

THE GHOST AND THE MACHINE

But, who among us has not fallen in love with the imaginary?

Who, hidden away in some distant hermitage, has not heard a single note of music or verse of poetry?
Who has never in their own heart sang praises to a woman that has never existed, save but in their own heart and soul?

I, for one, know not a human upon this earth who has not spent hours upon hours of their fading lives building castles in the air that they will never once lay a single foot in. To scorn that Promethean gift of imagination— perhaps it would not be human at all.

— @maguspraestrigae, 21 March 2015

The woman's face was painted a bright blue with the soft artificial light of the computer screen. In the musty darkness of the library stacks, at a quarter to midnight, another wandering student might have thought her a ghost who loosed the chains of mortality only to be trapped alone amid the meandering rows of bookcases. In a sense they only would have been partially wrong.

While not a ghost, she was, at the very least, haunted.

She hammered a few words into her keyboard. Bit her lip, in the same place that she had gnawed raw for months. Then slammed her index finger against the backspace button, watching as her words vanished into the digital ether.

Another failure. Another vain attempt to translate the ache in her bones to actual words.

She leaned back, feeling the faint pressure of an insomniac's migraine begin to build behind her temple. How late was it? Ten? Eleven? In the background, just above the rattle of the air conditioning, she could hear the distant sounds of the other students making the most of a Friday night. That meant it was before five am at least.

Her fingers hovered atop the keyboard, not quite able to bridge the gap between thought and action. This was too late for her to be up, wasn't it? She had to be awake and out of her dorm by eight or else she wouldn't get any of the good spots at the library. And if she didn't get any of the good spots at the library, then she wouldn't be able to get any homework done tomorrow. And if she couldn't get any homework done tomorrow, then...then...she didn't know. But judging by the feeling gnawing its way from her gut to her brain, the consequences had to be bad.

She took one last look at the screen—the post and the handle beneath it. It was a reference to *KARAKUL*, an audio series started back in the early '90s, chronicling a war fought between factions of magician-scientists in humanity's far-flung future. Most of @maguspraestrigae's blog posts were written from the point of view of a character in that world. Nadeiron, Mage-Breaker. A recurring antagonist who had augmented himself with metal enhancements of his own creation. It was difficult to get used to at first, then strangely compelling.

She let out a short laugh. How long had it been since she had actually listened to that series or, really, any series at all? Too long. Everything had begun to feel pointless over the past month, everything save

the glow of the screen and the person on the other end who she could never work up the courage to speak to. Who never even knew her at all.

With a decisive snap of her wrist, she slammed the laptop shut. The noise hung in the air a moment, then faded into the shadowy expanse of the library as though it had never existed at all.

Failed Attempt #38:

Hi! I'm Arvie from @housearvex. The one who's been reblogging all of your posts haha. It's really amazing. Like some of the best stuff I've ever read—you've totally captured what it's like to be a lonely college freshman who has resorted to an internet blog for companionship—love the characters in an audio series. You have such an interesting take on how Nadeiron's enhancements might work (not to mention, a great memory for all the rivalries and alliances between the different houses—I'm Arvex and you're Praestrigae. I can't remember, are we supposed to be at war?) Not to be too weird or anything but if you ever want to talk *Karakul*, I'm game. Just DM me.

~~Yes. Just DM me. A person on the internet you've never met before. Who already sounds like a fucking stalker. Going scrap this one. Bury it deep in my drafts folder where it never sees the light of day again.~~

She had been right.

There were no spots left in the library, all the good ones having either been taken or left unsuitable by the chatter nearby. Unusual for a Saturday morning, but then it was the fifth week of the semester. Midterm season was just starting up.

She bent over her phone as if accepting a seating invitation from a friend (a real one—not a magus praestrigae she had never seen nor spoken to), then hastened out of the room, down a set of stairs, and outside, onto the Quad. It was a late September morning, and the leaf-strewn grass was scattered with groups of what were ostensibly her classmates. Some tossing frisbees, others lounging on makeshift hammocks, and others still conversing beneath the branches of a towering oak. She kept her head down as she passed them, realizing that with the heavy bag on her shoulders she probably looked like a tortoise sticking its head into its shell. Art, as they say, imitates nature.

