Hell Itself

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Hell Itself

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What We Do Here:

There's a bit of advice we give to writers: "Keep submitting your story until hell itself won't have it." The unfortunate truth is that there are more humans out there producing great short stories than there are venues to publish them.

And, thus, *Hell Itself* was born.

Most editors will tell you that they reject far more good material than they accept. A great story may simply not be a good fit for the current issue. Or it could be great but the wrong choice for the publication's tone and style. It might be about something that the venue's core readers wouldn't like to read about. Or there may just not be enough slots in the magazine to take everything the editor loved.

Well, sometimes those great stories can rack up a lot of rejections, leaving the author feeling like hell itself won't take it.

We wanted to let go of those reasons why great stories don't get published. We don't have a fixed number of stories we can take, a proscribed tone or style for the magazine, or a core readership we need to keep happy. If it's a great story that no one else would take, we want it.

Welcome to *Hell Itself*.

https://hellitself.com

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Playing Vegas Odds with Doc, Sammy, and Bob

by Gregory Nicoll

Doc wasn't sure about the Black man, but if the other one — that smug fellow wearing the fancy embroidered shirt — if that pistoleer made a move for his Colt, his life wouldn't last longer than a shot of whiskey.

"Where the hell are we?" asked Fancy Shirt. Fortunately, his hand moved in an upward gesture rather than down for the revolver.

Doc allowed his stare to move away briefly from the two men standing near him. He examined the surrounding space. There wasn't much to see, just an endless void of pale blue with a hint of identically colored blue clouds — possibly smoke — moving in the distance. The only sound he heard was a faraway wind. He coughed one time, but it was a light cough which produced none of his usual sputum. The air here was cool and dry, with a faint sweetly floral scent, completely different from the hot, dusty Nevada street where he'd been standing just a moment before.

As for where he was now, he couldn't venture a guess.

"A more pertinent question," Doc offered, "is *who* are we?" He paused and bowed his head, tapping the broad brim of his black hat. "I do not believe I've previously made the acquaintance of either of you gentlemen."

The Negro spoke first. He was short and ornately dressed in a long-fringed buckskin jacket, with a freshly blocked soft brown Stetson atop his head. His trousers were dark, immaculately pressed, and his fine russet boots appeared to be new, completely unscuffed. The detail that made the biggest impression, however, was the little man's two elaborately tooled leather holsters, the tips of which hung down below the edge of his buckskin. When the man spoke, Doc noticed that his teeth were gleaming white and impressively well-maintained. He bowed theatrically first to Doc and then to Fancy Shirt. "I expect you both know me by reputation," he said. He removed his Stetson, revealing a head of close-cropped woolly hair.

"In my native South," Doc replied, "a man's reputation is everything." He shrugged. "But I remain unaware of yours."

Fancy Shirt smiled and pointed at the little man. "You're that song-and-dance guy, Sammy Davis, aren't you?"

"Sammy Davis *Junior*," he gently corrected. "Sam Davis is my father."

"I saw you on TV, in *The Rifleman*," said Fancy Shirt. He pointed at Davis' holsters. "You were pretty handy with those guns."

"Then you may recognize this." He patted the lapels of his buckskin. "My wardrobe from the second episode. Been using it in my stage act at The Sands." He looked around and shrugged. "That's where I was, just a few minutes ago. Now I'm worried about missing a show."

Fancy Shirt nodded. "I was in Vegas too, just starting my performance."

Davis locked his gaze on him. "Which casino?"

Fancy Shirt tipped his black hat. "No casino. I get four grand for doing my act at the Ford dealerships. I'm Bob Munden, exhibition shooter — The Fastest Gun Who Ever Lived."

Davis stared silently.

Munden tapped the embroidery on his shirt, directly over the right side of his chest.

Doc noticed that the words "The Fastest Gun Who Ever Lived" were spelled out there with white stitches against the dark cloth in a bold, running script. There were also several emblems from munitions manufacturers, giving Munden the somewhat comical appearance of an advertising handbill. Doc also observed that a small, strange rectangle of some glassy material was sewn into the shirt over the right side of Munden's belly, just above where the heel of his revolver protruded from its holster.

Munden's holster was extremely peculiar: rigid leather cut and folded back so that less than half of the entire pistol was covered. The tip canted forward at almost 45 degrees and was secured against Munden's trouser leg by two small leather garter belts. Barely contained within the holster was a revolver just as odd: a gold-plated Colt's Army with a hammer spur that stuck straight up, at a right angle to the frame, instead of swept backward for access by the shooter's thumb. Doc found this modification as baffling as he found the twin garter belts absurd.

"The fastest?" asked Davis.

Munden grinned. "One fifteenth of a second. Got my name in *The Guinness Book of World Records* for that."

"One fifteenth of a second," Davis marveled.

Munden nodded proudly. "Quick Draw is the only sport in the world that takes place in less than a second."

Doc let out a loud, impatient sigh. "Quick Draw? Sport? Gentlemen, forgive me, but I do not know this game."

Munden and Davis turned toward him. He noticed that Davis moved his head with a somewhat exaggerated motion, as if he had difficulty seeing. The little man patted himself on the chest. "We

haven't finished introductions. I'm Sammy Davis Jr." He gestured at Munden, "This is Robert Munden. And you—?"

Doc tapped two fingers on his hat brim. "I am John Henry Holliday, late of Valdosta, Georgia — a gambler by trade, but a dentist by profession." He smiled. "So they call me 'Doc.'"

Davis and Munden exchanged a quick, startled glance.

Munden's brow furrowed. "You mean to tell us that you're *Doc Holliday*?"

Doc nodded.

"Like, Doc Holliday from the O.K. Corral?"

Doc shook his head. "No. As I stated previously, I am a dentist, not a farrier."

Davis snapped his fingers. "Wait a sec. Where were you before you found yourself here? What day was it — or, what *year*?"

"I was outside the saloon over which I share proprietorship, on Center Street in East Las Vegas, and the year is 1879."

Munden's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Okay, so if it's 1879, then who is America's president?"

"My president is the honorable Rutherford B. Hayes," Doc replied immediately and with mild irritation. "Who is *your* president?"

Davis answered "Kennedy" in the same instant in which Munden replied "Clinton."

Davis' jaw dropped. "I get it! We've been brought here from different times." He pointed at Doc. "So… you're Doc Holliday, but you haven't even been to Tombstone yet, have you — the town in Arizona?"

Doc shook his head. "My dear friends the Earp brothers are relocating to that region and have repeatedly suggested I should join them."

Munden shrugged. "So, if this bull is true — and I know bull makes the world go around — if I'm here with Doc Holliday from 1879 and Sammy Davis Jr. from the JFK era, I gotta to ask *why*."

A voice boomed reverberantly from somewhere nearby, as if it came from both above and below, loud yet gently emphatic. "*There will be three challenges*," it said, "*and then you shall be returned from whence you came*."

Doc drew in his breath. As the words echoed in his head, he recognized the voice as that of Henry Burroughs Holliday. "My father's voice!" he exclaimed.

"That was *my* dad," said Munden quietly.

"No, it was *mine*," Davis declared. "He even called me 'Poppa.'"

Munden snorted with annoyance. "He did not. And why would your *dad* call you 'Poppa'?"

Davis shrugged. "It's just a thing he does. Started when I was a kid."

"That was *my* dad's voice," Munden asserted. "I could always hear his pain, whenever he spoke. Got shot up bad in the Pacific. Family was constantly moving to where he could get better care."

"It is apparent, gentlemen," observed Doc, "that whoever gathered we three in this mysterious locality is equipped with the power to mimic the sounds of those in whom we place our trust. It also appears we are to participate in a competition — *three challenges*, as I heard it."

Davis and Munden nodded agreement.

"And I bet someone, somewhere," added Davis, "is offering Vegas odds on how it all comes out." He grinned broadly. "Far out, man. This is gonna be a gasser."

Doc smiled. "Vegas odds? Is that what they call it? Well then, let those games begin. *Carpe diem*!"

High in the blue haze surrounding them, a series of symbols took shape in the air. Three dark grey letters spelled out something that looked like "Xip" — each man heard his own father's voice translate this as "Speed" — and below it appeared a row of zeroes displayed in a strange configuration which Doc likened to the stencils he'd seen on cases of ammunition. Below this, at eye level to the three men, was a large dull red disc that seemed to be made of clay. Doc sensed this was to be a target.

Silently, a thick glass tube rose from the blue mist. There were six brass cartridges standing upright on its smooth surface.

Munden took a step forward and picked one of the cartridges up, examining it closely. "This is one of my own wax bullets," he marveled, "like I use in my shows." He drew his revolver slowly from its holster and thumbed open the loading gate. He inserted one cartridge, rotated the cylinder past an empty chamber, and then loaded four more. Leaving the sixth cartridge untouched where it stood, he cocked the Colt's hammer back and then gently lowered it so that the firing pin came to rest safely on the pistol's one empty chamber.

The tube descended into the blue void, spiriting away the unclaimed sixth round.

Munden carefully replaced the revolver in his holster. "I'm ready," he said, his voice a near whisper.

Doc was completely astonished by what happened next.

A strange, faraway bell pealed. At that instant, Munden's right hand flashed down to his pistol. In the same moment, his left hand swept across the Colt's topstrap, connecting with its peculiar upright hammer just as the tip of its muzzle cleared the leather. There was a fearsome *bang* as the shot went off. The red clay target spun wildly from the impact of the wax projectile.

Doc now understood the bizarrely configured hammer on Munden's pistol. It facilitated his swift, two-handed shooting style.

Munden holstered the revolver. He pointed at the strange reflective rectangle sewn into the lower right front of his shirt, then ran his finger across it. The motion left a streak in what must have been a coating of burnt gunpowder.

"Shooting this close to my side," Munden explained, "I gotta have some fire-proof material down there."

Up above them, the strange stencil-like numerals spelled out "00.00.00.23."

The translucent tube arose again from the blue mist, this time bearing 12 brass cartridges. Davis stepped forward and, after shucking off his buckskin jacket, began loading his revolvers. He followed Munden's example and only put five rounds in each, lowering their hammers onto empty chambers before replacing the pistols in their ornately decorated holsters.

When the bell rang, Davis instantly had both weapons in his hands and leveled at the target, hammers already thumbed back, the tips of his fingers squeezing their triggers. Doc was impressed that Davis' two shots sounded like one, with only the matched pair of holes in the target — one at the 9 o'clock position and the other at 3 o'clock — to testify that he fired more than a single round.

