

# SIGNALS

Science fiction for an expanding age

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 Lower Decks Press

Featuring Stories by

Jason Clor

H. L. Hinkle

Wendy Wee

Vera M. Key

RLNPK

EDITED BY  
**ROHAN O'DUILL**

LAYOUT BY  
**JASON CLOR**



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# SIGNALS

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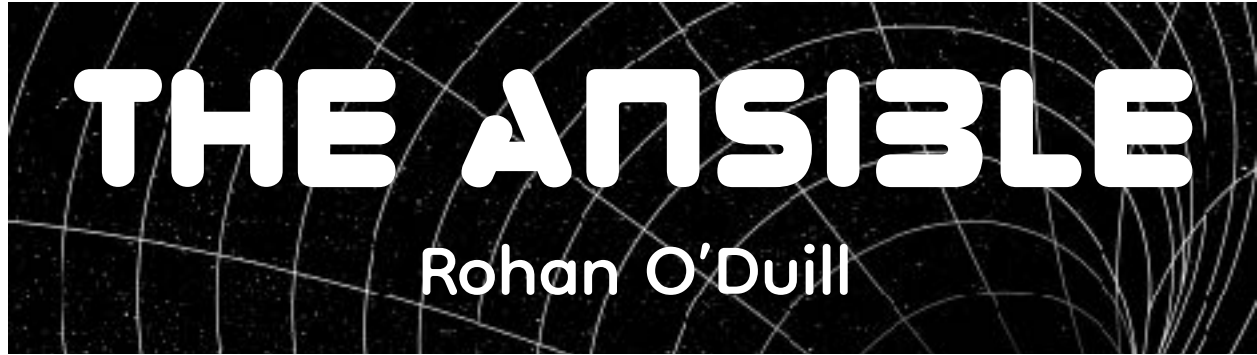
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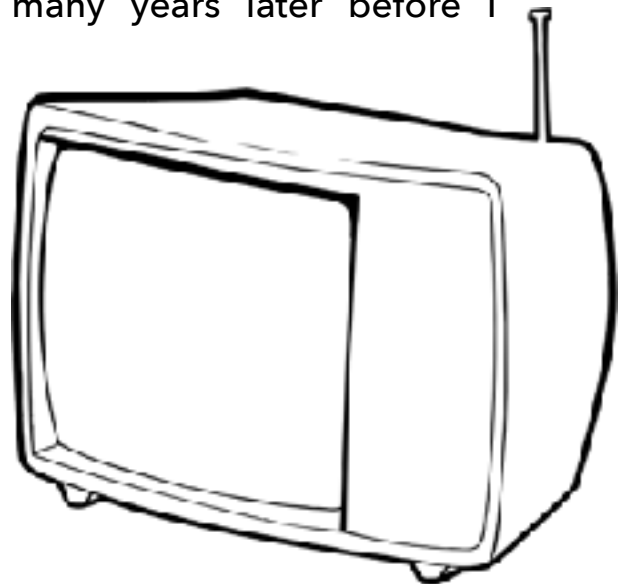


## Growing up with Science Fiction

As a child, I still remember clearly being told by my friends that I wasn't a real Trekkie. I didn't know much about the original series, I couldn't speak Klingon and my knowledge of rank or ship class was appalling. I failed to make the cut. However, I can still tell you that in Ireland in 1990, *Star Trek TNG* aired on RTE2 at 7pm every Thursday night. What was extra special that year was my dad upgraded from a 14" TV to a 22" TV so we could watch the Italian World Cup. I could now make out the Enterprise taking on a Bird of

Prey on something bigger than a shoebox. What a wonderful year that was.

If I wasn't obsessed with the tech and world-building like my true Trekkie friends, what was I and where did I fit in? It would be many years later before I



could attempt to answer that question.

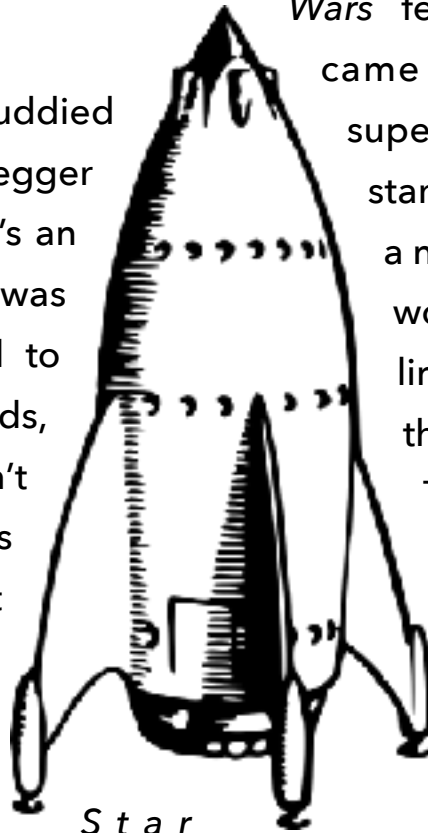
*Alien* and the *Alien* series kicked up many arguments. "It's a horror movie, not sci-fi," my cooler mates would state, not wanting to be lumped in with the nerdy Trekkies.

*Terminator* further muddied the water. "Schwarzenegger is an action hero, so it's an action movie," and was therefore not allowed to be claimed by us nerds, at least in public. I didn't care either way. It was awesome, and that was all that mattered.

And then there was *Star Wars*, so cool that it transcended science fiction and became something that was a beast of its

own. Nobody was beaten up in the schoolyard for acting like Han Solo or Luke Skywalker. Well, until *The Phantom Menace* was released and Jar Jar Binks single-handedly made *Star Wars* dorky.

Around the same time that *Star Wars* fell off of its pedestal came the golden age of superhero movies. Marvel started rolling them out and unfortunately wouldn't stop the factory line, no matter how bad the raw materials were. The movies walked a weird line. While they all took place in the same universe, only some of those stories were considered science fiction while others were not. How does any of this make sense?