She reached the coffee shop a quarter to ten, morning by anyone's standards. But then, the lunch rush started early here. She ended up standing in line for ten minutes, rubbing her swollen eyes as she recalled the events of last night with the hazy imprecision of a dream. Her phone hung limp in her hand. She wanted—more, even, than the latte she was about to order—to switch it on and look back at @maguspraestrigae's elegant words. But she didn't dare.

In the harsh light of day, their (no, his—his pronouns were on the about page) words felt like mere fancy.

Nevertheless, her thoughts were on him as she sat down, took the first sip of her latte, and flipped open the first page of her psychology textbook. Is this what it feels like, she wondered, to fall in love?

I have spent my whole life searching for love.

Stripping each cell down to its smallest organelles. Sifting through the aging cores of stars. Sorting through the ashes of a thousand potential apocalypses. All in search of that evasive force that shatters my synapses whenever I look into the pair of eyes that I thought (imagined, perhaps?) were yours.

I have not found it.

Do you remember those warm summer days where we walked the streets of the Capitol? It was beautiful then—a paradise not yet touched by the orbital bombardment that wracked so much of the globe. Blades of grass surfaced through the cobblestone roadway, to take long, deep swallows of the mountain air. Shafts of light dangled in the firmament above like a thousand swords waiting to fall. Our footsteps on the stone pathways sounded—at least to me—as though our hearts were beating as one.

You laughed, then, when I told you my fears that love itself did not exist. You said that trying to find evidence of love's existence was like trying to find a single ounce of gravity. Though I may not be able to see it, I can tell by the workings of its invisible hand that it is alive and real. But then you were always able to accept things on faith that I could not. Perhaps that is why, Calyx, we ended as we did.

On my more cynical days, I wonder if the search is all in vain. Perhaps it is so easy to fall in love with the imaginary because love itself is a sham, a trick played on us by our enormous ape-brains.

But then, I remember if my love is an illusion, then it is, at the very least, mine. Despite the enhancements I have made to my limbs, my lungs, my very heart, my brain is still human. And so, it is still in my nature to imagine. To dream up such things as cannot be seen to explain my inexplicable world (and what, indeed is more inexplicable than the feeling that coursed through me like lightning when our eyes first met?)

I love you and it is real and it is realer than anything I have ever thought before. And perhaps it is imaginary too.

That is, perhaps, enough for now.

— @maguspraestrigae, 24 January 2017

It was 6 p.m. Outside the glass window of the café, the last beams of sunlight had not yet managed to untangle themselves from the thick branches of the trees. And so sunset stalled, leaving the world adrift in some kind of golden dream.

She was lost as well.

Not physically—in fact, she hadn't moved an inch from the same hard plastic seat in the café for hours. First, flipping through the pages of her psychology textbook, then economics, then when her brain had at last been filled to the brim with knowledge, no book at all.

No—she was lost in conversation. Not her own. The last time she had spoken aloud had been to order a bagel for lunch, and *that* had been five hours ago. (Stranger and stranger---*before*, she had taken each interaction for granted, but now she savored them. A scrap tossed to a starving man. Who knew when the next would come again?) But, although she could not participate in any of the surrounding conversations, she could listen. And as night fell in the café, there was plenty to listen to. A steady buzz, that reminded her distantly of a field behind a house—once hers—that, in the late summer months, had filled with crickets.

When she was five, she would sit on the backyard stoop and listen to their hum until it was dark enough that she couldn't see the hand in front of her face. Now, she had resolved, without wholly realizing it, to do the same here.

And so, she closed her eyes and lost herself to the sound. To her right, she could hear a pair of seniors—a couple?—chattering on and on about how much they would miss taking coffee here when they graduated. To her left, four others—PhD candidates, she presumed—discussed what was apparently higher mathematics, but sounded suspiciously like gibberish. And, somewhere behind her, a fellow freshmen worried aloud about his first Classics exam, comparing its inevitable approach to a modern day Birnam Wood.

