The Last Trophy of Hunter Hammerson

by L Chan
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On the cover: Goran Gligović’s work inspired by L Chan’s “The Last Trophy of Hunter Hammerson.”

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Letter from the Editor

In January of 2020, I made a mock-up cover for a magazine that I named Chevalier. As a bilingual Canadian, it was my dream to create a magazine where speculative fiction in both English and French could be featured alongside articles and interviews. I made a few more mock-ups, showed my partner what I had made, smiled, and shelved the dream. I simply did not have the time or knowledge to start a magazine.

But once the idea was planted in my head, it grew like a weed. I found myself doing research for the next few months, analysing some of my favourite old pulp magazines like Fantastic, Unknown, Weird Tales, Amazing Stories, and Astounding Stories of Super-Science. These old pulp magazines were certainly not always the best that the genre had to offer, but I was inspired by their fun design and their flashy, colourful, mesmerizing cover art. I went back to that nearly forgotten cover mock-up and I began to rework it. I worked on fonts, layouts, and overall design. I narrowed my field of interest and came up with a new name, Hexagon. This name was a better fit with the magazine that I was now envisioning—a quarterly online literary magazine featuring the work of new and experienced international authors of speculative fiction. I wanted the prose and poetry to be weird, wondrous, and whimsical. But, I was still just daydreaming.

Then, something happened that brought the entire world to a screeching halt. The COVID-19 outbreak became a global pandemic. The school at which I worked sent all of the students home, to complete the year via online learning. I knew that this was my chance. Now, I would have the time to make the magazine of my dreams.

For several months before the first issue was released, I worked tirelessly to spread the word of Hexagon and our new call for submissions. I received hundreds of submissions and chose only five pieces to publish in the first issue.

Then, nearly six months after I made the first cover mock-up, the first issue of the magazine was released. I sat back, and I watched, and I listened. I took what I learned from the first issue, and I began to work on the second.

This second issue is the next step for this ever-evolving magazine. You may notice little changes from the first issue, but I assure you that
the quality of the pieces found within is still the same.

This issue contains four short stories and one poem. The short stories, written by L. Chan, C. M. Fields, Feng Gooi, and Taylor Rae, give this second issue a darker tone than the first. Combined with Deborah L. Davitt’s poem, “On the Donor List,” this issue is sure to surprise and excite!

In the future, I hope that this editorial slot can become a space where I share with you my insights and thoughts on the nature of short fiction and the genre of speculative fiction as a whole. However, for this first appearance, I wanted to keep things light and focus on where the magazine came from. Everyone loves origin stories, right?

*Hexagon* has already come a long way since Chevalier, and it will continue to grow and improve with every issue.

I hope that you enjoy this second issue as much as I enjoyed making it for you. I’m looking forward to speaking with you again very soon!

JW Stebner
The thunderbird watches me like it’s planning how best to kill me. The beast squats in the corner of its cage, the hot beads of its eyes digging into me. We both know, if the bars containing it vanished by some horrible act of God, the beast would have my entrails down its gullet in moments.

But I can’t help feeling a kinship with the poor devil. Even though the thunderbird eyes me with hate and hunger, one truth inarguably remains: we are both trapped by one of Mr. Buckley’s cages, one way or another.

I joined Mr. Buckley’s crew over a decade ago when he stopped in Cape Town, his ship full of impossible beasts. He spun up golden stories about the New World and how rich we would both be when the people saw the magic Mr. Buckley ferried across the Atlantic.

Most of that magic died on the journey. We ate tiger meat and picked our teeth with dragon scales, and carrion birds nested on the ship mast, eager for the next carcass we would throw overboard.

I’m yet to see those riches. My daily meals and boarding always seem to outpace my cut of the zoo’s earnings. Every day is another shovelful of earth, burying me here with Mr. Buckley, forever.

Tonight, the rain pelts us as if it knows we need to repent.

Still, the people flock to see Benjamin Buckley’s Impossible Menagerie, the only proof of living magic in all the American territories. They are driven, no doubt, by rumors of the boy from the next town over, who broke into our campsite early one morning to test the truth of the thunderbird’s infamy. The child was just small enough to wriggle through the bars of the creature’s cage.

Some folk insist he was gone before he could even start screaming.

I might not have believed it myself, if I hadn’t found the bird holding the boy’s shoe in its
claws, gnawing at the ankle bone protruding from it. The whole camp reeked with the stale burn of the boy’s half-cooked flesh.

That image—the shock of white bone, the bloody loafer clutched in its wicked talons—hovers behind my eyes as I kneel just inches from the barred door of the thunderbird’s carriage. I am soaked and shivering. The meager curtain partitioning me from the crowd does nothing to keep out the rain. It only functions to obscure myself, the fog machine, and our mythic final act from the audience’s view.

Beyond our curtain, the audience hums and titters amongst themselves. They have made it through the long line of exotic animals displayed on leashes: kings of their own jungles conquered and carried across an ocean to be petted and poked and jeered at. The big cats wear muzzles over their toothless jaws to preserve the magic of our wild petting zoo.

When we first started, we had winged horses from Ethiopia and a hyena who could turn himself into a man and beg for release. But they didn’t take to the bitter New World winter. They withered like roses after the first frost.

Now the audience waits, restlessly, for the grand finale. And I can’t get the damned fog machine to stay lit.

The storm murmurs over us.

The machine is Mr. Buckley’s own invention. It is a massive cauldron with a collapsible vent sealed over it, which directs the flow of vapor through its narrow neck. On show nights, I am the one tasked with heating the machine’s belly and pouring in a mixture of glycerin and water which, when burned, spits out thick clouds of milky fog toward the stage.

At Mr. Buckley’s cue, it’s my job to release a wall of fog and unveil one of the old gods. A living mystery, a relic of a lost world. The death that would take us all, given the chance.

I turn my body against the damp wind and feed the weak fire more tinder.

In the corner of my eye, the beast paces from one edge of its cage to the other. Its beak scrapes as it sifts through the bones littering the cage floor.

The thunderbird is dying. We both know it, even if the beast does not have the means to say it. I can see it in the fading sheen of feathers that litter the cage floor. Every day when I throw it another dead rabbit or prairie dog to peck at, more and more feathers fall. Every day it eats less and less.
Soon the creature will die, and Mr. Buckley will trap another spectacle to replace it, and our cycle will begin all over again.

On the other side of the curtain, my employer’s voice booms out over the crowd, “We are delighted, truly and utterly, to see so many of you come out today to witness this great and terrible horror with your own eyes.”

The flame gasps and flickers. I bite my lip hard, already imagining the tongue-lashing from Mr. Buckley if I can’t get the machine running. I would be lucky if he stopped there.

The bird throws back its head and cries. Overhead, the sky roars as if in reply.

“Whether this beast is a creation of God or an aberration of the devil himself, we cannot be certain. The natives will tell you stories of these creatures. They think them gods.” I can hear Mr. Buckley’s insipid grin. “And we have caught one.”

My mind spins. The air has the hot, electric taste of a gathering storm.

I push myself up off the ground to face the thunderbird.

Lightning churns in its eyes. It opens and shuts its beak as if addressing me in a language no man can hear. Or perhaps it is using the storm to speak. I can nearly hear the thunderbird’s plea in the drumming rain.

“Neither one of us has to die here,” I tell the bird.

It cocks its head. It is mad stupid. Death-wish stupid. I cannot explain what compels me. It’s as if God Himself is moving through me, keeping one last miracle alive.

I pull the cage key from my pocket. Maybe it’s just a wretched old bird, and Mr. Buckley has tricked us all. Maybe it holds the fury of a thousand storms, and it will kill me as surely as it had that boy.

But I cannot live with the question.

The cauldron fire is dead, and I don’t care.

“Don’t you eat me, you old bastard,” I mutter to the thunderbird.

It clicks its beak like it understands.

Behind me, Buckley’s voice booms. “Behold the lord of the sky!”

Here I am meant to lift the vent seal and let the fog free. Roll back the curtain. Reveal the majesty of a captured myth.

Instead, I unlock the cage door.

I set the tempest free.
On the Donor List

by Deborah L. Davitt

Cortexes bawling, mouthless,
brain and nervous system,
espaliered like a tree,
in a vat, not on a trellis,
blooming pain instead of flowers.

Robotic nurses—some are human,
but might as well be machines—
take visitors through the wards,
emotionless: “At least they’re still alive,
as they await donor bodies.”

