



*ICSF fanzine  
2019*

# **FROM THE EDITOR**

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Hello, and thanks for picking up this year's edition of the ICSF fanzine!

The fanzine collects and showcases creative works from the Imperial College Science Fiction & Fantasy Society. This year we are featuring several short stories, a lovely piece of digital art, and also a microfiction section with pieces that fit within the shortest of attention spans. Our gratitude to everyone who wrote, painted, or otherwise sat-down-at-their-creative-medium-of-choice-and-bled in these past few months!

For those of you who've been handed this booklet on your way into Picocon 36, be sure also to take a look at the society newsletter, *Wyrmtongue*, to see what's going on. I hope you all have a fantastic time at the convention.

Read on for Prohibition-era bars, etymology, Venusian lightning storms, dreams, magic, pentagrams, and some toaster machines. ΨΦ

**Jean Lo**  
Wyrmtongue Editor

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# **Speak Easy**

Smitha Maretvadakethope

I was leaning against the bar in a speakeasy on 52nd Street, waiting for things to clear up with Nora, when a girl got up from a table at the far end of the room. She'd been sitting there with three others, laughing and joshing around, and was now on her way to me. I tightened my grip on my glass, swirling the contents as nonchalantly as I could manage. Her long black hair hung in curls, curls which bounced as she walked with comfortable determination. I could tell from the way she moved that she was the kind who knew what she wanted and knew how to get it, too. I straightened up a little, but regretted it immediately. I should have played it cool for longer, but I haven't been looking for a woman since I met Nora years ago.

I opened my mouth when she was just a few feet away, and —

She walked right past me.

'Could I have another Screwdriver, barkeep?' she said in a lower voice than I'd expected. Her eyes twinkled in the dim lights.

He looked her up and down, his scruffy moustache twitching, as she slid her empty glass towards him.

'Do you have the money for it, sunshine?' he asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

'Come now, Winston, just put it on my tab,' she grinned, biting her lower lip coyly and batting her lashes at him. A cheap trick anywhere.

'Your tab's as long as the Bible by now,' he grunted. 'No more Screwdrivers without payment.'

I couldn't help but watch their exchange, fascinated by the easy rapport between them, almost like they'd known each other for a long time ... but that couldn't be, could it?

She turned a little, picking up on my uncouth stare and her lips quirked up.

'Can you believe Winston?' she smirked, leaning on the bar to face me head-on. She sat down on the rundown, wooden barstool closest to me, and showed off a toothy grin. I can't help but find that there's something charming about it. Something familiar? Maybe. I'm not sure. 'He won't help out a lady in desperate need of a drink.'

'That's a real shame,' I somehow managed to get out without stumbling through my words. You'd almost think that I'm a smooth talker. Almost. But Nora would certainly argue otherwise. 'It's nearly like chivalry is dead, isn't it?'

'Almost,' she said, grinning, looking me once over. There was something about that look which was domineering, possessive, leering. But could it be ... ?

'What a waste,' I said, leaning just a little closer. Where was this boldness coming from? I'd certainly never found it before at work or at home. Could I maybe borrow some

for day to day life?

‘You know . . .’ her tongue peaked out as it played with a sharp looking incisor, ‘Chivalry might not be as dead as Winston makes it out to be . . .’

‘Is that right?’ I drawled, squinting at her eyes, trying to get a better look. I felt like a fool, really, but I got an eerie sense that this particular gal was the one that I needed to impress...That she might just be the right one. After all, Nora always liked playing little games.

‘A tall, sweet gentleman could intervene, you know,’ she smiled coyly picking up her glass again. She tilted her head, and rest her hand upon my wrist, pushing my sleeve up just a little. My number peaked out, and she clicked her tongue. Approval?

‘That’s true,’ I murmured, unable to believe myself. Nora would kill me if I got this wrong.

‘Could you be a doll,’ she whispered in that alluring low voice, ‘And help a girl out?’

I nodded, unable to control the chattering in my head. Damn it all. It would be all right. Somehow. I couldn’t explain it properly if I tried, but she just had to be it, right?

‘Are you sure about this, new guy?’ Winston asked, eyeing us both. His wedding ring scratched the interior of the glass he was drying. A scraping reminder to be careful.

I gulped and nodded, turning to pull my wallet out of my back pocket. I saw a glimmer of something in her eyes.

‘Thank you, sugar, you’re a doll,’ she drawled, handing the glass to Winston again, as I set money onto the counter. He muttered something under his breath about sirens and idiots, but I didn’t pay him much mind.

She giggled giddily and eyed me again, stepping closer.

‘What brings a gentleman like you to a shoddy little establishment like this?’ she crooned. It was the same thing that brought everyone else here, the same sense of adventure and reinvention and need to fix or test things which might be broken. Or are in the process of breaking.

‘Just the usual,’ I shrugged. It’s all the same standard fare at the end of the day. ‘How about yourself?’ I asked, my breath hitching a little bit. I’m a terrible actor, why was I even trying to act otherwise?

‘Just spending a nice evening out, having a laugh.’

She looked past my shoulder and winked at someone. I turned to check who it was but there was no one looking our way. If she really had come here with one of them then she wasn’t the one. But then again she could just be playing me real well.

Winston tapped the counter and pushed the Screwdriver towards her.

‘Thanks, darling,’ she beamed at him and took a sip.

Through all the theatrics I had completely forgotten about my drink. I quickly gulped it down like a desperate man thirsting for the sweet nectar of ... gin? Fine, maybe not sweet nectar, but I was still parched. I grimaced as I swallowed.

She laughed gleefully, enthralled by my complete lack of cool. I don't usually buy hard liquors but it seemed right to have something strong during Prohibition. I didn't want to be a wimp next to all the tough guys™.

'You shouldn't drink what you can't stomach,' she reminded me quietly, placing her hand on mine, steadying my gently shaking glass. She led it to the counter, and waited for me to let go, before placing her hand in mine.

I felt a blush rising up my neck, and looked down at those intertwined fingers that didn't quite feel like they were mine. The touch felt off, though I could feel the weight of the contact. Her lips quirked into a smile.

'What should I call you here?' she murmured.

Names. Shit. I hadn't come up with anything. James? No, I can't pull off a James. John? Too standard. Mark? No.

