

TALES FROM

THE STRANGE™



BY BRUCE R. CORDELL, MONTE COOK, AND SHANNA GERMAIN

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by Bruce R. Cordell, Monte Cook, and Shanna Germain

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INTRODUCTION

by Bruce R. Cordell

Stories extend reality's borders. Literally. Most people think that tales of adventure, magic, weird science, and mythology are amusements without teeth. The quickened few know better. Limited worlds are constantly arising in the dark energy network of the Strange, through the power of human imagination. The Strange is a place where fictions become realities of their own.

In this collection, you'll find people facing challenges born of these fictions-made-real, called recursions. However, not all recursions are seeded from Earth myths—humans who venture into these alien worldlets must draw on every ounce of determination to remain whole. For others, dealing with the dangers that seep from the dark energy network is a daily duty, and they endure the costs eternal vigilance exacts. Many recursions are peopled by shadows fulfilling the needs of the narrative that seeded their world, though sometimes individuals pause and wonder why. And once in every great while, a recursion is called into being by a desperate act on which the very existence of planet Earth depends.



THE STRANGERS ARE LEAVING

by Monte Cook

The strangers are leaving.

They burst into the coffee shop with guns and things I couldn't begin to explain. There was a lot of shouting and running about. Guns were fired. The strangers' unexplainable things did unexplainable things. Windows broke.

People died.

None of that had ever happened here before. None of it.

Boss Plimsky kept things like that from happening. Kept things safe. Kept things normal. Until now.

Of course, Boss Plimsky is dead. The strangers killed him.

And now they're leaving.

You probably know I work at the coffee shop on the corner. Main Street runs south to the carnival grounds and north to Boss Plimsky's house. Broad Street heads east to the dockyard and west to the police station. That puts the coffee shop right in the middle of town, so I see everything. Big plate-glass windows give me what some might call a panoramic view of both streets.

I first saw one of the strangers a few days ago. I don't remember how many because it never occurred to me to keep track. She was asking everyone about Boss Plimsky. It was mid-afternoon, so there were three or four people in the

shop, as usual. Someone new coming in was strange, and frankly the very idea of it made me uncomfortable, but there was something about her—she seemed to fit right in, as if she belonged. Or as if she'd always been here.

I liked her right away. She smiled a lot, and her words twisted around themselves in a way that just made you want to listen. She made me smile, too, and I don't smile much when I'm behind the counter. Well, actually, I never smile when I'm behind the counter. There's always so much work to do, making the coffee and putting pie on plates and things like that. It's what I do. But then, she'd never come in before.

Which, can I just say right now, is itself so very odd. New people just don't come into the coffee shop.

"My friends and I recently arrived in town. We're looking for someone named Plimsky. He has something we need. Do you know where we can find him?" she asked me.

She asked everyone. She talked so fast, and her words spun my head around. I looked in her big brown eyes and tried to find the words for the questions I had for her. Questions like, "Arrived in town? What does that mean?" But I couldn't quite find the words. It was almost as if I'd never asked anyone a question before. It's hard to explain.

She didn't stay long that day. Not even long enough for me to learn her name.

I asked one of the regulars, Phil, what he thought of her. But he just sort of shrugged and turned away. I guess she didn't have that effect on everyone.

The next day I was behind the counter, as usual, pouring coffee and serving pie, hoping that the woman would come in again. That all alone is weird, because mostly I only think about the coffee and the pie and, well, not much else. She didn't come in, but around noon we got a different surprise visitor. Fast Ricky, Boss Plimsky's man, came in with two other big guys. They all wore shiny suits and fedoras. I've seen them before, of course, but they don't usually come into the coffee shop. Weirder still, they were asking questions, too.

"What we wants ta know is, has anybody been pokin' their nose around, what with questions 'bout the Boss and etcetera." That's the way Boss Plimsky's men always talk.

Most of the customers kept quiet. I didn't know what to do. Normally, I do whatever Boss Plimsky and his men say—not that they ever say much to me—but I actually was trying to think of a way to get out of answering. Or even, how to tell a lie. I don't think I'd ever told a lie before. It never occurred to me to do it.

What was happening to me?

But before I could figure out what to do, one of the other customers piped up. "There were two guys down by the docks, asking lots of questions. Strangers in town."

I'd forgotten that she said there were others.

"They's down by the docks, eh?" Fast Ricky said. "We'd better go and check that out." He turned to the two hulking men with him. "Lets go see what we can see."

"Yeah. We'll gives 'em what for," one of the other men said with a sneer.

For the first time, it occurred to me that Boss Plimsky's men spoke a bit . . . odd. They left before even asking me anything. I worried a bit about the woman with the spinning words and the beautiful eyes, but I didn't see her again until today.

It all happened when Boss Plimsky himself sat in the coffee shop. I gave him all the coffee and pie he wanted, of course. "No charge," I said with a grin. He didn't come in often, but when he did, he got whatever he wanted. That was pretty much true everywhere, as far as I knew. But I only knew my corner, really.

Boss Plimsky was a towering mountain wrapped in an expensive gray suit. His face was broad and his fingers were thick. He ate his pie and drank his coffee daintily, though, and never spilled a crumb or a drop.

Fast Ricky was there, too, and some others I didn't know—all Boss Plimsky's men. They huddled together around one table and talked about the strangers in town. Everyone else in the place was quiet and sat well away from them, but they sat still so they could try to overhear.

"They're comin' boss!" a man hovering by the door shouted. "Right down Main!"

Like choreographed dancers in one of the carnival tents down the road, every one of the men drew large guns poorly concealed in their shiny, well-tailored suits.

(I'd never done that before—compared things that weren't alike, things like a gangster's henchmen and carnival dancers. These were odd times and they were doing odd things to me.)

But then she came back into the coffee shop. She came in through the kitchen door—she must have used the back way. Before anyone could react, she started to speak. I don't remember what she said, but I was enthralled. Just about everyone in the place was. Most of Boss Plimsky's men stood transfixed. It seemed like she was focusing her little speech mainly on them.

"Don' listen, boys!" Fast Ricky shouted. "She's some kinda witch woman!" Then he fired his gun at her. Repeatedly.

All of this seemed to shake some of the gangsters out of their stupor, and they began to fire. People ducked under tables and behind benches. I crouched behind the counter, but not before three more people burst into the shop, also with guns blazing.

Shouts and gunfire and coffee mugs shattering. Bullets ricocheting and people crying in pain. I kept low, but I looked up to see the woman, now with a pistol in each hand, returning fire.

It ended quickly. The silence was abrupt, a relief that seemed almost too good to be true. I still kept my head down and hid behind the counter.

“Everyone all right?” a man said.

“I’m hit, but not bad,” another replied.

“Here, I’ll help you,” the first man said. “Karen, see if Plimsky’s got the artifact on him.”

“Right,” came the woman’s beautiful voice. Karen.

“Looks like a few bystanders took bullets.” This was a new voice. Another woman.

“Nobody but Plimsky here had the spark,” one of the men said. “Regrettable, but not that big a deal, really.”

I peered over the top of the counter. It was covered in blood and broken china. Most of the customers had fled. A few lay on the floor. Plimsky and his men were all dead. Karen was rifling through his briefcase.

“Yeah, once we leave, things will probably go back to normal,” a muscular man with an unshaven face said, as he bandaged a thin man’s bloody arm. He, and really all four of them, just seemed so . . . solid.

“What happens here without Plimsky, do you suppose?” a woman with blonde hair and a round face asked.

Karen answered, “Someone will take his place. It’s a ’30s pulp gangster recursion. It’s got to have a gangster boss of some kind to work, right?” Her dark hair framed her slender jawline nicely.

“I hate these little fictional leaks,” the thin man said. “They’re all so claustrophobic and narrowly focused. I can’t wait to get out of here and back to Earth.”
What?

“Here it is,” Karen said suddenly. She held up a diamond ring.

“Great,” the other woman said. “We can translate home, then.”

“Doesn’t look like much, does it?” the muscular man said, finishing his ministrations on the thin man’s arm.

“It’s nothing here,” Karen said. “Magic doesn’t work here.”

What?

“Back on Ardeyn, this will get us into the Hidden Cathedral.” Karen placed the ring carefully in a pocket of her slacks.

