

Eldritch Science



January 2026

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Editorial

A new year is upon us, and with it a new issue of Eldritch Science! And this one is even on time!

With Valentine's Day coming next month, it seems appropriate that three of this month's stories concern love. Love transcends not only species but biological kingdom in Robin Rose Graves' *Life, Love, and Death of Certain Forms*. This highly imaginative piece is a great wind-up for Valentine's Day coming up next month!

Love transcends all imaginable boundaries in Toshiya Kamei's *Moonchild*. This short but powerful story is a great example of what awaits us once we depart from the traditional nine dots of fantastic fiction. (WARNING: some explicit content and discussion of trans issues)

Stephen Tillman's *Abduction* has at its center a mother's love for her children. Incidentally, she's also a shapeshifter. Mixed marriages can be rough, but this is as rough as it gets! (Apologies to Mr. Tillman for getting his story published much later than I had intended).

Disturbing an eldritch abomination has its consequences in *Titan Stumbled* by T J Wilkinson. But is the monster the true abomination?

Adrian Kresank deftly combines the noir fiction and fantastic fiction genres in *Supply Chains*. This appears to be a starting point to a much larger story that really needs to be told in full, but stands on its own.

And as we put this issue to bed, we explore the implications of immortality in *Pleasant Dreams, Howard* by Larry Clark. What does it truly mean to be alive? It's a question we all ask ourselves, but perhaps not this literally. *(continued on page 61)*

Eldritch Science

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LIFE, LOVE AND DEATH OF CERTAIN**FORMS**

by Robin Rose Graves

And just like that, she's gone.

Dead.

Myrtle bows her head. For weeks she had known Rowan was nearing her end. At the first sign of her flowers wilting, they thought the sickness would pass. A little more time in the sun, a little less water on her roots and she would perk up again. Then petals kept falling. New buds died before they ever blossomed. Reality became inevitable.

Rowan lies motionless on her soft bed of moss and soil, a sickly yellow. Her fingers crunch beneath Myrtle's.

They had discussed what would happen afterwards. Myrtle had been reluctant, trying to avoid the conversation for as long as she could until Rowan had asked the unthink-

able of her directly. Myrtle's leaves curl recalling her over-emotional response. *"I don't want this to happen at all."*

At least she had been with her, these final moments together. Sunlight filters in from the glass ceiling above. She hates its golden warmth, the way it insults her loss. Yet she can't bring herself to close the shutters. She can't move. As immobile as the husk before her who had once been her love.

Myrtle is still intertwined with Rowan's fingers when their privacy is interrupted. Pollen wafts into the room, the scent distinctly belonging to Forsythia. "It's time for you to leave," Forsythia says. Cold. Who would have thought she had just lost her propagate?

Myrtle can't bring herself to look at her. There was always something unnerving about Forsythia looking decades younger than Rowan. A reminder that her own Willow had long passed. She keeps her head bowed as

she leaves. Forsythia catches her face, turns it towards her. Her eyes flutter about the room, before landing on Forsythia's cold stare. "This is the way it must be." Her tone scolding, as if Myrtle were only a sprout. Myrtle's leaves shudder, guilt crawling through her stem like an infestation of bugs. Surely Rowan never mentioned her final request to Forsythia. She couldn't have known. Myrtle shrinks, ever so slightly. "Excuse me, I must speak with the gardener." Forsythia slides past Myrtle, leaving her alone with her shame. It is time to leave. The Gardner will prepare Rowan for her return to the ground.

A sharp silver glint catches her eye. The Gardner's tools waiting in a line. A pang of hurt as if their sharp edges pierced her - no one had expected Rowan to recover. She considers the tool's weight in her hand. The Gardner is the expert, but how difficult could it be? Forsythia is out of the way for the time being. She never cared for Rowan the way she

had, the way Willow cared for her. Myrtle stands over Rowan, turning the carved handle of the tool in hand. Willow passed when it was her time. Whether it was an error the Gardner made or a misconnection with the host, Willow hadn't come back right. Her mind had been as barren as a new sprout. *Gardeners don't make mistakes*, Myrtle remembers.

Her leaves shutter at the sight of Rowan's hollow eyes. She shouldn't be doing this. She isn't a gardener. She isn't Forsythia. But she can't let her go.

Myrtle looks for a spot that is still green. Rowan's chest looks freshest. She pierces the tool in, flinching, telling herself it cannot hurt Rowan. She carves slowly, carefully, until she has a single shard of Rowan in her palm, still oozing.

No going back now.

Myrtle is less careful as she jams the tool into her shoulder, just where her neck begins. Her leaves curl in pain, but she persists until a sizable slit is made. *"This could kill you,"* she recalls the warnings. *"You're too young."* She drops the tool and nestles the piece of Rowan into the hole in her shoulder. The spot aches, pain coming in pulses. Better to be together than alive and alone. She leaves what is left of Rowan behind.

Myrtle plucks the unwanted mushrooms growing from their bed. They lift from the soil without resistance. She hadn't kept as good care of their bed once Rowan moved to a separate one. Rowan worried sickness might leak into the soil, contaminating Myrtle in her sleep. Myrtle would've taken the risk, just to sleep near her again.

She leaves the job half-finished before collapsing into the divet of soil, compressed to the shape of her body. Tilling the dirt would

make it fluffy and most comfortable, but she could never find the energy. Nuzzling back into the arc of the imprint, she pretends the dirt hugs her back.

Elsewhere, the burial takes place in her absence. Her friends are there to see Rowan off. They take turns dropping worms into her hole, encouraging the decomposition. They whisper about Myrtle's unexpected absence.

Do they see the missing shard of flesh from Rowan's chest?

The wound in her shoulder is still fresh. She worries she didn't do it right. She is foolish. She should've left it to Forsythia. But she can still remember Willow's face, absent of Willow inside. The wound throbs and Myrtle pulls her body in a little tighter. No doubt by now Forsythia knows what has happened. Will they find her in bed like this? Hurting and unable to move? Let them catch her, deal

whatever punishment they see fit or else her mistake claims her life first.

Myrtle steps out between the trees and onto the beach. She always hated the beach. The water too salty. Sand too dry against her roots. She doesn't know what else would have drawn her here unless she wanted to torture herself.

Her roots brush against the first feet of sand, bathed in sunlight, warmth soaking into her roots. The sky is blue, like the freshest water or velvet soft petals. She even enjoys the crash of waves on the shore. She spins, her arms extending out from her sides. Wind tickles her fingers. For a moment, she can imagine someone brushing against them.

She can smell Rowan's pollen, a phantom scent. A being stands with her, hand touching her outstretched hand. Petals undulate in the wind. A spattering of shiny black eyes. She feels a rush of warmth before recog-

nizing the face to be none other than her own.

A mirror image she looks into.

As soon as the connection is made, the figment vanishes. Myrtle rouses from the dream. *Our first date*, she thinks (or so she likened it, even though their feelings had been secret from one another). Seeing Rowan full of life, twirling in the sunlight, it had made Myrtle forget all about the unpleasant sand.

"Why would you come if you don't even like the beach?" Rowan had asked.

"I just wanted to spend more time with you," Myrtle answers aloud, her hand absent-mindedly cupping the small splicing of Rowan. Rowan's pollen fills the room around her.

When she wakes to a room empty of company and threats, Myrtle forgets what has happened the night before. She rises from her dirt imprint, expecting the next room over to

be occupied by Rowan's dying form. Her absence calls reality to come rushing back. Myrtle wilts to the ground. The wound twitches in pain, almost healed but disturbed by the action. Her hand covers the spot, fingering the not yet sealed division between herself and the splice. In a single movement, she could dig the digit beneath and pull the splice from her body.

"Myrtle." Sharp, condescending. It could only be Forsythia calling to her from outside. "I know you're in there. We need to talk." One movement of her smallest appendage and the evidence would be gone. Disconnected, the splice will die - if it hadn't already. "Myrtle!" The voice rises in urgency. Myrtle curls in on herself, making herself smaller. She guards the splice, the last piece of Rowan. Somehow she knows that if she lets Forsythia inside, it will be taken from her.

She reaches for the crank on the wall, turning it over until the ceiling blossoms apart, allowing the entrance of potential rain. She is not looking for a shower, but reaches towards the absent barrier, only to come up short.

"Don't ignore me!" Forsythia reminds her of her presence, and the patience running out.

Myrtle grabs a burlap of soil, another filled with moss, and stacks one on the other on top of the bed. The moss gives under her weight, but still offers the needed boost. She grabs a spade to make up for the last inch, hooking it over the ledge of the window. She pulls her body up. The angle of the window aids gravity's call. She slides down its smooth surface.

"Myrtle! What are you doing!?" Myrtle hops off at the end, her roots steadying her after her fall. Forsythia follows the raucous seeking the source. Myrtle bolts.

"Stop!"

Defiantly, she bounds into the woods.

###

She runs a well-traveled path, one that would take her to other homes, the clustered center of the community and then the fields where the dead decompose. Myrtle doesn't hazard a backward glance to see if Forsythia pursues. Soon the rest will know what she has done. If not Forsythia, someone else will take the splice from her. The path veers around a corner to the left, but Myrtle stops. She can hear the rush of water ahead, concealed by thick forest, and a lingering smell of lavender buds on the wind. Lavender. She only notices because it was Rowan's favorite. She had decorated her bed with buds those final days. She steps into the overgrowth in pursuit of some now.

"Myrtle! Stop!" She hears the voice clear as the river. Her blossoms lift. She can hear Rowan's laughter, dancing like the sound of crickets. She turns around and suddenly the

path is gone. Stalks of grass sway in the wind, lightly tapping against her form. Through Rowan's eyes, she sees herself seated, a beetle pinched between her fingertips.

"The pest was bothering you! I can't allow that," the image of Myrtle grins wide. Hearing her voice not come from herself was disarming, but only for a moment.

"You can't do that!" Rowan's voice says. Myrtle's face opens wide. She feels Rowan's laughter rumble through her along with her own as she, too, laughs at the memory.

"I can, it's just not advised," the memory Myrtle says. She watches her past self drop the beetle into the opening of her face. The exoskeleton crunches. Rowan's laughter grows until it shifts into the sound of wind rustled branches and she's in the woods once more.

"I can, it's just not advised," Myrtle repeats, patting the splice. "I'll be okay." She can feel the ghost of the stomachache the beetle had given her as she presses further into the woods, guided by the sound of rushing water.

The tree-line parts for the river, allowing for an open violet sky wherein the sun grows tired. She follows alongside it in search of the fragrant flowers. The longer she walks, the more she wonders if the smell was a trick of her mind. The absence of sunlight for hours finally drains on her. Myrtle feels the occasional drop of river water. Refreshing and inviting. Myrtle reclines on the shoreline and dips her roots in.

She stares up at the night sky. Stars wink back at her. One of three moons has vanished from the sky, she observes, as she lets all eyes shut for a moment.

"What are you doing out in the rain?"

When she turns to look at Rowan, her leaves shudder. Her flowers are white, each with a deep purple spot. They curve in an exotic, delicate shape. She is nothing short of stunning. Seeing her now, so healthy and alive, feels like looking at her for the first time.

"You're all alone. Aren't you having fun?"

This is their first time meeting, Myrtle realizes. Or at least the memory of it.

"I needed a break," Myrtle answers. She looks down at her roots plunged into a puddle. Rain continues to patter against her back, rolling down her leaves and buds.

"You're getting wet," Rowan observes.

"I like a lot of water." She attempts to look at Rowan again. Her face is like staring into the sun, too intense to look directly into.

"And sometimes I prefer my own company."

Not everyone understood that and took it for a flaw on Myrtle's part. She startles, feeling Rowan's hand on her shoulder, squeezing ever so slightly.

"That's fine. I just wanted to check to see if you were alright." Rowan's voice is warm. Myrtle feels herself falling all over again. *"Should I go?"*

"No!" Myrtle shouts, disturbing nesting birds in the trees above. She watches them scatter in the clear blue sky above her. Water touches her on all sides. Myrtle realizes she is floating in the river, being ushered downstream. Her roots find the bottom, digging in to stop her progress. Once upright, the water laps at her ankles. With trees around her on both sides of the river, she could easily believe she is exactly where she was when she fell asleep, but knows that it's unlikely.

