

WATER DRAGON PUBLISHING



SCIENCE FICTION
SAMPLER
2022

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2022 EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

STORYTELLING IS AN ACT OF COURAGE AND OF FAITH. Every author will tell you how difficult the writing process can be. Stringing the words into sentences, the sentences into paragraphs, and the paragraphs into chapters is, most writers might tell you is the easiest part of the process. It's what happens afterward that is the most challenging.

Submitting a story for publication feels like setting a child free. Stories (in a not-at-all-inaccurate analogy) are a writer's progeny. Release those stories out into the universe is anxiety-inducing and angst-provoking: How will the story be perceived? Will readers like it? What will a reader think after reading my story? What does it reveal about me, the writer?

No matter whether its characters are fictional or real, its settings pure invention or rooted in reality, a story can lay bare a writer's heart. As a reader, you may be able to peek into a writer's soul and psyche, gaining glimpses into their dreams and disappointments.

Introduction

This volume contains bits of tales from authors who were brave enough to trust us with their literary offspring to bring their stories to appreciative audiences. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did in bringing them to you.

ALL THAT WAS ASKED

VANESSA MACLAREN-WRAY

It was supposed to be an easy jaunt to observe the stick-like aliens of Deep Valley Universe.

But Ansegwe — perpetual student, aspiring poet, and scion of the (allegedly criminal) Varayla Syndicate — well, he just has to ruin everything. As everyone knows, Ansegwe may have sensibility, but he's not long on sense.

When a weird, twitchy little creature attaches itself to him, Ansegwe violates every protocol in the handbook to save its life. Finding himself in all kinds of trouble, Ansegwe needs to make some serious life changes, starting with that complicated family of his.

Ansegwe may just have to grow up ... now that he's adopted an alien.

*Visit our website for more information about
[“All That Was Asked”](#).*

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“At first, we were all nervous about having a Syndicate family member embedded in the crew. But Ansegwe was such a noof, always with his head in the sky and his feet in the mud.”

– Nara Ensargen
Contact Crew

MY NERVES STILL QUIVERING WITH ELECTRICITY, I turned to look for Tekere, to ask more advice, only to see the last of the team already fading into the woods. No time left, unless I wanted all the time in the world, alone.

“Wait!” I called out.

Moving automatically, I trotted over to my pack, slung it into position, and hustled along their track. All the while, my mind was full of the image of that moment. I didn’t care what the others thought. We had Made Contact. There would be something to talk about at home now.

Shortly, I managed to catch up with one of the other younger team members, Ensargen, who'd been assigned to bring up the rear. For once, he was willing to commiserate with me as we trudged along. Apparently, open disobedience of a team leader and smashing expedition protocols were a ticket to acceptance in the rebel generation.

For about a quarter of an hour, I felt almost like a real team member. Then my new partner looked over his shoulder and said, "Well."

The creature was following us.

This was certainly not in the Project Plan. I glanced nervously ahead at the seniors. Had anyone else noticed? The spindly little character was small and probably tired from being chased, but we were all loaded down with expedition gear. It was actually gaining on us. I tried taking a few steps back and making what I hoped were fearsome gestures. Clearly, I was awful at being awful; the creature perked up and hurried along faster, gesturing in return. I toyed with the idea of stasing it, but my partner-of-the-moment snagged my arm. We had lost ground and jogged to catch up.

Meanwhile, of course, everyone had noticed.

"Taking something home for the maiden aunts?"

"Look, Ansegwe's finally collected something!"

"Bets on when it'll catch up?"

"Bets on which limb it'll attack this time?"

I had to suck in a deep lungful of air to keep my temper. Both aunts had laid it on very thick: the consequences of one of my infamous blow-ups would be equivalent to not returning from the trip. I plodded on, keeping my eyes on the feet in front of me. But then the commentary shifted suddenly.

"Well, that's that. Don't cry, now, little Ans'we."

"Who bet on 'never'?"

I risked a look back. The creature had stopped. It seemed to be in some new kind of distress. It had lost coordination; its limbs jerked and twisted until it fell to the ground. It crawled a little distance, then pushed itself to its feet again. From my comrades' comments, it seems that had not been its first fall. But the next time, it did not rise. Even from this distance, I could see that its torso and

limbs continued to spasm. Clearly, it had been struck previously by the hunters and was now finally succumbing to its wounds.

Meanwhile, the troop was moving on, nearly out of sight already. Once again, I had to trot to catch up, the pack banging ruthlessly. We were back on track. There would be no more damage to protocol and planning. Three more days, then baths unlimited!

I expected to feel relief, that easing of attention that comes when a predator stalking the party loses interest and turns aside. This time, there came no such release; rather, my attention was riveted behind us. I willed my ears forward, but they rebelled. Instead of the soft chatter of the team ahead, I heard only the gasping nonsense farther and farther behind. Even as I consciously directed myself to think ahead, to phrase out the beginnings of my expeditionary report, all my best neurons were devoted to puzzling out the word-like utterances of the creature back there.

Waiwai eymcumm wai can t'movma fit owwoww eywl ono estop.

I found myself walking slower and slower. I swear I could not help myself. Not when I stopped entirely. Not even when I turned from the group and started back. And it was then ... then that I felt relief, as if released from a trap. My strides grew long, rolling into a comfortable three-beat lope, bringing me back to the downed creature in nearly no time at all.

When it saw me, it fell silent, and its thrashing efforts to rise ceased. But I observed that its limbs still jerked and twitched spasmodically. It breathed hard, as if afraid. Yet when I reached towards it, the creature did not draw back from me. Rather, it returned the gesture, stretching out both forelimbs to me, despite the random quakes and jerks. I wondered at my own lack of fear; but then again, I couldn't smell any warning signs of disease or of aggression.

So, when it actually grasped my outstretched hand, I found it not too difficult to restrain the instinct to pull away. Its skin felt cool to the touch, and its angular, many-jointed fingers pinched somewhat. The physical contact seemed to calm it slightly, as its respiration grew slower. I could even feel a pulse in its fingertips — a flutter that slowed from a feverish racing pace to a more measurable one.

I was struck by a foolish impulse to pick up the thing and carry it. That would not have been difficult; I estimated its mass at well under a fourth of my own. Still, I had attended to our lessons during the required emergency medical training sessions. The creature's involuntary motions bespoke neurological trouble. Perhaps it had suffered a brain or neural injury, in which case abrupt movement could damage it further. Proceeding quietly and gently, I disengaged my hand, stood, and curled my fingers to form a trumpet.

"Jemenga!" I called forward.

Far up the trail, about to disappear in a thickening of the trees, I saw the group stop. I waved my arm vigorously and could see that at least I had their attention. One of the youngsters began to sprint back down the track, the low man elected to make the run back to find out what crazy Ansegwe was up to now.

About halfway, he stopped and hollered, "What is it, now?"

"Get me Jemenga!" I bellowed back. "I need the medic!"

Without further noise, he pelted back. There was a fair amount of discussion; I could tell even from that distance. Though his back was turned, I could pick out Jemenga's iridescent green bag ... and his long black arms gesticulating angrily. Finally, he turned and trudged towards me. I braced myself for a row. But he walked slowly, shifting the medical kit from one hand to another as he came.

By the time he arrived, the anger was gone. He had used the time well. Less well than I had, of course. For I had done no thinking at all, had merely enjoyed the sensation of rising hope as he approached. I believe I even indulged myself in telling the uncomprehending creature that help was on the way. As soon as Jemenga came in easy earshot, I began.

"Thank you, Jemenga. I am so grateful. What do you think you can do for our little follower here?"

But he barely looked at it, jerking and moaning so pitifully at his very feet. Instead, he set the bag down, put his arm across my back, and turned me away to face the woods.

"Ansegwe," he said calmly. "I know you are the expedition sponsors' nephew ..."

All That Was Asked

"Yes, yes, but I am not asking as Varayla Ansegwe. You know I wouldn't play those games. Haven't I been a good member of the group?"

He huffed a little, the closest I'd yet heard to a laugh from him. "Ha-hm. Lad, you have tried, but it is a little difficult for others to forget. But you have been well-educated, have you not?"

With that, he moved in front of me, one limber hand on each of my shoulders, both deep eyes gazing authoritatively into my own. It was a little daunting, I can tell you. Even then, Jemenga was a formidable person.

"Um, yes, at least I study well enough. No one would call me a brilliant student. But I generally do better than passing." I was still puzzled. There are some consequences to youth, most of them involving the inability to follow a good line of thought to its logical conclusion.

"You know my vows, then," he said.

"Um, yes, I think." But of course, I had to think rather hard, and he watched my progress critically.

"For the wild ..." he prompted.

"Yes, yes. *For the wild beast, respect and freedom from even compassion. For the beast in our care, freedom from pain and ... er ...*"

He squeezed my shoulders encouragingly. It came to me.

