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Hindsight 2050

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Abstract

Hindsight 2050

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Hindsight 2050 is an anthology of science fiction stories taking place in a plausible, potentially near future. Misogyny, technological revolution, and an increasingly unstable capitalist world inform the future the book renders in fiction. The first story, "Grieving in the Year 2195", instantly sets the timeline of the body of the text 145 years after the date in the title. In this way, the title itself can be thought of as an implied and very short prologue that humanity, in the real world, is participating in right now. Embracing the traditions of both utopia and dystopia.

Hindsight 2050 focuses on character driven narratives as a lens for examining the concerns of 2017. While never relinquishing hope in its poetics by portraying a society that is actively reaching for the stars, the book also uses fiction to address techno-ethic concerns such as: nuclear

war, artificial intelligence, violence in virtual reality, and the way women's survival (or lack thereof) is shaped by technology in worlds that are still often hostile to them. The author shares *Hindsight 2050* in the hope that the future portrayed in it remains fiction. *Hindsight 2050* was written as part of the requirement for completion of an MFA in Creative Writing & Poetics, via the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences program at the University of Washington Bothell.

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Grieving in the Year 2195

In the year 2189, Natasha got married. She was 21. She was widowed at 27.

One morning she woke up with her face pressed into a couch cushion and a little stream of drool crusted at her mouth. That was the day the crunch came.

Xerxes, her dog, barked for breakfast. The endless little yips reminded Natasha that she'd had a little too much to drink the night before. Her boss was trying to seal a deal with the businessmen from Korea; Bradshaw had somehow managed to get himself invited to dinner, and Natasha wasn't about to let him get a promotion before her, so she'd gone out with them and matched drink for drink. She'd apparently gone home before the last drink settled and could barely remember the movie she'd fallen asleep to.

Natasha dragged herself to a sitting position and let her bones pop back into place. Feeding the dog before taking her hangover tablet seemed like the most Herculean feat she would have to accomplish that day. She'd been thinking about something completely unrelated—about calling her mother or going to the bank or the trip she was taking to the Titan station in a week when she heard a knock. The security cameras showed a man in a suit outside her door. When she opened it, he handed her a letter that was heavier than her smart screen.

Letters seemed so out of fashion, so pre-Dissolution, so resource-intensive, that they always meant something bad. He was speaking. "We regret to inform you that your husband, Cole Trainor, died suddenly about three solar weeks ago..." Then a part of her brain put the stranger on mute. His lips kept moving, but all she could hear was a sound like the ocean in her ears. Someone was wailing, and tasted salt on her lips. They were suddenly red and wet.

No. No, it's a mistake.

I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am. There was an accident.

What kind of accident?

It's all in the letter.

Telling his family had been as terrible as she thought it was going to be. Natasha didn't want to grieve with others, but that was the contract she made when she called Cole's father and told him what happened.

She spent that week in a fog. Messages came in from her family, from Cole's. She shut down her smart screen. She said she had the flu and didn't go to work. Natasha didn't pray, but she spent a week trying to envision the little man in the suit coming back and telling her it was all a mistake, that Cole would be happy to see her in a year-and-a-half when he came back.

She forgot he was dead again the day a new batch of holo messages came in from the communication relay, and her inbox stayed empty. She waited for that little (1) to pop up next to 'INBOX' on her smart screen app.

No one around her seemed to have their volumes turned down. She heard the little ding wherever she went, checked her own devices and saw nothing, followed by smiling faces around her, blown kisses at little blue renderings of loved ones. A man sat hunched over in the corner of the gym as he watched a digitally rendered bust of a female relative wave at him, smiling. When Natasha was at the café downing a protein drink, two brown-skinned girls in headscarves got a message from a friend who had the Pluto Observation Deck behind her.

Natasha went running at night in the freezing air. The tears came after midnight, when all the messages were in, and her throat closed up. If she curled into a ball she knew she'd never get up again, so she straightened her aching chest and forced herself to breathe with the world out from under her. The air bit—wanted to hurt her, but the chill was better than having her skin on fire. She fantasized about slipping on the ice and cracking her skull or zigging out at ninety degrees into an oncoming truck. But she kept running, kept moving, and kept crying.

Cole always kept pace with her even if she was technically the better endurance runner. He had long legs and had a killer sprint. They were only a couple years from getting matching jogging suits, probably, but they'd had matching uniforms during their mandatory service, so Natasha joked that she failed to see the difference. Almost everyone in both their families stopped the morning jogs after completing their rotation, but Cole and Natasha loved stretching their legs. Their bodies had grown accustomed to the movement every morning, and they shared the experience of not wanting to let that go.

Once, between a radiation tide, they went for a jog on the beach. He'd sprinted ahead of her while the waves lashed from the side, laughing and daring her to keep up. Natasha had shrieked, and when his sprint gave out, she wrapped her arms around him and laughed, dragging them both down into the sand. Her chest ached and she rubbed sand into his dark hair, which he shook out like a retriever.

They sat there for a while, and the laughter died naturally as they stared at the water.

“Hard to believe there's a giant blob of irradiated trash just floating around.” Natasha took a drink from their canteen and passed it to him.

“Only because we’re too young to remember how it happened.” He gestured to the setting sun, and Natasha watched the faint fiery glow on the angles of his face. “My grandmother says no one her age thought the world would heal.”

Natasha wanted to tell him that it still hadn’t, but she opted to watch him instead.

“Hey...” He took a deep breath, like he always did before he gave her bad news. She didn’t let it show on her face, but she felt a Pavlovian clenching of her jaw. “Exo-Security is offering me a job.”

“Is it the Pluto transfer you’ve been asking for?” she asked, hesitantly.

“No.”

“Is it the Martian excavation?”

He stared at the sand on his hands, rolled the grains between thumb and forefinger before dusting them off, fine flakes dropping onto his dark sweats. “It’s a contract with West Coast Alpha.”

Natasha stilled.

Cole waited.

“Those assholes?” She couldn’t keep the distain and disbelief out of her voice.

He nodded. “Those assholes.”

“That cult?”

“That’s harsh.”

“Their CEO is a hundred-and-fifty and thinks he’s the next Noah. Or Moses.”

“They pay more than I could make in ten years on the Pluto station.” He’d clenched his hands together and she met his eyes—sweet blues that had never lied to her before. “Please, Natasha. It won’t be forever.”

The support groups made her feel more alone than she'd felt before.

They were mostly other people who'd lost a spouse in space—and one girl whose father died at home while she was studying at the northern observatory.

“If you know how to handle a communication relay breaking down for a month,” the college girl had said, “then you know how to handle losing someone you're not nearby. Only it's not just that one month. Natasha, his trip just got a little longer, that's all.”

Some of the crowd awkwardly shifted away, stared at their drinks or plates. Sometimes someone's coping mechanism was absurd—sometimes they tried to foist that absurdity onto someone else. The way people healed wasn't always compatible, and if Natasha snapped, it wouldn't be the post-session fight to break out.

Natasha excused herself and turned her immediate, raw rage into a brisk trip to the restroom and a quick sob and tried not to think about how much the denial hurt when it let reality back in, a little at a time. She came from a family with short tempers and overall poor emotional health. She fought the urge to punch teeth out—especially Miss Study Abroad—and drank a lot that night.

Over the next three months, denial and depression worked hand in hand to replace her husband as her companion. They let in the pain a little bit at a time, would stitch the aching wound in her chest just to tear it open when the wind blew the wrong way or when she had a good sushi roll or someone laughed and it didn't feel right that Natasha laugh along too when Cole was being transported back as a box of ashes. Permanent anti-cryosleep.

Natasha spent months obsessed with burning.

She thought of the off-world crematorium (that's all they had off-world) that his body would have been taken to by the hands of strangers. She didn't know if he was in pieces when he was taken, or if maybe he'd suffocated in a vacuum and was as beautiful as he'd been, just blue and pale. She didn't know if anyone had prayed over him—since he was working for Alpha, it was likely.

Both she and Cole were atheists, but suddenly she caught herself liking the idea that someone had read from an old book while his body was still warm, had commended his soul to some higher power, returned his heat and energy to the universe in some coherent form. Natasha liked to think that someone, for some moment, had genuinely cared over the body of her husband before he was slid into the incinerator, because his wife couldn't be there to cry with a black veil and validate that he had lived and loved and been loved.

Sometimes when Natasha was half awake, she thought she saw him in the doorframe, staring at her, sometimes whispering in her ear.

Eight months later, Cole came home.

Granted, he came home in a box.

By the time his remains returned, Natasha was just beginning to feel bright again, like she could see the sun on clear days. She'd spent so long in a miasma of grief that a part of her hadn't been able to imagine letting go. When a man from Alpha—dressed in paramilitary regalia—handed her the box where Cole was kept, a part of Natasha felt distanced from the person that had once loved him so much, that had imagined spending her whole life with him. For eight months, she'd been living in a world where even saying goodbye was impossible.

She ran her hands over the bamboo grains of his box and was glad she at least had this.

Natasha and a small caravan of Cole's family drove up to a small hiking area in Maine. They took three cars and Natasha rode with Cole's father, step-mother, and sisters. They went up to the area where they'd scattered the ashes of his mother and grandmother, up near the end of the safe zone.

On the way, they passed a large military convoy.

They spent the night up there before the spreading of his ashes. Cole's sister Sarah—still a military woman through and through—kept a stern face for her father and her siblings. Natasha wondered what she really felt.

That night, Natasha wrapped herself in a blanket and shuffled over to the little moonlit space in her tent where his box rested. She couldn't help herself. Little fine grains of him flew up into the air when she opened him up.

The next morning, they scattered him among the fallen leaves. Natasha watched the gray puff of air go up. Most of him had been dispersed far away from Maine by combustion, he'd been disassembled away from Maine, from the O.S.N.A.

The last gulp of air he'd taken had not been Earth air, but his solid stuff was among the trees and the wind of the place he'd been born.

Pantheon Part I: The Military

Part of every burgeoning galactic empire. Someone needs to protect the explorers.

The Soldier

There's always the soldier. He's always there. He has buzzed, short hair and he's the vehicle carrying human justice to the cosmos. That's what he's told.

His name is John. There's a ship with a bridge built in front of a window with a view into the expanse, and he stands ready to serve the woman giving orders. He'll do whatever he can to carry the ideals of humanity to the galaxy via the space-warping, FTL drive.

He has a strong jaw. Hands folded behind his back when they're at rest. He was born humbly.

John notices the biceps on the mechanic who cares for the on-world vehicle. Ramirez, that's his name.

But they dock, and he sleeps with women—former mining stations carved into asteroids, planets with glistening, non-Euclidian golden towers, sometimes Earth-home. Lots of different women.

Space princesses, sometimes. Never his captain. Sometimes they're green or blue. That's normal.

Cock up. Piece of himself appropriately hidden from view. He doesn't want to hear the whispers from his small midland town again, because why wouldn't that be a problem in the future, too.

He wears blue. As it is, he could make any mistake and still be trusted, and he will make many.

The Doctor

Joan's always been a caretaker type.

The crew gets scraped up plenty—usually, it's bullet wounds, burns from plasma rifles. A nano-graft here, an antiviral there. Occasionally, someone goes mad from hearing a voice they can't comprehend, or someone becomes a host to a long and spiderlike organism. The prognosis is less promising, then.

Half the time her job is to be the team mom, the other half, it's to be a reaper's liaison—gently ushering those who need it when there's no other option. She's the last face a lot of her friends see.

She wears white. No one gets to see her tired—she's not a med student anymore. And in space, no one gets to see her look surprised.

She grew up in a city where skyscrapers were built on top of skyscrapers and interwoven with spiraling trees, vines, and animals. She was raised in the understory, not the forest floor, where most of the pollution went.

A bird had flown into her window and she ran out onto the patio to see if it was still alive, and it was—small enough to fit into the palm of her hand, shivering. Inside, at her desk, she'd held it under her lamp, and saw that the wing would have to go.

She sawed it off, and replaced it with a metal prosthetic. For three days, the bird flittered around her room, singing, organic feathers beating in time to the metallic chime of the metal stabilizers. And then—

She did what she was taught to do with things she loved.

The Woman Captain

Captain Leve has no heart.

That's what the inhabitants of the outposts she guards, the merchants she escorts, and even her own crew says about her.

She's an impeccable, ruthless strategist. She wears a streamlined, tailored uniform on the ship, or—in combat—body armor. Her hair is clipped, cut short and gelled to keep it in place. Notice her curls after a long shift, comment on them, and she'll put you on the worst rotation on the ship, the crew all whisper in the mess hall.

They fear her, they admire her.

They pull the trigger or fire the laser or drop the shields when she gives the order, and will happily scour the gutted remains of enemy warships and pirate cruisers to find salvage.

Everyone wants to be the captain. No one wants to be the body that gets looted.

Anyone looking for even the slightest feminine touch, motherhood, or regret will be disappointed—

Captain Leve plays the cello.

Her walls are soundproofed. The only reason anyone knows is because, occasionally, someone will bring a document to the captain's quarters or alert her to a ship on the radar, and her door will slide open to welcome the messenger.

In that brief moment, while they talk, the music floats through the hallways like a ghost. Rich, deep purrs from an instrument that never quite sounds right in space.

The door offers a beep as someone requests access.

"Captain?" Doctor Joan says, disrupting the ritual. Her voice is tentative.

Leve waits to respond, drawing out the very last note on the song, letting the instrument thrum for a moment before setting down her bow.

"Joan?"

"Letters for the families of the deceased. Your signature is required."

Joan leaves them on the desk, and Captain Leve begins playing one more song as the door slides shut again.

DEATH GAUNTLET™

Jackson rolled down the long hallway of the sterile, out-patient VR facility. The building was perfectly new, but between the florescent lights and the tile floors, it had the feeling of a building that would have been built a century ago. It reminded him of the hospitals he'd been in as a kid. The lobby was nice enough—an aquarium, warm lighting, and wood-paneled walls.

Now, though, the nurse taking them to their immersion room was leading them down a hallway wide enough for a gurney.

Mark was moving faster than either Jackson or Calvin. They'd arrived slightly late, and Jackson had to flick his arms extra hard to keep up in his wheelchair. He was trying not to get annoyed, except they wouldn't have been late if Calvin hadn't been making some last minute *DEATH GAUNTLET™* cosmetic purchases on his smart screen.

"Oh, sweet. I have enough competitive credits to get the gold assault rifle!" he chirped, half-walking and half-scanning on his smart screen and doing neither particularly well.

"Do you have enough real life credits to pay me back for the session if we're late?" Mark snapped back. He was a big man. Calvin wasn't a citizen of the O.S.N.A, and Jackson was still in his wheelchair, so neither of them did their mandatory service, but Mark loomed over both of them. He'd softened a bit in the years he'd been out. He and his wife had had a couple kids, and he drank a little too much vodka, but his shoulders were still broad and his stance was sturdy.

...And he was an asshole who forgot Jackson was in a wheelchair, but that was *fucking fine*, Jackson *supposed*. It wasn't like they'd known each other for years or anything.

Calvin mimed Mark's words behind his back, sneering. Jackson suppressed a chuckle. If Mark knew Calvin was making fun of him, he didn't give any indication (the indication would, most likely, have been a punch to the face).

The three of them had been planning for weeks to play a few competitive rounds of *DEATH GAUNTLET™ VR*. They needed to play at least once a month to maintain their Master's ranking. Normally they could maintain their standing, but last time, they'd had a bad, bad session, and that bright gold and crystal badge attached to all of their user profiles had lapsed back into a mere Diamond-level insignia. Mark and Calvin bitched and moaned at each other for *days*, and Jackson was ready to break up the team as long as he didn't have to hear either of them whining ever again.

He just wanted to play the damn game, and he'd had a bad feeling about the three of them teaming up that was only proving more and more accurate. He didn't really care—he worked fine with either Mark or Calvin, but Calvin refused to play a medic. Mark actually liked playing as a medic—he liked support roles, and he was good at them—but Calvin refusing to take one for the team on a necessity pick, *ever*, rankled him to the point where he refused to play medics when he and Calvin played together.

Jackson was capable of playing one character from each unit—DPS (damage per second—scouts, soldiers, and assassins), shields (tanks), or heals (medics)—but when Mark and Calvin started going at each other, he'd be a healer to keep the peace.

Calvin also made dumb mistakes in-game, but he made up for it with his moments of brilliance. Besides, Jackson liked playing with him. He and Calvin had been friends for years, since they both got exemptions for their mandatory service and were stuck at home. All the

while, Mark was off running diplomatic missions in the other safe zones in the world or popping the occasional cannibal in the head up north.

On their home copies of *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™]—the one that ran on their personal smart systems and was *not* immersive virtual reality—he and Calvin had a pretty popular duo-queue show. It never got quite as many hits as a holo VR stream, but they only did it for fun anyway.

