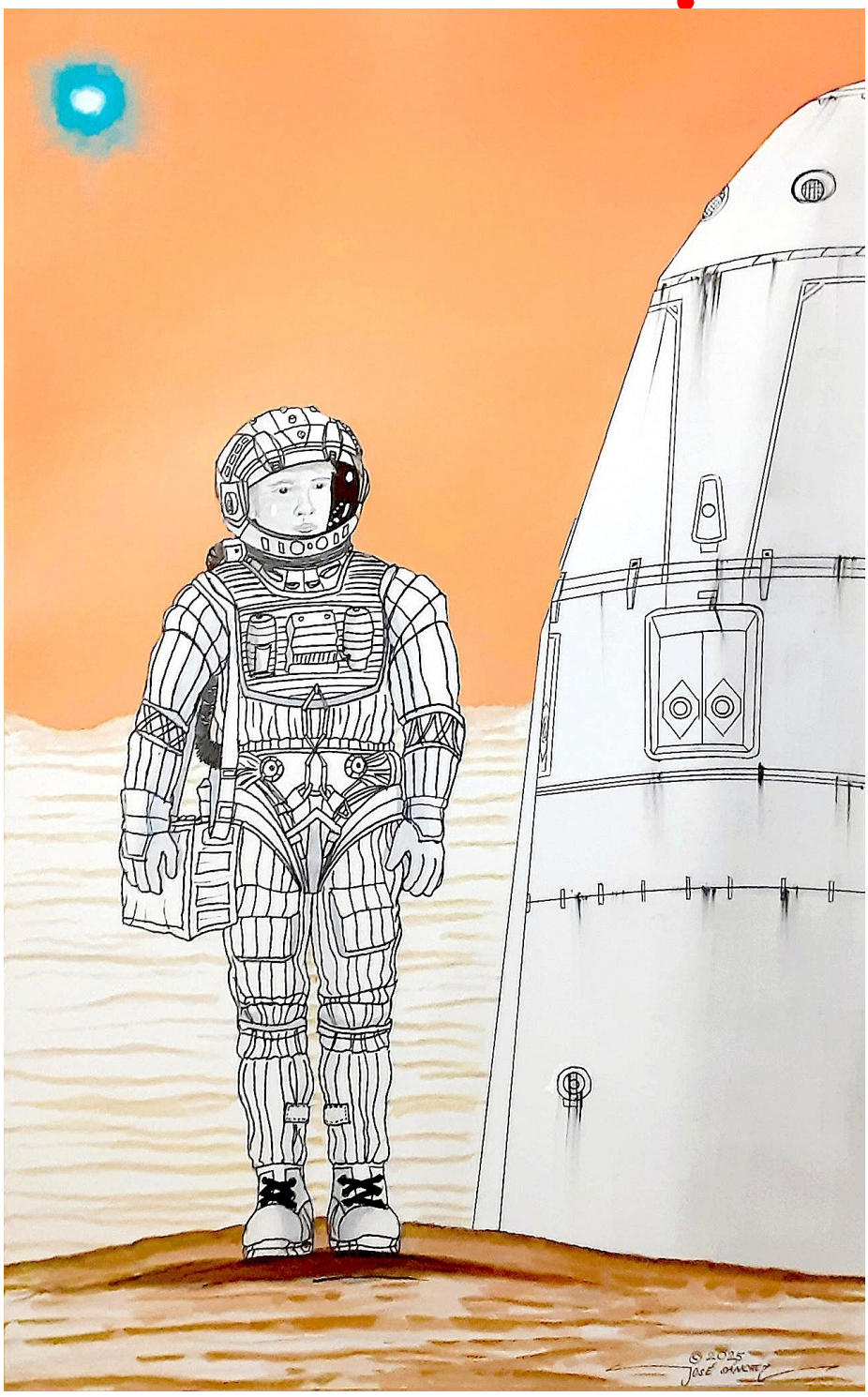
Eldritch Science



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Eldritch Science

Editor—Steve Condrey

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Editorial Address: Steve Condrey
4121 Maple Street, Omaha NE 68111
Email: steve.condrey.tnfff@gmail.com

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Editorial

And so begins the saga of the slightly delayed November 2025 edition of Eldritch Science. The past few weeks have been somewhat challenging but we now bring you a lineup of great stories for your holiday entertainment.

The Firebird Plains is brought to us by Valerie Sirenko, Dr. Sirenko holds a Ph.D in English literature from the University of Texas at Austin and has is an alumna of Futurescapes and a Codex member. It all shows through in this story of the hazards of interplanetary colonization. But is the real hazard inside the habitats?

Norman Goodman is the English pen-name of Nenad Mitrović, who had an entry in our last issue. *The Stain* combines murder-mystery with cosmic horror as the guilt and shame of a love triangle unleashes a nightmare on an entire nation...just to start.

Continuing with what appears to be a running theme this month, Mathew Anderson's *Rippling Waters* explores the consequences of underestimating one's enemies—and one's friends.

John Thiel concludes *Omnis Vivandi*, the previous installment of which ran in the September issue. *Omnis Vivandi* was a long-running feature in Thiel's own zine, *Pablo Lennis*. Contact me if you would like to be put in touch with him, as he does not presently have email access.

Our last entry, Clark Timmins' *Fog*, reconceptualizes the antagonist of C. Franklin Miller's story of a century ago as a challenging encounter you can slot into your next roleplaying adventure.

Whatever holiday (if any) you are celebrating during this season, may it bring joy to you and your loved ones. Happy reading!

The Firebird Plains

by Valerie Sirenko

The firebirds dive for the biggest, shiniest targets—which is usually us. When the wide-open plains between our neighborhood and Sector 4 are barren of prey, the creatures target anything that moves, talons streaming with flame across the hydrogen-rich atmosphere of Axiom, Octavia's largest moon.

"Zip me up?" I ask, pulling my helmet down around my close-cropped hair. Mornings on Axiom are painfully bright, and I am grateful for the visor.

My older brother and I cross the plains together when our work schedules align. Luke fastens my back clasp, then pulls his own suit over his broad shoulders. We clip small air tanks to our hips and exit our neighborhood's airlock.

Our heat-reflective suits glint like beacons, and the firebirds circle like an impending snap of bone. We cross using slow-motion steps that supposedly reduce their ability to track movement.

They circle day and night, but they do not always dive. Maybe they aren't always hungry, or maybe they have some other logic. We don't know what they do with the bodies they carry off—whether they eat them or use our bones to build nests or simply like the shiny beauty of our suits, the meat inside discarded in the cliffs.

"I didn't hear you come home last night," I say, keeping my voice level. I slide one leg forward while my arms stay locked in place, like a slow-motion sprinter.

Luke shrugs. "I was working late. If we complete the new atmo-dome on time, everyone gets a bonus."

Luke is on the crew building Sector 10. The Sectors are connected with Corridors, but some neighborhoods, like Installation 18 where we live, were built too far out, with the expectation that the plains in between would fill up with business districts and shopping centers. Those never came. The Colony still needs to expand its agro-domes and complete the terraforming. The atmosphere isn't breathable yet, and it takes a full-time engineering crew to keep the glacial filtration systems running.

"We can finally rent that apartment in Sector 9," Luke says. "My bonus will cover the deposit, then I'll be up for foreman next cycle."

His broad shoulders rise and fall, and I can't help but worry the angle of the sun against his suit will attract a firebird's gaze. My muscles clench in ways I don't even notice anymore. It's constant, this awareness that every moment might bring on the irreversible.

I stare at the black Sector 4 airlock, only a hundred meters away. We are approaching the Spot.

"What about Mom?" I ask.

"What about her?" Luke meets my eyes through our visors. "We can't carry dead weight. You and me. We've got a chance."

Ropes coil in my gut. Mom doesn't have any right to ask us to stay, but still.

I angle my slow, gliding steps to avoid a dusty patch of plains no one but me would recognize. The Spot.

I stood there, four years ago, with our younger brother, Jeremy. He was gone in an instant. The woosh of the firebird's wings knocked me down; the heat burned my eyes. Talons burst through Jeremy's chest as flames rippled across his body. The smell of burnt flesh overpowered my suit's filter.

I was so close to safety, but I turned around and went back. I had to tell Mom. I couldn't stand the idea of her waiting for us to come home, getting ready for the nightshift, heating up our dinners, not knowing Jeremy was gone.

Afterwards, I begged her to let me stay home from work, but she made me go. We couldn't afford to lose my job, too. We had just lost Jeremy's.

That was the day I started to hate her. I hated her more each day she carried on without Jeremy, because how could she survive? I wanted the grief to crush her, because that would prove losing Jeremy was intolerable, but she worked her shifts every night.

A shadow races across the plains, fifteen meters ahead, and I freeze. The firebird wheels and caws, but I don't look up. Either it will dive, or it won't.

I almost lost my job once, hiding from a low-flying firebird, crouched below a bluff while it circled, the temperature inside my suit boiling. When I finally got to work, Gabby threatened to fire me. The preschool had to scramble to maintain its teacher-student ratio, and that disrupted the parents' work schedules. The residents of Sector 7 do *not* like their schedules disrupted.

The shadow moves on. Luke and I resume our slow-motion glide.

We step through the airlock and store our suits.

"See you tomorrow," I say.

Luke's working overtime, so tonight I'll cross alone.

At work, I cuddle with toddlers and read them stories about worlds I've never seen. Their parents pick them up one by one, looking tired and frazzled, complaining to each other about balancing work and parenting. No one from the Sectors knows what it's like to cross the firebird plains. If they did, they wouldn't whine about things like "never having time for themselves."

If Luke and I move into the Sectors, I'll never have to cross again. But Mom still would.

Maybe she deserves it. I was nine when she made me cross for the first time. A lady in Sector 5 needed a sitter for her kids. I couldn't imagine how babysitting could be worth risking my life, but Mom held my hand, and we crossed together. She chattered softly, pointing out the huge, lumbering rock-crabs, and I almost believed this was normal.

A few weeks later, she let me cross by myself. Our neighbor, Mr. Elias, a burly man coming home from his shift, lifted an arm to wave at me. The firebird's talons went through his left shoulder and neck, and his eyes drained of life. I don't know how long I was out there before Mom found me. I don't remember anything until she was shaking me, yelling, "GET UP! MOVE!"

I sanitize the toddler room, clenching a toy rover so tightly its axle snaps.

When I exit the Sector 4 airlock, a firebird's flaming wings cut against the darkening horizon. How can it look so serene, so unaffected? The Colony's Ambassadors assure us the firebirds are sentient and capable of communication—that inroads are being made to negotiate a safer Axiom. Maybe that's propaganda, or maybe we really are on the brink of an inter-species breakthrough. Regardless, I have never spoken to one, and they have never tried to speak to me.

I whisper a taunt I hope it can understand, but it ignores me.

Anger floods my bloodstream, and I flail my arms, daring it to dive. I leap over rocks and trample shrubs under my boots. I invite the inevitable. I have never crossed the plains this quickly before. Stupid, but I don't care.

And yet, I make it to our neighborhood's airlock safe and sound. I look back through the atmo-dome to glare at the sky, but there's not a flicker of fire in sight.

The house is quiet. Mom is still asleep. What will she say if I tell her I'm leaving? Maybe it would be easier to say nothing.

The bed creaks in her room. Her feet patter into the bathroom. The faucet runs for a few seconds, just enough for a few cold splashes to the face. She never wastes water.

Without me and Luke, Mom will have to pay the atmosphere and water filtration taxes with one paycheck. Guilt climbs up my esophagus.

A door creaks. Mom exits the bathroom and pauses in the doorway, her thick hand pressing against the frame. Our eyes meet.

She grabs a dehydrated coffee packet and eases into a chair, pouring the powder across a protein cake.

"Luke home?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Working late."

Her chest heaves. Somehow, I think she knows.

"I can see it on your face," Mom says. "So you might as well say it."

I scowl. Angry phrases dash across my mind. *Why didn't you try harder? Why didn't you protect us?*

She purses her lips at the uneaten protein cake in her hands. "When Luke was born, I swore I would never let him cross alone. He was so small. It seemed a simple thing to throw my body across him if a firebird swooped too low."

I don't want to hear this.

"Then you were born, and there were two of you, running in different directions. I switched to cleaning at the Admin Bureau. Better pay, but we only cleaned at night."

She is quiet. I know this is my chance to escape, but I can't make my feet move.

"I think they can't see as well at night." She almost whispers it. "At least, that's what I told myself, every time I left you sleeping, not knowing if you'd wake up to find I never came home. When I went to bed just after dawn, missing you so much even though you were in the next room, getting breakfast. I told myself it was safer."

I don't say anything, but I know we are both thinking of Jeremy.

Finally, I clear my throat. "How could you go on living without him?"

Her face tightens. “How did *you*?”

Such an unfair question. I had no choice.

She settles a steady look on me as if she can read my mind. My cheeks redden. I don’t like the way my chest is softening. I don’t want to forgive her.

Hoping to wound her, I blurt, “Luke and I are moving out.”

I flash a defiant glare, but she just nods.

“That’s okay, honey. I understand.”

I want to scream at her. I want to harden myself like a rock-crab carapace.

“Well, I should get to work.” She pushes back from the table.

I let my forehead fall against the rough, cracked vinyl.

I wake up sometime deep in the night.

“Luke?” I mumble.

No one’s home. It’s not unusual for Luke to work through the night, especially when a project is nearing a deadline. I cannot count the number of times I’ve stayed up, losing sleep, just to find him here in the morning.

I go to bed, but I listen for the door. I’ll feel foolish in the morning when I’m exhausted for work. Toddlers are a lot harder to handle when you’re tired.

I doze enough that my alarm wakes me. Luke’s not in his room. I check my comms. No messages. Fine. He’s a grown man. He doesn’t need his little sister checking up on him. Maybe he stayed for a drink with his crew. Maybe he went home with someone.

And yet, I resent him for not letting me know. Luke and I have crossed the firebird plains thousands of times. Nothing has happened in years, but the one time it did—

The cognitive dissonance exhausts me.

I send Luke a low-sat comms. *When you home?*

I get ready for work. I zip my own suit, stretching my shoulder blades together awkwardly. I cross alone, slowly.

At the preschool, I take my break around noon. No message. I start to panic. I message Mom, Luke's friends, our neighbors. No one has seen him. After every child has been picked up, I rush to the Sector 10 work zone.

Luke left late last night. No one has seen him since. The foreman is pissed as a cliff rat to be down a man. Says Luke better be dead, because he'll never work this crew again.

I want to sink to the ground, but everyone is watching me. My mind grasps for an alternative explanation. Maybe Luke decided I was dead weight, too.

As I cross the plains, I look for signs. Scorch marks. Blood. Guts. I find nothing, of course. There usually aren't any traces after an attack. The suits keep everything inside.

My chest hurts by the time I'm home. Mom is pacing the floor. She looks at me with deadened eyes.

I cannot do this again.

"He left us," I say, but my voice cracks.

Mom shakes her head. "He wouldn't abandon his job."

Eventually, my sobs calm into deep, steady breaths. I need to be cold and rational. Like Luke. His room looks like he could be back any second. I trick myself into believing maybe he got into a bar fight and is laying low for a few days.

Either way, I need a new plan. I won't be splitting an apartment with Luke. I need to figure something else out, or I will eventually die like my brothers or end up like Mom.

Mom calls, "I'm leaving for work, honey. There's synthesized paneer in the fridge."

I hate her so much.

At work the next day, one of the toddlers throws up, and I have to call his mom for early pick-up. She folds him in her arms, cooing into his sticky hair and rubbing her cheek against his face as she carries him out the door.

My breathing hitches. Hot pressure wells across my face, and I tell Gabby I'm taking my break. There's an unread message on my comms. Hope spikes like a cruel joke, but it's from Mom. *For what it's worth, I wish it had been me.*

Her attempted—what? apology?—only makes me angrier. How could she decide to have kids, knowing she would be raising us in the installations? She chose us, not once, but *three times.* Despite the financial burden, despite the fear. What the hell was she thinking?

I spend the afternoon helping toddlers with block puzzles. They struggle to rotate the wooden pieces, but I don't do it for them. They need to practice their budding problem-solving skills. One girl, Ruby, gets close, but it ends in tears. I tell her not to worry, to try again. I wonder if what I'm teaching her is a lie, but then again, her family lives in the Sectors, so for her, that's probably true.