Myrtle returns to the shore. Excess water rolls off her waxy leaves. "I'm sorry! I know

you don't like too much water," Myrtle says.

She touches the splice, noting it has tripled in size from the night before. She holds her leaves a little higher. The first evidence that the splice is still alive.

She follows the river, against its stream. Her open leaves soak up the sunlight her open leaves, warming her throughout. Waking in such an unfamiliar place should leave her frightened, but all Myrtle's attention wanders from sight to sight. Small fish race through the water. Frogs burrow into the mud, their bauble eyes the only thing giving them away. Spiderwebs beaded with droplets of water shine like jewels. She spots a turtle, legs in the air waving for help. Myrtle slips her fingers beneath its shell and rights the creature. It continues its crawl without thanks.

"I forgot the taste of sun," Myrtle says. For months, the most sunlight she soaked up came through the glass roof of her room.

Most nights, she folded the shutters before the sun set. She couldn't bear to watch a day die. But she had missed so many hours of rich sunlight.

Her leaves fluff, spread wide to collect as much of it now. She plucks purple berries from a brush, chews on the occasional one as she continues her journey. It does nothing to nourish her, but the taste is novel.

The sun reaches its full height and then begins its descent once more. The first moon is faintly visible in the vibrant orange sky. Myrtle has run out of berries. The river shore looks no more familiar than it did miles back. She resigns to sit on the shore, allowing her roots a drink while the sky burns above her. She hates its fiery color. The color of autumn. The color of leaves dying.

"I wanted to go with you," Myrtle confesses. Her leaves curl. Creatures hide in the woods behind her, but no one is there to hear

her words. The confession that strips her bare.

"I did it in the easiest way I knew how. I just stopped taking care of myself." Slowly, color bleeds from the sky, the last sliver of light left is the fiercest of reds, reluctant as it takes the sun with it. "I know it wouldn't have made any difference. It would have been pointless. Meaningless. I just didn't want to be without you." She rests her hand on the splice and allows her eyes to shut. *Come back*, she thinks. She knows the visions are correlated. If only she could figure out how to control them.

Something touches her hand. Her eyes spring open. The sun is gone, leaving velvet black. An invisible line is traced along her hand. Suddenly, a spark of light. Gone once again. She holds her hand closer to her eyes. Another spark. *A firefly*, Myrtle realizes. It takes flight, joining a dozen other lofty lights. Myrtle watches them for a moment.

"I left all our friends behind. I wasn't even there with them for the burial," Myrtle says. Crickets chirp in response. No longer sounding like laughter, they merely fill the gaping silence. "They'll probably never see me again. The warnings came with good reason. This will kill us both." A lonely, gaping hole bores through Myrtle. Not even the sounds of surrounding life can convince her otherwise. She is alone.

Myrtle doesn't sleep. Her eyes remain open all night, watching the lonely moons cross above her, each in their own orbit, miles apart. Never to connect with another of their kind, only to observe from a distance.

When sunlight turns the sky pink, Myrtle rises and heads back towards the dry shore. She ambles between trees and through wild grass, not sure how far she is from the

nearest path. All she knows is she must keep moving forward.

Her leaves don't catch as much sun. Myrtle feels like she is wading through thick mud. Every step weighs her down, until gravity fully claims her and she rests facedown in the wildgrass. "What have I done?" she asks. Rowan's pollen wafts around her. "I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't have done this." The smell of Rowan is so strong, it chokes Myrtle. "Please stop." Her leaves curl. She can't feel the sun under the shade of the trees. "I'm sorry, Rowan. I should've listened to you. I should've been a better friend."

She finds the spade in her burlap. Her fingers wrap around its handle, holding the tool before her. Everything is overwhelmingly Rowan. "I'm sorry just - stop!" Myrtle digs the spade into her shoulder. Her leaves shudder in pain. She digs a diamond shape, before lifting the splice out of her.

The pollen is gone. The splice rolls to the ground, the size of a melon. The wind caresses through her leaves. Lavender, she smells.

Myrtle looks down at the freshly cut splice. Her shoulder stings from the hole she dug into herself, but besides that, she feels an immense weight lifted from her.

Myrtle cradles the splice as she ambles towards a clearing, golden sunlight casting heavenly rays onto lush grass. She picks a spot and digs her spade in, unearthing a new home for the splice. "Lots of sun, just like you like it," Myrtle speaks. Her leaves curl looking down at the lonely splice. "You'll be happy here," she says, though this time she isn't speaking to the splice. When the wind blows again and the scent of lavender reaches Myrtle, she feels the beckoning call. "I love you."

Myrtle follows the growing scent of lavender. She runs her fingers through the stalks of purple flowers. It's pointless to pick them now, with the splice gone.

"Myrtle!?"

She startles at the voice, her first instinct is to run, but her legs won't budge. A familiar figure wades through the overgrowth towards her. Briar.

"We've been looking for you everywhere!?! Where have you been?" Her hands rest on Myrtle's arms. Myrtle examines the point of contact. As if she can't quite believe she is really there. Briar's pollen surrounds her. The scent is a welcome change, like waking up from an uncomfortable dream to return to reality. She is really there. Briar's flowers stand high, all shiny black-eyes on her. She can feel her friend's love radiating towards her. Myrtle's leaves curl.

“Briar?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you...okay?” Myrtle asks. Briar laughs.

“I should be asking you that!” Her hand squeezes Myrtle’s. Myrtle squeezes back. She had noticed Briar’s eyes flickering to the gaping wound on her shoulder, yet she didn’t comment.

“I think I will be.”

The hole in her shoulder fills in over the course of the next few weeks, a bud growing in its place, almost ready to bloom. Myrtle follows the path until she is hit with the smell of lavender and the sound of rushing water. Then she leaves the path behind and travels into the wild.

She knows the way by heart now. A clearing with lots of sunlight, and not too

much water. Myrtle tends to it every day, though usually there isn’t much she needs to do. This is nature, after all.

Towering above wildgrass, swaying in the wind like a young tree. Wind rustles through new leaves and closed buds on the verge of opening. Young, but still just as Myrtle always remembered.

“Rowan.”

Her eyes flick open at the mention of her name. With roots buried deep into the soil, she is anchored to the spot. Rowan’s eyes look without focus, just like Willow’s had when she was ready to come out of the ground. Willow, the parent from which Myrtle had grown, died before her propagation, as nature dictated. She was spliced into her new life, though besides knowing her name was Willow, the plant that grew from that splice was not Myrtle’s parent. A blank slate against all plans.

"I'm ready," Myrtle says. "Are you?"

She starts at her roots, brushing away excess dirt. Rowan remains stoic as she works.

Myrtle is too afraid to use a tool, in case she accidentally knicks Rowan. Digging through the soil by hand takes careful, laborious work.

Rowan's delicate hair-like roots gently brush against her fingertips. Myrtle makes the work feel religious. Suddenly, there is pressure on her shoulders. She looks up. Rowan leans on her, her eyes still slightly out of focus.

"I won't let you fall," Myrtle promises.

Rowan gasps. She bends down, her hands joining Myrtle in her work. Myrtle can only look at her.

"Rowan?"

Rowan lifts her leg, yanking the thick root from the ground, no doubt sacrificing finer ones in the process. She pulls her other leg out with the same eagerness, before collaps-

ing in Myrtle's arms. Myrtle holds her. Mostly Rowan smells green, like fresh rain, her buds not developed enough yet to give off pollen.

"I'm ready," Rowan mutters. She looks up at Myrtle. Rowan or a blank mind, Myrtle can't immediately tell. "*Myrtle.*"

Myrtle's leaves curl, never before loving the sound of her own name so much. She squeezes Rowan tighter in her arms.

"It worked!"

"I knew it would. It just...had to be you," Rowan says. As her final request on her deathbed, she didn't want Forsythia to host her splice. The mystery of what went wrong during Willow's re-planting was something yet to be unearthed. Possibly it had something to do with the host. After all, now Rowan would always be carrying a piece of Myrtle with her after their time spent connected. "Thank you. I know it couldn't have been easy."

Their fingers intertwine. Myrtle doesn't ask whether Rowan has the strength to move on her own yet, not wanting to rush this moment. For now, all she wants is to hold her close. "It wasn't so bad," Myrtle whispers.

"I was with you for most of it," Rowan says. Myrtle's leaves lift ever so slightly. Rowan breathes a laugh. "Didn't you know?"

"I mean, I felt you with me just..." Myrtle looks down at Rowan curled in her lap. Her ocean of eyes peer back up at her. "I wasn't sure you'd remember."

"Of course I do."

It begins to rain, an occasional drop hitting Myrtle's back. She shields Rowan from the drizzle. The water feels nice as it traces along her back. "Now you'll know what to expect when it's your turn," Rowan says. She presses her hand to her cheek, holding it there. "Hopefully not soon."

The thought of death brings a pang of shock, but Myrtle allows it to pass through her. "Yes," she says. "And will you be there for me when it happens?"

"Of course," Rowan says. "Every time."

Moonchild

by Toshiya Kamei

Viewed from the dust-strewn lunar surface, Earth resembles a blue marble suspended in a dark void. Its breathtaking beauty never fails to evoke my hereditary nostalgia. Like Princess Kaguya whose heart ached for the moon, I long for our ancestral home.

As one of the first lunar babies born in the Moon Village, I was named after Chang'e, the Chinese moon goddess. At bedtime, my father used to read from a picture book. In its elaborate illustrations, Chang'e's milky skin was as luminous as moonlight. Her jet-black hair cascaded down to her hips. Her lips bloomed the shade of cherry blossoms.

The rebel that I was, though, I wore my hair short, ran around barefoot with boys, and refused to touch dolls. My pre-K classmates were confused about my gender nonconformity, and Bunny, the AI rabbit my father gifted me on my third birthday, was my only confidant.

My discomfort with my name grew with age. At five, I glared at the seven-inch ceramic statue of Chang'e on the hall table in our home. Anger took over. I grabbed the statue, smashed it against the floor, and told my father I wasn't a girl anymore. I've lived as a boy ever since.

My fondest memory from that time is watching a solar eclipse with my father. Still groggy from a nap, I trembled in the chilly evening air. I wore a sweatshirt and shorts, and my father told me to grab a coat, but I shook my head. The artificial atmosphere buzzed above us. We climbed the metal stairs that wrapped around our home. My heart

pounded as I gazed out at the sky through my handheld solar viewer. As Earth passed in front of the sun, I marveled as it cast a shadow on the moon. My father's hand was warm on my back, and I couldn't help smiling as a diamond ring appeared around Earth's sphere. I gasped and held Bunny tight.

"Bunny, do you think there are survivors on Earth?" I asked.

"I'm sure there are," Bunny said.

I imagined Earthlings looking up at that exact moment, viewing a lunar eclipse: Earth's shadow fell upon the lunar surface, causing the moon to dim and turn red.

The moon is a barren rock floating in space. Due to this lack of natural resources, humanity colonized the moon as a launching pad for other expeditions into space. In fact, the amount of lunar water found near its south pole can only support thousands, not millions, at a time. As far back as I can remember, the lunar population has been in constant

decline. The birth rate has hovered below one child per woman, and many have left for other parts of the galaxy.

The government fears further population losses will cause the Moon Village to collapse. The authorities now suppress pro-Earth sentiments, and an outright interplanetary travel ban may be in the cards. Patriotism means absolute loyalty, they say. Those whose allegiances are questioned are sent to re-education camps, and my father, an under-employed Earth historian, has been kept on a short leash. He tutors me in Earth geography, which is a banned subject in school. By the time I start the ninth grade, I feel like my father and I are the only ones who regard Earth with fondness.

On the weekends, I spend hours fixing the escape pod in our garage. The pod is barely big enough for two people, and it's only intended for short trips. Inside, a bewildering array of buttons, switches, and levers stretch-

es out across the control panel. The pod has been out of order since my parents migrated to the moon years ago. It took them forty minutes to traverse the 240,000 miles between Earth and the moon.

"I don't want you to stay cooped up in here." My father's voice fills the room. I crawl out from under the engine. My father stands with his arms crossed, glancing over the few tools and parts scattered on the floor.

I wipe grease and sweat from my forehead with my sleeve.