"... release from fear. For the person, all that is asked. Yes, yes, but what has that got to do with ... with ..." As I fumbled for words, the doctor turned me gently round until once again we were standing side to side, with his avuncular arm looped over my shoulders.

"Son, is this a person?"

I swallowed air and struggled to think. I was sure, certain, positive it was, but what proof did I have? Vocalizations that could be speech? The waving and finger motions that might be words? Its strange desire to be with real people?

He went on, "You need to understand that how I would treat this thing depends greatly on what it is." I twitched my ears, agreeing. "You may be right, that this is no wild beast. It seems to bear some pieces of cloth or hide that is not its own. But is it a domestic beast, some strange pet? Or a person of type unknown?"

I coughed. I admit, I hesitated. Was there such a thing as a person not of our own type? There was still disagreement as to whether the Stick Men were people, and this did not look like them, except in superficial shape. Even the noises it made did not resemble the shouts I had heard. But I could not deny my heart. There were those tattered strips of cloth, which I hadn't even noticed. And I knew how any medic worth his oath would choose to help a domesticated beast in such extreme distress.

"It is a person," I whispered hoarsely.

"Are you sure?" I could only twitch my ears again, taut with anxiety. Could he gainsay my declaration?

"In that case, this person is incapacitated. Are you prepared to contract for its medical treatment? And to perform the duties of family in support of that care?"

At first, I could not quite absorb what he had said. I had to turn it over in my mind several times. And, well, at least there are some choices made easier by economic security. I wonder if, had I had known the outcome, I would have thought longer on the issue of performing family duties. There, memory cannot help, because present knowledge would have me decide exactly as I did, only more swiftly.

"Yes, sir. I so contract." I said at last. The doctor presented no arguments, but went straight to his work.

ANGELS IN THE MIST

BOOK ONE OF "THE Z-TECH CHRONICLES"

RYAN SOUTHWICK

An ancient, powerful evil is loose in San Francisco. The heart of Silicon Valley must fight back the only way they know how — with compassion, unwavering determination, and, of course, super-technology.

Anne Perrin is resigned to a life driven by an adolescent trauma: a strict routine, no socializing (outside of the safety of her waitressing job), and no romantic relationships. When her cautious lifestyle lets the perfect partner slip through her fingers, Anne vows she won't let it happen again and ventures into San Francisco to find happiness.

Her first night out in a decade becomes a nightmare when her date turns on her with sadistic intent. But his nefarious plans for Anne are unexpectedly interrupted by a mysterious savior. Valiant, smart, compassionate ... Charlie is exactly the partner Anne has been looking for. And best of all, he likes her too.

Things go well between her and Charlie until an assailant with unexpected strength plunges Anne into a world she didn't know existed — nor could have imagined — where super-science and an eclectic group of extraordinary individuals may be the solution to Anne's lifelong loneliness ... and humanity's only hope against an ancient threat.

*Visit our website for more information about
“[The Z-Tech Chronicles](#)” series.*

THE OPERA

ANNE AND CHARLIE EXITED THE THEATER, both gushing over their first opera experience.

High school prom was the most formal event Anne had attended before tonight. Dressed in a skirt and blouse, with her boyfriend at the time in a proper suit, they had afterward eaten hamburgers at the local diner, celebrated by splurging on milkshakes, and they both wondered if it got any better than that.

Tonight, she discovered it most certainly could.

Anne wore an elegant, flowered dress she bought just for the occasion, cinched at the waist, which Doris said would show off her hourglass figure, and she was happy to see it had attracted Charlie's attention more than once. Charlie had swapped his signature brown leather jacket for a crisp black tuxedo that made her heart swoon every time she looked at him. He had treated her to a fancy French restaurant. Charlie had barely touched his food, which Anne found odd, but she made up for it by leaving not a scrap on either of their plates.

Angels in the Mist

Then, of course, came the opera. Anne had never felt so excited and out of place at the same time. There the upper echelon mingled in the lobby with fine champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries that even Anne's full stomach couldn't refuse. Charlie had seemed remarkably comfortable among the city's finest and made conversation easily, though she noticed that he avoided giving his name during introductions, which Anne chalked up to nerves. The performance itself had been breath-taking; the powerful music filled her with such emotion that she thought her heart would burst. She was the first from her seat for the standing ovation and wiped tears from her eyes the entire way out.

In short, the evening had been a chapter from a fairy tale adventure, and Anne couldn't imagine being happier.

She smiled at Charlie, who returned it. He had been pleasant, but maintained his usual physical distance and, while it was fun at first because it felt properly upper class, now that they were alone, the small space between them felt like miles.

Anne wanted to be closer, to feel his touch, and she was tired of waiting. She felt guilty over her selfish need; she knew Charlie was skittish about physical contact, for some reason. Although this evening had drawn them closer together, it wasn't enough.

Anne sidled closer, slipped her arm through his, and held her breath.

Several tense seconds passed. Charlie hadn't bolted, and she felt no signs of a flashback.

So far so good.

She relaxed enough to look up at Charlie. His jaw was clenched, eyes fixed straight ahead, as if fighting some internal battle. Not wishing to cause him discomfort, Anne swallowed her disappointment and released him, but he caught her at the last moment and patted her hand. When she looked up again, he was smiling. Anne sighed in relief.

Feeling bold, she rested her head against his arm. Again he didn't flinch, and her demons stayed put. Her smile grew.

A block passed with only the sounds of the city and their breathing. She closed her eyes to enjoy the feel of his muscular

arm, his pleasant warmth on this cold, misty night. When she opened her eyes, however, his smile was gone.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Charlie said, "I was thinking of something a friend told me earlier today."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mm."

She drummed her fingers on his jacket. "Are you going to make me guess?"

"It was just some advice."

"Ah. Something profound, like 'don't eat yellow snow'?" She nudged him playfully.

He chuckled and surprised her by slipping an arm around her shoulders. The demons stayed quiet. Anne wanted to sing.

"More like relax and enjoy yourself."

Good advice.

She snuggled into his chest; his silky jacket was a pillow from heaven.

They walked in blissful silence. Parking in the City, even on a weeknight, was an Olympic event. Tonight they had lost, finally landing seven blocks away, but, nestled against him as she was now, a long walk back to the car sounded just fine.

"So, who is this sage friend of yours?" Anne said. It was the first time Charlie had mentioned someone else in his life.

"Oh ..." Charlie cleared his throat and looked away. "H-her name is Cappa."

Her?

An unexpected flare of jealousy turned her mouth dry. "Is she pretty?" Anne snapped her mouth shut, but it was too late; the words had already escaped.

"Who, Cappa? No, she's just —"

Charlie stumbled on something, though Anne couldn't see what. "I mean yes! Yes, she's pretty, but she's a friend."

"So she's a ... pretty friend?" Her heart sank.

Charlie stopped and ran a hand through his thick brown hair. "Yes, she's pretty, but she's just a friend. Cappa's helped me

Angels in the Mist

through some hard times. She's been there for me ever since I ... I got started in the business."

Anne took a calming breath.

Down, girl. He's allowed to have female friends.

It didn't help. Irrational as the feeling was, Anne needed validation that she was still in the running.

"Charlie ... this is our third date. Yes, third," she repeated when he grinned. "I still count your dashing rescue in the furniture store as a date. Do you like me?"

He gulped. "I do."

"Then show me."

Heart thundering, Anne tilted her chin up in bold invitation.

Charlie looked at her, confused, like a teenager alone with a girl for the first time. "I'm sorry," he said in a shaky voice, "I can't —"

He stumbled forward — drawing a surprised squeal from Anne — and their lips met.

There they stood, wide-eyed statues in the night. A car sped by, leaving swirls of mist in its wake, the roar of its engine lost in the sound of her pounding heart.

Anne checked for flashback warnings. Nothing.

Okay, here goes.

She parted her lips and kissed him in earnest. He tasted like the chocolate truffles they shared during the intermission, and there was something else — an earthy, sensual flavor that quickened her pulse and left her wanting for more. Anne wrapped her arms around him. Her fingers slipped under his jacket and kneaded his firm back, then pulled him tight against her. Charlie was slower to the game, but eventually folded her in his strong arms, which had carried her to safety after William's knife —

Anne's scream pierced the night, shrill even to her own ears. Charlie jumped back, looking even more terrified than she felt.

A few seconds later, when the flashback of William cutting her throat receded, Anne was left with a different horror.

Oh no. No, no, no!

"Charlie," she said in a hoarse whisper.

He stepped back.

Anne reached imploringly but didn't advance, afraid that if she did, he might run away for good. "Charlie, please, I—I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Please don't ..."

He took another step away. Anne was devastated.

"Please don't go," she said. "Don't leave me. I didn't mean to scream. I won't —"

"Of course you did!"

His harsh tone hit her like a slap. Anne covered her mouth, but an anguished sob burst through her fingers.

