

# A COUP OF OWLS



Issue 8

Max Turner – Publisher  
Rhiannon Wood – Editor in Chief  
Dr. Sarah Boyd – Editor

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A Coup of Owls, Issue 8, December 2022  
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## Foreword

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## To The Mouse by Zary Fekete

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*What an experience, to encounter a mouse*

Zary Fekete has worked as a teacher in Hungary, Moldova, Romania, China, and Cambodia. She currently lives and works as a writer in Minnesota. Some places she has been published are Goats Milk Mag, JMWW Journal, Bethlehem Writers Roundtable, and Zoetic Press. She enjoys reading, podcasts, and long, slow films. Twitter: [@ZaryFekete](https://twitter.com/ZaryFekete)

## Forever and Ever by Victory Witherkeigh

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*A flash of grief*

Victory Witherkeigh is a female Filipino/PI author originally from Los Angeles, CA, currently living in the Las Vegas area. Victory was a finalist for Wingless Dreamer's 2020 Overcoming Fear Short Story award and a 2021 winner of the Two Sisters Writing and Publishing Short Story Contest. She has print publications in the horror anthologies Supernatural Drabbles of Dread through Macabre Ladies Publishing, Bodies Full of Burning through Sliced Up Press, and In Filth It Shall Be Found through OutCast Press. Her first novel, set to debut in December 2022 with Cinnabar Moth Publishing, has been a finalist for Killer Nashville's 2020 Claymore Award, a 2020 Cinnamon Press Literature Award Honoree, and long-listed in the 2021 Voyage YA Book Pitch Contest. <https://victorywitherkeigh.com>

## The Haggertys by David-Jack Fletcher

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*Matt wasn't sure what to expect when meeting his boyfriend's family for Christmas dinner, but it wasn't this.*

David-Jack Fletcher is an Australian horror author, specialising in LGBTQI+ fiction. He dabbles in comedy-horror and dark fiction, but his true love is body horror. He currently has published a novella and a short story, along with appearing in several anthologies across the US and the UK. David-Jack has completed his latest novel, the love-child of The Island of Dr Moreau and Cabin in the Woods, and is currently looking for the right home. His new novel, Indentured, focuses on a pair of bloodthirsty cursed dentures. He is also a qualified editor, operating a small online business, Chainsaw Editing, where he specialises in copyediting and developmental editing for horror/thriller, dark fiction, mystery/suspense, and the occasional historical romance. When not writing and editing, David-Jack can be found on the couch with a book, cuddling his dogs and his husband. You can find David-Jack at [Chainsaw Editing](https://chainsawediting.com).

## **Dark Matter Resume by Lorraine Schein**

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*Professional Summary: Helped create galaxies and stars.*

Lorraine Schein is a NY poet and writer. Her work has appeared in VICE Terraform, Strange Horizons, NewMyths and Mermaids Monthly and in the anthologies Aphrodite Terra, Tragedy Queens and Wild Women. The Futurist's Mistress, her poetry book, is available from mayapplepress.com. Her new book is The Lady Anarchist Café, a collection of poetry and fiction, published by Autonomedia - find out more via [Autonomedia](#) and [Amazon](#).

## **Cold by Miriam H. Harrison**

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*There are different types of coldness...*

Miriam H. Harrison writes strange and wondrous things from her home hidden among the boreal forests and abandoned mines of Northern Ontario. She is a regular contributor to Pen of the Damned, and updates about her published works can be found at [miriamhharrison.wordpress.com](http://miriamhharrison.wordpress.com).

## **Eye Contact by Zachary Rosenberg**

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*He had always been told it was very rude to avoid eye contact*

Zachary Rosenberg is a Jewish writer living in Florida. By night, he crafts fantastical and terrifying tales. By day, he practices law, something even more frightening. His debut books will be released by Brigids Gate Press and Darklit Press. Look for his released and forthcoming work from Air & Nothingness Press, Deathknell Press, Nosetouch Press, and Seize the Press.

## **Rivals by Max Turner**

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*Quince might miss other felidae, but stranded on a snow-bound planet, the last one he ever wanted to set eyes on again was Oberon Morningheart.*

Max Turner is a gay transgender man based in the United Kingdom. He is also a parent, nerd, intersectional feminist and coffee addict. Max writes speculative and science fiction, fantasy, furry fiction, many sub-genres of horror, and LGBTQ+ romance and erotica. More often than not, he writes combinations thereof. You can find Max online [here](#)!

## Foreword -

It's winter, my absolute favourite time of year! I am the reverse of everyone who gets depressed when it's cold and dark; I get depressed in summer. Too much light and heat. I need shadows and darkness to thrive. That's why I'm here with you in this snow-covered forest where the owls' cold hooting echoes.

This month we wanted comfort – snow-covered hills and roaring fires – and gloom – lashing rain to bundle up against, gloves, hats and woollen socks. What did the forest give us? So much more...

We got the universe. We got the cold, unflinching cosmos. We got deep, existential reflection that left us with a chill. We got cold enemies on cold planets making their way to a warm bed and warmer fur. We got a little mouse scuttling on the floor, the only sound in the house. We got monsters, festive-red blood and bonds made in the aftermath. We got strange family gatherings. And, of course, grief, the coldest, loneliest place, the loss of a loved one, a gaping chasm, a roaring, howling void.

We asked, and you provided.

And in return, I have a story of my own to share.

The other night, when I was walking my dog before bed, I saw lights that I cannot, as yet, explain. It was pitch black (I live in a forest by a river, and after eleven at night, they turn the streetlights out on our road), so it was just the stars, the moon and the sound of the river. I had a torch so neither I nor the pups would fall in the river, but instead of turning it on, I stood, as I often do, at the end of the road and looked at the darkness. Then, across the river on the other side of the forest, I saw three lights about halfway up the bank. Usually, there is nothing there except trees. No houses. No people. Maybe some deer or badgers. But there these lights were floating, bright as could be, about half a metre apart – bright white like stars.

I was sober (six months sober, to be exact). I was awake. My dog was standing stock still beside me. And I couldn't figure out what the heck those lights were. I took a deep breath, hoped my tiny dog would protect me (he wouldn't; he never does – he's a weed) and shone my torch at the lights: nothing, just the river bank. I turned the torch off. They were still there. *Yikes*, I thought. Full-body yikes. I shone it again, and nothing. I and the dog and the lights stared at each other for what felt like at least five minutes, but I'm not sure how long it really was. Then they blinked out of existence. Just darkness again. Time to go home.

What were those lights in the dark? I think it was the fae; they are definitely in these woods. My husband thinks it was me – my eyes, my brain, my weirdness. Maybe it was an owl... Whatever it was, it got me thinking about winter darkness. On this side of the equator, we get the really short days, the sun dipping from about three in the afternoon and disappearing completely at around four-fifteen, not to be seen again until morning. I know one of the reasons early Christians stole the pagan holiday that is now Christmas was so we could light our way home in the dark with candles (now fairy lights) and song. I think the fae love that tradition too. We need those twinkling lights, those glinting shimmers to follow on our way out of the darkness. I wonder what I and my less-than-intrepid but nobly named Socrates the pup would have found if we had followed those lights? What will you find in our forest this month? Come on in and find out...

**Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief**

# To The Mouse

## by Zary Fekete

**Content Warnings: Death, loss.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 10 for the next story.

\*\*\*

6:32 AM

There is a mouse in my kitchen. For a few days, I have been hoping it might not be true. I heard scratching... I thought it might be the upstairs neighbour's cat... but the little black droppings in the kitchen cabinets are unmistakable. I'll need to get some traps.

A few months ago, this would have been something my husband would have taken care of. I did have time to prepare for when I would be doing everything myself; the staff at hospice care had plenty of suggestions for getting things in order. The way they all made it sound was like, you never know... your first weeks home alone, there might be an earthquake or some other catastrophe. Instead, it's a mouse.

As I sweep up the black droppings, I can't help feeling guilty. I have not spent much time at all keeping the apartment clean. I haven't had the energy for it.

\*

The traps are in place now. I bought them at the corner store. The lady who owns the store is also a widow; her husband died twenty years ago... but I didn't know that until last month when she gave me her sympathies. I hadn't told her. I would not have guessed. She seems so normal. She put one hand on my arm when I was fishing out my change that day. She kept it there until I stopped fumbling around and looked at her. She didn't say anything... just smiled.