She drank it all in. The joy. The fear. The bitterness. In these moments, she did not feel wholly human. More like a distant cousin, a step removed on the evolutionary tree. A parasite, perhaps. She could gorge herself on the life contained in these conversations, could allow it to sustain her another day, but she could not be a part of them. This was not to say she had not tried. She had. Once she had even succeeded. But that was long ago. Now it seemed easier to sit and listen and let the intoxicating draught of sound and emotion fill her up until she was almost human again.

And so, she did until the last beams of sun untangled themselves from the branches above and fell to the ground, where they vanished from sight. Leaving only darkness. Darkness so thick that she imagined she could not see her hand if she held it but a foot away from her eyes. She smiled to herself, then slid out of her plastic chair. It made a loud creak as it pushed against the linoleum floor, causing the pair of seniors to turn their heads—startled—as though they had only just noticed her presence.

But by then, she was already gone, a wadded coffee cup caught on the rim of the trash the only proof that the seniors had not imagined her there.

He didn't post that night.

Or the following night. Or the night after that.

She stayed up for him, too. Her eyes plastered open with a combination of caffeine and anticipation, waiting, waiting for that flash of pixels in the bottom of her screen. *New Post from @MagusPraestrigeae*. It never came.

On some level, she was aware that she was not acting rationally. It was her first year, first semester of college. The best years of your life, or so they said. And here she was, locked away in the bowels of the library, trying and failing to contact a person who was, in a way, not even real. But isolation, even if it was self-imposed, carried its own peculiar type of logic. And if she kept to herself, there was no one there to judge her anyhow.

To pass the time throughout those sleepless nights, she read. Again, her psychology textbook. Then her economics one. By now, was weeks ahead in all of her readings. The best she had ever done, academically, if only to avoid the gnawing absence that had loomed from her computer screen.

At the third week of waiting, her parents called to congratulate her performance on the past psych exam. She could barely remember her grade. Barely remember telling them. It had been a passing blip on her radar, a sign that she had not failed. Yet.

Now, draining the last sooty drops of her coffee, she struggled to call up the energy to sound enthusiastic about it.

"Yes, yes. Thank you."

"Was it hard? I...I don't remember? I think so though. All multiple choice, no partial credit." And who knew how she would do if she was faced with something harder?

"Yeah, I know. It's an accomplishment anyway. Celebrate? Uh..." She glanced down at the cardboard cup, dangling from her left hand. "I guess I'll go out for coffee. Yeah. Me and some...acquaintances. No one close. Just people I know from psych class."

Yeah, right. If you counted Freud and Pinker and all the other old white men in her psychology textbook. They'd probably have some scintillating explanations as to why she was lying. But then, she already thought she knew. To do college right was to be fun, daring, a little crazy. So far, she had failed in all those things. And, as a general rule, people who stayed up until 4 am. studying for economics exams didn't like to fail.

"Yeah, we'll all go together. To mark the end of our first exam week. Though I guess it's technically not over yet." In the corner of her eye, the economics textbook sat squat on the edge of her desk like a looming dragon. Beside the blank screen of the computer. She closed her eyes, leaning back against the hard wooden back of the library chair.

"How has it been for you? Good? Good to hear. Yeah, it's been going alright for me as well. Kind of stressful. First exam week and all." And the missing *magus praestrige*. Though she doubted she could explain how that factored in—she barely understood it herself.

"You'll leave me to study? Thanks—I appreciate the call. I'll be sure to tell you how the economics exam goes. And the coffee? Well, I doubt it will be anything *major*, but I guess I can keep you updated." But then, maybe not. She wasn't sure how much longer she could lie. "Talk to you soon? Alright then. Take care."

The phone let out a low beep, the sound quickly devoured by the surrounding shelves of books. She slumped back in her chair and stared at the screen of her phone until it dimmed, then eventually went dark. The sudden absence of light—made her feel as though she had slipped beyond some invisible veil, separate from the real world.