Charlie didn't seem to notice. He was instead staring at his hands. "Why wouldn't you scream," he said softly. "That's what you do when someone hurts you."

"What? N—no, Charlie, you didn't hurt me."

He shook his head, brows furrowed. "You don't have to lie. I should have known better than to ..." He balled his fists and turned away. "I'll call you a cab, and ... if you want to press charges, I understand."

"Charlie, what the hell are you talking about? You didn't hurt me! It was a flashback, that's all."

His skeptical frown remained.

"Look, I'll prove it!" Anne shed her jacket and pulled her shoulder strap down, intent on baring herself to the world to show her unblemished skin, but Charlie held up a hand.

"All right! Just ... are you sure?"

She tugged her dress back into place and nodded. "Having post-traumatic stress disorder doesn't mean I'm made of glass. You did everything right, Charlie. I couldn't have asked for better."

He stuffed his hands into his pockets, but she caught his arm.

"No! Please, I ... I want a do-over."

"Anne, I know what a flashback is, and it's not pleasant. I don't want to put you through that again."

"And I don't want to scare you again, so ..." She tugged his hands out and took them in her own. "Let's try just the kissing part and see how it goes." Her spirits fell when he hesitated. "Please? I—I can't promise I won't scream again, but if you give me another chance, I —"

His kiss caught her by surprise. Tender, caring, passionate — it was everything she could have wished for. Anne drank him in,

Angels in the Mist

pressed her body to his, eager once more for his touch, but their hands remained joined; only their tongues danced the lovers' tango.

Minutes, hours, or years passed. She didn't know, and she didn't care. When they finally parted, her lips mourned his absence, and she could only stare into his eyes with unabashed yearning.

He brushed her auburn hair back with gentle fingers. "Anne Perrin, this last month with you has been my happiest in a long, long time. You're one of the kindest, funniest people I've ever met, and it's an honor to be your date."

Charlie might have said more, but Anne covered his mouth with hers, and for the next several minutes, she showed him the true meaning of passion.

• • •

Anne was in heaven. A few shivers were all it had taken for Charlie to enfold her in the warmth of his jacket under his comforting arm; even her demons knew better than to disturb her bubble of happiness. Head resting against his chest, she closed her eyes and absorbed his scent — a musty mix of cologne and an earthy smell that made Anne want to wrap herself around him and purr.

Wouldn't it be terrible if we got lost? We'd have to stay like this for hours.

She snuggled closer and smiled.

Oh darn.

A loud pop sounded from overhead. Anne looked up just in time to see the streetlight nearest to them go out. A second later, the same happened to the light ahead of them, then the one behind. Thick fog blotted out star and moonlight, leaving them in almost total darkness.

"That's odd," Anne said. She reluctantly withdrew from his warmth and fished around in her purse. "I've seen streetlights go out before and they're usually quiet. Maybe a transformer blew or something. Aha!"

She pulled out a small flashlight and clicked it on. Its broad beam lit the sidewalk but didn't penetrate very far into the mist.

"Oh well, at least we won't trip. Still think you can find the car, Charlie?"

Anne stepped forward, but a touch from Charlie made her pause.

"Stay close," he whispered.

"What's wrong?" His cautious tone put her on edge.

"The lights didn't go out by themselves. They were broken." He picked up a small object from the ground. Her flashlight glinted from a shard of clear glass between his fingers.

"Charlie, what's going on?" A sudden chill raised the hair on the back of her neck.

"I don't know," he said, eyes searching the darkness. He ran a hand through his hair. "Come on, the car's just up ahead."

Anne latched onto his arm and they set off at a brisk pace. Shadows danced in the mist, but disappeared when she tried to track them. Her demons stirred in response to her fear; phantom fingers groped at her wrists and ankles, making her want to scream.

"How much further?" she said, voice trembling.

The figures in the fog were becoming real, taunting her like specters. She clutched Charlie's arm, swinging her flashlight this way and that.

Charlie pointed ahead. "It's right up —"

Anne shrieked.

One of the shadow figures had taken form.

A wiry man jumped from the roof of a parked car. A blonde streak near his temple divided his dark hair. His pasty-white face split into a frightening grin.

Charlie darted between them. The wiry man grinned wider. He advanced, as if to walk right through her guardian. Charlie put a restraining hand on the wiry man's chest.

In a blur of motion, he caught Charlie's arm and hurled him into a parked car.

Like a scene from Anne's worst nightmare, Charlie struck the car with the force of a wrecking ball. It crumpled around him in an explosion of glass and screeching metal.

Anne rubbed her eyes, hoping it was just a hallucination, but the gruesome scene remained. Charlie's limbs protruded at sickening angles from the wreckage. She turned her shaking flashlight back to the wiry man, making his unusually large eyes glow.

He mouthed a single word.

"Run."

BUILDING
BABY BROTHER

STEVEN RADECKI

It seemed like a good idea at the time ...

Children will always grow up, whether we're ready for them to or not.

One truth about parenthood that I've learned is that there will come a time when your children will ask you difficult, and perhaps even uncomfortable, questions for which they expect you to have the answers.

It's also true that we often find it difficult to deny our children the things that they most desire — like freedom.

*Visit our website for more information about
"Building Baby Brother".*

1

“DAD, CAN I HAVE A BABY BROTHER?”

I paused, still holding the Lego piece in my hand. “Are you sure you want one?” I tried to sound casual about it. “You know you’d have to help take care of him. He’d be in your toys ...”

“I know, Dad.”

Josh gave me an exasperated look. We’d been through all this before.

It wasn’t that I necessarily wanted to deprive Josh of the sibling experience. I’d been through it myself. I also knew that it wasn’t all play time and brotherly love.

“Okay, Josh,” I said, turning to face him. “It’s your choice: you can have a baby brother or too many toys.”

Yeah, I admit it. It was kind of a cheap shot. But it was a whole lot easier than explaining the real reason.

Before answering, Josh took a quick look around his bedroom. He surveyed his collections of Lego sets, action figures, and the stacks of video game discs.

Building Baby Brother

“Too many toys,” he finally announced, nodding firmly in confirmation. With that decided, he turned his attention back to our current construction project, snapping a new piece into place.

Whew, I thought. Dodged that bullet. Again.

Later that night, after finally getting Josh to bed, I settled myself at my desk with the intent to pay the bills and deal with other household-related recordkeeping. Glancing at the clock, I saw that it was quite a bit later than I’d hoped. I considered putting off those tedious chores for just one more night, but knew there was no guaran-tee that tomorrow night would be any better than this one. The odds were that it was unlikely to be. It’s amazing how many excuses, and other delaying tactics, young children will resort to rather than simply closing their eyes and going to sleep. It’s probably not quite as astonishing, though, as when you look away for a moment, only to turn back to find their head against the pillow and their breathing steady and slow.

Might as well get it done, I encouraged myself, barely succeeding in fighting back a yawn. Most of these people do like to get paid on time.

It’s strange, but when I’m working, I usually prefer it to be quiet. At night, though, and when tackling these kinds of tasks, I find a little background noise comforting — just something playing at low volume so I’d be able to hear Josh if he needed me.

I wasn’t really in the mood for music, so I turned on the small television that sat on a low cabinet across from my desk. The screen lit up with a graphic and bloody scene from an episodic police procedural.

Ugh. I can catch the late news if I want to see that ...

I changed the channel. Again. And then again.

Fairly quickly, I despaired of finding any programming that was not an overly gritty adult drama or a talk show host chatting about the latest geopolitical happenings with sparkling celebrities who had also dropped in to discuss their latest motion picture, television series, concert tour, stint in rehab, or any combination of the above.

My fingers paused on the remote control when I caught sight of a small doe-eyed boy moving through blue-tinged darkness across a

moonlit hillside. I recognized it as a scene from Kubrick's last science fiction movie. While it wasn't among my favorites, neither was it among the worst, and I hadn't planned to really watch it anyway.

It might have been avoidance behavior, or simply fatigue, but my mind kept drifting when it was supposed to be keeping track of which payments I'd already made. I tried to focus on my balances due, but my eyes and attention kept wandering back to the images on the television screen. I watched the small artificial boy move along the scenery, and I began to wonder if it was really possible to create something like him.

Creating the software to do it, that I could almost imagine. That's my day job. I plan and develop computer programs. I try to make the hardware do what my clients want it to do, to produce the results that they want from it. I don't typically design or build the actual circuitry or components. I leave that to the electrical and mechanical engineers. I was certain that I could never construct a cybernetic being as complex as the ones presented in that film.

By the time I finally went to bed, though, I found that I was still thinking about it, unable to banish the notion from my thoughts. I tried telling myself that there were technological and financial realities to be consider — ones that would make such a project almost impossible for me to achieve alone.

After being unsuccessful in wholly silencing the persistent voice in my head, I finally decided that only thinking about the notion would cost me nothing. Well... other than perhaps the price of the loss of a little sleep or a few unusual dreams. So, I closed my eyes and let my mind see how far it could go with the idea.

