

PROOBIE

203



PROBE 203

March 2025

Published by: Science Fiction and Fantasy South Africa (SFFSA)
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Facebook address: - search under groups as Science Fiction & Fantasy South Africa (www.facebook.com/group.ph7p?gid=7967222257)

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Contributions of all types are very welcome.

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Cover: "Rage" by Gary Kuyper

Photo on inside back cover from the NASA website



Layout is by Gail Jamieson

Created in MS Word

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Editorial

Gail

It seems a bit odd that I was concerned if PROBE would make it to issue 200 and here I am writing an editorial to 203....

I don't know how many magazines have a really long publishing history as we do, but I was recently contacted by Avrid Engholm, from Sweden (the frozen north according to him) who is publishing "Intermission" for N'APA . (**N'APA** is the bi-monthly Neffer Amateur Press Alliance, formed in 1959 for members of the of the National Fan Federation, or N3F to help those who were keen to start publishing Fanzines.) You may remember that way



back in 1969 Tex and Rita Cooper were in contact with the N3F and a result partly of that contact was the foundation of SFSA. Interesting.

But what I was going to say was that I received, last month, the 152nd issue of "Intermission". Avrid publishes more often than we do, but it is still an impressive number of "zines. Although it is published in Sweden, it is an e-zine entirely in English and I full of current information as well as a look at history and well worth going to "Google" and downloading to have a look at.

I also received the 2024 edition of Collana Mondì Incanti, from Alberto Panicucci in Italy. This is the 2024 collection of the winners of various short story competition winners around the world translated into Italian. (Portugal, Spain, South Africa and Australia as well as entrants into RiLL's own competiton.) This year we are represented by Ken Cockcroft's "The fifth degree" (Di quinto grado). It is a very professionally produced book, and I'm just sorry I am unable to understand Italian.

And just for fun, Gary Kuyper has gone back to Sword and Sorcery for the cover of this issue – "Rage"

Chairperson's Note

Committees have struggled to find new members for a long time. Occasionally, some committees experience factional fights as members strive to gain control, but the usual situation is that committees struggle to find a replacement for a committee member who has left. This is not difficult to explain: committee members are not paid for their work. They are often criticised by club members when things go wrong, and yet those same club members rarely praise the committee for their efforts



Self-contradiction #1: the most welcome contribution club members can make, is to provide feedback, positive or negative. While extolment is appreciated, constructive criticism helps to build a better club. Self-contradiction #2: Berating club members is self-defeating. Disclaimer: These comments are observations about clubs and committees in general, and are not aimed at specific examples.

The SFFSA committee has, for many years now, experienced difficulty in fulfilling the offices listed in our constitution. The latest version (the 5th, as at 1 March 2020, may be downloaded from our website) lists offices of Chairman, Treasurer, Meeting Organiser, Short Story Organiser, Probe Editor, Secretary, and Public Relations Officer. While these offices should be elected at our AGM, they are generally filled by verbal agreement in the months before. Officially, acceptance is made at the AGM, and any club member has the right to request to be on the committee.

At the AGM in January 2025, the following positions were filled:

Chairman: Gavin Kreuter

Treasurer: Eileen Jamieson

Meeting Organiser: Gert van de Linde

Short Story Organiser: Gail Jamieson

Probe Editor: Gail Jamieson

Secretary: Nial Mollison

Webmaster: Shanil Misra

The office of Public Relations Officer is vacant.

The constitution grants the committee the right to appoint two additional members. Shanil will take on the portfolio of Webmaster, maintaining our website. This office, while not part of the constitution, has grown to a level that it may be incorporated officially at some stage.

Gail welcomed our new committee members in the Editorial of the previous Probe #202. She alluded to the disastrous year of 2024 for SFFSA, but was positive about the future. I take heart that we have not only survived the *annus horribilis*, but come through it stronger than before. The two new committee members have already contributed an enthusiasm that was desperately needed, and, as Gail wrote, the club now faces a rejuvenated 56th year of existence.

Live long and prosper, SFFSA.

Gavin

Magazines Received

Ansible David Langford

December 2024 451 <http://news.ansible.uk/a451.html>

January 2025 452 <http://news.ansible.uk/a452.html>

February 2025 453 <http://news.ansible.uk/a453.html>

De Profundis

DeProfundis #604 December 2024 Heath "Scribbles" Row, 4367 Globe Ave., Culver City, CA 90230; kalel@well.com;

DeProfundis #605 January 2025 Heath "Scribbles" Row, 4367 Globe Ave., Culver City, CA 90230; kalel@well.com;

DeProfundis #606 February 2025 Heath "Scribbles" Row, 4367 Globe Ave., Culver City, CA 90230; kalel@well.com;

Intermission #150 Late Dec. 24 Ahrvid Engholm ahrvid@hotmail.com Sweden

Intermission #151 Late Jan. 2025 Ahrvid Engholm ahrvid@hotmail.com Sweden

Intermission #152 Early Mar Late Feb 25 Ahrvid Engholm ahrvid@hotmail.com
Sweden

Blast from the pastfrom PROBE 1 Vol 9

August 1970

Beneath the planet of the apes - Film review Tex Cooper

Yecccchhh. Uuuggghhhhh. And assorted exclamations of disgust. Unfortunately, the other afternoon, I had the unpleasant experience of watching a bunch of assorted apes cavorting around the screen (this film is cashing in on- the forerunner - "The Planet of the Apes.") I enjoyed the first film, but how actors like Charlton Heston and James Franciscos (He played Astronaut Stone in Marooned): could allow themselves to be talked into this film amazes me.

There is the usual capture and chase by the apes but with a difference, The humans escape by going under the Earth, which happens to be the New York subway of course. There we meet a bunch of radiation-crazed humans who worship "The Bomb" These creatures have exceptional mental powers by which they get their enemies to destroy themselves. Somehow, inexplicably they don't use these on the apes who attack them.

As for the apes, it takes them quite a few days to reach the same underground entrance the humans reached in a couple of hours. The only bright spot is the fact that there won't be a follow-up to this film. (*You think?? Ed*) the Earth gets destroyed- by The Doomsday-Bomb', after the humans are killed naturally.

I'm afraid that it wasn't worth the 30 cents I paid to see it.

Nova 2024

We still received a reasonable number of stories. Interestingly, there were stories from 4 previous winners and 6 in total from those who had reached the top ten in the past. Unsurprisingly, the preliminary judges found it difficult to agree on the last three stories that went into the top 10. It came down to parts of a percentage point between their scores. So, these are the ones that went to the final judge, Arthur Goldstuck. I'm sure I will print some of the ones that did not go through in PROBE as well, over the rest of this year.

In alphabetical order:

Armed Response by Marthinus Conradie

Blood, Sweat and Tears by Marthinus Conradie

Ephemeral by Gary Kuyper

Heads by Maya Suriya Pillay

If you are the last to leave, please put out the light by Philip Machanick

Just so much by Philip Machanick

No time like the future by Dean Schneider

Seed by Ken Cockcroft

The stars must wait by Carmelo Rafala

This secret taste by Gillian Claire Erasmus

These are the results from the final judge, Arthur Goldstuck

1st If you are last to leave, please put out the light by Philip Machanick

2nd The stars must wait by Carmelo Rafala

3rd Just so much by Philip Machanick

It was a difficult choice, with at least 8 of the 10 finalists in the running for the top 3, but the ones I chose stood out from the rest, to my mind.

His comments:

1. If you are last to leave: Evocative apocalyptic story with a powerful twist.
2. The stars must wait: A fascinating tribute to the classic that inspired it. True to the original in style and story.
3. Just so much: A fun twist on the take of the first moon landing.

The winning entries all had three things in common: the quality of their writing; a strong grounding in the traditions of science fiction; and adherence to the age-old rule of fiction writing - "Don't tell, show."

Thank you all once again for keeping alive the tradition of amateur science fiction writing. I do hope you will continue to create SF&F and enter the 2025 competition.

Nova 2024 First Place

If You're the Last to Leave Please Put Out the Light

Philip Machanick

"That's just it. We do know better."

"What do you mean?" Enrique's bloodless lips compress in a thin line. "Jolly, you can talk in such riddles. And even at a time like this."

"What I mean is, what is happening now should be no surprise. We've known for centuries that an asteroid strike could have massively damaging effects on life as we know it. We started tinkering with the necessary genetic engineering decades ago, which could have prepared ourselves and a few critical species for massive climate change. But we've done nothing." Jolly's rotund face held more worry lines than laughter lines, a transformation subtle yet complete in its effect. He stands up and moved across the room.

"Look, Enrique. Look out of that window." He gestures. Enrique stands, stretching his lean frame, and stares out of the window.

"You've lost me again. I see nothing unusual." Fronds wave as a sunny backdrop to the university's wood and adobe buildings – a neat blend of nature and creations of a higher intellect.

"Well, exactly. But it's a scene which won't last. Enjoy, my lad while you can. Rather belatedly, the gene tampering has begun –" he cuts himself short, seeing the abrupt reaction of his companion. "Oh, it is tampering, Enrique old boy. We have the basics, but we don't know enough to get it right. Not in the scant months we have left. Your department is astrophysics, so you can tell me exactly when and where that lump of rock is going to hit. My kids are the geneticists, and I am old enough to know that they aren't as hotshot as they think they are."

Enrique shakes his head sadly. His gaze takes in his companion's office, full of the creature comforts of academia – old volumes, scattered documents, threadbare but comfortable furniture. "I suppose there's not a whole lot new on my front. We

recalculate, recalibrate, but what good does it do to know the point of impact to the nearest millimetre, to the nearest millisecond? All that's really useful to know is that it's going to strike on the other side of the world, which means we won't feel the immediate impact, and that it will cover the entire world with a dust cloud, which will blot out the sun for long enough to kill off just about every life form essential to our survival.

"No, old buddy, there's not much I can offer you that's new ... do you really mean to say your crew have nothing to offer, after all the hype over the last few years – especially the talk since the first reports of the asteroid?"

Jolly looks sober, yet the worry lines smooth a little as he starts talking about his own subject – as if being at home with the ideas eases the thought that the world he knows will soon be dead. "No, I didn't mean they have absolutely nothing – just that they quite likely don't have enough.

"We know a lot about the genetic basis of evolution. We know how micro adjustments over time can account for a lot of known variation. We know how standard building blocks can be repeated across organisms, and we have some plausible mechanisms for how that happens."

"Really, Jolly – I haven't kept up with this stuff, what with all the demand from the media for updates on the strike. Since I feel I have nothing more to contribute, I'd love to catch up. What do you mean about 'standard building blocks'?"

"Enrique –" the older professor sits down with a sigh, his many years of standing to give lectures notwithstanding, his feet are killing him – "it's been a bit of a puzzle how rather different life forms arrive at very similar solutions to the same problem, from very different evolutionary paths. For example, a very high fraction of aquatic animals have nostrils on the top of their head. A practical design, but why do they all arrive at it, rather than some other alternative?"

"What we think now, and we are starting to build some very preliminary science to prove it, is that microbes play a strong role in evolution."

"Microbes?" Enrique finds himself a chair. This appears to be the start of a long discussion.

"Yes. You see, the thing which has puzzled evolutionary biologists for a long time is that we can understand very slow change very well, but, every now and then, there is a jump in the fossil record – a big die-off, and relatively sudden development of new species."