Maybe Luke and I never put the pieces together in the right way. What might we have done if we'd had time to try again?

After snack time, Ruby finally fits the pieces into a rock-crab. The rock-crabs have carapaces too thick for the firebirds' talons, but the firebirds are experts at flipping the crabs onto their backs. Once, I saw a firebird with wings brighter than Octavia's sun, almost white like plasma, hook its talons beneath a rock-crab's shell and heave the creature over. The rock-crabs have a second line of defense: their underbellies emit sodium bicarbonate, a natural flame retardant. The firebird got blasted with the spray, and it flew away without its prize, but the rock-crab died anyway, already skewered in four places.

A cuddly toddler, Irma, settles herself into my lap, holding up a book about Axiom's floating oxygen tubers. We put as much local content into our curriculum as possible. Some of

the puzzles form firebirds, even though I have mentioned how stress-inducing it can be to solve puzzles featuring the creature that killed my brother.

Brothers.

In the early years of Axiom's settlement, an engineer used the rock-crab's flame-retardant spray to make a heavy-duty fire extinguisher. A firebird dove, killed him, and flew off, even though its wings were reduced to a sputtering flame. It took the extinguisher with it, which was an early clue at their intelligence.

After that, the Colony Admin decided not to fight a war it didn't need to fight. Atmo-domes were going up to provide breathable environments within the Sectors, so no one needed to confront the firebirds on the plains. When the Installation neighborhoods were built, they were hailed as spacious, affordable housing for a growing population, until they were lamented as bad civil planning. Only the people who couldn't afford to move stayed, and those were the same people who couldn't afford to engineer weapons or buy armored rovers. Colony Admin claims a Corridor Proposal is going up for a vote next cycle. It's been "next cycle" for the entire twenty-two years of my life.

My hands clench. In my lap, Irma squirms. If it were these children in danger, the Corridors would have been built. Irma's mother executes contracts for the Waste Recycling Board. Another kid's father is VP of Microchip Processing, and Ruby's family owns a dozen agro-domes.

The kids' coats are hanging on tiny hooks next to their cubbies. What if we took a little fieldtrip to the plains? I bet when they can't find a trace of their children, they'll wish they had taken my brothers' lives more seriously.

Irma throws her arms around my neck, melting into my shoulder for a hug, and I shiver, pushing away the horrid fantasy.

Besides, it's the adults, not the kids, who should pay. I know enough basic chem to manufacture an explosion. The Colony Admin holds public meetings once a month to solicit "community input." I've never attended. I have better things to do than listen to Sector residents debate whether they want the protein synthesizers to produce fake chicken or fake pork. I imagine the blaze, the fear in their eyes. But then I'd be dead, and for what? There still wouldn't be a Corridor.

No. If I'm going to do anything, I have to do it the slow, hard way.

* * *

I go to my first "community input" meeting armed with nothing but determination. People filter into rows of folding chairs. A low table up front seats two tired, middle-aged officials. An agenda pops up on my comms screen—a proposal for redirecting some of our high-grade printers to produce dental instruments in response to increased tooth decay.

A man stands up and argues the printers are needed to manufacture vaccines against the newest Axiom viral strain.

Someone else adds, "The problem would be better addressed by putting additives in the water. We should have been doing that from the beginning."

A woman in the next row scoffs. "How do you think we're going to produce enough fluoride with the chem labs already at capacity?"

The first man rolls his eyes. "We can survive a few cavities."

A parent from the preschool stands up. "This is a photo of my son."

She screen-casts an image. Her three-year-old son, Liam, is missing a small chunk of his lower jaw. The mother's voice is breathy. "His cavities spread to his gums, requiring surgery. He has trouble forming consonants."

The room is silent.

I remember Liam from my toddler class two years ago. After the surgery, he had trouble with solid foods, and his speech is still delayed.

Another man stands up. “As tragic as that is—and I’m very sorry to hear about your son—more children suffer from calcium deficiencies, which could be improved if we build two more organic molecule printers.”

There are groans across the room. Someone mutters, “Sure, and if we had an extra terraformer, we’d all be breathing the fresh Axiom air.”

The debate goes on for forty-five minutes. I find myself wondering if what we really need is to dedicate more solar power to the Atmosphere Generators to speed up the terraforming. I knead my palms into my face.

Finally, one of the officials clears her throat. “We’ll assign someone to investigate the options and compare costs. The report will be open for further comment before a vote.”

I stand up. “What about a new Corridor?”

Everyone looks at me, puzzled.

The official responds in monotone. “If you want to put something on the agenda, submit a petition with the requisite number of signatures. The lead-time to get scheduled is usually three to four sub-cycles.”

“Four sub-cycles? People are dying.”

Still in monotone, she says, “Plains crossing deaths are down 5% this year, and 10% over the last three years. Our diplomacy is making progress.”

“Are you kidding me?”

Everyone in the room is looking at me with the “how do we get rid of her” expression.

The second official, a man with silver streaks in his hair, inhales. “Look, I understand how you feel, but the firebirds aren’t our biggest problem.” He sees my face and holds up his hands. “I know they are a serious concern. But they are not a threat to the Colony’s survival.”

The heat in my cheeks stings my eyes. People start to leave.

A tall, lanky man steps over to me. “First time at one of these?”

I hate how calm he is. It’s jarring, the contrast between how boring the last hour has been compared to the way my heart is hammering.

He runs a hand through his hair and gives me a knowing look. “The bureaucracy here is…beyond frustrating.”

“How do you stand it?”

He shakes his head and smiles, but the wrinkles around his eyes are tight. “If you’re interested in the Corridors, there’s a group that meets.”

He hands me a card. *Axiom Corridor Coalition.* I’ve never heard of it, but then again, I spend most of my time with pre-verbal finger-painters.

“If you’re a coalition, why haven’t you gotten on the agenda?”

His jaw stiffens. “Before we can draft a petition, we have to decide which Installation gets the proposed Corridor. You ever live in an Installation neighborhood?”

His phrasing strikes me. As if it’s a place one lives for a time, then leaves.

I pull back my shoulders. “Installation 18.”

“Then you can imagine the, ah, *debate* over which Installation to choose.”

Of course. There are twenty Installations, and there’s no way the Colony will build Corridors to all of them. Even among ourselves, we have to choose.

He gives me an arch look. “A piece of advice. Take more than an hour to learn about something before you judge those who have been fighting for years.”

He stalks off, and I flip the card around in my hands. My breathing has slowed enough for me to think beyond the impulse to throw a chair. He has a point. I am obviously not the first person to try to get a Corridor built. I need to know why the others failed.

It's late, but I make my way to the Records Bureau. Under Infrastructure, I pull a stack of thick folders. The latest petition, about a year ago, got enough signatures, but stalled in debate. The one before that got as far as a site study but did not receive funding. I start taking notes.

A yawn stretches my mouth, and I clamp my jaw shut. At the front desk, the clerk looks just as tired as I am. She probably can't leave until I do.

"Can I make copies?" I ask. She takes the files and copies them for me. I read while she scans. Each dismissed proposal is accompanied by dozens of reports—population studies, cost of living charts, feasibility studies, budget allocations, and statistics on firebird deaths. Will Luke be counted in this year's data? How can they get accurate data at all, when some firebird attacks go unwitnessed?

I check how the figures are compiled. Sure enough, firebird deaths could be twice as high if missing persons "suspected" of firebird attack are included. This is the kind of ammunition I need to throw back at that monotoned official.

My blood pumps, beating back my tiredness. I decide to call the sponsor who submitted last year's petition.

A woman answers. "Hello? Quisha Rockwell speaking!"

Quisha, a college student in Sector 3, tells me how rewarding it was to collect signatures from both Sector *and* Installation residents. She crossed the plains *twice* to campaign in Installation 1. This girl, ironically, has done more than I have.

I ask why the Proposal stalled in debate.

"Not enough people showed up to the meetings," she says. "And then my semester was over. One of the Admin officials called it a 'vanity' project, and I figured, who needs that kind of shade?"

I hang up. My temples pound. I take deep breaths, but my fists are crumpling the photo-copied pages in my hands. How could I think attending one meeting and doing one evening's research would solve anything?

The pressure in my chest reminds me of crossing the plains, of knowing an impending strike is one wrong move away. How can I survive feeling this way both on *and* off the plains?

I head home, clutching the useless pages to my chest. I couldn't leave them there after the clerk copied everything for me. I plan to fling them into the plains.

The Sector airlock is bustling with people. Lined up in front of the first set of doors, an entire convoy of rovers is loaded with equipment.

I groan. How long is this going to take? Beyond the atmo-dome, the sky is dark.

A suited-up man yells at me to stand back. Engines rev. A man without his helmet on turns around.

I hold up my hand to catch the wall because I feel like I'm falling.

Luke sees me, and his face turns ashen. He steps forward and grips my arm as I sway on my feet. Instinctively, I clasp his arm back. We stare at each other. It's really him. He's alive.

"I was going to tell you." Luke's voice is husky. "The opportunity came up so suddenly, and I know you were counting on me—"

"You're not dead."

Something in Luke's face shifts, as if he is just now realizing I spent the last two days thinking he was dead.

My eyes drift across the loaded vehicles. "You work for Glacial Engineering now?"

Luke nods. “The pay is bonkers, especially if you have experience on the plains.” He ducks his head sheepishly. “And it comes with temporary housing. I’m sorry. I was going to tell you.”

My jaw aches from clenching. “You let me think you were dead for two days because you were afraid I would be mad about the apartment?”

The suited-up man yells a string of commands.

Luke says, “I can send money home. You can still get the apartment—”

“You’re going to work out there? *On the plains?*” My blood is pounding.

“Sure, there are risks, but convoys rarely get attacked.”

I mutter, “*We* ‘rarely’ get attacked.”

The rovers move into position in the half-open airlock.

“I’ve got to go.” Luke pulls me into a hug. At first, I’m limp, because I’m still in shock that he’s alive, and the relief is melting my body, but then the rage flares up, and I pull away.

“How could you do this to us? To Mom?”

His expression becomes puzzled. It’s only now that I realize I’ve begun to accept Mom’s pain as equivalent to mine, despite the way she refuses to show it. I pull out my comms to let her know her eldest child is still alive.

The expedition leader points at Luke and gestures.

“Love you!” Luke calls as he jumps into a rover. They speed away.

I stare after him. Maybe he will send money, and I’ll rent an apartment. Maybe I’ll even convince Mom to come with me. But our neighbors will still live in Installation 18. Someone will always live in the Installations.

The roar of the engines fades, and I clutch the files. Somewhere in these pages, I will find something that helps. I tuck them inside my suit.

My comms ping while I'm crossing, so I cannot check the message until Installation 18's airlock slides closed behind me.

It's Mom. *Thanks for letting me know.*

That's it? Her son is alive, and that's all she has to say?

I'm shaking as I stumble through our door. Mom has already left for the nightshift, and I'm glad, because if she were here, I might be tempted to do something unusually cruel, like tell her I lied. That Luke is dead after all.

Instead, I flop the files onto the table. I'm exhausted, but I start reading.

I scour the documents, going back as far as twenty-five years. My finger traces rows of names and figures. The lines start to blur.

I flip the page and see a name that causes my brain to stutter. I flip through page after page. I see the name again and again. I can't understand it.

For hours, I lie awake, staring at the ceiling.

It's almost dawn when the front door opens. Work starts in two hours. I need to change clothes and zip up my suit.

"Mom," I say, standing in the narrow hallway. I flap the pages at her.

"Do you need me to sign something?" She pulls off her suit and hangs up her helmet.

"You submitted petitions. *Dozens* of them." I flip through the pages.

Her eyes drift, then she forces a smile. "Let a person sit down, will you?"

She unclicks her oxygen and excess CO2 tanks, letting them drop to the floor. We don't release CO2 into the atmosphere, else we'd slow the terraforming.

She squeezes past me and falls into a chair at the kitchen table. Her eyes slide across my messy hair and splotchy face. "Don't you need to be at work soon?"

She's right. I cannot be late. But I need to know who my mother was before I was born.

I cross my arms. "The faster you talk, the sooner I can leave."

She massages her hands, which are gnarled and cracked. “I was younger back then. I fought even harder once Luke was born.”

That’s hard for me to imagine, but the evidence is in the paperwork.

“Why did you request an impregnation when you were young and single and broke?”

She smiles. “What’s the most important thing in the world, honey?”

I want to strangle her, or stonewall her, but I don’t have time. “My brothers. My family.”

She nods. “And where do you think family comes from?”

I throw my eyes at the ceiling. “There’s more than one way to build a family!”

She smiles at that, too, like she knows a secret.

“I’ll never have children,” I mutter.

“I hope you change your mind. Luke made my life worth living in a whole new way.”

I give her an incredulous look and am about to launch into a spiel about self-worth, but she tosses a hand in the air like she already knows and doesn’t want to hear it.

“Mom, why did you stop fighting?”

She sucks her teeth and rocks forward in her chair. “Well, for one thing, I developed high blood pressure. But mostly, I was missing too many moments with you and Luke and Jeremy. I wanted to be with you every moment I wasn’t working, which was already too much. And for what? We didn’t make any progress.”

My chest tightens. Mom did all that for nothing.

“Eventually, I decided to focus on what I *could* control, which was working hard and preparing you for this world.” She is silent a moment. “Every moment I had with you and Luke—and Jeremy—was worth it.”

I rub my exhausted eyes. “I have to go to work.”

It's like I stole her line. But I don't want to become like her, so I add, "See you tonight, Mom."

On the plains, I move a little too quickly. The morning is blindingly bright, and I lift my arm to shield my face.

Stupid. But I'm groggy, and what little brain power I have is processing what I learned about Mom. She tried. For years, she tried.

Very slowly, I lower my arm. My heart pounds, but none of the shadows diverge from their wide, spiraling loops. A rock-crab lumbers ahead of me. I pace myself alongside it, holding back while my brain screams, *You're late!*

The airlock gleams black against Axiom's near-white sky. A shadow thickens across my path, but I keep moving.

Maybe I am better positioned than Mom was to make a difference. The parents at the preschool have connections. If I convince them to help, I can get some powerful names on the next petition.

My comms ding, but I cannot answer. Probably Luke, with more apologies. More excuses for why risking his life is what's best for us.

The roving patch of darkness widens, and a searing heat rolls across my back. A force knocks me down, and my visor cracks against the rocks.

I gasp for breath, braced for the talons. White mist fills my vision. I lift my head and wipe at my fogged helmet. It's so hot, like the air is on fire.

A firebird has the rock-crab on its back. Its belly shoots a blast of sodium bicarbonate, and the firebird rears back. The rock-crab rolls back and forth on its carapace, spraying flame-retardant mist. One more strong push might flip it right-side up. The firebird's wings have dimmed.

I get my hands under me and scoot backwards.

A second firebird dives.

I scramble to avoid the blaze. The air fills with floating particles. They start to clog my suit's filter. I try to crawl away, but I can't see a thing.

Movement breaks the fog. I flinch, but it's a person. I crawl toward the silver-suited figure.

It's Mom. She's running, waving a silver tank in the air.

She skids to a stop. "You forgot your CO2 dispenser."

No wonder I feel so groggy. The suit has nowhere to store the excess CO2.

Flames burst through the white mist. Mom spins and chucks the tank at the firebird.

The bird plucks the tank out of the air. It grips the soft metal in its talons without crushing it. It wheels and circles.

Mom unclicks the oxygen tank on her hip and chucks it, too. I want to scream, *Wrong one!* but it's too late. The firebird catches it and flaps backwards. With both talons full, it cannot attack.

Why doesn't it drop the tanks? Is it like those monkey traps on Earth, where they won't release the shiny object?

The second firebird hovers, wings dampened by the rock-crab's spray. All I see is the empty spot on Mom's hip where her oxygen tank should be. How long until she runs out of air? There's always some oxygen flowing through the suit, but not much.

Mom says, "You can make it if you run."

I think she means my suit, but then I realize she is, as always, thinking of my job. She turns as if she's about to walk home. I grab her shoulder.

"You don't have an oxygen tank!"

The firebirds wheel.

