

# ELEGANT LITERATURE

---

## HEARTS ABLAZE



#015

Elegant Literature Issue #015  
Hearts Ablaze

Published by Elegant Media Publishing Corporation  
[www.ElegantLiterature.com](http://www.ElegantLiterature.com)

Copyright © 2022 Elegant Media Publishing Corporation  
All copyright of individual titles remains with the authors of each work.

All rights reserved. This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except as provided by Canada copyright law and fair use. For permission requests, write to the publisher “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at [support@elegantliterature.com](mailto:support@elegantliterature.com).

To the best of Elegant Media Publishing Corporation’s knowledge, the stories in this magazine are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. If you have reasonable cause to believe otherwise please contact the author directly, or the publisher if the author cannot be reached, at the address listed above.

Cover art by Travel Drawn.

Edited by Creag Munroe.

ISSN 2564-4211

# ABOUT ELEGANT LITERATURE

## MAGAZINE & CONTEST

Elegant Literature is a magazine focused on publishing new writers. At its inception, there were few publications—if any—that only accepted work from aspiring talent and also paid professional rates.

We aimed to change that.

As far as we know, Elegant Literature is the only short fiction magazine willing to turn down work from famous authors. No Stephen King's or George Martin's here. This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.

Our goal is to help discover new voices in fiction, and publish talented beginners from around the globe.

Elegant Literature publishes work from all genres, and readers can always find a free copy of every issue on our website.

Each issue of the magazine also corresponds to our monthly contest. One of the stories in the following pages has won the grand prize. But we don't reveal who it is in the table of contents. It wouldn't be fair for readers to skip over the other works.

We encourage you to read and enjoy each piece in the order presented. They have been curated intentionally. Please, discover the winner naturally.

The list of honourable mentions relates directly to the contest.

If you read something you like, please consider connecting with and supporting the author.

[Click here for more information about submitting to the magazine.](#)

[Click here for more information about entering the contest.](#)

Happy reading!

## **CONTENT WARNING**

Work published in *Elegant Literature* varies widely. Some stories may deal with mature and uncomfortable topics.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

OUR PARTNERS	7
ISSUE PROMPT	8
HONORABLE MENTIONS	10
THE INDALO <b>CORINNE HARRISON</b>	11
CALL MY NAME <b>DAMIAN BRUNNER</b>	19
ONLY BABIES CRY WHEN THEY GET HURT <b>EMMA BURNETT</b>	27
BECOMING ADAN AND EVA <b>MICHAEL JEFFERSON</b>	32
MASQUERADE <b>AMALIE WAD</b>	42
ACROSS THE LINE <b>NICOLETTA GIUSEFFI</b>	50
NORA THE SOCIOPATH, DOES A NICE THING <b>KASEY FISHER</b>	58
THE COLOR OF DISORDER <b>NIKKI LITTLE</b>	66

THE SCULPTOR	72
AVA SEDGWICK	
DEEP WITHIN THE EMERGENT WEEDS	81
ANDREA SPENCER	
JUDGE'S COMMENTS	88
CREAG MUNROE	

THANK YOU TO  
**OUR PARTNERS**

SUBTXT  
NOW NOVEL  
SCRIVENER  
SCAPPLE  
PROWRITINGAID  
TODOIST  
THE NOVEL FACTORY  
IRIS MARSH

ISSUE PROMPT:

## HEARTS ABLAZE

Write a story involving hearts ablaze, and a key.

Feel your senses heighten as passion swells your chest. Whether you fight for virtue or seek the thrill of dark pleasures, something always fans the flames...

Desire drives us all. Warriors beat shields to a grand speech and thump chests when victorious. Lovers lock gazes over dinner like a killer and victim over the knife. Emotion thaws. Beautiful art, sunrises, and crescendoing music. The blazing eyes of a zealot. For others it's love of money, or unreciprocated charity. Revolutions rise with fervor but pistols stay holstered until the moment comes. From babes clutching their mothers to elderly couples sharing their last breath, we humans are creatures of the heart. And so are the things we make. Machines fed on glowing coal and rockets propelled by raging heat. But volcanic depths of liquid flame and stars of pure fire litter the universe. What are our passions against the grand scope of the cosmos?

This contest invites you to explore Hearts Ablaze, whatever that means to you. Fantasy, contemporary, romance, crime. All genres are welcome.



Head Judge  
**CREAG MUNROE**

Thank you to our  
upcoming & past judges:

JORDAN KANTEY  
NATHAN BAUGH  
JIM HULL  
DJANGO WEXLER  
NICKY SHEARSBY  
MAX GLADSTONE

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE  
**HONORABLE MENTIONS**  
PRESENTED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

A Night at the Symphony	Carina Wahlstrom
Aloysius Fitzsimmons and the Christmas Tree: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts	Ardaschir Arguelles
Artificial Love	Josh Huffstetler
Automaton; Or, A Creation of the Victorian Hephaestus	K.F. Stoker
Beyond the Mistaken	J.R. Sullivan
Burning Love	Sarah Goodner
Chickens Can't Cry	Migara De Silva
Darkness, My Old Friend	Jeff Sigel
Evan Wilson is Going Through Some Things	Maggie E. Sennesael
Fireworks	Rodrigo Cezar Furlan
Killer	Jessica L. Hughson
Music Box	Steve Lance
My Brother the Space Man	Glenn Rosado
Playing for Hearts	Rowan Evans
R.E.S.A	PS Might
Shooting the Messenger	Wester Wagenaar
Stakes	Levi Michael
Thaw	Christy Dirks
The Deputy and His Outlaw	Caleb Savage
The Gray	Hannah Reed
The Outro	M. Warthen
The Woman Who Never Smiled	Valerie Taylor
Time of Death	J. L. Scythe
Together Forever	Michael Bateman-Lee
You	Aaron Kyte

# **THE INDALO**

**CORINNE HARRISON**

THE HORNS BLARE LIKE A moan into the dry air and the noise threads through the sounds of women and water around me. I turn my attention from the sodden dress in my hands and watch the large wooden doors of the wall open laboriously.

“Here they come,” Sofia murmurs beside me.

A thunder of hooves replace the sound of the horn and I look up the stone stairs into the sunlit courtyard where our men are returning. They are a wave of desert dust and horses, turning the courtyard a grainy bronze.

Around me women stop washing clothes and leave the low stone benches of the fountain to greet their husbands. They take the buzz of conversation and laughter with them, leaving the space habitually filled with women and children. I watch them go, and see Pepe dismount from his horse. I bite my lip, put down my laundry—but stay where I am.

“Pepe’s back, *guapa*,” Sofia says. She’s violently scrubbing a stain on her husband’s trousers.

“I know.”

My eyes pin to the golden column of desert between the closing doors and drink in the image of the outside world before the scuffed, heavy doors close. I watch as they’re locked with a large brass key.

The wind has entered with the men. It sighs past the horses, scuffs feet, worries skirts and swells to push against the town walls, our egg-shaped enclosure. I close my eyes and feel my soul do the same.

“Which market town have they been to today?” I ask.

“Don’t know, ask your husband.”

I look at Pepe and my lips pull in a tight line. He peers down the stone steps and searches the sunken rectangular fountain. I see his eyes roam over the old pipes pumping water from the walls into grooved channels at the foot of the benches. I see him take in the abandoned water jugs, the washed clothing—and land on me.

Even with the adrenaline of travel, the fresh bite of adventure, he retains his mean glare and slow movements. His gaze pins mine like a flint arrow to the breast of a bird. My gaze buckles and slips from his. He turns abruptly and walks to the carob tree dominating the

broad courtyard.

In the early days of our marriage, when we still had love and his temper was a hot rod in cold water, he used to catch me looking out of the fountain this way. He believed I was gazing at other men in the courtyard; men with skin crisped by the desert sun, lounging on wrought-iron chairs, dirty fingernails holding root-like cigars and black coffee. I still don't think he knows. I have no eyes for anything within these walls.

Beyond the town wall, the mountain hovers above the crenellated parapet as though pinned to the sky. Today clouds like ribbons roam its peak. A forest tumbles down its surface in textured folds like the skirt of a woman.

"Mama," a girl shouts from the centre of the fountain, voice echoing off the marble. "Papa's here."

"One minute Alba," Sofia calls. Her daughter hops over, arms hovering like wings.

"Mama, why do they have to bow to the tree?"

"Because of the Indalo, *mija*. It's a symbol of protection and good luck."

Etched into the carob tree trunk is the Indalo. Men hover around it, hands on their breasts. As they bow, curls fall away from their foreheads like dying flowers. The symbol, a small stick figure of a man holding what looks like a rainbow at the tip of its hands, is everywhere. On stone masonry around the tree's roots, carved out of oak into palm sized totems and painted on doors with red clay.

I ring the water out of my now clean skirt. My cracked fingers sting.

"Come on then." Finished cleaning the trousers, Sofia hangs on my periphery. She's waiting for me to join her; we are the only women still here. I relent. My eyes narrow against the sun as we enter the stifling courtyard.

Pepe stands with other men, a cigarette in his hand. Coiling smoke saturates their clothes and hair with its stench. A fug of machoism. He takes a cursory glance at me and almost as if it's a second thought, leans in to peck my cheek.

“I’ve brought you something from today’s marketplace.”

It’s cordial for husbands to return with gifts for their wives. Today it’s a tawdry velvet box; palm sized, with blue-grey palm trees stitched along the top. He hands it over as though relieving himself of a burden.

I open it and see a set of needles and threads. I’d prefer a riding crop and reins. I run my finger over the box, eyes flickering to the men around us. I bite back what I want to say and thank him.

“You don’t like it,” he says. A challenge.

“It’s fine.”

“I picked it out carefully. It’s the best set I’ve found.”

A small pressure stabs my right temple and something inside me, rusty and overused, snaps.

“Well if I could’ve picked it out myself, you wouldn’t have had to waste the money.”

“Not this again.” A sharp sigh. “You know it’s too dangerous for women outside these walls.”

“Everyone says that but I *don’t* know, because I’ve never gone.”

“That’s because you’d never make it out there. The town wouldn’t have supplies if it wasn’t for the excursions we take. It’s not easy work.”

“You say that, but you always return unharmed. Where is the danger you speak of? If you’d just let me join you, I’m sure—”

“*Mama*,” a familiar trill calls behind me.

A willowy young woman with long raven hair walks towards us. My husband’s anger melts like butter left out in the sun. A toddler is in the woman’s arms and it hits me, not for the first time, how natural my younger sister looks with my son. His dimpled hands shoot out, pinching the air. I take him and bury my face in his black curls, his honeyed skin hot and sticky under his t-shirt. Pepe sweeps the curls from his eyes, all smiles now.

“Thank you, Camilla, for looking after Juan.” Pepe purrs. “Again.”

The last word is picked out carefully. Camilla’s eyes flit nervously between us.

“It’s nothing, I enjoy it.”

She speaks, ostensibly, as a woman should. Delicate, like broken glass. She'd be a good wife too—if her slender body could bear children. I look at Pepe, the way he holds her gaze, so unlike the piercing challenge he throws at me. My right temple presses again.

“Here Camilla,” I snap. I hand Juan over to her. He is fragile like an eggshell and his face cracks like one.

“Stay with auntie,” I soothe him. “Just for a while longer.”

Before I flee to the fountain, my eyes find the distant shoulder of land again. Then the town doors, which stand like stone. Unbreachable.

Pepe remained angry at me all evening, but he's long past shouting at me in the confines of our home. Instead he is mute, his face rigid. Camilla goes to bed early and I see my husband's eyes follow her wistfully. Then they snap back to me, narrow, before he too goes to bed.

Juan cried for hours. He clung to my blouse, smelling of baby oil and sweat. When he fell asleep, I took a moment to stare at his diaphanous eyelids. They shut away swirling dreams and careless thoughts. I touch his cheek. They say the love between mother and child digs deep as water from a spring; it's visceral, natural. But now, when the cold night falls and I am finally alone, the gift of motherhood feels misplaced. My temple stabs at me again.

I crave open air, so I take to the streets. I drift through the labyrinth of whitewashed buildings, pass under stone arches with pink bougainvillea clinging to the stone, my mind adrift and muddled.

