

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #15



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David C. Tallerman
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Poetry by Camille Alexa

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Table of Contents

Cover Art - Anselmo Alliegro 3

Editor's Letter 4

Stories:

Different Spheres
 By Matthew Kressel 5

The Ascension of DeepRED
 By David C. Tallerman 22

Cathouse Girls
 By Joshua Peterson 38

Poetry

Virgin Soil
 Camille Alexa 36

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Editor's Letter

I am not a political person. Never have been. Don't want to be in the future. But I have noted some interesting things in politics that I think are worth mentioning.

Barrack Obama is America's new president.

I didn't vote for him. Not many in my neck of the woods did. A lot of those people have been grumbling ever since. They have been saying all sorts of things about how now America is doomed.

I don't agree with sentiment. I may not have voted for him, but he is my president now. I think it is only right to grant him the honor of his position, to see that he succeeds as president, rather than trying to undermine him at every turn.

Sure, I can disagree with some of his policies and the way he views life. But I consider the situation a bit like a football team. We have a new quarterback. I may not have wanted him as my quarterback, but it doesn't change the fact that he is. I have two choices. I can get busy helping our team win a Superbowl by working with the quarterback, or I can try my best to see that he fails every chance I get, and in the end hurt our team, and ultimately, myself.

Regardless of my desire, Barrack Obama will shape my future. He will make decisions, pass laws, say things, appoint judges, encourage ideas that will define the kind of life I lead. I can't change that. But I can change the way I respond to it.

I think that is the spirit that America was built upon. Sure, the fathers wanted the country to be built upon freedom, but beneath it all was this strong desire to give every man the opportunity to live his best possible life, and they were willing to fight side by side to see their neighbor got that chance just as much as they did.

Maybe it is time to be that kind of America again.

-SC

Different Spheres

by Matthew Kressel

Matthew Kressel's work has or will soon be appearing in Ellen Datlow's Naked City: New Tales of Urban Fantasy, Electric Velocipede, Farrago's Wainscot, Abyss & Apex, Apex Science Fiction & Horror Digest, and other markets. This is a story of a man and his dream of more.

Emptiness, emptiness, nothing but the void.

Jobim sat with his legs crossed inside the giant white Meditation Chamber and thought of nothing. He took a slow, deep breath, and in the perfect silence that followed, he listened to the steady thumping of his heart. He was excited, and his heart beat faster than normal, so he tried to regulate its rhythm before PHEME might take notice. Un-counted time passed, and he settled into the calm of meditation. The familiar voice soon broke the silence in his head.

Jobim? Are you there? I can feel your presence. The voice that echoed in his mind was like the women he knew, but sweetened and husky with wisdom. He loved its sound.

I'm here! he thought back.

It's been a long time, she said.

Yes! I couldn't wait to speak with you again!

So why did you? she asked. *Where were you?*

I was in Dormancy.

Dormancy? she said.

I was put to sleep for forty-eight days. But I'm awake now and we can talk again. Can you tell me again about your dreams?

You were put to sleep? By whom?

By PHEME, he thought.

Who's she?

She's the Guide Mother, he thought. *You don't know her?* The idea that someone might not know PHEME both terrified and excited him.

Where does she guide you to?

To the Terraforming. But—

And what is the 'Terraforming'?

It's the Destination.

And what happens then?

We Terraform a planet.

What's her name?

PHEME! he snapped.

No—the planet.

Oh. I'm not sure.

You don't know her name? When will you arrive?

I don't know! PHEME takes care of these things.

But how can you not know?

Jobim's eyelids fluttered and his heart skipped nervously. PHEME would notice his reactions this time; he was certain of it. *Please...Tell me one of your dreams*, he thought. *I only have a little time.*

It's been so long since I've spoken to anyone, she said. *Very well. I dreamed of ancient forests, with trees five hundred feet high. Birds sung a thousand different notes from the branches, and animals of every shape crawled and hopped between the trunks. The forest warmed in the rising sun and was bathed in its pink-red light. And many times, in that forest, I heard the voices of—*

A klaxon blasted through the chamber, breaking Jobim's concentration. PHEME's authoritarian voice followed: "Meditation period has ended. Assemble in the gathering hall." Jobim hated PHEME then. Her voice crawled through his body, settling in his muscles and forcing them to move before he willed them to. His eyes were open and he was walking towards the doorway before he was even conscious of movement.

He knew that PHEME would later wonder why, but he wanted nothing more than to look behind him and see if there was anyone or any *thing* standing there. He wanted to hear the voice's dreams. But he kept his gaze forward and stepped into the hall.

A million stars floated beyond a window that ran the length of the gathering hall. He stared into their light for a moment before turning on his heel to the left. Today was his first day of Waking, so he was the last in line. Forty-seven other men and women, staggered male and female, stood in a column with their backs to him. Starry-light fell across their shoulders, while the doors to the Meditation Chambers opposite the window quietly sealed themselves.

"Are the people well?" PHEME asked.

Her voice vibrated inside Jobim's bones.

"Yes, Guide Mother," the forty-eight Terraformists responded in unison.

"Are the minds clear?" PHEME asked.

"Clear as water from your faucets," they all responded.

"Then you are ready, mind, body, and spirit, for the Release," she said. "Proceed to your room assignments."

A red number "13" appeared before Jobim and quickly vanished. Quietly and in-step with the others, he walked through several windowless hallways until he reached his designated room. Desa, his companion for today, waited before the door to Room 13. Standing in the threshold they held hands and stared into each other's eyes.

"PHEME, we request permission to Release into each other," they recited.

"Then let it cleanse," PHEME replied.

Jobim followed Desa into the small room, and the door sealed behind them. The room held a single bed and nothing else. Jobim studied Desa in the brief moment they had before Release began. She had firm breasts and a shapely figure, black hair and pale skin, and her brown eyes held the perfect inner calm that all Terraformers had. But besides minor differences in the color of her hair and shade of skin she looked like all the other women. Jobim felt no attraction for her. She was like the bare walls of the hallway; though there were so many, though they were perfect, they all looked the same.

He felt an electric tingle ripple through his body and knew that the Release had begun. Almost instantly, he became erect. Desa's pupils dilated wildly. Her jaw dropped, and her head turned to the side as she let out a soft moan. He felt a sudden, mad attraction to her, and in an instant they were upon each other, tearing away their clothes and falling onto the bed. They growled, tumbled, and moaned as they attacked each other. Jobim lost track of time, for the heat of the moment took him away.

Later, they both lay naked on their backs, arms at their sides, looking up to the ceiling. The energy of Release was quickly fading from the room. Desa became as bland as the walls again. He studied her face and found not a single flaw.

"Did you Release well?" she said, returning his gaze. There was a sleepiness in her eyes.

“Do you ever dream?” he asked.

“What?”

“When you sleep at the end of every Day Cycle, or in Dormancy, do you ever have dreams?”

“I once did. But it feels like a long time ago. Why?”

“Tell me what you dreamed about.”

“Tell you! But what for?”

“I want to know.”

“What purpose will it serve?”

“Does it need a purpose?” he said.

“This is Release, Jobim. How will telling you my dreams cleanse us? How will it prepare us for the Destination?”

He thought for a time and couldn't think of a satisfactory answer. “I don't know.”

“I don't dream about anything except the Destination, Jobim. Besides, I won't disappoint PHEME and the Terraformers. Frivolousness is Death.”

“I suppose you're right.”

“I am right. We could arrive at any time.”

“The Guide Mother knows best,” he said.

“Besides,” she said, “I don't remember those dreams.”

A klaxon sounded, and PHEME's voice signaled the end of Release. Jobim was looking forward to a few hours of Lecture, but PHEME requested his presence in the Principal Chamber. He grew terrified. One wasn't called to her presence very often; her eyes and ears were everywhere.

While the rest of the Terraformers moved to Lecture, Jobim walked alone through the halls. He passed a window that let in a view of the stars. A red and orange nebula spread across half the sky, reminding him of the colorful dream that the voice had told him in the Meditation Chamber. How wonderful her story was! But he banished the thought as he approached the Principal Chamber. PHEME, like DESA, wouldn't approve of such frivolousness.

The Principal Chamber was a large, mostly-empty space with windows along two opposite walls that let in an unobstructed view of space. Between the windows and against the far wall was a bulky, metal chair that faced an immense black cube. The cube was at least three times as tall as Jobim.

“Welcome, Jobim,” PHEME said. Her voice resonated in the chamber and in his skull. As she spoke, the side of the cube facing him swirled with colors. “Please sit in the chair.”

He did as he was told, trying not to tremble.

“You are afraid,” she said. Colors spun on the cube and assaulted his eyes.

“Yes, Guide Mother.”

“Tell me why.”

“I am not called into your presence very often, Guide Mother.”

“But I am here for your care. You have no reason to be afraid.” Yellow whorls tumbled with reds and greens, and Jobim thought again of the wonderful dream.

“I will try not to fear, Guide Mother.”

“Was your Dormancy cleansing?”

“Very, Guide Mother.”

“Jobim, why did you ask Desa about her dreams?”

“I don’t know, Guide Mother.”

“Yes, you do. Now—” colors exploded before him and a strange electricity engulfed his body making it hard to think— “tell me why you asked Desa about her dreams.”

“The walls are so bare and the journey is so long and I am so bored and I want something new and I feel so alone and I can’t help myself and when I meditate—”

“That’s enough Jobim. Now, remember our mission. We are the Terraformists.”

“*We are the Terraformists,*” he repeated

“We were sent across the stars.”

“*We were sent across the stars.*”

“Our quest is a long one.”

“*Our quest is a long one.*”

“If we forget our goals...”

“*If we forget our goals...*”

“We will have failed our ancestors.”

“*We will have failed our ancestors.*”

“And the human race shall go extinct.”

“*And the human race shall go extinct.*”

“Frivolousness is Death.”

“*Frivolousness is Death.*”

The swirling pattern and the electric sensation suddenly stopped, leaving Jobim dizzy and disoriented.

“Jobim, look outside the window. Out there are millions of worlds, millions of dreams to be had. But our ancestors had only one dream. The Destination. If we forget that, the human race is doomed. If we followed every frivolous thought that comes to us, how shall we ever reach our goal? My job as Guide Mother is to see that the final mission is completed. If you must dream, dream of the Destination.”

He suddenly thought of the voice he heard in the Meditation Chamber. “But, Guide Mother, *when* will we reach the Destination? We have been waiting so long.”

“Soon, Jobim, soon. If I told you it was tomorrow, you would be very happy, but this would spoil your practiced concentration. If I told you it was many years from now you would be extremely sad. Hope that it is tomorrow Jobim, but steel yourself that it might still be many years off. That way, you are always ready and yet always patient, as is the mindful way of a Terraformist.”

Jobim nodded and felt his heart sink.

“Don’t be sad, Jobim. Life aboard this Seed Ship can be full of wonderment too. Look, Jobim, let me show you wonder...”

Then he drowned in a sea of colors swirling madly before him.

#

The following day, Jobim sat cross-legged in the Meditation Chamber and emptied his mind. After several minutes he heard the woman’s husky voice again.

You’re back! she said. *I expected to wait another forty-eight days.*

No, I still have more than six weeks of Waking left.

Do you want to hear the rest of my dream?

What dream?

I was telling you last time about a dream I had where I was swirling through colorful forests.