"Like now, if this asteroid –"

"Exactly. You see, we can understand the development of, say, an aquatic creature descended from a land animal over a few million years, with intermediate forms in-between. Small changes every generation, and eventually, over time, you have a very different animal. The problem with rapid speciation after some big

environmental stress is that you don't have huge numbers of generations – at least not of large animals. But you do with microbes – bacteria, viruses, and so on.”

Enrique wrinkles his brow. “Interesting – but I'm not sure I see –”

“Well, we didn't see either, until we started to discover viral links with genetic change in our studies of diseases, cancers, for instance. Then we started to search for the presence of viral fragments in DNA, and found them. More interesting still, we found similar viral fragments in pieces of DNA we had associated with the presence of flippered feet in aquatic animals.”

“You mean becoming an aquatic animal is a disease?”

Jolly laughs heartily. “Better still, much of life as we know it is a disease. Look at embryonic forms, how many start off looking similar, then differentiate as they develop. Our conjecture is that a common ancestor, in some cases at any rate, was infected with a disease which caused genetic change, precipitating the development of a new species. Maybe some were not infected, hence the differentiation. Or maybe they were otherwise infected, or other mechanisms drove other strands of evolution from the common ancestor.”

Enrique is thoughtful. “I'm still trying to make the connections... this is all a bit new for me, not really my field ...”

“Quite so, quite so.” Jolly stands and starts pacing about, now quite excited, his heavy footfalls causing his papers to rustle. “You see, the thing was, we needed to explain rapid speciation and the presence of common building blocks. Rapid speciation couldn't be explained by change through many generations of a large-scale organism, with a long gestation, and long generational cycles. But microbes are short-lived, and can mutate rapidly. In fact, that is the basis of modern medicine. We try to induce mutation of a virus to a non-destructive form. In the bad old days when we tried to kill them off with chemicals, we merely bred super bugs.

“But I digress to things you already know.” Enrique nods agreement, and Jolly colours briefly, then ploughs on.

“So, you see, when there is an environmental stress and plants and animals are dying off at a rapid rate, micro-organisms lose their hosts – their hosts are their environment. So they experience environmental stress too. At the micro level, evolution proceeds exactly the way we know it to do at the macro level, except we now have billions of organisms which can mutate and adapt incredibly rapidly. What do some of these do? They cause DNA to change in their hosts, so their hosts also mutate. Of course, not at the same rate as micro-organism mutation – but they produce more varied offspring than when there was no environmental stress.”

Enrique looks thoughtful. He gets up and starts pacing and Jolly (feeling his turn is over), stands still and watches him – wondering if he will make the next logical connection.

Enrique stops, facing Jolly, and says, “I think I am seeing how this all ties together. Over time, the microbes get smarter – they develop a library of building blocks, which they try, rather than making random changes – like developing flippers or moving nostrils to the top of the head when water levels rise.”

“Enrique, you startle me.” Jolly, for the first time, shows some real pleasure. “How did you get there so fast?”

Enrique shrugs. “Well, you did rather point me in the right direction, and you forget that I also majored in Computer Science, and concepts like this are rather central to efficient design of software.”

Jolly slumps back in his chair and Enrique turns to him. “So what is the bad news?”

“It’s all conjecture. We thought we knew everything when we discovered how DNA encodes for protein. Then when we started study genomes in depth, we discovered that outside of very basic micro-organisms, there is far too much DNA. Most of it is junk.”

“Junk? Surely nature isn’t so wasteful...”

“Wasteful! Tell me about wasteful. All vertebrates have a nerve that runs from the brain to the larynx. To get there it loops around the aorta, quite the scenic detour if you have a long neck, like some of our larger wildlife. It’s even bad in us. Yet in a fish, the path is pretty direct. The aorta over genetic time has stayed in the same place relative to the heart while the head is increasingly far.”

“But junk...”

“Don’t get me wrong. It has no purpose now. But that extra, apparently useless DNA could be building blocks for evolution.”

“But the microbes...?”

“Speculation! We really don’t know. That example I gave you of flippered feet could be a coincidence. We need more examples to confirm the theory. All our best work on genetic change is still the old-fashioned kind, selective breeding. We have some ideas in the lab but lab to life is a huge jump.”

On that discouraging note Enrique takes his leave. “Old friend, I am sure there is something there. You and those hotshot students...” Jolly watches him walk out, not much encouraged.

* * *

The sun is setting.

It is a particularly glorious day.

Jolly often relives the conversation, so long ago it seems (aeons, rather than months), with Enrique – the first time in a long while that he’d had the opportunity to talk evolutionary biology with an intelligent outsider and now, probably the last.

So much has happened since then, yet to no effect. The worry lines have completely obliterated the laugh lines, but he looks fitter thanks to losing some weight – the effect of overwork and too much worry to enjoy his food. He does not reflect on this though. Instead, as he stares at the leafy glade outside his office, he dwells on what little has really changed since that day.

Enrique has gone mad, for one thing, as far as Jolly is concerned: he joined a lunatic expedition to view the asteroid impact, from an apparently “safe” distance of 1,000km away.

The trouble is, there are so few fuel cells to go around, that the airship will have to rely on solar power to recharge its batteries. And where would that solar power come from with a massive dust cloud covering the sun?

Jolly shakes his head sadly. He doesn’t expect to see his old friend again.

He looks at his watch. Impact in 5 minutes. “Oh well,” he thinks, “it will be some time before I see anything. I might as well enjoy myself.”

He rummages through the old academic papers on his desk, finds a grimy key, gets up, walks to a little-used cabinet, unlocks it with the key, opens it and pulls out a dusty bottle.

“I hope this isn’t past its best,” he mutters, rummaging for an opener. He doesn’t usually drink in the office – or anywhere for that matter.

He pours some into a mug and settles back. After a hesitant taste, he smiles through the worry lines. “Never get anything like this again.”

And just this once, he doses off in his office on the comfortable couch so often the site animated academic debates.

He doesn’t wake up when the first ash cloud drifts over the moon. That fragment must’ve travelled at hypersonic speed to get there so fast. The planet-wide spread would take a while.

* * *

It is getting cold. Very cold.

Jolly puffs around the lab, his breath producing blasts of steam. Even here, in this high-priority facility, they can’t keep warm.

He stops at a bench where a large female student is inspecting some test tubes in a water bath. “Brunhilde,” he says, and she looks up.

“Professor.”

“I see you are managing to maintain the temperature for your samples at least.”

“Yes, it’s a struggle, we have so little power. It’s hard to imagine, just a few months ago, we had all the solar power we could ask for, and storage cells were only to keep things running at night and through the odd cloudburst. But now –” She sighs, emitting an impressive cloud of steam.

“Yes,” he nods. “The storage cells can’t keep up. Fuel cells seemed a promising idea, until someone pointed out that you need more energy to fuel them than they produce. Our supply is dwindling, and we can’t keep ourselves warm enough to think. But think you certainly do, probably still well enough, I believe ... always a bright student.” Jolly once again remembers his conversation with Enrique. Now, he is the one who thinks the students are sharper than they really are. “If only –” he stops the thought. They are the best the world has, and if that isn’t enough ...

In better times, Brunhilde would have warmed at the complement. But now, she seems to be close to tears of frustration.

“Professor, if I’m the best hope, I fear for the future, because I have run out of ideas. The virus theory appears to have promise, but we have had so little success in practice. There just isn’t time. And I suspect some microbes have escaped from the lab, it’s so hard not to be sloppy in this terrible cold.”

He pats her on the shoulder, an unaccustomed gesture of familiarity from one as exalted as he. “Sloppy you are not. But I also fear for the future. Just so little time. And we have so much to preserve. A civilization developed after millions of years of evolution. We have overcome the primordial urge to violence, developed so much knowledge, so much culture – and learnt to do so living at one with nature.”

He pauses.

“Who knows? If we had continued with earlier trends towards violent conflict, we may have had some super weapon capable of diverting an asteroid from its course. But on the other hand, we probably would have killed each other off long ago.

“No sense in dwelling on what-ifs. Get on with your work. It’s the best we can do, and someone has to keep pushing on as long as there’s the slightest hope. I will certainly not be the first to give up, and neither, I am sure, will you be.”

Jolly stands upright, squares his shoulders, and walks out.

Brunhilde feels a slight lift in the chill in the air as she turns back to her experiment. Perhaps the others feel it too, because there is a greater sense of urgency about movements in the lab for the rest of the day.

* * *

The group of students is huddled in a dorm, warding off the deepening chill by trying to share body warmth.

One stands up, shivering, chilled to the bone. Tall and strong, Brunhilde is – and able to take it a bit more than the rest. Perhaps that is why she had risked exposure to some of the experiments with the vague hope that she might come up with something that worked, even if it was poor science.

“We have to carry on. It’s only us – and whatever we can do that will make life go on.”

The others only stare at her, clattering teeth the only sign of physical activity.

Brunhilde sighs – or at least as well as she could with her teeth clattering. “I’ll be in the lab.”

She pushes the door open, to scant protests from those she leaves behind. “No damn spirit,” she thinks – “can’t even complain about me letting in the cold.” She pulls a rug around herself, in a forlorn attempt at warding off the chill. A small, furry shape runs past, bounding out of snow drifts. Enviously, she follows the flash of fur as the little creature speeds off. “No time, no time,” she says, steam pouring from her mouth and nostrils, and pushes on.

The lab is barely warmer than outdoors, and there is no one to cuddle up with for warmth. A few test tubes are steaming in water baths, with temperature readouts showing they are the one thing experiencing what until a few months ago had been normal temperatures.

Brunhilde settles in to work, taking small samples from the tubes, and preparing slides quickly before the temperature drops. She does some measurements, then prepares a hypodermic of a cocktail of several of the tubes’ contents. She goes outside hastily, to some cages, where shivering animals, all skin and bones, stare at her apprehensively. She gives each one a shot, then makes a note on a chart.

Back in the lab, she is startled to bump into an elderly professor. She recognizes him with a start, and blurts out his familiar name, “Jolly! I mean –”

“Skip the formalities... we are all dying. We might as well drop pretence and social conventions and just be friends, eh?”

She nods slowly, more to conserve energy than from acceptance of a new social milieu.

“Professor,” she says, unconsciously falling back into the habit of deference, “I’m glad you’re here. No one else seems able to stir in this cold. It’s as if I’m the only one who cares.”

“My dear, of course you are not... we just lack your fortitude. We aren’t built for this kind of weather. It bites us deep. And we give in to a sense of futility. After all we’ve achieved, we can’t beat this one. What can we do? Burrow underground, like those little furry creatures that seem to be popping up all over the place? Then, what would we eat? The entire ecosystem as we know it is dying.”

“I know. But I can’t just curl up and die. And it’s not as if we have had no results. Look!” She points out of the window, towards the sky. Through the swirling snowstorm, the aged professor vaguely discerns a movement. Then, a shape swoops out of the sky, elegant, functional, with glistening feathers.

“Isn’t that magnificent?” she says.

Jolly stares at the bird. “Did we make that?”

“I believe so. It didn’t come out of one our cages, but there are some genes we have been exploring which could have created such a creature. One or two of our

experiments were looking a bit like that, but didn't survive too long. Maybe something escaped – working with viruses is so difficult, especially in this cold, when you can't hold anything steady. You remember, I told you... sloppiness... I'm not even sure if I've infected myself ...” She clumsily introduces the idea of her informal experiments on herself, then gives up, seeing his attention elsewhere.

Jolly follows the bird's flight, until it disappears – a sadly short interval, with the perpetual flurries. “Yes, it is magnificent! Why do you keep talking as if you are failing? I will not hear that talk of being sloppy again.”