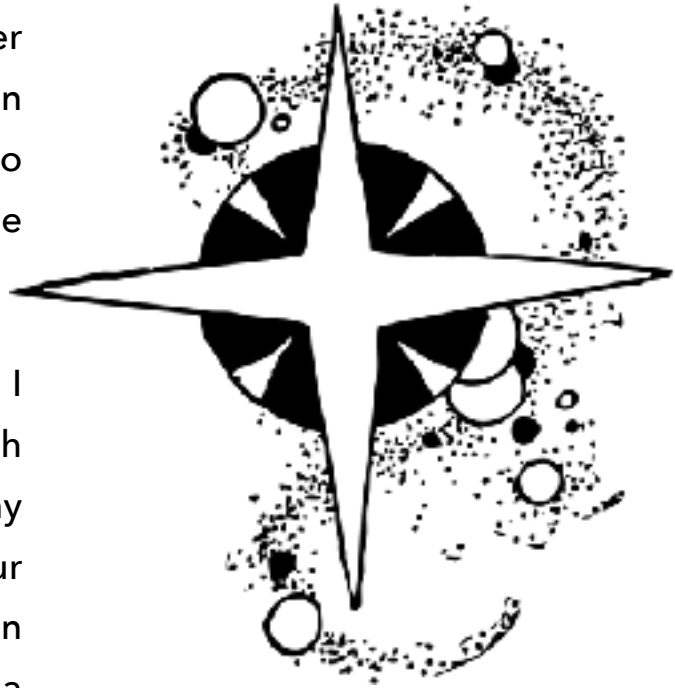


## The Ansible

And that question is the answer to understanding science fiction in my mind. It doesn't have to make sense; it doesn't have to be probable or even possible.

For many parts of my career I worked long hours in high pressure environments and my one release was that half hour before sleep where I would open a sci-fi novel and lose myself in a magical world that didn't have to make sense, that didn't have to meet any deadlines or conform to any standards.

As science fiction writers, we have a beautiful gift. As long as we tell a good story, we can do anything we want.



Jason Clor

ONE  
SMALL  
STEP

NEWS



“Life systems?”

“Go!”

“Communications?”

“Go!”

“Telemetry?”

“Go!”

“Manifold Dynamics?”

“Go!”

Operations Director Nolan Belfree nodded to himself approvingly. “The board is green. Ready to disengage interlocks and power up Phoebus.”

The atmosphere in NASA’s Special Operations Center was heavy with tension and flop sweat. One might expect the first manned test of a revolutionary (and, up until six years ago, utterly hypothetical) mode of travel would be streaming on every television channel around

the world. However, for a variety of closely-held reasons, the big event was happening deep underground and in extreme secrecy.

The biggest of these was uncertainty: despite years of calculations and modeling by the brightest minds in physics, no one was quite sure what was going to happen when the switch was finally thrown and Phoebus received the full output of four nuclear reactors. One tantalizing possibility was its instantaneous



transport to another part of the universe. Another was the sudden vaporization of the vessel and its pilot.

U.S. Air Force Colonel Breeze Wakewood sat in his capsule thinking exclusively about the former. As he listened to SOC's chatter, he wished he'd insisted on one last opportunity to pee. Belfree's steady voice was a bulwark against the fear and doubt that accompanied any risky mission.

"T-minus ten seconds and counting," came CAPCOM's fateful call.

*Showtime*, thought Breeze. Sweat-filled gloves gripped the arms of his control chair.

Belfree spoke directly to the capsule. "Godspeed, Breeze."

"I'll send you a postcard," quipped the astronaut.

"Hope you brought enough stamps!"

Breeze opened his mouth to reply but was cut short by a blinding light and deafening roar. His teeth began to vibrate.

This should be interesting, he mused.

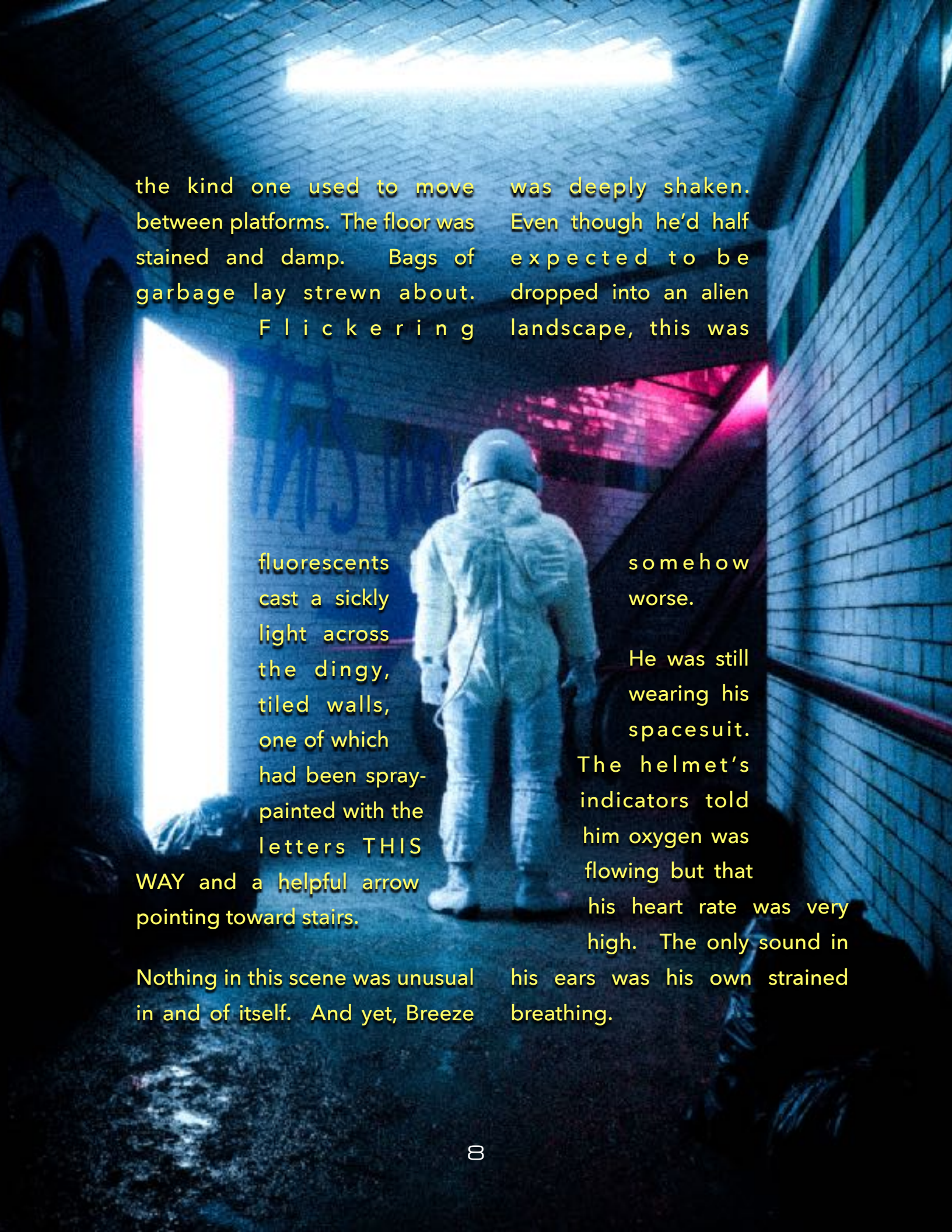
Then he noticed his teeth were missing.