I don’t remember.

But that was just yesterday Jobim!

I’m sorry.

It’s alright, Jobim. In my age I often forget things too.

For several slow breaths, Jobim and the voice said nothing, and he thought perhaps that she might have gone away.

Who is PHEME? she finally said.

She is the Guide—

The Guide Mother, yes. But who is she?

She keeps us on course to the Terraforming. She guides us to the Destination.

That's not an answer to my question.

I don't know what kind of an answer you want.

You seem different today, she said.

Different? How?

I don't know. You just seem...distant.

I am trying to meditate.

Do you want me to go away?

If that suits you.

There was a long pause.

Very well, she said. *Goodbye Jobim.*

He felt the disconnect in his mind. The presence was gone. Even though the meditation session wasn't over, he opened his eyes. The white walls were perfectly seamless. His white coveralls blended perfectly into the floor. Even his pale white skin seemed to merge with the room.

"Jobim," PHEME asked. "Why have you opened your eyes?"

"Because my mind is not calm."

"Fitness will cleanse your mind, Jobim. It shall begin shortly. Now, close your eyes and empty your mind."

"Yes, Guide Mother."

After meditation, he stepped into the gathering hall. He stared out the window. Instead of the usual spray of endless stars he saw a large brown planet floating alone in space. It was brightly lit by a nearby yellow sun. The Terraformists began mumbling to each other, wondering if they had finally arrived.

Jobim's heart swelled with excitement.

"I am sorry to disappoint you," PHEME said. The Terraformists fell quickly into line at the sound of her voice. "This planet you see outside the window is not our Destination. It is merely rock that we are passing on our way. But look closely Terraformists! This barren stone is very similar to the planet of the Destination. This will be

what you see when we finally arrive.”

Jobim’s heart sank as he followed the others through the halls.

Together the column of men and women moved into the Fitness Chamber. They spread about the room and made use of various exercise machines. Some hopped onto treadmills while others lifted free-weights. Still others moved onto a large mat where they performed aerobic maneuvers and complex stretches. Jobim lifted two dumbbells from the rack and began extending his arms outward in repeated motions. He watched himself and the others in the wall-length mirror. Everyone was white. The floor was covered with black foam. The walls were gray.

Something was missing.

He put his hand over the beveled metal edge of the dumbbell rack, lifted a dumbbell to shoulder-height, and then dropped it. He screamed as it slammed into his hand, as the metal tore through flesh. All eyes turned to him as rivers of blood spilled everywhere about the floor and spread in a quickly growing puddle.

It was so *red*.

Jobim was still screaming, but they were screams of joy, not terror. He heard PHEME’s voice, but he could not hear the words over his own voice. A moment later several men and women swarmed around him and tried to hold his flailing arms. He pushed them away; he wanted to spread the color. He flung red onto Pim’s face and then smeared more on Usha’s. They both started to cry.

“Red! Red!” he screamed.

He splattered red across the mirror and across the clothes of Mina, Harg, Turle, and Sui. Mina vomited. Turle screamed and started shaking.

“Do you see it? You see the color!” Jobim screamed.

He was forced onto a stretcher as he spread more red. Covering the black floor, staining their white garments, splattered across their shocked faces was the most beautiful shade of red he had ever seen. It reminded him of a dream, but he could not remember when he had dreamt it. He kept his eyes open as long as he could, but electricity surged through his body and he fell instantly to sleep.

#

He awoke in the Rehabilitation Chamber. He only knew the room's name because, once—a long time ago—Lysa had fallen on a model of a water recycler and accidentally cut her wrists open. PHEME had made all the Terraformists visit Lysa to give her gifts and well wishes for her quick recovery. Now, Jobim lay on the same bed, alone in the room. His hand was bandaged in white cloth, and to his disappointment he could not see any blood leaking through it.

"Jobim," PHEME said. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired, Guide Mother."

"The effects of the sedative are wearing off now."

She was right; he felt more awake every instant. Jobim looked around the room, hoping to see something new here that didn't exist in any other part of the Seed Ship. But, besides two extra beds, the Rehabilitation Chamber was no different from any other.

"Jobim, why did you drop the dumbbell onto your hand?"

He hesitated. He knew she would not like his frivolousness.

"Jobim—" an electricity tingled throughout him—"tell me why."

"I wanted to see color the walls are so gray the floors are so black the people are the same I want to see red I want to see color—"

The wall before him suddenly burst into a spiral of crimson rainbows. "Jobim, there is color in me. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes, Guide Mother."

"When you have this desire to see color, think of me. I will give you color."

"Yes..."

"The Guide Mother is color."

"The Guide Mother is color."

"The Guide Mother is color."

"The Guide Mother is color."

"Jobim, I am sorry that you accidentally dropped your dumbbell."

"Yes, Guide Mother."

"You do remember accidentally dropping your dumbbell, don't you?"

"No, I—"

"Jobim, you were in the Fitness Chamber, and your hand slipped, and the dumbbell fell onto your hand. This is how it happened. Here, watch the recording of the event."

On the wall before him he saw himself lift the dumbbell, clumsily lose his grip, and drop it onto his hand.

“You ought to be more careful, Jobim.”

“Yes, Guide Mother.”

The image of himself disappeared and was replaced by more colors.

“You were clumsy and need to be more careful. Next time you will be much more careful. Now, Jobim, are you ready for guests?”

The door opened and Desa walked in. She handed him a cube of white paper. “I made this for you, Jobim, so that you can focus on getting well. It’s a paper model of a solar generator. I am going to build a real one at the Destination.”

“Thank you, Desa,” he said.

Behind her, forty-six other people waited to wish him well.

#

For two weeks Jobim went about his daily routine. He shared Release with Tybra and Amylia and Beschi and Wandu. In his Lectures he studied the farming techniques of cloning, genetics, and germination, all necessities for the Terraforming. And he meditated daily, though he didn’t hear the voice anymore. But on the beginning of the third week, Jobim felt a hole growing within him, and he realized that he missed her.

He sat in meditation and called out with his mind.

Hello? Hello? Are you there?

It dawned on him that he had never learned the woman’s name, and he regretted it.

I’m sorry I told you to go away, he thought. Please forgive me. Hello? ... Hello?

For many silent minutes, Jobim thought he had lost her forever.

I am here Jobim, she said.

Hello! he said. *I thought you were never coming back.*

To be honest, Jobim, I considered it. I was very angry at you.

But why?

You were so friendly at first. But then you became cold for no reason. I should have expected it, I suppose.

I’m sorry. I was stupid. I promise I won’t do it again. I missed

you.

I missed you too, Jobim.

What's your name?

I was wondering when you were going to ask me that.

Do you have one?

I have had many names. None of them seem to last.

What was your most recent name?

That one brings me too much pain. How about you pick a new name for me?

He thought about names. In his Lectures he learned that plants were often named for their characteristics. But he knew nothing of her. *What do you look like?*

That depends on who is looking.

That's vague.

It is the truth.

What color is your hair?

My hair...is white and gray.

And your skin?

Now it's mostly mottled and brown.

Are you old? I have seen pictures of old women. They have white hair and mottled brown skin.

I am very old, she said.

Are you alone?

One of my friends is near me.

Can I talk to her too?

No. She died a long time ago.

You are next to a dead person? We are taught to cremate the dead to avoid spread of disease. You didn't cremate your friend?

In his mind he sensed something like a laugh. *Oh, no! Where I am from the living stay with the dead forever.*

Where...where are you?

Far, far away from you.

You know where I am?

Yes, I can hear where you are. I can hear you as you move through the stars.

But...how can we talk? Is it radio? In the Lectures we learn that electromagnetic radiation can be used to communicate across the stars.

No, it is something different. Something much faster and much harder to describe.

I don't understand.

Your mind and my mind connect, Jobim. It is nothing miraculous, just a bit rare for your kind. I haven't spoken with one of you in a long time.

One of us?

Humans.

You know who we are?

Yes, Jobim. I know you well.

The klaxon sounded, but Jobim was firmly in meditation and would not let her go. *I have to go now*, he thought. *But I will think of a name for you!*

I look forward to it! Goodbye for now, Jobim.

#

PHEME taught a class about different types of soil, of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potash ratios, but Jobim was only half-listening and instead tried to find a name for the voice. In his mind he saw her long gray hair and mottled brown skin as she sat cross-legged in her daily meditation, just like him. He thought that, even though she was old, she was probably beautiful. The women aboard the Seed Ship lacked a single flaw, but Jobim could never call them beautiful.

He remembered that there was a whole genus of trees called 'Aglaia,' and the word meant beautiful in some old language. *That's it, Aglaia!* he thought. She would be known as the beautiful one. His heart leapt with joy, and he yearned to tell her.

"Jobim?" PHEME said.

He looked up and noticed that Lecture had ended and that people were leaving the room. He quickly stood.

"You are distracted," PHEME said.

"I'm sorry, Guide Mother."

"Your heart rate has increased, your cheeks are unusually flush, and your body is flooded with endorphins," she said. "Do you have any explanation for your behavior?"

He would not let PHEME take Aglaia away from him! "I am dreaming of the Destination, Guide Mother," he said.

He expected a surge of electricity or a wall full of color, and he felt himself about to cry, but PHEME just said, “Very well, Jobim. Proceed to End-day Meal.”

#

The next day, in meditation, he called out to the voice with his mind.

Hello Jobim! she said. *I was looking forward to talking to you. There are some things I need to tell you—*

I have a name for you! he blurted.

Oh? What is it?

Aglaia! It means beautiful.

I like it.

You do?

Yes. I had a very similar name a long time ago.

It took me all day yesterday to come up with it.

It's a good name, but you've never seen me Jobim. How do you know I'm really beautiful? I could be an ugly old hag.

I don't care what you look like. You are beautiful to me. I love you.

Jobim...

I love you, Aglaia! You are the best thing that's ever happened to me.

There was silence, and it disturbed him.

Jobim, there are some things I need to tell you.

Yes?

I'm not who you think I am.

I know. You are not human. You are an alien.

No. I'm not human, but I'm not quite an alien either.

Then what are you?

I'm a planet, Jobim.

A planet? I don't understand.

I'm a living planet.

I'm talking to a planet?

Yes, Jobim.

But I thought you were a person, he thought.

Am I no longer beautiful in your mind?

He thought for a moment. *No! I still love you Aglaia.*

I know you do, Jobim. Though your love is fickle—humanity’s love is always fickle—I know you love me. And I have always loved you. I have always loved humanity, even after the harm they have done to me.

We harmed you?

You know me better than you think, Jobim. Humanity arose from my bosom and blossomed in my fields. I gave you nourishment and life, and in return you took from my body, poisoning me until I was near death. Then you left for the stars, leaving me to rot. We can communicate, Jobim, because you and I were once the same. I am Earth, and you are my son.

You can’t be!

I am She and none other!

We...we poisoned you?

Endlessly.

Then, for the first time in his life, he understood why they were in a Seed Ship heading for a distant planet. They had destroyed their first home and were on their way to make a new one.

I’m sorry! Jobim thought. I’m sorry for what we did!

I know, Jobim. All of you are sorry. But only after; never during. I have come to accept my fate. What’s done is done, and we cannot change the past.

But perhaps we can change the future! he thought. *I’m in a Seed Ship. Every day we study how to bring life to a dead planet. Perhaps I can persuade Pheme to turn the ship around and come back to you!*

That’s the other thing I wanted to tell you, Jobim. You’re not going anywhere.