It was still working the idea the next morning and, after I had dropped Josh off at school, I began to realize that not only might it be possible, but that it might also be practical using only off-the-shelf components. With the large number of computer stores in the area, I thought it possible to get everything I might need. If I couldn't find it at the one of the many shops, I had several friends who worked for some of the major computer and chip companies. They could probably get their hands on whatever else I might need. I even began mentally composing a proposed shopping list: motherboards, memory, hard drives ...

Building Baby Brother

While I suffered from no delusions that what I might create would be anywhere near as complex as the one I'd seen in that movie — or from any movie, for that matter — I had, in the span of one evening, gone from “That’s impossible!” to “How hard it could be?”

Well, a lot harder than I thought, it turned out. Much harder.

CHILDREN OF THE WRONG TIME

FLAVIA IDÀ

"Would you say you were loved by the right people at the right time in the right way and for the right reasons?"

Michael Holmes and Nora Savins stepped into the ornate atrium of the Department of Vital Privileges and looked up at the life-size marble statue of the Founding Father, a smiling young man who held in his hand an ancient movie script rolled into a scroll.

"Keanu Reeves," Michael said reverentially, "with his quote from Parenthood: You need a license to drive, you need a license to fish, you need a license to own a dog, but they will let any moron be a parent." And under the inscription he read the First Law of the Republic: "Never Again Any Moron."

*Visit our website for more information about
["Children of the Wrong Time"](#).*

ONE

MICHAEL HOLMES AND NORA SAVINS passed through the bottleneck of the security checkpoint, stepped into the ornate atrium of the Department of Vital Privileges, and looked at the white marble statue of the Founding Father.

The Founding Father beamed down on them above the busy crowd, a handsome young man with long black hair, who carried in one hand an ancient movie script rolled up into a scroll and, in the other hand, an auto racer's helmet. The wreath of laurels at his feet hadn't wilted since the national celebration of his birthday.

"Keanu Reeves," Michael said reverently. "Best thing America ever gave us."

He pointed at the inscription carved in tall letters on the base of the life-sized statue. "And his words that began it all."

He recited the movie line, known to every citizen older than six.

"You need a license to drive, you need a license to fish, you need a license to own a dog, but any moron can become a parent."

Children of the Wrong Time

Under the inscription he read the First Law of the Republic:
“*Never Again Any Moron.*”

Behind the statue was the Republic’s flag, a field of blue showing an ancestry chart with golden stars in place of family names.

Michael looked at Nora. “Are you all right?”

Nora made a small headshake for *no*.

“Do I look okay?” she asked.

“I told you, you look great.”

“Yeah, well, all you have to do is pick the blue suit over the grey suit. Me, I have to be conservative, but not dowdy; feminine, but not trumpy ...”

Michael brushed aside her concerns with a good-natured laugh.

“Come on, Grumps. Smile.”

He glanced at his holofolder marked *Reproduction – Application One*.

“Here we go,” he said softly. He passed his hand over the elevator plaque and stepped in after her.

Anxiety had dropped a wall between them. Too many worries, too many hopes, made noise in their minds. Was he a good provider, and did they really say he must provide for eighteen years? Was she a good homemaker, and did they really say she must make a home for eighteen years?

The elevator was full of people, each headed to their private petition. One elderly couple, the husband in a medchair, was certainly on their way to the Office of End-of-Life Privileges. The man was breathing with difficulty, a portable oxygen mask over his face. The woman wore a look of quiet anguish.

Nora eyed them on the sly. She thought it seemed cruel that a man that sick should be required to bring his application in person; but, of course, it was because anyone might make the application in his name with malice aforethought.

Would these two be granted their License for End-Of-Life Privileges? she wondered. Would she and Michael one day have to bring a similar application?

The elevator bell dinged; the doors swooshed open. People streamed down the hallway in a mingled chatter of voices. Michael

and Nora found the door of the office marked *Reproduction – Application One*. Michael bent to kiss Nora’s cheek, then leaned into the blinking Sesame panel and said, “Open”.

CITYFALL

LORNA HOPKINS KEITH

After Samanda Lar destroys her ex-husband, the Volen hand her the mission of saving the people of City and establishing their new home.

The Volen leave City to dissolve, forcing Sam to deal with her people amid the coming collapse, and the alien colonies on this world.

Sam is aided by her twin, Brad, and her alien brother, Max (who becomes Maxee). Joining them is Todd, whose mother took in the twins when their mother left when they were five, and Arlene, the governor's assistant who actually runs City.

Together, they find a new home for the residents of City — but one that comes with its own problems.

*Visit our website for more information about
["Cityfall"](#).*

1

DEEP IN THE HEART OF CITY, Sam expected it to be just another day in her inquiry agent office ... until she logged on to her screen and saw the message.

This is to inform Samanda Lar that if she wishes to reproduce, she must do so in the next six months. At that time, her birth control will become permanent.

“What?” Sam exclaimed. She couldn’t be that old, could she? All women’s birth control became permanent at thirty — a form of population control.

Something inside her awoke. *What had she done so far in her life? Not much, just solving other people’s problem and puzzles.* After her disaster of a marriage, a husband was no longer an option, and she’d never even considered children.

I don’t want to end up like old Mrs. Jones who couldn’t find her comm hanging around her neck.

Cityfall

Sam glanced around her tiny gray office. Her gray worktable with the screen on the beige wall behind it; two gray chairs, with shelves behind the padded one; and the toilet room and storage cubicle, filled the room.

Was this going to be my life for however long I survived?

NO.

But how do I get out of this rut? What can I do?

Sam shook her head, unease roiling up inside her. It came to her that something was missing in her life — something necessary to her survival. *But what? How could I get out of this rut?*

A request popped up on her screen. A schoolchild wanted answers to a math puzzle. Sam chose to respond. Children should do their own research, she thought, but she needed something to do. With her eidetic memory, she found it simpler to pull up the answer in her head than to key through several menus to reach the information on her screen.

After signing off, Sam stared at the picture of trees on the beige wall above her screen. Everything in City was gray or beige, except for the pictures on the screen or the walls. Outside the vast gray block of City there were trees, she knew. Was this what she needed? Trees and other plants and grass, waiting for her? If she could just get out.

Around her, City, a pile of two-level gray cubes made of the indestructible Volen material, hummed its own song. Layers upon layers of cubes of apartments and shops along dim gray streets, City was her life. A life that no longer satisfied her.

Her screen comm beeped. Sam answered, hoping it was her twin, Brad. He was supposed to be coming home on leave soon. Her heart sank when she found it was a young man who wanted answers to a list of questions. She pulled them out of her head as fast as he asked.

Another three credits. Whoopee.

Sam wanted to scream but didn't dare. She didn't want to upset Max, her alien brother.

Another call.

"Samanda Lar, Inquiry Agent. How can I help you?" she said automatically.

"This is James Fleetwood from Spaceport Management. A female of the Ambaak species who has just arrived on the Jarry liner is in distress and requires an investigator."

"I'm not an investigator, I'm an inquiry agent. Why an investigator, anyway? What kind of distress?"

"The female has had a loss she refuses to specify. She wants a female investigator. You are the only one we could locate. Are you able to come to Spaceport?"

Spaceport, Sam thought, tingling with excitement. *Finally, a chance to go to Spaceport.* The space station hung in a fixed orbit above the planet. Brad had told her about the shops. Not that she had any credits to shop with. It didn't matter what the job was; just to go there was enough. Somewhere new, somewhere other than here.

"Yes, I can come up." She had to preserve her outward professionalism, despite the excitement roiling inside. She would figure out how to get there later.

"You are to go to room 666 at five hours tomorrow morning. The female will have finished her sleep period then. Turn right from shuttle exit, turn left into first main hall. Room will be on right. You will be reimbursed for cost of shuttle fare."

"Do you have any idea what this is about?" Sam's business side took over.

"No. Companion wouldn't say."

"Do you have any idea how long this will take?"

"No. Be prepared to stay overnight."

"Very well." Sam looked at the picture of trees. "I'll be there. I require fifty credits plus expenses."

"Agreed." Fleetwood clicked off.

"Wheel!" Sam jumped up and did a two-step in place.

"Happy, Sam?" Max, her alien brother, poked his head out of his cubicle.

"Yes. I have a job at Spaceport tomorrow."

"Go, I?" Max, a grey-furred teddy bear about her size, had been brought to the xenolab as an infant of an unknown species. Del Lar had adopted Max and raised him as a little brother to Sam

and Brad. Max had turned out to be a shapeshifter, with his own version of their language, Standard.

"Oh. I'll have to think about it."

His face sagged.

Sam smiled at him. "I have to talk to Todd first."

"Okee." Max disappeared back into his cubicle.

Sam jumped up, put her mug back into its little cupboard, paced a few times, and then told Max she was going out to run. She couldn't call Todd until he went to lunch at noon. She wasn't made to just sit and stare at the screen until then.

