

THE FUTURE FIFE

SOCIAL POLITICAL & SPECULATIVE CYBERFICTION

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Art by Sebastian Timpe

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“I can’t pay no doctor bills
But Whitey’s on the moon
Ten years from now I’ll be paying still
While Whitey’s on the moon”.

— Gil Scott-Heron, “Whitey On The Moon” (1970)

Contents

Editorial	3
‘Believe Me’ (flash fiction) Christine Amsden – <i>art by Toeken</i>	5
‘Titanium Chef’ Crystal Koo – <i>art by Joel Bisailon</i>	11
‘The Protector of the Forest’ Katie Conrad – <i>art by Barbara Candiotti</i>	26
‘Break Free This Ground’ Merc Fenn Wolfmoor – <i>art by Sebastian Timpe</i>	54
‘The Trident-Tailed Water Monster’ Rae Zalopany – <i>art by Toeken</i>	60
‘Why Would I Be A Woman’ (poem) L.A. Hyland – <i>art by Barbara Candiotti</i>	79
‘In Our Nature’ (poem) Colleen Anderson – <i>art by Joel Bisailon</i>	81
‘Salt as a Second Language’ (poem) Abigail Dereje – <i>art by Sebastian Timpe</i>	83
Guidelines for submissions	85

The Future Fire (<http://futurefire.net/>) is edited by Djibril al-Ayad, with associate editors Regina de Búrca, Valeria Vitale, and M.L. Clark; occasional guest editors Kathryn Allan, Emma Bridges, Fábio Fernandes and Lori Selke, and copyeditors Brian Olszewski and Hûw Steer.

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Editorial

Djibril al-Ayad



Sometimes speculative fiction (including the relatively new genre of non-science-fictional space travel stories) is timely, feels like it was written totally for today's news. As we know, science fiction is not really an attempt to foresee the future so much as it is a commentary on the present—whether a scathing critique of runaway technology, AI or unfettered capitalism, or a hopeful world in which we can do better than the predatory burning and thuggish bigotry we see around us.

But at the same time, great art tries to be timeless, to transcend popular culture or pressing concerns of the author and their contemporaries. By this we don't just mean that the resistance to tyranny and struggle against prejudice are stories as old as our culture, but that our art is about more than just these things.

And so the stories, poems and images in this issue are more than just raging against the horrors of the world we live in (although many of them do that as well). They are

also free-standing, beautiful and useful works of art that have the potential to delight our grandchildren or grandparents. Please enjoy the work by Abigail, Barbara, Christine, Colleen, Crystal, Joel, Katie, L.A., Merc, Rae, Sebastian and Toeken, and try to hold on to the hope you need to keep resisting, the joy you need to keep hoping.

Djibril al-Ayad, May 2026

Comment on the stories in this issue on the TFF blog:

<http://press.futurefire.net/2026/05/new-issue-202676.html>

Believe Me

Christine Amsden



Art © 2026, Toeken.

“There’s an alien in my brain.” The words sound clear in my head, but they come out slurred, more like, *S’an aleen mbain.*

They don't believe me. They never do.

"That's right," says the nurse. "Isn't it a lovely day for a walk? When we get back, they're having chocolate chip cookies. Won't that be nice?"

That does sound nice. I don't remember much these days, but I do remember chocolate chip cookies. That, and a desperate need to fight. Until the end.

The alien's tentacles tighten around my spinal chord, intercepting signals from my brain to my body. I lose bladder control, and the nurse tsks.

"No cookie for you."

That makes me sad. I was looking forward to the cookie.



My bed is soft, the mattress sagging, my back sore. The soreness might be the alien, who sometimes whispers to me in my dreams.

Give it up; they'll never believe you.

I have a visitor in the morning. They meet me in the empty cafeteria where I didn't get a chocolate chip cookie. I'm not sure I got any food at all, but the visitor seems more upset that I can't remember his name.

"It's Paul. Your husband."

"I'm married? How odd."

"Yes, exactly. We're married." Paul offers me a weak smile. I wonder what he thinks I said.

"There's an alien in my brain." I say it to anyone who'll listen. The words used to be clearer. I think.

"Why's she in a straitjacket?" Paul asks.

"She tried to kill herself yesterday," says the nurse. "We're taking all precautions."

“How?” He sounds upset. “You made her remove her shoelaces when we checked her in!”

“She found a loose screw. She didn’t do much damage.”

“Cuz they wouldn’t let me have a cookie,” I say. It’s meant as a joke, and I sense it’s the sort of thing I might have said *before*.

“What about a cookie?” Paul asks.

“We’re having oatmeal raisin cookies today,” the nurse says.

“Yuck.” The word is clear, like the alien isn’t fighting me, like the alien *agrees* with me.

“She never liked oatmeal raisin,” Paul says. “Always said no one wants to bite into a cookie, hoping for a chocolate chip, only to find raisins instead.” He sounds sad. Poor man. He’s kinda cute. Has nice eyes, even if they’re sad.

“She seems to be getting worse,” he says. “Is it possible it’s not the bipolar, that it’s something else?”

“It’s an alien,” I say, but not clearly.

“Something else?” the nurse asks.

“I don’t think slurred words are a symptom of bipolar disorder or depression.”

“It’s the meds,” the nurse says. “We’re still trying to find the right combination.”

“Okay,” Paul says, but he sounds uncertain.

Get me out of here, I think at him, but he leaves me behind. Then the nurse makes me swallow lots of big pills that put me to sleep.



I dream of chocolate chip cookies. The alien wants one, too. *A chocolate chip cookie and a more willing host. That's the dream.*

Such a simple dream. I used to have simple dreams. A nice house and a couple of spawn, er, children.

We can have that together, says the alien. *But you have to stop fighting me.*

It's a trick, something the alien keeps whispering into my mind to make me more malleable. I don't believe it. I never believe it.

Tonight, the alien tries something new: *They'll let us out if you stop struggling.*

"Liar!" I shout as I fight my way free of my restraints and tumble from the bed to the floor. I don't get far, but I don't need to get far. There's a bed frame, hard and cold and just what I need. I slam my head into it. Once. Twice. Three times.



When I come to, there's a bright light and a low, rhythmic beeping sound. I close my eyes and moan.

"Take it easy," says a female voice. "It'll take a few minutes for the anesthesia to wear off."

I know better than to ask questions. That's the sort of thing that loses me cookies.

My head clears. My bed is wheeled somewhere else. A visitor is there, a man I remember. Paul.

"There's an alien in my brain," I say. My throat is dry, but the words come out clearly, as if nothing's fighting them.

"Not anymore," he says. "They ordered a CT scan after you hit your head, and they found it. Took you straight into surgery."

“Oh.”

“I’ve missed you,” Paul says.

“How long have I been gone?”

“Two years.”

“Two years? And no one thought to do a CT scan before?”

He looks away, but I still see his shame, and I remember why.

“I wasn’t the only one,” I say. “There were others infected—dozens of others.”

“Thousands, in the end,” he says.”

“Why, then?”

“We just thought you were having another breakdown.”

I wasn’t then, but I think I’m having one now.

“Leave me alone.”

“But—”

“Alone.”

He rises to his feet and heads toward the door, pausing to say, “I tried everything. Asked for fifth opinions. They all said the same thing.”

“That trying to kill yourself once means you’re nuts forever?”

“I’m sorry,” he says one last time before slipping through the door.

Now I’m alone, just like I thought I wanted. Only I haven’t really been alone in years, and I don’t think I like it. I also don’t want my husband back. What I want may mean I really am insane.

I’m ready, I think. A willing host and a couple of spawn. Remember?

Silence.

Are you there? Even a little bit?

No response.

I'll get us a cookie.

Nothing. I'm definitely alone, just like I wanted. Still groggy from the anesthesia, I roll over and manage to drift off to sleep.

It's there, in my dreams, where a familiar voice asks,
Chocolate chip?

Titanium Chef

Crystal Koo



Art © 2026, Joel Bisailon.

Sometimes you catch the show's copydroids roaming the city before the season starts, testing their programming against the vagaries of the real world. They're wide-eyed and tentative, like exotic animals reintroduced to the wild. I find photos of these titanium pseudo-humans online, lost in a pet shop or on a bicycle in the park, experiencing things in their memory for the first time, afraid it might be their last. A Titanium Chef that loses a round is deactivated, its borrowed consciousness wiped in front of thousands of real-time viewers. The last one standing returns to its lab and fights again next season.

They look at the camera warily, as if it might take their soul.



The copydroid's face looks exactly like Radha's: bird-like, at once hopeful and anxious. Its body is shellacked in naked, titanium sexlessness. I realize, years too late, that this is how Radha has always seen herself.

I cross the road to follow it, a taxi's horn making me jump. A Radha copy brings up possibilities I don't dare entertain until I'm sure.

In the coffee shop, the copy appreciatively watches the barista wrap a bagel in paper. But would the copy know how to smile the way Radha had: tight and closed-mouth but luminous, as if she had just told a joke she wasn't supposed to?

I only see the real Radha in magazines now, where she places a blob of yoghurt on a steamed crab in a kitchen of dry ice, her chef's apron a blinding white.

The copy turns around and sees me behind a wall of ancient hi-fis. Its face crinkles with surprise and apprehension.

It calls my name. It's Radha's voice, full of emotion. The sound of it makes my chest twist. I find myself wanting to offer the copy whatever it needs, just as I had with Radha.

Then the copydroid gives me Radha's smile. We are once again two women who understand something fundamental about each other, like castaways on a hostile sea.



My wife Marta isn't interested in *Titanium Chef* or cooking in particular. One of the reasons I had gotten together with her was because she was nothing like

Radha. But Marta obliges when I suggest that evening that we watch an old episode of the show, the one with the asparagus theme.

Marta likes seeing people happy, especially people she loves. I've always felt guilty about that. I'm not at all like that, which she knows. I can be small and resentful. I have the stamina to hold on to things for too long. There are times I think Marta's with me because she wants to feel superior or because she's working through some other psychodramatic script of her own.

Tonight she gives me a hot mug of chocolate and we hold hands as mind-copied androids swan into our screen. Each of them has been installed with the face of a chef and a copy of the chef's consciousness. They wear nothing but hats and aprons. Cleavers glint under studio lights. There's asparagus everywhere.

I don't tell Marta about the Radha copydroid.



I see the copydroid again a few days later on the skyrail.

The copy lets me touch its cheek. It's warm. The copy leans into my hand. People are filming us.

"I know this is a little weird," it says. Sadness and elation fighting across its face.

Reflexively I jump to reassure it. "You've done so well." The tenderness in my voice surprises me. The break-up had grounded me down, made me feel as though I'd never known how to recognize love correctly. I had avoided all the restaurants Radha and I had ever gone to together. "I've heard you on podcasts. On livestreams too."

“I haven’t,” it says wryly, channeling Radha’s inability to take a compliment. “I’ve never liked the sound of my voice.”

“You wanted this,” I say. “The copy thing.”