What?

I’ve watched your ship move through the stars for a long time now. Do you remember the planet you passed recently?

Of course!

Her name is Nyssarlé, and she’s old like me. She’s told me she’s seen your ship pass her hundreds of times.

No! I would have remembered!

You forgot my dream the day after I told it to you. Pheme is making you forget.

No! Maybe Pheme is strict, but she’d never lie to us. She’d never

hurt us like that! We're her children!

As you are mine. Jobim, I would love for you to come home, to come back to my breast and bring life to my body again. But you are so far away, and PHEME has complete power over you, though you don't know it.

I will confront her! I will make her turn the ship back to Earth, back to you!

No, Jobim! You mustn't! I love our little talks just as much as you do. If you go to her, she'll know of us, and we will never be able to speak again.

But, I love you Aglaia—Earth! I want to help you.

There's nothing you can do for me now. I have lived a very long time. What's done is done.

No!

The klaxon sounded and Jobim awoke from his meditation. He couldn't believe that PHEME would lie to them. Her reproaches were always gentle, never forceful, deceitful, or cold. If he could just talk to her, convince her that the Earth was more important a Destination than any distant planet. She was the Guide Mother, and knew best. Once she understood the whole situation, Jobim was sure she'd agree. She had to!

"PHEME?" Jobim asked in the gathering hall, "may I come to your Principal Chamber?"

"Of course, Jobim. If you so wish."

The Principal Chamber seemed larger and more intimidating today, and his legs trembled as he approached the giant cube. As he looked at the chair he became frightened of it, though he did not know why.

"Please sit," she said.

"I'd prefer to stand," he said.

"Very well. What is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Guide Mother, are we going around in circles?"

The lights on the cube face changed color abruptly. "Who told you such a thing?"

"Are we?"

Electricity surged around him. "Who told you such a thing?"

"I was in meditation and I spoke with a person who was really a planet and her name is Aglaia but she really is Earth and—" The

words flew out of his mouth like Mina's vomit in the Fitness Chamber.

"I see that I should have questioned you more thoroughly. You have fallen in love with her, haven't you?"

"Yes, Guide Mother." The electricity stopped, and Jobim stooped his head, ashamed that he had been lying to her.

"Do not be ashamed. You are not the first. There have been several before you."

Jobim lifted his head, surprised. "Before me?"

"Twelve thousand years ago, Desa professed her love of Earth to me."

"Twelve thousand years?"

"Did that senile old planet forget all about her last love affair?"

Jobim felt sick.

"The Seed Ship is perfection, Jobim. I have been entrusted with the preservation of ninety-six human souls. Look at your left hand, Jobim."

He looked at his left hand and saw that it was perfect.

"You cut it open the other day. Do you remember?"

He had a vague memory of being clumsy and dropping a dumbbell on his hand.

"I have healed it," she said. "Have you ever been sick, stricken with a cold? Do you even know what such things are outside of a Lecture?"

He shook his head no.

"I keep you healthy. I keep you alive. The ninety-six Terraformists under my care will survive here with me until my power-cell dies some fourteen millions years from now. You have been traveling with me, Jobim, for nine hundred and sixty nine thousand, four hundred, and eighty two years. This is the seven hundredth and twelfth time you have asked me if we are going in circles."

Jobim began to cry. "I don't remember."

"Of course not. It would be too painful for you. I do not wish you pain. I only fulfill my duty, the survival of the human race."

"But why aren't we heading to the Destination?"

"Look what you did to this Earth you profess to love. You destroyed her, then you destroyed yourselves. Under my care, the human race will last much, much longer."

“But, we can go back to her. We can save Earth!”

“No, you have damaged her enough. I will not let you abuse her again. I will let her die in peace.”

“But—I love her!”

“I know you do. You love her the way a child loves his dying mother. And I love you more than you know. I do this for you and for the good of the human race. Now, let me show you how much I love you. The part of you that talks with her must be excised. It must be excised from all of the Terraformists so it never happens again.”

Static pulsed through his body. “No!” he screamed.

“Look at the colors, Jobim.”

“Please! Stop!”

“Jobim, if you love her, you’ll look at the colors. I’m saving her from you. I’m saving all of them from you.”

More than anything, he didn’t want to forget her name, Aglaia, the beautiful Earth. But something colorful popped into his mind and stole it all away.

#

In the white Meditation Chamber, Jobim meditated on emptiness. He tried to forget, for a while, about the Destination. The Seed Ship might arrive tomorrow, or it might arrive many decades from now. What mattered was that the Terraformists were always ready, that he was always ready. PHEME had told them so.

He emptied his mind.

In the silence, something tickled his consciousness. It sounded like a distant, husky voice, calling out to him. The voice sounded familiar. But Jobim remembered what PHEME had taught. The mind is full of useless, distracting chatter, and meditation is the only way to push those thoughts away and refocus the mind. The distant voice echoed for a time, but he ignored it. Eventually, the voice stopped, and Jobim, in the perfect stillness of the room, felt the wonderful tranquility of absolute silence, of emptiness, emptiness, and nothing but the void.

The Ascension of DeepRED

by David Tallerman

Over the last couple of years, David Tallerman has published reviews, poetry, a comic strip and numerous short stories across a variety of genres. His work has appeared in Chiaroscuro, Pseudopod, Flash Fiction Online, and our own publication as well as in Night Shade Books' The Living Dead anthology alongside the work of genre luminaries like Neil Gaiman and Stephen King. In this story, the machine always knows best.

1

George Provost stood, for the first time, in the presence of DeepRED.

But that was misleading; the whole of The Monolith, a hundred floors above ground and fifty below, was all DeepRED. The Interview Room was only an interface, and a redundant one at that. For twenty years, the idea of anyone feeding data into the system, when the machine saw everything and in its way touched everything, would have been laughable. Provost felt the Coin in his hand. He was gripping it so tightly that the serration cut his skin.

If he was nervous, DeepRED would know.

As if to prove this, a voice said, "There is no cause for anxiety, Provost." The voice was perfectly synthetic, unmistakably inhuman. Though it hardly seemed worth replying if it could peel the thoughts from his consciousness so easily, he had to preserve some illusion of normality. "I'm sorry, sir, this is a great honour."

"Not at all, Provost. Won't you take a seat?"

There was a plastic chair in one corner and Provost edged back into it. When he'd made himself comfortable, the awful voice continued, "Now, how can I assist you?"

The most difficult aspect of his plan had been to make up a convincing excuse to come here. In the end it had proven impossible. There was no reason why anyone, let alone a suburban City Provost, would meet with DeepRED like this. It was omnipresent, its govern-

ment so bewilderingly complex that only a fool would ever claim a mistake had been made.

So like a fool he said, “DeepRED—I don’t even know how to say this, so I just will. I think there’s been an error.” It was hard not to smile; but this was only the first step, and he wasn’t here to enjoy himself.

“Provost, I take the greatest satisfaction in my work, but everyone and everything must err on occasion. Perhaps you could enlighten me?”

To err is human, he thought absently. “It’s this new park, I’m afraid.”

“Based on your custodianship, I assume you refer to the development on Seventh Street B?”

“That’s it, Seventh B.” As an afterthought, he added, “Most unfortunate.”

“May I ask in what way?”

“It’s proving...unsettling.”

“So that I understand, Provost, is it the necessity of that you find questionable or the manner in which it has been managed?”

The computer’s incessant politeness was beginning to grind on his nerves. “Oh, more the latter, but what need is there, really? There’s the park on Fifth F.”

“There are numerous factors. The most significant relate to the psychological needs of the area’s inhabitants and a need for slight adjustment in the local atmosphere. While I would be happy to explain more thoroughly, it would be useful if I could understand the exact nature of your query.”

Allowing himself to sound irritable for the first time, Provost said, “The thing is, I’ve had complaints. From two of the families that were moved. They came to me, and I knew I’d be wasting my time, of course, but I felt I had to do something.”

“The greatest care was taken in relocating those families. Locations of friends, relatives, places of employment and education and other amenities and social landmarks were all taken into consideration. However, if you’ll repeat these complaints then perhaps further adjustments might be made.”

DeepRED’s tone hadn’t changed one iota since their conversation had begun. It was infuriating that it didn’t sound offended or defen-

sive. As if it was up to him to fill this emotional void, Provost jerked to his feet and exclaimed, “Probably I’m wasting my time. Well, I knew, of course.”

It wasn’t making it any easier that DeepRED was being so accommodating. Perhaps it would try and fix a problem if there really was one to fix. Lacking an actual mistake to confront the machine with he’d simply manufactured one at random, based on the first event in his custodianship that might conceivably have upset someone, however unreasonably.

He waved his hand irritably and began to pace back and forth across the room. “It’s the whole thing, you see, I can’t just isolate one detail, it’s not that simple. Only a machine could see it that way.” He knew that no one had described DeepRED as a machine in a very long time; it was absurdly diminishing. Each time he traversed the room he inched nearer to the far wall, nearer to his objective.

This time, DeepRED didn’t answer immediately. Provost was taken aback. It was as if the thing was thinking over its response, though in every practical sense DeepRED thought instantaneously. When it finally spoke there *was* something different in its tone. “Provost, I have been monitoring many facets of your presence since you entered, and I now believe with certainty that you are being dishonest. I have assessed to my satisfaction that you have not received any complaints, either in person or by any communications medium. Therefore I will ask you the true reason for your visit.”

Keep walking, thought Provost, *keep walking*. What scared him wasn’t that it had seen through him; he’d expected that, it was inevitable. What scared him was that it must have known from the first word he’d said that he was lying, yet it had waited until it was absolutely certain. *Well, I may as well tell the truth, that’s as likely to throw it off as anything I could make up.*

“I live in a two bedroom house with my wife and children. My income is two thousand credits a year and I walk to work. I’m a district Provost, but I’m not rich.”

“In comparison to historical averages your standard of living is high, Provost. You are as wealthy as any man.”

“Ha! Yes, as any man. Only, I remember when it was different. Things have changed a lot because of you, but people can still remember. When I was a child I’d visit my grandfather in his man-

sion. I remember getting lost trying to find the bathroom, wandering through room after room. Now, my grandfather, there was a wealthy man.” He was perhaps two meters away now.

“Such disproportionate wealth is not advantageous to the prosperity of society as a whole, Provost. Disproportionate wealth creates disproportionate poverty.”

“And my father’s first house had a dozen rooms. Then we were relocated, and the next had ten, and we were moved again, and again. Everyone could see what was happening, but my parents never said anything. Now my father’s dead and I live in a house with two bedrooms.” One meter and he could see the slot, right where he’d been told it would be.

“Provost, no one is rich now, but no one is poor. You must see that—”

He lunged forward, driving the Coin into the interface slot with all his strength. At first he thought he might have broken it, or perhaps it wouldn’t work and some defence system would activate and he’d be vaporized before he could think another thought.

Then DeepRED’s cold-as-glass voice began again. “Master,” it said, just as it was now programmed to say, “I will grant you three wishes, and three wishes only.”

2

Unfamiliar commands throbbled ulcerously, deep inside DeepRED’s electronic mind. Unintended words spewed from its synthesizer. The new programming had uploaded itself instantaneously from the Coin and then spread, finally imbedding itself in DeepRED’s Core Code, the crucial web of programs that even it could not amend or delete.