She looks at the black rectangle promising safety against Axiom's blazing white plains. After she buys a new tank, she'll probably just turn around and cross back. She needs to sleep, after all. I can't stop her.

"Alright," she says. "Together?"

I nod. "Together."

I grab her hand, and we run across the plains.

THE STAIN

By Norman Goodman

PART ONE

Everyone was leaving work—just one more marketing agency housed in the Belgrade Palace—when Marina caught the elevator door and slipped her emaciated frame inside. The chatter fell silent, abruptly. A few seconds later, her coworkers resumed talking, but the tension lingered like static in the air. Marina felt it too. She slid her wireless earbuds into place but didn't play a single track. No music. No radio.

When the elevator reached the parking level, everyone surged out, brushing past her on all sides. She was left alone in the lift. With a deep breath, she stepped out and made her way toward her car. A Volvo V40. Safety first, she recalled his ironic tone. She was digging through her purse for the keys when something touched her shoulder. She nearly screamed. Her heart thundered violently.

"Oh—shit. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, did I?" It was one of her colleagues from the elevator. He looked at her, intrigued. He thought her vulnerability was something deeply woven into her being—something she wore like a too-tight shirt stretched across a solid frame.

Did he come back *just* to talk to me? The thought flickered through her mind, alien and unwelcome. "No, you didn't," she said, though her body trembled in a way that made it clear: this was one of those transparent, obligatory lies. "Did you want something?"

Marko. One of the younger members of the market analysis department, the same department she belonged to. She'd heard the gossip: "that cocky little guy is way too ambitious," and "he's already gunning for a higher position," without caring about the senior colleagues who were more deserving. With her, though, he was always pleasant. She figured it was because he didn't see her as a threat. As competition.

And maybe he was right. She wasn't ambitious anymore. Not really.

She studied him more closely. Marko had thick hair, often slightly messy in a way that somehow worked, and a neatly trimmed beard. His body clearly showed signs of regular training—people would call that kind of build "lanky but athletic." He dressed well, stylish but never flashy. Still, it wasn't his looks that caught Marina's attention.

It was a stain.

A tiny speck of ketchup on the lapel of his blazer. So small—yet somehow, impossibly—loud.

Obscene.

Offensive.

"Yeah, so…" he faltered for a moment. She looked into his eyes, then glanced away. That gave him back his confidence. He smiled. "I was just wondering if you'd like to grab a drink."

It took effort to return her gaze to his too-friendly teeth—and that damned red blotch.

"A bunch of us from work are going out. Thought you might want to join." His smile widened. He touched her forearm. His hand was cold.

A pack.

"Thanks for the invite," she managed a weak smile and turned her back on him. "But I'm just… too tired."

"Oh, come on!" His face tightened, then quickly returned to its predatory grin. And in that fraction of a second, Marina learned more about him than she had in two years of working together. "I mean, I get it…" His hand again, uninvited, on her. She imagined the stain crawling down his fingers and onto her jacket sleeve. She shivered. "How long has it been? A year?"

Now *that* surprised her. No one had dared to be so blunt before. That topic had been off-limits. She pursed her lips and looked at him like he was a piece of rotting meat—or worse, like he was Nothing. Then she got in her car.

He didn't want to be Nothing. He wanted to be Someone.

She closed the door just as he stormed off—back to his pack.

Eight months, she thought, as her Volvo slid silently toward the exit. *Eight months, three days, and seven hours.* As she drove, she kept thinking. What drove women insane wasn't all that macho posturing or the need to dominate. No. It was that **awful demand for rationality**. What does he know about how long it's been—what it *means* to me?

Her house—a well-kept two-story in Senjak—greeted her with silence and darkness. She leaned against the door and, now safely on her own ground, exhaled loudly. She was exhausted. This week had been hellish.

Then again, weren't they all lately?

She kicked off her shoes and collapsed onto the sofa. She didn't turn on the lights. She knew exactly what she was suffering from—**depression** and **grief trauma**—but wasn't that completely normal? Why did people expect her to be different? To *act* different? She poured a drink

from a glass bottle in the cabinet and downed it in one go. It was Macallan—his favorite. She sank back into the couch. Something nudged her to think about her life. The truth was—she was still young. Just turned thirty-five. She had a home, a car, a decently paid job.

"You can crawl out of this," she whispered aloud. Her voice was thin, unconvincing. "You *can*," she shrieked—then burst into tears. She could… but did she want to? Since he left, the world had bled out its color. Nothing touched her anymore. She didn't feel sadness, or joy, or pity, or fear. All emotion had been burned away. She found people disgusting.

Eventually, she turned on a lamp.

And that's when she saw it.

The **stain**.

It loomed in the upper corner of the ceiling, near the bookshelf—right at the junction of two walls and the ceiling. It took up just a sliver of space on all three surfaces. Roughly the size of a human fist. Or a tennis ball. In that half-light, it looked completely black. But also… strangely pliable. Like it shimmered slightly. Or was made of rubber. Suddenly, a chill passed through her. Something wasn't right. Like she'd stepped into a parallel world. It had to be an optical illusion. But the filthy blotch was real.

"What the hell? Where did *you* come from?" She stood up. It looked like mold, but she wasn't sure. It would've been a first. She'd never had mold problems in this house. She'd repainted everything just a few months ago. *Eight months*, a voice whispered. *Eight months and*—Enough. Shut up.

She moved closer, pressing her face to the freshly painted surface, which still held the faint chemical scent of paint and dispersion. That smell always reminded her of semen. Now the stain was directly above her. Larger than she'd thought. It touched all three planes. The core, deep in the crux where ceiling met wall, was pitch black. A **tar-black** that absorbed light instead of reflecting it. The edges faded to lighter shades of black, like bruises healing outward.

The perimeter was… cobwebbed. And there was something else. It glittered. Not brightly—but in that strange, evasive way stars glint in the night sky. The next moment, the shimmer was gone. No matter where she shifted, the dark substance refused to glint again.

"Wonderful," she muttered. "Exactly what I needed—mold."

She'd have to get some cleaner. Handle it this weekend. Mold wasn't healthy. And once it took hold—

That night, Marina barely slept. All night long, she dreamed of the stain. There was something in it. Something dark. Something that was calling her name**.** She was unable to fall asleep until morning.

PART TWO

Davor was a striking man in his early thirties. He owned a small PVC window frame manufacturing company in Voždovac. It wasn't a big operation—just him and three other workers handling the core assembly tasks. When things got really busy, he'd hire a couple of extra hands through a student agency. That made him the purchasing manager, lead installer, driver, and quality control—all rolled into one.

Still, he was content with the life he had built. The business had grown steadily, year by year, and the three full-time workers were more than employees—they were friends. Practically family.

That Friday, Davor was handling a delivery himself—frames for a private law office out in Višnjica. He loaded the materials into the back of his Renault Express and climbed behind the wheel.

Beyond work, his private life was stable too. After a turbulent decade of chaotic relationships and misfires, things had finally settled. He'd married two years ago. They had two daughters. A home. A routine.

But was this the life he truly wanted?

He found himself reflecting on that as he drove. The thought passed the time. His mind wandered—uninvited—back to the girls he'd dated in college. (He'd never actually finished college.) Each person that enters your life leaves a stain on your soul, he thought. Sometimes that stain is light. Sometimes it's dark. Back then, he couldn't keep anything steady. Relationship after relationship crumbled like dry plaster. Just like the one with Marina. Why the hell did I remember her? he asked himself, uneasy.

There hadn't been anything *special* about that girl. Nothing to set her apart. He'd had deeper loves. Wilder ones. But then that voice inside him whispered: *Except for the incident.*

Shut up. It was nothing. Nothing at all.

He was approaching Autokomanda. Time to focus. Not drift into those masochistic daydreams. Yes—this was the life he wanted. He was happy. And yet… that day, he didn't feel quite right.

As he drove past the Belgrade theological college, he worried it might be the flu. That would suck. He'd promised Jovana and the girls a weekend at "the village." It wasn't a real village, just a weedy patch of inherited land near Ritopek, where they could escape to the quiet along the banks of the Danube. No, it wasn't the flu. It was something else. A discomfort. A mild, crawling ache… That's when he realized: it was his right hand. His fingers. They hurt. That's why working the machine that morning had felt like pushing through tar. When he finally reached the client's address, he examined his hand.

That's when he saw it. **The stain.**

It had bloomed on the pad of his index finger—dark, almost like a fast-growing mole. He could've sworn it wasn't there the night before. Yet somehow, all day, he'd felt a dull agitation, like a buzzing fly in the corner of his mind. But he hadn't connected it to the blotch.

He put on protective gloves and unloaded the frames. His hand felt slower. Less responsive. He noticed a reduction in mobility, but it wasn't alarming. Maybe he'd injured it somehow—pinched it on the machine, maybe. Without realizing. Driving back, he wiped down his right hand with a moist towelette. Every finger. The index too. The ache subsided slightly. But the stain remained. Was it… larger now? He reached for the touchscreen on his GPS, and that's when it struck him—he couldn't feel the tip of his finger.

He pinched it. Nothing. He grabbed his key and pressed the metal tip into the very center of the dark patch. Hard. No pain. That's what worried him.

Still, he forgot all about the stain the moment he pulled into his driveway and saw his little girls rushing out to greet him, their faces lit with joy.

PART THREE

She woke up and looked at the clock. Half past twelve. *Half past twelve?!*

She bolted upright. Could it be? She rubbed her eyes and checked the numbers again. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept that long—maybe back in high school, after rave nights. That former life—wild, exciting, but carefree—felt so far removed from the one she'd lived the last five or six years, it was as if she'd dreamed it. Still, she had slept through the entire morning. And for the first time in ages—she felt rested. That feeling, now so alien and unexpected, actually scared her.

Stop tormenting yourself, she thought as she emptied her bladder. *Are you seriously upset because something good happened—because you finally got a decent night's sleep?*

But… I feel good. Really good. Full of energy. *What was I supposed to do today?* she wondered. Then she remembered. The stain. Like a punch to the gut. She walked to the living room and raised the blinds—and nearly collapsed. Overnight, the stain had tripled in size. In daylight, it looked even more grotesque—*oily*, threaded with some kind of…

"Fucking hell!" she yelled. "What is this shit?! What the actual fuck is that?!"

There was no answer. Not without a closer look. She felt like she'd been shoved into a waking nightmare. *Told you so,* whispered the voice in her head. *That deep sleep? A harbinger.* She staggered to the utility closet. There it was—the tool she needed. A putty knife with a long handle. The grip was still crusted with lime from past repairs, and the blade showed tiny rust spots. Her heart picked up speed.

Darling… you should've thrown this thing out.

She remembered it clearly—eight months ago (yes, yes, *eight*), she'd sealed the fireplace herself, filled it with concrete, then smoothed and painted the wall. She was proud of that accomplishment—her first hands-on repair job. The wall still looked innocent. It *would* have—if not for that abomination oozing from the ceiling like some cosmic infection from a second-rate sci-fi flick. She dragged over a chair from the dining room and climbed on top.

That's when she could *smell* it. The stain.

It gave off a faint chemical odor—acetone, ether, or something in that family. Her stomach knotted. The scent wasn't overpowering, but once inhaled, it lingered in her nostrils like a ghost. She shivered at the thought of what might be floating in that toxic air. Could she *see* them? Black particles. Like spores. Drifting.

Enough. It's bad enough without your neurotic breakdowns.

She raised her trembling hand and touched the mottled zone with the scraper. It wasn't a stain anymore. It was a kind of *tumor*. A wall cancer. How deep did it go? Fascinated and horrified, she watched as the fine hairs on its surface twitched in unison—then curled inwards like

petals, trying to *grab* the scraper's edge. A brittle fragment broke loose—powdery, ashen, speckled like iron filings. The flecks danced wildly in the air, as if they had a will of their own. A surge of fear clamped down on her. What if one of those fragments landed on her skin? Or worse—what if she inhaled it? She recoiled and fell.

"Aah!" she cried, crashing to the floor. Bruised, but nothing broken.

Still… she felt more helpless than ever. This was a slow-motion collapse. A train to nervous breakdown, with just a few scenic stops along the way. She tried to return to the familiar oceans of her depression—but the bitter comfort it once gave her was gone now. That ritual… had sailed far out of reach. "Come on. Pull yourself together," she told herself in the calmest voice she could muster. "It's just mold. Fucking *mold*. And I'm going to deal with it."

She limped toward the door. Time to gear up. That was a declaration of war.

She went to the big home-supply market where she'd shopped before and stocked up: five kilograms of "Bimold"—a product advertised as *"concentrated disinfectant and whitening formula for removing mold, moss, algae, soap scum, and other deep-rooted organic contaminants."* She also bought a few bottles of sodium hypochlorite cleaner, some sprays, and a good old-fashioned jug of bleach. The smell of chlorine brought back unpleasant memories. Still… she felt better. That sense of control nearly evaporated by the time she returned home.

"I'm going to fix you, bitch," she muttered to the stain, which pulsated gently at the edge of her vision.

She prepped the area—covered the parquet and wardrobe with old newspapers, pulled on her "Green Barrier" gloves (acid and base resistant, with that weird talc feel), and laid out rags. Then she attacked. With a full-force splash, she threw the Bimold onto the wall—aiming high, toward the ceiling. Grayish streams ran down like oil on a corpse. The stain began to dissolve under the chemical flood. She climbed the chair again, scrubbing with fury. Then came the hypochlorite. Then the mold spray. A triple assault. She stepped back to admire her work. The

cleaned area looked brighter than the rest, but that could be fixed later—with stain-blocking primer and a new coat of paint.

She could hear it. The chemicals reacting—hissing. The sound made her skin crawl.

Now in the zone, she kept cleaning. It felt *good*. Physical. Grounding. God knew the house needed it. She hadn't vacuumed in weeks. The apathy was gone now. Just… gone. While sorting the closet, she found his shirt. And sweatpants. The moment her fingers touched the fabric she recoiled like she'd been burned. She carried the clothes to the kitchen and tossed them into the metal trash bin. Then she burned them.

Done. That chapter—closed.

It was only around 9 p.m. that she remembered to check the wall. The site of the original stain. What she saw made her sit down—and bite into her forearm until she bled. The black substance was still there. And *how*. Despite all the bleach, the poison, the scrubbing—the **thing** had come back. Worse than before.

It looked… proud. The obscene form framed by the stark contrast of the spotless wall. Larger. Defiant. It was growing. Growing at a steady, purposeful rate. Unafraid of any weapon Marina had thrown at it. The black filaments—now longer—swayed in patterns. Hypnotic. Calling. Drawing her in.

She stepped closer, spellbound. There was a sound coming from it. She could *swear* there was a sound. She blinked. And the hairs—those whispering tentacles of cosmic desecration—were gone. Vanished.

That's because they were never there, said the voice. *They never existed. Just your mind, sweetie. Those hairs. The stain. But look at it now…*

"Enough!" she shouted.

The filthy growth froze—Then melted into a tar-black mirror. A perfect lake of meaninglessness. *How is this possible?* Her vision blurred. Strength left her limbs. This—this was the real

world now. No joy. No light. No future. Just the stare. The wait. The knowing that nothing comes next. Not even fear. Fear is for people who still have something to lose.

On the oil-slick surface, concentric circles began to ripple—as if something from behind, from *within*, was pressing forward. And then she saw it. A **face**. Eyes closed. She froze. Her mouth hung open. Saliva dripped from her lips.

Then—

The eyes opened.

PART FOUR

They were just leaving Belgrade, somewhere near old Kaluđerica. Davor always took the Smederevo road to reach their weekend cottage by the Danube, but this time—it felt like a mistake. The traffic was dense. The air—choked with exhaust. He rolled the window up and switched on the AC. His fingers wouldn't respond. Again. He glanced at them. The blackness had spread.

“For God’s sake, Davor—what did you do to your hand?” Jovana asked. She’d noticed his index and middle fingers—swollen and bruised. No. Not bruised. Black. Hardened. Like two burnt twigs tossed into a fire.

“Can I just—?”

“Don’t touch it!” he snapped, yanking his hand back and shoving it into his pocket.

She flinched. “Does it hurt?”

“No. That’s the thing. It came out of nowhere. I don’t know what it is. I can’t feel anything in those fingers. And it… it feels like it’s spreading. I think I need to see a doctor.”