After a two-block run in the narrow, dim street, she felt more relaxed and called Todd as soon as she could. "Todd, guess what? I have a job at Spaceport tomorrow."

"Wow." Todd, Brad's and her legal expert, was also their best friend. "Are you sure it's legit?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" That it might not be had never occurred to her.

"What was the name of the caller?" Todd asked.

"James Fleetwood. He sounded very businesslike."

"I'll look him up." After a pause, Todd reported, "Okay, he is what he says he is, and a ship did arrive last night. I think it's safe, but I'm going with you."

"He said it might be overnight. Do you think it's all right to leave Max that long?"

"Do you have any food?" Todd sounded concerned.

"Not much."

"Bring him as Brad. I have a duplicate ID."

"Okay."

"At five hours there won't be any traffic, so we should be able to catch the four-and-a-half-hour's shuttle, so I'll pick you up at four hours."

Sam groaned.

* * *

Sam set her loudest alarm to wake herself, but awoke before it went off. She had been dreaming about a house on a hill. As Spaceport sparked her mind, she fell into her clothes and ran downstairs to her office.

"Max, time to get up," Sam called.

"Mmm," came from the cubicle.

Sam crawled in and wrestled Max awake. She'd finally gotten him to sit up when Todd arrived. Between them, they got Max on his feet, dressed in a coverall as Brad, with his nutrients in his pouch. The human food didn't have one vital enzyme he needed.

They walked Brad-Max down the street to the up-tube and squeezed on. The platforms only held two large adults, and every corner had an up-tube and down-tube. At Level Fifty, they stepped off and took the stairs up to the shuttle port. By this time, Brad-Max was looking around at everything.

Todd had timed it well. The shuttle hatch opened; they embarked and found seats. Sam grabbed one by a window. She peered out and saw green below. *Were those real trees?* she wondered. *If I could only be down there with them.* She had to pinch herself to make sure this was real. If only Brad were here.

As they approached Spaceport, Sam caught glimpses of a round, gray structure. The three disembarked through a square blue room where a large man glanced at their IDs. She held Brad-Max's hand tightly to keep from floating away. She was actually on Spaceport.

Spaceport was City-world's one connection to other worlds. It had hung here forever. Most of the time when offworlders had business with citizens, the latter came up here to meet with them. The Space Service that Brad was a part of flew out of Spaceport. Knowing this and being here were two different things.

The checker waved them down a long blue hall. As they stepped out into a great open space, Sam and Brad-Max gaped. The area curved away to the side in each direction farther than she could see, wider across than half a street block.

Shops and booths decorated in blues and greens lined either side, selling a variety of goods and food. People, mostly clad in brightly-colored clothing, moved in both directions.

"They have a lot of things we can't get in City," Todd said. "Many people from the upper levels come up here to shop. Come on."

They turned the corner and Sam stopped at a shop with colorful scarves. "I want one of those," she said.

"After your job." Todd tugged at her arm. "When you have the credits."

"Pretty," Brad-Max said.

They moved on. Sam stopped at each shop, and Todd moved her along. She had never seen anything like this; her home, her job, even Brad had completely left her mind. She wanted to go into every store, look at everything, soak in the colors.

Sam planned that, someday, when she had plenty of credits, she'd come back here and explore these stores. The colors fascinated her and drew a sense of longing.

They came to a place with narrow doors on the outer side of the port with the familiar female and male silhouettes, and several more oddly shaped ones. Opposite them, a hallway led inward.

"This is it," Todd said.

As they turned into the hall, an announcement blared.

A SHIP FROM BARDAK IS ARRIVING AT DOCK
TWENTY-THREE. REPEAT, A SHIP FROM BARDAK IS
ARRIVING AT DOCK TWENTY-THREE.

Sam wondered if Brad was on it. Although she wanted to see him, it would be awkward, to say the least, if they ran into each other, with Brad-Max.

At the room, she knocked.

A tall, gray-haired man opened the door. "You are Samantha Lar?"

"Yes. This is my brother, Brad, who won't let me go anywhere alone, and this is Todd, a friend who showed me how to get here."

They all moved into a square brown room with another door at the back. A long seat, small table and chair, and a screen on the wall graced the place.

"You men do not need to stay."

Sam felt Brad-Max stiffen beside her.

"I stay." Brad-Max said.

"I believe I will, too." Todd stood with crossed arms, that suspicious expression on his face.

The rear door opened, and a dark man with beady little eyes close together stuck his head out.

"Is she here yet? Oh, there you are, Miss Samantha."

"Samantha," she said, stressing the 'd'.

"Get rid of the men. Biida only wants to see the woman."

Brad-Max pulled Sam toward the hall door, and Todd moved to her other side.

The dark man stepped out, leaving the door ajar. Sam peeked into the small dim room and saw nothing but a large container.

Where was Biida? Sam sensed something wrong and eased back. *What the eff?*

Another, larger man charged out from behind the inner door and grabbed Brad-Max. Sam was too startled to react as the dark man yelled "No", grabbed her and pulled her into the back room with the other two.

"Hey," Todd yelled as the door closed in his face.

"Todd!" Sam screamed.

A hand covered her mouth, the room went dark, and she couldn't breathe.

* * *

World slept.

BUBBLES OF TIME

LORNA HOPKINS KEITH

When Janni's mindTalent leads her to space, she discovers other human colonies ... and a threat to them all.

On the world of Peace, Janni must persuade her clan of the danger, and move the colonists from another, larger planet to her world.

On Cityworld, in the community of Starview, leader Samanda Lar, facing earthquakes, and water and food shortages after their disastrous move from dying City, foresees a coming menace and faces the daunting task of convincing her people to move to another world.

When aliens attack Peace, Janni must convince the Watchers, who have programmed Janni's clan to replace them, that her clan should remain human.

*Visit our website for more information about
"Bubbles of Time".*

1

PEACE

THREE YEARS LATER, in the spring, Janni was not happy. Although she was on the council, she had little say in things, she still lived at home with her parents and two younger brothers, and she had not seen the stars again. The clan village of Freedom was too small; she felt stifled. She was a woman with no mate, no place of her own, no purpose to her life.

The only people on the world of Peace, the clan just managed to produce a decent living, with everyone expected to perform their assigned tasks. The village lay between two rivers, and the air smelled fresh and sweet with masses of flowers everywhere.

Janni thought about going exploring, even though only certain people were allowed to go farther than a half day from the clanhome and, even then, not alone.

One day, she *heard* Granlyn's voice in her mind, *summoning* her to come by after she finished with the garment she was mending.

'Okay,' she *sent* back, glancing around the craft hall with its white walls and rows of worktables where people did everything from making clothing to painting clay pots.

Next to Janni, Glori said, "Did you hear that?"

"Granlyn?"

"Yes. You too?"

Glori nodded and put her mending away.

Janni finished sewing the last button on the tunic she was holding, stood up, and said, "Come on."

"Granlyn wants us," Glori said to Gramma Perri as the older woman looked their way.

She nodded, and the two young women left.

The two walked across the plaza and up the flower-lined path to Granlyn's house with the vines around the porch posts. The old woman welcomed them in, and they found Leona already there. She and her twin, Curtis, were Granlyn's late-middle-age miracle babies, born just before Janni and Glori. Leona had the same square face and black curls as the others in Granlyn's line, but blond Curtis took after his dad, Grampa Larry.

"Welcome," Granlyn said as Janni and Glori sat on the sagging brown couch next to Leona. "I've asked you here because it is time for you gals to set up your own households. Janni, you'll mate with Willie, and Glori, you with Brian."

About time, Janni thought. Something was finally happening.

Because the clan was so small, and she was the first born female and Willie the first born male of her generation, Janni always knew she would be mated with him.

"I guess that leaves Richard for me," Leona said, rolling her eyes.

"Unless you want to wait for one of the younger boys to grow up."

Leona shook her head. "I always figured it would be him."

Janni wondered what it would be like to mate with someone you loved, like Granlyn and Grampa Larry did. He and Granlyn had grown up with each other and always been together.

"There are several things we need to discuss," Granlyn began. "First, have any of you discovered any kind of new Talent?"

"No," said Glori.

Leona shook her head.

Janni thought of the stars she'd seen, but that wasn't a Talent. She shook her head.

"Okay. Let me know immediately when you do. Our Talents are creating a big problem. Some of the others in my generation — especially Maria, Chad, and Old Art — are afraid of your generation and want the Talents to go away."

"Do *you* want them to stop?" Janni demanded.

Granlyn smiled. "Yes and no. They do have their uses — the mindlink and teleportation. But Marisa's time thing, no. We don't want to turn into Watchers; we want to stay as we are and make a home here for humans for many generations to come."

"But what can we do?" Janni asked. "I don't want to give up the Talents I have, just not have any more." She thumped the couch.

