do it themselves—these must have wiped the floor even! Karl checked the bathroom: clean and shiny too. He could as well lie down on the sofa, watch TV, doze off a bit.

The fridge was filled to the brim; he took out an unopened packet of eggs, a piece of bacon, orange juice. He put the frying pan on the stove and reached for an egg, absentmindedly gazing at the metal-colored fridge that mirrored a girl who was observing him. He turned around and dropped the egg; she was standing in the doorway to the bedroom, dressed in a Barbie nightgown. "What the fuck?"

She stood there like a statue. Not a girl anymore, he'd say, with these large boobs and the face of a woman. A mongoloid! He said, "What are you doing here?"

She held up her nightgown.

"Holy fuck. Did you wet the bed?" He walked past her, into the bedroom she'd come from, and felt the mattress. "Shit." He pulled down the blanket, the sheets, everything. There was a huge stain; even if he cleaned it with all the soap he had here and turned the mattress around, it would probably smell of urine. He ran to the bathroom to get Chlorox, and the girl was still standing there with her hand pressed to her crotch, but he would deal with it later, now the main thing was the mattress. There was plenty of time, he tried to calm himself down, plenty of time.

He opened the window, poured half of the bottle over the stain, rubbed until his hands hurt. Then he picked up the linen and carried it past the intruder, suppressing the urge to push her nose in, like he'd seen a friend teaching his Labrador puppy a lesson. "See what you've done? Didn't they give you a nappy?"

The girl smiled and then pulled the nightgown over her head. Beneath, she was naked! "Oh my God," Karl said but the girl continued to smile and passed him the crumpled cloth. "Don't," he said, then shrugged, then headed on to stuff everything into the washing machine. The girl followed him to the bathroom and grabbed a wash cloth and climbed into the bathtub.

"Hey," Karl said. "Get out of there."

She turned on the water. He turned it off again. "Listen. I don't know what you're doing here but we need to get you out. What's your name?"

Call the police. Call the police right now! They'll know what to do. But then they'd find out about Airbnb, right? This could get the boss into serious shit. The boss and him, if they came to ask why he'd been cleaning here in the first place. He couldn't risk it. "Did they leave you here? Did mommy forget to take you with her? Or daddy?" What kind of parents would do that, even to a downie? They must have gotten used to her by now.

She turned the water on, drenched the washcloth, and held it up to Karl. “No fucking way,” he said. He ran to the kitchen/living-room and grabbed his cell phone. Why should he deal with it? He was just the fucking cleaner, let the boss do it. The boss didn’t answer. “Answer your fucking phone,” Karl yelled when the mailbox turned on. “I’m in real trouble here. Call me back ASAP, do you understand? Holy shit.” He tossed his cell onto the sofa and returned to the bathroom. The downie was still sitting in the bathtub, holding up the cloth. He’d just read in some news online that one of them was starting a teaching career, they couldn’t be that stupid. “Didn’t they show you how to do it? Hey, really.” He took the washcloth, put soap on it, pressed it into her hand. “Up and down, see?” He showed her the movements on his clothes, but she didn’t get it. She sat there shivering, accusingly pointing the dripping washcloth at him.

“Okay,” he said. “We’ll do it together.” He reached for her hand, pulled the washcloth over it, started with the legs. “What am I doing here? What am I fucking doing here?” He led the cloth over her hips and her stomach. He turned the water off and said, “That’s enough now. Out!”

She stood up, looked at him with her thin arms slung around her shivering body, waited.

He grabbed a huge towel and put it around her. She still didn’t move so he started rubbing her. “It’s a dream,” he said. “This all is just a fucking nightmare, I’ll wake up in a minute and have a good laugh.”

She dropped the towel and walked to the bedroom where she positioned herself next to the chair on which there were clothes, hers obviously. Someone must have put them there, they were neatly folded, washed even, he could smell the softener, fortunately also on the underwear similar to the ones his six-year-old niece wore. “Your parents did a lousy job. It’s what parents do, teach their kids how to get dressed.” He unfolded the undershirt. “You do have a mommy, do you? A daddy? Where are they?”