"Bàba, why did you and Māma leave Earth?" I ask, my mind still elsewhere. Every time I mention my dead mother, my father flinches. It saddens me that her face is a blur in my memory.

"Pandemics and other natural catastrophes swept through America and beyond." His right hand spins the globe on the dust-covered desk. The globe is a political landmine; it blurs the divide between home

and abroad, reminding us of the legacies of ever-shifting borders. Only a few generations ago, my forebears wrestled with geopolitical questions: Is America stolen land? Is Taiwan independent? What about Tibet? Xinjiang? Ukraine or the Ukraine? What's the political status of Crimea? All the same, the globe holds many memories for him. It once belonged to his mother, who worked as a travel agent. Despite its potential danger, he can't bring himself to throw it away.

"From a distance, Earth appears so serene," I say. "There's no trace of activity on its surface, let alone the disasters that forced many to flee."

"Alas, extreme weather conditions made it uninhabitable," he says. "Fire tornadoes raged, consuming thousands of acres every year, and rising seas swallowed coastal cities." He closes his eyes and shakes his head.

Even so, I dream of traveling to Earth. Possessed by a fierce yearning, I'm deter-

mined to make it a reality after I graduate from high school. There's no reason to doubt a few self-sustaining communities have survived. The decades-long absence of human activity must have allowed nature to renew itself. I'm reluctant to share my dream with my father, however. He's shouldered the burden of raising me alone since my mother's death, and I don't want to worry him. By the same token, I refrain from asking him if I can take the pod for a spin; I don't want to implicate him in case I get into trouble with the law. I test-drive it in his absence.

One afternoon, I come home from school and find the living room turned upside down. The damaged globe lies on the floor. The couch is overturned, and the coffee table is smashed to pieces. I swallow, and the blood drains from my face.

"Bàba," I call out, but no reply comes.

My heart in my throat, I call 911 via my wearables.

"911, what's your emergency?" a female operator answers.

"I think my father has been kidnapped," I blurt out, breathless.

"We'll send someone right away," she says. "Do you want me to stay on the line with you until help arrives?"

"No, but thank you."

As soon as I hang up, doubt seizes me. Can I trust the police? I pace back and forth like a caged animal until I step on a piece of paper. Bending, I see it's a list of some kind. I recognize my father's handwriting, but the scribbles confound me.

"It's a list of GPS coordinates," Bunny says.

Blue lights flash, and a police car screeches to a halt outside. A pair of robots with sleek metal shells mimicking female anatomy step out of the vehicle and come straight in, one of them morphing into a bespectacled social worker. I shove the paper in my pocket.

"Do you have relatives on the moon?"

the social worker asks, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

I shake my head.

The robots exchange glances and nod to each other.

"Pack your things," the social worker says. "We'll take you to the orphanage."

"Orphanage?" I stare at her, frozen in place, my pulse racing.

"We haven't got all day," she says in a chilly tone. "Hurry up."

I rush into the bathroom and wash my face.

"This can't be happening," I say, trembling. I stare at my reflection in the mirror.

Disheveled jet-black hair and pasty skin with dark circles under the eyes greet me.

I run to my bedroom. I gather my towel, toiletries, and some clean underwear and stuff them in Bunny.

The conversation I had with my father a week ago replays in my head. On the living room stereo, Teresa Teng sang "The Moon Represents My Heart," a romantic Mandarin ballad expressing nostalgia for the homeland. He turned up the volume to prevent eavesdropping.

"No one has gone into a re-education camp and come out alive," he said.

I fidgeted, trying to ignore the gnawing fear in the pit of my stomach.

"If something happens to me, I want you to go to Earth." He smiled, hiding his sadness over his face.

"But where?"

"Near the Mississippi," my father said, deep in thought. Resignation flashed across his face before it gave way to a bittersweet smile. "That's your best bet. Chances are some communities there have reverted back to an agrarian lifestyle."

"Let's go," Bunny says, bringing me back to reality. "I can disable their heat sensors for a few seconds."

I creep out of my bedroom window and open the garage door. After climbing inside the pod, I face the control panel, flip open the release button's case, and hit the red button. Green light illuminating, I smooth out my father's crumpled paper.

"Eeny, meeny, miney, moe," I chant and let my finger settle on one set of numbers. I type the string of numbers on the keypad at the bottom of the control panel and pray for the best.

"Hold tight," I tell Bunny, gritting my teeth. The horn wails as we zoom past traffic and fly across the intersection. Everyone else brakes hard. The police car is still in sight, but there are several cars between us. Bunny and I zip into the air, and the traffic below grows smaller until we're free from the moon's artifi-

cial gravity. The stars scatter across the sky by the millions, but we can't stop and stare.

"I hope Bàba is all right." My voice trembles with a mixture of longing and fear, and Bunny pats my shoulder in comfort. Longing is what Earth represents: love, peace, or even a new home. Fear, though, is also what Earth represents.

In less than an hour, we zip past the International Space Station and reach the Kármán line, which defines the edge of outer space. Earth, a hazy blue sphere, looms large on the monitor until it fills the screen. I reverse the throttle, ease us out of our dive, and Earth swims around until we fly parallel with it. I make sure my seat belt is secure.

The pod hits Earth's atmosphere hard, and we ricochet back into space. I scream as I try to right our spinning motion. When I fire the thrusters, dipping down again, we barrel through the atmosphere.

My chest tightens as I gaze at the crimson horizon. We speed up, and my stomach churns. We wobble like we're falling apart. The outside temperature gauge climbs, and the pod's interior heats up. The smell of burning fuel nauseates me.

A menacing expanse of water flows below me, the lights blink, and the collision alarm blares.

"Turn off the autopilot!" Bunny yells. I grab the controls and switch to manual, but the lights on the panels glare, and the pod disobeys me.

I hang on to the controls to steady our descent. I clench my molars so hard my jaw hurts. The console trembles like a loose tooth in its socket.

I let go of the controls. My head feels heavy. Bunny speaks, but her words make no sense. I'm about to pass out.

We scrape the tops of tall pines and ride through a forest. We mow down a swath

of branches, scraping the bottom of the hull on the ground.

I wake, ears ringing, to a view of overgrown magnolias. I assess the damage to the pod and discover the thrusters need repairs to become operational again.

I crawl out and gaze around with blurry vision. Colors flood my vision, overwhelming me. I draw in a lungful of air and hold it for a few seconds before blowing it out. I stretch my limbs like a newborn baby.

"This must be what the Garden of Eden looks like," I say, feeling a great sense of relief.

I fall to one knee and grimace as a headache assaults me.

"Take it easy," Bunny says. "You may have suffered a concussion."

Ignoring her warning, I push through the thick undergrowth. Dry leaves crunch beneath my feet, and a musty smell fills my nostrils. Songbirds chirp overhead.

Small apple-like fruits hang on the trees. My stomach pangs with hunger. I pluck one and take a bite.

A sour-sweet taste fills my mouth, and the juice runs down my chin. My headache returns with a vengeance, and I pass out again.

I wake to footsteps. I blink as my eyes adjust to the light, and a tanned woman in a buckskin skirt peers into my face. She smells like sunlight. Her lush dark hair is streaked with white, and tattoos spiral around her bare limbs like wisps of smoke. A pendant dangles alongside a satchel around her neck.

"Where am I?" I frown, fighting the headache.

"Cahokia, along the Mississippi River," she says.

"Sorry, the name doesn't ring a bell." I shake my head.

"Across from St. Louis," she adds.

"Home to the Illiniwek."

“What happened to the Gateway Arch?”

“It crumbled years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, not knowing what else to say.

She points to the red bow on her shoulder. “I’m Archer. My pronouns are she/her.”

“I’m Chang’e, and my pronouns are he/him.” I’m grateful for the chance to assert my gender identity.

“We saw you falling from the sky,” she says. “My mother, tribal chief, sent me to see if anyone needed help.”

Archer helps me sit up. She takes a bottle from the worn satchel and tells me to drink the contents. The sharp scents of ginger and peppermint tickle my nose.

“It’s anti-inflammatory,” she says. “It also helps relieve nausea.”

She props me against a tree whose bark scrapes my back, and I remain still until

the world stops spinning, holding Bunny to my chest.

“Can you walk?” Archer asks, gesturing to the pathless ground.

I don’t want to stay here overnight, so I stand with a groan. Bunny asks me if I’m okay, and I nod.

Archer’s eyes are wide when I glance at her.

“May I?” she asks before petting Bunny.

Bunny leans into her touch, and I smile. After everything today, it feels good to smile. If I think about my father, about what he’s going through, I may crack.

I have trouble moving through the uncultivated forest. The ground is a tangle of leaves, vines, and roots, and my head still pounds. My mouth feels woolen when I ask Archer about her community.

“The area is scarcely populated now,” she says. “Our enclave has emerged as an

agrarian society. We cultivate maize, soy beans, and pumpkins like our ancestors did in the pre-Columbian era. There are other communities like ours, and we prefer to remain decentralized.”

We pass vegetable gardens, and a group of thatched huts with mud walls comes into view. She leads me into the largest one.

“Mother, I found him,” she says.

“Welcome,” her mother says. “The boy who fell from the sky.” She touches my head to see if it’s swollen. “He needs to rest,” she tells Archer. “For the first few nights, I want you to accompany him and wake him every few hours.”

A young boy brings food and drinks, and the three of us sit around a low table.

“I’m an Ikoneta,” Archer says. “What that means is that I was born a boy.” Her smile sets me at ease. She puts roasted squash in her mouth and washes it down with a maple soda. “Per the Illini tradition, those of

us who show feminine traits from early ages are raised as girls.”

“That’s great,” I say, relieved that the Illiniwek embrace gender diversity. “I wish my high school was less gender essentialist. I still have to fight for my right to use the restroom.”

The squash tastes like carrot and melts in my mouth.

After the meal, Archer gives me a tour of the village. A few dozen houses are organized in rows around a central plaza. Children run around in the mud, shrieking and playing tag.

“May I?” I reach out and hold her pendant in my palm. It’s a black onyx disk with an eclipse carved into its surface. “It’s beautiful.”

I recall the solar eclipse I saw on the moon. I wonder if I’ll be able to see one here.

She removes her pendant and places it around my neck.

“Thank you,” I say, mesmerized by the onyx.

At night, a near full moon rises high and bathes us in its pale light. I recite under my breath Li Bai’s poem “Quiet Night Thought,” which my father taught me. Its poetic voice gazes at the bright moon and recalls its home. I think of my father, and tears well up. Archer notices my glistening eyes and holds me tight in her arms. Tears fall down my cheeks, and the salt burns my skin.

Archer slips into bed next to me, close enough for me to feel her warmth. Her steady breathing fills me with comfort.

After a few hours, she shakes me awake. A lamp flickers on the night table.

She rests her head in my chest, listening to my heartbeat. I tell Archer about my monotonous lunar life. She raises her head and looks into my eyes. Being so close to her makes my stomach flutter.

She teaches me how to pray in her ancestral language, which she says reaches straight to the Great Spirit. She tells me the Algonquin myth about the moon. The medicine woman travels to the moon to learn the world’s secret: when it will end. To this day, no answer has come to her, so she still lives alone on the moon. On a full moon night, she can be seen weaving a headband.

“I tell you what,” Archer says. “Why don’t you teach me how to fly your machine? In return, I’ll teach you archery.”

I can’t go back to sleep, drowning in thought. We stay up all night talking. To my relief, none of the concussion symptoms return.

In the morning, Archer’s mother grumbles that she kept me awake.

“I’ve never had so much fun talking to someone,” I say, smiling.

#

After remaining headache free for a week, I participate in the Illini's chores, helping to gather nuts, berries, and fruit. I refrain from hunting, however. Despite my private lessons from Archer, I prove to be horrible at archery. Besides, I have no heart for killing animals.

In our spare time, I teach Archer how to drive the pod. She soon gets the hang of it. We drift above the undergrowth, but Earth's gravity holds us grounded.

"The pod needs repairs to fly into the sky again," I say.

She remains silent, but a look of concern flashes across her face.

Regardless, Archer and I are inseparable, spending all our days and nights together. The whole tribe welcomes me with open arms, except for one young man who glares at us like a jealous lover. He goes by Chey. He's a six-foot-three, 250-pound giant. Tattoos jag on his tanned limbs. I share my concern with

Archer, but she waves it away, saying there's nothing between them.