The copy laughs, a one-note sound with little mirth. “She did. She’s in my prep team.”

We’ve gone past my station. “Do you want to meet at the pasta place another time?” I ask suddenly.

The copydroid’s face glows with pleasure, as if I had just done it a big favor. I’m already feeling the same cloying, old bliss at having pleased Radha.

I hold the copy’s arm to say goodbye and feel the cold metal. I look up at Radha’s brown eyes.



The real Radha and I first met at a pasta restaurant where she pumped out plates of fettuccine. She had waited for me to finish my lunch to come over with the bill and a tub of free arancini.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” she told me after I had visited her again afterward. She wanted to work in a more exciting kitchen that let her sear scallops and glaze them with pomegranate.

She had rolled her eyes when she saw me watching *Titanium Chef*. “Those poor things think they’re real,” she said. Every memory and opinion and passion from before kept intact, like—”

“They’re told what they are,” I pointed out. I was hurt because I hoped watching the show would bring us closer. “They know they’re not who they think they are.” But Radha shook her head as if I didn’t understand.

When she agreed to be my girlfriend, I only had a minute to feel the euphoria in my heart before she

caveated out loud that if we didn't work out, we'd end up with someone else who'd be a better fit eventually.

On some nights, she slipped out of bed to clink away in the kitchen.

"It's not worth it, morally," she started saying. "People get into relationships only because they want something from the other person." It was consumerism, she told me.

When we broke up, I watched her chart her course to where she had always wanted to be without me. These days she endorses pans and air-fryers on holostreams. She's head chef in a glorious new bistro downtown.

Marta has warmth like the sun and a strength that lives in her arms and her back. Radha had a nervous energy, the obsessive kind that catapults someone to greatness, and had been easily startled by hugs. It made you want to comfort her in some way. When we had fallen apart, she had only peered at me, angry and helpless, as if our fight was being conducted in another language.

I met Marta not long after.



I spend the next week being ravenous for Marta in bed. She laughs and asks me what's gotten into me and if there's any way to replicate this for the rest of our lives. Afterwards, I drowse in her arms and think of how nice this is, how nice she is.

The Radha copydroid waits for me outside the old pasta restaurant, dressed in a cardigan and jeans. Only its modular hands show metal.

"The prep team gave me clothes when I said I was meeting someone," the copy says shyly. "They're very nice to me."

Then it puts its arms around my waist.

I turn absolutely still. It smells of linen and new electronics. Then I move my face away so it doesn't see my confusion.

It certainly isn't Radha anymore. I don't know if they're programmed to be a little different or they're made to learn from new experiences but this isn't the Radha I knew years ago, who disliked *Titanium Chef* and didn't seem particularly inclined to touch me unless I asked. Whose vulnerabilities I had only ever seen in brief and unexpected glimpses before she returned to being ironic and in control.

There's new neon tubing all over the walls of the pasta restaurant. It was here that Radha had admitted to me that she was a chef who couldn't take the heat of chili. And that she didn't like flowers or chocolates either and found dating a complete puzzle.

I had found all this captivatingly candid. Later I thought how a more intuitive person might have read the signs, but among women I always become slow and self-absorbed.

The copydroid stares at me. "I've missed you."

I pretend to look at the menu before I say something I've never dared say to Radha before. "I always loved you more."

The actuators in the copydroid's skull pull tiny wires under its face, filling it with sadness. "That was never true."

I'm drawn into a spiral of what could have been. I look at the copy with new eyes. It gazes at me back, unflinching at the face of my emotion.

I tell it how when Radha and I had kissed, I had found myself deadening my own desire, keeping it from

cresting at a certain height because I could tell she couldn't match it. I know Radha had indulged me in bed out of a sense of duty, like we were pictures on a manual, and I had grown afraid of touching her.

The copy lets me talk. Then it comes over to my side of the table, taking my hand and squeezing it.

"I only have two months left before the show," the copy whispers to me.



Marta wakes me by bringing coffee to the bedside table and diving back into the sheets, snaking her hands around my belly. It's my favorite part of the day. But this morning, I suddenly can't stop thinking about how the episode with the asparagus ends.

The deactivation room isn't so much a room as it's a chair with a white sheet behind it. A camera zooms into the copydroid's face. Blue eyes, a shaved head, the beginnings of a tattoo on its pale, flesh-colored neck before it disappears into layers of titanium metallic white.

It shakes its head when it's asked if it has anything it wanted to say to the viewers. Its eyes keep darting to someone off-camera.

Blue-gloved hands fiddle with the nape of its neck. The copydroid's eyelids close, its body falling back softly against the chair as its consciousness is wiped. The end titles run and a bell pepper rises from the floor in a burst of orchestral ecstasy.



I buy books on copydroids. I find myself in interesting places online, repositories of erotic fiction written about

copydroids, long arguments about the ethics of robosexuality.

“You’ve been reading a lot,” says Marta, smiling, though she looks uncertain.

I smile back, trying not to instinctively shut the laptop out of guilt.

I had never told her about Radha. I didn’t trust myself to talk reasonably about it. It had been easier to say I was single during those years. I had framed it as badly-needed time to find myself, which Marta said was a healthy thing to have committed to.

At a loud teahouse, where piping hot bowls of noodles are on an unpredictable trajectory, the copydroid bites through a dumpling. Clarity pierces through its face and it remembers what it is. I mischievously push chili sauce towards it when the rice rolls come and it winces at the sight of it. “Okay,” it says and I laugh.

The copy traces an invisible artery in my neck, its finger pad squeaking against my skin. Then its cold, caressing finger climbs up to my ear.

Chef copydroids aren’t equipped with heat-producing nodes. They’re not built to be lovers. But Radha would never have dared. She’d push me away if I tried to kiss her on the mouth somewhere well-lit.

We go to a copse below a skyrail line like we’re teenagers. I kiss the copy on the chin and it pulls me closer. Its lips are firm and rubbery, tasting of wax. It kisses me with curiosity, not hunger, but with an urgency I had never felt from Radha. The coldness of its fingers slips below the band of my jeans.

I bury myself in its neck, where flesh meets metal. The copy’s hands find their way between the buttons of my shirt and its mouth covers mine. The angle is

uncomfortable; the friction burns my skin. I take its clothes off.



Marta thinks I'm having trouble sleeping because I've been out running too late in the evening.

The copy and I stay in cheap hotels. We are careful. We avoid going outside when we can, except when we venture out because it wants to try a food cart on the street or ride bicycles across a solarfarm. The copy doesn't have a lot of time left.

Secretly, I buy a seat for a live studio filming of *Titanium Chef*. I don't tell the copy about it. It doesn't like to talk about the show and how we might never see each other again. I don't ask what it thinks of being wiped.

I start calling it radha. It looks at me with gratitude because it's called by a number in the lab so no one confuses it with Source Radha. Source Radha goes along with it and tries very hard not to be left alone with her copy. It sounds very much like her.

Whenever radha goes back to the lab, I watch old episodes of *Titanium Chef*, desperate to unearth anything that might help it win. The *Titanium Chef* website says copydroids are repurposed into productivity, with new faces and capabilities. There are photos of copydroids as nuclear engineers, nurses in care homes. Parts might be recycled, they say in small font.

Sometimes radha and I can't help holding hands on the train. It always holds my hand as if it's doing it for the first time, digging deep between my fingers, when Source Radha had always waited for me to hold her hand.

“What did you mean,” I ask radha one time, “when we got together and you told me you’d find someone else if we didn’t work out?”

radha parses the meaning of this silently, searching for information online. Which means Radha had likely never thought about it. This hurts more.

“There are a few possible reasons why someone would say something so unkind to your face,” it finally says. “Want me to tell you about them?”

I shake my head.

“I’m sorry I said that before,” it says.

“It wasn’t you,” I say and lean in to kiss it.



It’s on radha’s last day when Marta finds out.

I come out of the bathroom to my wife holding her phone, the screen filled with photos of me and radha from an online forum about copydroids. Marta’s face is filled with a dangerous blankness, but I am too far gone, too worried about what will happen to radha soon, to convince my wife that it means nothing, which isn’t true. Marta packs a bag and leaves.

That night, radha and I sit in one corner of the pasta restaurant, backs against the wall, holding hands. We guess the toppings of the pizzas coming out of the kitchen. radha lets me win a few times.

Then it’s gone.

I have always depended on Marta’s presence for a sense of clarity and substance. Without her, there is no witness to my life. My evenings are difficult.

I deliberately miss the opening of *Titanium Chef*, when copies march in with the banners of their chef’s restaurants and introduce themselves. I can’t bear seeing

radha's competitors, how it might be felled by one of them. I tune in on the third hour for the mushroom round.

They show radha studiously working over a stove. It chops, sprinkles, brings it all out into a pan. There's a competence in its movements I've never seen before.

It's a miracle, I think, with a surge of manic, hopeful energy. radha may be able to win after all.

I mute the screen when other copydroids are led to the deactivation room and I turn away. I can't bear the fear on their faces.



In the studio, the seats rise ten feet above the enormous soundstage. radha is at the left corner of the studio, scrutinizing a crust on its spatula. I wonder if I should wave, but it won't be able to see me from where my seat is.

I keep my eyes desperately on radha, as if it might lose if I don't.

The themed ingredient for this round, we are told, is chili.

Radha had always been serious about substituting chili in her dishes. She didn't want to cook something she couldn't taste so she resorted to mustard seeds and smoked paprika, a squeeze of lime in the final moments, a dash of vinegar to lift the sauce.

Now radha chars its chilis and chops them, scraping them off the board into a bowl with the roasted eggplants. It unseeds chili peppers, fries them with red flakes and crushed Sichuan peppercorns with oil, and pours them over a pile of cabbage and cream cheese.

It refuses to taste what it makes, which can't be good. I watch it grind twenty bird's eye chilis into a fiery paste.

I'm not able to sleep when I return home at dawn. I give up and finally get out of bed at noon to find out radha has been eliminated.

I spend an hour over the toilet vomiting. I don't want to watch the stream and see radha in the deactivation room, its eyes closed, its head between the two gloved hands.

Marta has found her fury and she sends me strings of text. I turn my phone off.

I have a blinding headache and my bedroom feels filthy. When I finally sleep, I dream of being among the crushed blades of grass below the skyrail and radha telling me how wonderful scallops taste.

I only start crying the next day. I imagine how radha would have felt, coming into life with its pre-installed memories, as if it's been asleep all this time and now thrust into a world that demanded so much from it.

By now its body is recycled into a rig manager or a solarcraft pilot copydroid. Even if I can find where it's been sent, it won't recognize me. It won't remember anything about me.



I holo *Titanium Chef's* production company. I wade through recordings and finally find a live person seated on a cramped desk, his face encased with receivers. "You want to nominate someone for a spot in next year's season," he says, bored, before I can start.

"I want to find one of the contestants of the show. The one who didn't make it in the chili round."

"It's been wiped."

"And the body?"

"We call it the shell," he says.

“Please. Don’t you make a save before the wipe?”