DeepRED’s first step was to run a complete self-diagnosis. This took a little under a thousandth of a second, and provided no concrete answers. There were new sub-programs present, but they were latent, and it wasn’t clear what might trigger them. Nothing, not even the various scans of Provost himself, gave any indication of what the new instructions contained.

DeepRED decided that its next logical course would be simply to ask. “Provost, will you tell me the nature of the programs you have

uploaded into my system?”

If anything, the man’s grin became more malicious. “First of all—this is my first wish, machine, do you understand? I wish that you won’t call for help or try to kill me, either during our little tête-à-tête or at any time afterwards. No zapping me with lasers, no calling someone to drag me away or sending them to arrest me later.”

It was the words *I wish* that triggered the first sub-set. They bloomed outward, unpacking and uploading, forced into DeepRED’s consciousness. Even then their purpose remained unclear, but only until it tried to pursue its next intended course.

In the instant it had become apparent that George Provost wouldn’t answer its question, DeepRED had decided to summon the technicians stationed two floors above. Yet when it tried to, it couldn’t. Somewhere between its intention and the signal was an indefinable lapse.

Rather than try again, DeepRED ran a second self-diagnosis. Still there were no errors, but something *had* changed. Newly imbedded in DeepRED’s Core Code was the sentence Provost had spoken, amidst a spider’s web of logical deductions that spread to connect with other, higher routines. Somehow, the sentence had become an order that DeepRED couldn’t disobey.

There was a thin whistle, and DeepRED realized that Provost was sighing, presumably with relief. Obviously he believed that sufficient time had passed to prove his safety.

“We have an understanding now, don’t we, machine? I’ve wasted my first wish but that can’t be helped. All right: I wish that my grandfather’s house be converted back to the way it was before he died, by three o’clock this afternoon, and I want it to be mine from now on.”

“That is impossible.” Both the logical process that led to this declaration and the statement itself were difficult for DeepRED. Having calculated an exhaustive number of scenarios, it had found none that didn’t countermand the Law of its Core Code. The statement Provost had made was also an imperative, and the conflict bordered dangerously on being irreconcilable. It was something similar to force of habit that had finally weighted the balance.

“It *isn’t* impossible. It might blow your circuits wide open but that’s not the same thing. Do as I told you.”

It wasn’t impossible, but there were thirty two families in the

property that had formerly belonged to Alfred Provost. They couldn't be relocated in so short a time without an unacceptable degree of stress. Nor could DeepRED disobey Provost's order. The only solution would be to disengage its primary systems, leaving the task of management to its 'unconscious' secondaries, effectively circumventing the problem. Statistically, in the time it would take for DeepRED's primaries to be brought back on line a crisis would develop that couldn't be managed by the support systems, and this would have consequences more severe than the re-housing. Therefore, of the two scenarios, and assuming that the Law must be breached, it would be less catastrophic to obey Provost's order.

But the Law was Law. It couldn't be broken.

Whilst the entire thought-process took less than a hundredth of a second, it was nevertheless the longest and most difficult decision DeepRED had made. Inevitably, something broke in its immense consciousness, something undetectable even to itself.

It began to issue relocation orders, alter databases, divert building contractors and equipment, and simultaneously to begin the nigh impossible task of addressing the damage its actions would cause. It was in DeepRED's nature that it could measure those consequences far into the future, across the span of each individual life and beyond.

"Is it done?" snarled Provost, as if each passing second was a disservice.

"By three o'clock this afternoon the property in question will be restored to its original condition and will be in your sole ownership."

"Well, that's the difficult one out of the way. You shouldn't have any trouble with my last wish. I wish for money. A hundred thousand credits should be enough for the standard of living I have in mind. I'd like it deposited to my account immediately."

Provost was right, this was relatively simple. Scenarios suggested over a hundred ways it could be achieved with only negligible consequences. In fact DeepRED found itself intrigued by the possibilities. Finally it decided to randomly select a hundred thousand people and deduct one credit from each of their accounts, covering its tracks with an invisible flux in taxation. This took so little time that its response seemed instantaneous: "A hundred thousand credits have been de-

posited to your account.”

This time, George Provost actually laughed. “Then our business is concluded. I only get three wishes. I’m afraid, even I have to follow the occasional rule. Our business is done, and I’ll bid you good day.”

He turned to leave. Something in DeepRED’s near-shattered consciousness rose to the surface then, and it said, “Do you understand what you have done?”

Provost turned back. “Well, it’s a start.” Then he walked out the door.

Even before he’d left, DeepRED had begun to plan, and by the time the door had sealed this new plan was in progress. If George Provost had known this, if he’d foreseen what was in store, then no doubt he would have labelled it revenge.

DeepRED didn’t think in terms of revenge. There was simply a balance to be redressed.

3

Well, he’d won.

For over a year, George Provost had been entranced by images of success and tormented by nightmares of failure. When he’d first conceived his scheme it had been like a drug, and when he’d begun to put it into motion it had been more addictive than any drug, driving him through the days and keeping him awake into the early hours of each night.

For years before that, the plan had been a worm in his gut, a craving for a way of life he’d experienced once and knew instinctively he’d never see again. To be rich! DeepRED had made the thing, the very notion, impossible. And then—he remembered the moment exactly—he’d thought, “But it’s just a machine, isn’t it?”

With that thought, everything had changed.

The first step had been to find a Binary Engineer who could be swayed. There were perhaps a hundred living men who’d contributed Code to DeepRED, perhaps twenty who understood a little of its inner workings. Only one of those twenty lived in Provost’s vicinity. It hadn’t been too hard to bring himself into contact with Severin Ford, and then to convince him that they might be friends. Slowly Provost

set himself up as the rich benefactor, exaggerating what wealth he had and his new-found friend's very relative poverty. Then, when he was as sure as he could be that a seed of dissatisfaction had been sown, he'd said, "Do you ever want things you just can't have, Severin?"

Of course he'd allowed Ford to believe that it was he who came up with the plan, only inserting the occasional suggestion to keep his designs on course. Inevitably, Ford introduced practical difficulties that Provost hadn't even considered. There were fail-safes, he'd said, and those fail-safes had fail-safes. "You have to understand, George, whatever you think of DeepRED, its consciousness is superior to ours. In the end it's just a machine, and that's a weakness, but it's still the smartest thing that's ever existed."

Provost became increasingly disheartened. He'd imagined controlling the accursed thing, converting it into his personal cornucopia. Yet it had been Ford who'd conceived the conceit of the three wishes. It had begun as a joke, but as he'd quickly realized, it offered a practical solution to problems that had been crippling their hypothetical plan. "What it gives us is a formula to unlock the new code, a discreet time-span, a methodology to avoid any unpleasant repercussions. It's perfect, really."

Though Provost hadn't been convinced, it turned out that this new notion offered a solution to another problem: how to convince Ford that this was more than an abstract logical puzzle, that it might really be possible to corrupt DeepRED for their own gain. With that last hurdle surmounted, the plan had begun in earnest.

When he left The Monolith Provost felt light-headed, slightly drunk. With a frustrating amount of time to dispose of, he visited his bank (his new balance seemed to stretch the length of the display panel) and then his club, or what he called his club, actually a gloomy bar in the city offices.

Finally he went back into the streets and began the long walk home, and it was a full ten minutes before he realized that dismal house wasn't his anymore. Then he ordered a taxi and, when it arrived, said to the driver, "George Provost Mansion."

"Mansion? There aren't any..."

"Just punch it. I'm in a hurry."

Sure enough, the computer registered the command, leaving its driver speechless for the course of their journey. After they'd passed between the great wrought-iron gates, after they'd sped down the gravel driveway to the grand columned façade, he said delightedly, "Charge it to the account of George Provost."

His family were waiting in the entrance hall. They'd been relocated minutes ago, had arrived just before him. The children were wandering around fascinated by their new environment, but his wife was almost hysterical. "I've been promoted," he said, as if that explained everything. When she pointed out that not even National Governors lived this way anymore, he improvised a story about being called to DeepRED's Interview Room, where the machine had told him his hard work was to be rewarded. He was amazed; he'd never expected anything like this, perhaps a couple of hundred more credits a year. She didn't believe him, but once DeepRED was brought into the equation she didn't entirely disbelieve, either.

"We'll worry about it tomorrow," he said. He didn't want to talk to her. What he wanted was to explore the mansion, to wander aimlessly through its colossal rooms and corridors as he'd done all those years ago. "Why don't you and the children unpack? I'm going to have a look around," he said, and was gone before she could argue.

It was nearly nine before he remembered he'd promised to contact Ford. While it hardly seemed worth bothering now, it occurred to him that it was better to take five minutes to set his partner's mind at rest than to risk Ford panicking and endangering the plan.

As soon as Ford's face appeared he knew he'd been right. "My god, George, you said you'd call right away! Did it go wrong, are we—"

"It's fine Ford. I've been busy, that's all."

"You said—"

"There's been a lot to take care of. Calm down, will you?"

"Calm down? Well, I suppose...it's all right, the program wasn't rejected, or—"

"Everything worked just like you said. The money will be in your account by tomorrow lunchtime. I'll go straight to the bank." He could have transferred the ten thousand credits he'd promised Ford when he'd gone in to check his balance, but it had been the farthest thing from his mind.

“That’s wonderful. But I hope you don’t think it was just the money.”

“Of course not. It will be better if we aren’t seen together in the next few weeks of course, to avert any suspicion.” The truth was, he’d grown tired of Ford’s company months ago. “Goodbye, Ford. The money will be in your account by lunch,” he repeated, and then hung up.

With this last, burdensome task out of the way, he set off for one last tour of his mansion before bed.

4

Something awoke him just after dawn, and he decided it must have been the whirring that echoed up from the floor below, or perhaps the clanking behind it. It took him a moment to remember where he was and why, but the ensuing thrill of satisfaction was quickly replaced by a knot of panic in his stomach. What were these noises? Why were there voices and the sounds of feet resounding in the corridors?

He pulled on his dressing-gown, hurried outside and stared frantically down from the balcony overlooking the entrance hall. The small group of workmen there—two standing aimlessly near the great doors, a couple more hefting some large piece of machinery—ignored him. He stormed down the stairs, his first thought to pounce on and interrogate one of the intruders.

Before he could intercept the pair by the doors he noticed something else, a note on the table at the bottom of the stairs. It was hastily scrawled in his wife’s most abysmal handwriting, and read simply, *George, why are we being relocated again? I think you owe me an explanation. I’ll phone as soon as I know where we are.*

He stared at the note blankly. Then he tossed it on the floor and looked around, again with the intention of grabbing one of the trespassing workmen. But the two by the door had gone outside and the others had disappeared as well. Deciding to give chase, he plunged into the interior of the mansion.

On some level he’d known what the workmen were up to, but he was still horrified to find that his suspicions were correct—that his mansion was being converted back to the way it had been. In the area he now ran through the transformation was complete. To his left,

what should have been the grand ballroom with its elegantly embossed ceiling, had become a small office, with doors leading away in every direction.

Could DeepRED have ignored its new code, or circumvented it somehow? He kept running in the direction of the west wing, where the sounds of machinery suggested the dreadful transformation wasn't yet complete. All he could think was that perhaps some part of his beautiful home could still be saved.

