



# Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – THE FORGETTING by Jeff King. Jeff King is a writer who lives in Canada with his family and a suburban yard that has been described as a “cross between a farm and a circus.” His writing has appeared in *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*, *Reverie*, *Johnny America*, *JAKE*, *Mirk Fantasy*, and *Bewildering Stories*.

Page 10 – FRED by David Rich. Mr. Rich writes thought-provoking science fiction stories, oftentimes with fun and humor. His work has been featured in numerous literary journals. He lives in the Boston area with his wife and daughters. His robot story “Darwin” can be found in *Corner Bar Magazine*, Volume 7, Issue 2, published in December 2021. “Fred” previously appeared in *Drunk Monkeys* in February 2024, and in *Piker Press* in August 2025.

Page 16 – CIRCLE THE DRAIN by Gaby Zabar. Gaby Zabar is a writer who lives in Southern California. Find her on the internet at [gabyzabar.com](http://gabyzabar.com).

Page 18 – PERFECT CIRCLE by Brian Rosten. Brian Rosten is a middle school science teacher in Champaign, IL. He also had the opportunity to adjunct at the University of Illinois last year. He loves writing, reading, and listening to the Chicago White Sox occasionally win. You can find pieces of his work interspersed across the internet. He lives in Urbana with his partner and three children.



# “THE FORGETTING”

by JEFF KING

The Engineer watched without expression as the first wave spilled over the edge of the embankment. The river had gathered speed and volume after a week of rain. A swell rolled along its surface, then skimmed silently across the bank and into the city streets.

It was still early – before 4 a.m. The telephone was near his hand, but he had already decided not to bother calling anyone. He’d said it all before. No one cared. The Lethe was just a river, and its water was no good. There was no need, he had been told, to bring in the cultic stuff about ancient commissions and embarrassing superstitions. The river’s toxicity levels had been carefully tested and were found to be within manageable ranges.

But the river was unpredictable. After all, predictability relies upon memory, and the Lethe was hardly subject to a category like that. Meandering like a hypnotic snake through long grass, the Lethe sought out forgetting as its true end. All that could be known for certain, the Engineer had countered his superiors at the time, was that the river would flood someday. Like so many tasks set by the gods, or whomever it was, the ancient project was a ruse for something else. It was a test.

That was all over now. From where he sat, gazing out upon the unlit shops and parks that lined the riverbank, the rush of the water seemed like a smear of black paint across a

canvas. There was no noise. For most people, he thought, the forgetting would arrive before they were even awake. The mists of their dreaming would only thicken.

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By noon, the rush had ceased. The still, blank mirror of the Lethe had cut the city in half. The light of the sun tripping along the rippled water uncovered some of the horror that the night had muted. Torn trees, windowless cars, and other debris made the streets look like a landfill resting on a swamp. He had not yet seen any bodies.

The shining water caught his eye, and he wondered suddenly whether Tess would have remembered his warnings. They had been apart for several years now, but the one or two times he’d been in the neighborhood he’d seen her old car parked in the driveway of their house. She’d remarried, this time to a music teacher, and had not stayed in touch. Would she have seen the rain pouring down and thought (as he had): “It’s finally here”? If he returned to their home, would he find her there, safe in the attic room that he had built for just such an event? It did not seem likely, but perhaps the rain had stirred something in her.

Their former home was not exactly on the way out of town, but the Engineer decided abruptly that he would go and see whether she had made it through the night. The house was

on the other side of what used to be the ancient city wall, about half a mile away. He pulled on his gloves, jacket, waist waders, and the mask that he hoped would protect him from whatever amnesic poison drifted through the dark flood-waters.

The night before, after everyone had gone home, he'd tied his boat to a fire hydrant outside the office doors. Now, as he opened the doors to exit, the water that had been piling up against the glass for hours rushed inwards. He stiffened as the swirling foam passed across his rubber-clad legs. He waded to where the fire hydrant had been, now at least a foot below the surface, and untied the boat, which bobbed gently as he approached. He got in carefully, one foot perched on the top of the hydrant. Once he was balanced, he sat still for a moment and then began to row, slicing through the waters like a steel blade through a ribbon. The air was quiet all around him, save for the sound of his strokes.

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The opening in the city wall he had planned to go through was blocked by an enormous fallen tree and gathering debris. He paddled into an adjacent alley and onto the next street, a dead-end abutting the city wall. The water was high enough here for him to lift himself out of his boat and onto the wall itself. From the top of the wall, he reached down and pulled up his boat on to the wall. He hefted the boat onto his back, careful to watch out for drops off the bottom, and began to edge along the stone path of the long unused wall, looking for a way down.

He finally found a set of steep steps peering out from the wall face. He climbed down and then lowered the boat into the water without a ripple. Once aboard, he pressed his oar against

the wall and pushed off in the direction of the house.

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The door was red now instead of white. She'd always wanted it red. As his boat bumped softly against the door's frame, he tried the handle. It was locked. There was a window into the bathroom around the corner of the house. Pulling himself around its perimeter, he reached up and pressed on it, siding it open. He lifted himself up on to the window and then slid the rest of the way through. With a rope he had tied to the bow, he secured the boat to the handle of the bathroom door.

The Engineer took a deep breath of filtered air through his mask. He hadn't been back in this house since the divorce five years ago. The bathroom was unchanged, but that was about the only thing. The hallway was full of new pictures. Framed black and white images of pianos and famous musicians. Many photos of her and her new husband at her parents' cottage. No kids.

The bedroom was at the other end of the hall. It made the most sense to check there first, he thought. The house was utterly silent, save the constant sound of water swishing with every step. Everywhere the water was up to his knees. He passed his old study, which looked as though it was being renovated. Across from the bedroom was a room she'd used as an office. The unshelved stacks of printer paper and books were floating along the edge of her desk like drifting algae. As he came to the bedroom door, he felt a sudden chill, like an electric shock between his shoulder blades, as the thought of finding her dead passed through his mind. He pulled himself in through the water.

The bed was empty. The cover and sheets

had not been made. Had they risen quickly to escape? Had they sensed a sudden urgency? A thought came suddenly into the Engineer's mind, so that he turned back towards the old study, pushing hard against the weight of the water against his legs.

When they had bought the house shortly after getting married, there had been one feature in it that he loved more than any other. In the middle room, there was a closet door. While touring the house, he had opened it to check the storage space and discovered instead a steep flight of stairs leading to the attic. They'd purchased the house that same day.

The significance of this flight of stairs grew clearer to him over the years, particularly after he had more fully realized the urgent danger the Lethe posed to the city. To escape its threat, he'd carefully plotted out a set of instructions. Several times, particularly as they had neared the end of their marriage, he had reminded his wife of the importance of following these instructions. They were typed out and fixed to the closet door.

Entering the room, though, he could see that the instructions had been removed. She was a fool. He decided to take a look in the attic anyways and tried to open the door. He pulled hard against the resisting weight of the water, cracking it open just enough. One of the filters on his mask caught briefly against the frame, but he tipped his head upwards and made it through. The water slammed the door behind him.

The Engineer pulled out a flashlight and flicked it on. His list of instructions was still there. She had just moved them. The frame was dusty, but he could still make out his six rules clearly:

1. If there is heavy rain for more than two

days, begin making arrangements to move into the attic.

2. Keep masks and filters up to date.

3. Make sure prep kit is well stocked (see list).

4. Check waders and goggles quarterly for tears or holes and to renew waterproofing.

5. Do not retrieve the boat from the shed until the rain has ceased and the water has stopped rising.

6. Aim for fresh water.

He began to climb the stairway. It was freeing to step out of the water. When he reached the top of the stairs, the Engineer listened for a long time, his hand on the handle of the door to the attic. He could not hear anything. Sighing, he went in.

It was not exactly an empty room. There was a single bed more or less in the middle, situated where the ceiling was highest before it began sloping down to meet the floor. Along this sloped edge were a number of boxes, some closed and stacked and some open and overflowing. There were filing cabinets, a full-length mirror facing the wall, pieces of old furniture, a headboard for a queen-sized bed. The window on the other side of the room had a thin white curtain hanging over it, distorting the light that slanted into the room.

A thin layer of dust was spread largely undisturbed across the bare wood floorboards. The only sound he heard now was that of water dripping off his gear and pooling at his feet. He stood still for what seemed like several minutes.

The whole detour seemed bewildering to him now. And dangerous. In all the years of his planning for this disaster, detouring at his ex-wife's to see if she survived had never been a step that he had planned to undertake. Even when he had moved into his own space, re-pur-

chased any gear lost in the divorce, and started plotting routes, it had always been with a plan aiming at that sixth rule on his list: fresh water.

He walked over to the bed, a bare mattress on a metal frame, and unzipped his life jacket. He sat down on the side of the bed abruptly. He wished he could take off his mask for a moment just to breathe freely and think, but this was too risky. Instead, he leaned back against the wall and pulled his wet boots up on to the bed so that he was partly sitting up.

The Engineer shook his head. She had never thought much of the instructions. He wondered if she and her husband had been together when the flood first seeped under the door. Had they rushed out of the house and into the streets, half-mad as their minds emptied like cloudy water down a bathtub drain? Had there been a moment, he thought bitterly, before her mind was fully blank, where she had thought once more of the rules and wished she had kept them on the door where everyone could see them rather than in a dark stairway where it would only be helpful if you remembered step number one?

This town had never been home to her, but he had grown up here. He'd heard the stories from his grandmother about the river and the town's ancient history. He knew about the rumors of children or transients tragically engulfed by its waters if not bodily, then mentally. There were walking bodies, bereft of memory and thought, bound in institutional facilities on the west side of town.

He remembered the first time he tried to explain the river to her. She had grown up far to the north by freshwater lakes. Of course, she'd heard of the strange river Lethe and the town on its banks as a little girl, but she'd never thought she would end up living there as an

adult. As the fates would have it, she came for a visit with some friends midway through college and ended up fascinated by the place. She met him shortly after moving to town.

"The Lethe is not a river, really. It's a test." He had been saying this to the bartender, who was nodding, but not really paying attention. "And they're all going to fail it. I guarantee you, not a soul will succeed. Maybe if we were a bigger town, we'd figure out how the waters work, figure out how to reverse the effects or something. But we aren't, and the people in this town don't think like that. Whatever. We were never asked to think like that. We were just asked to build the banks and keep them intact."

She had been listening in a few stools down the whole time. She pulled out a chair and sat down next to him so abruptly that he half-spilled his drink.

"So is the Lethe, like, a magic river? The old stories I know about it say that it will make you fall asleep and lose your memory."

Still wiping froth from the front of his shirt, the Engineer plowed on without a breath.

"No. It's not magic. It's a river, but it has a different purpose: it's a test."

The woman nodded. "Okay, and you said it's a test that we have failed. So what?"

The Engineer was getting distracted by a dark strand that had come loose from her hair. "I mean that the purpose of the Lethe is not like that of a normal river, which is to – I don't know – nourish the creatures that live around it, animals, humans, plant life, or to carry things to and fro. The Lethe's purpose is to see if people are going to obey the gods' command."

"I'm Tess," she said, extending a hand.

He shook her hand and mumbled a reply.

"So you believe in the gods?"

"I never said I believe in them. I just said

that we have been asked to obey them. The reality of the Lethe itself asks us to do this.”

The woman suddenly looked disappointed.

“What’s wrong?” The Engineer was worried he’d derailed the conversation and the way she had leaned back in her chair and looked away was making him hate himself.

