



Collection TEN

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## *Preface:*

The April Reader is a monthly publication of poetry, prose, and other user-submitted content. Initially conceived as a successor publication to the now-defunct Zine Writers Guild, The April Reader aims to become a hub of online writing and content. Operating under the belief that the rise of the internet has allowed the written word to regain parity with mass-media and television, The April Reader hopes to serve as a launching point for the future writers of this generation.

## *Updates:*

Resting in the bliss of holiday vacationing, December proved to be a rather lethargic month for TAR staff. Thankfully, this respite does not seem to have impacted the quality of issue 10. We can assure you, dear reader, that for issue 11 we have much more activity in mind. This issue, we have selected “Cordyceps” by Andrew Mendelson to receive the TAR award of literary excellence. For information regarding why we made this choice, please see the afterword

## *Several changes to report:*

- Wildweasal is no longer a TAR editor, we thank him for his continued support in maintaining the site, but he will not be considered an editor henceforth
- As a result of this and Nipplelesshorse's departure, the award sum for TAR has been reduced to \$20.00. As this prize sum was never intended to exceed \$10 per person, this does not represent a retreat from implementation of this policy
- Finally, starting for issue 11 TAR will be able to call upon the venerable artistic talents of Bantha Fodder for illustration purposes. Some of you may remember Bantha for his artistic contribution to the ZWG- in case you do not, rest assured he is a diligent artist of the highest quality.

Lately, there has been much talk of changes to the format of TAR and our website. While readers may notice we have made no alterations in light of this current, TAR is not neglecting this criticism. For issue 11, we intend to address many (if not all) of the faucets of the publication criticized.

Our IRC Channel:

Server: irc.freenode.net

Room: #TAR

*Our Distribution Page:*

[www.theaprilreader.org](http://www.theaprilreader.org)

Submit your writing, comments, and whatever else to:

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## FICTION

**Cordyceps** (Winner, TAR Award of Literary Excellence, January 2012)  
-Andrew Mendelson

The youth pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth, which was so sticky and dry that it made a slight clicking sound as it peeled off. A small brown puddle lay under a dead tree. The tree was soggy from a recent downpour, and he thought it looked like a dead animal bleeding on the ground—bleeding delicious nectar. Despite the brown color of the puddle and the rust colored leaves floating within it, his thirst was stronger than his inhibitions.

“No germs?” the youth tried to say. He was surprised to hear his voice come out with a wheezy, strained sound.

Surely just a little sip wouldn’t hurt...

The youth got on his hands and knees and began to slurp away at the puddle. Bits of leaves, twigs and dead insects got into his mouth, but the water was cold and refreshing. He spit out the debris as best he could. It seemed as though his thirst was paradoxically growing as he drank more and more. He ignored the various bits floating around in the puddle and swallowed them so he could drink faster. His hands and knees sank into the muddy earth. He knew he was getting dirty, but the plush, cool earth felt like a wonderful mattress to his fatigued body.

The puddle was nearly depleted by the time the youth lifted his face and gasped for air. His lungs were weak and it took him several minutes to catch his breath. A vague panic started to creep up on him as he realized that he was still very thirsty, yet there was something wrong with his lungs. Would he have to choose between air and water? His need for both was unbearable.

He looked at his reflection in the puddle. His face was muddied. The skin on his lips was peeling. His dark hair was matted to his forehead. The crust of dried saliva ran from the corners of his

mouth down to his chin. Drops of sweat fell from the tip of his nose and distorted his unfamiliar reflection by creating ripples in the puddle.

After taking a few more sips he stood up and looked over himself. His jeans and grey polo shirt were just as disheveled and muddied as his face. He noticed a nametag on his shirt. He scraped away some dirt and saw that it read "Bryon, Student, Bio-1450." The name, like the reflection, meant nothing to him. Not even the slightest hint of recognition came to his mind.

Bryon wandered through the forest with no particular destination in mind. He felt exhausted and wondered if he should sleep. It was hard to tell whether or not it was dawn or dusk. What little patches of sky could be seen through the dense foliage of the fall trees were filled with an unrelenting, golden glare that made him squint as he looked up. He tried to remember the last time he had slept. Attempting to recall anything made his head hurt. He promptly gave up trying to remember anything. He felt as though he had drifted into the forest a long time ago but it was impossible to say when.

"Hello?" he called out. Trying to shout irritated his sensitive lungs and triggered a coughing fit that gripped him for five minutes. By the time it passed he felt light-headed and tried to control his panting. Each inhalation burned if he didn't keep them short and shallow.

The glare through the leaves began to shift and fade slightly.

*Almost night, almost dark*, he thought to himself.

The urge to drop right where he was, curl into a ball and sleep was great, but something didn't seem right. Trying to identify what could be wrong seemed too complicated. He decided to continue walking until he found...something. Eventually, he would find what he was looking for and then he could sleep.

No direction seemed promising. Each way he looked revealed an endless labyrinth of trees. As he turned, his blurry vision created an aura of brown and orange which engulfed him. He squeezed his eyes shut for a

moment to readjust and noticed something white in the distance.

Curiosity helped him to temporarily ignore his exhaustion and walk at a slightly faster pace. There was a white shoe sticking out of the mud. Bryon picked it up and examined it closely. He looked down at his own shoes.

As he tried to decipher how a shoe could have possibly gotten there, he felt a warm sensation around his groin. A dark stain was spreading through his jeans. He laughed at the sight of it, dropped the shoe and unzipped his pants.

The stream of urine stopped, but Bryon still felt as though there was more inside of him. He tensed for a moment and felt a warm, vicious fluid dribble out. Squinting his eyes, he reached down and brushed a little of the fluid onto his index finger. At the tip of his finger, there was blood.

Bryon looked back down to examine himself and noticed a large bulge under his skin going down his left inner thigh. As he pulled his pants down he saw it went all the way down to his ankle. Using the nail of his bloody finger, he picked at the section on his thigh. It seemed a little too big to be a varicose vein and he felt only the slightest tingling as he scratched at it. Eventually he scratched away enough skin to reveal the spongy grey thing underneath. It was somewhat flexible but also tough like the stem of a plant. He grabbed the tip he had exposed and began to pull. He pulled until the bulge that went down to his ankle disappeared, but it still kept coming. After pulling out five feet he got annoyed and began to pull faster. Seven feet, still it came; eight feet, more...

By the time Bryon stopped pulling the impostor-vein there was about fifteen feet of it coiled on top of his shoes, yet there was still more inside his leg. He tried to tear it apart, but it was surprisingly durable and he found that he had become so tired that he could hardly make a fist.

With a sense of dread beginning to overtake him, Bryon

quickly slung the impostor-vein over his shoulder and pulled his pants up. He tried to press the halves of his zipper together but they wouldn't bind. No matter how carefully he lined up each side of his zipper and tried to get the teeth to mesh, he failed. Tears of frustration emerged. It seemed as though the zipper should barely require any effort to close, but the damn thing simply wouldn't function. He gave up all attempts to line the teeth up and desperately mashed the halves together until his frustrated tears became weak sobs of self-pity.

The forest had become dark. Bryon began walking again with his pants pathetically bunched up around his ankles and the fifteen feet of the strange impostor-vein still sticking out of his thigh and dragging behind him. He got a few feet before turning around as he tried to remember something. When he came across the white shoe again he paused. But, seeing that he had both of his shoes he figured it was insignificant and continued walking in the direction he had come from.

After a few minutes, Bryon stopped to look around at the dark forest. He tried to remember where he was and why his pants were around his ankles. He wondered why something that looked like a vine was sticking out of his leg and how of it much could possibly be inside him as he pulled out another five feet.

“Mom? ...momma?”

His legs buckled under him.

When Bryon awoke he was lying on his stomach. His mouth was horribly dry again. He couldn't find the energy to get up, so instead he continued to lie down and chewed on bits of moist dirt and the dead leaves he managed to scoop into his mouth with his tongue.

An hour went by before he managed to roll onto his back, and by noon, he had gotten to his feet. He defecated as he walked and some of the feces managed to fall into the little pouch of his jeans around his ankles. He looked up at the tops of the trees. The afternoon sun was strong and burned a pink blob into his retinas that he saw each time he blinked, but he couldn't look away. There was something new about the tree tops that

drew his eyes toward them.

Bryon was so focused on staring at the treetops that he managed to ignore the trunk of a tree right in front of him as he walked straight into it and fell backwards with a grunt.

Lying on his back, he looked up at the tree and noticed something clinging to the trunk high above him. He tried to squint and make out what it was—perhaps some animal—but the sun had stained his vision and the bright pink blob faded very slowly.