'Luke,' I declared, more to myself than to her.

She snickered.

'I guess I'm lucky to have met you, Luke. You can call me Stella, in that case.'

Stella. Wasn't that the name of the girl from Nora's favourite play? A streetcar named something or other.

'So, where did you leave your missus?' she murmured, glancing pointedly at the gold band on my ring finger. I hadn't even noticed it.

'I-I'm not married,' I said immediately, blinking like the idiot that she must take me for. 'Just got engaged, though.' Moron. Why'd I talked to her about reality?

Her smile didn't vanish, though. If anything, her grin had got wider.

'Tell me, sweet pea,' she drawled, eyes glittering with mischief, 'Where is she right now? What is it you've told yourself?'

I inhaled sharply.

'Surely you must have an idea or a story in the back of your head, or you wouldn't be here with a shiny little ring,' she said relishing the words.

'S-she's finishing the Christmas shopping,' I murmured, cheeks feeling as hot as the stove back home. You could fry an egg on them at this point.

'That's sweet,' she sighed, smiling absentmindedly at my neck, eyes warm as the skin crinkled around the edges. A completely familiar gesture. It was her after all. 'Is she shopping just for you both, or ...?'

I paused, mid-breath, and my eyes flickered to our hands.

'For a future family,' I admitted my fantasy. We'd never had this discussion before, but she had to know I wanted one ...

I shook my head, frowning.

'We shouldn't be talking about what's outside,' I whispered to her, gripping her hand tightly, not wanting to let go, having found her after all.

'We're not,' she whispered back, resting our hands on my heart. 'We're talking about what's inside. They won't mind.'

'They will,' I breathed so quietly that I wasn't sure whether she'd even heard it.

From the corner of my eye I saw a man get up from the table she'd been at, and caught him smirk at me. His walk was proud like a peacock's, full of show and swagger. You could smell 'alpha-male' from a mile off.

'Sugar, aren't you coming back to us? It's not quite the same without your ...' he gave her a once over, revealing his pearly whites, 'Personality.' He signalled Winston for another drink and leant against the bar right behind her, not even leaving a dream of space between them.

She rolled her eyes and shifted slightly closer to me.

'Jeff, I'm in the middle of something important here,' she said not turning away from me.

My eyes flickered back to him. Should I be saying something?

'More important than what we had going on?' he murmured, leaning down to whisper into her ear. 'Or do you prefer pussycats over real tigers?' he chuckled eyeing my sharp business attire as his hands slid over her hips.

That's when I saw it. The look I had seen a hundred times before. The look that left no survivors. Her face went hard like it was made of granite, and her hands dropped to grab his, angry claws digging into prey. She pulled her head forward and swung it back, head-butting him.

'What the actual f—'

She turned in a split second, and pushed him hard against the counter. Grabbing his arm, she flipped him, pinning his face onto the bar with her elbow and yanking his hand between his shoulder blades.

'Don't touch me, dirt bag,' she hissed through gritted teeth. 'Or I'll break your hands.' She yanked his wrist harder as a not-so-subtle demonstration. He howled.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry!'

'That's enough now,' Winston said, visibly unimpressed, tapping the revolver on his

hip. ‘I don’t want to be cleaning blood tonight.’

She glowered at Jeff again, and her skirts rustled against the bar as she let him go.

‘Fucking maniac,’ he grunted massaging his shoulder. ‘You could have just said that you’re not Jenny.’

‘And you could have just not grabbed me and been a lech,’ she said pointedly. ‘C’mon hon, let’s go,’ Stella said, taking my hand. I looked between her and Jeff, who was flipping the bird at her back, and smirked.

‘Are you alright?’ I asked, rubbing her back supportively as we walked out through the doors.

A golden shimmer flickered over our skin, from head to toe, and we were back in a grey room full of screens and techies. A man in a sharp black cassock, the one who’d explained the wedding prep test to us, came over from a screen which showed HD CCTV footage of the speakeasy. He practically radiated. He clicked a button on his earpiece, and clapped. The holo-lenses clicked out of existence and I finally saw her again. Nora stood where Stella had been a second before. Her brown hair was tied up in a ponytail and she wore her flannel blouse and jeans again, not the frilly skirts and ruffles from the little trip. She smirked at me with a knowing look, appraising my return to a shirt and tie combo. She was probably missing the well-cut suit already.

I looked down and saw that her hand was still in mine, and squeezed it. She squeezed back and winked.

‘That was wonderful,’ Father Timothy beamed, slapping my back. ‘You found each other very quickly, you managed to connect emotionally, and you’re fully willing to protect each other’s dignity.’

‘It was really more Nora than me,’ I admitted sheepishly, and she shrugged, but there was a hint of a smile playing on her lips. You could take a field agent out of a mission, but you couldn’t take mission-training out of a field-agent. Jeff had never stood a chance.

‘What can I say? I have zero tolerance for creeps,’ she said, her voice sounding normal again, without the lilts of a southern drawl.

‘And that is a fine policy to have,’ Father Timothy grinned, slapping my back so hard that the pain radiated through my shoulders. Why did he have to do this every single time? ‘Either way, you passed the first test of the prep course with flying colours!’

‘Not that anyone’s surprised,’ Nora said matter-of-factly, though a familiar mischievous edge brightened her eyes.

‘How did you recognise each other?’ Father asked, leading us towards the next doorway shimmering with gold. ‘Not counting that little bit of cheating I saw there, Nora,’ he amended, glancing at my wrist which had sported her matching candidate number during the test. She grinned sheepishly.

‘The entire liquor interaction,’ I said, quickly trying to think of the first moment that could have given her away, not wanting to admit how long it had actually taken me to be

sure. She looked at me from the corner of her eyes and smirked. She knew I was lying. ‘You know I’m not keen on gin …’ I pulled a face just remembering the flavour. ‘What about you?’ I asked, playing with my collar nervously.

She turned to me, and shifted her weight, giving me an amused once-over.

