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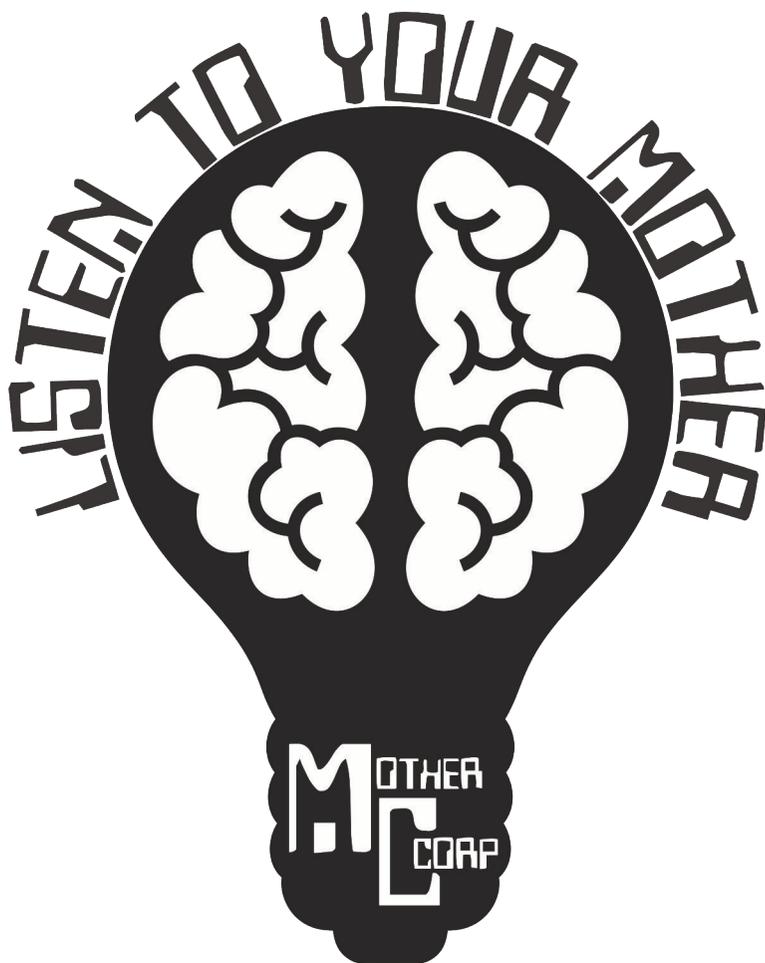


Sci-Fi LAMPPOON

Magazine



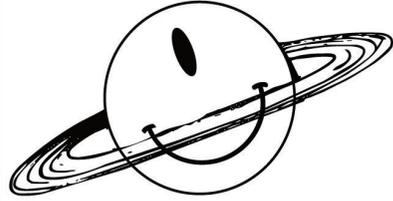
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**KEEP MAKING THAT FACE AND
I'LL FREEZE IT THAT WAY**

SCI-FI LAMPOON

magazine



SUMMER MMXXIII

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Sci-Fi Lampoon Magazine Vol. 5, Issue 1 Summer MMXXIII is published on a sometimesly schedule by I.C. "No Pun Achieved" Kreisberg in Woodside, NY which is in the most diverse place on the entire planet! Western Queens. Come for the food, stay because the MTA makes it hard to leave. The front cover is by Ian K. using images from the August 1926 issue of *Amazing Stories Quarterly* and the second February 1944 issue of *Ranch Romances*. We'll try to only "punch up" with our humor, and crave your pardon if we mess that up. This book was typeset in Bodoni 72 with titles set in Antique No. 14 and Matinee Idol. Tombstones are in Alienator because that's what I use when I'm feeling lazy, and drop caps are in Antique No. 14 and our social media icons are designed by Starline / Freepik. Sometimes I put messages or funny content here, but I've just been swamped lately and don't have it in me to do anything meaningful here. I crave your pardon. We got a party on the left, a party on the right. We gonna party for the motherfucking right to fight.

The Massacre on Pluto—A Fleishman and Graves Tale

Kieran Ryan

My name is Richard Graves and I live on Junkland.

Junkland is made from trash, so life here isn't exactly a picnic. In fact, going on a picnic is probably the last thing you'd want to do on Junkland. Still, it does have its good points. Lots of people die here, for example, and when you're an undertaker like me, that means money. And sometimes...sometimes something amazing happens, an opportunity that is just so good you can't let it pass. Let me tell you about one of those times.

* * *

It was a Wednesday—my least favorite day of the week. The glow of the previous weekend had faded and the upcoming two days of debauchery were still too far away to stir any excitement.

Outside, it was gray and rainy. I was ensconced in my usual spot, a tattered old armchair in the corner of the office, pretending to work. Chrissy, our intern, was plonked on a high stool in the small but

spectacularly messy kitchen area, where she had cleared a tiny working space for herself. She had spent the morning skilfully deflecting calls from our many creditors. She was learning some very useful transferable skills with Fleishman and Graves.

My business partner, Bruce Fleishman, was at his desk engrossed in his daily morning routine of eating through two packets of biscuits and reading the newsfeeds headlines. Fleishman moves his lips while he reads, and as a result, crumbs fall from his mouth and settle on his suit jacket. There's no escape, however, and every day, when the second packet is gone, Fleishman skillfully scoops up the stray fragments from his belly and tosses them down his gullet. It used to bother me, but I guess I've grown used to it over the years. I listened abstractly to him while he read, picking up some of the mumbled words.

“Scientists grow buttock in lab...*yawn*...rock gains

sentience...*Star Wars: Episode CXCVIII* released..."

Then, Fleishman abruptly stopped dead like he'd been hit on the head with an astro-hammer. He whispered something once, then twice, then a third time.

This was not like him—something was up. I sat upright and leaned in. I could faintly make out the words.

"Massacre...Pluto...Massacre Pluto! MASSACRE PLUTO!"

Fleishman stood up in a cloud of crumbs. "Oh, my Gods!" he cried, "today is our lucky day! Massacre on Pluto! Two thousand dead!"

Chrissy, who's a Goth and normally a big fan of death and dead people, shrugged in puzzlement.

"Don't you see, Chrissy?" blustered Fleishman, his face getting red with excitement. "It's an open tender. Two thousand dead and they're paying a flat fee per gram of flesh! We don't even need to reassemble the bodies. It's a win-win!"

Fleishman began to count on his stubby fingers. "Two thousand multiplied by lots of cash equals...lots and lots of cash! Oh yes, this is the one we've been waiting for! I knew our luck would change!"

By now, Fleishman was almost hyperventilating with excitement. "Chrissy, get the flights booked," he wheezed. "Graves, my old friend, you're going to Pluto!"

Two hours later and I was standing outside Junkport, the

biggest spaceport on Junkland. Fleishman had moved fast, and before I could come up with a convincing excuse, he had packed me off to tender for this messy but lucrative project. In one hand, I held a hastily packed travel bag, and in the other I had the one-hundred-and-eighty-page tender application dossier.

I looked down in disdain at the reams of paper. Yes, *paper*. Only on Pluto could they be so backward. One hundred and eighty pages of questions to answer and justifications to provide. I wasn't even sure I would be able to fill it out; it was so long since I had used one of those writing things. Pencils or whatever. Fleishman had thoughtfully shoved one in my pocket before I left.

My shoulders slumped resignedly. As I turned to make my way through the entrance doors, I was greeted by a sharp poke in the eye with a stick. That was all I needed—a bloody tree person.

"Hey! Careful with those branches, buddy!" I cried, dropping my bag and rubbing my eye.

"You watch where you put your eye, *buddy*," it retorted, in that ping-pong-ball-in-the-mouth way that tree people talk. "You could have knocked off some of my twigs."

"Yeah, but your twigs grow back and my eye doesn't!" I scowled and gave the tree a little shove. Big mistake.

"So, it's like that is it? You want a piece of me?" The tree person

lifted itself up and raised up two enormous branches so that it resembled a boxer about to go into combat.

I wasn't about to get into fisticuffs (or whatever it's called when a human fights a tree), so instead, in a moment of inspiration, I pulled out the pencil, grinned and said, "I already have a piece of you!" before running for my life into the melee of the spaceport, the tree person's expletives ringing in my ears.

The flight to Pluto wasn't for another hour, so I bought the cheapest cup of coffee I could find and headed for the economy waiting area. The seats were quadruple-decker and I spotted an empty spot fifth from the end on the top row. *Excellent*, I thought. At least I wouldn't have someone else's legs dangling in my face while I waited. Fleishman was adamant that expenses could not and would not be paid, so I had brought a convenience store lunch with me. It was one of those new zero waste meals where you can eat the box as well as the contents. After two bites, the taste was so bad, I chucked the contents into the nearest trash receptacle and contented myself with eating the container. It was chewy, but I've had worse.

Still hungry, I briefly considered trying a bite of the dossier. That would be one way of getting rid of it. Instead, I sighed, set it on my lap, and opened it up. The first two pages were simply a

list of contents. Satisfied that there were only one hundred and seventy-eight pages to go, I closed it up again. I flipped the pencil absent-mindedly and glanced across the packed waiting room.

Oh no.

The one person more than anyone else who I did not want to see right then was staring at me.

Angelina Morteus.

Let me tell you a little bit about Angelina. Oh, she's beautiful, there's no denying that. Long, straight black hair, curvy figure, perfect green skin. She's also successful. Very successful. Angelina has been the top-ranked employee at galactic mega-undertakers Moving On, Inc. for the last five years in a row.

The problem? She's also one of the most arrogant, coldhearted and patronizing people I know.

Angelina waved her delicate jade hand and called up to me.

"Richard! Oh, Richard! Is that really you up there?" She stepped disdainfully through the economy passengers, taking great care not to touch anyone. "Oh, how dreadful. Was there a mistake with your booking? Did they put you in economy by accident?"

I contracted the muscles in my cheeks, forcing my mouth into something that resembled a smile.

"Lovely to see you, Angelina," I said. "Yes, the spaceline messed up my booking. They're looking into it as we speak."

I somehow managed to squeeze the words out through gritted teeth.

“Oh, how awful. You poor thing, having to put up with these horrid conditions. I hope you don’t catch anything.” She let out one of her trademark high-pitched fake laughs.

“I don’t suppose its coincidence meeting you here, is it? I presume you’re on your way to tender for that big massacre job on Pluto.” Angelina’s big oval eyes lit up as she said the word *massacre*.

“Yes, that’s right. I think Fleishman and Graves have a really good chance on this one,” I replied defiantly.

Again, that fake laugh. “Oh, I’m sure you do. The dossier was quite straightforward, wasn’t it? My team completed it for me overnight. I have five copies safely stored in my luggage.”

I hastily pulled my travel bag over the dog-eared pile of paper on my lap. Angelina saw and fluttered her long, glittering eyelashes knowingly.

“Well, I’m sure you’re busy, Richard. A man like you always has lots to do. I won’t keep you any longer. Once you get everything sorted with the spaceline, come join me for a glass of Tempranillo in first class. I’d love to have a little chat with you about new opportunities...” She shot me one last, striking look. Then, with a fabulous swish, she was gone.

* * *

“We are now approaching Pluto.” The captain’s voice sounded over the space liner’s PA system. “If

your final destination is Pluto, please make preparations for arrival in two minutes.”

I gathered up the now tatty tender document. The light was so bad on board the liner, I hoped I’d done it properly. It was now completed up to page 102. Pretty good going, considering I was squashed between a sleeping Neptoidian on one side and a human mother with two bawling kids on the other.

Behind the alien, the tiny blue orb of Pluto came into view through a small porthole. I hadn’t been there for a long time, but that wasn’t long enough. Junkland was a dump, but it was infinitely preferable to Pluto. Remembering my last visit, I made a mental note not to refer to it as a *dwarf planet*. Plutonians considered that offensive. It was a small planet. *A small planet*.

A countdown timer on the back of the seat in front of me jerked me back to the present. I gulped. 10...9...8...I pulled my bag close to me and gripped it for comfort. 5...4...3...I tried to relax and forced my eyes shut. Then—

Then the world gave way and my loins hit the back of my throat. I breathed deeply and focused on not throwing up.