Today, when I bought the trap, I told her about the mouse. She said she's had mice, too, and that peanut butter works better than cheese.

When I got home, I put one trap in the upper cabinet. I also put some down below the sink area and stuffed some tin foil around the hole where the stove vent enters the wall. The internet said to do that.

There is a new apartment building going up one block over. I read somewhere that large-scale excavation activity can make ground mice nervous, so sometimes they look for new places to nest.

\*

The building caretaker says that he talked with the rest of the tenants. Apparently, no one else has found any mice. I think this might not be true. The rest of the folks who live here are pretty private, and I don't think they would like to admit to having mice. It makes one feel dirty and careless.

\*

I have just finished cleaning up after dinner. I'm going to switch off the kitchen light when suddenly I see a flash of movement on the top of the cabinet. She is so tiny. The moment I catch sight of her, she freezes. I freeze too.

Her eyes are fixed on me. Mine on her. I can hear the clock ticking in the bedroom. We look steadily into each other's eyes.

Her whiskers twitch lightly as though she is evaluating me through the air. I become aware of my breathing. I try to slow it down. It seems in that moment like we are alone in all the world.

Then, she turns her head slightly, creeps back, and is gone.

\*

I usually read a book before bed, but I don't tonight. Instead, I stare up at the ceiling. Tomorrow, I will go back to the corner store and ask the lady if she has any soft traps for the mouse.

If I manage that, I would like to bring her outside, perhaps down the street to an empty lot. I imagine what it will be like to let her go. I think she will scurry off in a hurry...

but then she will stop and look back at me. We will stare at each other again for a moment.

And then she will be gone in the grass.

And I will return home.

# Forever and Ever

## by Victory Witherkeigh

**Content Warnings: Death, depression.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 12 for the next story.

\*\*\*

‘Hello.’ My voice cracked as I spoke. I hadn’t opened my mouth in the days since everything came crashing down around me. ‘I’m here to pick up my husband’s ashes....’

The assistant’s voice washed over my ears like my body was submerged in a thick, black mud bath. I can’t honestly say I remember any of their words or the paperwork I signed. The white, plain, unassuming urn sat heavy in my hands as they handed it to me, the thick porcelain sinking into my arms as the tiny hairs on my forearms rose.

*It’s really him. He’s really gone...*

I was the last of my girlfriends to get married. While they all walked down the aisle in gaudy white dresses in their mid to late twenties, I struggled and starved in a studio apartment, trying to kick off a dream writing career. I’d given up on the thought of sharing my life with anyone other than a few trysts as I turned thirty-two, settled with writing awards and publications around the world. But he showed up, wholly unexpected, with red hair and hazel eyes, taking me around the globe from Reykjavik, Paris, London, Papeete, and eventually, our future home of Luxembourg.

In hindsight, being so far away from everything I knew would end up being his downfall when the virus spread. What had seemed a million miles away soon came to my home in hacking coughs, gasping breaths, and burning from the inside out. Then visions of IV drips, needles stabbing into my skin, and the beeping of hospital machinery with the stale

taste of sterile plastic. Thin sheets and hot flashes replaced the warmth from the nook in his armpit as the fevers rose and fell. By the time I came out of it, the grief was all-encompassing, a wash of drowning as I lived while he had not.

It took so long to get his ashes to our bedroom, cold and dreary from the lack of sunlight. I'd refused to change our bedsheets, trying desperately to keep the scent of his sandalwood and spicy cologne on them as long as I could. The heat from his kisses, the warmth in his eyes as he'd look at me was all I dreamed of, willing my body to stay asleep as long as I could to prolong the forever we'd never have.

*We only got two years...*

I stared at the urn, mocking me from his side of the bed with memories of our last taste of each other, the way his fingers mapped my skin as he explored my body. Despite the tears streaming down my face, my skin flushed, lost in the fantasy of his lips. My fingers traced the same trail, the same paths he took to bring pleasure from my mouth and skin. Sweat and tears dripped along my fingers as I dipped them into the urn, desperate for him to be connected in me one more time.

*Together... Forever and ever...*

# The Haggertys

## by David-Jack Fletcher

**Content Warnings: Unreality.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 17 for the next story.

\*\*\*

Neil's text said to arrive at 6pm, so my shaky hands were on his door at 5:50. I had been invited to Neil's family Christmas dinner. I couldn't say I'd expected the invite, having only known him for a few months. We'd met through work. Exchanged several electric smiles and stomach-flipping handshakes. I was nervous about meeting Neil's family and made it worse for myself by arriving empty-handed.

The front door opened, releasing the sounds and smells held captive inside. Neil let me in, apologising for the disarray, both of the house and his Kiss the Cook apron. The air was thick with classic Christmas aromas: an assortment of cold meats and red wine that had flavoured the air a little too long. Christian hymns flowed through the house, and despite my efforts, I began to hum along to Silent Night as I followed Neil. I stepped around streak marks on the tiled flooring as we travelled down the entry hallway into the dining room.

'Everyone, this is Matt,' Neil said. 'Matt, this is my family.'

When someone invites you to dinner with their family, one might presume the family consists of human beings. Maybe a few dogs or some cats, but the key ingredient for me would be something *living*.

All six seats at the table were filled, save for two. The first chair housed an upside-down mop, its stringy head having been arranged as though it were hair. Nicely combed, sure, and arranged into a tidy bob, but what really stood out was the makeshift nose and mouth that I reckoned were supposed to form a face. The mop was dressed in a gorgeous purple gown, although it did hang terribly from where the shoulders should have been. The rest of the family were a similar design, although what I imagined was Neil's father was an upturned yellow bucket with a face of permanent marker and a pair of reading glasses taped over the eyes. He wore a suit and tie, a strip of grey fabric looped around the back of his hair, completing the vague 'dad with hair loss' look. Murky water dripped from his bucket head. I wondered if he'd been used to clean the floors earlier.

I didn't dare guess at the other characters Neil had created, though there did seem to be a family resemblance between them. Looking between Neil and his family, I calculated the time it would take to get back to the front door and out to my car. But the shine in Neil's eyes carried an undertone of sadness, and I wondered if perhaps he needed the company more than I wanted to leave.

Neil leaned into me, his lips a hair away from my ear. 'Don't mind Mum,' he whispered. 'She doesn't say much these days.'

He introduced me to his siblings, Emily and Michael. Twins. I could have guessed since the balloons, decorated as faces, were exactly the same. The detail was lacking, though, as both Michael and Emily had a droopy eye and a faded smile. I wondered how many permanent markers Neil kept lying around; I was sure he could brighten those smiles up. Although both wore orange-red horse-hair wigs, Emily's was longer and plaited, like a balloon version of Pippy Longstocking. I could see the balloons had been taped to wooden hangers, connected under their clothes to the backs of their chairs. The twins wore matching dark green t-shirts, old and frayed.

*A bit casual for Christmas, isn't it?* I thought, and then wondered at the depths of Neil's loneliness.

He ushered me to a seat, and I accepted with a shy smile as he invited me to eat the food already on the table.

'Dad, why don't you tell Matt about that project at work?' Then, to me, 'Dad's an architect.'

Neil pointed out the bathroom and waited for Father Bucket to talk about work. Then his attention was disturbed by the sound of boiling water bubbling on a hot plate. As he disappeared into the kitchen, I realised this was my chance to bail. I was just about to leave when I heard a gruff voice.

'Just apartments.'

I searched the room for the voice, but I was alone. Part of me was terrified, the other part intrigued. Then I thought about those flirtatious encounters at work, and the sadness lying just behind Neil's eyes, and took a seat opposite Mother Mop. My ears were more sensitive to sound in that moment than they'd ever been before. A fly coughed as it choked on some red wine, but the voice did not return.

Shaking it off as nerves, I looked at Mother Mop. Her smile was relentless and somewhat infectious, if I were honest. I poured myself some wine, swished it around the glass for a moment and raised it to Neil's family.

As they ignored my gesture, I noticed Mother Mop's hair was wet with that dirty greyish-brown colour you get before the mop is squeezed clean. I tried not to imagine Neil's mother bobbing up and down in his father's bucket.

Neil joined us a moment later, placing the uncarved turkey in front of Father Bucket.

'Dad *always* carves the turkey,' Neil said. I raised an eyebrow, hoping that didn't mean I would go without. If Father Bucket had hands, I couldn't see them.

'Mum,' Neil said as he sat next to me. 'Do you want to say grace?'