The following morning, Chey approaches me while I'm watering our garden.

"I challenge you to a wrestling match," he says, referring to one of the events on Harvest Feast Day next week.

One of the old adages my father inherited from his elders comes to mind: In the countryside, do as the country folk do.

"Sure," I say, willing to embrace the local culture. I extend my hand and he shakes it, then tightens his grip until it hurts.

To my relief, he lets go of my hand. But that relief is short-lived when he speaks. "The winner gets Archer."

"Excuse me?" I shoo away a honeybee, and it buzzes around Chey. He doesn't even blink.

He walks away with a sneer.

At night, Archer and I lie in bed, listening to each other's breathing. Moonlight spills

through the gaps in the thatched roof,
painting the interior with its gleaming brush.

“I don’t know how to wrestle,” I say.

“Let alone a mountain of a man.”

“Don’t worry. It’s easy.” She pulls me
to my feet. “I’ll teach you.”

We stand face to face, one hand grasping the other’s collar, the other hand clasping the opponent’s elbow. She tugs me forward. I oblige. She laces her fingers through mine as she draws me near. I move, finding a rhythm to match hers. She tightens her grip as we move together. My heart pounds, my nipples harden, and warmth spreads between my legs. We collapse on the bed in a tangle of limbs.

“May I kiss you?” she whispers as she rolls on top of me. Our mouths seek each other, the kiss is hot and deep. I nibble and bite her lower lip. When she whimpers, I slip my tongue into her mouth.

Every night, our practice ends in love-making. I lie next to her in the afterglow, feeling optimistic about my upcoming wrestling bout.

#

The full moon announces the Harvest Feast Day, and the whole tribe gathers in the plaza to watch our match. Archer draws a large chalk circle on the ground. My heart races, and Chey and I shoot hostile glances at each other as we step into the makeshift ring. It pains me that I’m the first to avert my gaze.

Cheers burst from the crowd as we grapple and shove, trying to throw each other. He’s a lot bigger than Archer, though, and as we sweat, a lot harder to hold onto. My energy flags, and when I meet Chey’s gaze, the certain victory flashes there. I gasp when he pins me beneath him. He’s crushing the air out of me, and I try to kick, to punch, but his weight is absolute. Black dots cloud my vision, and

the shouts of the throng sound like they're being sucked into a funnel.

Chey's breath gags me. His awful grin almost brushes against my skin. I only hope Archer isn't too disappointed in me as the world turns black.

I wake to cheers. Blinking, I gaze toward the ring. Archer stands over Chey, who lies before her, defeated. She raises her fist in triumph, and I pass out again.

When the night comes, we celebrate Archer's victory by making love.

The full moon looms large in the sky, and I feel homesick.

"I want to go back to the moon."

"Why?" Archer frowns. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing to go back to. I admire your father for sacrificing himself to save you."

I say nothing.

"Is that why you spend so much time fixing the pod?" she says.

I look down, feeling conflicted.

The following day, Bunny and I go back to the forest to continue repairing the pod.

Archer's question from the night before bounces around in my head. What am I doing here? I love Archer, but my father is still on the moon. I swallow hard as I duck beneath a branch. Despite Archer's admiration for my father's sacrifice, it's too early to give him up for dead.

Grabbing a wrench from the pod's emergency repair kit, I slide under the chassis like I used to back home. Bunny and I work in silence for the great part of the afternoon as I think.

"I have bad news," Bunny says as I test electrical circuits. No longer beneath the pod, I press the red button on the control panel and it glows green. I can't help my smile. The pod is fully operational again. We should be able to accelerate.

"Bad news? The pod is back, Bunny!"

When Bunny doesn't answer, though, my smile fails.

"The communication between the lunar government and the ISS has recently spiked." Her voice is strained.

"What does that mean? What are they up to?"

"They've launched a gravity tractor. They plan to deflect the Jade Emperor toward Earth and crash it against North America," she says in an ominous tone.

"The Jade Emperor?" The name temporarily draws a blank. "Why?"

"When the dust settles, they come down here to harvest the metals. It's worth \$10 quintillion."

Now, I recall it's a house-sized asteroid. Named after the ruler of Heaven in Chinese mythology, it has high concentrations of rare metals: gold, platinum, and iridium. The Chinese deity is said to judge everyone by

their conduct and punish or reward them accordingly.

"Greedy bastards." I click my tongue.

"What will happen when the asteroid impacts?"

"According to my calculation, it'll wipe out the whole continent."

We hurry home. I find Archer's mother in her kitchen. Sounding more panicked than I'd like to be, I tell her about Bunny's warning. The lunar government's plan. The Jade Emperor. Archer enters the house and stands against the wall with her arms crossed. She looks pained.

"We need to evacuate as soon as possible," I say.

"But this is our home," Archer's mother says. "We're not going anywhere."

I reach for Archer's hand and squeeze it, needing the comfort.

“According to a Hopi legend, Rabbit shot the sun with his arrow. Perhaps my daughter will shoot down the space rock.”

“With all due respect, ma’am, that’s impossible.” I glance toward Archer, silently asking for help.

Archer keeps quiet.

“I can’t stay here,” I say, shaking my head, “and watch the Jade Emperor destroy our home.”

I step out of the house, feeling hollow. Children laugh somewhere in the distance. I turn to Archer, and we kiss. I’m hoping her touch will help me feel less desperate, but something inside me snaps. It’s like a dam in my heart has broken. Not wanting her to see my tears, I push Archer away. A gentle breeze touches my wet cheeks as birds fly by.

“It’ll be okay, Chang’e. The spirits will surely help us.” She tries to smile, but I look away.

“We’ll need more than the spirits.” I take a step back. My mind whirls, and what I’m thinking has me feeling sick.

Archer frowns. “Where are you going? Chang’e?”

“The pod. I have to get to the pod. I can fly it. I can save everyone. I’m sorry, Archer. I love you.”

I gaze around the village one last time before sprinting toward the forest. The pod. It’s a suicide mission, but if I can slam the pod into the gravity tractor, then...

Tongue thick in my mouth, I race through the forest. I’m doing this for her. For them. Hell, for my father.

I trip on a root and bash my shoulder into a tree. Crying, I stand and stare at the blue sky through the gaps in the canopy.

“Bunny, what do you think it feels like to die?”

But before Bunny can answer, the pod comes into view. At first, I doubt my eyes,

wondering if I'm hallucinating. What I'm seeing can't be real. I shudder as the pod floats in the air. I follow it with my eyes as it zips through the sky. I run and scream Archer's name, but the wind snatches away my voice. I collapse to the ground, hugging my knees to my chest and shaking.

In my mind's eye, a silent explosion erupts as Archer collides the pod into the Jade Emperor. Debris flies into space. A crater appears in the middle of the asteroid, and loose chips that have fallen off the asteroid's outer layer float in space.

Deflected from its intended course, the asteroid spirals through the atmosphere like a burning mountain. Spewing dust that blocks the sunlight, it strikes the Pacific Ocean and blasts out a crater thousands of feet deep and miles wide. A few hours after the impact, an enormous tsunami swallows the coasts of Hawaii, Canada, and California. In the long run, more rain-inducing nuclei form in the at-

mosphere, increasing rainfall and harming our crop production. Despite all this, our small enclave ekes out a living.

After six months, my journey through grief continues. It still feels as if everything happened yesterday.

It's dark when I wake to birds chirping outside. The white light seeps through the gaps in the roof. I rise from my side of the bed, take a deep breath, and shuffle through my morning routine.

Without Archer, time crawls by like a lethargic earthworm. I adjust my black armband which I wear in her memory. Earth turns, seasons change, but Archer stays on my mind.

At night, the full moon rises again. Earth's shadow falls over the moon and darkens it, causing a lunar eclipse. The temperature drops, and I feel a feathery touch on my cheek. I lift my hand, but I find nothing.

"It that you, Archer?"

No answer comes, only silence.

“Is my father viewing a solar eclipse on the moon right now?” I ask as I touch the onyx pendant around my neck, running my hands across the surface.

“Tell him I miss him,” I say, receiving no reply.

I pray for my father, whispering the litany Archer taught me. I step into my Illini mother’s room, kneel beside her, and join her prayer.

Titan Stumbled

by T J Wilkinson

The child was Nameless, bred under the shadows of Gia to Omen: The Church of Dirt and Ash. His blue eyes were speckled with gold, and every morning when they peered out into the Bay of Bread, they welled, raging at the sight of Gia's monstrous legs (which protruded like mountains from the sea, fathoms offshore). So large were they, so near they seemed, that, in his childhood, he imagined wading into the tides and grabbing on,

getting carried away as the giant strolled off into an endless sea. This was fantasy, he knew - Gia never moved, not as long as he had lived. Thoughts like these were quickly snuffed out; every morning sermon kindled contempt, which, as the years turned, blossomed into simple hatred. So went the rearing of all Nameless. By the time they could throw spears, each was oathbound to slay the giant or die trying.

This would be their gift to the world.

At dawn when the village stirred, Gia loomed, still and silent as ever, blocking every sunrise and blotting every horizon. A salty haze lingered on the bay. The youngest boys shivered under their mothers' coats while The Nameless reaffirmed their vows, etching their flesh with whalebone and dotting their faces with chasmbloom dyes. Their chants, so proclaimed the priestess, should rouse the titan, had it ears with which to hear. As it hadn't (nor had it ever), Gia therefore stood in defi-

ance of their prayer - a monument to a heresy so severe that it united the isles. The child chanted along, fresh etchings dripping red, passion burning in his eyes. Around his heaving chest, a woman fastened a whalebone dagger, through which coursed *Botulin*, the cleverest of poisons formulated by Omen priestesses. A single drop was said to have felled Ka'nik, the massive warwhale of old.

Twenty were chosen to climb. They were fed well in the weeks leading up to the journey, prayed and fawned over, draped with flowers, and made to sip pungent teas that granted strange visions. By the time that their pirogues launched, the child was as full and plump as he had ever been. He prayed to the cosmos, as he did daily, that he would be the one to deliver the killing blow, the one to prevent the cataclysm guaranteed should Gia ever wake and decide to take but a single step. This was the honor aspired to by all Nameless: to be named Savior in death.

Their morning prayers had paid off, it seemed, as the calm seas ushered the young company gently to the ankles of Gia. There, at Titan's Base, their ascent began. On the third day, the child first roused the courage to look down, at which time he was petrified by the sight of his village appearing as little more than a faint speck. What was more, the isles, so vast and unexplored by the child in youth, were revealed to him to be but pitiful heaps of dirt, all but sinking into the world. There he first considered escaping; slipping away; climbing around the other side of the leg so far that the others would dare not follow, lest they risk their progress. There he could wait until the deed was done, and then to starve.

In the first week, the most frail among them had fallen. One clung to the legside, refusing to advance, so he was cut down. The following day another two jumped willingly into the sea. The second week claimed two more as a cruel wind hammered them from all

sides, shortly sweeping them away. The rains took another, as the legside grew slippery, and in time rations dwindled scarce such that another pair opted to take the plunge as well. Twelve remained, including the child.

The climb had been on a month or more when first the flag was spotted. A rest was in order, the survivors decided, as venturing any further that evening would carry them higher than any had come before. There were rites to be taken, prayers to be said. Tomorrow promised to be the day. The child, whose fingers were naught but bone and whose lips cracked and bled, clang to his hammock, surveying the hollow faces of the few companions that remained. Were they as fearful as he? With his free hand, the child grasped at the whalebone dagger - a nameless thing, like him. He adored it, having never related more to an object, such that he took to calling it *Peench*.

The flag signaled a tear in Gia's strides, a hope which countless Nameless died to discover. After generations beyond number, the child and his troupe would be the first to glimpse the titan's flesh. There they would strike - there he and Peench would save the world. The child had no tears left to cry, he had no will left but to climb.

At first light the child again attempted to peer down. No longer could he spot his village, nor the isles on which he was raised. There was only the leg of Gia, and all around clouds, then sea. At horizon's edge he spied a landmass, larger than he'd ever seen and more distant than he knew a thing could be. Before him lied the world and he wondered, for perhaps the first time, exactly what it was that kept Gia so content, so still.