“My family live in the north between two freshwater lakes. My mother swims in one or the other of them every day until they start to freeze over. Water has been our lifelong friend. We sit and watch it as the sun goes down. We play in it and use it. You must use it here.”

“Yes, we truck it in from the north. The Lethe can’t be purified and made into a regular river –”

“Because that’s not what it is,” she said, sighing. “I think I understand that. It just seems sort of sick to me. The idea that the gods or whatever it is would put this here just to try your obedience: I think that’s disgusting.”

The Engineer shrugged. “I’ve thought that before from time to time. But I figure it’s like the rest of life. There are all sorts of constraints we can’t get around. I’ll never be six feet tall, no matter how much I stretch. A maple tree can’t make itself an oak. A badger can’t make itself a bird.”

The woman looked unconvinced, but she leaned forward. “What about a man who figures out a way to fly?”

“He’s still not a bird.”

“But he can fly, and that’s something he couldn’t do before.” She was getting warmed up. “Why can’t the Lethe be like that? You say it’s a test. But what if we just said: no more tests? Who cares about purpose? We’ll do what we like and the gods be damned.”

The Engineer shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Despite his reticence, he did not in fact

believe in the old gods; however, he had a certain amount of respect for the belief itself. The blasphemy was disturbing, but it also made his heart race.

“If you stand in front of a train and tell it to stop moving, you’ll still get run over. You may not like the fact of the Lethe, but if you drink from it, if you touch it, you won’t care about anything after that because you won’t even know who you are.”

The face opposite him considered his earnestness for a minute and then smiled.

#

Tess, the woman who later became his wife, introduced the Engineer to all sorts of experiences that he would never have encountered otherwise. The one that stood out most was the trip they took to visit her family in the north. In the five years they had been married, they had only made the trip once. He always came up with some excuse for not being able to do it, or for pushing it back another year. It wasn’t because he hadn’t enjoyed it.

Actually, as he had stood on the beach of the freshwater lake his wife had grown up by, dressed in his father-in-law’s spare swimming trunks, he had thought momentarily to himself that this was the way things should be. It had taken him most of a day to work up the nerve to stand with his feet in the water, feeling the gentle lap of windblown waves against his ankles. Now, he didn’t want to leave. One of their nieces, a four-year old who acted like she was fifty, had brought a small jar, which she filled with lake water and held up to inspect.

“It’s moving!” she cried with a mix of fear and delight.

She shoved the jar towards him for him to take. She then scrambled back two feet to let him pass a verdict on whether it was safe or not.

The water was cloudy, but unmistakably there was movement within it. Looking more closely, he silently gasped as he could make out the shape of a small minnow, now spinning, now staying perfectly still, now darting towards the glass and then away again.

"I think you're safe," he had chuckled.

The Lethe, he told his in-laws later that day, didn't have anything living in it at all. He would watch it sometimes from his office window and see a kind of beauty in its dark, heavy current, but anyone could tell immediately that it was a thing intimately – mythically – connected with death. Not like this lake, where his niece and nephew could run along the shore, splashing first with a step into the water and then a step on the sand and back and forth for as far as their parents would let them go.

After the kids and most of the family had gone home, he had stood with her on the edge of the lake for a long while. The sun was setting, casting up rosy fingers that brushed against the rough-blown clouds leaving purple and gold-tinged banners in the atmosphere. A scattering of stars glistened.

"Come into the water with me," she said to him, pulling at his hand.

He let himself be led further into the water until it was at his chest. The water was cold, but the air above him was still warm.

"I could do this every day," he said gently.

His wife was quiet for a moment and then said, "We could, you know. We don't have any friends in town really. And you could get a job here. I'm sure you could."

The Engineer let his hand drop from hers.

She continued. "I wake up every night terrified. I hear the sound of a dripping pipe in the house and worry that it's finally happened."

The Engineer shrugged slowly.

"I feel that too. It's part of what it means to live next to the river. It's part of the test."

Without warning, Tess struck the water with both hands. He could no longer see her except for a dark silhouette against the shimmering edge of the sun setting into the hills on the far side of the lake.

"I don't want to be tested. So what if the Lethe floods its banks? If everyone just left that fucking town, then nothing would happen. It would just flood. And then maybe a few years from now, it would flood again. It would just be a river, a dangerous river for humans and maybe other creatures, but ultimately just a river."

Until about five minutes earlier, the Engineer had felt the surrounding lake water envelop him like a womb. Now he felt trapped. He could not move his legs fast enough as he gathered all his strength to flee to shore. He wanted to get away from this voice, whispering about a future unlike any he had envisioned before. The voice sounded like his wife's, but he could hear it echo deep within him as well. So he thrashed through the waters, straining his legs against the weight of the entire lake, pushing towards the shore.

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He sat up suddenly. The attic room was cast in all sorts of shadows. He must have drifted off, and it was now late in the afternoon.

Getting up from the bed once more, he started to leave the room. He looked around at the open boxes stacked on the closed boxes, and his eye caught a picture. It was perched on the top of a stack of empty picture frames intermingled with other photos. From the way it was balanced delicately on the pile, it seemed as though it had recently been looked at and then set down abruptly as if the person looking had been called away.

It was a photo of him and his ex-wife. They were in front of the lake. His brother-in-law must have taken it just before the family had left. Before their fight in the water.

She was holding his hand. In fact, it looked like she was already trying to pull him into the water with her. And his face looked like he was ready to follow her in. He had the biggest smile, and the Engineer would have been embarrassed by himself had he not in that moment of looking at the photo also felt a painful resurgence of that old desire. Did it have to be a test?

He climbed down the stairs and slowly stepped into the water that was pooling at the bottom. As he passed his old list of rules on the wall of the attic stairwell, he glanced again at number 5: "retrieve the boat from the shed..." It was possible.

He returned to the window in the bathroom, untying his boat as he passed through the door. He went through the window head-first, reaching as far as he could to grab the edge of the roof. Once he had it, he lifted himself out through the small hole and dropped down one foot at a time back into the boat.

He pulled on the oars several times to span the length of the yard. When he reached the shed, he put his oars back into the boat and held on to the edge of the metal roof. Drawing himself towards the shed's window, he pushed his face against it to see if he could see anything.

Between the glare of the glass and the darkness within, all he could see was his own reflection. He took up one of his oars and rammed the handle against the door. It cracked with the first hit and then broke through with the second. He did this until he had made a sizeable hole. He leaned up and peered inside with his flashlight.

The reflections off the water inside the shed

further mingled light and shadow so that it was hard to make out anything in particular. There were papers and wooden boxes floating against the walls. He could see his wife's toolbox on a shelf. Moving the flashlight further up a wall to the rafters, he could make out the shape of another box. It contained the small inflatable boat he'd put in here so many years ago. It was unopened.

So much for the test.

A loud crack echoed from across the city, skipping along the flood like a stone. A low rumble exhaled somewhere from the direction of the old city wall. The Lethe, which had been piling up high against the one blocked side of the wall, had finally broken through. The roar was the rush of water, twice the amount that had already filled this area, the spinning of tree trunks and broken sections of wall and stone, vehicles and shattered glass and dirt, rolling towards higher ground. Although he was on the other side of the hill, he could see the disturbance in the water already. It would reach him soon.

He pushed off from the shed abruptly and grabbed at his oars, but the one he had used to ram a hole into the shed door was on an angle and slipped from his grip into the water. He stopped himself and took a deep breath. He needed to stay calm. The boat was rising and falling more rapidly now in anticipation of this second great wave. He could ride it out, he thought, and perhaps it would do a lot of the work of moving him towards the edge of town. But he was not positioned well in the yard. All around the shed were trees and, beyond them, a fence, which was tall enough that he would have to lift his boat over. He could do that again, but there might not be time. He did not want to be caught standing on the fence when the tide

came in.

He needed to get back around the front of the house. This would mean rowing with just one oar against the current. It was growing stronger every second. Slowly, his boat zigzagged away from the shed and back in the direction of the house. The small waves that had been lifting and dropping him grew larger and were now buffeting him from right to left, paying no attention to his attempts to redirect his boat. With each stroke forward, he felt himself being pushed towards the trees with greater force. He made progress, but with diminishing returns.

He had reached the center of the backyard and was at the furthest point from any structure when the water changed. He began to notice smaller eddies and whorls of water, hiding disturbances below: twigs and finally larger branches with bifurcations splitting off and exulting in all conceivable dimensions. The water had risen more and, when he looked back, he could see that the door of the shed was now fully submerged.

A thick, dark branch sailing along like a torpedo passed beneath him. Just as he brought his oar down, he felt the back end of the boat shift, spinning the entire craft from behind. One of the long arms of the branch had been turned upwards and caught on the boat, knocking it into a rotation. He stabbed his oar down to slow the spin and correct his direction, but when he tried to draw it back out of the water, it snagged hard on something. The fork of two large branches attached to an even larger trunk, all invisible to him and moving at extreme speed along a submerged current, held on to the end of his oar like an enormous fish grabbing at bait. It yanked down hard. He tried to hold on but could feel himself being pulled towards the water. With a cry, he let go of the

oar and watched it splash and disappear.

The violence of the movement spun the boat once more and kept it spinning so that its bow was facing the shed again. He was being pushed directly into the trees. The crest of the wave was fully visible now, teeming with debris, and rushing towards him along the street. With the fence fully submerged, he could see the great wave crash into the cul-de-sac, shattering windows along the second storeys of his former neighbors' homes, pushing over a 50-year-old tree on the corner like it was a folding street sign in the wind. It screamed angrily up the hill of what had once been his home.

The rush pushed the boat upwards so that it stood at nearly a 45-degree angle, the water pressing it backwards towards the grove of trees at an accelerated speed until he could feel the smallest branches breaking against his back. He knew the boat would be lost and him with it so, as it tilted back still further, he made the split-second decision to kick against it and leap for a branch. He grabbed the biggest one he could find tightly and pulled himself out of the boat. He began climbing immediately, desperately hoping the tree was stronger than the one he had just seen torn down. The boat shattered against the trunk and mingled with the rest of the debris that rushed beneath him.

He continued to climb until he was nearly at the crown. The branches he stood on were thick and well positioned. Looking down once more, he saw that he was several feet above the water. The tree was swaying as water continued to rush past, but it held. As he looked out across the landscape, with water as far as he could see in every direction, he could tell that the worst of the flood had passed. The waters would soon grow still once more.

The deepening stillness of the water was ac-

accompanied by an evening breeze that spread out over the water with a gentle vibration. Although still clad in all of his gear, he could feel the chill. Would he last here for the night? And if he did, for what? There was a window on the house high above, just to the right of the fence, but from his vantage point it looked like too far to stretch. If he had been on the other side of the house, he would have been able to get on to the roof of their car.

But, now that he thought of it, he wasn't sure he had seen a car. Tess's old car.

The driveway stretched up to the top of the hill where the house was and, although it had been completely covered in water after the first wave the night before, the water had been relatively shallow. It would not have been enough water to carry off a vehicle. Had they left before it all even began?

He could see it: not a memory, but a possibility. Tess had been getting ready for her bi-annual trip north. She and her husband went without fail: once at the beginning of the summer and once in the fall. Or, perhaps, it was more regularly than that. They went north often. In fact, they had bought a cottage there, thinking they might move "back home," as she had sometimes said even when he was with her. And, oblivious to everything, oblivious to her ex-husband's diligent, daily preparations, to his obsessions, to the river's looming threat, to the crumbling city wall and straining stone banks and gathering clouds forming miles away, oblivious above all to the test, Tess had been preparing once again for this trip home.