“Of course they’re volunteers,
signed their estates away,
got on waiting lists. Yes,
the executive board is pleased
by the bottom line.
No food, no meds, no complaints.
Win-win.”
They’d been people once, lined faces,
desperate eyes—
cancer or geriatric cases,
shucked out of their skulls and vertebrae
like king crabs at dinner,
hold the butter.
Free of the burden of bone,
the shell of flesh, they were trellised
over ladders of aluminum and glass.

Family members sometimes come
to read to these crackling neural
nets, not knowing
how or even if they can hear—
nurses assure them that the microphones
are directly connected
to the auditory cortex.

But most forget to tend
these trees of meat,
these potted plants,
so unable to respond or react.
It’s easier to pretend
not to hear silent screams
echoing from a sanitary horizon.
In the dream, there are too many stars in the sky. That is how Pir first knows that she is not home. A hot breeze grazes her cheek and brings the smell of sulfur and burning iron. Deep blue sand glitters and shifts underfoot as she walks towards firelight flickering between boulders the size of ships.

The dream is not a normal dream, because it happens any place, any time—whether Pir is biting into a flavorless soy ration, hurtling barefoot through the air between searing carbide rooftops, or curled up asleep in some dark and dirty corner of the Sigma district—the walking, and the darkness, and the stinging sand go on for seconds, sometimes minutes, and she is right back to the moment she began.

This time, she is hurrying through the Epsilon spaceport on her way to the aluminum dealer, head down, backpack full of rattling metal and clinking glass. She stops to breathe—a recently cracked rib doesn’t give her the luxury of deep breaths anymore—and it happens again, but this time she makes it all the way to the circle of boulders, which are not boulders, as it turns out. One is a huge head with serene, closed eyes, smooth, upturned lips, hair curled in ringlets in the style of the Larnassi giants; here lies a half-sunk fragment of an ornate, flowing gown, there two hands clasp a crown blackened by plasma fire.

The light is coming from a roaring fire. Nearby, under a rocky overhang, a cloaked figure sits alone.

Pir approaches and takes a seat, her knees cracking beneath her. The figure does not move. She doesn’t know how much time passes before the woman, of indeterminable age, pulls back her hood to reveal greying hair and a grim and weary face. Her nose is bent, lips thin and bitter, teeth crooked like smashed tombstones as she opens her mouth to speak. Dark and desperate eyes are fixed not to her, but to the sky.

Pir, she croaks, leaning on her name like a cane. If you get this message—

Then, she is back on the dock, blinking in the brightness.

Many things happen at once: first, the scream of pain from her lower ribs as rough arms drag her to the ground, then a deadly hiss-RIP as a
cable as thick as her calf whips through the space her midsection was a moment ago and splits a steel shipping container like an overripe melon. She howls in agony as the stranger stands and dusts herself off, unaffected.

The woman is tall; she wears a decorated military uniform, but not one that Pir has ever seen before, with gold piping up the front and a harsher shade of olive green than that of the caste guards. She studies Pir with eyes deep red like her own for a long, intense moment before turning sharply and striding through the gathering crowd. One girl clothed in sallow gray rags watches the stranger with wide, disbelieving eyes. Others begin to mutter amongst themselves. Some luck for a street rat... doesn’t look like an Epsilon to me... shouldn’t even be here in the first place... Pir scrambles to her feet, determined to move on before someone gets a mind to ask for her papers.

Eleven years later, and orbiting precisely five kilometers above the vast, glittering cylinders of her home station, Terra Sigma-Olys stared into the viewscreen, refusing to believe the face she saw on it.

“General?” asked a voice from her left. “We’re not here to negotiate, ser.”

“I—I realize that, lieutenant.”

Terra had probably gone to Primary with some of the anonymous guns zeroed in on her ship. Some of them were even caste-mates, surely, red-eyed with radiation, lean with manual labor. That must have been why she was chosen for this mission—a test to see where her sympathies lie. To see if an orphan from the Sigma slums had what it took to put down a rebellion.

But this was no ordinary rebellion. This time, Terra would be destroying her own.

If she could break them—no mercy, no surrender—then she’d finally have the trust of Sovereignty leadership. And once she had it? Her real work could begin. The chipping. The erosion. The undoing from within.

But first she was going to have to look into the face of her first and only love, and then she was going to have to pull the trigger.

The face on the viewscreen belonged to Pirouette Sigma-Karska.

Near-fatal accident had brought them together long ago. Terra had seen the wire’s snap coming, had been watching the freighters come in and out of the port when one snagged an anchor
line, had cried out to her so loud she must have been heard all the way to Omega.

There would be no leniency for a pair of dust-clad juvenile thieves here. Together, Pir and Terra raced from the swarming guards, zig-zagging through back streets, zip-lining mail tubes, improvising as one a sublime getaway, a symphony of escape.

It was just their first. Somewhere along the way, two beating hearts keen to the flight became one wild, sprawling love mapped along dirty alleys and scratched into secret spaces. In the closed cycle of scavenge and survive in Jadur Station’s lower castes they thrived; a symbiotic pair, two queens of a kingdom of refuse, star-crossed runners whose footsteps blazed constellations through the artificial night.

Terra bit the inside of her cheek as memories flooded back: Pir teaching her how to chase grav-fields, how to scrape live wires, how to drag a bar magnet just so over the fission vents to pick up actinide dust—far more valuable than copper, she had explained, with that electric smile and that manic gleam in her eye she got whenever she found some clever new exploit. But she was clumsy. She’d spent more than a few nights in jail and was starting to gain a reputation, a face.

Terra had no face. It wasn’t just that she could navigate Jadur Station’s nested cities blindfolded, she was a political savant. Every current event, every scrap of gossip, every military movement was fodder for her grand, intricate machinery, a perfect model of the local human sphere. While Pir watched from the shadows, she wielded it all flawlessly, knowing which guards could be bribed, which borders were in dispute, which district was too embarrassed by some local scandal to ask for papers. *Just listen,* she would tell her, ear to the floorboards above, as Pir prowled the basement of a Delta cafe for fallen coffee beans. *The enemy will tell you how it can be defeated.*

Terra had always thought she had been giving her the skills she needed to survive. With a growing pit in her stomach, she realized that she had given her the skills to rebel.

And now the rebellion had to be crushed.

“My love,”

Pir’s voice was exultant in its familiarity, relief and fear intertwined like bodies on a hot night, rising and falling in the space of her name.

My love fell silently in the gap. Terra felt the ghost of the words hit her chest like a shockwave. But there couldn’t be any such epithets anymore, no matter how much they
burned at her lips. She had chosen her path years ago in one blazing, reckless moment, set off that morning for the Academy and never looked back. The shame of it pursued her, as cold and ruthless as her own shadow.

The crack that would become a chasm had started small, as such things do.

*Where would you go, if you could go anywhere, Terra?* Pir had asked on one of their first days together.

*Probably the Alpha bath house,* she had responded. *I hear they heat the water.*

And Pir had laughed. *I mean in the entire universe.*

But the seed of that conversation would grow. First: why did some people boil water to drink while others boiled water to bathe in? And then: what made one a Sigma? What made one an Alpha? And finally: how does one change an unjust system? From within, or from without?

“Terra!” Sharper this time. Not a cry but a demand.

*I did this,* Terra thought. *This is my fault.*

The lieutenant sighed behind her, impatient.

“Beta-Howerlda, make yourself useful and get me the Fixer.”

“Ser, we haven’t even fired yet. I must advise—”

“Shut up. I want a full charge.”

The Fixer couldn’t really fix this. The time travel device’s intended purpose was for re-firing missiles too expensive to miss. It couldn’t stop the inevitable insurrection of a people starved to bone and and beaten ragged. It couldn’t stop the paltry rebel fleet and their homemade helium lasers from drumming a death march on the radar. But maybe . . .

“I know you can hear me!” Pir spat, vitriolic. “I know you remember.”

Her hand trembled as she punched in the spacetime coordinates she knew by heart, quickly, before her good sense could rebel. Even now she ached to say goodbye.

“Terra!”

Terra took a deep breath, straightened her uniform, and threw the switch.

• • •

*If you get this message,* the gaunt, eerie dream woman tells her, before she launches into a hacking, coughing fit, —*I have two things to tell you.*

*Do you remember that day?* she continues, much weaker than before. *A woman saved you, a general in the Sovereignty’s Order.* She shakes her
head. *That woman was me. But not...* She trails off. *Not the right me. I was in the crowd, too, watching. The girl in the rags should have saved you, not the woman in uniform. You were supposed to be friends, lovers, comrades.*

Her mouth hardens into a thin line. Pir gets a glimpse of her eyes and they are wet, and red, red like drying blood, the eyes of a Sigma. The woman expects her to believe these are the same eyes that she saw nearly a decade ago. Maybe they are.