"No, Janni," Granlyn said. "We need to pull back. The mind Talent would be safe to keep, but not the others." She rocked in her chair.

"But Granlyn ..." Janni began.

"How could we do that?" Leona asked.

"Try not to use them," Glori suggested.

"Glori," Janni cried.

'Calm down,' Glori *sent* on their private mindlink.

Granlyn moved around in her chair. "Janni, control yourself. Glori has a point. Leona, do you have anything to offer?"

"Okay. What if we three don't have babies, or maybe just boys, and the younger ones of our generation can have whatever they want." Leona rubbed the arm of the couch.

"What if the new Talent just goes to the firstborn girl, no matter when she comes?" Janni asked.

Granlyn shook her head. "I think we should simply use our Talents as little as possible. For right now, you three put off having babies for as long as you can. Think about it." Granlyn looked at Janni. "Second, have any of you started on your houses?"

"Willie and Brian have laid out our houses," Janni said. *A safe subject.*

"Good. Go ahead and get started on them." She paused and closed her eyes.

The young women waited.

When Granlyn opened her eyes and sat up, she said, "You do know the history of our people well, don't you?"

Three nods. Janni knew her great-grandfather, Grampa Larry, was Granlyn's cousin on her mother's side and so had no Talent. He was very good at telling what people were thinking by observing their body language.

"Good. We must never forget where we came from. And we must not forget there may be other human colonies on other worlds. Just because we were taken from Earth when men were barely to the moon, doesn't mean interplanetary spaceships weren't built, and people traveled to other planets later."

"Oh," said Janni. That had never occurred to her. She looked at the books on the shelf across from her. Old books brought from Old Earth. Some were about people on other worlds.

"Now. You are the first three girls of your generation," Granlyn said. "I expect you to become responsible adults and conduct yourselves as such. You will set an example by not using your Talents unless necessary."

"But ..." Janni began.

"No buts, Janni. It may be that our Talents will atrophy if not used. You three also be thinking of any possible ways to rid ourselves of these Talents."

No way. The thought came from deep within Janni. *I need my Talents.*

"One more thing," Granlyn said. "About your children ..."

Before she could say another word, a loud boom came from the plaza area and, at the same time, screams in their minds.

"Mick," Janni cried. "He's hurt."

Her thirteen-year-old brother worked with Big Art and his son, Uncle Artie, the clan's scientists. She *heard* her mama scream as the three girls ran out the door, followed by Granlyn.

Janni smelled the smoke first. The science lab on the east side of the plaza was on fire. People grabbed buckets and scooped water from the river to throw on the blaze. Uncle Artie and three boys sat on the ground nearby. Mick lay beside them.

She ran to Mick, already being treated by Medic Anne. He had a big gouge on his forehead, blood running into his closed eyes, and burns on his arms and chest. He bit on a stick and moaned.

"Mick," Mama cried. She dropped beside him.

"He'll be okay, Marisa," Medic Anne said. "Poor kid, he got the worst of it."

"You were using Talent, weren't you?" Janni said, *seeing* in his mind what he had been doing.

"Leave him alone," Mama said, holding his hand. "What happened?" she asked Uncle Artie.

"He tried to use a Talent he hadn't fully mastered, moving things without touching them."

Janni's younger brother, Steve, ran up. "What happened? Did he do something bad?"

"Steven, hush," Mama said. "Just be thankful he's still alive."

"Okay." He sat and watched.

Granlyn arrived. "Were you using Talent?" she asked.

"Yes," Janni said.

"Well, that does it." Granlyn sat down carefully. "We must stop this Talent."

"I agree, but how?" Mama asked.

"Or at least do a better job of training the youngsters. He said he knew how to use it." Uncle Artie rubbed his head. "Sometimes Talent's useful, but it takes time for a young one to learn to use it right. The other boys and I only have minor injuries." He ignored Marisa.

"Well, think about it," Granlyn said.

Papa arrived and carried Mick to the clinic, followed by Medic Anne. Before Marisa could go after them, an older woman and her daughter stepped out of the group that had gathered around.

"When are you going to control your brats, Marisa?" the younger one demanded. "Look at the mess."

"Nancy, children — especially boys — are going to make mistakes," Marisa said, balling her fists.

"Tell them not to use Talent until they're grown up and can handle it."

"Now, Nan," the older woman said.

Bubbles of Time

"All right, Mama," Nancy said. "But this has got to stop."

"Don't tell me how to raise my children," Marisa snapped.

Janni had never heard that tone of voice from her mother before. "Go, Mama," she whispered. *About time those old snoops got slapped down.*

"Girls, girls," Granlyn said in her boss tone. "That's enough. You two go on about your business, and you, Marisa, see about your son."

"Yes, Granlyn," Marisa said, and left for the clinic.

Janni tried to follow, but Granlyn held her back. "He'll be taken care of. You need to look after Stevie."

"Okay." Janni added, "Come on, Squirt."

"Smartyass," he said, and followed her to childcare, behind the schoolhouse. "Why can't I go home?"

"Because your lesson starts soon so you need to be here."

Janni returned to her craft project.

THE INSANE GOD

JAY HARTLOVE

A meteorite fragment cures a teenaged trans girl's schizophrenia, but leaves her with visions of ancient warring gods annihilating each other in space.

As the Earth hurtles toward the cloud that is the shattered bodies of those eternal enemies, their eons-old conflict is rekindled on Earth to divide and destroy humanity.

Can she and her brother stop the spread of global disaster?

*Visit our website for more information about
"The Insane God".*

11

SITTING ACROSS THE WHITE LINEN COVERED TABLE, Jefferson sized up Hiram as a bookie would assess a prize fighter. "How is the new training coming along?"

"Pruitt says I'm up to ten feet now. Hey, thanks for the grub. Real nice and fancy. We celebrating something?"

A waiter walked up the veranda, bringing two plates of steak, grits and hushpuppies.

Jefferson noticed Hiram's voice was deeper and more resonant than he remembered. "Yes, we are celebrating your progress. I can admit now that I wasn't entirely sure the visualization technique would work. But you have proven my doubts unfounded." He raised his glass of wine up for Hiram to toast.

It took the big man a second to catch on, but he clinked his glass with his own.

“Being able to inject your anger into men at a distance, you can use this gift tactically in a battle setting, acquiring allies on the fly.”

“Sounds cool.” Hiram picked up his knife and fork, cleaved off a large chunk of his steak and popped it into his mouth. When he opened his mouth, Jefferson noticed his lips opened quite further than looked possible. He stifled his alarmed reaction and looked again. Indeed, the man’s entire jaw was significantly wider than he remembered. So was Hiram’s neck. His gaze dropped to the two charm necklaces he wore.

“I see you’ve been working out a lot too. I imagine you didn’t get enough exercise in the institution. Are you feeling stronger these days?”

“Oh yeah. I’m seeing all kinds of bulk.” He held up his bent arm and showed off huge muscles.

“Your jaw is much better defined as well.”

“Oh, you mean my new mouth. Yeah, it’s a beaut!” he announced and then opened it to inhuman size. His lips spread all the way back into his cheeks and his teeth opened grotesquely far. He looked more alligator than man.

It was all Jefferson could do to keep a straight face. Trying not to clench his own teeth too hard, he said, “A most impressive unexpected benefit.”

“I keep hearing about this meteor shower that’s supposed to signal the end of the world. I take it that’s why you want to put me in the field.”

“That’s true, more or less. Rumor mills crank out as much chafe as they do wheat. Allow me to fill you in. In the Book of Job, God and the Devil make a bet that this poor sucker Job will buckle and doubt God’s love if God makes his life horrible enough. God throws the book at this guy, destroys his life, but Job stays true and never doubts his Lord’s love. It’s a long hard road, but the Devil loses the bet.

“We are faced with the same situation. God and the Devil have thrown pieces of their magic to Earth, to pit us against our fellow man. You are wearing two of the pieces of God’s magic. Our enemies are wearing pieces of the Devil’s magic. It is our

mission to fight this battle, no matter how long and hard, to ensure our God is victorious.”

“How do we know we’re the Good Guys?”

Jefferson was surprised. “Your waters run deep, Sir. Good question. Throughout the Bible and throughout history, God has instructed his faithful to take up arms against those who would quietly, subversively turn the masses against us. Joan of Arc spread God’s glory by force over those who tried to steal land from believers by rule of law. The archangel Michael used force to expel Satan after the Evil One threatened to turn the angels against God. Our enemies, the Lookers, have the power to convince people to put down their arms, to give up their righteous anger. It is subversive, it is the Devil’s way. God has given us this vision of taking decisive action. We are Michael’s sword.”

Hiram took the last enormous chunk of steak in his huge mouth and savored it. “You got this all figured out.”

“I think I do.”

“Does that make men respect you more?”

Again, an unexpected question. “I like to think so. I’ve had very few men turn away from my call.”

“Men just fear me.”