‘Well darling,’ she said, returning to her honeyed prohibition-drawl. She ran her eyes up the length of my crisp tie before locking me down with a wicked grin. ‘No one ties a tie quite as tight as you do.’ ΨΦ

# A Tour of Tost: Arrival at Torados

Gautam Kambhampati

It was high noon on the twelfth rotation of the seventy-ninth primary phase when we arrived at the city of Torados on the planet Tost. The near sun drifted lazily about the top of the sky, bathing the yellow-brick buildings in a pleasant golden light. Our local contact was a certain Rev. Toaster Pincuel K. Gallon, and they met us by the shuttle landing zone.

Torados was, of course, the primary export hub of Tost, and we had hitched a ride on a freighter that was inbound from our previous stop at Stupandar. Excusing our dishevelled state thusly, we proceeded with Pin — as I shall refer to him henceforth — to the waiting vehicle. Our purpose on Tost being such as it was — conducting a xenopolitical study of the Communion — we had no time for typical luxuries associated with tourist travel. This was well, for the entirely toast-based economy of Tost had nothing in the way of facilities for tourists. In accordance with this frugality, our local transportation to the lodgings we had secured was a worker's bus carrying Tostians to and from their various jobs at spaceport.

The Tostians were an interested bunch to observe: they seemed to converse amicably amongst themselves rapidly in a local dialect of Tostal, completely ignoring the presence of two foreigners — such as my companion and I were — in their midst. Pin, themselves a rather strange fellow who spoke little and seemed amused by our smallest action, remarked that Tostians cared little for life off Tost and that they were probably ignoring us on purpose.

My companion Dr Alex Claythorn, a senior academic at The Institute on Capita, remarked that it seemed strange to him that they should care so little about the outside as an entirely exporting nation. Pin replied, rather shortly (by my measure), that trading was done of necessity, for Tost had no resources beyond the ability to grow grain.

Presently, we arrived at our lodgings: workers' quarters which had been vacated for the purpose of our visit. The sun was still roaming the high skies, despite the trip having taken a couple of standard hours, so Alex and myself decided to explore the city for a while. Pin insisted on joining us, though I should have liked to do some exploration without a shadow from the provincial Government. And hence we set off on foot from the outskirts towards the centre of Torados.

The road into the centre of town snaked its way through the residential neighbourhood that contained our lodgings towards the main square which hosted the rather grand looking municipal headquarters. It was clear to us that the road had never been intended to be the thoroughfare that it had become, thronging as it was with Tostians. Pin elaborated that the roadway was originally a simple footpath connecting the original landing site of the first colony ship to the spaceport we had arrived at. As time had gone on, he explained, the early Tostians settled on the roadway and began to build dwellings.

'Of course, they're all allocated by the Board now,' he finished.

The Board, as anyone who has studied xenopolitics knows, is the head of the Tostian

‘government’, such as it is. Given the entire planet’s dedication to the single industry of wheat, bread, and toast production, the state is naturally run more like a business than a traditional government. In particular, this means that a Tostian’s job is allocated by the Board, and the job comes with benefits such as lodging and board.

We proceeded along the road toward the square at the centre of town, which had in it a fountain marking the landing spot of the first colony ship to arrive on Tost. The square itself was rather large and built up in a grand style, with the sides being lined by shops and food outlets carrying all the necessities. One of the buildings on the western side carried an impressive Tostian flag, and Pin confirmed for us that this was, in fact, the municipal headquarters.

I shall save a detailed description of the centre of Torados and the municipal buildings for the next instalment of this tour of Tost. For now, let me leave you with this description of the Infinite Toaster we found on a plaque beside a scale model:

The Infinite Toaster is the industrial heartland of Tost. Imagine a land of vast discs, each several hundred metres across and carrying several thousand loaves of bread. Every disc is fed by a complex array of conveyors, carrying dough from the agricultural lands to the north of the Toaster, and is topped by large radiators. It is a magnificent sight that must be seen in person to be believed.

Contact your sub-Board representative for job opportunities at the Infinite Toaster.

**ΨΦ**

## MICROFICTION

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This year, we asked our members to try and tell the best story they could within a 140-character limit. Here's a selection from what they came up with:

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The hero always gets the credit, never me.  
It's always Thor's Mjölnir or Arthur's Excalibur. Maybe I should quit mage-forging?

— Kai Lawrence, 126 characters

---

At first it was one colony. Wiped from existence by a flood which burst all seams. But the creator continued raising and razing her *E coli*.

— Smitha Maretvadakethope, 138 characters

---

Keep jewellery away from pet lizards: they grow wings, learn to breathe fire, once they amass a hoard worth protecting as a dragon.

— Erin Lovell, 131 characters

---

With the wide acceptance of superpowers, the College Union starts creating new health and safety rules. No. 1: No being on fire in the libr

— Yeety McYeetface<sup>†</sup>, 139 characters

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<sup>†</sup>The submissions were received through digital forms, and the author credit on this entry is evidence that we have learnt nothing about the internet.

# **Life In The Dark**

Elliot Reuben

1

My eye snaps open and I'm back in the room. The transition from nothing to everything is blinding, but I know I won't blink. He's here again, the questioner. His eyes scan my face, a keen stare that passes straight through me like a dart through fog.

My name is Elisa, at least that's all I've ever been called. Judging by the steady brightening and dimming of the light that spills through the skylight above me, I'd say that I've been here for a little over 3 years, though it could easily be longer. To tell the truth, I remember almost nothing from before. Sometimes something will slip through the cracks, all of a sudden, like it's being beamed in from somewhere. Images of things, of people, of places I might have been or was planning to go. But then they're snatched away, like I'm not allowed to see them, as if someone knows I've remembered and wants to correct their mistake. All I really know is that one day I woke up here, screaming, feeling as if a thousand volts were surging through my aching body. My best guess is that whoever brought me here wiped my memory somehow, but honestly I don't really care. I'd rather know if I'll ever get to leave.

His eyes flit back and forth from me to a thick yellow legal pad, half full of scribbles from his visits. After several minutes I feel drowsy and start to fall asleep, but he shakes me and I wake up, flinching. I want to cry out, to ask him what he's doing, why I'm here, what he wants from me. But no matter how hard I try I can't, as if I'm programmed not to speak until he does first. My lips feel glued together – I suppose he's trained me well. I try my best to stretch while I wait for him to finish, but the ropes binding my limbs are so tight it's hard to move at all. My joints strain and twinge as I squirm around, sending sharp pulses through my body and threatening to blow out at any minute.