Feeling brave, I opened an eye. As a bird lays an egg, I had been dropped from the liner in a small, transparent landing bubble, and was now traversing the thin nitrogenous Plutonian atmosphere in said bubble.

In the near distance, I spied the sleek welcome vessel that had just picked up the first-class passengers from my flight and was, at that very moment, serving them caviar and champagne. The thought was enough to make me lose focus and the contents of my stomach bubbled up unstoppably, filling the bubble with vomit, which, free from the confines of gravity, explored each and every crevice of the vessel.

Not unreasonably, I think, my thoughts drifted back to Fleishman, sitting comfortably in our office, eating biscuits. I distracted myself for the rest of the journey with daydreams of my fingers wrapped satisfyingly around his chubby neck.

* * *

Eventually, the bubble landed in its docking station with a *plop*. The lid popped off and I emerged into a dingy, metallic holding area that smelled of boiled cabbage. It was cold, and my breath steamed up instantly. Above a small exit door, the words “W_lcomE to Pl_t_” flashed in blue neon.

I grabbed my bag, wiped myself down, and followed a bunch of other bedraggled passengers through into a larger and dingier room, where the first-class passengers had also been deposited. Resigned to our fate, we all shuffled forward slowly.

Amidst all the depressed faces, I spied Angelina, her features twisted into a horrified grimace. Finally, something to cheer me up. The line moved fast and within minutes, I was face-to-face with Pluto

immigration control, which consisted of one low-level android. It gave me cursory glance before ushering me through the exit into the arrivals hall of Tenzing Montes spaceport.

Although most of Pluto is shielded by a heated biodome, it was still brass-monkey cold when I stepped out onto the streets of Tenzing Montes. Plutonians like to call it a city, but in reality it's no more than a town by Earth standards. It's a dwarf city, if you like. It only has two hotels, and Chrissy had booked me into (surprise) the cheaper of the two. I blew into my hands and pulled my overcoat around me. I was about to hail a cab, when a shaky voice made me turn around.

“R-Richard, it's me. C-can we share a cab?”

A disheveled, pathetic-looking Angelina Morteus materialized beside me like a ghoul. She wore a figure-hugging black cocktail dress and high heels—probably the worst possible attire for Pluto—and had already started to turn from green to blue. She was holding her two bags against her low-cut dress in a hopeless effort to stave off the biting cold.

I smiled inwardly, remembering the time she grassed Fleishman and Graves to the authorities for recycling embalming fluid. Then the thought occurred to me that this could be the perfect way of getting out of a cab fare. I put an arm around her and gladly agreed to share.

All checked in and settled in the relative warmth of the (just about) two-star Tenzing Montes Motel, it was time to get down to business. If thoughts of Fleishman and Chrissy pinning their hopes on me wasn't motivation enough, the idea of beating Angelina and Moving On, Inc. certainly was. I ordered a hot whoskey (they didn't have whiskey), a bowl of chili, and a pencil sharpener, and got down to work.

Before I knew it, eight hours had passed and my alarm was sounding. Obviously, it was still the same day, since a day lasts for 152 hours on Pluto—but regardless, it was time to get moving.

I was puzzled. I appeared to be still sitting at the shabby little desk in my room, fully clothed. Confused, I extracted the pencil from my ear and peered at a skyscraper of blurry whosky glasses before me.

Oh no. What have I done?

Very little by the looks of it. The tender document lay under my chin, covered with sleepy drool. I focused my eyes enough to see the open page number. 104. That meant I had completed a grand total of two more pages! Memories of last night's writer's block came flooding back to my pounding head like a tidal wave.

Oh, my Gods, no!

I had just over two hours to complete the document, get across town to the Death Facility, and submit the tender. Ignoring the splitting pain in my skull, I licked the pencil and got stuck in. I didn't

bother with accuracy or honesty. There was no time. This was serious and I just had to get something—anything!—down on every page.

An hour later and I was done. I grabbed my overcoat and hightailed it down to the lobby. What I saw there, however, stopped me in my tracks.

Angelina was standing just outside the main entrance to my hotel, staring in through the glass door, a designer bag under her arm. She had been shopping and was now wrapped up in a very expensive creamy white Venusian albino rat fur coat.

Alone on the streets of Tenzing Montes, she may as well have had “Rob Me, I'm Rich (and Stoopid),” tattooed on her forehead. Duly obliging, an eight-foot tall Crillian, dressed in a dark cloak, rounded the corner and threw her to the pavement.

Angelina is a tough cookie, but against an attacker of that size, she didn't have a chance. I moved across the lobby, calling to the disinterested hotel concierge. He had decided that today wasn't going to be the day he had his head ripped off by an angry Crillian, and was ignoring the entire episode.

Before I reached the door, the Crillian had snatched Angelina's bag and coat and legged it. I rushed slowly outside. Angelina's normally green skin was an unhealthy white and she was shaking like a leaf. I lifted her up, brought her inside and sat her on a lobby armchair. By now,

Angelina's eyes were welling up with tears.

"T-t-the tender. They got the tender, Richard." She launched into a full-scale flood of crying.

I couldn't believe my luck! Our biggest rivals, Moving On, Inc. were out of the picture for the job! Bursting with joy inside, I put on my most solemn face and gently placed a hand on Angelina's shoulder.

"All is not lost, Angelina," I said earnestly. "I'm going after him."

I knew the Crillian would be long gone, but here was a chance to gain a few brownie points with a beautiful woman. Yes, I know I hate her, but let's be honest, I'm shallow.

Angelina looked up at me, surprised. "You'd do that for me, Richard? Really?"

I narrowed my eyes and gritted my teeth, trying to look like one of those heroes from an action movie. "This is a tough business, Angelina. We have to look out for one another. Stay here and stay safe. If I'm not back in an hour, call the police."

Yep, I thought, that's plenty of time for the Crillian to get away. He's most likely on a ship to somewhere else in the galaxy by now.

I flexed my hands into fists and waltzed out onto the cold, mean streets of Tenzing Montes with the broadest smile on my face.

It was still early by Pluto standards, and apart from the odd pedestrian, the streets were quiet. Enjoying the performance, I thrust a hand dramatically to my left and started sprinting in that direction.

Twenty meters on the street came to a T-junction, and safely out of sight of the hotel windows, I puffed to a halt.

I was consumed by an overwhelming joy that even the aching in my lungs couldn't dim. Finally, finally Fleishman and Graves had lucked out! The trip to Pluto, all the time wasted filling in that damn tender, it was all worth it. We were going to get the job! Fleishman and Graves were going to win!

Ecstasy isn't a feeling I get very often, and I was going to enjoy it. Lost in the moment, I glanced casually to my left. What morning traffic there had been blocked by something on the road. My curiosity was piqued. I should have turned around and gone straight back to the hotel, but I didn't...and that was when things started to get complicated.

I jogged the short distance to the traffic jam. People had started to gather around. I tapped a young man on the shoulder. "What's happened?" I asked him.

"Hit and run," he replied. "Air-car hit that poor Crillian. Looks bad. I don't think he'll make it."

The words bounced around inside my skull. *Hit and run. Crillian. Looks bad.*

Could it be?

I pushed forward and looked in on the scene of the crime. There was no doubt about it—the crumpled figure lying in a pool of green blood was the thief that had taken Angelina's stuff. I'd seen

enough dead bodies to know that this was another one. *So what*, I thought. *Doesn't change anything.*

Or did it? I racked my brain for ways that this could play out. What if the cops found the bag, traced it to Angelina, and she got the tender back? Unlikely, knowing the police on Pluto, but it could happen. There was a chance.

The brief taste of ecstasy gone, I began to frantically search the area. A short way down the road, I found it—Angelina's shiny black designer bag, now scuffed and bent. I scooped it up. It smelled of expensive perfume. Now, what to do with it? Gone, I needed it *gone*. It didn't matter how, but this bag needed to get destroyed right now. I scanned the streets of Tenzing Montes like a madman, looking for a trash receptacle, or a drain, or some sort of bag-eating alien.

Then the worst happened. A voice called my name and the blood drained from my veins.

"Richard! My hero! You did it, you found my bag!"

It was Angelina.

I sat in the front seat of the cab, staring forlornly out the window as the cold, grey mountains of Pluto sped past. I shivered, all traces of warmth gone from my body. Five more minutes and we would be at the Plutonian Municipal Death Facility.

I looked down at the beat-up tender document on my lap and sighed. A new ball of emotion welled up in my chest. This was the usual deathly cocktail of anger,

disappointment, and frustration that I recognized only too well. It sat cozily under my ribcage where it belonged, like an old pair of worn-out slippers.

My eyes moved to the rear-view mirror where the source of all my woes sat reflected, absent-mindedly scrolling through messages on her datapad.

"It's all her fault, Graves," the ball in my stomach scoffed.

Angelina lifted her eyes, catching sight of me in the mirror. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. She tried again and this time a small, "Richard," squeaked out.

"Richard, if it wasn't for you ..." she said.

The air-car pulled up in front of a large black cube that had a Plutonian Municipal Death Facility sign stuck on its front. We got out in silence and walked side-by-side up to the main door.

"Richard, I know we haven't always seen eye to eye," Angelina murmured, "and I know I haven't always been very nice to you guys. I'm sorry about that business with the embalming fluid. And the whole psychic plain inspector episode."

"And undercutting us on the death cult contract?" I added.

"And that too," she replied, with a sigh. "Look, the thing is that my job is everything to me. Maybe too much sometimes. Outside of Moving On, Inc. I don't really have anything else. I don't have a partner, or a pet, or much in the way of hobbies either. Work defines me,

Richard. But what you did back there, well, it really touched me. You know, no one has ever gone out of their way to help me like that before.”

Angelina looked at me with those big, beautiful yellow eyes and shuffled in her fur-lined stilettos. Something warm stirred inside me and for the briefest second I was almost glad I had given her the bag back.

That’s why,” Angelina said, “I have decided not to submit our tender. It’s all yours, Richard. You and Bruce deserve this. Screw HQ. Moving On, Inc. will not be going up against you this time.”

I stood there dumbstruck. Had my ears heard this amazing, gorgeous, fabulous woman correctly? Moving On, Inc. was dropping out and the contract was all ours? Angelina climbed back into the cab and called out the window to me.

“I’m going to head back, get on the next flight out of here. I’ll leave the rest to you, Richard. I look forward to seeing you back on Junkland. Thank you again.”

The cab pulled off and I skipped into the building following the red MASSACRE signs. I always knew deep down that Angelina was a good egg. Maybe I should give her a call when I got home. My faith in the galaxy restored, I knocked on the MASSACRE door, and waited with bated breath.

The shriveled-up little bureaucrat that called me through seemed astonished to see me. He

sat behind a knobbly wooden desk, an empty tray in front of him. I smiled and pointed to the sign on the door. “Fleishman and Graves from Junkland. I’m here to submit a tender for that massacre job. I presume I’m in the right place?”

The man moved, disturbing a layer of dust that had formed on his bald head. He adjusted the thick spectacles resting on his nose. “Yes, yes, the Sputnik Plains massacre. You are in the right place. I’d given up hope of anyone coming.”

He glanced at an oversized watch on his wrist. “We haven’t received any tenders yet and unless we get another one in the next ten seconds, the job is yours.” Ten seconds passed. “Congratulations, you win,” the old man said, with all the emotion of a bowl of prunes.

My heart soared like a kite. I wanted to sing, I wanted to dance, but experience had taught me to be cautious. “Do you not want to read our tender?” I asked.

“No need,” he replied croakily. “I’m sure it’s all fine.”

Could it be? Had we really done it? My mind raced, thinking of all the wonderful things we could do with the money. A new hearse, a vacation on Mercury, or even, dare I think it, a swanky night on the town with Angelina Morteus. “Is it too early to get down to signing contracts?” I said, wanting to put the thing to bed.

“My, you are enthusiastic,” the old man said. A family of spiders that had been resting behind his

right ear scuttled away. “Well, no time like the present, I suppose.”