*But I broke that timeline, Pir. I erased it, and I undid us. I was a coward, afraid to disobey, afraid to do what was right.*

A mountainous weight fills her pause. *Now: here is what you must do.*

It feels it has taken ages for the dream to unravel thus far, for the fragments to add up into this. She is right: there *was* a girl in rags, that day—eight years ago, now—who stared at the woman in uniform like she’d just seen a ghost. But Pir had never seen the girl again. And although she has already seen the task in her heart, she is afraid.

Life grows lean and cruel in the outer districts of the Station as the gargantuan cost of the Sovereignty’s galactic manifest destiny begins to chew at the lower castes. They come for water first. Guards patrol the reclamators with a sneer and a stick for anyone who comes too close. Then come the nutrient rations. The black market scrap metal trade dries up and even the yawning fission vents down in Upsilon are picked clean of dust by dawn each day.

They are the rebellion’s first gathering place.

Pir listens. And listens. And listens. And when she has heard every voice, she speaks. Pir is not a natural born leader, but she has picked up enough of Terra’s tricks that people gravitate to what she has to say. When the meetings began, she spoke of empathy, of bargaining, of helping one’s neighbor. Now, she can see the way garments hang on the collarbones of her congregation. She can see the ribs of babies and the sunken eyes of children. Now, she speaks of revolution.

*● ● ●*

It has been eleven years since the dreams began, but as of late, they have ceased. Not to be, but to progress. Pir still sees the stone finery, the burned crown, she still hears the woman speak of broken timelines and missing pasts. Over time, it gets easier to imagine the sharp, tired face full of
life and fire like her own. Sometimes, she imagines her beside her, lending her strength as she speaks to the growing crowd. She is an invisible talisman, a silent patron saint of change.

But the dream never continues. And the longer Pir goes without her guardian’s assurance, the more she worries.

The rebellion has been a smashing success. Pir’s revolutionaries—and there are far, far more than those who would oppose them—sing as they stroll wherever they please, swilling liberated alcohol and leaving a trail of laughter and crimson streamers as they go. High spirits abound for everyone except the upper castes, forced from their spacious apartments and rationed down to size. Their threats go unheard while the masses cheer.

But someone has heard. Their upset has gained them the notice of the Sovereignty, and while the newborn political party drinks and delegates, Pir paces back and forth in a plush, redistributed office late into the night and tries to summon the sand and the boulders and the cloaked woman.

“Leader Karska?”

She turns to face the voice. It is that of a fresh-faced young girl, her bronze hair in long twin braids and her maroon cap tipped at a rakish angle. She grins as she steps through the doorway. Only nineteen, and Goss is already a seasoned rebellion leader.

“Are we ready for tomorrow?” she asks.

“Is there anything else I can do?”

“Yes, everything is in place. Just check on your stations, Goss, I can handle whatever comes up.” Truthfully, the future scares her. How long can they hold out here, alone? What is one station against the might of the Sovereignty? Who else will join them, and when? Will it be enough?

Only a towering silence answers her questions. She wishes the woman who knew the future would appear and assure her that she is doing the right thing. She knows it in her heart that the people of Jadur station could not go on in this way, that the old philosophers were right about death and liberty and the human spirit. But it doesn’t stop her from waking up drenched in sweat in the middle of the night, the taste of metal on her lips.

Goss must sense that something is wrong. She has always been attuned to the fears behind the facade, which is why she is such a good squadron leader.

“Don’t worry,” she says brightly, “our ships are in top shape. Bacchanale has modded everything. There’s nothing that man can’t turn
into a weapon. The Sov’ can’t even dream about what we’ve cooked up to meet ‘em.”

Pir smiles weakly. “Good to—”
—what you must do:
Run.

Her jaw falls open, the end of her sentence forgotten. Run? Where? From whom?
“Leader Karska?”
“Sorry, I just had—it was nothing.”
“We’re all a little stressed out, ser. But once we score our first real victory—” She curls her fist triumphantly.

The rebellion is going to fail.
“—then the other stations will see, and they, too will take up the banner.”

Your loyal army will be slaughtered and your fleet vaporized.
“What? Too much? Bad qhava?”

Do you know what happens to debris in space? I do, Pir, for I have seen it with my own eyes. Your failure will orbit Jadur forever—

“Ah, alright. Good night, ser.”
The office is cold and empty.
—and your dust will have no peace.

With one final jerk, Terra jammed the recorder drone’s makeshift battery pack into place. She wheezed with exhaustion and pulled her general’s cloak closer about her. Even under tidally-locked Majorca’s eternal sun, waning adrenaline chilled her veins and tightened her lungs with every breath. And whatever was oozing black smoke and noxious fumes in front of her surely was never meant to be set afire.

At least the blood-won ruins of the Sovereignty’s latest conquest would provide her with safe shelter for the moment. She grimaced at the massive face peering down at her. It was a face of peace, of promise. Why had they destroyed it?

It wasn’t worth it. It had never been worth it.

Terra Sigma-Olys had, in some sense, accomplished what she had set out to do. Other low-castes had followed her into the military and served their cause proudly. The tide of public opinion was shifting, slowly, like the turning of a great warship. Maybe one day, she had thought, Sigmas and Taus and Upsilon would fill not just the ranks of the military but the Sovereignty too. Maybe then things would change. Maybe in the distant future the castes would be abandoned and all people would be equal.
Or maybe she had just been naïve.

Pir had had it right, and she had killed her for it.

With a shiver, she sent the metal contraption buzzing up into the air where it hovered, its glassy circumferential eye scanning, recording, remembering. Gears ground and sputtered as it struggled to stay afloat. Too many lights blinked erratically. Was the dilator fried? The magnetic lift? Terra wasn’t an engineer, she was just desperate.

How did this thing even work? She stared into the fire while her mind raced. Would her words just appear in Pir’s mind, nearly fifteen years in the past? What if she had the spacetime coordinates wrong? What if the temporal collimator was out of focus and her message got there too late? And what if Pir got her message but didn’t listen?

She coughed and moved underneath the overhang, away from the toxic flames.

“Pir,” she began. “If you get this message . . .”

It is the second, and the last, hurrah for the Jadur rebellion. Swathed in mismatched reds, its orchestrators huddle around the captain’s chair of their flagship vessel, the Populace. The room is dark, all power has been diverted to weaponry, and hushed whispers instead fill the space. In the center, Pir sits as still as a statue, as pale as a ghost. She remembers waking this morning, getting dressed, eating a rich breakfast of fresh bread and jam and olla fruit all while two voices fought and raged inside of her. The dream woman had said the rebellion would fail. But Pir was the rebellion, and she could not stop its tide even if she had stood up and demanded the whole thing called off. So there it was—she had condemned them all to die.

The viewscreen pings and she flicks it on with shaking fingers. A young woman in a sharp new Sovereignty uniform settles into a chair and wipes her brow with a handkerchief. She stares, hollow-eyed, into her for a long, pregnant pause before clearing her throat. “General Sigma-Karska.”

“It’s Leader Karska around here,” Pir retorts. “And you are?”

Muttering surrounds the Sovereign general on her end. She gestures sharply, fatally, for silence. “This is General Sigma-Olys of the warship Lionel. We have you surrounded and
outnumbered. Surrender now and we may consider mercy.”


“Do you think we flew out here to surrender to you?” Pir asks, summoning as much steel in her voice as she can muster. She maintains her gaze. There is something familiar about the woman, something about the way she lays down her words at odd angles to one another. She is a Sigma, after all. Did they attend school together?

General Sigma-Olys scowls and makes a snapping motion.

On the comms board, one channel turns to static.

“Goss, order—”

_The second is this, Pir: Come and find me._

_I send you this message from the year 4667; August 9th in the Julian reckoning. I am amongst the ruins of southern Cebell on the netcore world of Majorca. You will see my beacon._

_I have aimed for the day some version of me saves you on the port, but truthfully, I don’t know if this message will reach you in time, or at all. But when the day comes, do not die a fool on Jadur. Come find me, Pir, and we will start a new revolution, a better revolution—together._

_Terra Sigma-Olys, signing off._


Its purpose served, the little drone smashed into the sand and its lights sputtered out one by one.

Terra held her breath as she watched the machine struggle against the inevitable. She flexed her scarred hands and watched the tendons stand and the knuckles crease.