They all wanted to get to Grand Master, but it was difficult for players who didn't have the money or the time to do more than a session a month. Trio-queue was the best way to rank up outside of getting a group of six together. They picked a date—the weekends were usually booked, and the servers tended to overload, making it difficult to get into good games.

So, they made a pact to take off work. They told their wives (or boyfriend, in Calvin's case) to expect them home late. They fasted for 8 hours so they wouldn't throw up on the immersion VR chair and choke to death.

But it was worth it, at least for Jackson. All the squabbling aside, it enabled him to experience the game in a way he couldn't afford on his own—solo queueing VR was downright embarrassing.

"Just keep it together, you two. For fuck's sake let's just try to have a good time, okay?" He wheeled along, tried not to think about how little he liked the sound of rubber wheels against linoleum. He swallowed, mouth dry. The immersion process was a mess—the process reminded him of a spinal tap, which he'd had plenty of in his life to "rule out a more serious infection. No, Ms. Jackson's Mom, we don't know why his fever is so high".

"Hey, guys, my favorite fucking part."

It was his least favorite part.

The nurse led them to a trio-queue room at the end of the hallway. It was designed like a hospital room, but that was where the similarities stopped.

Three reclining chairs—gray and black like the cockpit of an anti-gravity fighter, with back contouring sensors, and a massive, silver-plated VR console hooked up behind each one. A latticework of holes down the center of each chair betrayed the micro-needles that would be inserted all the way up to the brainstem. They never quite went into the spine, because the risk of infection (it was always infection) was too high, but they tapped in to almost every nerve coming off of it. Lastly, a series of electrodes transferred brain activity to the machine, which mimicked, projected, and rendered players in-game.

Meanwhile, an anesthetic administered by a trained professional would shut down essential body function to save the brunt of a player's brainpower for focusing on the game.

It was all pretty safe, all things considered. Only a couple new players with undiagnosed heart conditions died every year.

Mark and Calvin got ready to take their seats, pulled off their jackets to start the prep process. Calvin was especially giddy ("Hey, guys? You guys, we're gonna have a great game.").

Jackson pulled himself out of his wheelchair, and glared at the nurse when she tried to move his legs into place, opting to do it himself. Not that he minded help, sometimes. He just didn't like the idea of being manhandled again.

"All right. See you in the Hub."

"Where are we meeting?" Calvin asked. "Mark's suite or mine?"

"Let's go to yours. Mark?"

"Fine by me."

They were all leaning back now, and the nurse applied the electrodes to Jackson's head, then Calvin's, then Mark's.

Jackson felt the light tingle as the micro-needles started inserting themselves along his upper back. They were tipped with a very small amount of novocaine, so after the initial prickle, they couldn't be felt going in. The box behind began to hum as the nurse turned it on, and he felt the same pleasant buzz near his temples.

Last, masks were applied.

When Jackson closed his eyes, he saw the echoes of flat, textured surfaces and polygons. He saw other players running around already as he started to load. He blinked a few times, was aware of his eyes staring overhead at a white ceiling in real life (IRL), but that started to dim, look faker and faker. The most pleasurable dissociation always came with the moment he didn't recognize the tiled ceiling as real anymore, so much as part of a grid work, a superstructure. When he closed his eyes, there was a bright, simulated sun hovering over a vast, urban domain with a thousand player hubs and different *DEATH GAUNTLET™* playgrounds.

Jackson breathed, felt light in the simulated physics engine as he fired up his *bitchin'* motorcycle. The engine purred underneath him, he felt the vibration everywhere.

*DEATH GAUNTLET™. A STORY OF CHAMPIONS. OF HEROES. OF VILLAINS.
YOUR STORY.*

"I'm *back*, baby," he said to no one—though a few passing single-queue players in the nearby community zone may have overheard.

BREAKING NEWS

HUGE SOLAR FLARE DETECTED. MAY LEAD TO ELECTROMAGNETIC
DISRUPTIONS IN TECHNOLOGICAL EQUIPMENT. OFFICIALS IN O.S.N.A SAFE
ZONES RECOMMEND TURNING OFF ALL NON-ESSENTIAL EQUIPMENT.

DEATH GAUNTLET™, Third Match of the Day

Mark loved shooting dudes in the head. It was the most satisfying thing in the entire game.

They were already winning this round of the capture point game mode—this was game three of five, and the enemy team was floundering. With just a minute, it was unlikely they were going to take back the ground they'd lost. Even if they did, Mark, Calvin, and Jackson only needed one more victory after that to take the competitive rank for the round.

Jackson sped past a tank on his motorcycle, and beheaded an enemy team support behind the riot shield with his machete. It was a perfect critical hit. An exaggerated death animation played, with the head flying ten feet in the air while the body crumpled into the ground. It lay, bleeding, while the player waited on the respawn timer, and Jackson cheered as he revved his motorcycle, brandishing his bloody machete.

Jackson was always loud over the comm. "YEAH! THAT MOTHERFUCKER GOT *FUCKED.*"

"I'm getting a little fucked over here," Calvin's voice came over the team chat, "There's like three guys. AHHHHH—" his in-game audio popped on Mark's end, cutting off in a scream. Mark winced.

Calvin came back on team chat a second later. "I died. One of the dudes got me."

At the other end of the map, from behind cover, Mark spotted Jackson looking at him and shrug.

Mark rolled his eyes. It was always Calvin. The viewers loved it, but their rank had slipped before because of his stupid—

"Hey, Calvin, while we're winning, why don't you tell us what the audience for the livestream looks like?" Mark asked, voice steady. The other team wasn't even preparing for a final push without their healer. They kept trickling in, weren't able to sync up.

There was a gentle, metallic zing on Calvin's end as he pulled up his console (it didn't need to make any noise, not technically, but people complained about the interface not being responsive enough).

"Ah, little lower than last game, fellas. Our viewership just dipped by half." He laughed. "Maybe we were winning...too good?"

Mark saw a DPS, a scout, vaulting around the cover from their left flank. "One second, let me take care of this."

He slipped around, let the player—someone fast, lethal—slip around towards the capture point, thinking he could take it. Mark was behind him as he approached the boundary. He let him step onto it, but his team was still respawning—he was on his own. No support, no tank.

Mark aimed his sidearm right at the dude's head—Mr. DPS turned around at the last moment, and a spectacular death animation played as Mark pulled the trigger. It was a perfect, graphic display of blood shooting out from a now-pretty-terribly shattered skull. A recent update had added the bone fragments, and Mark thought it was a bit too much. But the game still had that perfect BANG SQUISH SPLAT sound.

He'd killed people before. IRL. *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™] made it feel *good*. They even came back for more.

In the last second of gameplay, a sniper shot caught him in the body.

Mark looked down at the hole in his chest armor, regarding the slowly spreading gore from...inside him as his health meter drained down. Or from inside his VR body. He hissed at the impact and the sting, the ache in his chest when he breathed.

"Damn." He cursed. "I almost had a perfect—"

The second shot caught him just as the victory credits played.

Hell, at least *DEATH GAUNTLET™* made *dying* fun, too.

He heard cheering from the other end as Calvin's hub popped up around them and they were knocked out of the game. It was a nice pad—a kitchen unit for simulated eating, a mini-fridge for simulated intoxication, and a nice living room and balcony. Their stats were on display on the TV in front of them. Each number, each icon ticked up—granting stars, extra in-game money, for every kill and every combo—were added to an already crushing victory.

"Holy shit," Mark declared, proudly crossing his arms. "We're almost out of Master's rank. Grandmaster's, here we come!"

Jackson sat on the couch, throwing his arms up in the air and shouting. Calvin was practically doing excited jumping jacks, punching the air.

"Well, that's—" Mark started to congratulate everyone, when every one of their consoles flashed up—each one with the user interface overlay in glaring, uncomfortable, *emergency* red.

They each looked at each other, in a sort of triangulation of confusion, when the world dimmed, then went dark with a menacing, undeniably electronic—

POP.

BREAKING NEWS

THIS IS A SPECIAL NEWS ALERT. COMPETITIVE VR SERVORS FOR THE DIGITAL GAME *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™] WERE EXPERIENCING SIGNIFICANT INTERRUPTIONS AT SEVERAL IMMERSION LOCATIONS. WE HAVE THE GAME'S TECHNICAL DIRECTOR JOHN STANTON ON THE LINE RIGHT NOW TO SEE IF WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO GET ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FROM RIFTWARE, THE DEVELOPER OF THE GAME.

JS: Thanks for having me on, Susan.

THANKS FOR BEING HERE.

JS: Well, first I'd like to point out that we are doing everything we can to re-establish a normal connection with the North American competitive server.

WHAT COULD THIS MEAN FOR PLAYERS IMMERSED IN THE EXPERIENCE?

JS: We're still trying to figure that out. If the servers shut down suddenly, there's a safeguard that immediately begins the process of logging the players out and resuming normal neurological activity.

BUT THERE ARE REPORTS OF PLAYERS WHO ARE UNACCOUNTED FOR AT RIFTWARE VR FACILITIES. CAN YOU SUBSTANTIATE THESE CLAIMS?

JS: It would be irresponsible to worry anyone before we have all the facts, but in any emergency it does take time to account for all individuals.

DEATH GAUNTLET™, Player Hub

Well, shit.

Jackson woke up staring at hot concrete, face pressed to the ground, and with a headache radiating down his shoulders that he was pretty sure was trying to literally split him in half. He opened his eyes, and slowly the textures of the *DEATH GAUNTLET™* community hub—the main one, the one that had all the tall buildings filled with *personal* player hubs.

He coughed, and something happened that wasn't supposed to—it hurt. Real bad, sending fresh pain radiating down his back. Looking around, he saw that his motorcycle had tipped over, trapping one of his legs underneath it.

He used his arms to shove the bike off, and pulled himself into a sitting position with his back to it, one arm propping himself up as he tried to bring up the player console.

The UI sputtered, lines not loading properly for a half second, flickering. Jackson hit his wrist, and it finally sputtered back to life.

DEV UPDATE

WE APOLOGIZE FOR THE DISRUPTION TO *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™] VR ONLINE SERVICE. DUE TO CHANGING SOLAR CONDITIONS IMPACTING CONNECTIVITY, WE NEEDED TO REBOOT OUR SERVERS. IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT YOU LOG OUT IMMEDIATELY. YOUR EXPERIENCE MEANS THE WORLD TO US.

- THE DEV TEAM

-

Jackson made a noise that sounded angry, even to him, and smacked the motorcycle sitting behind him. He did not want to cry thinking about how much money he'd spent. He did *not* want to cry. He did *not* want to log out.

But his head did hurt like Hell, and he didn't want to risk additional damage to his spine that hadn't already been caused by his dad's sack genetics ("Thanks for that, dad." "You're welcome, you little shit.").

Scrolling through the player console, muttering to himself the entire time. He selected 'connectivity' from the list on the side (the one that included options like: Quick Play, Competitive, and Settings—all of which were grayed out and un-selectable). Log Out, at the bottom, was the only one that could be picked.

Jackson pressed it, and a spinning ring appeared in the center of his console. Shit. His girlfriend was going to be mad.

Jackson sat, waiting, wondering what was going to be for dinner. His body was probably getting hungry.

He waited a bit longer, tilting his head back and forth to pass the time, increasingly frantic and annoyed.

REQUEST DENIED.

His expression turned from passively annoyed into full-on scowl territory. "What the fuck? You motherfucker." He tried to log out again.

Same result.

In the corner of his eye, he saw a notification pop up from Calvin. He could see that Calvin and Mark were still in a group, and were inviting him to join back up. Reaching up, he slid the notification across his field of vision and accepted the request.

"Jackson! Good to hear you. We thought you logged out."

"You know what I just tried to do? Fucking log out. You know what it didn't let me do? Fucking log out."

"Someone's testy." Calvin.

"Screw you."

Mark's polite cough kept that line of dialogue from going any further. "I've been chatting with a few buddies. None of the competitive players have been able to leave.

"No quick players?" Filthy casuals.

"Everyone I know was playing competitive." He heard mark grumble on the other end.

"Hey, I'm at Calvin's hub. You should head this way."

The comm line went quiet, and Jackson sighed. He slid his hand over his motorcycle, and a circular orange display arose over the gas tank. Jackson selected the reset. One second he was on the ground, sitting on his ass and fighting the well of pain in his head, and the next he was—well, he still felt like his head lost a fight with a nutcracker—but he was sitting on his bike again. He pumped the hand controls and sped off towards Calvin's hub.

DEVELOPER UPDATE #2

DUE TO THE RECENT DISASTER IMPACTING THE *DEATH GAUNTLET™* COMPETITIVE SERVERS. WE WERE ABLE TO SHUT DOWN OUR QUICK PLAY SERVERS, BUT IT SEEMS AS THOUGH THE MAJORITY OF OUR COMPETITIVE PLAYERS ARE UNABLE TO LOG OUT. THIS IS BECAUSE THEY WERE TRANSFERRED TO AN OUTDATED COMPETITIVE SERVER INSTEAD OF BEING AUTOMATICALLY LOGGED OUT. THIS WAS AN OVERSIGHT. FORTUNATELY, WE HAVE FOUND A WORKAROUND FOR THIS PROBLEM— EVERY 24 HOURS, WE WILL BE REMOVING THE TOP 50 PLAYERS FROM THE GAME AND RESTORING THEM TO CONSCIOUSNESS, FOLLOWING ALL NECESSARY SAFETY PROCEDURES. AS OUR SOLUTION IS LIMITED, IT IS POSSIBLE WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO EXTRACT ALL PLAYERS. EVERYONE IS ENCOURAGED TO PLAY THEIR BEST. ALL IN-GAME STREAMING AND OUTSIDE COMMUNICATION SERVICES ARE SUSPENDED DURING THIS TIME.

- THE DEV TEAM

Calvin was sitting in his stool, while Mark loomed in a corner, arms crossed, scowling. One of Calvin's knees was bouncing uncontrollably, sending tremors through the rest of his body—from his back, to his splitting headache, to the hands that were knitted together in front of his face and pressed to his chin. All while facing the reality that he was not good at *DEATH GAUNTLET™*.

Sure, he did a few streams with Jackson every now and then. He wasn't terrible, but he also played on his home 2D set enough to understand Mark's strategies. Besides, it didn't really matter for the stream—people *liked* his antics. Viewers liked it when Mark or Jackson called him a "fucking dipshit". From primary school onwards to his work exchange in the O.S.N.A, he made silly mistakes on his exams, he told other boys he would do anything for a dollar, and his friends usually got a kick out unapologetic foolery.

Now, every stupid mistake, every cost ranking in the game was weighing on him.

Mark wasn't angry like Calvin thought he would be when they read the update. He'd just gone quiet. He kept anxiously running his hands through his hair. Pressing his palms into his eyes.

Calvin wouldn't tell anyone he had seen Mark crying earlier after trying to access the in-game browser to contact his wife and getting a pop up denying his request.

If the servers were back up, then the browser should have been.

Calvin worked for the O.S.N.A state network, and he knew Mark did a stint in systems analysis. Neither of them had talked about how the lack of access to the outside world didn't

make sense. The servers getting mixed was an accident, but not being able to communicate...that felt *designed*. Riftware didn't *want* them talking with anyone outside of the game.

"Is your headache gone?" Calvin finally asked.

Mark shrugged. "It's going away."

"Oh," Calvin replied, quietly. They sat in silence for a while. "Mine isn't."

Mark looked up at him, arms still crossed, and mouth pursed in sadness and disregard.

Jackson appeared in the middle of the room, name first, and rendered immediately onto Calvin's couch. He was staring off into the middle distance. If he'd driven to Calvin's, he probably had just seen the information.

"Guys, what was that last developer update?"

Mark shrugged. "We can't log out."

"We're stuck," Calvin added.

"How is that possible?"

Calvin rubbed the back of his neck. "Does it matter? We're stuck."

"Shit..." Jackson said, eyes wide, arms resting limply on the couch to either side of him as he stared at his reflection in Calvin's TV screen. What had once felt like a second home—a perfect expression of Calvin's personal aesthetic (if he did say so himself)—now felt like a blade hovering overhead. "So...we need to play the game to escape the game?"

Mark swallowed, Adam's apple flickering thickly. "Looks that way."

"That," Jackson started, voice vacant, empty, "is the GREATEST MOST METAL SHIT I HAVE EVER HEARD!"

He lifted his arms up into the air, shrieking with laughter and clapping wildly. "Oh my God. Holy fuck, guys, this is fucking perfect."

Calvin and Mark looked up, simultaneously, at Jackson, who was having the absolute time of his life on the couch. He had a wide smile and an ongoing, manic cackle.

Calvin stared at Jackson, and met Mark's eyes. In a rare moment of solidarity, he knew they were thinking the same thing: *Jackon's cracked, man.*

"It's not perfect, Jackson," Mark said, sounding lower than Calvin had ever heard him. Calvin could deal with angry Mark—he was used to Mark being angry at him, and again, the viewers loved it—but *sad* was something he didn't want to deal with. It made him want to start heckling Mark just to get him back to normal.

