

Leaping From Towers:  
Three Short Stories

by

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## Table of Contents

573999	3
The Musician and the Autocratic Regime	45
A Curious Adventure in Buenos Aires	52
Bibliography	97

**573999**

“Service to the DreamNet has been interrupted.”

She jolted awake, gasping; something was keeping her head locked in place. She drew in air to scream, and choked.

“Service to the DreamNet has been interrupted,” said the voice again, in a soothing tone that was negated by its volume.

It sounded like a recording, and she couldn't see where it was coming from. All she could see, straining her eyes to each side, was the riveted, dark metal wall across from her. Her jaw clacked as she tried to turn her head, and she realized that she was shivering violently. She couldn't curl up to warm herself, either: she was pinned by her calves, forearms, head, and waist. She stood like a suit of armor in an alcove of a corridor that was uniformly dark and silent but for her own rabbit-like breathing. Though she had no idea what the voice was referring to, she had a stomach-twisting sense that she had been in the middle of a very important dream.

“Service to the DreamNet has been interrupted.”

“Unit five. Seven. Three. Nine. Nine. Nine,” added the same voice, vibrating the metal behind her head. “Service to the DreamNet has been interrupted.”

She managed to scream this time, squirming violently within her bounds. The corridor remained silent for a moment, and she held her breath, hoping she’d been heard.

“Service to the DreamNet has been interrupted,” announced the voice again. She exhaled, disappointed.

“All right, all right,” said a phlegmatic voice from far to one side. “I’m coming.”

As she strained her eyes sideways, a stocky figure strolled into view. Overhead lights flickered on at its approach, and she discerned a man with dull features and wide shoulders hunched in his baggy grey coveralls. He looked very much like a custodian.

“Hello?” she croaked.

The man’s eyes jerked towards her face in surprise, and he straightened, taking note of her open eyes. The light snapped on above them. He was middle-aged and strangely colorless, with deep-set, tired eyes, close-cropped hair, and a scar on one cheek. “Hello,” he replied, warily.

“Where am I?” she asked, made more nervous by his silence. “What is the DreamNet, and what’s going on?”

“Service to the DreamNet has been interrupted,” belted the voice again, making them both jump.

“Yes, yes, I’ve got it,” the man grumbled at the ceiling, and stabbed a button near her left side, making her flinch.

The voice said, “Alert acknowledged. Thank you,” and was silent.

The man squinted at her again, said, “Don’t worry, this will probably only take a second,” and transferred his attention to the wall next to her.

“What will?” she asked, alarmed, but he ignored her completely; he seemed to be pressing buttons and reading something next to her – she couldn’t turn her head enough to see what. “Who are you? Where am I?”

He glanced at her measuredly, but seemed to dismiss her, looking back to the wall. She found that now that she had started, she had more questions. “Why am I locked up? Can you get me out? Why aren’t you looking at me? Why can’t I remember – anything – oh, I can’t remember anything...”

He muttered something, annoyed at whatever he was looking at. He had very thick eyebrows, and dark puffs under his eyes: the combination made his frown look very deep. When he looked back at her, he actually looked into her eyes this time, if only to give them a clinical stare as if he were checking her pupils.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“I don’t – actually, it’s Joanna,” she said, astonished. She hadn’t known until he asked.

“Hmm. I’m sorry, Joanna; I’m afraid that I can’t send you back just yet,” he said, looking away again. Although his apology was strangely monotonous and unfelt, she felt a sudden, unexpected sense of loss.

“Well, why not?”

“Your link to the DreamNet is scrambled due to some kind of mechanical interference. It seems to have been missing one of the uplink components already, actually... You’ll have to wait outside for awhile while we repair it. I can put you in a temporary room while you wait.”

“Okay,” she said, though she didn’t understand at all. “Can you let me out?”

He tapped the wall a few times. There was a pneumatic hiss, and her bonds released so suddenly that she stumbled and fell. The floor was cold through her thin scrub-like trousers, and her bare feet were tender and pale; they left damp prints on the gleamingly clean metal. The man in the overalls helped her up, mechanically explaining, “Dizziness and confusion are normal at this time. Do not be concerned.”

As soon as she stepped away from the alcove she had been held in, a panel rolled across it, making it indistinguishable from the rest of the wall except for a blinking red sign on the screen next to it. The screen was labeled with the number 573999 in white. The custodian jabbed the screen a few more times, leaving only the red alert sign blinking.

“Please follow me,” he said, and began walking. He seemed somehow resigned, she reflected. His shoulders and gait as were weary as his deep-set eyes. He turned to see if she was following, and she jumped and started after him.

She followed him off down the corridor. It was slightly curved, she noticed, but otherwise remarkably uniform: on one side, a riveted metal wall, with a ladder placed at every ten yards; on the other, a series of large numbered panels, all

closed, and screens, all dark. Every surface was immaculate. Above, flat fluorescent lights blinked on every five feet they walked by, and ticked slowly off behind.

“How will I find my way back?” she asked. She could feel something waiting for her behind the wall back there. Her memories, or a dream – something more important than this dull dark corridor.

“We will take you back,” he said, without turning around.

“What if I get lost?” she asked, just to make sure.

“We will find you,” he said, flatly. “But your number is on your forearm.” She looked down and discovered the number 573999 neatly stamped there – no, tattooed, she discovered, rubbing a thumb over it. It seemed wrong, unexpected – but why would she feel that way, she wondered, when she couldn’t remember anything except her name?

They walked all the way to where the corridor ended in an abrupt wall; he turned and began climbing the last ladder. She followed him up into the darkness – a few feet of blind climbing – and then he pushed open a hatch and they ascended into another hallway, this one walled in white plastic instead of dark metal, but as devoid of doorways or intersections as the last. At the end of the hallway there was a door, which slid open at their approach – a spotless elevator with brushed-silver walls.

The custodian stepped aside and gestured for her to follow him in; nervously, she did. She was momentarily shocked when the doors closed, and a pallid, intense-eyed person appeared opposite her – but it was only a mirror, she realized, and stared at herself in fascination. Her skin looked nearly translucent; the

veins around her eyes showed through blue-purple. Her fuzz of short brown hair was patched with raw pink at her temples and the top of her forehead. She touched the shaved spots curiously, with pale fingers. Like the number on her arm, they didn't match up to what she expected to be there. Her other features seemed more or less correct, though her eyes were dark and angry in her colorless face. Next to the worn, grey custodian, who was disinterestedly watching her scrutinize her own reflection, she was like a ghost or a skeletal cave creature that had climbed up to his mortal plane.

The elevator slowed, fluidly, and the doors opened to reveal not another hallway but an expanse of greenery. Joanna exited cautiously, now feeling too thin-skinned to belong amid the deep green of the lawn, the mildly damp, grassy air, and the slender, smooth-barked trees. The light seemed oddly pale, and she looked up to discover that the sky was occluded by purplish-tinted panels of glass arranged in a geometrical pattern that looked like the inside of a giant insect's eye. The dome, which started several stories above her head, curved down to a high cement wall that ran parallel to the wall they had just exited from; she couldn't see anything outside but a uniformly clouded sky.

"Come on," called the custodian, already starting out on a neat cement path from the elevator. She followed, but on the grass.

"Why is it all closed in?" she asked. She stumbled several times as she walked, trying to take everything in, and not fully in control of her limbs. The path curved gently to match the outer wall of the building they had exited, which stretched up and up behind them, past the glass dome – up into a windowless silver tower taller



than she could see, wide and round. She stared at it for a moment, tilting her head all the way back (though her neck muscles felt wobbly), and had to dash to catch up to the custodian, who walked at a measured, efficient pace that made her feel like a recalcitrant, wandering child pattering along barefoot on the grass next to him.

“Because there is nothing outside,” he said.

“Nothing?” she asked, staring up. The tower and the lavender-grey clouds looked quite convincing.

He didn't respond.

“Then where do the clouds come from?”

“They're simulations.” He glanced at her, looking almost annoyed, as she caught up to him. The humid air was already dispelling the chill from her skin, and her muscles felt as if they were waking up. “They make us happier.” His answers had a rote quality, as if he had heard the words so many times that he didn't even think about them.

“What do you mean?” she pressed, but he narrowed his eyes ahead: something circus-colored swooped through the trees in front of them. The bird looped lazily, then dove straight down at the custodian, who covered his head and cursed. Joanna prepared to duck too, but it shot upwards again at the last minute, causing the custodian to straighten with an embarrassed, aggravated grunt. As it circled, Joanna recognized it as a parrot, its vivid coloring standing out almost violently against the subdued stillness of the lawn and dome: scarlet, electric blue, and crayon yellow. Joanna giggled with surprised glee as it veered around to dive-bomb the custodian again, who futilely yelled, “Go away!” as it swept off with a gentle cackle to

disappear behind the trees. The custodian shook his head, irritated, then started forward again, with a curt, “Come on.”

Soon, they came upon a panel of tall windows set into the side of the tower. Through them Joanna discerned a small cafeteria, with butter-colored walls and bare metal chairs clustered around matching metal tables, some of which were covered in crumbs. A counter divided off one corner, partially hiding several worn metal kitchen appliances. This place was the first she had seen that looked like it had a human use: the chairs were arranged as if people actually relaxed in them, a potted plant drooped inelegantly on the counter, and the tile floor was worn and stained.

The custodian ushered her inside, went to the counter, and rapped on it brusquely. “Hey! You back there?”

A square head adorned with half again its height in wild grey hair appeared over the edge. “What’s it to you?” Its eyes – bright bulges within their deep sockets – fixed on Joanna. “Ah,” said the head, its eyebrows bristling with sudden interest. “One of our frozen immortals, dropped onto the plane of the waking. How are you liking it, eh?”

Joanna blinked at him. His glittering stare was packed with a near-violent intensity: like the parrot, it seemed to belong to something outside this stilted place.

“You could at least try to follow protocol,” the custodian grumbled before she could reply. He steered himself to a chair, and gestured at Joanna, addressing the man who appeared to be the cook. “573,999. Same malfunction as last

time, still cause unknown. She had questions; I brought her here. I'll take lunch while I'm at it."

"Of course you will," the cook said sharply, standing up. His grey coveralls were identical to the custodian's, but his top two buttons were undone to release a voluminous thatch of coarse grey hair that seemed nearly as long as the stuff on his head. "Why bring her here, if I can't follow protocol? But of course! What you really wanted was lunch. Sandwich, then, or paste?"

The custodian remained insensate to the cook's needling, but looked downcast when he heard his lunch options. "Is there anything else?"

"No," said the cook, with a certain malicious smugness. "We're between crops."

"Sandwich, then," said the custodian, and the cook popped back below the counter, and reappeared with a sealed packet, which he began to unwrap and arrange on a plate.

"I brought her here because you like to talk," said the custodian. "She's quite alert, actually; I think there was something wrong with her connection even before the malfunction. Uplink component. Yet another thing I have to deal with off routine."

"Oh, off routine. Always with the complaining!" The cook came out from behind the counter to plop a spongy-looking sandwich down in front of the custodian. "You're the one who's not following protocol now. Polite treatment of our most revered passengers?" He turned to Joanna, who was again unnerved by the

effect of his forward-thrust head and expectant smile. To distance herself from the cook, she sat down across from the custodian.

“If I’m revered, can I get a sandwich, too?”

They both raised thick eyebrows, and she noticed that despite the cook’s age, the two men bore an eerie resemblance: they had the same blunt nose, strong cleft chin, bulky build, and sunken eyes. Where the custodian’s eyes were dull, however – his shallow regard lost under his protruding brows – the cook’s glittered out from between his drooping lids with an erratic intensity, as if he had a sparkler lodged in his pupils.

“You don’t need it,” said the custodian. He frowned at the cook, for confirmation. “She can’t be hungry.”

“But she wants it,” the cook said, and Joanna was again struck by the similarities in their voices: it was almost as if one person was speaking with two personalities. The cook’s voice was oddly sing-song, with mockingly precise articulation; he slipped from tone to tone and hit all the notes his monotone coworker avoided. “That’s *very* interesting,” he continued, addressing the custodian, but his eyes never leaving her. “You said there was already something wrong with her connection – but no brain damage, I take it?”

Their surprise and impersonal observation was disconcerting; she folded her arms and glared, trying to change the subject. “Are you related?”

“Minimal,” the custodian replied to the cook, ignoring her question, though the cook continued to track her gaze inquisitively. “Memory loss. Doc hasn’t checked her out yet.”

“Well, that only shows that our revered system didn’t fail completely. She does seem quite alert, though, doesn’t she? I wonder –” He peered at her, then, joltingly, leaned over and lifted up one of her eyelids with a forceful thumb. She tensed, and when he didn’t move, she slapped his hand away with stinging impact. He jerked his arm back, retreating a few steps. The custodian’s chair shrieked on the floor as he slid backwards, looking like he was paying attention for the first time.

Their eyes were satisfyingly wide. Joanna growled, “I’d like you to stop treating me like a brainless experiment and answer my questions now.”

They stared. The custodian looked as shocked as if she had slapped him instead, while amusement was slipping into the cook’s eyes. “You can start by getting me a sandwich,” she added, imperiously. “And my name is Joanna, since he completely failed to introduce me.”

The custodian warily lifted his eyes from her to check with the cook, and the cook suddenly cackled, so hard that he bent in half. When he straightened, he gave Joanna a mock salute, and marched over to the counter, smirking. “One sandwich, your Immortal-ness, Joanna. Your brain’s just fine, I see.”

The custodian looked from the cook to Joanna, still flabbergasted. “But you don’t remember,” he mumbled, as if to reassure himself.

“What, exactly, don’t I remember?” she asked sharply.

“What you’re supposed to,” he muttered, looking away, and she felt her teeth clench. He didn’t seem to have understood her outburst.

“Here is your sandwich, your Immortality,” the cook said, plopping a yellow plastic plate down in front of her. He sat, watching her inspect it. It was white

and soft, filled with a savory yellow paste. It wasn't bad, but she found her mouth clumsy and dry, and had to chew slowly. When she looked up, they were still looking at her with varying degrees of apprehension and interest.

"Never seen someone eat before?" she asked, half irritated and half amused. The custodian's jaw tightened, and the cook snorted at him.