Half a second later, the rest of him was as well.

\*\*\*

Breeze was standing in a subway tunnel.

More precisely, he was standing in a filthy underground corridor—

A person in a white spacesuit stands in the center of a dark, industrial hallway. The walls are made of dark bricks, and the floor is dark and appears damp. A bright light source is visible on the left, creating a strong glow. The ceiling has a grid pattern with a bright light fixture. The overall atmosphere is eerie and futuristic.

the kind one used to move between platforms. The floor was stained and damp. Bags of garbage lay strewn about.

Flickering

was deeply shaken. Even though he'd half expected to be dropped into an alien landscape, this was

fluorescents cast a sickly light across the dingy, tiled walls, one of which had been spray-painted with the letters THIS WAY and a helpful arrow pointing toward stairs.

Nothing in this scene was unusual in and of itself. And yet, Breeze

somehow worse.

He was still wearing his spacesuit.

The helmet's indicators told him oxygen was flowing but that his heart rate was very high. The only sound in his ears was his own strained breathing.

He wondered where the capsule had gone.

'You find yourself in a subway tunnel' wasn't on my contingency checklist, he thought.

After fighting back panic for several minutes, he took a sip from his suit's water supply and swallowed. Then he sighed and trudged to the stairs.

\*\*\*

Inside the ticket booth was a thing that looked like a sea

anemone.

"Take a number please," it said.

"Excuse me?" replied Breeze.

"We weren't expecting you yet. So you'll have to take a number."

"Where am I?"

"Not my department." The thing's tentacles twitched when it spoke. "Talk to public relations."

"Where is that?"

"Not my department."

Breeze pulled a paper slip from the



dispenser next to the booth; it was difficult with his bulky gloves on. Then he looked around the platform for other travelers. Seeing none, he turned back to the booth to ask why he was waiting, and for whom. The anemone was gone.

"Hello?" said Breeze, but there was no reply.

Realizing he could barely hear through his helmet, he took a chance and uncoupled it from his suit. The air in the place was damp and stale but breathable. A faint hum was the only ambient sound. As Breeze walked to the edge of the platform, his footsteps echoed ominously.

The only sign hung on a pillar and read, "UPTOWN." Breeze leaned out from the edge of the platform and caught sight of a bluish dot far away in the darkness.

As he leaned back, a shift in the air tickled his cheeks. Then, in the blink of an eye, a subway train appeared at the platform, followed by a gust of air so strong it bowled him over. The doors shuddered open with a labored squeak.

Breeze collected himself, grabbed his helmet and stepped aboard.

\*\*\*

The train ride was unexpectedly long. Breeze tried his radio multiple times without answer, though he hadn't expected one. After he became uncomfortable, he shed the remains of his suit, then sat in a molded plastic seat and watched lights flicker past in the darkness outside the window.

Half-dozing, he worked through possibilities in his head. Am I dead? Did I end up in another dimension? Is this Purgatory?



## One Small Step

None of the explanations felt right.

Lost in thought, he noticed, in the reflection in the window, a passenger seated next to him. Turning, Breeze was astonished to discover it was Nolan Belfree.

"Director?" he gasped.

"Sort of," said Belfree. "Though, not really. I'm with public relations."

Breeze sat dumbfounded for a moment. "Where am I?"

"A nexus of sorts, a kind of crossover point for travelers. Every species reaches this place eventually. Yours, however ... well, let's say you're a bit early."

Breeze nodded. "The ... ticket person said so."

Belfree nodded. "You've gotten ahead of yourselves again. Same thing that happened at Trinity. Reach exceeding grasp, if you catch my meaning."

Breeze shook his head.

"You don't have the mental capacity yet," said Belfree. "That's why you see this familiar environment. Your brain can't handle the truth."

"And what's the truth?"

Belfree smiled and stood. "Someday, maybe. If you don't self-annihilate first. Until then, we're taking you back to your starting point. Sorry for the inconvenience."

A calm tone sounded, and Breeze felt the train begin to slow. He

Jason Clor

had questions for Belfree, but the director was gone.

\*\*\*

"Capsule's intact ... and pilot's alive. A little woozy. Looks like he pissed himself. Otherwise, test was a failure."

o



ZOMBIE



H. A. HINKLE



**HAPPY SMILING FACES OF PEOPLE  
SATISFIED WITH THEIR LIFE  
BOUNCED ACROSS THE SCREEN  
OF THE WAITING ROOM TV.**

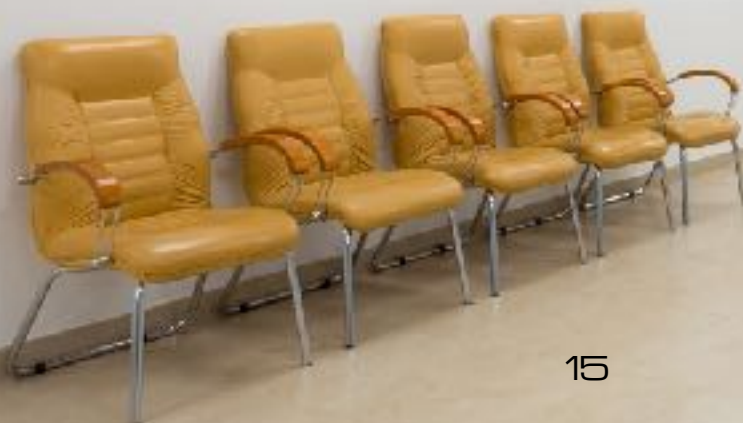
Of course, they were happy they were on whatever pill that commercial was peddling. I belched a noxious rolling gas of acidic stomach bile. My eyes teared up just as the warning scroll began at the end of the commercial.

