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*A Coup of Owls*  
*Spring 2024*



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Besides, she's a passionate traveler & photographer, music composer, singer, painter, 3-D art designer and practices yoga & meditation regularly. Devoted to vegan diet, she enjoys creative writing. Sonali is accompanied by the sweet memories of her 8-yr old canine friend Fuchoo, who left her forever last year.

Sonali appeared on *Alive65*, *Allwomen's talk*, *Agave*, [e-stories.org](http://e-stories.org), *The Asian Geographic*, *The Properties India*, *A Beautiful Resistance*, *Grasslimb*, *Silver Blade*, *Five Poetry*, *Beyond Imagination*, *Moon Pigeon Press*, *Blu Inc Media*, *The Peak*, *Herizons*, *The Sunlight Press*, *Held Magazine*, *SERVO Magazine*, *ParABnormal Magazine*, *American Paranormal Press*, *Mycelia*, *Paper Lanterns*, *Archive of the Odds*, *Queer Toronto Literary Magazine*, *MAYDAY* (appeared and upcoming), *Illustrated Worlds*, *Lorelei Signal*, *Rock and a Hard Place Magazine*, *Scifaikuest* (upcoming), *34 Orchard* (upcoming), *Banshee* (upcoming), *Ergot Press*, *Penumbric Magazine* (appeared & upcoming), *Exist Otherwise* and many more.

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## Foreword

Page 5

## Metamorphosis by Tyler Battaglia

Page 7

*A queer man does 'magic tricks' by shapeshifting into other people—but as soon as you ask him to show who he really is, he is liable to disappear from the vulnerability.*

Tyler Battaglia is a queer and disabled author of horror, dark fantasy, and other speculative fiction. He is especially interested in subjects that interrogate the connections between faith, monsters, love, queerness, and disability. You can find him on social media at @whosthistyler and online at <https://www.tylerbattaglia.com>, where you can also find a full list of publications to date.

## Smiling at a Homeless Woman by the Roadside Temple by Shaurya Pathania

Page 8

*An encounter with a homeless woman stuns the narrator.*

Shaurya Pathania is a 22 years old aspiring writer from India who has a Masters degree in English Literature from University of Delhi. He has a keen interest in poetry, food and sports. Some of his works have been published or forthcoming in *Synchronized Chaos*, *Exist Otherwise*, *JAKE*, *Vine Leaves Press* and elsewhere. He can be contacted @shauryapathani4 on Twitter.

## Reunification Day by Angela Acosta

Page 10

*A young Latine spacer returns to a mossy rock on an unassuming asteroid.*

Angela Acosta (she/her) is a bilingual Mexican American writer and Visiting Assistant Professor of Hispanic Studies at Davidson College. She is a 2022 Dream Foundry Contest for Emerging Writers Finalist, 2022 Somos en Escrito Extra-Fiction Contest Honorable Mention, and Rhysling finalist. Her writing has appeared in *Shoreline of Infinity*, *Apparition Lit*, *Radon Journal*, and *Space & Time*. She is author of *Summoning Space Travelers* (Hiraeth Publishing, 2022) and *A Belief in Cosmic Dailiness: Poems of a Fabled Universe* (Red Ogre Review, 2023).

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## **Last Rites by Colleen Anderson**

**Page 11**

*A mother fights to save her child's soul.*

Award-winning author Colleen Anderson's writing has been published in seven countries. Her works have graced the pages of *Amazing*, *Best Indie Speculative Fiction IV*, award-winning anthologies *Shadow Atlas*, and *Water: Sirens, Selkies & Sea Monsters*, with Rhysling-winning poem, "Machine (r)Evolution" in Tenebrous Press's *Brave New Weird*. She has performed her work before audiences in the US, UK and Canada, and her short story collections, *Embers Amongst the Fallen*, *A Body of Work*, and poetry collections *I Dreamed a World* and *The Lore of Inscrutable Dreams* are available online. Colleen currently serves as the president of the *Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Society* (SFPA) and is a poetry editor at *OnSpec*. [www.colleenanderson.wordpress.com](http://www.colleenanderson.wordpress.com)

## **Frizz Trippin' with Ursa and Pip by Franco Amati**

**Page 15**

*Tuck and his crazy aunts venture out on a post-frizz road trip from Jersey to California to meet the hologram of Larry Hagman.*

Franco Amati is a speculative fiction writer from New York. You can find more of his work at [francoamatiwrites.com](http://francoamatiwrites.com) or subscribe to his poetry newsletter *Garbage Notes* at [francoamati.substack.com](http://francoamati.substack.com)

## **Creepy Crawlies: A Space Opera by Avra Margariti**

**Page 31**

*Three siblings drift in space, facing an infestation of creepy crawlies, while tension rises within their ship.*

Avra Margariti is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Rhysling-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, and *F&SF*. *The Saint of Witches*, Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is available from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on twitter ([@avramargariti](https://twitter.com/avramargariti)).

## **The Grace Variations by Ria Hill**

**Page 35**

*A man contemplates the lengths he is willing to go to show the woman he loves how much he loves her.*

Ria Hill is a writer, librarian, and nonbinary horror. They spend the bulk of their non-work hours maintaining their recreational spreadsheet collection and interrupting their spouse's train of thought with deeply worrying story pitches. Their work has appeared in *The Book of Queer Saints Volume II* and *Escalators to Hell: Shopping Mall Horrors*, and *It Was All a Dream 2*. If you see them in the wild, they are very unlikely to eat you. They promise. They can be found online at [riahill.weebly.com](http://riahill.weebly.com) and on various social media platforms @riawritten.

# Foreword

I've been a bit all over the place these last few months. Shaky. What I call 'The Overwhelm.' I'm guessing that's something a lot of you can identify with in this increasingly terrifying world of wars, missing princesses, joblessness, violence, poverty and conspiracies that sound so mad they might be true. If you're anything like me, you need to find ways to avoid this constant state of panic and pain. When everything becomes too much, I must find a quiet, dark place to breathe through the panic. When my body shakes and my mind races, I have to remember to breathe. Sometimes I need help. So I bought a shakti mat (a fancy, modern version of a bed of nails) to lie on (as Gretchen Peters would say, the 'cure for the pain is the pain'). It comes with an app that has guided meditations to help you breathe and refocus your mind as you inflict some distracting but beneficial pain on yourself. It sounds crazy, but it works. Lying on a bed of nails helps. Who knew? Except for the people of India, who have been doing it for thousands of years...

This got me thinking about pain and how it works in the mind. How it weaves its way through your nerves and synapses until it is a single screaming thought that won't go away. Unless you stop the cause – take a painkiller or breathe and hope for the best (or lie on a bed of sharp objects). Pain is a changing force, a reminder of the past and a constant in our lives. It is a universal experience. We can all relate to being hurt, grieving lost loved ones, being heartbroken or breaking a bone, something going wrong in our bodies that we can't see or that we can. We have all seen someone else in pain and experienced that breathless helplessness at our inability to knit them back together. The human experience involves a lot of pain.

So here we are, together, in pain.

But together nonetheless.

Now, in this forest, we share our space and our pain. This is a comfort, albeit perhaps a small one. So, as you read these wonderful, awe-inspiring stories that take you from the outer limits of the solar system to city streets, quiet temples, and worlds of demons and aliens, remember that no matter how far away from each other we may seem, we are all connected by our experiences. The pain we have, the pain we have had and the pain we have seen etched in others. Remember, most importantly, that we are here within this forest, where the soft ruffling of feathers can be heard above the solemn sound of owls and the cool breeze rustling the newly sprouting leaves. You are not alone. The footsteps of your fellow human

can be heard right next to you. So, reach out and take a feathered wing or a panicked hand and walk deeply into the wood where words softly crunch under your feet.

**Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief**

# Metamorphosis

by Tyler Battaglia

**Content Warnings: Potential of implied self harm, potential of implied death, depression.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 8 for the next story.

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Carter is possessed of a certain magic.

He can metamorphose, not before your very eyes, but with a little time and patience. He can become anything that you want him to be. He can be the girl of your dreams if that's what you're looking for. With an abracadabra, a presto, a voilà, a razor, a little make-up and some heels, he is transformed.

Maybe you don't think his magic trick is so impressive. Maybe you think anyone can shave their legs and do up their hair.

But Carter is a shapeshifter. Do you want proof? Tell him to become someone else. He's your man. Or your woman. Your friend, your enemy, your lover.

Just never ask him his secrets; never ask him to peel away the layers to reveal what hides beneath. If you ask him to remove his gloves, maybe you'll see the nails bitten raw to the skin, the blood covered up by chipped crimson polish. Don't ask to see his face underneath the mask – you might see the redness of the eyes. Ask him to unzip, and he will remove all of his skin until a heart is bared for all to see, swollen and beating in a chest that doesn't know how to use it anymore.