He took a piece of yellowed paper from his desk drawer and placed it down in front of me. “Just sign here and here and we’re all done.”

I shakily signed in the right places and shoved the paper back to him. He peered down and nodded slowly. “Seems to be all in order. So, when would you like to begin?”

“Well, this is going to be a major logistical operation,” I began, slipping into work mode. “I’ll need to call my colleagues back on Junkland to start the preparations. I imagine within a couple of days...”

The look on the old man’s face made me stop. Beneath the thick glass of his spectacles, I could see his eyes widen. The wrinkles on the wrinkles on his forehead wrinkled.

“Did you get the latest memo?” he asked. “The one we sent out this morning? The one with the clarifications?”

“I...” I replied. I pulled my datapad from the inside pocket of my overcoat. 176 missed calls from Bruce Fleishman. I felt weak.

“Tell me.” I gulped. “What clarifications?”

“Oh, don’t worry, nothing has changed. It’s still 2,000 dead. It’s still a flat fee per gram of flesh.”

He reached back into the desk drawer and removed a small box covered in intricate, swirly carvings.

“Just some clarifications about the nature of the deceased,” he said, turning the box over in his hands. “It was a particularly bloody battle.

No one left alive. That’s what you get with ant people. Vicious race, they are.”

He leaned forward and handed me the box. “Here you go, they’re all in here.”

“All?” I said faintly.

“Yes, they’re in bits, but all 2,000 are in there. Take good care of them and give them a nice burial back on Junkland, won’t you? Something moving. According to our official measurements, they weigh just over a gram, in total. The money will be credited to your account in the next few days.”

I put the box in my pocket, left the building, and howled as the huge moon of Charon sat on the horizon and smirked down on me.

The distant sun was a tiny yellow pinprick in the Plutonian sky. I stared up at it miserably on the cold walk back to Tenzing Montes. When all the bills were paid, Fleishman and Graves would be thousands out of pocket after this one.

I pulled the little box from my pocket. It was all their fault—stupid, violent little creatures. The ant sarcophagus gleamed in what little light there was. It *was* beautiful. Moving to the edge of the sandy road, I pulled it open and emptied out all the tiny little pieces of ant people, wiping the inside clean with my sleeve. I squashed them down under the sole of my shoe. Served them right. Maybe I could pawn the box back in Junktown—get back some of the lost money. It certainly

looked valuable. My spirits lifted ever so slightly.

And had the trip been a complete failure? What about Angelina? I had always hated her, but why? She was good at her job; she was the best. Sure, she'd burned us a few times, but I would have done the same to her. And how could I forget about her withdrawing her tender? "You and Bruce deserve this," she had said. Plus, she was attractive. So very attractive. I pictured those alluring yellow eyes gazing back at me in the cab mirror. Those wonderful eyes that had, moments before, shone down on her datapad.

Shone down on her datapad...

Wait a second! She had spent the entire cab trip reading messages on her datapad. The awful truth dawned on me. She knew! Angelina knew about the ant people all along!

I fell to my knees and for the second time that day, let out such a long, heart-piercing roar of anguish that the cosmos itself seemed to shake high above my head.

* * *

Back on Junkland, five billion kilometers away, Bruce Fleishman lifted his head to the sky and wondered why he felt slightly queasy. He looked down at the unopened packet of custard creams on his desk. Unusually for him, he didn't feel like eating them. Instead, he returned reluctantly to the newsfeeds, feeling strangely dispirited. No matter, the next big opportunity for Fleishman and Graves was just around the corner; he knew it in his bones. Yes, right around the corner.

Sleepy Beauty: the Truth

Art Lasky

What'd you say your name was? Phillip. Are you sure it's not Charming? You are a Prince, yes? I could tell right away; it's that touch of madness in your eyes. No offense. It's from all that royal inbreeding—not your fault.

Sit down, make yourself comfortable. Would you like something to drink? How about a little nosh? I've got some cinnamon toasted dew-drops—delicious.

Okay, okay, you want the story, I'll give you the whole story. You'll get no short cuts from me, my eager young friend.

Of course, you've heard that they blame me. It's easy for them: I'm old. These days that's an indictment, trial, and sentence in itself. It's ageism, I tell you. Ageism! And I'm a fairy, to boot; they never miss a chance to blame the fairy. I've got two strikes against me before I even get out of bed. Fairy ageism, that's what it is—the worst kind of ageism.

And do I get any support from the union? No! I spend 975 years

paying my dues, Fairy Godmothers and Affiliates Local 205, always on time, like clockwork. I never complain, just put my nose to the grindstone and my ear to the ground (an uncomfortable position, I don't have to tell you). What do I get for it? Nothing, zero, zilch, nada, bupkis! The one time I need the union's help, and where are they? Nowhere, that's where. No help. They don't even return my calls; just throw old Carabosse to the wolves.

What was your question? What's an old Carabosse? Not what, who... WHO! I'm Carabosse. Try to keep up, boy. There's not much going on in that handsome head of yours, is there?

Never mind. Where was I...?

They banished me. The momzers banished me like I'm a lice-ridden goat. All to cover their own mistake.... Their heads should grow in the ground like turnips, ptui, ptui, ptui.

That's the noise I make to indicate spitting, without actually doing it.

Yes, three times, because three is a magical number; you shouldn't have to ask such things, though. After all, this is a fairy tale...well, a fairy's tale at any rate. But I digress. Let me tell you what happened. The real story, not that nonsense those half-wit brothers Grimm go around telling people. You be the judge, maybe I'm wrong. I make mistakes, I'm only fae, after all.

Okay, okay, don't get snappy. You came for the truth? Here's the truth:

It all started twenty years ago, give or take...huh? Oh, you're a traditionalist; here you go, then:

Once upon a time, long ago, in a kingdom far, far, away (actually it was just down the road a bit, but rules are rules).

So, once upon a time, yadda, yadda, yadda, the brave, and generous King and the beautiful, beloved Queen had their first child. Whoop dee do, a big deal. Peasants are popping out babies like Pez dispensers—bang, boom, and back to the field. The Queen has a kid, and stop the presses, blow the trumpets, what a matchless accomplishment, a national holiday.

But, all right, why should I care? They put on a big party for Princess Aurora's christening. Who doesn't like a party? Free food, music, and dancing; as long as they don't expect me to cook or clean up afterward it's fine by me.

Of course, being the kingdom's senior fairy godmother-at-large, I get an invitation. A very nice invitation. The Royal Couple knew

how to do things right. I have no argument with them; it's not their fault things got out of hand.

Okay, I know, I'm getting to it; you want to know the real story of the castle wrapped in that impassable, thorny tangle of a bramble patch. (Its blackberries are delicious, by the way.) And don't think you fooled me with your "I'm just looking to save an enchanted kingdom" shtick. You heard a hot babe is sleeping in there, waiting for love's first kiss. And I'm not dumb enough to think kissing is all you've got in mind. So don't rush me. Haven't you ever heard of the three-act story structure? This is the setup.

If I may continue now: here's the problem. The invitation arrives on Monday and the christening party is set for Wednesday. Two days, I only have two days to get ready. I hadn't left my cave in twenty-three years and all of a sudden they need me at the castle in two little days. I hurried, but between hair, makeup, a new gown.... Long story short, I got to the party late.

The other fairy godmothers are all, "Oh, Carabosse, we didn't think you were coming... We would have saved you a place at our table... Dear Carabosse, we're so glad you made it, it *is* a delight to see you."

Insincere, scheming back-biters, the lot of them. If they were so glad to see me, why didn't they make room at their table for me? At least the king had the sense to order another table set for me. So what if

the legs were uneven and it wobbled? I didn't complain. I didn't even care that the table cloth was plain cotton, instead of the silk adorning the other tables. And did I complain that the other fairy godmothers were eating from gold plates decorated with jewels, and all I got was some cracked china? Well, maybe a little.

Finally, the time came for the fairies to bestow their blessings on the child. I hope you don't think they showed any originality, because they didn't. They just offered the usual boring blessings—you know, great beauty, virtue, wealth, the love of all who saw her, blah, blah, blah.

Finally, it's my turn, and I take my work seriously. You won't find me just blurting out any generic blessing. I approach the baby—cute little thing—and I study all of her possible futures. The one thing that stands out, above all else, is that the girl is going to be a klutz. She is going to be tripping, falling, dropping, breaking her way through life. Worst of all, she will surely get an infection from all those cuts.

So my blessing is obvious. I lay my hand upon her brow and say, "You're going to prick your finger on many a spindle, can't be helped. So, Princess Aurora, I bless you with a strong constitution. You're going to need it; otherwise you will die from infection when you prick your finger on a dirty spindle."

That's when the fireworks started. Maryweather, the most irritating of the other fairy

godmothers, leaped to her feet shrieking, "Did you hear that? A death curse! That evil old (again with the ageism) fairy just put a death curse on our beloved princess!"

Everyone began crying and carrying on; no one would listen to me trying to explain things. I was banished from the castle and brought before the Fairy Board of Ethics on abuse of power and dereliction of duty charges. As I mentioned before, not one shred of help from the union, but that's another story.

Meanwhile, all hell breaks loose in the kingdom. To keep the princess from pricking her finger on a spindle, the king orders every spinning wheel in the kingdom destroyed. After a few years, things simmer down. The conniving weasel Maryweather becomes Aurora's fairy godmother, and life goes on.

True to my prediction, on her sixteenth birthday, Aurora is browsing in an antique shop. What does she find? You guessed it. What does she do? Right again, she pricks her finger. Pandemonium. The crying, the shrieking until Maryweather proclaims, "I'll save the day. I will cast a spell putting the princess to sleep until awakened by love's first kiss."

Then the queen says to Maryweather, "I don't want my darling child to wake up years from now, all alone among strangers."

"Say no more," says Fairy Overreactor-in-Chief Maryweather. With an "Alakazam Bibbity Bam,"

she puts everyone, from the lowest ranking turnspit in the kitchen right up to the King and his court, right to sleep. Then, as kind of a cherry on the dung pie, she causes this wall of thorns to grow up all around and over the castle.

So there you have it, my young and eager prince.

Yes, she's beautiful.

Will I help you get in?

Well, do you love her?

Never mind you're a young man. You don't know the difference between love and lust. I will help you get in as long as you promise not to be taking any liberties.

One kiss, just one kiss. On the lips, boy, the *lips*—and keep your hands to yourself.

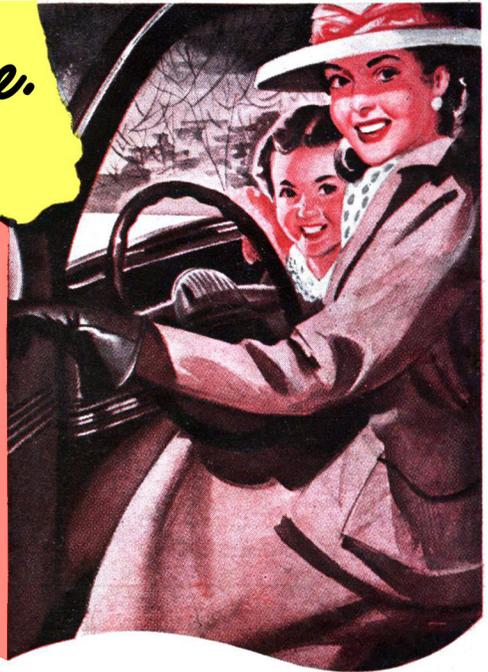
Okay, go to the north side of the bramble patch, sprinkle this fairy dust around until it reveals a road of yellow bricks. Then just follow the yellow brick road.

Oh, really? No, never heard of Oz. How curious.

Anyway, if everything works out maybe you can put a good word in with the king, and write a letter to my union. Thanks.

*Come in...
it's warm inside.
Come with us.*

'Hence for nine days' space I was borne by direful winds over the teeming deep; but on the tenth we set foot on the land of the Lotus-eaters, who eat a flowery food... and the Lotus-eaters did not plan death for my comrades, but gave them of the lotus to taste. And whosoever of them ate of the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus, had no longer any wish to bring back word or to return, but there they were fain to abide among the Lotus-eaters, feeding on the lotus, and forgetful of their homeward way...'