These people were mad. They must have escaped from an asylum (although for the life of me, I could not think of any asylums in the area). Not only were they incredibly violent, but they also talked about magic. And about Earth as if this wasn’t Earth. Madness.

They gathered by the door. The thin man winced. “You know, I’m not going to be of much help in the translation. I’m still pretty hurt. Sorry, guys.”

“Oh, all right, Matt, here,” the blonde woman said. “I’ve had this since we left Old Mars. Hey, look—I didn’t even notice, but it’s a buffalo head nickel here. It was a green crystal when I got it.” She pulled a coin from her bag and placed it on his arm, which was clearly still quite injured. The nickel glowed for a moment, like a candle flame. At first I thought it was just a glint of the light. But the glow flared and then faded.

“Thanks, Diane,” Matt said with a wide smile. “That really helped.” He began taking off the bandages the other man had applied. I watched as he did, and beneath them was a shredded shirt sleeve and an uninjured arm. It didn’t make any sense.

She smiled. “Anything to stop your whining.” She laughed, and they all joined her.

Matt shook his head good-naturedly. “Hey, you still owe me for that time I saved you from the dragon.”

She laughed again, and they started walking out of the coffee shop.

I stood up. “Wait,” I said, surprised at my own voice. It was small and thin. But still, they stopped. Karen looked right at me.

“Oh crap,” Matt said.

“You’re the barista,” Karen said with recognition. “I talked to you when I was here before. We didn’t know you were . . . um, I mean, I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Who are you people?”

The muscular man squared his shoulders. “My name is Jim Fielding and we just saved your, uh, city from this mob boss. We work for the feds.”

“Yeah,” Matt said, “G-men.”

“Where are you from?” I asked Karen. “And what’s a barista?”

“Washington, DC,” she said. It was hard not to believe her. But I had some newfound reservoir inside me. A churning in my gut I couldn’t begin to put a name to.

“Why were you saying things about Mars, and about going to Earth, and things like that?” And magic and dragons.

Jim shot a look at Karen. “Can you take care of this?” He waved his hand dismissively at me.

Karen smiled and began talking. Her words didn’t mean much but somehow I was calmer. Everything would be all right, she was telling me. I should just go home. That seemed reasonable. Certainly no more customers would come in today. And I was very tired. It had been a trying day.

Wait, no. I wanted to ask more questions. But the next thing I knew, they were already gone. I stood alone in the wreckage of the coffee shop, the grisly remains of the battle all around me. Somehow, I’d been swallowed up by her words and spun about. I needed to get out of there.

I opened the door and looked out onto the street, but saw no sign of the strangers. The street was surprisingly empty. The few people I saw seemed

faint, somehow. The street appeared almost intangible. Outside of the coffee shop, I still had the feeling of wanting to leave. To get out. But to go where?

I have to find the strangers.

On a hunch—and honestly, I don't remember ever having one of those before—I go around to the alley behind the shop. The door to the kitchen is still open. I creep down the alley quietly, but with a hurried pace. I don't even have to look in. I can hear them in there.

"Give me just a sec. Look, I just communicated with Adam. He needs us to get to Ruk." That sounds like Jim's voice, but I have no idea what he's talking about.

"What? No," Karen says. "I don't want to go to Ruk."

I hear Diane's voice. "None of us have even been there before. We can't safely translate to Ruk."

"Adam really needs us. He's in trouble. He wouldn't have sent a message through the Strange itself if it wasn't important."

"But we have the ring now," the disappointment is palpable in Karen's voice.

"It's a risk," Diane says.

"Guys," Matt says, "I have the cypher that we took from the Quiet Cabal that time back in Chicago. It can create a temporary translation gate. We could use it to get to Ruk."

All these names. None of it means anything to me. Except maybe Chicago. I'd heard of Chicago. Wait, wasn't this Chicago? How is it that I don't know what my city's name is? Amnesia?

No, it feels more like the opposite of amnesia, if there is such a thing. My mind races with questions. So many blank spots. What lay three streets over? How could I not know anything more than where I worked and lived, a few details about Boss Klimsky?

"I suppose so," Diane's voice again. "Look, anything to get out of this recursion."

They said that word before. What does it mean? What's a recursion?

"Agreed," Matt says.

Is a recursion something different than the real world? Am I living in a recursion? Is that why there's no name for my city? Why the police didn't actually come even after the big shootout in the coffee shop?

The place I call home isn't the real world.

But I'm real. I must be. How else could I be thinking all this? I think, therefore I am . . . someone once said that, right? Just probably not in my recursion. I'm still not sure what that really means. But I know what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean a place in the real world.

I want to go to the real world.

I burst through the door, to see Karen and Matt stepping through a swirling maw of spirals endlessly curving in upon themselves. Right there in the kitchen. Jim and Diane are already gone. Matt disappears into the opening, and just like that, he's gone.

I want to call out to Karen, but she doesn't care about me. Why would she? I'm a guy from a recursion. She's from the real world. I don't know what a Ruk is, or how these people deal in magic rings and go to Mars, but I can't deny that there's a churning doorway to somewhere else floating next to the sink and a pile of unwashed dishes.

Karen steps through. The swirling vortex begins to shrink.

I know in my gut that this is a place of limitations. Two or three streets, a dockyard, a carnival, and probably not much more. A coffee shop. The same customers eating the same pie every day. No past, and no future.

The strangers have left.

I leap into the spiraling doorway.

RECURSION

by Bruce R. Cordell

A few years before the Estate was founded

Falling in the men's shower shouldn't have knocked the wind out of me. Then again, five seconds ago my lungs hadn't existed here. When I printed back onto the university campus, I forgot to specify air to inflate them. Because I'm a fucking moron.

My chest heaved and my heart thundered. Sucking molasses through a straw would've been easier. What else had I forgotten to include? If asphyxiation didn't kill me, was I was going to keel over because of some even more fundamental screwup? One last fiasco to top all of my previous mistakes?

A scrap of breath hissed between my teeth. Then another. Finally the fist in my chest unclenched, and I gulped in lungful after lungful of air. I was going to live a while longer after all. A chance to get older, but probably not any wiser.

I realized I was writhing naked in the showers of the university athletic center.

"You all right?" asked a guy two stalls down, his hands poised in mid-shampoo.

I tried to speak, but coughed instead. I settled for nodding.

"You sure?" he said. "Looked like you were having some kind of fit."

"Slipped and fell," I finally forced out. "Knocked the wind out of me, is all."

I patted my chest.

“Okay, good,” he said, probably relieved he wouldn’t have to administer CPR to a nude stranger.

I staggered out of the showers, snagged a towel from a stack near the door, and dried off. Which gave me a chance to look around for something to wear. I’d never stolen clothing before, but as I’d hoped, a locker room was a great place for that kind of petty larceny. No one noticed as I pilfered an unattended locker, so I avoided difficult questions like, “Hey! What’re you doing with my pants?”

I exited the athletic building in borrowed blue jeans, a gray t-shirt, and Converse sneakers. Hopefully they didn’t belong to the helpful guy from the shower. The shoes pinched and the pants were too loose, but it was lucky they fit as well as they did. My plan, such as it was, didn’t immediately fizzle for lack of a belt.

I ran past the biology building onto Colorado Street, heading toward the engineering center. The center housed the computer lab where my graduate work with Peter Sanders had brought Earth to a precipice. Not that anyone in this world but me knew it.

If only he hadn’t tempted me back to academia after my online game design studio went down in flames. But Sanders’s offer had been a godsend when *Ardeyn, Land of the Curse* failed to move out of beta.

Of course I’d returned. Sanders’s latest paper, “Improved Processing Through Quantum Recursion,” turned out to be a gold mine. With his breakthrough as our blueprint, we fashioned the quantum superposition chip. We thought we’d discovered free, unlimited processing power.

If only we’d known what we actually stirred with our superposition chip. We thought we’d reached into some sort of perfect mathematical abstraction that promised as many cycles as we’d ever need for realistic VR. Instead, we’d pinged a network so primeval that it predated the solar system. A network crawling with hungry things eager to reach the orbits and atoms of our natural universe.

But there was still time for me to save Earth now, if I was fast enough. And if, let’s face it, I didn’t screw the pooch along the way...

I’d fought Jason to be the one to return. He’d been in a blind panic. So had I. The planetovores had breached the starting grid. Only one of us could print back to Earth. He hadn’t understood all the implications. There’d been no time to explain. How could I have known what would happen?