"Oh, go away, Henry, I know anything outside of routine makes you constipated." He turned to Joanna with a grand, magnanimous air. "We're not used to having our accidentally-released passengers act like much more than cattle. Or addicts. Cattle or addicts. But you – you seem to have a personality! We have forgotten such possibilities." He stared out the window, almost sadly. "A lesson for us all."

His apparent inability to divulge concrete information grated on her. *Passengers*, she thought, looking at the park outside. "So I'm a malfunction? I'm supposed to be locked up back there – with how many other people?"

"Five thousand," he said, nodding. "Not locked up, so much as asleep. Strapped into the DreamNet, their hearts beating once every month or so, thinking long slow thoughts. You, my dear, are much older than I am."

"I was – in hibernation?" said Joanna.

"All of you were – well, the rest of you still are. Like a thousand bears through a radioactive winter," said the cook; she couldn't tell if he was mocking her, and the custodian, who was still standing with his arms folded, snorted angrily.

"Don't like my turn of phrase?" the cook asked him, sharply. He leaned toward Joanna, conspiratorially. "We get time with the DreamNet too, you

know – but this one would spend all his time there if he could. He already spends all his free time with numbing agents and sex programs. It’s no wonder he doesn’t like to be out here.”

“That is *normal*,” the custodian burst out. “And that is not the point! This is not supposed to keep happening,” he added, angrily. “Why does the system keep letting people out, when they can’t do anything useful? Even this one doesn’t remember what she’s supposed to! We’re not supposed to have to deal with this, but for all we know the ship is slowly breaking down and we’re going to drift in space forever, with monthly alarms about the gravity going off when it obviously hasn’t.” Joanna stopped chewing mid-bite, and looked outside at the tower. *Ship*, she thought, and swallowed. Something about the *gravity* struck her – the same way the shaved patches in her hair had struck her. Wrong.

“I am sick of it.” The custodian seemed to be winding up his rant, his chest swelling indignantly. “And I am sick of watching you, the *oldest*, sit here, doing nothing but spoiling that parrot, and letting releases *eat*.”

The cook allowed him a moment of righteous glaring, and then said, pointedly, “Are you finished?”

The custodian’s chest deflated like a balloon. He folded his arms, looking petulant.

“We’re still breathing,” the cook said firmly. “And the gravity is still on, obviously, even if the ship thinks it’s not. So please, take a few hours off, and go deal with your rage elsewhere.”

“I’ll go see if her unit is fixed yet,” the custodian said, eyebrows joining threateningly. A gentle puff of odorless air slipped in as he opened the door, and Joanna watched him plod away through the muted sunlight. As her eyes lingered on the strange uniformity of lawn, full-grown trees, and lavender sky, the parrot announced itself with a triumphant squawk, flashing towards the custodian’s head. “Get away, disgusting thing!” she heard him shout, and it obliged, sweeping towards the cafeteria to land neatly in front of the glass door. It fluffed up its scarlet chest, and rapped imperiously on the glass with its beak.

“Hello, Ermentrude,” said the cook, getting up to open the door. The parrot gave the cafeteria a condescending look, and then consented to waddle inside like a tiny dowager. “This is Ermentrude,” the cook told Joanna. “She had problems with her tank, like you, but it was three months before we could catch her, and by that time we were quite used to the silly thing.”

Close up, Ermentrude was an enticing bright crimson all over, except for her wrinkled gray-white face and her wings, whose edges were dipped in yellow and bright blue. Close up, she was scruffy and possibly balding – but the tiny round eye she turned towards Joanna seemed to inspect as candidly as she was being inspected. “Silly thing,” she squawked, making Joanna jump.

The cook picked up the last quarter of the custodian’s unfinished sandwich and began to entice the parrot with it. Ermentrude sidled over, coquettishly, then snapped it up and dashed off to the farthest table, shedding a feather. Joanna pulled the mangy, bright blue quill towards her instinctively: it was too lively not to covet.



“All right,” said the cook, leaning back and looking at the parrot fondly, “Are you comfortable, Joanna?”

“I suppose,” Joanna replied, taking another small bite and chewing industriously.

“Well then,” proclaimed the cook, with a magnanimous air, “I will tell you the story of our tower and the sleeping beauties within it. Of how Mother Nature, that jealous bitch, turned on us while we were reaching for the stars. How you, poor fragile thing, are one of humanity’s last remnants, dreaming long slow dreams as you float to safe harbor – or perhaps to swift oblivion! The destination was preset, so how are your bored, stalwart guardians to know if we are steering accidentally to the heart of a sun? We grow, we learn the systems, we work within them, and then we retire to forgetful dreams and have our bodies recycled into food. And you sleep on still, waiting for your arrival. We don’t know if it will ever come, because the ship’s computer has ceased speaking to us. And one by one, every so often, but more and more, one of you slips out of sleep, usually only to cry to be put in again. You’re supposed to be our leaders, you’re supposed to wake all at once to a glorious fresh dawn on a virgin planet, but here you are, too early and without the proper training to be more than a burden.”

He trailed off, finally. Joanna, who had finished her sandwich and begun fidgeting with the blue feather as he spoke, folded her arms over her thin grey shirt. “You’re saying this tower is a spaceship.”

“Yep.” He grinned, eyes glinting.

“And you’re saying that the sky out there is a projection.”

He nodded.

“And I was in storage, with a bunch of others, waiting until we land.”

“Five thousand people,” he said. “And animals, seeds, chemicals, computers... everything you’ll need when you rise from the afterlife.”

“Why?”

“Because the blighted Earth dried up. All its last resources are on this ship, heading out into the unknown universe while our mother lies cold and hostile behind us.”

She had known all of this, she suspected. The things that she wanted to know – the things she had felt were hidden in the wall behind the label 573999 – had in her mind all along, waiting to be illuminated. Which was lucky, because the cook hadn’t been all that clear. A thousand bears, indeed. Joanna smirked.

“We’re sleeping through the journey to another solar system, while a few people stay awake to keep everything running. Right?”

“Yes.”

“We’re supposed to wake up when we land on this new planet, and remember how to start civilization again. But we keep waking up individually, without any memory. Is that right?”

He nodded, his eyes burning at her. “A few of you, not many. But before you, my dear, everyone who’s emerged has been so disappointing. The emergency ejection seems to have damaged your predecessors. I was excited to meet one of our passengers, that first time, but they just want to go back to sleep, and they cry until they can – or there’s nothing behind their eyes, which is worse; it’s like they

left their brains in there. There's something addictive about the DreamNet, even for us – you saw Henry; he doesn't want any fuss out here, because that would delay his going back to his games and fun. That's why you are such an interesting case. Henry said that your connection was already damaged, which may, ironically, have prevented the emergency ejection from damaging your brain.”

She felt again a strange pang of longing and dread at the mention of the DreamNet, and frowned. She looked outside, at the smooth purplish sky, fractured behind the dome, and the level, even path, and the perfect trees. In the corner, Ermentrude muttered to herself, tearing the sandwich into tiny pieces.

“Well, this is all very depressing,” Joanna said.

The cook, who was drawing in a breath to fuel his next flowery discourse, looked surprised, and a cackle erupted from his chest. Ermentrude flapped in alarm, then stretched her neck up and began to squawk; the alarming cacophony only ceased when the cook began to cough, and had to get up for a glass of water. Ermentrude found this equally amusing, and copied his cough near-exactly. Joanna decided that she liked Ermentrude.

“Do you know how long the ship has been flying? How long I've been asleep?” she asked.

“I have been on this ship my whole life,” he replied. She frowned.

“Don't you keep a log or something?”

“It is not our job to calculate such things. We will be informed of the landing time by the DreamNet,” he said.

Joanna tapped her fingers together impatiently. “What about the gravity? It’s not supposed to be working, according to the ship?”

She was clearly not asking the questions he was interested in answering. “The ship thinks it’s broken, but it clearly isn’t.” He gestured around.

“Have you checked the machinery?”

He scoffed. “We’re walking; there’s your check!”

Joanna kept her doubts to herself, and just said, “Can you take me to a window?”

The cook swallowed abruptly. “What?” Ermentrude coughed again, happily.

“If this is a spaceship,” Joanna said, “I want to see space.”

The cook looked at her with his strange bright eyes. “I can’t – there are no windows. Those are just projections on metal, you know.” He gestured at the stained-glass sky.

“I need to see it,” Joanna said, cleaning the last crumbs from her plate.

“I could understand if I see it.”

His lips twisted thoughtfully. “I could take you to the temporary DreamNet we use,” he mused. “You could view the tutorials they give us when we’re learning about the ship.”

“I guess that’s the next best thing,” Joanna said. “I’ll do it.”

“You’ll do it? Very good, your Immortality, we shall do this thing,” said the cook, with a grand wave of his hand. Joanna nodded, and he leapt to action. He seized her empty plate and the custodian’s, carried them to the counter like a

French waiter, and dropped them there with a bang. He then leaped to the door, holding it open while Joanna walked uncomfortably out, still holding the feather. Ermentrude followed, with much pomp.

The cook led in her the opposite direction from the one she had come with the custodian. Ermentrude accompanied them, pausing in every next tree to wait for them.

Another elevator slid open as they rounded the curve of the tower. Ermentrude followed them inside, landing on Joanna's shoulder just as the doors were closing. The parrot was surprisingly light for her size, and Joanna held very still, eyeing the beak next to her face uncertainly. The cook laughed at her tension. "She must like you. Both early risers from the afterlife, and all."

The ride was much shorter this time: they exited on a pale, soft-carpeted hallway. The cook opened the third door on the left, and practically bowed Joanna inside. The parrot, peering majestically from Joanna's shoulder, made a quiet click of approval.

The DreamNet turned out to be a dentist's chair in the middle of a room with pastel blue walls. A steel apparatus was folded down from the sides of the wheeled metal chair, and there were drawers on one wall: the effect was clinical and cold. The cook bowed her elaborately towards the ominous chair, and Joanna sat with sudden apprehension, jolting as it rolled a little.

Upon this jolt, Ermentrude removed herself to the cook's head, and sat observing among the grey tufts while he shuffled busily around the room, folding the recliner back, opening drawers, and moving the steel apparatus. He instructed Joanna

to put her hand on the armrest, where a steel bracelet half enclosed it. She realized that she was still holding the bright blue feather, incongruously bright and shabby in the bland room, and tucked it surreptitiously into the waistband of her trousers with her free hand.

“Ready?” asked the cook, standing back.

“No!” she snapped, nervously. “How does it work?”

He raised his aggressively wooly eyebrows and blinked at her. “It’s nothing to be worried about.” He grinned, and Ermentrude bobbed on his head. “The DreamNet itself will guide you. Make sense?”

“All right,” Joanna said, tapping her free hand nervously on her leg.

“Very well,” he said cheerfully. “Bon voyage!” With that, he clicked the steel cuff on her arm closed.

“Wait –” She yelped as something stung her arm inside the bracelet, and tried to control her breathing as paralysis rushed up her arm and towards her throat. “I wasn’t – what if – what is that?”

The cook chuckled, and patted her arm – which she couldn’t feel.

“Routine sedatives,” he said. “Should’ve warned you.”

Joanna gritted her teeth and prepared to say something angry, but the numbness slipped into her eyes and they began to close.

“You must accept death,” Joanna inexplicably thought she heard Ermentrude say in her soft, crackling voice. The cook patted Joanna’s arm again, reassuringly, but his burning eyes, following her into sleep, were anything but comforting.

Darkness.

She emerged slowly into a clammy, pallid, uniform grey that pressed blankly against her eyes.

Fog surrounded her, and a watery silence. The mist whispered and dripped; she put a foot tentatively forward, and felt her toes slipping in damp crevices of rock. “Hello?”

“WELCOME-TO-THE-DREAM-NET,” the fog boomed, suddenly and very rapidly.

The trickling noise resumed, plus a lonely birdcall.

“Hel-” she began again.

“PLEASE-STATE-YOUR-NUMBER,” the sky boomed again, making Joanna wince. She looked down at her forearm: the tiny print was still there.

“573999,” she said, and added imperiously, “Kindly stop shouting.”

“Confirmed,” said the voice, in much less stentorian tones. “Welcome, Jo-anna.”

Joanna was not impressed with its pronunciation of her name.

The fog began to drift back and away from her as if on a silent tide. It foamed up when it caught on structures, and buildings began to coalesce around her: stately, enormous, and old-fashioned, of grey stone, with golden paint gleaming on their elaborately carved trimmings. Water was drying swiftly in the crannies of the large cobblestones underfoot. The fog melted away, and she was in a city square with a bright blue sky shining overhead.

“What’s all this?” she inquired, running a hand over the stones at her feet. They were gritty and convincing.

“This is your preferred, personalized starting point,” the voice replied politely. It was still unclear where it was coming from – nowhere, or her ear, perhaps.

“All right. Why is it so empty?”

“Unfortunately, the temporary DreamNet cannot connect you to other people. Simulations are available, however. What do you require?”

Joanna blinked. “I would like the... tutorial,” she said, not quite remembering what the cook had called it.

“That is unnecessary; the DreamNet is quite intuitive,” the voice reassured. “Simply state your desires, and we will do our best to fulfill them. Indeed, the DreamNet is programmed to respond to unspoken desires as well.”

“ – No, no, the training program for running the ship,” Joanna interrupted, but it kept going.

“Past records show that you have enjoyed surfing, natural gardens, and fried foods. Would you like to sample any of these at this time?”

“What? No,” replied Joanna, though she was momentarily attracted by the idea of surfing. Perhaps – but no. The DreamNet’s tone was too obsequious to be trustworthy.

“I would like to view the training program for running the ship,” she repeated instead.

“It is not required viewing for non-guardian passengers,” the voice said, in the tone of a most respectful and well-meaning reminder.



“I would like to see it anyway,” Joanna said, needled by its reluctance.

“Very well,” said the voice, managing to suggest that though of course Joanna knew best, she was perhaps being childish in insisting on refusing its suggestions. “The program door is located behind you.”

Joanna turned in surprise; a slick white door stood by itself not ten paces behind her, alone in the middle of the sunny square.