She takes a few moments to compose her reply. “We *are* failing, even if we have *actually* managed to produce magnificent life forms that withstand the cold, that can fly, and that capture our genes – because nothing that can survive the cold has anything close to intelligence. And I have no idea how to bridge the gap. If we have to leave it to chance, it may be millions of years before intelligence reappears.”

“If at all,” adds Jolly soberly. “And who knows? It could arise from something completely different, like invertebrate. They are tiny now but some have brains that are remarkable for their size.”

* * *

Brunhilde struggles awake. The snow is falling harder than ever. No one else in the dorm stirs. She doesn't ask who is awake in case there is no one who can answer. She stumbles out through the flurries, pushing her way through snow drifts, deeper still than they had been the day before.

On the way to the lab, she trips over a large shape. Frantically, she dusts snow off the stiff form. It is Jolly.

She runs back to the dorm, screaming. All her companions are still, and when she shakes them, one after another, not one moves. They are all cold and stiff.

Somehow, she doesn't feel as cold as before. There is a fuzzy growth on her skin that she hasn't detected before. Could it be fur? Feathers? Could this be a hint of success? But what good will it do if no one else is left alive?

In a daze, she fights her way back to the lab.

The genetic samples are still warm and alive. She looks out the back at the rows of cages, and there is no sign of life there. A shape whirls madly in the air, enjoying the power of flight – if not the bright spark of intellect.

Sadly, she turns to the door of the lab, and reaches for the light switch. The last dinosaur turns out the lights, and walks out into the snow.

L.O.C

Lloyd Penny

Canada November 21, 2024

Thank you all for issue 201 of Probe. Our condolences and commiserations on all the friends you have lost this year. It's been terrible. Tex, Ian, and now Carla...I wish we could stop or slow down our aging, if only for a little while. No more passings for a good long while, OK?

Guest Column... I have seen other clubs struggle with the load of magazine, fanzines and books that come through the post office box, and then have to find space to store it all. (Right now, I have to find another place for all my fanzines. Got far too many of them, and I do NOT want to simply recycle it all.) The club in Montreal has had massive book sales open to the general public.

Chronos (Liquidtime)...Time in a bottle, hm? There are times in the life of this devolving world that the end of civilization is seen to be at hand. We'd all like to live longer, to see what happens next, but today's pessimistic future (mad politicians, with insane politics, etc.) might even make you wish for fewer years.

Inkbound Shadows – where did Alistair's boss come from in the bar? Where did he go? So many of us could use what Alistair created – catharsis for a frustrating and too-predictable life. Can we truly handle the truth?

Loc letter from me re six issues! To catch up, we have been to the NASFiC in Buffalo, New York, and the World Fantasy Convention in Niagara Falls, New York. We had a fun time at both, and I got to sell and sign copies of my book. I am working on some more books for Amazing Stories, and in a few days, we will be flying to Los Angeles for Loscon 50, and promote my book a little bit more through an autograph session. We have to say no to the Worldcon in 2025 in Seattle, Washington...2025 will be a saving year for us, for we have our memberships, and we intend to attend L.A.con V, the 2026 Worldcon in Los Angeles. Then, there is the bid for the 2027 Worldcon in Montreal...we just found out about a bid to have Worldcon in Edmonton, Alberta in 2030. I think we will be too old for all this by then. And, a fun story from Aunt Barbara Thompson. You never know who is writing, and what they're writing.

Gail, we are so sorry about Ian's passing. A terrible thing to report on. We've lost friends and loved one here, too. Never easy. All we can do is remember them, and gather again at funerals and celebrations of life. You have support from all over the world.

Thank you for this issue, and I look forward to more of them.

Nova 2024 Second Place

Carmelo Rafala The Stars Must Wait

Celebrating the 100th year of publication of Yevgeny Zamyatin's "WE" (now in the Public Domain).

This original story takes place some years after the events in the novel.

The old house is an antediluvian corpse, silent, tomblike, alone with its rotting innards of antiquities from a dead era. Unlike the Ancient House inside the protection of One-State this ruin, as with other Mephi ruins, sits *outside* the Wall. Outside comfort and safety. Outside normality.

The difference between them is the house inside our beloved domed metropolis serves as a repository for old-world items taken from archaeological sites. This old house is just a ruin.

I walk through the house, pistol raised, but find no other enemies. No Mephi. No deviant Numbers.

I head back into the mess of what I assume is a communal room. I step around the child's dead mother. A bullet hole in her forehead. Three Unit members come down the stairs and give me the "all-clear" sign; then exit the house.

"Secured," I say to Constable K-121.

She holds a feral child by the arm. A girl, two, maybe three years old. Once in a nursery and later a reconditioning centre, the child will learn how to live in our society, like the others we have taken.

"That makes seven ferals today," K-121 says. "We've done better." She nods to the simpering child. "I'll take her outside."

K-121 leads the child out to where the eighteen members of Unit 65 stand watch.

In this moment of quiet my mind wants to take in my surroundings: paintings, a brass statue of a bull, green with age, a musical instrument, and a bookshelf. My eyes are drawn to the stained-glass window across the room, pastoral and oozing tranquillity: a hill, bathed in glorious light. The heat of the sun bursts through the coloured glass, embracing me.

On a table, a book of cracked, black leather. The gold wording, still bright, tells me it's a book of theological doctrine. (The language is archaic, but similar enough to our own that I can make out meaning.)

I flip through its gilded pages and stop at a passage proclaiming a deific plan to ‘give hope and a future’. I scoff. We Numbers know the plans One State has for us; formulae and reason secure our present and create our future. Hope, an abstract, has nothing to do with it.

And yet, some of our own embrace abstraction.

And violence.

Why do Mephi treasure these things? And what about them corrupts a Number, turns them into deviants?

I think of A-505. Hand in my coat pocket, I stroke the ancient ivory brooch he gifted me, and wonder why I carry it around.

“What is it about these old places” —I jerk around at K-121’s voice— “that turns some of our own against us?” Her smile is barely perceptible. “Apologies, I’ve startled you.”

“I’m fine,” I say stiffly.

“You seem distracted.” She furrows her brows. “Maybe it was too soon to return to duty. A concussion is a serious matter.”

“I’m fine.” I collect myself. “But I don’t have an answer to your question.”

“How many of us will be exposed to flawed logic, become intellectually compromised, become deviants, before we see victory over the Mephi? Dealing with the tribes is hard enough, but having to deal with turncoats within our own society—” She’s rightfully worried. But who wouldn’t be when columns of our own citizens want to unite us with the Mephi, drag us beyond the dome, beyond the Wall, and into chaos.

“Victory against the Mephi,” she says, “against the corruption of Numbers, is paramount if we’re to take our methods to other worlds.”

“We have reason and scientific rigor on our side,” I say. “And a Benefactor who guides us.”

She stares at me, coldly, and exits the ruin.

As we begin the trek back to One State, I steal a glance at the old structure. I try to imagine a past that created this house of flotsam, and the madness of those who admired freedom of expression, of those who conjured up philosophies and theosophical insights—freedom, creativity, spirits, demons, gods—all without the security of scientific and numerical management.

The Mephi cling to the old convictions. They exist beyond the Wall, trusting they are richer in body and mind than we could ever be, leading more fulfilling lives than we could ever know.

Or so they believe.

*

A-505 is lounging on the settee when I arrive home.

“How did you get in here? What if *they’re* watching?”

“Your Bureau of Guardians?” He shrugs. “I suspect they have bigger things to worry about. The Wall, for instance.”

Numerous times we’ve rebuilt sections of the Wall after the Mephi broke through. The most recent attack left large segments severely damaged. Repairs are ongoing.

I draw the curtains across my translucent walls, even though it’s not Sex Day and I don’t have permission to do so. “You can’t show up whenever you wish.”

He holds up a visitation card. “I’m assigned to visit you today. Didn’t you get the memo?”

A forgery, of course. The Table of approved movements is rarely changed without justification. I still have my sidearm. I could hold him here and call for backup. He knows this. He also knows I can’t bring myself to do it.

“Don’t remember?” he says. “Guess that blow to head really did mess with your brain.”

Five weeks ago, my Unit was ambushed on the third floor of an abandoned factory by a group of Mephi. We had to shoot our way out. K-121 told me that on the second floor an explosion threw me against a concrete wall. All I recall is touching the side of my head and my hand coming away, sticky with blood.

“First K-121, now you.” I clenched my fists. “You think I’m unfit for duty?”

“Well, I guess if the doctors were happy to release you—”

“Get to the point.”

“Bring in a hefty load of Mephi young today?” he says.

“And once reconditioned, they’ll be productive Numbers. Unlike you.”

“Conquer the Mephi and stop the conflict by absorbing their offspring. Will that work?”

“The probability the war will end more quickly as a result of Mephi assimilation is high enough to make it a viable option.”

“Probability,” he says. “Not certainty? Since when did the State see chance as an acceptable mode of operation?” He shakes his head. “Chance, they tell us, is like the square root of minus one. Both are imaginary.”

“You embrace imaginary things.” My voice is curdled milk.

“Even if you take every child and end the Mephi as a culture, you’ll find you still have a deviant problem.”

“Are you here to insult me and criticise State policy?”

“No,” he says. “J-800 was executed by The Machine yesterday. Just curious how that makes you feel.”

My chest burns at the mention of that Number.

“Do you think she should’ve received The Operation?” I say. “She was more than compromised and deserved more than psychosurgery.”

“Well, I suppose I’d also prefer The Machine over being purged of emotion and the ability to innovate. Oh, don’t look shocked. Would you rather be moulded into a state of mechanical reliability? To become nothing more and nothing less than a human tractor?”

“She was a deviant.”

“Behind closed doors, she called herself Olga.”

“And what Mephi name do you call yourself?”

A crooked smile.

“J-800 was supplying weapons to the Mephi,” I say. “The Benefactor could make only one decision.”

“But you turned her in,” he says. “And there’s more to your decision to hand her over than you let on.”

I bristle at the suggestion I could be so influenced by love or jealousy. Old world concepts. I’m a Number. A product of reasoning, scientific rigour.

“We were tasked to offer the State new life,” I say. “We. You and me. Numerically matched by a meticulously composed equation to take part in the birthing mandate. But you chose to disregard the truth of those numbers, exposing yourself to a deviant.”

“How did it feel?” he presses me. “Was it satisfying, acting on scorn and jealousy instead of reason?”

“Your actions put you on the other side of all we hold true. What happened to you?”

“You tell me. I’m not doing your job for you.”

“Speaking of jobs, I hear you’ve been put on Work Leave from construction of the new *Integral*.”

“Ah,” he says, as if remembering something forgotten. “That instrument to carry the Benefactor’s wisdom to the stars.” He shrugs. “My production was down, apparently. Lack of focus due to exhaustion, or something like that.”

“You’re compromised. That much is clear.”

He waves a hand, dismissively. “If you wish to believe that, so be it.”

“Nothing is a matter of belief.”

“And yet the Mephi live by it,” he says. “Look, if I’m compromised, I’m in the first phase before becoming a deviant. I need reconditioning before that happens. Save me. Turn me in.”

I’m silent.

He goes ‘tsk’. “As an agent, you really should be able to make that decision. Here, I’ll make it easy for you.” He picks up the phone and holds it out to me. “Take it. Dial your colleagues.”

I put my hand out but stop short of grabbing the phone.

“It’s every Number’s duty to preserve the truth of the State,” he says.

When I find my voice, it’s small and weak in my ears.