I burst into the engineering building, chest heaving, mind screaming self-reproachments, and raced for the VR lab.

A man stood outside the lab entrance, a mug in one hand and a red metal toolbox dangling from the other. Michael Bradley was my friend and another survivor of my failed game studio.

Bradley squinted at me. I rubbed my temple, wondering how to explain myself. Bradley had been selected to monitor the simulation when the rest of us

went under the goggles. Which, according to the wall clock, was less than thirty minutes ago. It seemed much longer...

“Carter?” Bradley said. “What’re you doing out here?”

“Hey, Bradley,” I replied. “Um, call of nature.”

“Mmm hmm,” he grunted, nodding slightly. “You had too much coffee.” He sipped from his own mug.

I nodded. “What about you?” I asked. “Why aren’t you in the lab?”

I’d printed back at a location outside the VR chamber because I hadn’t wanted anyone to witness my arrival. If I’d known Bradley hadn’t been watching, I could’ve saved myself a lot of time.

“Server sent up a couple of faults,” Bradley said. “I had to replace some fuses, if you can believe it.” He rattled his toolbox. “Electrical fluctuations, I guess. Lucky the power supply smoothed everything out.”

“I think the test environment couldn’t handle all variables,” I said, remembering the shuddering expanse that opened beyond our virtual starting grid, a vista strange beyond all reckoning.

Bradley snorted. “Shouldn’t make any difference. Probably the idiots over in aerospace are using some unapproved CAD extension.”

I shrugged as if unconcerned. “Sure,” I said, wiping a drop of sweat from my neck. “You better finish with those fuses. I’ll hook myself back in.” *Please, I thought, turn around and head back to the server. Don’t make me—*

“Naw. I’m done.”

Shit. Shit, shit, *shit!* “Oh, good,” I said, my voice faint. How was I going to deal with Bradley? How, really, was I going to deal with everyone? I hadn’t given the next part of my plan much thought. It was too horrible, going far beyond what I’d already done. Yet there I was.

I opened the door and gestured for Bradley to precede me. He walked through and set the toolbox on the shelf inside the entrance. I followed him in and, without thinking about what I might use it for, quietly lifted the toolbox. It was cold and heavy in my hands. Bradley didn’t notice.

The Beatles tilted from the room speakers, from a soundtrack Bradley retained a maddening fondness for. “Oh, Grrrrrrl... Grrrrl...” No one plugged into the VR could hear it, thanks to sound-canceling headphones.

Five black leather chairs lined the far wall, each sprouting a garden of wires, LED status lights, oversize gloves, and blocky goggles. One seat held Jason. I let my gaze slide off him. The other four seats held Dr. Sanders, Melissa, Alice, and...me.

Bradley hummed along to the song as he checked his monitors. Then he froze.

“Carter, what the fuck?” He was staring at my original, still snuggled into the rig.

I swung, bringing the toolbox crashing down on Bradley’s head. He crum-

pled without a word.

“Oh, God,” I whispered, then swallowed. My hands were trembling. I desperately attempted not to think about whether I’d just heard the sound of crunching bone. And not to think about what I had to do next.

I stepped past Bradley’s lolling form and approached Jason. He looked relaxed, as if asleep. Maybe I should reconsider. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe—

Stop it, I told myself. *You have to be sure. You can cry about it later.* So I emptied the toolbox on the floor at Jason’s feet. He didn’t so much as quiver at the metallic racket. I rooted through the pile and finally selected a long screwdriver and a mallet.

I had to sever the connection between the flesh in front of me and the things that lived in the dark energy network that had absorbed Jason’s soul. Things had gone way too pear-shaped to simply remove his goggles and unplug him from the rig. Quantum entanglement meant that contamination had already occurred. I saw it happen.

Goggles hid his eyes, and I was glad.

“Is there anybody going to listen to my story, all about the girl who came to stay?” sang from the speakers.

I screamed and drove the fucking screwdriver into Jason’s head with the mallet. His body was already compromised, and his mind—perhaps even his spirit, if you believed in such things—was elsewhere. He’d made the transition and was still, in some sense, alive down in the substrate. Unless what I’d done to ensure that I was the one standing in the lab with the mallet and screwdriver, not him, had sealed everyone’s fate but mine.

I bent over and threw up on the carpet.

You don’t have time for this, I told myself. *Stop it.*

I stumbled to the next rig, concentrating on anything other than what I was doing.

“...that a man must break his back to earn his day of leisure? Will she still believe it when he’s dead?” That was the question. Were my friends still safe on the other side, or was I really murdering them? My plan required the former to be true.

Then I did the same thing to rest, telling myself they were all still alive on the starting grid. I wasn’t actually killing them—the planetovores would do that. I retched twice more before I got to the fifth and final rig.

Just one more. Don’t think about it, that it’s *you*, that—

The original Carter Strange twitched in his chair then fumbled off his goggles. I met my own gaze. Something crawled behind his eyes; it was the green of old phosphor computer monitors and it was blooming fractals. I screamed.

He howled along with me, a wordless howl. I may have pissed myself then.

My original struggled in his—its—straps, but remained snared in the buckles.

I whacked it with my mallet, over and over. What was in my original body

wasn't me. It was something from the primeval matrix, something that had sniffed fresh data and was hungry for more. Here on Earth, it had discovered a whole new world of information encoded in molecules and atoms, optical fibers and nerve impulses. The things that lived in the dark energy network were predators of a whole new class: planetovores. Though I don't think eating Earth was what they sought; humanity's end would be just a side effect of their actual goal. Impossible to say. And so, unimportant. The *reason* they wanted Earth was less important than the mere fact that they wanted it.

I stopped hitting it with my mallet when its strangled wail ceased and the green in its eyes guttered out.

Someone was still screaming. When I covered my mouth, the sound stopped. "Carter," I whispered to myself, "Now's no time to lose it."

I nodded. "Right," I replied. "You're a smart man, Carter."

Despite all the blood on my hands and clothes, there were things I had to do. I lurched to the computer interface, which was connected to a backup server in the basement that hosted all our work.

I called up a command line. At the blinking cursor prompt, I scheduled a complete data wipe, including all the remote backups, and set it for a 30-minute countdown. Just as important, I triggered a failsafe in Sanders's experimental quantum superposition chip. In half an hour, all the qbits composing the chip's heart would fall out of superposition, rendering the chip so much useless silicon.

Now, no one else would be able to recreate our work. I also figured that shutting down all the servers would be like pulling up anchor. Once the servers were offline, nothing else in that strange network could use the same hack I'd used to print myself back to Earth. Maybe.

Actually, the more I considered it, the more I got the odd sense that there might be another way to pass between Earth and the dark energy network. An intuition tickled my brain, hinting at a way different from the crude method I'd used to return to Earth. A way to translate instead of extruding a duplicate physical instance, a way to make the shift without worrying about air for lungs, clothing, altitude—

No. I didn't want to consider an alternative. With no open connection, reaching between the real universe and a network hosted in virtual particle wavelets would be extraordinarily difficult. Please, let that be true. Otherwise, I'd just killed the bodies of my friends for no reason.

Was there something else I could do?

Now that the planetovores knew about Earth, they'd continue to swarm around the naked grid we'd stupidly created. The grid was like an open wound gushing blood into shark-infested water. The wound needed to be sealed off, like slapping a cap onto an undersea oil gusher...

My eyes widened as an idea occurred to me. A brilliant, wonderful, half-

baked, and probably insane way to further fence off Earth from the primordial network. I didn't have something perfectly suited, but I *did* have a fat chunk of functioning code and twenty-five minutes before the servers were wiped and the chip fried.

What the hell. At that point, nothing could make the situation worse.

Typing furiously at the computer, I opened a link to the multi-user game I'd designed before I returned to the university. Although it never fully launched, a limited beta version of the game remained active across a handful of fan sites. The beta code was unwieldy, bloated, and more than a bit buggy. But it would give shape to a sector of the strange substrate that had been completely unformatted before we'd created our starting grid; it would cap the gusher. Please, let that be true.

I began transferring the code from *Ardeyn, Land of the Curse* directly into the server hosting the quantum superposition chip. There wasn't time to disconnect the two thousand or so playtesters currently connected to *Ardeyn*. They probably wouldn't notice anything as the code base around them replicated down in the stratum.