At the very least, she had not undone herself. But what exactly had she done?

In five minutes she would light the flare, and alert everyone within twenty clicks to her location. That meant a rescue squad would be dispatched to retrieve her—or that some scrappy Cebellian rebel would find her, and put her head on a pike. She sighed. Back to the meat grinder or finally thrown into it. She deserved the latter a million times over, she thought. Once for every life she’d taken in her foolish quest to unmake the Sovereignty.

Polish and politics had never been enough. Cold calculation had brought her this far, but it
would take her no farther. She needed fire and fury. She needed Pir.

Terra started to load the last plasma charge into her pistol, then stopped. A good Sovereign soldier always saved one, in case of capture. But maybe the rebels would take her alive. Maybe she could trade information for time.

Or maybe a squadron of her own soldiers could watch their general put a hole straight through her skull.

She clicked the cartridge into place, then removed the flare gun from her pack and fired it high into the air.

It was time to find out.

A nearby series of explosions rocked her hideout as she watched the red streamer hang, glowing, in the air like a prayer ribbon. The hissing of falling bombs followed.

Ten minutes passed. Twenty. Thirty. No rescue squad, no machete-carrying rebel appeared. No Pir. She sweated the minutes out, listening for footsteps, drinking shakily from her canteen every now and then. Feeling the weight of the pistol as she flipped it over in her palm.

The rebels had better things to do than investigate an enemy flare, she decided. But the Sovereignty should have been here by now.

So it was, then—a quick death.

Suddenly, a solitary figure slipped between the rocks and danced across the indigo sand. In the dust, their lithe form moved quickly, skirting the stone robes, ducking beneath the charred metalwork.

In a moment they stood before her.

Terra stiffened, embarrassed at having been caught off guard so easily. “Friend or foe?” she demanded, snapping up her pistol. Whoever it was held a complete advantage. She eyed the heavy, curved sword that hung at their hip.

In response, the figure pushed up wind goggles and unwrapped the gauzy fabric that bound their face, revealing red eyes and a crooked grin.

“Terra, it’s me.”

Explosions boomed, nearer now.

“We’ve never truly met, but for my entire life, I have seen your message,” Pir continued.

Terra dropped the gun. “I... you got my message? In time? I didn’t kill you?” she stammered. She stood as tears began to well in her eyes. We’ve never truly met...

Oh, but we have, Pir.

“You nearly did...” The grin faded from Pir’s face, joy extinguished. “My crew shoved me into an escape pod just in time. But they... there
were very few survivors.” Pir looked searchingly into her eyes. “Terra, tell me about us.”

A smile broke out on her face as she took Pir’s hands in her own. The angle of her cheeks, the scar on her lip, all perfectly preserved, every feature made only finer, richer with age. She couldn’t resist from tracing her thumb along her jaw as she spoke.

“We used to . . .” Words failed her, formed and fell like stones to the ground.

A shot sizzled across her ear. Another shattered the overhang just above, showering them with rubble as ten military exoskeletons marched into sight.

Terra snaked her arm around Pir’s waist and pulled her close, close enough to feel the soft brush of her hair, close enough to inhale the scent of sweat and sand and copper.

Then, without hesitation, she leveled her pistol, aimed, and fired her last round into the approaching squad.

“We used to run.”
The Last Trophy of Hunter Hammerson

by L Chan

[Ed: This piece about the Hunter is explosive. Monster hunting is still a revered profession, and your accusations could bring down one of the greatest. I have marked areas for improvement and verification.]

When you’re a small paper reporter, and you receive an invitation from the most famous monster hunter the modern world knows, you drop everything. There are stories, and there are drop everything stories. To be invited for a guided tour of his personal museum, to hear his stories of battle, to ask the question the rest of the country has been asking for the past few years.

Where have you gone, M. Hammerson, when you had so much more to give?

The Hunter, I am sure, needs no introduction. His exploits need no explanation, and have been reported in far more illustrious broadsheets than this one, but for the sake of the good name of this paper, we cannot assume that every reader has had the fortune of seeing twoscore years of front-page exploits.

Little is known of the young M. Hammerson, and it is beneath this paper to enquire into the circumstances of a man’s family, should he not choose to reveal it. His adult life is a matter of public record. A decorated scout in the Great War, and a self-educated scholar of no small merit in the esoteric fields of ways of the old country, he built up a brisk business in the nascent field of investigating the various complaints of farmers and other honest people, terrorized by things in the dark. Mostly untruths and fear carried back from the war, for people long used to the company of falling shells in the night grew lonely, and imagined terror where there was only the blessed silence of fen, and wood, and plain.

M. Hammerson’s renown was less built on debunking myths than on the matching of steel and lead to claw and tooth and tentacle. He was not alone in his success, but singular in his
business acumen. His accumulated riches he put into a series of ventures. By some divine providence he found success in both investment and monster hunting, both fields with fair share of casualties by the wayside. The growing wealth allowed him to purchase a fine manor house on the outskirts of Hawksfen, the sleeping town of which I am now a guest. In his retirement, he had given in to eccentricities and idiosyncrasies, purchasing a large swathe of state land behind his manor, and declaring it a preserve for all things natural and “returning it to the wilds”.

[Ed: There has been growing tension between M. Hammerson and the residents of Hawksfen, regarding the Museum. Write to the local rag, editor’s an old friend of mine. Couple of letters last year, complaints about the woods. Backpage article sometime in January. Get dates for this piece.]

The great Hunter had a small retinue of staff on his estate; a groundsman in his twilight years in rough cottons that barely kept out the spring chill, around his neck the groundsman wore a scarf of a weave I could not identify, both holding crumples like stiff linen but flowing in the frosty air like silk. The master, said the groundsman, by way of forewarning, was not the man he used to be, and his many battles had taken a toll on his body. Then he showed me the Museum.

An architect’s marvel was the Museum, a stately manor house dating back decades, perhaps owing its original construction to less savoury wealth, now transformed by the cladding of imported marbles, dark and fragrant timbers and mirrored brass fittings. The grandeur of the building was accentuated by its contents, an exhibition of trophies unnatural and weapons retired in glory. Along columns of marble, and solid mahogany inlays, were glass cabinets holding contents of singular ugliness. Skulls, teeth, claws, pelts, and in one case, an immense container of preservative which held something which took after a pillbug or woodlouse, all segmented shell, except with wizened fingers in lieu of legs. A trick of the light and the distortive curvature of the glass, the legs of the thing seemed to move as I circumnavigated the exhibit.

The man himself was announced by the creak of footsteps on wooden floors. M. Hammerson himself barely lived up to the legend. The diminishing of a hero would be scandalous in any mainstream newspaper, but I wager the reputation of this paper on the evidence of my
eyes. Hunched and shrivelled was the great man, inhabiting his clothes like a wire frame instead of full fleshed human being. Even with his curved back, so great was his height that he still looked me in the eye. Or would have, if his own eyes had not been hidden behind tinted lenses on wire framed spectacles. Previous accounts had M. Hammerson as a man of manners, but he received me in nothing more formal than a dressing gown, with the only incongruity a scarf of the same odd material his staff had worn earlier. When he spoke, it was in breathy whispers, less speech than a modulated sigh perhaps, as though the entirety of his energy was spent expelling air from his lungs, instead of forming words and sentences.

He took my hand, and when I say took, it was more like his grip enveloped my hands, which looked like a child’s compared to his. I, who have spent a lifetime spinning words, find it difficult to describe the discomfort of that handshake. It was not in the firmness of the grip, which belied the rest of his appearance, but the sensation of it, as though his flesh was amorphous, pressing down on my hand from all directions. M. Hammerson apologised for the summons, explaining that my earlier reporting on conservation movement and the various national reserves had given him the impetus to start his own modest contribution to the cause. It was only right, said the man, that I should be the one to tell the story of how the great huntsman had become a great conservationist.