But if you ask him to pull back any further, you will see another one of his magic tricks:

The disappearing man.

# Smiling at a Homeless Woman by the Roadside Temple

by Shaurya Pathania

**Content Warnings: Homelessness, prejudice.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 10 for the next story.

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Shri Rama Temple invites worshippers throughout the day, but they mostly arrive in the evening to complain about their entire day or beg for a good night in their beloved households. Although the temple is mostly empty the whole day, one devotee sits at the steps, doing nothing. She wears a dirty, stained, branded shirt, but it's not her size. It's surely not hers; it looks like a jute rug on her. She looks like a rug on those steps. I pass by the temple and her face twice a day. Every day, she stares at me, and to maintain the equilibrium, I do the same. In the evening, she seems happiest with plenty of coloured sweets tied in her shawl. Every person who walks through those stairs pays her in sweets (*prasad*), a toll tax for the worship of their god.

I never give her anything. I don't feel like donating to beggars; they can work for themselves, can't they? I don't even worship at that temple; I just pass by it every day. Although, once in a while, I bow down right in front of her and the gods from outside the temple and walk on. She doesn't like me and never smiles at me. I pretty much understand because the feeling is mutual.

\*

It is night already; I am late for home today. The gods are left all alone again in the temple, but I don't see the dedicated devotee today. I look around; she is nowhere to be seen, but just when I am about to walk away, she appears on the road. She stares at me from a distance as if I've stolen something. She nods at the pinnacle of the temple and saunters towards the road. I find myself glued to her. A truck honks from a distance; she doesn't care. The truck drives



itself towards her; she doesn't look around. The truck doesn't slow down; she doesn't stop. The truck is consistent with its speed; she is constant with her walk.

I want to shout out loud. I don't know her name, but I still want to scream something. I can't, I can't stop her, and I stand straight, similar to the helpless gods inside the temple. I wait and watch; she keeps walking.

The truck disappears within a second, almost flattening her foot put last on the road. She stops, looks back at me, and smiles for the first time. I'm not able to smile back. She moves away, but I stand there, looking at the spot where she usually sits. I can't stop thinking about what I have witnessed.

\*

If she had been hit by the truck, would I have picked her up or walked away, like usual? I am unable to find an answer to this question. The thought of walking away bothers me to this day. I have changed my route; I don't pass by the temple now.

# Reunification Day

by **Angela Acosta**

**Content Warnings: Reference to displacement, diaspora, generational trauma.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 11 for the next story.

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My tears were never worth anything in this system. I place my hand on the cool, mossy rock and try not to shudder. My people came from here, clad in sarape cloth with nothing more than tamal and sancocho recipes. I bask in the mercy of visiting a rock tucked away on an asteroid belt. This asteroid was our generation ship. The rocks breathed for us. I take a sample of the moss, glistening with morning dew, and surreptitiously steal the clump away in my suit. Five light years from here, the moss will grow a creche for our youngest.

# Last Rites

by Colleen Anderson

**Content Warnings: Violence, drug use.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 15 for the next story.

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Anita chewed her nail, watching Rafael twist and turn on the bed. His back arched, he screamed, then convulsed. The bed shook, and the arms of the nurse trying to hold him still vibrated with his contortions.

Sharp pain broke Anita's worry. Her index finger bled freely where she had bitten through. Sobbing, she ran from the bedroom. In the bathroom, tears swirled with blood in the sink.

Two months, three hospitals, five doctors and still Rafael suffered, growing thinner and paler. Her poor child withered – no one could find a cure. The screaming tapered to whimpering and stopped. Anita quickly bandaged her finger and met the nurse and doctor in the hall. She wiped her eyes.

The nurse, a young woman still intent on helping patients, walked by, her gaze to the ground. The tall doctor, her thick hair swept with grey, patted Anita's arm. Her eyes held experience and compassion. 'I'm sorry, but all we can do is sedate him. It will take more each time until it becomes ineffective.'

'Is there nothing to save my boy?' Anita cried out, choking.

The doctor put a finger to her lips before speaking. 'I hesitate to offer... It's not... something I believe in. It's not medical, but—'

'But what?' Anita grabbed the woman's hand, pressing it, pinning her with desperation. 'Please, anything! I'll try anything.'

\*

She wanted to sit for hours, to sleep on it – to have time to consider the options, but Rafael roused from the sedative. Tied to the bed with sheets and ropes, as if in some bizarre medieval torture device, he squealed and cursed.

The whites shone around his eyes as he gnashed at her. ‘Whorish bitch! You see what you wrought. No marriage, no sanctity. This whoreson is mine!’

His flesh bulged and subsided as if something crawled beneath his skin. The terrible words had happened before, but this – these terrible deformations...

Rafael shrieked as his bones cracked and his body arched like a bridge of flesh. One word creaked out. ‘Mama.’

Anita called the exorcist.

\*

She’d never believed. Seeing what walked in her door did not instil confidence. The repulsive priest had oily skin with pustules, unkempt, wispy red hair and breath so foul she had to step back. The older man accompanying him was his opposite: deep chestnut skin, smooth and silky, a handsome, strong jaw, bald head, and posture that would have made a prince proud.

‘Ms Corso, we are here to help. I’m Mr Estrella, and this is Father Mendacium. I realise that you only called because you had no other choice, but I assure you we can calm your son.’

‘I— What will this cost?’

Estrella smiled kindly. ‘That we can take care of Rafael is payment enough.’

Anita led the way, but her skin crawled. The whole thing was a nightmare. She’d tried to be a good mother. Sure, from time to time, Rafael had behaved like a little monster, and she had disciplined him. But no child was an angel all the time, and she loved him so much. If she could save her beautiful boy, give him back laughter and joy and all the antics of childhood, she would do so, even if she did not believe in religious hocus pocus.

They entered Rafael’s room, rank with stale sweat and bile. Father Mendacium waddled over to the boy. Anita refrained from pushing between the greasy man and her son. When the priest, stains showing even on his black robe, touched the boy’s forehead, Rafael calmed.

The priest removed implements from a black leather bag: red candles, a cross, metal discs inscribed with something Anita couldn’t make out and a black book she presumed was the Bible.



She wiped Rafael's forehead. His skin had the pallor of faded leather, grey undertones that shocked her.

His brow wrinkled, and his voice cracked. 'Mama? Don't... don't let them do it.'

She knelt, weeping, kissing his face. 'I'm sorry, baby. You're so sick. They have to help you.'

Estrella's firm hand gripped her shoulder. 'We must allow Father Mendacium to work.'

He guided her into the kitchen, making a cup of her own tea. Mr Estrella left Anita with the steaming cup. She stared at the swirling leaves. How had it come to this? She didn't believe in God or magic, only the cold, hard facts. Nothing helped, yet still, everything in her body raged to keep these men from her boy. 'Ridiculous,' she whispered. If they could help, no matter how unorthodox—

The screeching jerked her from the chair, hot tea splashing her leg. She ran, ignoring the burning.

In the doorway, Anita froze. Estrella's arms stretched like taffy as they weighed the boy down. Mendacium oozed, literally oozed, oily gobbets that splashed and sizzled Rafael's skin.

'What are you doing?!' Anita wailed but was slammed against the wall by one of Estrella's long arms.

'You will not interfere!' he roared, his mouth stretching impossibly long as his tongue snaked to lick Rafael's face. His eyes rolled in orgiastic delight.

Rafael growled and twitched, laughing monstrosly one moment, calling for his mother the next.

Then he expanded, bloating under the oleaginous administrations. Mendacium spoke from the black book, and Anita vomited upon hearing the sounds. Before her horrified gaze, Rafael's skin ruptured as red and yellow liquid spurted forth. From the lesions sprouted warty knobs and coarse black hairs.

One final 'Mamaaaaaaa,' and Rafael's skin peeled like old paint.

Another body appeared beneath Rafael's torn remains, red as scalded lobster, chancrous and distorted. It slipped the bonds that had held her boy, face a monstrous imitation of her son's.

Anita couldn't stop shrieking until Estrella smacked her several times.

'The exorcism was successful, and the remnants of humanity are gone. I am presuming you won't want our young progeny. I'm glad we could save another.'

As the world inked black on Anita, she saw Estrella and Mendacium leave, a young demon scampering in their wake.

# Frizz Trippin' with Ursa and Pip

by Franco Amati

**Content Warnings: Drug use.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 31 for the next story.

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It was a scorcher driving without air conditioning down the barren, post-Frizz wasteland of the American Southwest. Cruising in our dilapidated station wagon, my aunts Ursa and Pippi were arguing as usual. I was in the backseat with my cousin Barth, whose face I hadn't seen for about three hours. The car was so stuffed with luggage that we could barely even look at each other.