Squeezing his mum's shoulder, Neil thanked her and closed his eyes. He reached for my hand, and our fingers intertwined. My heart raced from the sensation of skin on skin, as well as the utter confusion of who was going to say grace – or if it had already been said. After an awkward silence, Neil whispered amen and released my hand.

'The Haggertys are *very* traditional,' he said and then whispered that his father's arthritis was playing up. Holding the carving knife would be difficult this year. I nodded, picked up my glass of wine, and watched Neil carve the turkey.

It looked delicious.

As Neil served the dinner, I saw a glimmer in his eyes. Unadulterated joy. Surrounded by loved ones, good food and decent wine, who wouldn't be happy? The fact that his family were made of household objects didn't really matter. I guess we all have our coping mechanisms; this was Neil's. I hoped that one day he might tell me what he was coping with and what had happened to his family. After all, he had trusted me enough to invite me tonight.

I found myself making small talk with Emily and Michael while Neil busied himself with the side dishes of salad and roast vegetables. The usual topics: university, work, hobbies. Like Neil's mother, they didn't have a lot to say.

'More wine, anyone?' I asked as I refilled my glass.

It was going to be a long night.

'Mum loves her wine, eh, Mum?' Neil giggled at some memory and gave me the nod of approval.

I filled her glass and gave a brief smirk in Mother Mop's direction.

'Water for Dad,' Neil continued, making chugging motions behind Father Bucket's back.

I waited for some kind of story about Mr Haggerty's drinking days, followed by Mrs Haggerty's reassuring hand on his shoulder, a proud smile, and a declaration of sobriety. None came.

The turkey was tender and flavoursome and came with homemade cranberry sauce. Whatever had been stuffed inside its backside was the nicest thing I had ever tasted. Spicy and fluffy, not dry like you sometimes get.

I was aware that nobody else was eating and hoped Neil wouldn't be upset, so I cleared my throat and said, 'Neil, thank you. This is delicious.'

He beamed and tucked some loose hair behind his ear. 'I wasn't sure I could pull it off. Mum normally does the cooking.'

I looked at Mrs Haggerty. 'Neil must get his cooking talent from you,' I said to her and sipped my wine. Maybe it was the three glasses I'd swallowed, but her smile broadened.

Excusing myself, I made a beeline for the bathroom. Taking a few breaths to clear my double-vision, I wondered if the wine was going to my head a bit too quick. Through the bathroom door, I heard the crash of glass and rushed back to the dinner table. Mrs Haggerty's wine was all over the table, shards of red-soaked glass glistening amongst her food.

'Mum!' Neil sighed. 'It's not even your second glass!'

I offered to help clean the mess, but Neil waved me away, even as he sliced open his thumb on a stray shard. I was sure I heard Mrs Haggerty whisper an apology and the twins snicker across the table. Staring into my own glass, I emptied it fast. Reached for a fresh bottle.

I was growing more aware that Emily and Michael were staring at me. They didn't say much, and they hadn't touched their food. I was tempted to say something but held my tongue as the guest. As I looked closer at the twins, I wondered which one was older and by how much. Michael's head was a little more deflated than Emily's. His droopy eye seemed closer to his mouth than his sister's, and I heard the faint but persistent squeak of air escaping. I hoped it was from his head and not the other end. In contrast, Emily held her head high and proud, although a crease in the balloon appeared like a dull scar. I wondered what had happened to her.

The dinner continued as any other from that point. I had my wine; Neil had his family. We all had Christmas carols in the background. Neil and I exchanged a few secretive smiles. He made the occasional comment to Emily and Michael to speak up or stop staring.

*So, it isn't just me.* I'd heard them giggling under their breath a few times and took a few gulps of wine to reclaim my sanity.

'Teenagers.' Mr Haggerty's contribution.

I wobbled as I refilled my wine. I rubbed at my left ear, certain I was hearing things, though I saw Neil nodding in agreement and Mrs Haggerty's hair swishing from side to side in a gesture of disapproval. Flecks of water landed in the food.

Another swig. Neil, attentive as always, topped me up.

Mr and Mrs Haggerty complimented the cooking as I took my final mouthful of roasted carrots, which had been drizzled in olive oil and sprinkled with Parmesan. A dash of salt and pepper. I relished the flavour, turned to Neil with a satisfied smile and thanked him.

Neil smiled and looked away as though the compliment made him uncomfortable. Then, to the twins, 'Stop snickering! You're embarrassing me in front of our guest!'

Not knowing how to respond, I swallowed another mouthful of wine and blinked until the room stopped spinning. Searching the table, I realised I had emptied three bottles and considered heading home. I wasn't sure I'd make it, though. Instead, I collected the untouched plates and cutlery.

'No, no,' Neil interjected. 'Emily and Michael can do that.'

I wasn't surprised that neither twin budged. *Typical teenagers.*

Rather than waiting for them to help out, I winked at Neil and continued clearing. He mouthed *thank you* and rushed to help.

'Can someone else get the coffee and pavlova ready?' Neil asked as he placed the dishes in the kitchen sink and turned to me. 'I have a gift for you.'

Worried that I hadn't brought him anything, I assured him it was unnecessary. He took me to the front room, anyway, for some privacy, and presented me with an envelope. Inside were two front-row theatre tickets to *The Book of Mormon*.

'We've been flirting for a while.' Neil's voice was shaky as he stepped towards me. 'What if we went on a date?'

I squeezed him tight and kissed him on the cheek as my answer. With the wine swirling around my head and a growing fear of falling over, I thought better of going any further. Besides, Neil's family was just in the other room. It would be indecent.

We returned with sheepish grins, hands clasped together, to find the Haggertys had moved to the living room. They sat around the television, watching the annual Christmas parade. I squeezed Neil's hand, excited for our first date, and joined them. The pavlova was already served, and I heard the distinct sound of a kettle whistling in the kitchen.

# Dark Matter Resume

## by Lorraine Schein

**Content Warnings:** None.

Not your thing? Skip to page 18 for the next story.

\*\*\*

### **PROFESSIONAL SUMMARY:**

Helped create galaxies and stars. I make up 80% of the universe. I contain WIMPS (Weakly Interacting Massive Particles), who are too weak and shy to interact with anyone. Well, someone has to protect them.

**OBJECTIVE:** To hold universe together and confound humans.

### **HISTORY:**

**14 billion–2 billion years ago:** This was about when the universe began, say your Earth physicists. They theorize I might have been created then. I don't remember, it was all too long ago. The physicists don't know how I came into being – and I certainly don't. Who can remember that far back? It's all a haze.... Maybe I was drunk or sleeping. No one was around to notice me anyhow. Well, maybe God, if he existed then. I'm spiritual, but not a believer.

Some say I was really created to hide the First Movers, otherworld inhabitants of me who don't want you to see them.

**1932–1939:** Scientists discovered me. Jan Oort noticed and named me in 1932, said I was responsible for the orbital velocities of stars in the Milky Way. In 1933, Fritz Zwicky said I was to blame for the missing mass in the orbital speed of galaxies. More evidence for me was discovered by Horace W. Babcock in 1939, but he wasn't sure it was my fault. He thought I was just an anomaly in the Andromeda galaxy.

**1960s–1970s:** The first to propose me based upon real evidence was Vera Rubin – clever woman! She used galaxy rotation curves to discover me. It felt good to be appreciated and showed me that not all humans are stupid.

**1980s–Present:** They used to think my particles were bad and created cancer. Or worse – that I didn't exist! That I was just an error in their calculations! This was discrimination against dark beings like me and my queer pal, Dark Energy, across the universe! D. E. is also still undiscovered – we hang out together and mystify you Earthlings. We proclaim our equal right to exist, even if you think we don't! (We are still deciding on our preferred pronouns.)

Lately in this more enlightened century, the nicer physicists think I might be a very cold quantum fluid, like a wave.

**Hobbies:** Surfing, lurking, writing mysteries, dream habitation and decoration, helping SF writers and conspiracy theorists, being an ancient object of worship, hiding the hidden.

### **REFERENCES:**

Albert Einstein. I provided clues for his General Theory of Relativity.

Stephen Hawking. Collaborator and co-author on *A Brief History of Time.*

God. Assisted with dividing the light from the darkness. Also helped him form and evolve galaxies.

(I have no contact information for these beings, but try a Ouija board or Google Maps.)