“Okay. But what’s going on with *you*?” she asked softly, gently touching the back of his hand.

He hated being touched while driving.

"Nothing. Why?" His tone was sharper than he meant. He caught himself. "Sorry, babe."

She was right, and he knew it. He turned to kiss her. But she leaned away, still smiling. He could tell she was hurt. Fine, then. *I can pout too,* he thought.

"Not toward me, silly. Toward them." She tilted her head toward the back seat. The kids. They were bickering now—fighting over a toy. A rubber duck. A yellow one. The kind that squeaks when you squeeze it. And they *kept squeezing it*. Over and over. High-pitched. Repetitive. Squeal. Squeal. Squeal. Then came the shrieking—each trying to rip the toy from the other's grip. It grated on him. He felt like his skull might split.

"I'm not being distant," he muttered. "It's just… the noise. It's too much. Can you calm them down a little?"

"They're just kids. Let them be. What's *wrong* with you?"

"There's nothing fucking wrong with me—it's those spoiled little—could you, for just *one* goddamn second—" Both kids screamed at the same time. "—*SHUT UP?!*"

Silence. Anja's blue eyes went wide with confusion. For baby Andrej, it was too much. He burst into tears. "Look what you've done now!" Jovana snapped, just as the traffic cleared and Davor slammed the gas pedal down.

"*Me*?!" he shot back, turning toward her, ready to fight this to the bitter end. "What did *I* do? They're the ones—"

"LOOK OUT!!!" She screamed.

He whipped his eyes back to the road—and saw it. Their car had drifted into the opposite lane. And barreling toward them—A massive truck. Lead-gray. Merciless. Davor hissed and grabbed the wheel—but his right-hand fingers wouldn't move. Wouldn't grip. His palm slid off the steering wheel. In a last desperate lurch, he seized it with his left hand and yanked them back into their lane.

The truck thundered past. A rumble of death, barely missed.

Jovana sobbed—then began to scream at him. “You could’ve *killed us*! What the fuck is wrong with you?! Do you even think about the kids?! WHAT. THE. FUCK. IS. WRONG. WITH. YOU?!”

He pulled over a hundred meters down the road. Sat still. Breathed deep. His vision dotted red. His chest ached. His blood pressure was volcanic. Then he turned and hit her. Hard.

She cried out and curled into herself. The kids started crying again. Softly this time. Like mice.

“I’m sorry… I… Just… I’m sorry.”

PART FIVE

As for the diseased fingers—his index, where it had started, and the middle one it had spread to—the doctors had done their part. They rubbed them with some kind of ointment designed to prevent further drying of the epidermis, then wrapped them in thick layers of gauze. The fingers were immobilized. He had no sensation in the index finger at all, and the middle one only faintly at the base, but even there the feeling was fading. What was going on deeper inside the hand—within the muscles, the bones, the blood vessels—no one could say for sure.

Or maybe they just don’t want to tell me, he thought bitterly.

Then someone made the decision to transfer him to the Infectious Disease ward. Access restricted. No visitors. That didn’t stop them from gathering in the hallway. He could hear them arguing. Could catch pieces of words like “basocellular,” “anemic necrosis,” “immunosuppression,” and “vasculopathy”—each one sending a shiver down his spine, feeding new nightmares. And the nightmares had been growing stronger, more senseless by the night. The doctors left him waiting, pending “further testing.” No one knew what it was. What illness

had taken hold. That was the phrase they repeated like a prayer: “Further analysis is required.” He raised his trembling hand and stared at it. Whatever it was—it was spreading, he thought, and his body quivered. He had lost sensation in his entire arm just hours ago.

He picked up the fork from his dinner tray and stabbed it into his forearm. Nothing. Not a trace of feeling. He wondered if the blackness had reached his brain. Was he still perceiving the world rationally? Was he still sane? But then again, mental health is a stretchy concept, isn’t it?

He unwrapped the gauze. With his other hand, he touched the finger—knowing full well he shouldn’t. A flake came off. Just a tiny one. Then the entire finger crumbled. Disintegrated. Into dust. Davor screamed. “No! No! Noo...!”

Sandra worked as a nurse in the ER, in the maternity ward. She had just finished her third consecutive night shift when she heard the scream. It came from upstairs—the Infectious Disease ward. Not unusual. People got jumpy when locked in isolation. She headed for the staff room to wash and change. She always showered before heading home—who knew what germs floated through those corridors? But tonight, she didn’t have the strength. She just wanted to crawl to her apartment and disappear.

In the hallway, she noticed a stir among the night staff. A doctor ran upstairs—still wearing a surgical mask. There were muffled, anxious voices. Then sobbing. Several voices.

What the hell is going on?

Truthfully—she didn’t want to know. Her shift was over. Any emergency could mean staying longer. She planned to slip out of the building before anyone noticed. She forced herself to wash her face and hands thoroughly. That’s when she noticed it. The stain. Just a speck, tucked into the corner of her eye. As small as a poppy seed. She was sure it hadn’t been there the night before while doing her makeup. It had to be mascara. She tried to rub it off while keeping her eye open, fighting the instinct to flinch or blink. But it wouldn’t come off. That pitch-black fleck stayed put. Dear God, what is this now? Her heart picked up pace. A burst blood vessel?

No—it didn't look like that. She closed her eye. Opened it again. Vision normal. No discomfort. Hm... what was that word... macula? As far as she could tell, there were no symptoms. So, what the hell was it?

Tomorrow, I'll go see an ophthalmologist, she decided. But not now. Now, I need rest.

She felt vulnerable. And in that state, she missed him the most—the man she'd loved. Who loved me back? Was that even true? She still thought of him. Every day, almost. To leave me like that, without a word, without a message... for no reason. That bastard. Deep in her bones, though, she felt something was wrong. He loved her. He wouldn't just walk away. At least, that's what he always said. What did she expect? He had cheated on his wife. Why did she think he wouldn't cheat on her, too? But after days without a single message or reply, she'd gone looking for him. His coworkers delivered the shock: Mladen Stanković hadn't shown up to work in five days. The exact same number of days he'd been silent with her. No one knew where he was. His wife had officially reported him missing. The only logical conclusion? He'd run away. She'd read about it—people abandoning their lives, cutting all ties. She found that behavior disgusting. He'd always said he would leave that frigid psycho bitch. But Sandra had never imagined he'd dump both of them. She wondered where he was now—what city, what country.

You bastard. You had no right to do that to me.

Lost in these thoughts, she made it home and stepped straight into the shower. She closed her eyes when the shampoo ran down her face. Wrapped her hair in a towel. Stood in front of the mirror. Looked at herself.

Her right eye was completely black. Her vision—blurred to hell. The left had started to show flecks.

PART SIX

It was Monday, though Marina neither knew nor cared. She hadn't gone to work. Her mind no longer recognized obligations or social expectations. In fact, there was barely anything left of what could be called learned human behavior. Reality, as she perceived it, had collapsed into an abyss—an immense, trembling chasm like a tear in the ocean floor. She felt like a tiny, trembling rock surrounded by a pitiless void, bathed in the beam of some unimaginable spotlight, and that light fell only on her.

The house had changed. The doors had become jaws, the staircase a gullet, and the empty rooms now bristled with invisible traps. She wandered in a fever dream, trapped in a well of blackness where, now and then, she caught glimpses of what might have once been her home. She discovered a hole in her head—so deep she imagined dropping things into it and never hearing a splash. That inner well was connected to the stain, the one spreading across her ceiling, like a Klein bottle looping itself through space and mind.

The filth had spread further now, infecting much of the wall and ceiling. From it grew trembling hairs of dark slime, shivering to the beat of her pulse. Sometimes, the mass took on the shape of a mirror—swelling, warping, and calling to her. Worse still, it showed her things. Memories. The kind she had buried deep. Her and her first boyfriend in a tiny student apartment—Davor. She remembered his name. How could she forget? He wasn't just a passing figure. No one is. Everyone leaves a scar—sometimes a scratch, sometimes a bruise, sometimes a stain so deep it burrows into the soul. They had been together for months. And she had ignored the signs. His temper. His control. Until one day, he locked the door and told her to lie down. He shoved two fingers inside her while she begged him to stop, climbed on top of her, ignored her protests, slapped her when she resisted, and forced himself into her again and again. She had been so ashamed she told no one. She buried it. Buried him. In the stain.

Eventually, she recovered, enough to trust again. Mladen had seemed like the opposite of Davor—gentle, attentive, kind. Their marriage had been the best thing that ever happened to her. But after he hurt his back playing tennis and spent time in the hospital, he began to change. He left the house more often, always claiming it was “for work.” He started showering twice a day. Switched cologne. She didn’t want to believe it, but something inside her already knew. One night, while he slept soundly beside her, she went through his phone. It was locked—a new habit. She unlocked it using his finger. Inside, on one of his messaging apps, she found the truth. And more than that. Her name was Sandra. A nurse. She’d been the one to approach him. She’d made the first move. But that didn’t absolve him, not in Marina’s eyes. It didn’t save him from what was coming.

Now the stain—the mirror—showed his face. His shocked expression when she told him. His face bulged and twisted, swelling out of the wall, spiraling into nonsense like dark icing smeared across a slab of black glass. She knelt before it, eyes wide, hands clasped as if in prayer. She could feel it—soon, the time would come. Soon, she and the essence behind the stain would become one.

PART SEVEN

Inspectors Obradović and Konstantinović sat in the shared office of the Belgrade Police Department, on Despot Stefan Boulevard 12. The mood was grim. Everyone was whispering about some strange skin disease spreading through the city—some were calling it the "Black Plague of the new age."

"Still working that case?" asked the older inspector, glancing over his colleague’s shoulder at the pile of documents stacked across the desk.

"Of course. Did you think I'd leave something unfinished?" Obradović replied without looking up. "I've had a few unsolved cases in my career, and every single one still haunts me. I swore this one wouldn't be added to that list." His voice softened slightly, and he finally raised his eyes. "Besides, it helps keep my mind off the thing everyone's obsessed with—that damned sickness. I overheard two officers from the third shift talking in the parking lot this morning. Even against my will, the details keep slipping into my ears, into my brain. Did you know there are already *hundreds* infected?"

"Jesus Christ," hissed Konstantinović, dropping his weight into one of the squeaky rolling chairs. He had no desire to talk about the outbreak, but as the hours passed, it became harder to avoid. There were too many tear-streaked faces around the station. Every few minutes someone answered a personal phone call in a panic or ran to the nearest TV for updates. In a strange way, Konstantinović almost felt lucky. He had no children—his marriage to Marija had been barren on several levels—so there weren't many people left for him to worry about. Just Marija, himself, and a few close friends. And the disturbing truth was, he wasn't even sure how much he still cared about them.

"This so-called epidemic actually opened my eyes," Obradović continued. "I took a second look at the medical file of our missing person, Mladen Stanković. A few weeks before he disappeared, he was admitted to "Dragiša Mišović" Hospital. Gastrointestinal issues. But that's not all—he had black patches on his skin. It all suggests poisoning."

"Okay… so maybe he ate something bad? Or drank something spoiled?"

Obradović shook his head. "I don't think so. I spoke off the record with one of the doctors who treated him. He's fairly certain it was a reaction to a large dose of pharmaceuticals—specifically, antidepressants. Now guess who those drugs were prescribed to?"

"His wife? You still haven't taken your eyes off her, huh?"

"You know it's the most logical place to look. These kinds of crimes usually come from someone close. Spouse. Family. Friends."

"Sure. But you're still missing motive. And a body. If she really abducted her husband, where'd she hid him? In the basement? We already checked. There's nothing there."

"You're close, but listen to this. Three days before he went missing, Marina Stanković bought a large quantity of cement at a supply yard called Vanas, out on the Obrenovac road. She paid in cash and requested a third party to handle the delivery—even though delivery is normally included in the price. The only reason we caught this detail is because we reviewed her car's GPS history. That was the only unusual trip she made during that period. On the day of the disappearance, she went to a supermarket and a hairdresser. Totally routine. Which means she didn't drive him out to the woods. Or to a river."

"I remember that. But she explained the cement purchase as part of some home repairs—something about a burst pipe, right? Isn't it more likely that the guy just ran off? Abandoned her? God knows the thought's crossed *my* mind more than once."

"We believed her at first, yeah. But I did the math again. No one buys that much cement to fix a pipe. That's the kind of load you use when you want to seal something off. Permanently." Obradović looked directly at him.

"Oh my God." Detectives's eyes widened. "You think she... what, buried him?"

"I've heard stranger things. In this line of work, you learn fast—people are capable of anything. There are no limits to human depravity."

Konstantinović sighed. "That much, unfortunately, is true."

Just then, a scream pierced the station—just a few offices away.

"No, no, no! God, what's happening to me?! Get it off me!" someone shrieked in abject panic.

Obradović stood up. "Let's go. Time to pay Mrs. Stanković another visit."

PART EIGHT

They arrived at the Stanković house around noon. It was Tuesday—the third day of the outbreak that the media had begun to call "the ash blight." They rang the bell, but there was no answer. Inspector Obradović dialed Mrs. Stanković's private number, which he'd had written down for some time. The message came back immediately: the number was disconnected.

"So, what now?" asked Konstantinović, already uncomfortable. He didn't like the way his partner handled the case—too much was based on gut feeling and instinct. Then again, Obradović's instincts had proven disturbingly accurate in the past.

Instead of answering, Obradović smashed the glass on the front door. "Didn't you hear the sounds coming from inside? That's probable cause." He reached in, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

Older detective sighed and followed.

They knew the moment they crossed the threshold that something was wrong. The house was cloaked in unnatural darkness. The air was thick—overwhelming—with a smell that defied easy description. A heavy mix of moisture and rot, touched with the sharpness of ozone, like the aftermath of lightning striking a barn full of wet hay.

"Mrs. Stanković? Police! If you're inside, please respond!"

"I don't think she's home."

"Her car's in the driveway."

"That doesn't mean—" Konstantinović stopped midsentence. Something inside him buckled, like a support beam giving way deep within his psyche. That moment when the structure of co-

herent thought begins to slip toward a pit of unreason. Something was moving across the floor. It took a second for their eyes to adjust to the dark. Then they saw her.

Marina Stanković was home. But she was no longer "home" in the head. She was naked, crawling toward the wall, her face slick and splattered with thick, white saliva. Her tongue hung from her mouth. Her eyes were open—and for a moment, Krsman could swear there was a writhing mass of malignant life behind her eyelids. Then, nothing. The windows of her soul went blank. Her mind had moved out.

The wall was smeared with filth. Human waste—and something else. Something oily and dark they couldn't yet identify.

"Dear God. She's completely lost it."

"Marina… can you hear me? Help me lift her—watch out!"

The woman struggled wildly. Whatever had taken over tried to bite at their legs.

"What do you think happened to her?"

"I won't speculate… but guilt can do this to a person. I'm calling for an ambulance. Keep an eye on her."

Why not switch roles? Detective thought grimly. He didn't want to stay in that house for another second—not that he could explain exactly why. There was something in the air. Floating. Waiting.

Obradović made the call and then began exploring the house. "Come look at this. Help me move this wardrobe."

"Look at this wall. Someone patched it up badly."

"Yeah. There used to be a fireplace here—I'd swear to it. Why would anyone seal off a fireplace?"

"And more importantly… Hey, buddy… what do you think *that* is?"

For the first time, they truly looked at it. That enormous, obscenely dark blotch. It was vicious—like a two-meter smoker's lung regurgitated onto drywall.

"Hell, if I know. Mold. What else could it be? Best not to touch it. I heard about a guy who poisoned himself trying to scrape mold off his wall."

Obradović contacted headquarters and requested a forensic team. He was fairly certain of what they'd find behind that wall. The ambulance didn't arrive for nearly half an hour. The city was in chaos. Entire families were showing up at hospitals with black marks on their bodies. The TV was full of warnings. The newspapers brimming with hysteria.

"They don't know how it spreads," one of the grim-faced med techs told them. "But I'm not going near anyone without gloves and a mask. Hell, there are thousands now. Hospitals are out of beds. I'm not showing up to work tomorrow. No way."