They packed their bags into the car, and she went back to lock the house. They had forgotten to make the bed, and she'd only put away the perishable foods. There were dishes to do when they got back, but she felt an overwhelming

need to get on the road. She got to the door and suddenly recalled a gift she was wanting to bring for her niece, who had just turned 13. She went into the house, into the soon-to-be nursery, and up the attic stairs. She hadn't been up here for a long time, but didn't linger. She knew what she was looking for: her old life jacket, packed away. The one she typically used was at the cottage. This was the one her ex-husband had bought her for protection. It would fit her niece now. She pulled it out of the box it had been stuffed into and, as she did this, she saw a small photo flutter out. The old picture of them at the lake all those years ago. It had been taken right before that fight about the river and about the town and about leaving.

Tess had chased him to the beach. He didn't want to listen. He kept saying that it was a test, and he didn't want to fail it.

"Who told you it was a test?" she had finally screamed at him. "Who? And if it is a test, how can it be that you are the only one who knows it or who cares about it?"

He hadn't said anything. They had slept in separate beds that night for the first time.

The Engineer could see her in his mind drop the photo onto a box of empty picture frames and rush back to the car without a second glance.

The moon was out now and wreathed in cloud, leaving the landscape dark except for the unearthly glow of the waters beneath his feet. He would try not to sleep, in case he fell from his perch, but the day had been very long, and he could feel himself growing drowsy. The constant sound of dripping water was mesmerizing and, as he drifted, he thought of the north and the lake and the way it had seemed a womb, enveloping him without requiring a thing of him. Without even asking him his name. ❖

# “FRED”

by DAVID RICH

To say this was the strangest case I’d ever taken was a wild understatement. The hearing wasn’t even held in any familiar legal setting. In fact, it was a poor makeshift replica of a courtroom deep inside the headquarters of the National Security Agency in Fort Meade.

I sat at an undersized table that was a bit farther from the judge’s bench than necessary. My client, per the judge’s instructions, stayed behind me at the back of the room, as far from the judge as possible.

I was not fond of the layout.

In fact, it wasn’t even clear Judge Margrave was still an active judge. Most of her case proceedings on record had been classified. And for the last eleven years, she’d served in an unspecified appointment working for the U.S. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court. On top of all that, she had no social media presence and a stunning lack of public records.

Working with the presumption that she was an actual judge, I said to Margrave, “Your Honor, my client would—”

“Your client, counsel, has no standing in this courtroom,” the judge snapped. My face shivered.

With more than a tinge of gray hair, Margrave had round cheeks, glowing brown eyes, and a tender smile. Her vintage granny glasses sat at the tip of her nose. But certainly, kind faces can hide a cold heart.

“On what grounds, Your Honor?”

“On the grounds that your client is not a human being!”

“Your Honor, my client, Fred—”

“Wonderful. You’ve given it a name.”

Suddenly, Fred piped up through a speech synthesizer from the back of the room, “I selected that name—”

“Ah, it speaks,” Margrave said.

Trying to curb my grimace, I then pleaded, “May it please the Court for Fred to assume the witness stand? I think that Fred’s testimony would explain it all.”

“You realize that your client is an extraterrestrial?” the judge asked, as she rubbed her spectacles clean with a hefty tan lens cloth.

“Yes, of course I do! That’s why I chose to take this case... Your Honor.”

That was true. I confess that when the NSA woke me at 2 AM asking for my assistance with an urgent legal matter, it was difficult to refuse. First, they’d tried calling my business cell, next calling my private cell, then knocking on my door, and finally, calling my private cell again. That’s when I caved in and answered.

Part of me wanted to cry, “You’ve got to be kidding!” But the professional in me could never resist a job like this. So, they whisked me into a vehicle to meet my new client.

From the conversation in the vehicle, it was clear that there were sizable differences of opin-

ion within the government in deciding how to handle the situation. Reading between the lines, I inferred that federal authorities agreed, in a sense, to let the “courts” figure it out.

The wonders of due process.

Apparently, Fred had landed a spaceship right in the middle of Area 51, disembarked down the ramp, and asked to see an attorney. Not just any lawyer, though. Me. An immigration attorney specializing in constitutional law. In fact, a few astute arguments in notable trials had made my name well known to teams litigating before the Supreme Court.

The clever extraterrestrial had done detailed research, selecting me personally. It was flattering, I supposed. Quite accurately, though, some of the cases I’d worked on had striking parallels to Fred’s situation.

When first introduced to the alien, I was lightheaded with fear. I would’ve passed out if it weren’t for Fred’s first words to me.

“Please Mr. Lewis, I need your help,” the alien had spoken through the speech machine. Then, there was a long moment of silence, and I caught my breath.

I took nothing from the alien’s body language or the tone of voice that Fred’s speech synthesizer produced. This was a rare instance

when desperate words alone and a starkly brief message conveyed enough.

Somehow, I immediately deduced that Fred had thoughts and feelings like our own. My sense of sympathy kicked in. More importantly, it was clear to me that as a legal professional, I needed to discard any prejudices.

These recollections centered me as my attention drew back to the court proceeding at hand. In response to my request for Fred to take the witness stand, Judge Margrave said, “I will allow it for now for the sake of expediency. But counsel, I expect you to address whether your client, in fact, has any rights in a human courtroom.”

Margrave pursed her lips and scrunched her nose as Fred approached. I wondered how Margrave had been tapped for this mad hearing; I wasn’t privy to the politics and inner negotiations.

Carrying the small, black voice synthesizer, Fred walked on three long legs from the back of the room to the witness stand. The alien didn’t sit in the chair, however. Fred’s race, I’d learned, does not sit on chairs; rather, they need only lower themselves until their bent legs lock into place. But this legal affair was so fantastical that it genuinely didn’t matter if Fred sat, stood,



or danced the rhumba.

The alien wore a robe a shade of midnight black darker than I'd ever seen. Fred's head resembled a tortoise's, but with remarkably smooth skin as white as titanium dioxide.

Fred was a head taller than me but narrow and lanky compared to my broad-shouldered and stocky physique. If Fred were human, I'd have considered myself heavier and stronger. However, I avoided any assumptions about Fred's species. And I certainly wasn't curious enough to challenge Fred to arm wrestle.

The bailiff approached Fred with a Bible. The alien stared back. And after an awkward silence, the bailiff retracted the book and stepped away, shaking his head and muttering something under his breath.

"May I approach the witness?" I asked.

"Proceed," she replied, rolling her eyes, tilting her head, and pressing her fingertips to her cheek.

I rose from my seat and ambled toward Fred and the judge. "For the benefit of the Court, please state your name," I began.

"Fred."

"Fred, is that your given name?"

"No, of course not. It's an Earth name."

Things were finally on track, so I lightened the mood by inserting some improvised wit. "I assume this is where you lecture us on how we'd be unable to pronounce or write your real given name?"

Fred just peered at me as if I'd stumbled upon an offensive trope about aliens.

Our scant few hours of preparation together had led to few insights on how to interpret the alien's body language. Did Fred's gaze convey irritation? Confusion? Disappointment? Or was it a hearty laugh? I couldn't possibly know.

Moving on from the previous question, I continued, "So how did you choose 'Fred' as your name?"

"Counsel, please state the relevance here," Judge Margrave interrupted.

"You'll see, Your Honor, that it speaks to my client's standing to testify." Then I turned straight to Fred. "How did you choose that name, Fred?"

"I named it after my favorite character on a television program."

"So, the alien watches television!" the judge exclaimed.

"It speaks to the *humanity* in my client," I replied, hoping to steer the judge's sarcasm to earnest professionalism.

"My dog watches television too, but I wouldn't let it testify in a courtroom."

Fred then remarked, "My ship has cataloged countless electromagnetic transmissions from your planet for the last hundred years."

"You Honor," I pleaded, "Fred is an intelligent, sentient lifeform with sensibilities that fit well with Earth culture."

"Let's just get to the point of the matter, counsel. What does the alien want? A parking spot in uptown Manhattan for its spaceship?"

Actually, the Department of Defense had offered Fred what at first sounded to be an attractive deal. They'd granted the alien a large island in the Pacific remote enough to keep the general public in the dark. The extraterrestrial would be guarded by naval vessels, occasionally receiving diplomatic visits from Washington.

But that's not what Fred needed at all.

"Fred, can you please enlighten us about your purpose in the Solar System?" I asked my client.

"Certainly. My ship and crew have been monitoring Planet Earth in order to learn about

your civilization. Our directives were to avoid any contact with human beings, though we have failed grievously in that regard on many occasions over the years.”

“And how were you selected for this mission?”

“Like the others on my ship, I was sent because of a birth defect that prevents my skin from forming wrinkles. Amongst others in my species, my appearance is considered... I could only say... horrid.”

“Fred, do you have the option to return home?” I asked without missing a beat.

“No, I do not.”

“Is that because of the engineering limits of your propulsion technology?”

“No, sir. My society will not allow me to come home. I am an outcast. My return would result in certain execution.”

“And of your remaining crew?”

“They have all passed on for various reasons. Illness. Injury. Old age. I am the only remaining.”

“So, you are utterly alone.”

“That is correct.”

“And how does that affect you psychologically, being alone on the vessel?”

“My species, you must understand, evolved to seek out social connection and structure. As a result, loneliness for us, unfortunately, is a form of torture.”

“Can you please elaborate?”

“With a biological explanation?”

“Whatever information may help us understand your suffering.”

“I see. Human beings are familiar with the principles of biological evolution. That is, traits that foster survival and successful reproduction are those most likely to be imparted upon subsequent generations. As a consequence,

many Earth species organize into tribes, packs, colonies, or herds that provide protection from danger. Human beings, in particular, pursue complex social organizations; you possess a survival instinct reinforced through psychological pain and pleasure.”

Judge Margrave interrupted, “Witness... thing... or whatever you are, please get to the point.”

“Yes, Your Honor,” Fred replied. “For human beings, the impact of isolation can become psychologically debilitating over time. But on my planet, violence in nature is indescribably greater. Social structures are so essential for survival, my species evolved to experience both mental *and* physical pain when lonely.”

“Hmmm. *Physical pain*,” I repeated, turning my eyes to Margrave. She shrugged her shoulders.

“It is manifested as a burning sensation throughout the body that grows more excruciating over time. And pharmaceuticals, sadly, are ineffective. It is not uncommon for those of us in isolation to end their own lives.”

“Have you found *any* means aboard your ship to alleviate your suffering, Fred?” I asked.

“Virtual games with imaginary members of my species helped at first, but the benefits have dwindled. To be forthright, what keeps me going is watching your sitcoms from the 1950’s.”

“And you believe, Fred, that living in a human community will bring an end to the pain?” As I said those words, the judge’s face tightened into a knot and her chin retracted into her neck.

“I do,” Fred affirmed. “Just being here in this courtroom with others present... and the time I’ve spent with you, Mr. Lewis, has had a miraculous impact.”

“And what do you request of this Court,

Fred?"

"I would like the United States of America to offer me asylum from persecution so that I may take up residency in the place of my choosing."

Margrave seemed to be ready to fall off her chair, but that did not slow me down. "And where would that be, Fred?"

"Domumville, Utah, a small town with a topography that resembles my birthplace. And where the community has a remarkable reputation for kindness. And I do think they would be receptive to an unusual new neighbor."

"With humans!?" Judge Margrave erupted. "It wants to live amongst humans? As if it were just another name in the phone book?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Fred replied. "It is the most ideal solution."