She raised her arms. If not for her breasts and the face, she could go for six as well. Maybe she was a midget too. Was that even possible? Weren’t both genetic diseases? Fucking unfair, he’d say. He pulled the undershirt down her body,

keeping away as far as possible from her skin, and then reached for the underpants and held them up to her. “Come on. It’s not that difficult.”

She sat down on the chair, dangled her legs. “Halleluiaah,” Karl said. “A dream. Just a fucking dream.” His gaze fixed to a Chagall print—identical to the one his grandmother had in her room at the old age home—he pulled the underpants over her feet, her legs, and when she’d jumped up again, over her hips. “Is that the way you do it at home?” He unfolded the sweater: Paddington Bear sitting on a leather suitcase. And that pathetic note around his neck: *Please look after this bear.*

Karl finished dressing her, tied her shoelaces, led her along the hall. “Listen, I can’t keep you here.” He opened the door. “I’m sorry.” He wanted to pull her out of the apartment but she pressed her back to the wall and it was as if she was glued to it, he couldn’t drag her away. He didn’t use full strength of course, but he clearly signaled to her that he wanted her out, so why the hell wouldn’t she listen?

He closed the door again. There was this chick he was seeing from time to time. Girls do this instinctively. Maternal stuff etc. They liked taking care of others. Because he fucking didn’t. He left the stubborn visitor where she was, called the chick who was visibly irritated and brusquely answered, no, she was at university, couldn’t possibly leave now, what about meeting for a couple of beers next weekend?

He looked at the other girl who had silently slipped into the kitchen/living-room and sat at the table now. “Don’t move! Don’t you fucking move until I figure out what to do.” He sat down next to her, studied her face. “Do you understand me?” He’d thought that they were able to speak. Not in the proper way of course, but they should be able to utter some sounds, shouldn’t they?

“You’re German, aren’t you?” How could she possibly not speak? She didn’t look like those who were totally messed-up. It was just the eyes really, the rest was pretty in a way. Like if she closed them you wouldn’t even notice. “*Svenska?*” He rattled through all the foreign words he knew, observing her closely. When he

came to French, her whole face turned into a smile. “*Comment t’appelle-tu? Moi, je suis Karl. Comme Charles, n’est-ce pas?*”

She started to laugh. How can that be that they suddenly become so happy about nothing? He fetched his cell to Google “Down syndrome”. So it was normal to be tiny, average IQ 50, identifiable during pregnancy. Why the hell didn’t they get rid of her then instead of leaving her in this fucking apartment when it was his fucking turn to clean it? “How old are you?” He held up his hands and said, “I’m thirty-three.” He opened and closed them three times, then held up three fingers. “Thirty-three. What about you?”

She laughed again.

“Didn’t you learn that in kindergarten?” He reached for her wrists, raised her hands, said, “Ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen.” She was still looking at him with that radiant smile, her shining strange eyes, as if he were the magician that mommy had invited to her birthday party. “Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six?” Still no reaction. “Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, hundred?”

The tiny hands suddenly showed a life of their own, she pulled them away and clapped. “A hundred? Nobody gets a hundred, you’d be fucking dead now.” He returned to Wikipedia. Some lost the ability to speak at the age of 30. He looked at her face again. Maybe that’s what happened. But she should at least understand him, it was written here. “What am I supposed to do with you?”

She turned her head. Karl followed her gaze. “You’re hungry?” He reached for the cereal package. “It’s empty. That’s the only thing your parents forgot to buy.” He stood up and opened the fridge. “Listen, I’ll cook us something and afterward I’ll bring you to the police. They’ll find mommy and daddy. They’re experts in finding people.”

But first he had to clean up the egg he’d dropped and he also had to think of making the bed, really, what would the guests say if they came here and first thing they saw was that gigantic stain of piss. It wasn’t anymore, of course, but that’s what comes to your mind when you see a stain on a mattress, right? He turned around. Would she do it again? “Hey,” he said, “Do you need to go to the

bathroom?” Maybe they went more often than normal people, but why wasn’t she wearing diapers then? He took the girl by the hand. “First wee-wee, then din-din.” He laughed out loud. “What the fuck am I saying?”