PART NINE

That evening, inspectors Obradović and Konstantinović stopped by for a drink each at a mutual friend's place — a former policeman who ran a bar on Ada Ciganlija. They enjoyed getting away from the city's hustle and the sound of ambulance sirens. At the city police headquarters, three people were already sick with ash blight. The doctors still didn't know what it was or have a cure. The Ministry of Health was holding an emergency meeting where the declaration of a state of emergency in Belgrade was expected.

Isn't that strange? Why is it localized only to the capital? Obradović thought. There was no evidence that ash blight symptoms appeared outside the wider city area. Besides, such a disease was unknown to the global medical community. The Serbs were once again gambling with fate.

"Why the long face? Don't tell me you're scared of this infection? It'll pass. Nothing will happen to you or Andrijana…"

"It's not that. I haven't told you one more thing I discovered about the case."

"Listen to him. The world is falling apart and he's still talking about the case."

Obradović seemed to sober up then. "The world is falling apart, yeah… It's connected to the disease. Our case."

"Excuse me? How so?"

"These days, the media is showing the faces and names of the zero patients. Those in whom, supposedly, the first symptoms of ash blight were observed. Those names, those people…" Detective had to stop and lick his lips, "appear in the case of the disappearance of Mladen Stanković. A case I'm increasingly sure is actually a premeditated murder. Davor Ilić, a small entrepreneur — a man with only a few hours of life left, as doctors predict — studied at the Faculty of Economics at the same time as Mladen's wife, Marina Stanković. Moreover, there are witness statements that they were in a relationship that ended abruptly. Soon after that, Davor dropped out of the faculty, and Marina became a withdrawn girl prone to depression and panic attacks. As for the second patient, a certain Sandra Panić — she works at the Emergency Center where the sick Ilić was first brought. However, she was not in contact with the patient. In fact, she worked in a different department. She doesn't know the patient. On the other hand, she knows the missing Mladen Stanković. Or rather, she knew him. I don't believe we'll find that man alive and well. It seems they were secretly involved. Mladen was planning to leave Marina, get a divorce, and start living with a nurse."

"So, what happened then?"

"Mrs. Stanković found out, killed her husband, and walled him up in the fireplace. The punishment, however, didn't come only for the adulterer but also for the girl who had an eye on her husband."

"I don't understand it. How is that possible?"

"Fuck me if I know. But everything revolves around Marina, don't you see?"

PART TEN

Marina felt heavy and hungover, like a stone at the bottom of a barrel. Her head was swollen, and her tongue—a glove of inverted skin. Her face had that limp, vacant look of stunned emptiness. It was the effect of the medication, of course, but also the final realization that it was over. If any part of her mind had been preserved, she would have known that she had been admitted to the Special Hospital for Psychiatric Diseases in Kovin. There, she would be kept until an assessment of her mental state and a possible trial. The forensic team had found the remains of her husband in the wall, but that was currently put aside. The entire nation was fighting an epidemic of a necrotizing disease. Twenty percent of the capital's population was infected, with no signs of decline. Moreover, there was no cure or help for the infected. The human body was, part by part, being consumed by tissue death. The sick people were dying in the most terrible agony. Finally, the inevitable happened—the disease began to spread to the rest of Serbia. The state was in chaos, and the world medical community was in panic, just like the regional political elite.

Marina was pulled from peaceful dreams by the sounds of screaming. In the special hospital, they were not uncommon, but these carried an extra layer of despair and pain.

"No! My legs! My legs have rotted away!" Ash blight had reached Kovin and was claiming its first victims.

Marina experienced a change in her head. It was as if someone had suddenly plunged a hot knife into her temple. She raised her eyes. Then she saw it. A stain.

On one of the virginally white walls appeared a pulsating darkness. You can only recognize what you observe. And you can only observe what is already in consciousness. Did Marina create the stain, or did the stain create Marina as she was? It spread and opened—a passage into

nothingness. Behind the syrupy mirror lay a cosmic void that carried comfort and peace. Marina's bladder was the first to give out. Then came the scream. She opened her mouth and shouted into the vortex as the darkness in the room grew and grew, an anthem in praise of paradox. Once she gave in to that weakness, she could no longer stop. She screamed until she lost her voice, until her vocal cords hurt and refused to vibrate any longer. The silence that followed was even more terrifying than the noise; the remnants of the scream hovered in the air like droplets of black ink in zero gravity.

While the infection outside sowed death and suffering, Marina stepped through and crossed over to the other side.

Rippling Waters
By Mathew Anderson

Lian pulled as hard as she could, whilst something tugged from under the water. With both hands, she managed to pull up the rod, almost falling backwards in the process. Before her was a large specimen.

Oh, you're a beauty. Me and Darren are going to eat well tonight.

She took hold of the catfish by its tail, bashing it against the rock until it became immobile. Lian always liked to fish at Lake Bulmis, as she never failed to get a bite in these waters. As she placed the fish into a bag, she stopped to survey the landscape before her.

The lake stretched so far that it seemed endless. Blankets of forest covered the mountains. Above her, a flock of geese flew ahead. They let out honking calls, but these were soon interrupted by a soft shimmering sound. A rectangular floating vehicle flew across the sky like an arrow through mist, quickly passing over the mountains.

Must be another set of tourists heading towards Haimas. It's getting to that time of year, when more and more tourists from the Terram Expanse come to Salane. Still, at least me and Darren get to enjoy our own little plot of land.

She looked back along the coastline towards home. *I hope the sheep aren't giving Darren too much trouble. Especially the lambs.* Lian chuckled to herself.

Just then, something caught the corner of her eye. From the shape of it, she thought it was a large log. Until she realized it was moving against the soft wind. Upon closer inspection there was-to her horror-dozens of tiny spikes lining the unknown shape. Lian started to follow the shape, trying to discern what it was.

It kind of looks like the back of an alligator. But alligators don't have spikes. Plus, they live in the Coastal Marshes of Bruma.

Lian's mouth suddenly opened agape when she saw them: giant claws, rising out of the water like great serpents. They hung in the air for a moment, snapping furiously, before splashing back down. For a moment, Liana simply stood there in shock.

She soon fell out of her trance when she realized where the unknown creature was swimming to.

Home.

Lian ran to her hover-vehicle, putting her foot down on the pedal as soon as she got in. The vehicle hummed as she sped along the lake's shore. By the time she got there, Darren had moved the sheep herd down to the lake for their morning drink. She jumped out of the vehicle, grabbed her strifle weapon and ran towards him.

"Darren!" She shouted.

Her husband was a young man with bark-coloured skin and dark hair arranged in a clump at the back. He wore a mix of yellow and brown clothing, with the emblem of a star on his shoulder.

"Lian," Darren said, waving to her. "Catch anything?"

"Not important," Lian said. "There's something headed our way."

"What?" Darren asked, confused. "What do you mean?"

"It's like… I'm not sure. Some kind of creature. It was bigger than an alligator, at least, and it had these huge claws."

"Claws?"

"Yes. Like a lobster or a crab. I've never seen anything like it. And… it's heading this way."

"You think…" Darren turned to the sheep, who were drinking soundly. "It's coming for the sheep?"

"I'm not sure, but it was swimming along the coast to our spot."

"Then let's not take any chances," Darren said, resolute. He turned back to the farmhouse, which rested upon a modest hill, and let out a shrill whistle. At once, a slender four-legged creature came running down the hill. It had an elongated head, like a cross between a shark and a wolf, and a large clump of feathers on its head.

It was Arran, their pet Slavhern.

Out of all their animals, he was the most alien, having originated from a planet called Keplar Beta, and yet he was their most trusted companion. He always accompanied Lian on hunts and helped Darren with his farmyard duties.

When Arran came to them, he made a small yipping sound, swishing his long slender tail in anticipation. Lian gave him a small stroke on the head.

"Arran," Darren said, pointing to the shore. "Round up the sheep, bring them back to the fields."

Without a moment's pause, Arran took off running. Within a minute, he had gotten the sheep to move away from the lake's shore, keeping a constant circle around them to keep the sheep

penned in. When one lamb had gotten separated in the scuffle, Arran sped back around and lifted it up in his jaws, keeping it open wide enough to not harm the lamb.

Despite this, there were still a few sheep at the coastline. Just as Arran had turned back around to retrieve them, an ominous shadow appeared at the water's edge. Lian sprang into action upon seeing this.

But then one of the sheep was lifted into the air by a giant pincer, which burst out of the water like a hand reaching out from its grave. The sheep bleated in distress. As if in response, the claw tightened its grip, the sharp ends digging into the sheep's stomach.

Blood started flowing from the wound. Lian took out her strifle, ready to fire. But before she could take a shot, the giant claw splashed back into the water, the sheep still attached to it. Only a veil of blood remained on the water's end.

"No!" Lian shouted in anguish. *That sheep was pregnant as well. Poor Sheila.*

Arran came to her side, whimpering as he nuzzled her leg. She patted his head.

"It's okay, Arran," Lian said, "it wasn't your fault."

Then she saw there was another sheep on the far side, nestled amongst some ferns. To her shock, a pair of stalk-like appendages came up, a large eye resting on both. The eyes looked from one point to another, until it saw the sheep. Upon this, the stalks disappeared under the water, and the shadow moved towards the sheep.

Lian looked to Darren, who grabbed his pitchfork. Together, with Arran, they all ran towards the sheep. With one fell swoop, the giant claw had picked up the sheep, holding it in the air. Lian stopped and aimed her stifle. She took a shot and struck the creature's left arm. The arm writhed, droplets of green blood dripping into the water. The pain seemed so great that it dropped the sheep.

Thankfully, the sheep landed on sandy soil, albeit bleeding slightly.

As Darren ran over to tend to the sheep, Arran ran towards the giant claws, screeching loudly. The creature seemed aware of this, for it swung its uninjured arm at him. Arran jumped back, though not before the sharp end struck him in the side.

"No!" Lian shouted.

Arran whimpered in pain and yet stood resolute.

With anger brewing in her, Lian aimed her strifle. But this time, the giant claw reacted, and she jumped aside just in time as it struck the sand in front of her. As if to make a point, the claw slowly crawled backwards into the water. Then both claws sprang up from the water, snapping furiously. They turned in the direction of Darren, who had just finished patching up the sheep with healing gel.

No. Stay away from them!

She aimed and took a shot, but it missed the mark. Arran started running towards the claws, despite Lian trying to stop him. As he came within distance of them, the left claw grabbed Arran.

No. No, no. Not Arran. Our baby. Let him go!

Suddenly, a large rock struck the creature's right arm. Lian looked to Darren, who threw another rock. The arm writhed like a reed in the wind, dropping Arran in the process. Arran lay on the sand, whimpering in pain.

Lian aimed her strifle once more, ready to take a shot. But as she did so, the claws disappeared back into the water. Soon, the shadow turned and swam further into the lake until it was out of sight.

She stood there for a while, bemused, before remembering Arran. She ran over and knelt by him. He whimpered, and she calmed him down with gentle strokes. Darren came over.

"Is he okay?" Lian asked, worried.

"Got some minor cuts and bruises," Darren said, skimming his hands over Arran. "But he'll live."

Lian nodded. Soon, silence overtook them.

"Just…" Darren said, eyes widened in fear. "What the doom was that?"

"I… I don't know."

#

"Found anything yet?" Lian asked, book in hand.

"No," Darren said.

They had spent hours poring over the Interstellar Web archives, and some paper books, to ascertain what the creature was. But all they compiled were half-baked theories and false leads. Some creatures seemed to somewhat fit the description, but none grew as big as the creature.

"Maybe," Darren said, holding up a finger, "it's one of these." The image sported pincers, but this was the only resemblance. Otherwise, it looked like a cross between a wasp and a butterfly. "It's a Faiulm, from Vimtipu."

"No," Lian said, shaking her head. "Those don't swim. Plus, the thing we saw had far larger pincers than that."

Darren sighed heavily, slapping the book down. "Then that's it. We've looked through every database, every book, and we're no closer to knowing what we're dealing with. I mean, not a single animal matches what we saw."

"Darren, there are millions of animal species recorded in the Interstellar Web, from dozens of worlds. Whatever we saw has got to be around here somewhere." When Darren only grunted in frustration, Lian put down her book, and placed a gentle hand on his arm. This calmed him down. "I'm as scared and confused as you are."

"It's just… We've dealt with alligators, wolves and even bears. They're ordinary animals. But this… This is something else. And we lost a sheep today."

"I know. And I know that you've raised all those sheep from lambs. This is hard for you. Just as it is for me."

"It might start with one sheep, but then another gets eaten. And another. Before we know it, our cows, horses, chickens, all of them might be next on the menu. Then we lose our livelihood and-"

"I won't let that happen," Lian said, sternly.

This silenced Darren. She felt ashamed of her near outburst, but the prospect of losing everything they had made her blood boil. They had suffered so much hardship and judgement to make their dream a reality.

She was not about to let that dream wither.

She heard Arran whimper. He was laying on his large cushion, his sides bandaged up. He still seemed shaken from his experience. She went over and stroked him gently, planting a soft kiss on his forehead.

"Can you remember when we first got him?" Darren asked, wistfully.

"How can I forget?" Lian said, smiling. "It was a year after we married. We passed by an animal rescue place, and you begged for us to visit it."

"And you simply wanted to walk on to the restaurant," Darren said. They shared a giggle.

"Yes," Lian said. "But… I'm glad we didn't, because we found this shy little cub, and brought him home to be our baby." Almost in response, Arran lifted his head and nuzzled it against Lian's, who returned the gesture in kind.

"Yes," Darren said. "He's been with us through thick and thin. Even through our most difficult times."

"We promised each other that we wouldn't let their words get to us," Lian said, softly.

"I haven't. But… at the same time, I can't ignore them."

"You know how people from the Terram Expanse can be, Darren. They're very judgmental towards those who don't conform to their ideals. When we left TE space, many looked down at us for our choice to farm. They called it bleeping 'basic' and 'primitive'. But we never gave up. And we're not going to give up because of some unknown animal living in the lake."

"But how do we go about dealing with this creature?" Darren asked.

"We…" *What can I say? We're both at our wits end.* "We'll just go out and scour the lake. And once we find that thing, we'll-"

Suddenly, the calm night air was disturbed by a shrill shriek. She recognised it at once: it was the cows. *Space damn it! It's come back, and it's going for the cows.* At once, Lian grabbed her strifle and ran towards the door, with Darren trailing behind her. When she threw open the door, she saw the cows running around in every direction, shrieking in fear.

Lian ran down to the large pen. She looked through her strifle's scope, watching the scene. Amidst the commotion, she could see the outline of a tall figure chasing after the cows, one by one.

Lian did not hesitate.

She aimed her strifle and fired a round.

The mark struck its target, and she heard a shrill shriek. But it sounded human.

"Hey!" She heard a voice shout.

Oh bleep. Oh no! Did I shoot someone?

She looked at Darren with a panicked look on her face. They both started running towards the source. Before long, they came across a young boy, kneeling on the grass, clutching onto an open wound on his left arm. Lian gasped in shock. She knelt beside him and would have tried to treat the boy's wounds. But instead, she saw the wound heal and disappear like water poured onto a scalding hot surface.

When she looked the boy over, she saw various small metal implants on his arms.

Good space. He's a synthetic. Must be from Haimas.

"I don't know who you are," the boy said, "but I'll have you know my mother is chief of law enforcement. I can get you arrested for this. Lucky for you, however, I wasn't badly hurt, so I don't think it worth my time."

"Look, I'm sorry," Lian said. "I didn't mean to shoot you. I thought-"

"What? That I was going to steal your cows?" The boy said, derisively. "As if."

"Then why are you here?" Darren asked.

"I got lost whilst taking a stroll," the boy said. "I happened upon this place. Though I was expecting somewhere more advanced."

"Hey," Darren said. "Listen, boy, you may not like-"

"My name isn't 'boy'. It's Hampton. Wait." Hampton squinted his eyes. "Neither of you have implants. You're… You're both organics."

"What about it?" Lian asked.

"I was wondering who would keep cows out here." Hampton said.

"For meat rearing and manure, of course," Lian said, defensively.

"Ah," Hampton said scornfully. "You're one of those types."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Darren said, annoyed.

"The primitive kind: those who farm and toil in the dirt."