She looked around once more, shrugged, and took hold of the smooth white handle. The foggy darkness inside seemed to brighten and shape itself as she looked, becoming an oblong, pod-like room: an entertainment center for one, or a tiny, minimalist spaceship. An enormous monitor extended across one wall, and the horizontal panel under it held a few aesthetically pleasing clusters of knobs and buttons. An extra-padded white leather desk chair sat facing the screen. Light came from the gently glowing ceiling, and everything was of rounded, glossy white plastic that matched the door – everything except the screen, which shone darkly, and a plate of beautifully golden, gently steaming French fries on the desk.

“Huh,” Joanna said, and stepped inside. The door shut behind her with the politest of possible clicks. The fries were as perfectly crisp and delicious as they looked.

“Okay, start,” she said, after she had demolished half the plate in a fit of gluttonous joy.

The screen blared into light with a click: it looked like a window onto a great salt plain, barren as the moon. Joanna looked up past the blue cutout

mountains that ringed the plain to check that it wasn't actually the moon, but she didn't need to:

“THIS IS THE EARTH,” boomed an announcer, and Joanna muttered, “Oh good, you're back.”

“WRACKED BY RUIN, RADIATION, AND SHIFTING WEATHER PATTERNS.”

A cloud dashed across the blue sky for ominous effect, followed by a whole saturnine flotilla of its fellows. Joanna watched as they crowded the sky, then began to spit unnatural quantities of lightning, turning the air an unearthly blue. Thunder vibrated her seat; Joanna found a volume knob and twisted it down a few notches.

“Human life became untenable,” the voice continued, in tones that were quieter but no less dire.

Her view (or perhaps the pod) suddenly lifted and flew up above the landscape: it was pocked with huge round plains of lifeless white like the one she'd just risen from. In the south, a desert swarmed outward on hot winds, shriveling everything it touched. In between, swamps exuded greenish gas and strange creatures limped and scuttled.

“The Earth could not hold us,” announced the voice. “Our technologies had freed us from needing to work with it, and so it turned on us. The soil supported nothing; only the deserts grew. Even the seas rose against us, chasing us to bunkers and mountain heights. We there resolved not to let our mother kill us,

but to quit this blighted place and set out for virgin territory to be our new launching pad for glory.”

Joanna was beginning to understand where the cook got his melodramatic turn of speech.

She found the screen sinking inward on the landscape again, to one of the few green patches left: a valley, closed in by an electric fence and rimmed dramatically by clouds. A silver tower gleamed against the sky, so tall it seemed to strain away from the murky vegetation below. The whole thing was lit to painterly effect by the late-afternoon sunlight.

“Here,” the sky announced, in a tone of noble tragedy, “Was our last, best effort.” The view zoomed in, and Joanna was surprised to recognize the thinnest, very topmost part of the tower as the one she had seen through the dome outside of the DreamNet. She thought of how tall just that tiny piece of the tower had seemed to her, and was astounded by the scale of the whole thing.

“Here were housed five thousand of our smartest, healthiest adults, suspended in a deathlike state with the DreamNet to keep their slowed brains active, and with all the supplies they would need to reincarnate themselves on their new world. And it was from here, before the skies turned molten and the ground broke underneath us, that we pierced the sky and flew to glory.”

“Lots of ‘glory’ in your history,” Joanna muttered.

The base of the tower began to hiss, then roar. Air gathered under it, and the ship rose from the earth with a colossal tearing noise. Joanna’s view widened and ascended with the ship, so she watched it swim through gradations of blue,

breezing past the dramatically darkening clouds, suspended on a quivering vapor-trail. The lower part of the tower broke off in two chunks and fell away, and Joanna perceived that all that astounding height had just been fuel cells, now discarded. Her view continued to follow the small ship left flying; it was composed now of just the recognizable tower and bulbous base. It sailed bravely into a soft blackness that was soon picturesquely swirled with sparks that looked more Pointillist or Van Goghian than the faraway icy vacuum she had expected – and there it hovered.

“And now, here you are, steadfastly on course for the paradise we had studied from afar for so long. Twenty guardians, two born every ten years, stay awake and keep everything in perfect order.”

The ship’s walls shimmered and became transparent, leaving only outlines: the ship rotated on the screen like a 3D blueprint, with tiny labels hovering over each piece. The well-groomed garden only filled one part of the base: the rest was taken up by rows and rows of crops. The base contained “Guardian Living Areas,” “Living Systems,” and above those, rows and rows of closely-packed, recumbent bodies. Something about their neatly packaged stillness made Joanna nauseous, and she pushed away the few remaining fries and looked instead up to the top of the ship, where banks of computers glittered and hummed.

“What’s that up there?” she asked, not sure if the program would answer her.

“The command center,” the narrator’s voice obliged. “Below it the airlock. Below that, tanks 6884 to 7000, holding domestic bovines, tanks 6791 to 6883, holding domestic ovines, below that –”

“Got it, thanks,” Joanna interrupted. “Are there windows in the command center?”

“There are screens programmed to show the external view from the ship.”

Joanna twisted her mouth sideways. That might have to do. “Hmm. Next question: when do we arrive?”

“That glorious day is yet to be determined,” the voice said dreamily.

Joanna frowned. “I thought the course was pre-set.”

“The course is set,” the voice responded serenely. The ship’s outline continued to rotate on the screen, the stars glimmering through its walls.

“Are we waiting for something?”

“Nothing stands in our way.”

“Are we just sitting in space, then, like that picture?”

“Everything is proceeding according to plan.”

“Why did I wake up, then?”

“You are not awake. You are here.”

“But my tank broke.”

The voice paused before it answered. A new plateful of fries had appeared on her left when she wasn’t looking, again piping hot, with a little pot of perfectly swirled, deliciously red ketchup. She frowned, and then shrugged and took one.

“Tank 573999 is not registered as broken at this time.”

Joanna folded her arms. “You don’t actually know much, do you?”

“Please rest assured that my records are perfectly in order and up to date.”

Exasperated, she tried a different tack. “Can the custodians access the command center?”

“Yes. However, it is safer to remain on the lower levels until the scheduled awakening time.”

“Why? Are there guard systems?”

“It is not necessary to visit the command center at this time.”

“You’re not saying that you can stop me.” Joanna grinned.

“The DreamNet’s purpose is to guide and entertain. It is neither useful nor amusing to visit the upper levels, and there is additionally the potential of injury or damage to the systems.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. I’d like to go now.”

“Very well,” said the voice. “Please state your preferred destination. Would you like to return to your starting point, sample one of your favorite activities, or explore something new?”

“No, no, I mean go out of the DreamNet.”

Another suspiciously long pause.

“Are you certain?” the voice asked politely.

“Yes, thank you.”

“It must be noted that it is not necessary for you to be awake at this time.”

“I’ll decide that for myself, thank you,” Joanna snapped. “Stop ordering me around; I believe I’m supposed to be a higher life form.” She stood and turned, and stopped short in front of a blank wall; the door she had come in from had vanished.

“The DreamNet and the guardians look after your best interests,” said the voice, as Joanna ran her hand across the smooth, blinding whiteness. Now that she looked, the whole room was like that, with nary a crack. Its smallness struck her more forcefully now. With sudden panic, she realized that the cook hadn’t told her how to get out of the DreamNet – only that it would guide her, which, in fairness, it was certainly trying to do. The spacescape glittered serenely on the screen when she turned back, and she had to take a breath to calm her frustration.

She cast around for the correct words, sat down again and drummed on the desk. “I need to be awake to help run the ship,” she said.

“The guardians will take care of everything,” said the voice, soothingly. “Please rest.” Joanna’s chair felt more padded than it had before. She stood up.

“Something is wrong with the ship,” Joanna said, remembering what the custodian had shouted. “The gravity detector is out, and the ‘guardians’ have no idea how to fix it.”

Silence.

*Ah-ha*, she thought. “You don’t know what’s wrong, do you?”

“Please rest assured that everything is proceeding as it should.”

“And, full circle,” Joanna said, throwing up her hands. “You know what? If you don’t let me out, I’m going to hurt myself.”

“The DreamNet is quite safe.” Joanna could feel the smugness lurking behind its chipper tone.

“All right, I’m going to try something,” she said. She picked up the new plate of fries, dumped the fries onto the table, and bashed the plate against the screen. The screen cracked, which was satisfying and a little surprising; she whacked the plate on it again. The cracks splintered through the whole window, and then it all crashed outwards with a musical tinkle.

“Ha,” said Joanna, brandishing her plate, and climbed out into the fog, careful of the glass.

Water trickled against rock, and a bird called mournfully. Joanna exhaled, disappointed. “WELCOME-TO-THE-DREAM-NET,” boomed the sky. “PLEASE-STATE-YOUR-NUMBER.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, experimentally throwing the plate at the sky. It crashed down somewhere in front of her, and she felt a little silly.

There was another cracking noise, and it began to rain. Perhaps her tantrum had been justified.

“PLEASE STATE YOUR NUMBER,” the sky boomed again, more threateningly. Joanna half-expected some punctuating lightning.

“How do I exit the DreamNet?” she asked, quite politely. The mist was beginning to clear a little: she was in the same city square, paved with wet, black, uneven rocks; buildings loomed to either side.



“It is not necessary or desirable for you to exit at this time. Please state your number so your preferred programs can be accessed.” The voice had sweetened, as if trying to be persuasive. Rain was beading on her eyelashes and bare arms.

“No.”

“The program is designed to become hostile to persons without the proper access number,” the voice warned.

“Let me *out*,” Joanna said mulishly, glaring at the loudspeakers.

The rain increased, streaming over her cheeks and soaking her clothes.

“That is not possible at this time. Please state your number.”

Joanna began walking across the square. Thunder rolled in the distance, and her feet splashed in the inch of water on the cobblestones. The buildings on either side now looked more ominous than stately. The same imposing stairs and weighty stones held up by fat columns were crumbled and dark with rain; the carvings had worn away and instead of paint, moss shone green in upper corners.

“Please state your number,” the voice repeated mechanically.

Joanna smirked. “I’m impressed with your dramatic staging, but what are you going to do, rain on me?”

Lightning struck the set of stairs on the other side of the square, followed by a timpani roll of thunder.

“You cannot wake up,” said the voice, in the following silence. Joanna remembered Ermentrude’s shed feather suddenly, and checked her waistband, but of course it wasn’t there.

The water had completely submerged her feet now, and the rain came more violently than ever. Joanna was at a loss. She splashed forward across the square to a monolithic set of stairs. Three squat lions with worn snarls crouched at their height. The water had reached her knees by the time she got to the stairs and climbed up to the middle lion, her toes slipping on the wet stone. The courtyard was now a pond, and her thin clothes were soaked. She was strangely warm against the cold rain, and supposed that it might be the anger in her gut keeping her that way.

She patted the stone lion once she got to him, and turned back. The water had reached the fifth step, and showed no sign of stopping. She looked the other direction. She seemed to be on some sort of balcony. Past the lions, there was about ten more feet of cobblestones, a stone railing, and then an immense vertical drop to the very same green valley from the tutorial, lush with water. The silver tower quivered in the distance, bridging angry sky and damp earth in a glimmering phantasm. The view was breathtaking, but it was not an escape route.

Back in the square, the buildings seemed to be wearing down under the fierce, unnatural rain. Below the unquiet surface of the flood, currents sucked at the stone: the columns began to dissolve like sand, and one crashed down as she watched, its sound almost smothered by the rush of the water. She even thought she saw a vertiginous fin slide ominously past, though where it had come from she had no idea.

As the water crept higher, Joanna climbed onto the stone lion, sitting sidesaddle and doing her best to look nonchalant and not bedraggled. She didn't know

if she could swim or not, but if she stayed on the lion, she wouldn't have to find out. She had to wonder why this was the intimidation technique the DreamNet chose.

“You have to let me out,” she told the sky, crossly. “I have to prove something.”

The voice remained silent. Waves that had begun as tiny ripples were growing; the water reached three-quarters up the stairs. Joanna was starting to get nervous, and she rubbed the lion behind the ears for comfort, as if it were a real cat. The water rocked, getting higher and higher – finally, a wave rolled smoothly over the top step. Joanna swiftly retracted her toes, and the water slid over the balcony, gracefully breasted the bottom of the railing, and poured over the drop. The splatter when it hit the ground was long in coming.

The lion was now one of the few rocks left out of the water. The square was submerged, studded with collapsed buildings and rough with waves. The rain relaxed slightly. In one direction, water and hulking ruins; in the other, a vertical drop to a wet, picturesque valley.

“No options, huh, little lion,” she said, rubbing his ears again.

Though the rain decreased, the waves lapped higher and higher on the stone lion, making her crouch further and further up on its shoulders. One wave submerged its feet, the next its haunches, then its stomach – and then the water all sucked away to gather halfway across the courtyard, converging into a broad tower of water higher than the ruins, higher than the lions, three times as high as Joanna standing on the lion's back.

“PLEASE STATE YOUR NUMBER,” the sky demanded.

Joanna eyed the wave, winced, and made a decision. “No,” she spat. She looked into the wave’s shimmering grey depths, solidified her stance, and crouched on the lion’s back.

The wave crested elegantly, eerily silent – and then, imperceptibly, it began to topple, building up speed, its insubstantial sloshing and bubbling accumulating into a roar – and on it came like an onrushing train.

Joanna snarled, and leaped straight into its quartz-colored, cavernous mouth. Just before she hit the surface, she had the strange impression that the lion leapt with her. She felt for a moment only as if she had broken through a wall of jelly, and was almost relieved – but then the weight of the water slammed her breath out of her, tearing it away in bubbles, and tumbled her over the railing, over the edge – she was falling in grey water – something thumped her head –

– and she woke with a gasp, choking.

“Careful! I said, hold her head!” said an irate voice. The cook’s intense eyes glittered in one corner of her vision, and the metal chair pressed against her back – but she wasn’t in the blue room anymore.

Her eyes darted around, taking in a riveted metal wall, a series of numbered panels, fluorescent lights above. She was still in the metal chair, she realized. Three men stood around her, their faces blank with shock – the cook, with his wild hair; the custodian, with his deep-set eyes, and a younger stranger who shared their height, blunt nose, and thick eyebrows, now raised high. Behind them, darkness yawned in a rectangular gap in the wall. The label 573999 gleamed next to it.