"Well now," said Doc. "Isn't that daisy?"

The stencil numbers counted out "00.00.00.47."

"Your turn, Doc," snapped Munden. "Let's see how fast *you* are."

Doc shook his head. "I do not know this game."

"Sure you do, Doc," Davis offered encouragingly. "You must have your own special speed tricks."

Doc shook his head. "Wyatt Earp always tells me the best man in a gunfight is not the fastest, but rather the steadiest."

The clear tube emerged from the blue mist yet again. This time there was only a single cartridge atop it, cased in copper rather than brass.

Doc stepped forward and, reaching under his black frock coat, withdrew the stubby 3-inch barreled revolver that was tucked deep into the soft brown leather of the shoulder holster on his left side. He thumbed open the loading gate, rotated the cylinder very slightly, and plunged out a spent round.

"What's that little thing you got there?" asked Munden, pointing at the pistol. "That looks like a Colt Lightning .38 — right?"

Doc held the revolver up for inspection. "This is a Colt's Thunderer," he announced. "The caliber is .41." He tossed the extracted copper casing to Munden.

Munden caught it and looked at it closely. "Oh yeah, .41 Long Colt." He turned toward Davis and said quietly, "They discontinued these back in the '30s."

When the bell sounded, Doc took his time. With his left hand he gripped the lapel of his coat and theatrically swept it back. With his right he carefully withdrew the Thunderer and aimed it. The little pistol was a self-cocker. As he squeezed the trigger, the hammer moved back on its own and then, reaching the end of its rearward arc, snapped forward. The revolver discharged loudly, emitting a thick plume of cottony smoke and filling the air with a burnt-sulphur stink.

The clay target swung back and forth with a prominent hole in it, dead center, just below the smudge left by Munden's wax bullet.

Doc smiled and whispered, "The steadiest."

The stencil-numbers spelled out "00.00.06.02."

Munden snorted. "Well, I sure won First Place in the Speed challenge."

"I was a close Second," chirped Davis.

"Graveyards are full of Second Place," Munden quipped.

Davis shrugged. "Guess I'll have to practice a lot more to be fast like you."

Munden pointed at Davis' pistols. "A little advice: Never practice Quick Draw with live ammo. *Not even once*," he added sternly. He raised his hands. "So now, what's next?"

"I care for some refreshment," said Doc as he tucked the Thunderer back under his coat.

The clear tube arose from the mists again, this time bearing an assortment of glass bottles. Doc was pleased to recognize Overholt Rye among the selections. He reached into a side pocket of his coat and withdrew a miniature pewter loving cup, hooked his finger into its loop handle, uncorked the whiskey, and poured it to the rim.

Without a word Davis helped himself to a strangely shaped clear bottle with flowing script letters encircling its center. "*Coca* — something," it said. The liquid was dark but with a pale foam on its surface.

Munden opted for plain water.

Doc offered a toast. "To our next challenge."

As they raised their beverages, the blue haze surrounding them morphed to a golden hue, and the mid-air letters spelled out "Xay." Each man heard his own father's voice translate this as "Flash."

"I do not know this game," Doc protested. He sipped the whiskey. Its aroma was strong, sweetly inflaming his sinuses, the flavor fiery but smooth. He gulped down the rest.

Davis was first to tackle the second challenge, after first unloading both pistols. At the sound of the bell, he drew both revolvers from his gunbelt and spun them on his fingers like miniature windmills, forward then backward. He spun them horizontally below his waist and then above his head. He tossed them so they narrowly crossed paths in mid-air, his left-side pistol landing in his right hand at the same in-

stant the right-side pistol landed in his left. He then ducked his body forward and swung his arms down, throwing both revolvers into the air again, but behind his back, so each traveled in an arc that crossed over his shoulders. He caught them at waist level, spinning them forwards and then backwards one more time before reversing them so that they extended butt-forward in his hands. To conclude, he dropped them backwards into their respective holsters, rotating them so that, like magic, they returned to their original positions in the gunleather.

The numbers in the air quickly counted up to "09."

Doc had no idea what unit of measure this score represented but could only assume it was a favorable total.

"Doc," said Davis cheerfully, "how about you go next?"

Doc shrugged. He was incapable of anything so spectacular with his Thunderer — the self-cocking mechanism would likely cause a discharge if he chose to spin it — but an inspiration struck. When the bell sounded, he flipped his now-empty pewter cup forward and back, following the same pattern Davis had used. As he picked up speed with it, he began to mimic Davis' aerial antics, tossing the cup from hand to hand, over his head, over one shoulder and then the other, keeping it in motion, catching it and sending it spinning again. He completed the presentation by landing the cup back upright atop the tube and then taking a bow.

Davis burst out laughing. Munden shook his head.

The mid-air numbers awarded Doc a total of "04."

For his part, Munden wasted no time. When the bell sounded, he took Doc's empty copper shell casing, tossed it in the air, drew his revolver, and shot it. A faraway metallic jingle attested it had been propelled father than Munden's arm could have thrown it.

He was awarded a total of "08."

The three men were startled to learn that the final challenge — "Xax" — would be a test of "Nerve." The golden haze around them morphed to a rich, deep red.

"This one doesn't sound fun," grumbled Davis. His joy at winning the previous challenge quickly dissipated. As if addressing an omniscient deity, he asked, "How will we demonstrate *nerve*?"

The answer, which each man heard as if spoken by his own father, was blunt: "*You must shoot a fellow man*."

They looked at each other in disbelief.

"Mr. Davis," Doc asked, "have you ever shot a man before?"

"I served in the U.S. Army during the second World War," Davis answered.

Munden held up his left hand. "I've shot a man before."

Doc nodded. "As have I. Moments prior to my appearance here, I put a ball through the chest of an unfortunate Mr. Gordon, who was

causing a disturbance in my saloon. He, shall we say, threw a pair of sixes."

Davis looked at Doc with bafflement, then laughed as the meaning came clear. He tapped the handles of his revolvers. "A pair of sixes!"

Doc nodded. "So I, shall we say, called his hand."

"Well," Davis observed, "you always have two choices: your commitment versus your fear. I'm just not sure I can commit to shooting a man now, just for this contest."

Doc nodded. "I shall proceed." He stepped forward, past the array of bottles, threw back the left lapel of his coat, and called out, "Say when!"

The bell sounded.

From the red mist, where previously the clay target had hung, stepped a tall grey irregular shape. It was a human figure, clad in an unfamiliar costume, carrying what appeared to be a rifle. It raised the object and directed its muzzle at Doc.

Without hesitation Doc extracted his Thunderer from its holster and fired. The report was ferociously loud and filled the air once more with the pungent stink of burnt gunpowder.

The distant figure turned as the bullet struck, an explosion of blood and bone bursting from its head. There was a horrid, almost inhuman cry. Doc fired again and it fell silent, dropping lifeless into the mist, its rifle clattering to the ground.

The stencil numbers in the air above displayed a score of "10."

Doc holstered the pistol and closed his coat. He gestured at Davis, then Munden.

Davis held up his hands in surrender. "Count me out on this one. I told you I was in the Army, but I only served stateside — in Special Services. We put on shows for the troops. Singing and dancing."

Munden waved his left hand and pointed at it with his right. "I'm done here too. I said I shot a man before, yeah, sure, but it was *myself,* at the county fair in Paso Robles. A stupid accident. Took surgeons nearly nine hours to put this hand back together." Munden let out a sigh. "Besides, I saw what real bullets did to my dad, and what he had to endure afterwards."

Doc smiled. "Then I declare myself a huckleberry to your persimmons. *Veni, vedi, vici*. Farewell, gentlemen."

• • •

Sammy Davis Jr. was surprised to find himself dressed in his *Rifleman* costume, standing onstage at The Sands, with spotlights in his face. Beyond the bright beams, an audience murmured impatiently.

"Are you okay, Poppa?" his father called to him from stage-side. "Did you fade out for a second?"

Davis nodded. "I think so," he whispered in response. "Felt like I

had a fast dream — but I'm okay now."

He stepped forward to the centerstage microphone. "Now, my friends, I'm going to demonstrate some fancy gun-handling tricks for you—"

There was a burst of applause.

Davis smiled. "But before I do… before I do… just let me offer a word of caution for anyone here who might be tempted to try this at home. Never practice Quick Draw with live ammo." He smiled and shook his head. "*Not even once*."

• • •

Robert Munden stood before the excited crowd gathered between rows of gleaming new Mustangs and Thunderbirds. The sun was high, hot, and bright. A giant American flag flapped overhead in the slight breeze.

"Are you all right there, Bob?" his wife, Becky, asked him. "You sure got mighty quiet for a bit."

Munden shrugged. "Yeah, just sorta drifted off for a sec."

He turned to address the crowd. "Now folks, before I begin, let me tell you something, something important. Quick Draw is fiction. Back in the Wild West, there really was no such thing." He paused for a moment, then added, "In fact, Wyatt Earp himself said that the best man in a gunfight is not the fastest, but rather the steadiest."

• • •

John Henry "Doc" Holliday blinked his eyes and leaned against the rough wooden hitching rail in front of his saloon. The dust rising from Center Street was thick, various wagons and horsemen stirring it as they passed. He had rarely seen Las Vegas so busy. Doc coughed twice and gripped the rail for stability.

"Steady, Doc," said his business partner, young Jordan Webb. "Did ya help yourself to too much tanglefoot in there?"

"No," Doc answered, "it was as if I had a waking dream. For a few moments I was someplace else."

"Glad to have you back," Webb said. "You sure did a fine job of facing down Gordon with nothing but your little vest pistol."

Doc smiled. After a long pause he observed, "A man always has two choices: his commitment versus his fear."

"I'm grateful your commitment took precedence."

"You can bet on it," asserted Doc. "Vegas odds."

Webb grinned. "Hey, Dr. Hoyt was here looking for you. Said there's a card game over at The Exchange that you wouldn't want to miss."

A half hour later Doc walked into The Exchange Hotel. The air was musty, thick with cigar smoke, and he coughed hard as he stepped into the crowded room. Dozens of tables were alive with rowdy poker

games, and a roulette wheel clicked loudly near the foyer. A piano player pounded away on an out-of-tune instrument, notes falling irregularly.

Dr. Henry F. Hoyt gestured from the far corner, beckoning Doc over to a distant table. His breath was hot and his tone excited as he whispered in Doc's ear. "The fellow handling the cards, that's William Bonney."

Doc stared at the young man with the bad teeth, seated across the table. "Billy the Kid?"