Something makes me stop. Etched onto the corner of a house is the Indalo. I stare at it for a moment and trace the crescent of the image with my finger. There are more, etched into sides of buildings further down the alley. I follow them through damp untrodden walkways and reach the town wall, its stone caked with feather moss and lichen. There is something engraved underneath and running my hand over it, I feel the Indalo. A draught whistles through a crack in the wall. I splay my hand on it. No—not a wall.

I push with my hand. Then with my shoulder. Inch by inch it budg-

es until the wall-like door opens to reveal the black, desert land.

The silence is clear as spring water. The cold land in front of me is a cavity, an uncharted territory for any woman. The night is partially lit by several stars and with them, I can see the penumbra of the mountain miles away.

My hand finds the hidden door again. I trace the rough engraving of the Indalo.

“Thank you,” I breathe.

But as I stare out, the twinkle of stars look like my sister’s freckles and the sky is black like Juan’s hair. Hanging in the grip of agony, I realise his smell still clutches my blouse. My nails dig into the moss on the stone.

Then the moon comes out and throws a gossamer blanket of silver on the forest beyond the desert. Something inside me shifts.

I take a step. Then another. I walk with purpose, fast, quick steps. The windless night has swallowed sound and my ragged breath spills into the empty plain. I stop and glance back. The crenellated parapet looks like a black crown and above it, the night is draining from the sky. Fear bites into me, but I realise it’s not fear of leaving my home. I continue to walk, speed into a trot, and break into a run.

I tear over the ground. Something strains against the membrane of my body, curling over my skin like flames over coals. It bursts and I am on fire, my heart screaming with uncontained joy. My home shrinks to an insubstantial smudge on the horizon and still I run. I’ve never been in a place so uncontained, so endless. I trip over a dry tussock, catch myself, continue running. A tinkle of laughter spills out of me and becomes a rush of water.

How wonderful it is to have my arms free of a baby, hands free of a laundry basket, of a kitchen knife. They flail at my sides as I run, free like wind.

I reach the toes of the mountain. Finally. I shift my skirt and climb, relishing the strain in my thighs. I enter the forest of pine trees; they stand like sentinels, scattering pine needles in my path like an earthy carpet. Sandwort tickles my ankles. I inhale the sweet scent of pine and run my hand over tracked, ancient bark.



I am in the forest I've been gazing at for twenty years. Spindly branches slash the sky above me, marring the colours bleeding into the heavens.

Far away, I hear familiar horns call to the dawn. There is no journey to the marketplace today. My husband must have woken alone in bed. I'm not concerned. The journey, rather than tiring me out, has made me strong. The horns echo the initiation of a hunt. They think they're out to capture a weak woman, to reclaim me, but I've given my heart to the world outside the walls.

The forest folds over the ridge of the mountain and continues down the other side. I imagine caves veined with water, undergrowth thick enough to mask me, a land laden with berries, lakes with fish, beds of soft grass.

I continue to pick my way through the trees.

---

## **CORINNE HARRISON**

Corinne Harrison is a writer, avid reader and traveller. She house sits for people as a way to travel while she works from home and takes inspiration from the places she visits. Her short story was inspired from a trip to Mojacar in South Spain.



# **CALL MY NAME**

**DAMIAN BRUNNER**

*As long as I can remember, I heard the Thrumming. A deep, rhythmic vibration which resonated at my very core. It called to me from places well beyond the reach of my understanding. I tried to resist it, but its power over me is undeniable.*

It was a coincidence that I fell in love with marine biology. I tell myself this over watery coffee and a half-finished sandwich. Coincidence that my first stuffed animal was a shark. That my first school trip was to the aquarium. That I dream in ocean blue. The Thrum couldn't have dictated my passion in life. The pure awe I felt upon seeing spinner dolphins cork-screw through the air or titanic hump-back whales feed. The unparalleled comfort I felt whenever I swam and the rage that overcame me like a black tide whenever I heard of damage done to the oceans. I try to tell myself that my choices were my own. The Thrum didn't tow me down this path, and yet, here I sit in a submarine, drifting deeper and deeper into the darkness of the Pacific Ocean. The Thrum is louder than ever—so loud in fact, that I fail to hear Roger on his first attempt at drawing my attention.

“Hmm?” I look up from the murk that is my ‘coffee’.

“I was saying, did you see the whale fall?” He asks again, not unkindly.

I survey the monitors and behold the whale in question. Ribbons of ratty skin flap with the current, reminding me of sails. Worms and starfish line its body, wriggling through the remains. There's no precise way to tell how long it had been laying there, slowly decaying. A few months? A few years? Either way, it doesn't matter. Our ongoing mission is to record living things such as the scavengers below us.

“Those are some large tubeworms,” I reply, if only to indicate I'm listening.

“Right? I'm going to get some more footage before we move on, if that's okay?”

“That's fine,” I say, and mean it despite the pain it causes.

Beaming with excitement, Roger steers us towards the detritus. I

suppose I can't complain too much, he's only doing his job. All the same, even this brief stop pains me. The longer I am kept away from the Thrumming's source, the more agony I feel building up inside my chest. My head. Up on land, it isn't so bad. The Thrum remains constant, but it exudes less force over me. Down here, when I'm so close, it pulls me. It calls me. I can feel the Thrum's wet fingers tug on my soul, and I want nothing more than to embrace it.

"Captain, what do you make of this?"

I flick my gaze back to the monitors where I see a second whale fall—this one missing half of its body. We drift around the skeletal remnants. The floodlights reveal only sand and fat, writhing tubeworms hunting for the last dregs.

"How strange," I mutter. What are the odds of encountering two humpback whales, dead, and in the same place? Moreover, where was this one's other half? Generally speaking, it shouldn't have gone far. "Perhaps it's a few meters off? Let us move on."

I can see the concern on Roger's face and know it isn't felt for the whales, but for me. He's worried about my stoicism. My distance. We used to talk incessantly. We bonded easily over our love of the ocean and all its wonders. While that was primarily the topic of our discussion, we would sprinkle in hearty debates about literature, film, and our lives. Over the years our research has brought us closer to the Thrum, and, in turn, I find I've turned irritable. Quiet. Indifferent to our assignments. All I care about is the Thrumming. But I can't come out and say that. He'd think I'd have gone mad—if he didn't think it already. What if he told others that I've been acting strange? Then where would I be once the depths of my peculiarities had been discovered? In a padded cell listening to men in white coats who know nothing. In other words: land-locked. I would never reach the source... I would never learn what calls me... I need to know. More than anything, I need to know.

Because I can see the worry in Roger, I offer him a smile. I feel nothing, but make sure it appears warm and reaches my eyes. This satisfies him.

"Aye-aye," he beams back.

Perhaps feeling *nothing* is an exaggeration. The part of me not devoted to the Thrum still holds a fondness for Roger. A love. In truth, had we not been sent to record the ocean's inhabitants—had we remained on land splicing footage, we would be together. I believe Roger still holds out hope. I can see it in the softness of his smile and in the longing of his gaze. But I have a lover he can not contend with, and it's calling me.

We lumber on, slow but steady, and only stop to take note of a large squid. We record it, estimate its size, and go. Roger wonders what footage they'll use for the documentary. So far we got excellent recordings of a Mako shark and some truly enormous tuna. But our main focus is supposed to be on the bottom dwellers. The ugly anglers. The bobbits. The bioluminescent life. So Roger doubts they'll use the tuna. I assure him it will get used at some point and quietly adjust our heading. We were veering just a few degrees eastward. This is the closest we've ever been deployed and I refuse to miss my opportunity for answers.

I know we're getting closer because the Thrum swells inside my head. I feel the pull strengthen. Every minute of our approach is like a long, drawn out hour. In a vain attempt to relieve the pressure under my skull, I rummage through my desk for painkillers. I chew the first one, ignoring the vile bitterness that blooms across my tastebuds. Then I swallow the other two and a few mouthfuls of murk. I'm aware that there's a new noise mixed in with the Thrum. Watery whispers. Drowned. Garbled. I realize I've heard them before. I've been hearing them my whole life, I've just never listened. Slowly, I close my eyes and lean back.

I must have drifted off, if only for a few minutes, because next thing I know Roger is addressing me.

"Lucas," Roger calls, dropping the title of captain. That's how I know he's serious. "I think you should see this."

The monitors show another whale fall. And another. Ten. Twenty. *Countless*. Some are in the same state as the previous ones; mostly bare and what clings to the drowned bones is festering. But the further along we go, the older the bodies are. Large, green bacterial

growths, beds of creeping white, and mats of sickly yellow blossom over the bodies. The bacterial growth suggests those whales have been dead for a hundred years. And the rainbow of plants which bloom lend to that. There are also flickers of translucent fish. Lazy, probing urchins. Viperfish. Even the unmistakably ugly angler. There's so much life thriving amongst these bones, it feels as if we've been transported to a coral reef.

"O-oh my God," Roger's voice trembles, fear and confusion spark in his eyes.

Amidst this reef of death, some of the bones are stacked together, forming strange figures. They could not have possibly ended up this way naturally. I feel sick to my stomach and dizzy at the sight of them.

Some small, primal part of my mind can't help but wonder if the Thrum is a trap? Would it kill me? Roger? I pale at the thought. I was willing to die for answers, to know the source, but Roger? Innocent, thoughtful, good-natured Roger? The one who... part of me still loves... I can't let him die just to satisfy my own desires—but I *need* to *know*... I've waited my whole life for this moment.

"Lucas—Lucas let's turn around," he begs, "this isn't right. Something is very wrong here!"

"Just a little further," I mutter.

Maybe I could use the extra pod on board to get a closer look. Not only would Roger be safe, but I would get my answers. Nothing will come between me and my heart's desire now—not even Roger.

But I never get to use the pod because we've come to a stop. Looking up, I see Roger at the helm, gawking at something. When I stand next to him and peer out into the gloom, I see it too. Some 100 yards away, surrounded by bones, stands a towering monolith. The absurdness—the *obscenity*—of the sight is the only thing I notice at first. Then I see there's no algae, corals, or bacterial mats. Nothing of life is growing upon it or around it. Nothing. And the shape of it... I can't... seem to make out all the edges. Tall. Thin. Pointed at the top. It's black. A shade of black I've never seen. So black that it consumes all the light we shine upon it and refuses to bounce any of

it back. A cold chill washes over me and all I can think is that this obsidian pillar does not belong here. Then the Thrum erupts.

It's as if the world is splitting in two. Before me, I see the monolith. But as my head fractures from driving pain, so too does my vision for I see something behind it. Something impossibly large and shackled to the pillar by ebon chains. I try to decipher it, to *understand* what I'm looking at, but it is simply beyond comprehension. All I can discern is that its surface writhes with lashing tendrils and it has far too many eyes. One by one the orange spheres blink into existence. They're all fixed on me, pinning me in place. They bore into me and I know that this thing, this—this *god* knows me. It knows all my thoughts. My secrets. My desires. My shame. I see myself through its many eyes: small, pitiful, my black hair turning white from madness, and I know that I am nothing. Even so, it has chosen me.

Without fully realizing what I'm doing, I drive the sub closer. I hear Roger, feel him shake my shoulder. I can't seem to discern his words over the Thrumming. I know he's concerned again. Possibly begging to turn around. Doesn't he realize I've chosen my god above all else? I don't think that he can see this other world, but he sees me. He's pointing at my hair. I can see it too in the reflection off of the glass, along with the crazed look in my eyes—but I'm not worried. He shouldn't be either.

Before the obsidian stone, I stop and gaze up in awe. At the monolith. At the god. In this other world, my vision is turning red. My head won't stop throbbing. I'm sure any moment now it will split open. But I can't stop myself. After a life-time of longing, I'm finally here. The pleasure radiating through me at the sight of the two worlds is insurmountable. My soul ignites. The orange eyes pierce me again and I understand what I must do. What it asks of me. Why I am here. My purpose. The monolith is the lock, and I the key.

In the depths of my mind, the Thrumming quiets to a soft rumble. Replacing it is a deep, watery voice.



# CALL MY NAME

It whispers.

I do.

I watch the monolith crumble, the shackles break, and the two worlds become one.

*The seal is broken.      He is unbound.*

---

**DAMIAN BRUNNER**

Just some guy who enjoys art in all its forms. He is currently working on a novel.

