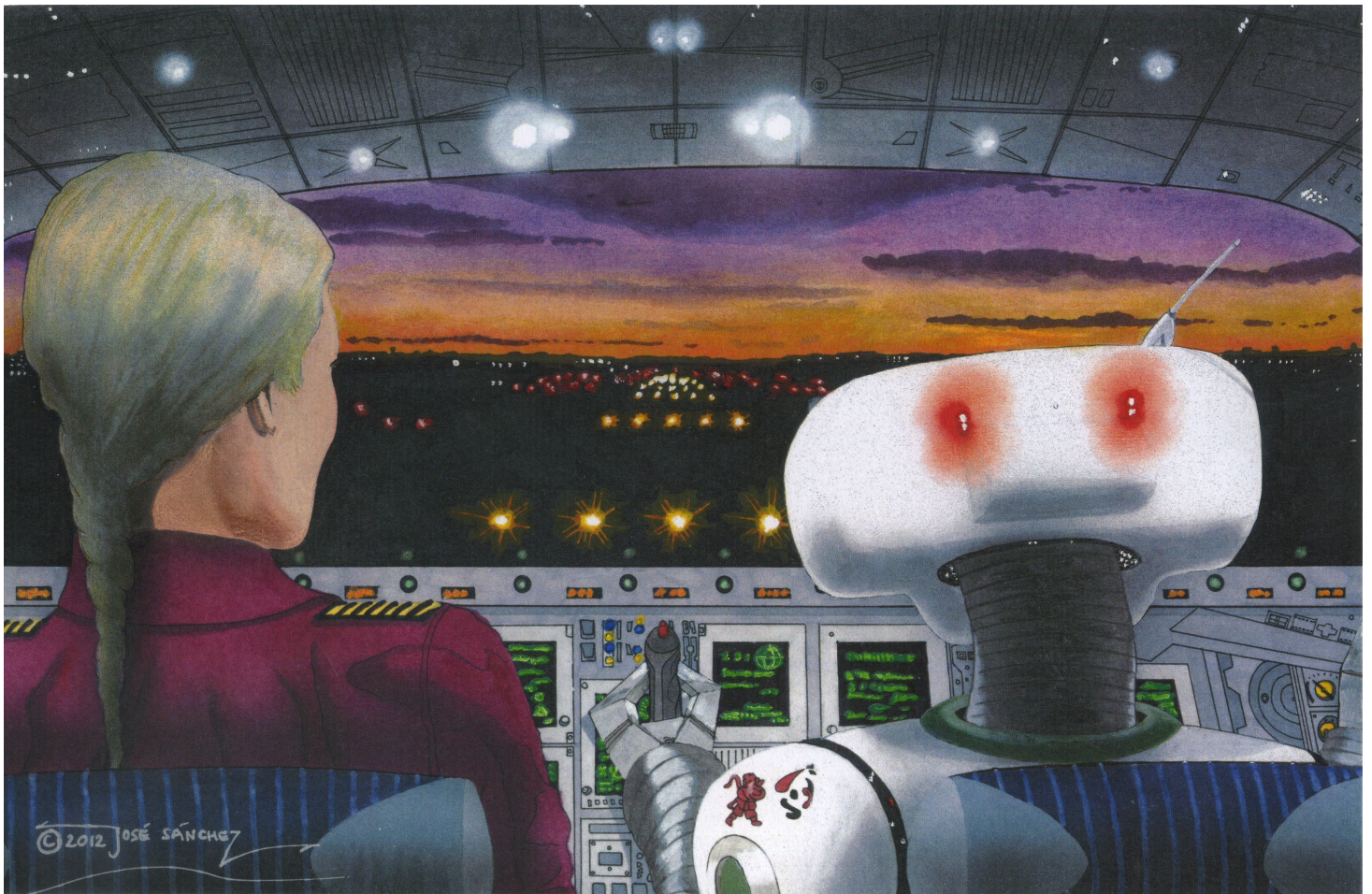


Eldritch Science

November 2018



On Final Approach

Jose Sanchez

Editorial

First, a significant error in the last issue. In setting up the bylines, we scrambled author names. AIIA is by Fiona Jones. Big Bad Bob is by Ray Nelson

Humble apologies.

Second, we have a new content item: First Chapters! Yes, if you are a Neffer and have published novels, send us the first chapter (and, if you wish, the cover image), and we'll publish it as an introduction to your tale

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Thrill Ride

By Shami Stovall

Weddings were generally dull, but after fifty-six times through with the exact same couple, on the exact same day, dull wasn't a strong enough word to describe the mind-numbing festivities. But weddings involved a lot of people, which meant plenty of opportunities to make my own fun.

"Attention, everyone," the best man shouted into his microphone, silencing the music. "I won't take much of your time. I just want to congratulate Charlie and Lissa. We all knew this day was coming, but seriously, what took you guys so long to tie the knot?"

Laughter spread throughout the vapid crowd. The guests lifted their glasses and cheered. Even the first time I heard his short speech, I hadn't been impressed, and now it grated at my limited patience.

How banal.

I needed to find something to enliven my evening. It took all of my willpower not to set the place on fire, but I knew that wouldn't result in the kind of raw emotion I wanted. Living life like an average person--going through the motions--it lacked all spark and exhilaration.