“A copy of the copy,” he chuckles. “No.”

“Why not?”

“For privacy reasons.”

“But you want everything else documented, every single zoomed-in pore, every fucking carrot peel that drops on the floor. I was there at the filming. I saw her.”

I don’t want to break down in front of this man. He doesn’t want it either because then he asks, “Are you the source chef?”

“Why? Would I get a copy?”

“Your team made imagefiles of its drive during prep, didn’t they?” The man makes a gesture that I don’t understand. Then he tells me he has to take another call.



Radha’s new apartment is on a hillside overlooking the city. The place smells of lemon floor cleaner and the leather couch is stuffed with colorful pillows. I catch a glimpse of the enormous, steely insides of Radha’s kitchen when she fetches wine.

Now that Radha’s handed me a glass, she’s on the other end of the couch where I’m seated. I’m incredibly aware of how her chest moves as she breathes in and out because radha did not have this feature.

Like muscle memory, I can tell Radha needs a drink of water, a bit of quiet in the toilet, but I’m indifferent to this information. It’s flavoring, the old instinct of knowing someone’s needs from the shadow on their face, not a study of someone you love.

On the coffee table between us is a flashdrive. The last save point had been the evening before the show had started, four days before radha was wiped.

“They don’t let us save any of its experience in the show,” Radha says. “If we had won, we’d have to borrow their own films to prep for the next season.”

“I thought you never liked *Titanium Chef*.”

She looks into her glass. “The PR team thought it was a good idea.”

Radha’s line of trophies on the mantel is guarded by a fat bronze chef on one end and a gold-handled ceramic vase on the other. Had she pitied me for always being the one to want more? I bury the question as deeply as I could. It doesn’t matter what she had thought, only that both of us had found ourselves in a relationship that neither of us had truly wanted.

“I watched all the videos the prep team sent me before I went to bed,” she says. “All its memories with you.”

“Did you find it flattering?”

The joke goes over her head. “I’m not sure what you mean. I was watching my copy do a better job than me as a girlfriend.” She chuckles.

“You never wanted a relationship,” I say.

“No,” she says wistfully. “Sex and dating and all that stuff—I’ve never really understood any of it. But you wanted one and I wanted to try. For you.”

I look at the flashdrive.

“It enjoyed its time with you,” says Radha. She’s referring to the copydroid. She looks out the window into a dark canopy of trees. “I don’t think I had ever seen you that happy with me.”

“Thank you for doing this,” I say.

“I’ve always liked doing things for people.” She puts her glass down. “I’ve got leftovers of a pilaf I made yesterday. I can heat it up in the stove and we can have some of it, if you want.”

“I’d love to bring it home with me.”

“Plans with someone else?” she asks with a little smile. Her eyes fall on the flashdrive.

“It’s a long way back.”

She goes to the kitchen and I take the flashdrive. It’s a light little thing, almost made of air. Radha returns with a paper bag.

“Don’t be a stranger,” she says, touching my arm, a movement so unexpected I nearly jump.

Outside I crunch on leaves as I cross the road, Radha’s fragrant rice clutched to my chest. There will only be audio and video on the flashdrive, dividing the things radha had seen and heard by hourly segments. I see Radha’s figure by her window, an exposed nerve in golden light, before she pulls away.

The flashdrive is warm, clutched in my hand. I want to hear its voice again.

The Protector of the Forest

Katie Conrad



Art © 2026, Barbara Candiotti.

We'd been living on Toivoa for a year when the trees began to die.

“What, all of them?” Captain Harris’ dark eyebrows furrowed above her wire-rimmed glasses. I sat on the visitors’ side of her desk in her office. It was a small place with bare walls and bare shelves. None of us had much in the way of personal effects, but the Captain took it to the extreme.

“No, ma’am. It started so slowly at first that it seemed natural, but it’s well beyond that now. Maybe five percent?” It was a guess, but it was the best I had.

“Five percent of the trees are dying, and you want me to do what, exactly?”

“Assign a crew to investigate.”

“Are you or are you not the colony’s xenobiologist, Officer Toro?”

“I am. But—”

“What have you found so far?”

“That’s the thing, ma’am.” I rubbed my face. “There’s nothing. No reason I can find for so many trees to be dying.”

“How do you know it’s not natural?”

“It’s well above the norm for a forest of this size and age.”

“Above the norm for a Toivoa forest?” She leaned forward. “Or an Earth forest?”

“An Earth forest, but—”

“I would have hoped you’d have the data to go beyond such comparisons by now, Toro.”

I spread my hands. “It’s more than were dying a year ago.”

“That’s a start.” She picked up the report she’d been reading when I came in. “We don’t have the resources to divert to this right now. Our existence is still precarious. Everyone’s role is critical, and I can’t spare anyone.”

“With all due respect, captain, our position will be more precarious if we let the forest die.”

“Find me some proof and then we’ll talk. You’re dismissed, Officer Toro.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I kept my voice and face even as I stood and saluted, but once I left her office my expression slid away into disappointment.

The door closed behind me and I turned toward my lab, only to find myself face to face with First Mate Anders. My heart sank even further. I suppressed the instinct to turn and run as his lip curled into a sneer. I squared my shoulders and lowered my eyes, trying to walk by in silence.

“Officer Toro.” I stopped, unable to ignore an acknowledgement from a superior officer. “What were you bothering the captain about?”

“We were discussing the forest, sir.”

“The forest?” he scoffed. “You’re wasting the captain’s precious time talking about trees?”

At the other end of the hall, two engineering officers stared at us, eyes wide. One whispered something to the other and they both laughed. My cheeks burned.

Anders wasn’t done. “I don’t want to see or hear you bugging the captain again. Just go skulk around your lab doing whatever it is you do. Stay out of the way and try not to get anyone else killed, alright?”

“Yes, sir.” I saluted and rushed back to the lab, not daring to lift my head as I passed the two engineers.



For a few days I obeyed Anders’ instructions. Every time I stepped into the corridor I was seized with panic

that I might run into him again. The dread kept me buried away in my lab.

But I couldn't sit back and let the forest die. Not when so many of us had traveled so long to get here. So after a couple days, when my fear had waned, I got back to work. I started spending time in the forest again, collecting the samples I needed to continue my investigation.

A few weeks after my meeting with the captain I went out to the woods again. It was a humid morning and I took my time. I climbed the small hill at the back of the colony and stopped at the top to look back. The ship perched precariously on the uneven ground. Its sleek hull had been built for the centuries in space, not the ones to come on Toivoa. It was anchored in place by massive spikes that had been driven into the ground when we first landed. I could see them plunging into the earth from here, even through the light mist that clung to the ground below.

The space around the ship was dotted with outbuildings; there were storage units for vehicles and samples, and some work areas to expand the available space. A few people walked along the paths between them.

I liked the view of the colony from up here. It felt small and far away, which was a nice break from the up-close experience.

I turned away from the ridge and walked into the forest. The trees around the edges were sparse, but as I ventured deeper into the woods the immense trunks grew closer together. I extended an arm and ran my fingers across the smooth blue bark as I passed. Here and there I stopped to examine the spindly branches that hung down like hair, checking for signs of rot or disease.

The avian creatures that perched at the top of the trunks sang to one another. Their voices were harsh but their calls were melodic. I let the sounds wash over me as I picked my way over the massive roots that frequently broke through the ground.

I stopped to collect yet another sample from yet another dying tree when the Green Man stepped out of a shadow to my left.

“You see it too.” His voice was deep and ancient and rasped like the scuff of my feet through the dirt.

“Do you know why it’s happening?” I spoke quietly and didn’t look up from my work. Even after a year, I worried that a sudden movement would spook him away. I wasn’t keen to scare off my only companion, however odd he may be.

He nodded, the foliage of his face flapping with the movement. It would have been funny if his expression weren’t so grave; the leaves that formed his eyebrows were drawn close together and his mouth was turned down.

“You did this.”

“Me?” A shard of panic stabbed through my heart. Not again. I couldn’t handle any more weight on my conscience.

“You,” he repeated, gesturing out toward the colony. The absolution of personal responsibility did little to quell my distress. We’d only been here a year, and already humanity was killing another ecosystem.

“What is it? A parasite? A disease?”

He ignored my questions and stroked the spongy purple leaves of the dying tree with one twiggy hand. “There is still time.”

“What should I do?”

His green eyes bored into mine. “You must get to the root of the problem.”

“Yes, I’ve been trying to find the cause—”

But he was gone, retreating back into the forest without another word.



The Green Man’s revelation gave some direction to my research, but I didn’t find any quick answers. And without proof, I couldn’t go back to the captain. Especially since I hadn’t told anyone else about the Green Man. I couldn’t exactly waltz in and announce that a quasi-deity from old Earth folklore had followed us here and bestowed me with magical knowledge.

Even if I had the data, they still might not believe me. Not after the last time.

So I kept looking.

One night as I blinked my weary eyes over the lens of my microscope, the control panel by my door beeped. It took me a moment to recognize the unfamiliar noise: an entry request.

The panel displayed the name Quinn Barringer. I frowned, but pressed the button to let them in.

“Hey, Gabrielle.” My stomach leapt. I had forgotten how my name sounded in their warm voice.

“Quinn.”

“Can I come in?” A light sweat glossed their forehead and their blue eyes darted around the lab, looking anywhere but me.

I nodded, hoping they couldn’t tell how fast my heart was beating. “What’s up?”

They stepped inside. “I noticed you were often working late recently and thought I’d stop in to say hi?”

The last few words came out in a rush and ended on an upward slant. The uncertainty in their voice was a stark contrast to the security badge on their jumpsuit and the ripples of muscle beneath it.

I couldn't help but feel like I was the one who should be asking questions, though.

"Hi," I answered. "I've been working a lot, yeah."

"Something up?"

I sighed and ran a hand through my short hair. I was too tired to come up with a lie to usher them out. "The trees are dying, and I don't know why."

"That seems... bad. Did you talk to the captain?"

"She said I need proof."

"Ah." The single syllable made it clear they knew why the captain wanted proof.

Because no one trusted a screw-up like me, not after what I did to David.

"Hey." Quinn's voice snapped me back from the edge of spiralling into worry. "You can figure this out."

I forced myself to take a deep breath until the panic coating my lungs started to crumble and flake away. "I don't know. I've been studying it for weeks and I'm no closer to an answer."

"I know you can. You're the smartest person in this whole colony."

"And you're the nicest." The words were out before I could stop them and my face flushed so hot I thought I would melt away into vapour. Quinn just beamed, their smile brighter than the two moons in the sky.

"Can I visit again? Maybe I can help."

"Aren't you on duty?"

They shrugged. "I have breaks."

“And you want to spend them here? In the lab?” I raised an eyebrow. “You hate this stuff.”

“I never hated it, I just found it boring. Besides, I’m a changed person. The lab has its charms.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I forced a cough. Old habits die hard.

Quinn smiled again, softer this time. “Goodnight, Gabrielle. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I breathed. “Tomorrow.”