"Ah fuck, just kill me now."

I ignored the annoyed look of the mom across from me, and her child trying to free themselves

from her grip as she covered their ears. Instead, I turned my attention back to the tv with a sigh just as the last sentence disappeared.

"Did that just say it may cause temporary death?" The mother just continued to glare at me. And before I could think about it any further, a nurse emerged from the door that led to the exam rooms in the back.



"Mr. Sim, the doctor is ready for you."

\*\*\*

The pills sparkled dimly in the orange light of the break room. I popped one in my mouth, the first one out of the five I was supposed to take a day. They were small like candy and fizzled just a bit on my tongue before I washed it down with the room-temperature coffee I had been nursing all morning.

"That coffee's not going to help your acid reflux, Tim," said Stacey as she plopped down beside me.

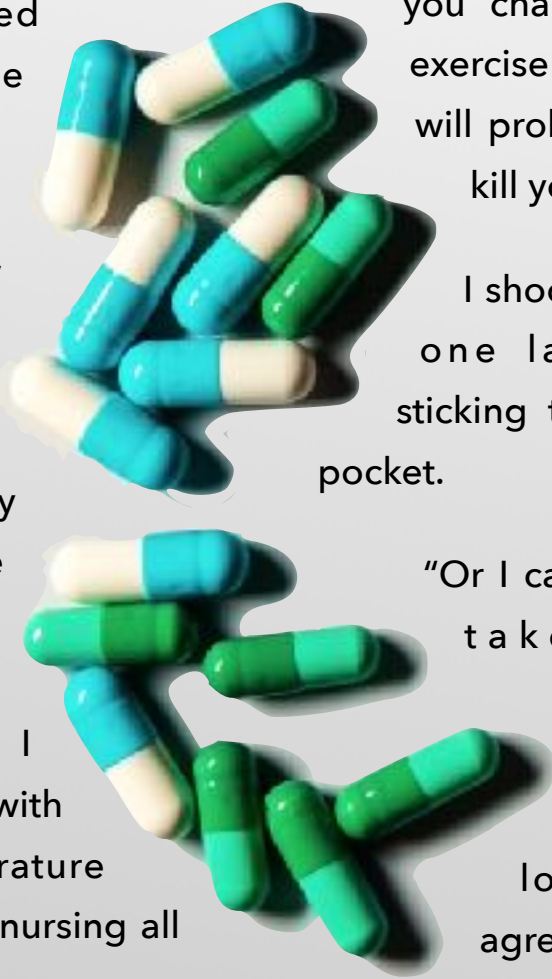
Her green juice bottle in hand was already in motion as she shook up her lunch. "New pills? You know I keep telling you that if you change your diet and exercise more, your stomach will probably stop trying to kill you."

I shook the bottle of pills one last time before sticking them back into my pocket.

"Or I can trust science and take the new experimental pill." I stood, my stomach gurgling loudly, apparently agreeing with Stacey.

\*\*\*

Four pills fizzled in my mouth as I roamed the aisles of the store as



a woman with an overly coifed bob trailed behind me, complaining about how we were out of Smokey Bubble Pops. My doctor had warned against taking more than one at a time, but my stomach was revolting against

you run out of Smokey Bubble Pops? You know I have a good mind to contact your regional manager- "

The woman just kept talking, and with every word my stomach



the woman and probably the greasy pepperoni pizza I had at break.

"This is ridiculous, you are a major grocery chain. How could

rolled, with every word it grumbled, growling at the woman hungry even though I had just eaten. With one final lurching growl, that brought me to my knees in the middle of aisle six.

## Zombie

The greasy pizza from lunch made its way up my esophagus and through my lips. It was red, redder than I would have expected, so bright against the dimming light of the world around me. It's after image hanging in the air as my world went black, and the last thing I felt was the dust of the tile floor as it scattered from me leaving only the cold floor beneath it.

I came to slowly; the world was gray as if the color had been leached out of it. The woman stood over me, looking down on me, but not in concern, in annoyance.

"Really, you're going to pull the sick card. Well, I will let you know that will not stop me from contacting corporate. If anything,

it makes me want to contact them more."

She wagged a finger down at me as she continued to scream at me. Others appeared from the corner of my vision, peeking around the aisle corners concerned but weary of the woman.

"Come on get up, get up you good for nothing—"

I move faster than I think I ever have in my life; her screams were barely noticeable as I latched onto her finger and bit down.

\*\*\*

My feet dangled from the end of the exam bed. Normally I would be cold with only the thin paper-like gown, but I felt nothing. Even my stomach for the first time in

my life was silent. I glance back at the door, knowing there was a cop on the other side. I suppose I had been lucky the moment the EMT found out I was on Britak everything seemed to change, and instead of jail I was taken to the doctor's office.

The doctor shuffled into the room, the silhouette of the officer watching the door just barely visible. His face was buried in his

clipboard as he came to a stop in front of me.

"Well, Mr. Sim, it looks like you're the lucky, or maybe not so lucky winner of the rare side effects award."

He looked at me from the clipboard before moving the half step to the counter, setting it down, and taking a seat in the tiny round stool on wheels.

"So, the good thing is you don't have to worry about the woman you bit the finger off of." He scooted up to me.

## Zombie

"The Mega Corp is going to take care of that. In fact, they are going to not only take care of that, they are going to fund your life from now on."

I sat up straight, his words hanging heavy in my head.