"Stratum" had a sort of ring to it. Maybe that's what I should call the network? No, too geological. The network was far more...strange.

Only a minute remained on the wipe clock when the copy completed. I dashed to my VR rig, stripped the equipment from the corpse that shared my face, and undid the straps holding it upright. I shoved it out and took its place. The gloves and goggles were still warm.

Static boiled against my eyes and ears. It scratched my skin and tasted like metal.

I logged in. My consciousness was swept down the connection, plunging into unfolding fractal architectures. I closed my eyes.

Then I stepped through to another place and pulled the door shut behind me. When I opened my eyes again, everything was different.

WHAT WE FIND

by Shanna Germain

Coda's got something in his sights. Or in his nose, rather. His whole face is lifted to the wind, his black snout twitching. He follows that snuffling black flag through the damp grey, and I follow him. He moves soundlessly, more like shadow than dog. I'm less quiet, splashing through the muck, my breath heavy and panting even though we're not moving very fast. It's the old song and dance. Radiation poisoning is shit on the lungs, no matter where you take your living.

We've got a little time before our appointment so I let Coda keep on following his nose, weaving through the alleyways, sometimes doubling back as the wind shifts. He slows at a crossway, his nose a dancing, living thing. Usually, I can tell what scent he's on by the pattern of twitches. Back on Earth, it was easier; there wasn't so much for him to detect. We mostly did radiological dispersal devices. Dirty bombs. Gamma, beta, alpha. Neutrons. Only once, neutrons. The word makes me shudder still.

But in Ruk, there's a hundred million things for him to find and they're changing all the time—artifacts, cyphers, spiral dust, bodies. His dispersal graft keeps his radiation poisoning in stasis, but it also helps him find all kinds of things that he shouldn't be able to find. I don't know how it works, exactly. All I know is I used to be the one training him, and now I can barely keep up.

I thought that Coda might be able to talk to me, to actually speak, after we

got here. But as far as I can tell, the idea that translating to a new recursion makes animals talk was all rumor and conjecture. Or empty promise. Or maybe we didn't come through the right kind of gate for that. Either way, it's the same here as it was back home. Well, not the same at all, but the same when it comes to communication between Coda and me: I try to read his nose, his body language, and his barks. He tries to go slow enough for me to keep up.

Here is what his nose does:

Cyphers give him a funny half-twitch, just on the right side of his snout.

Spiral dust makes him sneeze, every time. Let's just say there was a time after we first got here when he was sneezing constantly. In fact, watching that damn dog suffer and slobber and spew spittle everywhere might be the only reason I ever made it off the stuff. Sure, it also interfered with my graft. But mostly it was the dog.

Finding me turns his nose wiggle into a whole body wiggle, as if the discovery of me can't be contained in something as small and still as a nose. Watching him find me is one of my few pleasures. Sometimes I hide just to watch the way finding me brings his whole body alive with joy.

Someone who's dying makes him hang his head, his nostrils pulled in and his ears pulled down. He gives me that look that says, "Do we have to go in there?" But he goes without complaint. It's his job. It's our job. And if there's a rule here on Ruk, it's that you do your job.

Our last job was to uncover and retrieve some kind of transfer device the Karum had gotten hold of. "Something that would let you bring a nuclear bomb across recursions if you were so inclined," was how Sart-dayek, our grafter-slash-counselor, put it. Her English is ever-formal and a little lilted, but you always get her point. It took us weeks to track that sucker down, and finding it made Coda's nose twitch triple-time.

This particular twitch he's got now? I don't know what it is. A combination of all of them, maybe. Or something wholly new.

You'd think that Coda would garner attention on Ruk; he came through the same inapposite gate from Earth that I did, so he's still full-on husky, right down to the heterochromia and the curly-whirly, wagging tail. But mostly no one notices him, or me. He's just another odd-looking creature in a place full of odd-looking creatures and I'm just another maybe/maybe not human.

That's just the way I like it. The Quiet Cabal keeps trying to hook us up with everything we need to do this more efficiently—a central place in Harmonious to stay, a wing glider that carries both of us, backpacks of weapons, whatever drugs or sexes or sins we'd like. The Quiet Cabal wants to save the Earth, and Coda and I are important to that process. But living the Cabal way, it's all so public, so visible, so communal. So instead we've just got our feet, a spore pis-

tol tucked in my boot, and a little place we like in the Shadowed City.

Today we have an appointment with Sart-dayek. It's our monthly checkup where she tests our grafts and makes sure they're doing their job keeping our radiation poisoning at bay.

Nothing important.

"Find your thing," I tell Coda. I don't like going to see Sart-dayek, but I don't like being late either. Coda doesn't understand time or appointments, though. He just wants to find all the things, and it was his nose that got us here, alive and mostly well. So I owe him that. I owe him everything.

Around the corner of a sloping tunnel, Coda stops so fast and goes into full sit that I nearly trip over the back of him. This isn't a search-and-retrieve sit. This is a "favorite person" sit. His tail's going streaks across the ground and he's so excited, he can barely keep his haunches down. "The hell, Coda?" I say, but not unkindly, as I catch my balance over his wiggly butt.

The husky's tail does double time as a figure steps out of an indentation in the tunnel wall.

"Your pet's a little grumpy, no?" That's not directed at me, but at Coda. It's a joke that almost no one else in Ruk would attempt, much less understand.

I'm pretty sure Coda doesn't understand Rukic, but he understands enough to know that the owner of that voice always has treats in his pouch—not the bland stuff that passes for food here, but something that might actually be made of meat.

Kalla-lan's grafts make it clear that he's not human. His face is human-ish, with two grey-green eyes and a wry grin. His knees bend the wrong way, though, and he's got a good foot on me, maybe more. I've never stood close enough to Kalla-lan to tell for sure. There's a thing between us, a tension like a magnet, that keeps us both close and always at a distance. It's like we think worlds would explode if we got too close. Or maybe that we would.

Of course, maybe it's just me who feels this way. Maybe Kalla-lan stays at a distance for other reasons.

Coda has no such fears. He's holding his sit, but just barely. I say the word that sets him free and he bounds up at the same time that Kalla-lan crouches down. Worlds collide in wiggles and tongue and long-fingered hands deep in fur. My seclusion wears on Coda sometimes, I think. There are no puppy parks here, no doggy daycare, not even a stray cat to annoy. He seeks out companionship and I try not to let this bother me. There's no room for jealousy or holding tight, not in this place.

"How are you?" Kalla-lan asks, looking away from Coda to me. Those damn grey-green eyes.

I still dream in English, but my tongue has learned to be a Rukic muscle.

“Everything’s good,” I say.

Kalla-lan is scruffing the dog, but it’s not play. He’s subtle about it, but I can tell he’s checking Coda’s dispersal graft.

I imagine that he would like to check mine, too, but he never asks. I never offer. I hold my breath as his fingers work through the attached grafts. Sart-dayek is our grafter, and I trust her with Coda’s life, but I trust Kalla-lan more. I can’t say why. He’s the one who noticed Coda’s graft wasn’t dispersing properly shortly after we got here and practically forced me into High Command to get it looked at. He keeps telling me something about my lungs, too, but I mostly just nod a lot and don’t look him in the eye.

He’s high up in one of the factions, I think. It’s not the Cabal. Maybe Zal or the Unified Choir. Pray god it’s not the Karum. Wouldn’t it be just my luck, to be trying to save the Earth while he’s trying to destroy it.

When he clears Coda’s grafts and clicks his tongue in approval so that I know they’re working, I let my breath out. My lungs pound with that first intake of new air, like they have a heart of their own.

Kalla-lan reaches toward Coda’s ear and seems to pull something dark and crisp out of the air. Coda doesn’t get it—he clearly thinks Kalla-lan is magic—*He can pull food out of nothing! Let’s keep him!*—but I can see another bit of meat tucked inside the graft along Kalla-lan’s wrist.

Kalla-lan makes Coda sit, then shake for the snack. It is gestures like these, like his pet joke, like his magic trick, that make it clear that Kalla-lan has had Earth time, or at least some experience with Earth culture. I wonder if he knows that it gives him away, then decide that he knows full well. That maybe he does it just to make me, us, feel less alone. We’ve never talked about it, our pasts, the ways they may have crossed, or not. I suspect we never will.