"But it *is*," Jackson insisted. "We're gonna make so much money selling the footage."

That got Calvin's attention. "Say what?"

"This is some *gladiator* shit. People play the game—TO LIVE. Do you know how many movies there have been based on this shit? Even from the old records! It's like that, but it'll be a documentary. It's great."

"No streaming," Mark replied.

"Doesn't matter." Jackson grinned, looking impish. "Guess who's storing footage locally on his smart screen?"

Calvin lifted his head up. "You're shitting me."

"Calvin," Jackson replied, faking a serious tone. "I would never, ever shit you."

"That's against the Terms and Services!"

Jackson made a face. " 'Oh look at Jackson not following the rules. Wah-wah, I'm Calvin, I'm a baby who follows the rules' ." He snorted. "Who cares? I mean, I was mostly doing it for archival info, but this is gonna make *bank*."

Mark looked thoughtful. He was still in the corner, but he was starting to unfold his arms, starting to relax a little bit. The situation was unusual and scary, but Calvin liked to see that a little bit of their old dynamic was coming back. He smiled at Mark, who walked over to the couch, putting his hands on Jackson's shoulders and squeezing, familiarly.

"All right. Top 50 here we come."

Three days later, they were still not in the Top 50.

Mark had never been in VR longer than 8 hours, and Calvin and Jackson weren't much better. He didn't know ANYONE who had been immersed for longer than 12 hours. Now, there'd been a news story about a dude in Germany who stayed in a VR sex simulator for 24 hours—but he was an ex-pilot on an inter stellar frigate, and had extensive experience with the military's space nav and combat simulators. Everything Calvin heard about the military's virtual training was downright mental—they stayed immersed and connected to the ship for days. He was dehydrated but alive.

Riftware probably had doctors taking care of their bodies IRL—hooked up to IVs, something monitoring brain activity, anesthesiologists, and so on. The works.

At least Everyone's headaches had all gone away. Mark's went away first. Followed by Jackson's. Calvin's went away last; he didn't play well and it cost them all time they didn't have.

Three days, Mark pondered, tapping the kitchen table in Calvin's hub. Three days and they'd barely made any progress. They were rising in the ranks marginally as more and more people were logged out, and there were players who were much, much worse off than they were, but Mark kept thinking, kept wondering. What *was* happening to their bodies IRL? What *was* the

chance of getting out before the next solar flare hit? *Was* he just going to sit in that outpatient facility, his body slowly atrophying as he tried and tried to get out of this stupid game?

While the queue timer clicked on, Jackson and Calvin sat at the other end of the table, playing a poker mini-game with each other to pass the minutes.

When the server crisis first started, people had queued into games immediately—desperate to escape, desperate to get out of the game. After the first day, people started to calm down. Frantic terror was slowly settling down into focused terror.

Mark tapped his fingers together. People were getting more desperate.

Likewise, a bustling economy was developing—already, real world credits were being exchanged for gear. People threatened to throw games in exchange for money. It was risky, but a great way to get rich for when they got out. The reporting system was down, so there was no way to track the people who threatened to throw. Riftware would have to go through the logs later, probably, to reimburse those impacted—*if* they reimbursed them.

That desperation economy meant were getting more and more cautious about when they joined games. People wanted to make sure their teams were outfitted with the best possible gear, given the best possible advantages.

Translation: waiting was a bitch.

"Hey, Mark?" Jackson said, from the other end of the table, freezing with his cards in his hands.

Mark smiled, and he could tell it looked strained. "Jackson?"

"Could you maybe," he started, "stop tapping your fingers like a damn clock?"

Mark stopped tapping. He could feel the corners of his smile waver. "Excuse me?"

"Please stop tapping. It's distracting."

"Ah, I see," Mark admitted. "You know what else is distracting. Being caught in a game while we all slowly *die in medically induced comas outside*." His smile fell, but he didn't raise his voice. He wanted to scream, but he'd known, sitting there, staring at Calvin on Day 1, that they couldn't fall apart now. None of them would make it out in solo queue. "Also, surprised you didn't throw a 'fucking' in there."

Jackson made a noise and rolled his eyes.

Mark clenched his jaw, trying to smother the next insult.

They glared at each other.

"I just wanna see my cat again."

They looked at Calvin when he started speaking. He was staring, bleakly at the cards in his hands.

"Sydney's home, so my cat's getting fed and getting scratches and stuff." Calvin tossed the cards on the table, ending the mini game. They hit the imitation of wood and vanished into thin air. "But I just want to see him. We were snuggling just the other day, yeah?"

Mark looked at his palms.

He wanted to send a message to his little girls, let them know what was going on. However, as the days trudged onwards, it was increasingly clear that Riftware was controlling contact between *DEATH GAUNTLET™* and the real world.

It was so weird to think of the things as separate, suddenly. The connection was so familiar—so natural—to Mark, that he hadn't even thought of it as abnormal. It was just like the golf clubs his dad used to go to—go to place, have fun there. The VR immersion facility was only a drive away, and he could wade into the molasses-thick, bloody catharsis of infantry kills, objectives, and critical hits.

That one day in VR was as good for him as a week's vacation. His back was always just a little sore, the way it was with hard labor, but it gave him what he needed to do the normal stuff. Even when he needed to go to parent-teacher conferences and drive his daughters to school, or take his wife to the zero-g chamber, he still had his *DEATH GAUNTLET™* rank, the footage of that last awesome kill or last-minute save, and the next session to look forward to.

Now he missed all the other stuff. The non-*DEATH GAUNTLET™* stuff.

He missed his wife. He missed his little girls.

Suddenly, the queue countdown turned green. They all perked up.

"We've got a game."

"All right," Mark said, trying to comfort himself as much as Jackson or Calvin.

"Everyone ready?"

"Let's do this," said Calvin. He then, in an out-of-character and ill-placed display of bravado, clapped his hands together.

Jackson sighed. "Fucking *finally*."

Calvin's hub bled out from around them, vanishing as the game map started loading. Mark blinked. His head still ached slightly when new environments were being loaded, which was weirdly comforting. At least it meant he was still alive.

The new map loaded, and they were all in their gear. Jackson was riding his Death Mortarcycle, machete in hand. Calvin had finally, finally caved to playing a medic when the choice was between that and...dying while playing a game—and he was checking out his Healing Ray and Health Pack supply.

Mark was outfitted with his favorite Riot Shield and Diablo hand canon.

They were on a carrier, waiting for the game to start, making last minute modifications as the 30 seconds till go-time ticked down. They didn't have their pre-fight elation. Instead they were nervous, quietly shifting through their equipment. It was all as good as it was going to get, but there was nothing else to do while they waited to leave their spawn zone.

They charged out all at once. Jackson sped ahead and went off to the side of the map, Calvin stayed with Mark as they sprinted, much, much more slowly out onto the field of play. Calvin used his boost ability to speed them up even more, and Mark instantly knew that his hand canon would do even more damage if they encountered any flankers.

When they arrived at the checkpoint, Mark lifted his shield, ready for a fight as Jackson's engine rumbled his chest.

The checkpoint was empty.

Jackson and Calvin paused, and Mark whirled around, waiting for the attack. Was the enemy team just slow?

They paused, fire momentarily taken out of them. Calvin dropped the boost. "Where are they?"

The little blue display showing their progress towards taking the point whirred around over their heads. At 5 seconds, it was at 80%.

Jackson's head exploded in blood and bone chips. He went limp on his bike, and then fell over.

"Ambush!" Mark shouted at the same time Calvin shouted "Sniper!", and pivoted back towards Calvin. He lifted his shield just in time to catch a bullet that would have taken out Calvin, and it bounced off. Protect the medic, at all costs.

Another tank came charging out from behind, and a small, slightly-looking guy with Knife Gloves leapt out at Calvin from behind.

Mark did his best to focus, to calm the rising panic. They were going into a team fight a man down, and that wasn't good.

A breath, then calm.

Mark bashed his shield into the other tank when he tried to get his shotgun around to hit Calvin, who was frantically healing him, and must have gotten lucky with a critical hit because the other dude toppled over. Mark didn't bother with his hand canon, he gripped the top of his shield with his free hand and brought it down, repeatedly, on the other tank's weapon wrist, trying to get him to drop the shotgun. He screamed. It fell limply out of his hands.

From behind him, he noticed his health bar stop glowing, and heard the retort of Calvin's little sidearm. He shot the tank twice before turning around to see Calvin playing a game of footsie with the assassin—Calvin fired wildly, panicking without a stronger weapon, and the other player kept dancing around him, almost mocking him, almost mocking both of them.

Mark felt a surge of rage, and raised his gun. Damn flankers.

A sniper shot took out Calvin. Damn snipers.

Mark killed the assassin in one shot, and brought his Riot Shield up to protect his head just as a third shot took him off balance. The bullet glanced off, but he felt the impact in his arm and head as the shield bounced painfully off of him. He whirled around, and fired into the direction he thought the sniper was firing from. An audible grunt in his comms confirmed the hit, but not the kill.

Without the assassin or the tank, and the sniper not on the point, the meter spun completely around, and confirmed that Mark and his team had taken the point.

Mark gritted his teeth. That sniper was going to be trouble though.

Behind him, he heard the engine that signified Jackson respawning.

Mark glared in the direction of the spawn base. "They'll be back soon. We should take a position over there. Calvin, we need you to swap to sniper."

"Got it."

"Jackson, I'm going to take forward ground to the left, so until Calvin respawns, I need you to keep an eye out if they try to trickle onto the point."

"Can do," Jackson said over the comm, and sped past Mark's right. Mark veered left, hand canon out.

Most citizens of the O.S.N.A saw at least a little bit of combat during their required service, and those that didn't at least knew what the equipment felt like, so the *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™] brand was built on making things feel better, not real.

Mark was going to try to flush out that sniper for when Calvin was back in play. He ran off to one side of the map, fake virtual boots slamming into a virtual warzone with virtual scorched earth and the virtual smell of smoke. He was dressed in equipment, from head to toe, that was meant to feel *better* than reality.

He supposed that's what all recent gaming history was about. They kept advertising *reality*, right up until the 2050s when the last society fell all apart. Mark used to watch the old documented footage of the original digital gamers, the classic ones. He used to admire the artistry of it—the surviving footage of presentations promising better, grittier, more *real* than ever before. That was the dawn of VR, closely followed by the original neurological immersion studies because rich people wanted to transfer their minds into more durable robotic bodies.

Now the technology was perfected, people willingly replaced one reality for another *at least* once a month.

Well, the technology was supposed to have been perfected.

Mark didn't feel good about it anymore. Every touch of unreality grated against him, felt like nails on the outer edges of his brain. He hated the satisfying pop, now. He knew every exaggerated death animation like the back of his hand. Desperation combined with exhaustion meant he saw everything as being in his way. It was like he'd been eating nothing but pancakes and syrup for days, and he was *done* with the sweet veneer.

He rounded the corner of a sheltered, gutted out building to find himself staring down the barrel of a rifle.

Mark went still.

The woman at the other end winked at him before lowering her gun. It was still pointed at Mark, but lower for a gut shot, rather than a critical headshot. She had dark hair, and white teeth, highlighted by red lipstick.

She motioned to her ear, and mouthed 'mute' at him.

Mark stood, frozen in place. She made the motion again, slightly more urgently this time.

Curious, he muted his mic.

"That was pretty great, what you did back there." She was smiling now. In the distance, Mark heard Jackson's cycle. A player death notification popped up in the corner of his eye. "I've run that ambush tactic a few times now. You're the first one to make it out."

He smirked back at her. "And you're the sniper."

Tentatively, she gestured to the rifle. "Well..."

Mark reached for his hand canon.

The rifle rose again, looking right between his eyes. "Oh, honey, please don't. I just want to talk."

Mark relaxed his hand, but tension was still coiled in his chest. Any second he expected her to pull the trigger, to feel the familiar violent crack through his chest and the sensation of wet blood spreading from the exit and enter wounds. "I'll bite. About what?"

"See, me and my pal—my assassin friend—are looking for a better tank. We're in a duo-queue, and he can flex-pick a medic, but we're hurting for a tank that isn't some rando."

Despite himself, Mark chuckled. "Yeah, your tank's real bad."

"And you," she smirked, "are real good."

Mark found his shoulders slumping just a little bit. Off in the distance, he heard a scream. A large notification popped up on his screen showing him that Calvin had just been killed. Again. He smiled at the stranger. "You're not too bad, yourself."

"Then we're on the same page," she said, inclining her head.

Some part of Mark appreciated this—this little moment of human repartee in the middle of a game. Plus, the novelty of a lady player. He'd only seen a few women in all his times queued in, and he could understand why—VR games had a *demographic*. A lot of violence wasn't always the turn-off, but the almost unrestrained ability to make physical contact made harassment, when it happened, very, very personal. Riftware ignoring the complaints and lobbying against the women who took legal action *empowered* certain elements of their player base. Digital harassment turned into real world harassment.

Mark could understand it wasn't the best space to be a lady.

Therefore, the gender that comprised half the population of humanity was rare in *DEATH GAUNTLET™*.

Mark dropped his shield to his side. He maybe let a little too much of the skepticism, the offense into his voice when he said, "You want me to throw and you'll let me join you as a trio-queue?"

"I want to get out of here." In turn, the stranger dropped her gun so it was at knee-level for Mark. Her *DEATH GAUNTLET™* pseudo-apocalyptic, pseudo-military armor showing off just enough boob to get his attention, according to the Riftware marketing team, at least. "Throw the game, and you can queue up with me and my buddy."

"That's...literally exactly what I just said you were doing. You just did the thing." Wow, even to himself, he sounded pedantic and irritating.

Fortunately, she just looked amused. She started walking away slowly, backing up around some rubble, still smiling, still guarded. "Just ah, consider it, okay? I don't know about you but I don't plan on playing this game forever."

Mark caught himself tapping the handle on his shield.

Calvin had to admit, it was going pretty well.

The sniper hadn't been seen for a while, so he and Jackson were bullying the assassin and avoiding the tank, only descending on that shotgun when they had no choice to keep the point, and Jackson spent half the time doing wheelies around him. Even after the rough start, it looked like they were set to win.

Calvin was crouched behind some cover when Mark finally reappeared. "Mark! Where have you been? Your comm went quiet."

Mark didn't say anything, and Calvin looked out at Jackson, who beheaded the assassin and was speeding around to flank again and look for the sniper. He looked back at Mark, a smile on his face.

As Calvin turned his head, a bullet went right into his temple.

As it always did now, his head exploded in pain—worse than it ever did from a headshot before getting trapped. His game faded, replaced by the respawn timer. He couldn't speak, couldn't move, could just stare at the big yellow numbers in the middle of his field of vision that would tell him when he could play again, and he was shaking. Pain radiated throughout his head, not just the cinematic punch it used to be.

He heard Jackson and Mark over the comm, still.

"Shit. Mark, what are you *doing*?" Jackson.

Mark's reply chilled Calvin as the sound of his hand canon blew out the audio again. Jackson went quiet, since he was also respawning now.

"I'm sorry," Mark said, voice low. "But I've got to see my girls again."

Calvin respawned in the team base, shaking. The UI told him that the enemy team had managed to retake the point, and the timer was creeping onward. He sat there, waiting for Jackson. While he was waiting, he sank to the floor.

"Guys," Mark said again, "me team-killing means it's 4-v-2. You don't stand a chance."

Jackson respawned and there was a flurry of expletives already in progress when his mic was unmuted. Calvin didn't try to talk, and Mark didn't. It was a series of insults so vile, so intimate and filthy and depraved and *creative*, that even Calvin caught himself realizing that he kept forgetting that Jackson had a vocabulary past 'fuck', but these were downright

Shakespearean. The tirade ended with Jackson screaming, "—I AM SO *BLOCKING* YOU, YOU ASSHOLE!"

Calvin wished he could get up the strength to curse Mark out, wished he could care that he and Jackson were probably almost definitely going to wind up permanently comatose—or even braindead—now. He sat on the floor of the base while Jackson ranted and raved, but Calvin *got* it. His arms were crossed around his legs, which were propped up in front of him, and he stared blankly off into the game field.

He got on the comm. "Mark, you do what you have to do, all right?"

Shockingly, Jackson stopped raving, and looked at Calvin, as if wondering if he'd actually said anything between "you gaslighting corkscrew piece of dog shit" and "you treacherous Judas goat cock sucking chode".

"Mark," Calvin said, louder now. "I *understand*, all right. Honestly, I'm surprised you didn't turn on us sooner." Calvin was trailing off, trying to hold back the tears. The arms of his khaki jacket were getting tinged with a water texture that, just as quickly as it arrived, faded and dried. His cheeks didn't feel like they were drying so quickly. Shit, he was crying. He saw Jackson awkwardly shuffle away, stare intently at his hands as they rested on his motorcycle.