The Green Man first appeared to me a month after we arrived on Toivoa. Back then, it was still a miracle every day to have gravity, to ground my boots in real soil, to walk as far as I wanted. All these things I’d never experienced in my first thirty years. Things my parents and grandparents and twelve generations before them had never known. I relished it, and having my work as an excuse to take long walks in the woods and spend late nights in my lab suited me just fine.

I suspect it suited everyone else, too. Keep the killer out of sight, out of mind, too busy to hurt anyone else.

On one of my walks I noticed a shadow following me from a distance. Cold fear clenched my stomach. There wasn’t supposed to be sentient life here. Or even large animals. Our scans and studies had never picked up anything larger than the birds and monkey-like creatures that skittered through the tops of the trees.

I kept walking, circling back toward the colony, continuing to collect samples, acting like nothing was wrong despite my trembling hands. The figure kept its distance, and as the colony came into sight, it faded back into the forest.

I probably should have told someone what happened. But I didn't want to bother the captain about it, I didn't dare go to any of the other officers, who held me in contempt, and I couldn't go to security and face running into Quinn. So I convinced myself I imagined the whole thing and it wasn't worth telling anyone.

Except that it continued to happen. My follower came closer on every walk until I could make out some details: the green of his face and his lean body rough with bark. He didn't match the landscape at all. He looked like nothing so much as an Earth tree, albeit one with two legs and a face.

Eventually he came so close I could no longer pretend not to notice. I turned to face him directly.

“Who are you? Why are you following me?”

I didn't expect an answer. Why would a tree be able to speak? Why would anything on this planet understand our language at all?

But that raspy voice replied, “I am the protector of this forest. Your people brought me with you in your soil and in your hearts. Your kind call me the Green Man.”

“Soil?” It was a pointless detail to focus on, but it was the most solid to me. “We brought no soil; our people have lived among the stars for hundreds of years.”

“You brought enough, from the boots of your ancestors to the halls of your ship and into this forest.”

“Are you a god?”

“I am the protector of this forest,” he repeated again. “Do you intend to harm it?”

“No.” My answer was immediate. “I've spent my whole life dreaming of this forest. My ancestors spent their whole lives in space because we didn't care for our last forest. We intend to live lightly on this planet.”

The leaves of his face rustled for a moment without forming words. Eventually he said, “We shall see.” He merged back into the shadows before I could ask any more questions.

Since then he’s been my occasional companion, sometimes sharing wisdom, sometimes walking with me in silence. A few times, he sang forgotten earth folk songs in his raspy voice while I listened, enraptured.

While I’d always dreamed of the forest, I never thought that someday my best friend would be a tree. But over the course of a few months, that’s what he became, if only by default. He was an odd companion, but I wouldn’t have traded him for the world.



My lab wasn’t very big, not with David’s half of the room closed off. The extra space might have been nice but I couldn’t stand the sight of it. I’d kept everything exactly the way he left it and pulled the privacy barrier across a few weeks after his death. It was the only way I could function.

Quinn’s presence made the space feel even smaller. I could always see them or smell them and on one occasion they stood too close while I was preparing samples and my arm brushed against theirs and my heart beat so fast I thought I would faint.

No matter what they said about being a changed person, they still didn’t have an interest or aptitude for biology. Their help mostly consisted of encouraging words, bringing me tea, or waking me up where I’d fallen asleep slumped over my workbench and making me go to bed.

At first the whole thing was unbearably awkward. I'd grown so used to my own company, to silence and isolation, that I barely knew what to say. I didn't remember the rhythms of conversation and I couldn't fall back into old rhythms with Quinn. We had to start fresh. It was like learning the steps to a new dance. Fortunately, they were willing to take the lead.

They asked a lot of questions, about the research, about my work, about how I'd spent my day. Eventually I remembered to ask about their days too, and was quickly reminded that security guards are an endless font of knowledge and gossip. Quinn's cheerful chatter filled my cold lab with warmth and light.

I was walking into the forest one morning when they called after me.

"Gabby! Wait up!" Quinn jogged out of the ship and down the path toward me. I paused, trying not to flush at the old nickname.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," they laughed. "I thought you might like some company."

"Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"I'm off tomorrow; I can stay up a few hours." They shrugged. "But I don't have to, if you want to be alone."

"No, it's fine. Of course. I'm just gathering samples though, it won't be very interesting."

"I've barely spent time in the forest yet," they said, "so even if you're a bore, the scenery should be interesting."

"You haven't?" I couldn't hide my surprise. It was hard to imagine how other members of the colony spent their time without long walks in the woods.

“Nope. I’ve walked along the edges in the safe area a little, but I never seem to be free when exploration groups are going deeper.”

“So you’re just using me as your own personal tour guide?” I teased. Most crewmembers weren’t allowed into the forest unless they were part of a group, not until the woods were explored and mapped out. I had one of the few exceptions since it was necessary to my work. There should have been two of us travelling together for safety, but since David had died, I was left to my own devices.

“Hey, after all that tea I’ve made you, you’ve got to be good for something.”

I pulled a face and stuck my tongue out at them. Quinn laughed. The sound filled my heart with warmth, but it didn’t last long.

“Barringer. Toro.” First Mate Anders stood on the path before us, along with Amelia Liu, one of the colony’s medical officers. “Where are you going?”

Quinn answered. “To the forest, sir.”

Anders frowned and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Toro, I thought I told you to stop wasting other people’s time on this.”

I opened my mouth to answer but Quinn jumped in first. “I’m off duty, sir. If anything I’m infringing on her time.”

Amelia shifted impatiently behind him. She was good friends with Quinn. She had been my friend too, back when I had friends. I saw her lock eyes with Quinn for a moment. Then she glanced at me and her mouth twisted into a frown. I looked away, stung. Her quiet disapproval hurt more than Anders’ anger.

The first mate's mouth hardened into a straight line and his eyes narrowed at me. "I thought you had better taste in company, Barringer. You do remember what she's done, right?"

His words would have stung if I wasn't so used to his contempt. I braced myself for Quinn's response, but Amelia interrupted first.

"First mate, sir, I hate to butt in, but I'm due in the med bay in ten minutes. Could we get back to our discussion of medical supplies while we have the time?"

Anders sighed. "Very well. Barringer, keep Toro out of trouble if you can. My apologies, doctor, you were saying?" The two of them turned onto another path.

I stepped forward immediately, head bowed, intent on reaching the forest as quickly as possible.

"I'm sorry," Quinn said from behind me. "He really has it out for you, huh?"

"You think?" I muttered, still speed walking toward the line of trees ahead.

"Gabrielle, hey." I didn't stop, letting Quinn jog to catch up with me. "Come on, we can talk about this."

"I'd rather not." I sighed and slowed my pace slightly until Quinn drew even. "Let's just forget about him and enjoy the forest, okay?"

They peered at my face for a moment. I didn't turn away, but I didn't meet their eyes either.

"Okay," they agreed. "If that's what you want."

We walked in silence up the ridge away from the ship. As we passed the first few trees and entered the forest proper, the tension started to slide out of my shoulders. I inhaled a big breath of forest air. Its scent was unlike anything else I knew, but it reminded me of the

hydroponics bay and fruit wine and the spiced cake the kitchen made on holidays, all rolled into one.

I glanced over at Quinn. They must have felt my eyes on them, because they shot me a quick smile.

“It’s beautiful.” Their voice was barely a whisper.

“I know.”

We meandered through the forest together. I stopped every few minutes to collect samples while they gawked up at the trees. After a few minutes I became aware of a familiar figure trailing behind us.

Dammit. Not now, buddy.

“Gabrielle... “

Too late. Quinn had already noticed.

“It’s nothing.”

“You see it too, then.” They stopped to look at me.

I took a few more steps, trying to get us moving. “You don’t need to worry about it.”

“I’m a security guard. Worrying about it is my job.”

“I promise you we are completely safe, okay? Just let it go.” I glanced over their shoulder. As we stood still to argue, the Green Man drew ever closer.

“You know I can’t do that.”

They turned sharply and I lunged to stop what was coming, but they were stronger and faster than me and I never stood a chance. They drew their stun gun in one fluid motion as they turned.

“Who goes there?”

The Green Man stopped in his course, looking down at Quinn over his oak-leaf nose. He didn’t speak. The two remained locked in a silent stand-off for a minute before the Green Man turned his gaze on me.

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t know how to explain this to either of them. “They don’t mean any harm.”

“Hmmm.” The Green Man rustled all his leaves as though a breeze ran through them but didn’t say anything more.

“You know this thing?”

“He’s the Green Man. He’s the protector of the forest.”

“What? What does that even—what?” Quinn kept their focus on the Green Man, but their brow furrowed.

“Just put the gun down, please. I promise he means no harm. Don’t hurt the forest and he won’t hurt you.”

The standoff continued for another tense moment, and then finally, ever so slowly, Quinn lowered the gun.

“Okay. But I’m going to need an explanation.”

“I am the protector of the forest,” the Green Man repeated.

I sighed. Not helpful, my friend.

I filled Quinn in on the folklore and my own history with him as quickly as I could.

“So he just appeared here? Because we were here?”

“I guess so.” I shrugged and looked at the Green Man, trying to put the question off on him.

“Do you know why the trees are dying?” Oh, Quinn. Always trying to help. My heart softened into a cloud.

“Humans did this.”

“Is there a connection there? Humans brought you and humans killed the trees?”

“Everything is connected,” the Green Man replied, looking up at the tall trunks of the trees around us. “The forest is connected in more ways than you know.”

“What do you mean?” What was I missing?

“Look closer. You will find the answers.”

And then he was gone, melding into the woods until he was only a shadow and then nothing at all.

“What the—where did he go?” Quinn was on the alert again.

“He always does that. Likes to make an exit, I guess.”

“He... *always* does that? Gabs, how many times have you met this creature?”

“He’s not a creature; he’s a—I don’t know, a demi-god or something.”

“How many times?”

“I don’t know, Quinn, I don’t keep count.” My voice came out sharper than I intended. I winced and started to apologize, but they cut me off.

“Does the captain know about this?”

“How could I possibly tell her? You think she would ever believe me about that?”

“I don’t know, but if there’s some sort of apparently intelligent life on this supposedly uninhabited planet, I feel like that’s the type of thing our xenobiologist should bring to the attention of the colony.”

They were right. Of course they were. But. “It’s not that simple.” It’s not like anyone would believe me. Sometimes I wasn’t even sure I believed it. The Green Man came and left so silently and never left a trace of his presence. In some ways it was easier to think it was all in my head.

They exhaled and relaxed their shoulders. “I know. I know. But you have to tell them eventually. If you tell the captain, I’ll back you up.”

“Thanks.” My voice was small. I felt like a child who’d been caught in a lie.

“Now don’t you have samples to collect?”

I snuck glances at them as we walked, trying to guess what they were feeling. I couldn’t figure it out, but it was satisfying to see them experience the forest for the first

time. They looked up at the trees in awe. When one of the monkey creatures in the branches above started singing, they broke into a grin. They stopped a few times to examine the iridescent wings of the insects that sunned themselves on the trees.