Coda drops into the dirt and starts husking away on his treat, teeth crunching something that sounds an awful lot like bone and skin.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“Maybe I am waiting for you,” he says.

I don’t have anything to say to that, in any language, so I lift my eyebrows and wait.

“That gesture means something, but I don’t know what,” he says.

I don’t believe him.

We stand silent for a few moments, waiting for Coda to finish. It takes about 1.2 seconds for him to crunch that treat into nothing, and then another five minutes of him checking the nearby ground to make sure he didn’t miss a single, solitary crumb.

As soon as Coda’s satisfied that he’s absorbed every bit of flavored ground, I give him the scent question. It’s not a command, like when we’re working, but a probe: Is there still something out there that he wants to follow?

He lifts his black nose to the sky for a long moment, then drops on his

haunches, grinning at the two of us, tongue lolling. That's a no. Whether that means that Kalla-lan was what he had in his sights earlier, or that thing is gone, I don't know. What I do know is that next time I go to a new recursion—ha-ha, as if that's going to happen, ever, but I can dream for the two seconds it takes me to think it—I'm going to go to one where I can actually talk to dogs. Even if it means I can no longer talk to any other sentient upright life-form in the place.

"Are you going to your appointment?" Kalla-lan asks.

I don't ask him how he knows. Ruk is weird like that. The All Song communals mean that nothing is secret. You have to work in the open in order to be hidden. It's like a magic trick. Show people something openly with one hand, and they'll think they're seeing all your secrets. Won't even notice the other hand. But try to actually hide something, and they will sniff it out like Coda.

"Clearly, you know I am," I say.

"Will you walk with me first?" Kalla-lan asks. For a second it seems like he's about to reach his hand out to me.

The magnet between us turns north, pulls me hard. I don't think about Sart-dayek, how she'll scold me for being late. I don't ask Kalla-lan how he found me or how he knows where we were headed. Or how he, possibly, convinced Coda to find him. Which is a first—Coda's snagged rare artifacts, dead emissaries, weapons smaller than a fingernail...and me. The graft means that he can always, always find me.

But finding another living creature? That's not in his nose, not in his training, not in his graft. It must have been the magic meat in Kallah-lan's hand.

"Yes," I say, finally. It sounded safer, smarter, in my English head than it does coming off my Rukic tongue.

We walk a long time. He doesn't say anything. I get the sense that he's killing time, or on the verge of saying something that he never does. I watch him walk, the way Coda brushes against his legs, how he drops his hand to Coda's head without thinking. How carefully far he stays away from me.

When he says, "Be safe, you two," I don't know whether we've been dismissed or freed.

Coda and I are late getting to Sart-dayek's lab, but luck is with us. There's something else going on that has everyone's attention. The crowd outside her building is big enough and hard enough to get through that I'm already formulating it as my excuse for arriving late.

Turns out, I don't need an excuse. Sart-dayek's attention is elsewhere—on a creature resting on her lab...table is the wrong word...it's more like a waist-high synthetic beanbag. Its short, self-adjusting legs cause it to sway slightly. Or maybe that movement's from the thing that's on it, a creature in the middle of what can only be death throes. A grey paw rises off the table, stiff and arched,

and for one horrible, vision-stealing moment, I think, impossibly, that it's Coda. But Coda is safely by my side, and that thing is nothing like Coda. It's smaller, for one thing, a winged beast, red and purple and grey. It convulses, its many furred legs thrashing.

Sart-dayek is all black and grey spikes and blobs, one eye a big red orb, the other a tiny dot of green. Biomods run up and down her spined arms and lengthen her fingers into mechs and medical devices and other things that I don't know the purpose of.

She jabs one of her long appendage into the creature's neck. Its convulsions cease almost instantly, and even I can tell—her blinking eyelight gives it away—that wasn't the result she was hoping for.

"Agent Rodriguez," she says. She speaks out of somewhere in her throat, and her English is as impeccable as always, but my name is always a stumbled fall of consonants and hisses. "You're quite late."

And here I was, thinking she wouldn't notice.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"Lucky, though," she says. "If this had gone off..."

She's distracted before she finishes the sentence, poking the now-still creature along what is probably its throat. "Look," she says.

I can't help but lean in. Her appendages point to a series of round, fleshy pods on the creature's upper chest, now mostly empty of a bright yellow liquid.

"A living dirty bomb," she says, her voice full of respect. "Created to carry poison to large numbers."

I step back, instinctively, blocking Coda with my legs. Sart-dayek nods. She knows what happened back on Earth...

"This one is safe," Sart-dayek says. "It misfired before it got through the doors. Self-imploded, if you will. Luckily, it only managed to poison itself. They haven't yet perfected their delivery system. They probably need a larger creature to carry such a large amount."

"They? The Karum?" I ask. Everything's the Karum these days, it seems.

She gives a mechanical tongue-click, thinking. "Perhaps. It is nothing I have seen before. A radiation that seems designed to..."

At the word *radiation*, I drop my hand to Coda's head, dig my fingers into his fur. I don't hear the rest of the sentence.

When she's done poking at the creature, Sart-dayek pushes the table to the side, and it goes away on its tiny legs, rocking slightly.

"Can you graft for it?" I ask. Even here on Ruk there is no cure for radiation poisoning, but there are grafts, like the ones Coda and I wear, that keep the effects in stasis. They're not all-encompassing, though. If this radiation is new, we're not protected.

“Not yet,” Sart-dayek says. “Hopefully with time. Why were you late?”

I place the blame on Coda’s nose, and she buys it. It’s one of the few secrets of mine I let her see, how much I love that dog.

She checks my grafts, and I’m grateful she doesn’t need to adjust anything because her mind is clearly more on the dead creature than the living ones. She forgets to check Coda’s grafts. I don’t remind her. Kalla-Ian’s hands are enough.

Before we leave, she holds out a container filled with yellow liquid.

I don’t want to touch it.

“I know,” she says, almost kindly. Her voice goes into counselor mode, the one where she uses my first name, leaves off the “Agent” part. “Jules, you’re the best we have. You’ve tracked down more of the Karum’s plans than anyone else. We need to know who’s creating these before they perfect them and do some real damage.”

I close my hand around the vial. Feel my lungs tighten. Take a breath anyway.

When I exhale, Coda looks up at me without raising his head, his nostrils pulled in, his ears pulled down.

I’m procrastinating, walking around and around the tower of High Command, getting myself worked up. I don’t think I am allowed to say no to a job. At least, no one in the Cabal has ever given me that impression. They brought Coda and me here, saved our lives. At that point, it sort of became more than a job you can quit when you don’t want to play anymore.

But I wish I could, because taking Sart-dayek’s container of fluid means that I am obligated. And that means I have to plug into the All Song. That vital, horrible bitch. Ruk natives seem to love riding that ride, and I’ve even heard a few Earth natives equate it with plugging into a living Internet, but no, not for me. The living Internet sounds fun in comparison to what the All Song is really like.

Imagine you’re in the middle of a swarm of billions of insects, all of them heading right for you. Each promises to give you the thing you seek, if you’ll only let it in. Opalescent beetles against your eyeball. A furred hatch of spiders at the corner of your mouth. A marching ant colony seeking passage in your nose. And all of the unknown entities, the ones you’ve never seen—the silvered grubs, the black maggots, the torn-winged bloodmoths, the unnamed, the shadowed, the glistening, the newly hatched bodies that burrow and borrow and bite and eat.

Sart-dayek likes to blame my bout of addiction on the transition to Ruk, the “life changes” as she put it about a million times, but she and I both know that it’s the fault of the All Song. A little hit of the dust goes a long way in dulling the damn brain explosion that’s about to happen.

We take another lap around the building. I’m thinking about spiral dust and how easy it would be to turn away, go get a little, maybe put this off a day or

five, maybe forget about this new stupid job.

But I think about Coda and me, back when I was on the dust. How often that memory came up when I was spiraling out: me giving Coda the *find* command in the empty building, him resisting, his nose going in a whole new twitch-twitch-twitch that I didn't know. The way I urged him forward anyway because I was hungry, I was tired, I was an asshole, I was thinking about the guy I'd started fucking not that long ago, the one that was already going bad like so many of them had. So I put my hand on Coda's back, said, "Search on," back when I only knew English, only knew Earth. We were already working for the Cabal then but we didn't know it. I thought we were working for a terrorist unit of the government.