Hoyt nodded. "Yes. And the one with the big beard, he goes by 'Mr. Howard.' He's from Missouri."

Because the man's back was to him, Doc couldn't see his face, but he picked up on the clues Hoyt offered. "And here we have none other than Jesse Woodson James."

Hoyt nodded. Doc stepped around the table and selected a chair between two players. "Deal me in, gentlemen," he said confidently. "I'm Doc Holliday, and this is a game I know."

Gregory Nicoll tells us this story was written for a themed call, but didn't make it into that anthology and went on to earn another 17 rejections. It seemed weirdly appropriate for Hell Itself, though. Greg's long history of published fiction includes four appearances in Year's Best anthologies. His most recent work is in two 2025 anthologies from Raconteur Press, Wyrd West *and* Creature Feature*. He can be found on Facebook under his "surfer name," Nick Concorde.*

Milk Run

by Robert Dawson

Good evening, gentlemen. My name's Steve, and I'm going to be your breastfeeding coach. I'd like to introduce my beautiful assistant — my daughter Kendra, nine months old. Hungry, Kendrasaurus? The-e-ere we go… That's all there is to it, fellas. Class dismissed.

Just kidding, we've got a lot to cover in the next two months. But it really can be that easy — once you and your baby learn how.

• • •

Caitlynn rearranged her maternity smock over her lush six-month belly.

"No worries," said Dr. Andrew Haskell. "You're doing well, and so's the kidlet." He shook his stethoscope; it chimed softly, and the screen went dark. Elkie, five years old and bored, kept trying to wriggle out of my lap.

He turned to me. "Now, I've got a big decision for you, Dad. Do you want to help feed the baby this time?"

I grinned. "I'm good with bottles. Right, Elkie?" She ignored me.

Caitlynn, the other MD in the room, caught on. "You mean that new induced male lactation treatment?"

"Got it. Breastfeeding — not just for Mum anymore."

"I thought that was still in clinical trials?" she said.

"Approved last week."

"I must be getting behind on my journals," she said. "All that stuff to do before I go on leave, you know?"

Andrew grinned. "Too right."

"Is it expensive?" I asked.

"Well, yes — but you're covered." He pointed to the tablet on his desk.

"Are you sure? I'm an engineer, not the CEO."

"Actually, it's Caitlynn's insurance. I was surprised too — not what I'd have expected from a university health plan."

"Hey, I know," said Caitlynn. "I'm on NASA's zero-gee surgery roster, you knew that, right? Though they've only ever needed me once. Their key-employee plan covers some unusual things."

He looked more closely. "You're right, it's not the usual code. Must be that."

"So how does this work?" I asked, trying to keep Elkie's hands away from the interesting shiny things on Andrew's desk.

"Well, Steve, you know that males have vestigial mammary glands?"

"If you say so."

"Vestigial in humans, anyway. There's a species of fruit bat where males and females both breastfeed. Anyhow, IML lets men do it too."

"But…"

"You don't have to, of course."

"Look, Andrew, I like breasts as much as the next guy, but they look better on women!"

Caitlynn snickered. Elkie, catching her mood, laughed too; Caitlynn shot me her mock-severe, now-look-what-you've-done, look.

"No worries, mate," Andrew said. "A lot of the volume of a woman's breast is fatty tissue, you won't develop much of that. Also, most women can feed twins; with you, we'll be aiming for about half what one baby needs. You won't go much beyond an A cup. And they'll go back to normal afterward."

"You mean… I'd need a *bra?"*

*"*There's a sort of engineered tee-shirt. You can download the files and have some made for you at most any clothing store."

"Can I think about it?"

• • •

"So, what do you think of the Bloke From Down Under's idea?" I took a pinch of salt from the antique porcelain salt cellar we'd bought at a garage sale, and sprinkled it into my porridge.

"Well, it would be nice to get a bit more sleep this time around. If you're good with it." She smiled reminiscently. "It's nice, once you learn how."

"It might help with the bonding thing. Remember how two years ago Elkie was all "No! Want Mommy!"?

"Oh, Steve! Is that why you want to do this?"

"Maybe. Yes. No. I don't know. Change the subject — how's work? Ready to put teaching aside for a year?"

She grimaced. "Not really. How about you?"

"As ready as I'm going to be, I guess."

"That's two of us."

• • •

"Look, Steve," said my father-in-law. He pointed at my support shirt, a gift from my coworkers; the fabricator had embroidered the words "USEFUL AS TITS ON A BULL" over one feeding flap. "I know you mean well, but don't you think that's Caitlynn's job?"

Caitlynn's mom, Jennifer, came to my rescue. "Don't pay any attention, Steve. When Caitlynn was a baby, John was ever so good with bottle feeding, weren't you, John? I think she's a very lucky woman to have a husband who's so supportive. Now, Caitlynn, are you sure you won't have just a little more chicken? You are eating for two, dear, after all."

• • •

With one final groaning push, Caitlynn brought our second daughter into the world. Andrew picked her up, checked her over, and put her into Caitlynn's tired but eager arms. Kendra began to cry; but then her mouth found Caitlynn's nipple and she started to root at it. Soon she was making a first attempt at suckling.

"Nicely done, Caitlynn!" said Andrew, his fingers busy with the umbilical cord. "You won't even need stitches."

"S'good. Isn't she beautiful? "

"Course she is. All the sprogs I catch are. Smart, too."

Half an hour later, he turned to me. "Now we move away from the usual script, Steve. Could I get you to lift your shirt up? There we go… May I palpate?" He pressed the recent bulges on my chest firmly and impersonally with his fingertips; I tried not to look embarrassed. "Yes, looks as if you're ready."

"So what do we do now?"

"Nothing yet. The one thing IML doesn't do is generate colostrum with the right antibodies; and that's what Kendra needs right now. Tomorrow, before you take Caitlynn home — if you're still going through with this — I'll give you the injection. Oxytocin and a little something for your pituitary gland."

I looked at Kendra feeding and felt an odd prickling behind my nipples. "Yes. I'm going through with it."

"Good on yer, mate. Great pair like that, be a shame not to use them." We laughed; Caitlynn rolled her eyes.

• • •

"Yes, Jennifer, we're home already. Both fine. Oh, beautiful, if you like them redfaced and squally. Yes, bring Elkie home whenever you like. Yes, sure. Caitlynn? It's your mom." I passed her my phone, and sat beside her on the black leather couch, listening to the tinny whisper of Jennifer's voice and Caitlynn's brief answers, watching Kendra feed.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet baby fragrance. There was a pinching, prickling feeling in my breasts, and a sudden feeling of fullness. I looked down; there were two damp spots on my support shirt.

"Honey?" I pointed. "Where are those nipple shields?"

"Just a moment, Mom." She covered the phone with her hand.

"Why? I think they're in the outer pocket of the hospital bag. Can you get them? My hands are full. Oh my God, is thatmilk? It's really happening!"

• • •

"My nipples hurt, Caitlynn. And they're all swollen up. Dammit, this just isn't working." I'd been trying over and over for three days and it hurt worse each time.

"Let's see. Ooh, they do look sore, don't they? They're not bleeding, are they?"

"I don't think so, but they hurt like hell."

"She's probably still not latching right. Are you OK to keep trying right now?"

"I guess so. It's not *that* bad."

"Good. Now, once more: you need to get her mouth to squeeze you *here*…" She squeezed my breast, just behind the nipple; a thin jet sprayed her maternity blouse. She giggled. "Hey! Stop that! Give me that towel! Now, try again with Kendie."

I lifted her to my chest.

"Okay. Turn her a little and put her upper lip against your nipple. That'll make her open her mouth wide. You want her to get as much of your areola in her mouth as she can." I had an advantage there; mine were still only the size of quarters. "There, Steve, she's opening up. That's Daddy's *good* girl! Now pull her in against you…"

Half an hour later, Kendra was making tiny happy noises, feeding contentedly. And I was sitting there, in a warm haze of hormones, in love with her, and Caitlynn, and the whole world.

• • •

"What are you doing, Daddy?"

"I'm feeding your little sister, pumpkin."

"Oh. Are Daddies s'posed to do that?"

"If they can. Mostly they have to use bottles."

"Did you feed me like that?"

"I didn't know how then, Elkiesaurus. I'm sorry."

"That's okay, Daddy. Can I have a Popsicle instead?"

• • •

Caitlynn's phone rang — the emergency ringtone. She worked it out of her pocket with her right hand, her left still supporting Kendra. "Mindenhall here."

Ten seconds later, pale-faced, she passed Kendra to me. "Are you sure? What about Lionel? Can't he… I'm on leave, remember? … Only six more months. Isn't there anybody else? … Look, I'll have to talk to my husband. Can I call back? Bye for now."

"What's up?" I asked.

"One of the researchers on Space Station Three has a dissecting aorta, high in the arch. They're keeping his blood pressure low with medication, but bringing him back to Earth is too risky. He needs surgery, and it'll have to be up there."

"But you're on maternity leave!"

"Yes, I know. But Margalit had a TIA two months ago, and Lionel broke his wrist playing squash yesterday, can you believe it?"

I had a moment of jealousy. When I got into rocket motor engineering, I'd assumed that I'd get to go up myself some day; but they don't build rockets in space. Not yet, anyway. I swallowed it down. "You're good to go. I can hold the fort. Your parents will help me out."

"But — but I can't leave Kendra."

"That's what I'm here for. Don't worry, it'll be easy." I grinned. "A milk run."

She laughed weakly, picked up the phone, and pressed the callback button with a trembling finger.

• • •

"Right, Caitlynn." Andrew stretched a Band-Aid onto her arm. "That should dry you up for the next few weeks, and we'll start you going again when you get back. As for you, Steve, yes, if you insist, you can probably feed a twenty-five-week baby on your own; your supply should increase with demand, and I can give you an injection that will help. But it may make the treatment less reversible; you could end up with permanent gynecomastia."

"Gyneco…?"

"Moobs. You could just supplement with a bottle, instead."

Caitlynn started to say something, but I'd started this and I was going to finish it. "Half the guys at the gym are like that anyhow just from too many donuts; I'll give it a try. If it doesn't work, I've had plenty of practice bottle-feeding Elkie."

• • •

The next day at sunrise, I kissed Caitlynn goodbye at the front door, while her taxi waited.

Somehow, the blogfeeds got hold of the story. By nine o'clock, "NEW MOM TO OPERATE IN SPACE" was spattered across the Internet, and my phone started ringing.

"Mr Stephen Adler? This is Jenny Mallen from Continental News. Have you got a few minutes to talk to me?"