The sistrum sounded. It was time.

The remaining Nameless struck their hammocks for the final time; their use ex-

pired, they fluttered down and away. The skies were clear, the wind nervously calm.

An older boy, sunbaked and weary, sought to claim glory for his own - he cried out and tore up the final leg of their ascent, the first to venture beyond the flag. The rest gave chase, their war cries sending nesting birds scurrying. They neared the tear, no wider than a saucer through which peeked the pale flesh of a colossus, and as they did the gap between them closed. Arriving as more or less a huddle, they raced to free their daggers. Peench was the first to loose; the child reared back to strike when the sunburnt boy's elbow careened into his nose.

The child fell.

He fell, and he fell, and he fell.

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As he did, he watched his companions claw at each other for the honor of being named. When at last, one or the other struck true, the world itself began to shake. An impossibly distant cry rang out, and as if a dagger pierced the drums of the child's ears, all ceased to sound. There was agony, but the immediate, searing silence froze his flailing limbs in terror. Below him, the isles he had loved so dearly were gone, erased when Gia's nearest leg shifted only slightly. The child watched, horrified, as the opposite leg first rose then stepped, relieving the large part of a hemisphere from existence. He knew then what he had done. The dust, the explosive chaos: all so sudden; the force of it all incomprehensible. The eastern leg stirred again as titan stumbled, and as it struck the child he perished, nameless, and as it stepped, so too perished the world.

Supply Chains

by Adrian Kresank

Pangilinan was taking her first sip of coffee when the client walked in. He was tall, with hazel eyes sitting neatly to the sides of his hawklike nose. He was wearing a hoodie and shorts, which contrasted strangely with his leather shoes and golden watch.

"I'm looking for Coswan Pan-gilly-nahn," he said.

"You're looking at her."

"Oh. Uh, nice to meet you," he said, holding out his hand. "Did I say your name right?"

"Don't worry, you got it." People in the Philippines would probably pronounce it differently, but her family had been American for six generations. "What can I do for you?"

He sat down and told his story. He was Eddie Roxas, the man in charge of medical acquisition for the Bureau of Prisons. There had been a few high-profile escapes lately. The

investigators suspected the power-dampening collars failed. He'd acquired the collars.

"The board's breathing down my neck. I could fire one of my guys to give them a scapegoat, but it's still my job on the line if another escape happens."

Once upon a time, when she was an angry young idealist, she would have seen a man like him in a situation like this and told him to solve his own problems. But now she was older, and tired, and thinking about how the retainer fee would pay her rent for the month.

She asked if he had any suspicions of his own.

"I think they've been sabotaged," he said. "The Guardians or the Amp Rebellion or one of those college protests. I need you to find some evidence of that."

"I can investigate, but I can't promise you'll like what I find. Maybe your prisoners

just figured out how to break them. Maybe some software update made them glitch out.”

“Fine.”

Pangilinan didn't give any more disclaimers; she understood what the job was, and she was willing to do it. Her client left. The first payment went through. She headed down to Ozzy Alley.

The street was the border between the fashionable side of the city and the people who worked for a living. It had an art gallery next to a wine store. Their benches were designed with holes in the middle so the poor couldn't sleep on them.

Pangilinan entered the alley's coffee shop. She scanned the room and found her target.

Alicia de Moura sat by the wall, a mug and a laptop in front of her. She was a stylish woman with long brown hair and thick eyelashes. Pangilinan had often run into her before. Those fights usually ended with one or

the other lying in the dust. With some luck, this wouldn't end like that. All there was left was to talk to her.

“Hello there.”

And — there it was. The smell of ozone. The slight buzz in the air. Alicia's powers, freezing time for everyone around her. The only people who'd be able to resist it were speedsters or fellow time-shifters.

Pangilinan pulled out a chair and sat down. “What do you know about power dampeners?”

“The personal-use ones are cute, but the market is limited. Nobody's buying them for *themselves*. If I was—”

“The state-issued ones. The ones the Bureau of Prisons uses.”

“Ah, government supply. Now that's an enterprise.” She took a sip of her drink. “If you're thinking of the same thing I'm thinking of, they're called Linnets. Trademarked and everything. Now that's a great patent to get

your hands on. *Everyone's* afraid of the big bad supers. If you've got a product that'll bring them down to normal, you can sell it at any price you want."

"I suppose that if you had a way to attack the dampeners, you could also sell that for any price you wanted?"

Instead of answering, Alicia leaned back. She put a hand to her mouth, and Pangilinan was struck with the memory of her rascal cousins doing the same as children. *Why are you hiding a smile from me? You have to know I can tell.*

After a moment, Alicia shook her head. "Maybe somebody would, but not me. Let's just say it's in my best interest for institutions to keep buying the Linnets."

She waved her hand. The people around them slowly began to return to motion. They creaked like mechanical dolls, following the steps they had begun before the conversation. Then they were back to normal.

None of them seemed like they'd noticed the lost time.

"If it were up to me, I'd check those Amp Rebellion kids. You know how they are."

Alicia smiled visibly this time, then pointedly turned her gaze back to her laptop.

Pangilinan left. Someone had taped up the hole on the bench outside.

Her next stop was the factory.

It stood just outside the city limits. On the outside, it looked like any other industrial building: grey and square.

Inside, she was met by a gray-haired man in a blue jumpsuit. "Mr. Roxas told us you'd be coming."

He walked her through the production process. Most of the manufacturing was done overseas. The foreign factories engineered it in two halves; this factory put them together and added the locking mechanism.

Pangilinan wasn't an engineer. Her goal here was to look over the workers: see

who worked on what parts, then get their names for further investigation. If she was lucky, her presence would spark someone into action.

She wasn't lucky. After an hour walking around, she hadn't found any signs of sabotage. She went to the end of the production line and picked up one of the collars. She fiddled with it, halfheartedly attempting to pull it apart. She imagined what it would be like to wear one – or worse, have one forced on her.

If she had to, how would she try to break it? The hinge seemed the weakest point: lots of places to put pressure there. Her strength was above average, but she couldn't break it.

She moved to the lock.

That part was metal, but a different kind than the rest of the collar. There was a small keyhole. It would take a –

It cracked.

It wasn't a complete crack, or even a large one. Just a hairline fracture, something a guard wouldn't notice. Only the person wearing it would be able to tell, if they ran their fingertips across it.

She twisted it, making sure to use a motion that she'd be able to do if she were wearing it. The lock snapped open.

Well, there's your problem.

She found the man who'd welcomed her at the beginning and asked, "Why are the locks made of different materials than the rest of the collars?"

He shrugged. "Cheaper, probably."

"I see." At least it was an answer.

Tomorrow she'd call the client and update him. She knew where he would go from here. Sabotage meant a saboteur, someone or someones who had moral problems with the devices. Moral stances were so disruptive.

Money, though. People like him understood money. He understood cost-cutting

measures. He would take his knowledge to the suppliers, and they would understand that they had to pay him a little extra to ensure they had the city's future business.

As she walked back to her car, she pulled out her phone and looked up the factory's business registration. It was owned by a company she recognized – part of Alicia's empire.

Yeah, this would come up in their next fight.

Pleasant Dreams, Howard

by Larry Clark

"Be careful kids!" Howard shouted at several children running helter-skelter along this beach. With a clear blue sky above, and jewels of summer sun glittering in frothy waves, he wiggled his small frame onto a green lounge chair while carefully tilting a large umbrella to shade his feet. Dressed in sandals, red walking shorts, and a very colorful shirt and cap, Howard personified a tourist on holiday.

"Ah, the smell of sea and warmth of this day are truly marr-rvell-ous," he thought with a melodramatic waving of hands above his head.

On this evening, Howard Eugene Pendercraft's apartment was lighted by an array of colorful blinking lights emanating from a small console on a nearby table. A V-mask covering his eyes glowed an eerie aquamarine as his SensorLounge chair radiated enough warmth to simulate a hot summer day. Embedded speakers left and right provided sounds of sea gulls and breaking waves while small vents puffed a salty breeze toward his face. Howard's lips formed a sly smile as he saw a skimpy clad woman reach down to collect sea-shells.

His special lounge chair came with the apartment, which allowed him a once-a-week event — plugged-in and turned-on to "Vacation World." Last week he visited ancient Mayan temples. Today, Howard was on his favorite beach at Ocracoke Island.

As he yawned and stretched, the console produced a rather pleasant series of beeps. His eyes witnessed a blurring ocean scene which slow-

ly faded from red to green to blue — and then — darkness while those beeps rose to a higher pitch and stopped. This evening's program signed-off at a legally prescribed limit of two hours, now blocked six days. Current time-date: 19:40 p.m. November 17, 2146.

Howard moved one leg then his other while peeling the V-mask away to reveal a rather handsome head topped with frizzy white hair. A mixed assortment of facial wrinkles and crows feet only hinted at his advanced years while large, gray-blue eyes expressed a youthful vigor not found in others half his age. The SensorLounge hummed and bumped as he pressed the UP button.

Standing on slightly shaky legs, Howard rubbed his face with both hands while continuing to smell salty air and hear ocean roar in his head. Sometimes he felt these "vacations" lasted much longer than the timer indicated. While both physically relaxing and mentally invigorating, at this moment he felt hunger. Howard shuffled toward his kitchenette for a pre-bedtime snack.

* * *

The lab door at Maxwell Institute closed with a faint hiss behind Dr. George Spitz, currently a Senior Associate for Project III. He walked across a squeaky clean floor to stand behind a woman seated before an array of switches and multiple monitors. Except for two chairs, a small table with coffee pot, and a white writing board covering one wall, this room was completely filled floor to ceiling with electronic gadgetry.

Recruited by Maxwell Institute two years earlier from a local university, George Spitz accepted their offer solely on the reputation of this woman now seated in front of him — surprising himself as Maxwell Institute shared very few details about her current research. This was his first visit to what is commonly known in-house as "Central Lab" — or at other times "the office" of Project III Director, Dr. Louanne Parker — who neither spoke nor acknowledged his arrival as her fingers adjusted dials and moved rapidly across a keyboard.

Without looking to George, she asked, "What do Howard's most recent files tell us about his mental and behavior status?"

George had searched through a massive data bank maintained on an advanced Gershenfeld super-quantum computer, nicknamed “Mojo” — a technological wonder located directly below Central Lab.

He raised a small tablet to eye level, flipped several pages and read: “Delta and Theta neurological waves nominal. Alpha and Gamma variable within acceptable range. Pendercraft's aberrant motor and sensory functions remain within acceptable limits; however, many of his oldest video and audio records are blurred and distorted. No mental dysfunctions detected. Mr. Pendercraft is exhibiting superb cognitive response within current parameters. Overall, he functions as others in their eighties.”

George now looked toward Dr. Parker for a reply — and waited. His outward appearance in no way revealed his genius with advanced degrees in gerontology, biostatistics, and psychology; however, his demeanor epitomized someone much older than his thirty-six years — further enhanced by a short, well groomed beard, high forehead, and protruding mid-section. The black-framed

glasses, seated low onto a short nose, added more years.

So far, George had been methodically introduced, on a need-to-know bases, to the increasingly complex goals of Project III's multi-level, multi-decades research into human longevity — and Maxwell Institute's often times amazing geriatric devices and medical accomplishments. He had yet to meet Howard Eugene Pendercraft.

Within minutes Dr. Parker rose from her chair to collect a printout from the opposite wall. She was tall, rather homey in appearance with no makeup and twice George's age. Her hazel-brown complexion and dark hair contrasted sharply with a white, short-sleeved lab jacket. Following retirement from the National Institute of Mental Health a decade earlier, she was persuaded to accept this position at Maxwell. Although she distinguished herself many times among colleagues at work, Dr. Parker had yet to publish any conclusive research on her work at Project III.

Turning to face George, Louanne said in a rather flat monotone, "Let's run a three months

comparative gamma and alpha on Mr. Pendercraft.”

* * *

On the following day, while at his kitchen counter, Howard carefully constructed his favorite lunch — a turkey sandwich with cheese and lots of mayo on pumpernickel. The microwave signaled hot onion soup while a small espresso pot bubbled its thick brew with a rush of steam.