“Get out,” I say.

He grins and puts the phone down.

As I watch him head for the door, a question rears up in my mind, one I’ve resisted asking him: “Are you also supplying weapons to the Mephi?”

“What does the math tell you?” he says and shuts the door.

*

The conflict with the Mephi started before I was born.

The Operation was mandated for all Numbers to stave off the psychosis and the riots war created. But the new Benefactor rescinded that directive, and with new formulae reasoned a more aggressive reconditioning for every Number would help reduce the number of citizens being compromised and support the State’s foundations. An increase in births would bolster our population, securing our future.

The Assimilation Programme for Mephi young was part of that reasoning.

*

Early morning. An execution in the State Square. Every Number is required to watch. The Square is packed. The rest of the population watch on large screens hung at street corners.

In the Square, I stand with K-121 and other agents near the back of a crowd of uniformed Numbers. They are a sea, one great body moving in rhythmic waves before a massive stage.

Six deviants are brought up, and a voice from the Tanoy cries:

*“Those who seek to destroy us from within,
tear us from logic and reason, will never
prevail.”*

*We thrive because our lives are regulated,
scientifically operated; we’ve reached beyond
the uncertainty of the old world. Where chaos
once ruled, the State has brought order; where
the calamity of desperate ideas kept us apart,
the State has produced a unity of minds by way of
formulae, equations whose solutions are fixed
within the logic of mathematics—”*

A cheer goes up from the crowd.

“—only logic and reason and the purity of numbers can carry us toward that ideal life.”

As the six are led to The Machine, State music is played, chromatic scales meeting, separating, dissected by Fraunhofer lines in a regular, repeating pattern. Order against chaos.

A-505 is two rows ahead and to my left. I stare at him, hard, willing him to look over at me. A futile exercise.

Love.

Jealousy.

The numerator and denominator of the same fraction: bitterness.

*

The executions are supposed to uplift, bind us in a common cause. But they're not the salve I need to squash my desire to understand what happened to A-505 to make him turn his back on his duty, to turn his back on me.

But why am I so insistent on knowing the answer?

I balk at the idea I could be compromised. But how else can I explain my lack of focus, my jumbled thoughts, my emotionalism? Turning myself in means losing my place in the Bureau if I do. Years of starting over.

If I'm compromised, they'll be no escaping the remedy: reconditioning.

And if I wait too long to seek help, I may be too far gone; then it's The Operation. Psychosurgery.

And like A-505, I don't want to be a tractor.

In the shower, the urge to scream. I shove a washcloth into my mouth to muffle the sound.

*

Another mission outside the Wall. Remnants of a street, and a row of dilapidated houses in what was once a cul-de-sac. The forest has reclaimed most of the roofless homes, trees grow out of holes like mouths that were once windows, and vines creep over exterior walls.

K-121 takes half the team, spreads out, and checks the houses on the other side of the broken street.

Shots break out.

"That didn't take long," I mutter. There's a door off its hinges, leaning against a tree. I hide under it.

"Anyone have visual contact!" K-121 barks.

A barrage of "*Negative*" from the team.

Our enemies are everyone and nowhere. If ghosts are real, they'd be Mephi.

“Numbers 15, 320, 670 and 675,” K-121 calls out. “Watch our backs. Don’t let them surround us.”

Ahead, movement. Bushes rustle between houses. “End of the road. Cover me!” I make a break for it.

Down on my haunches, I push through the bushes to the other side and look straight into the eyes of a boy, hiding in some brush a metre from my face. I realise there are others just over his shoulder, all staring out at me. Five Mephi young.

I’m frozen there, oblivious to the bedlam in the street on the other side of the houses.

The child takes a step back; the others do the same.

The attack is a simple tactic: buy time so their young can escape us.

They boy takes another step back; so, do the others, again and again. I watch them disappear.

K-121 bursts through the bushes. “Are you okay?”

I get to my feet. “I’m fine.”

“What was back here?” Her eyes try to penetrate the dense foliage.

“Nothing.”

“You came back here for nothing?”

I leave her standing there.

*

I froze!

I never froze before.

Five feral young got away, and I’m responsible.

Luckily, K-121 doesn’t question me further about the day.

*

Evening is a warm band of light, filtering through the window and into my office. But the comfort it offers diminishes with the onslaught of night, and I’m left with the chill of uncertainty and self-doubt.

The stars shine through the State’s translucent dome, a reminder of our objective: to carry our way of life out there and end the life-struggles other worlds endure. To save them from themselves.

How can I serve such a noble purpose as I am?

“D-83?”

I jump. “Sorry, Constable. Didn’t hear you come in.”

“Your shift’s over.”

I look at the wall clock. Over an hour and I haven’t begun. “I’m still trying to write this report on the incident today.”

“You won’t get it done staring out the window.”

“I’ll just file the report and go home.”

Her brow furrows and there's a small tilt of her head. She's evaluating me, as any good Number would.

"You're off Table."

I do my best to look firm, unmoved by her tone.

"I'm never late with my reports, Constable."

"Nonetheless, it'll have to wait."

Her gaze is a steel wall. I need to choose my battles wisely.

"You're right," I say, grabbing my coat. "Thank you for putting me straight."

"D-83." She stops me. "A medical has been arranged for you tomorrow morning. A follow-up, as a precaution. We need to be sure you are, in fact, in top shape to continue your duties."

*

I pass the medical. Again. I don't know how.

If I were Mephi, I'd call it a miracle.

*

I'm Tabled for a walk this evening. I make my way to the eastern Promenade, a raised stretch of concrete, overlooking the city centre below. I stop to look down into the heart of the State.

"I'd heard about the attack." A man's voice. "I would've come to see you, but I know you wouldn't have appreciated that."

"You're everywhere, A-505," I mutter. "In my home, in my head, on my walk. Can I ever be rid of you?"

"Whatever's been done, you've done it to yourself," he says. "Maybe that's not such a bad thing."

"I'm not so bad."

"You've corrupted me."

"Nonsense. You've been sleepwalking in a static dream, and you've woken up all on your own. You're thinking beyond formulae."

"I've been awake all my life." I scoff. "Being awake is to be a Number, part of something managed, structured, bigger than myself."

He sighs. "A fault in the State's thinking is the fact that Numbers *can* be compromised."

"A biological machine is like an artificial machine; we break down internally, or we're damaged by an outside source."

"How you can be so black and white, so cold, despite all that's happened, all you've learned?"

"Learned?" I shoot back. "About what? What it's like to be unable to control myself and my thoughts? Confusion? Anxiety? Being unable to focus?"

"Lower your voice. You're creating a scene."

I feel the prick of eyes. Numbers pass us, staring, whispering. The heat of shame pools in my chest.

“What about J-800?” I whisper. “Did she know about the attack that injured me? Was it planned?” I turn to stare at the side of his face. “Did you know about it?”

“I wasn’t privy to everything they discussed.”

“I could’ve been killed.”

“If your life was at risk, and if I knew anything, I’d tell you. Believe me.”

“Why should I? You didn’t tell me you’d turned down pairing with me. I found out through the doctors.”

He mumbled something and stood up. I averted my eyes, looked out at the lights of the State, burning bright and hard against the night.

“And our matching?” I say to the lights. “Did J-800 persuade you to refuse it? Or did you make that decision all by yourself?”

I realise he’s gone.

*

Nights have been mostly sleepless. My head swirls constantly, jumbled thoughts, ideas, emotions. Rage. Jealousy. Love. Anger. The memory of the tranquillity from the stained-glass window, its warmth, seems to calm me, so I try and hold on to that.

Okay, so I can’t turn him in. I’m attached to him beyond reason, though I know he can’t be saved.

But I can save myself. I can turn myself in. I should. I must.

That idea—and its consequences—keeps me awake even longer.

*

Next day, there’s an explosion inside the State. A tanker filled with fuel for the *Integral*. It was driven straight into a reconditioning centre. A suicide run.

Deviants? Mephi who’ve managed to slip into the State?

I’m strangely unfazed by any of this.

Far in the distance is a thin, black thread, twisting up into the sky.

The Bureau Superior convenes an emergency meeting of all Units. I don’t attend. I walk home.

My mind screams, *Turn yourself in!*

At my bathroom mirror, I fail to recognise my reflection. Everything I am—loyal Number, disciplined, dedicated agent of the State, all of me—seem like the pieces of another person.

I stand there, staring at the stranger in the glass.

*

My phone rings. A-505’s voice.

“Don’t worry,” he says. The line crackles. “I wouldn’t call you on a monitored line. I’m down in the abandoned switchboard centre, using an old cable. I wanted to let you know I’m leaving.”

“Leaving? For where?”

“Anywhere away from the State. I can’t stay here. That explosion has put attention on my associates, and by default, me.”

My mind goes strangely quiet. One idea dominates. I’ve made up my mind. Strangely, I feel at peace. My mind has been chaotic, my daily life full of insecurity. Starting over is the only reasonable option. The State needs me operating at full capacity.

I need to operate at full capacity. I need scientific management embedded in my life once more, to be immersed in it, guided by it. I need to clear my mind of distractions.

I need the formulaic rhythm of purpose.

The purpose of the State.

“I’m turning myself in,” I say. “For reconditioning.”

“Why do that? Why not leave with me?”

“Because I’m a Number, that’s why.”

“Of course.” He’s disappointed.

The line crackles.

“I don’t have much time,” he says. “Listen. The *Integral*. They’ve done something to it, changed something...”

“What do you mean?”

The line crackles again. “...discovered a peculiar metal cased object in the repository, sitting among the other flotsam...” —*crackle*— “the *Integral* now carries it...an old-world terror...”

“What are you talking about?”

“...there may be empty lands beyond the realm of the Mephi. It may be safe there.”

“I don’t follow you.”

He doesn’t hear me.

“It must’ve...” —*crackle*— “...doubt the Benefactor is aware...” —*crackle*— “Whatever’s going on, whatever’s being planned, it’s coming from inside...” —*crackle*—

“Say that again?”

The line goes dead.

*

A-505. Either he was apprehended, or he made it out. But to where is anyone’s guess.

And me? I will stick to my plan and turn myself in. But first, I'm compelled to do something, something that's without reason.

Tomorrow is a Tabled personal day. I'll return to that house.

*

I stand before the stained-glass window. It presides over the room, a bright and golden window that bathes me in its illumination, its warmth smothering me. It's fallacious in its reassurance for its comfort is fleeting. This place, these things, A-505 himself, offer nothing. I know that now. And I'm ready to do what's necessary. For myself and the State.

I grab a brick and throw it. The sound of glass shattering is a cleansing music.

I stuff the fireplace with wood, broken chairs, table legs anything that will burn. I grab the black leather-bound book, too, a book of an unknown, nonsensical god, a god who never innovated or invented anything other than confusion. Not a rational, working god at all, not a god who is predictable, reliable. I throw it in the fireplace.

I strike a match, set it all ablaze, and watch it burn. Burn away the confusion, the uncertainty, all the things that threatened my life's purpose.

I finger the brooch, a reminder of A-505 and all the lost things of that old-world that deserved to be lost. I throw it on the fire.

"I thought you might return here," 121's voice is ice water poured down my back. "This is where it all came undone for you. Defeated by a corrupted Number and pieces of coloured glass."

I keep my back to her. "I'm going to turn myself in."

"Admirable."

I turn. "You must've been aware that I've been compromised for some time."

"Long enough," she says, pointing her gun at me. "Your sidearm. Toss it away, slowly."

I throw it across the room.