Call 877-690-5116 now for an appointment!

Culture Shock

Sarah Totton

People are wrong: pigs can fly—they just need jetpacks!
—*Ten Planets, Ten Days*

“Well,” said Flethers, putting his feet up on the guesthouse table and clasping his hands behind his head, “that is officially that: I’ve had my photo taken next to the Mars Crater, visited the Martian Gardens, shaken hands with a Martian, and gotten drunk on Martian cocktails. I’ve officially done Mars.”

Longear looked up from his notes and rolled his eyes.

“What?” said Flethers.

“You’ve been here for two days. When you get back to Earth you’ll show everyone the 3-D holos of you standing next to the Mars Crater (not an actual crater, by the way, but a hole dug for the tourists). Then you will proceed to bore everyone rigid for the next few Earth months, telling them stories about your Martian Adventure.”

“Oh, I know Mars,” said Flethers. “I don’t need to be an anthropologist to know Mars. I’ve

read the guidebook.”

“Yes you have. And you’ve just ended up doing what every other Mars tourist does. You haven’t had the real Mars experience.”

“All right,” said Flethers. “My ship doesn’t leave until tomorrow. Why don’t you show me this so-called ‘Real Mars Experience?’”

“Come with me,” said Longear.

“Are we going outside the dome?” said Flethers.

“No,” said Longear, “I don’t think you’re quite ready for that. We’re going to go to a Martian village.”

“A real Martian village?”

“Yes,” said Longear. “Where the actual native Martians live.”

“Do they eat tourists?” said Flethers.

“Only when they run out of cheese,” said Longear.

“They really could splurge a little and pave the roads,” said Flethers as the buggy bumped over the uneven terrain.

“They only bother to pave the

tourist roads. This is the real Mars.”

After a time, they arrived at a collection of round huts. The only sign of life was a green-skinned woman filling a jug with water from a pump.

“This is the real Mars, Flethers.”

“Hmmm....” Flethers started to look through his wallet. “I’ve still got a bit of money left. Maybe I can buy a souvenir from her.”

“You go right ahead. I’ll wait here.”

“Right,” said Flethers, hauling himself out of the buggy.

“Hello!” he shouted, “old Martian woman!”

Longear took the buggy for a slow roll around the village and went to visit one of the huts. Some time later, Flethers came storming up to him.

“You look different,” said Longear. “Less woolly.”

Flethers peered at himself in the side view mirror of the buggy. “I look like I’ve got mange. She used a knife on my scalp.”

“Who did?” asked Longear.

“That Martian,” said Flethers. “She wouldn’t sell me any souvenirs, so I asked her to cut my hair.”

“Flethers, you didn’t really? Not a Martian woman?”

“What does it look like? What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I should have told you.”

“Told me what?”

“It’s a Martian custom,” said Longear. “If you let someone cut

your hair, it means you’ve agreed to marry them.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m afraid not. Did the woman who cut your hair ask for any money in return?”

“How should I know? She didn’t even speak English—can you imagine? She just sort of waved me off after she was finished.”

“Then I’m afraid you’ve got a fiancée,” said Longear.

“No...hang on. She was too old—at least fifty.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Longear. “Physical age is meaningless to Martians. The soul is eternal.”

“Oh!” said Flethers triumphantly. “And she’s got kids.. .and grandkids. So she’s already married, so she can’t be engaged to me. Ha!”

“Doesn’t matter, Flethers. Martian women can take more than one husband. In fact, it’s encouraged.”

“They didn’t say anything about that in the guidebook.”

“That guidebook doesn’t say anything about the real Mars.”

“Look, this is ridiculous. I am not marrying some old Martian lady. I’ll just catch my ship and go back to Earth, and she’ll forget all about me.”

Longear buried his face in his hands and shook his head. “You can’t just leave; they’ll follow you.”

“Who will?”

“The Martian heavies. They’ll forcibly take you back here to marry her.”

“Okay, well... We’ll just go back there and explain to them that it was all just a misunderstanding.”

“You’d better let me do the talking before you get yourself into another lot of trouble,” Longear muttered, shaking his head.

Longear maneuvered the buggy back around the village to the hut they’d first seen.

“There!” said Flethers, pointing to the old woman. She was still filling jugs from the pump. “That’s her.”

Seeing the green woman in light of being a potential fiancée, a slight panic overtook Flethers. The old woman looked up and smiled, revealing pointed teeth.

Longear went up to her and gave the traditional greeting, then launched into a conversation in the Martian patois, which was gibberish to Flethers.

“Excuse me,” said Longear, “My friend here tells me you did this to his hair.”

“I thought he had lice.”

“An honest mistake.”

“What did she say?” Flethers asked Longear.

“She says she understands your situation completely. However, she doesn’t have the authority to dissolve your engagement. Only the village elder can.”

“Well, let’s go and see him.”

They made their way to the largest hut in the village. Longear knocked on the door. The village elder came out. He was a brighter green than the old woman.

“My friend here is ignorant of

Martian customs” said Longear to the elder in the village patois. “I thought we could have a little fun. Could you show me what you’ve got in the way of livestock?”

“With pleasure,” said the elder.

“What’s he saying?” said Flethers.

“He wants us to come with him,” said Longear.

The elder led them down a path to a small sapling. Tethered to the sapling was a brown and white creature that was quite goat-like in appearance—given that it was, in fact, a goat. It was nibbling on a patch of weeds.

“What do you think of that one?” said the elder.

“That’ll do nicely,” said Longear to the elder.

“What did he say?” said Flethers. “Will he do it?”

“He says he’s willing to dissolve your engagement to the old woman.”

“Thank God.”

“On the condition that you marry a murfin instead.”

Flethers blinked. “Pardon?”

“The villagers are all anticipating a wedding—this is the most excitement they get all year—and if we call this one off, they’ll riot. The only way to appease them is to have another wedding. The problem is, all of the other women in the village have seen you, and understandably none of them wants to marry you, so we’ve settled on this murfin.”

“What’s a murfin?” said Flethers.

“Well, it’s that,” said Longear, pointing.

“It looks like a goat,” said Flethers.

“Murfins are genetically engineered goats, created by Dr. Douglas Murfin on Mars. While they may look exactly like goats, they do in fact emit an electrical current when tampered with. You can see the obvious Martian applications.”

“You are *not* serious.”

“It’s quite an attractive murfin as murfins go, Flethers.”

“I am not going to marry that murfin!”

The village elder spoke to Longear. “What’s the matter with your friend?”

“Heartburn,” said Longear.

He addressed Flethers. “He’s just assured me that she’s never been married before, Flethers. She’s a maiden murfin; you’ll be her first.”

“I am not,” Flethers hissed, “having sex with a murfin!”

“Don’t think of it as murfin sex,” said Longear. “Think of it as *conjugal* murfin sex. That pulls a whole veil of respectability over the matter if you think about it.”

“Listen, Longear! You tell him that I am not marrying that murfin! I’d rather die.”

“That might be an option if you refuse.”

“This was all your stupid idea, Longear.”

Longear sighed. He said to the elder, “Do you have any cheese?”

The elder nodded. They

proceeded to the hut. The elder went in and Longear followed. When Flethers made to follow, Longear stopped him. “Better stay out of this. Trust me.”

After two hours, Longear emerged looking slightly unsteady on his feet and extremely pleased with himself.

“Good news, Flethers,” said Longear, rubbing his hands together gleefully. “I’ve talked him completely out of the murfin. The murfin is right off the table.”

“Thank God!”

“But I could only get him to that point by promising him that you’d marry a heraldic pipcheese instead.”

“A what?”

“It’s a genetically modified marmot. Excretes acid when it’s being molested, but otherwise much safer than a murfin. The elder showed it to me, and it looks just like a marmot—and quite a pretty one, by marmot standards.”

“How is that better?”

“Longevity, Flethers. Murfins live for about six or seven years. Whereas the record lifespan for a heraldic pipcheese is only two years. And this one’s already fully grown, so it could theoretically pop off at any time, making you a widower. You know how women go for a widower.”

“I don’t think I can take much more of this.”

“You have no idea how much fondue I had to eat to get him down to the heraldic pipcheese, Flethers. Don’t even think about making me go back in there to renegotiate. I’m

full up to the eyeballs with cheese.

“So, what’s it going to be? The murfin or the heraldic pipcheese?”

“Neither. And I don’t care what they do to me. I’ll seek asylum somewhere, at the Terran Embassy. I’m off.”

Flethers bolted for the road.

Longear performed a superb flying tackle and brought him down, to the applause of the villagers who were really quite impressed, since the only horizontal tourists they’d ever seen were usually drunk ones.

Longear put his companion in a headlock and whispered in his ear. “I just saved your life, Flethers. They’d have brought you down with a few well aimed Martian barbed enema-sticks if I hadn’t stopped you. Now listen, I’ve just thought of a plan: We set you up to marry the heraldic pipcheese, then at the last minute I make a quick substitution for the bride. No one will know. The bride is always completely draped during the ceremony.”

“Substitution?”

“I’ll switch the bride with a Martian popglott right before you exchange vows.”

“A what?”

“It’s a genetically modified mango. It spontaneously combusts when squeezed, but otherwise, it’s quite safe.”

“I’m not ready to marry a popglott, Longear.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, Flethers. It’s the popglott or the pipcheese.”

“Okay. The popglott.”

“Good lad.”

The wedding ceremony went off in a typical you-won’t-believe-what-happened-to-me-on-Mars fashion.

Flethers was made to walk backwards three times around a makeshift altar, stepping amongst the moonboots thrown thereabouts by the zealous villagers. The villagers seemed unusually pleased; at least, they were all grinning widely. In the midst of it, while Flethers attempted a distraction by pretending to choke on a genetically modified raisin, Longear, performing pirouettes in a lovely velvet cape, swept over the altar and then hustled off with a muffled, high-pitched squeaking in his wake. The “bride” was draped completely in blue cloth, and it remained a palpable and comfortingly inert mass when Flethers picked it up. He found himself picked up by the villagers and lofted back along through the village and deposited, with ceremony, on the doorstep of one of the huts. The villagers encouraged him with gestures to go inside.

“Erm...” Flethers looked around wildly for Longear and found him near the front of the mob.

“Metallurgy, Flethers,” said Longear, winking.

“Pardon?”

“Strike while the iron is hot! Enjoy your bride while she’s ripe. It’s your honeymoon night.”

Flethers, left with no obvious alternative, took his fruit and went into the hut, shutting the door firmly behind him.

“Thank God that’s over with,” said Flethers over breakfast at Longear’s house the next morning. He plunked the mango on the table. “I can’t wait to blow this whacky planet. What? What’s that look?”

“Um...” said Longear. “It’s just...there’s something I should have told you: the Martians are shape-shifters. So you might have married a popglott last night. Or it could potentially be an actual Martian.”

Flethers laughed.

“I heard about a man who married a Martian shape-shifter,” said Longear. “He was quite pleased with her, except whenever he annoyed her, she had a tendency to turn into a cactus during intercourse.”

Flethers dropped the popglott into the waste receptacle with a flourish. “Well, now I’ll never know what marital Martian bliss I could have enjoyed.”

“Flethers, don’t you dare!” Longear said. “That’s murder!”

He fished the popglott out of the receptacle.

“You really believe in that shape-shifting crap?” said Flethers.

Longear blew dust off the popglott and set it back on the table. “Things are different here, Flethers. Things happen—I’ve seen them. It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe it; the people here do, and they’re inclined to kill people who do things that they consider to be crimes. And killing your wife is a crime.”

“Who’ll know?”

“The village heavies who have

been sent to watch you and your popglott. If I’m not mistaken, that’s one of them out there on the street.”

“What? That Martian with the murfin?”

“Yes.”

“Is that the same murfin that...?”

“Yes. That Martian would have been your father-in-law if it wasn’t for me.”

“You mean I’ve got to carry this thing around with me? What happens when it goes bad?” He sniffed the popglott. “It’s going to go bad.”

“They likely won’t get on a ship to follow you. You’ll be all right once you’re off the planet.”