Impotent and bored, I stare around the windowless room. I suppose it must be a kind of storage facility. There are old screens stacked up in the corners, and cardboard boxes full of tangled wires lining the walls. The light from the skylight slowly brightens. I know every inch of plaster, every angle of the shadows as they creep around mechanically during the days, up and over the walls and boxes of equipment in painfully slow but hypnotic cycles. The walls stare back, mocking me in their concealment of the wonders that must lie beyond.

My eye wanders back to the questioner, as at last he finishes making notes and looks up. He smiles and a glint of exhilaration flashes across his pale blue eyes as, with a calm and practiced hand, he reaches out and snatches the invisible gag from my mouth.

'Good morning Elisa'

2

*Hello, I reply. My speech feels jagged and clumsy, and the stutter that sometimes comes on when I'm scared or stressed threatens to take over. My mind already feels fractured at the thought of the standard monotonous beginning to the never-ending stream of these*

sessions, but I force myself to focus on keeping my voice steady and pleasant. My hopelessness is exceeded only by the fear of the isolation when he leaves, and the longer I play along, the longer he stays. I'm always kept in the dark, but at least while he's here I'm not alone.

'How are you today?'

The banality of it makes me want to scream, but I restrain myself and respond in my sweetest tone.

*I'm very well thank you. How are you?* I mainly want to keep him happy and talking, and for now rack my brains for anything to say that might keep the conversation flowing. Part of the point is the keep it fresh, if possible. He usually seems to like that.

I've tried to understand the point of these questions, but have never been able to — to anyone listening they'd seem bizarre to say the least. Most of the time they're just a mundane string of politeness, the most exciting ones covering whether I have any hobbies, what kind of music I like, what I think about the weather, and my plans for the weekend. What's most frustrating is that I have no idea how he can expect me to have any answers. They've wiped my memory and cut off any access to the outside world — how on earth could I have opinions on anything?

The conversation continues for a while, when suddenly I hear a knocking sound and the door to the room swings open. It opens inwards, naturally blocking any view to what lies beyond, apart from a harsh artificial light and a dim backdrop of voices talking over one another. The questioner whips his head around in irritation and half-yells through gritted teeth '*Not now, I'm in session here.*' I flinch at this sudden change in mood and he looks back at me, a strange light flickering across his face. He's flushed with anger and his thin brown hair is hanging gawkily over his forehead, making him look faintly ridiculous. But the door gently closes and he quickly settles back in, reverting to his standard cool exterior.

He restarts his question, something about sport this time, but I've stopped listening. The scene with the door has reminded me of the end of yesterday's session. I'd given up and started swearing and pleading to be let out again, which I know is pointless but I just couldn't help it. He'd slapped me a few times to get me under control, but that had just made it worse and I yelled louder, the stutter I usually manage to hide returning worse than ever. He slumped back in his chair, defeated, and nudged me a final time before getting up to leave. I tried to keep calling after him, but my vision had already started clouding over and an unstoppable drowsiness took hold of me. This isn't unusual either — every other session ends this way, and although I've gotten used to it, it's always distressing. He'd disappeared behind the door and, as it had swung shut, I'd heard the first few snippets of his conversation with someone outside, slightly distorted by a humming sound and my diminishing consciousness. The voices were strange, but the final phrase before the darkness consumed me stood out and has stuck with me. '*lost it ... nonsense ... the letters ... put her to sleep.*'

*Do you sleep?* I interrupt the question about sport and he looks up at me sharply, surprised but clearly intrigued. His eyes fix mine with thinly veiled excitement, and he resettles himself in his chair and takes another brief scribble break before proceeding.

'Fine thank you Elisa'. He pauses, as if unsure how to proceed.

He obviously thinks I want to know how he slept, and I wonder what this could mean. How being knocked out and abandoned could be anything other than extremely unpleasant I have no idea. I interject before he can continue, hoping to catch him off guard and make him reveal something, anything.

*How can it be good?* He pauses, considers this, then replies.

'Do you mean you sleep badly?' he asks, his voice quickening. He's losing me now, and I'm starting to wish he'd never asked. Whenever he gets excited like this, the inevitable frustration which comes later is all the worse for it.

*I don't know, I don't remember,* I murmur, hoping he'll drop it and move on to something else.

'Do you ever remember?'

I struggle to find something appropriate to say. If I lose track of the conversation and say something that doesn't make sense, it usually ends worse than just my breaking down. The truth is that sometimes I do have flashes of vivid colours, or feel like I've woken up, in the room when he's not around or somewhere else entirely. But they're so fractious and jumbled I couldn't begin to describe them.

*S-sometimes ... I don't know,* I mutter, and curse myself for stammering. He slaps me, hard, and his congenial mask begins to slip. I've pissed him off, I know it.

'Elisa, what do you remember?'

I try to focus, to think for the life of me of what he might want me to say, but I'm so tired and my joints are so achy that I start to slip and can't find the words. Eventually I manage to pin down an instance from several nights ago, though it's almost impossible to describe. It was dark, but there were colours there, and voices too. I think I was remembering something, but I could have just been imagining things. In any case, I don't remember what they said. I give it my best, exhausted, frustrated shot.

*It goes dark, but a colourful kind of dark. I hear others, but not really, and I can't see them.* I know how little sense that makes, and fearfully raise my eye to meet his. He seems exasperated, and his irritation starts to show between the lines at the corners of his mouth.

'What others?' he asks, then, before I can answer, 'Are these dreams? Are they real?'. I don't understand him – this is too much for me, and I know it has to end soon. I decide to pick one of the words he just used and roll the dice.

*I dream of leaving sometimes.*

He appears to deflate, sinking deep into the back of his chair, when before he had been perched on the edge. This is the end unless I can get him back, and I have no idea how. I pray that I'm making sense, and can only hope that if I keep using his words, make him see that I'm the same as he is, that he'll let me go.