The man’s gait was awkward, a pronounced limp and general weakness afflicted his right side. He explained that a lifetime of fighting and hunting had taken its toll on his body. His once impressive musculature, now withered; he said while pointing out a portrait of his younger, broad-shouldered self in military regalia. I must make clear that the great Hunter, as many of his type, suffered from a particular backwards hubris, ascribing later greatness to nascent potential, for the younger M. Hammerson could scarce afford the extravagance of a portrait. His voice, was taken from him. The long-term damage of some noxious fume or another. As were his eyes, permanently and debilitatingly sensitive to all but the gentlest of light. He led me to a drawing room of mixed decoration, and another member of his retinue served us tea. Despite the warmth of the indoors, this servant, too, wore the same scarf as his master and the groundsman. Perhaps in his dotage, the Hunter had reverted to his earlier love of uniform and structure. This thread in the great man’s tapestry will go unpulled, for the better story was about to begin.
We were served tea that held earthy overtones, rich and dark, like truffles or fat portobello mushrooms. As with everything his profession had taken from him, his constitution was likewise weakened, and he could neither stomach coffee bean or tea leaf, but an herbal concoction of his own brewing. Restored by the application of the tea, he began to lead me through the museum, the path tracing his own life from soldier to journeyman Hunter. M. Hammerson was candid, painting a picture of a person driven not by principles but by the simple expedient imperative of filling his bellies. I had thought that the Hunter would want to use the paper as a means to bolster his fame, to build a foundation of legend upon which to construct his museum business. M. Hammerson had not started out with lofty ideals, but he was clearly not the man he once was.

This grew clearer as we reached the pinnacle of his career, the grand trophy room. In a place of honour was the story of the Black Deer Of The Woods, a creature of the deep forests, the Hunter’s trophy hidden behind velvet curtains. The Deer’s mere presence had driven a logging camp insane, when the spring rains came, the folk from downriver found nothing but deep gouges in the cabins, severed limbs but no bodies. Perhaps the most famous of the Hunter’s conquests, M. Hammerson had led a small militia of armed men into battle. M. Hammerson described the Black Deer as being something older than the first settlements on the continent, a creature called a deer because there was nothing else that could describe him. Standing eight foot at the withers, with a shaggy pelt and a mane of the blackbird feathers, his antlers were his crowning glory, a full man’s height in span, composed of blackened flesh instead of bone and tipped by grasping hands instead of points.

Militiamen were cannon fodder, something to distract the Black Deer. The Hunter narrated this part in a whisper as he pulled the curtains on his trophy. M. Hammerson seemed afraid of eavesdroppers, even alone as we were in his vast manor, without a servant in sight. He had bribed a local guide earlier to give him the location of the beast’s nest and, while the beast was menacing an ill-equipped and ill-trained rabble, dug a shallow pit and filled it with gasoline. In the lair, as promised by the guide, a squirming, squamous, mewling mass awaited. The trophy itself was a smooth, tumorous rock, basaltic in colouration and with an oily sheen to its surface. The air around the trophy swirled with wisps of smoke from a smouldering bundle of herbs, a pleasant smell leaking from the display.
The Black Deer, the Hunter explained, was not unreasonable. He bargained with the Hunter, speaking with a voice like a children’s choir, high and sweet and multi-layered. For the survival of his children, he would gladly lay down in the pit and take the Hunter’s fire. And thus passed a creature older than the trees themselves. The children of the Black Deer slept, kept that way by the ever-burning soporifics. On closer examination, one of the bulbous protrusions of the rock blinked lazily. I was unsure at what disgusted me more, the sleeping, pulsating thing before me, or the man behind me, craven thing that he was. Monster or no, to have achieved victory by falling to this level, M. Hammerson was not the vaunted hero the country held him to be.

[Ed: Get up to that township, there’s bound to be a few loggers who were paid hands for M. Hammerson. We need this piece corroborated. If you’re unable, send Perkins.]

M. Hammerson was not done. Next, he showed me the twelve jawbones of the Wyrm the afflicted the lowland swamps, a creature so venomous that its death poisoned a patch of swamp half the size of a small city. Dead Wyrm, dead swamp, but the story on the card next to the ivory jawbones with the concentric rows of teeth had the order wrong. The Hunter had killed the swamp with an industrial supply of arsenic, and the Wyrm’s death was a natural consequence thereafter. Or a werewolf, pinned to a bed in human form with a weighted net of silver filigree and then bludgeoned to death.

[Ed: Can we verify the arsenic?]

On he went, deconstructing his achievements and legends, one at a time. Behind each tale of heroism, each triumph, was a singular sordid truth. The great M. Hammerson was no hero; but rather a creature of subterfuge, of deception; ruthless and willing to sacrifice principle and comrade alike for his kills. It was an exercise in dissolution, mirroring the manor house he had constructed, watching the great Hunter disassemble his mythos one confession at a time. We had visited his keepsakes, his shames, all save his last great trophy, before I could contain myself no longer and confronted the Hunter. Why? Why, at the pinnacle of his success, withdraw and summon a small town newspaper reporter to bear witness to his deconstruction?

The Hunter explained himself to me, perhaps the only soul in his household that could
truly hear his confession. First, he asked if he was a hero. I answered him as honestly as I could, in that he was a hero to many, but no longer to me. He nodded. Humanity needed heroes, and it needed them to be noble, and its monsters to be evil. The business of monster hunting could not afford to be honourable, not when Hunters faced enemies as implacable as old gods and other spectres of the ancient world. He lay a hand on a glass cabinet, the one with the half canid snout of the wolfman and he looked at me through those smoked glass lenses and asked if the creatures he had slain were evil.

Allegiances of these things were unquestionable. They were, to a beast; unnatural, bloodthirsty and evil. Perhaps, argued the Hunter, only so because we had pressed deep into their territory with our roads, and our farmsteads, imposing our own unnatural regularity onto the hunting grounds of these ancient things. For he had studied them more than any other scholar, conversed with them, cajoled and cheated them and found some of them wise in their own way. And what of their need for meat, I pressed the Hunter, seeking the obvious flaw in his logic. His only answer was to snort and ask me to seek the mercy of a jury of cows and pigs.

He retired, he explained, after one last hunt, even though he had still been strong at the time. Slowly convinced that he should do more for the natural world and better employ the spoils of his long campaign, he bought acres and acres of woodlands as restitution, with the sole condition that the proceeds from a trust he had set up do nothing more than enforce the borders of the park he created. It is a strange thing for this newspaper to have to do, to reconcile this contradiction for our readers. M. Hammerson, a living legend amongst those select few that chose to hunt down these dark and dangerous beings, now a philanthropist and conservationist. People change, even great people like this one. Yet it is true, that the support for our campaign against these monsters, beasts, old gods and other misshapen things hinges on our moral perception of them, regardless of how they acquit themselves. We do not wage such wars against the mountain lion, against the grizzly, against the rattlesnake; who, in sum, account for as many deaths as those attributed to monsters. While M. Hammerson’s revelations were scandalous, I cannot imagine that he is the sole Hunter who practices subterfuge in his work. His adversaries are stronger, faster and far wiser than he could ever hope to be, how else could he triumph? There was no contempt in the
man’s voice for all the lives he took over the years, only sadness and the hope of redemption. But he had arrived at a truth at the end of his journey and haunted a prison built from the spoils of his victories. No way for his story to get out.

[Ed: M. Hammerson isn’t aiming for redemption here. He’s burying himself and using you to do it. Your article is getting confused here, your previous work has argued conservation but for the natural world, you’ve never held sympathy for these things before. Even if the Hunter were persuasive enough to have swayed you, his skill at words is not coming across.]

There was still one last thing to see, M. Hammerson’s final trophy. Before his retirement, the Hunter took on a singular, odd case. Far from home, he was commissioned for the Lansdown Cloak. Puzzling newsrooms everywhere, for the Hunter was not known to be a collector of curios, or a cleanser of cursed items. Yet he took an interest in this cloak, which had a nasty reputation for corrupting its wearers. Even then, I was not prepared for the shrouded glass sarcophagus that housed what was left of the cloak. When it was uncovered, I took a step back at the sight, grabbing M. Hammerson’s arm for support. Through his dressing gown, his flesh had a curious yield to it, not the softness of atrophied muscle, but something spongier. Springy like papier mâché, I had expected perhaps some form of shredded cloth in the display, some tattered fabric. Not this facsimile of a human, arms, legs, torso, all sketched out of a dense net of twined plant matter, thin and fibrous like the roots of a young tree. The humanity of it was unmistakable, even down to the knotted bundles that made up the eyes in a hollow face.

M. Hammerson asked me if I was a naturalist, to which I had to reply in the negative, still aghast at the caricature in front of me. He had discerned that the Lansdown Cloak held characteristics of something more than the inanimate, and after besting the Cloak’s latest victim, divined that the Cloak was nothing more than a fruiting body of a complex organism, with the rest of the fungus growing in a thick mycelium slowly permeating the body. The Lansdown fungus changed people, through the profusion of hallucinogenic compounds in the victim. Not all were inflicted with the bloodlust the cloak was known for, some gleaned hidden truths from it. The root structure was tough, M. Hammerson explained, and the spores even more so, cold or heat could not kill them, not even boiling water.
He invited me to have a closer look at his final trophy, and that was when I left that beautiful museum of his, never to return.