"What of A-505?" I say, facing her.

"The fool was dangerous, but he served our purposes." She smiles wryly.

"Where is he now?"

"He's eluded us for the for the moment," she says.

A part of me is relieved; another, sad that he refuses to be saved.

"We'd suspected him of being compromised and had been watching him for some time," she says. "We arranged your matching, knowing it would fail because of his dedication to J-800, to her associated and their cause."

"You arranged that? Why?"

"To see how you'd react, of course. Especially once you found out who he was spending time with. We needed to see how the old evils of love, jealousy and anger played out in you. I must say, you came undone faster than I thought you would."

“The Bureau was testing my loyalties?”

“No,” she says, taking a step forward. The floorboards groan. “We were.”

“And who are ‘we’?”

“A cabal of agents who’ve studied the edicts of the Benefactor and determined the State to be insufficiently guided. The programme must end, the Mephi youth purged from our society, and every Number subjected to The Operation. We must return to the first path set out for us.”

“Human tractors?” I say. “Every Number? Without innovation, the State can’t hope to continue its march towards perfection. One reason the Benefactor rescinded the old order.”

“I concede the point, and to address that problem we will reserve innovation for ourselves. We will direct the State from here on.”

“And the Benefactor?”

“She’s been deposed. Last night. A conflict was inevitable, of course, and already underway. All agents who resist us will be eliminated.”

A-505 said what was being planned came from *inside*.

“A coup, K-121? How very old world.”

“A mathematical necessity,” she snaps. “It’s been stalemate after stalemate for years. And yes, a stalemate is failure because you’re still failing to win. We have The Operation. And we now have the means to deal with the Mephi threat outside the Wall.”

“What does that mean?”

Her face is steel. “You’ll return with me. In this delicate time, you must be presented to the Numbers, made an example. You are, after all, a product of the Benefactor’s failure.”

“I’ve committed no violence,” I say. “I’m not a deviant.”

“You’re worse than that,” she says. “D-83, you’re Mephi.”

*

My head reels.

“You were found in a place like this,” she continues, “but with many windows like that one, and many black books. They called it a house of worship. Don’t you see? Your *memories* brought you here.”

“I don’t remember anything.”

“Buried memories, repressed trauma, can influence without being fully surfaced. One develops a distorted view of life, the world, and develops an illusionary perception of self.”

My distractions, emotion not tempered by reason, the inability to follow State norms and turn A-505 in...

“The brooch?” she says. “It was in your file. It belonged to your mother. We arranged—secretly, of course—for A-505 to get hold of it and return it to you as part of our strategy, a first step in opening your mind; the first step in finding out how suppressed your original self truly was.”

She takes a step closer.

“And you know what we’ve learned? You can’t fight the mind. That’s why The Operation is such a valuable too.”

“Lies!” I avert my gaze.

“Come now. What purpose would it serve to lie?”

“I’m a Number. I’m D-83.”

Another step closer, until she’s looking me dead in the eyes. “You’ll *never* be one of us.”

My fury is shrapnel flying in all directions. Then all is black. I don’t recall what happened, but when I regain my faculties K-121 is crumpled on the floor, making small noises, trying to lift herself up.

I dislodge a stack of burning chairs from the pile on the hearth. The fire spreads quickly.

*

I leave the house behind.

All my emotion is gone. Is this what it’s like after The Operation? To be numb and walking with the purpose of a machine?

I come to a plain of soft green grass. I see the State in the far distance. Columns of black smoke, the smoke of riots and madness, rise high above the buildings under the dome.

I watch the State burn, burn like K-121 did, burn like the house, with all its ancient, primeval flotsam of philosophy and religion and free-thinking and selfish desires—the things that A-505 and his ilk admired. Everything burning.

A mother. A child. Numbers and Mephi. The State and the natural world. Inside and Outside. Chaos and order. Reason and belief.

“I am D-83.” I repeat this to the trees, the birds chattering overhead.

A column of white smoke rises from behind the State, and something climbs over the dome. Something long and metallic, like a needle stitching a white line up the sky.

The Integral.

K-121’s words echo in my head: “*And we now have the means to deal with the Mephi threat outside the Wall.*”

How did A-505 describe it?

A metal-cased object? An old-world terror?

Of course. When victory is paramount, the stars must wait.

Sitting on the grass, I recite the words that had come over the Tannoy, words clear and full of purpose:

“...we thrive because our lives are regulated” —I say it to the grass, to the sun fading behind the smouldering city, and the warm colours, oozing tranquillity, blooming across the western sky— “where chaos once ruled, the State has brought order; where the calamity of disparate ideas kept us apart, the State has brought unity of mind by way of formulae, equations whose solutions remain fixed within the logic of numbers.”

The *Integral* stops climbing, arches, begins its descent; the white line stitching a path toward the earth, pulling the sky down.

I think of A-505. I'd like to think he made it, that he's safe in some far land.

“...it is only logic and reason and the purity of numbers,” I mutter, “that can carry us toward the ideal state of being.”

Or so we believe.

There's an intense pulse, a flash, and the world is bathed in glorious light.

L.O.C Lloyd Penney.

Canada January 6, 2025

Dear SFFSAns:

Happy New Year, and thank you for Probe 202. I am trying to work ahead on some zines I have, and so, I have made a few notes. I will flesh them out as I write.

First of all, all sympathies to the club membership on the passing of Carla Martins. Sad news, and you've had a lot of that, but I hope it will bring the membership together, and bring in more people to the club committee. A toast to absent friends...over the past few years, I'd need a very large bottle.

Greetings to Tony Davis in Thornhill, via SA! Seems this is the way we've always done it. We sent Christmas cards to both Tony and the club, hope you got both. We had to go through a postal strike here, so I will expect some more Christmas cards to come in. I must get myself a copy of *The Last Dangerous Visions*. I never met Harlan, and I wondered if I ever wanted to.

Fast Food...an interesting story, injecting the harsh reality of the press and politics into a speculative scenario...and then, the end, like a *Twilight Zone* episode. *The Cage* and *The Dolphin* is a heartbreaker for all abused women, and the beasts that

abuse them. Fishing with my Father...in a very dystopian way, I can almost see this happening. Logan's Run, Twilight Zone, Soylent Green?

Thank you for this issue, and I wish my letter was longer. I look forward to more!

Nova 2024 Finalist

Armed Response

Marthinus Conradie

My gut was telling me Kasia needed my help, despite what she was saying. My gut was a private investigator, and the rest of me joined in from time to time.

The coffee shop smelled of fresh cake. Most of the other patrons were young couples, eyes sparkling at each other. Our table was the only one with an atmosphere tense enough to curdle milk.

"The directors' decision is final, Eli. You're off the case." Kasia's eyes remained fixed on the tiny table between us, fingernails tap-dancing on its surface. Seemed to me, she was embarrassed by her company's decision.

"Just like that?" I was aiming to sound detached and neutral. I had a knack for it—most days. Now I sounded as detached as a vegan in a slaughterhouse. "We haven't even started yet."

"Yes."

I heard the word, but no ring of conviction.

She pursed her lips. They were full and really good for pursing, under a delicate nose and a neat pageboy haircut. Personally, I prefer long hair, especially on blondes, but I could appreciate that Kasia couldn't risk giving her opponents a convenient handhold.

Which... wasn't the point.

The point was, she needed my help. I could give it. My methods were secret, but word of mouth must have clued her in that I'm the kind of man who can unstick sticky situations. Why else would she ask her partner, Daniel, to wait outside the Mugg & Bean.

"Did the earth tilt since yesterday?" I asked. "Your company's 'openness to external expertise' has a super short expiry date."

Kasia did her best impression of a statue, eyes flat and cold. "Things changed."

She was under pressure. I could feel it. *Bliksem*, I hate the bureaucratic BS that keeps competent people like Kasia face-down in the dirt. You'd think supernatural companies would avoid the mistakes of mundane ones. Optimism: zero. Cold reality: one.

I breathed in deeply, silently counting to ten. Kasia's profession was hard. Maybe she'd say more if I showed some sympathy.

"Tough job, disarming curses," I said as gently as I knew how. "Enough pressure to crack concrete. Maybe that's all that happened yesterday. Oscar cracked. Seems unlikely though. Every time I met him, he carried himself like a nine out of ten, professionally speaking." I scanned her body language, looking for any subtle clues she might need me to pick up. "I'm damn eager to find out what killed him, but maybe the people running your company are losing touch with the ground level?"

Our waitress interrupted, bringing Kasia's smoothie, my espresso and another menu "Just in case you guys didn't see the awesome specials on offer tonight".

I nearly barked at her to leave us alone. When she finally scampered off, Kasia leaned back in her chair, eyes on her glass, while her fingers resumed tapping the table.

"Eli," she sighed, "the truth is, the company directors want to keep the investigation in-house. Daniel is a rising star. Oscar's been tutoring him for years. Apparently, that makes him suitable for looking into his brother's death."

“But they appointed you to keep an eye on the kid?” I flicked my gaze towards the young man waiting by the door. The guy was young enough that I couldn’t resist calling him *kid*, but his build resembled a battleship. Shorter than me, but most people are.

“Yes.”

“No space for a third wheel?”

“They feel that your involvement would be deleterious for the public side of business. Even worse for the special side.”

“De-le-te-rious?” I rolled the syllables around in my mouth like whiskey. “Now there’s a word you don’t hear every day. Must make those directors feel super clever.”

“Why would any armed response company contract a PI unless they have problems they can’t solve internally? Now imagine how our non-normal clients will react. Your CV is a problem, in this case. No one hires you when they’re certain an accidental death is just an accident.”

I stopped the sarcasm train gathering steam in my mouth and tried to see things from Kasia’s perspective—like a seasoned PI should. Not my best day.

Her position in EverSure might be more delicate than I’d imagined. If she pushed harder to get me onboard, she might fall afoul of internal politics I knew nothing about. Time to drum up some more sympathy. If I wanted her to clue me in on what kind of help she needed, I’d have to get it just right.

“Kasia, the kid’s personal connection to Oscar is a liability. We both know it.” I leaned closer, voice lower. “Look, even though you and I haven’t worked together yet, everything I’ve heard tells me you have reliable instincts. If the company’s decision sits well with your gut, then...” I shrugged my shoulders to show just how unbothered I was. It was a bad lie, but if I was wrong about Kasia wanting my help, now was her chance to show it.

“The directors are spooked.” She paused, sucking on the straw of her mixed-berries smoothie, then resumed pursing her lips. “Why wouldn’t they be? One of their... nine out of ten employees—to use your expression—encountered something that didn’t leave enough of him behind to fill a paper bag, never mind a coffin.”

Again, I flicked my eyes at Daniel waiting outside the Mugg & Bean. Some curses open doorways to scary places and scarier creatures. I could understand his eagerness, but this was a job for someone who could remain detached.

“Eli, if a veteran like Oscar could drop the ball like that, can you blame the old cowboys in charge for closing ranks against outsiders?”

“My reputation for discretion is top notch. I’ve disarmed almost as many curses as Oscar had. On top of that, I shut down some of the cults creating the curses without attracting any deleterious attention to people in our community. *Bliksem*, now I think about it, I’m basically working for EverSure unpaid.”

I pressed my tongue against the roof of my mouth. Bragging was immature. Stupid. Then I frowned as my brain caught up. “Wait a minute. That’s only the official word from the... What did you call them? Old cowboys? The real reason is...?” I raised my eyebrows encouragingly.

Kasia glanced at Daniel.