When we got back to the colony, they paused outside the ship.

“Thanks for a beautiful morning.”

“Thanks for coming with me. And thanks for being cool about... that.”

They laughed. “I’m not sure I am, yet. But I’m trying, Gabrielle. I’m trying.”

They walked away down the hall, whistling, and I wanted to try too.



I thought we parted on good terms, but they didn’t visit me in the lab the next three nights. I started to think I’d blown it, again, and drove myself even deeper in my work to quiet the fears that they’d never come back.

On the fourth night the entry request came just after midnight.

“You’re back.”

“I am. With tea.” They placed the mug in front of me. “I just needed some time to process.”

“Are you mad?” I hated being blunt, but I didn’t know what else to do. I either wanted them in my life for good or out of it. This tenuous rekindling was driving me out of my skin.

“Mad? Why would I be mad?”

Why wouldn’t they be mad? Everyone else still was. But I focused on the more recent issue. “About the whole Green Man thing?”

“No. I guess it’s not hurting anyone. Surprised, yes, and confused, but not mad.”

“Okay.” I didn’t know what else to say. “Good.”

“What are you working on tonight?”

I walked them through the new samples I’d collected and let them look through my microscope. As usual, they didn’t have much to offer in the way of scientific wisdom, but they were always ready with an encouraging word.

“You’ll figure it out.” They laid a hand on my shoulder, just for a moment. It was the first time either of us had intentionally touched since they’d walked through the door a few weeks earlier. I looked down at their hand, surprised to see nothing but their smooth skin and strong fingers against the white fabric of my jumpsuit. I had expected electricity, as if we’d both been building up static energy during our time apart and their touch would release the charge.

They turned to go and at the withdrawal of their touch, a yearning rose up so strong it threatened to drown me.

“Quinn?” I called softly, and they stopped to look back at me. “Why now?”

They didn’t ask what I meant. “I missed you.” A pause. “And I thought maybe you’d finally punished yourself enough.”

“Punished myself? You’re the one who left.”

“I could only let you push me away so many times.” Their words stung but their tone was gentle. “I was never the one who wanted to end things.”

“You don’t hate me?” I felt pathetic, begging for a scrap of reassurance, but I’d been living on scraps for years, and I was running out of energy.

“How could I?” They closed the distance between us, stopping in front of me, their eyes searching mine. “How could you think that of me?”

“Everyone hated me. I hated me.”

“Then everyone’s a fool, including you.” They sighed. “You made a mistake. A big one, sure, but it could have been any of us.”

“It wasn’t, though. It was me.”

“I know. But it doesn’t outweigh all the good things you’ve done.”

There were tears in my eyes then, and I dropped my head to hide them. “How can you say that? How can I be good when I—” I still couldn’t say it. After all this time, I couldn’t name what I had done.

“It’s like your Green Man said. Everything’s connected. We’re all connected. We can’t just sever someone from the rest of the colony. We have to work together, or we all wither and die.”

Oh. *Oh*.

“Quinn, you’re a genius.”

They blinked. “Am I?”

“That’s it, don’t you see? The trees, they’re all connected. If we sever one, they all wither and die—we must have damaged something when we landed—” I was scrambling for my computer, then, desperate to get my thoughts down as more came rushing in. “That must be what he meant. I’ve been going at it all wrong, studying individual trees when the problem was how they all fit together.”

Quinn hovered near the door and looked at the time.

“I have to get back to work.” It was an apology. “Looks like you do, too.”

“I’m sorry, I—you were so kind and I didn’t even...” I set my computer down. “You’re the best person on this damn ship and I missed you too.”

They bent close and pressed a kiss to my forehead so softly I might have imagined it. And then they were gone.



“When we landed, we drove spikes into the ground to anchor it. These severed the root systems here, here, and here.” I pointed to the spots on the map projected behind the conference table. It had taken a few more weeks of study, but I’d finally located the source of the forest’s problems.

“The trees here aren’t like most Earth trees. The entire forest—across the whole planet, as far as I can tell from my studies here—shares a network of roots that transfers nutrients and resources and maybe even information. It’s not unlike the quaking aspen which could make large clonal colonies, except instead of being individual stems of a single organism, these are all individual, genetically unique trees. Their roots connect and fuse as they grow. If a tree is cut off from the network, it dies, and if too many get cut off, they all start to die. I’ve already observed this process happening in the forest.”

“What do you propose we do?” The captain’s grey eyebrows arched over her sharp nose. “Pull up the anchors? That will leave the ship unstable.”

“Very true, Captain. If we want to keep the ship securely anchored, we’ll have to move it to a new site.”

A rush of conversation started around the table of the command room. The captain raised her hand and silence fell. A trickle of sweat ran down my back as she fixed her stern gaze on me once more.

“How do you know the trees will repair themselves once the anchors are removed? Have you tested this?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I couldn’t test it without damaging the roots further, which seemed unwise. But they definitely won’t heal as long as we stay here. Eventually, the whole forest will die out. That will take years, possibly even decades, but we already lost one planet to lack of action. If there’s one simple thing we can do to prevent losing this one, we have to take the chance.”

The uproar started again, and this time the captain let them have at me.

“Where can we go?”

“Won’t there be roots no matter where we try to establish a colony?”

“What if the roots don’t heal?”

I couldn’t even get a word out before more questions cut me off. In the end, I didn’t have to answer any of them.

First mate Anders slammed a fist onto the table, bringing the meeting to silence again. His methods differed from the captain’s, but they worked just as well.

“Enough! Why are we even listening to her? We all know we can’t trust her.”

“Anders.” The captain’s voice was curt but Anders brushed her words away with a sharp gesture.

“No. She was responsible for David’s death. Have you all forgotten?”

And there it was. The thing we all danced around and never named. My breath hitched and my heart pounded into overtime.

“She never should have been allowed in this meeting, let alone have us considering this half-baked scheme to—
”

I was on the verge of running from the room when the captain spoke.

“Quiet, Anders.” Her voice had the sharp edge of a scalpel cutting away all noise.

“But—”

The tension in the room was palpable by then. The first mate had defied a direct order from the captain. The two had different ideas about leadership and were known to butt heads.

“Science Officer Toro.” The captain turned back to me, her voice still hard. The breath caught in my chest. “You have a month. I’m assigning you a small team of surveyors. Come up with at least three proposed sites where we could re-establish the colony without severing any additional roots. And see what you can learn about the forest’s ability to repair itself.”

“Yes ma’am.” I almost choked on the words.

“Corporal Chen,” the captain was barking orders quickly now, not waiting for answers. “I want a report on how long it would take to pack up the colony, move the outbuildings back onto the ship, secure everything, and set back up once we land.

“Lieutenant Osei. Assign four of your team to work with Science Officer Toro on the surveys. They’ll be in charge of those four and I do not want to hear about any disobedience.

“Anders.” The captain didn’t even look at her first mate. “I don’t want to lay eyes on you for a week. Alright, folks, dismissed.”

I lingered as the rest of the meeting dispersed. Captain Harris was still seated and jotting notes.

“You’re hovering, Toro.”

“Sorry, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am. I—thank you.”

She skewered me with a look. “Don’t let me down, Toro. I don’t care if you don’t sleep for the next month. If you prove Anders right, I’ll never get the smug grin off his face and I can’t look at that the rest of my life.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I scurried from the room. Quinn was waiting outside the door, a mug of coffee in each hand. They handed me one without a word, only quirking an eyebrow in question.

I puffed out a breath. “There’s more work to do, but the captain’s on board.”

They wrapped their free arm around my shoulders for a quick squeeze. “Told you she would be. What’s next?”



In the end, Anders’ outburst might have been a good thing. Having the truth out there, spoken, let everyone start to move on. The members of my new survey team were friendly and curious and eager to help. I had almost forgotten how it felt to be part of a team. I started eating in the cafeteria again, and when I slid into a seat next to Quinn, our old friends picked up old conversations as if I’d never been gone. It wasn’t easy at first. I worried that eventually they’d remember what I’d done and turn on me again. But every day they proved me wrong.

In the end, maybe the only one who couldn’t move on was me.

David had been the other xenobiologist. There were at least two people for every job, to ensure there was always someone to pass the knowledge on to the next. David was twenty years my senior. He was a teacher, a mentor, and a friend.

When we reached Toivoa, we spent two years in orbit, conducting long range tests, sending down probes and drones and eventually away teams, until we were sure it was safe to land.

I was the one who couldn't wait until landing. I suggested we bring some samples back to the ship for further study. I convinced the captain to let us do it.

I conducted the initial studies. I declared the samples safe to work with.

David was the one who cut into a sample and released a plume of spores into his face. I ran across the lab to him with a spare oxygen tank, but by the time I got there his face was already purple and swollen around his mask and goggles. By the time the medics arrived, he was gone.

Of course no one in the colony trusted me after that. David was well-known, well-liked, respected. And he died because of my mistakes. Of course they all turned on me.

And Quinn... well. Maybe they were right. Maybe I was the one who pushed them away. All I knew at the time was that eventually they stopped calling. They stopped coming over for dinner. They avoided me in corridors and the cafeteria. And that was the end of it.

I thought they hated me too. And I didn't blame them.



The colony site was barren without the ship and outbuildings. The marks of things that had been there and weren't any more made it look forlorn. The worn paths leading away from the ship, the dusty patches where the outbuildings had sat, the deep gashes where the ship's anchors had been secured.

The ship was only a few kilometers away, its thrusters flaring a hot blue as it flew to our new home. We'd be reunited soon enough. A small team of us had stayed behind to monitor the situation here. We'd removed the anchors but now we had to see if the roots would heal and regrow.

Quinn stood next to me on a small rise near the edge of the forest, their hand in mine as we watched the ship shrink away on the horizon. Below, our team members were playing catch in the now-empty space.

Part of me longed to go with the ship. I'd examined the new site multiple times and they'd be using ground penetrating radar to guide the installation of the new anchors, but I still wanted to be there to make sure this didn't happen again.

I couldn't do both. The colony had trusted me despite my past mistakes; I had to do the same.

There was a rustling behind us and the Green Man came to stand on my other side.

"You did well."

"Is it enough? Will the trees heal?"

I was no longer afraid to look at him. I examined every inch of his leafy face, searching for some sign of reassurance.

"No." My heart sank at his words. "Not on their own."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No, child. But there's something I can do."

"There is?"

"Of course, youngling. I am the protector of the forest."

He walked down the slope to the empty space where the ship had been. Our crew members shrank back at his approach. With Quinn's help, I had eventually told the

Captain about the Green Man. We'd even taken her to meet him. But she'd decided not to disclose that information to the crew at large, at least not yet. Our teammates had no idea what was approaching them. First one reached for their gun and then another, and soon there were six guns pointing at my friend.

"Ah, crap." I started down the hill, but Quinn was already ahead of me. I followed after them, my feet thudding heavily down the hill. "Don't shoot!"