Something itched on the inside of her elbow; her scrabbling fingers found the cuff and tore it open, ripping the needle out of her skin. “You tried to put me back permanently? Without my consent?” she rasped, rage making her voice uneven.

The cook avoided her eyes, his expression falling between ashamed, righteous, and impressed. The custodian set his jaw like a petulant two-year-old, and the youngest man just looked confused. All three matched exactly in height.

Joanna narrowed her eyes at them, standing up and trying to ignore the shaking in her legs.

“You’re clones, aren’t you?” she said, pointlessly. “One set of DNA has been controlling this place since it was built.”

She pushed the chair away in revulsion, and something squawked down the hall. A light flickered on to reveal Ermentrude, who was pointedly ignoring them in favor of worrying at a crack in the paneling with her beak.

“Your tank was fixed while you were out, and we thought it would be less stressful for you not to wake up again,” the cook said finally, in reasonable tones. “Were we wrong?”

“You have been wrong about everything,” she said, drawing herself up righteously.

“Please relax,” said the youngest man, placing his hand on her shoulder. “You were missing a component in your DreamNet uplink, so you would not have been getting the full experience. The program should be completely satisfying now that we have installed it.”

Joanna grabbed his hand and flung it away from her. His eyes widened. “It is very important that I don’t go back in, then,” she enunciated, very slowly.

The custodian’s simple face was genuinely puzzled. “Why don’t you want to go back? You don’t have to be out here until we land.”

“It’s not real,” Joanna said, impatiently. “And we’re not going to land, can’t you listen?”

The cook stepped forward, face wrinkling intensely. “What do you mean, we’re not going to land? How would you know that?”

“Why would you know anything?” said the youngest one. His expression made him resemble the custodian more than the cook.

“I can prove it,” she said.

He and the custodian looked exasperated and dismissive, but the cook’s eyebrows rose significantly. At least his curiosity might get her somewhere.

“Ah?” he said. “And how is that?”

“We need to go to the command center,” she said.

The youngest man scoffed. “We can’t let one of you up there,” he said.

“Protocol is that you go back in as soon as it’s fixed,” added the custodian.

“You have to,” Joanna said, and realized she wasn’t being convincing. “Okay. I’ll follow protocol. I’ll go back into my tank.” She eyed the dark space in the wall, and realized that she had no intention of doing that, even if she was wrong. “But

only after you listen to me, and let me go where I need to go to show you if I'm right."

The younger men looked dubious again, but the cook was clearly amused. "A bet, then?" he said, tapping his nose. "We let you go up to the most delicate and dangerous part of the ship so you can prove something you came up with in Dreamland, and if you can't, you come back here like a docile little lamb and put yourself to sleep?" She could tell he doubted her promise of obedience. "I must merely suggest to you that there are three of us," he said. "And we would be well within protocol to ignore your confused suggestions and re-install you anyway."

The custodian nodded at that. Joanna backed up a few steps.

"But you won't do that," she said, slowly. "You wouldn't want to damage a passenger. And you want to know if I'm right. You want to know why the ship keeps calling you to fix the gravity, when there clearly is gravity. You want to know why the tanks are beginning to break, and why the DreamNet won't tell you when we arrive. I can tell you why, but I won't if you stuff me back into that hole without listening to me. I will fight you, though." She narrowed her eyes, hoping that despite her lesser stature they would be disconcerted by the idea of fighting a passenger.

The cook tilted his wild-haired head sideways and smiled, and Joanna knew she had won.

They went up the elevator again, though the custodian grumbled halfheartedly, and Ermentrude joined them just as the cook pushed the topmost button.

The elevator opened, after a strange, silent ride, on another smooth white corridor that reminded Joanna of the pod the DreamNet had tried to trap her in. At the opposite end of the corridor there was a large, incongruous metal door blazoned with 'AIRLOCK' in ominous red letters. The guardians seemed to ignore the door, though Joanna noticed the youngest one glance at it nervously as they progressed down the corridor. They stopped halfway down the corridor, at a set of luminescent upward stairs. Joanna paused before going up the stairs, looking at the heavy, baleful airlock door, but the youngest guardian pushed her onwards.

“Was the airlock the entrance to the rocket, too?” she asked.

“Air-lock,” repeated Ermentrude from the cook’s shoulder.

“How would we know?” the cook asked dismissively.

The stairs lit up as they climbed: Joanna counted ten. There was a set of double doors at the top, again in shiny white. All four of them gathered on the landing, the custodian looking increasingly uneasy, while the cook tapped a pass code into a panel next to the door.

The doors slid into the wall, letting out a burst of stale air. Joanna darted inside, and stopped in middle of the room, spinning around in dismay. Ermentrude took off from the cook’s shoulder and winged her way around in a spiral, matching the circular walls. Tiny lights blinked and shimmered, like a grid-system spacescape, from banks of computers around the room’s edges. The ceiling was a tiny version of the fractured dome on the lowest levels, but it showed neither sky nor real spacescape: it was uniformly dark grey. The screen was off.

Joanna’s hands clenched involuntarily at her sides.



The custodian looked reverent in this desiccated space, being sure not to touch anything. Joanna would have found it amusing, if only there had been some view of the outside.

“Well,” invited the cook. “Do share what you learned in Dreamland, oh immortal one.”

The dark ceiling seemed too close, and the room too airless.

“How do you turn the screens on?” Joanna asked.

The custodian looked at her skeptically. “It’s not our job to know.”

The cook’s eyebrows rose: his eyes looked triumphant. “You’re supposed to know that, at least when you wake for our landing.”

The custodian folded his arms and smirked, and Joanna felt caught. “Right,” she said, and approached the computers uncertainly. She had just gotten out of fighting some part of the ship’s computer, and even if she figured out how to turn the screens on, they might still show a lie – and then, she would have to go back to the tank, be just another motionless body waiting for someone else’s action. No. Joanna drummed the edge of a panel anxiously. She just needed a window, a hole in the tower, a –

“Airlock!” squawked Ermentrude, fatefully, landing on one of the consoles.

Joanna stared at the parrot, and then dodged around the cook and bolted out of the command center and the down the stairs.

Behind her, the cook startled, but she was halfway down the stairs before he shouted, “She’s going for the airlock!” She turned back in time see him

stumble on the stairs. She could hear the custodian galumphing past him down the stairs as she skidded into the hallway, turning towards the massive airlock door at the other end. Heavy fingers fell on her shoulder, and she wrenched herself around, preparing to hit him – but then, a flash of brilliant color rammed down on the custodian’s head, scraping its talons across his scalp. He swore, and released Joanna’s arm. “Silly thing!” Ermentrude crowed, just as the youngest man careened to bottom of the steps and into the custodian. They both lost their balance, the custodian’s curses – and Ermentrude’s shrieks – filling the corridor, and Joanna was free to sprint to the end of the hall.

The door loomed above her as she came up to it: cold, gleaming steel, with a long metal bar for a handle, and a small window that Joanna had to stand on her tiptoes to peer into, her uneven breath clouding the glass. Through the window was a tiny, dim, metal-walled chamber, with another imposing door at the other end. Joanna put her weight into the long metal bar. “Don’t do that!” she heard the cook yelp down the hall. She shoved, and it opened. Air rushed from the hallway into the chamber, tickling her scalp.

The three men had recovered, and were bearing down the hall, but the cook was limping, and Ermentrude flapped wildly around the hallway like a disorienting crimson tornado, getting in the way. Joanna backed into the metal chamber and closed the door on them all, with a final-sounding whump.

The noises were completely cut off. In the silence, Joanna stared up at the last door. It was exactly like the one before, but lacked a window.

Was she sure enough about her theory to risk being tumbled out into space, eviscerated by a cruel absence of air?

But then, was she willing to spend another eternity dreaming of agreeable illusions on the vague promise of a future earth given to her by the computer-stored remnants of a paranoid, egomaniacal, long-ago society?

Joanna smiled grimly, and put her hands on the final door's handle. She glanced back: the cook's eyes flashed irately, wide with panic, through the tiny window. He wouldn't open the door, though, and risk being blown into space with her.

With nervous precision, she pushed the handle up, closed her eyes, and shoved the door open.

When she felt a damp breeze, and wasn't instantly sucked into a vacuum, she opened her eyes – to a gloriously blue sky, patched with imperfect clouds.

Her hands unclenched from the door handle very reluctantly. She was on a ledge outside the airlock, standing at the height of a lofty silver tower, next to a long, long ladder down. She edged sideways on the ledge into the real warm sunlight, blinking as her pupils squeezed down several sizes to deal with the new light.

Below, she recognized the green, swampy valley as a less picturesque version of the one the DreamNet had shown her. She wondered if the ruined stone buildings she had seen really stood somewhere across the valley. There would be time to find out. Time to climb down that long ladder, to get dirt on her toes and figure out

what had interrupted the rocket between its completion and its takeoff. Time to let Ermentrude fly into Earth's real sky, and to break open the rest of the tanks.

Back in the tower, the cook's eyes were bulging through the small window. Joanna grinned and waved, imagining the custodian and the other man equally disturbed behind him. "I told you we weren't going to land!" she shouted, and found herself cackling like Ermentrude. "We never left!"

She left him gaping at the window and went to sit on the edge of the tower, next to the ladder down to Earth. They could wait. She took the feather out of her waistband, and released it. For now, she could watch the clouds flowing across the sky, and smell mud on the breeze. The feather danced out into the sky, almost merging with the blue air, and spiraled joyfully towards the ground.

## **The Musician and the Autocratic Regime**

Once, in the autocratic world regime of the future, there was a musician who, frustrated with her inability to become a composer and create the masterpiece she hoped for, began to think seditious thoughts. She was a very talented clarinetist in the city orchestra, but she was not quite as good as the dazzling first clarinet, and as she was most proficient at beautiful harmonizing, she had been placed as the leader of the third clarinets – a place that did not suit her ambition. She had to sit in the second row with the quietest, politest members of the band, dark reddish hair done stiffly in a bun, playing the soft background harmonies that neither punctuated nor created nor grounded the music, but only added complexity. During the applause, she would sit with her mouth tight, worrying the octave key on her instrument with a thumb while the lead clarinetist stood and bowed for the delighted audience, smirking through his hideous fashionable glasses.

The city closely regulated the schedules of its citizens to what they felt would benefit them, and her schedule – even when she requested a change – did not leave room for her desire to create her own music. Eventually, she became angry

enough that in breaks during her day at the orchestra (which, as she learned her parts rapidly, were often), or in her free hour before bed, she began composing harmonic variations to popular, catchy tunes (so the automatic copyright censors wouldn't remove them straightaway), putting mildly seditious lyrics to them, and sending them out to a public forum. Rebellion was in fashion that season, so they became quite popular for a time, enough so that the government felt that it was best to end the fad.

Though the government was omniscient and omnipotent, and therefore had no fear of sedition (or so they would have their citizens believe), the critical lyrics weren't the problem; the government found seditious thoughts to be a normal human process, and periodic bursts of frustration over the strict scheduling of time (the subject of most of the lyrics) were quite within the ordinary. But the tunes were quite catchy, and were rising in popularity because of their amusingly angry sound. After a summer of unexpected, hush-hush popularity for the musician, the government decided that it was time to end this phase of her career, in case she became over-popular without their consent, or in case she learned how to be more convincing in her criticism. As the government was omnipotent as well as omniscient, upon this decision, they immediately took the musician into custody. She awoke one morning not in the spacious apartment reserved for the lead third clarinet in the city orchestra, but in a cell.

As the government was omnibenevolent, too, however (or so the propaganda said), they did not employ cages full of rats or beady-eyed men with sharp instruments to convince her of the error of her ways. (In fact, they found such things rather inefficient, and had eliminated the last of the beady-eyed 'ticklers' under

their employ more than two decades prior). Instead, taking into account the talents used to commit her crime, her position as a third clarinet and the affinity for music and natural ability to harmonize it implied, they ensured that the very simple tune of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” played constantly in the background of her week-long confinement.

The cell was a hospitable one apart from the constant tune. It was entirely white (or rather, a soothing ecru; they had found that white tended to disconcert), including the soft full-sized mattress and linens; the built-in food storage, which was stocked with three meals each day; the small separate bathroom; and the treadmill next to the window overlooking the yard where other, more serious penitents crocheted baby booties and calculated citizen taxes. The overhead grates pumped in seventy-degree air laden occasionally with drugs: sleep aids for eight hours of the night, and de-stressors for the daylight. There was a clock (coincidentally, this was where the camera was hidden), but its ticking had been mercifully silenced. They intended this cushioned, relaxing space to beget the musician’s masterpiece.

On the first day, she woke up in violent confusion, and instantly rushed to explore the cell. On the unassailable door she found a statement of her rights (none), her crime (creation of treasonous work), and her expected confinement before trial (seven days). After fruitlessly trying to pull apart or break everything in the cell, she settled down on the floor and realized that “Mary Had A Little Lamb” had not ceased once in the last four hours.

As she was a woman of refined musical taste, and years of harmonic practice, this excessively simple and repetitive tune refused to fade into the background noise for her, but dug its charming little claws into her brain and refused to let go. A part of her mind was constantly occupied in charting the possible harmonic variations, the potential themes and repetitions that never came. It was unstoppable, and as she had no distraction but her meals, the treadmill, and the window, it soon became utterly maddening. After two hours on the treadmill in the afternoon, she sank into a listless trance on the bed, trying to muster some rebellious spirit but unable to think clearly.

In the evening, she began to pace, bang on the off-white door, and scream. She had worked herself into a hoarse, hyperventilating state by the time the scheduled sedatives infiltrated her air, leaving her to stagger to her mattress and collapse.

She resolved to spend the second day walking on the treadmill to focus herself, but she strained her ankle at about 2:00 p.m. and had to stop.

On the third day, she became resigned, and gave in to the constant tune from the speakers and its harmonies playing in her head. She sat cross-legged on the floor, hearing them rise and complicate and fade; she found that giving in to her tendencies towards harmonizing was in fact a meditative process, and relieved her of the itchy, irritating feeling that had plagued her since she had arrived.