I got it. “His parents?”

“What do you know about them?” she asked.

“They *liaise* between EverSure and the police, which means they have connections who can vanish evidence of magical mishaps from official records.”

“For example,” Kasia inserted, “the old cowboys can rest assured that yesterday’s collapsed church will be attributed to a structural problem.”

“However,” I ventured carefully, “if my read on them is correct, then you’re not just keeping an eye on their son. You’re meant to take the fall if he fails to uncover what happened to his older brother.”

Kasia’s eyes narrowed, then travelled up and down my body, suddenly making me wish I’d dressed more stylishly. My shabby bomber jacket and fedora were old hat—literally. Comfy but old.

When our eyes met again, I saw something sparkle in those hazel irises. Respect? Man alive, I sure hoped so. I wanted in on this case.

Oscar hadn’t been a friend, exactly. He’d been a useful contact inside EverSure. It certainly seemed odd that he could drop the ball badly enough to drop an entire

church on his own head, but it was far from impossible. If a professional curse-breaker lost their edge once—boom. Oscar had been at it for fifteen years. Kasia had been plying her trade for twenty without slowing down. She'd earned my respect alright, and scoring points with her would do wonders for my PI business. Reputation is everything. That was my motive. Nice and clean self-interest. Her being a woman needing to be rescued from corrupt old cowboys was irrelevant.

I opened my mouth, but she raised a finger.

"If you were about to suggest that Daniel's parents wanted you off the investigation, then you won't hear me refute it. They wield a hefty influence over EverSure."

"I don't remember pissing them off. What's their issue with me?"

"Maybe it's not you." This time, she didn't glance at the door. She didn't have to.

I caught on. "It's about giving their son a chance to shine? They're jockeying for advantage two days after burying their eldest?"

"Or," she toyed with her straw, "maybe Daniel asked them to do it. Maybe it's his way of coping with the loss. Take charge. Assert himself. That sort of thing."

Something about her inflection told me exactly what she thought of those *maybes*.

She shrugged. "Just a thought, obviously. I do curses, Eli. Not people. Some days, I suspect curses are less complicated. At least, curses are all bad news. You never have to distinguish ally from enemy."

"Point is, I'm off the case?"

"You're off. I'd tell you how sorry I feel for you, but I suspect you'd take that as an insult to your masculinity." She smirked.

By now, I'd decided to act, and Kasia must have known it. So, I stopped fishing for information and quipped, "My masculinity is a little tougher than that. I mean, it needs some dusting off and maybe a polish, but it's tough enough."

"Your masculinity needs a polish?" Her lips went from a smirk to a full smile.

Heat flushed up my neck, but I decided to own my faux pas.

“Blame my Y chromosome.” I didn’t bother hiding the embarrassment heating my face, but at least I grinned as confidently as I knew how. I was skilled at it. Being a PI demands a truckload of charm—not that anyone would score me higher than four out of ten for tonight’s performance.

Kasia laughed loudly and unashamedly, eliciting glances from the other patrons. “Pity you’re off. But who knows? Maybe we’ll work together some day.” She gathered her things and left without another word.

I slumped in my seat, rubbing at my eyes, cheeks still burning. “Nicely done, Eli Fletcher. How would you rank that on your personal moron-meter.”

“What’s that?” a deep male voice asked.

Pulling my hands away, I looked up to see Daniel looming over my seat. Like I’d said, battleship. His biceps strained the expensive fabric of his white jumper. I knew enough to tell that those muscles weren’t just for show. No, he also carried himself like someone who practiced martial arts. Oscar had probably trained him. Overall, the package said something about the kid’s discipline. I could respect that. But my suspicion-needle immediately ticked up. What did he want?

“Mr Fletcher.” He lowered his head as he spoke, and I could swear I heard real respect in his voice. “Kasia told me about the directors’ decision, and I just wanted to tell you I think they’re idiots. What we need now... Or, what I’d want now, is more expertise not less. And your reputation...”

Instead of adding an adjective, Daniel closed his eyes and clicked his fingers in rapid succession like castanets. I had no idea what that was supposed to mean. So, I smiled. Can’t go wrong with smiling.

“Mr Fletcher,” he looked at me and spoke as if he’d rehearsed his lines over and over. “I would appreciate it if you would join me tonight. I’m visiting the church that caved in on my brother. If there are any residual energies, they might explain the nature of the curse. I’ll be there at the witching hour, obviously.”

Okay. Unexpected. He beamed his pearly whites at me.

I opened my mouth to reply, but Daniel bulldozed ahead, now speaking like a machinegun. “Our top priority must be to figure out what kind of curse my brother encountered. Just because the building collapsed doesn’t mean it was a simple explosion. It could have been a demonic entity or members of a cult could have murdered him while he was disarming the curse, or...” He stopped, fingers twitching, waiting for me to respond.

“I assume Kasia’s coming along.”

His face made poker champions look expressive. “Just us, tonight. That was my thought.”

I didn’t dare glance at the door to check whether Kasia was there, trying to signal me in some way. I could play this in one of two ways. Agree to his proposal and see what the kid did at midnight. Hear why he wanted to cut Kasia out. Or I could implement my own plan, using my own little trick. Unlike Daniel or Kasia or anyone else at EverSure, I didn’t need midnight. I could do my thing at any time. Man alive, I could even finish before Daniel showed up, then hide and watch him.

Two birds. One stone. Easy choice.

My face was hurting from all the plastic smiling, but I kept it up and spread my hands. “If the company has decided to keep me off the board, maybe it’s better I don’t ruffle any feathers.”

Daniel stared at me for a long time. He glanced over his shoulder at the door. Then he turned back to me, “You’re... abiding by what they... I... hadn’t expected that. Well... sorry for taking up your time.”

Kasia was waiting for him, her back to me, and they departed together without looking my way. I was pretty sure things couldn’t get any weirder, but that was okay. I knew how to un-weird it.

*

What were the chances? A huge wooden cross was standing upright in the ruins of the church, pinned in place by concrete blocks. I gaped up at it, like it was a witness I could interrogate. The cold night air nipped at my ears and slid along the back of my neck.

“Did he cut the wrong wire on a magical bomb, or did something more complicated happen?” The cross wasn’t polite enough to respond. Well, at least I can give Kasia more intel on whatever voodoo he’d encountered. I crouched down, pushing my fingers into the sandy ground. “You saw what happened, right? You always do. Help me out, buddy.”

On this very spot, Oscar had once explained to me how EverSure conducts its two-sided business. “This church, and some of the houses around it, have EverSure alarm systems, with curse detectors seamlessly incorporated into them. The owners don’t even know. They don’t believe in magic, after all.”

“Cults,” I’d commented. “Man, they like targeting places of worship. Like teenagers painting gang tags, only with curses—which are far less artistic.”

Oscar’s hands had trembled with anger at the comparison. Humour was his lowest scoring trait.

A yellow moon leered at me between cloud banks. Loud music hammered the night from a few streets away. Hip hop, I think. Something annoying. Several dogs started barking, obviously agreeing with me. I was stalling. The night was cold enough that I didn’t relish the next step.

I got up, letting the sandy soil trail between my fingers, and started walking a slow circle around the rubble. Then I removed my boots and socks, planting my naked feet on the chilly, sandy earth.

“*Bliksem*,” I cursed the cold. Shivers raced up my spine. Once my teeth had stopped chattering, I whispered, “Oscar Lebusa.” Now the shivers stealing up my back and neck had nothing to do with the cold. I smelled cloves—the scent that accompanied my magic.

Nothing happened. So, I walked closer. The shattered bricks were rough, brown-red stuff, oddly washed of colour by the moonlight. A massive support beam had fallen close to the periphery of the rubble. I placed my left foot on the wood, dust and debris poking into my soles. I closed my eyes, then opened them again, glancing around nervously. Nothing. If some crazy cultist showed up and attacked me now, I’d have no chance of responding in time. Closing my eyes again, I breathed deeply, dulling my five senses, awaking more subtle modes of perception. If Daniel decided to pitch early, I’d be in trouble.

“Oscar Lebusa.” More nothing happened.

I opened my eyes and circled the rubble again, stopping often to touch parts of the ruins with my toes. Finally, something. The smell of cut grass. It vanished in a heartbeat. But I knew that spell.

“*Bliksem*,” I breathed, frustrated. That smell had answered one question.

Someone had visited the ruins before me and wiped away the magical fingerprints of whatever curse had gone down. Someone had something to hide, whether they’d killed Oscar or not.

This trick with my feet was far stronger than any spell Daniel could cast, or even Kasia, as far as I knew. Sometimes, it gave me images, sounds and smells so intense, it was like I’d felt them in person. It was key to my success as a PI. Someone had been super, ultra thorough to beat my trick.

I snapped my eyes up to the wooden cross. It was a damn impossible coincidence. The cross had been set upright. Why? A taunt? A clue?

My gut shouted at me. If Daniel showed up early and caught me, it would look as if I was the person wiping away evidence. It was about 23h45. No need for a watch. I had a knack for tracking time, and it was time to scarper. Recovering my boots, I laced them up in a hurry.

Behind me, someone cleared their throat.

I said something stronger and less gentlemanly than *bliksem*, but at least I had enough self-control to stop from turning around with murderous magic in hand.

“Eli,” Kasia whispered. “You’ve just made a huge mistake.”

I stayed bent over my boots, careful to look non-threatening. No need to look any more guilty than I already did.

“*Bliksem*, Kasia. Ten out of ten for your cloaking spell.” I frowned as an ugly thought wormed into my head. “You knew I’d be out here, right? We sort of agreed on it. Why hide?”

“Daniel’s going to be here any second, Eli. This doesn’t look good for you.” Her voice was oddly passionless. “I gave you a shot and you fudged it badly.”

Who's in need of help now. "Kasia, I..." My lips kissed dirt as an invisible force tipped me over, pinning me face-down and ass-up on the ground, like a collapsed L.

"Kasia?" I heard Daniel's voice. "What are you doing here? Who's that?"

"The company wanted me to secure the scene, just in case," Kasia answered him. "I've been waiting for the last half hour."

"Is that Mr Fletcher down there?" Daniel asked.

Heat flushed up my face, my stomach burning. Good grief what a picture I must have made, pinned down, butt facing the moon. I nearly started fighting back against Kasia's force, if only to gain a marginally more dignified position, but any resistance could give Daniel the wrong impression. No telling how he'd react.

"What's he doing here, Kasia?" "It's obvious, if you think about it." Her voice was as clinical as a court subpoena. "Trying to recover clues about what happened to your

brother. Trying to get one over on you, to prove that the company needs him."

Obviously, I couldn't see Daniel from my position, but the silence suddenly thrummed with subtle vibrations, and I smelled something like car oil. Most practitioners' magic works that way, giving off a signature odour when they summon it. Daniel was readying a punch and there was jack I could do about it.

The silence lengthened. My joints started aching. Grains of sand tickled my nose every time I inhaled.

I heard footsteps departing and risked a question, "Kasia... what are you doing?" I tried to think of something witty, but being pinned in that position wasn't helping.

"Daniel's performing the ritual. Obviously, he won't find anything. I'm going to tell him that you accidentally erased what evidence there might have been because you were too eager to wait for midnight."

I tried spitting some grit out of my mouth. "And is that what you think happened?"

"You can lie down there and keep guessing, Eli. You've proven yourself a blunt

sword. I'm sorry but I don't trust either your sincerity or your competence. I'll be filing a report with EverSure. No choice. Telling them that you fudged up our investigation is about the best I can do. The alternative is suggesting you showed up to erase your own involvement in Oscar's death."