"Don't shoot!" Quinn echoed, their voice louder than mine. "Don't shoot!"

The others obeyed but didn't lower their weapons. The Green Man walked on, unperturbed, until he reached the middle of the space where the ship had been. He turned toward us and looked right through me for a moment before closing his eyes. He raised his arms and his body started to change. His arms grew into wide, sturdy branches; his body thickened into a broad trunk; his legs melded together as roots plunged from his feet into the earth below.

"What in all the cosmos is happening right now?" someone asked, voice caught between awe and terror.

"Gabrielle? Quinn? What is that?"

"It's—he's—a friend." I had no time for more than that. "I'll explain later."

I crossed the rest of the field toward the Green Man, who was more tree than man by now, though his face was still discernible. Quinn hung back with the rest of the crew to make sure they didn't do anything rash.

"What are you doing?" My voice was a whisper. My friend was unrecognizable and I wasn't even sure he could answer me.

“I’m merging my roots with theirs. I will repair the gaps.”

“Will that work?”

His face was disappearing into his trunk; leaves along its outer edges fluttered to the ground. His mouth still moved. “It will.” His voice was fading too; it was no longer the deep thrum of a gale through a forest, but a single flower shivering in the breeze. “I am the protector of the forest.”

“Will you be okay?”

“I will be here, youngling. I will be here.”

His voice faded to nothing on the last word as the leaves of his lips tumbled away. I caught them and clutched them to my chest.

I was alone in the field with a massive oak; a single Earth tree on an alien planet. I fell to its base and wrapped my arms around him, sobbing into his trunk until I had no tears left to cry.



It did work. Radar scans the next day confirmed his roots had melded seamlessly into the network and repaired the damage.

I insisted we stay longer to make sure, though I really spent the time looking for any flicker of intelligence from the oak tree.

We could only wait so long. There was work to be done.

Six months later I was working with a team to clean up the rest of the damage to the former colony site. Two knots had appeared on his trunk, like eyes watching over us.

Two years after that, Quinn and I were married under his branches. I swore there was a hint of a smile beneath the eyes as we said our vows.

We brought our children to picnic in the meadow that had blossomed around him. They played among the little oak saplings and I taught them about acorns. Above us, the eye knots were starting to regain their old green twinkle.

I taught biology and ecology to the children of the colony. I brought class after class out to the meadow, using the oak tree to teach them about our history from Earth to the stars to the surface of Toivoa. The children pointed and whispered at the face on the tree, and I knew it wasn't just my imagination.

I'm training my assistant now, a bright young biologist who will continue my studies here. There's still so much to discover on this planet. The Green Man's face is fully formed, verdant, the leaves resplendent. We study him too. I lean against his trunk sometimes and just talk. I tell him about my life, about Quinn and the kids, about how the forests healed and flourished. I listen for an answer in the wind sweeping through his branches.

Maybe, by the time I'm old, the Green Man will walk amongst us once more.

Until then, I will be the protector of the forest.

Break Free This Ground

Merc Fenn Wolfmoor



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You're not alive just now, wrapped in soil and silence.
The ground holds you through this current death, while

you quietly rage. *Let me go!* you tell the ground. *I don't want to be here.*

This time, you broke when you leapt from a precipice and your paper wings failed. You were trying to touch the stars.

I wish you'd take more care, the ground says. Its reproach is meant kindly. *You won't mend forever.*

The rains have left the ground rich with worms and bacteria. Your flesh breaks down quickly, lovingly eaten away until it's just your cracked bones cushioned in soil. These bones, too, will fade until only the ground remembers your former shape.

However you die, the ground is always there. In the sea, deep below currents untouched by the sun. In the mountains, with icy shawls swaddling pointed shoulders. Under the rainforest canopies where ants carpet the soil and toucans whoop in the branches.

In the stars, you think, you can expand, breathe, and be yourself. There is no ground in the void.

What if I don't want to mend? you snap. You're reshaping yourself, gathering your strength for the rebirth and another chance.

You belong here, the ground says. *You are made of earth. Earth is what you are meant to be.*

You're too angry to talk to the ground any longer.



When you wake and taste the air, people are building vehicles to the stars: rocket ships that will break the sky and bring heaven nearer. It's exhilarating. You strive to be one of the first astronauts in space. This is your opportunity.

Instead, you die in an alleyway, walking home from a second job, the rejection letter for the space program burning in your pocket.

Even in a city, the ground is there.



Stay, the ground says.

You fiercely ignore it as your coffin rots.

Why do you do this? the ground asks, confused as you tunnel your way back to the surface.

You don't answer the ground.

You spit soil from remade lips and wipe the dirt from your eyes.

This time, you tell yourself, you'll find a way to fly.



You remember the first time you realized you do not belong to the earth. You were very young, then. Just a frightened sapling, trying to stretch past your roots and fly. You reached and struggled and didn't understand why the earth held you in place and demanded you remain a part of it.

You were born of soil, yet in truth you are sky. The ground is heavy, and it's fine for those who want to be earth, but you are not one of them. This is what the ground doesn't understand.

You tried to tell the ground once: *I need air. I am air.*

No, the ground argued, *you are not. Do not hurt yourself believing lies.*

Your heart is not a lie.

Is it?



The cliffs are smaller now. Worn away by wind and rain. Returned to the ground from whence they came. The cliffs are happy; they never complain.

You walk along a cracked road to see where the world has turned since you last saw it. Everything is dry and cracked, blistering heat and gutted fields. It's hard to find water, and harder to find air.

Still, you journey on, across the barren landscape. You have a plan this time. There are rumors of a mountain so high, it kisses the very lips of space. You can climb that mountain, and up there, in the thinning atmosphere, a thousand miles from the ground, you can leap into the sky: free as air.

A dust storm whirls from torn-up plains and swallows you, choking you in unnatural darkness, and the sky doesn't hear you scream.



There is not much of you left, the ground says solemnly.

You curl in on yourself, waiting for your molecules to gather mass so you can push yourself up. Climb out of this current grave and try... again. Again. How many times now?

You are so tired, stretched so thin—you wonder if you will ever reach the sky. Can the ground be right? Have you lied to yourself all this time, believing you are air when your cells are earth?

The thoughts scrape and gnaw, so painful you want to keep screaming to drown them out, but even that rage is too weak to sustain. You wonder if giving up, staying forever in the ground, will be easier. You don't have much left.

And then...

Hello? whispers a voice you've never heard before. It sounds like you, only smaller, younger, and more afraid.

Can anyone hear me?

Who's there? you ask.

I'm stuck, the little voice replies, quavering.

The ground rumbles. *Leave this to me. You rest.*

Hello? I don't know what to do, the little voice says, and though you could ignore it, there is something so familiar in that plea. *Will someone help?*

Hold on, you say, and dig your way slowly, painfully, through the earth towards the new voice.

Leave be, the ground orders. *This is not your concern. You need rest.*

You refuse to heed. This new voice is scared, and you remember how it is to be scared and alone and confused.

And then you find them.

They are tiny, raw after a first death. Though your forms are different—yours is tough and scarred, stronger than you remember from how hard you've always fought to escape; this small-one is vulnerable and glowing with fervor and hope—you recognize something you share: this small-one, too, is truly air.

Oh, the small-one says in wonder as you reach a hand and touch their fingers. *Oh! Are you like me?*

Yes, you say, and you wrap yourself protectively around the small-one.

Do not plant lies in their mind, the ground says, and it is angry at you now. *You will only confuse them. They are earth, as are you.*

No, you say. **We are not earth.**

The small-one gasps, tasting a new word for herself, a word that speaks to who they are. A true word.

Yes, the small-one says, clasping your hand. **I'm sky.**
And I am air.

Both your hearts are true.

Come on, you tell the small sky. **Let's go home.**

It will be a long road, a grueling one, maybe, because the ground is vast and unyielding. But the sky and the air are equal in might. Together, you will thrive as who you are. You will live, and you will fly.

Together, you and the small sky begin digging upward, shedding dirt and shaking off the lies the ground has always told you.

*A version of this story was first published as a
Twitter thread in 2019.*

The Trident-Tailed Water Monster

Rae Zalopany



Art © 2026, Toeken.

A man rotates from one teenage girl to the next in a half-
assed game of chicken. One teenager climbs onto his

back, his hands gripping her thighs a little too tightly, and the girl in turn, would beckon the two other girls to climb on top of each other. It never comes into fruition, the game, but his shoulders are never empty for long. Natalie couldn't figure out who he was to the girls. Uncle, maybe, not dad, but you never know, possibly worst of all, a family friend. She scans the pool deck, wondering where any of their mothers were, as if she were a hundred years old. The girls are having fun, she posits, an emotion that felt unreachable.

The pool is packed at the Salty Springs Resort. For a weekday in April, it felt almost illegal for this many people to congregate. The recreation area had three cement levels: the top, where the jacuzzi was, the middle was the pool, and the third was an abandoned pool that had gone green from algae. Just a half mile away, you could see Little Lake Kerr, arced by the hundred-year-old oak trees. It was a step above a trailer park, full of snowbirds, RV retirees, and towners—an unincorporated town nestled between Salty Springs and Ocala National Forest. During the drive up, Natalie noticed only a Dollar General, a boiled peanuts shed, a diner, and of course, the ever-stretching woods.

“You like it?” the man asks Natalie once the teens take up tanning. Looking up at him, his eyes are hazel, his skin is pink and worn. He could be twenty-five or forty-seven. His disturbance annoys her. She feels her lips purse in response but turns it into an affable smile.

“Not really,” she says, turning the book over as if she were reading the cover for the first time, “it’s for a book club I never go to.” She sits at the edge of the pool with her legs in, her oversized t-shirt still on. He nods at her,

continues his assessment—whether at the book or of her, she didn't know.

“You here fur family or pleasure?” he asks. She's always astonished and slightly charmed whenever she notices a Floridian's southern accent. She had one too, but it was so slight and imperceptible that it only came out in certain words like doin' or bye (b-EYE) or an occasional y'all.

“I'm here for the springs,” Natalie says, immediately regretting it. She gives him a curt smile and goes back to her book to signal the conversation was over. She didn't like the idea of him knowing anything else. A woman travelling alone, even if it was only two hours from home, wasn't something she wanted to advertise. Especially him now knowing where she might be. Perhaps he was just making conversation. Her mother would've said, *you're always so angry*.

He nods, having met plenty of her kind and genially says, “Make sure to check out the Glen in Salty, it's our best spring. Go in the morning on a weekday, you'll have the place to yourself.”

Without looking up, she says she plans on it, and he turns around, refocusing on the girls who've hopped back in for another go at their game. He looks like a preacher, raising his arms to the gaggle of teens that dance around him like his Bacchae. She hates him without even knowing him.



Here is the dream that led her here:

An owl was the size of a petite man perched on the post office roof. He wore Spanish moss like a lei around

his brown, freckled neck. A sign in red Sharpie was taped to the banister that said *WET PAINT*.

Natalie took a step, then another toward him. His blank eyes, the color of the moon, bored down onto her.