On day five – after two full days of percolation, during which she had gently settled the competing melodies in her head into a crystalline organization that



allowed her to breathe – she received a notice from the government (as well as a subtle spike in the anti-stress drugs pumping into the cell). It went like this:

“Dear Ms.-----,

“We imagine this letter finds you well.

“You have probably noticed that for the preceding duration of your stay, we have allowed you to listen to ‘Mary Had A Little Lamb’ on repeat. In the past two days, we have noticed a distinct decrease in your agitation, as well as signs of tapping along to the melody and humming. This may be an indication of imminent psychosis. If it is, please disregard this message. If it is not, however, we believe it signifies that a multilayered masterpiece is taking shape within your brain. We hypothesize that if the piece is not yet complete, it should be within two days at most.

“Considering this, we will deliver to you, at this hour tomorrow, three hundred sheets of blank music paper, and one piano.

“We expect that you will have completed and recorded your opus within two days, on the seventh day of your relaxed confinement.

“If you have not (presumably due to some *inability*, we sincerely hope), we will find it necessary to extract the music from your brain itself, which is an expensive, time-consuming process that generally leaves the subjects deprived of their former creative talents, not to mention their ability to formulate complete sentences.

“We urge you not to be alarmed, or to get carried away, if you feel any reluctance towards this task: some reluctance is perfectly natural. Simply keep in mind that it is much more efficient to your individual happiness and to the common

good to *get cracking*, to use the colloquial term. As your compliance is clearly to everyone's benefit, we have every confidence in you.

“Sincerely,

[Signature illegible],

C.O. Office.”

Perhaps it was the note, or the calming, focusing drugs, or even the voices the musician thought she heard when she floated momentarily out of sleep during the scheduled sedative hours – the ones that said, sweetly, “Do it for the common good!” “Do it for love!” and, “We have every confidence in you!” But the moment the musician woke up the next morning, she went to the piano that had been placed by the window, pulled off the sheet paper, and began to compose.

Evening the next day found her playing through the final piece, layering it over the still-playing background tune like muscle over bone. It was a rousing, emotional thing that made one want to dance and weep and sit in silence to listen, that reminded one of spring rain, the joy of *schadenfreude*, and the frustration of waiting for a late bus. The final note resounded beautifully in the silence, and the musician had just enough time to realize, as she stared at the completed work's papers scattered all around the piano, that the speakers playing ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ had finally ceased. Then the sedatives (and relief) kicked in once again, and she slumped forward onto the open piano.

She woke up not at the piano, surrounded by the detritus of the creative process, but fastidiously tucked into bed, with her piece stacked neatly on the

piano. She had just enough time to groom and eat the single meal provided, in blessed silence, when a man in a precisely tailored charcoal-grey suit came in to shake her hand and commend her accomplishment.

“As your lawyer, I think I can say that you have truly achieved your potential here, and if you allow the government a share of the profits, we’ll not only forgive your trespasses, but help you distribute your music,” he said, with a sharp-toothed smile. She had no choice but to smile back.

The piece was an overnight classic, featured in several motion pictures, and went on to become a popular wedding tune. The composer, after producing a few more tunes and achieving minor, non-controversial fame, was allowed to retire early, to a well-soundproofed house where, inexplicably, she took up crochet. The government patted itself on the back for having managed to quash sedition and bring forth greatness in one stroke, and continued to use variations on this same method for any creatively rebellious citizens that cropped up. And everything continued towards universal happiness.

## Unknown Number

The Thursday that George Grund first encountered Luz Aguilar was damp and dismal. Rain had been dribbling down for two days straight, refusing to develop into a full pour but leaving George with a permanent feeling of oppressive clamminess. Peering into a shop window from under his broken umbrella, he was met not with the sight of the wares but with his own face: soft cheeks, messy, damp blonde hair, and anxiously squinting eyes. His rounded shoulders slumped in his slate-blue raincoat, which he had finally given in to wearing this morning, though he still felt uncomfortable in such an obviously American garment. He was glad he had, though: a stray gust had done in his umbrella on his way to the subway, and by now the books he'd packed into his bag would be as soggy as he felt if he hadn't been able to protect them by clutching them under his coat. And he doubted that the Biblioteca Nacional de Buenos Aires would be forgiving if some foreign scholar destroyed their books.

He saw no umbrellas in the shop, and was about to turn away when he saw something odd reflect in the glass: someone had climbed onto the statue down

the block. It was a thin person in an enormous coat, perched like an intent hawk on the prancing rump of the larger-than-life horse and rider. George turned around, astonished, and felt the weight, even through the veil of rain, of two oddly luminous eyes on him, before the figure turned, slid off the statue with one hand on the horse's plumed tail, off the pedestal – a long drop – and slipped away around the nearest corner.

George peered into the rain, but the person didn't reappear. None of the other pedestrians seemed to have noticed; they strode along with their umbrellas lowered in front of their faces. Maybe it was unremarkable – but George had been coming back and forth from his home to the Subte stop this way for two months now, and he'd never noticed anyone climbing the statue before. And he would swear the person had been watching him. He pushed down his feelings of unease, lofted his broken umbrella, and started on his way again.

He was only a block or two further when his phone rang, making him jump, and he backed into a doorway to pull it out.

*Numero desconocido* flashed on the screen – for the third time this week. The Buenos Aires phone system was notoriously unreliable, George knew, but at this rate, he was starting to wonder if someone was giving out his number as a joke. Still, he felt better answering it; at least then they wouldn't call back.

“*Hola?*”

“*Hola, Embajada Estadounidense?*” asked an oddly rough voice.

“*No, teneis el numero incorecto,*” George said with a sigh, although ‘American Embassy’ was closer to correct than usual. Last time some woman had

insisted that he transfer her to ‘Liliana,’ and that it wasn’t seemly for Liliana to keep letting men borrow her cell phone, and really, didn’t he have any respect? When he had finally convinced her that he had no relation to Liliana, she asked him why he’d let her go on so long.

“*No eres gringo?*” the voice persisted, and George winced and backed further into the doorway; he’d hoped his obvious accent was improving.

“*Si, soy Americano.*”

“*Pero esto no es la Embajada Estadounidense.*”

“No,” George repeated.

“Interesting,” said the voice, in an exaggerated American drawl that might have been female. “What’s your name, American?”

“George Grund,” he said, too surprised to think about it.

“George Grund,” the voice repeated back, in a satisfied way. “Ge-orge Gruuund. In that case, I’m Luz.”

“What do you mean, in that case?” George asked, looking around nervously. He didn’t want to broadcast his obvious foreign-ness too loudly in such a public space – but again, no one on the rain-grey street was looking.

“Do you know of the Organization for Human Betterment?”

George’s eyebrows rose in surprise. No one back home *or* here had ever heard of the Organization for Human Betterment, an apparent branch or affiliate of the US Department of Defense (it was never quite clear) who were, oddly enough, paying for his research in Argentina. George couldn’t see how research on Argentina’s folklore and mythical creatures could help the US protect itself from

international threats, but he hadn't been inclined to question the deal they offered him.

“I have,” he said. “Were you looking for them through the American Embassy?”

“Yes. Their website isn't very specific.”

“No, it really isn't, is it?” George agreed. Starved for details on the organization that had promised to fund him, he had searched every corner of their website, which looked like someone had taken a template labeled “Generic International Organization” and forgotten to add any real information to it – including contact numbers or addresses.

“ ‘We strive for tangible improvements and increased understanding across the globe,’ ” she quoted, in a mocking tone. “Improvements in what? Farming? Knitting? Nuclear arms?” George couldn't help but laugh. “Anyway, why do you know of them?” she asked.

“They're funding my research grant. I can't imagine why. I guess their website doesn't give me a reason why they shouldn't, either.”

“Why, what's your research?”

“I'm writing a paper on mythical creatures,” he said. “Goblins, angels, *duendes*; monsters and little gods. Specifically, of Argentina and Chile.”

There was a pause so long that George checked the phone to see if she had disconnected – and then a veritable *cackle*, the kind of full-throated and slightly wild laugh of someone fully committed to her joy. “I see,” she said finally, still snickering. “And did you choose this subject, George Grund?”

George huffed. “Yes, I did. I know it sounds a little silly, but there are some really fascinating traditions, and –”

“I wasn’t laughing at your subject matter,” she interrupted, “I was amused... at the coincidence – I am also interested in the subject. Actually, I just picked up a book on just that. It’s called *Bestias Fantásticas de Argentina Noroeste*, have you encountered it?”

“No, I don’t think so,” George said, frowning again; he thought he’d been too thorough to miss something with such an obvious title as *Fantastic Beasts of Northwest Argentina*. “Where did it come from?”

“Jujuy,” she said.

George tilted his head, more intrigued than ever. “The northwestern province? With the llamas?” (George had read a few tourist descriptions of Jujuy, when he was deciding where he might need to travel for his research, and all of them had mentioned llamas).

“Yes, with the llamas,” she said, and laughed again. George decided that he liked her laugh, though it was a bit wild. “You should borrow it, if you haven’t seen it yet. It’s informative.”

“I’d like that,” George said immediately, then felt abashed at his own eagerness. He shifted from foot to foot, tucking his umbrella under his arm. He could see the shopkeeper eyeing him through the window he was standing in front of; he’d probably need to leave soon. “That is, if you would be comfortable lending it to me.”

“Of course, I’d be happy to help.”



“Great!” George said. “Could you mail it to me? I have a box at the Organization.”

“I suppose that I could,” she said. “Or I could bring it to your house, if you live nearby. I’m in the Congreso area.”

George frowned. She seemed fairly innocuous so far, but he had been warned against letting strangers into his house by someone at the Organization. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t want to put you to any trouble...”

“It’s no trouble, I promise! It’s just an old book and I’d rather not send it by post. But I will package it carefully; what’s the box number?”

The shopkeeper, an elegantly dressed lady with tiny, suspicious eyes, came and tapped on the window, making righteous shooing motions. George nodded jerkily, and looked from side to side before heading down the street. Perhaps he was jumpy from seeing the person on the statue, but he wanted to wrap up the conversation.

“You know, I am in the Congreso area,” he said. “Why don’t you bring it by?” If she seemed suspicious, he didn’t have to let her in. He gave her his address.

“Excellent! I can bring it around later this evening if you’ll be there.”

“Okay,” George said. “I ought to be in until nine; I’m on my way home now.”

“Very good,” she said. “And now I must go. Be seeing you!”

“*Nos vemos*,” he agreed.

“Perhaps,” she said, with another laugh, and hung up.

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George stopped to buy groceries on his way home. He was considering a packet of *alfajores* when it occurred to him that Luz, if that was her name, had said not a word about why she needed the American Embassy, how she knew of the Organization for Human Betterment, or indeed who she was. Her accent, now that he thought about it, had been untraceable – it wavered between a long American-sounding drawl and a soft, slightly foreign accent that left him quite confused. Perhaps he would be able to get a better fix on her later this evening, when she delivered the book.

Although, he reflected, selecting the cookies in the appealing copper-colored package, he had felt similarly about his grant from the OHB before he came, and *still* wasn't quite sure what his purpose was here. He had applied to another, more famous grant on a whim, right before its first due date, with the proposition of studying mythology in Bolivia. They rapidly rejected him, and he thought that would be the end of it – but a week or so later, he got an email from someone named Maxine Snelling, who said that she had heard from an affiliate about his application, and that her department was interested in offering him a very similar deal. The Organization for Human Betterment hoped that George would study mythical creatures in Argentina specifically, instead of stories and figures, and they would require him to report his findings every two weeks. It was unexpected, and not quite what he had in mind, but their budget was generous, and they had very few requirements for the paper itself.

“Suspicious,” his mother called it, and immediately developed a rant. “Who on earth is this Organization for Human Battlement? I’ve never heard of them. They could just be luring you down there to kidnap you! The name sounds like something from one of those fantasy books you always read, anyway. It’s probably a hoax.”

“Used to read,” George corrected, but that was all he bothered to say. No matter how official the OHB’s website looked, or how lucky George was to get such an offer, his mother wouldn’t approve; she simply didn’t want him to go. Now that his sister was gone, she had said, she needed him to be in the country. George (instantly) needed to be *out* of the country, and took Maxine Snelling up on her offer without inquiring too much further into it.

Now he was here, though, he felt hardly better informed. The offices of the OHB were incredibly nondescript; the secretary’s desk didn’t have a single photograph or memento on it. And Maxine Snelling, it turned out, was a terrifyingly crisp, sharp-eyed woman who clearly expected perfect obedience and no trouble from George, and had no inclination to help him figure out how to get started in this new place.

George had figured it out, more or less. He’d gotten an apartment through a college friend who had a friend in Buenos Aires, and he was getting along in his research with the help of Ms. Snelling’s bland underling, Mr. Talbot. The Organization was fortunately much more forthcoming with money than it was with information, allotting George twice the travel budget he asked for when he decided to travel to a library in Rosario.

George was a little frustrated by how little they would tell him, he thought, as he was exiting the grocery with his plastic bag under one arm. He couldn't tell what their purpose was in offering him the grant. "The Organization for Human Betterment's mission is to promote knowledge in all corners of the globe," it said on their website, but George had never gotten the impression that Maxine Snelling, or indeed any of the people he'd met at the OHB, were interested in *knowledge*.

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He spent the rest of his walk home in a fog, wondering who he had seen on the statue of the horse, and whether his imagination had been getting too enmeshed in the fantastic elements of his research. He was jostling the key into the recalcitrant lock when the door opened from the inside, and he nearly fell onto his roommate.

"We've had a break-in!" announced Carlos Olivares in excited Spanish. Carlos was a rotund young man, six inches shorter than George, who radiated energy and conviviality. He worked as a waiter at the bar down the block and took afternoon classes at the University of Buenos Aires. George wasn't sure if he ever slept at night.

"What?" George asked in confusion, taking off his parka and placing his books carefully to one side, patting them to make sure they were still dry.