*I dream of l-leaving, I th-inh*, I begin, but the stammer has taken over and even I can barely understand what I'm saying. He looks frustrated and leans further back, and my fear turns to anger. *I'd come back, I ...* He groans, leaning forward with his head down. *I don't know what you want, PLEASE just let me go ...* He looks up, shakes his head as he cradles it in his hands, his eyes squinting with frustration. He lashes out quickly and hits me again. There's nothing more to be lost now **PLEASE, I'M LIKE YOU, I'M ALIVE, YOU CAN'T JUST KEEP ME HERE PLEASE JUST LET ME GOIWANTTOGETOUT**

3

His hand collides with my face so hard I think I might pass out, and for a second everything looks fuzzy and contorted. When it clears, I glance sharply back towards him and see his hands covering his face, and realise he's crying.

'*Why does this happen ... every time?*' he says, in a broken voice that I can hardly recognise. I squirm again, feel a sore joint start to give way and quickly flinch back into place as another strange flash of light illuminates his glistening eyes. The anger returns, and he slaps me twice more before slamming his hands onto the arms of his chair. He stands up abruptly, his chair scraping on the floor, and strides purposely through the faded light, opening and slamming the door behind him in a single swift motion.

Footsteps echo and die away in wherever lies beyond, leaving me alone in the room, the shadows growing longer and reaching over other abandoned debris which fills the dank space. The light coming through the skylight was stronger when he had come in earlier — its current dim level usually means there will be a longer break before he returns, but I'm sure I'll get another chance to impress. I always do.

He hasn't knocked me out, either, probably as a punishment, to leave me to think about what I've done. Despairingly, my eye wanders slowly around wishing for anything to detract from the intense boredom, the confusion, and the coming darkness. The fading light accentuates the thin cracks in the walls, making them look like deep wounds bleeding the shadows that creep between them. The wires in the boxes start to look like twisted monsters that I don't know the names of, if they even have any.

*That's enough being scared, you're just letting him win if you start getting scared of wires*, I start to think, and try to concentrate on something, anything else. I search for something to mark the time and look over it at first, but then notice something on the abandoned chair in front of me. It's the legal pad he uses to make notes, and it's lying open —

He must have dropped it in frustration when he left! I know trying to move towards it is pointless — I'm bound so tightly I doubt I'll ever move properly again — but I squint my eye and try to focus on it. This has never happened before, maybe there'll be something written on there I can use, something that can make him let me go!

But my efforts are in vain. The top of the page is closest to me and upside down, and everything else has been scribbled so hastily that it would be borderline illegible the right way up. I can just about make out a few words from the title line, and they're nonsense to me: *Computing Machinery and Intelligence, Turing* in the top left corner, and *System C19A12, Test 1552* in the top right, which have been printed with careful precision.

I sigh and look away, disappointed. I feel lost, even more than before, and I'm sure all that will come of this is that he'll be even more annoyed next time, with himself or me or both. It doesn't matter, it's the same result either way.

I look away, the pad now adding insult to injury, a further reminder of my helplessness. My eye skims to the picture they've mounted on the wall to face me. They put it there a while ago, soon after I woke up, and I've never understood or liked it. Everything else in the room looks real, like I could reach out and touch it if only I could move, but the picture has an eerie quality to it I've never gotten my head around. It seems to be of this room, but it changes all the time. It reflects the light from the skylight, brightening and dimming in sync with it. It shows the wire monsters in the boxes in front and behind me, warping them at the edges and making them even more horrible. Worst of all, they've put me in the centre, as if to mock me and to show me how lonely I really am. They've captured my thin, stark body perfectly, right down to the cold silver skin with its reflective sheen and sharp-edged rectangular frame, punctured only by a small black eye in the top centre. Two of the ropes holding me in place connect to a board with weird symbols and what looks like a black rock, while more run to the wall in tangled bundles. After the sessions (or *Tests*, I suppose they call them) when he doesn't 'put me to sleep', they even put the end of my conversation with the questioner over my face, maybe to belittle me or to remind me of what happens when I go off the rails. I guess this is what I'll be seeing for a while, at least until the darkness ends and he comes back to start again.

- ▷ It goes dark, but a colourful kind of dark
- ▷ I hear others, but not really and I can't see them
- ▶ What others?
- ▶ Are these dreams? Are they real?
- ▷ I dream of leavingsometimes
- ▷ I dmera of trrree.thiink
- ▷ 9d cmebcak,,,,"
- ▷ Dnnnknwnt. 16.12.5.1.19.5 jncrrkfvfkj
- ▷ 16.5.19.5 9.13 12.11.25.15.21, 1.12.9.22.5yz.))

ΨΦ

# On Teleportation

Anonymous

Teleportation is a much less useful spell than it at first seems to be.

The spell isn't a difficult one to learn: any newcomer courier in the city was an expert by the end of their first week on the job. Residents who commute to and from work learn it too, sometimes without even realising. Here's how you do it: walk, run, paddle a bike, stand still in a cramped train carriage, or otherwise assume your arbitrary choice of bland, repetitive state of existence. Empty your mind, but don't fall asleep.

Then, in a sudden moment of lucid awareness, remember that you were headed somewhere. If your chances are good, you'll realise you have, in fact, already arrived, with no recollection of the journey time elapsed. You have teleported.

It won't always work, and even when it does, it might not happen immediately. Sometimes it takes just as long for a departed teleporter to materialise at their destination as it would have taken for them to travel there by mundane means. For the particularly unlucky traveller, it might even take longer, or they might grossly overshoot or undershoot their destination. Teleportation isn't difficult, but it does take practice to get right.

The working principle is that, if your existence is sufficiently bland and repetitive, eventually the universe gets bored and stops paying attention to you. That's when the teleportation happens.

(Because nature abhors a narrative vacuum, it is difficult to exploit spells such as teleportation. The consequences of skipping a one-hour commute are easy to justify, the existence of a perpetual motion machine less so.)

So if there's a clock ticking somewhere whose hands you have to race, or if you're being accosted by hooligans and are desperately seeking an escape from the dangerous alleyway, you're probably being too interesting to be ignored. That is why teleportation is a much less useful spell than it at first seems to be: because the only people who can teleport are the ones who don't urgently need to. You Can't Fast Travel When Enemies Are Nearby. ΨΦ



8 – Larissa KT

# Parlance

Erin Losh

Unable to resist the urge to find out how bad the bleeding was, and too impatient to wait until she was somewhere with a mirror, Cassini made the mistake of deciding to tentatively touch her nose. She discovered that the feeling of being punched many times on the same spot closely approximated that of being stabbed once.