The girl’s hand was warm and delicate, holding on to him as if he was her fucking daddy. What would she do if he was one of the bad guys? Would she follow him around as well? What if he took her to the bedroom instead? Would she even try to fight him off? There were enough perverts out there, maybe they’d find it extra exciting.

“Come on,” he said, pulling her to the bathroom. He shoved her inside, closed the door from the outside, went back to the kitchen, and finally cleaned up the floor. Then he lit the stove, poured oil into the pan, fried the bacon, cracked the other eggs. When the pan was steaming on the table, he returned to the bathroom. “You’re done?” He waited, then said, “Lunch is ready.” He waited, then carefully opened the door: the girl was standing right behind it. “What’s the matter?” He stepped inside and pointed to the toilet. “Don’t tell me that you don’t know how to do this? What the fuck did they teach you?”

She stepped forward.

“You want me to stay here? All right. But hurry up now. Our food will be cold soon. I hate cold eggs.”

The girl didn’t move.

“Holy shit,” he said, opening the lid. Then he pulled up her skirt, pulled down her underpants, sat her on the toilet seat. “Quick now.” He listened to her pee, unrolled some toilet paper, pressed it into her tiny hand. “Either you do it or we leave that part out.” He waited for a few seconds, then took her off the seat and pulled up her underpants. “They didn’t have toilet paper in the middle ages. You won’t die.”

She followed him to the table and sat down. He filled her plate and then he filled his own plate and said, “Bon appétit.” He greedily shoved the now cold egg into his mouth while she continued watching him. “You don’t like it? You don’t like

eggs? I don't believe it." He took her fork, picked up a bit, held it up to her. "Yummy."

She obediently opened her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. Can that be true? Do you have to feed them? Will they be like that until the day they die? The doctors surely must have warned her parents, how could they do that to themselves voluntarily? He grabbed his plate, sat down next to her, took turns shoving the fork into his or her mouth. When they were done, he reached for a paper napkin and wiped her face. "What about dessert? Let's have a look what's in here."

There was yoghurt and ice-cream. He put both on the table and said, "What would you like?" He opened the yoghurt, she didn't object, he fed her, she finished. "Okay, then I'll take the ice-cream." Her eyes followed his every movement. "You wanna have a try?" This time she opened her mouth double and she opened it again before he'd even had the chance to refill the spoon. "How can such a tiny person eat so much? Where does it go?" He fed her until she leaned back in her chair and he wiped her mouth again and the clock said that they had one hour and a half. He browsed over the last paragraphs on his smartphone: 92% went for an abortion.

"Stay here," he said. "I have to work now." So this was the plan: he would get everything ready, take her to the nearest police station, come back, hand over the key, and charge his boss fucking double. He went to the bedroom and felt the mattress: it was far from dry, but if he turned it around it would do. Most important, that reek of piss had gone. He opened the dresser where the bed linen was stored. It was empty. "Shit. Really, this fucking asshole." He called his boss again, let off steam on the mailbox, browsed through his contacts. Whom could he call for help? What could he say? "Get that downie out of here? Bring fresh blankets? Pinch me, make me wake up from this fucking nightmare?"

There wasn't enough time to take the subway to Alexanderplatz. He couldn't think of any nearer place and wouldn't he hate to spend his last money on fucking sheets? The other apartment, the one where he'd played the piano this morning, they had plenty of linen, a whole antique chest full of it. And the place was ten minutes away.

“All right,” he said to the girl. “You stay here. I’ll soon be back. Don’t touch anything, okay?” He grabbed his coat. “Don’t fucking move.”

The girl stood up and reached for his hand.

“No,” he said.