We were on our way to the Ojai mansion of Larry Hagman, or rather the immortal hologram of the once-great Larry Hagman, screen actor of *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Dallas* fame. Ursa had won a contest run by a sketchy shroom tycoon who'd set up a lottery for the chance to meet Mr Hagman, the proceeds of which were to be donated to a charity with the intention of providing universal access to medicinal shrooms to colleges for students who – uh, I guess – needed it.

Anyway, Ursa paid a butt-load of money to get as many entries into that contest as possible so she could visit the home of her hero. She had met him and his hologram many times before at various charity events, including the 2045 Brain Transplant Olympics in Minneapolis. But visiting his SoCal abode was to be the crown jewel in her otherwise moderately successful career as a semi-stalkerish groupie.

When she was young, most kids her age watched *Friends* or *Full House* or whatever other canned-applause sitcoms were popular toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But not Ursa. She was obsessed with binge-watching episode after episode of *Jeannie* and *Dallas*. It was Larry Hagman's cool confidence and charm that resonated with the young Ursa. She fantasised about marrying him someday – in some parallel universe, of course. Though, I guess now that it was legal to marry holograms, I could totally see her making a play for the man and trying to finally live out her pipe dream with his now (probably) highly degraded

simulacrum that haunted the outskirts of Hollywood. But I was hoping that was *not* what the trip was about.

A vacation – just a fun family trip, I told myself. A non-traditional sort of vacation, you know? Could you still call it a vacation if you were technically unemployed? I wasn't working in those days. None of us were. Employment was as uncommon as non-lab-grown meat. After the catastrophic Big Frizz, you were pretty much either a full-time student or you stayed the hell home and waited for your government cheque because it was way too risky to go outside.

Everything was in shambles. It was a rough time for most people, but that didn't stop us from going to see Larry Freakin' Hagman. And I'll tell you what, we certainly weren't making the whole odyssey any easier on each other the way we argued in that tiny-ass car.

'I'm gonna pull over, Pip. I gotta pee,' Ursa said.

Pip threw the tattered map across the dashboard in frustration. 'Damn it, I have no clue where we are. You know you can't just piss on the side of the road. What if a patrol catches you?' Pip said.

Barth pushed a suitcase to the side and said, 'The patrols are looking for murderers and pillagers. They're not looking for middle-aged tourists peeing in the desert.' He then flexed a bicep and sniffed his armpit. It had been days since any of us showered, but he especially reeked.

Ursa parked the car. Barth and I groaned because we were tired of all the stopping. Seemed like every half hour, they wanted to take a pit stop to scavenge for food or pee or poop or whatever. If you've ever been on a cross-country trip with anyone in your family, you know the struggle. It was bad enough that Ursa made us listen exclusively to television soundtracks on her bootleg stereo.

'I'll only be five minutes,' Ursa assured us. 'Ten, max. Stretch your legs or something.'

Barth and I got out of the car. Pip, ever the stubborn older sibling, stayed in the passenger seat, picking at her toes. She would always push her seat way back to prop her feet up on the dash. Sometimes she'd be even more of an ass and stick a whole foot out the window. Made me want to throw up each time I caught sight of her crusty soles.

'How far are we, man? I can't take this anymore,' I said.

'I don't know, dude. And it's slim pickings on stuff to pass the time. I finished that issue of *Senior Living* we scavenged yesterday. So freakin' bored,' Barth said, squeezing out the excess sweat from his headband.



‘You want that copy of *Parent Pages*?’ I asked. ‘It’s pretty toasted, but you can still read most of it.’

‘Nah, dude, I’m pretty sure some kid threw up on it. You can keep that one.’

Pip was the paranoid type. Her anxiety always got the best of her. Within a couple of minutes, she was standing on the hood of the car, scanning the desert for threats with her broken binoculars.

‘Hey, Ursa,’ she shouted, ‘watch out for rattlesnakes!’

‘Leave her – she’s in the zone,’ Barth said. ‘Damn, Tuck. No matter how much creatine I eat, I can’t get my calves to look like yours. And you don’t even work out. I don’t get it.’

‘You try too hard,’ I said. ‘Your body wasn’t meant to support muscles. The second you stop eating all that synthetic protein, you’re gonna deflate.’

‘Don’t remind me. My supply is low,’ he lamented.

‘Just let her be, Pip. She’s a big girl,’ I said.

‘I’m just worried. We’re in a high-frizz zone,’ Pip said. ‘Who knows what we could run into.’ Her palm covered the broken left lens as she squawked at us like the tall, tattered flamingo she was.

‘Actually, I don’t see her anymore,’ Barth said.

‘Shit, where’d she go?’ Pip hopped off the hood and started pacing back and forth.

Moments later, Ursa howled from the distance. ‘Ahhhhh! Oh... my... gosh!’

‘Oh no – what the hell is that?’ Pip screamed, binoculars shaking in her hands.

Ursa appeared on the horizon, running toward us with her bloomers in one hand, flapping in the wind, and a wad of toilet paper in the other. ‘Start the car! Start the car!’

Trailing behind her was a giant, frizzed-out armadillo. It chased her all the way back to the vehicle. We laughed like crazy while Pip revved up the engine. But it stalled. ‘Shit – no, not now.’

‘Open the door, open the door,’ I said. ‘She’s gonna dive in. Look at her leg.’

Pip opened the passenger door. Ursa closed in on us, panting, her face like a giant raspberry. Her rat-nest of a hairdo flopped up and down. She ploughed into the vehicle, slammed the door behind her, and we all braced ourselves for the hit. The glowing mega-armadillo slammed into the side of the car once, twice, three times. It rammed the door until we were able to get the vehicle moving. We sped down the highway, Ursa still panting like the devil.

‘Damn. It got you. You’re injured,’ Pip said.

‘Darn it – my leg is messed up.’ Ursa sighed. ‘We gotta find a place to rest for the night.’

‘Oh no, come on. If we keep stopping, we’ll never get there,’ Barth whined.

I reached over the centre console to grab the map. ‘Let’s see – maybe there’s a hotel or something.’

The prospects were bleak. This part of the country had been hit especially bad. Most businesses had evacuated. Only the crazy folks stuck around. I was pretty worried about what places we might find that were actually still open.

‘Well, anything?’ Ursa asked, inspecting her wound. ‘This is gonna get infected if we don’t find running water and supplies.’

‘Damn,’ Barth said. ‘Didn’t know armadillos could bite. That thing was jacked.’

‘That was no basic armadillo. Didn’t you see the colour? Who knows what happened to it,’ I said, studying the map. ‘Well, it looks like there’s something coming up, but you guys aren’t gonna like it. It’s the only place for hundreds of miles.’

‘Whatever it is, we don’t have a choice.’ Pip’s whole face was covered in beads of sweat.

‘Settle down, sis. You’re swerving. You’re gonna drive us off the road.’ Ursa cracked open a bottle of expired Tylenol from the medicine stash. ‘What place is it, Tuck?’

‘It’s called the Roswell New Mexico Space Alien Museum and Cultural Center Bed and Breakfast Hotel Slash Motel.’

\*

When we got near the place, my stomach gurgled. ‘I don’t know, guys. The place looks busted as hell.’

‘It doesn’t look that bad, actually. From the name, I was expecting worse,’ Barth said, cleaning his face with a WetNap that he’d dug out from between the seats.

The building was two-toned – greyish-purple and a sort of crème yellow. Awful. And the sign had a green alien face on it. You know, the classic big-eye, small-mouth stereotypical alien-type deal.

Since real first contact happened about a decade ago, most of these depictions of extraterrestrials had been banned because, well, they were racist. It was a testament to how disconnected this part of the country remained, even after the interstellar peace treaty. I feared

the kind of folks who had the narrow-minded gumption to keep this kind of establishment up and running.

The lobby was tacky in the way that only a museum-hotel hybrid could be. There was a front desk in the middle of the room with a bell and a sign that said ‘Ring For Attendant.’ To the right of the desk was a hallway that led to the museum, and to the left was the hallway that led to the rooms. The place had only one level, and there couldn’t have been more than a dozen efficiencies.

Pip rang the bell. ‘Let’s hope this place isn’t run by some mutant freaks,’ she said.

‘Don’t be racist, Pip. It’s not their fault if they’re messed up from The Frizz.’ I always tried to keep the peace and put my aunts in their place when they acted up, but my family was really out of control sometimes.

Ursa defended her sister. ‘It’s not racist because freak isn’t a race. It’s a condition brought on by being too stubborn to evacuate when you’re supposed to,’ she said.