Aliens. They have discovered more about me than you humans have but are hard to reach and may not be able to write a letter of recommendation in a knowable language. You may be able to locate them on their home-world exoplanets with your new James Webb telescope.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION:**

Photographs unavailable, but I am on Ghostagram and Faceless-book.

I am also available for Zoom interviews – but only on mute, without video.

# Cold

## by Miriam H. Harrison

**Content Warnings: Relationship Discontentment, Sexual references.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 20 for the next story.

\*\*\*

There were two kinds of cold in Eva's life. One came from her husband – the other she kept to herself.

At night, she left their frigid bed for the moonlit sitting room. Here, the window spread wide. There was nothing to see outside but the snowy trees. But closer, on the glass, her reflection waited.

In her reflection, Eva found her satisfaction. The cold touch of glass caressed hungry places, and the window's eyes reflected her deepest need.

Returning to bed, she felt her husband stir.

'Sorry, love,' she said, reaching for him hopefully.

'You're cold,' he replied, turning away.

# Eye Contact

## by Zachary Rosenberg

**Content Warnings: Ableism, violence, horror.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 31 for the next story.

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For once, Eric Friedman's desire to flee a crowded room had nothing to do with general anxiety and everything to do with the monster currently lecturing the class.

Eric tried to focus on his work, steadily drumming his fingers upon the hard wood of his own desk. Fidgeting had always helped him focus his nervous tics, especially when he had to sit still for nearly two hours. Tapping his fingers or feet or toying with his pen could distract him from the overwhelming urge to stand up and start walking. Remaining sedentary was hard enough on a good day in Professor Love's algebra class. It was nearly impossible when he had to hide his fear of the one teaching it.

Few other students seemed to have the problem Eric did. Even Sandra, who had once considered math a complete waste of time to her ambitions of a hospitality major, was sitting at firm attention while scrawling notes. All around Eric, uniform students sat in uniform rows, neatly dressed and neatly groomed. They focused ahead on their teacher, writing in perfect unison. The sounds of scratching pencils and pens permeated the air, Eric's nose assailed by lead and ink.

Professor Love droned on, though Eric had ceased trying to make sense of any of the numbers she attempted to explain. Even when his life might depend on feigning uniformity, math was simply not a subject that had ever captivated his mind. Eric's own interests were found in the realms of literature, media, and mythology. If given a chance to discuss a classic novel or mythological hero, he could have walked to the front of the class and spoken for hours. When made to listen to how one made an x into a 36, Eric could only force himself to sit in his seat and pay as much attention as humanly possible. He had told himself he would try to pull a passing grade from the class after enough late-night study sessions and tutoring, algebra being the one class that threatened to sink his GPA.

Not helping matters was how Professor Love handled the disruptive or those caught slacking. She was quite insistent about eye contact.

‘Are you paying attention, Mr Friedman?’ The professor’s voice was so sweet it could have been bottled and poured over pancakes. Her grin was frozen sugar, her gaze piercing. Eric jumped in his seat, almost dropping his pen. One by one, the heads of his peers craned so they might stare at him, over a hundred pairs of eyes boring into him. He fought away the searing claws of anxiety that threatened to tear into his chest and forced a weak smile, tilting his gaze up.

He looked at Professor Love’s pointed dagger of a chin, brought his eyes up to her saccharine smile that flashed sharp little teeth. She tilted her head downward, attempting to lock eyes with him. On pure instinct, Eric dipped his head down, gaze centred upon the professor’s cherrywood desk. He found solace studying the swirling patterns in the wood, counting the fine, spiralling lines he saw there. They reminded Eric of cinnamon swirls, that amusing thought distracting him from the professor’s insistent attempt at engagement.

He had always been told it was very rude to avoid eye contact. You showed your respect for people by meeting their eyes. That was how human connections formed, his father always said. The whole sum of human interaction was learning to read the cues written in their eyes. Eric had evidently been given a very different manual to the human condition.

He kept his eyes away from Professor Love’s, scrupulously avoiding her gaze just as he avoided the eyes of every other student in the room, just as he had avoided the eyes of teachers and parents’ friends and relatives his whole life while attempting to piece together just what they were thinking and how he might respond to them. Comics, books, and television had been his teachers on human reactions throughout his life, and he still often caught himself struggling with how to engage in ways that came so naturally to others.

‘It is rude to avoid eye contact, Mr Friedman.’ The professor’s voice was crisp and cool as the air over a frozen stream. Her long, red nails tapped upon her own desk in what seemed a mockery of Eric’s nervous drumming earlier. ‘Has nobody ever told you that?’

‘I’m sorry, Professor.’ Eric’s mumble was a memorised recitation, a performance given countless times to unappreciative audiences. All his life, he had been told how impolite it was to prioritise his comfort over societal norms. He focused only on his desk, his pen and Professor Love’s chin when he dared bring his eyes up, avoiding each uniform, robotic stare from his classmates. All he wanted was to be back in the familiarity of his dorm, to be working on his own writings. ‘I’m paying attention. I promise.’

‘See me during my office hours tomorrow, Mr Friedman. We’ll discuss this then.’ Her voice was the disapproving scold of so many teachers in his life, laden with condescending venom. He wanted to collapse to his knees and scream in helpless rage. He wanted to run to his dorm and let familiar surroundings lift his spirits so he might savour the warm comfort of his bed. He had seen what happened to those who entered Professor Love’s office.

Students tended to change after meeting with Professor Love. She had said at the start of the class she could be most persuasive in achieving results for her students, that she would see them all succeed as they were supposed to. And after their conferences with her, they devoted themselves fully to their studies without any hint of their old vigour. They seemed to have no space in their lives for anything save academics.

The notion of meeting with the professor during her office hours made Eric’s throat go dry. The desire to stand and pace nearly hurled him out of his seat on the spot, his mind consumed by a wish to return to the safety and security of his afternoon and evening routines. It was pointless to try to reach out to anyone for help. Who would believe that a professor pushing students to behave and achieve could be a negative thing?

‘You as well, Thomas.’ Professor Love directed her gaze from Eric, the collective stares of the drones following suit. Another young man in the front row was hastily pushing a note into his pocket, the professor’s wrath now focused upon him with no less scorching intensity.

‘Professor Love, I wasn’t doing anything!’

‘You aren’t in trouble. It is only intended as a *discussion*, Thomas. I merely want to talk about the behaviour, no more.’ Love’s smile only grew. Her breathing quickened like the anticipatory panting of a wolf expecting a rabbit to fall within its den. ‘Need I remind you this class is required? Correct, class?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ It was vocalised from nearly a hundred throats, a toneless affirmation of normalcy. Eric simply looked down and tried to make sense once more of the patterns on his desk. He felt delegated to the role of abnormality, a trespasser in the spaces of typicality. There were only a few of them left who did not conform to Professor Love’s notions of what ought to be. Very soon, there might not even be that.

Eric gave up trying to take notes after a point, contenting himself with scribbling drawings and reminders for potential stories. It helped him to focus, to escape the buzz of the professor’s voice, to avoid thinking of what might await him within her office. He did not have to think of whatever strange process took individuals and broke them down to spit out the conforming automatons sitting all around him.

He tried to think of what the heroes of stories might have done, just as he had always dreamed of. He tried to put himself in the shoes of heroes who knew what to do. Heroes who could easily relate to others, convince others of the truth. He tried to believe he wasn't the person who would sit awkwardly to the side as others socialised. He didn't even need to be a hero; he just wished he was someone who could meet the eyes of others, whose mind worked the same way theirs did. He tried to smile when the professor's eyes turned back to him, but it curdled upon his face with no joy behind it.

'Remember,' said the professor. 'Tomorrow. During my office hours. We'll straighten all this out then, and I can promise you will excel.'

\*

'You shouldn't go,' Becca's voice implored while Eric kept his eyes on his computer screen and away from hers.

'Do I have a choice?' Eric's fingers danced over the keyboard. He was typing rapidly, fear giving him fresh bursts of inspiration as he wrote another story, one of many he left tucked away for fear of rejection. They were in Eric's dorm, Becca sitting on the bed, her fingers toying with the sheets. 'Did you take your pills this morning, Becca?'

'I did, but don't change the subject.' Her voice carried a scolding edge as she frowned at him. 'I'm not blind, Eric. I've seen what's happening, too.' All around them were students who had once walked with such vibrant energy. All through the dorm, they saw it.

'Why don't you tell someone, then?'