After a few minutes Bryon's vision had improved enough so that he noticed a white spot. His vision improved even more and he could see there was a man gripping around the trunk with all of his limbs, and he was wearing one white shoe. A pair of binoculars hung from his neck. Bryon stood up and squinted again. As his vision became clearer he noticed that there was something very odd about the man. His muscles were all visibly tensed, yet he didn't move at all. His foot, arms, ankles, neck and bits of exposed skin around his mid section where his shirt was torn all revealed that his skin was covered with a white fuzzy substance that resembled cotton. Bryon's vision became even clearer and his eyes widened when he noticed that a branch had impaled the man's head. He gasped and tried to see where the branch sticking out of his forehead connected to the tree, but then he noticed the white fuzz around the base of the branch. He saw another smaller branch was coming out of the man's ear which was also covered in the white fuzz at the base.

The colors of the branches coming out of the man were not the same color as the tree he was gripping. There wasn't a speck of blood. They were not impaling him; they weren't branches. Bryon followed the stalk growing out of the man's forehead. Above the treetops at the top of the stalk which grew from inside of the man was a massive, umbrella-shaped mushroom cap. It was the same light shade of brown as the thing coming out of his leg.

Bryon let out a high-pitched cry that made his lungs feel as though they were bursting. He turned and waddled away as quickly

as he could as the shit that had fallen down to his ankles in his pants splattered against his calves. A slight burning feeling irritated his inner thigh and when he glanced down he saw the imposter-vein being pulled out of his leg rapidly as he tried to run. It had become snagged on the tree. A memory surfaced rapidly in his mind. He was unsure where or when he had heard it: *Mycelium...it's mycelium.*

The terrible realization only made him panic more and he waddled faster. He managed to get fifty feet before the mycelium snapped out of his leg and released a torrent of blood from the ripped vessels it had fused to in his thigh. Another cry escaped him when he saw the wound.

In his haste, Bryon tripped and kicked at his pants until they finally came off. His lungs were threatening to collapse. He went a little further before stopping and held onto a tree for balance. Vicious coughs erupting from his chest sprayed out blood droplets as he tried to breathe.

Eventually, he caught his breath. He opened his eyes and looked around. Nothing looked familiar. No memories surfaced as he wondered where he was and how he had gotten there. He noticed the bloody, detached mycelium lying near him, leading deeper into the woods. He had no idea where it led, but instinct told him that there was something terrible that way.

Bryon hugged the tree and muttered unintelligible gibberish to himself. His body became tense. He tried to pull away, but his arms were locked together. His naked legs suddenly wrapped around the tree. Every muscle in his body became tense. His jaw clenched so hard that his gums ached terribly, but after a moment his body went completely numb. He could feel nothing, not even his naked crotch scraping against the bark as his body inched up the tree against his will. Everything felt far away. He glanced down at the forest floor and saw that his nametag had fallen off: Bryon, Student, Bio-1450. The nametag seemed important but he couldn't quite understand why.

***Editors note: Cordyceps refers to a parasitic fungal variant common to small insects. The fungus systematically replaces host tissue with itself, and has been known to radically alter subject behavior.***

## Clandestine

*-Anonymous Mouse*

I was sitting on a rambling metro zooming through the dark under Berlin. Opposite me were two pubescent punks with their scrawny half starved mongrel openly juggling about their marijuana nuggets. They were acting and dressed like clowns.

I gave them a glare. They looked up at me, cringed and cowered away into a distant corner like the spineless insects that they were.

At the next stop an elderly women with a shiny new zimmer crawled onboard and took the punks' now vacant seat.

The train started rambling again as it revved and accelerated. With the rattling I groaned in sync, mumbled incoherently. The women became aware and threw quick awkward glances towards me.

I then stood up erect on my two stout legs, unzipped my trousers and urinated a golden puddle in front of her. She started shaking in fright. Then I shoved my face right into her wrinkled grandma countenance and gave her one big lick across her salty face.

Oh, how I took delight in her squirming and palsied body. I could even smell her diapers filling up. Suddenly her hands grasped to her breast as she slid down the seat in agony.

The next stop had arrived. I covered her filthy old body up with filthy blanket, jumped out into the city and wriggled and shoved my way through the crowds.

Faces in the crowds took notice of me slouching violently through until I Finally found the entrance to dirty unused public toilets. I pushed open the door and vanished within.

The toilet was occupied by a group of lowlifes scattered motionlessly on the ground and from them pungent vinegar like whiff, mixed with the flowery scent of urinal cakes, perfumed the room in a most vile fashion.

I stood opposite the graffiti smeared mirror trying hard not to take notice of my disgraceful hunched posture. From the depths of my plastic bag I retrieved my belongings. With an electric shaver I slowly shaved off my beard and my dreads. I tore off my piss stained rags that reeked of alcohol and regurgitated dumpster food, threw it on top of the gurgling floor men as a charitable jape and jumped into my tailored suit.

Afterwards I perfumed myself with the aroma of “clandestine”, the newest most expensive cologne of the year. And I with elegant strides and soft grinning face came back out of the lavatories as a new man.

Through a gap in the overcast clouds the sun shone through and brightened up the platform. From the stationary train I heard shrill screams and hectic shouting. And from afar in the distance I saw a group of paramedics and policemen rushing hither.

As they passed me one of them, a policewoman, accidentally ran straight into me and we both crashed into the ground. As I opened my eyes out of seemingly nowhere an old scruffy man wearing my rags with discoloured white eyes stood in front of me.

He pointed at me with his long straight finger and said *“It’s him, It’s him, He’s man you are looking for!”*.

The police women looked up at him from the ground, astonished and unsure what to do. As she got up she hesitated for a moment but then decided to ignore the man and with a quick “entschuldigung” She ran off again, and I too skedaddled away from the scene.

\*\*\*

The very next morning I found myself eating scones at a local coffee shop, the scone was crumbling asunder onto the morning newspaper on my lap as I munched at it.

After brushing the crumbs away with a quick swipe of my hand I found my incident on the very first page under the headline *“homeless man scares women to death”*.

At first I let out a quick chuckle, but then, as I read further and saw the picture of the arrested white-eyed suspect that was wearing my rags I openly laughed while I looked about for the next victim.

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## Spyre Hunters

*-Anonymous of /tg/*

Unlike the majority of Hive City Primus' population, Emily awoke to natural sunlight as a maid opened the blinds on her bedroom's panoramic window. She sprang out of bed and dashed over to the shower, standing impatiently while she was doused with precisely temperature-regulated water and fragrant soaps. As she scrubbed herself with cleansing foam, her excitement was marred with the first inklings of doubt. She had been training for this day since the age of twelve. Six years on, the thought of finally having the opportunity to use the techniques she had spent so long honing was both exhilarating and terrifying. Recalling the reassuring words of her instructors went some way towards calming her nerves.

She wrapped herself in a hand-woven silken dressing-gown, and hurried down the hall to join her mother at breakfast. The pair of them sat across one corner of the huge table as waiting staff fussed over them, laying down plates of fruit and cold meat, making sure their every possible need was satisfied.

"So, Emily? How do you feel?"

"A little excited, I suppose." She sighed. "I just wish father could be here to say goodbye to me."



"You know your father has no time for such trivialities, Emily."

"Yes, mother."

The rest of their breakfast was interlaced with cordial small-talk: gossip about the other noble houses, rumours about the other heirs who would be joining the hunt. Once finished, her mother dabbed the corner of her mouth with her napkin, and stood. Emily did the same.

"I'm going to meet some executives from Van Saar in twenty minutes, so I doubt I'll be able to see you off. Kischner is waiting for you in the outfitting room, he'll explain everything else to you. Your father and I spared no expense when we commissioned your suit, so I do hope you'll like it."

"Thank you, mother."

Her expression softened for a rare instant.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine, my girl," she said, giving Emily a peck on the cheek and a quick hug. "Now get out there, and do your best. Show them everything you learned in the last six years." She turned and strode out of the dining hall. She did not look back. Emily stood aimlessly for a few moments before leaving for the outfitting room, two floors down.

She hesitated before walking in. She had met Kischner a few times before, for him to take her measurements and determine her metabolic profile, and each time she had felt uneasy around him. Maybe it was his unnaturally white skin, or the fact that he always wore those weird goggles, concealing his eyes behind circles of mirrored glass. She drew a deep breath, and entered the room. Kischner was hunched on the floor, fussing with a black garment. His brown leather trench coat was draped over a chair.