“Well, the sooner I get on a ship and out of here the better.”

Flethers sounded calmer than he felt. Three times on the way to the spaceport he thought he saw someone in a buggy following them. Once, he thought he heard the bleating of a murfin. At the spaceport, he became convinced that one of the people at the concession stands was paying unusual attention to his popglott. He stowed it in his carry-on.

“Make sure you’ve left her room to breathe,” said Longear. “They’ll be watching.”

“I can’t wait to pitch this thing when I’m back home.”

“Why don’t you enjoy the fruits of married life?” said Longear. “The Martians were impressed that you respected the bride’s chastity on your wedding night. But once you’re in private... Conjugal

popglott sex, Flethers. Few men can say they've had *that*. *That* is the real Martian experience."

"Then I wish I'd stayed on Earth," said Flethers. "Next time, I'm taking my vacation in Kansas."

This morning at the Colorado Spaceport Mr. Cecil Dower, 36,

suffered multiple contusions after an assault by an unidentified male traveler wielding a piece of fruit. The attack was apparently unprovoked.

One witness said, "All I heard was Dower make some smart-ass comment to the guy like, 'Nice haircut.'"



"I'm adopted, aren't I?"

Middle Earth Word Search

P R Q E D O R A S T Y N Q W G D
 Q D D P F G G W W L B I R O W N
 X W O A H I T H L U M N N D A A
 J Z R X B H I M L A D D S N H B
 P B X N M R S V T Y O A K O S G
 W V O I L H A G F L G M L L B N
 I E Z A O O U H I O J O J R B A
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 T P O D E L O T H T O M M A L D
 M V A D I O K K K E J L G H V M
 G J N I F L O G N I F I E N X S
 K H T A I R O D Z H I T B D F H
 F C E L B A R O S I K V C A J Y
 T E G L A D O R N D O R G N A V

The following words are hidden , , , , and 

ANGBAND
 ANGRD
 BELERIAND
 CALEMBEL
 CELBAROS
 DELOTH
 DORIATH
 DRUN
 DURTHANG

EDORAS
 EGLADOR
 EGLAMAR
 FALAS
 FINGOLFIN
 FORLOND
 GONDOLIN
 HIMLAD
 HITHLUM

ISENGARD
 LAMMOTH
 LOTHLAND
 NARGOTHROND
 NEVRAST
 NINDAMOS
 OSGILIATH
 RIVENDELL
 THARBAD

No Such Thing

Alexandra Amick

“There is no such thing as ghosts,” he said. Which, truth be told, was an odd thing for a ghost to say.

The absurdity was unfortunately lost on Ralph—who, instead of recognizing the irony, simply screamed and ran towards the front door.

Before he could reach it, the ghost instantaneously relocated himself to stand in the door in front of Ralph, blocking his exit.

“Quite sorry, my good man. Didn’t mean to startle.”

The ghost failed to see that literally standing *in* the door with only half of his ghostly form visible would do nothing to un-startle the already startled.

Ralph wheezed, his brain searching through every bit of ghost story lore he’d had to read before taking the tour guide job at the old Healy Mansion. Unfinished business seemed at the top of the quick inventory.

There we go. Get him talking.

“W-what is it that you want, oh spirit?” Ralph asked, not completely thrilled with how Ebenezer Scrooge that sounded.

“My good man, I am no spirit, but there is something that I want.”

Ralph thought it best not to argue with a ghost on what he wanted to be called, and was more than happy to never add “oh spirit” to the end of any sentence ever again.

“What do you want?” Ralph asked, liking the way that sounded much better, indeed.

“For you to never give ghost tours here again. For, as I said, there’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“What?” The shock of encountering a ghost was beginning to wear off, and the irony of this statement was starting to sink in. Finally.

“Really? A third time? Fine, for you my good man, and I shall say it slowly. There. Is. No. Such. Thing. As. Ghosts.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because they don’t exist.”

Ralph was beginning to wonder if he was in one of those ghosts-who-don’t-know-they’re-ghosts situations and noted to himself to tread carefully.

“Well,” Ralph began, “how can we know for sure that there aren’t ghosts?”

"I've never seen one," the ghost replied.

Ralph was momentarily speechless. It looked like he was going to have to be the one to tell a ghost that not only are they real...but you are one. *Tread carefully*, he reminded himself again.

"Uh, what year were you born?" Ralph asked.

"1873. How is this relevant?" the ghost asked.

"And, um," Ralph continued, "what year do you think it is now?"

And at the precise moment when Ralph could have really gotten through to the ghost, another ghost appeared.

"Oh my God!" Ralph exclaimed, having now seen two ghosts in one day compared to no ghosts in the one hundred and fifty-four days he'd been working at the so-called haunted house.

The second ghost floated past Ralph and his confusing companion, taking notice of neither.

"What?" the first ghost asked.

"A ghost!" Ralph said.

"Where?"

"There! Right there! What do you think that is?" He was nearly jumping while pointing.

"Why, he's a butcher."

Ralph had to take a moment. "Before he died, maybe. But look at him. You can see right through him!"

"Rude," the butcher commented before floating through the drawing room wall.

"He just floated through a wall! Only ghosts can do that."

"Simply cannot be true. I can float through walls."

"Well...oh, dear Lord!" Ralph exclaimed, for yet another ghost had decided to appear.

"The butcher was quite right. You are rather rude, my good man. That's no way to speak in the presence of a lady."

The lady ghost gave a haughty sniff and proceeded to turn to float up the staircase. In doing so she exposed her back to the arguing pair...as well as the axe embedded between her shoulder blades.

"She's a ghost!"

"Where?"

"Come on! She has an axe in her back! Her feet are not touching those stairs! She's a ghost!"

"My feet don't touch the st—"

"BECAUSE YOU'RE A GHOST!" Ralph bellowed, all decorum and caution gone.

"You were born in eighteen hundred something; it's 2022. You can walk through walls; the living can't." He gave a sharp knock on the nearest wall for good measure. "Your feet don't touch the ground when you walk! You're. Dead!"

The ghost considered the outburst, then said, "Prove it."

"You're standing *in* the door."

The ghost looked down and took stock of his torso hanging out of the door, the rest of him nowhere to be seen. He put a shaking hand to his throat.

"Oh, oh my, oh no, oh no no nooooooooooooo."

Ralph regretted his less than tactful delivery of such terrible news. "I-I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sure this isn't easy to hear."

"Oh I think I might faint. Can I faint?! Oh noooooooooooooo!"

“Here, uh float over to the seat here. Take a breather.”

“I cannot breathe!” He was near hysterics.

“Just slow, deep breaths.”

“No, you simpleton! I’m dead. I CANNOT BREATHE! OH NOOOOOO.”

After much apologizing, reasoning, and a fair bit of attempted fanning and wafting, Ralph was able to guide the ghost into a chair.

The ghost gave a shuddering sigh. Dead or not, he could still do that.

“So I’m dead.”

“Seems that way.”

“Nothing I can do about it?”

“Not that we’ve discovered.”

“Shame.”

The two sat in a momentary silence perhaps contemplating mortality, perhaps contemplating how to ask for raise.

The ghost spoke first. “There’s still no such thing as ghosts.”

“I can’t,” Ralph threw up his hands. “You’re de—”

“Yes, yes, I’ve gotten over that part. But I object to the term.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s lacking a certain... something. It doesn’t fully encompass what I feel is my identity.”

Ralph sighed, but having never been dead, he couldn’t be sure if this was a reasonable objection or not.

“What would you rather be called?”

“Haven’t the foggiest.”

“Poltergeist?” Ralph offered.

“Too negative,” the ghost countered.

“Apparition.”

“Too insubstantial.”

“Specter.”

“Too creepy.”

“Wraith,” Ralph continued.

“That’s creepy *and* negative.”

“Revenant.”

“Too biblical.”

“An...occurrence.” Ralph was stretching his vocabulary and his patience.

“Sounds like bad weather.”

“Paranormal....excretion.”

“And from where is this excretion coming?”

“Well, I’m out,” Ralph said.

“And there’s going to be a tour coming in soon. You might want to vanish, or sit in a wall, or go wherever it is you’ve been this whole time.”

“I do not want to, my good man. I may never leave this chair again! And you cannot make me. I’m dead, without a proper title, and I am not moving.”

“Fine. But don’t be surprised when people scream, or start trying to poke you.”

The ghost waved a translucent hand and sniffed.

As if on cue the front door opened and the Miller family reunion group entered the foyer.

Ralph braced himself.

“Hello?” a member of the party called as the group wandered towards the drawing room.

Ralph made to greet them, but his dead companion suddenly rose from his chair.

“Hello, my good fellows. Welcome to the Healy Mansion Ghost Tour. This is your living tour guide, and I, as you can see, am a ghost.”

The Miller family was struck dumb.

Ralph, on the other hand, was not.

“I quit.”

Salt Flats

Margaret A. Meiber

“No.” Luna sighed as she gazed at the bank balance on her tablet.

“Well...maybe. What does it pay?”

Denruhl smirked and leaned back in his chair. “It will be worth a lot if I don’t have to deal with it.”

“Define ‘a lot.’” Luna leaned forward to counter Denruhl’s movement. “How many zeros?”

“Five zeros,” Denruhl replied. “Maybe more.”

Luna shook her head. “I want it in writing. We still didn’t get the last couple of three-zero payments you promised.”

“You know it doesn’t work like that. Here.” Denruhl pulled his wallet from a jacket pocket and fished out a wad of bills. “This should cover what we owe you.”

“Wow, you are desperate.” Luna grabbed the cash. “So what is it?”

Denruhl whipped out an envelope and dropped it on the table between them.

Luna looked around to confirm nobody in the coffee shop was

looking. Satisfied it was safe, she pulled the contents out.

“What is this?” She scoffed. “Porn?”

She dropped the picture of a naked man back onto the table.

“That is the mayor of Tampa. Look behind him. That’s The Emperor.”

Luna picked up and examined the photo further. About twenty feet behind the nude mayor was a slight man pointing in the politician’s direction.

“The Emperor?” Luna scoffed again. “That guy looks like a mouse. Besides, people point at perverts. So what?”

“Aha! That’s the thing. The Emperor’s not pointing at the mayor because he *is* naked. He pointed at the mayor and he *became* naked.”

“What?” Luna laughed. “You’re kidding me. This guy’s power is to make people naked...? Oh. The Emperor. I get it. That’s a terrible name.”

“Don’t look at me. He named himself.” It was Denruhl’s turn to

sigh. "Listen, we've been...unable to apprehend him. He eludes us each time."

"How? Big-time secret agent and you can't capture one scrawny guy?" Then she grinned and nodded. "Ah."

"Nobody wants to be unexpectedly naked in public." Denruhl smirked and inclined his head. "We hear that Ghost doesn't have those hang-ups."

Luna grinned. "Only when he's intoxicated. Which is most of the time. So, yeah, maybe we can get him onboard." She shrugged.

"Does that mean you'll take the job?"

"Okay. We do need those zeros and the pickings have been slim lately."

"Good." Denruhl stood up, opened his wallet, and left money on the table for the waitress. "Just make sure you read the file thoroughly. You don't want any surprises."

"What? Surprises?" But before Luna could inquire further, Denruhl was halfway out the door.

"Crap," Luna muttered.

* * *

"Okay." Ax pointed at the picture of The Emperor. "Why do they need us? This guy doesn't look like much."

Luna swallowed a bite of her Big Bub Burger and wiped her mouth with a napkin. "I know. There's a catch there. You'd think they'd just get him someplace isolated and send a clothing-optional team in."

"These rigid company men are not the type to be clothing-optional." Ax held up his cup of fries and offered some to Luna.

"And nobody wants to be unexpectedly naked in public. I'm surprised they don't just shoot him from a distance."

"They can't. The body count from the Tulsa incident made them put a cap on assassinations."

"Okay, but why us?"

Luna grabbed a few fries and shoved them in her mouth. "Pff. Probably because we're desperate. Plus, Benny's been known to let it all hang out occasionally, so they hope he'll be game."

"Is Benny in? I didn't think you two were talking. I...oh. That's why you called me first."