'They'd just think I was seeing or hearing things.' Becca's voice was soft and bitter, not that Eric could blame her. He had seen Becca when she hallucinated and when she could not form coherent speech. She had been there for him at his moments of anxiety, never tried to force eye contact with him, defended him when people called him stupid or careless for not grasping basic norms. He had been there for her when there were delays refilling her medication and protested vociferously when people in the dorm called her dangerous during a particularly extreme hallucination.

'They'd just think I was making up stories if I said anything. Professor Love just wanted to talk, Becca.' The words sounded hollow to Eric already. He tried to imagine himself like the others who had visited the professor, just one out of a number of *others*. Maybe he didn't have to live with people thinking something was wrong with him. Maybe he

might find a peace in that uniformity, never to worry that he embarrassed his family or his few friends.

He looked at the words on the page, the actions of a confident hero staring back at him while he fought down the pounding of his heart. ‘You’re still you, too.’

Becca was too shy for eye contact, which others often took for rudeness. She and Eric had met at orientation and become fast friends. They shared the same interests, finding common ground in quoting movies or talking ideas for stories with one another, and Eric loved that she let him talk at length about anything he had been reading. She was not in Professor Love’s class, though she had caught on to the growing strangeness on campus. ‘And I want you to stay you, Eric. Who am I going to write with if anything happens to you?’ She tried to make her smile nonchalant, but even he could see through the strain.

Perhaps it would not be so bad. Perhaps the professor might only take parts of him and leave the fundamental essence of Eric Friedman to appreciate what remained. All he had to do was meet her eyes the way the others had. Just force himself past the threshold of comfort, and then he could be reborn like the others. All the fear and anxiety would bleed away through a sieve, so he might be made new.

A brand-new Eric, to study math and take notes with the others. He looked at his computer screen, poring over the prose he had crafted. A silly fantasy story, nothing special at all. Just a story to compete with a million others born from enterprising minds. But this one was special, Eric thought. This one was his.

‘I guess there’s no point in putting this off,’ murmured Eric. He reached out and closed the laptop. ‘Hey, if anything does happen, story’s all yours to finish, Becca.’ He didn’t look at her, certainly did not meet her eyes. The knowledge that he might find disapproval and pity was too painful then. They were both people pushed to the outskirts. Both knew not to pity the other for it. Not in a world where pity often became indistinguishable from condescension. Eric simply ran his story over in his head, every detail of a confident hero who could wield a sword and save the day. Becca’s heroine was a brusque, humourless warrior who was more empathetic than she let others see. They fought monsters together. It was a good fantasy; they’d even had dreams of sharing it with the world one day. ‘Just stay safe, Becca. If I come back different, just take off.’

‘Where would I go? Do you think anyone’d believe anything I say?’ Becca sounded resigned, a quiet plea in her tone. Eric was never any good at reading anyone, but he understood the hidden meanings in her tone. Don’t give in. Don’t just be what they expect you to be.

But he didn't feel he was strong enough for that. Resigned, he stood and gave Becca the best, least-halting smile he could muster. He walked out of the room into the empty dormitory hallway and made his way through an empty hall that had become a grey-walled mausoleum. So many rooms were now crypts where the walking dead dwelt, making tombstones of their textbooks.

With the knowledge he might soon join them, Eric walked out of the dormitory, heading for the campus. There was a curious mixture of students in the main hallways and by the classrooms, many dressed in black and white, with flat stares that Eric avoided. Other students had their gazes drawn, pausing as the walking dead locked eyes with them. Soon they would join the ranks of the corpses, Eric suspected. But he was good at dodging eye contact. He'd had a lifetime of practice.

His face was expressionless, not reflecting the maelstrom of terror and self-loathing he felt at his inability to do anything but obey. No doubt the professor wanted him for herself after he had avoided her attention for so long.

Down a long hallway he walked, a condemned man strolling to face his own executioners. The professors' offices were made of dark wood with golden nameplates distinguishing them from other rooms. He counted them down, one by one, until he reached his destination and looked at her name etched into the metal: Professor Sandra Love.

There were voices coming from behind the door, hushed tones whose meaning he could not decipher. His hand closed on the cold brass of the doorknob and twisted, the door opening just a sliver without even a creak. He recognised Thomas's voice. 'I really didn't mean to slack off, Professor Love. It won't happen again.'

'I quite concur.' Professor Love stood wreathed in shadows. She was not concealed by them so much as she wore them; she made of them a cloak, stood proudly within them. There was no light in the office save a tiny crescent that Eric had created by opening the door. There was not even a window. 'Please look a bit closer at me, Thomas. This little campus has allowed me to dine well lately. So many students, so many in need of a great change.'

Her voice was raspy with anticipation, her hands snapping out to close on Thomas's shoulders. Eric clapped a hand over his mouth, his own eyes widening as Thomas struggled. It did him as much good as a fly bound in spider silk. He yelped in surprise and pain, a red-taloned hand cupping his cheek and then seizing his hair. It bent his head down to where the professor's eyes waited.

Eric caught only a glimpse of them. He saw only a flash of colour human beings were never meant to perceive mingled with the satisfaction of a predator, the cool delight of the

snake finding a mouse crushed within its coils. ‘Hush now,’ the professor chuckled, and her voice sounded as though it had been forced through a wall of festering earth. ‘Look into my eyes. It’s so much sweeter when I see you myself. So much tastier.’ She pried Thomas’s eyes open, Eric rooted to the spot and feeling as though he had no choice but to watch. He wanted to lunge and do something to save Thomas, suddenly aware that only a brief delay had prevented him from being wrapped in Love’s hungry embrace first.

Thomas’s shrieks were muffled by the professor’s hand clamping around his mouth, frenzied whines of agony as the boy twitched and jerked. But Love yet held his gaze, her lips curving upward into a sharp crescent of delight. She made rapturous noises, her eyes holding Thomas. Then she released him suddenly, Thomas stumbling back. He rose and stood upright, rigid attention that Professor Love clicked her tongue approvingly at. ‘How does that feel?’

‘It feels right, Professor Love.’ Thomas’s voice was flat, as though all the individuality had been bled from him. The professor’s gaze shifted, hungry lights gleaming in the dark. A cold shard stabbed deep into Eric’s spine as he felt her gaze turn toward him.

‘Ah, Mr Friedman. May I call you Eric? Please come in for your appointment.’ Her tone made it clear it was no request. ‘I’ve been saving you. Those with minds like yours are such a special treat. It will only hurt a moment, Eric, and then, you will feel better. You’ll belong. Come to me. Look into my eyes.’

All his life, Eric had been told he could not look away from others. Authority was to be obeyed if he wanted to get ahead in life. And never had he failed to listen. Until that moment.

He avoided her ravenous gaze, twisted away and ran down the hallway. He bolted as fast as his legs could bear his shaking body, fearing they might betray him at any moment.

He tore through the student body, once more trying to avoid every look as students who had joined the emotionless throng peered at him. Each tried to meet his eyes, but Eric turned his gaze from all of them, fleeing down the hallways out of the building. He ran for the only place he might feel safe. He ran for his room, for the comfort of familiarity, like that might make all of this terror vanish.

He wanted to break down and cry, though nothing seemed to be pursuing him now. Nothing dogged his heels as he opened the door to the dormitory. Instead, in front of each room was now a student, each in grey and white and black. Their heads turned as one to greet him, followed him as he ran through the hallway, his footsteps thundering all the while. ‘It’s better,’ they said, different throats to make one voice. ‘It’s better.’

He tore open his door and slammed it shut behind him. Becca was gone, he realised, sinking into his seat. He thought of her, praying she was okay. She would avoid eye contact with them. He just had to call her, and they could decide what to do together. He grabbed for his cell phone on the desk, opened the screen and began to type in a text when the door opened.

Professor Love's slender frame filled the doorway, her foot delicately tapping a rhythm upon the floor. 'What am I going to do with you, young man?' She tsiked, shaking her head. Her movements were stilted, unnatural. The motions of something that knew it was wearing an unfamiliar skin and attempting to pantomime motions it had only heard of in the vaguest terms.

But what frightened Eric most was that Professor Love was *here*. Here in his dormitory, here in his place of sanctuary. This was the only place he could feel safe amidst the comforts of routine, and Professor Love was taking even that from him. The barest illusion of security shattered when Love crossed the threshold between hall and room. 'All you ever needed to do was look in my eyes, Eric.'