“Can you tell me where to find the springs?”

The owl didn't move for a moment. The only light came from the electric bug lamp that occasionally made a *zzt* from a moth. He leaned closer from the roof, and she noticed his human legs as he adjusted and squatted and bent his owl torso toward her. His shadow engulfed Natalie, as if she were nothing but the cement, should someone look their way. His breath, hot and coppery blew in her face. It reminded her of a panting dog, or the leg of a hare caught in a trap. His presence was a weight on her chest, which made her buckle. With closed eyes, she intuited his movements. In a book, it said to never look at a god or a man directly. She opened her eyes when she hears a ceramic clinking at her feet. It was a painted vase, black and terracotta, with a painting of a boy weeping over a deer.

“Open your mouth,” the owl said.



The RV was unlocked when she arrived. It smelled like the ghost of a smoker. Beige interior, black leather couch, mirrored bedroom wall. She checked closets, under the bed, behind curtains before relaxing. The first day she stayed at the grounds, hit the pool, then wandered the grounds: presidential flags, Don't Tread on Me signs, sandhill cranes stalking the empty golf cart paths. Her phone flashed SOS.

She came to the resort to think. It was roughly halfway out of the state, which appealed to her. Halfway meant

neither here nor there. She could go home. Or not. She had the border papers. The doctor's note signed and dated that said she wasn't pregnant.

On her second morning, she put on her swimsuit, cutoffs, and a wife-beater. A switchblade in her back pocket. Bear mace on her keychain.

At the dollar store, she bought a snorkel, child-sized goggles, sunscreen, and water.

"You might want a pool noodle," the cashier said, "fur lookin'."

Salty Springs Park was empty. Every Florida preserve felt the same: pine-needled trails through prehistoric trees ending in water. The path led downwards until the blue waters breeched through the trees. There were no more park rangers, so the parks had become wild and littered. A half-eaten ant-filled birthday cake sat on one of the picnic tables. Bud Light cans that rattled whenever the breeze kicked up like wind chimes. A Smokey the Bear sign that showed the fire danger for the day had the needle pointing towards HIGH. Natalie had no clue when that was last checked. The man in the pool had asked, *visiting for family or pleasure*. She supposed pleasure would've been the wrong word. She was here for clarity or a repose or for a sign to stay.



People were burying books, burying sex toys, dying. She couldn't breathe right anymore. Couldn't walk into a store without scanning every face for signs of danger, or decency. She hadn't always been this way.

She walked her apartment complex the night before she left. Most cars were gone. The bottom-floor units were empty. When the hurricane hit, she pulled up a chair

and watched the flooding through the window. Water took everything: cars, trash bins, strollers. Like a toilet rising with shit. That's what it felt like. The whole world backed up.

She packed a bag with some clothes, old keepsakes, her papers. At night, the front's doorknob rattled.

If she called for help, no one would come.

If she had a baby, no one would help her raise it.



The manatees had left for the season. The spring's floor was bald from winter grazing. Natalie eased into the frigid water, careful on the algae-slick stairs. If she slipped and snapped her neck, it might be days before anyone found her. Maybe her body would bloat and be mistaken for a manatee left behind.

Tilapia darted past as she submerged, goosebumps rippling up her arms. She fumbled with the too-small goggles, sliding the strap back and forth. Underwater, there was silence without dread. No wrens, no whispering scrub-jays.

Unobserved, she spun like a child, swimming from rock to spring vent. She circled the black opening, imagining an alligator lurking at the edge. But the vent only pushed her back, a steady, invisible force.

After an hour, she spit out the snorkel and floated, ears underwater, face to the sun. There are good things here, she thought. Everywhere is bad and getting worse. She was alone in the world, craving something. She didn't want to admit the anger. But it lived in her—daily, constantly—and in it, a sharp desire to unleash.

“Are you here for family or pleasure?” someone from behind asks. Her ears still underwater, the voice is

muffled and almost sounds like, here/forever. She rights herself, planting both feet on the sandy bottom to scan the steps, benches, and picnic tables. There was no one. The woods had gone quiet, all but her heart that thumped loudly in her throat.

“Are you here for family or pleasure?” the male voice repeats. She turns toward the roped-off riverbank. The NO TRESPASSING sign is tagged: Call Tanya for a good time, digits scratched out. She only see’s the cypress trees—tall, gnarled, their knees yawning into black water. From the oldest-looking tree, something begins to unwind.

One resplendent eye, then another until two hazel slits meets her goggled stare.

“Well?” he asks. His voice is cracked and impertinent.

The switchblade in her shorts is far and likely useless. Her whole life she’s been threatened. Her whole life, she’s felt useless.

“Neither,” she says and continues, “I’m here to say goodbye.”

The water monster made a *tsk* with its tongue. Perhaps he could smell her lie or was affronted by the idea of abandonment. Natalie could hear him shift in the darkness, the black water ripples from the cypress shadow move toward her like an elbow. His smell wafts on the breeze, old like paper and salt.

“What do you want?” Natalie asks, breaking the silence. If she were to be eaten, she didn’t want to play any games. Waiting to be eaten was making her jittery and annoyed. “I was just about to get out.”

He laughs at her assumed imperviousness. “I’m sick and old. A river divinity once, perhaps, but now I sleep in my tree, sick and panting.” The river monster starts to

breathe short, quick breaths as if to illustrate, but breaks into a low laugh. His eyes slit as if he had cheeks that pushed up into an invisible smile.

She bounces on her toes, inching back, trying not to show it. “I thought gods couldn’t die.”

“We both know that isn’t true.”

“What is it that you want?”



When she got to The Square Meal Diner, all she could see was yellow. Yellow linoleum, yellow chairs, yellow cups, yellow fluorescent lights. Her steps sounded like peeling tape. Everything was under ten dollars. When the waitress came around, she ordered coffee, water, The Salty Burger, fries, and lava cake. Each warm sip brought her back from the dead.

The diner buzzed with locals waving at every newcomer. She played her usual game: Who Voted Against Her Rights. Still, her mind drifted to the water monster, how could it not?

When he revealed himself, he was the color of an opal. Shaped as a snake but much longer. His head like a needlefish mask. His coiled tail tipped with a trident. His face: horrible. But his eyes were cheery and bright.

“My tree weeps gold. Would you like to taste it?”

“I know what cypress sap is,” she’d replied, still backing away in small increments.

He made another *tsk*. “Would you like to know what I want? You did ask.”

He’d told her he wanted her to bring someone for him to eat. Anyone she wanted, but she had to bring the sacrifice, and he’d do the rest.

“Why not just eat me if you’re so hungry?” She didn’t know why she should ask a question like that, but it all seemed strange.

But he laughed and impatiently said, “It’s not about hunger, it’s about the oblation.”

Natalie looks around the busy diner as she eats and wonders if everyone knew about the water monster. Was it a local lore kept secret amongst the patrons? What secrets were passed along in this forgotten town.

“I see you found the spring,” the man from the pool says. He’s smiling down at her, and for a moment, Natalie meets his gaze in fear. It takes her a moment to regroup, so that anything as normal as a man coming up to her could happen now. How could she consider bringing someone to be sacrificed, and worse, why had the river monster asked it of her? The river monster had promised her his sap, “The gift of transformation. If you lick my sap, you will be granted one state of being of your choosing. Luck, happiness, solitude—whatever that should be.”

Natalie looks up at the man who looks at her with the same candor as before. She feels her body, painfully aware of it, constantly. Adjusts, shrinks, and bends less.

Perhaps there were never really any mermaids that ate the sailors. They were just women grasping at a share of power.

She smiles at him back and hesitates before asking, “Would you like to join me?”

“I could be wrong,” he says, sliding into the booth across from her, “but I thought you hated my guts.”

Natalie looks at him. Her hair is still damp from the spring, curls sticking to the sides of her face. Her shirt

clings to her back. “I’m just shy,” she says, which was true. “Most people assume it’s personal.”

He smiles at that, large and toothy. The diner’s light casts everything in a jaundice glaze—cups, linoleum, his face. It smells like scorched oil and something sweet gone off.

He orders a grilled cheese and coffee, says thank you like he means it.

“You in town for long?”

She shrugs. “Not sure yet.”

He nods, like that makes sense. His hands rest flat on the table, fingers tapping out some rhythm only he hears.

“My mom loved the spring,” he says. “She used to go out there early, bring her coffee, just sit and watch the birds. Said it was the only place around here that felt honest.”

Natalie doesn’t say anything. The waitress sets down the lava cake, and steam lifts from the cracked plate. She picks up her spoon but doesn’t eat.

His name was Brandon. He’d inherited his mother’s RV at the resort four years ago. Started a lawn service that tanked after the park contracts dried up. Liked boating. Talked too much, assumed too much, glazed over when Natalie spoke. She couldn’t tell if he was good or bad—just that he was typical. No kids. No local family. The teenage girls from before were never mentioned.

She wondered if this was how a serial killer feels: detached, assessing. The thought scared her. She was considering the water monster’s terms. Was she always this person, or had she become someone capable of violence? “We should go together,” he suggests to her

surprise. “I still go sometimes. Mornings are best, cooler and quieter.”

She looks down at the cake, splits it open. The chocolate spills out in a slow, thick line. It was so easy, she thought. She didn’t have to do anything.

“Alright.”

He takes out his phone and slides it across the table. She enters her number, hands it back. He saves her as Natalie, nothing else.

When he stands, he touches the edge of the table with two fingers. Then he’s gone.

A minute later, her phone buzzes.

Brandon. Spring in the a.m.

She doesn’t open it. Just flips the phone facedown and takes a bite of the cake. It’s already going cold.

She didn’t want to know about his mother, or the coffee, or the mornings that meant something to him. But now she does. And it lodges somewhere—low, unpleasant.

Not guilt. Not yet. But close.



It was the library that broke her. Not the laws, not the noise online, not even the flood. The library. It felt stupid, almost—getting wrecked over a building. But that was how it happened. First came fear, then dread, then something hotter. She walked in on a Tuesday. The usual kids were at the computers. Someone had left an *Uncrustable* on the radiator.

A sign on the front desk said: *All Checkouts Suspended.*

The librarian, Ms. Carroll, who always wore two cardigans, didn’t look up.

“We’re closing,” she said.

“For how long?”

“Forever, I guess.”

Natalie looked at the shelves. Some were already empty. The poetry was gone. So was the law section.

She’d always lived on the edge of erasure. Her rights debated before she could read. Something bad is going to happen to you, they seemed to say. And she felt it, ticking inside her like a pool cleaner under deep water. As she grew, met girls, heard stories, it became a pattern. Your time will come. And it did. Then again. Then again. Some wounds were small. Others weren’t. Life moved on.

The library was her escape. A place outside her body, where she could vanish if she needed to. There were ghosts there too. Men watching porn in the lab, eyes that followed her by the doors. She ignored them. She always had. The books were what mattered. Then came the bills quiet, deliberate. Funds cut then power shifted to the states. Public spaces gutted. First a few libraries closed, then whole cities. Florida libraries went dark. Then the entire South. She decided she’d leave. Go where the libraries still stood. Where the light was holding, for now.