‘You know, you’re both ones to talk. Pip, you have a sixth toe on your right foot. That technically qualifies you as a mutant. And Ursa, don’t lecture us on stubborn. You’re the one who’s so obsessed with an actor that you’ll drive across the country just to meet his hologram.’

‘How many times do I have to tell you? It’s not *just* to meet him. It’s to tour his freakin’ mansion, to see the way the man lives. It’s much more than a meeting.’

‘You mean lived – past tense,’ I said. ‘The way the man *lived*. You realise he’s not alive, right?’

A creepy-looking guy appeared behind the front desk. Not a total troll, but borderline freak for sure. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had a few extra digits or some webbed appendages somewhere – or maybe a tail. His hair was black with grey streaks, greased back with what looked like lard. You could see oily chunks of whatever he used to style his hair just sort of oozing down his forehead and temples. He also had very chapped lips, the kind that looked like they’d bleed if he moved his mouth the wrong way.

‘Good evening, folks,’ he said, making these strange finger movements where he’d touch the finger of each hand to its respective thumb consecutively over and over again as a kind of impatient gesture.

We all looked at each other because it was definitely late morning, if not early afternoon. Though he seemed the sort of person who didn’t keep track of time.

‘Uh, hi,’ I said. ‘We’d like a room – a room with two or more beds, if possible. My aunt here is hurt and needs to rest. Also, do you carry any medical supplies?’

‘We have some band-aids. I can check the basement to see if there’s any ointment. Will that do?’ He contorted his face upon noticing Ursa’s oozing gash.

Pippi, with attitude, replied, ‘Um, we’re gonna need more than ointment and band-aids. Can’t you—’

‘That’s fine,’ I interrupted, nudging Pippi out of the way. ‘We’ll take the band-aids. Thank you so much. And, yeah, whatever ointment you have. That would be great.’

‘The room costs forty credits a night. For another ten, you can have full access to our alien museum. It’s quite lovely. Do you want to see our incredible, out-of-this-world exhibits?’

Barth responded first. ‘Hell yeah, we do. Wouldn’t come all this way and miss a chance at the museum.’ The rest of us rolled our eyes. But that was Barth – he always had to do the thing, whatever the thing was.

‘Now, that’s a man after my own heart. I’m Mr Delianto. If you need anything else, please give me a ring. I am always in the cellar underneath the museum. Oh, and here’s a key to the fitness area. There’s a spa and hot tub. Continental alien breakfast starts at— hm, when’s it start these days? Well, how ’bout this – just show up, and we’ll bring you some pancakes. Sound good? There aren’t many guests here right now, so we’re extra delighted to serve you.’

\*

After we rested in the hotel room for a bit, Barth and I decided to see what the spa looked like. We went in, and it didn’t look too bad. No one was using the hot tub, so we decided to take a dip.

I was surprised the water was fairly clean and the tub itself was in good condition. Nice temperature and everything. I was glad to unwind and vent about our trip. Barth was pretty much my best friend. I probably would have felt awkward sitting in a hot tub with anyone else. With him, I could relax and not worry about awkward silences.

After a little while, our peaceful time in the hot tub was interrupted by a dude wearing a neon green speedo and a matching alien mask. The lights in the pool area were dim, so it almost looked like his speedo was glow-in-the-dark. The rest of his body was normal looking, except he had a big puff of hair on his chest styled in the shape of a heart.

The guy removed his flip-flops and inspected the tub. He dipped a finger in the water,



tasted it through his mask, and gave us a once-over. I couldn't tell what his facial expression was, but I remained calm and tried not to give off the impression of being irked by his presence. Even though the heavy breathing from under his mask was rather unnerving, I was sure he'd remove the alien face before getting in the water. But no, he kept it on.

We all stewed in there for a few minutes. The alien-guy tugged at the mouth part of his mask with his thumb and index finger so as to make an opening to talk. Then he said in a muffled voice, 'So, where you guys from?'

'Old New Jersey,' I said.

'Ah, the Big Apple,' he said with a stifled laugh.

'No, that's— we live about a half hour from the city.'

'Same difference, home-slice.'

'Hey, Barth – maybe we should check on Ursa?' Barth nodded, and I turned to the dude and said, 'See, our aunt got injured by an armadillo. So we need to go check on her.'

'I have medical training if you'd like me to take a look.'

'Where'd you study medicine?'

'At a small military clinic called Ikterak stationed on the third ring of Saturn.'

'Oh. You know what – that's really kind of you to offer, but—'

'Roffolio – my name is Roffolio.'

'That's really kind of you to offer, Roffolio, but I think she just needs to rest. We'll find you if she gets any worse, okay?'

He was getting close to us, sloshing his way through the hot tub foam. He reached out his arm. 'It was nice to meet you guys. Wonderful that we're both staying in the same hotel. I'm in 103. What room are you guys in?'

'One-oh-three, huh. Good to know,' I said. 'We know where to find you then. Nice to meet you as well.' I stood up and climbed out of the water, not even looking for towels to dry off. I led the way across the pool area back through the hallway to our room.

'The people in this place,' Barth said, shaking his head.

'I know, right? Can you believe he asked what room we're in?'

'He probably knows we're weirded out by him. We shoulda told him the number so he doesn't try to stalk us out of spite.'

'Are you serious?'

'There's only a handful of rooms here. He'll probably figure out where we are regardless.'

'Let's freakin' hope not.'

We returned to our rooms, and I rested for a while, trying not to think of the hairy hot tub dude.

\*

Hours later, after the sun had gone down, someone knocked on our door. We all looked at each other. It was nearing 10 pm, so it couldn't have been the desk attendant checking on us.

'Who the hell could that be?' Pip stood up.

'I bet it's the whacko from the hot tub.' Barth approached the peephole to get a look. 'It's him,' he mouthed to us.

Three more knocks. 'Hello, anyone home?' the voice behind the door said. We all froze, tense and quiet, waiting to see if he'd leave after a couple of minutes. Three *more* knocks. 'Open up. I won't leave till you open up. I'm a paramedic. It's my duty to help you. Let me in!'

Ursa looked up at us from the bed. She whispered, 'Maybe just let him in. He might actually be able to help.'

'No. The guy's insane,' I said. 'Let's ride it out. He'll give up eventually.'

He didn't. I kept checking the peephole throughout the night. Roffolio had made camp outside our door. We waited, restless, through a night that seemed unending.

\*

As the brutal southwestern sun broke through the blinds, Barth yawned, looking as tired as ever. 'Is he still there?' he asked.

I handed my cousin a cup of instant coffee. 'We're gonna have to leave through the window and sneak back to the car. Something tells me this guy wants something. He's bad news, I know it. No normal person would wait like that for complete strangers.'

So we packed up our stuff and took turns crawling out of the window, trying to make as little noise as possible. The biggest challenge was getting Ursa out safely.

We made our way around the building, but there was a surprise waiting for us near the car. A group of costumed people were camping out in their RV. They looked like a bunch of cosplayers. We loaded up the car, trying not to draw their attention. But to our dismay, our

vehicle wouldn't start. The trash wagon had finally given out. We were cooked.

One of the cosplayers, a pale woman dressed as a witch, approached us.

'Hey, have you seen a guy roaming around here with an alien mask? We want to get going, but we're waiting on one of our friends.'

'Uh, yeah,' I said. 'He's still in the hotel. Check outside of room 107.'

'Sweet. Hey, did you guys enjoy the museum? Pretty wicked, right?'

'Yeah, it was great,' my cousin replied. 'We'll have to stop here again next time we're in the area.' Barth gave her a flirtatious wink.

'Hey, is your grandma all right? That leg looks pretty bad,' the witch said.

'It's our aunt,' I said. 'She got bit by an armadillo. We stopped to give her time to rest. Do you know of any medical stations or hospitals nearby?'

'We got a med-station set up in the van. Some of us are volunteer paramedics.

Roffolio, the guy we're looking for – he was an army medic. He can patch her up in no time.'

Ursa, hearing that info, balled up her fist, threatening to punch one of us. I gave her a look, prompting her to settle down. 'Sure,' I said. 'Thank you. Should we just hang out here then?'

'Tell you what. My Wolfman over there will set your aunt up in the van. I'll go find Roffolio. You guys from around here?'

'No, not from around here. I'll walk back in with you,' I said. 'I know where to find him.'

'Great. Where you guys headed?'

'Ever heard of the show *I Dream of Jeannie*?'

\*

'I cannot believe I'm meeting another Larry Hagman fan right now!' the witch said. 'I was in loooooveeee with Major Nelson. He was so dreamy! My name's Margarine. Most people want to call me Marge. But no. It's Margarine.'

'Okay,' I said, trying not to laugh. 'Damn, Ursa. Can you believe we found another one – another fan, I mean?'