The window was at the back of the room. They were on the first floor. He could reach it and fling it open and try to run, but he realised he would likely not get far, futile scenarios parading about in his head. Professor Love's smile only grew as she walked into his room like a shadow bleeding its way towards him. He could feel her eyes on him, one question coming to his mind. He asked it with deceptive calm: 'What are you?'

'Would knowing make it better, Eric?' Her skin appeared to flake, like old plaster crumbling from a poorly painted sculpture. There was something beneath it that could not be described as skin. 'I have eaten very well here. I've tasted of every soul that's met my eyes, one by one. That is how I feed, dear boy. Those like me slide into your disharmony, and we consume your very souls. Little nibbles at first as we strengthen, though sometimes we gorge ourselves. The end result is the betterment of what you are now, Eric.'

She drew nearer to him, a ravenous intensity in her voice. The manic vehemence of her dialect was lost in the hungry smacking of tongue to lips. 'Don't you want that, Eric? To fit in? To be like everyone else? To not despair that you'll be misunderstood, that you'll embarrass those around you? I'm giving you the choice to do it easily. It won't hurt as much if you're not forced by me or if I don't consume you by proxy. All you'd need to do is let me eat away the parts you don't like about yourself.

'Just meet my eyes.'

Icy hands burnt his shoulders, resting there in an inescapable grip. Eric looked within himself, realising, to his shock, that he was considering Love's offer. 'People will know,' he breathed out in a weak protestation.

'You think they don't already? Why would they *mind*, Eric? I am not giving a choice beyond an easy way or a hard way. Nobody would care.'

'I would.' Becca's voice came from behind the professor. She stood framed in the doorway, a mirror image of how Professor Love had arrived. She was shaking, trembling with a fist clenched, and Eric wanted to yell at her to run, to go before Love turned her attention fully upon her.

'I'll be with you in a moment,' Love replied, already dismissing Becca from her thoughts to focus on the meal before her. 'Or you can go if you want. It isn't like you'll be believed anyways. They'll just attribute it to being, what does your kind say? "Off your meds."' She chuckled, and the noise was so hateful that Eric felt a surge of rage.

He reached his hands to Love's chest and shoved her from him. Her frigid grasp slipped from his shoulders, and she rocked back on her heels, mouth forming a small circle of shock. Eric looked past her and met his friend's face. He met her eyes, seeing Becca's desperation and remembering days of friendship. He remembered the stories they wrote together. He remembered their talks about movies, books and shows. He remembered the faith they had in one another.

*I would*, Eric thought.

What did it matter if one other person saw the value in him compared to the rest of the world? What did that mean if he did not value himself?

Love was straightening, and the thin veneer of politesse was lost, cast away with such fervour that if the professor needed it, she would be incapable of discovering where it lay. Instead, there was nothing but cruelty and ageless hunger, her voice slipping into a bass fury as she lunged for Becca. But Eric was faster, catching Love back and locking his arms around her. He felt the cold, almost burning his skin as he pulled her away from his friend.

Love struggled against him, snarling. Becca scooped up a textbook off the desk and swung it savagely at the professor's head, Eric suddenly grateful for the overpriced and thick volumes they had been made to purchase. Love's head snapped back, but she recovered and lashed out, knocking Becca into the wall. Eric struggled against her, attempting to regain some grappling hold on whatever Love was. She pushed him away with almost contemptuous ease, her mouth now a sneering gash upon that peeling plaster face.

‘What makes you think this isn’t all a hallucination?’ she asked Becca, receiving no response. Snorting, she walked to Eric, gliding silently to him and seizing him by the hair. She bent his head back, eyes pulsing with that manic light. ‘Stay still. I’m going to fix you.’

‘I’m not broken.’ He pushed his hand up, stabbing a finger at one of those lights. She tried to twist her skull from him, but too late. His finger sank into her eye, a sensation like he was sinking the finger into warm jelly. The disgust nearly made him pull back, but he pushed beyond that feeling to drive his finger onward. Becca lunged at the professor’s back before she could turn her remaining, now-panicked eye to Eric. His friend did not wear her nails long, tending to bite them out of nervous habit; they sank into the other orb all the same.

There could be no eye contact if there were no eyes.

Two students with no business fighting back against a thing like Love held on, pushing their fingers in so only ruined flecks of her eyes fell to the floor. Love screamed, a keening howl. Terror mingled with agony as her body twitched, skin flaking and peeling away to reveal something else, something indescribable. It bucked and convulsed, writhing in sheer terror, trying to look with its broken and ruined eyes.

Then it fell still and silent, dissolving until nothing was left but ashen stains upon the carpet and fearful memories.

\*

Eric wasn’t really sure anything had changed in the following weeks. The students had mostly returned to normal, the haze lifting from their minds with Love gone. With a replacement algebra teacher found, the next exam had been administered. Eric had gotten a D. He was planning on a study group to try to balance that out soon.

But now he was sitting at his desk, typing away at the story while he and Becca exchanged ideas. She had taken her medication for the day and was lucid and relaxed. The two had not spoken overmuch of what had happened with Love, whose life had been reduced to little but an extra housecleaning bill.

After a moment, Becca asked, with a smile on her face, ‘Do you feel better?’

He considered it. Love’s destruction had not changed the core of him as a person. She was no avatar for his divergence from the norm, and destroying her had not altered the course of his mind or life. Perhaps there was more confidence in him now, but he still evaded eye contact. He still focused on books and movies. He focused on their story, which might not

have been anything special but was *theirs* and nobody else's. 'I do,' Eric said, meaning it. He nodded for emphasis, keeping his gaze on the screen. He managed a smile.

'You know, there might be others like her out there,' Becca said. Her voice was suddenly soft. 'What if they know she's gone? What if they come after us?'

'That's life, isn't it?' he asked her. 'There's always going to be something.' Truthfully, he had no idea. All he could do was take it day by day, accepting himself all the more as he went on. All he could do was try. 'Guess we have to face it together, huh?'

'Like you can get rid of me that easy. So, what happens next?' Becca leaned forward, a smile playing on her lips that Eric managed to mirror, reflecting the emotions within him. Life was difficult for those who didn't fit in, for the alternates. To stare into society's eyes and see the crowds looking back could leave one bereft. They would always have to cope with difference.

Perhaps they'd face it afraid.

But not alone.

# Rivals

## by Max Turner

**Content Warnings: Anthropomorphised animals, drinking, rivalry, sexually suggestive content (non-explicit).**

Not your thing? Then this is the end.

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Oberon Morningheart hummed his annoyance as he tapped his claws against his thigh. A cool and calm tiger by nature, he kept most of the emotion buried, seething under the surface.

This was supposed to have been a quick task.

In and out.

Pick up the shipment and get off the planet before it closed down for the annual Light Festival. He knew he shouldn't have accepted a job this close to a festival on planet Winter, and now he cursed his stupidity.

Winter was already a hell of a planet to try and trade on; the unpredictable temperature drops, the unending parade of public holidays, the very delicate natural resources. It was only the fact that many of those resources were not available anywhere else this side of the galaxy that kept trade coming through this inconvenient planet.

The risk traders ran for those highly priced resources was getting caught up in one of their many, many public holidays, the weather, or both.

And now, with extra checks required due to a recent drop below the usual range of sub-temperatures, the paperwork had delayed Oberon significantly enough that no one was around to approve his take-off.

Oberon stood at the small shuttle station that ferried crew back and forth to the launch site in the exclusion zone, growing cold enough he wished he'd tucked his tail into his pants or got one of those tail hoods that seemed all the rage here. Too late now; there was nothing he could do but go back to his ship, wait out the Light Festival and take off as soon as he was allowed.

But the shuttle station seemed deserted, leaving Oberon to wonder about his options until a voice broke through the still, chilled air.

‘No access, friend,’ the launch officer told him with a smile. ‘The ships are outside of the exclusion zone.’ He was a bear from the Theta System, so not a native of the planet, but clearly acclimatised, given how effortlessly he moved in the jarringly cold temperatures. And, as with many on planets like Winter, he’d rarely seen felidae; that much was clear from the bear’s expression. Felidae was one of the few species native to only one planet – in their case, planet Earth. And very few of them travelled so far from the Sol System, given their territorial nature.

Oberon turned his brightest smile on the bear. ‘I won’t freeze in a ship meant to survive the rigours of space.’