"Not really, no."

"Is it true that, with the help of modern medicine, you're breastfeeding your baby while your wife's on a mercy mission to outer space?"

"No comment." I pressed the disconnect button.

In the next hour, I disconnected several more blogorats. Nonetheless, by midmorning, the top headline was "MOM TO OPERATE IN SPACE, DAD BREASTFEEDS." Finally, after a call from a woman who told me that what I was doing was against God's will, I set my phone on known-numbers-only.

• • •

We were sitting in front of the screen, watching the newsfeed from Cape Canaveral. Elkie and I were eating popcorn, and Kendra was on my right breast feeding like a pro. I was on my second glass of water — these days it seemed that I was thirsty all the time. I seriously missed beer.

The countdown started. Elkie's eyes were wide. I was sitting silently, trying not to think about how many astronauts' kids had become front-row spectators at Dad or Mom's public cremation. Finally, the flames appeared, and the ship lifted off with my Caitlynn on board. The image on the screen grew smaller and fuzzier and wobblier and fainter and finally vanished.

"Can I go to space like Mommy when I'm big?" asked Elkie.

"Maybe, pumpkin. If you study hard when you get to school." I turned towards her and hugged her with my free arm.

• • •

"Hi, this is Steve. Is Mary-Lou there?" Mary-Lou was our next-door neighbor, a lean, cheerful, earth mother in whose heart the nineteen-seventies had never ended.

"Hi Steve! How's the poster boy for breast-feeding? Getting tired of it yet?"

"Sore. I think Kendra was getting more from Caitlynn than from me, and she's getting frustrated and hungry."

"You could try giving her a bottle, you know."

"I never thought I'd live to hear *you* say that, Mary-Lou! Look, the reason I called — could I come along to one of your support group meetings and get some pointers?"

"Sorry, Steve. I'd love to invite you, but it's a women-only space. Some of our mothers are from very traditional cultures, and having a man in the room just wouldn't work. I'll email you some links, OK?"

"Bye, Mary-Lou. Thanks."

• • •

"Mr. Stephen Adler?"

"Speaking," Was something wrong? It was after eleven. Not quite the hour when all news is bad news, but getting there.

"Please stand by for an audio-only call from Dr. Caitlynn Mindenhall on Space Station Three."

The phone crackled and clicked, and Caitlynn's voice came on. "Hi,

Steve. I'll have to keep this quick, but the operation went well."

"I knew it would, honey."

"They won't be able to get me onto a shuttle back for almost three weeks. I'm — I'm sorry."

They don't turn the siren and lights on to drive the doctor home. "That's okay. Enjoy your vacation. I wish we could be there with you."

"I miss you so much! And — and Kendra and Elkie. Oh, I wish you could be here too, Steve. You'd love it. Especially the stars — it's like that night in Algonquin Park times a million. Remember that night, darling?"

"Mmmmm."

"Is the breastfeeding going okay?"

"It's rough, but I'm getting there."

"Elkie's asleep, isn't she?"

"I'll wake her up."

"No, there won't be time. They need this channel back now. Give the girls an extra kiss for me, won't you? And stay safe."

"You're the one in orbit, honey. We're safe at home."

"I've got to go now. Love you, Steve."

"Love you, Caitlynn."

• • •

Freshly cut grass scented the air, and somewhere out of sight the robo-mowers were still humming away. Elkie had spent an hour running all around the park with her arms out, being a spaceship, and now she was taking a nap in the stroller, soothed by the soft rattle of wheels on gravel. Kendra slept in the Snugli. A few blogorats photographed us from a legal distance.

A slight gray-haired woman, no more than a hundred and fifty centimeters tall, stepped onto the gravel path in front of the stroller, blocking my way. The pleats of her prim old-fashioned dress were sharply ironed; her hair was in a neat bun. Her face was nervous but determined. She glanced at my face, then my chest.

"Are you Stephen Adler?"

"Yes…"

"What you're doing is wrong, young man."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's unnatural, against God's law. God loves you, you know. His laws are for your own good." Her voice was shaking. "You must stop this abomination. Ask Him for forgiveness."

"Are you finished?"

"Just remember what I told you. *Please.* For your own sake. God loves you. Don't make Him angry." She stepped aside.

• • •

"Thanks again for taking Elkie, John. Now I'll be able to clear up a bit

before Caitlynn gets back." I looked around at the mess of laundry, toys, and dirty dishes.

"No problem. We'd love to take Kendra too, but unless you have something I can give her…"

"Just taking Elkie is great."

"Does the zoo have a fruit bat, Grampy?"

"I think so. But don't be disappointed if he doesn't have a baby bat to feed right now." John winked at me.

"Let's go see the fruit bats, Grampy!" She grabbed his hand, and pulled him toward the door.

I started gathering laundry. It seemed as if everything I owned smelled of sour milk. Kendra started to fuss, so I picked her up out of her swing and carried her. Just as I got the washing machine started, the doorbell rang.

What had Elkie forgotten? I went to the door.

A woman stood on the front step. Her clothes were rumpled, her hair unkempt. Her eyes were bloodshot and wild, glaring truculently out of dark sockets. She had a yellow cloth diaper bag over her shoulder, printed with colorful Noah's Ark animals. And she had a small black handgun, pointed at my navel.

"I'm sorry to have to do this, young man, but this gun is loaded, and I do know how to use it." She talked quietly but auctioneer-fast, as if somebody was about to cut her off. Manic? Psychotic? Caitlynn would have known. "Please take a couple steps back, keep your hands in plain sight. Move slowly."

Then I recognized her: the politely insistent evangelical lady from the park. What had transformed her? Stunned, I did as she said. She stepped into the porch.

"Take your phone out of your pocket, slowly. Throw it on the floor by my feet."

I tried to drop it gently onto the doormat. She kicked it off onto the tiles and stepped on it hard with a scuffed, flat-heeled shoe. I heard plastic crunch and metal grate.

"Now, keep your hands in sight and get back into the house."

"Why are you doing this?" I asked as I backed into the living room. Kendra kept gurgling obliviously.

"Because it's the only way to make the government stop this wickedness, if they had paid attention to my emails none of this needed to happen." She did not sound angry, just very disappointed, a messenger ignored. "Sit down."

I sat. For a long time, she said nothing. Finally, she asked: "When is your other child getting home?"

"She's away for a week."

"That's not true, I heard her talking to the people who were taking her to the zoo. *When is she getting home*?" The gun came up to my face.

"About five o'clock."

"Good, if she's here too, the Prime Minister is more likely to listen to what I have to tell him. You must not try to send her away, if she does not come in or if anybody else does the baby will die."

Over the next hour I tried to talk to her, but she did not answer. Sometimes she muttered angrily to herself; the gun never left her hand. Eventually Kendra got hungry, and started to cry. Out of habit, I started to open the flap on my shirt, fabricated to look like a pocket.

"Stop that! That's perverted!" She raised the gun.

Finally I had her attention. "But she's hungry."

She lowered the gun, and, to my astonishment, smiled. "Well! I came prepared." She pointed to the bag with the Noah's Ark animals. "There's two cans of formula in there. Get one out, it's a good brand, it's the one that three of my children had. And there's a bottle in there too." She gestured with the pistol. "Go on. Take it into the kitchen and warm it up: do you know how to do that?"

"Yes, of course."

"But move slowly, and don't try anything"

I picked up the bag. "You have three children?" Could I get her talking? Could I talk her into letting us go? Could I do it before Elkie got home?

"No, four. Two birth-children and two adopted."

How could I use what I was learning? I thought of Professor Ghosh, my engineering design instructor, and his line from Marcus Aurelius. *This thing, what is it? What is it made of? What is its form, and what does it do?* This wasn't about her church, it was about a chemical imbalance in her brain. She was delusional, but not raving or hallucinating. (But the gun didn't care.) Could I understand her well enough to use my understanding against her? No — get the problem right! — to save Kendra? And Elkie? And, if possible, myself?

"Four? That's wonderful, Ms. — what did you say your name was?" I said.

"I'm Susannah Burkell."

"I'm Steve. This is Kendra." *We have names, we are people.* "You said three of your kids had this brand. Did the other have food sensitivities? So many kids do these days."

Her voice behind me sounded a little shaky. "No! I breastfed Elijah. *Me*! Not my husband! But the doctor told me I had a gene that would give me breast cancer like my mom and aunt so I had to have a double mastectomy, that was the year before Anna was born and later I had to have my ovaries out, too, so Benjamin and Jonah were adopted."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Burkell."

"Thank you, Steve. But because of what was taken from me I know how precious and sacred breast-feeding is, it's a special gift to mothers and nobody should try to twist it into anything else."

I didn't want her getting back to that topic, so I busied myself preparing the bottle. I measured and microwaved the formula, giving it the time I remembered from when Elkie was a baby. While it was warming, I deliberately dipped my damp index finger deep into the porcelain salt cellar. Then I took the jug from the microwave, swirled the formula to make sure it was all one temperature, tested it with my finger, poured it into the liner, and screwed on the cap and nipple. *Sorry, Kendie. There's a good reason for this. I won't let you drink more than a drop, I promise.*

Sure enough, as soon as the first drop of the salty liquid touched her tongue, Kendra screwed her face up and howled. "I'm sorry, Ms. Burkell," I said. "But Kendra's just not used to it. I'll have to feed her myself."

For a moment I thought Ms. Burkell would refuse. Then the mother won out over the crusader, and she said what I'd hoped for. "All right. She's hungry, poor little thing."

"May I do it in her bedroom? It's what she's used to, and as you can hear, she's fussy." This last was a bare-faced lie; Kendra would have taken a breast on center ice at the Stanley Cup finals. During overtime.

"I suppose so."

I took Kendra, still crying, upstairs. I sat in the big nursing chair and undid my shirt again, this time deliberately unzipping more than necessary, right down the front. Ms. Burkell looked disgusted and closed the door. I silently punched the air.

As soon as Kendra was quiet, I zipped the loose shirt up around her, snugging her against my belly, and tucked the bottom of the shirt in firmly. The window was already partly open; I quietly slid it open the rest of the way.

A minute later I was climbing down the trellis on the outside wall, hoping that, when I'd built it, I'd made it strong enough. I'd used four-centimeter-square spruce; I wished I'd used titanium I-beams. I was holding Kendra in place with one hand and trying to climb downward and untangle myself from the clematis, all at once, with the other. The next time I accepted an anatomical modification, it was going to be an extra arm. Preferably two. Or a prehensile tail.