"So... I'm a Zombie?"

⊖

I looked at him, dumbfounded by just how easy this was all going.

"Ok, ok, but I bit her finger off... and... and it tasted good."



He sighed and smiled at me.

"One of the side effects... a rare one is temporary death. You are one of the few people that have experienced this side effect, and thanks to that, you will now be dependent on the pills to... not enjoy it again. So, basically, you are set for life and will live... or not live for a very long time."

Wendy Wee

# MIGRATION

WENDY WEE



TODAY IS  
THE DAY  
MY BRAIN  
MOVES  
INTO A  
NEW BODY.

I lie on the operating table with a grunt, thanks to the ever-present ache in my lower back.

I can't wait to get into a younger body.

Four disembodied robotic arms hang from above me, expanding and contracting as if stretching and testing their limbs to make sure they won't cramp during a major operation. Would they,

though? Well, not cramp, but something like the screws popping out of the hinges. Then the

metallic arms would fall apart and land on my exposed brain, squishing it. I shudder at the imagery.

My heart needs to stop trying to burst out of my chest, and be a team-player. I need to give myself the greatest sales pitch ever.

Relax, Bob, it's all going to turn out fine. The company paid top money for this, a token of appreciation for me being the best employee for three years





straight. This migration firm should be the best of the best. That means trust those damn robotic arms, Bob!

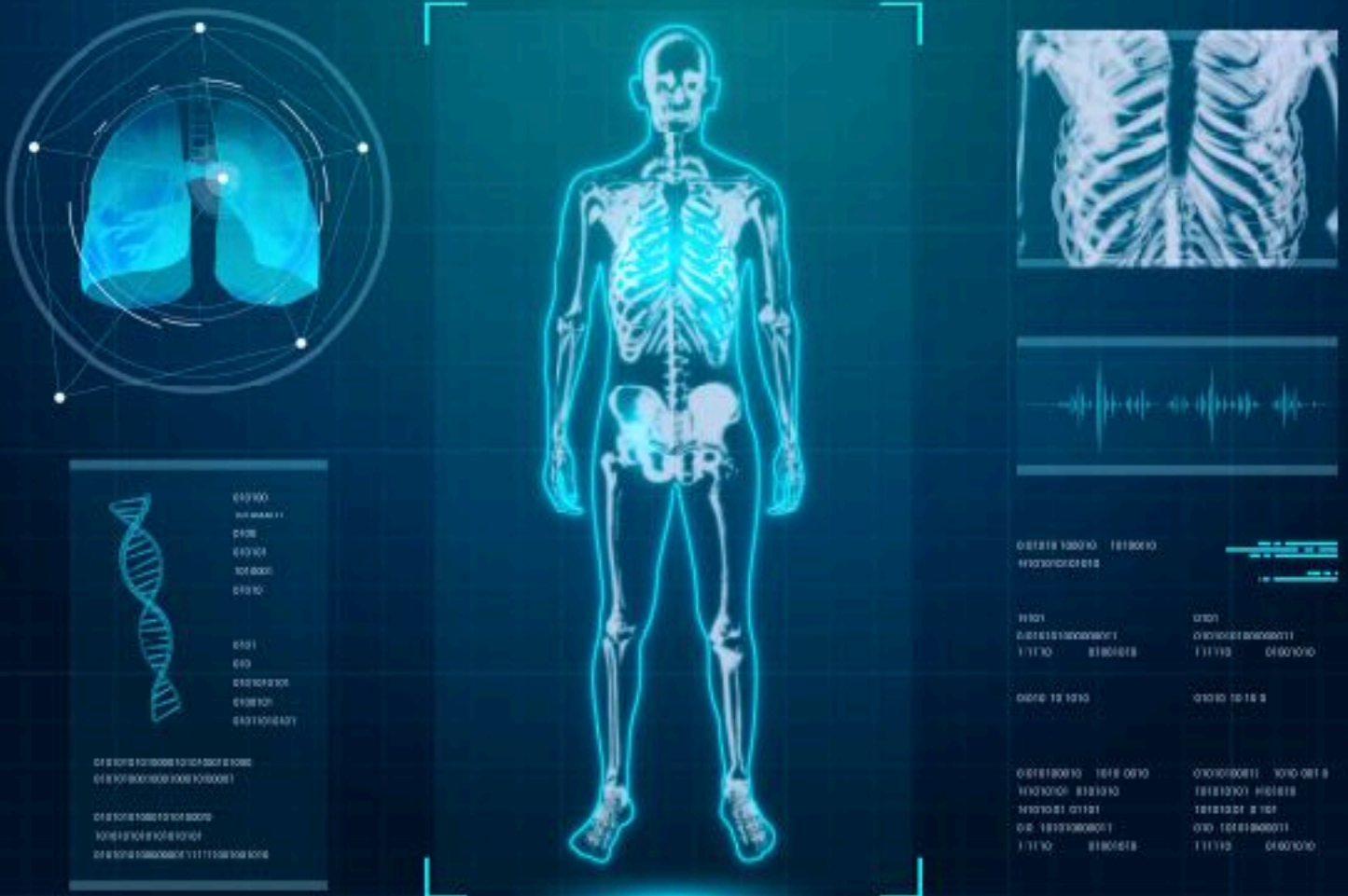
Ah, just think about it... goodbye diabetes and body aches. With a new clone body of my younger self and my seasoned sales experience, I'm going to sell exponentially more cars. I'll be

legendary among the used-car salespeople. LEGENDARY.

My vision blurs, thoughts dull. And then, I'm out. With a smile on my face.

\*\*\*

I crawl into consciousness. My body feels foreign, I can't make heads or tails of anything. I sit up



and find myself in an operating room. The memories come back to

me. I was in a brain transplant procedure.

I look down and my heart drops. My arms are wrinkled, sagging, and invaded by age spots. What the hell? I was supposed to wake up to a younger me, but I have old man arms!

There's a mirror on the far right of the room. I rush to it. My limbs are working rather well, so I can't be that old, right?