Again she suddenly developed an incredible force. He wasn’t able to retrieve his hand, at least not without hurting her. “I warn you, we’ll have to run. This is no happy after-school stroll, do you understand?” He dragged her out of the apartment, down the stairs, along Kastanienallee. He pulled his hood over his head and said, “Aren’t you cold?” She was just wearing her short skirt and that pathetic Paddington Bear sweater. He sighed and took off his coat. It was much too big for her, nearly reached her feet, but at least she’d stopped shivering. “Your parents should go to prison for this, really.” He pulled up the zipper and said, “Mommy and daddy are very, very mean. How could they leave you alone?”

Or maybe they didn’t. Maybe something happened to them. But what? Where? In the apartment? Let’s assume, let’s *just* assume that they were murdered, a) wouldn’t there have been at least a trace of a fight? Blood? And b) why would somebody break in and murder them? There was nothing in that place except for furniture and a TV. Which was still there. It made no sense. So they must have left the apartment, maybe to go shopping. And then? Why didn’t they return? People don’t get abducted here. It was their last day, they had to leave, the only possible answer was that they forgot her here, really, how can you forget your fucking child?

He pulled her into the house that he’d left only a couple of hours ago, and how he’d left it, in such good spirits after playing the piano for at least an hour, he hadn’t touched one since he came to Berlin, how could that be anyway, he needed to find somebody with a piano, he didn’t realize how much he was missing it. He pulled her up the stairs and into the apartment and only then did she loosen her iron grip.

“Stay here.” He hurried to the bedroom, opened the chest, reached for two sets of linen, a couple of sheets. There was no bag here, so he went to the kitchen to get

one and when he returned, the girl had disappeared, there was just his coat lying on the floor. “Hey,” he cried out, “where the fuck are you?” He searched in the children’s room first, then in the dining room, then in the living-room and there she was, sitting in front of the piano. “We’re done here. Let’s go.”

She raised her hands and let them fall on the keys with all force.

“Hey!” He tried to lift her from the chair but she’d locked her feet around the legs. “Do you want to have a beating? You’re a nasty child, aren’t you?”

She raised her hands again, only now she didn’t attack the keys, but slowly led her index finger from left to right.

He held her by the wrists and said, “Okay, I’ll show you how it’s done and then we go, all right?”

After a while she untangled her feet and allowed him to lift her. When he sat down on the chair, she climbed onto his lap. “No,” he said, trying to get rid of her but she quickly locked her feet around his own legs now. “You’re really something, aren’t you? Must have driven your parents insane, that’s why they’re not here anymore. Surely they had to be taken to the loony bin.”

He touched the keys. “So what is it you wanna hear?” Wasn’t Mozart good for kids? Something light anyhow, not too depressive, he remembered Wikipedia mentioning a tendency toward depression. No surprise really. He started playing sonata No. 13, which seemed to please the little brat enormously. She swayed back and forth on his lap—arhythmically of course, he had trouble staying in rhythm himself—and started humming—so she was able to produce sounds! Then she put her hands on his and strangely enough he was able to continue playing.

Like a kid she was, really, he felt her warm body, maybe it wasn’t so bad in the end, maybe you get used to anything after a while, maybe you begin to accept the weirdest things, like having a downie who can’t talk and doesn’t even know how to use fucking toilet paper. “That’s Mozart. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Ever heard of him?”

She leaned her head against his chest and sighed.

“You like that, don’t you?” He played the Turkish March next, which made her jump up and down on his lap, then he abruptly stopped and slid from the seat, and this time he’d surprised her, it was too late to lock her feet around anything. He pulled her to the hall, wrapped her up in his coat, and took her back to the apartment, where the clock above the sink was threateningly ticking and the bed was still unmade.