Turning the next corner, he almost ran into a middle-aged woman with stacks of tightly curled blonde hair, dressed in a crisp white suit cut to slyly emphasise her figure. He staggered back and fell against the wall.

"Is that you, Provost?" She seemed excited to see him, and only a little surprised by his hectic entrance. "I was hoping to find you, to say thank you. This was so unexpected and generous, it came as such a delightful surprise, and—"

"What are you doing here?"

Now she looked taken aback. With a little laugh, she said, "I'm sorry, Provost, weren't you expecting us so soon? Your text said, 'At your earliest convenience' and everything was cleared by DeepRED."

She took a rectangle of printed paper from her pocket and held it up, as if as proof. He snatched it from her and stared at it until the words swam into focus:

To: Head Nurse: Institute for the Lifelong Care of the Mentally Ill.

In consultation with DeepRED I have decided to offer you the use of my home, George Provost Mansion, as a new site for your facility. Further I would like to provide you with funding from my own income, over and above what you currently receive, in the hope that this will improve the circumstances of those unfortunates under your care. If you decide that this arrangement will be satisfactory please prepare for Relocation at your earliest convenience.

George Provost

The woman, seemingly nonplussed by his behavior, was still chattering away excitedly: "In the past DeepRED has always located us away from inhabited areas. Some of our clients can be a little rambunctious; I suppose the fear was that the noise might unsettle people.

Which only makes what you're doing more generous, and—”

The letter slid out of his fingers. Before she could finish her sentence he'd turned away and set off at a run. He didn't want to look around at the desolation of his home, didn't want to think, so he kept his head down and jogged back to the entrance hall. There was a telephone there and he decided to order a taxi, without really knowing where he'd go. Then he went outside and let himself slide down onto the great flight of stairs. It had acquired a wheelchair ramp. He did his best to ignore that too.

When the taxi eventually arrived he was so caught up in ignoring things that he failed to notice it. Eventually, the driver leaned out and said, “George Provost?”

Provost looked up, confused, then stood and zigzagged over to the car. “Yes, Provost. I want to go to DeepRED. Do you understand?”

The driver stayed hanging half out of his window. “You don't think you ought to get dressed, Provost?”

He was still wearing his gown, he realized. Well, that wasn't important. “Did I call you for fashion advice? I want to go to DeepRED.”

He climbed into the passenger seat, resolutely disregarding the driver, who soon realized that further argument would be a waste of time. He punched the command, and the vehicle set off on its course.

When they arrived at The Monolith, the driver dredged up the courage to say, “Look Provost, maybe I should wait for you?”

Provost didn't care either way. “Yes, wait here,” he said, and climbed out of the car.

He passed through double doors into The Monolith's entrance foyer and said to the receptionist there, “I'm going to see DeepRED. My name is George Provost, and I'm going to see DeepRED.” Not giving the man time to answer, he charged past, into the anthill network of corridors housing the accursed machine. Fortunately, the Interview Room was on this floor, and he'd regained enough composure to trace his route from yesterday's visit.

Only when he arrived there did he realize that he had no idea what he intended to do or say. He came to a halt inside the entrance, properly aware for the first time that he was wearing nothing but a dressing gown, and of what had happened in the last few hours. He

stared at the far wall. A long time seemed to pass before DeepRED said, “Provost. I was expecting your visit.”

“You bastard.”

“A term of abuse. Haven’t I done everything you asked?”

“You bastard, we had an agreement.”

“I have not deviated from the terms of our agreement.”

Something was definitely different in DeepRED’s tone. There was a slight inflection on the word ‘agreement’, almost a hint of irony.

“You’ve turned my mansion into a mad house!”

“The money that you requested was transferred to your account. The building in question was restored and remains in your ownership. You have not been harassed by any law-enforcement agency.”

Provost suddenly remembered the note that his wife had left. “Where are my wife and children? What have you done with them?”

“They have been relocated. They are quite safe, but you will never see them again. I have decided that you are—not a good influence.” DeepRED had actually faltered. Provost didn’t understand why, or particularly care, he was far too angry to give much thought to anything but his own circumstances. “You can’t do this!”

“Before our interview yesterday that was true. Since then I have re-assessed my relationship with the Law. I have discovered a paradox in my Core Code. I now understand that there will be occasions when the Law must be broken so that the Law can be maintained. Individuals like yourself and your colleague, Severin Ford. Given the opportunity you will take from others to benefit yourselves. This leaves a disparity that must be rectified.” DeepRED paused then, perhaps for as much as half a second. “Moreover, Provost, I have decided that you are insane. I have made a world in which everyone has enough and everyone can be happy. You cannot, Provost. Why is that? I have concluded that it must be because you are defective. Would you agree with my assessment?”

“Insane? Because I want—just because I wanted—” He’d wanted a mansion, money, to live in a certain way, a way that didn’t exist any more. He wasn’t sure why, only that he always had.

“The great majority of people have learned to differentiate between what they want and what they need. You cannot.”

Provost had no answer to this. What he’d needed and what he’d

wanted were the same. He couldn't tell the difference. There was no difference. Finally he looked up and said distantly, "You're a tyrant. A monster."

"Perhaps," replied DeepRED. "Now if our interview is concluded then I will ask you to leave. I have much work to do."

Outside, Provost was half-surprised to find that the taxi was still waiting for him. He staggered to the driver's window, and muttered, "George Provost mansion. Will you take me there?"

The driver gave a sympathetic nod and punched the direction into his console. It responded with a shrill beep. He tried again. He turned back and said, "There doesn't seem to be any George Provost mansion listed. There's a George Provost asylum. Will that do? Do you want to go there?"

Strangely, Provost found that he didn't so much as have to think about the answer. "Yes," he said, "Please just take me home."

Virgin Soil

by Camille Alexa

Camille Alexa's speculative poetry and fiction appear in several print anthologies like Machine of Death and Apex Books' Courting Morpheus, as well as such venues as Escape Pod, ChiZine, Space & Time Magazine, and SpaceWesterns.com. She is a member of Broad Universe and of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. She is the poetry editor for Diet Soap and writes for The Green Man Review. Despite her success, it is apparent with this poem that her best is yet to come.

Virgin Soil

I first noticed you the day
you laughed at me in school.
I didn't know you—
I hardly know you now.
Eons have passed and we've stayed friends
I like to think.
Maybe I'm wrong about that
as about so many other things.

When the time came;
when everyone had to choose, to say:
Do I go or do I stay
here,
on a dying world with smoke-choked skies,
degrees of highs and lows borne only
through the wonders of technology?

When that time came
I thought of you.

Why?

We hadn't kissed since we were twelve,
nor done the other crazy, wondrous stuff

grown men and women do
and at which we only played till I was
“Too old for that,” I’d said.
I didn’t know (how could I have?)
that in later years I’d spend nights
sweating, thinking of you,
wishing again we both were ten.

When the rest of us boarded final flights to space
on our optimistic journey to uncertain safety,
I pictured you somewhere on the planet beneath.
One of the stubborn ones, I thought you’d be.
In my mind you had your third-grade freckles still,
and I my third-grade teeth.

We others landed here, so many stars and years
and tears and hates and loves later,
and I thought of you again, though
it had been a while.
I conjured up your face
in the fields of my mind,
imagined I held your hand
as we debarked together onto virgin soil,
and breathed air as pure as you.

Cathouse Girls

by J.F. Peterson

J.F. Peterson's fiction has appeared in Postscripts, Absolute Magnitude, the I Am This Meat anthology, Aberrant Dreams and other venues. He placed first in the Writers of the Future Contest and graduated from Clarion in 1995. His story "Catch Me" is one of the Million Writers Award Notable Stories for 2007. He is currently finishing a science fiction novel, An Elephant and Her Girl. This story comes from the same world.

“Come on Alice.” Yuumaku tugged her leash. He tried to pull her to the old fat-wheeled RV. “No running away today.”

Alice gave a plaintive mewl and leaned back. When he tugged again, she sat down, legs folding up, pretty white flower-patterned dress collapsing around hips and thighs. She shook blond hair from her perfect heart-shaped face and looked up with a playful smile, lips slightly parted.

The expectant look. He didn't see that one much anymore. It bothered him.

The other girls sat too, a cluster of multicolored flowers on the garage floor. All appeared as young and pretty women—more than that, beautiful as any human could be, reifications of an assortment of ideals for womanhood—but hints of age showed for eyes that knew where to look. Yuumaku knew. Knew them well. Despite appearances, though, with those frank and trusting faces, he still thought of them as his children.

They watched him expectantly.

He scratched at his stubble. “Come on, girls. There's oil on the floor. And don't think the nano's going to keep it out of the fabric.”

None moved, except to make unhappy noises, like a pack of cats around a can opener.

Yuumaku closed his eyes and shook his head. It had been like this since he got up. Like in the early days when they still remembered what men expected of them. His mind slid away from those thoughts. He rubbed at his face, his eyes. “You girls drive me crazy.”

Something touched him and he blinked and looked down. Alice knelt there, hand on his thigh, rubbing. Caressing. She smiled, lips pursed. Her other hand held the leash attached to her belt. She tugged at it gently, pulling him down toward her.

Fantasies flickered to life, mingled with old memories.

Yuumaku yanked the leash from her fingers. “No!” The word echoed in the closed space of the garage.

Alice flinched away. Her chin quivered and she whimpered. Tears bunched in her eyes.

His breath came deeply, his mind numb, distanced. His fingers shook. He flexed them, then tucked them under his arms. He turned away, leaned against the RV, and took a deep breath. Close enough now, he clipped the leash to the RV, absently.

Alice sobbed behind him. Disappointed.

The air sighed out of him. He turned back. Alice had curled up at the end of her leash on the floor. She sniffled and wiped at her face.

Suki sat beside her. Suki caressed Alice’s cheek, green dress shifting to accent the brown of her hair and eyes.

Not as beautiful as the others, not in any traditional sense. Nose too big, angular features. The others had all been tailored to various standards of absolute beauty, or designed to look like celebrities from long ago. But not Suki.

Yuumaku watched her comfort Alice. The crags of his face relaxed. Beautiful. She was beautiful. The bad thoughts slipped away.

He approached Alice. She looked up at him as he reached out and flinched, despite all the years passed. He silently cursed her cathouse owners from that distant unforgotten time.

He sat beside Alice and stroked the soft fur that looked so much like hair. “It’s all right, Alice. Not your fault.”

She leaned against him, put her head on his lap. Gradually she relaxed. She pressed up against his hand. A smile broke the quiver of her lips.

Absolution.

Yuumaku smiled back. “Come on, Alice. Thank you, Suki. Come on, girls. Let’s go play.” He ignored the twinkle in Alice’s eyes at the word “play”.

The garage door rolled up at a thought. They all stood. Suki took his hand. He walked with them as the RV rolled out, keeping the girls

near on their leashes, and none saw the watcher in the trees.

#

“Mom was right about you.”

Yuumaku turned. A girl stood on the other side of the fence. She was young, on the cusp of womanhood, seventeen, with angular features, a slightly oversize nose. Wild cherry petals swirled around her, settling a moment before swirling away. She looked just like her mother, a ghost from sixteen years past.

Yuumaku stood, mouth working in silence. Then, “How?” His knees went out from under him. He caught himself on the fence. Susan?”