She spared a glance at her economics textbook, wondering if she'd be repeating this conversation in a week or so, after the next exam. Probably. Assuming insomniac study sessions worked as well for economics as it did for psychology.

But then with a chance touch of her fingers to the mousepad, the computer shuddered to life. Though 'life' was perhaps a poor description. Its screen was as blank as ever. Ah, there it was.

Failed Attempt: #47

Hey—I'm Arvie, from @housearvex. I've ~~loved~~ been a really big fan of your work for a while (you can probably tell by how much I reblog it haha), and I know you post daily at 8pm EST. So, I was kind of worried when you didn't post anything yesterday, or the day before that, or the day before that...I mean, you get the picture. ~~and that picture is you have a stalker~~

I just wanted to ask if you're, you know, okay? If you are, then feel free to ignore this message. I know it's probably strange to have one of your followers asking after you, but your posts have meant a lot to me for a long time. How long, you ask?

~~Well, I actually don't know the answer. But, because it's you, @maguspraestrige, I'm going to go check...~~

~~...~~

~~This is harder to find than I thought. Wait, I think I've got it—~~

~~Holy c~~

~~Holy car~~

~~Holy crap~~

According to my account history, I started reading your blog on fourteenth of September. A good three days after I broke up with my ex-boyfriend.

God, I never realized that. But...holy crap. It makes sense. It makes way too much sense. Not to be that person complaining online about their ex, but ~~he was~~ the breakup was...a real shitshow.

~~God, you probably don't care about any of this, do you? But then again, it's not like I'm going to send this draft to you anyways. Might as well spill the whole raging garbage fire of a story.~~

The long and short of it is this. ~~The bastard~~ My ex said that it wasn't *worth* staying in contact since we were attending separate schools in separate states. I thought it was. I tried to call him to work it out. He sent me a text message telling me we're done.

In retrospect, I don't know why it hurt me so much. I mean, People break up all the time, right? Big sea, crazy number of fish, I'm sure you know the drill.

But it felt as though he had gotten tired of me. Had just thrown me away as though I was some malfunctioning genet-android (to use *KARAKUL* terminology). But ~~Nadeira~~ you know how that feels, don't you? I can see it in the way you write. I'm sorry for what ever happened to you that makes you have to ask if we even have love but let me tell you—I've been there too.

~~I care~~

~~I care about~~

~~Ah fuck it. You know what? You're not going to see this.~~

More than that, I care about you. I want to see your posts again, not because they entertain me or whatever (though they are very good), but because they mean you're still there. You're still okay.

I know it sounds crazy, right? That I'm so worked up about someone I've never spoken to before? Who only really exists inside a machine? But, hey, you were the one who was explaining how we're built to care about the things we can't see...Right?

~~Yeah, right.~~

~~More fodder for the drafts bin. I'm... sure he'll be back. Besides, I have lots of time. I can wait.~~

~~***~~

And so, she did.

Three weeks became four, and four became five. After that, it all dissolved into a sort of unending blandness, punctuated occasionally by any conversation longer than ten minutes. She kept track of time by deadlines and by the ever-earlier arrival of sunset.

But there were moments yet when it all felt like a waking dream. For example, now. It was psych class, and the professor was talking, but she couldn't focus. No, not even with three cups of coffee roaring through her veins.

Instead, all she could hear was her own thoughts rattling around in her head. At least—she had assumed they were hers. On closer inspection, some of them didn't seem quite...right. Bastard children, perhaps. Cuckoos in the nest. She had heard once that, when humans are shut up on their own for long enough, they began to hear voices. What those voices were, she could only imagine: crying children, distant whispers, hideous laughter. Still, she doubted that any one of them had heard their *own* voice, warped almost beyond recognition, aping the words of their psychology professor.

Have you ever heard of mirror neurons, class?" She heard herself ask. It's as though her brain had taken what the professor had said then repeated it with her own pitch and cadence. Her hands start to twitch, as if reaching out for something to grab onto. She had never wanted to hear another human voice so desperately as she did in that moment. If given the chance, she imagined she would trade away her soul, just to hear her professor tell her she was failing the course.