Spiral visions are not like dreams, because dreams end before you die. But spiraling goes on and on, remembering for you. How safe you feel, how fucking proud, because you find the thing and nothing happens.

Then that moment you find the first blister. Not on you. On your dog. And you know you've fucked the universe and it's just getting started with its pay-back.

"No more dust," I say now to Coda. Like a promise. He's heard it before, and doesn't even honor my declaration with a look back.

High Command opens its doors for us. It's soft and clean, safe. I hate it, the busyness, the push and pulse of living creatures. But it's the only place I can plug in. The only place I know they'll take care of Coda if I finally, irrevocably lose my mind in that bitch.

The communal rooms always make me think of hookah houses back home, all pillows and cushions, circles of bodies around an instrument of worship.

I find a communal in the corner and Coda lays down next to me, patient, protective, one paw against my leg. He's smarter than I am. We've done this before. He gets it.

I unwrap my umbilical. My hands don't shake. Not even a little bit. But my lungs are hitching for all they're worth. It's like the radiation knows, like it senses weakness and goes after that cracking, crumbling wall. My graft kicks into high gear, gurgling a little at the back of my neck.

I put one hand on Coda's back, dig my fingers into dog fur. With the other hand, I plug in. Tuck out. Black up. Feel the folds of my brain unravel and dis-integrate. Fuck this bitch.

I don't know how information comes to others when they're plugged in, but I swim through it like a sewer. Hold your breath and toss away all the crap you don't actually care about until you find the pet alligator that someone accidentally flushed down the toilet a hundred years ago.

I find my alligator: a chem-and-creature lab right in the middle of Harmo-

nious. They've been experimenting with creatures, some like the one on Sart-dayek's table, others different, filling them with radiation, trying to find ones that can carry the living bomb to perfection. They're done now, though. They found their creature, whatever it is.

Karum tags all over it. It's so obvious, so purposefully unhidden, that you'd overlook it if you weren't craning your neck to see the other hand.

As always when I come out, I've got the shakes, bad. My brain feels like it's steaming, bits of it burnt away. My vision won't clear the whirls of wings that circle through it, but I can hear the shuffle of pads and pillows around me, smell the scent of living creatures. I take a deep, full breath. Oddly, my lungs clear all the way to the bottom. Fresh air. The world returns, colors first, then shapes, then everything in its rightful place. Before my grafts, I was half-blind. This is like first thing in the morning used to be: take off the sleep mask, blink in the grey, feel for my glasses, press them to my face, reach for Coda.

Who isn't next to me.

I scramble to fully unplug, frantic, sure that he's there, that I just can't see him. But I can't feel him either. Not beside me. Not anywhere in the communal room. When I call, there's nothing except a few Cabal members who are in the process of plugging in. They turn their heads, inquisitive but unhelpful.

So much for those clean lungs. Tight as fists, clenching what little air they have as I run from the room, through the clean, quiet hallways, calling and calling.

I calm down—or run out of air—before I get much farther.

I remind myself that Coda has slipped away before, and that he always finds me. I don't know why I'm so panicked this time. Maybe it was the creature on Sart-dayek's table, the viscous, deadly gel in its gullet. Coda and his nose will find me.

But Coda doesn't find me. Days and days and days. If he hasn't found me by now, he is dead. This is a truth that I know. My heart says it's not true, but there is no other explanation that I can think of.

Where do you go when you lose the thing you love?

Back home I would have called the shelters, pinned up posters, scoured the Internet. And when that failed, I would have gone to a bar. And then to bed. Probably with somebody whose name I wouldn't remember in the morning. I knew people who went to the river. Pockets full of stones and all that. I'm stupid enough for that, but I've never been brave.

Here, I didn't know where I went when I lost something. Coda was the only thing I had to lose. I could go to Sart-dayek, but she would only tell me something I didn't want to hear. I could go to the All Song, but no. That never gave

me anything good.

So I walked. Let my feet take me where they would.

“Hey, hey, Rodzy. Long time no speak.”

The guy who calls himself Slipknot is Earthmade. The only other one I know who came through an inapposite gate. He clung tight to his heritage like a drowning man clings to a sinking ship. You could see the holes in it, but it was all you had. Slipknot still wore blue jeans and a T-shirt that said ROGUES DO IT FROM BEHIND, both about a thousand washings old.

“Yeah,” I say. We’re underground. I know this place, of course I do. It’s just been so long.

“Where’s the pupperino?” Slipknot slaps his leg and whistles. My lungs go tight, hold for half a second, hoping for a bundle of grey and black fur to come speeding around the corner, out of the darkness.

Nothing but the moans of someone who’s mind is far away.

“He’s gone,” I say.

Slipknot is a good man, but a better businessman. He doesn’t waste a moment. “You want?”

“I want.”

Spiral dust is supposed to cause wild hallucinations, slide you away into somewhere you’ve never been. Travel of the mind, is how I’ve heard Slipknot hawk his wares. But not for me. Never for me.

I get memories of Earth every time. Maybe it’s the graft. Or maybe it’s the radiation itself, or some funky bit of genetics. Whatever it is, I’m grateful for it now. There’s Coda, his puppy face, his ears so big he couldn’t even see half the time. The first time I took him to chemdog training. Our first real find, a dirty bomb that never had the chance to go off. On and on, until we hit the place we always hit: our last day on Earth.

Something touches my hand, hot and wet. I imagine it’s Coda.

I spiraldream in Ruk this time. Coda. The creature on Sart-dayek’s table, chest flecked with yellow. The image of the lab from the All Song. All those creatures, none of them quite right. “They probably need something larger to carry this amount of poison,” Sart-dayek had said. Fear shifts in my stomach like thick liquid. Coda’s not dead. Not yet. He hasn’t found me because the Karum has him.

I think about going to Sart-dayek’s or plugging into the All Song but there’s no time. If I knew how to find Kallah-lan, I’d ask him for help. Even if he wasn’t Karum, he must know something. But I don’t know how to find him. And I do know how to find my dog.

I can't follow my nose the way that Coda does, but I don't need to. I've still got the images burned in my brain from that ride I took on the All Song bitch. I follow the visions, sniffing at the edges of my memory until it reveals a tangled path.

Here's the lab, just as it is in my memory. Karum tags and all. Even as I walk toward it, I know that finding it was too easy. I know that I'm being led here, that I'm looking at the wrong hand. But I know that Coda's in there, that his chest will be flecked with yellow, that I cannot let him die alone. What I can't figure out is the real trick, why they didn't let him track me down, carry the bomb right to me. Too public maybe. Maybe they don't know Coda like I do, don't know that he will always, always find me.

Radiation has no smell. But inside the building is the scent of exhaled metal and exploding spores. Dank and living. It's dark in here, but there's enough light for me to see that it's empty.

Almost empty.

In the middle of the room, a figure faces away from me.

I pull my spore gun from my boot, step forward until I can see the outline of the figure's back. Almost the same height as me. Not human, but not Coda either.

"Where's my dog?" I say.

"I'm sorry, Jules," the figure says. "I had to do my job."

Even before he turns, I see the sleight of hand. How the front of him will look, his chest lined with sacs filled with yellow-green liquid. How his eyes will be grey-green. How the magnet between us will turn and tug at the core of my being. How I will tell myself it is just my lungs, and not my heart, that is finally dying.

He turns fully. His chest is laced with sacs that open and close like seaflow-ers, releasing their spored death with every pulse.

The hand with the pistol shakes. My lungs close in like fists, hammering against my ribs. My breath locks up so fast the edges of my vision blacken.

There's no getting out of this one. This new radiation is already slipping past my dispersal graft, working its way into my cells. I can feel it, weighting down my insides like so much lead.

This radiation is special, made just for me and Coda.

That's the end of Sart-dayek's sentence that I didn't hear but should have pieced together.

Made just for me and Coda by the man standing in front of me.

All this time, I was looking at the wrong hand.

It isn't the dying. It isn't the way I can taste the tainted air sliding into my

lungs. It isn't even the pain that I know will come, the one that makes your teeth ache in the back of your jaw and drums the curve of your eyeballs.