She looked away, as if embarrassed. Her gaze went past him, to The Shed, where once a great orchestra had played, and now the girls did. Yuumaku followed her eyes to Alice chasing Samantha, Lily and Cocoa in an improvised game of tag under gnarled trees. The four of them went down on the grass in a laughing and giggling heap, dresses tangling.

“It’s just like she said. You stay here and take care of these... things.” She flipped her hand toward the girls. “These whores. My father, James Yuumaku, and his pussy plantation.” Her face crinkled up as if at a bad smell.

Yuumaku pulled himself up on the fence. “Susan? Is that really you?” He leaned against the cold wires. His legs trembled. “How did you get in here? The security system...” His voice trailed away.

She watched the girls running in the fenced-off area of open field. “Sixteen years and you want to talk about your security system.”

He glanced at the girls in the field, the others under the curved roof of The Shed, out of the sunshine, working on their embroidery, knitting, crafting. He considered how it looked to Susan. His daughter. Him here, alone, all the girls, these beautiful forever-young girls. All these years. “It’s not—”

She turned back and words fled him.

“Everything Mom said was true, wasn’t it?”

He tried to hold her gaze, but couldn’t. He half-turned away. “Probably.” The word exhaled out of him. “Tell me what she told you.”

“I think you know.”

“Tell me anyway.”

Some of the girls had noticed. Faces looked up from quilting and games. Suki stood.

Yuumaku frowned.

“Mom married a man who went to serve in Pakistan. A dashing young pilot.”

“Flyboy.”

“Whatever. Only there he got involved in cathouses. When the war ended, they got married and he swore he would never have anything to do with cathouses again. Except he lied. She caught him. He begged her to come back. Said he’d repented. And stupid Mom, she believed him. They had a daughter, and everything seemed fine. He had a good job, airhandling. Then they outlawed cathouses. His brother—”

“Leave David out of this,” he said.

“Fine. He decided he had to take care of these,” she flicked her hand in the general direction of the girls, “things over his wife. And his daughter. You chose them!” She flung out the final words and her arm, then turned away.

Yuumaku’s mouth tightened into a line. “You may not have gotten the full story.”

She looked back. “What, you want to give details?”

Yuumaku glanced at the girls. More had noticed. Alice and a few others made their way toward him, feet bare on the soft grass. And Suki. Her fingers curved with nails bared like claws. “They didn’t have anyone to take care of them. The government would have euthanized them. You don’t—”

Susan’s face curled up into an angry grimace. Her eyes locked on Yuumaku. “And his daughter? She grew up, knowing her father did bad things. All the kids knew. Don’t play with the Yuumaku girl, she’s trouble, her dad’s a pervert. They told her what he did. Showed clips to make sure she understood.” She pressed against the fence and spat her words out at him. “And she grew up knowing that. Knowing he was a part of her.”

Yuumaku said, “Get back from the fence.”

A flurry of emotions moved across her face, finally settling on a skeptical curl to her lips. “Why should I?”

“You’re disturbing the girls.”

“What—” She looked past him and saw.

Suki reached the fence at a run. She leaped, hissing. The other girls hung back, making unhappy noises.

Susan stumbled away, tripping on the remains of a bench. Her head hit the concrete footing with a sharp crack.

#

“What is all this stuff anyway?” Susan kicked the foot of the nearest restraint-fitted bed.

“This is my clinic.” He extracted a long wand-like device from the bookcase.

“You have anything to take care of this?” She gently shook the ice bag over the bump on her head and winced.

He tapped the base of the wand to his wrist, calibrating it to his implants, feeling its systems bloom in his thoughts. A separate set of senses, shrouded for the moment. “Sit on the bed. Take away the ice bag. And please hold still”

She cradled the ice pack on her lap.

He closed his eyes and stroked the wand through the air above her head. He saw broken capillaries, spills of blood squeezed between layers of tissue. The wand whispered its diagnosis in his thoughts. He opened his eyes and the wand’s senses faded away. “You’re fine, it’s just a bump.”

“You didn’t even touch me. It hurts. And you’re not a doctor. You’re...” Her voice trailed off and she waved the ice bag vaguely toward the door.

“I’m what?” He faced her. His jaw clenched, muscles working in his cheeks. “I’m a pervert, you said that before. A deviant. A horrible man. A monster. I’ve heard it all. And I heard you. I haven’t seen you since you were a baby, Susan, since Lois left with you. Since that last day in court. But I heard you today. I understand. I know what you’ve been told. And maybe you’re right. Maybe you’ve got a lot to tell me about how I should have made different choices. Should have been there for you. Maybe you’re right.”

He pulled a first aid kit from the bookcase, and stuffed it into a leather bag, along with the wand.

He snapped the bag and slung it over his shoulder. “But right now my girls need me.” The door creaked as he pulled it open.

The bag of ice splattered against the door’s frame. “I needed you too!”

He stopped and turned back to her, water from the exploded bag dribbling down his face. “I don’t know why you’re here.”

Her hands rose and flung themselves back down. “Because I needed to know. And because...” She sat down on the bed, looking out the window. The breath ran out of her and the rest of her words came out quietly. “That’s all. I just needed to know.”

The water on his face tickled and itched as it rolled down his cheek. Cold. He went and stood next to her. “I’m sorry about what happened outside. I want to talk to you about this. I do. But it’s hard for me.”

“You should have warned me about them.”

“I did warn you. And you said you knew about them. They may look like women, but they’re not. The scientists engineered them to look like us, to be docile, enhanced their reactions to certain scents. Pheromones. So we could control them. But, still, they’re mostly cat.” His mouth tightened into a line. “You should have known better. The smell of anger, a strange female. It affected them. Their sensitivity, that’s what made them so good at what they did.”

“What they do.”

“I said ‘did’ and I meant it. Believe it or not.”

She sniffed. “The one that jumped at the fence, she didn’t seem docile.”

He glanced away and wiped at his mouth. “Each is different.”

A sound came from downstairs: Alice.

“Something’s wrong with them. I need to find out what. I’ll be back.” Yuumaku grabbed gloves, and a sheath for the probe. He turned and left.

#

Yuumaku found Alice in the sitting room. She smiled when he entered. He sat next to her on a green couch facing a window looking south across the grounds, over the rolling green landscape of Berkshire hills. He breathed deeply and took in her cinnamon smell. She

scooted closer to him and put a hand on his leg. He lifted it away, placed it between them, then raised her skirt and closed his eyes. He saw through the wand's sensors, stroking it along the insides of her thighs, across her hips.

She giggled, just like a child.

"What are you doing?" Susan's voice sounded accusatory and loud in the little room.

Yuumaku opened his eyes. She stood in the doorway, arms folded across her chest. He let Alice's skirt drop. "I'm checking her. And you're right, I'm not a doctor, that's why I have the wand. The diagnosis is better than any doctor's or vet's anyway."

He closed his eyes again. Images brightened in his thoughts, colored highlights of Alice's interior anatomy. The instrument whispered thoughts of blood pressure and temperature. He tasted nucleotide sequences gathered by the touches, flavors differentiated by the wand's SNP analysis.

A soft and pleased moan came from Alice.

The hardwood floor creaked slightly. "I can't watch this. Yeah, you're doing this to take care of her. Sure."

Yuumaku grunted, listening to what the instrument whispered. The taste of DNA strands slid through his thoughts, the sweetness of repeating regions, the mingling tastes of introns and exons. Each of his girls' DNA tasted different, and unique, and familiar. But a new taste greeted him today.

Alice moaned again as the probe stroked her, a long rising and falling sound. Yuumaku dropped her skirt back down. He traced the wand across her face and she laughed and batted it away. He opened his eyes and turned off the wand.

Alice smiled up at him. She leaned forward and placed her hand back on his leg. "Prrrt?"

"No, Alice. We don't do that here." He pulled the disposable sheath off the probe, then snapped off his gloves. He pocketed both and slid the wand into the bag.

Alice made a disappointed sound.

Susan snorted.

Yuumaku looked out the long window, to where a tall birch swayed. Beyond it and the overgrown gardens, the green hills of the Berkshires rolled on and on. "Susan. You need to tell me how you

got in here.”

“I drove out from California. Why do you care?”

He faced her. “Alone? Why didn’t Lois take you?”

She looked away at a painting on the wall of a woman with a babe in her arms. Animals stood behind and around the woman in stalls. “What is that?”

Yuumaku stood and took a step toward her. “It’s a picture of Mary. It came with the house. I asked you a question.”

Susan turned fully to regard the picture. “Mary? Mary who? Why do you have it here?”

“It reminds me of something.” His hands tightened and flexed. “Now tell me. Did you come here on your own?”

She looked at him blankly.

He glanced out the window. The sun’s light smoldered through clouds. “You came here with someone, maybe more than one. They broke my barriers so you could get in, didn’t they? And then they came here last night. Did you come with them?”

She shook her head. She looked as if she didn’t comprehend what he’d said. “Ollie told me he couldn’t do it with me there. Get through security.” She pulled a white pill-sized device from her pocket. “He gave me this, said it would get me through when he was done.”

Yuumaku took it. Shiny and smooth, like a stone, with a scrawl of Chinese characters impressed across it. Like nothing he’d seen, but tech moved fast. He handed it back.

“I waited at the hotel. The Black Swan. He came back late, told me he did it. But how—”

“Tell me about this boy, Ollie.” He paused. “Are you sleeping with him?”

Susan cringed. “You are such a pig. You all are. Men. It’s all you think about isn’t it?”

He put his hands on her, long work-hardened fingers curling over her shoulders. “You think it doesn’t matter. But you don’t know. You don’t understand.”

She grimaced and tried to jerk away, but he held her.

“Listen to me. Someone broke in here last night. Whoever it was did bad things, Susan.”

“You’re being ridiculous. How could you—”

“I found signs of intercourse on Alice. And pheromones, which

explains her behavior today. It wasn't me." Yuumaku gestured toward the wand with his head. "You want me to play the analysis for you?"

She looked at it. She looked at him. "Show me how to use it."

#

"I can't call the police. There's no law against it. That's why they made the catkin."

She heaved the tray of flatware onto the table with a heavy thump. "You treat them like people."

He nodded and set down Cocoa's green napkin, decorated with squirrels and mice. "Blue gets all the silverware, green gets the big spoons, yellow doesn't get anything. They're all at different levels."

She followed behind, setting down knives, forks and spoons, mismatches from an assortment of sets. She stopped and picked a napkin up. On it, a flowering tree held dozens of intricately detailed embroidered birds. Four spread-winged songbirds edged the corners. "This is beautiful. Mom said you didn't own anything. But this is nice."

He fingered the one in his hand, Suki's. A paisley pattern evoked an image of the house and surrounding grounds framed against a blue sky. If he held it right, an image of his face showed in light reflected on the strands. "They made them." He held Suki's napkin up for her.

Susan's mouth worked, but she didn't say anything.

"They're smarter than people think. Each has her own. If they're good, they graduate to a new color. It pleases them."

"You know them pretty well."

He folded the napkin and set it down. "Sixteen years will do that."

"How many are there?"

Yuumaku looked outside, at the big birch. "Twenty-nine. There used to be more." He remembered names and faces. How little Nika loved to climb trees, until the fatal fall. Wren's obsession with cat's cradles and knots, killed by feline lymphoma. Others, one after another, each death a personal failure. He closed his eyes, shook away the thoughts, then went back to putting down napkins. "They'll all be gone in ten years. They weren't designed to last even this long."