My thoughts on the great Hunter M. Hammerson are contained in this article, how he has sequestered himself in a mausoleum, built on the corpses of many marvellous creatures. And I do say marvellous, for the least of them was a marvel, notwithstanding the lives they’d taken.

Dangerous, as all great things are, from the Black Deer down to the last. I left a man transformed in the hours I spent with him from hero to monster and perhaps back again with his revelations, in his clumsy attempts at redemption. I worry of what was looking out at me behind the dark glass on his brow, I worry of what was under his skin. Most of all, I wonder what strange truth he gleaned, for when I made my way around the last trophy of M. Hammerson, I saw a remaining fragment of the fruiting body of the fungus that was the Lansdown Cloak, looking so much like a piece of brown cloth, sprouting from a neck should have been.

[Ed: The paper will run this, it’s going to rock the country if we can prove the M. Hammerson’s stories. Maybe tone down the sympathetic elements, show the hunter rambling more. On a personal note, it’s late summer and I know you’re overly enamoured of this reformed hunter and his backwoods sanctuary, but you should lose that scarf.]
Memories Taste
Best When
Marinated With
Sadness

by Feng Gooi

Shiren put on a big fake smile when the patrons strolled into her memory distillery, The Iridescent Tear, the galaxy’s premiere location to savor the delicious taste of sorrow. They admired the seemingly endless stacks of tanks above her bar. Within them were distilled memories that bubbled in melancholic shades of blue. Everything in the distillery was meticulously designed to evoke a certain set of emotions. From the antiquated furnishings that stirred nostalgia for the Neo-Utopianist Era to the soft strings of Departed Colonies funeral laments playing over the speakers.

Shiren let them take a moment to bask in this delightful atmosphere of gloom before she launched into her greeting. One of them she recognized, a regular here, the wife of a zetta-corp over executor. Shiren noticed she had gotten a new companion drone, this one had rose gold plating and a brash geometric shape. It looked hideously tacky.

“Madam Mierach! So lovely to see you again. Your new drone looks simply exquisite! A perfect combination of elegance and boldness!” she said.

“Why thank you Shiren! It is an Arventik Oleo original design. Of course, true master artisans like you Shiren know great art when you see it,” Madam Mierach said, leaning close to give Shiren a measured embrace.

“Arventik Oleo is a genius unlike any other. Anyone who disagrees should be shot out of a ship and strangled by the cold vacuum of space. But I see you’ve brought a friend today?”

In stark contrast to the over executive’s wife, the man wore drab modest clothing, a gray and black vac-suit commonly worn by spaceport shipsmiths. It did a piss poor job of hiding his aristocratic nature, you could cover this man in a radbat’s excretions and he would still radiate affluence.
“Yes! Shiren, please meet Itto Plaize the 37th. I was telling him all about your services, how it just opened my mind and changed my life completely. Needless to say he is very intrigued.”

Shiren quickly searched her mind for an Itto Plaize, but she couldn’t find this one or any of his thirty-seven predecessors. So, she opted for the standard response. “It is a great honour to meet you, Mister Plaize. I have heard so many wonderful things about you.”

“No! No! The honour is mine! I must say Madam Mierach has only the highest praise for your services and I am very excited to experience some fine misery.”

“I try my best. So tell me, do you have any particular flavor of sadness you wish to indulge in today? The bitterness of regret? The pain of grief? The longing in isolation?”

“I’m not sure honestly, there is just so much to choose from.” Itto said, his eyes scanned the tanks of bubbling teal, marine, indigo and sapphire.

“Well, I would be remiss not to recommend you my most popular drink, ‘The Inferno of Sorrow.’”

“Catchy name. Tell me more.”

“This spiral of despair follows a once brave and joyful Kilonean mother, who had everything she loved ravaged from her in the Ninth Kilonean Genocide. From lone survivor to abused refugee and mutilated vagrant, her body and soul is decimated to oblivion in a relentless torrent of endless tragedies. I have to warn you though Mr Plaize, it is a highly intense experience, many of my patrons come out not just wrecked in sobs for the Kilonean mother but for the merciless cruelty of the universe.”

“Ooh! I love this one, tried it last month! It is unbelievable, I was literally wailing at the end! You must try it!” Madam Mierach said.

“Intriguing but I think I'd prefer something less bombastic,” Itto responded with a condescending chuckle.

*Of course he would*, thought Shiren, straining hard not to roll her eyes.

“I see you are obviously a highly intellectual man, Mister Plaize. Perhaps another drink of mine, ‘The Emptiness Above Us,’ would be more suited to your sophisticated palette. Extracted from the memories of a disrobed Priest of The Ascendant, it is an anguished moan in the cold darkness of space, an utter deterioration of all that is holy and good. An encapsulation of cosmic existentialist horror. Here’s a fun little fact, famed philosopher Vizya Doko is a frequent patron here and was inspired to write his seminal work “The
Weight of a Black Hole’ after consuming this memory.”

“Hmm . . .” Plaize said while rubbing his chin. “I’m sorry that is undoubtedly provoking but I just think I’d prefer something more . . . personal, if that makes sense, more . . . intimate.”

Shiren stared ahead and furrowed her brow for a while like she was thinking long and hard but truth was she already knew what she would say.

“There is one memory I brewed that I'm especially proud of but it is an acquired taste, so to speak. I’m not sure how to describe it. It’s subtle, it doesn’t so much break the heart but drowns it.”

“Oh, really? Sounds fascinating. What is the memory? Pray tell.” Itto’s eyes were alight with interest.

“A factory worker lives in the pit of The Eta Belt Underport. Day by day, he slaves away breaking his body to construct luxury goods discarded without a second thought by those living above him. His life is a colourless dredge of solitude and alienation. Nobody has ever loved him and he accepts no one ever will. Eventually he has forgotten how to even dream. There are no powerful tear choking tragedies or final breaking points, it is the silence of sleepless nights and the paralysis of hopelessness. It is a solemn ode of quiet simmering misery. I call it ‘The Song of The Machine.’”

“That sounds just marvelous! Just the experience I'm looking for!”

“A fine choice,” Shiren said. She raised her hand and her own drone whirred into action, its magnetic hook detached one of the tanks high above and placed it gently down onto the bar's mechanical dispenser. Shiren gathered a cup and drops of smoky warm blue dripped into it. Itto downed the contents of the cup in one big gulp.

Shiren and Madam Mierach watched his eyes glaze over, his body go loose and sink into the seat. Low unintelligible mutterings escaped his mouth while his hands made strange languid gestures. He was fully immersed now, repeating the motions of the factory worker's daily grind.

“Oh yes, Shiren! I have spectacular news, remember when I told you about how my husband was intrigued with your services? Well, let's just say you can expect a representative to contact you soon!” said Madam Mierach.

Shiren widened her eyes and acted like she was taken aback. “W—Why I don't know what to say Madam Mierach. This is spectacular news! I cannot thank you enough for . . .”
“Oh! No need to thank me at all, you are a master artisan Shiren, the galaxy deserves to experience these masterpieces you’ve compiled. In fact, it is my duty to lift up these marginalized voices just as you have. A better, kinder galaxy will emerge because of us.”

“I hope it will,” Shiren said with a thoughtful smile. She let it linger in the air before she asked, “What about you, Madam Mierach? Are you not in the mood for some sorrow, today?”

“I’m afraid not. My psion-analyst recommended me to limit myself to one experience per week but . . .” she looked at her dazed friend lost in a separate world of misery with envy. “Well, that memory from the priest you mentioned, the philosopher’s favorite, that sounds mighty intriguing . . .”

Shiren smiled and raised her hand. Her drone whizzed into action and got the tank.

From behind her bar and under the pulsing blue tanks, Shiren lazily watched her two patrons relive the misery of lives so unlike their own. Hundreds of Iridescent Tears throughout the galaxy, that was what the acquisition would mean. Long ago, this news would have made Shiren ecstatic. Once, she foolishly believed the very words Madam Mierach said, that her work would make the galaxy a better place. That not just seeing, not just hearing, but actually reliving the experience of the downtrodden and hopeless would unleash a sea of kindness and genuine understanding.