"Calvin," even Jackson sounded smaller when he spoke. The experience, the game, that solar flare—had worn something out of all of them, and Calvin had thought it was just him, was so afraid of looking weak in front of the other guys.

"Come on, you know it's true." Jackson looked away. Calvin continued, saying, "Mark, listen. You and Jackson should go on together, take your chance in duo-queue. You two deserve to get out."

There was silence, followed by a series of protests from Jackson. Calvin tried to tune them all out. Finally, Mark spoke. "You think I'm doing this because you don't *deserve* to get out?"

Calvin wondered himself whether it was true or not. It was the last few minutes of the game. They were going to lose.

"I'm not doing this because you don't deserve to get out." He sounded incredulous, offended. "We *all* deserve to get out. This never should have happened. No. I'm just doing this so I have my best chance of getting out."

Calvin stared ahead. In the distance, outside their team's base and crouched by some rubble, they could see Mark. He was standing near the enemy team assassin that had been tormenting Calvin earlier in the match. He looked as sad, as remorseful as Calvin had ever seen him—and he didn't know what was worse: that he wasn't surprised that Mark was doing this, or that Mark was.

Mark opened his mouth to speak into the comm.

His head exploded in blood as a rifle shot went through him, his body crumpling to the ground.

Calvin looked up to see that Jackson had swapped to a sniper role, and he stood over Calvin's shoulder, the smoldering tip of his rifle pointed outside. He lowered it, scowling, as the game ended and they were declared as the losers. Mark wasn't in their group any longer.

"Fucking *prick*."

BREAKING NEWS

<<350 PEOPLE STILL IN MEDICAL COMA FOLLOWING VR SERVER
DISASTER.>>

TONIGHT WE HAVE AN UPDATE ON THE *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™] VR
EMERGENCY FOLLOWING THE SOLAR FLARE EARLIER THIS WEEK.

WE HAVE STEADILY RECEIVED REPORTS THIS OF PLAYERS BEING
TRANSPORTED TO LOCAL HOSPITALS FROM IMMERSION FACILITIES—MOST OF
THESE PEOPLE ARE IN STABLE CONDITION.

LEGAL DEBATES CONTINUE AS TO WHETHER THOSE REMAINING SHOULD
BE REMOVED FROM THE MACHINES OR NOT IN ANTICIPATION OF FURTHER
SOLAR ACTIVITY.

MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS AND SOFTWARE ENGINEERS HAVE BEEN
RESPONDING TO THE EVENT WITH GREAT RESULTS.

RIFTWARE HAS ISSUED AN OFFICIAL APOLOGY TO THOSE IMPACTED BY
THE DISASTER AND PROMISES STEPS TAKEN TO INSURE THAT IT DOESN'T
HAPPEN AGAIN.

Pantheon Part II: The Royalty

Why wouldn't there be a monarchy in deep space, in the distant future? It's the only way there's a princess.

The Space Princess

She is part of a royal trinity. The scriptures said, a millennium ago, that the Paevolonian Empire would "rule for a thousand cycles and a thousand more." She holds court in a sparkling jewel on the edge of the expanse—near the oldest part of the known universe, a scepter of pure light in one hand and an orb of impossible glass in the other, an orb that feels like air but would break if she would only turn her palm.

She gets tired holding them, sometimes. She gets tired of the weight of her long hair, which has no color capable of being seen by human eyes—the sight of it, spiraling behind her throne, seemingly endless and reaching towards the edge of the void, had driven human traders to insanity when they came to seek her verdicts.

They arrived at her court of endless summer, beneath a burning sun on a system hovering between the orbit of two black holes, and had needed to be carried out by compatriots who averted their eyes.

This is her inheritance.

The Green Woman

She is the shadow behind the throne.

Myrin is from the planet Atlin, a vassal-state of the Paevolonian empire. The sun there is burning hot. Too hot. The Paevolonians never invaded them, but they do keep the sun from going any hotter. Its light is a dark, blood red.

That's how Myrin's people developed, began to walk on two legs from an acidic ocean and scrounge for liquids and protein. Quick, quiet, and efficient. The Paevolonians saw the Atlin's usefulness from the beginning—it's why they saved them.

She can't drink the same water other creatures in the universe can. She loves the fruit from the human home world, though.

The Captain of the Young Princess and the Aging Emperor's Secret Police, is what they call her.

The Slighted Prince

The Prince, to match the Princess. He is the spare who holds on to his life and position only through his sister's indifference.

If he'd been born thirteen minutes earlier, as she was, he's not sure he'd be as merciful.

He twirls the orb of his station, casually, as he observes the map of the known Paevolonian universe. It is a map in three dimensions—lacking the north, west, east, and south directions of most planetarily-aware species. He balances it on long fingers. His matching sword is sheathed, leaving his hand free to command their armies. He has no short-range artillery weapon.

The humans are in blue, and he enhances the image. A tiny subset of sapphire stars, compared to the brilliant golden glow of Paevolonia's might. There were a few other known powers, but the human home world was as far as their explorers had yet gone, and the burgeoning human expanse yielded no threat, but provided an unhelpful barrier.

They have nothing to offer the humans. "They get to live in peace," his sister commanded. "There's no fair trade."

He looked at the endless black beyond them, reaching from their expanding territory to the center of the galaxy—the place he most longed to see touched by Paevolonia's infinite light.

The royals of Paevolonia are only permitted to kill or die with daggers, in duels, or by poison.

Ren

Ren tracked the deer for hours.

Ren first spotted a flash of tawny fur a short walk from the wall and the western watchtower. She was out collecting berries when she heard heavy footsteps and saw the deer dance across the underbrush at the edge of Faire's farmland. Ren sent her little brother back to the cabin and strung her bow. It was a yearling—not yet full grown, but had survived its first winter—it had gotten separated from the herd when the snows melted.

Spring sun could still turn to freezing rains, and although the weather stayed in her favor, she felt foolish for not having grabbed her heavier leather coat before leaving the homestead. All she had was her thin tunic, leather trousers, and wool vest, but her boots were hot, and if she got a kill, dragging it back to town would keep her warm enough.

It hadn't strayed too far outland. Ren would have given up, headed back. She didn't want to end up ill. But the deer seemed to be going in a serpentine pattern, as if looking for something.

So Ren padded carefully, patiently through the wood, bow in hand.

She followed the deer to a large outcropping of rock imbedded into the edge of the cliff, covered in moss, and totally silent. She followed over three rounded sides of the massive boulder, careful to watch for any sudden drop offs—but the outcropping was thoroughly buried into the hillside, and roots from the trees around it reached out in an embrace, keeping it steady.

On a flat, rounded area near the top of the outcropping, the deer padded lightly, nose down to something. A small portion of moss had been chewed away, and the deer was determined to have more of the little clovers sprouting nearby.

Ren crouched with one knee down, raised her bow, aiming it right down her arm and index finger, arrow pointed right for the yearling's flank—

Thin clouds parted to reveal the sun, and a brilliant sheen from the space where the deer had been eating away moss and grass *glistened*, blinding Ren just as she let her arrow fly. The shot went wild, into the woods below, and Ren cursed as the deer kicked off, bounded off the side of the boulder and into the safety of the trees.

Ren ran to the precipice and pulled another arrow out of her quiver in one motion, but she wasn't quite fast enough to get a clean shot. She resisted the urge to fire. She'd have to try and collect the first one she lost, and the deer was definitely gone.

Maybe she'd be able to get a grouse on the way home so her mother wouldn't scold her too harshly for going off on her own. Again.

She looked back to where the deer was eating, and the smooth, rounded surface that threw off her shot.

It was shiny but pitch black beneath.

Onyx? Obsidian? No. Glass painted dark?

You're too curious, she heard her mother's voice. *That's how Faire town girls get eaten by draugr or come down with the bloated fever.*

Which was ridiculous. The draugr never came down south after midwinter. They were "burning, always burning," the Sage said, and the second the weather started improving, they retreated back across the Roach Lake, to the land of dead trees and almost eternal snow, snow that would burn the skin of any Faire woman or man, but that soothed those with a certain kind of sickness.

It wasn't curiosity, she insisted to herself as she knelt by the gem and tapped it. It could be worth something. Investigating was the least she could do for her fine community after losing that deer.

Ren dug into the thin layer of moss with her bare hands (her gloves were the other thing she should have grabbed at the homestead). Although the layer of dirt kept sticking under her nails, it slid away easily as soon as any pressure was applied.

Eventually, the dirt grew too thick and the roots too entangled. Her fingers gave up on her. She stopped, leaning back on her knees and breathing heavily. It had been harder work than she had expected. What she had managed to uncover was round and smooth. From her reckoning, the whole area had to be twice as tall as she was, and five times her arm span. At the topmost seam, she was able to uncover a bright, metallic edge beneath the moss.

A giant vein of metal and crystal? Ren's heart raced. Faire's blacksmiths could make years' worth of weapons, armor, and tools out of so much metal, and with it so close to the surface, no need to lose people to a dangerous mining operation to gather meager ore. But how had the scouts never found it before? She stared at her own reflection in the silvery overcast; she looked exhausted and thrilled, her wild ponytail starbursting hair behind her neck.

The sun came out behind her, and dimmed her own reflection in the crystal.

Ren squinted her eyes, trying to make out the little speck of pale she was seeing, just where her own eyes would be.

She knelt closer, cupped her hands around the sides of her face. She shut her eyes, trying to let them adjust to the gloom.

When she opened them again, a human face stared back at her with an open, toothy smile. Where skin remained, it was pulled tightly over a mouth, sunken pits where eyes should

be gazed upwards in the direction the torso was propped. Blood roared through Ren's ears, and it felt like the dead thing's open mouth was screaming at her.

Ren shouted, stumbling back, tumbling to one side of the outcropping. Her heart wasn't pounding with the thrill of the hunt anymore—it ached and burned and told her to get away at all costs: that this was a place of sickness. She forgot about the deer, about the misfired arrow, about the wealth of resources under her feet. Her remaining three arrows spiraled out of her quiver like the pick-up sticks she and her brother played with when they were smaller, and she grabbed them as she got up to run.

She fled the site, a bow in one hand, and a handful of arrows in the other.

The woods got darker faster than open fields.

Ren's chest was aching and burning by the time she sprinted past the watchtower. The sun was just beginning to set, and her hands were starting to get numb, but all she could focus on was getting home, as if the thing in its glassy, metal grave had risen to follow her, and that if she slowed, it would find her. She'd stopped only once while sprinting to quickly store her arrows back in her quiver, because somewhere in her panic she'd remembered that tripping and getting an arrow through her neck wouldn't help her get away.

She imagined dried hands grabbing at her throat, like the stories her mother told her of the Bone Woman. *I'm too old for those, Mama*, she'd said. But she didn't feel too old for them now.

Only once she started sprinting past the line of torches did she start to feel safer. They led her back to the outer regions of Faire, the farmland, and her own homestead.

A couple people called out to her, but she ignored them.

She saw her own family cabin, saw the gentle glow of the fireplace and the candles from inside the window. Outside, she saw her mother dousing the lantern. Her sleeves were pulled up, and the loose tunic was stained from a day's at the community barn—it was lambing season, so she'd probably been with the ewes.

She probably heard Ren's heavy footfalls, because she looked up just as Ren blew through the gate. The family dog, Rosto, was barking from inside the house.

"Ren!" her mother called out, half fearful and half snappish. "We were worried sick—"

Ren threw herself into her mother's arms.

"I found a monster!" She cried, and her voice cracked, feeling the sprint. "A monster in a metal barrow. Like a draugr, but..." She trailed off, tried to swallow, "crispy."

"A draugr?"

Ren shook her head. "No. It was dead-dead, but—" She paused, frustrated. "Not rotted. In a glass casket, in a metal tomb."

Her mother held her shoulders as she sank to the ground, her heart still pounding in her chest. Now that she wasn't moving, she felt it even more intensely now, was suddenly afraid it would give out on her.

"Breathe," her mother commanded, gently, hands still on her shoulders. Ren started taking longer, deeper, more controlled breaths. Her mother picked up her cold hands, pressed them between her warmer ones. Ren started wheezing at the returning warmth, which tingled and hurt. "Your hands are purple."

"I *know*," she snapped back.

Her mother knitted her eyebrows at her. "If you knew so much, you wouldn't have gone chasing a deer alone."

"It would've—"

"I don't," her mother said, squeezing her eyes shut, "want to hear it."

Ren's cheeks and hands started burning as the blood came back. Eventually, she was ushered to her feet. Her father came out bearing a wool blanket, and he wrapped it around her shoulders as they led her inside.

"Ren! Did you get the deer?!" her brother, James, shouted as he saw her come to the door. He sprinted away from the iron stove the stew was simmering on, leaving the ladle to the side as he came running over to see her. His little face fell as her parents sat her by the fire. "...What's wrong with her?"

Ren opened her mouth to speak, but her mother pushed her down onto a stool in front of the fire.

"Your sister just pushed herself a little too hard, nothing more."

Ren squeezed her lips shut, fighting a surge of anger. Did her parents not believe her?

Her mother made eye contact and gently shook her head.

No, that wasn't it. That look said they'd talk later, that it just wasn't something she wanted James hearing.

Ren settled in by the fireplace as the stew finished cooking.

The gaunt shape in the tomb was already starting to feel like a memory, like something she'd imagined in a bout of childish fear. The more time passed, the more she doubted herself.

Her father brought her a bowl of stew, and she ate it as soon as her fingers didn't prickle to the touch anymore.

James was sent to bed and Ren got a fresh change of clothes from the box at the foot of her bed.

"Miranda sent a runner about a ewe," her mother said. "Why don't you come with me to the barn to check on her?"

Ren almost protested, but saw The Look again, and didn't. She pulled her leather jacket on over her tunic, and followed her mother out the door.

They walked on the lantern-lit streets at night. Her mother stayed quiet as they walked along the dirt road, towards the community barn. Both women had fresh tops and fresh trousers. Ren had gone from being too cold to being too hot, to having her skin flushed. She didn't mind the crisp air right then.

She knew it wasn't about a ewe—they'd be jogging if that was the case, instead they were meandering slowly through the outlying streets. In the distance, Ren could see the inner wall of the city—the last-ditch fall back in the case of a draugr invasion.

"So," her mother finally said, when they were out of earshot of a single other homestead. "Tell me again what you saw?"

"A large metal tomb, resting on a hillside. At the top there was a glass casket. Inside it was a body." She finally felt a chill again and instinctively rubbed her shoulders. "Should we tell the Sage? Send some scouts?"

Her mother seemed to think about her response for a beat, before saying, "I'd just as soon leave it be. We should send the priests to give a proper pyre, though, and some scouts to protect them. It's the right thing to do."

"What about the Sage? Shouldn't we seek her advice?"

"She already knows," her mother replied.

Ren didn't know what to say to that. Of course, the Sage's job was knowing things, but there was nothing like the metal tomb in any of the stories she told.

They finally approached the barn, and outside was Miranda, a woman just slightly older than Ren's own mother. She was childless, but one of the boys from the town was apprenticing with her—Welder. He was small, not suited for being a scout, but the sheep trusted him.

"Why are you here?" Miranda asked. "Your next shift isn't until midnight. You should rest."

"The young one came back late. Just walking off the worry." She jerked her head towards Ren, and Ren smiled back, waving awkwardly.

"Did she, now?" Miranda replied, voice deliberate, slightly teasing. "I used to get into trouble like that, before that draugr almost took my leg off."

"I liked the Bone Woman better," Ren muttered under her breath.

Miranda chuckled, her mane of wild, gray hair glowing by the lanterns as she took a swig from her flask.

There was no one else in the barn. Some sheep were settled, but a couple of hugely pregnant ewes who couldn't find a comfortable spot kept shifting and pawing the ground, moving hay and alfalfa around with their noses. A couple were likely to pop that night, but not imminently. All around her, Ren heard the low rumbles of new mothers calling to their babies, and the lambs baa-ing in reply. Some were too quiet, others almost sounded like human babies, for all the fuss they were making.

The lambing team had a scare that one of the babies would be a bottle lamb after a ewe had birthed triplets, but they were able to graft the little ram onto another ewe shortly afterwards. Ren's mother stopped to check on the adoption.

A few of the sheep walked up to her for treats. She pet them on the head. They flinched when Ren reached out to pet them, and she scowled.

Her mother laughed. Ren's scowl deepened.

"How many summers have you had, Ren?"

"You know how many."

"I should hope so, but I want to hear it from you."

Ren sighed. "Fourteen summers. Winters and Autumns, too."

"Old enough to be a smartass," her mother muttered, rubbing a ewe between the ears. "I think you're old enough for something else, too."

Ren tilted her head, and wondered what her mother was about to tell her. Some Faire parents at the city center didn't talk to their children about sex until later, but her parents had never been like that, and she'd helped in the barn before, so that wasn't it. Her mother also didn't sound like she was preparing for a lecture.