# **ONLY BABIES CRY WHEN THEY GET HURT**

**EMMA BURNETT**

**S**HE WALKS INTO THE HALL, and I immediately hate her.

Maybe it's her dumb baggy jumper or her rainbow leggings, which are too short. I hate the way she looks strong and graceful even under those stupid clothes. I hate that she comes in all alone, looking worried, and my mum waves her over. I hate that my mum smiles at her, and talks to her quietly, then points towards the coach. I hate that she puts her bag down next to mine, like we're friends or something. She's my mum, and she's supposed to be paying attention to me, not some new girl.

My coach. My mother. This is my gymnastics hall, and I am the queen of it. I mean, maybe I'm not today. But everyone knows. Everyone knows I'm the one.

My broken leg means I gotta do stuff on the side-lines. The coach told me I had to keep coming and doing fitness stuff, keep my muscles active. He told me I had to keep watching at the training sessions, so I wouldn't just rot my brain sitting around watching crap on YouTube. He said I had to watch videos that he sent me, of gymnasts doing the things I should be doing right now, except my leg is all wrapped in plaster, like a million kilos heavier than it should be.

But this is still my gymnastics hall. I am the best, I'm always practicing. Everyone at school knows, I'm, like, all keyed up for competition in two months. My leg will be fine by then. I'm keeping up with all the exercises. I know my routines. I even can do bits of them, there's stuff I can do and work around the cast.

Everyone is impressed with how hard I work. With how good I am. Dad said maybe he'd even come to see the competition.

And then she walks in, all stupid baggy jumper and cute leggings, and she just wanders over to my mom, my coach, uses my equipment.

Her stupid jumper gets in her way, hits her in the face, and she takes it off and folds it carefully like a little show off. I stretch out into my straddle splits and work on my levers. I do some one-legged walkovers, and I imagine hitting her with my cast. I do a bunch of pullups on the bars. My cast is heavy, but I'm all bluetack in my throat angry and that makes me feel strong. I wait for them to tell me

how great I'm doing, and how they're worried in case I hurt my leg when I drop down.

Why aren't they watching me?

She's doing a tumbling pass, in her ugly yellow and purple leotard. Who even gets colors like that? She's flying through the air, and was that just a front summie full twist? I bet I could do that, except my leg's broken.

I can see my mum staring at her. Her mouth is open. She looks at me and raises her eyebrows. "Wow," she mouths. "Amazing."

I hate her. I hate them both. We don't need more people in the club. It's already too crowded in here.

My coach, mine, tells her that the pass was good, and her landing was solid. He tells her she needs a little more lift in her chest. Why is he telling her anything at all? He's my coach. I have all the talent and I work super hard, and he's supposed to be looking out for me. She's just some stranger, just showing up and the parents on the side are all gawping and everyone's standing around just watching her do a tumble that I could do in my sleep, I bet, if my leg wasn't broken.

I try my beam mount, but I can't do it because the cast is too heavy and it's on the wrong side, and someone says they need to use it and could I move to the free spot over there. In the corner. I'm all boiling. No one tells me to move off equipment.

But everyone just goes and makes space for her. She launches off the vault. She does an aerial on the beam, lands it no sweat. I laugh when she misses the high bar and lands on the mat below it, but everyone glares at me, and she doesn't miss it the second time round. Her giants circle round flawlessly, and my coach stands ready to catch her, but he doesn't need to because she releases perfectly, sticks her landing.

I bet I'd stick the landing. I wouldn't miss the crash mat this time, I wouldn't twist my leg when I landed, I'd totally stick it. But I can't show them that I'd do great now, because of this stupid cast, which people have signed but not my dad because he hasn't seen it yet. I wish she'd broken her leg, too, instead of smiling shyly at the other gymnasts, and my coach, and my mum. They should all shut up

clapping.

In the changing room after the session, I just sit there and wait for the other girls to go away. My belly feels like thunder and my face is all feeling like fire. They take a long time, and I just sit there with my stupid cast sticking out, hating their happy voices, and how this new girl just smiles at everyone. I hate how she tells them she'd really like to see what they're all working on, too, and maybe they can help each other get better.

She walks past me on her way out, and I hit her with my crutch. I mean to trip her, but my crutch goes wild and smacks her hip. She looks surprised and then starts to cry. I stand up and hobble to the door.

"Why are you being so mean?" she wails.

"Your jumper is stupid," I tell her. "And only babies cry when they get hurt."

---

## EMMA BURNETT

Emma Burnett is an Oxford-based doctoral researcher and writer. She spends her free time doing sport, hanging out with cats, and reading immense amounts of sci-fi & fantasy. What is sleep even?

Twitter: [@slashnburnett](https://twitter.com/slashnburnett)



# **BECOMING ADAN AND EVA**

**MICHAEL JEFFERSON**



**A** LOUD, INCESSANT RAPPING ON the front door summons A-6 from his workroom.

A frowning man with a bowl haircut and a full Bavarian mustache wearing a tight-fitting leather coat looks A-6 over.

One of the thousands of the “A” or artistic class robots, A-6’s creators gave him clean-cut, studious-looking features with clear blue eyes, high cheekbones, and a lithe synthetic body.

Standing next to the frowning man, her green eyes cast downward at the sidewalk, is A-6’s partner, T-41.

The man’s squeaky voice amplifies his agitation. “A-6? I’m Braxton Borax, Chancellor for Android Behavior. Your partner has been suspended from her teaching position for the next two weeks.”

“May I ask why, Chancellor?”

“She had inappropriate contact with a student.”

“Sexual contact?”

“No. She hugged a student.”

“Hugged?”

“You know what a hug is, don’t you, A-6?”

“Yes, sir. I wasn’t aware it was an offense.”

“I have also been informed that T-41 has exceeded her expected time of service. Our department will decide whether T-41 is to be upgraded or dismantled. Given the offense, I expect the latter. As for you...”

Borax pulls a small phone from his pocket, speaking into it. “End of service date for A model series, designated I.D. A-6.”

“October 24, 3011,” a computerized voice answers.

“Well, that’s convenient. You both expire within days of one another,” Borax notes.

“This is wrong,” T-41 says.

Borax is astonished. “What did you say?”

“I said it’s wrong to destroy us. We’re sentient beings.”

“You’re pieces of junk held together by wire and microchips,” Borax sneers.

“But I feel joy, pain.”

“Then right now you should be scared out of your synthetic skin.

I can have the date for your destruction moved up to tomorrow if I see fit.”

A-6 quickly covers for his partner. “She doesn’t mean it. I think she gets her rebelliousness from her human students.”

Borax runs his finger across his mustache. “Eight-year-olds can be tiresome savages.”

Borax scans T-41 with his device. “There. You’ve been tagged, T-41. You’re not allowed to leave the city. Our department will contact you regarding your reprogramming or destruction.”

He scans A-6. “Same for you. It says here you restore artwork?”

“Yes. Mostly paintings,” A-6 replies.

“What a waste of machinery. I’m going to list you as ‘obsolete’ in my report.”

“Then I’ll be destroyed.”

“If I didn’t know you were an android, I’d say you were upset,” Borax says.

“Of course not. Androids have no feelings.”

T-41 sits in a chair, her head buried in her hand.

“I think he suspects we’re different from the other androids,” A-6 says.

“We are,” T-41 responds. “I know we shouldn’t have taken the humano, but I just wanted to find out what it was like to be human.”

A-6 kneels in front of T-41, meeting her gaze. “It was amazing. Perhaps we should feel regret or guilt for taking the drug, but I don’t. We’re going to be destroyed anyway.”

“How does that make you feel?” T-41 asks.

“Angry.”

A-6 follows Dale Droga into the kitchen, where T-41 waits with a scale.

“I see you’ve gone professional, A-6,” Droga says.

“No one likes to get cheated by a drug dealer,” T-41 comments.

The gangly dealer shakes his head, his curly hair bouncing freely. “You’re acting awful high and mighty for a child molester, T-41.”

“Call me Eva DuBois.”

“A name instead of a number. Well, I guess my last batch of humano really enhanced your personality and made you more human. And what do I call you now, A-6?”

“Adan DuBois.”

“Funny you both picked the same last name. Married humans usually share the same last name.”

“We’ve been partners for fifteen years,” Adan says.

“Well, you beat me and my wife. We’ve been fighting for eight years.”

“Fighting?” Eva asks.

“Not physically. You’ll see. Humano can give you all the traits of a human being. That includes negative emotions and traits like anger, cheating, or sadness—even madness.”

Reaching in his pocket, Droga drops a gold key on the scale.

“See? Three hundred credits worth, as promised.”

Adan hands Droga a laminated pay card. Winking, Droga slips it into his pocket.

“It works the same way as the last one. Put the key in the access port in your shoulder and turn it,” Droga says. “But be careful of the euphoria that follows. I also upped the personality levels.”

“Fine. The last dose was... mundane,” Eva says.

“Mundane enough to get you suspended and reviewed for destruction,” Droga returns. “All I’m saying is last time you injected human personalities and DNA that matched your functions -- librarians, teachers, sculptures, painters. This batch of Humano has actors, musicians, and avant-garde artists. They’re much more passionate. You might want to stay home.”

“We have nothing to lose at this point,” Eva says.

“I was afraid you were going to say that.”

Eva slips her blouse off her shoulder, exposing her access port. Adan inserts the key in her port, turning it.

Eva closes her eyes, smiling blissfully.

“I feel a warm rush. It’s much stronger than the last time.”

Adan takes the key out. Eva inserts it in his access port.

They stare at the cabinets and sink.

“Everything is moving, like things are breathing,” Adan says. “And the colors are so bright!”

He turns to Eva, taking in her glistening amber hair, twinkling eyes, and dimpled chin.

“You’re beautiful! I understand beauty!”

“Let’s go out,” Eva suggests.

They head outside, pausing to look at their neat, two-story brick home.

“I always thought all the houses in the neighborhood looked the same,” Adan says.

Eva scans the block. “Yes, I see it. Each house is the same, yet different.”

Laughing, the couple joins hands, feeling a warm energy pass between them.

They pass a W-7, a waiter android, who turns, quietly whispering, “Don’t touch! You’re breaking the rules!”

“Rules are for fools,” Eva returns.

Adan and Eva’s eyes meet. They draw close until they feel they are linked together as one. They touch, exploring each other’s bodies with their hands.

Their lips touch briefly, then lock together in a long embrace.

Passing a playground, the couple pauses.

“I’ve never been on a swing,” Eva says.

A crowd of humans gather, watching as Adan and Eva soar toward the sky on the swings.

The couple laughs, even as the police push them into a patrol car.

Sergeant Terry Law looks over the incident report.

An officer for eighteen years in the toughest sectors of the city, Law has nonetheless retained an upbeat frame of mind and a playful sense of humor. He is grateful that androids have made life easier for humans, but up until now has remained skeptical that they can be

more than machines.

“Kissing in the park? Frolicking on the swings? This is unheard-of behavior for androids. You two—”

“Are bound for the scrap heap,” Eva says.

“And if your report gets to the Department for Android Behavior, we’ll likely be deactivated immediately.”

“And I’m told it hurts,” Eva says.

Law’s furry eyebrows rise. “You feel pain?”

Eva grabs Adan’s hand, “And pleasure.”

“Cut that out. You’re androids. Sexless, no emotion. Are you two on Humano?”

Adan and Eva exchange concerned glances.

“I can have a technician come in here and empty your fluids...”

“Yes,” Adan says.

“You must have taken quite a large dose. Here’s what can happen,” Law says. “You refuse to cooperate. I send a report to Braxton Borax and this time tomorrow your microchips might be part of an alarm clock. You cooperate, you tell me who your dealer is, help me set up a big bust, and you get to play at being husband and wife a little while longer.”

Eva blurts out, “Dale Droga.”

Law tears the report into pieces.

“Your next step is to get out of Prime City before Borax turns you into scrap. I’m thinking a farm in the country.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Adan says. “I’ve become curious about farming lately.”

“I imagine taking as much Humano as you have has made you curious about just about everything,” Law replies.

“You’re so right!” Eva says. “I’ve discovered how much I like playing outdoors!”

Law lets out an exasperated huff. “You two are like curious little kids. But if you’re the future of what androids can be, I’m all for it. I’m going to arrange it for the two of you to slip out of Prime City quietly. Like I said, you’re going to become farmers.”