"Yup. Call him." Luna picked up Ax's phone and waved it. "Sell it, brother."

Ax took the phone and dialed. A moment later, his expression shifted to bewilderment, then irritation.

"Benny...Benny, I can hear you...you answered your phone. Are you on the toilet?"

Luna watched as Ax continued to tread the minefield of conversation with Galactic Ghost on a bender.

"No, Benny," Ax continued, "this is not your bookie. This is Axtastic, your teammate. No...no, Benny, Luna is not...that's an image I didn't want. Benny...Benny, we have a job."

Luna's face twisted into a smug grin as she visibly experienced schadenfreude watching Ax squirm.

Luna asked for his third of the monthly payment, he dropped the topic.

When Ax and Luna exited the building, they found Benny was already there. He was lying face-down in a puddle of liquor, clutching an empty bottle and babbling about the differences between goats and llamas.

“Benny!” Ax shouted, deliberately trying to make Galactic Ghost uncomfortable. “Have you been here all day?”

Benny moaned and rolled over on his side. “Was kicked out of the shelter.”

Luna shook her head. “What happened to the apartment the government gave you?”

“Burnt down because of the Gerbil Twins.” Benny sat up and hung his head between his knees. “Stupid rodents.”

“I don’t want to know.” Luna turned to Ax. “He can’t work like this.”

“Why not?” Ax asked. “He has before. In fact, this is ideal, given the situation.”

Luna sighed and looked back at the Galactic Ghost, wondering, momentarily, how he had gotten to this level of depravity. “Did you read the file yet?”

“I skimmed it,” Ax replied. “Why?”

“It’s just that Denruhl made an ominous comment about the details of the file. You know these assholes are like leprechauns when it comes to these jobs. They only outsource when it’s a shitshow.”

This seemed to irritate Ax even more.

“Yes, Benny, money. More...no...no...they will not pay you in cocaine. Benny...Benny. Yes, meet us at headquarters in an hour. No...no...I can’t look for...no...we’re not...no, Benny...we’re in the diner on Fourth Street. No, you can’t come; you’re banned, remember?”

Ax facepalmed. “I don’t care if she said she was eighteen. She was the owner’s daughter. Benny, just meet us in an hour. Okay. Okay. Yes, Benny. Okay.”

Ax ended the call and put the phone face down on the table.

“Is he coming?” Luna asked.

“Who the hell knows?” Ax whimpered. “He said so. But it’s Benny.”

“But we have time to finish lunch. Wait.” Luna grinned. “Did you tell him we’re in the diner on Fourth?”

Ax grinned. “I wanted to eat in peace.”

“Hope he doesn’t get arrested.” Luna snagged another of Ax’s fries. “I’m not bailing him out.”

* * *

Headquarters was a large storage unit at the local Tesseract Sharp. The owner let Luna have it at a discount after the team had rescued his daughter from a Fishmen attack at the aquarium. Since Luna was fronting the payments, she took the liberty of using a third of the unit as her personal storage area. At first, Benny had complained, but when

pointed at the empty bottle on the floor.

“Oh, I spilled most of it. Barely got a buzz on. I was just tired.”

“Yeah, then what was that about the goats?”

Luna and Ghost locked eyes for a moment.

“None of your business,” Ghost replied.

“Yup.” Luna rolled her eyes.

“Ax, anything else we need to know?”

“Yes,” Ax stepped up next to Luna and held up a page. “I know why they won’t deal with it.” He pointed to a sentence.

Luna leaned in and read the line. “Dammit!”

“What?” Ghost asked.

“Nothing, Benny.” Ax looked at Luna.

Luna shook her head. “I don’t want another Maras Salt Flats.”

“Salt Flats?” Benny popped a breath mint. “Isn’t that where you ran into that crazy tool who turned Luna into—”

“Yes, Benny.” Luna ripped the page from Ax’s hand and shook it.

“Crap!”

“Well, count me out. I don’t do magic.” Benny grabbed his duffle bag from on top of Luna’s box of chicken farming magazines. “Not getting my ass turned into a giant penis.”

“Too late,” Luna and Ax stated in unison.

Ax held up his hand. “The Emperor isn’t a magician. He’s a one-trick pony. No need to panic. The agency can’t use power dampeners on him. That’s the catch.

“I’ll read it.” Ax picked up the envelope and sat in one of the lawn chairs that made up the headquarters’ furniture. “You get Benny functional.”

“Ugh,” Luna whined as she dragged herself over to Ghost’s side. “Get up, Benny.”

Galactic Ghost shuffled to his feet. “I need my costume.”

“Mmm.” Luna shook her head. “Not really. The Emperor would make it disappear anyway.”

Ghost clutched his head. “Wait, this guy makes costumes disappear?”

“He makes all clothing disappear. That’s his schtick.”

“Where does he send them?” Ghost asked.

“Send them?”

“The clothes.” Ghost rubbed his eyes and started bouncing up and down. “Where does this guy send the clothes?”

“Good question,” Luna stated. “Ax?”

“Well, the file doesn’t actually say. They just disappear.”

“Disappear.” Luna scoffed. “Impossible.”

“Maybe they disintegrate.” Ghost made a sweeping motion across his body. “Into tiny particles that blow away.”

Ax pointed at Ghost without moving his eyes from the report. “That was incredibly coherent of you.”

“Thank you.” Ghost grinned. “See, I contribute.”\

“Surprisingly, after chugging a bottle of whatever that is.” Luna

cursing his name with every little mess she found.

* * *

It was a couple of days before Ax called Luna. In the meantime, Luna was able to track down likely locations where The Emperor hung out. It wasn't hard, as he wasn't trying to conceal his movements. In fact, he verged on bold, as if he knew he wouldn't be captured.

Ax popped open his iced tea and took a sip. "Here." He handed Luna a green lump dangling from a ribbon.

Luna recoiled at the sight of it. "That looks like snot on a string."

"It's an amulet of protection. Rhiannon Angelnose gave it to me. It will protect us from The Emperor's magic attacks."

Luna gingerly accepted the necklace. "Rhia... never mind. So how does it work?"

"You wear it and the magic is deflected. Before you confront The Emperor, you have to focus your energy on remaining clothed."

"That's it?" Luna studied the talisman with obvious hesitation and then slipped it around her neck. "But you go first."

Ax grinned. "Fair enough."

"I know where he hangs." Luna held up her car keys. "I'll drive."

"Wait, let me change first."

"You're not going in your costume, are you?"

"Why?" Ax asked. "Afraid the amulet will fail and I'll lose it?"

"No, I'm afraid if the guy sees us showing up in costume, he'll take off."

Nobody can get close enough to neutralize him."

"I'm still out." Ghost heaved the bag onto his shoulder and winced. "I'll take my chances on the street."

"Seriously, Benny? If you ditch this job, you won't get your cut."

"That's the thing." Benny grinned. "I still will. It's in the contract. All earnings are split three ways, no matter who does the job. Remember?"

"Great, just great."

"You liked those terms when I was carrying all the weight. Now that you gotta do the work, you're bitching. I'm out. Call me after you're done turning into talking private parts or whatever this freak does to you."

Benny left, the door slamming behind him.

"Well, this is a mess." Ax took the paper back from Luna and stuck it into the envelope. "Let me work on something. All the groupie conventions with Benny left me with some contacts. I'll see what I can come up with."

"You know magic people?" Luna asked.

"I know magic groupies," Ax corrected her. "But yes, I know some people who may have some ideas. So don't worry. Okay?"

Luna nodded. "Okay."

"I'll call you soon. Go home. Relax."

"Okay," Luna repeated.

Ax smiled and left.

Luna spent a couple of hours cleaning up after Galactic Ghost,

pointing at Ax. In a blink of an eye, he was naked.

Well, naked beside an ugly amulet that hung from his neck.

He stomped over to the car, stubbing his bare toe on the way. “Dammit.”

Luna handed him a pair of sweatpants as he opened the car door. “Here. I planned ahead.”

“I hate it when you plan for failure.” Ax scoffed as he climbed into the pants.

“We fail a lot. So, I plan.”

“I’m going to give Angelnose a piece of my mind.”

“Why?” Luna asked. “The amulet worked.”

Ax threw up his arms. “Look! I’m naked. Mostly.”

“Yes, mostly. The amulet didn’t vanish.”

“So what?” Ax grasped his amulet and gazed at it. “Should I ask Rhiannon to make a suit of amulets?”

Luna shrugged. “Maybe. Where do we find her?”

“She goes to all the superhero and New Age conventions. I’ll have to look up which one is coming up next.”

“You didn’t get her number?” Luna threw the car in gear and pulled away.

Ax grimaced. “She’s very secretive.”

“Wonderful. I hope this guy doesn’t pick up and leave now that we’ve found him.”

“Nah,” Ax replied. “He bought the uniform. He just hates postal employees.”

“He said that?”

“Don’t worry.” Ax held up a small gym bag. “It’s a postal uniform. I’m going stealth.”

Luna laughed. “Pulling up in my car instead of an official postal truck.”

“That’s why I have this.” Ax held up a set of “Rural Carrier” magnets.

“Okay,” Luna acquiesced. “You got me.”

Magnets in place, Ax fully clad in postal wear, the pair took off to find The Emperor. The drive was less than twenty minutes. Luna realized this might be another contributing factor to why the agency tapped her and Ax.

“There.” Luna pointed to a single-wide situated on a dirt road just off the highway. “Behold The Emperor’s lair.”

“Wow, he’s either a criminal mastermind or completely pathetic.”

Luna turned onto the dirt road and parked in the gravel driveway. Two cars were already parked there, a minivan and a battered pickup truck.

Ax clutched his amulet and closed his eyes. He sat motionless for a moment and then let out a sigh. “Well, here goes nothing.”

“Just don’t come back naked.”

Ax gave Luna the thumbs up and jogged over to the door.

Luna watched as he rang the bell. At first, it seemed like nobody was home. Ax stood on the stoop waiting for what felt like ten minutes. Suddenly, the door opened. Ax said something and held up a box. Then a hand reached out

amulet and it's kind of an emergency."

"No, sorry. She's gone on a spiritual journey around the country in her Winnebago. She felt her energy had been tainted by this greedy society and she needed to recharge her batteries. She's returning to her roots in Detroit."

Luna put down the cabbage sigil kit she had been pondering. "So she ran out of funds and went back home to her parents?"

Lilith nodded.

"Okay, Ax. Now what?"

"Maybe we find another mage to make an amulet suit?"

"Lilith, you don't happen to know where we could get these amulets in bulk, do you?"

"No, sorry." She bit her lip. "Rhiannon was really good at those, but I didn't learn how to do them. I just did the marketing."

"Ah. Okay." Luna smiled.

"Thank you."

She grabbed Ax by the elbow. "Come on. We need to talk to everyone here until we find something."

The pair began the arduous undertaking of finding a competent amulet maker. They stuck to magic vendors and skipped the rest. For hours, they repeated their request to different mages: an amulet that defeated magic but that could be bought in bulk. They even checked the car fob vendor in the parking lot to see if he could somehow duplicate the existing amulets with his code scanner.

Luna rubbed her face in frustration. "We're out of options."

Ax nodded. "'Suffer, postal scum.'"

"Okay."

* * *

Spiricon was a metaphysical convention that was popular enough to be held quarterly on the first weekend of the month. Luckily, it was only an hour away and it was the right weekend of the right month. When Luna and Ax arrived, the event was in full swing.

"How do we find Rhiannon?"

Luna adjusted her wolf T-shirt, which was a little tighter than she remembered it being.

"She was in the vendor area."

Ax pointed toward a large conference room.

Luna nearly tripped over a luggage carrier as she entered the cramped exhibition room. The place was packed to the gills with everything from alchemists and herbalists to artists and costumers. "It's like ten pounds of bologna in a five-pound bag. How did the fire marshal allow this?"

"They don't care about weirdos," Ax replied. "Besides, the hotels pay them off. There!"

Ax grabbed Luna by the arm and led her to a table. A large woman in a flowing black dress was handing out pamphlets to passers-by.