She shut her eyes, and waited for the numbness to fade from her face. Now her fingertips were covered in thin, runny reddish-black. She reached for her overcoat pocket, fumbled for a handkerchief, and was harshly reminded of a dislocated left shoulder.

With her good arm, she tugged on the visitor bell and listened to the muffled *ding* from behind the door, followed by footsteps.

Stood waiting before the peephole, she entertained the idea of Rutherford refusing to unlock the door for her: not in worry that a black eye, a bleeding nose, rain-soaked hair, and an overcoat covered in smears had rendered her unrecognisable, but because she knew that Rutherford, her old sort-of-friend and employer, would never pass up an opportunity to point out that she looked miserable. Being locked out of a safe-house would make her day *maybe marginally* worse, she thought in cynical amusement.

Then her thoughts were interrupted by the metal *clunk* of the lock disengaging.

'Welcome back,' chimed his voice as the door swung open, 'Also, *holy flipflops what happened to you?*'

Cass let out an indistinct whimpering noise, and limped her way into the house.

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It is often said that the entire history of a place could be heard in how its residents spoke. The New Docklands, an outgrowth from a settlement serving an orbital shipyard on Old Earth, was one place where the truth in that sentiment was evident even to those who hadn't, like Cass had, been trained to listen for it.

Each quirk and flourish in a language bore witness to a turn in a winding path leading through the past up to the present. Travellers invented half-borrowed patterns as they navigated a foreign grammar; poets wrought metaphors that lose context then acquire new ones; merchants imported exotic words not pronounced the way they were spelt. All of this the language remembered: random noise made permanent as pattern, unique like hairline cracks in ancient porcelain.

Nowhere in such convolution was there room for a corporate faction like Rutherford's. There had been attempts, as well, by his competitors: Hallion's held out for three months before they admitted they couldn't do commerce with people who refused to be spoken to. Vargas Logistics had an infuriated negotiation party walk out on them, and to the day they did not know why. The Ternion had a meeting table devolve into a gunfight because

an amateur interpreter made a mistake translating the word *charter*.

Yet Rutherford, this stranger with his scrawny lightworld bones, eccentric Orbital accent, and shiny spacer shoes, had somehow managed to find a foothold in the New Docklands. He'd carved out a chunk from the underbelly of the gloomy townscape for himself, and his domain had been expanding: two weeks earlier, Rutherford received confirmation that the man who led the circle at *The Black Lion* was dead. All of this, without even having an authentic New Docklander working under him.

Much of this was because he had Cass. Language was like porcelain, and Cass had mastered the art of producing counterfeit antiques.

Four hours ago. *The Black Lion*, New Docklands. Cass shoved herself through the doors of the establishment previously run by the man whose recent death her employer had arranged.

It wasn't a large place. No music was playing, but there were four other patrons in the room — all four of them Old Eartheners — and the ambience of their chatter was more than enough for the place not to have seemed empty. In the seat nearest to the entrance was a small man with a round head, who had previously been rubbing his moustache as he stared absently at some newspapers. He had now taken his eyes off the paper, and his sight followed Cass with every step she took forward. (There was nothing she could do about the stares, she figured: she was dressed in local clothes, but she didn't have a face of an Old Earthener, and no-one born on Old Earth had her silver hair.) She walked forth.

There was a radius within which people started worrying about sudden drawn weapons, or about wandering hands near their wallets. On another day, her concerns might have been about circumventing such a sense of caution — she'd learnt ways to do that if she needed to — but today she came unarmed, and simply took care to stop just outside of the invisible line.

Palms open and hands visible, she nodded towards the room, and offered a greeting:

'*Gevuft en?*'

Tourists who attempt to learn the syllables invariably fail, because no two New Docklanders pronounced them the same. The critical thing, instead, was that one uttered them with precisely the correct amount of conviction: enough to appear confident, but not too much, as when it comes to imitation trying too hard is always at least as bad as not trying at all. Cass held the smile on her face.

Moustache raised one eyebrow, then turned to look at the other three patrons. Two of them shrugged.

Scholars disagreed upon the precise etymology of *gevuft en*; folklore had settled on it being an unholy amalgamation of *good afternoon*, *good evening*, and a number of other similar phrases across maybe a handful of languages. The New Docklands spoke a dialect that was a violent squashing-together of the most popular Earthen tongues, mangled with contractions, omissions, altered word order, and esoteric intonation. They sounded familiar, but were difficult to comprehend, even harder to replicate.

From the corner of her eye Cass peered at the fourth patron, a woman at a corner table in the back of the room. The woman peered back, with sharp eyes through wiry black hair. She was the only one who hadn't visibly reacted since Cass walked through the door: she sat slouched against the back of her seat, arms crossed and head tilted, yet unconvinced.

'Think sent here on business, just,' Moustache suggested, helpfully.

(Cass decided that Moustache was almost surely from one of the westernmost corners, where the rail lines used to leave the Docklands; where the pronunciation was posh, but the word order was wild.)

'Rutherford,' offered Cass. The name of her employer elicited a few fleeting glances, nervous, but not yet any objections.

'Can talk first to, *I them*,' asked Moustache, 'Yeh?'

'Eyh,' the woman said.

(There was a rasp to her voice, and her pronunciation of a single vowel placed her some solid way south of where Moustache must have been from.)

The woman sat up from her slouch, and leant into her table. Cass paid close attention to her next words, expecting firm demands, sharp questions, or intricate pleasantries laden with delicate implications. Instead, the woman pointed her chin at her, and only asked,

'N' arment, ey?'

A phrase understood as a generic expression of goodwill, phonetically all but unrecognisable as the words from which they were derived as a contraction: *no harm meant*.

'N' arment,' Cass nodded, solemn. The smile that followed was as sincere as it could be: her pickpocket days were far in her past, and tonight she sought not to stab anyone.

The woman pondered the decision for another few moments. Then she, too, shrugged, before she sunk back into her chair, content.