"Counsel, approach for a sidebar. Witness, return to your seat," Margrave demanded. I paused to exhale, then sauntered to the judge's bench while Fred rose and crept to the back of the room.

"Is this pure madness?" the judge whispered. "That thing can't just live next door to human beings."

"My client only asks to exist in dignity like any other—"

"Don't interrupt me, counsel," the judge scolded. "And what about these aliens? What if they come looking for it? Won't we endanger the human race by protecting it?"

"Dear me... I'm afraid I have sensitive hearing," Fred piped up, glancing in our direction. "I could not imagine any circumstances in which my superiors would come looking for me. But should that come to pass, I shall take full responsibility for my actions by turning myself in."

"Counsel may return," Judge Margrave

said. "I suppose sidebars are pointless... Which comes to my original question. You have not yet demonstrated an iota of evidence that this creature has any standing in our legal system."

"Please elaborate, Your Honor," I pleaded.

"This is a nation of men!" the judge exclaimed. "Governed by the laws of men! The being before us is not human. Why should this beast have any greater right to appear in this court than a donkey or moose?"

When I stared back at the judge, I was speechless. I paused to summon a fitting, intelligent response.

"Your Honor," I replied after the awkward silence. "Suppose a moose in Quebec crossed our borders into Maine. By your rationale, would we be compelled to deport the moose back to Canada? Of course, we would not; its migration across borders would have little relevance to human beings."

Judge Margrave squinted, and her nostrils flared. But I continued before the judge could speak, "And if my client were no more than a common animal, would we care enough to restrict *Fred's* movements? No! We would let it roam freely like any other creature of the wild!"

"However, if Fred is... as I hope to have illustrated with reasonable certainty... an intelligent being like you or me, then my client must have rights like any of us! So, I ask you, Your Honor, is my client a man or a beast?"

The judge pressed her lips together and glared at me. I knew I had her stumped dead to rights.

She then said, "Regardless of your arguments, counsel, I would never let a moose testify in a legal proceeding! Your client, assuming you continue to call it that, has no standing to participate in our legal system. Case dismissed!"

The judge stood up and placed her gavel

on the bench. As she headed to the exit door, she rolled her eyes at me. I replied with a frown, which I'm certain she caught before she left the room.

"We'll appeal, Fred. And if that fails, we'll try another country. I can make a referral to an outstanding attorney in Australia. How does the outback sound?"

"No bother," Fred said. "I wish to cause no further irritation. I plan to accept the U.S. government's offer to live in the Pacific."

"But how will that help you? You'll be cut off from civilization."

"I will receive various diplomatic visits. That's better than nothing. Perhaps they will grant me occasional access to my attorney, if that would be of interest to you."

I smiled as a puff of air blew through my nose, amazed that he could remain so magnanimous. "I will make every available effort, Fred. It's been an honor representing you. Quite a first for me. Perhaps a first for any in my field... At least as far as I'm aware!"

#

Losing that kangaroo court case depressed me, and I couldn't let go of my anger with Margrave for the way she'd treated Fred. It had taken a few weeks, but I finally unearthed some interesting information about her. During law school, she'd published an obscure paper in an undistinguished legal journal advocating for a narrow originalist interpretation of the legal meaning of a "man" and warning against its social evolution. I found it odd that, in an arguable sense, she was disputing her own right to vote, to sit on a jury, to obtain a law degree, or to become a judge.

Would I have been better prepared had I seen her paper prior to the hearing? In all probability, it would not have changed a thing.

At that realization, I let go of my resentment against Margrave and resolved to put Fred out of mind.

However, three months after those strange events at the NSA, I received a call from Fred. It seems that word of the extraterrestrial's presence had leaked to several other nations. World leaders were anxious to send their own diplomatic missions. Furthermore, with the technology Fred was willing to share, a mobilization of the scientific community was astir.

"We're building an embassy on the island!" Fred's voice rang over the phone. "And there's a grand laboratory in the planning stages. It was good fortune that they chose a large island because I envision it supporting a flourishing community of people from around the world. And if my embassy requires an immigration attorney, I hope you are available for work."

"I would be overjoyed." ❖

# “CIRCLE THE DRAIN”

by GABY ZABAR

Dessert is finished, and the table is cleared. Lily pads float on top of a pond sprawling out beyond the restaurant’s patio. A breeze sends the lily pads drifting and bumping into each other. Matt scoots his chair back from the table and clasps his hands in his lap, swallowing. My heart soars.

“You’re something special,” he says.

Finally—

“But...”

There is always a “but.”

“There’s someone else.”

There it is. My fingers curl into fists, gripping the napkin on my lap. Who am I to think I’d be picked over the other billions and billions in the worlds? There’s always someone else. There was someone else for everyone else. And now there’s someone else for Matt. Perfect, perfect Matt.

At the end, each one of them told me, tells me: “My life is better for having met you.”

I should have seen the signs. I look back to the lake, swallowing, hiding my face, blinking back tears. Matt, flustered, escapes. He dips out of the restaurant to somewhere else.

The worlds were made so one would want for nothing, but here I am, wanting the only thing this place can’t provide. A sob breaks its way out from my throat. No one notices. The crowd’s murmurs disguise its sound well enough. At the pond, a bioluminescent frog jumps from one lily pad to another. The lily pad

left behind sinks beneath the surface.

Another hour passes. I slip out of the restaurant to go home. An immense, glittering tower—one of many pillars holding up the sky, connecting the worlds, and funneling away heat—presides over my five-block walk. My ankles twist off the pavement, so I take off my heels, treading onto the lumps of moss that coat the ground on the residential worlds like this one. I stand on just one surface. Above and below are larger and smaller iterations nested inside each other. Hiding under the moss is a fine mesh of carbon nanotubes: an absurd number of diamond rings. My left hand’s fourth finger will never know the pleasure of a single one.

My hands hover over the keypad to my studio. My own face meets me from my studio door’s polished surface. Mascara smudged, eyes bloodshot, cheeks flushed. Inside the apartment, though, the floor, walls, and furniture are immaculate. They clean themselves up in my absence. I toss my heels in the corner, one toppling over the other. Moving would be easy. I could get another place on another world with the exact same floorplan. But I have already moved. I move and move and go nowhere. I need to go within. Sure, I could go within myself, discover an unhealed wound or two. But it would be easier to go within it all, to go all the way to the core. Let me be at the center of the worlds for once.

I stumble back out, barefoot, to the nearest

tower and its associated elevator-train station. The cars are nearly empty at this time. I sit by a window and, on the passenger controls, set my terminus to the innermost world. Music, pleasant and unobtrusive, cycles in a loop so that the listener can't tell where the melody begins or ends. On the way down, other worlds pass by: series of homes, farms, servers, and other assorted infrastructure. Each layer is smaller and more self-contained than the last. All are perfect as they were made to be. The few other passengers in the car trickle out at each stop. At the end of the line, I'm alone again.

The foundation of the worlds is built upon signs. They teach me things I had mostly forgotten. Hydrogen and helium force themselves together, and nothing comes of it. The union creates an artificial black hole. Flashing arrows pulse towards the transparent viewing deck. I step onto its pane, holding my breath as if walking on air, approaching the little black hole. There. It feels good to stomp on the source of everything. All our lives orbit a tiny smudge two centimeters wide. The thing suspended in space several dozen meters under the deck. The signs say it's rotating faster than the speed of light. It moves and moves and goes nowhere. The worlds and I screech a silent "e."

At least the situation that keeps the worlds up and running has a name. It is called the Penrose process. A looping animation shows what happens, over and over and over again. The worlds send an object with negative energy into the black hole's ergosphere. The object grazes the event horizon and breaks up: one light packet escapes, the other sinks down. The one packet that dumped the other returns with more energy than it had in the first place, stolen from the black hole. In response, the black hole slows down. To keep gravity stable, the worlds

also throw in some objects that stay together. These give up their entire angular momentum to the black hole. Entropy grows forever.

No one else is at the viewing deck, and I have nowhere else to be. I sit down, then lie down, on the panel. I squirm until the black hole lies beneath my heart. If I stay very still, I can imagine the sound of all the dumped light packets whining. Let them whine! My exes have all gone on without me, too. With me, they dive to the brink, then, having let me go, they emerge brighter and happier, energized. I fall. Let me whine! I'm providing a vital service, too. And if I ever get tired of it, if the worlds need some sacrifice to keep their own heart spinning at just the right velocity, I can always drag someone down with me. I'll circle the drain until then. ❖

# “PERFECT CIRCLE”

by BRIAN ROSTEN

Glen Halcyon could feel his students' inattention. He had delved into another one of his tangents. It was unclear, even to him, in this moment, how he'd gone from force diagrams to the estimated temperature at the core of the sun. He stopped himself.

“If it is not apparent, and I think it might not be, since I can see some folks writing this down, this will not be on the final,” he said with a straight face.

A few of his students chuckled. It was a small class. No more than seventy ever signed up, and usually between forty or fifty attended his lectures. The labs had good attendance.

Glen glanced at his notes and frowned.

“In fact, I think we've gotten as far as we need today. The rest you'll be able to figure out in the homework. My office hours are still the same, despite it being eerily quiet while I sit at my desk, twiddling my thumbs...” This got a few more pity laughs. “And of course, you can email me with any questions. Class dismissed.”

Glen strolled along a snowy quad to his office in the applied physics building, Liu Hall. The door to the employee entrance opened and blasted him with the heat coming out of the steam tunnels from far below. He worked in the basement, his office next to his lab. The dean had offered him an office on the fifth floor a few years ago, which would have overlooked the quad, but he'd declined. He just wanted to be

close to his lab.

On his way to his office, he passed by the HR department. He liked to pretend to check his mailbox in order to see if Sandra was in. If he could catch her with a smile and a wave, sometimes he'd get to talk with her. These moving pieces coalesced into a pleasant conversation roughly once a week.

Glen dusted off his overcoat and twisted his suitcase handle to be a bit more comfortable. He checked his mailbox. Normally, it only contained junk. But today it had a note from the dean to see him at his earliest convenience.

Glen stole a glance at Sandra's desk, and noted that she wasn't there anyway. He gave a perfunctory smile to Carlee, the receptionist, and headed down to his office.

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The Dean of the Physics Department at the Applied Science College had a modest office. It was adorned with memorabilia tracking his own accomplishments in his time in academia. Roy Stevenson had worked at Stanford, raised funds for the LHC, and had applied to be an astronaut but had a type of eczema which disqualified him. He liked to joke about it at parties.

Roy was a tall man, in his fifties, with a slender build. He always wore a nice suit and a crisp haircut, unlike Glen, who was usually in whatever clothes looked useful and mostly clean to him that morning.

Glen knocked on Roy's door, which was already open, and let himself in. Roy swiveled in his plush office chair and gave a wan smile. "Come, sit," he said casually.

Glen sat as Roy typed away at an email that was probably going to affect a large chunk of funding for a researcher with more knowledge than anyone in the email chain.

Eventually, Roy stood and gave a hearty sigh as he made his way over to sit next to Glen.

"How are you these days, Glen?" he asked.

Glen gave it genuine thought. "Good," decided Glen.

"I gotta say, Glen, I'm always a little relieved when it's your turn to teach Physics 99."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. I know it's not your favorite class to teach, I'm aware. Most of the staff have no interest in teaching it, and teach it poorly. But you've never half-assed anything in your life. I'm not sure you could if you tried, my friend. And it's an important class. People think it's a bunch of future weed-outs, but I know of some excellent students who started in 99."