Now she knew the truth—she was no different from the vendor who sold novelty lightglobes to tourist on the street corner. Sure, sometimes her clients would awaken from their experience and proclaim their ‘undying commitment’ to a worthy cause but when she looked at her beloved patrons she knew they had not changed. They were still the same people, dining in their castles in the sky built from the bones of the people they so graciously throw their scraps down to. The systems would remain. Shiren was no longer disgusted at this fact, she was just resigned to it.

Her only consolation were the lives she saved from the corrosive poison of memory. Shiren knew the all-consuming devastation that despair could wreak very well. Her mother was trapped in a prison of it. Shiren learned from a young age that any sign of happiness and pleasure her mother displayed was fleeting. Anytime her mother broke through the surface to catch a
breath, her memories would rise and drag her back to its dark infinite ocean.

Now, Shiren sought to release others from their pain. The memory distillation process meant a complete extraction, everything would be wiped clean. The damned soul she found would be born anew, with a fat stack of credits, and one ticket to any destination in the galaxy. She often liked to think about what kind of lives they led now, she imagined glorious adventures and the comfort of a lover’s hand holding their own. When her two patrons finally finished their experiences, wept buckets of tears, gave grand soliloquies on gratitude, and exited the premises with a heavy heart, Shiren decided she would descend to save another miserable soul from their misery today.

The Pox was named so for obvious reason—it was an unsightly, blistering, pus-filled blight on the city. Every person in it was a mark of the mega-city’s festering sickness, every crumbling home a sign of irreparable decay. Criminals, neuron-addicts, and psy-jackers lurked in every corner but Shiren walked through its streets unafraid. In fact, she was very familiar with every rusted pole and cracked window in The Pox, it was the perfect place to find pain and misery after all. Sadness was by no means a domain exclusive to the impoverished but it was here Shiren found those in most desperate need for escape from the spiral.

A bunch of vagabonds were gathered around a fire, dressed in rags, passing a bottle of acidic green fluids between themselves, moonshine distilled from cheap astrofuel. In their chemically induced high, they sang drunken songs and stumbled their way through jolly dances. Shiren judged them to not be in a sufficient state of depression, they still had a community of sorts. Also, the astrofuel moonshine wreaks havoc on their memory, Shiren would be sorting through glaring blank holes in their lives.

She then walked passed a beggar with a clunky oil-leaking robotic arm and a neon sign with the words ‘Ionite War Veteran Need Credits For Battery Charge’ typed out. Shiren looked at him with pity, but her catalogue was already full of veteran memories. It was always the same story. They were treated as nothing but gears churning the machine of war till they were broken and replaced. Their memories were also unpopular with her patrons—they did not like being reminded of the devastation the war they pushed
wrought. Shiren transferred a hundred credits to the veteran and moved on.

Next, Shiren passed by the old lasgun factory. Now, that ancient relic had been emptied out and converted into a makeshift hospital for Church of Ascendant missionaries. Oh, what sad tales the sick and dying told her while she was there. Unfortunately, she was no longer welcome there as the Sisters disagreed with her form of salvation. Shiren offered to make a very sizeable donation to the Church, but the Sisters scoffed in her face. Memories were the very essence of the soul, they said. To steal their memories and suffering away from them would be a denial of The Ascendant’s redemption. It didn’t matter, her donation would be useless anyway, the Church was more interested in death-bed conversions than true salvation.

Shiren stopped in her tracks when she saw the ashen-haired woman. The moment her eyes landed on her, chills ran down Shiren’s spine. Her world-weary eyes looked intently at a cracked graffiti infested wall like she was in a trance. A beautiful sad journey down the spiral of memories. She must have her.

“What are you looking at?” Shiren asked.

The woman stayed silent for a while and all Shiren could hear was the soft whispers of the wind, the whir and clatter of the mega-city seemed to be drowned out. Finally, she answered, “There used to be a mural underneath all this.”

Shiren squinted hard and under the clashing cacophony of graffiti, she could see it. At least some semblance of it, faded brush-strokes clinging to the wall like an evaporating ghost.

“What was it?” she asked.

The woman shrugged, her eyes never left the wall.

“What do you think it was?” Shiren asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Could have been something beautiful, could have been something hideous. But it was something different.”

Shiren let the ashen-haired woman’s statement sink before she asked “What do you think of the future?”

“The future? Do I look like some sort of fortuneteller?” the woman answered with a smirk.

Shiren ignored her and pressed on, “Do you think there is a future?”

“Yeah? I don’t know.. are you some kind of apocalypto missionary? Sorry, whatever religious bullshit you’re selling, I’m not buying.”

“Do you blame yourself?”

“Blame myself for what?”
“Your failures. Has disappointment taken hold of you? Disappointment in yourself, disappointment in the world.”

“W—What?! Look I have no idea what you’re saying and . . .”

“Has the world lost its colour? Or have you lost your sight?”

“I’m sorry lady but what is with all of these questions?” she asked in annoyance but Shiren could detect the tenor of anxiety in her voice.

“Are you drowning? Is there no shore? No boat? Do you pray for sleep or dread the dreams? Can you still sob? Are the tears all gone? Will the end come or has it already arrived? Is there an escape from the spiral?”

“No,” the woman muttered. Shiren waited. “No,” she repeated louder.

Shiren smiled and introduced herself “My name is Shiren and I am an artisan of sorts. I would very appreciate having a little chat with you.”

The ashen-haired woman’s name was Lira. When Shiren told her the nature of her business, her face was a mask of stoic indifference. There was no intrigue or disgust, she just listened quietly and slipped into the deteriorating background of The Pox after.

Usually, Shiren would be confident that the people she found would find their way up to her distillery but this time she was wrecked with anxiety. Every passing day, Shiren clenched her teeth and endured the slow sandy drip of the hourglass. She would find herself staring at The Iridescent Tear’s door while her patrons got drunk on delicious sadness. She wondered about the reasons for her obsession. Shiren was convinced that Lira held a special sadness in her that would make all the other tragedies in her collection laughable sob stories.

She looked very familiar somehow. Maybe it was because Lira reminded Shiren so much of her own mother. The desperate longing of her stare, the heaviness of her woeful silence, the false flickers of life. When her mother was trapped in her world of sadness, Shiren was desperate to be let inside. She clawed at the walls her mother erected but they were impenetrable. Her mother was determined to suffer in solitude. Her story was buried with her death and all Shiren was left with was a memory of a woman eternally broken. Even the ephemeral moments of joy, when her mother laughed and raced with her across a field of green, when she held Shiren close on a cold
night and kept her warm with a sweet lullaby, were tainted by the irreparable gulf that she now knew existed between them. Those were the memories that haunted Shiren the most. Sometimes she longed to turn her extraction machine on herself, distill those memories down into the pulsating blue liquid and smash the tank. Let those memories spill onto the floor and evaporate into oblivion.

Shiren was trying to forget when Lira entered the distillery. It had been nine days. Shiren masked her pleasure and gave her a courteous nod.

"Let’s do this," was all Lira said.

Shiren lead her back to the workshop. Unlike the curated atmosphere of melancholy up front, it was cold, sterile and industrial. In the middle was a small bed-sized chamber and above it hung the extraction machine, a clunky metal beast straining the integrity of the ceiling.

"So, have you decided where you want to go?" Shiren asked.

Lira shrugged. Not an uncommon response.

“How do the emerald sands and indigo seas of Mier sound? What about the golden lights of Seraphore? No? You could lead a simple peaceful life in the colonies outside the quadrant. A fresh start in a brand new world.”

Lira shook her head at all the options. “I don’t care where I go. I just want to be gone.”

Shiren nodded respectfully. “I will make the appropriate arrangements then,” she said. She decided the green pastures and newly oxygenated air of The Beta Colonies would be most suitable. With a few clicks on her console, a brand new life was arranged for Lira far away from The Pox.

Shiren then instructed Lira to lie down in the chamber. The extraction machine was kick-started and two rods pointing at Lira’s temple emerged from the side of the chamber.

“Any words you wish to impart to your future new self before we begin?” Shiren asked. Sometimes, her contributors would give lengthy explanations of their past and reasoning to their future amnesiac selves. Sometimes, there would be a whole manual on how they should live their new lives. Most of the time, they didn’t leave anything at all. Their new selves would be totally free to forge their own destinies.

“Maybe this time things will be different,” Lira said.