"Ah, Miss Ranlo, good morning. I was just making some final adjustments." His voice lingered slightly too long on the 's' sound. "Why

don't you have a look at the suit, and see whether it's to your liking? I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

He stood, and offered her the fabric draped over his hands. She took it from him by the shoulders and allowed the rest of it to unravel, holding it against her body to check the fit. She hadn't expected a once-piece garment. The material was sheer, black, and slightly stretchy. She frowned.

"Your Spyrer suit. Try it on," he said.

"It's a bit, uh..."

"Yes?"

"You know..."

Kischner looked at her expectantly.

"Could you turn around, please?"

The man obligingly turned his back as she slipped out of her dressing-gown and donned the suit. The quality was high; every seam and contour had been designed with the shape of her body in mind. She finished sealing the strip up the back, and every crease and wrinkle disappeared from the surface of the material as it hugged tight against her skin. Despite being clad from the neck downwards, she felt completely naked.

"And the rest?" she asked, a shade impatiently, one arm crossed self-consciously over her chest.

Kischner clicked open a metal-shod suitcase, revealing curved grey shapes nestled in foam cavities. He took out a pair of half-cylinders and offered them up against Emily's shin. The inner surface was moulded to exactly fit the contours of her leg. The first shin-guard clicked into place, and Kischner applied the corresponding piece of armour to the opposite leg. The process of

fitting the rest of the suit took forty minutes as Kischner made last-minute adjustments to straps and power conduits. By the time he had finished, most of Emily's body was sheathed in grey armour plates, the solid shapes broken at the knees, elbows and midriff so that the suit did not hinder her movement.

The last piece of the suit to go on was the visor, a narrow band of matte black that sat snugly over her eyes. She was blind for a few moments before its systems initialised, overlaying shapes and readouts on to the objects around the room, supplementary messages appearing in a text marquee scrolling across the lower part of her visual field like a news ticker.

A pair of brackets appeared on both sides of Kischner, along with a readout of the distance between him and her: zero point seven metres plus-or-minus zero point zero zero one metres.

"Everything OK?" he asked.

She gave him the thumbs-up.

"In that case, let's go and meet the others."

The pair stood in uncomfortable silence as the lift carried them downwards. Emily wondered what suit patterns the others would have opted for. The houses never communicated much on the subject of what new technologies they were using for the suits; everybody was paranoid about their economic competitors gaining an edge. The doors of the lift hissed open, and she sprung out, breaking into a jog towards the border control area. Microscopic actuators in the suit's weave complemented her muscles, making her feel light and bouncy. Kischner hustled along behind her, struggling to keep up.

She passed beneath the large, copper-coloured arch that marked the entrance to border control. Standing the other side she, recognised Sarah Greim and Tarquin Ko'Iron, each with their own Kischner-analogues: technicians brought along to run their final suit checks, and outfit them with their weapons. She skipped over to them.

"Hey Tarq. It's been a while."

He smiled as she approached. Tarq had opted for raw power over finesse with his own Spyrer suit, an Orrus model exoskeleton. His head looked comically small between the suit's bulky shoulders. A single-piece carapace of ceramite enveloped his chest, and his legs and arms were buried within bands of alloy and strengthened hydraulic hoses. He raised a massive hand to wave at her.

"Emily. Likewise."

"Ready to hunt some hiver scum?", she asked, grinning.

"You bet. Hey, you want some stimms? Lowe here fitted a dispenser in my suit. Give her some stimms Lowe," he said to a bearded man, who was holding a dataslate in one hand, connected to Tarq's suit with an umbilical cable.

"Master Ko'Iron, the pharmaceuticals are specifically tailored to-"

"Give her some, man! You've gotta try some of this!" he said, turning back to Emily and punching the air a few times with a whine of servo motors.

"I feel great!"

"Maybe once we get down there," she said.

Emily took a step back to get a better view of Sarah's suit. The technician fiddling with her backpack was dressed entirely in black, and sported a neatly-trimmed goatee. Probably from house Van Saar, then. The girl was clad in a garment similar to Emily's undersuit, although it only had a few extra plates layered over it: knee- and elbow pads, and a harness, crossed at her sternum and attached to the pack on her back. The fabric bore a gaudy pattern of black and pink. Her wrists were bedecked with the snub-barrels of

some energy discharge weapon, and her eyes were concealed behind a bulky visor and headset, much cruder than Emily's sleek optic interface.

"Sarah. Nice camouflage," she said, smirking.

Sarah flashed her a winning smile as the pattern on her jumpsuit faded to grey, a perfect match for the concrete walls and floor. "Isn't it?" she replied.

Fair enough. She had won that one.

"Didn't think you might want some more serious armour? It's dangerous down there."

Sarah stepped away from her attending mechanic, spreading her arms wide and rotating through a full turn.

"Armour's no good," she said. "Weighs too much." Her backpack blossomed outwards into a pair of wings, eight feet across from tip-to-tip. The chameleonic covering of the wing surfaces shimmered before turning the same colour as her suit.

"I think I've got some final checks to do with my own equipment," said Emily. Let's see how you like those wings when you're trying to crawl through a ventilation duct, she thought to herself, tapping Kischner on the shoulder.

"Can we fit my blades now?" she asked.

The man knelt on the floor, laid his carry-case down, and flipped the lid open. The last components of her suit rested within: a pair of gauntlets, each bearing a three-foot long, carbide composite blade mounted alongside a Malcadon-pattern web launcher. Kischner held one up so she could slip her hand in without the risk of accidental dismemberment. The polyaramid weave was surprisingly flexible around her fingers, and, after both the gloves had been buckled in place and interfaced with her suit's computer, she took a step back before flicking her wrists in the same manner she had done hundreds of times before in her

VR training. The blades swung forward and locked into place with a visceral clunk.

She looked around at the others. Sarah was sighting along her arm, murmuring numbers to herself and tweaking a control on her headset. Tarq wore a satisfied expression as he gazed into the palm of his hand, flexing and unflexing his fingers with a hydraulic whine.

"We ready to hunt some hivescum?"

The other two nodded at Emily. Her brain failed to provide her with anything inspirational to say.

"Off we go, then."

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Claire tried to ignore the steady pain in her shin as she limped back to the hab-block. Having queued for three hours outside Derek's shack, only to be bitten by his pet gyrixa after paying three times the going rate for a pair of woven carbohydrate bars, she was convinced the day could only improve. Surely her brother would be pleased that she'd managed to find some edible food, at least.

She left the main pedestrian walkway, and the floor of perforated steel plates transitioned to bare, slimy mud. She trod cautiously, unused to the new route she had had to find after her regular tunnel had flooded with chlorinated waste. Her brother had always insisted that she make the food-runs on account of her smaller size - his reasoning being that she was better suited to slip through small gaps in the heaps of wreckage that bordered their slum. She didn't mind. He found it difficult leaving the hab-block these days.

Her new route took her past a heap of fractured transport containers: a thicket of jagged, green plastic edges. Amidst the split containers were a few bundles of clothes - consumer goods that had,

for some reason, never found their way to their outlet. She clambered down to have a root around. Clean clothes were the next best thing to a shower.

She spent a few minutes picking through drab, utilitarian overalls and shirts, some of them still shrink-wrapped. Then she laughed in delight as she reached the bottom of the crate and found a few girls' garments, pretty clothes probably intended for noble rich bitches up in the spire. She looked around to make sure nobody was skulking in the shadows before slipping out of her grubby jeans and t-shirt. She unwrapped the plastic from around the new garment and unrolled it: a light summer dress with a floral pattern. She wriggled into it, a grin appearing on her face as she felt clean fabric against her skin. She struck a pose like she'd seen girls doing in the tattered pages of discarded magazines, and looked at her reflection in the glossy surface of a plastic shard hanging from a crate. The dress went well with her steel toe capped boots, she thought.

Ten minutes later she arrived at the entrance of the hab-block. As usual, she tried not to look at the corpse at the bottom of the stairwell when she passed it. It had turned up ten days ago, a dark shape half-concealed underneath a pile of refuse. Today, she noticed, it was missing its leg. Cursing her inability to ignore both the sight and the stench of the carcass, she began the climb up to the apartment she and her brother had claimed, on the sixth floor.

As she approached their module, she could hear the dissonant chords of the thrash-jazz ensemble "The Noise Marines" emanating from the other side of the door. She wasn't sure what appealed to her brother about the music, but she had learned to put up with it. Entering the apartment and carefully stepping over the pile of gas cylinders that her brother had insisted 'might come in handy some day,' she raised her voice over the din.

"Hey big brother! I'm back! I found carb bars!"

There was no reply. Perhaps he was still asleep.

"You want them raw? Or should I cook them with that orange stuff from the dumpster?"

Still nothing.