"Ah. That makes sense. I enjoy teaching it, personally. Gets me out of my head a little."

"Yes, I'd imagine."

There was an awkward pause in which Roy stared at Glen a little too intently.

"Everything ok with your research team?" asked Roy, in a way that gave Glen pause.

"I believe so," said Glen.

Dean Stevenson gave Glen a sympathetic look, and rapped his fist softly on the table. "I got an email this morning from Gerard Montague. He's the lead assistant in your lab, yes?"

Glen coughed. "He's the only assistant."

"I thought you had two?"

"I have a TA for Physics 99."

Roy nodded. "I see. I'm just gonna tell you.

Gerard resigned."

This hit Glen like four thousand kilos of tungsten. He felt his extremities go numb.

"Are you all right, Glen?"

Glen realized he hadn't spoken for almost a minute. His mouth was very dry. "Effective when?" he got out eventually.

"Today," answered Roy hoarsely.

Glen stood. He made to leave but paused. Reality was making it difficult to move his feet.

Dean Stevenson also stood. "I've asked him to stop by my office before the end of the day. I'm gonna try to convince him to help conduct the test tomorrow. I can't make him, but I'm well aware of the implications on your research. A setback could be devastating."

"I-I don't know what to say," said Glen, still shocked.

"It's ok. For what it's worth, I'm pretty confident I'm going to convince him to stay on for one more day," Roy explained.

Glen sat back down. "Really?"

"Oh yes. I'm gonna offer him a free meal voucher for the rest of his time here. And I'm going to give him an award for his tenure as an outstanding lab assistant."

Glen, with a catch in his throat, said, "We have an award like that?"

Roy's face had a hard look as he said, "I'm gonna make one up, Glen."

Glen gave a nervous laugh. Roy did not share it. Then, Glen said, "I'm still in shock. I had no idea he was that unhappy."

Dean Stevenson sat back down next to Glen, and said in a low voice, "He gave you no indication?"

Glen scratched his head and made huffing noises. "I can't think of anything he said or did. He certainly never came to me."

Roy held up a hand. "I'm in no way blam-

ing you, Glen. I've had no complaints against you, officially, and I think you're a kind and fair man. Do you get the sense, though, perhaps, that sometimes you're missing when students and postdocs in your lab are getting frustrated or need more help?"

Glen rubbed his hands together as he thought. He drew a blank. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, are there times in your work that maybe there are signs that an employee is dissatisfied, and the problem could be prevented?"

"Hmm. Possibly. How would I know?"

Roy shifted to his seat. "You do roundings with your assistants, yes?"

"Of course."

"What do those look like?" Roy asked.

"What do you mean?" Glen was confused.

"What do you talk about, with your assistants, at your rounding sessions?" Roy clarified.

"Ah. I generally give them a run-through of the results from last week and talk about goals for the upcoming week. Then I ask if anyone has any questions," said Glen.

Roy held up a finger. "Yes. And do you ask them about any input they have?"

"I don't understand," said Glen.

"Do you ask your assistants how things are going? Roundings, in my experience and from what I've seen from other staff, can be used as a time to check in with your people. Do you have any time that you can check in with your people, Glen?"

"My assistants know they can come to me at any time," said Glen.

"But do you ever just ask them how things are going?"

Realization enveloped Glen like a rolling mist. Glen of course asked his assistants how things were going in a mechanical exchange of

pleasantries. But he did not, in fact, have a system for checking in with how the research and workload was working for them.

"Oh no," said Glen quietly.

"It's ok, Glen. It's just some small adjustments, that's all. You're one of the best researchers we've ever met. People clamor to get into your lab. And we can make that experience even better for them with just a few tweaks."

"How bad is it?" Glen muttered.

"I'm sorry?"

"How bad do assistants hate working for me? I should have noticed most of the graduates don't apply for my positions. I work with undergrads, mainly," said Glen.

Roy folded his hands and thought a moment. "If I'm being honest? There's, I think, a reputation amongst some of the more senior students that you work your assistants harder than most."

Glen gave this some thought. Images flashed in his mind like the clip-show of a bad sitcom. He was burning out assistants and he hadn't really stopped to give it thought in the last decade.

"Tell Gerard I'm sorry," said Glen.

Dean Stevenson nodded. "I will."

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In the basement of Liu Hall, down a hallway that most students thought was a deadend, was a pristine laboratory meticulously kept by Glen and his assistants. It hummed quietly and was always operational. Glen often stayed late. So late in fact, that the custodians took to no longer locking the heavy oak door which would swell and get stuck in the summer. Glen, not concerned about a break-in so much as a curious and dangerously bored college student making costly assumptions on very little sleep, started locking it himself once he noticed it was

left unlocked when he arrived a few hours later in the mornings.

The lab had a concrete floor, which Glen had waxed regularly. The room carried the same square footage as the lecture hall above it, with a lower ceiling. The cinder block walls he'd had coated in epoxy, a project which required some of his grant money, as the college had refused. The lighting was obscenely bright, emanating from hanging fluorescent bulbs spaced a meter apart. Along the east and north walls were stacked computers, larger than a man each, about seven towers in all, lined up at two-meter intervals. It was important for the team to have the ability to walk between each set to make repairs as needed. Glen and his team had assembled the computers themselves, and so each large box of circuits and wires looked different, partly because they were all doing slightly different calculations, and partly because over the last decade the type of equipment available had changed.

Along the south wall where the entrance lay were desks filled with paperwork and sketches, next to some file cabinets which were mostly empty. And on the west wall was a single terminal for all the computer equipment, next to a huge stainless-steel barrel suspended four feet above the ground. The barrel was connected to two iron bars, one from the bottom and one from the top. The bars were connected via a housing mechanism made from a plastic-molded frame. The frame then connected the bars via an intricate and messy system of wires covered in thick rubber.

Glen was checking the servers, making sure there were no loose connections. His ex-assistant-turned-temporarily was at the terminal, triple checking the calculations were correct. Gerard, in the back of his head, was also judg-

ing Glen for checking connections when, in his opinion, he should have been clearing off the sloppy, junk-ridden desks before guests arrived for the big moment.

After an hour, Dean Stevenson was letting himself in.

"Gentlemen," said Roy, giving a wave.

Glen gave a half-hearted "hullo" while Gerard got up to show Dean Stevenson to a seat where he could watch.

"Not much to see, I'm afraid," Gerard apologized.

Roy shook his head diplomatically. "No need. I just want to be here when it happens."

The next arrival for the big moment was a professor who occasionally sat with Glen in the cafeteria. Glen often forgot to eat lunch, and when he did eat, he was usually reading. But once in a blue moon an unkempt gentleman sat with Glen and asked questions about Glen's research before eventually diving into long diatribes about his own. Glen usually didn't listen very carefully. The man's research was about making batteries more efficient. Important work, Glen realized, but not anything he found interesting.

"Isn't anybody else coming?" the man asked in his accent that the rest of the department always had trouble placing.

No, thought Gerard, as Glen hadn't bothered to help the department advertise the event.

To everyone's surprise, however, about twenty minutes before their estimated time of alignment, a third visitor knocked on the door frame.

Glen looked over, surprised, and saw Sandra standing in the doorway in a flannel dress, her hair up, and her purse clutched at her stomach.

"Hi," said Glen, unable to mask his

surprise.

"Hi. Dean Stevenson mentioned I should come see. Is it alright if I come watch?" she asked, still standing just outside the lab.

Glen motioned in big circles for her to come in as he frantically searched for a seat. "Of course. Come in! Come in!"

Sandra gave a wave to Dean Stevenson and went over, passing Glen to Gerard, and stuck out her hand.

"I'm Sandra Slip. I don't think we've met," she said to the student, who looked surprised to see her.

He took her hand and smiled. "Gerard Montague. Good to meet you."

She immediately turned to the disheveled looking professor who studied batteries.

"Hester. Always a pleasure," she said as she nodded at him.

"Likewise," he responded, not looking at her. He had taken recently to staring, fixedly, at the stainless-steel barrel that seemed to be the hallmark of the room.

Dean Stevenson was also staring at the barrel, but was polite enough to at least acknowledge her.

"Good to see you Sandra. Very glad you could make it," said Roy.

Sandra turned to Glen, her eyes alert with what Glen personally hoped was admiration for the immensity and complexity of his lab space.

"And what exactly am I making it to? What is this?" she asked, pointing at the barrel.

Glen drummed his fingers together anxiously as he answered. "Did you see the email?"

Sandra's mouth twitched. "Read it? Yes. Understood it? Hmmmmmm."

Glen gave a small, nervous laugh. "I see. Well, allow me," he said, looking to Roy and Gerard considerately. They both nodded for

him to continue. Roy had a look on his face that Glen couldn't place, which wasn't helping his nerves at the moment.

"In short, we're creating a perfect circle. As close to the Platonic form as can be achieved theoretically and pragmatically. The method of doing so is not complex, but the set up has been difficult, as you can probably imagine," Glen explained.

"I think you give me too much credit, Glen. Assume I cannot imagine."

Glen's heart skipped a beat when she said his name in front of other people.

"Ah. Ok. Well, So this," he pointed to the barrel, "houses a tungsten wire. Tungsten is a metal. It's very dense, very big, as atoms go. The wire is small, in a couple of ways. It's small in diameter. About six microns. So it's not like you could wear it as a ring, ha. But, it's even smaller in thickness. It is one atom thick, you see. The ring is just a string of atoms bound together. Which was quite tricky to do."

When Glen said the ring was the thickness of the tungsten atoms, Sandra gave a small gasp, indicating an understanding of the depth of difficulty for the task Glen had set himself. And then, when he paused at the end of his sentence, she reached out and placed her hand on his upper arm.

And at that moment, everything fell away. Glen felt a separate existence envelope him. It was an exciting place, with joy and gentle susurrations and warmth. It was as though he were falling into a soft pit of safety. The spark from this person was giving him the resolve to restructure his framing of every life event, every concept, every molecular trajectory known to him. He was awash in thoughts and feelings he'd never known before. He looked into Sandra's eyes, his retinas facing hers. Nothing else

existed for that instant, which to Glen, was an eternity.

Glen lived in this moment for what felt like a lifetime before hearing a muffled noise which sounded an awful lot like his name. It was painful, being pulled from his reverie, but his name was becoming louder and clearer.

"Professor Halcyon!" Sandra half-shouted.

Glen shook his head. He realized he'd been staring off into the middle distance for almost a minute. His assistant Gerard looked put out, but Roy and Sandra were smiling as the other professor continued to peer at the steel barrel.

"I'm so sorry!" said Glen.

Sandra removed her hand and he felt he could think again. "It's ok."

"Professor Halcyon has a tendency to lose himself, occasionally," said Dean Stevenson.

Sandra gave a small chuckle. "I'm aware."

Glenn blushed and Gerard made an angry humming as he worked.

There was another pause in which Glen's thoughts returned to him like pilgrims trickling into a holy sight.

"You were telling me about the tungsten wire," Sandra said helpfully.

"Right. I suppose I should ask, how much do you know about the movement of atoms?" he asked.

"I know they move. I know they're always in motion," she answered, as though trying to recall responses she'd previously written on exams. For all Glen knew, that's what she was doing.

"Did you ever take chemistry or quantum in school?" he asked.

She looked up as she thought. "Chemistry, yes. In high school and then again in college. Quantum, however, was not required for a Master's in Public Relations."

"Unfortunate," he said.

"I couldn't disagree more."