"Now, what shall I do on this Sunday afternoon?" he wondered while seated on a bar stool. His first thought, of course, was of widow Ramirez next door but she was out of town visiting relatives.

Howard enjoyed her unrelenting optimism along with her one-sided conversations about volunteer work with kindergarten children — and then her reports on community gossip. While their relationship was not exactly platonic, they avoided any public appearance of a real romance. His age secret did not permit a long term relationship, which also avoided the pain of losing, once again, someone he loved.

Howard placed dish, bowl, and cup into a washer, pushed START, but then realized a buzz in his ears was at his back door.

"Who's here this time of day?"

An opened door revealed a tall, grinning, burley man who shouted, "Hi, you old coot. What are you up to? Having an early party with a bunch of wild women?"

They laughed as Big Ben Gardner filled this small apartment, shaking Howard's hand and patting him on his back. Big Ben was in his early eighties — and looked it. This was Howard's fishing pal, best buddy, and "coach." Ben's career as a football linebacker, and later coach, resulted in him constantly encouraging Howard to exercise. He enjoyed saying "exercise is more important for us over seventy than those youngsters under thirty."

Howard understood this dictum better than Ben knew. His scheduled weekly physicals kept him enrolled in a special senior research project at Maxwell Institute — and paid all his bills.

"Hey! Have you done your walking today?" Ben asked loudly.

"No," Howard replied a bit sheepishly, "but I worked my tail off at the antique shop all week. Time for inventory."

"Well, let's go down to the mall, walk around a bit and get frozen yogurt. This fresh air will do us good and you'll sleep better." Ben was already moving outside, knowing his buddy would be close behind.

Howard grabbed a jacket and cap from a chair and fell into step with Ben, who began telling the sport statistics from last night's games.

As a cool, fall breeze brushed Howard's face, he felt a chill down his spine and sensed a deep, inner feeling of melancholy. "*Somebody walked across my grave,*" he thought with a silent chuckle.

* * *

Louanne moved around Central Lab with hands expertly flipping switches and turning dials but her thoughts were clearly elsewhere. It was near check-out time and she needed to accomplish one more task today — Dr. George Spitz. His tenure had been productive, and his work commendable. All staff assessments were highly com-

plimentary, and yet, she needed to understand his deeper motives in joining Maxwell. Her need at this moment was to determine if George had the where-with-all to replace her as director.

She sat in a chair facing George, "Your work here has been outstanding but what really prompted to you to join the Institute?"

"Huh?" was George's quick reply. This question caught him off guard. He was casually seated at their coffee table reviewing charts.

"Why did you really want to join Maxwell?"

Somewhat confused George responded, "Do you want my scientific-based, scholarly answer or a gut-level one?"

Louanne smiled broadly as she leaned forward to look into his eyes. "I heard your first during initial interviews. What is your real one?"

George shifted a bit on the chair before answering, "Well, let's see. I was born. . .no. . .ah. . .that's a long version." He faked a stammer to follow with a series of short, sucking sounds that simulated laughter.

Louanne did laugh, somewhat.

"No, seriously now," George began, "I've followed your research since I was an undergrad student. In fact, my first term paper was based on your, 'Living Forever' concepts. As you might guess, at that age, I took a pretty cynical view of Otto Maxwell's early 22nd century ideas to fund decades of longevity research."

George paused to examine her expression before adding, "And here I quote myself verbatim, 'Maxwell will never discover Ponce de Leon's fabled fountain of youth'"

He now leaned forward to continue. "But much earlier, as a child in fact, I clearly remember two of my grandparents lived into their late nineties. Great-grandma Spitz lived to be 105. What fascinated me then, and still does, is remembering her walking, talking, and full of vigor until the day she died.

"However, great-aunt Janie was silent in bed for many years until age ninety-four when her body eventually failed. Those youthful experiences, I believe, led me into network neuroscience and then gerontology to puzzle over why aging and dying may vary so greatly. . . inheritance, ge-

nes, or something else? It was those memories that left me with questions. Why does a body and brain not age at a similar rate? Why did aunt Janie's brain diminish before her body died. . .but not grandma Spitz? We still do not have any clear answers."

George now stood to walk about. "What good is it to extend life with reconstituted organs from stem cells, bio-mechanical devices, and a dozen other things we do, if eventually, we have a dying brain with cognitive impairments? How did this improve a person's life? Longevity research must have a joint, first priority goal for both mental and biological longevity. Maxwell Institute seems to have this dual mission."

He turned to look for her reaction. George was being perfectly candid and hoped his remarks did not end a career with Maxwell Institute.

"I think," Louanne answered slowly, as if carefully selecting her words, "our professional ethics require us to always recommend to each patient, and each research client, the very best treatment he or she knows to be available to sustain a productive life. A basic assumption being, if

all other biological systems are functioning properly, a brain. . .and that person's mind. . .will continue to function well also.

“With an emphasis on neurological longevity,” Louanne explained, “Methuselah has for example. Perhaps doctors succeeded in maintaining her physical functions while not understanding her neurological needs. Here at Maxwell Institute we have made significant advances in both areas, especially with neurological preservation. . .which is the center of one's life..”

“On the other hand, take your aunt Janie for example. Perhaps doctors succeeded in maintaining her physical functions while not understanding her neurological needs. Here at Maxwell Institute we have made significant advances in both areas, especially with neurological preservation. . .which is the center of one's life..”

George walked to an opposite wall to turn toward her, his face flushed pink. “Yes. And this is what excites me about supporting your research.

This Institute has made extraordinary progress in mediating several forms of dementia, but I believe more can be done to preserve mental capacity. At this moment Mr. Pendercraft seems to be a perfect example of everything going right. . .without clearly understanding why.”

Louanne rose from her chair to invite George into her “official” office where they could expand their discussion about proper procedures

for human experiments. It was now that George discovered Project III had a secretive component

— the Methuselah Program with Howard Pendercraft and a few other select clients.

“With an emphasis on neurological longevity,” Louanne explained, “Methuselah has become this Institute's biggest success.”

They continued talking for another hour about technical issues and those experimental procedures involved before she revealed her primary concern — her retirement with him becoming director of the Methuselah Program. After asking him to think on it overnight, she promised tomorrow they would meet with Howard Eugene Pendercraft.

* * *

Howard returned to his apartment rather late to walk quickly into his bathroom. *"I will never understand how Ben can sit through dinner, watch football for hours drinking beer after beer and never, not once, get up to pee. His bladder must be as big as a football."*

Afterwards, Howard made his way to his lounge chair where he picked through a stack of meaningless mail before reaching for his tablet. "A

little tv will get the roar of this crowd out of my head before bed." He leaned back, pressed a button. A far wall immediately glowed with a full-screen scenic advertisement of a rural countryside:

CALL 1-999-706-6000 TODAY FOR A

FULL ASSESSMENT OF YOUR

FINANCIAL STATUS

Rural Country Living Offers You

THE BEST LIFE HAS TO OFFER

Clicking this last item produced images of quaint neighborhoods, a nearby strip mall, and smiling faces of young and old residents involved with various activities. Actually, he was thinking ahead of this vivid offer — having received word from the Institute it was time to move. He would certainly miss Ben and that lady friend next door but this was required in his contract.

Howard knew he was Maxwell's oldest client at a hundred-five, always operating an antique shop (his idea) where a mobile laboratory, disguised as a delivery truck, visited weekly. In his

apartment, a specially designed bed monitored vitals nightly while his lounge chair monitored daytime vitals and provided certain experimental possibilities.

His thoughts, however, soon drifted toward a time long, long ago when he had "the best life has to offer," a loving wife, Beth; meaningful work as a mechanical engineer; and a home — minus those children they were unable to birth. Although these memories were beginning to fade, his emotional attachment to this past remained all too real. As they grew older, he and Beth took annual get-away trips to celebrate special anniversaries — and even made-up holidays.

Their devotion and affection for each other grew during these happy times but began to end as Beth developed dementia. That slow wasting away of her mind, her memories, and his heroic attempts to keep her at home, took its toll on Howard. Eventually, physical exhaustion forced him into retirement and Beth into a nursing home. Her body would not give-up until seven years later. In a desperate attempt to escape his pain

and loneliness, George moved to a small town in

Arizona where an adequate pension, entitlement

housing, and a Senior Center's woodworking shop

made his life bearable — for a time — but then a

notice in the Center Newsletter eventually sent

him onto a totally different path.

WANTED: Single male or female over eighty years old as full-time participant in longterm medical research into aging and degenerative mental disorders. Must have sound physical and mental health. Tech or medical background preferred. Modest stipend, housing, cost for relocation. Apply online by June 6, 2124, at MaxInstitute.org for complete details.

Weeks passed before Howard

rediscovered this torn notice in a jacket pocket. He

sat on a park bench for a long time that day with a

vague feeling this was an opportunity speaking to

him. Not until he returned to his apartment did an

answer seem near. *"Perhaps, just perhaps, more*

medical research could have saved Beth. But now,

maybe I can help others. And, anyway, it gives me

a reason to keep living."

* * *

Year after year Howard, and other

longterm volunteer clients, signed agreements to

keep their "medical condition" secret, until their

physical appearance and longevity became a

concern when living in one location too long. Dr.

Maxwell required relocation often, with new

identities, to avoid public scrutiny. Following

Maxwell's unexpected death, Dr. Louanne Parker

arrived to select only a few of the oldest clients for

her highly focused Methuselah project.

Today in Central Lab, Louanne provided

George with background history to Howard's

involvement. She rose from her chair, slipped a

pencil into her hair while walking over to stand

beside George.

He was peering through a small observa-

tion window into an adjacent, dimly-lighted cubi-

cal — a view concealed by the labs large, retracta-

ble, white writing board.

She spoke softly, almost reverently,

"Fascinating isn't it."

"Utterly fascinating," George replied in a barely audible whisper. "Really incomprehensible to me at this moment."

He was looking at Howard Eugene Pendercraft's brain encased in a glass skull covered by hundreds of tiny, multi-colored wires attached above with a maze of pulsating tubes below filled with life sustaining fluids.

George turned to face Louanne, anticipating another comment but quickly looked back into the cubical. "When did Howard die?"

"Three years ago. Over a period of months. Biological death occurred from heart failure. At one hundred twenty-six years, a heart transplant was deemed inappropriate for our continuing research. While truly concerned about this Methuselah client dying, in-house debates quickly morphed into asking if it were possible to save his brain. We had studied this possibility for years and had a plan. Mojo provided answers."

George stood silent for several minutes before returning to the coffee pot, his mind jumping from one thought to another, one image to another. He slowly poured a cup and returned to

the window. "Is Howard conscious of pain? How do you avoid that?"

"As you know, Yale's School of Medicine, decades ago, not only revived brains from dead pigs but eventually created exceptional procedures to maintain extracted brains outside a body. At first, EEG brain waves flat-line, indicating no consciousness. Following Yale procedures, we slowly activated Howard's five sensory areas with electrical stimulation. . .this avoided phantom pain awareness and produced global EEG activity typical of a healthy brain. If any other pain area indicated activity, a cocktail of suppressors were injected to deactivate those neurons."

George's mind leaped about, trying to comprehend these possibilities. He turned away to stir sugar into his coffee. "And Howard's current age, his brain, one hundred twenty-nine years?"

"Closer to thirty," she replied, "but he believes he has reached an age of one hundred-five. This appears to avoid mental confusion."

George stopped stirring his coffee to stare into her eyes. "What did you say? Howard believes what? How? What are you saying?"

Louanne sat in her chair while motioning for George to sit. "We have established limited communication with Howard through sensory inputs. It is currently a very basic, elementary two-way communication, primarily through a V-mask. We generally know what Howard is thinking; however, we have only limited algorithms to translate his sensor output. We understand some of what he is experiencing and, occasionally, offer sensor inputs, new ideas. The brain, as you know, trends toward creating a reality out of incongruity. . . like a dream. As yet, he seems not aware of us."

George thought back to those files he recently studied, "Pixilated videos and garbled audio recorded by Mojo? Pictures and sounds taken from Howard's brain. . . his mind?"

"Yes, the best we've achieved so far, based on Wynstein's work at UCLA with ESPRIT. Although a host of ethical issues were raised, Howard was our best chance to prove both the Yale and Wynstein concepts. Final approvals came from National Institute of Health with backing from NASA and, of course, DOD. These last two agencies see potential for other national interest.