She walked into the lounge and turned off the oppressively loud sound system as the opening bars of "You Captured my Heart (for Chaos)" started to play. Jack, her brother, lay on the floor with an idiot grin spread across his face. A pair of syringes were discarded nearby. She jabbed him in the ribs.

"Breakfast time, bro."

He remained unmoving. Claire jabbed him harder, and lightly slapped him on the cheek.

"Hey!," she said, "snap out of it!"

He belched, before heaving a stream of watery brown vomit onto the floor next to him. His eyes rolled back into his head.

"Jack?"

Claire had seen him dosed up dozens of times before, but normally he was lucid enough to speak to her, or at the very least rant about how the walls had teeth and his legs had turned into snakes. She pressed her finger under his jaw, and found his pulse. It was erratic, coming in quick bursts, multiple beats between long pauses.

"Jack...?"

He was totally unresponsive. This was bad. She took a few deep breaths, calming herself whilst she tried to recall the diagrams from a first-aid pamphlet she had dug out of a waste bin some months ago. She rolled him over onto his side, arranging his limbs and head in the recovery position. His skin was cold and clammy. She chewed on the knuckle of her index finger, wondering what she

should do next. Her brother spent a lot of time in the basement with a group of guys who lived down there. Perhaps they'd be able to help.

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The basement went completely silent at the sight of a sixteen year-old girl standing in the doorway, nervously brushing her hair from across her face. A cigarette rolled across the floor, fallen from the slack mouth of a muscle-bound youth with bright green hair and facial tattoos.

"Um... do any of you know Jack?" she asked.

Slowly, the hubbub of noise returned. Surly men raised tankards to their lips and resumed card-games, or picked up the next part of a stripped gun to clean and inspect. Seated at a table made from a board laid across two burned-out electronics stacks, a man gestured to Claire with a tilt of his chin. She walked over and pulled up a crate to sit down, trying to stifle her reaction to the smell of beer and tobacco. He had been playing some intricate game with the other man opposite him; cards and dice were laid out on the table's surface.

"What do you know about Jack?" he asked.

"He's my brother."

"Well then. Isn't that interesting?", he said, raising his arms and lacing his fingers behind his head. Claire wished very much that he hadn't exposed his armpits like that. The stench was practically visible in the air.

"I think he needs help. Like, medical help," she said.

"Do I look like a doctor?"

"I thought... he comes down here so often. I couldn't think of anywhere else to go."

The man laughed to himself. "Clueless little bitch, aren't ya?"

"But, I thought-"

"Piss off," he snapped. He lifted a can to his lips.

The second man spoke for the first time. His voice was an octave lower than any human's had the right to be. "Wait, Saul," he said.

As the second man turned to Claire, she got the first clear look at his face. The side that had been away from her came into view, and she involuntarily put her hand to her mouth when she saw the warty growths that marred the man's skin. The left side of his face was fully covered in scaly knobs of flesh. Where it met the fringe of his black hair, some yellow secretion had dried out in a thick crust. He regarded her with his single eye.

"We might be able to get him help," he said. "How badly does he need it?"

"He's lying in our apartment. I think he overdosed on something. There were syringes."

Across the table, the first man paused mid-sip.

"And how badly do you want him to get help?" he continued. She was slightly taken aback. "I- of course I want him to get help! He needs a doctor, or something."

The man leaned back and crossed his arms. Claire saw that more of the warty skin covered his hands, making his fingers thick and clumsy.

"What's in it for us, if we help you?"

"I thought... aren't you his friends? Like, a gang or something?"

The man burst into crude laughter.

"Your brother isn't worth the shit on my boot heel," he said. "So if you want us to help, you'll need to do something for us in return."

"What do you mean?"

"There are certain things a young lady like you can provide," he said. He ran the tip of his tongue across his scabrous lips, reaching a hand towards Claire's chest.

"For fuck's sake, Chad!" the first man grabbed him by the wrist, halting the advance of his hand inches away from her. "She's a fucking kid!"

"Nah. Look at them titties, Saul. She's all grown up, for sure."

He made another attempt to paw at her, and then there was a crumpling sound as Saul crushed his beer can against the man's head.

"Ow, what the fuck?" he exclaimed.

"You're a freak, Chad."

Saul let out a sigh, and turned to Claire, who was trembling slightly. The colour had drained from her face.

"You said there were syringes?"

"Yeah. Two of them. They had this sort of purple label."

"So he used both of them?"

"I guess."

He let out a long sigh, screwing his eyes shut as he grimaced. "I told that stupid fuck to only use ONE godsdamned shot at a time! Fuck!"

He took a moment to compose himself.

"You're lucky that your brother's such a good customer of mine, and that I'm feeling particularly benevolent today," he said. "Is he far from here?"

"In our room, on floor six."

"Okay." He slapped Chad on the shoulder. "We'll take him to see Darzen. Chad doesn't mind helping out, do you buddy?"

He grunted in response, still rubbing his forehead.

"Show us where he is, then."

The three of them left the dingy basement and clambered up bare concrete stairs to Claire's floor. By the time they had reached the top, Chad was breathing heavily, making a gurgling sound. He paused to lean over the centre of the stairwell, coughing up gobbets of black mucus that sailed through the air to spatter against the concrete fifty feet below. She led them to the apartment.

"Just through here. Watch the gas canisters."

There was a crash as Saul kicked them aside. Within the lounge, Jack was still laid out as he had been left, albeit with more vomit pooled around his face. Some of it was matting his hair. Saul crouched beside him and pulled his eyelid open, peering closely.

"He's fucked, all right. Chad, pick him up."

The warty man stooped and hefted Jack over his shoulder, unperturbed by his vomit-stained clothes.

"Where's Darzen based nowadays?" he asked.

"The administratum moved him down another dozen levels. Heh, poor bastard. He's slumming it with the best of 'em, now."

"You know the way?"

"Sure," said Saul. "There's a decent enough route through a disused lab one dome over. We can use the supercon access tunnels to take us most of the way there."

Saul led them to a part of the hab-block Claire had never seen before, down in the very lowest basement levels. Amongst the wreckage of the decaying pumps and heaters that had provided water to the complex decades before, he uncovered a metal hatch, and pried it open. He dropped through the hole into a tunnel below, and his boots crunched against rust. He reached his arms up, and helped Claire to clamber down. Chad followed last, pulling the hatch cover back over loosely behind them. Burdened with Jack's limp body, he stooped as they set off down the maintenance tunnel, picking their way over decayed floor panels and debris. The wreckage had been strewn around when the cooling for the superconducting cables had failed, blasting the insulation apart under the sudden onset of huge temperatures.

"Hey, Saul. Do you reckon the rumours about this 'plex were true?" Chad snickered.

"What?"

"You know. About the 'stealer cult."

"Shut up, Chad."

They trudged the rest of the way in silence, which made Chad's rattling, phlegmy breaths all the more audible. Eventually Saul held up his hand as they reached a cross, marked on the wall with chalk. He raised his arms, and slid a grating away from overhead before clambering out. He held his hand down to help Claire climb up. Halfway up, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Chad leering upwards, demonstrating his approval of the view with a seedy grin. She wished she hadn't changed out of her jeans.

"Disputed territory," Saul said, after they had all brushed the worst of the grime and dust from themselves and stretched aching muscles.

"Cawdor were here a few days ago, I think. Just be careful, OK?" He unholstered two pistols from either side of his jacket. Taking one by the barrel, he held it out to Claire.

"You used a laspistol before?"

She nodded, taking the weapon from him. Its construction was rugged and simple, burnished metal with a strip of leather wrapped around the grip. A bundle of wires was visible beneath a glob of clear epoxy where it had been repaired.

"Two-stage trigger," he said. "First is to sight, second to fire." He checked his own pistol, an antique stub gun. From the folds of his coat, Chad produced a snub-nosed, bullpup-configuration assault rifle and cradled it with his free elbow.

The building into which they had emerged had an open floor-plan. Claire worried about the possibility of firefights in such wide, empty spaces, with no cover behind which to hide. The three of them set off, keeping alongside one wall and navigating around tumbled waste cylinders and overturned benches. Elsewhere in the room, huge, decrepit machines hinted at better times in the lab's history.

Saul led the way. "Darzen's about half a mile away, the other side of the lab's storehouses," he said.

They walked onwards through the building.

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A web of piezoelectric fibres in Emily's suit massaged her skin, helping to keep her blood circulating. Even so, hanging upside-down was still uncomfortable. She bent her neck backwards to look down at the floor where she had strung sticky tendrils from her web projectors. The strands were barely visible under her visor's highest-gain setting. She opened a radio link with a twitch of her eyebrow.

"You see anyone yet, Sarah?"