“I’ll tidy up here, you watch TV, all right?” He made her sit down on the sofa and browsed through the channels until he found a cartoon. Then he put the clean sheets on the bed, unloaded the washing machine, cleared the table, noticed a pen, a pen and a notepad. Of course, that’s how they did it: when she wasn’t able to speak anymore they made her write it down. He went to the sofa, sat next to her, put the pen and the notepad on the coffee table. “Look,” he said, “Maybe we won’t have to go to the police after all.” What could they do really? They didn’t have downie experts there. He reached for the pen, wrote down his cell number. “That’s how you can reach me.” Then he gently put the pen between her thumb and index finger. “Now it’s your turn.” He held her hand over the notepad. He waited. Finally he felt a movement. It was clearly her, he wasn’t doing anything. Maybe they had at least thought of that, teach her to remember a fucking cell number, to make her memorize it, so that someone could at least fucking call them. Once he’d run into a little boy at the grocer’s, he was crying, had lost his mother, on Christmas Eve, when everybody thought of shopping like five minutes before closing time, but this boy at least knew his mother’s number, it was amazing really, he rattled it down like a poem. “Let’s call mommy and daddy, okay?” How could he have been so stupid, he’d read that they all went to a normal school nowadays, they were mixed with normal pupils, weren’t they? They taught them how to write, that’s what schools are for, teach them kids to write, doesn’t matter if they’re normal or a downie or have to sit in a fucking wheelchair.

He made his hand light as a feather, closed his eyes, stopped breathing: He felt her hand going up and down, left and right. “Go on. You’re doing fine.” He waited until she stopped moving and then opened his eyes again. She’d drawn the sun. And the moon. And the stars. “I wonder who will pick up if I dial that,” Karl said.

She looked at him. If it weren't for the eyes, really, he wouldn't be able to tell. And it was not that he didn't like them. Fucking honest eyes, he'd say. Like, these eyes wouldn't tell no lie to nobody. A little sad maybe, but with that smile on her face, who knows. He gently pulled the pen out of her right hand, reached for the piece of paper, discovered the word in the upper left corner. It was hardly decipherable but eventually he was sure that it couldn't mean anything but LEYLA. "Is that your name? Leyla? Gosh, that's beautiful. Are you an Arabic princess?" Of course not, with that fair hair. "So what is your father the sheikh paying when I return you? A million? Two million?" She laughed and he said, "Five million euros? Wouldn't that be awesome, Leyla?" He looked her in the eye and smiled. "So that'll be my last cleaning job I assume. Let me finish it properly then."

Without a warning she threw her arms around his neck. He stopped breathing, his heart pounded against his chest. Her arms hung on to his neck, and the only thing he could do was put his arms around her too and they sat there until she decided to let go of him again and when she did, he said, "Right. Let's do that now."

He was cleaning the dishes when the doorbell rang. "Holy shit," he whispered. They were early. No fucking way that they were early. He had to hide her, but where?

Karl turned off the TV, lifted the girl, carried her to the bathroom. "You stay here, don't move. If you move, the monsters will come and they will eat you alive, you understand?" He shut the door, threw a last glance over the place, and then went to the front door and opened it. A woman in her fifties stormed in. A man her age, supposedly her husband, followed suit and behind him, there was a guy of maybe twenty, whose face was the image of guilty conscience. "I'll kill you if something happened to her, you stupid moron!" the man hissed.

"She's here," the woman shouted and the rest of the family joined her and Karl stood in the hall, waiting for them to finally address him, apologize at least, explain to him how all this had been possible, but they didn't even turn around, and neither did the girl who reached for the man's hand, while the other guy was

hugging her, crying like a fucking baby. Eventually they led her out and the woman looked at Karl as if she only now realized his presence. “Who are you?”

“The cleaner.”

She turned around and ran out. The door downstairs fell into the lock with a big bang.

Karl looked around for a few moments as quiet settled around him. Then he went back to the sink, added hot water, and reached for a dirty plate.

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GUEST WRITER

Doree Weller tells stories because if it's fiction, it's not lying. She is morally opposed to matching socks. She can usually be found on her couch, drinking coffee and brainstorming creative ways to kill people... um... characters. Currently she lives in Texas where she listens for things going bump in the night and wonders what's hiding under the bed.

She, along with information about her other published stories, can be found online at <http://www.doreeweller.wordpress.com/>, on Facebook, and Twitter.

Welcome Home

by Doree Weller

When my mom talked to me about taking in foster kids, I loved the idea. I'd always wanted a sister. I envisioned us sharing my favorite books, giggling late at night, playing video games together.