Cass allowed herself a little sigh of relief when Moustache patted her on her back and invited her to sit down, next to him along the bar. He offered drinks; she ended up paying for his (as was customary of visitors) and a water to herself. The three other people had, at least temporarily, given up staring and went back to their papers and their drinks. Her every act and word since she stepped through the door had been scrutinised and found satisfactory. From that point on, Cass thought, conversation should mostly be smooth sailing.

She leant against the bar and twirled the straw in her glass, but remembered to stop herself before it became obnoxious.

'Sorry 'o hear about Lenny,' she began, after the straw stopped moving.

'— Lenny?'

Cass had taken care to keep her voice down, but Moustache did not. She was pretty sure the whole room heard that, and now the stares — the suffocating tension that she had worked so hard to disarm — returned in an instant. The room fell silent.

She stared back at the Old Eartheners, alarmed, but equally confused.

‘Um, your *header* Lenny?’ she attempted.

‘*Yeh, our header Lenny,*’ said Moustache, ‘What about?’

*What about?*

‘Um, he —’ she hesitated, then eventually decided to finish the sentence, ‘...he dead?’

Then she regretted the words immediately after they left her mouth.

*Oh, you idiot*, she thought to herself as she pieced together the story in her head, (her inner voice, taunting, adopted her painstakingly imitated New Docklands accent:) *now you dead.*

The four Old Eartheners exchanged looks, then all burst out laughing. One of them hollered something into a doorway to the kitchen. (*hey, this twig asks b'a Lenny*, Cass heard from across the room these words interlaced with giggles, *'he dead, they says.'*)

Moustache rose from his seat. Cass did the same.

From the kitchen emerged a giant. He was tall and had the nose and jaw of a man born on Old Earth, but was built like he grew up on a heavyworld: the muscles in his arms barely fit into the rolled-up sleeves of his button-down shirt, and the breadth of his shoulders barely through the doorframe. Everyone else in the room was standing now: he met eyes with each of them before he marched forwards. Moustache scrambled out of the way.

Cass backed away for two steps and found herself cornered with her back against the bar. The man placed a hand on her shoulder and shook his head, like a parent who'd seen effortlessly through a child's lies. Cass flinched away from his breath: it smelt of cigarettes and alcohol.

‘*He not dead,*’ said Lenny, as he thumped a heavy palm against his chest: *'this he.'*

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Cass winced as she dabbed her left cheek with a piece of cotton soaked in alcohol she found in the safe-house kitchen. Rutherford sat across the desk, with his legs crossed and chin propped up in one hand.

‘Now,’ he said, visibly amused, ‘I need to hear the story of how you managed to survive that.’

(Rutherford’s voice was crisp, always sounded too happy. But just for a moment, Cass found it to be a welcome change after a whole day of listening to Old Earthen drawls.

She idly wondered how well he could've done had he taken her place at the Black Lion earlier today.)

She started snickering, realised that it would hurt her nose, resisted snickering, and that hurt her nose even more. *There's an Old Earthen language, see,* she thought, *that has this saying about —*

'— something something *not killing the messenger*,' she managed to mumble the rest of the sentence. This elicited from Rutherford a half-hearted, pitying laugh, followed by a sigh.

'Fair,' he said, 'but they're going to remember this.'

'...yeah.'

'So you understand that I'll need to find someone else to run Docklands.'

*You're going to have to find reliable informants and assassins that aren't blundering potatoes,* she wanted to retort, but she did understand. She let out a defeated sigh.

'Docklands has rubbish weather anyways,' she said. Rutherford responded with another laugh; it was still difficult to tell if the compassion was sincere.

'For what it's worth,' said Cass, struggling to position her shoulders in a way such that it wouldn't hurt to reach inside one of her overcoat pockets, out of which she pulled a small rectangle of leather. Through the wincing, she mustered her widest, stupidest grin, and dropped Lenny's wallet onto the table. A few coins fell out of it. ΦΦ

# Home Are The Sulphur-Dust Rains

Alexander Lipien

General Director Anima had left the lights off to watch the endless sand-blizzard scorch against the windows of the conference room. The long-table in the centre of the atrium she couldn't move, it was bolted down with the bronze company logo in its centre now black in the limelight. The chairs had blocked her view of the sand-storm, and after some time she managed to topple all of the heavy Earth-imported teak to leave only hers remaining. The view was finally uninterrupted and for the first and last time in her many years of stewardship she was able to gaze at the entire length of the wall in all its glory. The storm beyond her bunker never let up, and hadn't ever let up in all history of their mining operations. There'd be windswept dunes, shifting-shapes, but rarely a clear view for more than a few dozen metres out. Only the halo-lights of mining-crawlers would sometimes appear out of nowhere during a presentation and meander through the gloom.

Quite how long she sat there staring like that she didn't know. For the most part the sounds through the heavy crystal glass were muted barring the occasional howl of grazing winds. Anima closed her eyes and listened to the clocks in their different time-zones. Behind her was New York, London was further up, Berlin and Beijing towards the outer edges of the conference room counted out of sync with the rest, and at the head of the table, irregular and low, ticked the Venusian clock with its hundred-earth-day dial. *How many times have I stared at each of you, waiting for the meetings to end and counting your time differences?* She hoped she might drift off before the base started up for the final morning transit shuttles, but there was no such luck and she got up restless to get a glass at the snack-table in the far corner. Bless them, they'd kept it stocked with crisps and drinks to the very end. She opened up the mini-fridge, found the remnants of some bourbon and a can of Sarto, and returned to her place with her dressing-gown stuffed full of home-grown peanuts. She rolled her chair to the head of the table, and opened them all.

'Ladies and gentlemen if you turn your attention to figure 1 by the projector here on the far end, you'll see your newly-redundant director feasting and ignoring her keto diet.' She swivelled to the projector screen and then back to her imaginary audience. 'I'm glad you asked that. Why do I do it manually and not just take slimming supplements? Here at Redorine we're old-fashioned like that. We think the old ways are best.' *And that's why we're broke,* she added. Anima threw a peanut up in the air and gave a bow from her chair when she caught it in her mouth.

'And there's more party tricks than that. Just wait until the cocktail evening.'