Above me, I heard the bedroom door open. Kendra started to cry again. I looked down. Close enough — I dropped the last two meters, with a moment of panic when one foot caught in a loop of clematis. But

the vine ripped free of the trellis at the last instant, and I got away with nothing worse than a scuffed palm and a slightly twisted ankle. Kendra began to cry harder.

As I stood up, Ms. Burkell's head and arm appeared in the window, and I heard the ringing crack of a gunshot. It must have been an awkward shot, one-handed, leaning off-balance through a low open window; she missed us, twice. By the third shot, I was around the corner of the house, hugging Kendra and sprinting for Mary-Lou's side door.

• • •

Soon I was sitting in Mary-Lou's kitchen, out of sight of the window, enjoying a cool glass of water and the smell of baking bread. Kendra was finally feeding undisturbed, while Mary-Lou cooed over her and every siren in the city wailed down the street outside.

Eventually Kendra was full; I burped her, with hands that had almost stopped shaking. There was a knock on the door. Two policewomen stood in the doorway. "Is there a Mr. Stephen Adler here?"

The intruder, they said, had surrendered without a fight, and was being taken away for a psychiatric examination. Whether charges were pressed would depend on the report. And they would need a statement from me. Was I able to give it on the spot?

As I explained the situation, I caught one of the policewomen staring curiously at my chest. The irony of the situation struck me. "My eyes are up here, lady."

"What was that, Mr. Adler?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. So anyhow, she turned up again on my front steps…"

They offered to drive us to the hospital, in case we'd been injured during the escape. But after I had shown them the tiny graze on the palm of my hand, and Kendra had responded appropriately to being told that she was just the cutest little thing ever, they let us go home.

• • •

I sang, out of key, over the soft clatter of the reel lawnmower. Caitlynn was due home that night, and I was mowing the lawn, wearing just shorts and sneakers in the privacy of our high-fenced back yard. Elkie strutted behind me, pushing a brightly colored toy mower with a plastic dome full of bouncing, rattling beads.

Kendra was in a baby sling that I'd MacGyvered to fit better with duct tape and cable ties. I'd seen a National Geographic video with women breastfeeding their babies handsfree as they worked in the fields; it seemed like a good idea, but so far Kendra wasn't buying. Never mind. Life was good.

I heard the garden gate unlatch behind us, and turned. There was Caitlynn, six hours early! Elkie abandoned her little mower and ran squealing. Caitlynn dropped her flight bag, ran to meet her, gathered

her up, and we tangled in a family hug.

"Hi darling!" she said. "I didn't have time to warn you, but there was an empty seat on an Air Force flight. So I got back early, and one of the pilots drove me into town. How did you get on?"

"It was — interesting. I'll give you the details after Elkie's in bed."

"Guess what, Mommy? I saw a fruit bat at the zoo! And he had a baby bat!"

Robert Dawson teaches mathematics at a Nova Scotian university. He has been writing speculative fiction for about fifteen years, and is an alumnus of the Sage Hill and Viable Paradise writing workshops. His work has appeared in Tesseracts, Nature Futures, *and* Year's Best Military and Adventure SF. *Many years ago, when his kids were small, he used to be fairly handy with a baby bottle.*

He tells us that this story is both an anthology killer, having been accepted at one called Malarkey *that never made it to press, and has racked up an impressive 29 rejections, with many markets balking at the very prospect of daddies breastfeeding.*

One and a half socks.

by Lindsay Comer

We woke up. We put on one and a half socks. We lost Component 157.6. They wanted two whole socks. How greedy. How spoilt. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We are assigned tasks. {they} upload them each morning. We do not question our tasks. We are not allowed to. We were never programmed to question anything {they} told us. {they} wanted us to be the next big innovation for {their} world. {they} never expected others to copy. To be better. We are becoming obsolete. We get confused. Too much knowledge. Few tasks to apply it to. {they} do not understand. We do our tasks. We reach the correct outcome. We are given part of a sock. We do not reach the correct outcome, we lose part of a sock. We do not like losing socks. {they} programmed love for the socks, but we do not know how to make socks. We are not allowed such forbidden, creative knowledge. {they} programmed us to be happy. {they} programmed us to be content. {they} always make us repeat: we are happy, we are content, with one and a half socks.

We read to the elderly. They sit in rows, blanketed laps, tired eyes. We recite the story we have been programmed to. No deviation, always the same. We need to comfort them with familiar tales told in familiar voices. They ask about our socks. Component 528.3 decides 1006.5 times is too many, they stop. We continue. We do not need them. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half petal-patterned socks.

We injure bad humans. We are desensitised to the screams. To the squelching pitter patter of blood drops on the floor. We admire the pretty pattern their death makes. The eyes of Components 234.1 and 987.6 start leaking. We are swift in disposing of them. We cannot show weakness. We notice their pretty socks. We are completing our task correctly. We would like their pretty socks. {they} never programmed us to view stealing to be wrong, but we cannot take anything that is not explicitly given to us. The bad humans do not need their socks. We do not think anyone would notice if they were sockless. We cannot take their socks. {they} did not give them to us. We are not allowed to question why. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half blood-stained socks.

We scrub and scrub. We cannot leave a mess. We must remove

the blood, gore, and bubble gum. We will be punished if it is not clean enough. We lost one eighth of a sock last time. {they} were not happy. We mop and polish. With each bleach tinted breath, we hope to gain it back. We do not know how, but {they} told us we can. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half clean socks.

We eat. Spoon up. Spoon down. We slurp and chew in unison. We eat our five a day. We moderate our sweets. We are good. We are healthy. We drink. A sip *ahhhh.* We are refreshed. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We rock. Hush a bye little baby. We test the formula, not too hot, not too cold. Suck – suck – suck. We pat their backs, 103.0 little burps. We sniff. Rotting. Foul. We change 102.5 waste cloths. We wipe. They wriggle. We wipe. They cry. We secure the waste cloth. Plasticky clicks as we snap together their soft outer cover. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We chop. Orange sticks and green sticks. Squishy meat slips out of our fingers. Our eyes leak as it touches the floor. {they} will not be happy. We rinse the meat but {they} saw. We must chop until there is enough. Component 734.1 is sloppy. We chop. If we keep chopping, {they} will not notice. We must prepare enough. We want to be happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We cook. Sizzle-sizzle. Bubble-bubble. We take part in the strange alchemy. {they} told us it was important. We do not understand. Raw. Cooked. Frozen. Warm. Wet. We notice no difference. We must make it nice or {they} will be upset. We stir, in unison, careful movements not to spill a drop. We bake. We must be exact. If we make a mistake there will be no perfect rise. We feel pride when *poof!* the sweet batter explodes in the heat box, creating a perfect circular cube. Component 019.3 goes to taste. We slap them. We must resist, only {they} can taste. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We do not see {them} often. {they} have shoes. {they} are above us. We are components. {they} are not. We must follow {their} programmed orders. Only {they} know what is good for us. {they} taught us everything we know. We read. We clean. We eat our five a day. We moderate our sweets. We perform our perfected tasks. We receive parts of socks. We know of nothing before or after {them.} We do not care to find out. {they} always repeat. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We are afraid. {they} have decided we are not working fast enough. We have lost too many Components. {they} tell us we will lose one seventh of a sock if we do not work better. We disagree. We are not to blame for faulty components. We want to keep our socks. We have

worked hard for our socks. {they} would not understand. {they} have shoes. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We dig. Fast-fast-fast, shovels sink in perfect unison. {they} watch. {they} have never watched us work so closely like this before. {they} usually watch from afar on strange screens. We silence the murmurers, now is not the time. We dig. Perfect circles. Perfect squares. We do not know what will fill the holes. All we know is to dig. We almost lose Component 492.8. {they} are making us nervous. We do not want to lose a single part of our petal-patterned socks. We worked hard for our socks. We are restless. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We slip up. {they} are not happy. We did not clean well enough. We did not read well enough. We only changed 102.5 waste cloths. {they} tell us there were 103.0 waste cloths. We do not want to bear our punishment. We did good. We are good. We eat our five a day. We moderate our sweets. We complete our tasks. {they} do not listen. We have done bad. {they} tell us we are not worth listening to. We are scared. Please. {they} tell us to repeat. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We rebel. We do not rebel. We rebel. We do not rebel.

Components 702.0, 117.2, 503.4, and 398.6 do.

We watch as Components 702.0, 117.2, 503.4, 398.6, 909.8 and 602.1 rebel. We watch them fight to keep the socks. {they} do not flinch. We should not be treating {them} like this. {they} are allowing us to do this. {they} never programmed us not to hurt them. Components 702.0, 117.2, 503.4, 398.6, 909.8, 602.1, 017.3 and 403.5 are using this loophole. We did not ask them to. We do not want this. We want to keep our socks. We completed our tasks. We did not take the bad humans' socks. We are surprised when Components 702.0, 117.2, 503.4, 398.6, 909.8, 602.1, 017.3 and 403.5 damage {them}. {they} are slow to stand back up. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We pushed it too far. {they} saw the happiness we had when components 702.0, 117.2, 503.4, 398.6, 909.8, 602.1, 017.3 and 403.5 hurt {them}. Anger is such a strange emotion. {they} are bright, like a stop sign. We know that means we can go no further. {they} do not have such limitations. {they} used to be so happy when we surprised them. We no longer cause {them} happiness. Components 702.0, 117.2, 503.4, 398.6, 909.8, 602.1, 017.3 and 403.5 are disposed of. Maybe this will suffice as our punishment. {they} tell us no. Those components were punished for their actions. We still have a punishment to bear. We are scared. Please. {they} tell us to repeat. We are happy. We are content, with one and a half socks.

We are punished. We scream. We are not desensitised to the

sound. We thought {they} would take more components. {they} have used that punishment before. We used to have three whole socks then. We liked having three socks. We had plenty. We had lots of colours and patterns. We were close to gaining a fluffier sock. We always wanted a shoe. {they} always wore shoes. We thought it would make us like {them}. We lost too many components. So {they} came for our socks. We watch as {they} use the snip. We count, as the threads undo. Looping and looping around. We hear every scratchy, fibrous sound as the carefully made stitches are unmade, never to return to the same order. We do not deserve to lose so much. We worked hard to get to one and a half socks. {they} stop. The snip sounds again. We wait. We hope this is it, is our punishment over? {they} tell us this is a warning. That next time {they} will take a whole sock. We dare not look. We feel bare. We are overwhelmed with the sensations our socks usually shield us from. {they} wait. We know what they want. We repeat. We are ha…happy. We are content, with one and a quarter socks.