Then Kendra came to stay.

She had her own side of the room, but I felt her invade every inch of my space. I hadn't known how it would feel to see homework on the table that wasn't mine, or shoes in the closet that I'd never wear.

Instead of giggling with me, Kendra looked through me. On the bus, I continued sitting with a girl I knew, while Kendra squeezed in wherever she could. We didn't talk, and barely looked at one another.

*

At school, Laura met me at my locker. "Hey, Angie," she said.

Jared slammed into the locker next to me and I jumped. “Hey, look who it is! Fido and Rover! How are you guys today?”

Tears sprang into my eyes, and I turned away, getting books out of my locker so he wouldn’t see.

“Hey, look who it is!” Laura said back. “Moron boy. We’re great. How are you doing?”

Jared snorted and walked away. Laura put her hand on my shoulder and whispered, “I don’t know why you let him bother you. He doesn’t have two brain cells to rub together.”

It was nice of her to say, but it wasn’t true. Jared was cute and smart and funny. Laura was actually really pretty, and normal sized, not fat like me. So, of course it didn’t bother her.

As we walked down the hall toward class, I heard someone yell, “Hey Ken, where’s Barbie?” I looked up, even though I knew what I’d see. Kendra was walking down the hall, tall and weird, with short hair and clothes that made her look like a boy. She was ahead of us, and her shoulders stiffened a little, but she didn’t give any other sign that she’d heard. She never did, and it was like a game among the other kids to see who would get her to break first.

“She’s so weird,” Laura said.

“My mom keeps offering to buy her nicer clothes, but she says she likes what she has.”

At lunch, Laura and I sat with a few of our friends, while Kendra sat with the other freaks. There was Creepy Cal, always sweaty, hunched over comic books; Willow, a fat girl whose clothes were too tight, and who was always way too nice to everyone; and a few others. As they all chatted, I wondered what they could possibly have to say to one another.

Laura must have seen me staring because she nudged me. “Looking for a date for the dance?”

“Ew, no!” We laughed. A couple of people picked on me, but at least I wasn’t stuck at the freak table.

*

After school, Kendra and I sat on opposite sides of the kitchen table with our homework. Mom gave us cut up apples with peanut butter and glasses of herbal tea. “How was your day, girls?”

“Fine,” I said.

Kendra shrugged. “It’s school.”

Mom went back to work in her home office, and we ate our snack. The only sounds were papers flipping as Kendra read over her assignment, or the pen scratching as she took notes.

I snuck a look at her as she worked, wishing she were someone else. Someone happier, friendlier, not so weird. Unfortunately, we were stuck with her for a while. Mom said Kendra was a long-term stay, which meant that she went to court every six months, but that currently, there was no plan for her to go home.

Kendra looked up and caught me staring. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” I mumbled, and looked back at my math problems.

*

Kendra was polite to my mom, but never said more than a sentence to me at a time. She kept her stuff on her side of the room, and never touched mine, but she was everywhere in my house. She was in my room, she was watching a movie with us in the living room, she was on the counter in my bathroom. The house that had seemed so big when my mom first talked about taking in foster kids now seemed too small.

Kendra had been with us for almost six months when my mom got an emergency call from her social worker, Madeline. When she got off the phone, she stared

into space for a minute, then said, “Madeline is bringing a little girl to stay tonight.” She looked at me. “She doesn’t have anywhere else to go.”

When Madeline arrived, she handed the squirming toddler to my mom. The baby screamed and twisted, her face red and angry. Madeline blew her bangs out of her eyes. “I’m sorry. This is Erica. She’s been like this since I picked her up from the hospital.”

“It’s fine,” Mom said. “We’ll figure it out. Maybe a bath will calm her down. Angie, can you run a bath for her?”

“Sure.” It’s not like I had anything better to do. At least the bathroom was quieter than the living room. I hoped the kid wouldn’t scream all night.

I ran the water warm, making sure it wasn’t too hot, and grabbed some bubbles from under the cabinet.