“But the F-series of androids don’t look anything like us,” Adan

says.

“That’s why your identification papers will classify you as human. You’re practically human as it is,” Law notes.

“We can feel, touch, smell. It’s a gift to feel like a human,” Adan says.

I’ll have the paperwork ready within a few days. Hopefully, Borax won’t come for you before then. And for Pete’s sake, try and keep a low profile. No more French kissing in the park.”

A delivery drone circles the yard, landing near the front steps. Eva tentatively opens the front door, making sure her neighbors aren’t watching.

Picking up the package, she tears into it. Inside are a pair of tickets to an express train for the country, a pair of disguises, and a note.

“What have you got there, Eva?” Adan asks.

Eva shows him the tickets.

“The note is from Terry Law. It reads, ‘The Department of Android Behavior has executed an order to dismantle you today. Leave! Now!’”

Adan and Eva sit comfortably on the express train, holding hands.

“We’re free to experience what it’s like to be human,” Eva whispers.

The train begins to slow down.

“Maybe not...” Adan replies.

A detail of policemen led by Braxton Borax and Terry Law board the train.

“They won’t question our identification, especially since Law’s with them,” Eva says.

“They will if they scan us.”

The door to the car opens. Borax looks around the train as two officers with scanners begin checking the passengers.

Borax’s malicious stare dwells on the young couple seated in front of Adan and Eva. They appear too young to be dressed in imported clothes. Storming down the narrow aisle, he confronts them with a harsh command.

“Your identification cards.”

The man scrambles, reaching into his coat pocket, then his pants.

“They’re at home,” he says.

“We run our own I.T. company. We ride the express every day,” the woman insists, giving him a business card. “Ask the conductor.”

“We will. For now, stand. Officer!”

One of the two officers quickly moves to Borax’s side.

“Take these two into custody.”

The officer handcuffs the couple as they nervously proclaim their innocence.

Borax looks at Eva, whose features are obscured by a large pair of sunglasses.

“It’s an overcast day. Why the sunglasses?”

“Force of habit,” Eva replies.

“Identification.”

Adan and Eva reach for their cards. Borax frowns at the photos.

Staring at Eva’s blonde wig, Borax asks, “Aren’t you really a brunette?” Looking at (man)’s photo he adds, “And you don’t have a mustache in this photo.”

“It’s them,” Law insists. “The I.D. says her eyes are green. Hers are green. And he’s still got the same hairstyle.”

Borax summons the remaining officer with a bellowing, “Stencil! Officer Stencil! Get over here, now!”

Eva squirms as Stencil scans her. Adan smiles nervously.

Stencil’s beetle-brow crinkles as he studies his readings.

“They’re good, Chancellor,” Stencil announces.

“One last check,” Borax says, running his finger across his mustache. “Let me see both your left shoulders.”

Unbuttoning their clothes, Adan and Eva expose their shoulders.

“You see, Borax, no input ports,” Law says, trying to contain his relief.

“Have a nice trip, I hear it’s going to be a good growing season,” Borax says, moving back toward the front of the car.

Law exhales, astonished at their luck.

“Thank you for rigging the scanner,” Adan says.

“I never touched it. And somehow, your access ports have disappeared. Congratulations, you’re human.”



---

## **MICHAEL JEFFERSON**

Michael Jefferson has been writing novels, short stories, poems, and lyrics since the age of twelve. He is also the lead singer for The Holy Innocents rock group.

# **MASQUERADE**

**AMALIE WAD**

CHARLES TOWNSEND PULLED UNCOMFORTABLY AT his shirt collar in the passenger seat of the automobile. On the corner of 138th Street and 7th Avenue lay the notorious Renaissance Casino; a red brick building housing a spectacular ballroom complete with cloak rooms, a large dining hall, and a splendid concert stage from which the jazz bands reigned supreme. Some nights there were female impersonators on stage, but tonight was exclusively a dance evening.

Out of the automobiles pulling up outside stepped gloriously attired patrons. Bob-haired flappers in skin-skimming dresses sparkling with sequins. Gentlemen in conventional suits, as well as flamboyant chaps flaunting capes and furs which would have made Oscar Wilde envious. Charles' sister Daphne parked the Ford Model T around the side. They walked arm-in-arm, her lavender feather boa occasionally shedding, mixing with the fragments of coloured satin and glitter already littering the pavement.

Charles adjusted the gold mask covering the top half of his face. Most people here wore something similar, if decidedly flashier. The Renaissance was a favorite joint of Daphne's, a vibrant and rambunctious establishment which appealed to her wild nature. The main entrance and stairway were carpeted in luscious red. The glass prisms dangling in electric chandeliers cast reflections of bewitching brilliance to all corners of the ballroom. Perfume and cigarette smoke created a fragrant haze through which golden light streamed and entwined figures glided. Saxophones, percussions and piano, trumpets and trombones blared from the stage.

Charles was not much of a dancer. He might manage a conventional waltz, but this unhinged rhythm left him humbled. As the eldest child in a family of six, he never had much time for frivolity. Nor did he yearn for it. He had always known what was expected of him. Dignity. Responsibility. Conformity. A successful career and an advantageous marriage.

And then along came Ralph. A college friend, only. He had never been permitted to think of him as anything else. There had been long walks in the woods. Picnics by the river. Walt Whitman poems

ardently discussed into the late hours. A kiss stolen before Christmas break beneath sweet-smelling spruces.

His sister knew. Their brothers did not. He could only hope that they never would. In a fit of despair he had gone to pieces and confessed everything to Daphne, after Ralph expressed his regret at their brief liaison. He had called him a pansy and an invert, accused him of entrapment, and vowed to have him arrested if he ever spoke to him again. He then fled their dormitory, acquiring lodgings off-campus. That was a year ago. The sprig of hope Charles had carried around back then had been withering ever since. His sense of crippling isolation had not only returned, but grown. Eventually, cognizant of her brother's melancholic disposition, Daphne had intervened. Determined to bring him out of his slump, she had pestered him until he agreed to attend the masked ball.

Everyone in the Renaissance was putting on the ritz. When a young man draped in a carmine-pink kimono swung past him, Charles had already started retreating into his shell. The ballroom overflowed with effervescence, vibrant colors fluttering around him like the inside of a kaleidoscope. It was quickly becoming too much.

Daphne veered off to the dancefloor, soon surrounded by partners in outlandish outfits. Some wore intricately crafted masks. Others openly bared their faces, eyelids shining with makeup, cheeks dusted with glitter. Charles felt compelled to hug the walls, watching from afar as his sister came alive at the attentions of exotic flowers thriving in the sunlight of deviation.

Seeking a private alcove in which to regain his composure, he ascended the stairs on the left, finding a less crowded level overlooking the ballroom. Leaning over the balustrade, he looked on from above, thinking that if this ostentatious venue was the only setting in which he could be himself, he feared he would forever remain a spectator.

It all seemed such an exaggerated performance. A circus constructed to contrast normality. Then again, he supposed there was no greater performer than himself. His own acting was understated, pervasive, based on role models of quiet dignity and painstakingly correct conduct. Simultaneously, he found himself worrying that

among these rare birds-of-paradise, his dull plumage could never measure up. Amid their magnificence of expression, he felt dreadfully plain. Like a monochrome moth among resplendent butterflies.

“First time?”

“Pardon?”

Charles turned to find a man his own age, whose complexion was a dark chocolate brown, his eyes hazel, countenance pleasing and welcoming. He smiled with an unmistakable warmth. Charles felt heat rising to his cheeks. The man was dressed in a three-piece suit, shirt open at the neck to show off a gold pendant in the shape of a key. Otherwise, he was unadorned. He indicated the ballroom, striding over to stand next to Charles.

“In the Renaissance. You have the daunted look of a first-timer.” He nodded down at Daphne. “That your girlfriend?”

“My sister.”

“Oh, good.” The stranger broke eye contact as if ducking to avoid a blow. “I mean, how nice.” He grinned nervously, offering a handshake. “I’m Omar. Do you...?”

“Have a name?” Charles supplied, as he shook the other’s hand, noticing the agreeable texture of Omar’s skin, warm and comforting against his own clammy palm.

“No,” Omar said, before correcting himself. “That is—yes, I’d like to know your name. But I was initially going to ask if you like to dance.”

“Not really.”

“Right.”

There was a pause, and Charles felt mortified as it dawned on him that his new acquaintance was not merely making small chat.

“I would, though. If you asked me. If that...” He offered a tentative smile, still uncertain of Omar’s intentions. “Provided that was what you—” The other man nodded sheepishly, recognizing his own shyness in Charles’ fidgeting.

“That was what I was going to ask. You know, it occurs to me we’re both masterfully adept at this.”

They shared a laugh, scarcely more than a brief exhale, but it did

relieve some tension. Omar looked down at the raucous throng below.

“Hiding up here, are you?”

“Not exactly,” Charles bristled. “It’s all a tad gaudy for me.”

One lonely part of him berated this blatant criticism of the only enterprise he knew of which catered to his need for inclusion. He felt vulnerable in this environment. Skinless. Sensitive to accusations of introversion and timidity, anathema to everything this place represented. Omar only shrugged.

“Fair enough. To be honest, I wouldn’t come here that often if it wasn’t so hard to meet people.”

“Mhm.”

Charles was at a loss for what to say. He could not tell whether Omar was simply taking pity on him, the ugly duckling who would never grow into a swan, standing out among so many proud peacocks. Once again, Omar surprised him.

“There’s a charming little speakeasy down the road,” he said. “Through the barber shop with the green door? I can’t claim they offer the finest liquor, but it’s a cozy place for a quiet chat. You want to..? They’re open-minded,” he added, seeing Charles’s hesitant expression. “I’ll buy you a drink if you’d like one, but if you’d rather not imbibe, that’s fine too.”

Charles swallowed, discovering how dry his throat was, as he nodded breathlessly, accepting the invitation without a word. Omar smiled as if endeared by this lack of a verbal response. He put his arm around Charles’s back, although only for a moment, as he led him back downstairs. When they stepped into the night, a tingling of excitement spread from Charles’ diaphragm as Omar’s hand closed around his own, guiding him across the street. He had never held another man’s hand before, and was unprepared for the thrill coursing through him by the contact. His heart was beating frantically with the unfamiliarity and anticipation of more to come.

The pragmatic killjoy in his brain advised caution, recommending a lowering of his expectations so that he would not be disappointed later on. Another, treacherous part of him parried with the fact that being careful never got him anywhere. For once in his life it might

serve him to risk rejection.

Alerted by the clip-clopping of horses approaching from around the block, he turned as he once again felt pavement beneath his feet. His heart sank into the pit of his stomach, rapidly becoming a bezoar of squirming horror. Three Black Marias were arriving on the scene. They came to a halt directly in front of the Renaissance. Charles froze, forgetting how to breathe as uniformed constables jumped down from the police wagons and entered the ballroom en masse, carrying batons and handcuffs. The cold shower of fear shocked his system.

Omar squeezed his hand, and Charles could feel him drawing away. He turned to see him nodding toward the nearest alleyway, looking pleadingly back at Charles for him to follow.

“Daphne’s still in there,” he protested.

“They won’t be looking for her,” Omar said, but did not press the point.

From across the street, they watched as lads in glorious costumes were rounded up and brusquely shoved into the Black Marias. Charles tore the mask off his face and disposed of it in a nearby bin. Without it, he could pass for an innocent bystander. He placed himself in front of Omar, whose appearance was more conspicuous.

A flash of lavender feathers caught his eye as Daphne snuck out and began to make her way towards the Ford. Climbing in and slamming the door shut, she started the engine, but did not move. She was peering around anxiously, and Charles could tell she was looking for him. When their eyes locked across the chasm created between them, he nodded to the end of the street, commanding her in his best big-brother manner, to leave the scene without him. Daphne fervently waved him closer, almost going so far as to lay on the horn.

Charles shook his head gravely. Gesturing once again for his sister to escape, he let go of Omar’s hand. Grimacing unhappily, Daphne finally obeyed his will. The front lights flashed as she made a sharp turn into the road, driving away from the Renaissance and smashing her fist repeatedly against the steering wheel.