It's that I know Coda will find me. He will search me out, and he will not stop until he has dragged my body out into the street. Until he is covered in spores and blisters and death. This time, there will be no inapposite gate, no grafts, no second chances.

"Coda," I gasp. My voice is raw with a loss that hasn't happened yet.

"Coda will not find you," Kallah-lan says.

I look into his face, almost human. Those eyes that say, "This is all I could give you," and I see the magic trick that I missed before, hidden behind small talk and half-hidden treats. He wasn't checking Coda's graft. He was changing it.

Never again will Coda lift his nose to search me out. Never again will his whole body come alive with the joy of finding me.

But he will also never discover me here, in this place of our death.

Kallah-lan reaches for my hand. We touch for the first time, and I close my eyes and dream of home, of a puppy wiggling his whole body, every cell coming joyously alive when he finds the one he loves.

THE FIXER

by Bruce R. Cordell

8:45 a.m.

The Fixer's smartphone chimed with a priority call. Despite a warning premonition, he answered. "Fixer. Badge number?"

"I shot a state trooper!" a half-hysterical voice screamed in his ear.

"Tell me your badge number," the Fixer said in the same tone of cultivated calmness he'd used to answer the call. Damn rookie operatives. Why they were allowed to have guns on training missions he'd never know.

"I...my Estate badge? Hold on."

"Call me back when you've got it figured out," the Fixer said.

"Wait, I only get one—"

The Fixer killed the connection and tucked the phone into his vest pocket. *Dumbass*, he thought. He returned his attention to Udam-magir—or, as she was known here, Maggie Lawrence. With her business suit, manicured nails, and wire-rimmed spectacles, Udam-magir passed for an Earth native instead of what she actually was: a native of Ruk and a member of the Estate's sister agency, the Quiet Cabal.

He and Udam-magir sat facing each other across a table in a small, lime-colored room. Given his lofty position in the Estate, the Fixer had his pick of offices, but the anonymous space suited him. He said, "Sorry about that, Maggie.

Please continue.”

“A Karum radical escaped our custody,” the Quiet Cabal representative said with a frown. “He stole a myriand pod and brought it to Earth.”

“Translated from Ruk to Earth?” the Fixed asked, barely stressing the first word.

The woman shrugged. “An active myriand pod wouldn’t translate. He must have used a matter gate. Either way, he’s assassinating Quiet Cabal agents on Earth.”

The Fixer rubbed his chin. “A myriand pod. Doesn’t seem so bad. Why do you need my help?” He actually had no idea what a myriand was. The term was familiar, but he couldn’t recall any details. It was rare for an artifact from the super-science recursion of Ruk to arrive on Earth and retain its function. Subject to Earth’s more restrictive physical laws, artifacts that did make the transition via matter gate only functioned for a short time, although that was sometimes long enough to cause trouble.

Why had this myriand shown up on today of all days, when the Fixer had his own urgent business to accomplish? He hadn’t crossed even *a single line item* off his strike list. Time remained, but the window was closing fast.

Udam-magir interrupted his musings. “You didn’t read the dossier I sent,” she said, not asking.

The Fixer’s smartphone shuddered with another priority call. He lifted a finger to Udam-magir and snatched the phone from his pocket. The number was the same as the one a minute earlier. He sent the call to voicemail. If Dumbass was still able to use his phone, his situation hadn’t gone past the point that the Fixer could smooth things over later. He suspected a myriand was more pressing.

“I know the basics,” he said to Udam-magir, lying. “But pretend for a moment I haven’t read the dossier.” He hadn’t had time to scan the briefing document she’d provided, not today. The strike list was more important than whatever was in the manila folder he’d ignored. “What’s a myriand, and why’s it killing embedded Quiet Cabal assets?”

The woman leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. She was angry: he wasn’t giving her his full attention. The Fixer resisted crossing his own arms. Instead, he brought out his cultivated, calm voice and said, “I just need to confirm a few more facts.”

She clenched her hands then allowed them to relax, finger by slow finger, until both hands splayed wide. It was an odd habit, or would have been for anyone native to Earth.

Udam-magir said, “Myriands keep the peace in Ruk. When someone agrees to a myriand contract, or is sentenced to serve as a myriand, it’s only for a certain number of hours each day. The pod triggers the metamorphosis that changes a person into a myriand battle chrysalid.”

The Fixer had translated to Harmonious, the Glittering City of Ruk, a few times. Crazy place. Memory, or maybe an instance of his erratic premonition ability, filled in what he was missing: myriands were a police force for the recursion. They looked like Frankenstein's monster by way of RoboCop. Now that it was on Earth in chrysalid form, it couldn't transform back into a person.

He leaned forward, ready to stand. He had what he needed to locate the myriand. Plus, the first item on his strike list wasn't going to arrange itself. He had to *move*. "Got it," the Fixer said, tucking the dossier under his arm. "It should be easy enough to spot. If that's all—"

She grabbed his wrist. "No, you don't understand! Myriands are hypervigilant, strong, tough, pitiless, and never feel fear. Loose on Earth, with no All Song or group mind to govern it, a myriand will act according to the underlying mind's strongest-held beliefs. Elimination of Quiet Cabal assets, yes. But what's a Karum faction radical want more than anything else?"

"To see Earth destroyed," the Fixer responded. He took a deep breath, then released it.

She let go of his arm and shifted back in her chair. "Do you understand now?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I do."

10:10 a.m.

Despite the Estate's many surveillance assets, locating the myriand would still take time—time the Fixer was relieved to be able to use for his other business. A line tap on emergency communications and a decrypted police scanner didn't guarantee instant miracles, even when the target was some kind of cyborg monster. So the Fixer congratulated himself as he slammed the trunk of his V8 Crown Victoria. He'd recovered the first item on his strike list. The thought put him in such a good mood that when his phone chimed its priority jingle, his first instinct wasn't to hurl it.

"Fixer. Badge number?"

"It's me again, but..." Scratchy breaths, one step from hyperventilation, feathered his ear.

"You're the trooper-killer?" the Fixer said. "I guess you found your badge."

More rapid breaths, with something of a whistle developing, were his answer. *Save me from associate trainees*, the Fixer thought. Just as he was about to close the connection, the trainee said, "I got away from them! But...but I think I might have killed a few more. Accidentally."

Oh, shit. Dumbass might have crossed the line and committed a firing offense, if he survived that long. Calling on the Fixer's services too often was the best way to ensure one's early retirement from the Estate, but killing cops, plu-

ral, was an even quicker way to be shown the door, with prejudice.

“Listen,” the Fixer said into the phone as settled into the driver’s seat, “tell me where you are. I’ll call for an extraction team, start a records sanitation order, and send in the interviewers to make sure we don’t miss any loose ends.”

The police scanner channels suddenly lit up, screaming about a vigilante wearing a military-grade exoskeleton armed with micro-missiles and high-caliber rounds. “Hold on. I’ve found my myriand,” the Fixer said as he gunned the Vic into traffic.

“What?” said Dumbass.

The Fixer hung up.

12:20 p.m.

Why, why, *why* had the myriand come to Seattle today? Splitting his attention between the police scanner, the road, and his own often unreliable premonitions had generated two things: a headache, and a growing worry that he wouldn’t get to everything on the strike list before 4 p.m. That was zero hour.

His handset chimed with Dumbass’s number. “What?” he growled. He’d save phone protocol for someone more likely to retain operative status.

“Are you even trying to help me?” came the voice he’d learned to hate. “Everyone said you were ‘the shit’ when I was recruited. That there wasn’t anything you couldn’t make right. That you gave up your name so it wouldn’t get in the way of your job. I guess that was a load of BS.”

“You’ve decided insults are the way to move to the top of my queue?” the Fixer asked. A fleeting sense of certainly suffused him and he spun the wheel, making an illegal turn without killing any pedestrians. His premonitions were like that. Of all of his unusual abilities, it was the one least under his control. He might be driving east now, instead of south, just to avoid a fender bender rather than—

A new report came over the scanner. A perp answering the myriand’s description had walked into a credit union in the Wallingford neighborhood. Which was just ahead, by his new bearing. His ability had delivered something *useful* for a change.