Yet, whatever twisted part of her brain was orchestrating this coup, however, would not relent.

"A shame. Well, you all have them. They're tucked away inside your inferior frontal cortex and superior parietal lobe. Whenever you watch—or read about—a person performing some action, a fraction of them will spark, as though you were doing the same action yourself. Meaning, in a way, we can react to the imaginary as though it were real." As the words swarmed her brain like flies to a corpse, she thought she could see the shadow of the professor turn its head toward her.

It smiled, looking awfully like how she'd imagine a magus praestrigeae.

She recoiled, slamming herself against the back of her seat, and the moment was lost. The professor—certainly real this time, the warped voice gone—shut down off the monitor then waved a dismissive hand to the class.

"I'll leave you with that, then. Now, remember there will be a study group at 8pm for the exam next Tuesday—And yes, I do know it's a Friday night. But I expect at least *some* of you to attend. It will be in room 202 down the hall." The professor nodded in the general direction of 202. "But if you're going, I recommend starting out early—I think it's going to start snowing tonight. Five inches, at least."

The woman, finally loosed from her daydream, grabbed the strap of her bag, and slipped away as a collective groan rang out through the small auditorium. Indeed, the start of winter was a terrible thing anywhere north of Pennsylvania. But before she left the room for good, she spared a glance at the small slit-like windows along the back wall. There, she could make out the clouds, blotting out the late afternoon sun like an armada of *KARAKUL* warships. The dark would come early tonight.

Again, she had waited out the last rays of sun inside the café, where she had become a near permanent fixture over the past weeks. And as the lonely sun dyed the clouds a red like fallen leaves, she had taken a deep draught of the conversation around her. Tonight, they were but vague whispers, mainly of exams and of a vacation at some distant point in the future. It didn't matter. For whatever reason, the

conversation was less potent tonight. It did not satiate whatever parasitic part of her she had desired to fill. And so, for the first time in weeks, she had left the café before dark.

Now she was returned to her lair deep within the stacks. Her face, made paler by the long hours spent away from the sun, looked even more spectral in the wash of artificial light from her screen.

She remembered an old legend about a woman who was monster by day, but human by night. Perhaps then, that was what she was—not literally, of course, but the imagination was a powerful thing. Her days passed in a dull haze of assignments, reading, and eavesdropped conversation, and she barely felt human at all. But it was at night—when she was building her imaginary castles in the air, fashioning her unsent replies to a person who would never respond, loving with all the force still left in her body. Then—she was alive.

But tonight, hours of the darkness waxed long—longer still, given that she had arrived there before an early dusk. Having no readings left to do, she passed the time by watching the first flakes of snow melt against the small, rectangular window beside her. She imagined she was the monster-turned-human, surveying her domain. She imagined she was deep in conversation with the magus in the machine.

Then, when the appeal of that had faded, she passed the time by scrolling through the @magus praestrigae's old posts.

I walked, today, in all our old familiar places. The aerial bridges and soaring parapets that inhabit that narrow boundary between earth and sky. So many times, I thought I could hear your voice speaking to me in the evening breeze. You told me that you loved me. You told me that you hated me. You told me that you had moved on to someone else. Someone who understood what love is without having to pick it apart in a laboratory.

I know that I should do the same. It is the rational choice after all, and I am the rational one. Or so you said. And yet here I am walking down the meandering pathways of the Capitol, lost inside of you.

I have obtained my first enhancements today. A thin plating of flexisteel pasted to my skin. It is the color of gray skies over Karakul, the color of clouds without rain, of eyes without tears. As I emerged from the tenebrous haze of the painkillers, the first thing I thought is that you would not recognize me.

Was that wishful thinking, Calyx? Or did I fear it to be true.

I am encased within layers of steel. I cannot be injured. I cannot be touched. The scar that ran down my back, from when the two of us ascended the eastern mountains has been covered in bonding fluid then plated with armor. Every cell of flesh where you touched me has been altered, at its very genetic level. It is no longer yours. I am no longer yours.

I have reimagined myself and I am no longer anyone's but my own.