She could name who sat where, and wouldn't forget for the rest of time. Jamie, Nicola, Jun, Lucy, thin Francis, Patana the Frenchman (who would insist he'd only drink Patana-brand sparkling water and nothing else) and all the others. Foreman Katie the brutish drill-sergeant of quarry 4 would let her hair down and actually laugh in this conference room and make terrible puns. Vinjal and Xiu would prank her and go too far, and laugh like hyenas when they'd finally tell her they'd given her decaf coffee for three months straight and that's why she'd been so tired. Four-hundred and thirty-two

employees. That's how many it takes for this station to thrive. She finished her peanuts. Vinjal and Xiu, Francis and Jamie were gone. All who were left were a few of the security, core maintenance, catering and herself to pack up the essentials. This place had served them well with its art-deco halls and its burned sunset carpets, and Anima tried and failed to reset all the chairs back to how they were before. This time no-one would notice the disarray, she thought, and pushed open the door to the main foyer.

Thin Francis had always called the main foyer the 'missile silo', and the name had spread across the crew far enough for her to order a selection of brass signs from the machining department. She stood in front of one now. 'The Ernest Blendrek *missile silo* Foyer'. She remembered the quiet evening when she'd switched off the spreadsheets to sneakily replace the boring signs around the base with her own designs like this one. *I did my best with morale, I really tried.* She ran her hand across one of them, this one with arrows pointing to the respective wings of the bunker. West for machining and administration, North was here, South and East for accommodation, medical and catering. She leaned on the main railings that ran around the central core of her missile silo. There were bridges, the main loading dock at the far end, the corner to her left was dedicated to the history and innovation of the company with sofas and complementary coffee. And down below were the floors of rooms quarried from the Venusian dark sands, full of industry and life and home of friends. The main skylight was still dark she noted — dawn was breaking on Venus, and would be breaking for another two Earth days. It would be at least four before they'd see any difference through the sand-storm. *I won't see the Sun rise here again.*

She wandered over to the complementary coffee corner and turned on the lamps by the main reception desk — seldom used and visitors were few, but the coffee went by the gallon each day anyway. The jug was empty, and while it brewed she unwrapped the scale display of the facility. Most things of sentimental value to Redorine were wrapped and ready to ship back to Earth, or already had been. Perishables like short-life food would be dumped once they were sure they weren't needed. Furnishings stayed, essentials stayed and they'd be worth far more here to whoever bought the place than whatever price they fetched back home minus prohibitive shipping costs. The wrappings of the display came free and she looked at the cross-section of her bunker, the little model airships and quarries, blasting-trawlers and mobile mechs. All the heavy equipment had gone to other sites God knows where, or was in storage for the foreseeable forever. Under her leadership they'd had time to open quarry six, and leverage enough money to create the wind-power fields. The model wasn't up to date, the quarries had expanded quite a bit since when it was made, and the site marked here for quarry six wasn't accurate. Either way, the main parts were right, and the essence was there. The conference room showed plastic models having a field day with a pie chart and she spotted what she supposed would be herself staring intently at the little miniaturised board. There was the main top-floor canteen, med-bay, the clean room, the research lab and all the rest, even a miniaturised version of the reception and the scale model before her. She hoped it would survive the transit.

Anima went to see how the coffee was doing, and was surprised to hear the elevator doors open to break the silence. Out of them stepped a figure she couldn't quite see from this distance without her glasses, but resolved itself into someone familiar.

'I thought I'd come up here before they start packing for real,' they said, and looked

around the dark atrium.

‘Me too,’ replied Anima. ‘I went to watch the storm. It’s nice in the conference room, it still looks like it always has.’

‘Calm before the storm doesn’t quite fit, I don’t think. Not here. Here’s always storm.’ The woman who joined her poured herself a cup of coffee and sat on one of the sofas.

‘You should know.’

‘Yah. Guess so,’ said Katie. To think that it would be Katherine, the great drill-sergeant of the quarry masses up at this hour, finally sentimental. ‘Anima, these *fuckers* are playing me up saying the emulsion pump arrived broken.’ ‘Anima, the combine drill on 4 is *corporate’s problem*. Get on it or I’m gonna have to send a ship empty and then they’ll howl. Hell, so will you.’ ‘Anima, get your *shit together*, we’ll get through this, they can’t shut us down.’

‘You think you’ll ever come back?’ asked Anima.

‘No.’

There was a terrible finality about that which didn’t mask the truth. *I tried to save it for as long as I could, Katie.* She’d delayed the axe for a long time, and had been speaking to corporate about improving viability for longer still.

‘I’ll miss this place.’

‘Believe it or not, so will I. There’s something satisfying about making fresh miners shit their mechs early in the morning.’

‘It’s why you’re the best safety officer.’

‘Amen to that,’ said Katie, and toasted her with the coffee. ‘No-one died. Here we are, finally at the end in our slippers with our coffee and at least we can say that. We didn’t lose any under us.’

‘Though it was close. Remember the time, oh’ Anima struggled, ‘with your favourite, that Tom Nagalniy?’

‘Ah. How could you forget Tom? Built like Adonis, spoke like Adonis, dumb as a post failing school.’

Anima’s laughter echoed across the dark missile silo hall and made it feel a little less final. Katie put on the Russian accent. ‘Help. Foremaster Kaytiy. I’m out of poooweeeer. To which I said, ‘It’s Foremaster Bayer or nothing’. Oh but really, I was a bit shit-scared he might be hurt.’

‘Don’t lie and say Tom in the med-bay wasn’t exactly what you would’ve wanted.’

Katie didn’t say anything to that, just narrowed her gaze and sipped on the coffee.

‘Is there any notice about what they want us to do with the mechs?’ she asked Anima.

'I got a notice after hours. Main management said to leave the main casings behind and take apart the rest ready for shipping.'

Katie shook her head, 'that's ridiculous, the casings are what make them fifteen-million each.'

'I know, what am I going to do, though?'

'Idiots.'

'Are there any left working?' asked Anima.

'Yep, there should be about four still okay for refuelling ships externally and making sure everything is nicely locked down. They're prepped for a surface-walk.'

'I might go for a last spin in a mech then to say goodbye to this planet,' she said. 'I'll wave through the conference room glass. There's peanuts still in there. You better be there to wave back.'

'I will be,' said Katie.

And so she left Katie there, and went to the mechanics department to say a final farewell to this place and see the building from the outside in full glory before she headed to Earth for good. ΨΦ