The heat in my face and belly turned molten. I pushed back against Kasia's power, but she was strong. "Kasia... my business."

She didn't answer.

Time ticked on until even veteran yogis would have found the position torturous. Far worse than any joint pain was the anger. An irrational, primal urge accumulated in my bones, shouting at me to push back and hammer Kasia into the ground. I'd never felt that way before. Not about women. Shame followed, mixing with the anger.

Finally, my gut caught up with the situation. "Kasia, how did you know I hadn't found anything?"

I had every right to feel ashamed. I'd been a moron. Well, more than usual. Strength flowed into me—hot and angry, along with the scent of cloves, and I pushed back against Kasia as hard as I could. She didn't give in, but I raised myself up on my knees. My back felt as if a giant was pressing its palm on my scapula, but at least I could turn my head.

Kasia's eyes glittered in the dark. Literally glittered. And the smug look on her face fuelled my strength, until I rose, gaining my feet. I twisted my hips, rolling out and away from the force she was directing against me. She nearly lost her footing, as I turned to face her.

Kasia stepped back from me and raised her hands, palms up, but I turned on her, calling fire into my hands, hurling it directly at her in a steel-melting cone. It was about the stupidest thing I could've done. My night vision was ruined, just as shame choked my power again, winking the fire out.

I could barely see, but Kasia's silhouette stood unharmed, exactly where she'd been, her hands still raised in a gesture of peace. A dome of semi-translucent orange light shimmered around her. Daniel came racing to her side, while she flicked one hand, killing the orange light.

“Are you two insane!” he shouted. “We’re in public! You want to bring the police down on our heads?”

Kasia lowered her hands and, with my night vision still ruined, I couldn’t see the expression on her face.

“Daniel,” I said as calmly as I could. “I made a mistake. Earlier... when you talked to me. I should have listened.”

“Of course, he made a mistake,” Kasia interjected coolly, sounding every bit the controlled, rational adult. “Eli was overeager. He couldn’t wait until midnight. That’s why you couldn’t find anything, Daniel.”

My eyes were adjusting, but Daniel’s face was covered by nighttime shadows and despite how much I kept calling him a kid, I was damn glad I couldn’t see his expression. The stink of car oil around him was bad enough.

“Daniel... I.” What was I supposed to say? How much could I say with Kasia right there? I still had no idea how she was involved.

“Go away,” Daniel whispered. His shoulders sagged and his head hung low. When he spoke again, I could hear heavy reluctance dragging at each syllable. “My parents will hear about this. Now, just go.”

I did. Not because Daniel scared me, or Kasia. I left because Kasia was right. I’d made a mistake. This was none of my business. All I’d accomplished was to stick my nose where it didn’t belong. And to shoot a cannonball through my precious reputation.

*

There’s a firing range in town where I can give my gut and my brain time to catch up with each other. Technically, it’s not open 24/7, but I knew the owner. So, at 01h00, I pointed one of my revolvers down the gullet of the sound-proofed tunnel, without aiming, and pulled the trigger. No careful squeezing. No need for precision. I just pulled. The old gun did what all guns do. Except for the crucial bit. A flash of yellow flame. An angry bark, dulled by my ear-protectors. The gun kicked, its grip biting into my palms, and the barrel jumped up towards the ceiling. I didn’t lower it. Instead, I

counted one second, focusing all my thoughts on the count, then tipped the barrel's mouth to the floor.

Clink.

The projectile that should have been racing at murderous speed towards the sandbags at the far end of the range, rolled harmlessly on the floor. Five more shots. Fire more projectiles on the floor.

I walked to the small, padded table in the range, placed the gun down, and removed its cylinder. From my second holster, I removed my other revolver; the one I carried in public. It was different. Holes had been drilled through its barrel and it was missing a hammer. I replaced its cylinder with the one that had just absorbed all the kinetic energy from the explosions that normally fired projectiles. The spell was my own design, and it gave me a legally deactivated firearm that seemed harmless, but which could release enough energy to break bones. Strange hobby, I know, but it's way better than hitting the bottle like my old man had done until his death in some lonely, dingy pit.

By now, my brain and gut had caught up.

How many options did I have? My success had earned me some powerful allies . One or two of them could at least limit the damage to my reputation. No. Running to them would be a mistake. Allies are not friends. If I didn't do something, my usefulness to them would drop to three out of ten. I'd been duped. I'd been stupid, shortsighted. Not exactly qualities my allies valued. I had no illusions about how they'd react.

I shook my head as I reviewed my conversation with Kasia in the Mugg & Bean. "*Bliksem*," I whispered.

Maybe it was all for the better. Maybe I should just back off, step aside, let Daniel figure out what had happened and how Kasia was involved. He suspected her already, so maybe he could do better than me. I could retire. In fact, I might have little choice now. Find something else to do.

"No." I raised the special revolver into the light of an overhead bulb and watched the metal gleam. "Not yet." Daniel had asked for my help. I could still be useful. If I did it right.

Kasia. I hadn't smelled any signature scent around her when she deployed her magic. That might mean nothing. Some people are like that. But those eyes. The upright cross. The fact that someone had known to guard against my feet-on-the-ground spell.

Oscar had told me that church had been flagged several times in the last month. He wasn't the only EverSure employee who got dispatched there.

*

"Kasia, Katarzyna Kowalska."

This time, when I removed my shoes and wriggled my toes into the cold sand, I possessed enough knowledge to direct the spell where I should have done in the first place.

"Kasia, Katarzyna Kowalska," I whispered again, surprised at how calm I felt. All my anger had evaporated. "Welcome to round two."

It was 03h00, and I was certain I was being watched, again, and that was just fine. My spine tingled, the scent of cloves filled my nose and in my mind's eye, the ruined church transformed into the small, but beautiful building it had been not long ago. Moonlight slanted down on the narrow windows. Kasia arrived, her long coat swirling around her boots in the wind, along with her short, blonde hair.

She produced a key from her pocket, marked with an EverSure tag, and entered a small side door of the church. Nothing happened. Usually, my perspective followed the person targeted by the spell, like a movie camera. Something blocked me. Two hours passed in five seconds, like those sped up videos of plants growing, and when the door opened again, Kasia stepped out, eyes glittering. No explosion. No fireworks. Nothing overt. I blinked my eyes to end the spell and looked upon the shattered ruins, still bathed in moonlight.

"Oscar wasn't the one who lost his edge," I announced, voice loud and challenging. "I'd ask who you are, but I know how jealously demons guard their names."

I turned slowly, as non-threateningly as I knew how, to face the thing wearing Kasia's body. Its eyes gleamed a beautiful shade of green, but I couldn't see anything of its

face, in defiance of the moonlight. It spoke, and its voice no longer mimicked hers. If anything, it sounded gratingly masculine, like a chain-smoking baritone.

“We have not come here to battle you, Eli Fletcher.”

The air vibrated as the syllables of my name slithered out of its mouth.

“You know what? I’d wager good money you never asked the directors at EverSure to put me on the case.”

The thing’s eyes glittered emerald and it spat to one side. I might have heard a sizzling sound, or it might have been my imagination.

“Know what else?” I pressed. “I’d wager even more money that you’re here to make me an offer.” I wasn’t acting. I felt as calm as I sounded. “You’re predictable that way.” This time, I’d come prepared—like a seasoned PI should.

“We know what you want, Eli Fletcher. Power to protect. The power to do what you deem right. You are not evil. You would use it well. Unlike this one.” The thing raised Kasia’s hand to point at its body. “You have no idea what she really wanted. You would not like it. You would use us more wisely. And you would deserve the admiration, the adoration that we know you crave. That is what drives you. Did you know it? You yearn for admiration.”

Something about the words *admiration* and *adoration* kicked up my heart rate. I felt one, large, jagged crack appearing in my confidence, like ice under strain. Those two words fell on me like hammers, but I refused to let this thing see its effect.

“Is that how you got your claws into her?” I kept my eyes on the thing, not daring for a second to glance around. Hopefully, Daniel was already here. “See, your offer doesn’t look too good from here. Looks to me like you made her into a puppet. Why would anyone want that?”

It shrugged. “She tried to change her mind. Tried to push us out. We only defended ourselves. Accept us in, and we can work with you. We will align with you. We have no care what you do with what we give. We only want a home of flesh, blood and mind and soul—not dead stone and mortar.”

“You’re still not making much of a pitch. If you’re so accommodating, why did she

change her mind?”

It shrugged again. “What matters it to you? Accept our offer, or we will kill you and find another to treat with. We have all her power to hand. She outmatches you.”

“Any day of the week,” I conceded. “But I don’t need to fight fair.”

Its body went perfectly still for five seconds. Then its head turned like a dog hearing an interesting sound. More seconds ticked by, before its head snapped back upright, making horrible popping sounds as it did.

“Surely, you do not speak of that?” It gestured towards the ruined church. “The congregation was uncommitted. How else do you think we gained entry? Our cult broke in and summoned us in there. Could they have done so if the worshippers were devoted?”

I wasn’t speaking to it anymore. “Enough of them believed. The residue of their faith is still there if you know how to look for it.”

It giggled in response, its voice shifting from gratingly masculine to creepily childish, but when it spoke, the smoker’s voice was back. “Eli, Eli, Eli. Despite the meaning of your name, you have no right to that power, even were it still under that heap of nothing.”

“No, I don’t.” But Oscar believed. And so does his brother. I hoped.

I closed my eyes, bowed my head, and pointed my left hand towards the church, fingers cupped as if begging. Warmth touched my fingers as if another hand were reaching out. So, I opened my eyes and looked.

The moonlight intensified. Faint traces of silver light limned the broken stones, the beams, the cross. I’m not going to lie and tell you that I truly believed it was some kind of divine power. That’s not the point. The point was that enough people in that building believed hard enough to create something that accumulated and settled into the foundations. Sure, there was hypocrisy enough to let this thing find a home there too, enough doubt and pretence and plain old human meanness. Hey, we’re complicated.

The light was too weak to hurt the eye, too weak to do anything really. But I was banking on some help. Any second now.

I looked back at the thing and grinned.

It sighed, shaking its head in disappointment and waved a lazy hand at the new light. Instantly, fine red lines appear, like a fisherman's net, enclosing the ruins. The silver light dimmed.

"It will not answer your plea, Eli Fletcher."

"You're right, but I'm not calling it for myself. See, I've learned my lesson."

The thing crouched, shifting from languid confidence to alertness in an instant, its head twisting again, making Kasia's beautiful, short hair drift a little to one side. Its green eyes dimmed and suddenly a mixture of red and silver light played over its face. Kasia really had been quite beautiful.

Nothing happened. My confidence cracked some more, making that booming noise you hear in documentaries about icebergs. Then it sounded again. A muffled booming noise, coming from the ruins. It wasn't just in my head.

I had enough sense to get the hell out of the way, staggering back clumsily, nearly falling on my ass for the second time that night. Bricks, support beams, church benches, and a whole fricking pulpit rose into the air, limned in light, and shot towards the thing like iron filings to a magnet. The cross came along too, flying like a crazy spear that almost made me laugh.

But ex-Kasia wasn't kidding about its skill and power. Probably, it had found untapped reserves of power and talent, unlocking it.

A translucent dome of orange flashed up around its upper body, and it dashed towards me. A completely unfair number of heavy objects either crumbled into dust upon impact with that dome, or slid off harmless, falling behind it as the thing drew nearer.