Secrecy became paramount, not only to protect Howard but to protect Maxwell Institute and Methuselah from any appearance we may create a Frankenstein."

Leaning back in his chair, George asked in a serious tone, "How in this world did you get approvals to conduct such an experiment? This is getting a bit eerie. How could all of this happen so quickly?"

"Remember our international scene at the turn of this century: seniors everywhere were demanding, and getting, more research on aging. Birth rates were significantly down worldwide while people were living longer, productive lives. The United Nations pushed for expanded longevity research. Even laws on reconstituted organ transplants, stem and gene research. . .and euthanasia. . .were relaxed."

George nodded his understanding.

"While our regenerative procedures extended both physical and mental longevity in a few clients, as yet, these are not practical for public trials. Methuselah and Howard are a giant step toward extending physical health while preserving

mental capacity. . .and learning how long a human brain can survive which offers. . .”

George interrupted, “I see those as legitimate research objectives but what happened to Pendercraft was. . .is. . .radically different, totally unexpected by me and most likely shocking to anyone else. Physical and mental health are not matched.”

Sensing tension in his voice, Louanne stood and walked around while continuing to talk. “Each Institute client is provided our most advanced medical care. . .the best in the world. . .right up to the end. In fact, our knowledge in stem and gene transfer saved Howard on several occasions when his body tried to die. And now it appears our neuron regeneration techniques have maintained his mental capacity.

“It is this continuing research which already offers elders a chance for extended years for a productive life. . .both in mind and body. Remember, Dr. Yang’s work succeeded in mitigating age-related cognitive decline. Imagine what our next discoveries can offer. Only Methuselah and Maxwell Institute can deal with these fundamental and extraordinary questions.”

“Did Dr. Yang approve new regeneration procedures for Howard?”

“Yes.”

“And this result has not yet been replicated?”

“So far, only with Howard also reaching an advanced biological age. Two other Methuselah clients hold promise but. . .”

George rose to pace around Central Lab. “What other issues arose with your Methuselah project?”

“Howard has been declared a matter of national security by the White House, with international consequences. Methuselah is currently focused on an incredible question: What if we had been able to save Einstein’s brain. . .or other great minds in the past. . .or in the future? What if our world had a ‘Methuselah Library,’ a repository for our world’s greatest minds . . . brains which continue to think, experiment, and add knowledge to our world, something far beyond the capacity of any super computer. The world would witness unheard of advancements in technology, medicine, and much more. NASA envisions a regenerated brain trained as an astronaut to endlessly search our solar system.”

George returned to stand at the display window to look again at Howard. Turning to face Louanne he asked, “What happens next to Howard. . .and those other clients?”

She approached him and said, "The honest answer lies with the next director, and we hope that person is you."

Now sipping cold coffee, George stood silent, continuing to stare at the glass encased brain. *"Me. . .director? But then, how do you determine Howard's future. . . and the other clients? Where is their humanity?"*

* * *

Howard awoke, quickly realizing he had slept overnight in his lounge chair, again. A clock on the wall blinked 08:23 a.m. November 19, 2146. He felt refreshed but needed coffee. Once in his kitchenette, he pulled the window curtain aside to see a deep blue sky, white cumulus clouds, and glimmering sunshine. He thought to himself, *"Another marvelous day!"*

Abduction

by Stephen Tillman

Yawning, Tiffany opened the door of her apartment. She was both tired and hungry. The assignment had taken much longer than she'd expected, and she knew the rest of her family must've already eaten. She hoped the boys were still awake so that she could kiss and hug them before they went to sleep.

"Hello," she called, but not too loudly. If the boys were asleep, she didn't want to awaken them.

"Hi, Mom," Judith said, coming out of her room. "I'm glad you're home. I'm starving."

Tiffany glanced at a clock. 8:42. *The boys should be in bed by now, she thought. They must've been fed. Why wouldn't Judith eat at the same time?* Aloud she said, "You didn't eat with your father and brothers?"

"Daddy took them to his parents' place," Judith replied. "They're still there. I didn't feel like dealing with Mr. Aaronson, so I thought I'd wait for you. I expected you before this."

"It's kind of late," Tiffany said as she and Judith headed for the kitchen. Her feelings hovered between concern and anger. "Are they sleeping over? I wasn't told anything about that."

"Daddy said Mr. Aaronson wanted to show them a new school."

"We still have some corned beef left," Tiffany said, examining the contents of the refrigerator. "Do you mind a cold supper?"

"No, that's fine."

"Go wash up while I get things ready."

Tiffany fumed as she took out the meat, rye bread, pickles, mustard, and coleslaw. *What's this crap about a new school, she thought. They're going to a Jewish school right now. That's what Shmuel and I agreed on. Plus, I don't like the fact that a young girl was left on her own, even if I was expected before now.*

Noam Aaronson, Tiffany's father-in-law, disliked both her and Judith. Although Tiffany was Jewish, she was not observant. As far as the ultra-orthodox Noam was concerned, she was little better than a *shiksa*. Shmuel, his son and Tiffany's husband, was not Judith's biological father. Shmuel had adopted her, but Noam didn't acknowledge her as his grand-

daughter. If he referred to her at all, she was "the girl."

Judith's biological father was dead. She'd only been two months old when she was adopted. She called Shmuel "Daddy," but Noam was "Mr. Aaronson."

After the meal Tiffany sent Judith to bed. By 10:00 There was still no sign of her husband and sons. She called Chavi, her mother-in-law. A sleepy voice answered the phone.

"Hi, Chavi," Tiffany said. "I hope I didn't wake you. I apologize for calling so late, but I haven't heard from Shmuel. I don't know where he and the boys are, and I'm a bit concerned."

There was silence for several seconds before Chavi said, "I'm not sure where they are. Noam is not happy with the school you're sending them to."

"What's wrong with it?" Tiffany asked, keeping a tight lid on her temper. "They're learning Hebrew and all about Judaism along

with their secular studies. Shmuel agreed to have them go there.”

Once again there was silence. It lasted so long that Tiffany asked, “Chavi, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here.” Another hesitation, and then an audible sigh. “Shmuel will do just about anything you ask, but he’s troubled by the school. Neither he nor Noam like the fact that boys and girls are together in the same classes. Your sons don’t have *payos*, they don’t wear *tallit* under their shirts, they don’t wear a *kippah* away from the school, and in general they don’t dress and act like the males in our community.”

“I see,” Tiffany said while thinking, *Shmuel and I are going to have this out.*

“When are they due back?”

“I don’t know,” Chavi replied in a teary voice. “I told Noam that going behind your back was not a good idea, but he said that he had a responsibility to God to see to it that his

grandsons were raised with a proper reverence for Torah and the principles of Judaism.

The school you sent them to were perverting those principles.”

“Shmuel shared those sentiments?”

“Yes.”

Tiffany ended the call. She paced for several minutes before coming to a decision.

First, she called her boss, apologized for the late hour, and explained that because of a family emergency she would have to take the next few days off. He was upset and tried to talk her out of it, but she was adamant. Rather than lose her services altogether, he gave in.

Next, she called her mother. “Judith and I will be taking the midnight Amtrak to DC.

We’ll catch an Uber from Union Station to your house. I want her out of the way while I settle things up here.”

“What needs to be settled?”

“I’ll go over everything when I get there.

By the way, this is not related, but Judith eats

a lot of meat and is much stronger and quicker than you'd expect of an eight-year-old girl.

I'm trying to convince her to keep her abilities hidden."

"I see. I'll impress upon her the need for a low profile. Is it time to bring her into the fold?"

"It might be. She's much more mature than I was at the same age."

"Are they asleep?" Noam asked in Yiddish.

"Yes, finally," Shmuel replied in the same language. "They do not understand where their mother is. They want to see her."

"Do not worry, my son. They are very young. They will get over her."

"I cannot help feeling I have betrayed her. She will be very angry. She can be quite... formidable."

"It would be better for you and the children if you issued her a *get*. She is not a prop-

er wife. I will find you someone more suitable."

"She keeps a Jewish household. Our children went to a Jewish school."

"Pah!" Noam exclaimed, derisively. "You call that place a Jewish school? You might as well have enrolled them in Saint Anthony's parochial school. She does not follow *kashrut* away from your home. She refuses to attend the *mikvah*. She rides and works on *Shabbat*.

She is at best a semi-Semite. Add to that the fact that Samuel is three years old and there is no sign of more children. She is failing in her duty."

"You and Mama only had three children."

"Your mother had several miscarriages. After Dayana was born there were complications and your mother needed a hysterectomy. It was the lord who limited us to three children. Your wife has no such limitations."

"I still can't help feeling I am going back on my word."

"It is honorable of you to think that way, my son," Noam said, putting his arm around Shmuel. "But you also have a duty to the lord, and that should take precedence over everything else."

Tiffany stormed into the opulent jewelry store on 47th street, yelling, "Where's my husband?"

"He's involved in an important meeting upstairs, Mrs. Aaronson," a security guard said, stepping in front of her. "He left word he wasn't to be disturbed. If you take a seat, I'll inform him that you're here when the meeting ends. That might take a while."

Tiffany brushed past him and went to the door leading to the second floor. It was locked. She ordered the guard to open it. He refused. Unlike the steel doors barring the way to the vaults, this was made of wood. Tiffany stepped back and slammed her foot into the door near the lock. The wood splin-

tered and the door flew open. The guard tried to stop her, but, with little effort, she pushed him aside and rapidly ascended the stairs. The guard trailed right behind her.

Tiffany headed for the conference room. Shmuel's secretary called out to her, but she ignored the woman. Three men were meeting with Shmuel as Tiffany burst into the room.

"She broke the door," the guard reported. "She moved so fast I couldn't stop her. Should I call the police?"

"Go ahead, call them," Tiffany said. "Then I can charge Mr. Aaronson with kidnapping. That's a federal crime."

"There's no need for the authorities," Shmuel said to the guard. To the room at large he said, "I'm sorry for the interruption. My wife and I need to have a private conversation. This is a good time for a break anyway. I'll ask Mrs. Bernstein to bring in a coffee service. Tiffany, let's go to my office."

Once they were alone in his office, Tiffany said, "You haven't been home for nearly a week. Are you afraid to face me?"

"Frankly, I am," Shmuel admitted. "I know that's cowardly of me, but you scare me. I confess to missing Judith. How is she doing?"

"She's fine. She's staying with my mother. FYI, she's showing signs of becoming... like me. Now tell me where my sons are, and I won't press kidnapping charges against your father. Or you."

"I can't do that, Tiffany," Shmuel said, unable to hold back tears. "I gave my word. I still love you. I won't ask you to adopt the ways of our community, but if you could see your way to bend a little bit. Allow the boys to attend one of our schools. We could be a family again."

"My sons will *not* be raised in an environment where they are taught women are subservient to men, and that their role in life is to be baby machines, pumping out one kid after

another every twelve to eighteen months. We will *never* be a family again. What about your word to me? You've gone back on it. Under no circumstances will I be able to trust you."

"I deeply regret the necessity of betraying you, but I was in an impossible situation. It was a choice between you and hundreds of years of tradition. It was not an easy decision. Please, Tiffany. I beg you. Your feelings for me cannot have changed that radically. I don't want to lose you. Compromise."

"I've already compromised far too much. Our marriage is over. I've seen a divorce lawyer. She assures me that in light of your lying and the kidnapping of Ben and Sam, I'll get full custody. You will never be allowed unsupervised visits. The only question is whether or not your father, and possibly you, go to prison for kidnapping. Tell me where my sons are, and I won't press charges."

Shmuel began to cry in earnest. He shook his head in the negative. Tiffany picked him up

bodily, slammed him against the wall, held him there with his feet a foot off the floor, put her face inches from his body, and roared, "TELL ME!"

Shmuel again shook his head and cried harder. In frustration Tiffany banged him against the wall one more time, allowed him to drop to the floor, turned, and left the building.

Tiffany unlocked the door to her in-laws' apartment and entered. It was Saturday morning, so she knew none of the family would be home. She waved to the housekeeper, who knew her well, and probably wouldn't question her right to be there.