“You are a fearsome figure. But as a leader, you will be inspirational. Being feared and being respected are not so very different.”

“You think men will follow me into battle?”

“Absolutely. With your power and my intellect, we will draw men up out of their boring lives to strive for glory.”

“Your brains and my brawn, huh?”

“Indeed.”

“Let’s find out.” With no further warning, he reached across the table and seized Jefferson’s arm.

“What are you doing?”

Hiram stood up, lifted Jefferson right out of his seat and held him aloft, grabbing a leg with his other hand.

Jefferson felt like a puppet under the giant’s unbelievable strength. “Release me at once!”

Hiram opened his gargantuan mouth and dropped Jefferson's body down on his face. Jefferson felt his teeth tear through his torso, breaking ribs and cleaving sinew. The unstoppable biting pressure shocked him. Feeling teeth slicing through him was terrifying. Jefferson screamed in agony while beating Hiram on the back of the head with his free fist. Nothing worked. He was so frightened he couldn't form words. *Can I recover from this?*

The giant swallowed and went in for another bite, this time tearing loose organs which fell all about. It was all he could do to not dwell on the sensation and what it meant. Jefferson tried to pull up his free leg to kick himself free, but his muscles all spasmed and wouldn't respond. His whole body went limp and he lost any remaining hope. Hiram must have torn through the aorta because then came a gushing waterfall of blood. Blood flooded Jefferson's mouth and gagged him, which added to the overwhelming sensation of doom. Jefferson wanted it to end, but he was mercilessly still aware when the next bite came, this one on his throat. The last sound he made as he felt the teeth close down was to gurgle, "Why?"

He managed to open his eyes through the pain that crushed his entire being, just long enough to see that mouth open around his whole head. He felt and heard his skull shatter like a clay pot in those huge jaws.

The pain finally faded, for which he was hugely grateful. The release of death at last. But the pain was replaced by a sense of...fullness? Jefferson felt an intense urge to belch. He opened his eyes, which were now over seven feet above the floor, and let out a window rattling croak. He looked down and saw an arm and two legs scattered on the table. He recognized them as his own from the blood-soaked linen suit shreds that clung to the severed limbs. He looked at his hands and indeed his entire towering body and everything around him was covered in bright red blood.

A waiter came running at him with a kitchen knife, followed by two other men. Jefferson flashed out his huge hand and using only his willpower, forced the first man to enrage, then turn

around and attacked the two followers. He didn't much care to watch the ensuing knife fight.

He was much more taken with what had happened to himself. He was in Hiram's gigantic, muscled body, which seemed to be even bigger. He could feel Hiram's presence, his lust for life, his ever-present back burner anger. But he was still Jefferson. "Your brains and my brawn," Hiram had said. He looked down at the ripped shreds of meat that was what was left of his original body. He always liked that suit.

THE
LAST SPECK
OF THE
WORLD

FLAVIA IDÀ

No name. No race. No nationality. The survivor of the perfect catastrophe struggles to preserve herself and her hope that she may be found — by humans.

“I am female, thirty-two, alone in the last speck of the world. My name, my race and my nationality are no longer important. I do not know why the plague has spared me. It has taken everything else. All the clocks and all the machines are dead. What keeps me breathing is the hope that I may not be the sole custodian of the planet.”

*Visit our website for more information about
“[The Last Speck of the World](#)”.*

ONE

ANOTHER NIGHT when the world seemed so beautiful she could almost be persuaded it was the work of creators. The full moon hung in the cloudless sky, dripping silver on the black expanse of the sea, and the pine trees stood tall under a crowd of stars. If the world was the work of creators, she wondered, had they created it because they were lonely?

Illuminated only by the red pulses of the beacon arcing up from her front steps, she could see the shapes of the houses rising next to hers along the bluff, no light in any window. She owned all of those houses. Were she so inclined, she could have spent every day in a different one.

Every house had its charms, every owner had made her a bequest. The owners of the house around the corner had left her a handmade quilt, those of the house next to the kindergarten a full spice cabinet, those of the house opposite the post office a grand piano. She could not use all the bequests, but they were all hers for the taking. She was the wealthiest woman in town.

The Last Speck of the World

How quiet the world had become. No more car horns, no more bird calls, no more children's laughter. No more ambulance sirens screeching day and night for miles around.

She switched on her portable music player. Lovely cascading notes, centuries old, filled every corner of the house. Sometimes she kept the music player on all the time. She had no human voices except those of the singers; without them, she would lose her mind.

In a corner of the living room sat blind and mute the television set. No more movies, no more cartoons, no more documentaries, no more nature shows, no more weather reports, no more sports events. No more news. When the world was a full nest, she'd wondered whether by hovering in space one could hear an aural corona around the planet, the incessant buzz and hum of billions of souls and billions of machines talking to each other.

On a corner of the desk sat unused the computer, once king of tools and mighty messenger of the earth. The net wide as the world had no more dots to connect. The only thing the machine was still useful for was keeping a castaway's log.

She'd never felt the desire to keep a log. Among all the endless needs of everyone who ever lived, she needed a sense of purpose. Her only purpose now was to preserve her life; chronicling day in and day out the diminished, tiresome tasks she had to perform in order to preserve her life seemed a waste of time. And who would read her log?

She was familiar with stories of castaways marooned on desert islands; everyone was. Humans, exquisitely social animals, had been fascinated by the speculation of what they would have done if they had been deprived of each other's company.

One story told of a sailor who was the sole survivor of a shipwreck; another told of a young girl who was the sole survivor of a massacre. Both had endured long enough to be rescued, after a number of years. She could have never imagined that she would be a castaway on a desert island encompassing the planet.

But if she ever decided to write a log, she knew what the first entry would sound like:

I am female, thirty-two years of age. I live in the last speck of the world, on a bluff above a barren sea. My name is not important. There is no one to call me by my name. My race is not important. There are no longer races. My nationality is not important. There are no longer nations. It is now ten months, three weeks and five days since I was appointed custodian of the planet. All the machines are dead. All the clocks have stopped. I do not know why the plague has spared me. It has taken everyone I loved, everyone I hated and everyone I never met. Not a day goes by when I don't think about ending my life. What keeps me breathing is the hope that perhaps I am not the sole custodian of the planet.

She went to the kitchen, lighted like every room in the house by industrial-strength, motion-activated flashlights she'd screwed to the walls under the ceiling. After she'd remained alone, she'd slipped into the habit of talking to herself.

"Hmmm, do I want to cook tonight? No, not tonight. I'll make a cup of tea and ... I'll have some cookies, yes, and some peaches."

From the cupboard she took a can of peaches, and from the cutlery drawer the most important of her kitchen utensils, the can opener. She checked the expiration date on the can: still good for ten months. On the label were two smiling farmers holding full baskets, along with the words "All Natural" and "Pesticide Free". Not that it made any difference anymore — no farmers, no pesticides, no problem. She hummed the jingle that had made some shoppers want to buy that brand of canned peaches and not another.

She remembered the taste of fresh peaches, their pink fuzzy skin, their sweet juice on her lips. She missed fresh foods — milk in dewy bottles, raw tuna tasting of the ocean, apple pie warm from the oven, ripe tomatoes scented with basil. She missed all fresh life.

The Last Speck of the World

Her cutlery and cups were plastic, her plates and bowls were paper. Water was too precious to waste on washing metal, china and glass. Instead, she cleaned her cooking pots by wiping them with paper towels. She used only the kettle, a pot and a pan.

One thing she didn't mind washing was her favorite mug, made of sparkling white porcelain and graced with the gold logo of her alma mater. She'd never been one to get attached to material things, but if she lost the mug she'd be as close to grief as one can be after losing everything else.

The kettle was whistling. She poured hot water into the mug with the teabag in it, put the mug, a spoon, the cookies and the peaches on a tray, and went to sit on the patio.

The moon had dipped in those ten minutes or so. It was no longer above the pine trees but behind them, a bright faraway dot crisscrossed with the mingled black outlines of the branches. If she had spent those ten minutes looking only at the moon, she would have seen it move with her naked eye. My God, she thought, does the earth spin that fast? One could go mad thinking about it.

The tea was fragrant, the peaches not too tin-tasting, the cookies not too stale. She ate and drank slowly, savoring the night breeze, listening to the windchimes and to the sea that never sleeps. Then she went back inside and closed the patio door. She didn't have to worry about dangers from humans or animals, not even a mosquito bite, but the habit still made her feel safer.

She dumped the empty aluminum can, the plastic fork, the paper bowl and the cellophane wrappers into a single trash bag, and put the bag in a trash can by the front door. There was no longer any need for her to sort trash for recycling, but she still used only compostable bags. She hated having to throw away what remained in cans and jars when she didn't finish the contents, but she had no choice; she could neither refrigerate the leftovers nor feed them to animals.

Tomorrow she would cook — perhaps the basmati with saffron her neighbor never got to make. Saffron had been the most expensive spice on the planet; she bought it only as a special treat. Now she could have all the saffron she wanted, but she still used it seldom, so it would not lose its specialness.