Marge's breath was awful. Didn't help that she was a mouth-breather, and her teeth were the colour of her name.

My aunt Ursa smiled. 'I know. How awesome is that? I thought I was the only one alive who still wanted to marry Major Nelson.' She crossed her arms, blinked her eyes, and

nodded in what took me almost a half-minute to realise was an attempt at a Barbara Eden impression.

Barth stuck his finger in his mouth to make a fake gag gesture. ‘Stop it, Urs. Just stop. You’re nothing like Jeannie.’

He had eaten his last protein powder packet, and I could tell it put him in a bad mood. Within a few days, he’d shrink back to the size of a halfling.

‘Hey, so how come you’re dressed as a witch and not a genie?’ Pippi asked, still sceptical of our new friends.

‘Well, because I also love *The Wizard of Oz*. Oh, and also, because I *am* one.’ Marge said it so straight-faced, but I’m pretty sure our entire group thought it was sarcasm. Well, maybe Ursa didn’t, but she was too into the fact that she’d found a fellow Larry fan to even care who the hell this person was.

Roffolio cleaned up Ursa’s wound, stitched her up, and gave us some antibiotics. We apologised to him profusely for not opening the door. ‘What can I say? We’re a judgmental bunch of pricks,’ I said. ‘We were definitely wrong about you.’

‘Just glad I could help,’ he said.

The paramedic-cosplayers were not able to repair the car, though. It was clear to us that the station wagon was not going to make it the rest of the way. Thankfully, Margarine had a solution.

‘If you take me with you to meet Mr Hagman, you can borrow my father’s balloon.’

‘Your father has a hot air balloon?’ Pip asked.

‘Yeah, he’s really into *The Wizard of Oz* too.’ She giggled.

‘All right, get him down here.’ Pip turned to us. ‘Ever been in a hot air balloon, guys?’

‘Let’s just hope it doesn’t deflate,’ Ursa said with a mocking glance at Barth.

‘Hey, why’d you look at me while you said that?’ Barth rubbed his incredible shrinking deltoids in dismay.

\*

Nothing could have prepared us for Margarine’s dad. When he arrived, we almost couldn’t handle it.

‘Guys, meet my father, Walter. That’s short for Walterford Stanton Excalibur the

Third. And that, over his shoulder, is his brother, Walterford Stanton Excalibur the *Fourth*.’

The guy had a second head. That’s right – a dead, totally non-functional head that, I guess, belonged to his deceased, conjoined twin.

‘That was just a joke, guys. My dead, vestigial uncle doesn’t have a name or anything. That would be morbid. Jeez – that joke usually kills. I thought you had to have a sense of humour to grow up in Jersey.’

We were too thrown off by the second head to even consider it as a joke. The most troubling thing about the head was that the face had a big, frozen smile. You could even see part of the deformed tongue sticking out too. It made for a tragic contrast with the live Walter, whose face was a lumpy, saggy, unsmiley mess that resembled the mug of a basset hound. But, hey, the man had a hot air balloon and knew how to fly it. That was all that mattered.

So up, up and away we went for the final leg of our trip. All we needed were some flying monkeys.

\*

‘All right, crew,’ Walter said. ‘We’re coming up on Ojai. We’ll be landing in just a few minutes.’

‘Oh boy, you can see the mansion from here!’ Ursa was giddy, trying not to pee her pants.

‘Hey, Urs, do you think Larry Hagman will have any whey or protein powder stocked up in his mansion?’ Barth asked. ‘He probably worked out during his life, right? If he was, like, a professional actor and all.’

Ursa didn’t even answer the question. ‘Whatever you guys do, don’t embarrass me, please. The last thing I want is Larry thinking we’re trashy people from Jersey. He’s a refined and civilised man. Be on your best behaviour.’

‘But we *are* trashy people from Jersey,’ Pip reminded her.

‘Um, speak for yourself, Pip. Look at you – what kind of scumbag doesn’t get her nails done before a vacation?’ Ursa said.

‘The kind that’s too busy navigating and worrying about her family’s safety,’ Pip responded, posturing with both hands on her hips.

‘Can we please not fight now that we’re so close?’ I said. ‘We’re almost there.’

‘That’s right, guys. I’m so stoked I met you,’ the witch said. ‘This is gonna be the best

day of my life! Dad, bring her down. Looks like there's a flat patch of land over there.'

Walter landed the balloon, and we all exited, happy to be back on solid ground. What I was less happy about was the fact that the entire property looked totally wild and unkempt. Overgrown wilderness all around. Everything was covered in vines and bushes. The grass was almost as tall as me.

'Ursa... you sure this is the place?' I asked.

She limped her way to the front gate, opened the dial-up box. Wires spilled out. The thing was completely non-functional. 'I don't know how we're supposed to get in. The contest guy said Larry would welcome us at the door. Something's wrong...' Ursa's voice trailed off, panic in her face.

'I knew it was a freakin' scam,' Pip screeched. 'We came all this way, and it's an abandoned ghost town. You never learn your lesson! Do you? My sister is a complete fool.'

'Duck!' I shouted. Out of nowhere, we heard the whoosh, whoosh of arrows and other flying objects being hurled in our direction.

'Oh my god, hurry, find cover – what the hell is happening!?' Barth said, scrambling for safety.

'See, I told you it wasn't abandoned,' Ursa panted as she took cover behind a tree, and the rest of us scampered behind her.

'This isn't the kind of party we signed up for,' Pip growled.

'Ahhh, I'm hit. I'm hit!' Barth had taken an arrow to the calf and cried out in pain.

'Everyone – back to the balloon,' Walter commanded. 'Sprint! Let's hurry.'

We took brief shelter in the balloon box. I could see Walter's wheels spinning. He looked like the kind of guy who had been in sticky situations before. He put a firm hand on his daughter's shoulder. 'Margarine – can you cook something up for us? Something that'll get these goons to cease fire?'

'Yes, Father. Wait right here.'

Margarine did some mysterious hand symbols with her eyes closed, took a deep breath, and chanted some words that made no freakin' sense to us. Then she stood tall in front of the balloon, held her hands in the air, and created a huge vortex of air, a fantastic whirlwind that somehow nullified all the projectiles and then caused them to fly back in the opposite direction.

'God – she wasn't lying about the witch thing,' Pip said.

Margarine collapsed on the ground from fatigue. Walter retrieved her and carried her back inside the balloon box. We waited a bit until the action died down.



When the rocks and arrows stopped raining from the sky, our adversaries emerged in the distance. A dozen or more wild-looking young adults, looking like straight-up *Lord of the Flies*, stood before us. Probably the majority of them were late-teenagers or twenty-somethings, all dressed in Tarzan outfits.

‘Ursa, why are there a bunch of young barbarians guarding Larry Hagman’s palace?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know, Tuck. Maybe you should try to talk to them. Didn’t you go to school for psychology? How about you put those diplomacy skills to use?’

I hesitated out of fear. That was when Walter projected his baritone voice from behind the box. ‘Friends, we come in peace! Please put down your weapons. We were invited here by Mr. Hagman.’

‘No one is invited here,’ the leader said. ‘Go away. This is our land.’

Pip smacked Ursa’s arm. ‘See, they’re savages. Your contest guy conned us and set us up for a trap.’

‘Shut up, ladies. One of us needs to go out there and negotiate,’ Walter reasoned.

‘Don’t look at me, I’m hurt,’ Barth said. ‘Tuck’s the one always trying to get everyone to get along. Why don’t you go?’

‘Are you joking? I’m not the one who brought us here,’ I said in defence.

‘Right, you’re never the one who initiates anything. You always just go along for the ride, keep the peace and make sure no one fights. Just admit it, dammit. You’re always afraid! That’s why you dropped out of school. That’s why you didn’t trust Roffolio. God forbid you do anything except be a passive wallflower making witty observations about pointless things. Ursa’s hurt, Pip’s gone mad, I got an arrow in my leg, the witch is down, and her Quasimodo-dad is, like, a hundred years old. It has to be you, Tuck! You’re the only one right now who can keep it all together. Now, go – do it for us. Let’s finish this thing.’

I looked at Walter, hoping the elder statesman would bail me out. But he just gave me a nod of assurance. ‘You can do it, kid. Stand up for your family.’

They were right; this was my time. No matter how many mistakes they made. No matter how imperfect they were. I had to be there for my family and show these maniacs that we belonged here as much as anybody. We came all this way to see Larry Hagman’s hologram, dammit, and we weren’t leaving until we got the royal *Dallas* treatment!

I took a deep breath and stood tall. ‘Hold your fire. Like the man said, we come in peace.’

‘Are you the leader of this sad group?’ the lead warrior asked me.

I looked back, nodded my head. ‘Yes, I’m their leader. My name is Tuck. I want to talk.’