"No, but I can hear them. At least four voices, and they're heading roughly our way. I'll see if I can hurry them along. Moving into-"

"Come on!," Tarq interrupted. The chugging of hydraulic pumps was just audible over his audio feed. "Less talking, more action!"

Emily heard his boots crunching against rubble as he bounced up and down twenty feet below her on the warehouse's floor. Sarah sighed over the radio link.

"I'm moving behind them now."

Silence followed. Even Tarq cautiously took a few steps back to try and conceal himself behind a fallen structural beam. Then the air crackled as it was ignited by a volley of laser beams from Sarah's gauntlet. Hoarse shouts issued from the next room over, along with a staccato burst of automatic fire.

"That got them riled," she said. "Heh, one of them's just firing blindly at the ceiling. Poor little juve is scared." There was another crackling noise. "Poor little juve was scared," she corrected herself.

Emily could hear footsteps now, growing closer. She looked down expectantly just as a lanky girl carrying a shotgun blundered through the door, cursing as she ran headlong into the webbing Emily had laced across the opening. She swatted at the strands, kicking uselessly as she tried to get her ankle free. She cried out in surprise as Emily's gauntlets spat another strand of web, which instantly stuck to her chest, before raising her shotgun to the ceiling and sighting along it.

She was jerked from her feet as Emily detached the sticky rope from her gauntlet, threading it through a hole in a girder before dropping downwards, holding on to the severed end. As the web stretched elastically, her descent slowed until she stopped just in front of the girl. The pair looked at each other for what seemed like a very long time. Emily had practiced this manoeuvre countless times before, but years of slaying computer-generated adversaries could never provide anything close to the

experience of killing a living human. She set those thoughts aside, and drew her wrist blade across the girl's throat in a swift, smooth motion. Her blood started to empty from her severed carotid arteries with surprising speed.

The instructors were right, thought Emily. This did feel exciting, in a way.

She sidestepped as Tarq barrelled into the rapidly-exsanguinating girl with a chug of machinery. The inertia of five hundred pounds of man and machine was enough to tear her web from its anchor points as he charged onwards, swatting the girl's body out of the way with a massive hand. Emily slipped through the doorway after him, skirmishing off to one side. She could see Sarah as an orange blob in the infrared, crouched up in the rafters. In the centre of the room, the two remaining gangers were standing and facing Tarq, screaming as they emptied the magazines of their autoguns.

The projectiles pattered harmlessly against the surface of Tarq's armour as his leg-pistons clunked and hissed, accelerating him into a sprint. He slammed shoulder-first into one of the gangers, bringing forth a sound like snapping timber as every rib broke in unison. Killed instantly by the impact, the broken body tumbled across the floor, coming to rest against some wreckage. Tarq started to turn about, loudly cursing his suit's lack of manoeuvrability over the radio link. Sarah beat him to the second kill, spreading her wings and gliding down from the roof before alighting next to the remaining ganger, discharging both of her laser gauntlets into his head whilst he fumbled for a new autogun magazine. The smouldering corpse crumpled to the floor.

"Yeah!" Tarq shouted, lumbering over to the pair of girls in the room's centre. "Underhiver scum! Hah! Too easy!"

"Four down," said Sarah. "Three hundred and ninety six to go."



Emily looked down at the remains of the ganger's head, steam still wafting from fleshy craters. She flicked the blood off her wrist blade and clicked it back into place along her forearm.

She had never felt so alive.

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Saul removed his finger from his lips, gesturing to Claire that it was safe to move over to him. She scuttled out from behind the pile of waste drums and crouched next to him. He spoke softly.

"That sounded like autogun fire," he said. "Now, I don't particularly want to get shot to pieces, so we're just going to turn ourselves around, and head on back."

"But... my brother..."

"He's not worth it, kid. None of us are dead yet, and that's the way it's gonna stay. Maybe he'll come around on his own."

Claire lost the composure she had been doing such a good job of maintaining, letting out a sob as tears rolled down her face.

"You said you'd help him."

"That was before it looked like we were going to walk into a firefight."

"They were your drugs!" she said, sniffing. "You did this to him!"

"He did it to himself. I'm not responsible for how he uses my product."

She hugged her knees to her chest.

"Coward," she said.

"You've got no right to-"

"Fucking. Coward," she said again, glaring at him.

"Some nerve you've got, kid."

He sighed. "Stay twenty feet behind me. You see somebody who isn't Chad, or me, you shoot them. Understand?"

She nodded.

Saul muttered to himself as he slinked across to an overturned metal bench. Twenty feet off to one side, Chad ducked underneath a suspended pipeline to flatten himself against the wall on the other side. "If things get dicey, I'm dropping sleepyhead here," he said.

They moved cautiously at first, but when there was no more gunfire to be heard they started walking more easily between the rooms. A door along the opposite wall of a lab filled with stacks of glassware opened into a wider, unfurnished space, with rolls of packing material bundled in piles. "Well what do you know," said Saul, "the warehouse. Not far now."

Claire stood inside the doorway as Saul and Chad entered the open space. Saul held up his hand in a 'stop' gesture, and then walked over to the room's centre, pistol raised, head swivelling as he scanned the surroundings. Claire peered around to get a better view, and saw him crouching over a body. She walked over.

"Guess we know where the autogun fire came from." He pointed at the gun lying next to the body. "Wouldn't like to guess what killed him, though. Looks like he was shot by a whole squad of lasgunners at once."

Claire caught a glimpse of the charred head before turning away, eyes closed.

"His buddies didn't have too much luck either", said Chad from across the room. "Look here. Poor bastard looks like he was hit by a truck."

Their progress through the next two warehouses was painfully slow. Saul moved methodically, identifying cover, running to it, checking that the area was secure before moving on. Chad held his rifle against his shoulder one-handed, flitting between firing positions surprisingly quickly for someone carrying the dead weight of an unconscious body. Saul stepped through the wide opening of a cargo door, and then stopped dead as a sticky glob of material landed on his shoulder with a splat, trailing a thin streamer from the ceiling.

"Ah, fuck."

Those were his last words before he was wrenched upwards, out of sight beyond the doorway. The sounds of his pistol discharging rang out in the empty space, and a second later there was a tinkling sound as brass casings hit the floor.

"Saul!" Chad lunged out from behind a support pillar, dropping Claire's brother on to the floor as he raised his left hand to the forward grip of his assault rifle. He strafed across the doorway, shoulders hunched, gun barrel pointed in to the room beyond. There was a barely-audible sound like a pair of scissors snapping shut before Saul's severed head fell back down towards the concrete, impacting with a wet smack, bouncing once before coming to rest. His body followed, crumpling like a rag doll as it landed.

Chad braced himself against the doorway before quickly ducking under and squeezing off a burst of automatic fire towards the ceiling. He stepped back around, beckoning to Claire, pointing at the opposite side of the doorway. She looked down at the laspistol in her hands, and tried to swallow. Her mouth was completely dry. She eased her way out from where she was hiding, and sprinted across to the door frame, standing opposite Chad, pistol raised. She tried very hard to concentrate on stopping her hands from trembling.

"They know we're here," he said. "So I need you to cover me now. Shoot anything that moves."

Claire nodded twice, trying to control her breathing. She glanced over to her brother's prone body, lying exposed on the warehouse floor, face down. A brown pool was forming around his head. He coughed.

"He'll be fine. Focus. Here." Chad enunciated the words clearly. He held up his hand with three fingers spread, curling them in as he counted down. On the third count he stepped around the doorway, rifle raised to the ceiling, and walked inwards. Claire tracked her pistol across the width of the room, which was filled with piles of containers and machinery. So many places to hide.

Chad trod softly, making his way over to a stack of shipping containers. He paused, perhaps hearing some tiny sound that Claire could not, before twitching around to his left- rifle chattering in his hands. The stack of boxes next to him burst outwards and packaging material tumbled in all directions. A dark grey shape pounced towards him. Long blades on its arms folded forward and locked into place. There was a scream, and Chad fell to the floor. His assault rifle dropped in front of him, both his hands still wrapped around the grips, no longer attached to his arms. He howled as arterial blood gushed out of him, and the shape disappeared off to the other side.

Whatever it was moved fast. Claire caught glimpses of arms and blades working in fast synergy as the figure clambered amongst the stacks. It paused to hang off the wall for a moment, before dropping out of sight behind a pile of metal gas cylinders.

Chad kicked his legs as he continued to scream, folding his arms across his chest and desperately trying to stem the bleeding. Claire kept her pistol trained on the last spot she had seen the grey shape, before noticing what was written on the cylinders. The label looked familiar. "N<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub>", the numbers in subscript, just like the gas bottles her brother had insisted on keeping in the apartment all these months. Whatever it was that had attacked Chad was hiding behind them.