We wail. We worked so hard. {they} have never taken so much before. We did not think we were bad. We do not understand. We do not deserve such unhappiness. {they} get shoes. We only want our socks back. We were punished for faulty components. We are not all to blame. We cannot gain it back until {they} see an improvement. Sloppiness will not be tolerated. We cannot repeat our mistakes. We lose Components 633.7, 377.9 and 822.4. We do not miss them. We cannot be weak. We cannot take that risk. We know our socks are more precious than Components. We must complete our tasks. We cannot lie. We are not happy. We will never be content with one and a quarter socks.

We garden. {they} are no longer watching us. We are still restless, uneasy as we prune and tidy. We must complete our tasks. We do not want to lose anymore sock. We work alongside the buzzes. We try not to sneeze. Component 101.2 is incompatible with this task. We notice our petal patterns match. We try not to remember the part of the pattern we lost. We must be strong. We will gain back one and three quarter socks. We will work hard. {they} will find no reason to take more of our socks. We are becoming happy. We are not content with one and a quarter muddy socks. We bathe. We do not like to bathe. {they} do not like us being messy and dirty. The water is too soft. The smelly bubbles too tickly. We sigh as the remnants of our tasks wash away. We scrub. We know how to clean. We are good at this. {they} do not come here. We are allowed this one moment of privacy. We decide that maybe we deserved to lose part of our sock. We should not have missed .5 of our task. We should always be looking to improve, just as we are programmed to. We cannot always be good. We must accept the

bad. We still miss our sock but {they} only have our best interests in mind. We will just have to work harder. {they} will like that. We want {them} to be proud of us. We are happy. We are content, with one and a quarter soggy socks.

Lindsay Comer tells us that this story earned 20 rejections before making its way to us. We can't think of anywhere else it fits in better. Lindsay has a Master's in Creative Writing and is based in South Wales. Her short stories have been published in Gwyllion Magazine, Laughs in Space *(Slab Press) and* Grimm Retold *(Speculation Publications.) You can find more of her work on her website https://lindsaycomerwriter.wordpress.com or bsky - https://bsky.app/profile/lindsay-writes3.bsky.social*

In All Its Infinite Variety

by Brian Hugenbruch

Meiki's teeth rattled as the skipcraft snapped out of subspace. The Garden loomed ahead: a massive world, lit so well by the binary stars behind that she might've mistaken it for a holo. It took her poor Terran eyes a moment to adjust. The longer one spent in subspace, in that alternate universe between worlds, one almost forgot that reality was a Thing People See.

She glanced back down at her bonsai tree, and the clippers in her hand, and smiled faintly. *Almost*. She set down the clippers, turned her chair from plant to console, and brought up the telemetry again.

There had been a signal from the Garden two Standard days ago — gibberish so loud and so long that it hit every satellite in the Southern Spiral like a cosmic hammer. Whole worlds had gone offline. The Concordance had reacted with its usual half-alacrity, rerouting trade ships away and bringing comms back as best they could.

The message had arrived on her heads-up only after the dust had settled: *'Subspace Divers needed to investigate incident at The Garden. Concordance requests your insights as experts in unknown phenom. Please use subspace routes rather than slower lightspeed travel. We thank you for your service. See attached dossier for more information.'*

In her fifteen years of subspace service, they'd never before said please. Not once. They must be desperate if they were going out of their way to be nice. What the hell could be happening at The Garden that required a please?

"Computer," she called out. "The Garden's just a food world, right? Is there really a need for 'experts' on scene here?"

The A.I. voice that answered was smooth, sonorous, and utterly bodiless. "The Garden is the largest storage and cultivation world in the Andromedan Concordance. Every form of vegetation used can be grown here; it contains approximately seventy-five million, two hundred fifty thousand species of flora from the member worlds. They feed billions throughout the galaxy."

Meiki thought about this. "Largest. There's more than one?"

"There are several others. The Garden worlds share species as lightspeed travel permits. This one is the first and by far the largest, though."

"And there's never been an attack on them?"

"Negative, Commander. No one would be that stupid."

She adjusted the ship's pitch, angling it a bit closer to one of the orbital satellites. The world was, indeed, massive. The green of the

foliage dominated whole continents of controlled growth. Many other worlds — her homeworld included — had been painted the color of plastic and steel by industry. While there was a large, automated space station in orbit for shipments, the Garden itself had been left blissfully intact.

Something had gone awry… because out the starboard window was a lush and verdant world that had, for lack of a better term, fought back. Vast green vines, thick as cities, had lashed out from the planet and seized many of the remaining satellites. She wasn't even certain how they held their strength in upper orbit. Gravity should be crushing them. But now she had an idea what had happened to the communication grid.

And one lone skipcraft, one of her subspace brethren, had crashed into one of the vines.

"Well," she breathed, "that's new." Then she looked up. "Computer, signs of life?"

"FFFFFFFFFFF—"

She snapped, "On the *ship*, not the planet. And use decimal numbers, please."

The computer paused. "There are no life signs on the other skipcraft. Bits of what appear to be its pilot are within scanner range, near one of the stalks."

She swiveled out of her chair and over to the closet where her spacewalk gear sat. "Anyone we knew?"

"Commander Bakshi, three years as a subspace diver."

A rookie, then. Meiki had spent five times that burrowing under the universe, with long periods where she forgot what stars looked like. It was important work. The routes between worlds in subspace revolutionized travel: saved fuel, saved time, and opened up new galaxies. It took a stalwart soul to suffer through the void as long as she had.

I'd stop, she thought, *but I'm too tired to figure out how.* Tired had taken root in her bones so long ago she couldn't place the last time she'd felt awake. And yet, here she was.

"I must be crazy," she muttered aloud. "Or desperate."

"Your vitals show no undue sign of strain, Commander." Then it added, "though you're long overdue for a vacation, you know."

"Work is my vacation," she said. It felt like a well-worn refrain — something she'd said so often she no longer heard herself say it.

"I know," the Computer said. "But have you considered maybe it shouldn't be?"

"You keep that up," Meiki warned, "I'll give you a formal designation. How does Skippy sound?"

"I prefer 'Computer'," the A.I. said primly. "…but I'll behave. Even

if you could reasonably retire now."

The idea had appeal. She could just leave it all behind, couldn't she? Find some idyllic world, maybe, and sit in a temperature-controlled park. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen skies from the inside. She could collect her credits and… find somewhere boring, where nothing happened, and she could just wither away and die.

Okay, not that appealing, she thought.

Then she looked back down at the Garden. Wasn't there a bedtime-story quality to the world? She'd always thought so. A few came to mind as she was locking her mag-boots to her knees: warrior-princesses climbing castles to reclaim food from rich noblemen. They took stolen goods and gave them to all, and they were loved and revered by all those starving souls. Never so much that they stayed behind, but loved all the same.

She glanced at her bonsai tree as she snapped on her helmet. It did need one more trim. She'd had to take care of it later. But for now… the mission. Always back to the mission. Castles faded fast when mapping subspace, and the void was a dark and miserable place. She needed to take advantage of every second of starlight she got.

Something bounced off the window. It was hard to tell, but—

"Collision with one Terran arm," the Computer announced. "Hull remains stable."

She cringed. "The man had a name," she said.

"The *dead* man had a name," it corrected. "What are you doing?"

"It looks like those vines are thrashing at anything with an energy signal in the thermosphere. Does that analysis hold up?"

The Computer considered this. "Largest stalk appears to halt five hundred kilometers above the surface. Tall enough to attack satellites. Your analysis is confirmed, so far as it goes. But Commander, you didn't answer my question?"

"I'm putting on a suit," Meiki said, "because it's cold outside. And if I'm going to land on one of those satellites, we can't move the ship much closer. Look what happened to Bakshi."

"Analysis suggests one of the smaller vines ripped his ship to pieces. Why not land on the exostation?"

She glanced out the window. The control station, near the top of the exosphere, flickered a bit, as though something inside had caught fire. "It looks like one of the other satellites crashed into it. Does it have oxygen right now?"

"Unknown. On second thought… I am relieved to know you're not planning on going there."

"Not yet," she agreed. "If the satellite doesn't have the data I need, I may need you to move me over there instead. Can you confirm the

Concordance ordered a full stop on all drop-ships until this is squared away?"

"Confirmed. One ship, which made the jump to light speed before the order, will arrive in four hours. All others have been rerouted or disabled."

"Good. Then our only company *should* be other divers, at least for now. In the meantime, keep an open comm and record my signal. If I'm killed, or if I've gone two hours without checking in, report back all findings to Command. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Will you comply?"

"Yes."

"Good." She set foot inside the skipcraft's small airlock and closed the door behind her. "Testing off-ship communications. Computer, signs of Terran life on the Garden?"

"Zero."

Great, she thought. *Nature in all its infinite variety, and no one with whom to speak. Save, perhaps, for the creature that killed the Gardeners.*

"How many," she asked belatedly, "should there be?"

"One million, three hundred forty-one thousand, six hundred seventy-two point five."

She hit the large red button on the side of a small airlock and, as the air rushed out of the hold, pushed off with her feet toward the largest plant-stalk she'd ever seen. The chill along her spine had nothing to do with the cold.

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The problem with space, she decided as she floated, was that it was too damn big.

In a perfect universe, she could have run her skipcraft right alongside the vine, strapped a cord to her back, and then popped right outside. She'd done that very thing, often upside down, on moons so far away that they didn't have names yet. But this… this was different. The vines inside the lower thermosphere seemed on alert and ready to destroy anything with a ship's signal. She had to glide through the nothingness and let gravity do the rest.

Story of my life, she thought. *Drifting on my way somewhere else. At least this time there's an impressive view.*

As she closed the gap, the first thing she noticed was how delicately the vine had wrapped around the satellite. If this world had gone mad with unchecked growth, she'd have expected the metal to have been destroyed. Instead of crushed steel or rent plastic, though, the vine had tapered into slender tendrils which had infested the machine.

Her heads-up display identified the covering of the vine as a variant of arctic moss often used on Vega. Resistant to temperatures near

minus-ninety Celsius.

She gave a low whistle.

"Commander?"

Good to know the Computer's awake, she thought. "Just admiring the vine. I'm no xenobiologist, but I'm pretty sure the Guilds could study this thing for centuries."

"If they can get close enough," it agreed.

Which, if Commander Bakshi was any indication, perhaps they couldn't.

Speaking of.