‘Come with me, Mr Tuck.’

\*

The woman brought me into an underground bunker filled with vintage arcade games from the turn of the century. If I wasn’t so stressed out, I would have been excited to see all the functioning video game relics. These kids seemed to be living the high life in Larry’s mansion.

Their leader was named Everetta. She was clearly the oldest of the group, perhaps in her late twenties. She was a lean, muscular young woman with a head completely shaved except for a thick, dirty-blond braid that came out of the top centre of her perfectly smooth scalp. I was afraid of her – she had an imposing and self-assured presence unlike anyone else I knew.

‘So you’re saying we *did* get conned – you guys have nothing to do with Larry Hagman’s foundation?’

‘Conned – maybe so. But, no, we love Mister Hagman. He lets us stay here. We take good care of him, and he lets us live here and eat his food and play his vintage arcade games. We do whatever the hell we want as long as we keep the Hollywood vultures – as Mister Hagman calls them – from intruding. We’re his protectors. He never got along with his own children, so he tells us we are his family now.’

‘Hollywood vultures?’

‘People who want to profit off his likeness. They want to make rebooted streaming television shows using the likeness of his old characters. Because his existence has been digitally preserved, like most famous retired actors, they believe they have the right to use computer graphics to keep him on the screen forever. But he does not want that. He is retired and wants to stay retired.’

‘*Dead*. You mean he’s dead, not retired.’

‘Retired is a nicer word. Once you meet him, he certainly won’t seem dead to you.’

Everetta was right. After realising we weren’t a threat – that we had no affiliation with these Hollywood vultures – they agreed to bring us to the room that housed Larry Hagman’s hologram.

In addition to his crew of young-adult warriors, Larry Hagman also had a number of robots in his employ. They did most of the housework – cooking, cleaning, fixing – and one of them was even a licensed medical bot. They patched up Ursa and Barth’s wounds, gave Margarine some kind of smoothie-elixir to help her recover her aura, or whatever, and their top robo-chef made a first-class Hollywood feast for all of us to enjoy.

We dined in style. They weren’t lying about how charming and very much alive Larry Hagman was. He seemed as real as he did on the silver screen, and he was as welcoming as we could have ever hoped for. And, if I hadn’t been so distracted by how great the food was, I would’ve been certain that he and my Aunt Ursa had really hit it off. They had been flirting throughout the entire meal.

We all got to sleep in lavish quarters, and the next day, we got a full tour of the mansion. Barth and I played a few hours of *Ms. Pac-Man* and *Street Fighter* and dozens of other arcade games with the other warriors.

Eventually, it was time to pack up and head out. Larry gave us supplies for the road. We prepped the balloon and said our farewells. As we were leaving, I approached my aunt, who still seemed very comfortable. ‘Ready to go, Ursa? Good Old Jersey is waiting.’

‘Um... listen, guys. Larry’s invited me to stay a little longer. I’ll meet you all back in Jersey in a couple of weeks.’ She winked and smiled at Margarine.

Margarine couldn’t hold back her excitement either. ‘I’m staying too,’ she said, smiling at the handsome silver fox of a hologram standing behind both of them.

Larry, in his pink and yellow Hawaiian shirt and trademark Texas hat, gave the rest of us a thumbs up. ‘It’s been a while since I’ve had such adoring fans around. Don’t worry, boys. I’ll treat them well. Miss Pippi, you’re welcome to stay too if you like.’

‘Um, no thanks – I’m good, Larry. It’ll be nice to get a break from my lovely sister for a bit.’

Before I got too grossed out by the thought of what their next week would entail, I said goodbye to Ursa and Margarine, thanked Mr Hagman for the hospitality and shook Everetta’s hand. ‘Good luck, Everetta. I wish you well in guarding the mansion. Just go easy on the arrows next time.’

That’s when Everetta gave me a fierce look and refused to let go of my hand. The ice in her glare melted away, and she said, ‘Wait, Tuck. I’ve always wanted to see the East Coast. There’s nothing here for me – only abandoned mansions and toxic California waste. I’ve just never had the chance to leave. I’m coming with you.’

I turned and looked at my crew. Barth gave me a knowing expression of approval.

Walter and his second head nodded too. 'Well, Old New Jersey isn't much nicer than here, but there's plenty of room in the balloon. Let's go!'

# Creepy Crawlies: A Space Opera

by Avra Margariti

**Content Warnings: Death, emotional abuse.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 35 for the next story.

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## ACT I

When he was younger, and his parents were alive to captain their family's spaceship, and his brothers didn't yet act like they hated him, Crow used to affectionately call the alien insects swarming this part of the galaxy *creepy crawlies*.

'They're parasitic, all right.' Crow's older brother Robin spat out the words as if they tasted foul in his mouth. He peered at Crow with sharp eyes from across the rec room's oblong table. 'And *you* have been slacking off.'

Crow wasn't a child anymore, but he still felt like one whenever Robin or his twin Sparrow – both captains now – talked to him.

'I still need to find the nest,' Crow said. 'It'll be easier than chasing every lone creepy crawly around.'

Robin sighed, clearly already over this conversation. 'Whatever you say. Just make sure the insects don't bother us while we fix the broken dome.'

They'd been recently hit by enemy fire. Their parents had successfully secured alliances with the various Tellurian spaceships and fleets travelling the galaxy toward a better home like they were. However, ever since their parents got sucked into deep space and Crow's brothers took their parents' place, the twins' tactless speech and rough manners made their allies drop one by one. They were lucky they'd managed to temporarily seal and isolate the breached room before they all asphyxiated or, worse, suffered a fate similar to that of their parents.

'It's all under control,' Crow lied.

Robin was already gone.

## ACT II

Crow put on his spacesuit and tied a long rope around his waist, attaching him to the anchored spaceship like an umbilical cord. Repetition never diminished the strangeness of swimming through nothingness or hopping from asteroid to asteroid in order to reach his desired spot without using the fire-blasting boots that would no doubt alert the creepy crawlies.

According to his thermal reader, the main nest was tucked between a cluster of asteroids that had half-melted and merged together. It wasn't bad luck that had caused them to anchor their damaged spaceship so close to the nest. Crow had tried to warn his brothers about the infestation recorded in the area, but Robin hadn't listened. He never did.

Classical violin music played gently through the headphones tucked inside his helmet. Most of the time, Crow preferred Martian rock'n'roll, but there was something about Earth's classics that could soothe a bristling soul and drown out his brothers' voices.

Not much was known about the species Crow called creepy crawlies, but he had the few paragraphs that could be found about them memorised. The lack of information didn't faze him. No matter how much his brothers ridiculed him for it, he had always felt a kinship with these creatures beyond his understanding.

Crow floated around the perimeter of the asteroid cluster, his body clenched tight as a fist inside his suit. As quiet as possible, he inserted canisters of sedative gas through the fissures in the old rock. Robin had said kill, exterminate. But even putting the creepy crawlies to sleep made Crow feel all wrong and churning inside.

He turned off the violin music to better focus with all his senses and entered the nest through the main fissure. The insects inside were sluggish but not asleep. Although this impeded his progress, Crow heaved a sigh of relief. Nestled inside the honeycomb hexagons of old rock and ice, the creepy crawlies regarded him with multiple eyes and twitching antennae. Their human-sized bodies were long and muscular, an exoskeleton shielding the softer parts underneath. They followed his every movement but didn't appear inclined to attack. Crow could feel the time bombs Robin had given him, heavy in his backpack. He pictured himself placing them all around the asteroid cluster the way he had done with the canisters of sedative gas and almost retched.

Crow switched on his gravity boots. A few steps forward took him to the centre of the cluster, where a crater-like hole cradled what, at first glance, looked like plain rocks. When he bent lower, however, Crow gasped. The rocks were actually eggs, shining like geodes



under his helmet's beam. Pulses of internal light illuminated the outline of embryos cradled inside the thin shells.

'Oh,' he said, full of awe – and longing. 'You're beautiful.'

He reached out, unthinking, despite the paragraph in his e-book clearly stating not to. The adult creepy crawlies, which had left him alone up until now, reared up on their hind legs, clicking and clucking their proboscises, spreading their sharp-edged wings. One creepy crawly darted close and bit Crow's outstretched hand through his glove. It broke skin.

### **ACT III**

Nothing happened that first night after he held onto his rope, hand over bleeding hand, and dragged himself back into the spaceship. His brothers asked about the creepy crawlies, and Crow muttered something about having dealt with them. He cleaned and dressed his wound, then went to sleep, lightheaded and dreaming of brilliant geodes and kaleidoscopic eggs.

When he woke up the next day to the sound of bangs and shouts, Crow tried to get up and found that he couldn't move. He tried to ask his brothers to please not shout, but no words came out of his mouth save for an insistent, whirring sound.