‘Absolutely right,’ the bear replied, jovial grin still in place. ‘But we can’t let people travel unaccompanied between the city and the launch docks, especially at night. One wrong turn, and you’re lost in the tundra and dead in a day. And I’m on my way home to enjoy the festivities with my wife, so I won’t be going looking for ya. Let me point you in the direction of a lodging house.’

To make the point, the bear wrapped his scarf a little tighter around himself and started back towards the city with the expectation that Oberon would follow.

He took a deep breath and accepted defeat, following the officer out of the shuttle station and towards the bright lights of the port town.

\*

Quince Thornstick grumbled as he pushed his credits across the bar and picked up the refilled glass. Drink prices always seemed to be inflated over the holidays. And there were so damn many of them on this planet. There were more public holidays than normal working days, from what Quince could tell.

He figured it was a way for the residents to stay cheerful in the constant and miserable cold. He also figured he was going to end up dying on this planet, drinking himself to death on overpriced booze, a sad and lonely old man. As it was, his fur, which had been as thick and soft as any other ocelot’s, was now lacklustre and rough, leaving him wishing he could grow a winter coat like some other felidae.

Quince knocked back the last of his drink and stood up from the bar stool, getting his bearings. A little tipsy but not too worse for wear, not at these prices! He was about to wander back upstairs to the room he rented above the bar when someone caught his eye.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ Quince growled.

Oberon Morningheart? That damn tiger. Here? On Winter?

As if Quince's life couldn't get any worse.

By the time Morningheart saw Quince striding to where he stood at the entrance of the bar, his fist was flying at the tiger's jaw. It wasn't as hard a punch as Quince would have liked – in fact, he'd barely glanced the blow – but the surprise was enough that it sent Oberon reeling back out through the door and into the street. Into the bustle of the festival-going populace.

The small crowd inside and the larger one outside on the street gasped and watched as Quince strode out and stood over Oberon, snarling down at him.

'Quince?' Oberon asked as he looked up, rubbing his jaw.

'What are you doing here, Morningheart?' Quince growled at the last felidae in the universe he ever wanted to see again.

'I could ask you the same. You're quite far from home,' Oberon replied with a raised brow. Not quite amused but clearly nothing more than baffled at Quince's actions. In fact, he then held up his arm for Quince to help him to his feet.

At that, Quince obliged, unsure what else he could do. Sure, he'd love to kick the guy in the ribs, but with a crowd having formed and law enforcement in this place not exactly forgiving of public disturbances during the holidays, it was best he didn't. So instead, he pulled Oberon to his feet and dragged him back inside the bar.

'I was told they have lodgings here,' Oberon said, 'though I had hoped for a warmer welcome.'

Quince grunted, 'No less than you deserve.' He went back to where he'd been at the bar and signalled for another drink after all, ignoring the tiger who took the stool beside him.

'Is that so?' Oberon questioned, at which Quince couldn't help but shoot him a sharp look.

'Yes, it's *so*, Oberon.' Quince almost snarled the words, his hackles rising as one might with a rival, but this went beyond rivalry. There had always been issues between them, ever since flight academy. They'd been in the same graduating year and were the top two from beginning to end.

And sure, that rivalry had sometimes gone beyond classes and flight simulations, as it might with two hotshots, as they had been. There were several occasions where it had become physical, jostling turning to pushing and then brawling. Though Quince recalled, then as now, it had usually been himself as the aggressor, with Oberon doing little more than evading and defending.

That had always annoyed him. He'd wanted Morningheart to fight back. He'd wanted to pin him down and tear him apart. And—

'What is it I did, Quince? Surely you are over your petty adolescent rivalry?' The tiger made a show of rubbing his jaw, though Quince was sure he had barely skimmed that fluffy chin.

Quince clenched his own jaw and resisted the urge to hit Morningheart again. 'Are you being purposely obtuse?' he asked before knocking back his drink and placing more credits on the bar.

Oberon signalled for a drink of his own and then shook his head at Quince, as infuriatingly cool and calm as always.

'You remember the job on Tiko V? The job that should have been mine?' Quince snarled.

Oberon frowned. 'I took some VIP passengers from there to here, that has to have been at least a year ago now.'

'Try two,' Quince corrected. 'You undercut me on that job, Oberon. I had to settle for a cargo contract on the same route. But I hit an asteroid storm on the way here, and the delay meant fuel loss. By the time I got here, and with a late penalty, the payment wasn't enough to cover fuel. I've been stranded here ever since. Without being able to use my ship, I can't earn enough to *actually use* my ship, and it's all your fault.'

Oberon took in the words, then picked up his drink and began sipping at it thoughtfully. 'I had no idea you were bidding on that contract, but even so. Business is business and—'

'And you caused the storm! The asteroid belt was stable until you went through it.'

At that, Oberon paused, swirled his glass and then set it down. 'I encountered an unusually large asteroid and had to blast it out of my path to get through without losing time by diverting.'

'Like *I* had to divert,' Quince growled.

'Quince.' Oberon breathed out his name. 'I had no idea. I'm—'

'Save it,' Quince snapped. 'You always seem so cool, but really, you're just cold. You don't think about others. You haven't changed.'

They were both silent for a moment, Quince's jaw tight as he locked eyes with the tiger.

Damn, his eyes were gorgeous, like blue sapphires. His scent was earthy and rich. Quince hated it.

It was more than enough to remind Quince quite how much he missed other felidae and how long it had been since he'd been around one. He was sure that until Morningheart arrived, he'd been the only felidae on the whole of Winter.

Just being around the scent of another felidae after so long with Winterians was making his fur hum, whether he wanted it to or not. The native Winterians might look very similar to Earth's arctic wolves, but their culture was vastly different, even more than from Earth's felidae species.

Quince sighed. If only he had the company of a tiger he actually *liked*.

'I apologise, Quince. What else can I do?'

\*

Oberon had gladly paid for more drinks for Quince. Enough so that he became all the more tipsy, though not more forgiving.

Despite Oberon's offer to at least take him back to Earth, Quince was adamant he would not leave his ship, which Oberon could, of course, understand. But fuel wasn't cheap. Perhaps there were other options?

In the meantime, he was happy to listen to Quince rant all about his time on Winter, the seemingly endless public holidays and how expensive everything was. Until Quince finally ran out of steam.

'I'm going to bed,' Quince finally mumbled, his eyes slightly glassy.

'I should get a room, too,' Oberon agreed, startled by Quince's laughter.

'You won't get a room. Haven't been rooms here for days. Nowhere else either, I imagine. This is the biggest of the many, many festivals. The Light Festival attracts people from all over the sector.' Quince was still chuckling, shaking his head in disbelief that Oberon thought he might be able to find a room.

'I see,' Oberon murmured, looking around the bustling bar. 'I had been told this place would hopefully have rooms.'

'You might have been in luck a couple of days ago...' Quince started and then stopped to look at him. That same look he'd given Oberon many times in flight school. A look that had always made Oberon wonder if Quince Thornstick was actually attracted to him. It would explain why the ocelot always seemed so flustered around him.

'I will have to see if I can make some other arrangements. A couch in a backroom, perhaps?' Oberon ventured.

That earned another slight chuckle, and Quince shook his head. ‘No, there won’t be anything. Nothing remotely resembling a surface you can sleep on.’

As Quince said the words, he looked Oberon over again and then went quiet as though realising the predicament. Which he surely did because then he added, ‘After what you did, I should let you sleep on the street and hope someone gives you a warm blanket.’

‘But?’ Oberon asked hopefully.

‘No buts, that’s what I should do.’ Quince chuckled again, clearly a little more than tipsy now. He took in a deep breath and let it out as he kept Oberon’s gaze and continued. ‘You can come to my room. It’s not much, and you can take the floor. It’s warm. Just for tonight, though.’

‘Of course,’ Oberon agreed, inclining his head in thanks. ‘This is very much appreciated, my old friend.’

Quince grumbled something unintelligible under his breath in response.

\*

Of course, this was a mistake.

Having another felidae sleep over? And one he hated this much? It left Quince with an aggravating mix of comfort and frustration that sobered him up quickly enough he regretted the number of credits he’d spent that evening.

He’d given Oberon some blankets and pillows and let him sleep on the floor, true to his word, despite having a large enough bed to comfortably accommodate them both if they didn’t mind sharing.

It was the consumption of so much alcohol that led to Quince having to use the bathroom in the night. And after an hour or two of heavy sleep, he was barely awake when he tripped over the prone body on his floor.