I reach the mirror. "Ohh for fuck's sake, I am so old!" I scream and scream and scream at the horror that's my reflection. Wrinkles are all over my face and my neck. I



look like Count Dracula if he hadn't fed for centuries!

The door opens and in comes a woman in the light blue uniform of the migration firm. Judging from her artificial-looking skin and eyes, she must be an android.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Russo?" she asks, a concerned expression on her face. "You look distressed."

"I look distressed? Well, shit, here's a clue." I spread my arms wide open. "I'm old! Why am I old?"

"You instructed us to migrate your brain to a 62-year-old body of yours."

"WHAT? No, I did not. I'm supposed to be 26, not 62!"

"You typed '62' in the new body age field."

"No, I did not. Your side made a mistake. Now fix it."

"We did not make a mistake. Here is the recording of you typing '62' into the new body age field," she says and light beams fly out of her eyes, projecting something on the wall.

The lights dim, and I get a clearer view. It's a video of me, viewed from above my head. I was here last week to fill up the

migration form, so this must be it. The camera zooms in and there it is: my stupid fingers typing '62'.

I made a typo. "Fuck me..."

I stagger to the bed behind me. "Look, there's been a misunderstanding—well, a typo, specifically. I want to be 26, not 62. Please reverse this," I plead.

She pauses for a beat, then says, "I just checked with your employer's system. The system responded that your employer will not pay another round of migration for you."

I pace about. I can't possibly afford to pay for the migration. What should I do? I can't be



this old so suddenly—my steps halt. I turn to the android. “Can you... ask my employer if I’ll be out of the job now that my body is 62-years-old?”

She nods, then says. “The system said as your physical being is now above the retirement age of 60-years-old, you will be terminated as a staff member. However, based on your stellar past performance, the company is open to hiring you as a contractor that will be reviewed annually. You may discuss this further with your company’s HR.”

This is such a mess! “Why didn’t anyone from your side use some common sense? I mean, why would I want to be ten years older?”

“Humans are complicated.”

“That’s your answer?” I pull at my hair. “Is there a human staff here I can talk to? It’s pointless to speak to an android who can’t understand how terrible this situation is.”

Her face remains calm at my jab. “There are no human staff on this premise. The company is fully operated by machines. The only human is our Founder/CEO.”

My shoulders slump.

“You look sad. Would knowing you no longer have type 2 diabetes and your kidneys are no longer close to being damaged cheer you up?” she says.

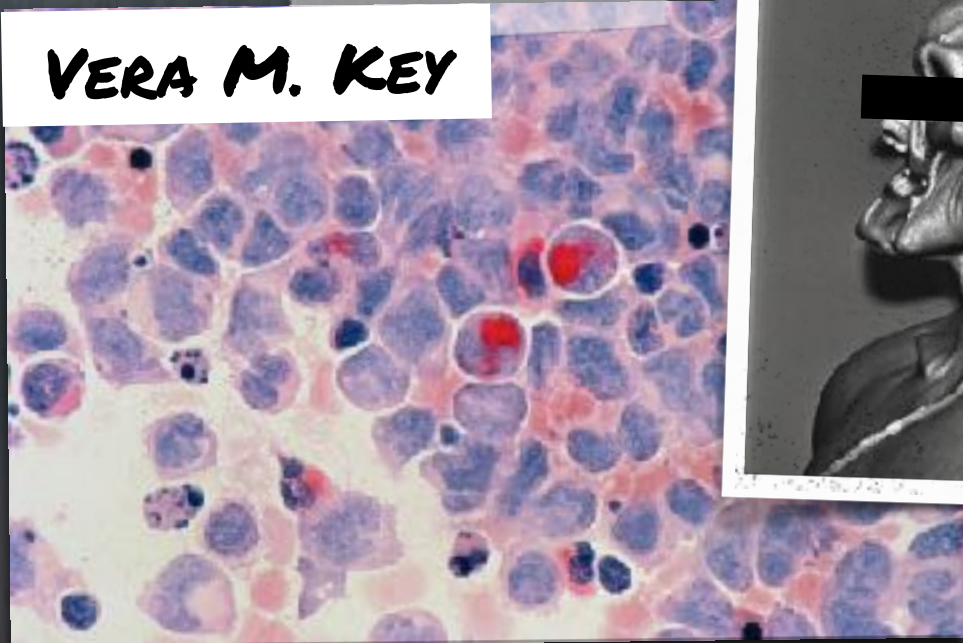
I sigh. “I guess in life, you win some, you lose some.”

Ⓜ



**A CURE FOR  
ALL DISEASES**

**VERA M. KEY**



Mister, you look like you're in a mighty hurry, but I'm gonna tell you my story anyways. And you would do well to listen.

When I saw that grayling coming down the street, I almost chickened out. Yes, sir, I did. The grayling was, or used to be, no more than a slip of a girl, but I was pervaded by the feeling of dread. The way it walked, the color of its skin... unnatural.

I knew why we were stalking it, but that didn't make things any easier. Nor did my cough get any better from the cold. What kept me going was the thought of all

that sweet money waiting for us if we got the job done. Enough to pay for a visit to a doctor. So, I looked at Bobby, and Bobby looked back, and off we went to catch it.

Didn't quite work the way we planned. You see, we weren't the only ones after the grayling. Wasn't hard to guess, all things considered, but Bobby'd been so sure of himself that he hadn't



even thought we might get scooped by the competition.

There were three of them, two of us. Bobby managed to take two down before he took a bullet, and I finished off the third one. Now, I could've stayed and seen about that bullet in Bobby's gut, but he wasn't moving, and it didn't seem

like there was much I could do to change that. Besides, all the ruckus had alarmed the grayling, and I wasn't goin' to let it get away.

The little scuttler was fast, and I had trouble keepin' up, especially after it vanished into an old warehouse. I knew that I was

## A Cure for All Diseases

running a risk of losing its track, so I doubled my efforts. I almost caught it when it tried to climb and its foot got stuck in a ladder. But it scrambled up and I didn't persist, seeing that I didn't really want to touch it. I figured I'd catch up with it and knock it down with my gun or something.