The apartment looked in order – or as least, as much so as it ever did. The yellow, flowery couch, mostly covered with the blanket Carlos's concerned *abuela* had knitted, the TV, their shelves of DVDs, George's extra pile of books, and the windows overlooking the narrow street all seemed to be intact. George peeked

into the kitchen, which was large compared to the minimal size of the rest of the apartment, and found it in its usual neat and homey state. Carlos liked to cook, and kept his workspace scrupulously clean. “Everything looks fine,” George concluded.

Carlos shook his head. “I was asleep, and there was a bang in the living room,” he said, gesturing and widening his clear brown eyes for effect. “I thought, that can’t be George, he is far too polite. And then I remembered that time with the cockroach and thought it might be you, and I’d better come help you, but there was someone on the window ledge! Too small a person to be you,” he added seriously. “A skinny person in a long coat. He wasn’t there long enough for me to even shout. When I ran to the window, he was already on the street, and turning the corner on the end of the block! Vanished!” Here he paused, expectantly.

“Vanished?” repeated George with a dumbfounded frown, wondering if Carlos was playing some prank on him.

“And when I turned back, look what I noticed!” added his roommate dramatically, lifting a package wrapped in brown paper from a side table. George took it: GEORGE GRUND was scribbled on the top, in impatient capitals.

“It’s a book,” asserted Carlos.

It couldn’t be, George thought, hefting the package himself. “You opened it?” It was indeed square and heavy and bookish.

“No, no! I felt, I did not open. I had to make sure it was not a bomb. Maybe the CIA fired you today, what do I know?” He laughed at George’s expression. He liked to tease George about working for the CIA, even though soon after George had moved in, he had sat down with George very seriously and made

certain that he was not, in fact, working for the CIA, because Carlos was strongly politically opposed to their previous work. George had explained the extremely non-political nature of his research, which seemed to bore Carlos, and then unfortunately mentioned the connection to the Department of Defense – which led to another long round of explanations about how they sometimes funded research. (George was privately confused about why the Department of Defense would bother funding his research on the fantastic – were they really that over-funded? Perhaps it was just a whim of Maxine Snelling’s they were too intimidated to correct). Carlos had seemed convinced (or had said he was, because he was suddenly bored with the conversation, in that way he sometimes was) but he still liked to joke about it, as if to check on the subject every few days. George realized later that he’d explained it so badly because he wasn’t too clear on the details himself.

Now, opening the wrapping on the mysterious package, George wondered if Carlos had a point.

It was indeed a book, fat and solemn-looking. George couldn’t tell if it was old or just dirty: the thick corners and the edges of the cover were all shabby and nearly gray with ground-in dust. The cardboard of the front cover was peeling, and it looked like it had once been not quite classic and gilded and proper, but as if it had been designed to look that way: a copy for the respectable but not quite rich. *Bestias Fantasticas de Argentina Noroeste*, read the cover, just as the woman on the phone had promised.

“That is some book,” said Carlos, leaning over George’s shoulder.

Another scribbled note revealed itself on the inside of the wrapper as George lifted the book away.

“*Duendes*, monsters, and little gods,” it read. “Enjoy! – Luz Aguilar.”

“*Duendes y monstruos*,” read Carlos. “You have weird friends.”

“She’s not really my friend.”

Carlos grinned hugely, and slapped his shoulder. “O-ho! A relation with a girl, ay?”

“She’s not that either. I haven’t actually met her,” George said, rolling his eyes at Carlos’s phrasing. He gathered up the rest of his books and headed to his room to investigate the new one in depth.

“Dating crazy people from the Internet is never a good idea!” Carlos called after him playfully. “And my sisters are coming over for dinner at nine, all right?”

“Got it!” yelled George, who was busy putting everything away before he looked at the new book. His room was small enough that anything left out looked messy, and just large enough that one could walk between the bed and the desk to get at the built-in closet. The window, which he had placed his desk under, looked over the central courtyard of the apartment complex. The walls were bare and white, but the floors and trimmings were dark wood, and the window was large, so the whole thing was not overwhelmingly shabby. Because the room was missing a bookshelf, George’s books were piled around the edges of his desk. A small, framed picture of a girl with wildly curly blonde hair leaned against one of the larger piles.

George could hear Carlos clanging around in the kitchen as he sat down at his desk, placing the book neatly in front of him. He opened it gently: a musty odor rose from the pages. The first few pages – the ones where the publication information would have been – were missing: the first page was numbered “VI,” and appeared to be halfway through the introduction. Bothered, George skimmed the remaining introduction – it seemed to contain only vague, general information – and moved on to the rest.

“*Ahó-Ahó,*” said the first page. A sheep with huge black eyes and clawed feet like a velociraptor’s stared out from a forested background: the picture was printed in black lines like an engraving. “Entity of the Guaraní region,” read the description. “To meet with one is instant death, and can only be prevented by climbing a palm tree.”

George raised his eyebrows, and turned the page. “*Ajaktalhay,*” was next. A lanky man crouched on a tree branch, apparently whipping the air around him into a frenzy. “Represents the bird men, or thunderbirds. Controls the thunder, lighting, winds and rain.”

George made short work of the hundred pages remaining, as well as of the packet of cookies he’d just bought. The book contained the mother-earth figure *Pachamama*, a tree-protecting spirit called *Sachá Yoj*, a tiger with human limbs, more familiar creatures like werewolves, basilisks, and flying horses, and plenty of other strange and frightening figures that George had already encountered in his research. He flipped through the pages absently when he was done, watching their various snarling, mysterious, or inhuman faces meld into one another. The descriptions were



not revolutionary to his studies – there didn't seem to be any information he couldn't get from other sources – but the pictures might be useful. He would have to get around the problem of having no publishing information, however. And there were no more notes from Luz. No indications of where she had gotten the book, or how to contact her other than the number he had saved in his phone – if that would even work. He didn't even have any idea of what she looked like, except that Carlos had thought she was a 'he.'

His eyes fell on the page he was on now, a page he had only skimmed on the way through.

“Talve-Tuaj: A shapeshifting being whose intent is to cause chaos, especially among herd animals. Human in appearance, but never entirely so; identifiable by one non-human characteristic at any given time. Androgynous, though may assume either gender. Sometimes classified as a trickster god. Typically depicted with whiskers, riding a llama.”

George blinked down at the illustration: a dark, bony figure sitting astride a llama, with its arms wrapped around the llama's woolly neck and its large whiskers fanned over a wide, sharp-toothed smile. Something about its glowing eyes was familiar, and unnerving.

The doorbell rang, and George heard Carlos run to let his sisters in. The smell of garlic and roasting meat was wafting under his bedroom door. George shook his head at his own overactive imagination, shut the book, and went to investigate Carlos's cooking.

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The persistent drizzle finally cleared away the next day, and it was in the freshly washed sunshine that George set off for the Organization for Human Betterment's offices about ten blocks away to present his biweekly report to Mr. Talbot. Above the sensible angles of the apartment buildings, the sky glowed blue, with silvery white puffs of cloud sailing by unhurriedly.

The OHB was quite nondescript from the outside: the entrance was just a green door in between an ice cream shop and an apartment building's foyer, and the building's seven stories looked like all the others in the area. George swiped his keycard in the door, and from there, followed the long hallway deep into the building, to the foyer where Tabitha Norton, the burliest secretary George had ever seen, would give him a hard glance as he went under the security gates, and then press another button to let him through the final door into the office proper.

"Good morning," George said this time, to where Ms. Norton hid behind a newspaper, one stockinged skier's leg sticking out from behind the desk. Like Maxine Snelling, Ms. Norton favored heels with extremely pointed toes, however, Ms. Norton's were two inches shorter than Maxine Snelling's usual pumps, and demure black.

Norton lowered the newspaper a few inches. "Good morning, Mr. Grund," she said in a menacing monotone, and was about to go back to her paper when George walked under the security gate, and several alarms went off.

George found himself face-first on the floor with his arm twisted up behind his back. A light strobed on the ceiling, and a pinging alarm alternated with a blasting one.

“Are you carrying a cell phone, Mr. Grund?” Norton said politely from above him. Her (rather dense) knee dug into his back.

“Yes?” George said, faintly. His voice was almost lost under the noise.

“Any cameras, tracking devices, guns, chemical or biological weapons, grenades, or other explosives?”

“No,” George said. “Ma’am.”

“One final question, Mr. Grund: have you accepted any gifts from strangers in the past ten days that you have since brought here?”

George frowned. One of his eyebrows dug into the floor. “Yes, but it’s a book, and I can’t see how –”

“I’ll need to see that book,” Norton said, letting him up. George rubbed his cheek, sighed, and opened his bag to hand her the book. She pressed a button under the desk to turn off the alarms, and placed the book precisely in the center of her desk.

“It’s just a book,” George said, approaching. She held up a hand, and he halted, his back twinging.

“Stand back, Mr. Grund,” she said. With her pen, she slowly opened the front cover. When nothing happened, she put down the pen and leafed through each page carefully, inspecting everything but the words. She paused only once, and then just to raise an eyebrow at one of the more lewd female spirits.

“I’ve gone through it all already,” George said, crossly, when she reached the end. “It really is just a book.”

“The alarm did not go off without reason,” Norton said, looking at him with distaste, as if she was contemplating having to search him more thoroughly.

The sleek black phone on her desk purred discreetly. “Yes, Ms. Snelling?” she answered. She pulled a small gadget out of a drawer and ran it over the book in a practiced motion.

“Yes, definitely the big alarm... Mr. Grund. He says someone gave him a book. No, I’m checking right now.” The device in her hand started beeping when she ran it over a corner of the inside front cover, and George winced as she seized a letter opener and slit the cardboard open. The letter opener reminded him of Maxine Snelling: all polished, steely smoothness, except for the razor edge.

“Did you have to do that?” he asked uselessly, wringing his hands, although she clearly wasn’t listening. Her strong fingers extracted something silver and green and button-sized in the slit she’d made, and dropped it on the desk.

“Yup,” she said, peering at it closely. “It was in the book. Tracking device. Definite signature. Strong likelihood of correlation. No,” she said, glancing at the bewildered George, “Definitely not. And I don’t think he has any idea.”

George folded his arms.

“Very good, Ms. Snelling,” finished Norton. From her tone, she might have been saying ‘Sir!’ instead of ‘Ms. Snelling.’ “I’ll send them right up.” She clicked the phone down, and looked at George. “Ms. Snelling would like to see you in her office.” From her almost sweet tone, George inferred that he was in trouble.

“Okay,” he said, rubbing his bruised back again.

“And take these,” Norton added, placing the book and the green button on the edge of her desk.

“Uh, okay.”

She prodded the button to open the inner door, and vanished behind her newspaper again. George gathered himself together, and went forth to meet his doom.

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The first time George had met Maxine Snelling, he had been prepared for an easy chat with the welcoming woman who had unexpectedly offered him the generous OHB grant, even though he had only communicated with her by email or over the phone.

The woman in the spacious corner office was nothing like the fellow academic George had pictured: instead, she was sharp, always in a polished ponytail and crisp business attire. She was in her forties, George guessed, but fashionably toned, and her skin was only barely sagged or wrinkled. George suspected that her morning beauty routine consisted merely of her staring her wrinkles down in the mirror, and thereby terrifying them out of existence. It was equally probably that she had trained her face muscles to move very little, and therefore she had never exercised the skin enough for it to droop. Gravity would probably never affect her as she aged: her skin would just shrink tighter and tighter around her bones until her face was just a skull, still with those precisely made-up eyes gleaming watchfully from their sockets.

George gulped as he met that gaze now, across the smooth mahogany expanse she called a desk. (He had never been sure what she actually did while at work; her desk was always close to bare, and generally when George was around, she was clicking around the office in talonlike red heels, snarling in dulcet tones at her submissive employees.)

“Well, George,” she said now, smiling in an unconvincing way that only reminded him more forcefully of a skull, “I’m sure that this is entirely not your fault. Are you all right? Tabitha said that she restrained you, just in case.”

‘Tabitha’ had said no such thing, that George had heard, but he would not be surprised if Maxine Snelling was psychotic enough to keep the security camera feeds behind the sliding doors that covered one side of her office.

“Yes, I’m fine,” George said. It was best not to display weakness to a predator.

“Good,” she cooed, all teeth. “Well, maybe you could explain how you came to possess... that?” She nodded at the book, as if it were far too crude a matter for her to actually speak of. The damaged book looked even more dirty and forlorn on her immaculate desk. “Please don’t leave anything out. You have no idea how important this is.”

George was reluctant, but his curiosity, and Maxine Snelling’s clinical stare, overcame the feeling. He related the whole thing, and oddly enough, though she occasionally looked bored (or rather, like she was restraining boredom), and once, incomprehensibly, she nearly smiled, she never once seemed incredulous.

“Well,” she said, when he was done, “She has made contact. Very interesting.”

She was silent for a minute, and George fidgeted uncomfortably.

“She may contact you again,” Maxine Snelling said finally. “Do not mention that you know about her, or about the tracking device she put in your book. If she seems open to it, solicit her friendship.”

George’s eyebrows went up, concerned and inquisitive.

“Be very careful, though,” Maxine Snelling continued. “She is extremely unpredictable. Make sure you don’t accept anything else from her. If you must do so, report it to us, and don’t bring it here until you have.”

“Why would she contact me again? I haven’t even seen her! Are you sure that isn’t all some accident, or coincidence? How do you know that the book didn’t already have the tracking device in it when she got it? I don’t understand.”

Maxine Snelling gave him a small smile that said, ‘Of course you don’t,’ and steepled her fingers on the table. “You don’t need to know what she is, except a confused, dangerous young woman who means this organization harm,” she replied. “I assure you, it was no accident that she contacted you; she only did it to get to us. But if you can gain her trust enough to report on her movements, it would be immensely helpful.”

“I don’t know.” George grimaced. “This isn’t in my grant.”

The smile that spread across her face was very, very satisfied. “I think you’ll find that I can rewrite your grant, and deny you all future funds, any time I

wish to,” she said sweetly. “Feel free to request another copy of your contract from Bertram or Tabitha on your way out.”

George blinked at her, feeling a little like an easily outwitted rabbit, until she said, “Go on, George. And leave that –” she flicked her manicure condescendingly at the book – “with Tabitha. It will need to be checked for anthrax.”