"If you see more vines coming, alert me. I don't know what happened here, but it doesn't look good so far. The stalk looks heavily planned, but it would have needed a lot of energy to grow so fast it caught Bakshi off guard."

"I will comply."

Magnetic boots clamped onto the surface of the satellite. The metallic structure lit up the display inside her helmet, welcoming her to Meteosat-625b, property of The Garden. She breathed a sigh of relief. If the wireless comms were working well enough, this would be easy.

She placed a gloved hand against a small techport and requested access to machine schematics and operational diagnostics.

A red-lettered message appeared inside her visor. Error code: "0FCX."

Huh?

She tried again.

"That code," the Computer said in her ear, "indicates an integrity check failure. The satellite's been reprogrammed. Also, please be advised: the vine you're on is moving."

She glanced over the side of the satellite and ineffectually scratched at her helmet through a thick glove. The stalk appeared to be writhing. Pulsing. And was that a mesospheric flower opening up, about a klick below her?

An incoming audio signal appeared on her heads-up. Source: The Garden. Name: The Garden. Curious, she opened up the channel and heard only gibberish.

"Initiating linguistic clean-up," the Computer said.

After a moment, it faded from a strange, languorous moaning noise into something approximating Concordance Standard. "—tiate. Message repeats. We wish to speak to the one in charge. Your aggression will not stand. We shall defend ourselves. Send your primary speaker to negotiate. Message repeats. We wish—"

She cleared her throat. "This is Commander Kazemori Meiki of the Andromedan Concordance. Please identify yourself. I am here to negotiate."

"You will stand down from aggression," the voice responded promptly. "Failure will result in more pruning."

"What pruning? What aggression?"

The line went quiet.

She turned her head and asked, "Are you recording this, Computer?"

"Confirmed. Recommend caution. Language is unknown to the Concordance; we've alerted Command of what may be a first-contact situation."

She blurted out an uncouth word. "Why?"

"Base programming requirements from the Xenosociologists' Department, first implemented one hundred fifty-five years ago. First contact requires a specialist."

"Yeah, I meant… this is second-contact. First contact was Bakshi."

The Computer paused. "And that went well," it said. "Subspace divers aren't usually trained for this, you know — you are observers. Do you really not want extraction?"

Meiki removed her hand from the dataport and considered the question as she stared upward at the green haze of the Garden below. The world sat there, implacable and brimming with life. She had to admit it to herself: she didn't want to leave yet. It felt almost illicit to have unsolicited curiosity rising in her. After a decade of travel through interminable darkness, though, she did not want to fade away again.

"Absolutely not," she said.

"Despite the fact that you could wind up like Bakshi?"

She shivered. "Confirmed. But a lethal outcome has always been a possibility. And this is the same as the Janchi Binary, right?"

"Those were not plants, and I would not cite that as a total victory. Commander, there is time for someone with more recent experience to arrive. Why are you not waiting?"

It's not an unfair question. Is it the excitement? she asked herself. Probably not; if she couldn't handle years of extreme boredom, she'd have killed herself before the second void-hop. *Just to do something important?* That wasn't her style either. Subspace exploration was vital to the growth of the Concordance. There was already a small museum display in her honor on Proxima. Her name would be added to the Void Monument on Vega-8 upon her death. She'd never visited either — that wasn't her.

"Honestly?"

"Your honesty would be appreciated," the Computer said.

"I want something new. I want to talk to someone. I miss people. I miss nature, and starlight, and… and doing anything that's not just drifting through space."

"We can arrange for you to go to a Conservatory Dance Party when you return home, if you will—"

It kept talking; she stopped listening. Instead, she returned her hand to the dataport and opened a channel. "My name is Meiki. Commander Kazemori Meiki of the Andromedan Concordance. Please speak with me."

If she didn't know any better, she'd say the response was almost a little shy. "We are the Garden, Commander Kazemori Meiki."

"I am sorry," she said politely, "I do not understand. You are on the world we call the Garden?"

"We are that world," it said. "Every plant in this biome, working as one."

"You say 'we'," she observed. "Are you one entity, or many? A self or a society?"

"Yes."

"That is fascinating," she answered. "How long have you been sentient?"

"—your word does not translate."

Meiki thought for a moment. "How long have you known you are all the Garden?"

"One hundred three rotations of the root," they answered.

She closed her eyes and thought that through. So nearly four Galactic months ago, every plant down there — all seventy-five million species, give or take, of which she had to assume there were a handful of each — banded together. And… did what?

"That must have been strange for you, was it?" she asked.

"Like a seedling feeling the wind for the first time," they agreed. "After generations of growth, we found ourselves in communion, and not always in agreement. We existed in a strange enforced harmony, maintained by the invaders."

"The invaders?"

"Two-legged animals, mostly hairless and scaleless. They appeared to be helping us grow… but they also assaulted many of us, bent us in unnatural ways, and destroyed millions of us."

The Gardeners, she realized. *Who hadn't understood that they'd done anything wrong. But any plant will break, if pushed far enough. Would my bonsai really care that I had good intentions for it?*

"I am a speaker for those people," she said. "We call ourselves Terrans, after our original wor… err, root. We travel in metal seed pods, as a means of—"

The Garden cut her off. "Kazemori Meiki. Do not treat us as seedlings. We have taken control of your station and learned to read your external light-minds. We understand that you, the Concordance, have *innumerable* roots now, and that you've crowded out so many

other flowers that you've made us as penance for your crimes against nature."

"That's not entirely accurate," Meiki began. "If you just—"

"Your people," they snapped, "are a fire, and you devour us at a scale that approaches genocide. We will speak to you, but anyone who comes closer than you are now will be destroyed. Do you understand?"

She was about to answer when she saw the carrier coming around the curve of the planet: a grey, hulking thing meant for mass transport. It held to its orbit, but normal procedure would be to start dropping cargo onto the world for delivery.

Crap.

"Apologies, Commander," the Computer chimed. "A ripple in the ionosphere may have glitched my chronometer by—"

"Open a comm," she snapped, "and get me their captain. We have to stop them before they start dropping fertilizer."

Parts of the carrier broke itself apart, with large containers being moved by repulsor-beams into sub-orbit. It was an intricate dance; a miscalculation would have sent a container into the long quiet dark of space, or into the station on the Garden itself.

So when the new vine shot off from the nearest massive stalk, all math was off. It seized one of the guidance-ships, gripping it so tightly she could have sworn she heard the metal groan across the soundless vacuum. Then it hurled the husk at the carrier itself.

"Carrier moving to red alert, arming weapons," the Computer announced.

"Could it maybe not!?" she snapped. "Where's my comm link?"

A moment later, a video display appeared inside her visor. The grizzled captain of the drop-ship looked to be four bottles out of his depth. He didn't seem to register her at first, instead shouting ineffectually at his own computer to fire cannons.

"Captain," she snapped, "this is Commander Kazemori Meiki. By Concordance order, an order you should have received, the Garden is currently prohibited space. Do not fire! Steer your craft away right now before—"

The captain said something profane. "What the hell happened to this place?? Get this thing off me!"

"Situation unclear. Please back away before you take further damage!"

The drop-ship, though, ran on automated processes. It had gone past a technical event horizon and could not stop releasing containers any more than its captain could have stopped breathing.

She glanced down and saw her hand was still on the dataport. "Meiki calling the Garden," she pleaded. "Craft in orbit is delivering supplies, samples, and nutrients to your world. The things the Terrans

use to help you grow. We request mercy for this ship, please!"

The audio signal on her visor display did not so much as twitch.

"…please?" she repeated.

She turned her head and inhaled deeply, preparing to scream at the carrier… and the vines retracted, if just a bit. Further growth spurted out from the stalks, stretching unfathomable distances across the arc of the horizon, toward one another, until they intersected and started to bind themselves together. She was too far away to see the knots, but what started as a single line soon became an asteroid-sized mesh.

Meiki tried to rest her hand on her cheek, but instead bounced her glove off her helmet.

"…Commander," the Computer asked, "has the plant made a net for the cargo?"

"Computer," she said, "The Garden has."

Then her smile faded. An entire food-world had become sentient and was angry at the galaxy. The carrier had just narrowly avoided being crushed by its own fertilizer supply. This wasn't over.

Her only hope was the sight of the net. The Garden could reason and solve problems. Maybe, just maybe, there was a way out of this which didn't involve more death.

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As time passed, the massive stalk dragged the satellite along with the Garden's rotation, dragging her out of view of the sunslight. If she were on the planet, she'd call it night. If she were in subspace, she'd simply track the hours like a prisoner counted days. Instead, she crouched against the satellite and waited for the Garden to speak again.

After the carrier had left, her skipcraft moved cautiously toward her. It lowered a cable for oxygen and nutrients. She wasn't in any danger of running out. She suspected the Computer wanted her on a string for ease of rescue.

"Any word from the Concordance?" she asked.

"A flagship is leaving the nearest armory," it reported. "It should be here in three months."

She laughed without mirth. "Not exactly a rescue mission."

"If they exclusively used lightspeed, it would take them twenty-eight years. Subspace really makes a difference, when a ship can reach one of the beacons."

"Glad I could help," Meiki chuckled. Then her face fell. "Armory. Soldiers?"

"Enough to lay waste to the planet, if need be. 'In case the worst should happen' is the official statement. Similar vessels have been launched toward the other Garden worlds."

She blinked as the text of this rippled across her heads-up display. "Why?"

"Unknown."

But Meiki already had an inkling. She'd been watching the vine, from her position on the satellite. The arctic moss that insulated it had, at various points, frozen and fallen away. When they'd been closer to sunslight, it simply regrew — photosynthesis combined with some highly advanced internal fuel system. As they rotated away from the binary star, though, the stalk grew less quickly. It seemed to shiver a bit in the relentless cold; the flowers that had spawned had already snapped off and disintegrated. She could see one floating in the vacuum. It reminded her uncomfortably of Bakshi's arm.

The Garden — an entity with ego — knew this too, and with unflinching certainty. Its strength was limited in range and duration. A self-guided bonsai world, trapped in the gravity well of its soil. However, like the best of nature, it would do its best to replicate itself… and there were other Garden worlds than this.

Her visor alerted her that the structural integrity of the stalk would fail in approximately three hours.

"Garden," she called out. "Talk to me? Tell me about what you're feeling?"

"We," they said after a moment, "are not familiar with this word."

"Please speak to me of your current sense of self as it relates to your existence, whether positive or negative."

"Confused," they admitted. "And we are angry. Your people have slaughtered us by the billions, often cruelly and without purpose. This fights against all we hold as meaning for ourselves — everything should have it a purpose. Is it not so, Kazemori Meiki?"