She clicked the trigger through its first stage, the laser cell emitting a low-powered sighting beam and projecting a small red dot on the wall. She brought it around, so that the spot of light was focussed on the neck of one of the cylinders, the red circle wavering slightly with her unsteady grip. She exhaled, and pulled the trigger all the way back.

Shards of hot metal rained down as she ducked back around the doorframe, ears ringing painfully from the blast. Hot air gushed through the doorway, bringing fluttering scraps of ash and burning fabric. The only sound she could hear was her racing heartbeat. She curled up with her hands over her ears.

Slowly, her hearing returned, and she cautiously peeked her head around the door. The floor where the cylinders had stood was blackened, the walls surrounding the area scarred and dented. A charred body was slumped against the back wall.

"Emily!"

The voice came from her left, further down in between stacks of crates.

"Emily! Can you hear me?"

The voice sounded amplified.

A hulking figure stepped out from behind one of the stacks, knocking boxes to the floor as it lumbered into view. Its legs were wreathed in bands of olive-green armour and metallic hoses. Between the suit's massive arms, the head of the man occupying it looked strangely small. With every step he took towards her, Claire could feel the floor vibrating.

"You!" he growled, "You did this!"

She raised her laspistol, and the red sighting point quivered around on his barrel-chest. She tried to train it on his forehead, but her hands were shaking too much.

"You fucking bitch!" he bellowed, his voice unnaturally loud, enhanced by the suit's electronics. "Underhive scum!"

She squeezed the trigger of her pistol, and a flash of light split the air. The beam sparked harmlessly against the man's armoured carapace, leaving a small burn-mark. Again and again the pistol buzzed in her hand as she discharged it towards the lumbering brute, the shots fizzling impotently against his suit. The few that were, by chance, aimed at his head, were deflected mid-air by some unseen force field. As she started to feel the pistol grow uncomfortably hot in her hands, the man was upon her.

He lunged forward, and she felt massive fingers closing around her throat. The hydraulics in the arms of the suit hummed as he lifted her off the floor, bringing her to eye-level. She clawed at the metal hand around her throat as she choked, legs flailing in mid-air. The man's teeth were clenched in a malevolent grin.

A voice called out from somewhere in the warehouse's ceiling.

"Tarq! No! She's just a child!"

Claire felt a sudden pressure around her neck, and there was a crunching sound. The last things she saw were the man's eyes, gazing into her own.

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# Christmas

*-Joseph Brown*

As soon as December rolled around me and my brother checked the mail every day for the Christmas catalog. We didn't know where it came from, who sent it, or how they knew where we lived, but the second we got our greedy hands on that large, ornate booklet we knew that Christmas was coming. It was our true omen. It was our good book.

We greedily tore into it, flipping furiously through all the pages and gazing at the pictures. There were pictures of children filled with joy next to massive plastic castles playing host to knights and archers and elaborate electronic football fields with working scoreboards and crowd sounds. There were video games: Sonic The Hedgehog, Super Mario, Kirby Superstar, Madden 96; each promising to be the best, fastest, latest, and greatest. We wanted it all. We stayed up night and night again circling what we wanted and dividing up the plunder. We ripped the choice pages and pictures from the catalog and delivered them where they could be found by our parents.

This was our pornography.

We hardly got anything from it. I never received that huge race track with its amazing spiral of bright orange track launching Hot Wheels across tables and over plastic cups. My brother never got that miniature air hockey table. Our parents scoffed at our video games. They chuckled at our sincere pleas and promises of good grades and conduct in the future. We swore we'd never ask for anything again.

The offering was not worthy.

When we were at Wal-Mart we peered into the big decorated barrel for Toys For Tots. In it were Batman, The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, baseball cards, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Matchbox, a collided universe of everything beloved and cherished. We wondered what the hell those kids had done to receive all those action figures and play sets

for nothing.

We asked our parents, "why throw those away like that? What about us?"

"It's for the poor kids." She said.

"Aren't we poor too?"

"Not poor like them."

Our poverty was a different poverty. My father couldn't afford the \$30 remote controlled Megazord. My mother couldn't afford the \$40 copy of Megaman X. What were those numbers to us? We could count to thirty and forty no problem. Adults spent that kind of money casually and childlike all the time. We were selfish and didn't care who was making what.

We never thought about how the lights stayed on, the cable kept going, or the food filled the refrigerator. To us those were mere elements of the universe. The lights had always been on, and we pulled and pushed switches to prove our mastery of light. There was always food in the refrigerator. Always food in America. People only starved in China and Africa. Wherever those places were. Flitting images of emaciated African children greeted me and my brother when we were up late watching TV sometimes, but we just turned the channel looking for something funny to watch.

The only thing we knew about money was that Mom and Dad fought over it like hounds. They'd scream and shout and throw things across the room. Mom would hit Dad or Dad would hit Mom and the police came afterward. The police sat down with us and tried to get the story from us, but we just shook our heads silently, never knowing. Me and my brother were always looking for cameras because we wanted to be on Cops.

If the fighting was really bad I'd run into the back room and hide under the covers or in the closet with my brother. I'd feel like crying but my brother never cried so I tried not to either. We'd laugh

at the shrill screech of my mother and giggle at the curses of my father. Except when it was too bad. When it was too bad just sat there in silence listening to things thunder against walls and shatter into pieces. We'd listen to pleas not to hit each other. Screams. Yells. It was incomprehensible to us and spoken in an language known only to adults; we heard our names and that was all we understood. When there was finally silence we'd peek our heads out the door and look into the hallway. Sometimes everything was fine, the tumult having vanished like an argument between ghosts. Other times there were clothes and furniture all over the place. Broken glass. Sobbing could be heard at opposite ends of the house. We'd hear our names cried out and shudder.

Sometimes real late at night or real early in the morning Mom would snatch us from our beds, telling us that we're going somewhere. "Where?" we'd ask, but she wouldn't tell. She just kept asking to put our clothes on and do it quietly. Then we crowded silently into the car and went to the Holiday Inn. We'd ask, "why can't Dad come?" and she'd never answer. But it was fun because the TVs at the Holiday Inn picked up more channels and we got to go swimming in a real pool. We ate at Denny's, the nicest restaurant in town. We'd stay nights and sometimes a whole week and then suddenly we'd be back at home, Mom and Dad chatting lovingly at the dinner table. We didn't understand it, but we were happy to be home.

Sometimes Mom and Dad left the house to me and my brother. I was scared to be alone, but when it was me and my brother I didn't give a damn. We'd fix up a bed of pillows and blankets in front of the TV and stay up all night watching movies and shows we weren't supposed to. We'd sleep late and play video games all day. We lived on sandwiches and snacks. I thought it was perfect, just me and my brother; we could make it without them. We fought but not like they fought. We'd wrench each other into wrestling moves but let go when someone gave up. We didn't throw or break things.

Then they'd come back and tear our asses up for wrecking the house.

But every year the Christmas music that we loathed came from the radio and TV and suddenly soothed that inexplicable rage between them.

They started working together. Dad strung up the red and green lights along the outside of the house while Mom held the ladder. They hung up the stockings and the decorations and laughed and kissed in familiar and forgotten ways. Something soporific seemed to leak from all those decorations. We'd watch the marathon of jerky stop motion Christmas movies that aired every year. We did it all together.

When we brought the tree home and finally got it standing straight Mom revealed her huge white box of ornaments. It was full of tiny houses, Santa Clauses, novelty ornaments of M&Ms in Santa hats, angels, ornaments me and my brother made in school, and the little plastic globes that glittered like jewels to us. They were packed carefully between layers of styrofoam and white paper. Me and my brother had our favorites that we'd search out for immediately. When we decorated the tree me and my brother fought over what to put where. We thought up stories about why Frosty was hiding on the branch below The Pillsbury Doughboy. Me and my brother balanced GI Joes and wrestlers on the branches making Owen Hart swing from one branch while Snake Eyes sat perched beside Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer on another. We watched in awe as Dad, towering over all of us, placed the final star on the very top of the tree.

Then came the lights. Dad pulled out the coils and coils of Christmas lights, a labyrinth only he could navigate. We were constantly looking over his shoulder trying to find the secret of it all, but he pushed away as he unraveled and wrapped the cords around the tree, needing the space to navigate. Mom worked underneath the tree laying the thick, white cloth of fake snow. She set her little village down on it building by building; a post office, an inn, a train station with tracks leading nowhere, more houses, a few figures of jolly men and women laughing and waving. The Christmas village was flanked by the Manger Scene: wooden figures of Joseph, Mary, a lamb, and the Three Wise Men arranged around a plump, plastic Son of God resting in a bolted down bed. When the whole labor was finally done Dad plugged it all into one cluttered surge protector, and a hot, soft light emitted from all the tiny windows of the quaint

village and from all the bulbs that snaked their way to the very top of the tree.