So, up I went, and we found ourselves in this room, all dark, crumbling walls, and half the ceiling missing. Rubble everywhere. My grayling was with its back to the wall just the way I wanted it. I found myself a solid piece of a plank, grabbed it tight, and went for it.

That didn't quite work the way I planned it, either. It turned out there was a hole in the floor

beneath all that rubble—but this I figured out only later when I woke up tied to a metal pole in one corner of the room. The grayling must have done to me what I wanted to do to it—namely, hit me on the head when I fell—and it had done a fine job judging by the blood running down my neck. I was tied pretty tight, and my cough chose that moment to return with a vengeance.

"Why are you after me?" I heard someone say. I smacked my already dented head off the pole as I jumped in shock, but it was merely the grayling.

"You can speak? I thought you only growled," I said when I caught my breath.

"What do you want?" it





asked again. It had lank, blonde hair and dark eyes, and it must have been a pretty critter once upon a time when its skin hadn't been so ashen and its limbs so thin.

"I don't want nothin'. Some people paid us to catch you. I needed money," I shrugged. "You are worth a lot on the black market. There are some who think that eating your bones or brains will cure them of all diseases."

"That's stupid."

"Some used to eat ground tiger bones to make them healthy again. Now they want to eat yours. That's people for you," I said.

"It doesn't work that way," the grayling murmured.

"What doesn't?"

"The healing part. The virus."

"Well then, how does it work?" I didn't know what it was rambling about, but I thought I might as well ask, considering that I was tied to the pole anyways.

"I, we all, were given this experimental drug to cure our cancer," the grayling said.

"But the virus went on to fix and change things in our bodies. It did it well, at least for some. The ones who survived don't die that easily. We only look like we've been dead for a



## A Cure for All Diseases

century."

"So, if I ate your bones, I wouldn't get cured of my cough?" I wanted to make sure.



"No. I don't think there's much that can cure your cough."

"What do you mean?"

"You've got cancer. I can smell it. You don't have much time left."

I didn't want to believe it, but I'd kind of been suspecting it for a while. And, there was something solemn about the way the grayling had said it which made me take its words seriously.

"So then why don't you just let me go? Do a dying man a favor?"

It shook its head. "I can't. I don't trust you. You'll try to catch and sell me, and I don't want people to eat my bones."

"Understandably," I shrugged. "But, if the healing part doesn't work, as you say, then how come everyone thinks it does?"

"Because there are some of us that still shed the virus. They can infect others."

"And cure cancer?" I narrowed my eyes.

"And turn you into this..." the grey skeleton kid jumped to its feet and made a pirouette. "If you're lucky."

I took a good look. I gave it a thought and weighed all pros and cons, so to say.

"Do you...do you know where one such can be found?" I asked in the end.

The grayling girl, she knew.

So that's how, mister, I became what I am now - but if you think that I'll let you catch me and eat my bones and brains without a fight, you are sorely mistaken.

ω

The Stratosphere

RLNPK

# THE STRATOSPHERE

**Blaise thought the attendants had moved off, so when his case was jostled he let out an involuntary grunt of surprise.**

He could tell by the sucking hiss and thud of the cases being opened and shut that someone had heard him. He was fucked. His heart beat faster, but adrenaline was no use. Beyond being in Facula, he had no idea what the environment was outside of his hiding spot. The chances of him getting out of his case unnoticed were close to null. Sweat beaded on his forehead. All he could do was hope that his case was inconvenient to access-

his lid went up. The sudden light revealed his finder in silhouette first, before his mods compensated: the Facula kind of tall and skinny, with a perfectly oval head and a zero G halo of hair. As color vision returned, his image was upgraded to include piercing black eyes in a shallowly featured face, with the smooth skin that came from never being exposed to the elements. Blaise felt a tug of attraction calm his

## The Stratosphere

panic-though it did nothing for his heart rate.

"What are you doing in there?" Her voice was as smooth as her face.

"Isn't it obvious?" He said, resting his chin on his hand, smiling

ever so slightly.

She snorted "you're trying to *sneak* into Facula?"

"I'm *trying* to go unnoticed." He flicked his eyes at the lid of his case and back down to the rim. Maybe she would help him out, he read more amusement than reprimand in her posture.

"You've been noticed."

He waited for her to sound the alarm but she just stood there. "Now what?"

"Get out of there. What did you do with the supplies?"

"Ate them, mostly," he said, awkwardly levering himself out of the case. His body was stiff from disuse. Who was she? He didn't think she was an attendant, even though she was wearing white-

that's what everyone on

Facula wore. The woman

kept him from

flying into the

ceiling

with a

perfectly

angled hold that

maneuvered him

into standing next

to her. He came

up to her chest.

She snapped

the lid of his case shut with her free hand and stepped off, keeping hold of his arm. He wasn't complaining. She was moving along a black strip, obviously magnetic, and his pointers were most definitely not. The room was a huge white sphere, with the pile of cases netted into one curve; he would have been free floating in the dead center of it without her to anchor him.

"Where are we going?"

"Planetside, where you belong." She pulled him along the floor/wall, did something with her foot and a section of it opened into a starry hole. Alarmed at the immediacy of space here she shrunk back before realizing that it was just a clear funnel. Below them was the Stratosphere-its clear dome top unmistakable. The woman stepped into the funnel with a

## The Stratosphere

strange bounce against its far wall, dragging him along like a favorite toy. The view of Facula was unparalleled. Rings swung out concentrically, segmenting the cosmos, replacing it with bands of ordered lights swallowed by the greater dark. Then they were back in the Strat. They descended into the living quarters and he was flummoxed. It was empty.

“Shouldn’t there be more traffic? Spherium just ended.”

“Facula’s on lockdown, and whoever traveled for the conferences is still networking. No one comes back right when it’s





over." She disengaged the airlock and the portal snicked shut.

"You're coming?"

"I have a message to deliver."

"Couldn't you just send a ping?"

Instead of answering, she opened a pod and threw him in with another perfect angular manipulation that landed him softly on the bed. She followed him in and closed the hatch behind them.

"A bulletin then?"

"I told you, Facula's on lockdown, there's a gate on extroverted links."