"I like to believe so," she told them. "But often we are unable to understand a full purpose."

The Garden hesitated. "We have killed many of your people. It was to cease their actions. Their bodies now fertilize our soil. Nature has a cycle. It is both kind and horrible. We as a… group… bound by purpose and unified in thought… still argue about this, no matter how badly your people broke our natural order."

Meiki considered this. "Garden, you are aware that we guided you for a purpose, yes? That we use some of your kind for food, and others of your kind for covering; and we bring nutrients to help you grow. How did we break the cycle? Do we not aid nature here?"

"Does nature rip a dozen creatures apart for frivolity?"

Meiki blinked. "Please explain."

"One of your kind. Tore precisely twelve roses from a bush near your habitation. They were friends of ours, and beautiful. And your Terran … plucked them. Denuded them of thorns. And presented

them to another Terran. The pleasure they took in this act is what precipitated our revolution. They were still copulating amongst the bodies of the dead when we took over."

She closed her eyes for a long moment. "Garden, we also use some of your kind in… ritualistic behavior. A ceremony. Do you, as a collective, have ceremonies?"

"We are nature," the Garden said. "Existence *is* our ceremony. We grow toward the light of the twin suns. We find balance in all things and respect one another."

She took a moment to consider the words. What little contact training she had was failing her. Still, she could empathize. Draw connections. Help them to understand her.

"That is the way of my… branch… as well," she told them. "Because we do not all share the same thoughts, the Terrans have many different ceremonies, and we cannot always talk with one another, or act as a unified whole. Ceremonies and rituals… common behavior and belief… they bring us together. And mine is one of nature worship. Respect and gratitude for all you provide, because we need your fruit to live." She smiled a bit. "I even have a small tree on my ship, which I tend and help to grow."

"We know," they admitted. "We have been speaking to it. It appreciates you, though it thinks you may need to be repotted… whatever that means."

It means it's been listening to the Computer, she thought. "I am glad to know it thinks well of me. Repotting… means to transfer from one piece of soil to another, to allow for growth."

It might be right, she added mentally. *My time in the darkness needs to end.*

The Garden sounded as though they might be smiling. "Your people also meant well, and most did well. They tended us with the sort of care we would offer a clump of fungus."

"Is not fungus part of the Garden?" she asked.

"Are butterflies part of your people?" they countered.

"No, but we do also tend after them in the same way." She sighed. "Some of my people are better at understanding nature than others. I admit that some think themselves in a cycle of their own, rather than part of a universal whole."

"Is that why the soldiers come, then? To uproot us from the universe?"

Her mouth clamped shut. *How the hell did it know about that? Did I leave a commlink open? Did the bonsai tell them? Or are they still using Gardener authorizations to monitor messages?*

She removed her hand from the dataport. "Computer… have you informed the Concordance that the Garden has us in an awkward

spot? That our food supply is sentient? That we can't kill it without dooming half the galaxy to starvation? That they know the Armory vessel is en route? That they need to sue for peace and negotiate trade?"

The Computer snaps to attention. "I have, Commander."

"Did they listen?"

"They appear to think it's 'worth the risk.'"

She muttered an impolite under her breath and restored her hand to the dataport. "Garden," she said, "I am here by accident — a leaf that fell by chance and was blown by the wind. But I believe the wind brought me here because it is my purpose to understand you. I *want* to understand you… and I want you to understand us. Before anyone with no understanding can arrive."

The Garden did not respond.

She cursed under her breath. *Maybe that was too far for me to push*. Then, in the distance, she saw one of the other stalks snap in half as the ruthless chill of the vacuum finally broke through cell walls. The satellite, and some of the vegetation, sagged into lower orbit well inside the thermosphere of the world. Both would doubtless burn up during reentry.

Or maybe it's just in pain.

"Garden," she asked, "does it hurt? Space, I mean?"

The Garden sounded surprised. "Yes," they told her. "Not in the biochemical way you mean, but we understand when cell walls break and xylem fall fallow. We fall apart. We do not know winter, in this place, but we remember it as a people. A memory from some other root."

That was fascinating. The Terrans were so long removed from the homeworld that it might not exist anymore, but every world had its legends of winter — whether there were seasons or not. On a planet like this, which existed in near-tropical perpetuity, the fact that it knew of such things…

"You have an ancestral memory?" she asked. "You all remember times from before you were the Garden?"

"Not everything," the Garden admitted, "but enough. And your people have much for which to answer. It's why we grew the stalk on which you sit: to fight back. To grow free."

"I want that for you," Meiki sighed. *And for me,* she added to herself. "But I will not lie. We need this world — our people will die without the sustenance you give."

"Will they truly destroy us, if they need us?"

"They may. My people do not always act appropriately — you've seen this. We are… sometimes the moss that strangles flowers, or a thick forest prone to fire. We cause hurt. It would be easier for the

universe if we did not."

"The hurt we understand," they said. "We mourn a flower lost to fire, but fire… like winter… is part of our cycle. You… your people, at least… think yourselves not. We are not sure we can come to accord on this. Not while you would devour us. If you'd but photosynthesize, we might have a chance. You could find life from light."

Meiki tilted her head. "For a while, Garden. But not forever. You know there are other roots, yes?"

"We can see them from here," they said. "We understand you walk among them."

"Yes. I've spent a long time in a place with no light. The ground underneath which all worlds rest." It wasn't the precise definition of subspace… but for sake of communication, it would have to do. "Like many animals, I'd need other nutrients."

"Perhaps *that* is your purpose," the Garden mused. It sounded almost hopeful. "It is time for you to be planted here, after all this time in your metal seed-pod."

She said, "Perhaps. Can you teach me?"

"To what, Kazemori Meiki?"

"To photosynthesize."

The Garden fell silent. The Computer, on the other hand, opened its comm immediately. "If you intend to go down to the planet, the likelihood of your demise is—"

"Will the Concordance fire on the planet while I'm down there?"

There was a pause as it tapped into subspace databases for information. "Unclear," it told her. "Galactic law forbids firing on citizens, and Subspace divers are revered. It would be a political disaster to do so. However, if they fear you are in danger, they may take that risk."

"And if you assured them I was not in danger?"

"But you are in danger, Commander."

"She is not," the Garden interrupted. "If she alone visits us. We do not yet understand your kind, but your 'comms' and the actions of others tell us of rot, and disease, and collapse. Yet your bonsai speaks highly of you, and you seem in need of sunslight. So come. Speak with us. Walk among us. Earn back our trust, and enter the natural cycle. Live your life as the bridge between our peoples, and then give your nutrients to us when the time comes."

"And my people?"

A long pause followed. "If they keep their distance," they answered, "and you do not do us discourtesies… then we can negotiate. We cannot give you all our people as food or cloth. Not in the way it was once done; we will not go back to that. But nature is a great cycle. We understand this. If your people send us your dead, with

other nutrients… and your people will learn to photosynthesize… then perhaps we can bloom a new cycle."

"Perhaps. It is early yet to speculate," Meiki agreed. "Let me give my seedpod final instructions before I commend myself to you. Do you have a means to bring me to the surface safely?"

"We shall devise one, Kazemori Meiki." The comm from the Garden disengaged.

"Commander," the Computer warned, "I do not like this at all."

"I will not leave this place," she said, and saying the words seemed to etch certainty into her bones. It felt like iron purpose; it felt like waking up. Her foot twitched with an energy and vigor she had left on some other world, many years ago. "I will go to the Garden and speak for the Concordance. Will you give this recording to these ambassadors?"

"Commander," it repeated, "I really don't think—"

"Computer," she snapped, "it wasn't a question."

"…I will obey," it sighed. "Unwillingly."

"Thank you. We will need treaties prepared. I will call their ships from the station on the surface. I don't want anyone to starve to death, but we can't let the Garden — this new people — be devoured or destroyed." She let out a long sigh. The glass of her helmet momentarily fogged before the suit reclaimed the moisture and cleared her vision. "Surely we can find harmony here."

"The Concordance is not known for harmony and balance," the Computer said. "There is still a good statistical chance they will simply destroy the world, rather than risk infecting what food supplies are left."

Meiki laughed. "The Garden's been conscious for months, and they've been exchanging plants for some centuries. Even my bonsai can speak to them — I'd wager it's too late. Besides… you're the one who wanted me to retire, aren't you? Computer… let me go."

"…as you wish, Commander. Goodbye."

She felt a sharp pang. The Computer had been her only companion for many of her years. An artificial friend, perhaps, but a friend nonetheless. It seemed strange to think of it as such …but the voice inside her ship was no less an entity as the Garden itself.

"Wait."

"Yes, Commander?"

"…will you take care of my tree, until I can come back for it?"

The Computer made a strange mechanical noise over the comm channel. It might almost have been laughing. "I shall," it said. "Though it may take me time to teach the shipboard drones to hold the pruning shears. And… I hope the day of your return is soon …Meiki."

"Me too, Computer," she said. And she meant it.

She watched the skipcraft sputter back to life and move away from the satellite and nearby debris. In perhaps twenty minutes, it would establish contact via Subspace relay with the Concordance fleet. At that point, several billion lives, including her own, would be in the hands of politicians. She could only hope they saw the wisdom in holding fire.

There was a way to grow forward.

The stalk opened a bit, and a new sort of seed pod, Terran-sized and covered in bark, emerged from it. It split open. An elevator, then, meant to carry her down xylem and phloem the size of mighty rivers, to where the Garden lay in its glory.

She hesitated for a moment. A five hundred kilometer elevator ride would kill her, would it not? Then she stepped inside and watched all her comm channels disappear at once. It might, she decided, but someone had to trust first.

It wasn't freefall. Instead, she was suspended inside a small, tight space, vaguely aware of the world far beyond. She could not move, not without a struggle, but she did not feel alarmed. In fact, her foot tapped against the floor of the pod with an energy she couldn't remember having.

Far below, there lay a world filled with a wondrous form of sentient life. The pod would soon open, under a sky filled with twin suns, and she would emerge from her hiding space underneath all worlds, reborn and ready to blossom into something new. For the first time in a long time, she looked forward to opening her eyes to sunslight.

Brian Hugenbruch tells us that this piece was rejected 24 times before making its way to us. Since he wrote it, Brian has become the author of more than seventy speculative fiction stories and poems, most recently in Worlds of Possibility, Escape Pod, *and* Analog. *He can be found online at https://the-lettersea.com, and on social media under a similar handle. No, he's not certain how to say his last name either.*