The magus' words fluttered across the screen, like a thousand tiny snowflakes.

She imagined that he was speaking to her. She knew him, after all. She knew the ache that he was trying so painstakingly to translate into words. And yet even so, she could not hear his voice.

At last, the screen stopped, and she could read no more. She had reached @maguspraestrigae's first post. A post which she had avoided for months, as it held up a mirror to her own insanity.

Name: Nadeiron of House Praestrigae

Bio: Nadeiron, Mage-Breaker, Lead scientist of the House Praestrigae, was born in the mountainous region south of the Capitol, sometime in the year 4068 B.C.E. The eldest scion of a disgraced House, he learned early on that the greatest good that he could do in life was to restore his family name to its previous eminence. Fortunately, the young mage showed a budding talent in abjuration magic that won him membership in the House Praestrigae. There he met the equally talented Calyx, the heir apparent of the famed House Rakmosa. Their stories became entangled, as the two fell in love, then came apart all within the span of the year. Calyx, set to inherit magics untold, could not be matched to the magus of a nothing House. But the two would meet again on the battlefields of Karakul...

(Read more)

Important Disclaimer: This is an RP (that's roleplay for all of you Karakul noobs) blog for the character of Nadeiron from the Karakul audio series, run by me, Gent at @agenteelblackhole. This is probably going to be the only time I'll be speaking ooc (out of character). It's all Nadeiron from here on out.

Thanks for reading!

For a long time, she stared at this. The magus. The man in the machine. The man who she had loved—was himself, not real. Nor was voice that she had imagined was his, that read his words aloud, that spoke to her in the night. That voice was hers.

And she had known it the whole time.

Perhaps there was a fundamental insanity at work. An insanity that let her hang onto every word of a personal blog that did not describe the life of a person. That let her fall in love with a man one step removed from reality. In the back of her mind those first words echoed—was it, in fact, human to fall in love with the imaginary?

Perhaps. When there was no one else to fall in love with.

Successful Attempt #1:

Hi. My name is Arvie, and I'm from over at @housearvex (yeah, I know this technically means we're at war in the *Karakul* canon but bear with me). I just wanted to let you know that I've loved your blog. I've loved it for a while, but I suppose I could never work up the courage to tell you. I know that you've stopped posting this past month. I don't know why, and I don't expect you to tell me. I do hope you're okay though. And I wanted to thank you for all you've given me, even if you never knew you were doing so. If you need anything...just DM me. I'll do my best to help.

Wishing you the Best! –Arvie

There. With a final tap of the return key, it was sent.

She straightened against the high back of the wooden, old library chair, feeling as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. A weight that, until now, she had never known existed at all.

In the old legends, the way to cure the monster-woman was with a kiss from her true love. The way to banish a lingering ghost was to resolve its unfinished business.

She snapped the computer screen shut with a thud of dull finality, knowing that if @maguspraestrigae did DM her, she'd see it on her phone. But then, somehow, she doubted he would. He was already long gone, had been for days now.

She simply hadn't the courage to realize it.

Perhaps, she still wasn't sure that she had that courage. Perhaps, she never would be. But something had changed in her the moment she read the disclaimer at the end of the bio. If love and people could be imaginary, then why couldn't courage? She could imagine herself brave, plant those first seeds, and, should she care for them well, they may even grow into something real. Something she would not have to imagine for herself. And so, slipping the strap of her backpack over her shoulder, she left the stacks before midnight for the first time in weeks. On the Quad, the soft light scattered across the snow gave the appearance of dawn. The snap of her boots against the fresh-fallen snow broadcasted her presence for all to hear.

I'm alive, the sound seemed to cry to the roof of the library, to the tops of the trees, to the frozen earth below. Or perhaps it was only in her mind. But then she was human. This was how she understood the world.

Boots still hammering the snow, she set out across the Quad, toward the room 202 and the psychology study session that she had not planned on attending. Her steps were unsteady at first, as though she had awoken from a long dream. But then they quickened. In the distance, she thought she could hear the sound of many voices joined in laughter, each as real and unlike as the shards of snow that brushed soft against her face.