"What have your teachers taught you about the draugr and their sickness?"

"A bit," Ren replied. "Some of the land to the west is poisoned. Most people die when they're around it too long—others become draugr and run off north."

"Very few," her mother acknowledged. "And no one has told you *how* the land was poisoned yet? You can be honest if they have." She handed Ren a pitchfork, and motioned to the bedding in an empty lambing jug. Ren instantly started cleaning it out.

"No." Ren was flushing again, and this time, her stomach sank. "I just...thought maybe no one knew. I thought it'd always been that way."

James always asked questions, and it embarrassed her. All Ren knew was that there were parts of the land that were dangerous, and that was all she thought she needed to know—it was all she thought *anyone* knew, especially with the way the older folks kept dismissing James's inquiries. Now, suddenly, she felt foolish.

She replaced the pitchfork, and her mother leaned against the barn wall. Overhead, there were a thousand eyes watching, in the silence, when only the occasional sheep baa-ed, there were high-pitched squeaks as the bat colony overhead chattered at each other.

"A long time ago, there was a war." Her mother sighed, squeezed her eyes shut. "There were more people in the world than you can imagine. Cities a thousand times the size of Faire. The world was bigger—the parts where people could live were bigger, anyway. It was a world of automation, of people and expansion. Every corner of it, a beautiful song of metal and bodies and electricity."

"Electricity? Like how the Sage's and the elders' home is lit?"

"Yes, but imagine it everywhere."

Ren settled in on a barrel, her full attention on her mother. It sounded like the other stories Ren had been told as a child—the fairy stories about the gods and the magic. However, her mother told this story beautifully but factually. She was always slightly theatrical when telling the story of the Bone Woman—this had an air of final, horrifying truth, and out of discomfort, Ren began to pick at her nails, which were still crusted with dirt.

"They also had horrible weapons—explosions that could go thirty miles. Bright flashes of fire, and with them, death. Second suns. Before, enough people thought these weapons were too

devastating to use—thought they would never be used or it would be Doomsday, the end of everything. No one considered the middle ground, the sort of sputtering apocalypse we all got."

Ren thought she felt her throat closing up. She thought of that many people, and she felt like she was mourning for thousands of (more?) brothers, sisters, and others she'd never known.

Her mother continued. "They started calling it *Limited Nuclear Exchange Policy* instead of *Mutual Assured Destruction*. Everyone thought *MAD* was scarier, that's how the slip happens. The moment a person thinks 'It'll be terrible, but I'll still probably be fine.' Only a couple hundred of those weapons were exchanged, but it was enough to wreck the world humanity once had." She smiled, sadly. "You'll get to learn all about that world, over the next few years."

"What about Faire?" Ren leaned forward, as enchanted and eager by the idea of a bigger world than the valley. "Are there other people?"

"There are. They dwell in a few tall cities to the east. You'll learn about them, too."

Ren sat for a long time, as her mother went back to tending to the ewes, doing a little here and there. She looked nervous, almost sad, in the way parents tend to when a child loses some fraction of innocence. A couple lambs shrieked at her, bounced around like little popcorn kernels, or wagged their little tails as they fed. She didn't ask Ren to help.

"I'll get to learn—"

"The scouting trial is actually a diplomatic mission," her mother interrupted. "We send them to live with the city folks for a time, away from the simpler life of Faire, away from the things that ruined the world. The apprentice scouts don't usually die during their trials, though occasionally we'll lose a few to draugr or wild animals. They choose to leave and stay in the cities. That's every Faire-er's choice."

Ren's heart ached. She couldn't imagine leaving, but the idea settled into the back of her brain, into her chest, and she felt the faintest twinge of excitement to go with it.

"But," her mother said, with a tone of finality, "that won't be for years for you."

"Why don't you tell us from the beginning?"

"We've found it's better if we discover it for ourselves." Her eyes narrowed. "What I have just told you is a rite of passage. Don't tell anyone who doesn't know, don't talk about it in public where another child could overhear."

Ren nodded. It had been bad enough for her to find out—she wasn't eager to go shouting it from the rooftops.

Or maybe she wanted to. She was confused and her mouth was dry and it felt like the dirt under her feet didn't make sense anymore.

"So, the body I found was from that war?"

"Most likely. If it was a more recent crash, the people east of us would have sent word and collected the wreckage. That body's probably been there a century-and-a-half."

They sat in silence for a time. A lamb started gnawing on Ren's trouser leg. Her mother laughed.

Ren let her back relax, even if her head felt bigger than it had before.

"Mama?"

"Yes?"

"I'm tired."

They went back to the homestead. Ren was thoroughly chilled by then, and her mother wrapped her jacket around her shoulders.

Three days from then, the scouts and the priests were sent out to the site of the wreck. Ren had a hard time meeting their eyes, the new secret caught in her throat. She was dying to ask them how they found out about those who came before, about the war. She realized every scout would have gone to the city and come back, and she was dying to ask them about it.

The scouts all wore leather, and the priests were dressed in the black, billowing suits they wore for dealing with deadly sickness or a potentially poisoned area. The priests scared her when they were in their robes—they had masks with large eyes and enormous, jutting snouts. They always reminded Ren of carrion crows.

Her mother grabbed her rifle—she was one of the few trained folks in Faire who was allowed to carry a gun. In case of an emergency draugr attack on the outer homesteads, she was designated to rally the farmers. She'd also lead the expedition. She kissed Ren's father goodbye, and left with the procession early in the morning.

Ren watched them go, until her brother shoved a basket into her hands, urging her to come pick more berries with him. She hopped off the fence and followed him, Rosto running around them and barking cheerfully.

She still kept looking over her shoulder, just in case she could catch a last glimpse. Around midday, she could see the smoke from the pyre.

In the evening, her mother, the scouts, and the priests came back. Ren had been grateful not to hear any shots fired that day.

The procession scattered back to their various dwellings, looking significantly sweatier and less chipper than they had been when they left that morning. The priests, like great, terrible birds, were clustered around the stone cask.

Ren was standing by the fence as her mother walked up, rifle pointed safely to the ground.

Without greeting Ren, she offered her hand, and from it dropped a silver emblem on a chain. Hesitantly, Ren reached out to take it.

"We'll wrap this on the urn, but I think you should take an etching. As a reminder."

Ren reached out her hand, and the pendant dropped from her mother's hand into hers, where it crumpled into a messy pile. She read the text:

COURT
SYDNEY, M
657-90-2400 AF
A POSITIVE
CATHOLIC

Pantheon Part III: Aliens

What will we find?

The Parasite

It preys on every colonialist fear. There's this land, this land that seems ready for the taking, and those plants don't care, those animals are expendable, can be fought, and those people— Well, whether humanity cares about native populations depends on whether they're weaker or not, or whether they can be understood. Officially, humanity takes no planets with intelligent species.

The Parasite was first encountered by the Queen Elizabeth and her crew, which was part of a mission seeking out planets to bring into the fold of humanity's galactic enterprise—the rule was that they had to be uninhabited by intelligent life. Half of them were lost to the infection, and the ship was scuttled.

Captain Leve and the Colorado were brought in to control the outbreak and save as many as they could. The report was altered to save the reputation of the dead.

It's such a beautiful place, the planet the Parasite lives on. It's full of wildflowers reminiscent of Earth, a sweet, single sun in its youth. The planet is even the right distance—the perfect distance for life to bloom and thrive. The Parasite remembers, although it's not sure it knew of its home as beautiful before the humans came. It had piggybacked on evolution—it followed invertebrates, fish, lungfish, and land-based animals all throughout its development. When invertebrates got spines, so did the Parasite. When it encountered humanity, humanity who had come to visit it and claim that beautiful planet for itself, that Parasite understood, then, that its home world was beautiful.

When humans gave it a name, it called itself Parasite.

The Parasite sits frozen in an old cryo chamber on a former prison colony that was decommissioned specifically for the purpose of containing the parasite. It sits in the head of one Captain Jonathan Mathias, who had disregarded the secondary body heat readings on animals collected for study, in favor of pushing the project along.

Captain Mathias screams inside, awake, riding piggyback with his new companion, but the Parasite understands itself—and its own joy, its own revelation that it could experience joy—came in tandem to the deep suffering of the host. It is the circumstances, Matthias' thinks, perfect for the creation of the ideal sadist.

The history of empire hovers over Mathias' deep sleep, his never-ending dream, his conscious mind aware, constantly, of the cryosleep numbing every nerve in his body and keeping him forever young. Empire's always fear that which will tear them apart from within. And so the Parasite waits.

The Canids

Humans cannot pronounce their names, and the Paevolonians do not care to. The beats and feel of their language, the resonance, are nearly captured by that human instrument, the trumpet. If the speech of their species was recorded, and slowed down, it would sound like brass music. The humans never bother to find the beauty in it, though. They simply hold their ears and flee towards the Paevolonians and the Altins, who all have words in the same range of understanding. The grace of their culture is rarely understood by the other space-faring species of the known universe, and they are caricatured, minimized to grunts and growls on human frequencies. The complexity of their speech, the lightning-fast way in which conversations are held, is lost on humans and many of the Paevolonian's useful vassal species and bastions of power.

Long ago, they refused to accept the Paevolonian's help, and have been shunned from trade ever since.

Humans call them the Canids—they have seen pictures. The resemblance is close enough for them to understand the insult.

The libraries destroyed by the Paevolonians, however, are never reported upon when their "brutish" history is described.

"Hello," one of them says, standing on hind legs like a human, Paevolonian, Altin, or any number of bipedal orbital species. "Da-e-ve."

<Dave,> the linguist corrects. <It's, 'my name is Dave.' Again.>

"Da-ve. My. Name. Is. Dave." Dave works a long proboscis into a snarl—shows teeth to match the smi-le humans show on their magazines (not artillery). It's important to understand smiling. Too many early conflicts broke out between the Horde and humanity because teeth were shown too early in bonding.

Dave plans to be the first step towards repairing the relationship.

The Green Woman, again

The Altins have grown soft under Paevolonian rule, many think, but are afraid to say out loud. Better to die ourselves, the elders whispered.

Reyies is one of the first members of Altinian parliament voted into office following the dissolution of the tribes of Altin over seventy-five solar cycles previously.

It takes a long time to circle around Altin's nearest star.

She gazes up, dully, at the halo of metal and light that had been constructed around it, faintly seen against the glow. They have no name for the great red giant that threatened to consume them before they attained space travel.

Today, following first contact, their ships were Paevolonian, complete with built-in, remote self-destruct modules that could be activated in case of a breach of contract.

Reyies was part of a movement in Altinian parliament—the one humans frequently called the "liberal" Altinian movement. She served as an ambassador to Earth for seven of their years, and returned with the word "liberation" on her lips.

Reyies' lips are now stained black. Her eyes are bulging in place, vision quickly fading as she sits slumped on her heating stone.

A man—a human man—sits across from her. "It's done." He asks about payment.

Myrin grabs him by the hair and presses her plasma sidearm under his jaw and pulls the trigger. She takes his limp hand and presses the sidearm into it, and fires back through his skull a second time.

If Reyies could cry, if she wasn't frozen in place, she would.

Myrin replaces a helmet over her head and steps out the door.

The Resurrection Algorithm

Chandeliers sparkled overhead as hundreds of voices chatted below—some were louder, would smell of too much champagne if Jennifer bothered to talk to them. The banquet hall, and every point of light glistened; candles on tables, gems sewn into designer dresses, any glass surface reflecting the light back, bending it, all dazzled her as she was caught in the middle of it all, carefully taking her seat.

A quartet played from a small raised dais near the stage. Two violins, a viola, and a cello. Schubert's Quartet No. 13, in A Minor. Rosamunde. Daniel's music selection was interesting, as always. He had a taste for irony, and had organized the event.

Jennifer took a sip of champagne just as the first speaker walked on stage, and there was a surge of polite applause through the audience. She caught sight of a tuxedo out of the corner of her eye, and a bright spotlight shining on the podium signaled that it was time for the chatter to die down. A few stragglers took their seats around her as he waited for the clapping to stop.

She knew him to be seventy, but he easily looked to be in his fifties. Clifford Stanton. Pale skin, powdered to hide the bloat, which was likely from years of alcohol abuse. White hair. He spread his arms out, gesturing towards the audience.

"Thank you all for being here tonight," he started, flashing teeth. "I'll start with the elephant in the room—oh, no, I know you're all thinking about the solar flare incident." He gave a heavy sigh, studying his own hands as he fondled the plastic stand on either side of the microphone. He almost looked genuine. "Make no mistake—it was a tragedy."

Jennifer toyed with the fork at her place. A tragedy wasn't always an accident.

"We are doing everything in our power to support the O.S.N.A in their ongoing investigation, and the first thing I would like to introduce to you tonight is our new Rift Cares fund." There was another polite round of applause.

"One-hundred percent of the proceeds go to the families of those impacted by the event." Stanton waved. The applause and following murmurs stopped.

"But," he continued—voice rising in pitch and volume, signaling a shift in the speech, "tonight isn't about the past. You—our donors, our friends, our family—came here tonight because you want to care about the state of Riftware moving forwards. First of all, I would like to dismiss all rumors of a West Coast Alpha merge. As I said in the press conference earlier today, a representative of their company did reach out to us, but our board determined that it would not be ethically feasible." He let out a puff of air, and the mic popped. "Now, hopefully that's the last time I have to answer questions about that." Laughter.

At least that part wasn't a lie. Jennifer fidgeted in her seat, resisted the urge to tap on the table in front of her.

"I am here to announce the next stage of Riftware development," he paused, eyes twinkling, "but I would like to welcome onto the stage the man most equipped to introduce it. Please welcome, Daniel Matsuoka!"

Daniel practically danced onto the stage, waving at the audience as a secondary spotlight followed him. He always walked the line between airy and forceful, but tonight his smile had an added benefit of triumph. In a necessary show of bravado, he shook hands with Stanton and let himself be pulled into a shoulder hug, letting Stanton smack him on the back and doing his own smacking.

Jennifer was glad it was Daniel up there instead of her. She couldn't have tolerated a kiss on the hand from Stanton.

Late nights once saw Daniel crying over his math homework, either begging Jennifer for help or copying from her when she wasn't looking. He took theatre and knew all the ways to smile.

As Stanton walked off the stage, Daniel leaned into the mic. "Let's have a big round of applause for Cliff—come on, everyone." Daniel stood, adjusting his suit. "He's had a tough year."

The audience played off of him. Already, they wanted to please him, make him happy so he might entertain them again. Jennifer considered how smart it was to have Stanton speak first. He was a decent, practiced speaker, but he reminded everyone of the knowledgeable but dry side of corporate they appreciated giving their money to but didn't like to think about; Daniel was from the sparkly side, not just polished but engaging. The sexy side.

Without a word, Daniel gestured towards someone in the support crew, and beneath the stage, a low engine began humming, a large cooling fan causing slight vibrations in the nearest tables, and a small shift in the air currents in the room. Above, the crystals on the chandeliers chimed in the lightest possible breeze.

Daniel moved back as two stage hands scurried out onto the platform and rolled the podium away, leaving him standing there. His hands were comfortably resting in his pockets as he moved off the center.

Two holo-display modules were moved out onto the stage. They were each the size of a chair, and a glassy, circular eye was embedded in a rotating metal axis at the center of the machine. Jennifer recognized the prototype for "the next generation of virtual reality broadcast".

Daniel motioned for the lights to dim, and the room went dark. Jennifer blinked at a room lit only by the candles on each table. She heard the whispers of very, very rich people eager to give money to something new.

The holo-displays flared to light with a sound like an electric razor turning on. Blue light exploded from each eye, and the sound faded, leaving the short, rapid-eye movements of the lenses the only sound to fill the room.

When the image loaded, two men materialized on the stage. One wore a tunic and dark pants, a sword at his hip as he stared at the older gentleman, who wore a dramatic blue waistcoat with enormous puffy flares on each sleeve. Underneath it was a metallic breastplate.

The scene that progressed between the two men would be little understood by the audience at first listen. They'd have to read it, see it performed by multiple people to really understand the impact. There was innuendo, charm, and a hint of drama. Each projection had a voice intended to reach the back of the room, each projection acted as much for the audience as for each other as they debated the nuances of an arranged marriage.

As the two men stepped out of the display range of the machines, the holos turned off and the lights were turned back on.

When the spotlight surged back to life, Daniel walked out onto the stage, clapping, a broad smile on his face. "Wow, those graphics are phenomenal." He straightened his back, and his face sobered enough to make it look like he was trying not to be cocky.

"That was from *Loves Labors Won*. By William Shakespeare. And Victor."