"Hi, Lilith," Ax greeted her. "I'm looking for Rhiannon. Is she around?"

Lilith shook her head. "No, she's out of town."

"Will she be back soon? I have a question about the workings of this

whipped up Luna's smoothie. "It's paint."

Luna looked at Ax as both of their jaws dropped. "Paint."

"Yeah." The smoothie guy finished Ax's drink and poured them both into cups. "She and her group come here every con, and at every con the local Karens have a fit. That will be fifteen thirty-six."

Luna handed him a fifty from the cash that Denruhl had given her. "Keep the change."

"I said fifteen. This is too much."

"No, you earned it. Thank you." Luna handed Ax his drink and then sipped her own. "Ax, we need her help."

"The naked girl?" Ax took a gulp of his smoothie. "I'm not complaining, but why?"

* * *

When Ax exited the car, his hesitation was palpable. Luna motioned him forward.

Ax pulled at his postal uniform. "It feels like it's sticking."

Luna rolled her eyes. "Just stick with the plan."

Nodding, Ax continued forward. He held a cardboard box in one arm as he bounded up to the door of the single-wide.

Like before, The Emperor made Ax wait a few minutes before opening the door. Also like the previous visit, Ax's postal uniform disappeared when The Emperor pointed his finger out the door. However, this time, Ax was clad in a painted-on replica of his costume. Sure, it wasn't exact due to the

Ax nodded in agreement. "Now what?"

"They had a smoothie vendor inside. Let's grab one for the road and figure it out from there."

"Yeah."

While waiting in line, Luna was less focused on the problem at hand and was able to enjoy the con's flavor. "Ax, look at that dude." She motioned with her eyes.

"With all that fabric, how does he make it through the halls?"

"It's well-executed. I think he could almost fly in that. What if we just dress you in ten layers of fabric so he can't get it all?"

"Nice try, but the file said he disappeared full-on body armor." Ax shook his head. "Layering won't do it."

"Hmm." The queue moved forward, and Luna was next in line. "There's gotta be something we're missing."

"Wow!" This time Ax was taken aback by a costume. "That's—"

"—tight." Luna glanced at the woman Ax was fixated on. She wore a colorful outfit of blues and greens that was so form-fitting it hadn't a single crease in the fabric. "You can almost see her hoo-ha through it."

"You can," the smoothie vendor stated. "What can I get you?"

"Oh, I'll have a Blood and Magic, large, and he'll have a Spiritual Breeze, also large. So what do you mean we can see her hoo-ha?"

"She's naked." He dumped ice and fruit into the blender and

limitations of body paint, and yes, his dangling bits still dangled. But somehow, the paint job provided enough modesty to temper Ax's self-consciousness.

Quickly, Ax ripped open the parcel he was holding and deployed a mitten. He slipped it onto The Emperor's still-pointing hand and zip-tied it to his wrist. In reaction, The Emperor deployed his other hand, but Ax was prepared for it. He slipped the other mitten on and zip-tied both wrists together. Then he added handcuffs, just to be sure.

Luna jumped out of the car and leapt to Ax's aid.

"Chill out and cooperate," she whispered into The Emperor's ear. He complied and allowed the pair to lead him to the car.

Ax sat in the back seat, monitoring The Emperor as Luna arranged the meeting with Denruhl.

"We're good to go," Luna announced. "Denruhl will meet us with his team at the fairgrounds."

"Is there a fair now?" Ax's face lit up.

"No, silly. We're meeting them there because nobody is around. Just in case."

"Bleh," Ax whined.

* * *

When they arrived, the grounds were flooded with agents. As soon

as they pulled in, the car was checked and rechecked for weapons. Luna was searched thoroughly. Ax was unintentionally groped several times before they realized he was naked, and The Emperor had a sack thrown over his head before he was thrown into a white, windowless cargo van.

Denruhl stepped forward with Galactic Ghost in tow.

"You're right, Ghost." Denruhl shook Ghost's hand. "Your team followed your orders to a tee."

"And what orders were those, Benny?" Luna scoffed. "Do it without you?"

Ghost grinned. "Get the bad guy."

"You suck, Benny." Ax uncharacteristically gave Benny the finger.

Luna followed suit and gave Benny two fingers. "We expect to be paid, Denruhl. Not just Ghost. All of us."

Denruhl nodded. "Done. Split fifty, twenty-five, twenty-five."

"Really?" Luna glared at Galactic Ghost. "You are a huge dick. Well, at least it's something. Come on, Ax."

"Where are we going?"

"The Maras Salt Flats. Maybe they have something to change Benny back from a giant dick."

Titan Armstrong & the Brilliant Escape Plan

Taylor Rae

There's good news and bad news.

Good news: I'm Titan fucking Armstrong, uncatchable space bandit, best stardust-smuggler this side of Andromeda.

Bad news: I'm an uncatchable space bandit who just got caught. Usually, I can talk/bribe/shoot my way out of anything, but usually I'm not the star of a backwater planet's Earth exhibit. I'm trapped here, and my spacepod's so close I can see cephalopod aliens climbing inside, leaning against it to take pictures, getting slime on everything.

"Goddammit," I mutter. "*I just* had her repainted."

I'm locked in an elevated glass cage with my expertly-researched natural habitat: plastic grass and an inflatable pink palm tree. The air has an oily-hot, fried-food smell. Shrieks from distant rides carry across the pink, two-sunned sky.

Squid-faced aliens schlorp past, gawking like *I'm* the fucking weirdo. They look like God got drunk: slime, cilia-grooved tentacles, giant fish eyes. The

works. I catch a familiar face among them: the carnival's owner. Slimeball, I call him.

We met a few hours ago, when my Brand New Super Great, Totally Not Suspicious Client who ordered a kilo of my finest Andromedan stardust turned out to be a goddamn space pirate ambush. After they got the drugs, they sold me and my ship off to Slimeball for cheap. I'd shouted myself hoarse about being an Alliance-protected species. Technically true, but a total bluff. The Alliance wouldn't waste hydrogen fuel to save a drug-runner like me.

But Slimeball doesn't need to know that.

He squicks up to the glass. He's got six tentacles, snot-green skin, and a used-car-salesman smile. A PortaVox translator rests in one tentacle, a plastic shoebox in another.

"Well?" I snap.

He glorp-gups into the PortaVox, and it comes out as robotic English.

“Wonderful news. Per your request, I’ve investigated the Alliance bylaws. You may be indefinitely contained for research purposes—*if* paired with a comparably intelligent species.”

Some punk-ass cephalopod kids start throwing orange candy at my enclosure. It sticks, dripping down the glass.

I gesture at it. “You call this research?”

Slimeball doesn’t bother translating that. He taps at a keypad on my cage’s base.

A narrow slot at my feet slides open. Slimeball stuffs the box inside, and the slot closes again.

“Enjoy your stay *and* your new companion.”

Another candy cluster plunks against the glass. The assholes outside burble-snort, which must be laughter. Slimeball shoos them off, then oozes away.

I squat and open the box. A pigeon sits inside, staring at me.

Slimeball’s already gone, but I yell anyway, “I’m smarter than a fucking pigeon!”

“Not likely.”

I look down. I’ve seen plenty of shit, but nothing like this.

“Yes, I can talk,” the pigeon says, in a way-too-human voice.

“Pick up your jaw.”

“What *are* you?”

“A pigeon. You think I’m the idiot?”

I scowl. “I’m not kidding. You some kind of AI?”

It fluffs its chest feathers. “I’m a genetically-tweaked pigeon with an

IntelliTech larynx. You may call me Humphrey. Do you need further evidence? Shall I shit on your boots?”

“Relax. I believe you.” Well, not really. But I’m not risking pigeon-shit by arguing.

Humphrey gracelessly hops out of its (his?) box.

“Now,” he says, “what’s our plan?”

“Plan?”

He flies onto my shoulder.

“This is the first time I’ve left that research lab in years. *And* this atmosphere has a surprisingly high oxygen content. I doubt I’ll have a better escape opportunity.”

I kick the two-inch-thick glass wall. “Use that stupid beak and start tunneling.”

“Perhaps that can be Plan B.”

Some kid clambers up my ship’s starboard side, leaving circular slime-prints in the clearcoat. I grimace.

“Tell you what, Humph. That’s my ship over there. If you get us outta here, I’ll fly us off-planet.”

Assuming no one found the spare key under my seat, that is.

He cocks his head. “Are you a good actor?”

“Absolutely. For example, I’m currently pretending to listen to a talking pigeon.”

“Perfect,” Humphrey says.

“Collapse and fake a seizure.”

I groan.

“Have you got a better plan?”

“No. I’m mad I didn’t think of it.”

If pigeons can smile, I swear he just did.

I stiffen up, tip over like a dropped board, and start spasming. My skull smacks the grass hard, but it's gotta look real.

From the corner of my eye, I watch it all.

The crowd scatters. Carnival staff rush in, sliding like wet bars of soap. They pound tentacles against the glass, but I keep convulsing until the door finally opens. Somebody drags me out by my ankle, letting my head smack against the platform, then the ground.

Humphrey flies off. Opportunistic little shit.

Now Slimeball stands over me. He turns to glorp something to the alien beside him. There's only four of them. More coming, maybe.

It's the only chance I've got.

I kick Slimeball's gut as hard as I can. He *whuffs* and doubles over. There's a narrow arch between his tentacles, and I scramble through it on my hands and knees.

I'm slime-coated and dizzy, but I laugh when I see my empty ship, waiting for me.

A tentacle coils around my foot. I yank my boot off and run. The gravity's so light, I feel like a goddamn Olympic sprinter as I bolt across trash-strewn dirt, up the slime-slick gangway, and into the pilot's seat.

Humphrey's inside, perched on my headrest.

"About time," he grumbles.

"You didn't even help!"

"I believe I did my part."

My spare key's still under the seat, blessedly goo-free. I jam it into the ignition.

"You still have a physical key?" Humphrey gives the cabin a cringing, open-beak onceover. "How old is this thing?"

"Shut up. She's a classic, and you can stay here if you don't like it."

The engine sputters. Dammit. Maybe the alien-goop coating my dashboard killed the electrical system.

"It seems we're both staying here," Humphrey mutters.

Slimeball and his goons surge toward us. I was fast, but not fast enough.

Then the engine rumbles, and the dash lights up.

I grin and grab Humphrey, stuffing him into my jacket.

He puffs, "*Excuse* me—"

"Sorry, Humph. Bumpy launch. I'm fresh out of pigeon-seatbelts."

Slimeball reaches the gangway. His tentacles coil into the cabin.

I punch the throttle, and my spacepod jolts upward, leaving Slimeball and my gangway behind. Wind screams through the cabin until the door finally shuts.

Good news: we clear the atmosphere before you can say *hyperdrive*.

Bad news: Humphrey proved I'm dumber than at least one pigeon.

The Unintended Consequences of Interdimensional Tinder

Taylor Rae

Gary finished off his second bottle of beer and reached for the third, which was waiting patiently on the bar.

“And another thing,” he announced. “What difference does it make which way I put the toilet paper on? Why does she get so upset over whether it’s forward or backward? It doesn’t make any difference.”

“Beards are good. Mullets are bad,” said Skip.

“What?” said Kyle.

“Toilet paper. Beards good, Mullets bad.”

Gary shook his head. “Ignore Skip. He was already wasted when I got here.”

“Mullets are destroying society,” proclaimed Skip.

“Right. Never trust a mullet, I always say,” said Kyle in a soothing voice.

“Damn right!” said Skip.

“So anyway, Gary. What’s with your wife and toilet paper?”

“You’re single. You’d never understand.”

“Beards, beards are good.

Never trust a beardless man...unless he’s a woman,” pronounced Skip. He slammed his fist against the bar, spilling a bowl of nuts.

His two friends ignored him.

“Heck, I think Gert changes which way she wants the toilet paper just so I’m wrong every time,” said Gary, picking a peanut off his lap and popping it into his mouth.

Kyle chuckled. “You know what I like about you, Gary? You’re the only guy I know who can go on for nearly an hour complaining about his wife and not run out of material.”

Gary froze, the bottle hovering in front of his mouth.