‘Dammit,’ he muttered under his breath, remembering Oberon was there. ‘Could you just...’ Quince started, irritated, ‘just get into the bed. I don’t want to break my neck because of you. Though, at this point, it would be fitting for you to be the cause of my death.’

When Quince returned from the bathroom, he was still muttering under his breath. But as he got back into bed, overcome by the warm and comforting presence of someone there with him, he fell immediately back to sleep.

Hours later, he woke to find himself curled around Oberon Morningheart, purring.

\*

Oberon had been enjoying the closeness of the ocelot wrapped around him when he felt Quince draw a sharp breath and still.

It had been a while since he'd been in port long enough to make an acquaintance with someone, much less a felidae, and he had been savouring it. Along with the chance to finally feel what it was like to be close to this felidae in particular.

He still remembered, with fondness and frustration, their rivalry and the tension between them when they were younger. It had been exhilarating and only served to make him work all the harder because he had wanted to impress his rival, as one often seeks to impress a potential mate. Not that it ever worked. So, he had just assumed Quince wasn't interested in him.

And now here they were, in bed together.

Oberon knew he had a choice to make here. To allow the ocelot to pull away and pretend nothing happened, and even that there had never been that spark between them. Or to finally use this situation to say something.

The moment he felt Quince start to pull away, Oberon reached behind him and wrapped a hand around Quince's arm. 'Stay,' he encouraged. Not a command or a request, more a hope, he realised.

A low hiss came from Quince, and for a moment, Oberon thought he might push him away or even assault him, which wouldn't be entirely out of character.

But Quince only hesitated a moment longer before he rolled back against Oberon, sliding an arm around him and caging him there.

Oberon couldn't help but let loose a low rumble in his chest. Quince let out a contented purr in response, and they both drifted back into slumber.

\*

Quince woke a little hazy.

He was, surprisingly, not hungover; if anything, he was feeling a residual kind of tipsy, still a little buzzed. And while that was nice, it did mean it took him a moment to realise there was someone in his bed.

Oberon Morningheart.

*Damn!*

The few dreams he'd had about the asshole back at flight school came back to him. It was only natural that he got riled up about a rival like that. No matter how much they hated each other, there was a fine line between that and desire. Those instincts and reactions ran deep.

Quince could easily slip out of the bed if he moved one way, but if he moved the other, he'd be spooning Morningheart, as he vaguely recalled doing in the night.

Before he could move either way, Oberon looked back over his shoulder and moved a hand backwards, taking a gentle hold of Quince's, pulling him closer. It wasn't so firm a movement that Quince couldn't have easily pulled back from it. But he didn't resist, rolling with the pull until he was behind Oberon once more.

It was a little surreal. Especially given the fragments he could remember of his drunken rantings the night before. This tiger had ruined his life, and yet there was a pull. Maybe it was the old rivalry getting his blood pumping? Maybe it was being next to a warm body for the first time since long before he'd been stranded on this frozen rock?

Quince inhaled deeply and nuzzled into Oberon's neck as their bodies slotted together, his arm around Oberon pulling him tight to his chest.

'You smell good,' Quince growled as he pressed himself against Oberon.

Oberon hummed, and Quince knew he should pull back, but it was difficult to fight instinct. Maybe he wasn't as evolved a felidae as Morningheart. 'But we shouldn't—'

'Seems the least I owe you,' Oberon muttered.

Quince winced and pulled away. 'I shouldn't be doing this—'

'I don't mind, Quince,' Oberon replied softly.

'Don't mind? If I'm going to be intimate with someone, I want them to want it. Not minding it doesn't quite cut it in my book. This isn't right,' Quince hissed, finally pulling back from his near-overwhelming instincts.

Quince sat and started to get up off the bed, but Oberon turned quickly and pulled him back down so they were face to face.

'I don't mind, Quince, because I've wanted you since school. The top of the class, someone I could never quite beat. I wanted you, and all you wanted was to stay on top and not let me beat you. Was there more to it?' Oberon studied his expression, and Quince frowned. 'Was there more to your rivalry with me?'

Quince huffed out a breath. 'We were children, it was nothing,' he dismissed.

'We were young men, and it was everything. You consumed my thoughts then as you do now. If I had known you were also on Tiko V while I was making that deal, I wouldn't

have taken it. I would have found you and convinced you to end up in this situation we now find ourselves in.’

Quince blinked at the candid words and shook his head. ‘You ruined me.’

‘And I’d love nothing more than for you to ruin me,’ Oberon asserted with a wink.

‘Damn!’ Quince breathed out the word.

He wasn’t sure who leaned in, but the next thing he knew, they were kissing, hungry and frantic as they pulled at each other’s clothes.

\*

The festival was drawing to an end – this one at least – and Oberon woke purring.

They hadn’t left Quince’s lodgings since going there from the bar. An unexpected but welcome turn of events as Oberon gladly discovered that perhaps their rivalry had indeed been tinged with a different sort of tension.

A tension that Quince was happy to work through together, and Oberon wasn’t sure he was ready to say goodbye. But as soon as the flight restrictions were lifted, Oberon needed to go, to ensure that he lost as little time on this assignment as possible.

That was easier said than done as he watched Quince stroll back from the adjoining bathroom, wet from a shower and with a towel slung low on his hips, his spotted and striped fur damp and sticking up at all angles.

Quince grinned at him, a mischievous smirk. One that had taken Oberon a day to pull from him. A day for him to finally relax and allow himself to enjoy the experience fully. They were both stranded, they both wanted each other, and it made sense that they should take advantage of that.

It had been intimate and enjoyable, something they’d both needed.

But now it was over.

That much was clear as Quince’s face fell when he saw that Oberon was collecting his belongings together.

Quince silently went to his dresser and began pulling out his own fresh clothes, the mood instantly changing.

‘Quince,’ Oberon started, noticing how the ocelot tensed, ‘I can help you.’

Quince stilled but didn’t turn to look at him.

‘I have a surplus, several drums of fuel that I can spare. And once my current load is delivered, I’d willingly give you half of the fee to compensate—’

‘I don’t need your pity,’ Quince hissed, turning to look at him with fury in his eyes.

‘Not pity. Payback. Your misfortune is my doing. I owe you no less than I have offered. I can transfer you the credits as soon as I reach Sigma Prime and collect payment,’ Oberon explained, calm and reasonable. Hopeful that Quince would accept.

Quince huffed and cocked a brow.

‘Yeah? Why should I take your word on that? Fuel is great, but I’ve been out of the business long enough that my contacts are meaningless. I might as well stay here—’

Oberon interrupted. ‘If you won’t take my word, we could rendezvous on Sigma Prime, and you can ensure I transfer the credits. And I have contacts I would willingly share, or perhaps we could work together... Two felidae take on the universe.’

The ocelot narrowed his eyes and huffed again. ‘Why should I trust you? Why should I waste the fuel getting there only to be stranded again?’

‘Come now, Quince. After the last couple of days, surely you can be in no doubt as to the regard I’ve always held you in. And even without that, I would feel obliged to right the wrong I caused you.’ When Oberon was sure that Quince was about to rebuff him, he continued. ‘And perhaps I can give you an incentive to meet me on Sigma Prime?’

Quince scoffed at that, but at least he seemed vaguely amused. ‘More incentive than the credits?’

‘Perhaps so,’ Oberon replied as he started towards Quince.

Quince watched him, clearly sceptical. Right up to the moment Oberon reached for him and pulled him into a kiss.

He kissed the ocelot breathless until they had to part and draw in those breaths.

‘Oberon.’ Quince whispered his name, and Oberon was sure there was purring.

Oberon kissed him again, this time more chaste and just for a moment before he pulled back and smoothed down the lock of damp, amber fur that fell in front of the ocelot’s eyes.

‘Okay,’ Quince said, breathless. ‘You’ve convinced me.’ He gulped down some more air before continuing. ‘As soon as the launchpad is open, we transfer the fuel. Then we rendezvous. Two felidae take on the universe.’

His heart thumping with hope and promise, Oberon nodded and confirmed, ‘Rendezvous on Sigma Prime.’

Quince nodded back, a slight smile playing across his lips as he purred. ‘Anywhere but Winter.’

Oberon chuckled and kissed Quince's cheek. He couldn't form any further words, and he was sure that even if he could, Quince wouldn't care to hear that Winter had actually grown on him.

He certainly would have some very fond memories of the place.