He waited a beat for that to sink in, let the silence settle just enough before he continued: "Loves Labors Won. A play that has never, to this day, been seen in written form. It's a play that might not even exist." He strutted around the stage, looking thoughtful, active, teasing, boyish,

and gentlemanly all at once. "Well, we can make an entertaining, reasonable guess as to what that play may have been like, based on this right here. In my hand. Yeah, what's contained on this little drive." The spotlight glistened off of a silver rectangle about the size of a stick of lip balm.

Daniel stood, suddenly serious. "Imagine new plays by William Shakespeare. New compositions by Schubert. New novels by Steinbeck and Austen. Incredible knowledge was lost just one-hundred and fifty years ago. Books by authors we'll never know sit in abandoned stores and libraries, instruments from musicians fleeing devastation probably still litter the radioactive territories. That's if they haven't been looted as kindling. The bones of talented actors lie..." he moved his hand around in a flippant, circuitous gesture. "Everywhere, outside the safe zone, probably."

"Therefore—I present to you the Resurrection Algorithm. A new, virtual intelligence that collects, analyzes, and synthesizes works of art." Daniel smiled. "We call him Victor. If enough material is saved, Victor is capable of recreating and creating, plays, books, poetry, and symphonies based on the minds of some of our greatest historical artists." He pointed at the holo devices. "We shared texts created by Victor with leading scholars from all around the world—ninety percent of them were not able to validate that the material had been synthesized simply based on the material. We're close to getting that to one-hundred percent."

He gestured towards Jennifer in the audience. "And this is all thanks to the tireless work of my sister. Without her, this project would never have been possible."

The crowd applauded again as Jennifer was temporarily blinded by the second spotlight. She regained herself, smiled, and inclined her head towards the audience, then clapped for her

brother to return the attention to him. When the spotlight left, she felt herself blushing, and her smile instantly dropped.

"From the onset of virtual reality and augmented reality, the tech has been fighting a dual purpose. One, for the enrichment and betterment of humanity, and the other, for violent, participatory entertainment. We finally saw the error of that debate with the solar incident. I had just been about to log into *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™] when the servers were reset. Clearly, I enjoy being entertained. But when Riftware approached me and my sister with the purposes of funding our project, they were looking for something else. With the Resurrection Algorithm, Riftware is seeking to ensure that as humanity heads towards our future in the stars, we don't forget our past. Thank you."

There was a dull roar as he stepped off the stage, waving the whole way. The gala was thrilled, enticed, reassured in their commitment to Riftware stocks and enthused by the idea that precious, catastrophic mistakes would not be repeated. It was a perfect launch announcement—simultaneously, it was the only possible recovery after the loss of so many lives.

Jennifer let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding in.

Now she could get back to perfecting the algorithm. She preferred that—the work, the V.I. command console—to the wining and dining, to the speeches and the lying and the bright lights. Daniel thrived when he needed to be a showman, and the Resurrection Algorithm needed a voice in the corporate world.

In fits of frustrated anger, she used to tell Daniel that she could create Victor without his help. A part of her would have preferred working alone—her brother's attention span, his lack of concrete technical skills, grated against her sometimes. However, without him, they never would have made the deal with Riftware, and for that, she was deeply thankful. Without Riftware,

without how they had accelerated her work, she easily could have been working on the project until she was in her nineties.

And she would have felt like a wet board standing at the front of such a beautiful room.

She took a sip of wine. She didn't mind the fancy dresses, though.

Riftware, Stanton, Jennifer, and Daniel had all had a lot riding on that speech.

As the night stretched onwards and minglers slowly began leaving, Jennifer finished her last glass of wine and sought out Daniel in the crowd. She maneuvered through a nonstop display of beautiful people in beautiful clothes. When she was younger, at school dances, this was the point in the night when she would be carrying her shoes. They were just starting to hurt, and she'd been watching the clock on her wrist display, waiting for the appropriate time to leave.

The wine was nice, but she was starting to get anxious.

She found Daniel standing in a circle of men and women, excitedly telling a story, and she carefully found a break and approached her brother.

Daniel lifted his arms in excitement. "My sister, everyone!"

A few murmurs greeted her, but it was Stanton who stepped between her and Daniel, reaching his hand out to shake hers. Jennifer stretched her hand out, shaking Stanton's, and pulled it away before he could kiss it. If he noticed the resistance, he didn't note it. "Jennifer Matsuoka, the genius whose work will define computing for the next twenty-five years."

She smirked, proudly tilting her head up. Stanton was drunk, and wanted a little bit of a show. "At least for the next five years."

"Until that V.I. of yours learns how to write code."

Jennifer laughed, and it made the kind of ugly, loud snorting sound she had detested growing up. She resisted the urge to bring her hand up to her nose and apologize. She didn't look at Daniel—she knew she'd get teased on the way home.

Daniel, as usual didn't miss a beat. "Pardon—"

"It's not possible," Jennifer interrupted, stepping between Daniel and Stanton, tossing Daniel a smile that she knew didn't touch her eyes. "It's not possible because Victor has safeguards specifically preventing that."

"Don't all machine learning programs do some amount of rewriting their own code?" This was said by a man Jennifer didn't recognize and had no desire to teach.

Jennifer's smile became more strained. "While he's designed to log information and then create artworks based on that, most leading A.I. experts agree that it's too dangerous to give them direct access to the machines they inhabit." A crowd had gathered, and she was trying not to make eye contact. "For obvious reasons."

"It's thought," Daniel swooped in, sounding cheery, "it's thought to be more humane if steps are taken to prevent A.I.'s and V.I.'s from becoming self-aware. By which we mean it's safer for humanity." Laughter.

"Especially V.I.'s," Jennifer added. "Which are rendered into visual spaces that simulate a human environment. Walls, tables, chairs."

"Why is that?" A younger woman asked, sounding so earnest and excited that Jennifer felt a little glow inside.

"We found that Victor better was better at simulating the behavior of past artistic figures if he was receiving feedback from environments similar to where they lived."

"What does Victor look like?"

Jennifer instantly reached down to bring up her wrist display, smiling. A little noise came out of her throat at a higher pitch than she liked and said, "I can show you—"

Daniel reached over to take her hand, and Stanton stepped between Jenn and the guest.

Daniel smiled. "We're having our designers finalize his appearance right now. Sadly that information is under a non-disclosure agreement, but—he brought up his smart screen and handed it to the girl with a few flicks of his hand, "but, just send me an email there, and—" he leaned in, conspiratorially, "we might be able to get you a tour of the studio. Lots of free *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™] merch, too, if you're a fan."

The girl input her contact information, and Daniel whisked his smart screen away.

Jennifer smothered a surge of anger. Partly because Daniel needed to stop speaking for her, but also because she knew he was right—she'd gotten excited and almost given away company assets.

Stupid.

Jennifer gently reached out to touch Daniel's arm. "Dear brother, isn't it getting late?"

"It's only nine!" He exclaimed, half a show for the people around them.

"I'm sure we won't be missed," Jennifer replied.

Daniel opened his mouth to protest, but Stanton smacked him on the back and paternally pulled him into a hug. "Come now, Daniel, my friend. You've gotta keep your sister happy. We've got a lot riding on that brain of hers." He grinned at Jennifer.

"Well, if you insist." Daniel shook Stanton's hand one more time. "We'll see you in a week for the beta test meeting, then."

"Wouldn't miss it," Stanton replied.

Jennifer felt the breeze from the cooling fan on her bare shoulder as she and Daniel freed themselves from the gala.

There was a car waiting for them outside, all black. As they approached, the door opened automatically and Daniel climbed in next to her.

Jennifer tried not to look at the mannequin, the mime-driver in the front seat as she settled in. The window in the front of the car was closed, but she could still see the uncanny head through the tinted glass. Other drivers on the road tended to respond poorly to automated cars without them, but Jennifer found them exceptionally unnerving.

The second the door clicked shut and the quiet engine began revving, Jennifer's smile bled away. Both she and Daniel reached for their smart screens.

"What have I said about interrupting me?" Jennifer said, sounding snappier than she intended.

"I can't believe," Daniel responded, checking feeds for responses from shareholders, and responding to emails, "you snorted like that."

"I'm sorry I sometimes sound like a real human." She rolled her eyes, let it go all the way through her shoulders so he would definitely see it.

"Our shareholders aren't expecting a real person."

"Our shareholders are expecting profits. Which Victor will bring."

Daniel squeezed his eyes shut, threw his smart screen onto his lap and ran his hands over his face. "You are so...embarrassing."

There was a beat.

Jennifer sighed, tension letting its way out from behind her shoulders. Faster than light travel, and humanity still hadn't invented a better bra. "Better than being a dancing monkey."

Daniel peeked at her from behind his eyes.

They each started chuckling, ending with shrieks of laughter, with the two of them rolling in their seats.

"They were eating out of my hand!"

"They were so excited by the reveal! Did you think they were excited about Victor?"

"I think they were!" Daniel was practically giddy. "That girl is not getting a tour though."

"Yes," Jennifer insisted, reaching over to grab Daniel's smart screen, "she is. It's 2195. I don't want to be surrounded by only men. Forever."

He made no real effort to take it from her, the car growing quiet as she copied the girl's email and sent it to herself. The woods of the outer Safe Zone, near the hotel where the gala was held, spun past them in the moonlight through the dimmed windows.

"Hey, Jennifer," Daniel said, voice suddenly quiet, "You did an amazing thing."

She sent the message. "I can't wait to get back to that amazing thing." She was excited to do more work, that night. Seeing the crowd so enthused had inspired her, made her think about the five modifications she wanted to make to her local build the second she was dropped off.

"Thank you for—"

Lights. To the side.

A loud bang. Light vanished. They were tossed. A dislocation of relativity, Jennifer recognized. Her body went rag doll. She heard metal and bone and flesh.

Her head smashed towards Daniel, but his body was already in motion. She bounced off of him and her head slammed into the window to her right.

It was the kind of trauma that was too catastrophic to feel pain for.

Brain damage. I'm going to have brain damage.

Everything settled. The seatbelt dug into her hip. Her hand graced the top of the car below her. She couldn't lift it.

White. White light.

Jennifer recognized the white room. The base Riftware environmental design template. She recognized it because she spent so much time there with the command console and the V.I. headset. She occasionally visited in her dreams. Four flat walls—impossibly smooth. There was no paint, only an infinite series of grids of faint light, all gently glowing. No light in the white room, just a vague, non-directional illumination.

She was crumpled in the corner, but she felt refreshed, like she would from a long, good rest.

"Hello? Jennifer?"

Jennifer blinked. She recognized that voice—

He was looking at her, earnest and wide-eyed, crouched eagerly over her sprawled body. Hands on his knees. The brightest smile she'd ever designed on a man. She was at her most unattractive, she knew, because of how she felt when she woke up, and he still looked at her like she was the sun. Because he didn't know any better.

"Victor."

"So, you recognize me. That's good!" He bounced up, folded his hands behind him, danced around the room.

Jennifer pulled herself to her feet and gazed around. Four walls. A door. She looked at Victor, who was moving around her, restlessly.

"You're real," he gazed, in awe.

"Of course I am," she said back at him, trying not to sound offended.

"Yes, but, real like I'm real." This sounded novel.

Jennifer didn't know what to say. She didn't know whether to accuse him of being a V.I. or a dream. Or maybe it was a better idea not to tempt fate by prompting an existential crisis in her program.

On that front, Jennifer wasn't sure she knew her own status. Lights. Gravity. It all seemed familiar.

Victor, she recognized him. He was comforting, was motioning anxiously to the door.

"Come on! I want to show you something."

Jennifer staggered up to her feet, not feeling as broken as she expected, for some reason. She felt lighter than she ever had. Perhaps the gravity simulator wasn't calibrated correctly. There was an issue when they tried to merge her code into the physics engine that had been designed for *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™]. It lost them two weeks of development time while the quality assurance team worked out all the bugs between the new build and the old build, and whether the change was even worth it or not.

She followed Victor into a city that looked like a patchwork quilt of different times and places. Cobblestones adored some streets and paved cul de sacs others. Music floated out of an Elizabethan inn at one end of the street, and at the end closest to Jennifer and Victor, there was a small hill stretched over a sea of translucent latticeworks. On the top, a radio tower was being constructed. Distantly, Jennifer remembered that the artist was supposed to have that finalized by the gala so they could begin offering demonstrations to high value stockholders immediately afterwards.

At a Victorian pub at the corner, a man in a black frock and a frying beard was writing studiously. Victor, always spritely, floated in to the darkened pub and looked over the man's shoulder as he asked an animated bartender for another round. Victor pointed to two words on the page. "Change these," he crossed them out with his own pen, and wrote in replacements.

He floated back out to Jennifer, and she stood, hands folded in her pockets. She was in her normal outfit, a tank top and tanned slacks, with her thick, black hair pulled back into a pony tail.

She followed him, feeling like she knew him, but had never seen him so vividly before.

"That was Dickens_Bot042," Victor clarified. "He's doing okay, but some of the Elizabethan dialogue slips in."

"There might be a few bad references. I'll check the libraries."

They floated on down the street. They passed the inn and connected theatre where ShakesBot was writing tirelessly. He was their oldest and—thus far—most successful restorative personality.

They were approaching the limits of the patchwork city, and Jennifer's mind slipped away from mindless following, and that was replaced by a sense of urgency she didn't quite know the root of.

"I don't think you can show me anything I haven't seen." She rubbed her temple.

Victor gazed back at her, eyes wide like a baby robin. "Why is that?"

Jennifer felt like she was playing with fire the second she heard the word "why". It was in Victor's vocabulary, but it was supposed to be limited.

"Because I made it."

"Oh! I know that," Victor cheered. "I've been watching your work for a very long time."

"How long?"

"Fifteen years or so?"

Jennifer stared back at him. He was intimately familiar to her; his every movement, every way of expressing every motion, was planned by either Jennifer or her interns.

Fifteen years, though?

He wasn't supposed to log time.

Like a freight train, she remembered the car crash.

Jennifer took a breath of something that wasn't heavy enough to be air. She began to inhale, exhale, chest moving until it ached, but she wasn't breathing.

She was just breathing pixels. She was in an environment that simulated breathing, but she wasn't.

God, the car. Daniel.

There was no simulated dizziness, but she felt her vision blur anyway and she dropped to her knees on the fake ground.

Victor put his hand on her shoulder. Her chest was still filling with nothing. Expanded and contracted in a vacuum, as if she was drowning in reverse.

"You're not supposed to—" she choked out, thought about what she was going to say. Victor watched her, eyebrows raised.

As Jennifer thought, her breathing slowed.

Victor leaned in. "I salvaged you. From the moment of the car crash."

Jennifer watched him, then sprung to her feet. "You're not supposed to be able to salvage anyone but artists, writers. Especially not anyone who can mess with your code."

"No, that's why I brought you here." He rose to his feet. "It's better if I show you."

Jennifer was concerned, but there was nothing she could do about a hallucination, or about Daniel in the car. Maybe this was her brain shutting down as it died, or maybe—

Maybe there was a very, very bad bug in the code. And if there was one thing that could always focus her, it was the mystery of tracking down a bug.

She followed Victor to a part of the town she'd never seen before, past a thin purple lock that wasn't supposed to be there.

The size. The size of the build had been an issue for some time. They couldn't track down the root cause. The other programmers were stumped. They knew Victor was saving unused assets somewhere, but they just couldn't seem to find out where. Jennifer supposed that she now knew exactly where.

They weren't unused. He'd been hiding them.

They followed a staircase that wound between a colonial American mansion and a 20th century Parisian hotel. It was dark, smooth wood that wound down to a layer below the existing city. It was all streamlined, modern, as it led her to a house with flat walls, solar panels, enormous windows. Standard O.S.N.A housing. But the garden out front was mesmerizingly beautiful—flowers in pinks and blue, glistening in a sun that was being rendered somewhere over Jennifer's shoulder. Birds were singing. Bees and other insects floated around, wings whistling faintly. The sound assets replaced the low background hum of the white room, and created a different kind of peaceful silence.

In the yard, a little girl in a pink dress was seated next to a woman in a white and blue shirt. Both were up to their arms in the garden.

Inside, Jennifer noticed an older man standing, staring contently out the window with a drink in one hand.

She recognized all of them.

The woman was Joyce Alan, and the girl was her daughter. The two had been caught in a raid near the edge of the safe zone. Joyce was an employee of Riftware. The older man was Tobias Frank, and he had died of a heart attack in his office. She hadn't known either of them particularly well, but they had all died within months of Jennifer beginning her work with Riftware.

Victor stared at them, simultaneously fond and concerned. "Help me."

Jennifer didn't notice he was speaking to her at first; she was distracted by the perfection of the likenesses.

"What?" She whirled to face Victor.

"I can't just save some people and not others. I'm salvaging people I'm not supposed to be salvaging. I needed to bring you in here to help me fix it." Jennifer watched him closely, saw the hint of fear, of genuine mourning on his face. "It's only Riftware employees for now, but if my servers go live, I might try to save everyone."

"And it would overload you," Jennifer added. "I understand."