I widened my stance, balancing my weight and pulled my special revolver from its holster, aiming for one of its ankles. Just as ex-Kasia's foot came down, with all the weight of its body behind it, I unleashed the pent-up kinetic energy, slamming it into the fragile joint. No flash of light. No bark of sound. Only a sickly crunch of impact.

The orange dome vanished. Ex-Kasia hit the ground in a graceless heap but converted the fall into a roll that carried it far enough along the ground to avoid the last chunks of debris.

“Oh, come on!” I snarled.

But Ex-Kasia didn't rise from its roll. Instead, it flopped onto its back, slowly clambered up to one knee and stayed there panting. Its body could still register pain, I realised. It could still be destroyed. I wasn't sure what would happen to the demon after that, but wasting time seemed a bad idea, so I aimed at its neck, trying to figure out where to place a spine-snapping shot.

Daniel finally appeared, jogging towards us through the open space between the two heaps of leftover church. Only then did I start thinking about the noise we were making. It was almost as if I hadn't even heard it, even though my ears were ringing. We only had so much time before the police showed up, surely.

I lowered my aim from ex-Kasia's neck. If Oscar had trained Daniel right, Kasia might still be saved. So instead I aimed at its left wrist and blasted the joint into a crooked angle, then its right. Injuring its hands probably wouldn't stop it from using magic, but the pain might distract it long enough.

Ex-Kasia didn't cry out, but its breathing went shallower still and it spat something on the ground.

“Why did you kill Oscar?” The question just bubbled up in my brain like a dead fish.

It looked up at me with that lovely face and beautifully gleaming eyes. “Just to see what would happen. Let's see what happens now.”

Ex-Kasia tipped its head back, opened its mouth and fire roared out towards me. I had only seconds to act. I could have tried a spell to absorb the heat. Maybe it would have worked. But for some reason, I reached for the reservoir of silver light still sitting under the church.

The angry light of the fire stole my vision. I raised my arm over my eyes and the air around me heated up, but only from a biting winter's night to a pleasant summer evening.

It was over in a heartbeat. The cool air washed away, making space for winter's fangs to snap down on me again. The light of the fire faded, and I opened my eyes again to see Ex-Kasia staring at me, slack-jawed, emerald eyes dimmed to tiny pinpricks.

"For you?" it whispered. "Why?"

The incredulous look on its face had me grinning like an idiot. I heard myself laughing, loud and hysterical with the joy of being alive.

Daniel crept up behind her, both hands cupped, and it looked as if he'd borrowed light from the moon in his palms. I stopped laughing and wracked my brain for something witty to say. A final goodbye to the thing that had stolen Kasia. Police sirens blared their way closer.

"Would Eli Fletcher accept a confession from us?" ex-Kasia asked. "We from the Other Place have heard of you and your feet. We were curious to meet you. Who knows? Maybe we'll work together some day. If you manage to escape custody."

It whipped its head in Daniel's direction, and he stopped, eyes wide as if mesmerised. My gut took a few seconds to catch up with what was happening. I couldn't hear the demon speak to him, but it was speaking, sure as hell.

"Daniel! Don't listen to it!" I pointed my gun at the back of ex-Kasia's neck and unloaded every bit of stored-up energy. Doing it made me sick. Every injury I had inflicted on her body had twisted my gut, even though I knew she wasn't in the driving seat anymore. But was she still trapped in there?

Ex-Kasia's neck twisted into an unnatural angle, stretching the skin to one side, along with a snapping sound that nearly emptied my stomach. But it had been too fast for me, again. The silvery light in Daniel's upturned palms vanished in smoky trails, like vaporising water, as he sunk to his knees, mouth open in a soundless scream.

I stood there like a moron as my gut and brain both came up empty-handed in the ideas department. What was the best move now?

Daniel collapsed onto his side, and I forced myself to believe that he was fighting the invasion. Maybe I just needed to say something, call on him to remember who he

was and how this was the best moment to avenge his brother. Something. Too slow, again.

Daniel rose in a feral crouch, mouth stretched wide, teeth gleaming in the moonlight, tiny pinpricks of green light flickering in his eyes.

“Good luck explaining her body, Eli Fletcher,” ex-Daniel cackled, its voice oddly high-pitched, like a prepubescent boy’s. “We shall meet again, oh yes. We have so much more fun in mind.”

Ex-Daniel turned to leave. My gut and brain remained awol until my ears finally warned us about the sirens drawing closer. Fleeing the scene wouldn’t save me from trouble with the police. It would only deepen the hole I was about to plummet into. I had contacts in law enforcement. Allies, not friends. They could give me a heads up, but not a free pass. Once Kasia’s body was discovered, they’d be duty-bound to interview all known associates—and the PI she had recently been seen with inside a Mugg & Bean would rank somewhere in the top five.

“Wait,” I called after the demon.

It did, leering at me over one shoulder. “Tick, tock,” it mocked, its voice now resembling an ancient crone’s.

“Is Daniel still in there?”

“Perhaps. He’s even stronger than she was. Inexperienced, but stubborn. Why?”

“You wanted to meet me. You wanted to learn about me? Is that right?”

Slowly, ex-Daniel turned to me, still smiling. “Why?”

“If that’s what you want, then I have an offer for you.” I raised my revolver. “Get in here. Leave Daniel and get in here.”

Blue lights flashed on the nearby houses.

“Tsk, tsk, we were hoping for something smarter from you, Eli Fletcher.”

“If you can attach yourself to brick and mortar, you can make do with steel.”

“And why would we accept so cold an abode?”

I wiggled the revolver, as if waving a bar of chocolate at a kid. "This gun is special. I've been filling it with my magic for decades." I spoke slowly, considering each word, careful to avoid giving the demon any loopholes to exploit. "Leave Daniel. Get in here. And I promise, I will feed you my own magic for nine days. Imagine what you could learn about me." I swallowed the nervous lump in my throat. "After nine days, you will leave the gun, and I will help you go back to the rest of you in the Other Place. I will set up all the ruins necessary for your return."

"Return? Yes. To share what we have learned." Now its voice hissed like a snake and actual drool slithered over Daniel's lips. "What status that would buy us." Its glittering eyes narrowed. "This you promise? You will feed us *willingly*? It must be done willingly, or you offer us nothing we cannot take from our current host."

"This I promise and promise and promise. Once, twice, thrice I promise."

It eyed the revolver. "Promise you will not seek to trap us inside. Promise that if you break your word, your access to the Human Power will wither and die. Promise that if you fail to adhere to our terms, you will accept us into yourself willingly."

Three police cars, sirens still blaring and blue lights flashing, pulled into the yard around the church, one of them sliding on the sand, throwing dust into my face. If I said yes, there would be no chance to trap the demon. No clever spells could keep it inside the gun if I accepted those terms of my own volition.

"My name is Eli Fletcher. I accept your terms and accept them and accept them. Once, twice, thrice I accept."

Daniel's body collapsed on the ground. The gun in my hand grew almost unbearably hot before going ice cold in the space of five seconds.

"Your part of the bargain, kid," I whispered to the body on the ground before me, uncertain if he was alive let alone able to hear me, "is to get in touch with your parents and make them pull enough strings to get both of us out of trouble with the police."

Harsh voices shouted at me to drop the gun, put my hands over my head and to get down on the ground. "I'll take care of the rest."

I surrendered without resisting and before the officers had even loaded me into one of their cars, I heard them muttering to each other in confusion. Who could blame

them? They'd found a body with a broken neck and me—a familiar PI—holding a gun that couldn't shoot even if it wasn't empty of ammo. Their report of the night's event would make for interesting reading.

*

I sagged against the sound-proofed wall of the gun range and slowly sunk down until my butt hit the floor. Pulling the revolver from its holster, I held it up to the light and said, "You know, this used to be a relaxing activity, almost meditative."

Tonight was the ninth night.

For the first time ever, one of the inanimate objects I spoke to, replied. Granted, I shouldn't have been surprised, given the circumstances.

"You have honoured your obligations to us, Eli Fletcher." I was forced to strain my ears. The sheer number of voices speaking simultaneously hindered my ability to pick out individual words. I leaned closer to the gun.

"We are well sated on what you have fed us."

"Really? That's fantastic. Now if you'd please rate my establishment on Trip Advisor and leave as promised, we'll call this bill settled, alright?"

The walls of the gun range looked different. For the last nine days, I'd poured myself into research about demonic wards, and every surface, including the floors, were covered in painted symbols. I was as ready for any funny business as I could be, and at the very least I knew that if I messed up and got myself possessed, ex-me would not be able to leave the room.

"We shall leave in peace."

That... surprised me.

"Fantastic," I replied, unable to keep the dubious tone out of my voice.

"We shall leave you with this warning, Eli Fletcher. You did not see us when we wore

her body. We were close to understanding you. Our hook was well baited. We have fed on you now. We know you now. We know what you long for and what you fear. You will not see us when we return. But we shall.”

The revolver grew too hot to hold and I flung it against the far wall, where it shattered into splinters of ice.

I leaned my head back against the sound-proofed wall. “I wanted in on this case. Looks like there isn’t any getting off.”

The demon’s question still lingered in my mind. Why was I able to touch the power under the ruined church?

What is a church, some part of me wondered, but a gathering of people striving towards some common goal.

I needed sleep.

But first, I needed to set some plans in motion. Daniel was recovering slowly, and at least he’d been *compos mentis* enough to call on his parents’ aid after the police arrested us. Now, I was going to make him get all the directors of EverSure together. Everyone needed to know about the demon. The more people who knew, the more of us would keep watch, waiting for it to return. If that damaged my reputation, then I’d accept it with a side order to *what will be, will be*. And I was going to ask Daniel to sit down with me and draw up some contingency plans for fighting it.

I wasn’t going to be arrogant enough to go it alone. Aside from Daniel, my knuckles would be rapping on some of my allies’ doors. I was not going to allow my personal liabilities to cost someone else’s life again.

“I’m sorry Kasia,” I whispered.

NASA's Near-Earth Object surveyor (NEO) – The first satellite to hunt specifically for asteroids



Alarms about asteroid 2024 YR4 were first raised in December last year, when astronomers found it might be on a collision course for Earth in 2032. It appears to be between 40 and 90 metres wide and could generate a deadly blast should it hit a city. In the following weeks, the world's telescopes and space agencies closely tracked its trajectory, honing its future path with greater precision. It reached its highest impact risk on 17 February, with a 1-in-32 chance, but in the days after, this fell to 1-in-67, or a 1.5 per cent risk.

The world's space agencies have reduced the chances of asteroid 2024 YR4 impacting Earth to below 1 per cent, which strongly suggests that a potentially devastating collision will be avoided. However, the asteroid will still probably pass extraordinarily near to our planet, giving astronomers a rare opportunity to observe an asteroid up close.

The close approach could still be a good opportunity to test our ability to deflect asteroids, says Voigt – the only previous attempt to do this was NASA's DART mission, which successfully changed the trajectory of the 160-metre-wide asteroid Dimorphos in 2022. Or we could build a satellite to send to 2024 YR4, he says, similar to ESA's Ramses satellite – due to travel to observe the asteroid Apophis, which is set to pass close to Earth in 2029.

A final decision on what to do about 2024 YR4 probably won't be made until planned observations in March using the James Webb Space Telescope. As well as gathering trajectory data, this will better assess the size and composition of the asteroid. That information will be then fed to the United Nations-backed Space Mission Planning Advisory Group, which will decide on a best course of action around the end of April.

(Information from the NASA website)