“Nearly an hour?” He looked at his watch and immediately set the beer aside. “Dang, I gotta be going. I just stopped in for one quick drink while I was going to get some milk. Gert’s going to be furious.”

“You’re supposed to be getting milk?” asked Kyle, a sheepish grin on his face.

“Beards good. Mullets bad.” Skip waved to the bartender. “More nuts.”

Other than giving him sharp looks, his friends ignored him.

“Yeah, she’s got to have milk for her oatmeal in the morning. That’s another thing that bothers me,” continued Gary. “Why should I have to be the one to get the milk? So what if I finished off the jug and put it back in the refrigerator. She’s the one who uses ninety percent of the milk when she makes meals.”

He grabbed his beer and took another sip. “You’d think she’d know when it was running low and get some herself. It’s the same thing with butter and eggs—”

“Never buy eggs from a farmer with a mullet.”

* * *

It had been nearly two hours from the time he left to get the milk when Gary finally pulled his pickup into the garage. He picked up the gallon he had bought at the Dollar General and slowly climbed out of his vehicle. He watched the door, expecting it to fly open any second. He imagined Gert exploding through the opening like a bull just released from the gate at the local rodeo.

Maybe I should have got her flowers or something? he thought. *I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t be happy if I gave her the five dollars’ worth of scratchers I bought, even if I hadn’t already scratched them.*

Gary took a deep breath and pushed open the door. “I know I’m

late—” he began, but stopped in midsentence when he saw a handsome stranger sitting at the table with Gert.

Gert glared at Gary. “We’ll talk about that later,” she snapped.

Her demeanor did a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn when she addressed the man sitting next to her.

“Lord Umbro,” she said, smiling gently, “this is my husband, Gary. As you can see, I was telling the truth when I said he wasn’t too bright or physically intimidating.”

“Be that as it may,” said the man, with an accent that Gary couldn’t place, “there are certain protocols that I must follow. I am a creature of honor.”

Everything about the stranger emanated masculinity. He had a full head of long brown hair, a chiseled chin, and deep blue eyes. The expensive-looking three-piece suit he wore couldn’t hide his barrel chest and muscular arms.

“W—who are you?” stuttered Gary.

The man stood, rising to a height of well over six feet. “I am Lord Umbro of the Umricon Dimension.”

“Huh?”

“Let me explain,” continued Lord Umbro. “There are many different dimensions of existence occupying the same space. My race—and by ‘my’ I do indicate ownership and control—has technology that allows us to travel from one dimension to another.”

Gary didn't know if he should trust the man or not; he had neither a beard nor a mullet. He turned toward Gert.

"What is this, some kind of joke? Is this another one of your stupid sister's theme dinners or something? I told you after the whole *Baywatch* fiasco that I wasn't going to ever do one of those again. I'm still finding sand in my recliner. Not to mention the nightmares after seeing her in a swimsuit."

His wife shook her head. "No. It's all true. He came into the kitchen through some weird magical gateway."

"I can see you don't believe me," said Lord Umbro. "Allow me to demonstrate."

He took a small device out of his jacket pocket and made a few quick passes over it with his hand. Suddenly, a glowing circle appeared a few feet above Umbro's head. Through the brilliant light, Gary saw something drop. There was a loud thump as the object landed on the table. The portal disappeared without a sound.

Gary stared at the center of the kitchen table. Lying there, partly stuck in a stick of butter, was a diamond the size of his fist.

"I just had that sent over from my dimension. I understand that such things are quite valuable in your world."

"Well, don't just stand there like an idiot," said Gert. "Say something. Do something."

Gary wanted to do something, all right. He wanted to turn and run.

He wanted to go back to the bar. At this point, even Skip's ramblings would seem reasonable.

Instead, he just stood there with his mouth open.

"Let me explain why I am here," continued Lord Umbro. "I am the master of the Umricon Dimension. Every being in that dimension, and the many others that we have conquered, bows to me and me alone. I am the most powerful being in existence, but I am lonely. It is time for me to take my queen. I have used the most sophisticated technology available and searched every known dimension. Trillions of beings have been considered and tested."

The handsome alien turned toward Gert. "You have been selected as my perfect mate."

"What?" laughed Gary. "I think you've got some serious errors in your programming."

He ducked as a butter knife flew over his head and bounced off the wall.

"Shut up! Let him talk!" yelled Gert.

Lord Umbro smiled, displaying thirty-two impeccably aligned, flawless teeth. "I assure you that no error was made. I have come to ask for Gert to return with me to Umricon and be my wife."

"You've got to be kidding," said Gary. "Look at you. You could get any woman in the world with your looks and power. Now, look at her. Don't you see a problem with this picture?"

Instinctively, he ducked again, but this time there was no projectile hurled in his direction.

Gert was too busy smiling and batting her eyes at the alien overlord. "That's very flattering, Lord Umbro," she said. "As you can see, I don't get much respect around here."

Umbro turned to face Gary. "I agree that she does not meet many of the standards for beauty that are currently adhered to in this dimension. She's is quite skinny and wrinkly."

"Hey."

"And have you noticed her crooked nose?" added Gary.

"Not until you just mentioned it," replied Umbro. "Her ears don't look level either."

"Hey, you realize I'm right here. I can hear everything you're saying about me."

"Oh, I apologize," said Lord Umbro as he pulled the device out of his pocket again. He tapped it a couple of times. "There. She won't be able to hear us now."

Gary looked at his wife. She sat at the table, completely frozen. The finger she had been shaking at Umbro was still raised a few inches from her nose. Her mouth was open and her eyes squinted.

"You know, that's pretty much what she looks like in every photo I've taken of her in the last ten years. I still don't know why you want her."

"Let me explain," continued Umbro. "I only look like I currently do because I am in your dimension.

I will have a much different appearance when I return to my home. Your wife will also transform when I take her there. She will be absolutely gorgeous. She will have six plump tentacles, four of the loveliest black eyes, and two tantalizing mouthfuls of sharp fangs. I get excited just thinking about it."

Gary wanted to say, "So, in other words, she's not going to change that much," but he resisted. That would be a little too mean.

What he said instead was, "So you're here to steal my wife?"

"Not at all. I already told you that I am a creature of honor. I would like to make a deal."

"I don't think I have the right to sell my wife. I mean, it's not like I own her. We're just, sort of, stuck together."

Umbro picked the diamond off the table, wiping the butter on his pants leg. "I believe this would be a very fair offer." He extended the jewel toward Gary.

"That would be very fair," said Gary. "But there's more to it than that. You see...as much as we fight and stuff...we're still connected. Underneath all our bickering and snide comments is something...I don't know...a bond..."

"I see," interrupted Lord Umbro. "Monetary treasure isn't going to replace that. You need a new mate. Let me see what I can do for you."

The alien's fingers danced over his magical device one more time

and a larger portal opened behind him.

The bright light coming from the interdimensional doorway made it difficult for Gary to see exactly what was happening but he thought he saw a large, grotesque, squid-like creature on the other side of the opening. When the monster stepped through the gateway, however, it instantly transformed into the most beautiful woman Gary had ever seen.

She wore a tight-fitting black cocktail dress that emphasized her hourglass figure and her long, slender legs. The stiletto heels she wore positioned her body into an alluring pose.

Her face was even more impressive than the rest of her body. Luxurious black hair tumbled down to her shoulders. She had the deepest blue eyes. High cheekbones bordered a cute button nose. Thick red lips encircled her ideal mouth. When she smiled at him, Gary found himself shaking.

“Would this be an acceptable substitute?” asked Lord Umbro. “I can program her mind however you desire. I can make her totally devoted to you. If you want, I can make her the perfect housewife and lover.”

Gary pulled his eyes away from perfection and looked at the below-average-ness that was Gert.

No, that's not fair, he thought. *Gert's sort of average*. She had been very pretty when they were younger. She had the brightest green eyes. He remembered how they used to

twinkle when she would smile. Sure, she'd changed as she aged, but so had he. He glanced down at his oversized stomach.

Gert could probably still be pretty if she had the time and resources. She worked too hard to get all dressed up and put on makeup every day. She was the one who made their household work. He had to admit that he didn't work nearly as hard as she did.

Her true beauty was in her ability to put up with all the stupid things he did and the mean way he treated her. There was a time, not too long ago, that they both laughed at their little inside jokes and jabs. Somewhere along the line that had changed, but it was his fault, not hers.

“Do we have a deal?” asked Umbro, startling Gary from his contemplation. “I will give you the jewel and this woman in exchange for your wife.”

“I don't think so,” replied Gary. He looked again at the beautiful woman standing across from him. Sure, she was exquisite, but she hadn't been at his side for the last twenty years. She hadn't picked him up when he was down or directed him along the right path when he got lost. He also couldn't quite get the idea of her true form out of his mind. He shivered again, but for a much different reason than the last time.

“How about if I throw in a set of Ginsu knives?”

“You mean the ones that can cut through aluminum cans? Those are pretty cool.”

Umbro nodded and reached for his remote.

“No, stop,” interrupted Gary. “I can’t do it. I can’t trade my wife.”

“Why not? It seems like more than a fair offer.”

“I’m sure it is. But, there’s more to this than just looks and money and fancy knives. We might not show it as often as we should, if ever, but there is something else between Gert and me. I love her. I admit it. Right now, I’m very much regretting how rarely I tell her or show her that lately. I’m sorry. I just can’t let you take her.”

“You know I could take her by force. It would be very easy.” Lord Umbro tilted his head toward the lovely alien woman he had summoned. “I could have her tear you to pieces with a snap of my fingers.”

The woman cracked her knuckles and rolled her head from side to side.

“I’m sure she could. Heck, I might even enjoy it for the first couple of seconds.” Gary laughed. “Still, I have to say no. I need more time with Gert. I need to be able to make up for the way I’ve treated her. I need to let her know I still love her. Hopefully, she still loves me.”

“Ah, yes, love. It is a very complicated thing. I’ve been to hundreds of dimensions and witnessed all sorts of beings claiming to love someone or something. I must admit, I don’t

understand. I guess I was hoping that when I found my perfect mate, I would understand it.”

“I don’t think anyone will ever understand love.”

Lord Umbro stood there, quiet, for what seemed like an hour to Gary. Finally, the interdimensional demigod shrugged and smiled.

“I am impressed by your devotion to Gert. I did not expect it from the way you two interacted. I don’t understand it, but I will not destroy your relationship. I will just have to settle for the next-best possible mate out of trillions of choices. Second place shouldn’t be too bad. There’s a female slug creature in the Grog dimension who is pretty hot.”

“Thank you, Lord Umbro,” said Gary. “Please take back your diamond, and...” He nodded toward the beautiful woman.

“I will take both back,” replied Umbro. “The female is not much to look at, but she is a very good worker. I do feel that I owe you something for interrupting your lives as I have. Is there anything I can give you before I return to my world? The knives, perhaps.”

Gary smiled. “Honestly, you’ve given me quite a bit already. You opened my eyes.”

After a brief delay, he added, “I guess it would be nice if there was some way you could make it that Gert doesn’t remember any of this.”

“That is easy to do.” Umbro started fiddling with his fancy device.

“And, it would be really good if you made it so that she didn’t think I was getting home too late. Maybe have her remember that she sent me for milk like twenty minutes ago instead of two hours.”

“Of course. Is there anything else?”

“Well, I can think of one more thing.”

* * *

Gary opened the door from the garage and shouted “I’m home, Gert. I got the milk.”

“That was quick,” said his wife as she finished wiping the last plate and placed it in the cupboard.

“And I got you something,” added Gary. He handed Gert a

bouquet of strange-looking flowers.

“Wow, they’re beautiful,” she said. “I’ve never seen polka-dotted roses before. That was nice of you. Thank you.” She gave her husband a quick but caring hug.

“You’re welcome. I don’t show you how much I love you near enough.”

Gert smiled. “You know another way you could show me how much you love me?”

“I have an idea. But I’d like you to tell me.”

“Good, come with me.”

“Okay. Where are we going?” asked Gary, a huge grin plastered on his face.

“To the bathroom. I want you to fix the toilet paper.”