The door to Noam's study was locked, but it was old and primitive. A credit card slid between the door and the door-jam allowed her to circumvent the lock. She relocked the door behind her and began searching. The desk yielded nothing useful. It didn't take long to

pick the lock on the filing cabinet. There were references to three different Jewish schools. One was in the Catskills, the other two in Brooklyn.

Then a voice said, "Open the door, please. This is the police."

I guess the housekeeper was given instructions to keep me out after all, Tiffany thought, as she rapidly replaced everything back the way she'd found it. She opened the window. There was no fire escape and she was on the seventh floor. The apartment building was about thirty feet from the neighboring building, which was only six stories.

Tiffany quickly stripped, wrapped her clothes into a bundle, wrapped a cord around the bundle securing it to her body, and *changed*. The leopard climbed onto the window sill, gathered her legs under her, and leaped. She caught the parapet of the neighboring building with her claws and pulled herself onto the roof. Then she *changed*.

It took a full minute for Tiffany's breathing and heartrate to return to normal. Finally she donned her clothes and went to the roof access door. Fortunately it wasn't locked.

"Is anything missing?" Shmuel asked.

"Everything appears to be in order," Noam replied. To the housekeeper he asked, "Are you sure she was here? The door to this room was locked."

"She was definitely in the apartment," the housekeeper said. "I didn't actually see her enter your study. As per your instructions, I called the police. Perhaps she found the door to the office locked and left."

"The window was open," Shmuel pointed out.

"It was hot yesterday afternoon, so I opened it," Noam said. "I might have forgotten to close it when your mother called us to dinner. I've done that before. Besides, we're on the seventh floor. The walls are

sheer. If she went out the window she almost certainly would have fallen and been killed or badly hurt. No, the simple explanation is that she was unable to get in my office and left."

"I suppose," Shmuel said, while thinking, *I have never told anyone that she's a were-leopard. Even with her preternatural were-leopard strength, could she leap from seven stories up and not get hurt? I simply don't know. But if I mention that fact to Papa I would be once again breaking my word, and this time I would have no religious excuse. If I want to keep even a faint hope of reconciliation alive, I better not say anything.*

That four-story structure seems out of place in the serene Catskill mountains, Tiffany thought. She was crouched in thick bushes observing the ultra-orthodox religious school building. Her sons had not been at either of the schools in Brooklyn. She hoped they were in this one, as she had no other leads.

The fourth story was actually a gabled roof. The building sat on about an acre and a half of land, which was enclosed by a ten-foot-high chain-linked fence made of heavy steel wire. The fence was topped by a foot of razor wire. All the windows of the bottom two floors of the school were barred. Armed security guards patrolled the area. Fortunately there were no dogs. There were multiple trees in the enclosed area, but all of them had been denuded of branches up to about twenty feet.

The sun had set. It was a new moon night, so the only light came from the stars. But that was enough for a leopard. Tiffany *changed*. Her leopard, with a backpack strapped to her, climbed a tree just outside the compound and jumped to a tree within the fenced-in area. Then she climbed down and slivered to a tall tree about ten feet from the school.

When the guards were out of sight she climbed the tree. The lack of branches was no barrier. Leopards are superb climbers and,

pound for pound, are just about the strongest members of the cat family. From near the top of the tree she jumped to the gabled roof, hanging on by her claws to keep from sliding off. She padded over to a window and *changed*.

It took about a minute for Tiffany's breathing and heartrate to return to normal. The window was locked. Tiffany took a glass cutter from the backpack and made a roughly circular cut in the glass, about four inches in diameter. She knocked in the glass. It made slight tinkling sound as it landed, but nobody seemed to hear it. Tiffany reached in, unlocked the window, opened it, and climbed inside. She appeared to be in a storage room.

Tiffany descended to the third floor and peered around the corner. There were a series of rooms. A young boy came out of one of them. She pulled back before he noticed her. Shortly thereafter came the sound of a toilet flushing. She waited a few minutes to give him

time to fall back to sleep. Then she opened the door to one of the rooms. There were two sleeping boys, neither of whom were her children.

In the fourth room she found her sons. She must have made a slight noise because Benjamin woke up. He saw her, his eyes opened wide, and he started to say something. She was on him before he could utter a sound.

“Benny, honey, you must keep quiet,” she whispered as she hugged him tightly and kissed him multiple times. “I’ve missed you terribly.”

“We missed you too, Mama,” Benjamin whispered back. “We don’t like it here. The people are mean. Please take us home.”

“I’m going to do that, but first I have to give you some medicine to help you sleep. When you wake up the three of us will be away from here.”

“Okay.”

Tiffany injected both her sons with a sedative which would put them asleep for several hours. It would be too much to take both boys at the same time. Benjamin, at five-years-old, was the older and heavier. She’d take him first.

Tiffany made sure Samuel’s airway was clear. Then she made up Benjamin’s bed so that if there was a superficial bed-check, he’d appear to be sleeping. Next, she took out a carrier from the backpack, fitted Benjamin into it, and strapped it to her back. She peeked out the doorway, saw that the hallway was clear, and quickly made her back to the fourth floor.

Tiffany *changed*. The leopard, carrying Benjamin, retraced her steps to get over the fence. Once there she quietly hustled to a large SUV Tiffany had borrowed. The leopard *changed*. This time it took a full three minutes for Tiffany’s breathing and heartrate to return

to normal. Every *change* in form took a lot out of her, and the recovery was slower.

Tiffany strapped Benjamin into a car seat, ate two protein bars, drank a quart of water, and rested for fifteen minutes. She made sure a window was cracked open, and headed back to the school for Samuel.

Tiffany's leopard used the same procedure as previously to get back to the fourth-floor room in the school building. She *changed*. Several minutes later Tiffany crept down to the third floor, made sure the hallway was clear, and darted to Samuel's room. He was still sleeping peacefully. She fitted him into the carrier, and made up his bed so it would appear that he was also sleeping.

Suddenly the door to the room opened. A man stood there, googled-eyed, with his mouth hanging open. The sight of a naked woman wearing a backpack holding one of students momentarily paralyzed him. Tiffany was on him, but not before he uttered a yell.

She held him with her hand over his mouth.

He struggled, but he was no match for her in strength. She injected him with a tranquilizer, dropped him, and went to the door. She hoped nobody else had heard his cry.

Unfortunately there were three other men in the hallway, and several students were looking out of their rooms. One of the men was blocking the way to the fourth floor. Tiffany sprinted down the hall toward a door with an "exit" sign over it. A man tried to block her, but was unable to do so.

There were stairs, but only leading down. Tiffany didn't hesitate. She raced down the stairs to the first floor and came to a fire-door. As she pushed it open a blaring alarm sounded. Exterior lights came on, lighting up the compound.

Two guards appeared around a corner. One of them raised a rifle, but the other yelled, "Don't shoot. She's carrying a child. The gates are all locked. She can't get out."

“How did a naked women get in here?” a man called out.

“It does not matter,” someone replied.

“Get all the teachers and guards out here. Once we capture her all our questions will be answered.”

Tiffany ran toward a copse of trees near the fence. She stepped on a rock, twisted her ankle, and stumbled, but managed to keep her feet. She noticed, however, that the rock must have cut her bare foot, because she was leaving a blood trail.

Limping, she reached the trees. She could hear the men coming after her. One of them noticed the blood. There was no time for anything fancy. She gave explicit instructions to her leopard and *changed*. The leopard scrambled up a tall tree which had a branch extending beyond the fence. She went out along the branch as far as she could and jumped.

Like most cats, she landed on her feet. As she headed toward the SUV, she heard some-

one call, “Did anyway else see a leopard with a hump on its back?”

At the SUV the leopard *changed*. Tiffany knew she could not take the time to recover gradually. Samuel was still sleeping, apparently unharmed by the jolting. She strapped him into a car seat, threw on a dress and sneakers, and drove away. She would take care of her injured foot later. If she was stopped once she was away from the school, she could prove she was the mother of the boys and had a perfect right to be driving with her sons asleep in the back seat.

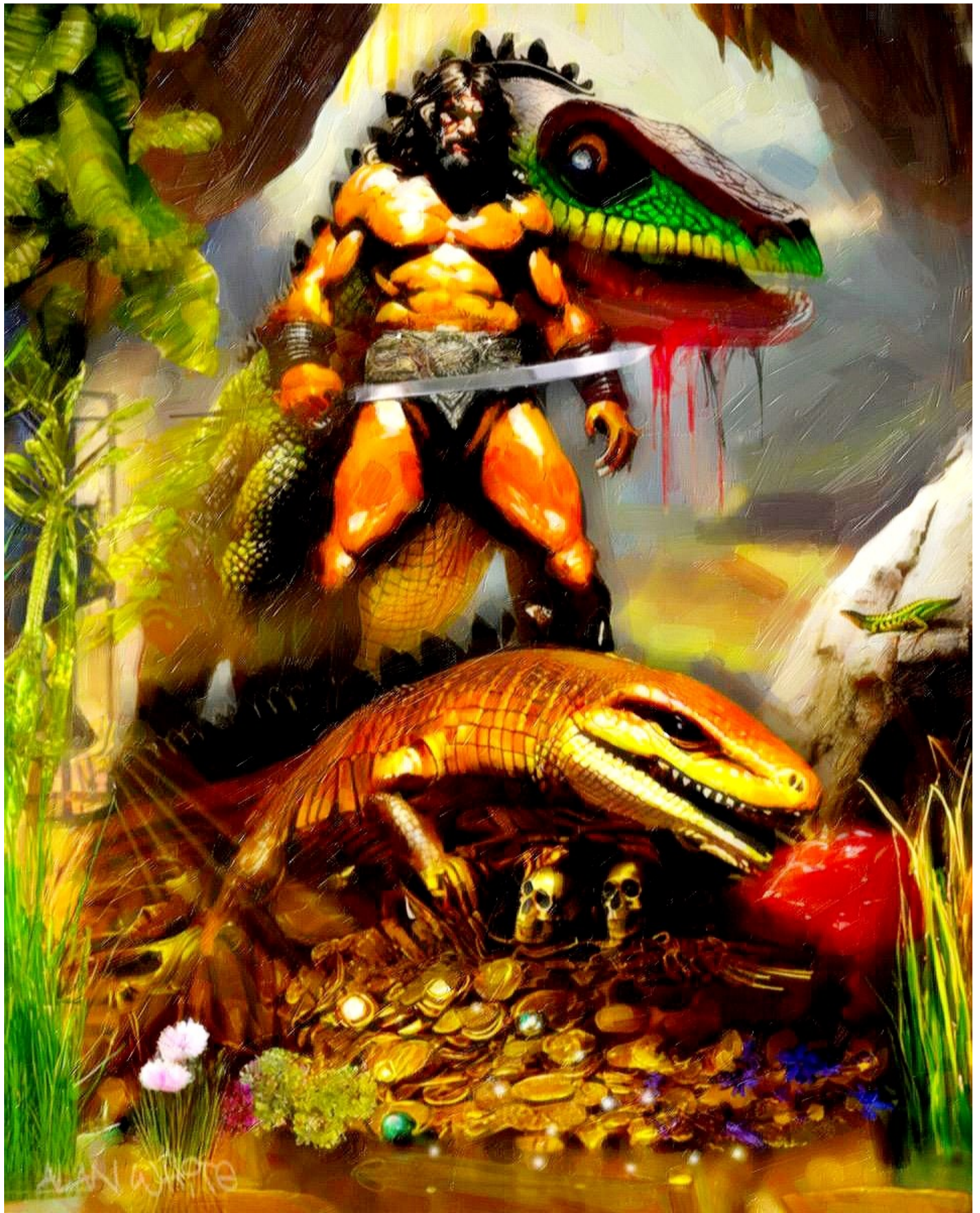
(continued from Page 2)

As always, I am looking for suggestions to improve Eldritch Science. What would you like to see more of? What would you like to see less of? I also accept direct submissions at the address on the masthead.

I accept all suggestions and constructive criticism. My objective is to make receiving *Eldritch Science* the highlight of your day as you peruse your email and sort through the various exhortations about your car's extended warranty.

Rotten fruit and vegetables, however, will be returned on the same trajectory as they are received. You have been warned.

Happy New Year, and happy reading!



Barbarian and the Monster/Alan White