Shiren liked it. It was a little cliché, but still meaningful and mysterious. She nodded and closed the chamber door. The extraction machine jostled into consciousness, each loud whizz stripping Lira’s identity away from her.
It was now time for Shirens magic. The machine could not discern good memories from bad memories, significant ones from boring ones. It took all of them away. Shiren needed to dive in and sort through them all, edit the story of Lira’s life into a powerful consumable narrative. This was the true distillation process. Shiren was burning with excitement to uncover the secrets beneath Lira’s mysterious facade. She took in a deep breath and plunged herself inside Lira’s memories through the console.

Shiren began at the end like she always did. The machine required her to go through the memories in reverse chronological order from the most recent to the oldest. So, Shiren skimmed through Lira’s first few memories after their encounter. She spent those days just purposelessly wandering The Pox’s dilapidated streets, staring at its marvels of ruin and devastation. Shiren felt the wetness of the acidic rain pouring on Lira while she walked, the soreness of her tired, blistered feet. Shiren wondered if Lira was a native of The Pox, those born there rarely ever escaped.

She dove in further and got her answer. Lira was exiting the ship arriving at the planet. A man tried desperately to say goodbye, he shouted her name “Lira! Lira!” in the crowd. Shiren caught a quick glimpse of his sad dejected face when Lira turned for a moment, but then she turned back and walked on and on. Going back, Shiren found no answer as to why Lira did this. The last time they were together on the starship, Lira smiled and listened intently to the man’s description of the beautiful arboretum his family conserved. He invited her to visit, to feel the cold wet petal dew on her fingertips, to inhale the wondrous freshness. She looked him in the eyes and promised she would. On the long journey, they found companionship with each other, trapped in the cold little metal hurtling in darkness, they found warmth. When they first met, Lira saw him gazing out the starship window sketching. She told him she had never seen anyone paint the blackness of space so beautifully before, he captured the emptiness that made the stars burn so bright.

The ship came from a planet of high raging winds and open soft lavender plains. It looked so tiny when she looked out the porthole. Shiren heard the sighing creeks of the floor as Lira crept out of a little aerofarm while the suns were just about to rise and everyone else was still asleep. A dog saw her and flipped on its back for a belly-rub but Lira did not look at it. She walked on and on to the spaceport.
The day before, Lira worked the farm tirelessly. Shiren felt the tips of her ears sting as the high winds blew against Lira, but then there was warmth. The old man from the aerofarm braved the winds just to hand Lira her helmet. He really shouldn’t be doing this. On the previous night, the old farmer told her that the winds were wreaking havoc on his bones. His wife poured her tea and told her how much they appreciated all the help she had given them. The dog snuggled in between Lira’s feet; Shiren felt soothed by the softness of its fur. Diving further, Shiren saw how the old couple were always so kind and caring towards Lira while she worked their farm throughout the seasons, but the dog wasn’t. When Lira first arrived, the dog growled and snarled at her with furious distrust.

Then, Shiren saw the sea of darkness and flecks of stars again in the porthole of another starship. The ship came from another planet. This one was newly colonized, the once silent planet bustled in the chaos of noise as skyscrapers were erected and dead deserts were terraformed. Shiren endured the thunderous hammering of machines while Lira walked to the spaceport. There was supposed to be a meeting she needed to lead, her fellow workers were all sitting down waiting for her. A few months before Lira had won the nomination to be The West Terraformer Union representative. Shiren saw how her colleagues sang her high praises and drank to her name when Lira won them the negotiations with the corpo-reps.

The further she dived into Lira’s memories, the more of the same she saw. Different planet, different people, but always the same outcome. Abandonment. Shiren had explored enough lives that she was as familiar with the sentient mind as a psionic-analyst. People abandon because they’ve been abandoned. Shiren knew why Lira fled without reason each and every time. She was afraid; the pain and misery of potential betrayal outweighed the possibility of happiness.

She was dying to know why. Which wretched soul hurt her so? Who abandoned her? She raced through Lira’s memories, walking through the rough empty terrains and buzzing mega-cities of all the planets she’s been to, staring at the faces of all the people who said her name with deep affection. Propelled by furious curiosity, she dove deeper and deeper but Shiren was shocked to discover that Lira’s memories were not a deep dark ocean but a murky shallow pool. Lira’s memories only extended as far back as five years. The pit of Shiren’s stomach broiled as she entered the last memory, dread and panic invaded
her, overriding the memory’s own sensations. She desperately wanted to rip the console off her head and shut it all down, but she couldn’t run away.

The last memory Shiren experienced was Lira’s first. Again, Lira was trapped in the familiar cold walls of a starship journeying across the darkness. It was headed for Seraphore, capital of the cosmos, heartbeat of the galaxy. But at this time, she didn’t know that. She didn’t know anything. She awoke from slumber with nothing, no memories, no name, no friends, no family, no one. All she had was a piece of paper by her side that said “Maybe this time, things will be different.”

Shiren exited the machine in shock. For a long while, she just sat down and stared at Lira lying comatose in the chamber. To her shame, it was only now that she recognized her. Lira used to be a sanitation worker, she had dreamed of being a poet but she could never calm down enough to pour out the words swirling in her head. Every moment of silence brought hauntings of her painful past. Her only escape was through neuron-injections and psy-zaps, that is until she met Shiren. The memory wasn’t very popular. To Shiren it was just another generic story of woe—she hardly ever promoted it to her patrons. So, Lira’s past just laid there another tank of blue amongst Shiren’s thousands. Shiren forgot so much about it that she didn’t even remember Lira’s face.

Why did Lira come back to The Iridescent Tear? She must have figured out that it was the origin of her state of amnesia after her meeting with Shiren, right? Why did she choose to do it all over again and write the same message? Question after question, an endless maze of inquiry. Shiren wanted to smash the chamber open and beg for answers but the process was already underway, Lira would awake as empty as she was five years ago after her first encounter with Shiren.

One answer did come to mind though. Shiren closed her eyes and imagined how lonely and confused Lira must have been waking up in that starship all alone, with nothing except a vague message and a pile of credits. The person who abandoned Lira was herself. She was why she lived every second of her life with a cloud of fear, why she believed that every moment of joy was ephemeral and meaningless. That in spite of everything, a destiny of pain awaited her. No, it was Lira and Shiren.

Shiren looked away from the chamber, she couldn’t bear to look. She staggered out of the workshop and into the bar. All the tanks of blue liquid memories stared down at her. Were they
truly living lives of adventure and contentment like she dreamed or did they end up like Lira? Lost, confused, abandoned. The truth was that Shiren never looked them up because she would be afraid to see what she saw now, that she had done nothing to better their lives. She now knew that her whole business, ‘her craft’, was a just fraudulent scam, that everything she had done was utterly meaningless.

Shiren looked at the tanks with ravenous thirst, she wanted to drink all of them, to drown in a sorrow that was not her own, to escape the spiral that she was starting to descend. But she walked back into the workshop and stared at the sleeping Lira. Inside the chamber, she was nothing, there was no world-weariness, no longing sad-eyed stare. One final question popped into Shiren’s mind. What could she do to break the cycle?

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When Madam Mierach and Itto Plaize came by the following week for another dose of beautiful sadness in their lives, they found no bartender behind the bar of The Iridescent Tear, the entire premise was empty and the owner was gone without a trace. Still, the corporation Madam Mierach’s husband was a part of was able to acquire all the assets and intellectual property of the business. In the months to come, the affluent and adventurous were able to pay a premium to weep and mourn to their heart’s content at a convenient location near them. Hundreds of Iridiscent Tears across the galaxy, little boutiques of curated misery where aristocrats role-played empathy.

But down in in the underbelly of a megacity, the denizens of The Pox enjoyed going to a new small hole-in-the-wall bar. There, they weren’t served drinks of intoxication, but of joy. They experienced the memories of a little girl and her mother. The mother chased the girl across a field of green, they heard the excited childish giggles, felt the moist grass between their toes. When the mother picked them up and whirled them around, the world spun in a dizzying kaleidoscope, but they saw the mother’s laughing face clearly. It was a look of deep love. It was beautiful. In the back of their minds, they knew this was ephemeral, that soon this moment of warmth and bliss would fade, but they didn’t care. Their lives weren’t drastically changed—for many it was still one of hardship and pain. Still, sometimes this one drink helped them get through the day and they were thankful for that.

Somewhere far across the galaxy, Lira felt the
same way. In her moments of solitude, she took out the bottle that she had found beside her when she had awoken all alone on a starship. She supped on this memory of happiness, and hoped.
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L Chan hails from Singapore. He spends most of his time wrangling a team of two dogs, Mr Luka and Mr Telly. His work has appeared in places like Translunar Travellers Lounge, Podcastle and The Dark. He tweets occasionally @lchanwrites.

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