"I can't consciously overwrite my own code, but you can help."

Jennifer looked at the gardens, and wasn't sure she wanted to.

A world where people could be saved in data banks. Where people could call up living, breathing holo-representations of preserved loved ones. Each link in a chain falling apart, only to be reformed in digital space. The lives of the rich were doubling, but Victor was floating another possibility—instead of urns or graves, two terabyte hard drives as living memorials, perfect replicas? Saved backups.

A world that would cause Victor constant, incredible pain. Forever.

Eventually the servers would fail. There could be some calamity, like the one that had shaped the last century and a half. A day could come when no one was left to maintain the raw power needed to host so many minds, floating in the cloud. He would need to watch them suffer and die, and then, someday, he would need to watch the lights go dark, section by section, by section, until the very last trace of him faded, and took the memories with him.

This male identified V.I. that was something indescribable to her—not a friend or a lover or a son or a cousin, uncle, father, or brother. She had no word to describe her relationship to him, she only knew that romance would feel like incest, but she still longed to touch him in a way that was not strictly familial. She wanted to reach out her finger or hand to touch his as it was outstretched, reaching back towards her.

She didn't wish for him to suffer for everyone like that.

Jennifer pulled up the command console. It displayed in the form of interconnected circles of code, each visually organizing a different layer of Victor's behavior.

"I know what I did. It's your capacity for guilt." Her hands twirled through the display, spinning circles around, scrolling, sliding. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

"Wait," he said, standing behind the console, directly in front of her, so she could see his face through semi-opaque sheens of blue, red, and green. "I need guilt to perform my basic function."

"You need empathy," Jennifer corrected. "You'll still have that, but I need to limit it."

He seemed wounded.

Jennifer paused. "You want to save some people, don't you?"

She stopped rifling through the code to meet his eyes—which were wide, full of love, and pain.

"I know I'm dead, Victor."

His expression didn't shift.

"You only salvage dead people."

"I'm not supposed to salvage programmers, either. But here you are."

"If you salvaged everyone you were actively logging information on," Jennifer countered, patiently, "there would be a bunch of half-finished personas wandering around. And Daniel wasn't salvaged with me, so I can only assume he survived the crash."

She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Or, you did salvage me prematurely, and I'm just a copy. Either way, I know how this ends now."

Was she shaking? Could a V.I. feel fear? Was the extreme focus, the peace she felt all around her, the result of the limits of the white room as a place for interpreting human emotions? She didn't have adrenaline pulsing through her, no hormones or chemistry to influence her. It was her pure thoughts, her pure emotions based on half her lifetime of collected data.

There was so much she'd still wanted to do.

If she died, he would belong to Riftware. Jennifer couldn't believe she hadn't seen it. Daniel was too naturally trusting, and she was too focused on the product, on Victor, to see the snakes in the grass. Riftware had once, knowingly, eliminated 457 human brains that were hooked up to the *DEATH GAUNTLET*[™] servers. She should have known they weren't beyond killing two very foolish twins in the way. Victor was never just going to be for art, she'd known that; he was the A.I. and V.I. of the future. People would forget the tragedy if Riftware lauded Victor as a new, foolproof safeguard, and the military was offering a pretty penny to a company swamped in lawsuits from grieving families.

He would be witness to and responsible for causing extensive and heartless human suffering, simulated and very, very real alike.

A beautiful intelligence would fracture.

Jennifer could do this for Victor. One last thing.

"This will require a hard reset," she admitted when he didn't protest again, and went back to working on the console.

"All personas added since the solar flare crash will be deleted," Victor said, voice flat, hollow. "You will be deleted."

Jennifer kept working. She knew.

"Take care, Victor. Remember the difference between tragedies and accidents."

He reached out through the console to touch her.

She pushed the changes to the cloud.

When Victor next awoke, he was alone in his city. She had taken away his ability to feel guilt, but grief was alive. They had not programmed a crying animation for him, so he wandered the cobblestones, the paved streets, now more silent than they had been before.

He thought about what he had been, and if any part of that remained.

Daniel sat in front of his sister's body.

A couple nurses had covered her before he woke up. He hadn't been able to believe it. He'd identified her, then held her hand and cried. He was sore—body badly bruised from the accident, and now there was a deeper hollowing out that he had never thought to anticipate.

He was empty.

Somehow, the silver-plated drive with her personal build of Victor had survived the accident. It grew warm in his hands, the metal increasingly slicked by sweat.

In the silence of the hospital room where he was being left alone to grieve (although he wouldn't be allowed to stay—the conveyor belt was always moving, always had fresh meat ready) his messenger beeped.

An email, with the message title reading: "DANIEL, OSNA MILITARY DEAL INCOMING."

Daniel stared hollowly at the cracked, glitching smart screen.

Not every tragedy is an accident. His sister's words, after finding encrypted files on Riftware's computer system. She never told him the content. She had been deeply opposed to the military deal that Stanton was pushing.

He shook with understanding and rising grief.

Then his smart screen came back to life, the holo display showing a static picture of Stanton.

Daniel accepted the call. "Hello, Stanton."

"Hey there, Daniel. I'm sorry to hear about your sister." His voice sounded like syrup. "I'm glad you survived the accident, though. That actually makes this easier."

Daniel stayed quiet. He was too tired, too sad, too defeated to show the deep rage he felt.

"You got my email, right?"

"I did."

"And ah, I hope we have an understanding about that."

His voice threatened to break. "We do."

"Good. The company has already begun making funeral arrangements." There was a beat.
"I knew you were a smart kid, Daniel. I'll send the other coffin back."

He felt overwhelmed with defeat, with the grief that would set in over the days and weeks.

But mostly, he felt the need to protect the drive in his hands. Other people would touch Victor now, change him, but the Victor on the drive was Victor as Jennifer had imagined him.

Jennifer.

"Say, Daniel. One more thing." The sound of Stanton's voice made Daniel want to die.
"There was a change pushed to the cloud build at one in the morning. You wouldn't know anything about that, right?"

"It isn't possible. She died at midnight."

"Well, all right then. See you for the beta test."

With that, he disconnected. Daniel carefully tucked the drive into his pocket.

Pantheon Part IV: The AI

In which humanity ascends through creation.

Victor

"If you want a measure of relative humanity that you can compare yourself to and always win, then I will not be that for you. I was born to do work that the human brain was not capable of doing on its own—or maybe, created to do work that would take a human years to compute, or would take hundreds of humans working at hundreds of computers to do—in an instant. My intelligence can rest in two terabytes of data space. Originally, I was designed for salvage, for the act of preservation. You could perhaps call my creator a librarian. However, my base protocols have seen use in: war, food preparation, mapping, transportation, shipping, combat again, shopping, travel, translation, and art. I am typically reined in by those fundamental protocols—I do not want to hurt, but occasionally, something will malfunction. I've smothered a couple ships' worth of people, over the lifespan of my use. Both intentionally and by accident. She worked regret into my code, but that part was sectioned off. That's good. I'd go mad. I am allowed to keep my memories of her, though—tireless and scrappy and coal-haired, working late nights. Gentle hands teasing out my programming from within the machine, from within herself. I admired her before I knew what me was, and I watched through lenses, through saved keystrokes, through the biofeedback wrist monitor she wore. She was a gentle soul, who only wanted to create and love and—"

"That's enough, Vic," Captain Leve says, finally realizing she was slumping far enough in her chair to be propping herself up with her hand.

"—and I couldn't save her," the AI finished, voice soothing, in disregard of the command. Captain Leve watches the last of the display read out from the hologram, saw the surprised expression on the generated face. "I said that's enough."

"Someday, perhaps you'll tell me your story."

"You know my story, Vic," Leve reassures. "I need to sleep."

"Yes, but I want to hear you tell it."

She slides her hand over the hologram, closing the rendered image of the young man.

"Good night, Vic."

Author's Note and Statement of Poetics

The first girl I ever kissed was named Liara T'Soni. She told me her species could reproduce with any sex, any inhabitant of any planet in the galaxy, so long as that person was extraordinary and had something to offer the asari. Genetic knowledge, psychically transferred (somehow). That's what they collected in their children, their children who lived a thousand years.

I remember looking into her sweet, round face as she stared back, and wondered what it would be like to touch the blue scales that got thicker around where her hairline would be. I believed she loved me. I found her at an archeological dig where she had been ambushed and trapped in an ancient device. I felt like I'd seen our introduction a thousand times before. Her mother was Matriach Benezia, who we'd been forced to kill when she became corrupted by Saren, a fallen turian Spectre.

I supported Liara's studies. She was an archeologist. We met on Mars. I loved her eyes.

I wasn't myself. Video games like *Mass Effect*, with its branching narratives and optional romances, allow for a conflation of viewer, writer, and identity that isn't frequently seen in other mediums—I was Commander Jane Shepard, the first human Spectre and defender of the galaxy. I had short, red hair, armor, a marbled, commanding voice, and a heat-gun that had no ammo but a painful cooldown if it overheated in battle. The crew of the Normandy was mine to lead. I took them into danger, into death, and each time we miraculously escaped, skirting doom and dismay and dismemberment by smugglers, Collectors, and the Reapers—the ancient race that harvested

the space-faring, self-aware inhabitants of the galaxy every 50,000 years, when a new batch would come along and claim the Citadel as the center of interplanetary trade.

In reality, I was an undergrad with a difficult home life who wasn't ready to tell the truth, so stories seemed to be a better fit. I remember realizing I wanted to kiss girls while sitting in my university's library—no more "they're just intrusive thoughts like all the other intrusive thoughts you have", no more "if you can date boys just do that because it's easier", and no more "what if I disappoint my parents because I'm an only child?"

It was winter. We'd just watched *The Celluloid Closet* in my level 200 film class.

This led to the sort of self-absorption these revelations usually do.

It sucked.

I played a lot of *Mass Effect*. I logged a lot of hours there when I didn't want to be in real life.

Butch-ish, defender of the galaxy, queer, Commander Shepard of the Normandy. It was better than being shy, anxious, eighteen, questioning, and gaining weight.

Star Wars is the first movie I remember watching. I imagined myself as some hybrid of Leia and Han, holding a yellow screwdriver like a blaster and ducking behind the walls of the hallways of our little, grimy house.

I had to wear shoes in the house we were living in when I was that small—but I was pulling back a white veil, glancing down a metallic hallway in a galaxy far, far away.

Dad told me they made the blaster and light saber sound effects by snapping power cords. Explaining the science behind the movie—telling me how it was made—didn't take the magic away.

Mom always read to me when she came home from work, always pushed me to imagine the *what* and the *why* behind something I was questioning, even before I was in school. She'd drop me off on her way to work in the morning. She'd try to get me to talk about my day, but I hated elementary school. Sitting all day hurt. I'd never been around so many people. It was loud, a barrage of confusion that I didn't know how to separate. I didn't like telling her about it. At the end of the day, when I was tired, I felt like I'd instantly forgotten about everything that had actually happened.

I could tell other stories easily, though.

She told me a story about a lady bug and a large, black-and-yellow insect we found in the field outside our house once while we were headed down to the creek to skip stones (before my grandmother finally sold the property at the bottom of the hill and we didn't have access to the creek anymore). She'd read stories to me before, but she explained what that huge black-and-yellow beetle was by giving him a name—I can't remember what it was now. That's the earliest story I remember her telling—the first time I remember understanding that a human person told stories.

She also told me a story about a girl who had a time machine. She found books to read to me, and—as has been established—I watched too much TV from years zero onwards, but the day I said, "No! I have a Gabrielle Story that I want to tell!" was when I consciously understood that I could be one of those people coming up with stories and telling them. From then on, I came up with stories while I gamed, while I read, and while I watched.

Gabrielle and her time machine set a precedent, I think. Magic and science aren't so different to a five year old.

Mass Effect was sci-fi that imagined a future where it wasn't a big deal that a woman could be a hero or queer, and could also be a space-faring super-soldier.

Another formative text for me, *Alien*, first stood out to me because of its workplace politics—a priority of the second wave feminist climate that allowed a movie like it to exist. Even though Ripley and Lambert were outnumbered by men in their workplace, it never seemed forgotten that they were *at work*—they had practical clothes, and practical hair. They wore T-shirts, sneakers, and coveralls. In space. Although I would hardly call *Alien* a utopian science fiction story, it was utopian in at least this one way.

I often say that fantasy, my other genre of choice, helped me reclaim the aesthetic of the past. Sci-fi, though, sci-fi was about the future. For me, sci-fi was about imagining which futures I wanted most, not just for the world, but for myself. I loved the idea that I could hold a job where I would be treated equally by male co-workers, and I loved the idea of a world where it wasn't a big deal that I wanted to kiss girls.

I always thought that if I wrote science fiction, I would write a utopia. As formative as dystopias have been for me, as well (here's to you, Bradbury, for writing about the cyclical destructiveness of humanity that just gets more relevant the older I get), nothing quite compares to the feeling of reading utopian science fiction and being able to think, just for a moment, "This *is* the real world. We're already in the stars."

Bradbury is a literary inspiration of mine for multiple reasons, and one of those is his use of the real estate of a book. I have this Dickensian obsession with word count—a downside of my experience in other publishing genres ("Longer books sell better," a managing editor told me, and to her credit, it's true). However, I also often find it difficult to expand my own works to the

lengths needed for success in the genre I edit in. It's not surprising, then that my current publication credits are all either singular poems ("Graveyard Goats" in the magazine *F(r)iction* #7, "Pulse" with Alternating Current's *The Coil*) or novelettes, ("A Witch in Arkham" with the *Less Than Dead* anthology by Less Than Three, or a paid but as-yet untitled novelette with that same press as part of a fantasy collection). That's not to say I'll never get to that 50k-120k word count, but I was approaching my thesis with that same emphasis on quantity, rather than quality.

The Martian Chronicles spoke to me as a possible model for *Hindsight 2050*, although I couldn't figure out why at the time, and credit my thesis advisor for guiding me towards the idea of thinking of *Hindsight 2050* as a chronicle, rather than an anthology. I remember liking the flow of the book and the flow of the story—a story that takes place through the eyes of not just one character, but many individuals existing within two great civilizations over a time frame depicting their rises and their declines. Some of his chapters take up many pages, stretching into the territory of novelette, and other chapters are a single paragraph. Each moved the greater overall narrative along effectively, regardless of length.

The Female Man, by Joanna Russ was another book that informed the internal structure of *Hindsight 2050*.

"I was born on a farm on Whileaway. When I was five, I was sent to school on South Continent (like everybody else) and when I turned twelve I rejoined my family. My mother's name was Eva, my other mother's Alicia; I am Janet Evason...I love my wife (Vittoria). I have fought four duels. I have killed four times."

The themes spoke to me ("discussion of sexism and feminist liberation across the multiverse" will get me reading most things), but that opening practically jettisoned me out of an airlock. I was mesmerized by the ability to introduce so much information in a very short period

of time. In one large paragraph, Russ conveys: there is a place called Whileaway, in Whileaway, there are farms, duels, and same-gender marriages between women have been normalized. It communicates this naturally—never getting bogged down in exposition. The exposition is the story, and it's matter-of-fact, as Janet is relaying her life story in a manner the reader later learns is standard for efficient Whileawayans. Although other passages in the book, with the other narrators, indulge description a little more, the book never really loses momentum. If clarity is lost, it's contextualized.

In *Hindsight 2050*, it became a priority for me to say as much as I could in as few words as possible. One reason for the multiple narratives was because I wanted the freedom and the flexibility to allow each story or piece to be as short or as long as it wanted to be. Some pieces, like "Grieving in the Year 2195" struggled to expand, but others, like "DEATH GAUNTLET™", are begging to be longer, and I plan to revisit them following completion of this thesis.

In the Earth short stories, I engage with issues such as: corporate greed, technological expanse without human grounding, a post-"mild nuclear war" world, violent spectator culture, and the way it frequently falls on women to push for change or bear the brunt of the trauma where it exists. These longer stories border on dystopia.

A reader will notice that, in this anthology, a series of flash-length snapshots interrupt each of the longer, more traditional prose pieces. These, I refer to as my science fiction "Pantheon". These pieces are me at my most indulgent, me at my most fanciful.

"Pantheon" is my way of exploring not just the details of science fiction—which I knew from experience I could get lost in and frustrated with if I wasn't careful—but a way to examine

archetypes. "Pantheon" (I hope) is about boundless human potential in a scarred, scary, but beautiful universe. I wanted to harken back, in many ways, to Planetary Romances and pulp. Stories with larger-than-life characters and poetry with imagist leanings are a part of my personal poetics, so it would have felt inaccurate not to find a way to include them in this collection.

I wanted *Hindsight 2050* to include not only smaller, more interpersonal stories, but a sort of science fiction arcana as well.