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I kept returning to the wedding, hoping to find a situation or person that piqued my interest since so many were here. There had to be something I never tried before. Something exciting and not on the schedule.

With stiff motions I slipped through the crowd, never making eye contact, my attention focused on the trite slice of cake I had on my plate. I side-stepped the drunken windbag doing his karaoke--I knew his every wobbly movement by heart--and avoided the urchins playing tag in the dining room despite their mother's constant ineffective reprimands.

Where to sit?

Where hadn't I sat before?

I looked up from my cake to take in the surroundings.

My chest filled with a flutter of anticipation the moment I spotted my favorite person. He wouldn't be predictable. Things always got interesting when I involved him. Always.

I sauntered over and took a seat at the rickety foldout table. The corner of the room offered protection from the cacophony of dullards all around us, and I appreciated the semi-private space.

Simon, the only other occupant, didn't move when I joined him. He kept himself bundled in a black puffy jacket, his eyes focused on the plate in front of him, drilling a hole into his food as though he couldn't see it at all.

I stabbed my cake and broke it apart, trying to act normal--trying to hide my excitement. The icing slid across the cheap paper plate.

"Hello," I said.

Simon looked up, his blue eyes momentarily flashing with some sort of intense emotion. Hate? Fear? I didn't know. But it disappeared as quickly as it came, his vacant gaze afterward a disappointment.

"How are you enjoying the wedding, Lukas?" Simon asked, quiet and without enthusiasm.

"It's hard to enjoy anything you've seen hundreds of times before."

Simon lifted an eyebrow. "Did the best man practice his speech with you?"

The struggle to hold in my laughter prevented me from answering straight away. "That's not what I'm saying," I whispered.



Art by Angela K. Scott...Goblin

"I don't know what you mean then."

No one knew. It always amused me to explain it all, even if it would be forgotten in an instant. After I finished mutilating my cake, I leaned forward and smiled. "The best man is about to spill his drink. Wait for it."

Right on cue, the best man fumbled and with his second glass of champagne. It slid from his hand and shattered across the floor, eliciting a grasp from the cows of the audience. He shrugged off the ordeal, grinning like a fool, and threw down a few napkins.

“Technical difficulties,” he said.

Everyone laughed.

Well, everyone but me and Simon.

“And now some fat buffoon will attempt to help,” I continued, keeping my voice low, “but he’ll only make the situation worse.”

As though my words were a script, and everyone in the room mere actors for my amusement, an older man, heavy set and breathing hard, got up from his chair. He carried over a fistful of napkins but tripped on a speaker cord underfoot. He stumbled forward, hit the edge of a table, and then slammed to the floor. Food and drinks went flying. More glass shattered across the concrete floor of the community center, creating a hazard that would eventually cut some idiotic cleaning woman later in the evening.

The other guests jumped up and rushed over.

Now it was my turn to get a chuckle.

“It isn’t a wedding without a few hiccups,” the best man said into the microphone, repairing the jovial atmosphere with his laidback attitude. The crowd lifted their glasses and cheered at his sentiment.

Simon returned his attention to me, his complexion wan under the fluorescent lighting. “You’re drunk, Lukas,” he said. “Or do you really expect me to believe you can see the future?”

“I don’t see the future. I live through it. Over and over again.”

“Maybe you should go home,” he said after he took a bite of his cake. “You’re bringing down the mood.”

I chortled. Then I jabbed my fork into the last of my spongy dessert, puncturing the plate. “No one ever believes me when I tell them. I thought you would be different. I guess I was wrong.”

Simon finished his glass of champagne but didn’t offer further commentary. How disappointing. Then again, maybe I could still get a reaction

out of him. Something to entertain me while the charade of human life continued on around us.

“It happened one night,” I said, meeting his gaze with my own. “I was depressed. In too much debt. Bank foreclosing on my house. Divorce paperwork in the mail. Some circumstances eat at a person. You know what I mean.”

Simon ran his thumb over the ring on his finger. He hated whenever I alluded to his ex-wife.

I continued, “So I loaded a gun, brought it to my temple, and right before I pulled the trigger I heard this whispering.”

He stared without blinking, his muscles tense.

“The susurrations spoke to me, like the darkness itself dared me to say its name.”

“You must have been dreaming,” Simon said.

“Maybe. But then I said it. The name of the darkness.” I slammed my hand on the table, toppling over Simon’s glass and causing him to flinch.

“And?” he asked.

“And then I went back. To before everything went wrong. Years of time. All undone.”

The groom picked up the microphone and shouted, “I’m so grateful for our lovely community! I moved to Alcombry ten years ago, thinking I needed a change. Little did I know my life would change forever when I met soulmate, Lissa, at the grocery store.”

The crowd awed, followed by a hearty round of clapping. Then the lights dimmed, casting our corner in shadows, and the happy couple started their dance.

Simon moved to the edge of his seat, his gaze hard set. “You should just enjoy the celebration, Lukas.”

“I’ve done that already. A few times. Because every time I whisper the name of the darkness, I go back. I used it to relieve the best moments in my life. A hundred times over.”

And I kept going back. Again and again. Doing everything perfectly, whenever I made a mistake. Falling in love, experiencing the first date, the first kiss, the heated moments in bed--but slowly it lost all meaning, lost all luster. So then I made new friends. Had new first dates. Fell in love with others. Had those first moments all over again.