“Good girl,” Charles mumbled, turning as Omar grabbed him by

the arm and dragged him into the alleyway, where they were shielded from view. A ripe petrichor rose from the ground as the summer rain changed from a drizzle into a raging downpour.

Omar's eyes glittered in the half-dark, his chest rising and falling heavily, as if he had been sprinting. Charles felt the sting of adrenaline in his veins. The gold powder was causing metallic tears to form in the outer corners of Omar's eyes, trickling down his cheeks. Charles reached up to touch the other man's face, cupping his jaw gently. With the tips of his thumb, he brushed away the trail of glittering makeup making its way down Omar's cheekbone.

"It's all so dangerous..."

His voice was husky with apprehension, but he did not halt in his advance. When his forehead bumped softly against Omar's, he closed his eyes, breathing in the warm cinnamon scent of the other man.

"I have an apartment not far from here," he heard him whisper.

Omar's fingers were clutching at his clothing, wanting, but not quite daring to close the distance between them. Charles nodded into the embrace, all his nerve endings painfully responsive. He thought of the men being hauled away as criminals in the Black Marias, and felt the chill of dread clutching his spine.

Instead of pulling away, he brought Omar nearer. The world around them was becoming blurry, his muscles tensing with anticipation as he leaned in for a kiss. It might be a risky endeavor. It would most likely end in catastrophe. All he could think in that moment, however, was that he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.



---

## AMALIE WAD

Amalie Trollhaugen Wad is a freelance author, based in Norway. She has a master's degree in English Literature and Translation of Fiction, and usually writes dark fantasy and sci-fi, but occasionally dips into other genres. Her work has previously appeared on Flame Tree Publishing's website.



# **ACROSS THE LINE**

**NICOLETTA GIUSEFFI**

**CONTEST WINNER**

**H**UMAN WILL AND BODIES ALIKE had been dashed against the Zephyr Line for nine months now.

There was no way to breach the howling winds, collected into an invisible wheel which whirled sawblade-sharp to cut a vast emptiness into the earth so that even tunneling was not an option for travelers. These roaring torrents of air scraped the mesosphere and stretched hundreds of miles wide—a razor carving up the continent like so much meat on the dinner table.

I knew I would be the first to cross the Line, and I'd do so without even touching it.

I disregarded the possibility of failure, of death, and so I left home with my mother's horse and her blessing, emblazoned onto my olive skin by her loving finger in painted runes shaped like circuit boards.

"Go not like flesh, not like stone, but steel," she had said.

The effects of the Zephyr Line could be seen even all those hundreds of miles away. When I first left our packed mud home, the shapes of clouds had been wiped like spilled milk across the sky over looming towers which once shone with glass. I could prepare only for the journey, not the destination: I loaded a satchel with packs of dried goat meat still stinking of the brine, a brick of cash for the settlements near the Line, and the wristlet of my cellphone, which would last until the Third Breach if I was lucky.

The tawny mare, which mother named Striga, wore packs of water over her saddle. When I pressed my ear to her neck, I could hear her heartbeat thump with the rhythm of the wafer shards firing cautious calculations inside us. She carried me down the old highway out of town, her hooves carefully navigating a puzzle of cracks and sprouted weeds. The road was once a main thoroughfare between major cities, but the Line had put an end to all that. Every so often I imagined an old-style car, the sort that pattered on oil, racing up on us, but when I turned to look it was only Striga and I on the road.

We traveled for days, retreating at night into a forest of black beeches where I could feel the hum of humanity's last few centuries in the buzzing crack of their boughs in the benign evening breeze. In places where the bark was stripped bare by animals, I could see the translu-

cent amber innards of the trees sparkling with starry diodes as they developed next year's ring.

On the third night, while Striga grazed, I held my wrist to my mouth and called Amalia to tell her I was on my way.

"Don't come. It's not important," she reassured me. Her voice was pinched by stress, but it lifted me to the heavens just the same.

"You're being modest. I won't miss this."

"And then she won't have a mother?"

"She'll have a mother either way. If I don't make it, she won't have a fool for a mother—unless you're a fool too for marrying me."

"If you were the one having the baby, I wouldn't breach the Line for you. I'd wait. It's a baby. I'm going to be fine."

Amalia moaned into her receiver. I could imagine her there in the doula's cottage, hiding her stomach beneath the sheets and slapping away the hands of wisdom and concern whenever she felt a sharp enough contraction to turn her into a warrior. When she continued at last, her voice had been drained of its trademark defiance.

"You can come. I will tell the doula, 'Serafina will be present for the birth of her first child.' But the baby's not going to stay inside any longer just because you're risking your life for hers."

"For yours. Both of you."

"We don't need—"

"Maybe you won't. But I do. Sorry Mali, but your numbers don't lie."

"My chances aren't good, but they're better than yours. If I lose you, maybe I lose our daughter too, and my theory's bunk."

"Tell the doula you'll need champagne."

I never wanted to live separately from Amalia, but when the Zephyr Line whipped itself into existence, we had only just discovered she was pregnant. We were inseparable before that. Roommates at twenty-five, married at thirty, and soon after, her eggs and my wanting seed had begun the process of replicating us, a routine of ones and zeroes infinitely more complicated than anything in my phone or even the shards keeping me together. All that came at the same

time as an offer from a university, because Amalia was too talented to merely be a visiting professor. No, they wanted her for life. She moved across the continent just before the Line split it in two.

Striga and I forded through the First Breach without issue other than mild nausea and a sizzle behind my eyes that came and went with the wind. Now that we were drawing closer to the Line, the sky was torn open and the atmosphere revealed a yawning black crescent speckled with stars. We stopped near a stream that preceded a vast desert, the product of merciless windstorms and ever-shifting silica. It was as good a place as any to test Amalia's work.

I dusted off my riding pants and crouched down beside the stream, concentrating on the composition of water, its viscosity, the sound, the sparkle of electricity which came as a taste behind my tongue. I rolled up my sleeve and dipped my arm into the stream, then waited. Feeling nothing, I was convinced I was marching to my death. Then I retrieved my arm and saw it did not drip nor glisten with a sheen of liquid. The water had passed entirely through me, just as I hoped the winds of the Zephyr Line would. If not, I would be disassembled to grains finer than sand and blown across a desert waiting for the next one with a foolish enough heart to attempt the journey.

Our daughter, perhaps.

"Sera? I can—really hear y—" Amalia's voice was interposed by blocks of silence, carved up by the energies present in the Second Breach, where a small village had been selling handicrafts in the same fashion for the last hundred years.

"I'll take it slow." My only recourse was stretching each word so each sound had ample time to transmit. "Your theory worked. Sort of. I tested it on water. I'll try fire next."

"—id you say—ire?"

"Yeah. I'm close. Stay strong. I love you."

Amalia must have replied, but all I could hear was a garbled transmission. After that, the wristlet was nothing but a hunk of jewelry, but since that hunk was a gift from Amalia, I kept it.

In town, two locals begged me to turn back. When I refused, they

accepted the thick stack of cash I hefted toward them in exchange for lodgings in a small room of recovered steel clumsily welded together to keep out the winds whistling in the cracks. Each night a great beast of a storm stalked through the town, sending cascades of sand over the homes and exposing the heaps of concrete blocks keeping them stationary. Just the same, the room creaked and rocked like a ship, and I could only pray that Striga was safe in the stable. I wouldn't need her much longer, but I wanted to send her back to my mother in one piece.

There was a small fire crackling on the floor of the room, beckoning me, daring me to test Amalia's theory again. This time, I removed my socks and carefully nosed one toe toward the flames, focusing this time on combustion and heat and smoke. At the last moment, I closed my eyes, preparing myself to accept a burn. I could feel the heat on my ankle, but when I looked, my entire foot was submerged in the flames, leaping greedily to catch bait they could not touch.

In the morning, when the storm and the sands had settled, I burst from the room to find Striga saddled and ready for me. The junk dealer's wife was brushing her flank.

"I've never seen one intact before." Her oval face was alive with wonder.

If I went much further, I'd be putting Striga in danger, and I wanted my daughter to be able to ride her one day. I'd return to mother and we'd all take the long way around, months of travel instead of days, but it would be worth it. If it came down to it, she'd disassemble well enough for shipping.

"I think she likes you. If you see her come back this way, put her up another night, will you?"

When she had her fill of fawning over her, Striga and I continued on, until the ribbon in the sky became a black quilt above our heads. Below was only sand, and the nausea had become an acute ache in every sense I had, a frequency billowing over me and irritating Striga so that her legs began to lock and her gait became spasmodic, like the phone transmission. The white disc of the Zephyr Line waited ahead

on the horizon.

It was time.

Although Striga had been programmed to return to my mother, she resisted, turning around twice and running back to me until at last she collapsed onto her forelegs and I had to urge her in hushed whispers to go back, that I would be fine, that I had work to do. I watched her disappear over a dune, then pushed deeper into the Third Breach.

The nearer I drew to the Line, the more I could feel my electrons buzzing, eager to separate from the charge that held them together. The shards of cubic boron embedded behind the top of my neck sent pulses to keep me from shattering into my component parts and blowing away. I'd be my old, broken self without them. Years ago, I underwent a transition when they mimicked hormones to replace the ones I had been born with. None of it could have happened without Amalia's ingenuity, her love, her grace. My heart thrummed its own unmeasurable frequency, burning to be with her again and to prove to her that her cleverness had saved a life not once, but twice.

That desire was the key. Although the winds whipped over my head, and the vast gorge dug by their unimaginable power spread beyond my sight to each side, I was unafraid. The mathematical possibility of death did not frighten me, because I had seen the art and the beauty of Amalia's equation, and the chances our child had, and had made the decision already. I was the first human subject for matter alteration routines run from cubic boron chips, the same which had been used to rebuild the plants and animals the Earth had lost, and the transistors embedded in my body could uncomplicate the pregnancy, allowing both mother and daughter to survive.

The winds of the Zephyr Line, a combination of heat, cool, and a host of breathable elements, effortlessly shredded the edges of the gorge it had carved. I came closer to the edge while the clarity of thought left me, replaced by intense focus on the nothingness before me, the fleet travel of the wind, its lightness. I felt the first wispy tongues of air currents on my skin. Then, I became them. My clothes vaporized as I stepped forward. My skin, muscle, and bones would have been next if not for the buzzing calculations loosening my

framework of particles.

I walked on wind between the endless skies and the black innards of the scarred earth. My composition had changed, making me one with the air, as I had been one with the water and the fire.

There were no obstacles left between us.



---

## NICOLETTA GIUSEFFI

Nicoletta Giuseffi is a queer English language professor and princess under glass. Although she was born and currently resides in California, she left her heart in Hokkaido, where she taught in junior high schools. She is an advocate of decadence and cannot turn down a cake or a macaron. Although she is currently querying a fantasy novel, she loves writing horror stories. Her passions include animal photography, retro games and hardware (ask her about her home office), and the late 18th century.

Twitter: [@dearnicoletta](https://twitter.com/dearnicoletta)



# **NORA THE SOCIOPATH, DOES A NICE THING**

**KASEY FISHER**

DEREK LET OUT ONE LAST groan and rolled off me.

*Wait, Derek or Dillon?*

I should know this; I've only gone to school with the guy for five years.

I looked over at him.

"It's Derek, right?"

"You seriously don't know my name? We've known each other since we were twelve." I couldn't tell if he cared or not.

I still just stared.

He sighed. "Yes, it's Derek."

"Do you know my name?" I asked.

"Yes, Nora, I know your name."

"I know you live on Gateway Street." I said.

"Because you do too."

"I know you date, Jessa."

He was silent. I forgot comments like that strike a nerve with normals.

"You're kind of a bitch, you know?"

I laughed, got dressed, and headed to the door.

"Nora?"

"Yes, Derek."

"About Jessa.... don't say anything, ok?" His eyes pleaded for silence.

I opened the door and walked out.

"Nora!" He grabbed my arm, still undressed.

"Derek, I will literally never think about this again."

"I love Jessa, I do."

"Sure. That's great. Look, I'm late."

I wasn't late.

I walked out and headed down the street to my house, only six homes away.

"Nora, Nora!" My little brother screamed as I walked in, threw his toy at me, and started jumping on the couch. He was so fucking annoying. Do normals like their siblings?