He was halfway down the hall before he registered her final comment, and nearly dropped the book. She was probably joking, he reasoned uneasily, unsticking his frozen fingers from its corners and putting it gingerly on the edge of Norton’s desk. “She said to leave this here, and to get another copy of my contract from you.”

Norton smirked, and printed him his document. George decided that he’d have to update Mr. Talbot another day. He’d already missed their scheduled meeting time (even though the residents of Buenos Aires were relaxed about time, Mr. Talbot was even more punctual than the average American) and he was too shaken from being tackled, interrogated, and coldly ordered around to stand up to Mr. Talbot’s cheerful, unlistening stare as well.

George exited into the sunlight, blinking like a bat, and decided that he needed some ice cream. And probably an ice pack for his back.

---

He re-read his contract over the ice cream (dulce de leche with chocolate shavings), pulling faces every time he found a clause he’d been too stupid to notice the first time. He swore when he reached when he reached the deadly paragraph, couched in high-level Lawyerese, that said that the head of the



organization could terminate his contract at any time, denying him all further funds and – even worse – gaining all rights to and possession of any work done up until that time.

“Wow,” he muttered, sitting back and morosely slurping his ice cream.

His phone rang again. *Numero desconocido*. George was not surprised. Maybe it was the Devil, trying to get him to sign an even worse contract.

He picked it up. “*Hola?*”

“How’s the book, George Grund?” said Luz’s bright voice.

“I saved your number last time,” George grouched, caring less about speaking English in public this time. “Why didn’t you call from the same one?”

“Borrowed a phone,” she said affably. “Was the book useful?”

“Nearly got me –” *beat up*, he stopped himself from finishing. He straightened his back and recalled his manners. “Yes, it was, thank you. Is there a reason you couldn’t ring the door like a normal person?”

“I like to climb things. I hope I didn’t scare your roommate too much. He seems sweet.”

George glowered. “What do you want from me? And why can’t you meet me face-to-face?”

“Well, I could do that now. I only wanted to find out if the book was good, and to apologize for running off yesterday. I had an appointment I had forgotten about.”

George frowned. “All right,” he said grudgingly.

“Would you like to meet up today? I’m free – ”

“Tomorrow,” George interrupted. He’d had too much unpredictability already today.

She laughed. “Very good. Meet me on Corrientes and Junín, it’s in the Congreso area.”

“We really don’t have to meet up, that’s not what I meant. It was very nice of you to loan me that book –”

“Oh, nonsense, I’ve been very rude,” Luz said. “I must make it up to you; I’ll buy you a choripán. Are you free at 5pm then?”

“Okay,” said George, defeated. “Yes. 5pm.” His back was really beginning to ache.

“That’s settled then. *Nos vemos*, George!”

“Be seeing you,” he agreed, and put down his phone. His ice cream was sadly melted, and he was disappointed. Luz was acting how Maxine Snelling had predicted, and had made it nearly impossible for George to disobey Ms. Snelling’s commands. They both seemed to want the same thing from him, and neither expected any resistance.

He looked down at the tiny print of his contract, and realized that he had dripped ice cream onto it. To be fair, he wasn’t very good at resisting.

---

The next day found George hovering uncomfortably next to a shop window that had been plastered over with the enormous torso of a partially clad woman. The doorway was lined, ridiculously, in black velvet. This was the corner of

Junín and Corrientes – he had checked three times already – but all four corners of the intersection were clothing shops, not restaurants.

He checked his watch. 5:03. Perhaps she had meant somewhere else? He wouldn't mind so much if he had somewhere to wait without the busty blonde leering down at him.

At 5:10, when George had progressed past annoyed to resigned, he scanned the street for the hundredth time, and discovered a thin person leaning on the wall right next to him, its luminous eyes fixed on his face. George jumped, spluttering, and the person laughed – a wild, familiar, female sound.

“Luz Aguilar?” he asked, once he had recovered his breath. She was – well, less feminine than he had imagined. Bony, olive-skinned, with dark hair pulled carelessly into a pony tail – and dirty, he noticed: there was a smudge of something on her cheek and on the arm of her grey jacket. Her eyes were a murky mixture of yellowy green and brown, and a mischievous grin lurked around her mouth.

“Hello, George Grund,” she said. “I’m sorry, I thought you saw me coming.” George would have doubted she meant it – he had been looking for her, and hadn't noticed her come up – but for her smile, which was like a crescent-shaped piece of the sun.

“That’s all right,” he said. “Where exactly were we supposed to meet?”

“Oh!” She looked sideways. “I should have given you the exact address; I always forget it doesn't have a sign. It's right here, just past Mrs. No-Nipples.”

George barked out a laugh, and followed Luz by the risqué poster, to an unmarked door that he hadn't noticed amid all the color of the street. Inside was an undecorated eatery full of men shouting at the soccer game playing on the TV, and cooks with bare arms slapping fried things onto the counter.

Luz somehow slipped her way up to the register and ordered them each a choripán and a soft drink, and paid for both, just like she'd promised, before George could do more than blink.

"It's not fancy," she told him, reappearing at his side and handing him his bottle of soda, "But it is delicious. Anyway, I like the atmosphere, don't you?"

George generally preferred places with less noise, but he nodded. "Lively."

She smirked at him. "Come on, the back's a little quieter."

She wound through the people to two stools in the back corner, at a table that barely fit both of their elbows. "So, are you liking Buenos Aires?" she asked, regarding him.

George nodded. "It's a beautiful city."

Her eyebrows rose. They were very long eyebrows, very unlike Maxine Snelling's precisely plucked ones. "It is that. Is it really a good place to research wild creatures, do you think?"

"The libraries are more than adequate," George said.

"But is this really where you think you'll find them?"

"What do you mean?" George asked, but one of the cooks bellowed, "Luz, dos choripanes!" and Luz melted off her stool and through the crowd to get

them. As she came back, George admired her fluid confidence: she dodged around people like a dancer or a martial artist, appearing at one end of the counter, sandwiches in the air, spinning to avoid someone grabbing the salt from the counter, and then materializing back at their table and sliding the plates onto the table and herself onto her stool as if it were all one movement.

“Try it,” she said, shoving her own sandwich into her mouth like a starving woman. It was half-gone before he could blink, and he turned to his food more slowly. It was basic: a white bun, a sausage dripping with grease, and chimichurri smelling mouthwateringly of vinegar. George took a nibble, and soon found himself eating almost as fast as Luz.

“Wow,” he said, mouth full, and she shone her smile at him again.

“You are a likeable character, George Grund,” she told him.

“Why’d he call out Luz instead of Luz?”

She shrugged. “Luz, Luz, same thing, different languages. Did you like the book?”

George clenched his teeth. “The pictures were great. What happened to the title page?”

She shrugged. “Been through a lot, that book.”

“I’ll say,” George said, thinking of its slit-open cover and dirty corners. “What do you do here, in Buenos Aires? Is this where you’re from?”

“No,” she replied, and didn’t elaborate.

George felt uncomfortable. Maxine Snelling had just said, ‘befriend her’ – he didn’t even know what information she was looking for. Clearly, Luz didn’t take well to personal questions.

“So, are you interested in mythological creatures?” he asked instead.

Her smile returned. “Yes. I loved fairy tales, as a child.”

“Me too,” George said. “Obviously, I guess, given what I’m studying now.”

“Why do you focus your energies here, in Argentina?” she asked, tilting her head to one side.

“I – well, long story. I was a Latin American Studies major as an undergrad, and I applied for a grant to Bolivia, actually, but I didn’t get it, and Maxine Snelling, the head of the OHB, unexpectedly offered me the one I’m on here.”

She bristled just a little at Maxine Snelling’s name, like a cat putting its ears back, and George wondered if he had gotten too close to things he wasn’t supposed to talk about – things that he was supposed to let her hide. He prattled on hurriedly, to cover up the mistake. “I wanted to get out of the States for awhile,” he said. “I – my sister died, and...”

Her long eyebrows tipped up in the middle. “Goodness, I’m sorry,” she said. “That is very sad. My... my brother is dead, but it’s been a few years.”

George looked away, glad she hadn’t asked for details. “I’ve been trying to distract myself,” he said quietly. She nodded, across the table.

“Understandable.”

George took an enormous bite of his sandwich, even though he was suddenly less hungry. She had finished hers a few minutes ago, and now polished off her soda. “Well,” she said, “I hate to leave you on this note, but someone called me yesterday after we spoke and insisted on a meeting. Do you mind?”

George managed a smile. “No,” he said.

She crumpled up her paper plate and napkin, and looked seriously at him. “It’ll get easier,” she said. He nodded dumbly, and she grinned, and darted away. She vanished behind a large man carrying a case of mayonnaise, and George didn’t see her exit.

George sat at the small table for a few minutes after she left, listening to the soccer announcer and to the men shouting at the TV. Then he left, back to the noisy street.

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“I expect more from you next time,” Maxine Snelling said, staring George down in her office. She was wearing a delicate silver chain with a deep red jewel on it today; George found himself staring at that instead of at her eyes.

“You didn’t hire me for my social skills,” he said, dully.

“No, we hired you for your interests, your intelligence, and your face,” she said.

George looked up in surprise. Was she joking? Her face was as impassive as ever. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You look trustworthy,” she said, as if he were slow. “Too innocent and obvious to be a spy. Good-looking, but not too good-looking.”

George felt his guts curl up at both the clinical way she said that, and that she had said it at all – as if he was a piece of décor, or a meaty chicken put out to bait a cat.

“What if I don’t want to do it?”

“Well,” she said, luxuriating in the word as if considering some delicious possibilities. “We confiscate your research, and cut off your access to the libraries.”

“Is that it?”

One eyebrow twitched, just slightly. “You want more?”

“I didn’t sign up for this!” George said.

“Well. We cut off your funding, requiring you to send home and beg your mother, who you haven’t talked to in two months, for more money to stay here. Or to go – we don’t care. I assure you, I have enough contacts to keep you out of any jobs you might enjoy here, as well as a fair number of government jobs in the United States as well.”

George pressed his lips together, wishing that he didn’t believe her.

“And all you have to do is find out where she lives, works, or likes to be,” she said, tone sweet again now that she knew she had won. “And report it to me.”

George looked down at the desk. He could see his own reflection in the polished surface, and his face was subdued and unhappy under his ruffled hair.

“Does that make sense, George?”



“Yes,” he said in a monotone. The ruby in her necklace sparkled malignantly.

---

Two weeks passed without any incident. George was in the café a block away from his apartment with his papers and books spread all over the booth, putting together some rather interesting conclusions about water demons of the [Paraná] region, when Luz sidled into the seat across from him, slapping her hands down on the table. He stared up at her, pen still poised above his notebook. She looked grim, her pale eyes offset by the dark crescents under them. Her hair was down, and looked greasy and tangled. She was wearing a thin jacket and sneakers.

“Do you want to hear a story about some people you know, George?” she asked. She didn’t sound like she wanted to hear ‘no.’

“Okay,” George said. “Do you want coffee?”

“Sure, fine, or a sandwich,” she said absently. She leaned on the table, fixing him with her eyes.

“Do you see that man over there?”

George followed her eyes to a plump man in a grey suit. He nodded.

“He’s an editor. Worked ten years to get there, and even then he didn’t get it because of his excellence. Got it for steadfastness and attention to detail, and because no one else stuck out of the applicant pool. Bought a car with his new salary. Likes dogs, but the apartment he and his wife and kids live in isn’t allowed one. Boring, mostly.”

She paused, because the waitress had come over. George ordered a latte, and Luz a ham-and-cheese sandwich.

Luz smiled thinly until the waitress left, and then turned right back to George. “Three days ago, one of his employees came to him with a story. Martín, his name was. Youngest guy in the office, mostly did copy editing and errands for other people’s stories. But Martín had a story, to our editor’s surprise – all properly researched, fleshed out, and typed up. Quite printable apart from a few overexcited phrases, and who wouldn’t put in a few overexcited phrases with the scoop Martín had? No one.”

George leaned forward. “What was it?”

“I’m afraid it will never come to light now,” Luz said.

“But you said –”

“Oh, I’m getting to it,” Luz cut him off. “Martín had a scoop on a government official. I won’t say which, and you’ll see why in a minute. But it turned out that this official had gotten his start somewhere very dark indeed. Sex trafficking, and a number of other details I won’t get into. I don’t want to put you off your food.

“Martín was a more enthusiastic, hungry type than our editor had ever been. He had followed this lead for months, in his spare time, on the office computers, anytime they sent him on an errand. He’d kept it to himself for months, waiting until he was sure, and until he had proof. And now, there it was. A beautiful scoop, tied up with a bow just for his well-respected head editor.

“And do you know where the lead came from? A discrepancy in one of our editor’s very own stories, six months ago. A tiny error that made Martín

curious. That when he checked on it, led to another discrepancy, which in turn led to a rabbit hole of past bribery, intimidation, and silence. Martín was good, though, in a way our editor isn't. And tenacious. Martín wormed his way down the rabbit hole with his innocuous smile and his ability to seize on the negative space in the answers people gave him. And Martín found the big, scary bunny at the bottom.

“The problem was, the editor had known about the tiny discrepancy in his story. The editor didn't *want* to find the bunny. Because he knew that the bunny would find him.

“So because of this, and because he saw in the flashing eyes, the nervous pacing, and the carefully concealed passion of Martín something he could have been, our editor – our moderate, dependable man in the grey suit – he did something awful.

“He made a phone call.

“And some people came to Martín's home the very next day. They were reasonable people, they said. They were in the business of helping the world run smoothly. They were in the business of keeping secrets.

“And now he could be in on it too.

“Martín didn't have a wife, a child, or even a dog. Martín's parents lived far away in the province of Rio Negro. Martín was the only one in his apartment. And so the choice they offered him that evening in his seventh-story apartment was simple. It was the same choice that they had given our editor all those years ago, when he had gotten close to the lead that Martín fleshed out.

“Fall in line, or fall out the window.”

Luz's smile was bitter. George gaped at her, his coffee cold. "And?" he asked.

Luz shrugged, and jerked her head in the editor's direction. George looked over at him, and saw that his hands were shaking so much that he couldn't hold his cup of coffee without spilling.