Mom brought Erica into the bathroom, and she had quieted a little, though tears still ran down her grumpy face. Mom pulled Erica’s T-shirt over her head and made a sound of distress. I turned to look.

Erica’s little body was covered in bruises. Some were purple, and some partly healed to yellow. “Oh,” I said quietly.

Mom’s hands had stilled, but she resumed taking the little girl’s clothes off and started chatting brightly. “And we have ducks that you can play with in the tub. You’ll like it. When we’re done, you can have a snack. Do you like apples?”

The little girl stared at her dully, and didn’t respond.

“I can’t believe someone would do that to a kid,” I said.

Kendra’s voice startled me from the doorway. “Why did you think kids came here? Because their moms didn’t make them cookies? You have no idea.”

I turned to look at her, my eyes wide.

Kendra leaned against the doorway with her upper body, cocky as always. Her face had the same pinched expression it always did. I watched her eyes flicker to Erica. They heated, and a fleeting look of pain crossed her face, but when she met my eyes again, they were hard and cold.

I looked closer. I had the feeling that the Academy Awards had never seen acting as good as hers.

“You have no idea,” she repeated. With one last look at the kid, she turned and flounced away. Three steps later, she ruined her exit and called back, “I’ll slice an apple and peel an orange. Maybe she doesn’t know what she likes.”

“Thank you, Kendra,” Mom said.

“Whatever.”

I watched, frozen, as my mother talked softly to the little girl. I wished I had been the one to offer to get fruit, that I’d known how to be the big sister she needed. Erica stayed silent as my mother pulled her out of the water and wrapped her in a fluffy towel. She stared at me over my mother’s shoulder, and her huge brown eyes seemed older than they should be.

My mother turned around and startled when she saw me watching from the doorway. “Oh, Angie, I didn’t know you were still there. Can you go through the bag Madeline brought? See if there’s any nightclothes or anything in there?”

I rooted through a plastic shopping bag crammed with clothing, and found a stained T-shirt and droopy underwear. When I handed them to her, my mother’s lips tightened, but she didn’t say anything. She continued talking to Erica in that determinedly cheerful voice.

I trailed downstairs after them. Kendra had cut the fruit into small pieces, even halving the orange slices. She’d also poured some apple juice into a small plastic cup. Normally, Kendra retreated to our room in the evenings. But now she was lurking just inside the living room, pretending to read a book.

Mom sat at the table and held Erica in her lap. The child gobbled up the fruit, and then started rubbing her eyes.

“I think she’s tired,” Kendra said. “Where’s she going to sleep?”

“I’ll just keep her with me in my room,” Mom said. “It’s probably only for a night. But maybe I should see if I can get a few baby things, in case this ever happens again.”

“I thought you didn’t want to take little kids,” I said.

Mom was silent for a while, like she was thinking. “I didn’t,” she said finally. “But we were the only ones who had space tonight. I don’t know where she would have gone if I said no.”

Mom put Erica to bed, and Kendra went to our room. I wished my mom weren’t busy so I could talk to someone. I started to text Laura about what I’d seen. I had a text mostly written out. “This little girl got dumped here tonight. Covered in bruises. I felt so sad.” But rereading the message made me feel funny, like I was gossiping, so I deleted it.

Not knowing what else to do, I went to bed.

I didn’t sleep well, and when Mom woke me, I grumbled. “Come on. You don’t want to be late.”

I didn’t care if I was late or not, but Mom would.. So I got up and got ready for school. I just made it to the bus stop.

Kendra stood a little way off from me, staring into space, the way she always did. I sat with a girl I knew. She wanted to talk, but I couldn’t concentrate on what she was saying. My eyes kept going to Kendra. She was staring out the window, and I wondered what she was seeing. Was it the trees going by? Was it her Civics homework? Or was it something from her past, something I couldn’t imagine?

Jared greeted me with his usual “Hey Fido!” at my locker, but I was barely paying attention. All day, I could hardly concentrate, thinking about those bruises, and

how Kendra hadn't been surprised. Weird Kendra had been exactly what the little girl had needed. And I'd just stood there, not knowing what to do.