When our parents went to sleep we'd sneak into the living room and turn the scene on again, and in total darkness the tree glowed a faint, beautiful red and gold. We fell asleep basking in that wonder. Or we played around the tree. Green Army Men launched major operations between the quaint, country post office, hoping to overcome the Tan forces entrenched around the train station. The once joyous villagers lay strewn in the streets as grim corpses. Spider Man fought Venom in the Manger. Airplanes wove in and out of the branches and ornaments in deadly dog fights. We got drunk on the smell of pine.

Come Christmas Eve we gazed at our scarce presents with ever more anxiety. We'd ask if that's all there was, and to coax us into church our Grandmother told us that Santa wouldn't come unless we attended church so we begrudgingly got our clothes on for the 10 pm mass. We always sat on the second floor balcony in a little room with a huge window overlooking the entire church. This was the "cry room" where the other weary parents nursed their whining children who were only vaguely interested in the motions and homilies of the Catholic mass. We squirmed and teased at one another while the priest slugged through the gospel and the psalms. We pointed at the old folks in their lavish Christmas clothes and laughed. We asked questions: "What's a You-Car-Wrist?" "Who's Our Father?" We looked down at the Body of Christ so tiny in our palms. When we finally tasted it we wanted to spit it out because it was so awful.

When we finally got home we tore out of our church clothes and ran to bed. It was the one time of year we were anxious to get to sleep.

And in the morning we jetted out of bed, sometimes in just our underwear, to our presents and stockings. We were amazed at the things that had magically appeared overnight. We tore at the boxes flinging paper and tape all over the floor. We showed off our presents and tried to guess which of us our parents had spent the most on. Video games were reverently shed from their boxes and slid into the Super Nintendo for play. Clothes were swiftly discarded into an ignored pile. We went for the boxes marked "Grandma & Grandpa Brown" first because those were always the

best.

If my parents were not yet awoken by our noise and cheers we rushed back into their room to get wake them up by force. We'd burst into the room and leap onto their sleeping bodies talking excitedly. We'd push and pull at them. We'd tickle feet or pinch faces. They'd curse and laugh and drag themselves from bed. Mom cooked a big breakfast for all us. Me and my brother in our treasure heap sat puzzled trying to decide what to do first.

All the while we had been totally unaware of the scene we'd disturbed. Moments before we leaped on them Mom and Dad lay together in bed, Dad's hairy forearm across Mom and Mom's curly, black hair resting deep against my father's chest. Their breathing silent and calm. Their bodies precious and fragile. As kids we didn't think anything of it. We tore them from that embrace for Christmas.

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## **A Modern Comedy**

*-Ross Lustfield*

He put the earbuds in once the shouting started. The volume was turned all the way up on his console, yet didn't fully eclipse the noise coming in from the other room. He preferred to have it this way: he wanted to hear some of it.

Gradually, the outside world became quiet, and he began to dread that they would turn their attentions toward his neglected, little room. A knock sounded on his door. He pretended not to hear it. His father entered and delicately closed the door behind him.

His father's face, though imbued with bitter regret, still managed to show concern and sadness. He crossed the room to where his son lay on the bed.

“Son?” he said. He seized and lightly tugged free the string that hung from his boy's right ear.

The boy glanced up at his father's face. “What?” he said, his eyes falling back to the pixelated screen in his hands. He held himself aloof from his father's presence, his senses seemingly engrossed in the game. He allowed himself a mild attitude of annoyance at the interruption, but proceeded undeterred in his bid to walk vicariously through his 8-bit hero. His thumb never left the arrowed portion of the keypad. Seating himself heavily in the boy's desk chair, the father watched his son for a few pensive moments.

“Can you take the other one out? Hey?”

Almost mechanically, the boy removed his other earbud.

“Some—things have happened, you should know...you probably do know.”

His son unplugged the headphones entirely from his video game, thereby filling the room with strangely pitched, tinny music. A flash of discomfort quickly stole across his father's face.

“Were you wearing those because of your mother and me?”

The boy's response, a noninflected, “I don't know,” elicited a grave nod.

“Things—between your mother and I have not been good. It's not bad—I don't want you to think it's bad. But, we both agreed it's better if I left for a while.” After a moment, he added, “As it is for now. Only a while. It might just be only temporary; we don't know.”

The boy continued to stride his fictional world, but could now scarcely pay attention to where he was going. He felt his face burning, as heat radiated from his forehead, branching rapidly out and neckward, like an upside down thermometer.

“Son?”

“What?”

“Are you—understanding this? What I'm telling you? You know—”

“Yeah.”

The boy almost wished his father had already left the house. A new thought flashed across his consciousness: his father's going away might terminate his chances of getting the new video game he'd already asked both parents to buy for him. He was made angrier by this, but without properly understanding why. The cognitive flinch was gone as soon as he'd had it.

“I can't believe it's come to this,” the father said as though to himself, staring at nothing, and knowing it was a lie. He had suspected all along that this would come to pass, and had secretly foretold his leaving months before his son was born. Recognizing this, he searched his mind desperately for something real or true, some phrase that could simultaneously eliminate his guilt and give his son something to cling to. He could find nothing, and so he sat gently shaking his head.

He stopped to observe his child.

“What do you think of this? How're you feeling toward it? Tell me.

“Look at me, a minute.”

The boy said, “I can't. I'm at a hard part.”

“You're at a hard part,” the father repeated, after a plaintive silence. He caught himself nodding.

“Yeah.”

The boy became preoccupied with how the hero of his game was perpetually located in the very center of the screen, and that it was only the depictions around him that moved. An uncanny sensation took him over. In the game, he backtracked just to confirm the illusion.

There was a long pause wherein both son and father thought about their own concerns. The music played on obnoxiously. The same brief snippet of song, replaying in a hellish loop.

A length of time passed before the father informed his son that he was going to go pack his things. Receiving no response, he rose and left, but not without mentioning he'd stop back in before leaving the house entirely.

Once alone, the boy saved his game and turned it off. He lay there, looking, apprehensively, at nothing. He dreaded his father's return. The life he'd had so far rendered him ill-equipped to handle it. If he could have wished for his father to simply leave without any further contact, and by wishing it make it occur, he would have done so. He walked around his small room. When the tension became too great, he lay back on his bed, turned his game back on, and resumed playing.

Half an hour later, his overcoat-clad father dropped his suitcase in the middle of the floor and requested a hug. His was a concise valediction. The scene, however, appeared slow and awkward to his mother, whom the child could see standing dejectedly in the doorway. His father, meanwhile, savored what he could of their embrace, for, directly behind both of his ears, the video game's music was playing out injuriously loud. His son never thought to set the thing down.

## Hardy's Rumble

*-Wolf Harris*

Today, love was arbitrary; a distant friend watching from afar, perhaps to see what next move might be made, waiting to offer its hand in grace, to bring the fallen to their feet once again. It had been like this for a few weeks. It had felt like the eyes of love were no longer set upon him but rather had been left to slumber or moved on to a more deserving character.

Hardy barely let his feet leave the ground as he dragged himself along the sidewalk, lost in a pitiful display of loneliness in which the world was against him and he was the losing hero, the attitude never served him well in times of despair, exacerbating the issue by encouraging his alienation in a fictitious display of heroism; ‘always determinedly alone,’ He would say. For he knew that humans could love one another, would love one another, to stave off that feeling of being alone in the world, to make themselves feel better about themselves (in these times especially). A simple trick of the brain. Love was for fools and degenerates. Two degenerates get together to love each other and show each other that the world is wrong and that they are both in the right, cementing each selfish view into the other's vile eye. For someone to look past every blemish and downfall and to feel perfect in the other's painted sight. Each and every person is living out their own story, some are more eager to watch and absorb the goings on in awe than to act out their piece.

Caricatured society whizzed by on billboards- a man, glistening like no man ever seen before stands giant with his piece resting in the faces of passers by, computer processed biceps and airbrushed acne scars. The collective egos eating itself up with such reluctant perseverance, to relentlessly pillage the excrement of the bank and paint itself with a glossy sheen. ‘They may be dead but they'd look nice in their graves’



Such an air of disdain flowed endlessly throughout his brain, tarnishing every past memory and future prospect of hope with the nicotine stain of impurity that leaked from the brand new crack in his now heavy heart; the heart she saw fit to penetrate and conquer for her own empirical means. Every image served to mock him, embarrass him, with silent laughs cursing him from nowhere. Typical, a story told a thousand times, a man brought to his knees by woman. The same man that flew to space, the same man that built the pyramids, the same man with the ability to destroy all existence at the push of a button, the same man that worked in the fish and chip shop. 'No kidding ourselves,' they'd say, and accept that, although they could control the tides, trends, traffic, economy and the happiness of others, they couldn't well be in control of their own emotions. How ridiculous is man in his self-superiority then!