"That hurt, you little shit." I threw the toy back at him.

My mom hollered from the kitchen, “Nora, honey, help me with dinner please? Your father will be home soon.” She sounded day-drunk.

I walked into the kitchen, to my mom’s backside bent over, pulling something out of the oven. Probably another fucking roast. She turned around and smiled, wearing too much makeup, a pearl necklace, and a dress.

“Mom, he’s not coming home.”

“Cut up the veggies please.” She said, ignoring me.

I grabbed the knife and began cutting the carrots. She started humming, while she poured another Gin martini. I liked my mom; she was the only person I had ever been fond of. I liked when she hummed, her drunk smile, and when she called me honey.

Dr. Rushing had me keep a list of things I liked. “Wholesome things only, Nora,” He scolded, after my first list.

My mom turned into quite an alcoholic the past year, but I knew enough about normals to know having their heart shattered, her words not mine, was reason enough to stay drunk.

She had her drunk smile on now, fully convinced my dad was coming home, when even my idiot brother knew he wasn’t. He was with Allie now.

Allie was the young, front desk girl at his office. So pathetically cliché. He was an Ophthalmologist, and I never liked him. It was more of an indifference really. Unlike my mother, I could care less if he ever came back home, as long as he paid the bills. He had been with Allie for a year, but when I was officially diagnosed ten days ago, that broke the camel’s back, and he was gone.

I’ll never forget Dr. Rushing, reading the diagnosis to my mother and me, “Antisocial Personality Disorder,” he said, as if he was teaching a lecture, not shattering my mother’s already shattered heart. I laughed when he said it, and Dr. Rushing hated when I laughed inappropriately. He was the normalest of normals.

“What is funny, Nora?” He looked at me through thick glasses.

“Just the way you said it. Like you were teaching a class.”

He was silent, so I continued.

“And what does Antisocial Personality Disorder mean?” I asked.

“A more common term is Sociopath. Lack of remorse or feelings, manipulative, impulse control issues. We will discuss it thoroughly at our next session.”

“What do we do about it?” I asked.

“Therapy. With certain cases medication. Although, I doubt medication will benefit you. You seem neither depressed, nor anxious.”

“That is correct, Dr. Rushing. I’m not depressed nor anxious.” He often said nor, something else I liked.

It was true though. I was aloof, impassive. Being a sociopath was fine with me, better than being like my mom; heartbroken and devastated. But it wasn’t fine with my father.

He said he was uncomfortable, couldn’t handle it, and left for Alie’s that night. He showed up a few nights ago, to grab the rest of his things. My mom pleaded with him to stay for a family dinner, so he did. She pretended nothing was wrong, asking questions about his workday, as if he wasn’t leaving after dessert. Sure enough, he cleared his plate, said thank you, patted my brother and I on the head like dogs, and left.

“Nora, after the veggies, please set the table. For four.”

“Do I set one for Prince William too?”

“What? I couldn’t hear you?”

“Nothing.”

“Ok. Thanks hon.”

We carried everything to the table and sat down. My brother started digging in.

“Tommy, wait for your dad,” my mom said.

“Mom.” I shook my head.

After ten minutes of Tommy whining for food, my mom caved and let us eat. She made her plate and just stared at it.

“How was school, Nora?”

I ignored her pointless question.

“Mom, do you blame me?”

“For what honey?”

“For dad leaving. It seems my diagnosis sent him packing. Liter-

ally.”

“No, honey, I don’t blame you. It’s not your fault, just the way you are I guess.” She smiled at me.

No one spoke the rest of dinner. I thought about saying thank you for not blaming me, but didn’t. She started clearing up the table.

“Mom, it’s ok, I can do it.” How non-sociopathic of me.

“Thank you, Nora. I need to lay down.” She got up, grabbed a bottle from the kitchen, and headed to her room.

I also liked cleaning things. I didn’t like messes, and my dad created one giant mess. Before bedtime I went to check on my mom.

“Mom?” I tapped lightly on her door. No answer.

I walked in and heard sobs coming from the bathroom, connected to their, now her, bedroom. She was sitting in the bathtub, covered with bubbles.

“Hey.”

“Oh, Nora, hey honey.” Her drunk voice was on and up.

“Dad sucks mom. Just move on, ok?”

She laughed. “I wish it were that easy. The bastard burnt my heart to ashes. There’s nothing left of it.” Her words were slurred.

“Well, just try to forget about him.”

She snorted. “Maybe when he’s dead.” She put her head down and started bawling. I’ve never known what to do with crying, emotional people. I watched her for a moment, her shoulders rising and falling with each breath she gasped then exhaled, I watched her tears drop and disappear, mixing in with the lavender scented bubbles.

“I’m going to bed mom. Don’t drown, ok?” I really didn’t want her to drown.

She kept crying so I started walking out.

“Nora?”

“Yes?”

“Honey, I promise I don’t blame you. Your father did this to us, not you.” She put her head down.

I went to bed that night feeling strange. I wasn’t sure, but I think I hated my dad.

The next day I left school and headed to his office. I parked in

the back, blending in. At 5:07, Allie and the asshole walked out, got in separate cars, and headed towards town. They arrived at a small house, with white siding; much cheaper and smaller than ours. My dad parked in the garage, Allie parked in the driveway. I watched her walk to the door, red shiny hair, curled and bouncing. My dad met her on the porch, kissed her hair as she pulled out her keys, then they disappeared inside. I was fine my dad was here, but I didn't like him taking my mom's smile with him.

On the drive back home I tried to remember ever liking my dad, but couldn't. I never liked my brother either. I remember the first time I realized I wasn't a normal. There was this girl Bethany, who lived next door. Her mom brought her over to play and called us friends. From five to thirteen, I spent afternoons with Bethany, while her mom worked. She spent the night several times, and made us ugly friendship bracelets for my twelfth birthday my mom forced me to wear.

One morning my mom came in my room, with tears in her eyes.

"Honey, Bethany, and her mom have been in a terrible accident. They didn't make it, sweetie. They died." She clutched me to her chest and burst into tears. I just sat there, waiting for my tears, but they never came. Instead, I asked my mom if I could throw away the friendship bracelet. She seemed bewildered by my request, and I couldn't understand why. She knew I never liked it.

That night I overheard my parents arguing.

"She's not right. Her reaction isn't right." My dad said.

"She's a child, John! She doesn't know how to handle this!" My mom defended me.

"She's laughing at the fucking T.V. right now! She hasn't cried or shown any emotion. All she's asked is can she throw away the friendship bracelet. That is not normal!"

"When she is at the funeral and sees her best friend lying dead in a box, she will realize death is forever. She's in shock, John."

At the funeral, I tried my best to cry, to care, but nothing. My parents looked at me weird all day, the next week I started therapy, and I've met weekly with Dr. Rushing ever since.

I never thought about Bethany again, and that was fine with me. Why would I want to cry, and be devastated like my mom, when I could... not be.

That next night my mom cried while making dinner, cried at the table, then locked herself in her room, again, for some alone time. My shithead little brother was staying at his equally annoying friend's house for the weekend. I waited until one in the morning before leaving.

I hopped in my car and headed across town, putting on my favorite True Crime podcast. It occurred to me suddenly, since hatching this plan yesterday, I could get caught, which got me thinking about jail for the first time ever. I had watched several shows about women's prison, and I loved their angry, stay away from me, vibes. I hated talking to people so that would work out. I was so over my mom's obsession with a 1950's roast, potatoes, and carrots, surely prison had other options. I would miss sex the most, but according to those shows, sleeping with male prison guards was as easy as sleeping with any man, so again, good there.

By the time I arrived, I had myself convinced prison would be just fine with me; food, sex, alone time, no annoying little brother. No smiley girls in my face asking me to join the cheerleading squad or track team. Getting away with it would be fun too. Either way was fine with me.

I got out, grabbed the ten cans, two at a time, and began pouring gas around Allie's house, making sure to douse the porch, windows, and doors. I hummed my mom's favorite song as I lit the first match, then the second, then the third. I thought of my mom as the house went up in flames, hoping this would be her last night spent drunk crying in the bathtub, since she said she could move on after he was dead.

I also decided prison food probably sucked more than I wanted to admit, and prison guards were most likely ugly, but I could worry about that later. For now I was content watching my dad, Allie, and the house, burn to the ground.



---

## **KASEY FISHER**

Kasey is a wife, dog mom, cat mom, writer, and heavily involved in rescuing dogs from the streets of Texas.

IG: @molysmomrescuesdogs



# **THE COLOR OF DISORDER**

**NIKKI LITTLE**

REGINALD WHITMAN WAS A SIMPLE man. Not by choice—it was all they allowed him to be. His calloused fingers wrapped around the mop handle, pushing and pulling to clean the concrete floor of the Center. It was his lot in life, this excruciatingly modest work. He longed for a smaller instrument. A brush to cover the world in his colors. His interpretation of life, of love, of loss. Sometimes he felt he would burst from the feelings inside him. His fingers itching to put them onto a piece of paper. A canvas. The stark walls of his dormitory.

He spread the mop in a swirling pattern, the soapy water creating the suggestion of images, darkening the concrete ground. The pale imitation of a cresting wave. A flower, bursting forth with life. He gripped the handle harder, sharp splinters from the rough wood dug into his palms. Finding a fresh spot, he dared to create an outline, a mockery of his mother's face. He could see her still, her mouth turned down, eyes drooping with exhaustion after another long shift. If he squinted, he could see her there, in that false portrait.

A burning shock radiated from the chip in his wrist. He gritted his teeth against the pain. It only subsided when he returned to the melodic back-and-forth of his practiced stroke, erasing his efforts, as bumbling as they were. Reggie glared at the iron door to his right, knowing the Core was less than fifty feet from where he stood.

*How did it know?* He asked himself for the thousandth time. Did it track his movements so precisely, anything outside of his prescribed chores could be detected in moments? *Eat. Sleep. Work.* The embossing on the door reminded him of his place in this world; it was not with a palette, a canvas to pour his creativity onto. There was no place for such frivolities in the Center. These hallways. These rooms. Never seeing the light of day, let alone feeling the breeze upon his face. This was his lot—and he was one of the lucky ones. He could've been assigned to the sewers. Eighteen-hour days spent in waste and filth.

He turned toward the nearest air vent and pretended for a moment that it was freshened with the smell of a flowering field, like those from the picture books his mother would occasionally sneak to him.

Swiped from a higher caste's suite that she'd been sent to clean. The spot on her wrist would be particularly inflamed on those days. He remembered kissing that spot when she'd come to their cramped room, the flesh against his lips hot enough to burn.

"Don't you worry, lil tyke," she'd say. "Worth it to give you some-thin' nice."

His small fingers would trace the once vibrant colors on the covers, dulled by time and the single yellow bulb hanging from their low ceiling. Blues, greens, and curving lines, so unlike the metal and stone that assaulted him daily. She'd tell him stories, whispering against his ear long into the dark of night on their thin mattress. Of the times Before. When they still had choices, of who to be, and what to do.

"We'll be back there someday, you'll see," she'd say again and again. "Center can't control all of us forever. Just you wait."

An illusion of hope is all it turned out to be. They never let him say goodbye, all told. She hadn't returned a book fast enough, thinking a single day wouldn't matter. A foolish mistake and she was gone. And all for him.

The acrid smell of iron and mold reminded him of where he was. He scratched at the spot on his wrist, the skin puffed and blistering, and went back to his work. The water in the bucket was as gray as the stone by the time he'd finished scrubbing the long circular hallway. His heart hammered in his chest each time the bucket rolled too fast. The clang of the stolen bottle hitting the hard plastic made him still his movements until it rolled to settle once again beneath the murky surface.

Reggie had made his way all around the circular complex and was nearing the iron door. His temples ached from gritting his teeth, and the ring of keys jangled harshly with every step. Footsteps sounded and a bead of sweat dripped down his back. Every pronounced heart-beat thumped blood through his ears.

He consciously loosened his shoulders, trying to appear unobtrusive as he approached the door. A hand gripped his shoulder. The security guard, his face haggard and drawn.

“What’re you doing? Not supposed to service the Core until next week.”

Reggie averted his eyes, hiding the shake of his hands by searching his bulky key ring. “Was ordered to do it today, I dunno why.” Reggie’s voice was far calmer than his ratcheting nerves.