Time for bed. Like so many of her days now, she'd spent the day bicycling, walking, pushing, lifting and carrying heavy provisions. The provisions she would need to get tomorrow were lighter, but would require more bicycling and more walking.

In the bathroom, the bathtub she could no longer use was stacked with jugs of bottled water for flushing the toilet, the purest water that ever flushed a toilet. Some of it came from mountain springs halfway across the world.

She cleaned herself with hospital cloths, then toweled off. Bath towels were the one household item made of cloth she still used. She reasoned they were for the drying of a clean face and clean body, so they never got dirty enough to need washing too often.

She opened her medicine cabinet, studiously avoiding the mirror; she wasn't sure she wanted to see the results of having to cut her own hair. In the medicine cabinet she kept a tube of lipstick and a small container of mascara. She no longer used makeup, but she didn't want to throw away the two last items she'd bought.

Only three tablets of the sleep drug left. She'd have to get another month's supply tomorrow without fault. After water and food, the drug was her third highest priority. She'd never needed it before; now she couldn't do without it.

She was grateful for the drug in the same measure as she detested it. Every time she took it, she was reminded that for all intents and purposes she had become an addict. She wouldn't call it medication; no doctor had prescribed it for her. It had been prescribed by whatever it was that had stopped the world and wiped out her peace of mind.

She swallowed the tablet with a sip of water. The drug worked quickly. It spared her the harrowing limbo between the time her mind could no longer stay busy with today and the time it could not yet get busy with tomorrow; the time that ambushed her with the thought of all the things she could not change. She switched off her music player and was soon fast asleep.

Outside, the beacon kept pulsing, as it had done without interruption for ten months, three weeks and five days.

MEMORY AND METAPHOR

ANDREA MONTICUE

Civilization fell. It rose. At some point, people built starships.

A millennium after the Earth was abandoned to climate change and resource depletion, Sharon Manders wakes up in a body that used to belong to somebody else, and some say she was a terrorist. She has no idea how she could be digging for Pleistocene bones in Africa one day, and crewing on a starship the next. That was just before she met the wolfman, the elf, and the sex robot.

Struggling with distressingly unreliable memories, the expectations of her host body's family and crewmates, future shock, and accusations of treason, Sharon goes on the lam to come face to face with terrorists, giant bugs, drug cartels, AIs, and lawyers.

All things considered, she'd rather be back in 21st Century California.

*Visit our website for more information about
["Memory and Metaphor"](#).*

2

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S HARON MANDERS WOKE UP SCREAMING.

Then stopped because she couldn't remember why she was screaming. It hadn't been much of a scream. Mostly it was just the thought of a scream, as very little sound had left her dry, raspy throat. She also didn't remember being in bed, but she was.

Sharon tried to remember going to bed, and discovered that she couldn't remember much of anything at all. She opened her eyes with a squinting, fluttering, almost painful motion. The room was dimly lit from some light coming from outside her field of vision. She could also see what looked like LEDs, and hear the soft humming of electronic equipment.

All of this went through her mind in mere moments before the lights came on, causing her to close her eyes tearfully.

She heard the sound of a door opening and sensed that somebody entered the room.

"Simmons!" a man said with a sound of total surprise.

Sharon cracked her eyelids open and tried to sit up. That is to say, she sent the signals from her brain to her spinal cord to start the process of sitting up, but nothing happened. It was difficult to tell where her body stopped and the rest of the universe started, as if her entire body was paresthetic and unresponsive.

The man was about thirty, clean-shaven and had short, neat hair. He looked horrified, paused only a moment and then became very busy studying medical instruments and mumbling to himself.

Hospital. I'm in a hospital. Something happened. Am I paralyzed?

She could see an IV bottle of clear fluid connected to her arm. The words on the label were too small to read.

Sharon made another effort to sit up and her muscles tried dutifully to respond, but this only brought on dizziness, pain, and a reaction from the man.

He said something in an accent that was so foreign that Sharon didn't immediately understand, but concluded that it was something like, "No. Don't try to sit up."

"Good idea," she mouthed, but it sounded hoarse, dry, and unrecognizable, so she sucked on her tongue to generate saliva. She wanted to examine her head with her hand, but her arm felt like molten lead, and responded by going in random directions. She let it fall back down.

"Simmons," the man held a light in front of her face. "Follow the light with just your eyes."

Sharon still didn't quite understand the words, but the gesture and intent was obvious. She understood by the cadence and patterns that the man was calling her *Simmons*.

Who is Simmons, and why is he calling me that?

Her name was Sharon Manders, though at the moment she felt lucky to remember that much, because the rest of her life was a vast darkness. She concentrated on following the light.

"Good," the man said, though it sounded more like "goot". A name patch on his well-pressed shirt read *Bradford, MD*. "Listen to me carefully, Simmons," he continued. "You had a nasty head wound and brain trauma. Do you remember being injured?"

Though she could tell the man was speaking some form of English, it was like listening to somebody with an extreme regional accent like Creole or Appalachian. Sharon parsed out what she did understand and filled in the gaps as if it was a verbal crossword puzzle. She tried to say "No", but her tongue still felt huge and as if it was upholstered with sandpaper. She tried to shake her head, but only managed a minor tremble.

Dr. Bradford mumbled some more, then produced a cup and a spoon. He offered her a spoonful of ice chips. "Here, let these sit on your tongue."

The ice melted in her mouth, lubricating her tongue and throat. It felt marvelous.

She swallowed the cold fluid and her larynx no longer felt like a gravel road.

"No," she finally whispered.

"Your EPU died," Dr. Bradford said as if it should mean something. "You'll have to make do without until we can grow you another."

Sharon could feel the spot in her head that had been damaged. It was numb. Or more accurately: it was more numb than the rest of her body.

"Simmons, this is important. You've been in a coma for twenty-three days. Your body will take some time to recover. Don't try to move yet. Get your equilibrium back."

Sharon wanted to tell Dr. Bradford that she wasn't Simmons and that, beyond that, she couldn't tell him who else she was.

Did the head wound have something to do with why I woke up screaming?

"What do you remember?" the doctor asked.

While pondering questions of memory, Sharon's mind made wild associations between faces, places and events that seemed fantastical, she realized that her eyes were closed and she'd fallen

asleep. The dreams hinted at a past life in which she did important things.

She lay there, listening to gentle electronic beeps and the occasional muffled sounds of human speech coming from beyond a door while sorting out the dream images.

As she opened her eyes, the room lights came on dimly. With great effort, she carefully rolled onto her side. While this was a vast improvement over her previous attempt at fine motor function, there was still a sense that her body and brain were learning to cooperate again. She had to concentrate on one movement at a time. When she finally succeeded, she saw that she was the lone occupant of a long, narrow room with half a dozen empty hospital beds.

It was a medical room, but beyond that she had no idea where she was. There were no windows. She was looking at a handle-less door. There was some writing on the wall, but it was too small, and the room was too dark to read it.

The door opened by sliding sideways into the wall. Dr. Bradford walked in, causing the room lights to brighten.

"Good evening, Simmons," he said with a forced smile and his strange accent. "Glad to see you're back among the living." He started mumbling to himself again.

Sharon made a successful attempt to find something akin to a voice. "Uh ... hi. I'm not Simmons."

Bradford continued mumbling for a few seconds then looked directly at Sharon's face. "I beg your pardon?"

Sharon spoke again, this time doing her best to duplicate Bradford's drifted vowels and mutated consonants. "Hee. Uhm net Zeemuhns."

After a few moments of awkward silence, he said, "Well, then. That will certainly come as a surprise to everybody else." He pulled up a chair. "Who are you then?"

Sharon was overcome with the feeling that she had said the wrong thing — that she should have kept quiet about her identity.

But why?

"Sharon Manders. Was there an accident? Maybe we were mistaken for each other."

Bradford chewed his lip, mumbled some more, folded his right arm across his chest and rubbed his jaw with his left hand. "Not unless you and Specialist Carol Simmons have identical DNA."

Sharon struggled to figure out what all this meant, and her brain was too sluggish to give concrete responses.

Bradford looked worried about something. "What year is this?"

Sharon had no idea, but numbers seemed to form in her consciousness. "Thirteen?"

Bradford kept a straight face. "Thirteen what?"

Sharon shook her head. "I dun' know," she said with a puff of breath.

"What else do you remember?"

Sharon tried to remember anything. Her mother. Her job. The president.

She asked, "Who's the president?"

"The president of what?"

Sharon almost said the name of something ... a country. She closed her eyes trying to conjure up images of important things.

• • •

Sharon ran, swam, and even jumped rope while singing some inane rhyme. She mastered one physical skill and moved to another. She threw a ball, performed some archery, and rode a horse. Her body was remembering how to do all these things. The year was nineteen —

Then she woke up.

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