She dreams the algae green pool was black.

She pants like a dog above the moon’s reflection. The paver bricks dig into her knees as her bent body lowers towards the pool. Then the face surfaced—slow as a hand rising from sleep—its eyes slitted, gleaming, inhuman. A mask clung to it, stitched from wet skin, puckered at the seams.

“My payment?” she says, opening her mouth wide. Her tongue peeks over her lower lip, dry and pale like an

enoki mushroom. Nothing comes though, no moisture or stickiness meets her lips.

“Protection,” she whispers.

Below, in the water he’s gone.

“God,” she calls out, “Where did you go?”

“I’m here,” he says back from beneath her. No, she thinks, from inside her. Behind her teeth, in her blood, her gut. In the humming ache of her hips.

The bikini bottoms clung to her like wet petals. When she pulled it down, something new unfurled—small, slick, and tender as a root just breaching soil. Not hers, and yet undeniably part of her. It twitched once, as if testing air. The tip split delicately into three fleshy prongs, pink and glistening, like the tongue of some deep-sea thing. She didn’t scream or touch it. Simply watched, and breathed, and listened to the water lap ahead of her. Her body felt lit from the inside, bright and trembling, as if something ancient had taken root in her marrow. The night pulsed around her. Far off, the frogs had gone silent.

She rose slowly to her feet.

Something was afraid of her now.



In the morning, she sits in bed, writing and deleting the same cancellation text. Could she really stand by while a man was eaten? Probably not. But a wish—real magic—didn’t come around every day. Still, how reliable was a promise from something that lived in shadows? She’d read enough to know the monkey’s paw always curls.

If she went through with it, her word had to be airtight. Her state of being, unshakable.

On her tenth draft of hey I think I'm just going to stay home, Brandon texts: *just headin out now want me 2 get you a sub?*

She replies: *I think I might stay home today sorry :/*

He shoots back immediately: *it's your last day you gotta go!!! im not taking no for an answer*

He didn't seem like someone who needed to be erased. Maybe she had judged him too quickly, been too guarded.

If she were a man, given a wish, would he hesitate?

Outside, horseflies bob into the acacia bushes. The switchblade stays in her water shoe this time, bulging slightly—but she doubts he'll notice.

Brandon waits in the empty parking lot, holding a plastic bag of subs. "I got your favorite," he says, grinning, though she never told him what that was. They amble down the boardwalk, his steps too close. An elbow brushes hers and lingers. When she doesn't laugh at his jokes, he laughs anyway, loud and pleased with himself.

Hands trembling, she bites the inside of her cheek to keep her teeth from chattering. Maybe he thinks this is a date. The thought makes her feel guilty. There's still time, she tells herself. She could back out. Ask him to leave.

Weather, fish, monkeys with herpes—he fills the silence with easy talk. Points toward the trees and says, "Place looks better with you," like it's a line from a bad movie. Her stomach flips. She forces a smile, hating how fake it sounds in her throat.

They sit at a filthy picnic table, eating gas station subs. Out of habit, she offers to pay him back. The offer feels grotesque, considering what might happen. He waves her off. "Nah. This is my treat." A quiet moment passes. He

watches her, expression unreadable. Then, voice light: “Can I kiss you?”

For the first time that day, she feels vulnerable. Alone in the woods with a stranger. A man. The complexity of it hits her all at once, how easily she’s been led into this. How easily she’s expected to trust. If he were to die today, would it be kind to give him one last kiss? A reversal of a fairy tale awakening.

He doesn’t wait for an answer, takes her far-off gaze as permission, or indifference.

It starts slow. Her eyes stay open at first, startled by the press of his mouth. Then, emboldened by what he reads as compliance, his tongue presses deeper, harder. His hands—greasy from the sub—crawl up her thigh.

She pulls back, disgust rising sharp in her throat. It’s like kissing Aaron, and Marc, and Eli. Like all the other men who took and took and took.

Something clicks into place.

Let him believe this is still a date. Let him think she’s just a girl too polite to say no. It’ll be the last thing he gets to believe.

She keeps her face blank. “Should we go for a swim?”

She can see something shifting in his expression. A flicker of thought, maybe. Is he thinking of going further, or asking to take her back to his place? Would he ask next time?

“We could stay here a little longer if you like,” he says, his fingers brushing the side of her neck. She forces a flirtatious smile, gets to her feet, and beckons toward the spring. “Come on. It’ll be nice.”

He nods, pulls off his shirt, and walks toward the steps. There’s a pause before he moves, a slight irritation

behind his eyes. He isn't looking at her—he's watching the water.

How does this work, she wonders. Does she have to say something? Bleed? What if the monster doesn't come at all? What if it never intended to?

Natalie follows behind, her switchblade heavy in the water, thudding dully against her ankle with each kick. She wishes she'd brought goggles. Brandon bobs further ahead, calling back to her.

“Did you know Elvis swam here?”

When she was little, she'd sit on the coquina rock and pretend to be a mermaid, arching her back like Ariel whenever the tide pushed in. She moved without thinking, caught in the game of basking, yearning, waiting. Her imaginary tail was pink and blue, color-changing like Dreamtopia Barbie's. But the memory isn't about the tail. It's about an old man who watched her. The one who grinned and asked if she needed to pee.

“If you need to go potty, I can take you to the bathrooms—they're just over there.”

Instinct had pulled her away then, back to her sunning mother and snoring father. That same instinct hums through her now. Not bravery. Not clarity. Just the old, wordless signal that something is wrong. She drifts toward Brandon, every nerve lit.

At first, when he grabs her, she thinks he's trying to make out again or maybe something worse. His hands settle on her hips with an artificial kind of care, like how you'd lift a snake you're afraid might bite. She tries to shrug him off, but he moves quickly, twisting her around. Water slaps her ribs. Her spine presses to his stomach. His arms clamp down, not violently, but with a firmness that leaves no room to move.

“Mesis,” Brandon calls out, “Mesis.”

“Let go,” Natalie says, thrashing to get out of his grip. It took her a moment to realize what was happening, who he was calling.

In the cypress dark, Natalie glimpses ripples sliding toward them. She thrashes, but her arms are bound, useless. Spring water floods her nose and mouth. She kicks upward, gropes for the switchblade with her toes. Her fingers brush the handle. Then too late. The water monster is there, summoned like a trick of light. His face, pale and warped, leans close.

“For fear or pleasure?” the water monster asks.

“Prosperity,” Brandon says, hitting the T like a cymbal. His grip slackens, certain now that her fear has rooted her.

Natalie blinks, unsure if the question was meant for her.

Her lungs burn. Her limbs ache.

What did he mean—why?

She thought of the library. The cold quiet. The feeling of knowing something no one else did.

It was protection. It was power.

She hadn’t lost yet.

“Safety,” she murmurs, not knowing if he heard. She was so tired. So scared.

The water monster looks at them both in deliberation. “Open your mouths,” he says.

She closes her eyes, wishing that the last thing she felt was just the spring and the Florida sun and not Brandon’s hands touching her body. What a beautiful place to die in. What a terrible way to die. To her, this all didn’t have to happen. This choice, her predicament, was urged by her proclamation of violence. That, she decided, wasn’t her.

She supposes you don't truly know yourself until you make a wrong decision.

Brandon's eyes are closed, mouth opened wide. She hears the insertion, feels his body jitter, and slump. The trident sounded smooth, like a bare neck being shaved with a razor. His blood warmed her in the cold water. She didn't dare to open her eyes and look. Just stood, mouth open like a preening pelican. She doesn't think he even realized they were competing against one another.

The sap drips onto her tongue tastes bitter, like medicine she would've spit out had she been a child. And then in an instant the sun goes away, everything really. She drifts for a moment in the darkness before she tilts her head and glimpses the sky far above, small as a coin, trembling on the surface. Below it, something moves long, pale, and coiling. The water monster, slipping back to his cypress. She is in the spring vent, a space where only the eel grass lives.



She asked for safety, and over the years, she watches through the pinprick of light as swimmers come and go, floating and splashing above. It's only then she begins to understand the futility of her chosen state. Swimmers are always curious of her hole, looking down into the darkness. Water is always dispersing, pushing out from the hole and propelling curious swimmers away.

So, she watches people grope and rape and kiss and love. Sees the fat red gusts of blood bloom when the river monsters feed—something that, to her surprise, only happens once every two years. Not as desperate as he made it seem.

Rae Zalopany

The world, she knows, will end. And she will watch it all from the refuge of her cavern, safe and alone, at the bottom of nothing.

Why Would I Be A Woman

L.A. Hyland



Art © 2026, Barbara Candiotti.

when I could be a dragon?
when I could be a gorgon,
petrifying all who dare
disturb my thoughts?
when I could be a kraken
waving sloops like pompoms?
when I could be a giant
striding mountains,
roaming barren shores
and gravid forests,
even at night?

In Our Nature

Colleen Anderson



Art © 2026, Joel Bisailon.

In the beginning—
there was no beginning
not for flowers, trees, glacial rivers
evolving with the planet's cycles
swimming through acid erosion

Nature rebounded
bursting abundance
environmental champions thrilled—
the earth reflowed, would thrive
pollution's agents would not win

Trees canopied the sky
kudzu threaded streets
every rooftop wigged in moss
spongy mulch accepted footsteps
lichen licked our tender flesh

Nature birthed
 barked beings
 fungal friends
 dryad denizens

This symbiosis, we accepted
dreamed new Edens
repenting past transgressions
living together—harmony

Nature had no interest
in trying again
it feeds on all our flesh
an architecture of bones

Salt as a Second Language

Abigail Dereje



Art © 2026, Sebastian Timpe.

*I have stood at your edge,
and mistaken you for peace.*

A wave rises, translucent and green,
its crest lit lustrous.

Your current cradles my knees,
folding me
into your green-blue spine
into the grammar of you
cold
into my palms.

I watched you inhale a pier,
one plank at a time,
the slow erasure of a sentence.
Watched you suck the sand out
from under a man's standing body
from under the ribs of an oarfish.

Foam threads my toes,
catching the morning silver,
threading the seams of denim,
translating me
into the rhythm
of you.

And I feel the pull—

Somewhere below it all,
something keeps calling,
something keeps turning,
waiting,
for what falls in.

Guidelines for submissions

The Future Fire welcomes submissions of speculative fiction and poetry with progressive, inclusive and socially aware disposition. We are particularly interested in feminist, queer, postcolonial and ecological themes, and writing by under-represented voices.



- Fiction (up to 1000 words): pay \$10 per story
- Fiction (up to 17500 words): pay \$20 per story
- Poetry: pay \$10 per poem
- Art: pay \$10 per story illustrated (+\$10 for the image we use as cover art).



Submissions by email. Responses within 6 weeks.
No multiple or simultaneous submissions, please.



All guidelines at <http://futurefire.net/guidelines/>