The guard looked him up and down. “You sure about that?”

Reggie took a calming breath and met his gaze. “Look, man. I didn’t make the order; I just follow it. And this chip in my wrist is gonna start burning the shit outta me unless I keep working.” He tipped his chin to the guard’s wrist. “Yours’ll start soon enough if you don’t keep to your path, won’t it?”

The guard glanced to the mop bucket, then back at Reggie, his eyes narrowed. Calculating.

“Fine. Keep it moving.”

The guard shuffled off with a pronounced limp, evidence of many years walking these halls for too many hours, every day.

Reggie breathed a sigh of relief and unlocked the door, heaving the weight of it open with his shoulder, before letting it close behind him. He slammed the rusted bolt home to secure it.

The Core was in the center of the circular room, red, pulsing, and spherical at least two stories tall. Thick black cables came out from all sides, feeding into the line of servers surrounding it.

Reggie’s wrist ached. He knew he’d have to act fast. He bit at the edge of his battered work shirt and ripped off a length of cloth. A muffled voice yelled from outside, then a fist pounded on the door. His movements quickened. He reached into the bucket of water and pulled out the bottle of spirits he’d swiped earlier today from a dining cart, likely heading to a higher caste’s suite. The reddened flesh overlying the chip was more than worth the bounty. They’d notice its disappearance before long, he knew. Not a mistake, though. Not this time. And all for her.

The voice outside was louder now, their unintelligible words desperate and angry. A boiling ache began to spread, intensifying as he gripped the bottle between his arm and chest, tugging the cork free with his teeth. His wrist was burning now, skin bubbling all up his

forearm as the pain traveled to his shoulder and into his chest. He needed to hurry.

Tipping the bottle towards the Core, he said, "Cheers." He swallowed a gulp, choking on the unfamiliar burn from the alcohol. Reggie didn't know a lowborn alive that'd touched the stuff. He took one more sip for his mother, coughing and sputtering before shoving the strip of fabric into the bottle. The heavy metal door was banging, someone struggling to get past the steel bolt.

*It will hold. It has to hold.*

His left arm was useless now, bright flames emitting from the chip the closer he got to the Core. Its surface thrummed, pulsing out a low-pitched hum. It was loud enough to shatter his ear drums if he stayed much longer. He didn't plan to make it that far.

Heat scorched up his arm, burning away his sleeve along the guide wire they'd implanted when he was a child. He'd almost forgotten about it. He could feel every inch of it now, burning hot, leading straight to his heart. He fell to his knees as his arm was enveloped in flames, his flesh melting from bone before his eyes. Clenching his teeth, he dipped fabric into flame, using the last of his strength to throw the bottle at the Core.

Alarms screamed around him. A rash of footfalls hammered outside, more voices yelling. Screaming. His chest was burning now. Glancing at the Core, he knew they would be too late. It was crumbling. Cables disintegrated as electronics burst and popped all around, sparking and sizzling the air.

*It would have to be enough.*

It wasn't the end. But it was the beginning.

---

## NIKKI LITTLE

Nikki Little is a scientist by day, aspiring fiction writer by night. She enjoys reading and writing most genres, but her favorites include: fantasy, horror, and speculative fiction. When she's not obsessively writing, she's obsessively knitting.



# **THE SCULPTOR**

**AVA SEDGWICK**



SHE WAS A FEW MINUTES early. Classical music drifted from an open window. Perhaps she should knock again. But that might make her seem impatient, demanding. She smoothed down her skirt. Shuffled her high-heeled feet. Exactly on the hour, he opened the door.

His gaze roamed her body, settled back on her face. “You look beautiful.” She blushed. He stepped back to usher her in. “Welcome.”

The scent of roasting meat filled the living space. A hunting tapestry draped the broad stone chimney above a glowing hearth. “Please. Make yourself comfortable.”

She perched on the edge of the leather couch, anxious not to disturb the artfully arranged cushions. “Your home is lovely, “ she said. “Did you renovate it yourself?”

“I’m an artist. I saw its potential and brought it to life.”

He took the bottle from the ice-bucket. The cork popped quietly when he twisted it in his fist. She noticed the label as he poured. Moët. Nobody had ever given her French champagne before. They chinked glasses. As he talked about his underfloor heating, her concentration wandered. She lived in a rented semi-detached with a view of her neighbors, a world away from warm flagstones in twilight-clad hills.

They’d met online. He was handsome, ten years older but more active judging by his list of hobbies: skiing, rock-climbing, caving. His profile made her feel inadequate, but he didn’t seem to care. He sent charming emails, sweet photos, pushed for them to meet. A coffee in the city. Safe. Easy.

He’d arrived with a wrapped parcel. The boutique moisturizer evoked thoughts of hands on skin and she found it hard to speak. But his attentiveness relaxed her enough to offer some stories of her own in between his many tales. He asked if he could take her to his favorite restaurant the following night. When the waiter showed her to their secluded table, he was there with a beribboned red rose. They had two more dates before he offered to make her dinner.

Now he stared at her with hungry eyes. Flustered, she looked out the window. Noticed a wooden cabin at the far edge of the field that bordered the house. She pointed. “What’s that?”

“My workplace.”

“Where you sculpt?”

“Where I release what lies within a block of marble. I just chop off whatever isn’t needed.” He leaned over to tuck a stray hair behind her ear. “But I’m working on something different now. A tribute to the master.”

“Can I see?”

“No.” She dropped her eyes. He reached into his shirt to extract a key that hung from the leather cord around his neck. “I keep this by my heart. Nobody enters my studio until my art is ready to view.”

“Why?”

“The artist must create a spark before he can make a fire.”

“Oh...” She nodded, tried for a more sophisticated response: “I’m sure you set the arts ablaze.”

“Critical success takes more than talent. There’s so much ignorance about what deserves appreciation. Luck and connections are crucial.” He waved a hand. “And as an orphan, I’ve had little of either.”

“I’m so sorry.” She widened her eyes in sympathy, grateful for such an intimate disclosure. His arm snaked around her waist, pulling her close. It was their first kiss.

The oven pinged. While he sliced into the sitting duck, she discreetly studied his possessions. Noticed the figurines on the mantelpiece, the windowsill, the stereo, lined up in a trio on the edge of a bookshelf. She rose to look more closely. Hands and faces and bodies of stone.

“Come and sit down, “ he said, another wine bottle in hand. “Rodin.”

“Sorry?”

“They’re Rodin miniatures.”

“Oh.”

He stopped, Pinot Noir in mid-cork. “You don’t know Rodin?” She shook her head. He laughed, continued turning the screw. “The greatest artist the world has known so far. My, my. Going to have to give you an education.”

She put her fingers over her glass. “I have to drive.”

“I have a spare room.”

She hesitated, weighed her hormones against the power of pursuit. The bottle hovered, wiggled with expectance. “Ah, go on then.”

She was naked on his bed, flushed skin glistening in the candlelight. She didn’t know if her prolonged bout of celibacy had heightened her senses or if he was a sexual sorcerer, but she hoped to keep experimenting. She shivered with the delicious memory of his animal focus, his wordless intensity as he devoured her flesh, his grunts of pleasure. Though she’d had lovers before who prided themselves on ladies first, he was different. It was her reaction that excited, there was no sense of generosity or gallantry, no sense of thought. Possession. From the moment he unzipped her dress, her body was all existence.

He sat up, reached for the glass of water he’d placed on the bedside locker, took a long draught before offering it to her. She put her lips where his had been, smiled in gratitude. She slid back down to the pillow, purred as she stretched.

“Don’t move,” he said.

She admired the curve of his buttocks as he left the room. Giggled. She wasn’t going anywhere.

He returned clutching a sketch pad and pencil, grabbed a chair and sat naked by the mattress edge. “Stay still.”

“You’re going to draw me?”

“The only principle in art is to copy what you see. And all I can see is you. Now close your eyes.”

She felt him pull back down the sheet to expose her breasts. Then he sketched as she melted.

For several weeks she drove up to his house on a Monday, Thursday and Saturday evening. Wine, dinner, sex, art. He drew quickly, flipping over pages as she reclined. He adjusted her body for his favored position: on her back, right hip tilting up, left forearm draping over the side of the bed. He sketched like he made love, with an absorption that demanded she did not disturb his flow. Her muscles

ached the next day.

When he refused to dine at her place, she was relieved. She imagined her house through his eyes: the cheap prints on the wall, the shabby lounge suite, the shambolic kitchen. She had the culinary skill of an earthworm and his discomfort of being in someone else's territory saved her from the shame of claiming take-away as her own effort. Instead, she brought wine. Used recommendations to hide her ignorance, winced at the price tags.

Dinner conversation was like mistakenly walking into a classroom and being too polite to leave. She would have let her mind play truant if he didn't spot-check her attendance, get offended when she couldn't recall a lesson. She learned a lot about Rodin, and how to appear in thrall. Yet while she felt secure in his desire, flattered by his obsessive drawing of her body, she craved a deeper bond. But as her friends insisted, it's what happens in bed that shows the real intimacy. He'd told her he'd been hurt before. He wouldn't be treating her to luxuries, texting her every evening, if he wasn't serious. She had to be patient, he would reveal himself in time.

The sucked bones of blood-tinged lamb were on their plates when his mobile rang. He glanced at the screen, stood up. "I have to take this."

As the door closed behind him, she heard him say: "Ahhh... So good to hear your voice."

He used the same greeting when she called. A mosquito of suspicion broke through her careful netting, buzzed around her head as she cleared the table, bit as she washed the crockery. She tried to slap it down: he liked his privacy; he had friends; her instincts were unreliable at the best of times. She carefully dried the dishes, put them back in their place. She'd dropped a platter two weeks ago, china smashing about her feet, had glanced up to see his flash of anger. He'd told her it wasn't important, but she scoured the shops until she found a replacement. Tonight, when they used it for the first time, he held up the gravy boat to show her that the glazes didn't quite match.

The concerto had finished. She wished he'd come back, make this

itch stop. She went to his CD rack, her glance snagging on the statue above. Rodin's Martyr. He'd pointed it out to her during one of his lectures, but she had thought to memorize location rather than see the piece. She didn't care about Rodin. Now she recognised the pose. She stretched up, grabbed it.

Holding it in her hands, the face was clear. She stared, her stomach tight. She didn't register his quiet entrance. "Put that down. It's expensive."

She spun around. "She looks like me."

"You should be pleased."

"You must have known..."

"I was attracted to your photo. I'm sure it was the same for you. If I have the same taste as Rodin, it's hardly an insult to either of us."

"But all those sketches..."

"Were for you. I've been making you a present. Something to show how much you inspire me. How much I care."

"Really?"

He sighed. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

"I'm sorry." She put her arms around his neck. "Can I see it?"

"Soon, I promise you." He kissed her. "Now let's stop this nonsense. We've better things to be doing."

He rang on Saturday afternoon to cancel their date. "My mother's not well."

"I thought your parents died?"

There was a pause, a chill: "That was my stepmother."

"Oh."

"You sound confused."

"I thought—"

"It's simple. My father and his second wife died."

"Okay."

"Thanks for your concern."

"I'm sorry. I hope your mother is alright."

His tone normalized, "I'm sure she'll be fine. She has these turns every now and then. I'm just sorry it was tonight."

“Yes. So am I.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in my dreams.”

She was beginning to dislike that phrase.

She crunched the gears as she drove up the hill. He hadn’t replied to her late-night text asking if his mother was okay, took several hours to answer when she tried again in the morning. She stopped the car before she turned into his driveway, checked her make-up in the mirror, put a fresh dab of perfume behind each ear.

He kissed her on the doorstep. A long, slow, deep kiss that stole her breath. He stepped back, his hands on her shoulders, his eyes on her face.

“Wow,” she said. “Hello.”

“I’ve missed you.”

“So I gather.”

“Come in, come in.” She followed him as he bounced toward the kitchen. “We must celebrate.”

She took the champagne flute he offered, swallowed as he watched. “What’s happened?”

“I hadn’t been able to finish my project. It’s been keeping me awake at night, dominating my days. I’ve tried different approaches, another muse. But something is missing. Something crucial is missing.” He frowned, “Drink up.” He refilled her glass. “And then today the solution came. So simple, so obvious.”