'Oh, just look at him. Is he even human anymore?' Sparrow said, disgusted.

Robin's expression was equally ugly as it loomed over Crow's expanded field of vision. Maybe it always had been ugly, but Crow had more clarity now that his eyes had apparently multiplied overnight. 'What if he's contagious? We can't keep him here.'

Crow thrashed his bulky body and tried to beat atrophied wings as a robot helper was commanded to carry him from his bedroom to the spaceship's upper lounge. It was the same room that had been breached during the last encounter with an enemy ship. The broken glass and metal dome had been sloppily welded back together, but the lounge was still the weakest spot in the spaceship until a real mechanic could fix it. Crow wanted to laugh, but his new throat only clicked and clacked in vain.

'You'll be quarantined here until we reach the next planet and find you a doctor. Or an entomologist,' Robin said, neither looking nor touching. 'We'll take care of the infection. And then, you and I are going to have a talk about your place in this family.'

Crow lay across the floor on his hunched back. Unable to move his new body, he watched the stars over the cracked glass dome. Perhaps he should have been more panicked. Yet, as he thought about his overnight metamorphosis, all he felt was relief. He wouldn't have to go back and kill his creepy crawlies.

*I know you didn't mean to hurt me, Crow thought. You were only trying to protect your eggs. That's what families are supposed to do. Protect their own.*

The sky outside remained dark and unchanging. Crow couldn't tell how much time had passed. The spaceship was still anchored. His brothers paced outside his door sometimes, boots ringing over metal. Once or twice, they left some food and water for him just inside the door. Crow found both wholly unappetising. Nobody talked to him, as if he was already gone. Maybe he was, and like a dead star, his mind's light still travelled.

Ever since his parents' death and his brothers taking over the ship, Crow had felt invisible. Now he truly was alone, him and his stars and his thoughts. His new eyes weren't capable of producing tears, no matter how much they wanted to. So tiny he was, and why would the universe ever care about his plight?

When the glass dome shattered, it was like a supernova, fractured and reflected a thousandfold in his insect eyes. Crow tried to smile. The creepy crawlies zoomed into the room, hovering or landing all around him. Their wings beat so fast as to appear invisible. Yet, instead of being sucked into space or asphyxiating slowly and painfully, Crow found he could control his body at last. Microgravity allowed him to flap his wings and right himself on his six feet.

*Are you here to end things?* Crow clicked at his creepy crawlies with his proboscis.

Their many eyes reflected the cosmos, the great unknown.

*You're us, and we're you,* the insects clicked back. The sound wasn't gentle, but the words were nothing but kind. *We're here to take you home.*

The door behind Crow was locked. His brothers' footsteps approached, summoned by the breaking glass. They shouted and murmured to one another, then fell silent. Crow knew, deep down, that his brothers wouldn't unlock the door. Wouldn't put themselves in danger to save him. Not when they could just let nature take its course and call it a mercy afterwards.

Crow stretched his membranous wings and took flight together with the rest of the giant insects. There were so many stars in the sky. Even more celestial bodies glittered in the prism of his eyes.

# The Grace Variations

by **Ria Hill**

**Content Warnings: Death (consensual, but not self-inflicted), violence, bondage, body horror, explicit sexual content.**

Not your thing? Then you have come to the end, until next time...

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Now we are together, for the final time.

'Are you sure?' In her every breath, Grace lives up to her name. This is no different. The way she holds her body, the way she holds her hands... all done with the same wide-eyed beauty that made me fall in love with her to begin with. Her hair is falling over her face. Red.

So much of this story is red.

'I think so.' The words come out of my mouth like they were pushed. Whether by me or by some other force, I can't be certain. I can almost feel them exiting my body. The weight they carry with them is still somehow part of me, perhaps growing heavier. I can barely feel anymore.

The numbness is both physical and psychological, and all of it is hers.

'No.' Her head is on my chest. All I can see is the red of her hair. All I can feel is the barest warmth. 'You can't think, you have to know.'

I'm not sure if I will ever know the things that she needs me to know. All I know is that if I can't do for her what she needs me to do now, then there is nothing left I can do for her.

I remember our first time. We were high school sweethearts, now reunited in our hometown after two semesters apart. Nine months had passed since I last touched her face.

She returned from the city pale. She knew something new. She had found herself there and been uncertain of what she had found.

We made love in my car, just a few feet into the forest. Her first time, but not mine. Others, none that mattered, had been before her.

She didn't come. She cried.

'It's all right, you know, if you've changed your mind.' She is looking at me as she says it.

I know she means it, but I also know that if I do change my mind, then something will have changed between us. Something irrevocable. Something that will mean the ruination of every moment of trust we have built.

Once we had dressed, after, I drove her home. She stopped me in the field halfway to her house. She got out of the car and dry-heaved in the dirt at the side of the road.

I sat with her in that car for almost two hours before she let me touch her shoulder.

'Something got fucked up,' she said. 'I love you, but it's all fucked up.'

It was the first time she had ever told me she loved me. Whatever she had that she thought was wrong, I knew then and there that we were perfect for each other. I knew I couldn't leave her side. No matter what.

Then she told me what she had that was wrecked, and we passed the ride home in silence.

'I think...' I can't just think, but it's all I seem capable of. I bite my tongue. I can't feel the pain, though I can taste blood.

'No matter what happens, you came this close.' Grace kisses me, delicately.

It is a kiss of consolation. A kiss short of the finish line.

I can feel my heart lurch as she sets her head on my chest.

If I say no, it is over.

If I say yes, it is over.

I remember our second time. It was almost two years since the first, and eighteen months had passed since I last touched her face. Another college summer, this time in her city. She had not come back after that first summer.

I saw her by chance at the library, one of the largest in the country, and we shared a smile around a marble lion she introduced to me by name.

We had coffee. There was incredible ease in our words, ease that came from forgetting.

She thought I had forgotten.

I remembered everything, but the love took precedence over the broken piece.

'Come with me,' she said. 'I'll show you how I manage.'

I followed her into the underbelly of the city, into darkened rooms. I saw her with three men that night.

She took their money and destroyed them for it.

All screamed; one cried. None touched her as I had, but she left each one satisfied.

At the end she asked me, dared me, to tell her how I felt.

I told her that I needed her. I told her that whatever she felt was bad, I could accept. I told her that I loved her still, in ways that those men could only dream of. I told her that I loved her in spite of whatever she thought was broken.

'I think we should wait.'

She looks up at me again.

'Not long. An hour. I need to feel you.'

'You can't think.' Her hand is on my face, but I can only tell because it turns my head.

'You have to know.'

The night of our second time, we didn't make love.

We fucked.

We were like the animals science keeps saying we are. We soaked the sheets, our bodies, our hair.

She had been with no one but me, but still more women had come and gone from my life between her first time and our second.

She didn't come. She cried.

'Okay,' I said. 'Okay, let's try.'

With a bit of coaxing, I persuaded her to hurt me. I urged, begged and pleaded with her to do to me what she had done to those men in their dark basement rooms. I had to give her a dozen permissions before her fingers closed around my throat.

With a delicate and expert hand, she brought me to quiet tears. Gently, precisely, she brought out cries and whimpers I did not know I contained.

'I do.' I can almost feel a tingling in the tips of my toes. I know it will be far less than the hour we were promised before I can feel her. 'I do know. Like I know two and two.'

She smiles slightly, then frowns. She is thinking, as I am, of my students.

My students will remember me as a quiet man, a thoughtful and thought-provoking man. Just as ready to explain simple arithmetic as he is to discuss unfinished mathematical proofs. Someone logical.

What is there of logic in what I'm doing now?

'Whatever you like.' Grace's students, when she someday retires from teaching, will remember her as vivacious, beautiful. She is the teacher it is impossible not to love, with a way with words and exquisite handwriting.

Her fiction, for the few in her class who have read it, is quite unlike her form.

I remember our third time.

Her apartment, her soft bed.

Sixty-three minutes had passed since I last touched her face.

This time was like the first, gentle and tentative, careful not to harm. This time, my bruises were being watched instead of her virginal flesh. None and nothing had come between for either of us.

She did not come, but she did not cry.

'I know I can't be fixed,' she said. 'But even shattered things have worth.'

The next day, she started to write again. The next week, I moved into her apartment.

She made my life whole, and I did what I could to add to hers, most of this service showing itself in long-sleeved shirts in summer. In buying concealer from a drugstore in the middle of the night. In nightly pain and sex.

She never came, and she never cried.

I did that for her.

'Can I touch you?' It has been so long since she has had to ask, it takes me a moment to nod my consent.