“Got to go,” he said, and thumbed the connection closed. If Dumbass kept pestering him, the next call would ring through right when the Fixer could least afford a distraction. Putting his phone on silent would’ve done the trick, but the Fixer wasn’t one for half measures. He blocked the number entirely and smiled as he tucked the phone into his vest.

Minutes later, he pulled up in front of a building with a smoking hole instead of a front wall. WALLINGFORD COMMUNITY CREDIT UNION, announced the dangling sign. The Fixer burst from the Vic at a sprint, just in case the myr-

and had eyes on him already from inside the credit union. Hitting a moving target with gunfire is ten times harder than nailing a static one.

Nothing interrupted his trajectory, and the Fixer slammed against the concrete wall next to the opening. He bent low and risked a glance through the breach. The credit union's interior was a special hell of murdered tellers and customers, smoking wreckage, orange flames, and crimson streamers of gore spattered across the walls and toppled furniture. The Fixer had arrived too late to help anyone. But he still had a job to do.

The Fixer couldn't see the lunatic wearing the Ruk battle chrysalid, but a riot of obscenities echoed from the open bank vault: "Benighted Cabal loyalists! Father-fondling cysts of a spore worm's stomach! Degenerate Earth-lovers, you will betray Ruk no more!" and more the Fixer didn't understand, with an accent that didn't come from anywhere on Earth. He dropped to his stomach and wormed through the broken wall into the credit union.

The Fixer reached the vault and peered in. A nightmare of charcoal-colored armor leaned over an unmoving woman wearing a credit union nametag. The shimmer the Fixer saw around both the victim and the myriand wasn't an artifact of his smoke-watering eyes, but confirmation that neither had originated on Earth. For the myriand, at least, that much was obvious. Its machine-enhanced musculature purred when it moved and its firearms were straight out of a science-fiction thriller.

The Fixer had his own advantages. His position in the Estate wasn't merely for show. He considered his options as the myriand berated the corpse.

One, his H&K .45 pistol. It had great stopping power, but it was rated for threats native to Earth. He was unsure what effect, if any, its rounds would have on the myriand's armored hide.

Two, his cyphers. The Fixer carried a couple of those rare bits of inexplicable technology that Estate operatives gathered from the various recursions they visited. He had one or two special cyphers he'd been saving for just the right occasion, including one that could petrify a target, turning a person—or a myriand—into a marble statue. He decided he'd give that one a shot.

Of course, there was also his ability to translate. People quickened to the Strange could translate between recursions. It took some time, but he knew a couple of variations that—

Then the Fixer noticed the two-foot-thick metal bank vault door.

Could it really be that easy? He inched left, put a hand on the huge door, and shoved. The massive disc of metal swung on oiled hinges. The myriand glanced around, reached for a weapon, and leaped towards the narrowing gap in one continuous, super-accelerated movement. It wasn't fast enough. A muffled boom on the other side of the door vibrated through the metal, quickly followed by a dozen more.

The vault door held. A few more bangs and shakes followed, but in a few

minutes the noises dwindled to nothing.

The corners of the Fixer's mouth tugged up. With enough time, the mad-science abilities the myriand possessed would degrade under the physical laws of the normal universe. Maybe in just a few more hours, but certainly no more than a few days. If the metallic vault wasn't up to the task of holding the thing indefinitely, it likely would've already given out under the initial onslaught.

Time to do the *other* job the Estate pays me for, he thought. The Fixer strode to the front of the credit union and scanned the street.

Approaching sirens meant that first responders were already on the way. He had to arrange a cordon so that the myriand wasn't inadvertently freed by police or firefighters. He also had to make sure no YouTube videos featuring the myriand showed up online. In a nutshell, he had to fix things so that the "normal" world continued to be safe and unaware of threats from the Strange.

He pulled out his phone and started down his list of usual assets. Luckily, the Estate was already—

CRASH! The vault door arced over his head and smashed into the building across the street. A desk, spinning end-over-end, followed instants later. Fumbling for his cyphers, the Fixer wheeled around. An armored figure the color of a hearse collided with him. The impact threatened to knock the Fixer off his feet, but he wrapped his arms around the myriand and squeezed. The myriand belled something about "Traitor! Defiler of history!" and reached for the Fixer's head with one oversized, machine-assisted hand.

No time for anything but to try for exile. If it didn't work, the Estate would be out one Fixer. He squeezed the thrashing figure more tightly and triggered a mental revision: The myriand did not belong on Earth. It belonged on Ruk. He asked reality to make things right. And reality, often an intransigent bastard, this time chose to listen.

The Fixer's surroundings vibrated. The color lifted away from the broken walls, the bodies of the slain, the myriand trying to crush his skull, his own dark suit, and began to swirl overhead. He and his captive were caught up in the current, stretched out like material being wound into a black hole, and then sucked through the vortex.

2:01 p.m. - Ruk

Air blasted the Fixer and he squinted into its chill roar. He wasn't standing on anything. He was *falling*. The riot of lights and slender shapes rushing toward him resolved into a crazed city of immense illuminated towers, connected catwalks, and thousands of flying cars like dandelions on the wind. He was plummeting toward Harmonious, the Glittering City.

The Fixer released the myriand, which was windmilling its arms and legs in

a believable pantomime of something with no way of saving itself from a long fall. If the Fixer was going to survive this, he was on his own, and he had only a handful of seconds to figure out how.

Translating back to Earth was out of the question—normal translation took too much time.

He had no cyphers quite right for the task. The one he'd considered using on the myriand that could turn flesh to marble was only useful if he didn't want to be conscious when he hit the ground. But the rubble pile that marked his grave would be no less final.

The air rushing in his ears drowned out the flailing myriand's shouts. The Fixer closed his eyes so he couldn't see the approaching towers set to skewer him.

What about the mental trick he'd used on the myriand? That revision was something he'd only ever used on enemies who weren't where they belonged, on foes who had either translated or found their way to Earth via a matter gate. He'd always thought of the power as deleting his target. Luckily, that wasn't literally true. Could he use the revision on himself? If he did, would he return to Earth, or find himself facing some kind of terrible, self-imposed exile?

Only one way to find out.

2:02 p.m. - Earth

That was damn lucky.

3:58 p.m.

Obtaining the last couple of items on his strike list had been nothing less than hellish, especially in the aftermath of the credit union mop-up. With the 4 p.m. deadline fast approaching, he'd had to do a couple of things he wasn't exactly proud of, and which would probably require a bit of paperwork later to resolve.

But that was for tomorrow.

Now it was time to celebrate the fact that he'd actually pulled off everything he'd promised.

Arms full, the Fixer walked up the sidewalk leading to a sedate, two-story home on a tree-lined Ballard street. He stopped at the gate and set down his packages. He straightened slowly, seeing the man in disheveled clothing standing behind the lilac bush in the front lawn. The man had a gun aimed at the Fixer's face.

The Fixer said, "Can I help you?" The man wasn't familiar, but he was a

native of Earth—no shimmer.

“Apparently, you CAN’T help me, even though it’s *YOUR JOB*,” the man screamed. The Fixer recognized the voice.

“Dumba—I mean, it’s you. What a surprise.” The Fixer’s mouth dried. He licked his lips. The trainee shouldn’t have been able to discover this address. That information had been scrubbed from the Estate’s servers.

“Do you know what I’ve had to go through to find you?” said Dumbass.

The Fixer *did* want to know that, but he had more pressing concerns. Like how to safely remove this lunatic from the front yard of the home where his family lived.

“Listen,” said the Fixer in his most reasonable tone, “I apologize for not getting to you sooner, I really, really do. But I have something with me, right now, that’s *exactly* what you need. I know you’ve had it tough—”

“I *have* had it tough!” Dumbass interrupted.

“I know, I know, and I’m sorry. Which is why I’ve decided that you’re due something incredible for your troubles. It’s not something I’d give to just anyone, but because of the incredible strain you’ve been under today, it’s only fair.”

“Only fair,” Dumbass said, his voice milder, his head nodding along. “What is it?”

So as not to startle the trainee, the Fixer slowly reached into a pocket and pulled out a hand-held device about the size of a smart phone. “See?” He tossed it to Dumbass.

Gray light sizzled on the grass.

“Fixed,” said the Fixer. The new marble statue on his front lawn didn’t respond. The Fixer retrieved his daughter’s birthday cake, the balloons, and the air pump for the inflatable castle he’d arranged to have delivered later, and went inside.