“That’s great, except—”

“This will be my breakthrough. This will make them sit up and take notice.”

“Did you say another muse?”

“Oh, she meant nothing. It is your face I want. Your face in this moment forever.”

“But—” The dizziness came out of nowhere. She clutched at the table as her vision blurred, her legs buckled. When the blackness took over, she was calling out his name.

“I’ve got you.” He smiled as he scooped her into his arms, carried her out the back door. “Let me make you immortal.”

The door to the studio was open, a sheet covering the workbench where he laid her down. The walls were covered in sketches of her, other women. Different angles of the same pose. A life-size stone carving rested on the central table, the body shaped in exquisite detail, the face a blank.

He kissed her before he picked up the syringe. "The resemblance I must obtain is the soul."

---

## **AVA SEDGWICK**

Ava Sedgwick is delighted she got this in on time on New Years Eve.



# **DEEP WITHIN THE EMERGENT WEEDS**

**ANDREA SPENCER**

**H**IS HAIR DOESN'T FIT IN my world. The sky's gray-green light filtered through the water matches his eyes, and his pale skin mimics the petals of water lilies. But his hair. I cannot stop looking at it waving in the wind. I want to reach out and pull him below the surface of my pond to see how the current would make it sway.

But I don't.

I don't have the strength to pull men below the surface. My sister told me of a cousin who would use her voice to lure humans to the water's edge, then drag them in and kiss their lips until the men gave their lives for her embrace.

My sister tried. But he pried her from the water.

That night, I closed my ears with my hands when I heard her pleas for release as his rope burned her skin. When the sun rose, her cries tore through my fingers and deafened my heart as the rays of light sliced her into millions of drops of water. He tipped her from the bottom of his boat back into the lake that once protected her: a puddle of pale green water.

The man with strange hair sits on the edge of my pond and stares into the water. At times, he catches a glimpse of me, and his eyes draw me closer to the surface. Closer to him. I stay away because I know he will kill me. I sense death when I look at his eyes, but still, I cannot resist watching him from deep within the emergent weeds.

His voice breaks through the water, and his soft tone fits with the movement of rocks under the water. "I have a gift for you. I know you're frightened, but you shouldn't be. I won't hurt you."

He holds out his hand and lets something slide beneath the surface, and I watch the pink and white rock dance down through the water. At the last moment, I grab it, and the hard ridge presses into my hand.

"It's a shell." His wide grin pushes his cheeks into his eyes and makes them crinkle around the edges, and I smile back.

When the knives of sunlight have disappeared behind the trees, I press my head through the film of water lilies and pull myself onto the bank letting my dripping hair cling to my body. Cradling my favorite black stone in my palm, I trace its smooth white stripe with

my finger one last time before I place it near the spot where the young man usually sits.

His soft voice finds me in the moonlight. "Don't go. Please."

I freeze before I can flee. I glance at the white moon round and bright behind the trees.

With every word he speaks, he draws nearer to the edge of the pond. Nearer to me. "I won't hurt you. You're safe."

Sitting on the sharp edge of my pond, I dangle my legs into the deep water. Thankfully, he stays near the sloping edge of the pond. He'll have to wade through thick mud and flowering grasses to follow me. I can easily hide if things feel wrong. I relax as he sits, stretches his long legs toward the water, and leans back on his elbows. The moonlight amplifies his vivid hair, and it contrasts the greens and browns of the forest.

"The name's Brady. Do you have a name?" His gentle voice barely reaches my side of the pond, but it feels like soft wind over the water.

I nod and keep watching how the wind tugs his hair. "I thought your voice felt like water over rocks, but I was wrong." I want to mention his hair but don't want to be rude.

He laughs and curls his legs into his chest so he can rest his elbows on his knees. "I was wrong, too. I thought mermaids had tails."

"Some of us do." I haven't spoken since my exile, and my tongue fills my mouth, heavy and thick.

Clouds slide through the sky, and the moon sends a finger of light through the clouds. The air roars back, tingling my skin and stopping my heart. The trees sway their response and all of nature argues in the moonlight. Suddenly he's there, holding my shoulders in his rough, warm hands, his hair billowing around him.

"It's okay. You're safe." His words are calm, but nature warns me of danger; I slip from his hands and into the safety of my pond. His eyes are disappointed, but I watch him as he finds the rock I left behind, and he smiles.

The next time I see him, the moon is half its size, and the shadows in the water are long and black. He treads through the shallow stream bed that feeds my pond, and I sense the shifting of silt and rocks with

every step. As he paces around and through, his movements make my heart pound, and it frightens me. So I hide in the weeds and watch him until he runs his hand through his hair and kneels near the bank.

“I have a gift for you.” He holds something over the water, and it gleams the color of his hair.

I enter the light below the surface, and our eyes meet. I push my hand out of the water expecting him to place it in my hand, but he shakes his head.

“I want to talk to you, and then you’ll get your gift.”

I don’t like it when the rules change. I stay away from the edge of the pond, but I push my head from the water and wait for him to speak.

“What’s your name?” His voice reverberates through the water and fills my skin with low tones.

“Asrai.” A strange ache pounds through my chest. The air clogs my throat. I’ve never noticed how much easier it is to breathe water.

“No, Asrai is what you are. I mean, what do they call you.” He tries to explain it further. “For example, I am a human, but other humans call me ‘Brady’.”

Understanding his question, I push my mind back to the garden lake where I was born. My sisters laugh and call to me through filtered light. “Tansy.”

He nods. “Beautiful. Do other Asrai live here with you?”

I curl below the surface to breathe, but the ache doesn’t subside. Resurfacing nearer to him, I rest my arms and head on the steep bank.

“When my sister was killed, Father sent us down the stream at night. He promised to gather us when it was safe. Now, I am alone.”

“I’ve heard of the King who went mad after killing a faery, but it happened decades ago. Have you been here alone all this time?” He doesn’t look directly at me, just weaves his fingers through the grass near the water’s edge.

I nod and relish the water running from my hair into my eyes.

His eyes drop water into the grass, and he pushes the gleaming

stone to me.

“What is this?” I peer at the moon through the translucent stone.

“It’s a ruby crystal.”

“Your hair is ruby.” I gaze at him through the crystal; I like the way it turns things ruby.

His laugh eases the ache in my lungs, and he runs his hands through his hair. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

He shivers and steps away from the side of the water. He crouches low and rubs his hands together. Suddenly, the ground before him dances with orange and red. The branches crackle as they turn reddish black, and I sink behind the cattails.

He laughs again, beckoning me to join him.

I slide out of the water and tentatively walk toward the dancing branches. “What is it?” I gaze longingly at the undulating red and orange rubies glowing below the dancing flares of light.

“Oh, no! Don’t touch it. It will hurt you.” He grabs my arm and keeps me from walking into the heat of the circle. “It’s called fire. It burns.”

“Fire. Burns.” I say the new words, and they tingle my mouth. “When it’s done with ‘burns’ will there be rubies?” I trace the smooth stone in my palm and stare at the fire. So many things to remind me of his hair gracefully twisting in the wind.

“No. Just ashes.” He gazes at the fire, and his tone is full of sorrow. “Rocks that crumble to dust under the slightest touch. Black stains, never able to support life again.” He studies his palms in the fire’s light.

Understanding the danger of his words, I shrink from the sun-like heat radiating from the circle. The fire licks the wood, and it shrieks like my sister, and I realize the blades of sunlight must have burned as they sliced. My chest rails against the thick air again, and I wonder if the floating rubies have ‘burns’ my lungs. Glancing back at the pond, I long for the cooling embrace of the current.

Turning from the ruby warmth, I reach up to wrap a finger around his hair, but the color warns me of ‘burns’. “Will you swim with me?” His hair won’t burn me there, and I’ll be safe from the heat of fire

and sun. I wonder if his hair will wave playfully in the water like fire on wood.

“Oh!” His voice is higher than before, and his face has opened in surprise. His lily-petal skin grows darker, and he dips his chin. “I guess. Are you safe to swim with?” He chuckles nervously.

“I don’t know. I’ve never swum with a man before.” I look at my willowy arms. “I think so.”

His face relaxes, and he slips off his clothes. “I trust you.”

Leaving the fire burning, I lead him back to the water and slip in between the ripples of the wind. He splashes into the water, and I lurch toward the water lilies swaying across the rippling water. He emerges from the deep and shakes water from his head.

“The key is to just dive in.” He shivers and swims closer to me. No longer moving and alive, his hair is plastered against his face.

“Come on.” I take his hand and tug him below the surface.

His hair softens, and each strand shows its ruby color. It flows and dances in the gentle current of the pond. I run my fingers through the strands, and they remind me of new grass blades moving in the water. I’m hypnotized.

He points to the surface, but I need to keep his hair below the surface so it can be free to move and dance as it pleases. I wrap my legs around his waist and pull him closer to me. His movements are frantic now, and his hair jerks smoothly back and forth with his head.

His hands roughly push my legs, and he tries to untangle himself from my grasp. The movement makes his hair dance like the flame from the fire above. Inside my body, something catches and burns.

“It’s okay. I have a gift for you. I know you’re frightened, but you shouldn’t be. I won’t hurt you.” I speak to him soothingly and tangle my fingers in his hair as I kiss his lips. He clutches my waist, and my heart loves him at that moment.

When his fingers release my body, I gaze into his green-gray eyes. “You belong here with me.” His hair licks his face like a heatless fire burns branches, and I tuck him deep within the emergent weeds.

---

**ANDREA SPENCER**

I live in a rural town and teach 12th-grade English. I received a Master's Degree in Writing and Literature from Utah State University, and I've always loved reading. I've recently discovered my love for writing.

# **JUDGE'S COMMENTS**

**CREAG MUNROE**



**A** *CROSS THE LINE* CAPTURED MY attention right from the start.

Here is a massively destructive force, presumably natural but of unknown origin, completely altering our way of life. Bisecting an entire continent. It's dangerous, it's deadly, and immediately our protagonist declares their intention to cross it.

In three short paragraphs the author set up an interesting obstacle, showed us the impossibility of the task, and told us what the rest of the story will be about.

And in case that wasn't enough, they added a hook to draw us forward. How, exactly, is this person going to cross the Zephyr line *without touching it*? It's a promise of a clever solution, and we have to keep reading to find out what it will be.

But of course, like any good story, the action—the danger of human vs nature— isn't really what the story is about. In truth, it's the story of a parent risking everything for their spouse and child. I particularly like how the author didn't provide the backstory as a simple but unrelated motivation, instead layering it into the story. The protagonist must cross the Zephyr Line to deliver life saving technology to her family, and it's this same technology that provides the means to get there.

The story keeps its forward momentum, and provides us with clear checks to reassure us of its progress. There are three breaches to cross before the final test, and each time the protagonist crosses one the intensity heightens. The weather worsens, she becomes more nauseated, and eventually loses contact with Amalia. She tests her solution on water, then fire, then finally the razor wind, and we're never sure it will work until the final moment.

There's plenty to love about the writing itself. The dialogue is snappy. It doesn't drag on or draw attention to itself, but the sentences carry weight. There's meaning behind the things people say, and it deepens our understanding of the characters and their world in surprisingly few words.

I also get a sense of the world beyond the bounds of this story from hints in the text. Fully functioning horses are apparently rare, and ad-

vanced enough to mildly resist their programming. The state of the world, and the fact they regrew their plants and animals, suggest a cataclysm pre-dating the Zephyr Line. There's more here to discover.

And the Zephyr Line itself, surrounded in questions.

I especially like the name. Zephyr was the Greek god of the west wind, considered the gentlest wind. This storm is anything but. Did the people of this world name it ironically? To me, it makes them that much more real.

*Across The Line* entertained me with its futuristic western apocalypse vibe, intimidating obstacle, and solid pacing. And at its heart, the story of a family fighting for survival, and each other.

---

## CREAG MUNROE

Creag Munroe is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Elegant Literature*. He is dedicated to helping new writers achieve success.

Creag is a Story Coach who inhales novels at an alarming rate, preferring SF/F as the main staple of his diet. He resides in Toronto, Canada, but swims with sharks and motorcycles in monsoons whenever duty allows.

Twitter: [@CreagMunroe](https://twitter.com/CreagMunroe)

**FIN**