I feel her touch like ghost fingers across my naked stomach. The drugs are wearing thin, giving me more time with her by virtue of their scant longevity.

We might have minutes.

'Can I?'

She nods, and my hands are in her hair.

I'm thinking about her readers. They will remember her, when she someday retires from writing, as a creature of the night. They will remember words that kept them up with the lights on for weeks on end, words they devoured like one of her monsters would happily devour them. They will remember almost none of it as the truth that it was. They will remember her as creative. Imaginative.

My readers, for I have published several papers, will not remember me.

I remember our second first time.

We had been living together for nearly four years before she allowed herself to bring a blade into the bedroom.

It was small, a single-edged razor blade.

I had brought it home with its ninety-nine brothers, purchased from a hardware store for \$10.48 plus tax.

She had unwrapped them a year before, on her birthday. She took one out and



immediately threw it away.

'Maybe someday,' she'd said. 'Not today.'

Someday came, and she tied me up like always.

I had to give her a dozen permissions before her blade touched my skin. Panic like nothing I had ever felt made me flinch. My flinch made her pause, then made her squirm like nothing we had ever done, nothing I had ever done for her.

I felt inadequate next to my fear. With something so real as that in her bed, what good was I?

'You're perfect.'

She smiles in response. She has not bound me this time.

I start to wonder if perhaps she should.

But not now. Later. Now I have one tingling hand in her hair and one on her breast.

'I'm broken.' She is breathing heavily. She has been breathless for nearly an hour.

'You're my missing piece.'

We made love almost before the discarded blade hit the floor. For the duration of our embrace, I worried if the panic would ever come back, ever be there to entice her the way it had that first time.

I did not know if there would be a second.

All that mattered was the indescribable look on her beautiful face.

Her eyes met mine, and her face fell. She did not come. She cried.

She had thought the Bad Thing, she told me later. She had convinced herself that I was the exception, and her illusion was unceremoniously shattered.

I slept on the couch that night, and the next.

Our second second time, she was able to continue. A week had passed since I last touched her face, the longest time since we had moved in together.

I had to beg her to remove the third little blade from its casing and plead for her to touch me. Each cold and gentle caress was bringing her higher. The panic – the very real panic – I had felt the first time was coming closer and closer.

My skin, pale and fragile, succumbed by accident. Two drops of blood began to rise from a spot on my chest.

Her face was impossible to read.

I could only imagine her horror. Her guilt. Her arousal.

'No matter what happens, you came this close.'

I take her hand, the one holding the one-hundredth brother, and kiss her knuckles.

'You have to promise you won't let guilt in.' Guilt has been an unwelcome house guest for far too long.

I look into her eyes and believe in her so deeply. I think that perhaps no one has loved anyone like I love her.

Two drops of blood were all we managed on our second second time.

Two drops, as it happened, were all we needed.

Her eyes were sparkling with tears behind their maddening unreadability.

Without a word, I beckoned her.

Her movements, slow as stone, transported her against my body.

I knew the moment I felt it that I would never forget the sensation of her small, hot tongue tracing over the tiny scratch that she had made.

With each successive time, more blood was drawn. Each time, she came closer – but she never came, and she always cried.

'I'm a monster,' she said. She begged me to leave, but I would crawl to her as soon as the old wounds had healed, naked, with a single-edged razor blade clenched by the handle between my teeth.

With each passing night, we made love, or we fucked; we knew what she needed. We knew what would satisfy her.

We knew.

Her latest book had just been published when I approached her with a dog-eared old copy of her first.

I don't think either of us slept that night.

'Okay.' I can feel enough. The tingling has all but gone.

Her hand has never left my slowly rising and falling stomach.

I should be more awake by now: keyed up, rapid pulse, heavy breathing.

She is heightened in my stead.

She ties me up like usual, at my request.

We are on the floor this time and not the bed. The rug has grown old and worn. The mattress is brand new.

'Are you sure?' Her knots are as dainty and inescapable as she is.

Grace.

'As sure as I am of my own name.' I smile, then we laugh.

This may be the last time we laugh together.

She kisses me.

I taste her, doing my best to savour it, to save it.

She climbs on top of me.

So it begins.

I remember the preparation. The plane ticket we booked to Mexico. The time spent making up stories of all the wonderful things I would do on my trip.

I can feel her heat, her incredible arousal, her doubts melting away.

I only took one week off from my summer teaching position. The rest would be the university's problem.

She lets me finish before she does it. That's part of it for her, the finality. As soon as I do, she still waits for my nod. My final consent. The one-hundredth razor from the package sinks into the meat of my stomach.

Our years together, all the pain, is nothing, has done nothing to prepare me for the agony of this not-quite-surgically-sharp blade entering my body. All the little cuts and scratches combined were a kiss compared to the feeling of the tiny razor tearing its way across my abdominals.

If she got caught, she told me, she would tell the truth. She would do nothing to escape the repercussions of our actions, but she would try to make them understand the months of begging and pleading, the dozen permissions that had been given before she had even considered laying a finger on me.

She would try to make them understand that what we had done, we had done for love.

The last brother of the razor box is cast against the bedraggled carpet.

I hear it hit, but I see only her.

Her longing is palpable.

This is what she has always wanted, and I am the only man willing and able to give it to her.

As soon as I learned that I was not immune to her longing, I knew.

We had bought the anaesthetic from some dealer she had heard of from a student. That was her idea. As much as she needed me in pain, she did not want me to suffer.

To me, that seemed like a waste. If I was going to die for her, it hardly made sense to die numb.

Is that what this is? I'm dying?

Grace puts one hand on my face and the other on my opened stomach.

I am still inside her when she enters me for the first time, two fingers gently tracing the opening that she created.

I let myself cry out. For a moment, there is a twinge of regret that I allowed the drugs to dissipate. This moment lasts until I see her face.

There is everything in her expression. It is a magnified copy of the maddeningly unreadable look with which she had greeted first blood. As time slows, meaning unfolds, and I can read her at last.

Passion. Horror. Love. Despair. Desire. Sorrow. Longing.

'Grace, my hands.'

She unites them for me.

The initial agony has passed. My hands are on her face. Her hands are inside my core.

'So slick. Like chicken livers on Christmas.'

Somehow, I think I love her more.

I try to remember Christmas, but for once, this moment is all there is.

She picks the blade off the carpet and carefully unwraps my insides from their casing, my peritoneum taking the place of the customary colourful paper.

When they come out, they are not in single ropes like in the movies, but in a knitted sheet, a tangle of veins and tubes and tissue.

She is not looking at me anymore. She is looking at them.

I don't mind. I give them to her willingly.

But the pain... is unprecedented.

'You're crying.'

I feel my elbows bending, and her face meets mine. I taste blood in the kiss and know that the time can't be long now.

'Say it.'

'I'll miss you.'

Her hand squeezes something vital, and I gasp.

'Grace.'

'Not that. You know.'

My mind has to search for what feels like hours through the complex lexicon of the English language to find the words to describe how I am feeling. There are not enough synonyms for the agony, the terror, the incredible, unfathomable love I bear for this woman. I remember her book.

'It hurts.' This is not exactly the scene from her novel, but I have come close.

She has come close to her own demon.

We have created something like the first fantasy she ever let herself commit to paper.

'And?'

'Please stop.'

'Do you mean that?' Her eyes are locked to mine. Beautiful. Blue. Perhaps blue is the last colour of this story, not red.

'No.'

She is lying down beside me, my viscera spread over her lap like a blanket. Her arms are around me.

I think of all the cleaning she will have to do: the scrubbing, the things in garbage bags.

The house will smell of bleach for weeks, and for the rest of her life, when she smells bleach, she will think of me. Maybe she will even get a little wet. I wish I could help her clean, but I have helped her all I can.

I touch her.

She whispers in my ear, but I cannot understand her anymore.

I watch her smearing my blood over her breasts. The pain is so intense as to become almost meaningless.

I watch her as she comes, and as she cries.

I remember the tape we will have made. It will be in two parts. The most redeeming and most dangerous parts of the ordeal.

The first part, my own part of the confession. The summary of all the begging, pleading, coercing I had done. The arrangements I had made. The fasting and the potions I had endured to clean my body for her. The statement that there was nothing I wanted more than this. The assertion that I went to my own torment willingly.

The second part was the torment itself.

As I spared one final glance at the steady, red light of our camera, I hoped that no one would see this tape but her. I did not choose to die for them.

I chose to die for Grace.

My choice is at last coming to fruition. Breathing comes with more difficulty now. My fingertips that so recently felt her first climax feel nothing.

The warmth of her head on my chest, the pain of her hand in my abdomen, these are the last things I will feel.

I whisper to her. I am not sure of what I said, but I adore her even now. I hope she understands that nothing is broken in her unless it's cracked in me as well.