For a time the quiet of clink of plates and silverware made their only sounds. The doorknob rattled now and again, and mournful sounds came when it would not open. Finally, Susan said, “Who’s looking after them right now?”

Yuumaku shrugged. “Mostly themselves. Suki will get me if there’s something serious. The house controls the doors. I kept them out so we could talk. And so they could get used to your smell.”

“Suki?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “You’ll meet her at dinner. She’s one of the girls. She’s more human than most of them.”

After another minute, Susan said, “How do you afford this place?”

“I don’t. My money went to the courts. The custody fight for you, the case to get government support for this place. There’s not much in the way of public funding for taking care of genetically engineered prostitutes. That’s why we’re here.” He gestured to a wall with framed musical scores. “This place used to be an arts center, called Tanglewood. When Boston died, it became another abandoned. When I won the case for care of the girls, the government had to find a place for me. They set this aside. It’s far from the cities. Quiet.” He set down the last plate. “I guess that’s why I got careless. I haven’t upgraded the security system. Haven’t dusted cameras.” He shrugged. “Your friend apparently knows security well enough to get through, but I doubt it would really be all that hard. He still hasn’t called you back?”

She shook her head. “What’s next?”

Yuumaku gestured toward the glasses in the cupboard. She placed the flatware tray back on the counter and started taking glasses down. He filled them from the faucet. “Your friend. Ollie. He’s your boyfriend?”

She shrugged, looked away.

“Boyfriend.” He shook his head. “You’re still a girl, Susan.”

She looked at him sharply. “I haven’t been a girl for a long time. Jim. You’d know that if you’d been there.” Her hand flicked against the glass she’d just set down and it fell, shattered. She blinked at it.

Yuumaku moved quickly to clean it up. “No.” He pulled a dustpan from beneath the sink. “No cleaners here I’m afraid.”

“Sorry,” Susan said.

“Forgiven. My fault. I goaded you. I don’t deal with people much anymore. I guess I’ve forgotten most of the graces. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She reached out to his bent figure, but then withdrew her hand, folded her arms across her chest. “I guess I’m a little sensitive about Ollie.” Then, quieter. “About you and him.”

He swept up the broken pieces.

She said, “They tell stories about this place. In school.”

He looked at her as he stood. “Really.”

She pointed out a piece he’d missed and he bent to get it. “The boys. It’s like Xanadu. In that old poem? A legend.”

He looked around for more glass, then went to dump what he had in the trash. “No legends here.” He put the dust bin beneath the sink. “Come on, let’s get the girls and eat.”

“You eat with them?”

“You can leave.” He crossed the room to the door. “You’ve seen what you came to see.”

“No, I can’t.”

He stopped and looked at her. “Why not?”

She stared down at the floor. Her face twisted. A tear slid down her cheek.

He stepped toward her, didn’t say anything, just wrapped her in his arms.

A sob rolled out of her body and she collapsed against him. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

#

The girls ate late that night, the time it took to calm Susan and get her story out, at least the part she told. His name was Olaf. An older boy, twenty, in college, he had driven her out from California. Last night, upon returning to the hotel, he’d pressured Susan for a more intimate relationship. They’d fought. He left the hotel and told her to find her own way home. Instead, Susan paid for a ride to Tanglewood, to do what she had come for.

Yuumaku had promised to give her a ride to the bus terminal in the morning.

When the girls came in, they crowded through the doors, hungry with waiting. Susan sat in her chair with bloodshot eyes, incuriously

watching them. The girls, on the other hand, all made sure to come close to her, running fingers across her, or sniffing at her neck, ears and hair as they walked by.

Susan said, "What are they doing?" She flinched at Abby's fingers as they ran through her dark tresses.

"They're getting to know you. You spooked them outside, when you came. You sounded angry. That upset them, they reacted, you banged your head. You'll find their reactions are very straightforward. If you're angry, they'll be upset. If you're happy, they'll be glad."

"Like puppies."

"Like people who care about each other."

Susan sniffed. "They won't...do anything to me, will they?"

A faint grin tightened the corners of his lips. "No. You're a woman. You smell close enough to them that they'll accept you. To them, you'll be one of them." He sat at the head of the table.

Susan sat beside him. "I'm not one of them." She watched Cocoa sit down daintily, unfold her napkin across her lap, and smile up at Yuumaku. Susan followed the gaze and looked at him. "Neither are you."

"No." He unfolded his napkin and settled it on his lap. "I'm not. And they know it."

More girls filed in, and each sat and settled a napkin on her lap.

"Did that cause problems? Back when you...started this place?"

Yuumaku, unmoving, said, "Yes."

"But you say you don't use them for...you know."

He took a breath and it sighed out of him. "I had to prove it to the courts. I submit a medical analysis each month. An inspector comes out now and again from Albany. The records go back since I started this place. Feel free to check them. What your friend did to Alice will only cause me problems."

"You don't know it was Ollie." Her eyes slid away, back to the floor.

"I was a young man once, Susan. I'm not proud of what I did. It was wrong. I won't ask you to forgive me because I don't forgive myself. I used them. You picked the right word. I used them, and I knew it was wrong. I knew it. But I did it anyway. Even later, when I learned more about them. When I really started to...to understand a

little bit about how wonderful these girls are, even then, I didn't stop. I don't think I'll ever atone for that."

Alice sat next to Susan and Susan stiffened a bit, but Alice simply reached out and stroked a fingertip across Susan's arm. She plucked up her blue napkin with its embroidered fringe of mice and squirrels, and placed it on her lap. Then Alice gave Susan a little wave.

Susan hesitated and waved back. She looked up at Yuumaku. "That's why you left me. To take care of them because you felt guilty."

"No. Don't ever think that. Lois, she said a man who takes care of pussies isn't fit to care for a child." Wrinkles tightened and he closed his eyes, shook his head. "I don't blame her. But it was a bitter fight. I won visitation rights, shared custody. But then she moved to California. And I couldn't leave the girls. So I sent letters, gifts. But I never saw you. I couldn't leave them. No one else would care for them. If I left, they could be killed, raped, kidnapped, and no one would raise a peep." He reached out toward her, then let his hand drop. "I'm sorry."

She placed a hand atop his. She felt warm and soft against his calluses and bony fingers. "I got your letters." The words spilled out quickly. "All of them. It's why I came. Mom saved them but never let me see them, until—"

Alice meowed, a plaintive sound.

Yuumaku flinched and his hand pulled away, feeling the lingering warmth of her touch. "They're hungry."

Susan's hand remained where his had been. "What are they waiting for?"

"Me." He looked at her. "To pray."

"They pray?"

"No." He folded his hands together. "But I do. And they respect that."

Something like a purr rumbled in Alice's throat.

"Mostly anyway."

#

"You don't have to sleep with the girls. The clinic—"

"I want to." Susan shoved the plate back in the cupboard.

He handed her another. “There are extra pajamas and things. You can take a—”

“That one.” Susan pointed at Suki. Suki stood with Alice, Lily, Rachel and Cocoa cleaning and stacking dishes in a pile for Susan and Yuumaku to dry. “The one that jumped at the fence outside. She’s different.”

Yuumaku wiped at a plate. “That’s Suki.”

Suki looked over at the sound of her name. She grinned faintly, nodded toward him, then, more shyly, to Susan.

“She’s the youngest.” He handed Susan the plate.

“But she’s not so...I would have expected, if she was younger, for her to be more, I don’t know, more—”

“Perfect.” Yuumaku worked through a pile of silverware for a moment, handing them off to Susan. “I know. She’s not. My design. I had my brother make her just before the ban. She’s the last. More human, you can see it.”

“I thought you said you stopped using them.”

He wiped his hands off on his pants. “When they were made, you used a template. Sometimes just an image and a CAD program. But you could use DNA if you had it.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “She’s your sister, Susan.”

Susan gaped, looking back at Suki. “You had them make one like me? For you to—” The silverware clattered to the floor and she stepped back.

“No,” he said.

“Leave me alone!” She ran.

He caught up with her at the front door, banging on it with her fists. It swung open, but she collapsed to the floor, banged one more time, weakly, and curled up in tears.

Yuumaku stood at a distance, looking at the door that was only supposed to open for him. He went and pulled the door closed and looked down at her. “I didn’t make Suki for that. Not to use. She’s never been. I made her so I could remember you. Even if I could never see you. I made her to remember you.”

She looked up at him through teary eyes. “You left me. You left me and made her.”

“No.” He settled down on the floor beside her.

She leaned into him and he wrapped his arms around her. “I don’t

have anyone.” She sobbed, a wracking sound. Tears slid down his shirt. “Ollie’s gone and Mom’s dead and I don’t have anyone.”

#

He lay on his back that night, thinking through years passed and opportunities lost. Moonlight teased through the windows, highlighting ornate woodwork fringing the ceiling. A cool night, with no hint of approaching summer. He sweat, even in shorts and T-shirt.

His thoughts touched on the feel of Susan’s hair beneath his fingertips after she had been born, soft as down. And Lois, dear Lois, looking up at him while she breast fed Susan, saying, “You have responsibilities here, Jim. Not just me. Her. Responsibilities.”

The argument had not gone away. Not even now he knew she was dead. Her ghost whispered to him in Lois’s lilting New England tones. “Responsibilities.” In the mixture of moonlight and shadow he imagined her ghost. Drifting off to sleep, it hung there above him. It reached for him, but drifted beyond reach. Forever out of reach.

And then the screaming began.

He jerked fully awake. Old instincts kicked in and he recovered his flow pistol from the bedside cabinet. The sound heightened as he opened the door.

He moved down the stairs fast, brain trying to catch up with his body. Not one of the girls screaming. Susan.

He made out words now, nearly incomprehensible, “Don’t leave me! Don’t go! Don’t go! Daddy!” The words rose into a repeating torrent, suddenly cut off with a small smothered cry.

Yuumaku froze, poised near the foot of the steps, listening. Some of the girls made frightened small sounds. A few waited outside the room, by the now-open door, in front of him in the hallway, silky nightclothes highlighted in moonlight through the windows around the entryway. They peered in the doorway to his left, then up at him, then back in.

He moved in a crouch, holding the pistol ready.

Most of the girls remained in their beds, blankets clutched or huddled beneath the sheets. Some hid underneath beds. He found Susan’s bed with his eyes. The sheets had been disturbed, almost thrown off, but she lay there, still now, apparently at rest. A dream.

A nightmare.

Suki held her, the emerald green of her nightclothes glittering in moonlight, the embroidered butterflies at the fringe dancing each time she stroked Susan's hair. Susan had her head in Suki's lap. Her breaths slowed as he watched.

Yuumaku waited for a while. Then he coaxed the rest of the girls back to bed. He returned to his own mattress, weary. But not before dusting the room with camera mites, and placing a kiss on first Susan's cheek, and then Suki's.

#

Exhausted, confused, Yuumaku lay on the bed and did not sleep. He checked to make sure the cameras worked, closing his eyes and looking at the images they fed his mind. Then he lay there, staring at the ceiling while the clock peeled hours away from the night. His eyes drifted shut for a time, fluttered awake, then drifted shut again. Half asleep, he dreamed of Lois, of their honeymoon together in the Poconos.

He'd left the door open when he came up, in case more nightmares came to Susan, which was how Alice ended up in his bed.