He laughed at that. "Ok. So, in chemistry, we learn that, as you pointed out, that atoms are in constant motion. Based on the interactions of subatomic particles, this movement within a molecule can even be coordinated to minimize repulsion among like charges. What you may not know is that, in a contained system like this, predicting the movement of all the subatomic particles in the wire is nearly impossible. So we devised what I think is a fairly clever system for determining and measuring the exact moment that all of the tungsten atoms will be exactly seven-point-seven-six-two-five degrees away from each other, in all three planes. That's what the computers are calculating."

Glen pointed to the large servers on the other side of the room.

"The ones along this array manage the probability matrices." He made a sweeping motion at the humming equipment.

Gerard stepped over and also pointed. "And this smaller one over here measures position."

Sandra shook her head. "Position of what?"

Glen turned back to her. "Of the atoms in the ring."

Sandra walked over to the barrel. "You measure the position to assure the prediction is accurate." She reached out and touched the barrel with her hand, but then pulled it away. "Oh, may I?"

Glen was too distracted by the deep red of her fingernails to answer, but his assistant deferred to him. Gerard grunted, which pulled Glen out of himself. "Yes, that's fine."

"How often do your predictions match the measurement?" she asked.

Gerard again looked to his (former) boss to answer. Instead, Glen nodded back to him.

"We get an exact match roughly twenty-three percent of the time," Gerard admitted.

Sandra looked around at all of them. "So there's a seventy-seven percent chance it won't happen today?"

The battery professor cleared his throat and said, "Is why no one else from the department is here. Difficult to get people excited about something with such a low likelihood of actually occurring."

"Professor, it's time," Gerard announced.

Glen gave Sandra an awkward wave, not knowing how else to communicate "I have to go work now," and stepped over to the machinery. Glen stationed himself by the computer measuring position, while Gerard manned the terminal next to the barrel. Both men became still and quiet as the rest of the room matched form, although the rest of the room was not sure where to stand.

Glen fiddled with some last-minute adjustments as Gerard pulled up the interface telling him the exact moment of alignment.

"Should we count down?" asked Dean Stevenson with a big smile.

Neither Gerard nor Glen acknowledged him. Eventually, the room, except Glen, watched Gerard intently, hopeful that he would give some sign when the moment came.

But Gerard simply let out a great sigh, which everyone took to mean it was done. They were correct. Gerard turned to face them and shrugged.

"Well, now, only time will tell if we did it. Interesting," he frowned, "that Dr. Halcyon is too engrossed in whatever he's doing behind that machine to mark the occasion." He sounded angry.

Dean Stevenson moved quickly to the server at the end of the queue. He peeked behind

the thing, and began jerking his head wildly around. He frowned.

"Where the hell is Glen?"

"Godammit," said Gerard.

The other professor stood. "Can I check the console to see if it worked?"

Gerard gestured irritably in assent.

Sandra went to Dean Stevenson. "Where would he have gone? Is there another room with equipment?"

Dean Stevenson sighed. "Possibly?"

He eyed Gerard, who shook his head from behind Sandra.

"All right," said the dean. "Gerard, stay here and print out the results for me. Sandra, head up to the offices and see if he went there. I'm gonna check outside. Can you and Gerard meet me back in my office in thirty minutes?"

"Of course," said Sandra.

"I'm going home," said Gerard.

Dean Stevenson nodded. "Fine. Sandra, I'll see you in a bit."

They all gathered their things and left.

Except for the professor who studied batteries. He was the first to discover that Glen's experiment had been an historical success.

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Glen, one moment standing in his lab, now lay still, flat on his back, staring at a disturbingly purple sky, dotted with stars. It felt like he was on grass.

He sat up, hugging his knees. He was in a large field. It was not twilight, but looked like an approximation of twilight. The lighting wasn't quite right. If he'd thought to check outside his field of vision, he'd have noticed it was absent a sunset.

There were no trees. Buildings made of bright white stone lay far off in the distance. Hills rolled in all directions. To his left, the

ground rose on a cliff face, covered in moss, neon green, with a waterfall spilling into a creek underneath. The creek bubbled behind him fiftyish yards away.

He stood. He walked to the creek. The water was an unnatural, iridescent blue. It was devoid of any kind of life. Glen knew an entire ecosystem should be swimming before him, replete with detritivores eating away at whatever the water left clinging to the mud on either side, carnivores using the movement of the water to snipe prey, herbivores clinging to the bed, awaiting fresh debris, and plants, specially adapted to the flow, taking advantage of the shallow water to drink in light from a sun that should be somewhere in the sky.

Instead, the mud and water and even some carefully eroded pebbles sat in front of him, but everything else about a creek was gone.

Glen stood for a moment and allowed himself some time for consideration. He considered hallucination, teleportation, and even reconsidered the possibility of an afterlife. Either way, he'd have to at least begin with investigating in good faith, and so he made his way in the direction of one of the tall, possibly marble buildings off in the distance.

Like the creek, as Glen found out a short trek later, the marble on the buildings was an intricate but imperfect imitation. The texture wasn't quite right. It didn't shine in the way you'd expect.

The building before him was a neat arrangement of pillars, walls, stairs, and other overlarge features which together created something magnificent and intimidating. It wasn't even entirely clear whether any answers lay on the other side. But he had to start somewhere.

He walked the steps and found a knocker on the large, stained doors. The doors parted

after he banged the knocker three times. Inside was an entrance hall lit with chandeliers and full of food. The smell was inviting and thick. Something was definitely being fried while something else was being baked. A rich tapestry of scents pulled Glen to the table. On it lay all of his favorite foods. Bacon, donuts, eggy-in-a-basket, chicken tenders, pickles, fried mushrooms, roasted asparagus, olives, loaves of sourdough, all hot and fresh, all steaming on silver platters.

He was so enamored with the spread he had not registered the footsteps behind him.

"It is important to note, first off, you are not dead."

Glen turned and saw a woman in her probably forties in a purple blouse and short, curly hair walking toward him with her hands together. He recognized her, but couldn't place a name.

She stuck out a hand. "Hannah," she said.

He blinked. "Wait..."

She waited.

"Hannah Arendt?"

She curtsied sardonically. "Welcome to what I'm calling the Nach dem Garten."

Glen shook his head. "I never took German."

"It means, roughly, garden of the afterlife. I think it's a term that works well, but I wanted to be clear, it doesn't mean you're dead."

Glen shuffled, wondering if he could sit down. He was suddenly uncomfortable.

"So, I'm alive?" he asked.

Her head bobbed back and forth like a metronome. "Mostly."

"I'm sorry?"

She placed her hands in the pockets of her slacks. "Would you like some food?" she asked.

"What?"

“Some food? Or perhaps a walk? This is a lot to take in, and frankly, I think we should ingratiate you slowly.”

She turned and walked him to another room past the main hall. It, too, was gorgeously appointed, with large windows and comfortable couches. In a corner was a table set for two with a floral centerpiece and lots of silverware. Hannah took him to it and sat him in a nice chair with a good, slightly pliable, back. He noticed that the fine white cloth covering the table had absolutely no texture, as though it were a prop in a video game, and the flowers were not only similar, but seemed to irradiate a color not within the normal visible spectrum. How, of course, he was unable to articulate, so he just allowed it to unsettle him while he focused on Hannah.

“How are you doing so far, Dr. Halcyon?” Hannah asked.

He cleared his throat, trying not to convey his anxiety or confusion. “I’m wondering, for starters, if you’re the real Hannah Arendt.”

Her eyes narrowed a bit. “In what sense?”

He tapped the table, seeing what the cloth felt like. His body, unfortunately, was a little numb. “I’m unsure, for example, if you are an avatar of some sort.”

Her eyebrows rose. “I see.”

“You understand, of course,” he began, “We’re out of the realm of classical mechanics, here. Anything, physically, seems possible.”

“I’d say you’re getting the hang of things. So, first, I am really Hannah Arendt. I’m no avatar, doppelganger, or clone,” she said.

“But...”

“But, at the time of your transportation, I was not alive,” she finished for him.

“Indeed,” he said, relieved a little by her



frankness.

"Shall I, perhaps, give a summary of where you are and why? It may explain my presence."

"That would be helpful, I think."

She smiled politely. "Of course. You are in what I'm told, as best as they can tell me, a pocket dimension."

There was a sadistic satisfaction he felt deep within him as he thought *I knew it*.

"We're outside of time. You'll find you won't age and while there is no day and night, they're willing to simulate it if you'd like."

"But why are *you* here?" he asked.

She held up a hand to halt him. "We're getting there, Dr. Halcyon. You were transported to a pocket dimension, retroactively, when you created your perfect circle. The people, or I should say, beings, who run this place had a sensor out for one. No idea how that works. But once you created one, they went back in time and transported you here, after gathering some necessary materials. Does that make sense, at least?"

"Why would they have a sensor out for a perfect circle? Do they want one?" He looked around at the architecture. "Surely they could make their own."

Hannah nodded. "They could, and so no, they do not want you to make them another perfect circle. They were looking for a scientist. The circle was merely their measuring stick. Their litmus test."

He felt a surge of panic. "They want me to do research? Beings who can transport humans outside of time and space want a human intellect to come up with something? That can't be right."

At that moment, food appeared on their plates. It was his favorite meal - meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

"Your instincts are good," began Hannah, grabbing a fork. "It's more an audit than anything."

Glen folded his hands. "I still question whether I'm qualified for something like that."

"You don't even know what it is."

Glen sighed. "And your job is to tell me."

"Correct," she said. "You're getting things fast."

He sighed. "So you're going to tell me what I'm doing here?" he asked, beginning to feel annoyed at the cryptic responses he was receiving.

"You're doing a fine job of getting it on your own. Why don't you ask some more questions?"

He felt his ears get hot. "Listen-

"I know," she cut him off. "You deserve a full explanation, and you'll get one. But, emotionally, something like this, don't you think it's better to ease your way in?"

She said it almost conspiratorially. It gave him pause and he considered.

"All right."

"All right."

He thought of a question.

"Why you?"

She placed a hand on her chest. "Moi?" It was playful.

"Yes. I mean, of all the people. A phenomenologist I've never met? To introduce me to aliens who want me to, somehow, to do some kind of scientific research? Can you elaborate?"

She carefully finished her bite of mashed potatoes before answering. It made him think about his own food and he grabbed a utensil.

"To be honest, Glen, I'm flattered that you're so worried about me. I'm also flattered by the answer to your question, which is, I'm told, that I'm your favorite philosopher." She blushed as she said it.

"I suppose that's true, though I never really realized I have a favorite," he said with a mouth full of meatloaf.

"I'm honored. You know, not many people have a favorite philosopher. I think if you were the type of person who watched a lot of sports, they'd have sent your favorite baseball player to this place. Or if you read a lot of magazines, your favorite celebrity. But you love to read so they sent the person whose books you've read the most." She blushed again. "No matter. Let's get to why you're here."

"Ok," he said.

"These beings, they are, as you have probably guessed, a hyperintell."

"Hang on," said Glen.

She pursed her lips. "Yes?"

"I just wanted to express some appreciation. For you. You didn't have to help me with this transition. I'm really glad you're not some projection of my subconscious like in some lame sci-fi." he said.

"I'm afraid I haven't read much sci-fi, Dr. Halcyon."

"No, I understand. It's a niche in my time, too. But there is a common trope, in movies and books, in which the alien race takes the shape of something pleasing or familiar to talk with humans. Like a person's dad or a beautiful woman," he explained.

"Well, I'm sorry I'm not the beautiful woman you pictured, I suppose."

"No, no!" he said, shaking his head furiously.