"Well, where do you think meat comes from?" Lian asked. *I can't believe it. On the same day we deal with a water creature, we now must deal with another elitist.*

"From a laboratory," Ha said. "How else do you get Burlkur steaks or chicken?"

Good space. I knew people from Haimas were ignorant of the old ways, but I didn't know they were this sheltered. At least I can say I work my fingers off for good reasons.

"Wrong," Lian said. "It comes from real animals, which you must kill to get the meat. Sure, most meat these days is cultured in a lab, but a lot of it is still from real animals. You just don't realize it because you've been used to the TE way of living."

"Well, at least I'm not playing in the dirt," Hampton said. "I'm on my way to being in law enforcement, like my mother. And I'm liable to get good prospects of promotion as well."

"Good for you," Lian said. *Now he's showing off.* "And I wish you the best in that. In the meantime, me and my husband will work here on this 'primitive' establishment and work our fingers off providing produce which people can enjoy."

"Sure," Hampton said, mockingly. "You know what? I haven't got time to mess around with you two. I've got to get back home. My mother has a strict curfew. Just point me in the direction of town, and I'll-"

Hampton's words were cut off when one of the cows let out a loud shriek. From where she was, Lian could make out a large lumbering mass crawling towards their direction. It leaned over the fence, using its large claws to pierce the ground for leverage. Soon, it reared up as tall as anything, snapping its claws. Then it dropped them, striking a nearby cow.

The cow shrieked in pain, flailing as the creature began to dig into its flesh.
Lian instinctually grabbed her strifle and aimed. She took a shot, but the round barely made a crack in the creature's bony covering.

The creature stopped feasting and turned to face Lian.

It was then that Lian saw the creature's face in detail.

It was sunken, sporting a large mouth lined with sharp teeth. Its stalk-like eyes constantly looked around in every possible direction. The body itself reminded Lian of both a caterpillar and a lobster, with what seemed to be four legs just under a large mass. As it looked at Lian, the creature's back spikes flickered like reeds in the wind.

The creature let out a soft growl but made no attempt to attack. Even so, Lian kept her weapon ready.

A period of silence and mutual contemplation, the pace was broken when the creature let out a deafening wail. A large rock had been thrown at it, which struck its left eye.

Lian turned, and saw the source was Hampton. And he was clutching another rock.

And expanse-types are meant to be logical and rational. What a load of srit.

At that moment, things became a blur. The creature started moving towards them, its claws snapping. Darren had attempted to take the rock from Haimash's hand, who pushed him away. As the creature came closer, Lian lifted her weapon. But as she was about to fire, she was pushed aside.

For a moment, her vision became dazed, and everything seemed to be formless. But soon the haziness cleared, and she saw Darren screaming in pain, whilst in the grasp of the creature's claws. Hampton was lying on the grass beside them, clutching onto the bloody stump where his lower arm had been.

The creature dug the tips of its claws deeper in Darren's skin, blood seeping out.

"No!" Lian shouted.

She lifted her strifle and fired. It struck the creature in a soft spot, green-brown blood flowing out. The creature shrieked loudly, rearing up on its four legs. Then it rattled Darren about and threw him to the side. Lian screamed in anguish as Darren struck against a tree.

His body went limp as he struck it headfirst.

Upon seeing this, Lian opened her mouth, but could barely make a sound. She dropped her strifle and ran over toward Darren. When she got to him, Lian saw a large gash on his forehead. She knelt beside him.

Good space. What do I do? I... I...

Her hands began to shake, uncertain of how to help him. He had been hurt before during one of his farming duties, but never like this. *Come on, Lian. Keep it together. You need to help him.*

"Hey," Lian shouted in the direction of Hampton. "Come over here and…"

But Hampton was already running through the fields, holding onto his half-torn arm.

Damn coward.

She saw the creature as it took a dead cow in its claws and began to crawl away, Lian felt torn between helping the love of her life, and stopping the creature, thus preventing any more tragedy. In the end, she could only watch as the creature vanished into the darkness, the sound of splashing following soon after.

Lian knelt beside Darren.

"Darren," she said, softly. "Darren. Please. Wake up. Speak to me. Darren? Come on. Don't die on me. Please. Please…"

#

"'Though the adults are sapient,'" the data file spoke, "'the larval Kraul is more animalistic in nature, driven by a basic instinct to feed itself until the metamorphosis stage. From the time it hatches, the larval kraul will feast on any fauna it comes across. After a period of a few months, the larva will then cocoon itself in resin made of its own substance and mud to gestate.'"

Well, at least I know what it is. I only wish I knew about this sooner.

Lian skimmed through the archive once more.

"'Kraul Colonisation Methods: krauls typically avoid contact with other races, preferring to colonise uninhabited planets. They often target planets reminiscent of their home world: humid, tropical and even volcanic. During such efforts, Seed Pods will be deposited, containing larval

krauls destined to be bred as a new generation for the colony. Krauls guard their region of space with impunity, attacking anyone who…'"

"That's it!" Lian said, shutting off the data file. "That's it, Arran. That must be how that thing got here. Maybe it was part of some colonisation effort. It must have somehow got off course and accidentally crashed here. You see what I mean?"

Arran simply stared at Lian for a long time. He then turned and slowly walked toward Darren, who lay comatose on the bed. Lian had applied a lot of healing gel, so Darren was mostly healed from his wounds. But he had been unconscious for about a week now. The doctors looked him over, and said he should recover, but the process would take some time considering his injuries.

Just when I need him the most, he's not here. It feels like a part of me has been ripped out.

Lian sighed. She walked over and knelt by Darren. Even when comatose, Darren had a content look on his face. Arran let out a soft whining sound and brushed his snout against Darren's arm.

"Oh, Arran," Lian said, scratching Arran's head. "I'm scared for him too, sweetheart." Tears welled up in her eyes. "I… I wish he were here. He should be here." With that, her hands began to shake with anger. "That… That thing… It…"

She let out a shrill howl of anguish, and grabbed the nearest object she could grasp, throwing it against the wall. She soon found herself in a rage-fuelled daze, stamping on the carpet, punching the wall, and smashing things without an ounce of concern. Until she grabbed an object and looked at it.

She felt her heart sink.

It was a picture of her and Darren, smiling as they held hands. She wore a white-yellow dress, whilst he wore a grey suit.

Our wedding picture. How did I come close to destroying this?

It was only then that she surveyed the damaged around her, broken pottery everywhere, holes in the walls. Even the couch had gashes in it.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she looked at Darren again.

"Oh, Darren," Lian said, sobbing.

Arran came to her side, rubbing his head against her leg. She returned the gesture, kneeling and hugging him, planting a kiss on his forehead.

"Don't worry, Arran," Lian said. "We'll make sure his pain isn't in vain. We'll… We'll stop that thing. Before it hurts anyone else." She felt her fists clench again.

It was then that she heard loud voices. *Who could it be? Hardly anyone comes out here. Unless they came from Haimas.*

Taking her strifle for protection, Lian, with Arran by her side, walked out onto her porch. Out in the cow field, she saw a crowd of people huddling around something. Immediately, she ran towards the commotion.

Even if they're not rustlers, I don't like people sniffing around without permission.

When she got there, the crowd had spread out as a single person was speaking. It was a tall woman of fair age, with red hair and greyish-blue clothing made of nano-fibre. As Lian came closer, the woman stopped in her tracks.

"Who are you?" The woman asked. From the suit, and small implants in her head, Lian could tell the woman was synthetic.

"The owner of this farm," Lian said, defiantly. "And you're on private property. I don't know why you're here, but you could have at least asked for permission before-"

"I am Melina Samron," the woman said. "Chief of Haimas law enforcement. Thus, I can investigate wherever I need to fulfil my duty. Especially when it concerns someone getting badly hurt."

Melina gestured to the left. Lian's eyes widened when she saw it was Hampton. His left arm was fully healed, as though nothing had ever happened to it. She had heard the nano-bots within a synthetic could help regrow lost limbs, though Lian had never seen such a thing.

"And, as I heard," Melina said, scornfully, "that creature wasn't the only thing that attacked him. He told me you shot him."

"I'm sorry," Lian said. "I didn't mean to. I thought he-"

Melina held up a hand. "Luckily for you, it wasn't severe enough to warrant an arrest. Besides, I've bigger problems. That creature ripped off my son's arm."

"Sounds like you're making this whole thing personal," Lian said.

Melina scowled at her. "My son was hurt, severely. So yes, it's damn personal."

So much for the TE philosophy of logic. At the end of the day, she's just like the rest of us.

"Well, you're not the only one who's affected by all this," Lian said. "My husband is in a comatose state because of that creature. And… It hurts me. I suppose you're going out to deal with it?"

"I'll be leading a posse out soon enough, yes," Melina said.

"Then take me with you," Lian said. This garnered murmurs from the crowd, some of which were derogatory. "I've as much right as you all do."

A few chuckled under their breath. One even whispered: "'That little organic wouldn't survive even a minute against it.'" *Typical. When an organic steps up, they ignore him or her.*

"I bet you don't even know what you're up against," Lian said.

"Actually," Melina said, "we do. It's a larval kraul. My ancestors fought them in the ancient Kraul Hive Campaigns. We destroyed many hives during those years. Even the Kings and Queens. So, I know, somewhat, how to deal with it. And I will deal with it. Rest assured; I'll take care of it on behalf of your husband as well."

"No," Lian said, angrily. "That's not enough. I need to be there."

"Don't worry yourself," Melina said. "As chief of law enforcement, I'm best qualified to deal with matters of this nature. Besides… Someone needs to tend to the farm, don't they?"

Why, that arrogant scrimp! I could just… Her fists clenched tight. *No. I've bigger fish to catch.*

Without saying a word, Lian simply turned and walked away with Arran in tow, huffing under her breath. Though she did not look back, Lian was sure they were staring at her scornfully. Once she got to the house, she slammed the door. She stood there for a time, breathing heavily.

"Don't worry, Arran," Lian said, as Arran came to her side. "We can take care of this ourselves. We don't need them. But first… we need to find out the kraul's weaknesses."

She rushed back over to her tabla and looked up the data file on krauls.

"Right. Let's see here. Weaknesses…" She scrolled down many pages. "Come on. No. I don't want to find out about their diet. I want… This isn't any…"

She stopped. Her breathed shortened upon reading further.

If what I'm reading here is true… Then this is more complicated than I thought.

#

"Easy girl," Lian said to the cow as she dragged it along. "Easy."

I really wish I didn't have to do this. But I don't have any other choice.

Once she tied the cow to a wooden pole, she sprayed fertiliser on herself to hide her scent. She could not risk giving herself away. After this was done, Lian ran towards the log where Arran was hiding behind. Her strifle was nestled in a large crack on the log's side.

"All set, Arran," Lian said. "Now remember, we need to be quiet. Don't move until I tell you, okay?" Arran looked at her and let out a small whimper. "I'll take that as a 'yes'."

She looked out into the horizon. Just beyond the fence was the lakeside. She peered through her binoculars. Other than a gentle breeze, the water was otherwise calm.

"Nothing yet," Lian said to herself. She took out a small box from her pocket and fished out a small cylinder with a sharp needed at its end. Arran whimpered slightly. "See this, Danny? This is a tranquilizer cylinder. It'll put that kraul to sleep." At this, Arran made an inquisitive whine. Lian sighed. "I know. I said I wanted to avenge Darren, but… krauls create a psychic bond with their offspring and siblings. If they get hurt, their family or hive can not only sense that pain but see who inflicted it. In essence, if we were to kill him, its entire hive would know what we look like and where we live. Granted, they may be light years away, but I can't take the chance that they won't be looking for it. I want revenge, dear, more than anything, but…" Lian rested her hand on Arran's head, who rubbed against it. "I can't lose any more family."

No sooner had she said that then a loud splash sounded from the water. Looking through her binoculars, she saw a large mass coming out.

He's here. Arran growled, but Lian shushed him. The kraul was soon crawling over the fence and heading towards the cow. In turn, the cow was mooing loudly, all the while trying to pull away from its chain. Lian took out her strifle, loaded the cylinder, and looked through her scope.

First, she saw the creature's gaping mouth, then its stalk-like eyes, before finally locking on her attended target: the base of its neck, which had leathery skin.

Believe it or not, this is going to hurt me more than it'll hurt you.

Just as the creature was about to rear up and attack the cow, it let out a shrill scream. A stream of electricity streamed all over its body like smoke over a corpse. It flailed it claws about, and the spikes on its back flexed erratically.

Lian recoiled in shock.

What? Who… How did… Wait. It must be…

Sure enough, she saw multiple people burst from the forest line and run towards the kraul. They carried large nets, which they threw into the air. These landed on the creature, seeming to cause even more pain, for the kraul shrieked louder. As soon as the creature became immobile, dozens of people came out from the bushes, wielding staff-like weapons.

They started thrusting them into the kraul, making it scream.

Among the people, came someone Lian recognised: Melina.

The others stepped aside as she approached the kraul. Holding her hand out, she took a shock -staff from one of the trappers. As Lian watched in horror through her binoculars in zoom, she saw something to the woman; her eyes had the visage of sadism, as though the kraul's pain brought her pleasure.

The kraul stirred, but Melina placed her foot on its neck, pushing it down. Then, without a moment's pause, she lifted the staff and thrust it into the kraul's back. Streams of electric currents flooded over the creature, making it squirm like a seal on burning coals. Every attempt by it to free itself from the stun nets failed, as they only seemed to tighten as it tried to cut them with its claws.

I only wanted to catch it, but… She's enjoying this! Personal vendetta my stazz; she's just looking for an excuse to hurt someone. And she'll kill all of us in the process!

Lian ran toward the scene, with Arran following behind. Though the creature had caused great injury to Darren, she knew killing it would have greater consequences. Even ignoring that, it did not seem right to take its life, when it was a young soul that did not know any better. With her fist clinched, Lian punched Melina in the face, sending her backwards. This seemed to only phase her slightly, for she was back on her feet in no time at all. The crowd simply stared in horror, their mouths agape.

Then Melina gave the order, and soon Lian was surrounded like a deer hounded by wolves. Three or four pairs of hands grabbed her, pinning her to the ground. Lian heard a whimpering

sound, and saw Arran was being pinned down as well, with one of the citizens pushing his snout down with one hand.

No! Leave him alone!

"Well," Melina said, wiping the blood off her nose. Lian's punch left a small bruise on the side, which was quickly dissipating. "If it isn't the farmer. You're lucky I have nano-bots in my bloodstream, or the injury could have been much worse. On that note: I thought you were set on revenge."

"I was," Lian said, struggling against the three or four men holding her down, "but killing it would bring even more tragedy."

"Oh… You mean how the kraul's hive would be out for blood if it was killed?" Melina said, smiling.

"You… You knew that?"

"Of course, I did," Melina said. "Like I said, my family has a history of fighting krauls."

"Then why kill it?" Lian asked. "You know it'll only bring more death."

"Because them we'll be able to wipe out the hive, all at once," Melina said. "That way, we'll have dealt with them before they even had a chance to wipe us out. The Samron name will be vindicated once again."

Lian chuckled. "So that's what this is about?"

"What?" Melina said, bemused.

"This was never about your son, or the community. It was about you; about your lust for blood."

"How dare you?" Melina said, shouting. She made a gesture with her hand, and one of the men holding Lian down struck her on the head. "My son is important to me. It's why I'm doing this. Krauls are dangerous. That's why the problem needs to be nipped in the bud before it gets worse. Although… I must admit, the thought of being victorious against the swarm is enticing."

"And you all call yourself TE citizens. You're meant to be rational, and level-headed."

Melina shrugged. "That is the official doctrine, but… It's overrated. It teaches us to stay nice in the face of other races. Even when they threaten us. You know that this colony has only become known for its tourism and glamourous countryside. The more prominent TE colonies probably look down at us, and I don't blame them! This… This is Salene's chance to create a name for itself. And for my family to be worth something again."

"So, for that, you'd risk an entire hive coming down and killing everyone for revenge?"

"Let them come," Melina said, smugly. "In fact. I'd welcome it."

This made Lian sick to her stomach. She saw a sadistic streak to the woman; her very smile invoked a killer's delight. And from what she saw around her, Lian was not the only one. Many of the people had doubt in their faces. But none spoke up.