"What?" George sputtered, but she was getting up and stalking over to the man. George hadn't realized how angry she was until he saw the jerky way she moved, grabbing the cup from the man's fingers and clinking it hard onto the table. Coffee sloshed over the edge and onto her hands.

"He was a better person than you will ever be," she spat into his startled face, in Spanish.

"I – I don't know –" He was looking around at the other people in the café, who were staring.

"You don't know?" She leaned in close. "Well, I do. I know everything. But don't worry. I'm going to make sure the Organization is gone soon."

She picked up his cup again, and George was worried that she would throw it in the man's face. But she simply took a sip. "I hope that at that point, you find the nerve to honor his memory and print that story."

She set the cup down, nodding politely at the slack-jawed editor, and grinned modestly around at the people still staring. Most of them went back to their conversations.

Now she stalked back over to George. He stared up at her, intimidated. “Those people who offered Martín that choice? Those are the people you’re working for. Try not to get sucked in.”

Then she picked up her sandwich, and marched out.

---

“Look what happened two blocks away!” Carlos said the next day, slapping a paper down in front of George as he sat at the kitchen table, staring blindly into his coffee. George had been up late, agonizing over Luz and her story. Was she deluded? But the man really had been shaking. Was the OHB really that kind of organization? If so, it was a scary, international-scale group Luz was taking on. Affiliated with the Department of Defense, he remembered again, his face creasing further. Or perhaps Luz and the man were cooperating to use George to get into the OHB. But why would they need to do that?

And what, above all, was he going to tell Maxine Snelling?

“Hey,” Carlos said, patting George’s shoulder. “Rough night?”

George’s eyes swam into focus. “*Suicidio*,” he read. He seized the paper. Seventh story – apparent suicide – lived alone – two days ago – copy editor Martín Velazquez. “Oh my God.”

“Calm down,” Carlos said, taking the paper away from him. “It’s just the news. I meant the protest – the big headline? I thought it would wake you up, but not like that!” He sat down too, tearing into a croissant. “It’s the weekend. No work today! Not for you, either. We’ll go to a bar tonight, okay?”

Maxine Snelling wouldn’t be in the office today, George thought.

“Okay,” he nodded.

“That’s the spirit,” Carlos said, and opened the newspaper.

---

Two a.m. found them wandering out of a bar in the Centro neighborhood, Carlos trailing a girl with lush lips – his words – and her two friends, George trailing Carlos to make sure he didn’t get into too much trouble. George was much happier than he had been this morning, and his eyes were moving pleasantly slowly. The street was far from empty, so he wasn’t surprised when he turned his head and Luz appeared in his view, strolling next to him. Her hair was tied back again, and she was wearing a coat that looked several sizes too big – the sleeves were rolled up.

“Hello,” he said. “Have you come to send me into another fit of existential crisis?”

Her long eyebrows rose. “Only if you’ve made the wrong decision,” she said.

“What’s the wrong decision?”

She stopped walking. “Come with me, George.”

He stopped too, looking between her and Carlos, who was nearing the street corner. Carlos looked back, and tilted his head quizzically. George made a decision, and gave him a thumbs-up sign; Carlos frowned. George waved him on anyway, and then Carlos caught sight of Luz, who was watching impassively. Carlos squinted at her, then waggled his eyebrows at George, who rolled his eyes and waved

him onwards again. Carlos grinned, and skipped off around the corner to follow his new friends.

George was glad Carlos was drunk: a sober Carlos would not have let him run off without more of an explanation.

Luz walked slightly ahead of him for several blocks, until they reached a less peopled area. George was starting to feel nervous.

“Are you going to rob me?” he asked, jokingly.

She looked at him, her eyes briefly catching the glow of a streetlight. “I’ve already gotten into your house uninvited, George,” she said.

“Where are we going, then?” George squinted at a street sign. Everything looked different after dark.

“You should be able to figure that out.”

George deliberated for a moment, counting out the streets they’d passed. He was glad that Carlos hadn’t dragged him to Plaza Serrano this time, or he’d never know where they were. But they weren’t far from either his house or –

“Oh. The OHB,” he said. “Sorry, I didn’t realize I was that tipsy.”

She turned back to grin at him, and he grinned back happily, until he remembered. “Wait. Why?”

“Were you even listening yesterday?” Luz asked. “I didn’t make that story up. Maxine Snelling was there at Martín Velazquez’s death. And the time has come for action.”

That was a sobering thought. George fell silent, drawn along in her wake as she strode like an avenging angel through the empty streets. The whole thing was surreal.

Finally, they came to the unmarked door that would let them into the Organization of Human Betterment. She leaned on the wall next to it. George looked up at the door uneasily.

“It might not even let me in at this hour,” he stalled.

She just smirked at him, barely visible in the shadow of the building. “Aren’t you sick of being bullied?”

George pulled out his wallet, and swiped his card. The latch clicked open. Her teeth flashed as she grabbed his card and pushed inside, sprinting down the dark hallway before George’s eyes had even adjusted.

George was glad for his slight tipsiness now: otherwise, he would have been too terrified to move.

“Hey! Luz!” he called, in a loud whisper. “There are alarms...”

The light flicked on at the end of the hall: she had gotten into Ms. Norton’s station.

“Come on!” she called, actually laughing. “I need you to show me where Maxine Snelling’s office is.”

George hurried down the hall. Luz had already found the button for the second door, underneath Norton’s desk: she pressed it too quickly for George to even wince and brace himself, but again, no alarms went off. “But –” George began, in confusion.



She winked at him, and laughed, and they entered the office proper.

Luz flicked the hallway lights on and looked at him expectantly, and George straightened his shoulders. He had begun this, so he might as well see it through all the way. “This way,” he announced, marching forward.

“That’s the spirit!” said Luz, who was crackling with energy now that they were inside.

They passed darkened doorways and cubicles, everything silent and neat, no alarms blaring to life.

“Here it is,” George said when they reached his least favorite place in the building. “The office of Maxine Snelling herself.” He tried the handle, but it was locked.

“I got this one.” Luz shouldered him out of the way, pulling something from the pockets of her enormous coat. Something occurred to him.

“You were on the statue that day!” he said, as she pulled out some tiny bits of metal and stuck them in the lock, jimmying them around. “Before you called me – that was you, in that coat!”

“Guilty,” she said. “I needed you, George.” She looked up at him. “But I like you, too. Which is why you should leave now.”

“What?” George said.

“It might get ugly in here,” she said, seriously. “No alarms went off, but I’m sure someone’s been alerted. I have your keycard already; it’ll seem like I stole it yesterday, and no one will blame you.”

“You just needed me for my keycard,” George said, dumbly.

“Yes,” she said, looking apologetic. “But I want you to take this, too.”

She pulled something from another pocket: it was a flash drive.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“It’ll tell you what you need to know to survive this, if I don’t win.

And it’s got about two-thirds of the secrets the organization has been paid to keep on it.”

George stared at the tiny drive, and she had to press it into his hand.

“I’m here to get the final third,” she said. “But you have to go, okay?”

“But I –”

“No, you have to go,” Luz said, jimmying the lock again. The door swung open, revealing the flat, shiny surfaces of Maxine Snelling’s office. Luz gave him a gentle push, then backed into the office.

George clutched the flash drive, and took off down the hall. He sped back past the cubicles and closed doors, hurtled through Ms. Norton’s office, past the security gate, and into the long, dark hallway – where he skidded to a halt, because Norton herself was there, having just entered with Maxine Snelling and two large men in suits.

They all stared at each other. George recovered first, and took off the way he’d come, slamming the door to the office proper shut behind him.

“Luz!” he yelled. “Company!”

She swore. “I need another minute!”

“What? What do I do?” George clutched his head frantically.

“Barricades!” Luz shrieked, and George looked around. There were chairs in the cubicles: he started to pile them in front of the door, mumbling, “Why is this happening, why is this happening...”

There was a bang, and the handle fell off the door. Norton slammed it open the next second, stomped over a chair, and pointed a gun at George’s head. Her face was set into a snarl like a pit bull’s.

“Well, that about takes care of the barricades,” he said, in a very small voice.

“Don’t kill him, Tabitha,” Maxine Snelling said, stepping through the ruined door after her. “It would mean a lot of unnecessary paperwork and phone calls.” She cast her eyes disapprovingly toward the out-of-place chairs. “Ms. Moreno?” she called, sweetly. “Are you finished playing spy?”

Luz stepped out of the office at the end of the hall, wearing a brittle grin. “Got it,” she said, brandishing another flash drive.

“What have you got, you vile creature?” Maxine Snelling hissed.

“All the things you’re paid to hide,” Luz said. “And a way out.”

A tendril of smoke coiled out of the office behind her. Maxine Snelling’s eyes widened.

“Don’t worry,” Luz said. “It’s just the files on me that I’m destroying. Everything else has been sent for safekeeping to about a dozen major and minor media corporations in six countries, as well as to four people whose lives you’ve destroyed.”

Maxine Snelling's nostrils flared, and she drew herself up like a snake about to strike. "Tabitha," she began, but Luz interrupted.

"I wouldn't do that," she said, with a wide-eyed, feral smile. "You'll destroy everything in your office."

"Tabitha, shoot her," said Snelling anyway, and put her hands over her ears.

Tabitha solidified her stance and pulled the trigger. George shouted, hand over his mouth, but he was drowned out by the bang of the gun. He could smell burning gunpowder and metal, and his ears were ringing uselessly – that was why Maxine Snelling had covered her hers – and down the corridor, an orange inferno exploded from Maxine Snelling's office, blowing the doorway and part of the wall out. Something hit him on the head, but George clung determinedly to the wall, deafened and half-blinded, but searching in the billows of fire and smoke for a thin person in an enormous coat. He must have imagined the fire rolling out around Luz's shoulders like a pair of fiery wings. Dimly, he noticed Norton bodily pick up Maxine Snelling, whose face was contorted into a scream of rage George couldn't hear, and force her back through the security door. The two men in suits had vanished already: George supposed that they were all running out in case Luz had set up more rooms to explode.

The air was acrid, and full of fluttering bits of burned paper. And suddenly a thin figure flew out of the smoke, frantically disentangling herself from her burning coat. She kicked it down the hall; half of her hair was frizzled and burned. "George!" he saw her mouth.

“How did you – ?” he asked, bewildered. She pointed at her t-shirt, which had a long singe mark across the front – then she lifted up the shirt to reveal a slick black vest underneath. “Kevlar,” she mouthed, clearly.

“Dangerous,” George said vaguely. “Stupid.” His head ached, and when he put his hand up to it, it came away bloody. He blinked frantically, but his legs were sliding under him. The last thing he saw was Luz’s concerned face, her amber eyes swimming in the smoke.

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He awoke in his bed, his head feeling like an overfilled balloon. He stared up at the ceiling for a few minutes, trying to breathe and determine how much of the past few weeks he had dreamed up. A fat bandage was taped to his forehead: the skin there was tender when he prodded it.

The room spun when he sat up. Everything looked far too normal. He staggered around like he was still drunk, getting dressed, and went out to the kitchen.

“George!” Carlos threw his arms around him the moment he entered. “I was starting to worry. Thought I might have to carry you downstairs for a taxi to the hospital! What the hell happened last night? I never should have left you go off with that crazy girl who broke in!”

George winced at the tirade, not sure where to begin.

“Sit, sit,” Carlos ordered, putting down a mug, a bag of chamomile tea, and a bottle of ibuprofen in front of him, and putting on the kettle.

“You’re such a mother bear,” George said, sitting and opening the ibuprofen.

Carlos looked offended, and then smiled. “You’re all right, my crazy American friend. But I want an explanation this time. I found you stretched out on old General Roca’s statue near dawn, out cold, and it took two neighbors and a helpful taxi driver to get you down and back here. You are so lucky I was walking home and noticed you lying up there. You owe me big time!”

George was embarrassed, and nodded. “Definitely.”

Carlos nodded back. “So what was it? Did you just climb up there and pass out? How’d you hit your head?”

“I... well. It was... you know how you keep asking me if I work for the CIA?” George began. Carlos stared at him, and George smiled sheepishly.

“Well...”

The story took a good hour to tell completely, what with George’s muddled head and Carlos’s many interruptions.

“*Dios mio*,” Carlos breathed, when they were finished. His brown eyes were round. “I think I believe you.” He shook his head. “She must have just left you there. Maybe she knew I’d pass by at some point. *Dios*.”

“She probably had to get away from Maxine Snelling and Tabitha,” George said, who had been thinking about it as he told the story. “They don’t have anything left to lose, now – if it’s all true.”

“It’s true,” Carlos said firmly. “It adds up.”

George nodded. His head was aching. “I think I need to go back to bed,” he said.

“Very good. I am satisfied with your explanation. You should take it easy, eh? I’m going to run out for some empanadas, want anything?”

George shrugged, unable to concentrate on empanadas. “Whatever you like,” he said, and tottered back to his room.

His keycard to the OHB was sitting on his pillow, as well as the unkempt book on mythological creatures that had started this whole mess. Tucked inside the front cover was an envelope that contained a check for ten thousand dollars and a note. George looked at the note, because the check was too big for him to think about.

“This is officially the OHB’s final grant to you,” it said, in scribbled capitals. “Use it how you like.

“There will be police, about the explosion and the disappearance of Maxine Snelling. You won’t be implicated. But be very careful who you show that flash drive to.”

George remembered the flash drive she had given him, and clutched at the pocket of his jacket, which was draped over a chair. The little metal stick was still there.

“Sorry I had to run. I’ll be running for a while. Nice to see you this last time.

*“Nos vemos,*

*“Luz.”*

George re-read the last lines, and then dashed over to his window. A bony young woman in a leather jacket dropped to the ground from someone’s

balcony, and waved at him with an impish smile. Then she winked one luminous eye and slipped out of sight.

“*Nos vemos,*” George said. Then he sat down on his bed and opened the musty, beleaguered book, to read it properly this time.



**For Further Reading:**

Fabián, Guillermo. *Entidades Mitológicas del Norte Argentino: Una representación desde la ilustración*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Salta, Argentina: Cartoon S.A. Industria Gráfica, 2010.