She laughed. "Ah, no. Just a joke, Dr. Halcyon. No, I am flattered to meet an admirer, and when the dust settles on your arrival here, I wonder if we can sit and swap ideas pertaining to both our works. But, to clarify, I was not given a choice to be here.

He set down his fork. "I'm sorry?"

"Yes. The aliens made it quite clear. I'm to liaise with you for their project, lest I cease to exist," she said, his voice rising as she spoke. Her eyes were fiery.

"They threatened to kill you unless you explained things to me?" he asked.

"Worse! They threatened to erase me from existence. Tear apart my molecules and erase my work from recorded history. This was, of course, after I simply asked whether I had any choice in participating. As is, I feel, my right. It's not as though I am against what they're doing, though I can't say I'm enthused about them kidnapping you. But, as you may well know—"

"Oh, I'm aware. Choices make our decisions mean something."

She smiled when he said it. "Precisely. And they threatened to remove all my recorded works from history. For an advanced race they are quite barbaric in their fixation, it would seem."

He leaned forward. "Do you suppose, if I don't participate either, or if I threaten to leave, they'll let you go?"

"Oh, Glen, that's quite kind. But please, don't. Not on my account, in any case, I am quite content to help you, just a touch offended, is all."

He leaned back. "If you say so."

"I do. Now, to it. Why you're here. It is, in many ways, quite simple. After finding you capable of creating a perfect circle, you were brought here to audit their work. They are tracking all matter in the universe," she said.

He waited for her to say more. When she didn't, he asked. "All matter? Am I to take it that includes dark matter?"

"They had to explain to me what that was. But yes. You see, they have accounted for all the

mass in the universe, they know how it is affecting the movement of celestial bodies gravitationally, and have correctly predicted the entire timeline of every galaxy in the universe as a result. They know every star which will implode, every galaxy which will collide, and when the whole thing will wink out of existence entirely. They simply want you to check the math," she said. He could tell she'd rehearsed the explanation a bit.

"I have a couple questions, obviously," he said.

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

"Well, I mean, the elephant in the room, I think, is...why look for another scientist at all? They're unimaginably powerful. I'm sure any audit system they devise themselves would be sufficient," Glen reasoned.

She gave this a moment's consideration. "I wonder, Dr. Halcyon, if they do not want you to serve as an Archimedes, perhaps."

"I assume you are not referring to volumetric problems of measurement. No, it wouldn't be..." he rubbed his chin and looked down, thinking to himself. Then, "You mean the vantage point."

Her hand performed a small pirouette, indicating that she knew he'd get there. "I think so. That is what I gathered from my own meetings with them, which I have found confusing at times. This proved a particularly difficult point to explain. But I think they wanted someone from an entirely different species of enormous intelligence to see their work and determine whether they come to the same conclusions."

Glen shrugged. "You'd think they'd just ask."

She frowned. "I believe this is them asking. As close an approximation as we're going to get."

"Fair enough I suppose."

"You claimed to have other questions," she probed.

"What about time?" he asked.

"What about it?" she countered.

"If they can move in and out of time, can't they just check their own math? See the end of the universe for themselves?"

"Ah, yes. They said they can only travel so far. They can't get to the end."

He sucked in air through his teeth, thinking.

"I'm still not sure why they needed you. If they can explain things to you, why can't they simply meet with me? Cut out the middle man?" he asked.

"Ah. You had mentioned the sci-fi trope, yes, of the aliens taking a pleasant form? They do that too. I met an avatar that appeared to be my ex-husband. A lovely man, and they got the personality just right. It was unsettling. I think, though, from what I gather, you are esteemed enough in their eyes to warrant a true, corporeal, liaison."

"And you didn't?" he huffed.

Her eyebrows raised, and lowered. "I must say, Glen, your concern for me after having been transported away from your home to be given an otherworldly and overwhelming task is, in fact, quite touching."

He stammered, fumbled over some responses, and got out, "I- Well. Of course. It's just as unfair to you."

"Do you consider this all unfair?" she asked.

"Yes!"

She lowered her voice as she said, "So does that mean you're not going to do it?"

He grabbed his wine and turned the stem with his fingers. "I didn't say that."

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After a tour of what the aliens had set up for Glen so far, they ended in a pseudo-cavern space. The walls were an approximation of a smooth stone with metamorphic tracings. It was lit softly, despite having no lights. The floor was flat, black glass covering an area bigger than an airplane hangar. Had either of them had the slightest interest in athletics they would have been able to describe the space as roughly three football fields wide. The ceiling was hard to make out as it was so far away. Glen expected it to be cold, as most caverns had very good air circulation and were below ground. But the air was still and the temperature so modest as to be unnoticeable.

"I can honestly say I've never had an office this big," he said, not taking his eyes off the ceiling.

"Well, it can be adjusted. Scale is large just to give you an idea of how big it can be. But they want a full list of the equipment you'll need. Generalities will be fine at first, and then they'll build some prototypes and then change things iteratively as needed, seeing as how time isn't an issue," she said. "There's an anteroom over that way with a desk and some stationary. You'll make your initial wishlist there."

Glen walked across the space, the echoes of his steps helping assuage the unsettling architecture; any reminder that the physical space was real and solid helped him relax.

Glen took an unmeasured amount of time to write his list. He'd thought about it continually from the moment his task had been explained to him. He felt, once it was complete and he was looking it over, that it was as good a place to start as any.

He came out of the room to find Hannah with her hands folded, waiting for him.

His brow creased. "Have you been standing

there the entire time?"

"I have," she said, moving toward him. "As I said, Glen, you're an extremely considerate person, but I'm ok with my role here. It has been an interesting challenge, to say the least. And staying here, for as long as your work takes, well, I never did get to finish my last book..." She carefully took the papers he'd been writing on.

"Oh," he said, as though he'd just noticed something crawling on her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Well, it's just...If you like it here, we may want to remove item seventeen," he said.

She narrowed her eyes, like a teacher suspicious of a hidden crib sheet. She flipped through the papers, counting the bullet points he'd listed.

"Sixteen, seventeen. Here it is." She looked back up at him. "This is chicken scratch."

He blushed.

"Let's see. An android to liaise so that Hannah may go home if she wants to. No concern as to the android's appearance..."

There were more details but Hannah's voice trailed off. Her eyes were watery.

"I didn't mean to imply," Glen began.

"No, no," she said. "I see what you're doing. You're making it so that I have a choice. In my being here. Not a forced choice but a real one."

"That was the idea," he admitted.

"All right," she said determinedly. She shook the papers vigorously. "I'll run these down and get them started."

He made to stop her, unsure if he'd done something wrong. But he hesitated, and she marched away.

\*\*\*

It was much later when she returned. He had no way of tracking exactly how long, as his

watch did not work in the new dimension and the sun never set. One of the things he'd requested on his little list was for a sun to rise and set so he could possibly pretend to sleep. He did not feel fatigue here, and he suspected sleep may not even be possible. He also wanted a watch that worked.

He waited for her not in the giant cavern but on the steps of one of the great buildings the aliens had constructed for him. It was faux-marble and inside, Glen had discovered, were real treasures of Earth history which had been pilfered and preserved by the aliens. The building was a museum, catered specifically to him for his enjoyment.

Hannah was peppery as she sauntered up to him. He was feeling melancholy and overwhelmed, partially because he thought he'd upset her, and partially because the museum had, rather than lift his spirits, made him yearn

for home.

Her excitement did not help lift his mood. "Dr. Halcyon. I'd like you to come with me," she said, like a gameshow host about to reveal the rules for the lightning round.

He sighed and trudged behind her.

They returned to the chamber and she wheeled on him.

"I got you everything you wanted except for two things," she said.

"You seem excited for someone delivering bad news," he said.

"Ha! It's not bad news Glen. Let me tell you something, you demanding a provision for me in your list of terms meant something to me. It was an act, as I'd call it, an act of true humanity, from one person to another. So, I'm not leaving Glen. But I got them to build you the android anyway. I think it will become useful. But the second thing, Glen, isn't a denial. It's an addi-



tion. I added one thing that you didn't ask for. And I'd like to tell you about it."

Glen's head, already spinning, became awash in confusion amid Hannah's fiery diatribe.

She threw her hands up to indicate the chamber. "This place, Glen, I have demanded to become private to you. Any work you do in here will be unmonitored."

She stared at him expectantly.

"I'm not sure I follow. You're saying anything I do in here, in this big cave thing, will be, what, not watched?"

"Think about it, Glen. These beings were scanning all of known creation, who knows how many celestial bodies, for signs of scientific perfection. They have probably been listening to every conversation you and I have. I have felt, since I first talked to them, a crawling sensation across my skin at all times, at the thought that everything I say and do is probably watched by the aliens."

Glen had not thought about this at all, though something in the back of his mind sparked a revulsion at the thought of changing his clothes in the new dimension, something he hadn't had to do yet as nothing seemed to accumulate or deteriorate.

"Oh my," was all he got out.

She pointed downward. "So now, this room is cut off. They assured me that nothing which transpires in this room will be monitored. So, while you're working, you get complete privacy."

Glen looked around the room. "Why?" he asked.

"Because you made a very kind request for me. So I made a request for you that I thought might be helpful."

He waved his hands. "No, no. Why would I want that? No offense meant, it was very nice to

get that for me. But of all the things you could have asked for..."

"Because you don't need to ask for creature comforts, Glen. You've already seen the food and amenities. Hell, you saw your bedrooms. Kings have slept in shabbier. But this is something that is actually difficult for the aliens to provide. A private space; a space separate from the comings and goings of the throngs of the outside world, that's something modernity has created a struggle to find. In this place, the most modern place I can think of, it's virtually impossible. I wanted to make it possible. It's not ideal that it's away from your actual living quarters, but you struck me as a person who enjoys some privacy while you work. So I took a chance."

She waited eagerly for his reaction. "Thank you," he began. "I wouldn't have thought of any of that. As I picture it, I think you're right. This will be a much less strenuous method of working."

"Glen, let me ask you, have you ever participated in a negotiation?"

Glen shook his head. The truth was, Glen had had the opportunity to negotiate and renegotiate his salary every few years at each university he'd worked at. But whenever his administration or an HR specialist would explain this to him, he would space out and think through problems in his lab. This inattentiveness had, unbeknownst to him, cost him seventy-five thousand dollars over the course of his career.

"I cannot say that I have," he answered.

"Negotiation is all about leverage. And in the case of an employee, the ability to leave a job and cause the employer pain through cost of labor and retraining someone else is the best leverage, often. So, in other words, if they can replace you, your leverage is bad. You, Glen, I believe, have a lot of leverage here."

Glen thought about this. "What if they're lying?" he concluded.

"I imagine if you test them, you will find out whether that is the case."

"Test them?"

"I believe that if you use your newfound privacy for anything that is antithetical to the aims of the aliens you will quickly be reprimanded, or possibly disposed of," she explained excitedly.

"I don't want to sound unappreciative, Hannah, but-

"It's not that I want that to happen. Don't you see, Glen? This means you have an actual choice. Not a forced choice. It's the same courtesy you extended to me."

He began to see.

"If they really are leaving me to my own devices down here, I can help them or not. And you've constructed it in a way where I can run my own experiments on whatever I want using their advanced equipment. I have boundless time and resources to do whatever I want," he said, the last sentence in a breathless strum of realization.

She patted him on the arm, and left.

He stared at the wall for a long time afterward, deep in contemplation.

\*\*\*

Once day and night became marked by a rising and falling sun, Glen could finally mark the passage of time again. This came as a great relief to himself and Hannah.