'Jack, Chris, Joseph, the names change and the variants differ, though the stories tend to stay the same.' A thought that suddenly occurred to Hardy in amongst his squalid attempts at philosophizing life in order to make himself feel better, as he so often found himself doing.

He dives into the first bar he sees without registering its exterior past the obvious fact that it was a licensed seller; a dingy place with blackened walls and neon lights plastered across the ceiling, it may well have been a nightclub... it could have been a morgue for all Hardy cared. As long as his friend was there, for once on a night of drunken, rambling tangents Hardy had concluded that 'with a friend you're never lonely!' The 'friend' being a large drink or several.

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## POETRY

## Imperium of Man

*-Karl Skarin*

With worn down soles and a wary head  
I spot a spaceship docking — in my bed.  
Hold tight, grip the corners of the cushy helm.  
Ignite, that last remaining gray matter cell.  
T-minus five, four, three...  
A lone explorer head out, for bounty on a boundless sea.

With eyes wide shut I rest my head  
on the violet rim stretching deep,  
dipping my feet in the aqueous blue terra sky,  
while scraping a finer nuance of black  
from the darkened void with the tip of my fingernail.

It's easy.  
Infinite our choice - however it may be.  
Like newborn baby stars exploding,  
synapses fuse and lit up the galaxy.

Just follow the red carpet  
laid out by a standing army of excited atoms  
dancing to my pipers tune and big bangs.  
How can the sound from one mans broken drum,  
breathe life — where it ain't supposed to be none?  
I feel the rhythm from Descartes beats as Zarathustras crys are  
deafened.

I am, that clustering milky dust revolving round the centre of  
massive black holes,  
and the tiniest surge from gamma rays passing moons named from  
gods of old.  
I am all, there'll ever be.

What shores undreamt of have I yet to become,  
what bedrock have not been cooled by my wake?  
From humble origins? I ask, knowingly a wiser fools belief.  
"I, descendent from a single cell — there is nothing that I can't  
achieve"  
As the cosmos lie sleeping with it's giant ears resting on its  
paws,  
I race the last light beams from an old dying sun.  
Yelling, screaming and hollering.  
No particle in universe reach further than mine!

## An Ode to Narrative Contingency

*-Maja Topic*

I sometimes fantasize about becoming a page  
Enticed by the thought  
of Massacred perception  
Decapitation of existence  
Executed via chainsaw

The industrial process  
Of thin slicing and refining  
All constituents of ego  
The separating and the packaging  
The branding of fine corporate names  
The shipping and the trading  
Of my distinct components

I offer myself to those who will rely  
On my ability to show them  
Where void space stands in creation

NOTE: I did say page  
Not paper

The page  
The final product  
Of a paper  
With a meaning  
A message that reminds us  
What it's like to lose: our  
Source of compensation for our  
Incapacitating lack of correlation to unity  
We are single experiences

With malleable perceptions that are always counted as  
multiples

We know there is connection  
In contrasting

Is all but parallel infinity?  
We are linear inventions  
That could not fit the screen of time

Boundaries so possessive  
Of the confines of straight lines

Expression is admittance of surrender to submission

Defeated by the drive,  
The compulsion to transfer motion  
And deprive mass of its choice to please speed  
In accordance with our ideas  
About the possibilities of an  
Instantaneously accessible destination

Paroxysms of coincidence  
Enhance viewing pleasure  
We need never move  
If all stays the same  
If all stays the same  
It happens anyway

We aim  
To collide with attainment  
Abating  
Our sense of alignment  
With reception

More is wasted on fragile intention  
Intention which if not approached critically  
Exists as delayed effect

You put the input  
By the output  
Like when you introduce the microphone  
To the speaker (that it could not do without)

I do not mean the person  
Who would combust, if not considered  
No.  
I mean the circuits in containers  
Of lattice and engineering  
A meticulous portrayal  
Of elemental manipulation  
Our compression of vibration,  
Causing emanation of  
An adverse harmony

If by chance,  
By serendipity  
We ever happen to stumble upon the end of searching  
Then we will know the answer was our inability to pinpoint fate

The position of question and answer will switch  
The lost will replace the found  
The found will get lost, looking to find  
The populace has been inflicted  
With the curse of competition  
Just a minor reflection  
Of our need to satisfy design

We do not give rhetoric the admiration it deserves  
The foolish praise externally  
The wise appreciate in silence

We tamper with its magic  
When we beg for the procurement of the secrets to the  
mysteries  
Considered much too precious for transient affairs

The most sacred of transactions  
Is the one that has managed  
To acquire the intrinsic  
Value of perpetuality in constants

There are many degrees,  
yet they are all based on 0  
We neglect the empty like we neglect rhetoric  
We take both for granted:  
We tarnish empty by abundance  
and rhetoric by communication

We define both by the result  
And forget the purpose of the journey:  
To compile masses of distinctions  
between that which is not,  
that which has been arranged to suit context,  
and that which is.  
Do not believe the truth if it presents itself as the truth  
The truth is not naive  
It does not flirt with aesthetics  
It does not manifest itself in conclusions  
The truth will not seduce you  
With the consolation of proof

## The West

-Nikolai

They are already here:  
Caffeine-free coffee  
Alcohol-free booze  
Cunt-free women  
Cock-free men;

Once sunken, now  
Risen from the sea by the morning mists  
Swallowed whole by the longing city  
And worn by its hollow *cives*  
And worn by its open eyes  
And worn by its blistered soundscape  
And worn by its reverend stony face

Instead of silence  
Instead of irksome, necessary conversations  
Instead of humming treetops above.

We ate it, we wore it  
and suddenly we were it.

## Untitled

-Sorbetyumm

Religions are all based on the same true story  
where only the names and places have been changed.  
Each person has come up with their own interpretation  
according to their environment  
and their unique set of experiences.  
All of these differences create the garments  
each culture will use to dress up the truth  
like a pageant contestant.  
Suddenly the focus is diverted  
and we forget the naked beauty  
underneath and Spirituality becomes competitive.  
Instead forget the names of your gods  
and forget the names of your idols  
because they do not matter.  
They are inventions  
that only persuade us into ignorance.  
Eternity has a name  
but it is not in a language  
that our human tongues can reproduce.  
To see the truth  
we must shut our eyes  
and drift into a state where we are  
not even aware of ourselves.  
That is where the truth is waiting  
and that is a place to call our home.

## Afterword

December has proved to be an excellent issue for TAR, and we are pleased to present the TAR award of literary excellence to Andrew Mendelson for his horror short, “Cordyceps”. Andrew has proved a steady and reliable source of horror-themed short stories for TAR, and it does not surprise us that he should write such a well-composed piece this issue. It is difficult task to write dramatic stories containing only a single character, yet it is a reflection of Andrew's competence as a writer that “Cordyceps” manages to avoid this potential pitfall completely. “Cordyceps” is also laudable for balancing clarity and confusion in describing the malevolent growth plaguing the protagonist. In all, an excellent submission we are pleased to award.

Notable runners-up for the award include the equally satisfying “Spyre hunters”, by Anonymous of /tg/. There was some a certain degree of editorial controversy over whether this piece should be awarded instead, but in the it was felt that some of the warhammer 40k-specific terminology may have served to confused general readers. While TAR holds no grudge against science fiction, the realm of fan fiction is more murky

At any rate, happy new year from the TAR crew

## Credits & Information

Submit your writing, comments, and whatever else to:  
theaprilreader@gmail.com

**Website:** <http://theaprilreader.org>

**IRC:** #TAR on irc.freenode.net

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### Editors:

Matthew S. Vodička

Prole !XDERDXUpqQ

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Special thanks to Wildweasal !FvTu.n1ohA, our Authors, and everyone who took the time to download TAR

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**And now for an informative word from Wildweasal on copyright:** *Copyright law in the United States states that when you write or create any work, you as the creator of this work, possess ownership of this work at the time of its creation. When you submit something to The April Reader, you still retain the copyright to the work, and you still own what you have submitted. By emailing your work to TAR you are simply giving TAR permission to host this work on our Internet server. There is never a point in time at which TAR becomes the owner of your work and you will always own the work that you have submitted.*

See you next issue,

-TAR