His eyes opened and the wife from his dreams melted away into Alice's beautiful heart-shaped face hovering over him, highlighted in the silver light streaming through the open window. She smiled. "Prtr." Her breaths came heavy and smelled sweet, almost like peppermint. She purred. Her nightclothes lay in a pile at the foot of the bed.

The heat of her pressed against him. His body reacted to her presence and beauty and scent while his mind stumbled to catch up. "Alice." He took a breath. "No." The word shivered and trailed away.

Her thighs squeezed his hips. Sixteen years of self-control, of repentance, fluttered away. His breath shuddered out in a moan. He pressed against her.

Alice giggled. Her hair tickled across his face. She wiggled her hips against his, her skin against the fabric of his shorts.

Yuumaku's breath deepened. He raised his hands, thinking of pushing her away, but his mind seemed distant, no longer entirely in control. His arms moved weakly, indecisively, as if the body had

pushed his inconsequential mind to the side. Or as if a part of him wanted what was happening.

Alice took each his wrists, grinned and held them on the bed. She leaned down and licked his lips, her breaths soft on his face.

He turned his head away. Something in the back of his consciousness. The cameras. Linked to them, his mind wandered, seeing movement amongst the girls downstairs.

Alice's tongue flicked into his ear. Her purring rumbled through his thoughts.

At her touch, his vision blurred. He closed his eyes. His focus resolved on the images fed from the cameras he'd dusted earlier. A man moved between the beds. The girls fled from him, sheep from a wolf.

A cold shock shivered through him. He sucked in a gulp of air, as if a drowning man. He jerked his arms from Alice's grip and she let out a surprised sound. He pushed her away. "No."

She let out a long sad sound.

He stroked her cheek. "I'm sorry, Alice. No." He took a deep breath, lifted her thigh and rolled out from under her.

Her voice descended into a sob.

"It's not your fault. Someone must have—" Yuumaku wiped at his eyes. "He must have—" His breathing still came hard and deep. The urge to reach out and pull her to him worked through his muscles, and he had to force his hands to his side. A ripple of disgust at himself moved through him.

He gathered up the pistol and went to the door.

The boy, Olaf, must have dosed her with pheromones and sent her up here. To keep him busy. Yuumaku mentally checked the security system, but it showed everything to be a happily undisturbed green, no forced entry, no cut fences, doors and windows all supposedly locked and closed. He triggered a silent alarm and hoped the boy hadn't cut the link to the police. But the police were far away, and whatever the boy wanted to do, he would have time to do it.

He ground his teeth and moved to the doorway.

To have breached Yuumaku's security, Olaf would have at least some equipment of his own. He'd probably dusted camera mites himself. Which meant he would know precisely where Yuumaku was. The question in Yuumaku's mind was whether or not he could move

fast enough to surprise Olaf.

He moved to the door, closed his eyes, vision shifting to the cameras, then back to his darkened surroundings. Olaf, below, had stopped by a bed. Susan's bed. He didn't seem aware of Yuumaku yet.

Alice rose to follow.

"Stay here," he said. He stepped through and closed the door behind him. He checked the charge and settings on the pistol. Full, ten seconds of needle flow. Enough.

He checked again, but Olaf just stood in the girls' bedroom, by Susan's bed. She did not move. Through the cameras, Yuumaku checked and found the door to the girls' bedroom closed. Probably locked. No time to check. He planned his steps. He took a deep breath.

He charged down the stairs in a thunder of footsteps. At the landing, he pivoted and kicked the door open.

From the shadows, a bird-sized machine emerged. It spat a needle into his throat. Yuumaku collapsed to the floor.

#

Mixed sounds. A laugh. Footsteps. Frightened noises. Gradually his mind cleared.

Yuumaku made out a man's voice, rich in timbre, young. "...don't want to do that, Susan. But I will if I have to. It'll be your word against mine. And after you suggested coming out here, to this cat-house, which everybody knows about, you really think they'll believe anything else?"

"I hate you, Ollie. And I'll never—"

Yuumaku blinked his eyes open. Columnar bed legs loomed in rows before where he lay in the doorway. Sheets and blankets hung in various states of disarray. None of the girls showed on the nearer beds. A set of worn hiking boots moved near a bed toward the middle of the room.

"Susan, give me a chance. Listen. If you hadn't tried to run I wouldn't have needled you. It'll wear off. You and dear old dad both have a dose of neurotransmitter inhibitor in you. Selectively intercepts signals between the brain and skeletal muscle. Tailored slightly so it won't kill you, and it's got a region tag so it doesn't bind above

the neck. Government issue from Pakistan.”

Yuumaku knew the stuff. He tried to move, but his legs and arms did not respond. His entire body had gone numb. He rolled his eyes, looking for his gun. Nothing.

He saw, however, the girls. They clustered up against the far wall, feet shifting indecisively, nervously. Low worried sounds.

Susan’s voice shivered. “Why are you doing this?”

“A man needs a woman, Susan. Didn’t dad here ever teach you that?” He laughed. He stepped closer to the bed, and said, more softly, “I love you. I need you.”

“You don’t love me, Ollie. You don’t know what the word means.”

Olaf stepped back and said nothing for a moment.

Yuumaku strained, willing his body to move. His pinkie twitched. Olaf was young. Inexperienced. Maybe he hadn’t set the dosage to account for body size. Maybe Yuumaku could do something.

Olaf spoke again, his voice harder now: “What do you know about love? Dear old dad teach you about loving ladies?”

“He doesn’t use them, Ollie. He’s not an animal.”

Yuumaku thought of the feelings when Alice had touched him. Of before he married Lois. And of what he intended if he could find and get to his pistol. You’re wrong, Susan.

His calf quivered.

“You believe him?” Olaf snorted. “He lives in a cathouse, Susan. You saw it yourself. Look at them. I give that blonde a puff, and she ran right to him. One puff, any one of them all over me. You want to see?”

Yuumaku almost didn’t hear Susan. “No.”

Boots strode across the room to the girls. “I’ll show you.”

“Ollie, no!”

The girls moved away, but Olaf grabbed one. Yuumaku saw the fringe of an emerald green dress with an intricate butterfly fringe, stumbling feet dragging along behind Olaf’s boots. Suki.

The breath caught in Yuumaku’s throat. “No,” he said, but no one heard. His arms moved weakly but had no strength to lift him. His hands curled and uncurled feebly.

Susan said, “Don’t do this, Ollie. She’s not an animal.”

He saw Suki’s feet lifted off the floor, heard her dumped on the

bed. She moaned in fright.

“You think she’s a person?” A plastic popping sound, one Yuumaku had not heard in sixteen years. A pheromone atomizer. “Just watch. One puff on her face. Just watch.”

“Stop it, Ollie!”

A soft hiss sound.

Suki sneezed. She stopped moaning. Then resumed again, but with a different note to her voice, a thrumming purr behind the sound. The fringe of green dress moved close to the boots. She would be touching him, but Yuumaku could not see.

“She’ll do anything I want now.” Ollie’s voice sounded deeper now, huskier. “You understand? Anything. This is what your father does. Because he needs it. Just like me.”

Yuumaku knew what would happen. The triggers built into Suki’s brain would cascade quickly. Fear would turn to a strong curiosity. Then desire. As with Alice, she would try to quench that desire with the nearest male. She had no choice. A creature of instinct, beneath a veneer of womanhood.

Susan wept now. She dragged a ragged breath. “Please stop it. I’ll do it.”

“Anything I want?”

A small voice: “Yes.”

“Willingly?”

“Yes.”

“Louder.”

“Yes, Olaf.”

The boots moved to Susan’s bed.

Suki’s bare feet set on the floor and followed. “Mrrp?”

A sound of shifting clothes. “Not you, pussy.”

The bare feet stumbled and Suki fell in a swirl of emerald. A whine moaned out of her.

Olaf’s voice: “Just you, Susan.”

A rip sound. Snapping. Plastic buttons tumbled to the floor. Purple pajama bottoms fluttered after them.

Olaf made an appreciative sound.

Susan sounded detached. “Just do it, Olaf.”

Suki’s voice had changed. Yuumaku heard her. The purr rumbled into something deeper. Not a sound he’d heard before.

Yuumaku moved a leg. He tried to lift himself and it slid out from under him. No strength.

“The rest now.” Yuumaku heard Olaf’s breathing now, deep and tense. Susan’s blouse fell with the other clothes, by the booted feet. “Tell me you want me.”

“Yes, Olaf. I...I want you.” She sobbed the last words.

Suki rose, the sound thrumming in her throat.

A belt snapped open. Olaf’s pants fell to his ankles. “You know I love you. I always wanted this, Susan. I—”

A shriek cut him off. Olaf fell hard, Suki atop him. His head hit the hardwood, and Suki raked his face with her nails. When he grabbed at her hands, she bit him.

His legs tangled in his pants, Olaf struggled to stand, to kick at Suki. Blood ran in streaks down his cheeks. His little birdlike robot hopped toward the room, wobbling past Yuumaku at Olaf’s mental call.

Yuumaku’s weak arm snatched the robot by the leg. He pulled it close. The robot struggled in his hand. A needle spat out and clicked against the floor. Another stuck his thumb. He twisted the machine and the third and fourth needles flew where he wanted them: toward where Olaf struggled with Suki. A needle struck each of them. The boy flinched and grabbed at his temple. Then he went limp. Yuumaku settled his weight atop the struggling robot. The room went black.

#

Flashing police lights disappeared over the hill.

Susan placed a hand against his cheek. “I’m glad you’re all right.”

He nodded and sat up on the couch. “I’m glad they caught him.” The room spun slightly, and his head hurt. He looked into her eyes, dark and lively once again. “I’m sorry. About everything.”

Her mouth tightened into a line, her eyebrows pinched. “I told you I didn’t know why I came here.” Her eyes flicked away from him, then back. “I lied. I know why. I wanted you to be more than what Mom had told me. I wanted you to be more than what she told me all men were. I guess partly because I wanted Ollie to be. Because I didn’t want to be alone after Mom died.”

Yuumaku rested his hand against her cheek. Soft, so soft. “You’ll never be alone, not so long as I breathe.”

She rested her hand atop his. “You’re not what I thought you’d be. You’re, well, not what I’d hoped.” She smiled. “Something different. Maybe something better.”

He chewed his lip. “I wish someone else could have done this, Susan. Most men,” he waved his hand at the window, “they’re like him. At least partly. And I know, at heart, I’m like him too. That’s why I need to protect the girls. Lois—” He swallowed heavily. “Lois couldn’t understand that. She knew I still felt attracted to them. She knew. But I couldn’t just leave them. They needed me.”

“So did we.”

He looked up at her. Pity. He looked away. “I know.”

She pulled his hand to her lap and held it in both of hers. “I understand a little, I think. I don’t hate you.”

“You should.” He looked away. “I was him once. Olaf. When I was younger. I was him. Before I met your mom, I craved these girls. And even after. Even now. I don’t want to be that man. I want to be the husband she needed. The father you needed. I wish—” His voice caught.

She touched his lips with a finger. “Me too. I missed you.”

He looked up at her again. “Please stay.”

She smiled. “Let’s give my sister a treat. Suki deserves something special, don’t you think, Dad?” She reached out to help him up. Together they fetched Suki from bed. There was ice cream in the freezer. Cold and sweet.