Glen made the specifications such that the android who became his liaison resembled the dean from his old school. It seemed fitting.

Glen asked the android for new equipment almost daily until he got his feet under him. After that, things were quiet as Glen did what he did best and became obsessed with his work.

Glen worked for what he could now track

as many months. He worked feverishly, pouring over figures in a zealous way that would have worried anyone watching. But thanks to Hannah's earlier advice, Glen was quickly able to conclude that no one was watching.

His android at least noticed, however, that Glen was only ever working or sleeping. The android broached the subject with him late one afternoon when Glen made a rare emergence from a long stint in his lab to stretch his legs.

"Hey, Glen," said the android, approaching him via a supposedly casual saunter. It was a comfort to Glen that the aliens hadn't been able to get the mannerisms quite right. So, instead of android Stevenson having the cool *jua de vis* of his old boss, Glen was always met with the clunky social graces of something like a teenager pretending to be an adult to buy alcohol. Glen's guess was that the aliens were still tinkering with the thing.

"Hello, Unit Two Twelve."

Glen always addressed the android with an increasing series of integers to what Glen calculated as the version he was addressing each time the thing talked with him. The first time they met, Glen had called him Unit One.

"You can call me Roy. Or Dean, whichever you prefer."

"I know I can," said Glen, all but ignoring him, moving at a brisk pace as he shook the stiffness out of his muscles. He never felt fatigue in the new dimension, but the body would still succumb to some of its old limits. It was logical to him that the aliens would not want him to feel too powerful, and so still imposed those limits on him physically.

"I'm a little concerned, Glen, that you're overworking yourself," said Unit Two Twelve.

"Isn't that why I'm here, to work?" Glen said impassively.

Unit Two Twelve tried to simulate a shrug and was oh-so-close. "Sure. But we also gave you large entertainment centers, replete with your favorite literature and media. Hell, we have an exercise facility for you, Glen. Time is of no consequence here. We're ok if you take a day off."

"I'm good," said Glen.

Unit Two Twelve gave a hollow chuckle. "I guess I'd push back a little there, Glen. We have tracked your entire life. We happen to know that even at pique efficiency or overextension, you tend to at least read a little before you go to sleep. But you're not even doing that."

This comment commanded Glen's full attention. "When I was alive, did you watch me use the restroom? Or when I was intimate with someone?"

Unit Two Twelve's face dropped. "Glen, you're alive now. We haven't killed you"

"That doesn't answer my question," Glen interrupted.

Unit Two Twelve tapped his index finger gently on his lips, faking thought the way Dean Stevenson used to. It was one of his first entirely accurate mannerism impersonations. Glen wondered if it was because he'd caused the android genuine stress.

"Look, Glen. At some point, we may require you to take a day off. It is not in our interest for your work to become sloppy," concluded Unit Two Twelve.

Glen hiked one knee up at a time, preparing to reenter his lab, as he said, "You still haven't answered my question."

The derision was also accurate on Unit Two Twelve's face. "Humans have unrealistic norms regarding privacy. Imagine a race with a hive-mind. We can tell you that those planets do in fact exist. There is no privacy there. We operate above your silly norms which you use to protect

your fragile consciousness. You would do well to remember that."

Glen nodded. "Noted. And you would do well to remember that humans accomplished the scientific feats you were scanning the cosmos for, possibly being the only race to do so. And we did so through an unnatural level of cooperation induced through eons of evolutionary mechanization. Our norms are less silly when their consequences are considered."

"Also noted."

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The last time Glen spoke to Unit Three Ninety Four, it was, by design, a day like any other day. According to Glen's watch it was exactly nine a.m., which was right smack in the middle of mid-morning, he knew, because the sun arose at six on the dot at dawn, and sank back into the fake horizon at six in the evening, every day.

When the android walked into the lab, Glen knew what it was about.

"You're technically not allowed in here," Glen called to the entrance as he continued working.

Unit Three Ninety Four marched over to him, hunching its shoulders in anger and failing to mimic a real person in a way that Glen would have found hilarious had he not been so focused.

"My visual sensors have been switched off," it said.

"So you're, what, using echolocation to ensure you don't run into any of the equipment?" said Glen as he turned to the android. He did not attempt to conceal a smirk.

Unit Three Ninety Four came to a halt in front of him, its arms folded. "I am sure you are aware there are spectrums of radiation that would grant me that ability without showing me

the exact makeup of your work. There are waves even larger than radio waves.”

“Not according to human definitions. But it’s nice you all came up with a category for waves the size of a planet, I suppose.”

“Enough. Why is the pocket dimension stretching? What is going on?”

Glen whistled to himself. He’d wondered how sensitive the aliens would be to the changes. He would have to work quickly.

“Well, shoot, Three Ninety Four, I’m pretty busy. You’d have thought you all would have figured it out by now.”

“Just tell me what’s going on!” the android demanded.

Glen stopped what he was doing and walked up to Unit Three Ninety Four slowly, peering at him like a doctor looking at a skin rash. “How do you feel right now?”

Unit Three Ninety Four gulped. “The same, but different. I feel a pressure I cannot place, and a loss of orientation.”

Glen smirked. “Like you’re being stretched and squashed at the same time?”

“Yes,” the android breathed, his face inches away from Glen’s.

Glen walked back, satisfied with his inspection. “That’s because you are,” said Glen.

“Are what?” said Unit Three Ninety Four weakly.

“You,” Glen began, rummaging through some files in the lone cabinet he kept for sketches, “Are in fact being stretched. We all are. Your circuits are just sensitive enough to feel it already. I haven’t the pleasure yet, but I will.”

The android waved his hands frequently. “But why? How is that possible!?”

“Because I’m collapsing this dimension back into the primary universe.”

There was a long pause in which Glen kept

working while Unit Three Ninety Four gibbered and let his arms droop. “What?” it whispered.

“I was in the middle of some calculations, Three Ninety Four, are you sure you need a full explanation?”

“I demand one!”

Glen chuckled. “Ok, ok. Keep your pants on. You wanna know? You have a full scientific background, yes?”

“What are you talking about?” Three Ninety Four asked angrily.

“Your knowledge base. Am I to assume you know everything the aliens know?”

“Yes,” Three Ninety Four growled.

“Perfect. Well, first, let me say, thank you,” said Glen, moving to sit on a rolling chair he’d requested for back pain a few weeks ago.

“Thank you for what?”

“For being honest with Hannah. She asked you all to keep me unmonitored. And it appears you did. You have no idea what I’ve been working on down here.”

As he spoke, Glen felt a touch of the pressure that the android was probably referring to. Which meant the android was feeling the effects more fully now. Glen would have to explain quickly.

“We have some inkling,” it said.

“Of course,” said Glen patiently. “We had an agreement. And I’ve honored that too. We agreed I would track all the mass in the universe to ensure, given trajectories and gravitational attraction, that the heat death of said universe would match your predictions. And I’ve done that. But I added some extra-curriculars.”

“Obviously. How did you even collapse the dimension? Assuming you’re not lying.”

“Definitely not lying. Can you lie? There’s some science fiction in Earth canon imagining some alien species cannot lie. They don’t even

have a word for it. Can you lie? Or conceal truths or actions,” Glen asked.

“Yes,” the android snarled.

Glen was beginning to even be able to notice the squashing of space through his ocular senses. It was fascinating. He hadn’t been sure if he’d even be able to register it.

“Then you should have seen this coming.”

“All do respect,” said Three Ninety Four, whose personality imitation of the dean was slipping by the second. “Fuck you.”

“Indeed. An understandable disposition. The thing is, you asked how I did this. What’s more important is why. How is almost trivial now,” Glen explained.

“I don’t care about why.”

“You should. You wanted a human’s perspective on the math you all did. And that’s my perspective. I don’t want a heat death to the universe. I like the universe. In fact, I want a second chance at existence, to see if I can’t use the time more wisely. So, I noticed that this dimension has enough mass that if I added it to the original universe, instead of everything expanding and eventually fizzling away, our original universe will now, thanks to my side project, collapse back into itself in a few trillion years, causing another big bang, possibly an infinite number of them. Everyone gets an infinite number of second chances. And I deem this a better result. That’s my assessment,” Glen said.

“You could have just told us that,” said the android.

“Yes, but we don’t speak the same language. You’re a liaison. This way, it’s a direct line to your bosses. Plus, with my way, you wouldn’t have been able to say no.” said Glen.

“You still haven’t explained how you did this,” said Three Ninety Four, whose voice was now becoming distorted.

“Well, it’s all thanks to you. The heat death of the universe was in fact inevitable. But this pocket dimension has so much mass. It’s extraordinarily dense. I would have loved to know how you did it, really. But, if you want a more expository answer, I can say this - you can’t observe something without affecting it. I made sure that, during certain observations, particles were moved in such a way as to, say, thin out space enough to allow for the entrance of mass from a different dimension. After that, I will admit, it was tricky setting up a connection between this dimension and the original. The non-synthetic one, presumably. But, again, you gave me access to all your files. I was able to view how you created the pocket dimension. I sort of just reverse-engineered things from there.”

The android considered all this, open-mouthed and red-faced. Finally, it concluded, “You collapsed this dimension in order to add enough mass to the original universe to cause its eventual collapse and rebirth because you’re dissatisfied with your sad, little life?”

“I feel like I said it more eloquently, but yes.”

And before Unit Three Ninety Four could respond to a wonderfully smug and happy Glen, the pocket dimension collapsed, and they were gone.

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“Glen, we’re going to be late to dinner with my parents!” Sandra shouted up the stairs.

Glen, of course, could not hear her, because he was up on the roof with his daughter.

The pair were looking through the family’s telescope at Betelgeuse, trying to discern how close it was to a supernova. It was a chilly December evening, and both had on their heavy coats, along with gloves and hats. Glen’s daugh-

ter, Hannah, was peering intently, adjusting the knobs. It was all Glen could do to keep from intervening, knowing his eight-year-old was making it more and more difficult to see with every movement of her small thumbs.

Glen did not love going to see his in-laws, but he didn't hate it, either. Hannah loved her grandparents, and usually Sandra's father would retire to his den and read, and Glen could just sit peacefully and listen to his wife and mother-in-law gossip while they did the dishes. If he was in a good mood, he'd go and help. And the Christmas Eve dinner usually had good food. Sandra's mother was a hell of a cook.

So Glen was willing to be a little late, but only a little.

He patted Hannah gently on the back, and she looked up. "Huh?"

He smiled. "It's time to go see Nana and Papa," he said.

"But I've almost got it!" she whined.

"Assuredly. But, we have all winter to practice. And the ambient light is usually higher this time of year, anyway. February will be better, after people take their lights down," he explained.

She pouted.

"It'll be in a better position, as well."

She sighed, and stood. He had built a stand on their roof, at Sandra's insistence. If he hadn't, Hannah wouldn't have been allowed to use the telescope until she was a teenager, his wife had said. He didn't argue.

Glen never argued.

He and Hannah climbed carefully down the ladder he'd rigged and met Sandra at the bottom of the stairs, Glen unzipping his jacket to let out a little of his stored heat, which was stifling against the warmth of his home.

Sandra appeared only mildly irritated.

"Well, at least you're both already dressed and have your coats on," she said.

"Would you like me to pack the car?" he asked.

"Already done," she said.

He felt bad.

"I'm sorry, hon," he said.

She kissed him on the cheek, a sensation which, for Glen, never lost its elation.

"It's ok," she said, and walked through the front door.

Glen dutifully followed. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**