He didn't follow her jargon but he immediately parsed the situation. "So, what's the message?" He asked conspiratorially, trying to

lean back into the bed but only succeeding in bumping his head and floating awkwardly. He didn't really expect her to answer, but she rattled it off like she was tired of keeping it in.

"A vessel from the past has arrived and our delegates are keeping it a secret from the rest of the spheres."

"A vessel from the past..." his brain didn't digest that as quickly, "you mean a spaceship? I didn't know we were missing any. Why keep it a secret?"

"It's not ours," she huffed, "it's from way before us, before the spheres system, and it's full of aftermath survivors," she spat with disdain.

"Wait- they had spacefaring tech in the glass age?"

## The Stratosphere

"Our stations share a foundation so, yeah."

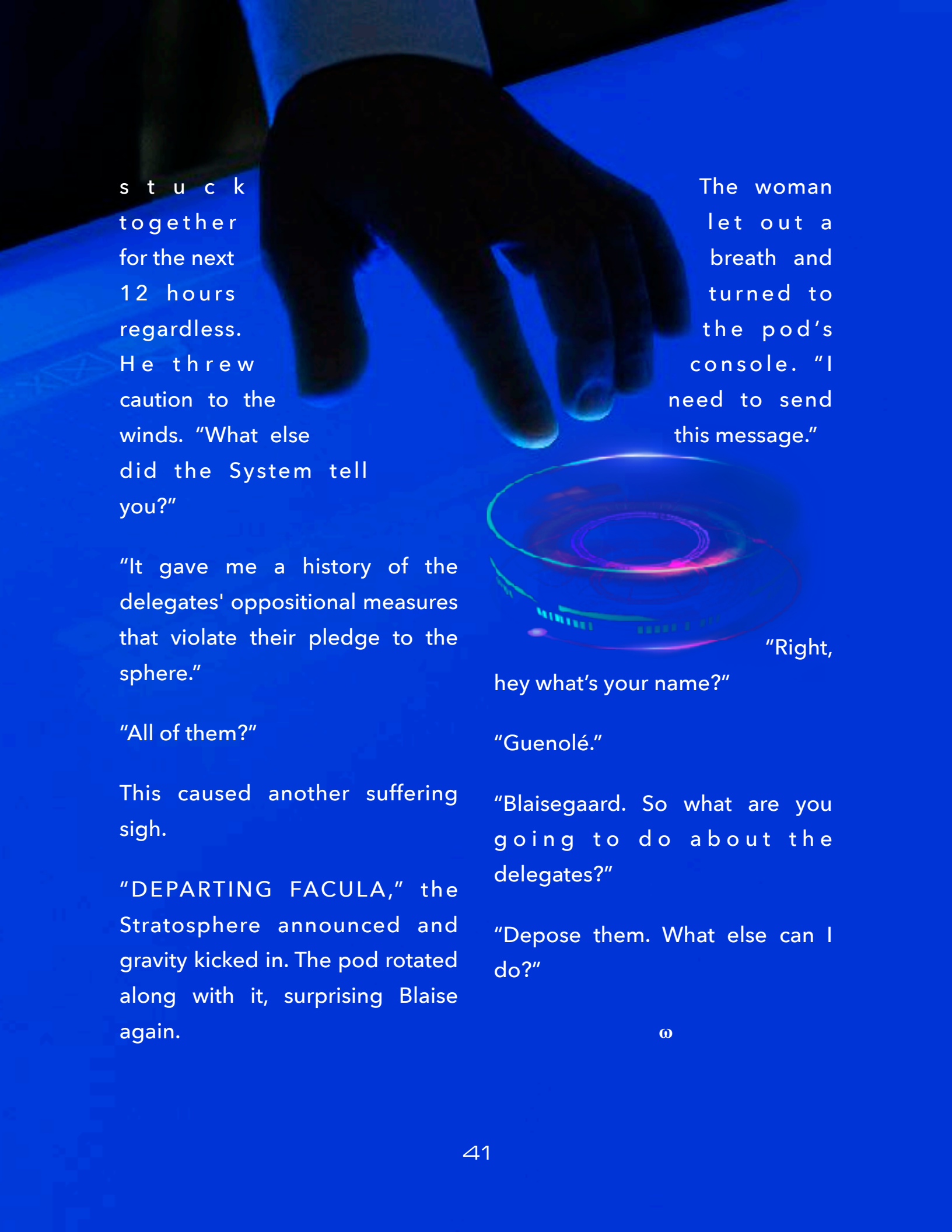
"Wow, I thought they just sent all their trash up here and that's why they built it."

He knew the files were old, but he never thought they meant the glass agers themselves were spacefaring. "Wait- how do you know that?" He was sure no one but his crew had seen those files. His heart rate picked up again; could she be a Systemite?

She sighed. One of those resigned sighs that were usually followed by a drastic change in character. Blaise thought that was it for him. But she folded into a lanky heap on the floor and leaned her head against the curved wall, without bouncing off it.

"I suspected the delegates of hiding something and queried the System. It told me about it."

Blaise's own suspicion was far from dampened. But they were



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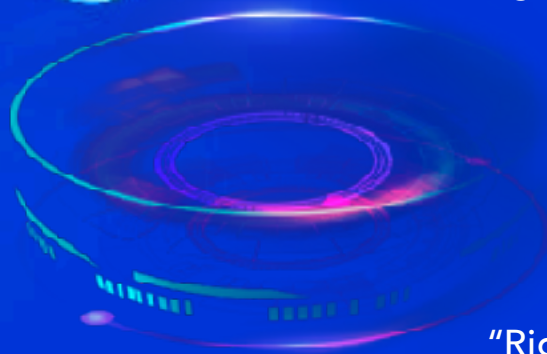
"It gave me a history of the delegates' oppositional measures that violate their pledge to the sphere."

"All of them?"

This caused another suffering sigh.

"DEPARTING FACULA," the Stratosphere announced and gravity kicked in. The pod rotated along with it, surprising Blaise again.

The woman let out a breath and turned to the pod's console. "I need to send this message."



"Right, hey what's your name?"

"Guenolé."

"Blaisegaard. So what are you going to do about the delegates?"

"Depose them. What else can I do?"

ω

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