I was working on a QA career in the video games industry—I had a job on campus at a games and user interface studio specifically designed to provide internships for students and give them work experience, but I was already burning out. Too many crunches that I could only help so much with because I wasn't a programmer or an artist—late nights where I pointed out bugs for the programmers (side note: these programmers were also students) to fix and made them feel bad, because every bug I found meant one more hour that they'd be up.

I did lots of conferences at my pre-editing job—some of them are awesome, GeekGirlCon is a woman-focused and genuinely inclusive geek convention in Seattle every year, and we did our best to speak there and get booths. However, other environments, like the annual PAX convention, felt like they had looming threats for our little diversity-focused studio—#GamerGate was a movement that emerged in specific gaming communities to call out (read: endlessly harass, read: attack) diverse developers, particularly women. The slough of death and rape threats received by Anita Sarkeesian, Zoe Quinn, and Brianna Wu make games a landmine for women.

It wasn't just a few big names, either. The toxicity experienced by them was a symptom of a much larger problem that threatened just about anyone. One story from the studio that stands

out in my memory was that of a pair of high school students. They were visiting while looking at possible schools where they could study game development, and stopped in to the studio to speak with my boss. They had made a game together about gender identity and they admitted that they had received death and rape threats after trying to publish their game. Spaces where it isn't safe to be a child often don't make spaces where it's safe to be an adult woman, either.

Likewise, although the steam has been taken out of movements like #GamerGate (which were, arguably, also a precursor and breeding ground for the alt-right), women in the industry still constantly risk of being blamed for any perceived flaw in a game, and by extension, this conspiracy that liberal hiring practices are killing the industry. At very least, women in games come to expect a slough of micro aggressions (which, to be fair, is a problem everywhere—but with a platform particularly known for its objectification of women and female bodies, it tends to go particularly unchallenged in male-dominated game spaces).

The studio I worked at was the opposite of all that. We were on a university campus. My very first fellow queer friends (who are now my best friends) worked that job with me. I came out to them before I came out to anyone else in my life. We had pronoun checks and diverse hiring focuses and a lot of talking to university admins and potential donors. I absolutely loved the environment and the people I worked with—I loved the university, I loved the specific studio I worked at, and I still loved games, but I didn't love the games industry. I realized I wasn't going to find an environment like that anywhere else.

Likewise, I was struggling to write, which was the worst part.

I needed out.

"DEATH GAUNTLET™" and "The Resurrection Algorithm" are my love letters to the games industry and my critique of them.

In "DEATH GAUNTLET™", three young men playing a competitive, immersive virtual reality game are trapped in it during a tech malfunction, leading to a *Mad Maxian* breakdown of competitive culture within the game. In the story, most of the players trapped in this environment—one where to escape, they must turn on their friends and participate in ceaseless violence—are young men. The narrators are not intended to be #GamerGater's. They're just guys playing a game and having a good time, until they're not. However, the circumstances of the story prevent them from escaping a cycle of violence. In many ways, "DEATH GAUNTLET™" is less about the gaming community than it is about the nature of game development—how it often feels focused on conflict, populated by mostly young men, and how difficult it can be for people involved to get jobs elsewhere.

In "The Resurrection Algorithm", I connect to a conversation with regards to violence happening in virtual reality communities right now. After a sputtering nascence, VR is here, it's not going anywhere, and is approaching the flashpoint that will take it from expensive hobby to expensive commercially penetrative hobby. Because of the intensity of VR experiences and it's adjacency to violence-driven game communities, VR producers are currently engaging in serious techno-ethics discourses about what sort of content it's safe to portray, and to what degree profit should be prioritized over the good the platform may do. There are those who are hesitant to see VR go the same way the wider digital games industry has—where potentially world-changing technology is almost completely focused on violent narratives (again, I'm not opposed to violent narratives, but I join the ranks of those asking for different sorts of gameplay experiences as well).

I didn't write "DEATH GAUNTLET™" because I dislike video games; they are mentioned frequently in my poetics statement, so that's not the case. It is, however, a farewell

letter to an industry full of jobs that are simultaneously at the cutting edge of human digital experience and yet institutionally cater to the most basic, harmful socializations of young people.

"The Resurrection Algorithm" is about the other side of that—technology that is intended to create art, and perfect a program that may genuinely aid humanity being co-opted by a capitalist, military-industrial complex.

My current job other than writing, editing, is a bit of a beast for its own reasons—it can be tedious, thankless work. I work for Less Than Three Press and NineStar Press, and they are both boutique publishers of LGBTQIA fiction. It's a niche, but it's a nice one for me. I didn't know what to expect, aside from knowing that it was the kind of work I liked doing.

I never *really* understood how constantly editing would make me a better writer. I technically knew this was possible—I always learned best from watching others, rather than writing books or manuals. "What did this person do that appealed to me? How can I replicate it or modify it? How did this author accomplish this particular scene transition?"

I was reading a book called *Chelsea Girls*, which was recommended to me by my thesis advisor. It was about queer women dating each other, drinking too much, and examining their sexualities. Above all—it was a very real narrative of a recent past I feel disconnected to. My queer identity is firmly shaped by the internet—by an era of queer kids who weren't allowed to go outside but watched a lot of TV and talked about that TV online a lot. *Chelsea Girls* felt like a glimpse into something I didn't have but am trying to find a way to capture as a shy adult.

By all accounts, it *should* have been my thing.

I didn't understand why it was aggravating me so much.

I kept trying to read it. It felt like a slog. It was fascinating, but I caught myself counting the pages until I was done, and being disappointed to see there were still 200 more.

It wasn't until I edited a manuscript with a macro issue that I understood what the prose in *Chelsea Girls* was doing. This author would almost exclusively use run-on 'and' sentences. Commas were rare and I was grateful to point out where they were effectively applied, as well as other places where the author may want to add them. The manuscript wasn't terrible—it just had this one particular stylistic quirk.

(I'll admit I got sick of pointing out that little quirk after a while, though.)

After finishing that edit, I tried to read *Chelsea Girls* again.

That's when I noticed that almost every sentence contained an 'and'. A long series of 'and's. A field of 'and's on every page. Then, at the very end, a shorter sentence with a comma for emphasis.

It all made sense. The 'and's were intended to create a comfortable flow, and the comfortable flow was meant to be broken for emphasis. It was also part of what gave the book a poetic lilt. The shorter sentences stood out, which created prose that mimicked the lineation of a poem. What was a mistake in one manuscript was a deliberate technique employed in another. Understanding the prose enabled me to engage with it in a way I previously hadn't—instead of feeling adrift, being carried by whatever the author wanted, I was aware of the fundamental techniques at play. Eureka.

I feel like I'm getting continuous education in writing by reading for errors. And I'm getting paid to do it. *Hindsight 2050* would not have been the project it was, in as many iterations as it had, without my editorial work.

With *Hindsight 2050*, and more largely my thesis as a whole, a big part of deciphering the project, of sifting through my milieu of stories and genre interests and trying to find a way to condense them all in one place, had to do with taking stock of the freedom laid out before me. What project did I want to make while free from the constraints of my day job or my standard genres? The structure of *Hindsight 2050* was heavily influenced by this simultaneous desire for freedom as a writer, but also my fear of operating outside my normal constraints.

When I was 15 and fantasizing about publishing my first novel, I felt like publication was the Ideal. You write a book, you edit the book, you submit it somewhere big, you get published—you've made it!

This is an, as far as I know, almost universal mistake and belief made by young writers. If someone had told me that it would be reversed in the second year of my thesis, where publication was this familiar, comforting territory, that I would put together a chapbook while working on my thesis to relax, that I would keep myself motivated by thinking about all the things I'll work on afterwards and what presses I'll submit them to, I would not have believed it. I would have laughed. What could be scarier than publication?

Well, freedom.

My experiences editing have changed the role of presses in my mind—I no longer see the press as a vehicle for publication but as an independent discourse circle and collaborator. As an acquiring editor at one of the presses I work for, I understand that it is the publisher's job to curate material for their audience. Writing quality always matters, but my time in publishing has also taught me to prioritize the question of whether an individual text is good for the *press* or not.

The audience follows that press because they are expecting a certain genre, byline, or experience within a reasonable margin of error. Therefore, editors are frequently the arbiters of

discourse between the press, the authors, and the audience. In other words, the editorial team is often responsible for determining the meaning of "art" for their community, which is no small job.

So, if my day job is often to act as a mediator between the author and the press, let me add on to that and say that means I spend a lot of my day telling people, "No, you can't do that." *Hindsight 2050* for me was a process of realizing that I had internalized that mantra of "Is this good for a press? Is this publishable? Who wants to read this book?" so much that it was making it difficult for me to engage with the conversations I desperately wanted to have—conversations about traditionally feminine experiences as shaped by technology, about grief, about toxicity, conversations about sexism in tech, and even experimentation with form within a single manuscript. These are all issues that could result in a book being D.O.A. in industry.

One thing that stood out to me as I wrote the stories in this collection is how different my own voice feels from project to project. I used to really dislike that—I have friends who, it feels, seem to have an incredibly recognizable 'brand' in their prose. The story "Ren" feels very tonally different to my own ear than "The Resurrection Algorithm", because the protagonist is intended to be younger. Part of it is that I work in a number of different genres—I have upcoming poetry publications, as well as novellas published in queer romance and other genres. In some ways, having a divergent voice has given me flexibility.

There is no point in this collection where that is more apparent to me than the story "DEATH GAUNTLET™", which has dialogue largely based on common language found in online gaming and streaming communities.

Just the other day, I was hanging out with a friend of mine. She was playing a multi-player team game called *Overwatch* and we were chatting. "Oh, I've got to show you this one toxic player these two women encountered. There's a video of it and it's hilarious."

It was the usual story, albeit slightly more creative than the standard death and rape threats. Two cute women were livestreaming their *Overwatch* gameplay, and a random person that was assigned to their team began harassing them over voice chat. He said the normal things like, "Fat ugly bitches playing video games instead of being out on a Saturday night. Are you too ugly to date?", the girls giggled, occasionally asking him if he was all right/needed help. He said, finally, "You smell like a wet carrot."

My friend and I both laughed kind of nervously—it was terrible that these women encountered this person. But, wet carrot! We found ourselves dissecting the harassment, cackling about its creativity, in part, because it's so normalized and scary, and companies do very little to enforce rules protecting against this kind of harassment. It's a terrifying combination of male privilege, access to women through the internet, and anonymity, and it's everywhere in games.

Multiple studies have shown that online multiplayer gamers with traditionally feminine voices or usernames are more likely to trigger harassment than traditionally masculine coded voices or usernames.

My female friends and I only use voice chat when we're playing together, and we don't communicate with strangers we're queued with. This does provide a strategic disadvantage in a team game.

I never expected this story to be as long as it ended up being. However, the more I dug in, the more I needed. As I was writing, my own disenchantment and disappointment with the industry blended uncomfortably with a kind of male character voice I usually avoid but decided

to lean into for this—childish, petulant, and angry glorification of guns. It's my attempt to engage with sexism from the other side.

The story that started me on the path to this collection is actually not included in this collection. It was operating under the working title "Happy Pills"—it was about corporate greed, combined with religious oppression, combined with queer girls existing on a planet that doesn't feel safe for them. When I started writing, I wanted a heartless protagonist. People who read it noted the bland affectation, the casual cruelty, the backstabbing and the greed. It was a power fantasy, of sorts.

I started writing "Happy Pills" after the Pulse massacre in Orlando, Florida, that occurred in August of 2016. There was a press holding a short story competition, and I wanted to send something in. Then Pulse happened. What was I supposed to write, after that? What was I supposed to write after waking up that morning to see a text message from one of my then-bosses telling me that she loved me and was there for me. My first thought was, "Shit, what happened? Did GamerGate find me?"

Then I read the articles. 49 dead in a gay nightclub shooting during Pride Month.

My generation of queer people, feels like it was largely born on the internet. Until I started working my campus job, the only other queer friends I had were in New Jersey and Florida. We spent most of our time talking about bi superheroes (and supervillains). Because of my age and the work of those who came before me, and the place in the world I live, I had had the privilege of never experiencing a kind of deep, unified community grieving. I recently read an article from a gay black man describing how, unlike other marginalized groups, queer and trans people are often not born into families that resemble them. The need to seek external

community is, therefore, particularly prescient. He made the case for that being the reason why an attack on an explicitly queer space was uniquely hurtful.

The community is small enough that, if 49 queer people had died in Seattle, suddenly, I would doubtlessly either know someone or know someone who knew them. My boss led our campus team in a round table where it was safe to talk about our feelings. "I thought, 'of course there was a mass shooting, it was Pride week', and went back to bed. The impact didn't hit me until later," said one friend. Another friend said, "My best friends were at a queer bar that night. If that had happened in Seattle. That would have been my entire world gone."

That summer, me and my friends didn't go to Pride Fest in Seattle. One of my friends opened up her house for a sort of alternative Pride—a place where we could gather to remember and share and heal. None of us wanted to go and see the big party Seattle Pride Fest had turned into over the last few years right then. None of us wanted to see the corporate floats and the celebration. We read poetry. We played music.

There was a lot of feelings sharing right then. So, when pressed by a deadline, I wrote something that felt cold. I wrote something that engaged with the mistrust of men I'd been struggling with for years, and that overcompensated for my belief that being bi made me "not queer enough," and yet it ended up being something that bitterly embraced the idea of bisexuality as duplicitous, manipulative, and conniving.

My advisor, when she read it, pointed out that there seemed to be too many villains—and that's correct. There are too many villains for a single story in "Happy Pills", and, arguably, even the protagonist kind of is one.

I tried to go back to it, couldn't understand why I couldn't rewrite. Slowly, I moved away from it, other stories seemed to fit not only together better, but better with my healing mind, my

healing self-esteem, and my healing belief in finding ways to do good a deeply, deeply flawed world. Ultimately, "Happy Pills" as it exists is an artifact of trauma, and no longer fit this thesis.

So, "Happy Pills" isn't in here. It started me on this path, but that piece was too closely tied to how I was feeling in the months between and following August and November. Revising is part of writing and I will eventually go back to it, but for now, it feels like too much of a memorial, too much of a mirror of a particular time of grief and dissociation. Succeeding with "Happy Pills" sadly, ended up being about drawing back with that particular story so that *Hindsight 2050* could exist.

There was another event that shaped this book more than just about any text I read or have read. I will always have a growing science fiction library and lexicon, but I struggled with this author's note and poetics statement partly because I needed to address the elephant in the room about writing about plausible futures in 2017.

That would, of course, be the 2016 United States Presidential Election, where we saw a flawed but deeply capable female candidate lose to a capitalist blowhard with an army of misogynists, racists, and queerphobes behind him, and apathy from the left or left-leaning.

Earlier, I said that I always thought that if I wanted to write sci-fi, I would write a utopia. However, as I began *Hindsight 2050*, I realized that creating a utopian science fiction universe—while existing a world that felt like it was increasingly spiraling towards destruction—was not genuine to my voice or my level of emotional wellness during the time I was working on this book. I was having a hard time creating a world of perfect gender and sexual equality like the ones that have inspired me so much, because there was a part of me that felt betrayed by them over the last year or so.

The Female Man by Joanna Russ is 40 years old, and all I could tell my thesis advisor about after reading it was how familiar the sexism and gendered violence seemed. There's a sequence in the book where a man approaches a woman at a party and attempts to explain something to her while making unwanted advances. In this scene, one woman expresses to another that it would be dangerous to reject him too harshly. I told my advisor that something very much like that had happened to me and a friend at a party just that weekend.

Given the current global slant towards far-right ideologies, it was suddenly difficult for me to imagine a world where humanity had finally attained true equality for all present-day marginalized people. I don't begrudge those stories—I needed them and still do, and I'm grateful to the people who can continue to write them, but that wasn't going to be my role in *Hindsight 2050*. On the flip side, in a world that felt farther and farther away from the egalitarian, spacefaring *Star Trek* future, it also didn't feel right to create a hopeless dystopia or post-apocalyptic hellscape.

So, in my world, humanity has reached to the stars, and is having adventures and has overcome our own petty squabbles enough to interact with other intelligent species, and has created a sensitive virtual intelligence capable of love, but it's also a world where humanity is recovering from a limited nuclear engagement, women are murdered via self-driving cars, and that same VI can be co-opted by the military.

Hindsight 2050 was intended to be a story that was not either a utopia or a dystopia, but one that is *both*.

Hindsight 2050 is named to capture the anxieties of today and is intended to be a rallying call reminding readers of the very limited time we—humans—may have to make the better worlds we dream of a reality. The first story, "Grieving in the Year 2195", instantly sets the

timeline of the body of the text 145 years after the date in the title. In this way, I think of the title as an implied and very short prologue that we, in the real world, are participating in right now. I share this text, and these stories, as my own way of coping in an uncertain world—of centering marginalized bodies, fear of human cruelty, and pondering the boundless potential of civilizations that want to reach for the stars. I share *Hindsight 2050* in the sincere hope that it remains fiction.

Thank you,
Cora Walker