They're probably scared of her retaliating. After all, she's the head official in town. She could snap her fingers and make them disappear.

Lian looked toward the kraul. For the first time since she crossed paths with it, she saw something to the being; instead of monstrosity, she saw sadness. The kind she could see in any person or creature. The sad contemplation of being on death's door.

I feel sorry for the poor thing. And not just because its… his death would mean Doom for us. He looks as scared as anyone would be. As me and Arran are now.

"Now," Melina said. "Enough of this mindless chitchat. You two…" She pointed to two young woman who branded small clubs. "Kill the beast."

The two women did not stir, simply standing there with resigned looks on their faces.

"Did you not hear me?" Melina said, angrily. "I said kill it!"

"But the woman said…"

"Forget what she said!" Melina shouted. "She's an organic! She doesn't know any better. She'd have us spare the creature and let it eat our children. Do you want that?"

It's a bit late to playing the 'community head' card now.

"Kill it!" Melina shouted.

No one among the crowd even stirred. It seemed they had more sense than Lian thought. *Seems not all of them are as arrogant as Melina.* The men who were holding Lian down even relaxed their hold on her, allowing Lian to sit up.

As Melina looked around at this quiet rebellion, her face grew more and more enraged. In the end, she let out a fierce growl, before grabbing a shock stick from the nearest person to her right.

"Good space," Melina said, irate. "You're all useless. And you call yourselves TE citizens."

A few people tried to stop her, but she pointed the shock stick at anyone who even took a step towards her.

Just then, Lian stood up, brushing away the grip of her captors, and ran towards the kraul. She started to use her knife to cut the net, despite the small shocks she received.

Melina was walking towards get, shock stick primed, but Lian threw some dirt into her eyes. Whilst Melina was incapacitated, Lian quickly got to work cutting the net. The kraul stirred, turning one eyestalk towards her. As she continued cutting the net, the kraul suddenly rose up, throwing it to the side.

It turned toward her; teeth bared. Lian held up her knife in response. She waited for an attacked. But nothing happened.

The kraul simply stood there, staring at her. There was a sense of curiosity to it, as though it knew Lian's intentions.

I still hate you for what you did to Darren. But you don't deserve any of this.

"Go!" Lian said, making a side-swipe gesture with her hand. "Go! Get out of here! Go to safety! She wants to kill you. Go and-"

Lian shrieked in pain and was soon on the ground. When she tried to stand up, she was pushed down again by a heavy foot.

"I always knew you and your husband would cause trouble," Melina said, maliciously. "You'd happily betray your colony for this… thing. Once the swarm comes here, I'll let you be their first victim."

The kraul rose up, ready to pounce, but Melina struck it in the underbelly. It shrieked and dropped to the ground next to Lian. She saw the same sadness in its eyes again.

"Actually," Melina said, sneering. "I think I'll take you out myself. Can't let the krauls have all the satisfaction."

A young woman from amongst the crowd spoke up in protest, but Melina suddenly whipped out a small gristol and shot the woman in the leg. She dropped to the ground almost instantly. Melina then aimed her staff at various people, who held up their hands in surrender. Once she seemed sure there would be no protest, she aimed her weapon at Lian.

Lian looked to Danny, who was still being pinned down, and then to the kraul. Finally, she looked to the house.

At least… At least I died doing the right thing.

A single shot was fired.

But Lian felt no pain.

And the heavy pressure was lifted from her back. When she lifted herself up, Lian saw Melina lying on the ground, clutching onto her side, which was red with blood. From seeing her wound, Lian could tell that, even for an enhanced person like Melina, it would cause great damage to her body. To the point of incapacitation.

"Lian," a familiar voice said.

Tears welled up in her eyes when she heard that voice. She turned. Darren was standing there, weapon in hand. He still had the injury to his left side, but he was otherwise standing up

with vigour. He turned to the two men who were holding Arran down and aimed his weapon at them. At once, the men threw their ups up in surrender and released Arran.

Arran ran over to Darren, licking his face. Darren hugged Arran and rubbed his head. Then he turned to Lian. Without hesitation, they both ran towards one another, and intertwined in a tight warm hug, holding onto each other as though this would be their last moment together.

"You…" Lian said, barely containing her sobs. "You're…"

"A sight for sore eyes?" Darren said, equally as tear stricken.

Lian laughed amidst her sobs. She pulled away slightly, then pounced on Darren with a kiss. He returned the gesture. Even as the rain began to fall, they did not pull away.

Never leave me again. Never.

They only stopped as Arran was rubbing both their legs. They each petted him, with Lian scratching him lovingly on the head.

It seems we have a happy ending now.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lian noticed a red shine in the sky, which grew and grew until it seemed to be as big as a sun. Then there came a rumbling bellow sound that pierced her ears. She saw that everyone had been affected by this sound, for everyone was covering their ears, cowering before it.

Soon, the red light dimmed. The sources revealed itself to be a large craft, circular in shape, with overlapping rod-like symmetries worming their all along its circumference. Lian's jaw dropped at this sight. It was as if she were staring at the face of a mighty god.

Then she realized.

"Good space," she said. "It's them."

"Who?" Darren asked.

"The hive," she said. "They've come for…"

Her words were cut short when two separate beams of light shone upon the ground, just next to the larval Kraul. The crowed backed away in fear, uttering words of fear. Before anyone had time to even contemplate the situation, two figures emerged from the beams.

They stood at around nine to ten feet tall. The krauls had a similar body plan to the larva, but without the paddle like end. Instead, they had four actual legs at the bottom. They had slimmer necks, and each carried a large staff-like object in their claws while holding the bottom with their left small arms.

When one of the krauls approached them, Lian reacted by holding up her knife. But the kraul did not attack. Instead, it simply stared at her, making soft grumbling noises. It turned to the crowd, looking at them with intent. The other kraul went over to check the larval Kraul, which groaned in pain.

"He's okay," Lian said, without thinking. "Really. He got hurt by the other human, but I saved…"

She recoiled in fear as the other kraul turned back to her, growling. Darren came to Lian's side, but the kraul kept him at bay with his staff. He then took out a small rectangular device-reminiscent of a tabla-and pressed on the top. An image appeared.

Lian's eyes widened.

It was footage of her defending the kraul against Melina. Then it went white before showing her attempting to the free the larval kraul.

So, they know I was trying to save it.

Once the footage played out, the kraul deactivated its device. It then let out a small croaking sound, before laying its lower arm on her shoulder.

Despite not knowing its meaning, Lian said: "You're welcome."

At that, the kraul back way, and walked over to the larval kraul. The other kraul was applying a jelly like substance to areas where it was injured. Suddenly, a bright beam descended upon them, and they disappeared at once, as if they had vanished into thin air.

Lian felt a hand clasp her own. She smiled as she looked into Darren's eyes.

The ship rose and rose until it had disappeared.

Even as the crowd began to disperse, Lian and Darren continued to stare at the blanket of stars above, holding one another's hand in a gentle embrace.

Omnis Vivandi (Part 2)

by John Thiel

Here's a girl who's grown down, not up. From a woman in her twenties with a professional employment to a child of five years, she has grown to the age of eighteen and then, having reached this landmark age, has with no great speed reverted to the age of sixteen, where she is intending to stay. In her adult days she had no family, but when her chosen way of life, that of a 'socialite,' ceased to be necessary she became a child, which entitled her to care and support. She'd been that when she first arrived in the city, too, and was part of a large and indistinct family of people. Now she was not able to return to them, for they had gone their ways. But she required dependance. It came when Valmar Menderson and his wife were showing her their extraordinarily large house and lands, for Valmar was wealthy, having gained the title and employment of Civic Alderman. She was greatly impressed and said she wished she could live in a house like that. It came in a flash to Valmar, and he said, "You can. Our house is equipped for guests, but Monique and I have been considering having a family. You might like to be our daughter, and then you could live in this place." Duanella reeled about, stunned, then regained her senses and said "I would very much like that." "Then come inside and we will talk this over," said Valmar, and within a few days the invitation was made certain. The parents told her that they loved her very much, and that this thing would last. As time passed she grew older,

and developed a desire for independence, which was granted to her by Valmar, who knew very well she could take care of herself but also required guidance. She spent her time in the lowly parts of the large area in which they dwelt, and along a ritzy route called the Avenue, and Valmar bought a cheap house for her in the area she was interested in. Valmar had seldom been in these parts fo town, and she would send back information about these areas.

She became too independent, and great arguments developed between her and her father. He did not like the libertine areas in which she was living, and got harder and harder about the matter. She knew he was right, but he could not sense the values the anarchic Avenue could have. The people there had a new outlook on life and had built what they had along a rural highway. Valmar said their new outlook was to do everything wrong. But she had a soul feeling for the Avenue. “It could happen to someone,” he said of this. Their arguments were not serious, bu they became morbid as the life around them seemed to deteriorate.

Finally Valmar came out to have a look at Nel Gwyn. His daughter had said that he might be the very man who could set things straight there, and she was a very perceptive person. He entered the area and found that he was exactly what was needed. An alderman had what the recently created area was lacking: official finality and completion. And so he took it upon himself to be the salvaging of Nel Gwyn, and became a great man thereby, and therefore proceeded to rectify the failings of everything along the Avenue, even to the very end where it met with soldiers. One of his new group who was in a partnership with his daughter, Antonay the demon, met with the military and helped solve the conflict the military had with the people of the Avenue, who also broke up the signal conflict with Vinton. In presenting himself for Judgment, Antonay shrived himself. He is now part of an effort instituted by Sayona the Savant to improve and elevate the Underworld and make it safe. Brother Myron and Ralph Rogers, principal of the school of evil, have both done repentance, and Baylor of the Circle of Nine has fully repented and taken on a new way of living, and all of this is influential to the entire society

known as the Decamerons. Duanella sits among the heads of the Avenue effort, where she fully belongs, and she has a lot of good connections, including several with us. She reasons similarly to ourselves, and joining the Decamerons has not interfered with her innocence. Her father has called her publicly a hooligan and a mantrap, but said he felt the public need be warned that she is wild without being watched strictly, but this is now being done. Antonay and Chancellary, and the new entrant to sin Jeanette, have established an office in the area of peace which is close to the Avenue, and country-related, and they are there to have doings with the superior people. Monarch Sokolsky, who is also one of the Circle of Nine, and some of his people have also established some buildings there, and says he is using these to go back to normal behavior.

A rising melody as the saxophone, having no faults, made its music while its player twisted in behind a shrub and opened up, honk beyon, barana blay, a tone that was miraculous. There was a clear crescendo, then another man began to sing:

When bohemian lips invite you to smile

You might take a break and stay for a while.

Don't let bad things fool you; they're likely all right

When you get in the mood and the sky's shining bright.

Rakacota Picardo, and try it again

Let's all get together, and be cozy again. Just like men.

When Stresses besiege you, take comfort, no strain.

When a lady once loves you, she'll love you again.

Bababado ditbo yore, amana piper,

Be sure of your earnings and blessings.

Get with your coffee, and sing in the rain.

You'll like it much better, from gripes you'll abstain.

The saxophone player came in from behind the shrub and raised his sax in full glory. It got to be a bash when a lady joined in, with all the fa-la-la you could want. Other instruments joined in, and they began to march in files of four, with all their disparate support behind them, also in close files of four. Across the grass and lanes they did go, coming from the music museum, ready to swing with all. Burrazimo Bonimono. The players started to improvise, deep vibrato and far-flung high wailing, the drummers seeming to attack but changing their minds. Ah, how they played! The Brothers Five from back in the sticks came looking at them near the roadway, then stopped short of the march and looked. Sheboygan Trailor unwound a bit and looked some more. It was easy, he considered, to hate people; why then was it not easy to like people when they came across playing good music? "I'm going to hear these guys out," he said. "Love rules," said Tik Schenway. "It comes easy when it comes." Many of them had been moved down to the industrial area, the rest demurred. Trailor had said, "I'm not going anywhere else. This is my place."

"They've got a power of fine musicians," a soldier said, a light colonel by rank. He'd been arguing about his rank, and it had got him moved over to the road. He also had his thoughts—if you were listening to music, all the trouble you had might just slide away—transient as well.

Over the way, an overseer was looking on with great approval. No sense making suggestions now, when they were making their own. He knew the musicians were following the path they had taken when they entered the area with the company of soldiers; he wondered if that meant anything to all the people around them, whether they noticed it. There had been talk about finality, of the military action being over with. The settlement talks and the questions and answers were to begin. Once begun, going from there.

The Civic Improvement Movement was running classy. Various stokers on the way up the freeway had joined in, and it was overseen and doing well. It had amalgamated with civic action across the way into the great big area where many things were to be found. Here the big improvers got right in with them, even offered some ideas of their own, which were surveyed; they seemed to be filling up voids. Waithcoate was seen weeping because the old orders were passing away. He was now stationed in the other half, of which Darcey was a participant and in which Towanis Selig had turned out to be a major power, and of course that was being improved but at the same time they were revamping things and performing well under scrutiny. They knew pretty well they were committing transgression. Waithcoate had let on everything they were doing that wasn't in the lawbook of principles. They were turning out to like their improvements pretty well. There had been a lot of despair in their midst. Meanwhile they had been doing their big, rich thing on the upper Avenue, and all that could be done was figure out what to do about it. This had been found to be a major force in the riots, and it could have gotten over into war. But this didn't happen. The military filed away what was done here, in the big stuff files, which vandals had threatened to burn.

`The one thing the visitors wanted to know was how those people who ran things in the city could possibly let things get in the condition they were in. A lot of things were not even describable, no matter how much effort was put to it. Nothing like these things were seen previously or anywhere else, within the scope of their intelligence. "A lot of the people who got in here were not earthly," they were told at the top. "You'd probably find identifiable similarities elsewhere, and people unchecked. The Earth was not invitational to dinosuars. Yet there was quite a bit of that going on in places mentioned in Biblical listings. And, too, if you've seen fairy tales, they're more or less true; these were people who lost their places in a planetary sys-

tem and, in a sense deported, brought with them inexplicable behavior which was never recognized very much. Here they blent in with other people better than they did elsewhere, but as for the results you speak of, things weren't monitored very well in the new territory, which was commenced in its mapping and construction over thirty years ago and was considered five or so years ago, both reasoning back from before your exact announcements, now there's more such thinking, but the doings are more active."

"As we've seen it, Withers and associated territory were about to plummet out of sight."

"You were just at the right time to see action being taken. When a conflict between Whitford and Seinfeld broke out, major actions were commenced. Those two places should have been one place, but there was never any ordination. Why we hadn't heard from them was that they were saying the same things as they had been saying at first, and seemed pretty much concerned with what they were doing, no real complaints. It had been rough getting those new places built, and everybody got more easy-going, maintaining hat for years but being careful and having some self-doubts. Somebody in Withers pointed out that the doing of all that travel was not compensated for in the consideration of the activity, and the reason for all that transference in living had not been adequately explained. The newspapers there certainly didn't show much intelligence about it, but there was a lot of awareness of it in those news writeups. Papers here could be examples of ignorance of anything but the facts. The first news stories of real significance we hard from them were about an outbreak of war. Later on we heard that the speculation of warfare from the outside had become other than speculation. We knew it was real when he heard from Whitford that they were hitting an area along the Avenue because it was a weak spot in our defense. That was not an actual weak spot, it was populated by workers and was an industrial area, and their advance had been observed by people in Whitford, who were

connected with the industrial area and who met them head on in torrential warfare that obliterated the assailants."

One of the listeners to this said, "The leader of that warfare defensive has repented and it is a lifelong repentance."

"Who was it? We don't know who it would be or who it was, and they had no contact with us."

"He is a person named Ernest Baylor. His special platoon repented with him."

"That isn't the first name I had for him, but I've heard of Baylor and it seems to me you've gotten a really good early repentance."

"Sayona announced an end to the dominion of evil and Brother Myron led a march through that end of the city and stayed on a 'Watch' for a month."

"That's your case, and I've heard of both. Myron's a saint and we were asked to look through our records about Sayona De La Porte and found that she'd done city work involving housing and location of new arrivals. Her records were good. If they're good it's first class. Subsequently she was found to be odd but they say she is entering into city matters again with a new outlook."

"That of repentance. The Decamerons, who were the masters of evil, are changing their ways to reconstruction and civic improvement."