At lunch, Laura greeted me with, "Did you see what Ken was wearing today? Oh my god... I couldn't believe it."

Something twisted in my stomach, and I didn't know what to say.

"Her T-shirt looks like..."

"She's nice," I said, my voice sounding hoarse. It wasn't quite true, but I didn't know how else to stop Laura from saying whatever nasty thing she was going to say.

Laura looked like I slapped her. Her face flushed, and she looked down at her lunch.

Yesterday, I would have listened to what she said and laughed. But I couldn't do it today, and I couldn't explain why.

I boarded the bus on the way home, heading to my usual seat. Kendra was already on the bus, hunched alone in a seat, making herself as small as possible. Maybe so that no one would bother her. Or maybe just because she didn't feel welcome. Because no one had made her feel welcome.

Without thinking about it, I plopped into the seat beside her. She looked up at me, surprise crossing her face. "Do you think Erica will still be there when we get home?" I asked.

She shrugged and then looked back out the window, as if she didn't care. She wasn't acting the way I thought she would. I thought she'd be glad to have me sit with her, eager to make conversation. But she acted like I was just as much of a stranger as all the other people who sat with her. Maybe I was.

"You were really good with her," I said. "How did you know what to do?"

Kendra turned toward me, her face tight. I didn't think she was going to answer, but then she said, "I have younger brothers and sisters."

I blinked, speechless. “How many? Do you ever get to see them?”

Her face closed off, and she turned away again. I knew she went for visits on Thursdays, but I assumed she was visiting her parents. Now I realized that I didn’t know, hadn’t asked.

We rode the rest of the way home in silence. When Kendra had first arrived, I’d tried to get her involved in the things I liked, and when she wasn’t interested, I’d stopped talking to her. When she started school, and I saw how the other kids treated her, I started avoiding her. I’d never tried to make her feel welcome or get to know what she liked.

I ducked my head to hide my face, even though no one was looking at me. I didn’t know how to make things right with Kendra. Maybe it was too late.

Erica was gone when we got home. Over the next few days, my mom collected baby things from relatives and neighbors, and her small room got cluttered. “Just in case,” she said.

Over the next several months, my mom got a reputation for being having space for anyone, at any hour. We took in babies and teenagers on an emergency basis, and they stayed for a night or two. I did my best to make them all feel welcome.

I sat with Kendra on the bus every day, whether she spoke to me or not. I tried to make her like me. She talked to me more often, but never about anything important.

One day, Laura was out sick, but I headed toward our usual table anyway, intending to sit with my other friends. Kendra came up beside me. “Why don’t you sit with us?” she asked.

At the freak table? I wrinkled my nose automatically, and then tried to pretend I hadn’t. She obviously saw it because she scowled. “Never mind,” she said.

“Why don’t you sit with us, at my table?” I asked, my voice sounding too eager.

She shook her head and walked away. I hesitated, holding my lunch and standing in the middle of the aisle. Other kids stepped around me, but I felt frozen. If I

took several steps forward, and sat at my regular table, nothing would change. I felt like I would lose something if I did that.

If I turned and went the other way, I could sit with Kendra and the freaks. One day at the freak table probably wouldn't kill my social standing, but why risk it?

I had a flash of the bruises on Erica's small body, and Kendra's face. "You have no idea," she'd said.

Suddenly, I wondered what the other freaks' lives were like. Maybe they all had secrets I couldn't imagine. There had to be a reason Willow dressed the way she did. She had to know the other girls called her a "fat slut" and "walrus." It wasn't really a secret. And Creepy Cal... didn't he know that if he just wore an undershirt and didn't bring his comic books to school, life might improve?

But I didn't really believe that, which is why I was standing still. All of the freaks were stuck where they were, and nothing was going to magically turn them into other people.

A girl I knew waved from the table where I normally sat with Laura. I pretended I didn't see her, and went to sit in the empty space beside Kendra. She looked at me, surprised, then flashed me the first genuine smile I'd ever seen on her face.

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