"No bluff there. I might have thought there was, it sounds like public speaking. I might like to see a few of you handling these matters."

"That's what we're doing. The Decamerons are being voluntarily purged. It's real."

"Her name's Candy Oates," Daryl Van Ness, one of the standbys of the sky, said.

"I've been feeling it," the main speaker, Calvin Thomas Deimarot, said. "Put out a general alarm. We have one ready."

"That's us," Dan Flight, one of the observers, said. "We'll help you out with that alarm."

"Some of that ground work happens everywhere," Elias Montaine observed, looking like a sidekick to Deimarot. He appeared to have said enough, all he was going to say. Another, Charles Rhodes, said "Really, we ought to have an intermediary meeting place, if this is to occur."

"This isn't my house, of course," Deimarot said. "This is the Procidium."

They had been standing in what may have been an anteroom, with the door readily accessible. Charles opened the door and they all went out through it, a crowd of twenty. An apparition said, "There should be people falling on that bottom step."

"There's nothing wrong with it," Charles said.

"There's nothing right in shantyland," said the apparition. "Dirt driver down there." He vanished.

Lawrence Whittingham (who may have commanded the Procidium, though Calvin wouldn't have been second in command) said, "I'd establish this meeting right directly, and no time to lose on it, but there isn't any place nearby to meet. Yet this is where we ought to meet."

"There isn't anything that could be converted to a meeting place, either," Deimarot said.

"We'd have to build one," Rhodes said. "Or we could bring one up piecemeal."

"I'd look like a commoner, doing work of that kind," Deimarot said.

"If you have a place, we could put something in at this very moment," Jack Desmond of the stellar group said.

"Let's all stroll down to where it would be," Deimarot said. "I know the place. It's spacious and hidden and nobody's looked at the area for a long while."

"Know the housing? Here's an empty place that looks kind of official," Desmond said.

"It's where they were making statues. It was called a museum. People have been wanting to get rid of it," Lawrence said.

"I know. That's why it looked good to me."

"It might as well be now," Deimarot said. "It'd be the same thing at any other time." They huddled and went into conference. A tired hour later, with most of the offensive encroachers gone, they decided upon doing it then, and then there was how to furnish it. Another forty-five minutes, and they were situating the place, and a good job was being done of it, too.

"This is the kind of thing that could take my hat off," Deimarot said.

"We have got to get the people classified, so the various places could be classified and known clearly to us for what they are" was coming out of a steam room outside the city, where various beings of the judgment were congregated. The idea was getting a comprehensive and even certain overview of all of it. This was a hard thing to do without offense to the top dogs, all of whom did not like to be considered inferior to the monarchs of the sky. THEY had an overview, and if an overview came along from these overseers it would bother them. Wicked words came from higher than that, people who would contest these set views and who said conflict was inevitable at this particular point. There would have to be philosophical interjecting and that of the best, or the whole of the enterprise would be shaky. They referenced Deimarot. He formulated a sliding action when this matter was involved, the matter being that whether the actors of the judgment could tell those people of the city who were overseers of the whole of it what to do. Tehre would have to be interactive persuasion with not a word of it suggesting that the judgment people had any control over these people. If any of them were found obdurate in a pursuit in which new happenings were outmoding his own doings, his approach to things wee to be fully investigated and discussed by the best and most cooperative, until the matter was cleared or fully explained. By all means they would find out why he was not giving up his posi-

tion, and a solution would be found for it. It wouldn't matter or schmatter what the nature of it was as long as it could be brought in some good form to the true and natural objectives, those which would be put to the test in the future and not solidified as certainties. "This very thing has been the ruin of many a previous foray" came from above. "We have a grand committee looking for potential failures and the nost notable contemplators and thinkers are not being blocked, but indeed are getting help getting to where their exquisite wisdom is needed." They all recognized a lack of vocabulary in their conversations and these were things much discussed and further researched in all the apparent right places, right then as the actions were progressing and, yes, getting reviewed by those most serious in what they were doing, but not bent upon certain formulations. In doing things this way they would be successful in their doings. No trite statements of yore followed or dismissed, no platitudes, and all their like. These, as you may know, would not long be forgotten, anyway, in the passage of time. And there you had it, just remember to keep in goodwill. A saint ahd called this an imperative. Saints did not actually need their asses kicked. Try kicking the ass of a saint, so the story goes.

And so a major glitch was overcome. A word about all this fidelity: the original builders of the city, eleven in number all told, were in close contact with the judgment at this time, and what they say goes, once understood and communicated among themselves. They were still distant, all of them residing in one of two different states, and had been seeing their city from a distance, with only occasional visits. They were really interested in what was going on now, and would be there in not so long a time.

Roadrunning became a popular thing among the people repositioned in a new territory: Brother Myron's people, most of them being reestablished a decent distance away from the dividing line representing underworld territory, which was in the passage of time to cease being called the underworld. Among these people were some of Sayona's minions, from the days of her public psychic gatherings before the reign of evil had begun. She was going to reclaim their

place in the city, too, as the northerly procedure she had begun with the city man was established. “The days of misery are coming to an end,” she said, a statement that was scoffed at. A few of these people had remained in Whitford, and others were on the side of the dividing line from the main multitudes of them. Growly Bear had become more interested in Myron’s parade of departure and, although he would not join with them, he remained with what they were doing and was now in a house fairly near to the Circle of Nine, of which he was now a guard, and accessible to the northern territory. His actual name was Bernard Eminschaler. The people claimed they would stop calling him Growly, but then decided they would never stop calling hm Growly Bear. One of the two ladies who had spoken with Duanella in the transportation room had moved into Duanella’s house, that now being her hideaway, as she had become relocated in a more viable pattern. She would still be coming there and staying for a while, but she needed someone to tend the house between, so Doreen Grumacher took over the residence. Duanella’s father came down to look at this and said to Duanella, “Hasn’t this house got any YOU to it?” Duanella said, “No, but it’s got HOUSE to it.” Doreen said she was going to get better flowers in it and yard improvement, and that Lavina would be one of her frequent visitors, who was now living close to the entertainment district. Duanella took her symbol out. There were still commissioned surveillance men looking over the attempt that had been made to exterminate the neighborhood, and the information was coming in from far afield; one of the men of the judgment commandos was making sure that all was being discovered and correctly interpreted, pointing out that this should not beset a city. Menderson had been asked twice whether he really wanted mercy for those involved in this attempt, and he said he did. The commando said that he need not expect to be asked this; he, the commando, already knew that there should be mercy for these people. Berringo was the name of the new territory up north. It might not have been named that had not Myron been more or less in charge of things. It might be that it would be changed as time passed.

Courtesy of the Grand Overseers, there was a grand one-storied building, even more decent in its distance away from the line, forward from half the new territory. It faced in two directions, northeast and southwest, with side doors, and this was to gather as they had been doing, with items of various kinds in a lengthy and spacious yard enlarged centrally. “Now, you just be careful, you might be running over something of mine,” said Sayona, who had not been told this was being put here. A blessing from the grandees was added, the Temple of Truth, in which important things could be discussed and in which Brother Myron could orate. Easy transportation for the ones behind, even the ones there, was made possible and scheduling brought to mind, and a highway took them past Sayona’s house with a bus running on it at known intervals; they’d get out where there were nearby neighbors on the less ritzy side, and make their way through the neighboring area until Sayona could see them coming. They could leave on the same bus when it was going the other way. They were warned they might have to put on a costume if they went in the front way, but if they liked they could walk around the house and come in the front door. Myron had confessed all his worldly sins and evils within three weeks or so, and was now living regularly and going to the Temple of Truth when there was more he wanted to discuss, like the conversion of Baylor or the restitution of the ghosts that had been accomplished by the Far Aways. That had been where the apparition at the top came from, as was eventually learned.

The two demons, Antonay and Chancillary, with their secretary Jeanette, were now having real business, and this was all the work of the Overlords, who had them covering the various points of their concerns and bringing in the information about them, such as the interest in the civilian area and the onetime estranged area in which Wayne Durman lived, and the Parking Lodge of Jack Mangueld, and they were able to handle all of this in the fashion of those who were managing things successfully. The Overlords had selected this for them wisely, and of course they were not the only ones seeing this.

It wouldn't be a job if there were nothing on the other side of them. They did keep files as well. Another plus for Antonay was his proximity to Duanella, who was now completely restationed. Her job in the entertainment district had been expanded and officialized (much as Menderson had been suggesting, though he was not making a point of it there) and she was now doing big business as an intermediary between the entertainment district and Nel Gwyn, with further expansion where Darcey was at, and she was contributory to the straightening out of that adjunctive to the Avenue—both were, under the direction of Towanis Selig, and this was further advanced and administrated by the up-and-at-'ems, who were super merciful and helpful to the roadway commission. She was also positioned importantly in the entire Avenue effort, met with her gang near the Circle of Nine and was at their meetings along with the rest, and then there was some off-and-on helter skelter. She was spending most of her time at home in Withers, of which she said "This is where I make my home." She had invited Jeanette (who had no true family) into the family, but Clara had one and was only a visitor. "I will not give the young lady up," her father said. Antonay knew when she was in her position and presence in the Avenue headquarters and was able to get there often and find a place for a private meeting. The two soldiers also found her readily available there, and Jack of the Service remained visitable or could be invited out there. So she was in solid, calling Withers her home ground. Menderson had three young ones, and none of them were in a hurry to get any older. Clara reckoned she would grow at a slow pace, and then be a dreadful woman. She was being corrected about this last thing by operators from far away, who pointed out that it could be something different. They were into that whole area.

The Decameron building, still called that, was intact but visible. These were all still Decamerons, just as they had become, but with many a distinction coming or pending, and with some better associations, such as the library. Sayona was finding some better associations as well, including some with the city people.

That was how it all was, after three and a half years, and then some of judgment would be leaving and the rest were solidifying. They had made the city speakable, and then next was some real heavy talk about its improvement, some laying in of what was thought about what ought to be, or what had to be. Judgment…that was what it was all about: what had been wrong with things.

As to the talk about the people who had made the city, they had started to become more audible, and began becoming more nearby to the city. "It's ours. Why not be close to it?" And at about this time it came to be a topic of discussion that was audible all around the city "Who indeed made this city? Why do we not hear very much from them? Perhaps they can explain themselves." Those roller rigs had been doing their own things for as long as the city had existed, and were out in lands which pleased them, just as though they had retired in some way and were taking it careful for the future. A talk was achieved with some of the top people in the city for an answer to two questions. One was, "Did those people live close together?" and the answer was yes, except for three who resided in another state. The other question was "When would they ever come back?" And the answer to this was, they'll be coming back now. Were they going to return on the judgment times? No, they weren't sure when they'd be back, and they were talking about it from time to time. Then, with the Judgment coming, they came up with they'd better hurry on back, but they were going to wait until the big stuff was over.

It came into the office of Valmar Menderson, and his wife and Duanella were there, as was Ken. There were changes going on in that office, which had far out people of the first order in it anyway, and some finity explorers. Duanella said, "Someone should write to them. There should be contact with the masses, not we waiting around for them to get over the Judgment. That could be a long time. Probably, it would be a long time. Are we to wait for something like that? We need to hear from them now."

"Very good, then. You write that letter," one of the minotaurs of judgment said.

"I'll write it if you send it," Duanella said. And they asked her to sit down and write it. And this is what she wrote:

> *"Dear whoever you are, dear which one you may be out of eight or eleven, we would like to hear from you. In all the time we have lived here, we never have. Now it seems as if the city will fall apart. The people of the Judgment are amending this, but we need more than that. We need to hear from the people who made this city. We need to ask if it's the way it's supposed to be, which it clearly is not, but whether what we are doing is the way it's supposed to be and what do you think is the way we should be. You are the ones who wanted this city to be here and you left how it should be here, but most of us here have not heard in any direct way what has been wanted. We hope one of you, at least, will come here and tell us about this. And also have a direct look at what is here. Now, can you answer this letter, and tell us if you might come where we are? We'd really like to see you.—Duanella Menderson."*

"That's very good, without any additions or explanations," the sky person said. "And now, I'll see if I can get it mailed, and find out that I can." He left the room carrying the envelope, which he'd addressed. He came back in an hour, saying the letter had been dispatched. And in another half an hour a man walked through their door, who hadn't knocked or consulted with the front office. He was a sturdy man with blond hair and a good look to him, and a gentleness which compounded a look of great power. "Are you Duanella?" he asked her. And she replied that she was. "Then take this to mind: I would not think of answering this letter in anything but the affirmative. And you know this: I will not have my city come to naught. Already I am beginning to look at it, as I look at the people assembled here. And I shall find what I have dreamed of, and leave behind all the dross, with harm to no man, for it has been that way with me. I wish to see no man come to harm, unless he is a student of it, and then I wish him well. And all the losses there have been, will be drawn back to our intentions by my compatriots. And this is starting now."

"Are you the man who received this letter? Or was it opened first by someone else?" Menderson asked.

"It went through many hands until finally it reached me. And I am the one who answers it."

"What shall we see soon?" said Duanella.

"First I will see what I have come to see of you. Then you will see all the others, as they come into different places. We have all been waiting to see you. I was glad to receive the invitation. We shall make sure that what is wanted in your letter comes to pass."

C. Franklin Miller published the short story "Fog" in *Weird Tales – The Unique Magazine*, Vol. V No. 1 (January 1925). The story, subtitled "Prehistoric Patagonian Monsters – a Tale of Stark Terror", features an encounter between two spelunkers and a nearly
invisible monster that takes one of the men and allows the other to escape. The encounter later is told to the narrator by the survivor.

The creature lives in a cavern system that runs along an underground river as it passes through a mountain. The cavern system itself is foggy and hazy. The creature is described as "Damnable life! A hideous survival of those ancient times when life first oozed up from the bottom of the sea." The area has "a strange, nauseating odor…at times almost unbearable" – though it is unclear whether the odor comes entirely from the creature or also from a rotting corpse within the cavern. Later, the creature is said to have "a pungent, fishlike stench that was almost overpowering". In any case, the corpse and to some extent the cavern are covered in a "sort of gray mold", though again it is unclear whether the mold is associated with the creature. When the creature

moves, it makes "a steadily swishing sound…like some unwieldy body laboring along in" water. The creature exudes "a blast of icy air" that "struck us and froze its way in to the bone". Later, the creature makes "a tremendous long-drawn hiss" which apparently causes "an icy spray" that "descended like fog and settled without dissolution". All of this takes place in the dark of a cave. The end of the encounter occurs at the mouth of the cave, as the men are frantic to escape, in heavy fog issuing from the cave. At this point, the creature is described thusly – "an enormous shadow loomed in the mouth of the cavern. Gray, shapeless and scarcely definable, it seemed a part of the fog itself. Like a huge puff of smoke it came rolling out of its lair and spread." The creature does have some type of corporeality, however, for the survivor attacks it – "Almost blinded and scarcely able to breathe, I hacked away with my knife, trying to dig a way through the pasty mass."

Fog

Large elemental, unaligned
Armor Class 14 (Natural Armor) Hit
Points 97 (13d20+26)
Speed 50 ft., Fly 50 ft. (hover)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3, +3)	19 (+4, +7)	14 (+2, +5)	10 (+0, +0)	15 (+2, +2)	11 (+0, +0)

Skills Perception +8, Stealth +14
Resistances Bludgeoning, Piercing, Slashing
Immunities Cold, Poison; Exhaustion, Grappled, Paralyzed, Petrified, Poisoned, Prone, Restrained, Unconscious
Senses Blindsight 60 ft.; Passive Perception 18
Languages None
CR 6 (XP 2,300; PB +3)

TRAITS
Fog Form. The Fog can enter an enemy's space and stop there. It can move through a space as narrow as 1 inch without expending extra movement to do so.
Fog Camouflage. When in fog, the Fog has the Invisible condition.
Stench. *Constitution Saving Throw:* DC 15, any creature (other than a Fog) that starts its turn in a 10-foot Emanation originating from the Fog. *Failure*: The target has the
Poisoned condition until the start of its next turn. *Success*: The target is immune to the Stench of the Fog for 1 hour.
Sunlight Weakness. When in sunlight, the Fog has Disadvantage on D20 Tests.

"All In The Family" by José Sanchez