

Science Fiction

# Stories For Men

By John Kessel



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*by John Kessel*

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**one**

Erno couldn't get to the club until an hour after it opened, so of course the place was crowded and he got stuck in the back behind three queens whose loud, aimless conversation made him edgy. He was never less than edgy anyway, Erno—a seventeen-year-old biotech apprentice known for the clumsy, earnest intensity with which he propositioned almost every girl he met.

It was more people than Erno had ever seen in the Oxygen Warehouse. Even though Tyler Durden had not yet taken the stage, every table was filled, and people stood three deep at the bar. Rosamund, the owner, bustled back and forth providing drinks, her face glistening with sweat. The crush of people only irritated Erno. He had been one of the first to catch on to Durden, and the room full of others, some of whom had probably come on his own recommendation, struck him as usurpers.

Erno forced his way to the bar and bought a tincture. Tyrus and Sid, friends of his, nodded at him from across the room. Erno sipped the cool, licorice flavored drink and eavesdropped, and gradually his thoughts took on an architectural, intricate intellectuality.

A friend of his mother sat with a couple of sons who anticipated for her what she was going to see. "He's not just a comedian, he's a philosopher," said the skinny one. His foot, crossed over his knee, bounced in rhythm to the jazz playing

in the background. Erno recognized him from a party he'd attended a few months back.

"We have philosophers," the matron said. "We even have comedians."

"Not like Tyler Durden," said the other boy.

"Tyler Durden—who gave him that name?"

"I think it's historical," the first boy said.

"Not any history I ever heard," the woman said. "Who's his mother?"

Erno noticed that there were more women in the room than there had been at any performance he had seen. Already the matrons were honing in. You could not escape their sisterly curiosity, their motherly tyranny. He realized that his shoulders were cramped; he rolled his head to try to loosen the spring-tight muscles.

The Oxygen Warehouse was located in what had been a shop in the commercial district of the northwest lava tube. It was a free enterprise zone, and no one had objected to the addition of a tinctures bar, though some eyebrows had been raised when it was discovered that one of the tinctures sold was alcohol. The stage was merely a raised platform in one corner. Around the room were small tables with chairs. The bar spanned one end, and the other featured a false window that showed a nighttime cityscape of Old New York.

Rosamund Demisdaughter, who'd started the club, at first booked local jazz musicians. Her idea was to present as close to a retro earth atmosphere as could be managed on the far side of the moon, where few of the inhabitants had ever even seen the earth. Her clientele consisted of a few immigrants

and a larger group of rebellious young Cousins who were looking for an *avant garde*. Erno knew his mother would not approve his going to the Warehouse, so he was there immediately.

He pulled his pack of fireless cigarettes from the inside pocket of his black twentieth-century suit, shook out a fag, inhaled it into life and imagined himself living back on earth a hundred years ago. Exhaling a plume of cool, rancid smoke, he caught a glimpse of his razor haircut in the mirror behind the bar, then adjusted the knot of his narrow tie.

After some minutes the door beside the bar opened and Tyler Durden came out. He leaned over and exchanged a few words with Rosamund. Some of the men whistled and cheered. Rosamund flipped a brandy snifter high into the air, where it caught the ceiling lights as it spun in the low G, then slowly fell back to her hand. Having attracted the attention of the audience, she hopped over the bar and onto the small stage.

"Don't you people have anything better to do?" she shouted.

A chorus of rude remarks.

"Welcome to The Oxygen Warehouse," she said. "I want to say, before I bring him out, that I take no responsibility for the opinions expressed by Tyler Durden. He's not my boy."

Durden stepped onto the stage. The audience was quiet, a little nervous. He ran his hand over his shaved head, gave a boyish grin. He was a big man, in his thirties, wearing the blue coveralls of an environmental technician. Around his

waist he wore a belt with tools hanging from it, as if he'd just come off shift.

"'Make love, not war!'" Durden said. "Remember that one? You got that from your mother, in the school? I never liked that one. 'Make love, not war,' they'll tell you. I hate that. I want to make love *and* war. I don't want my dick just to be a dick. I want it to stand for something!"

A heckler from audience shouted, "Can't it stand on its own?"

Durden grinned. "Let's ask it." He addressed his crotch. "Hey, son!" He called down. "Don't you like screwing?"

Durden looked up at the ceiling, his face went simple, and he became his dick talking back to him. "Hiya dad!" he squeaked. "Sure, I like screwing!"

Durden winked at a couple of guys in makeup and lace in the front row, then looked down again: "Boys or girls?"

His dick: "What day of the week is it?"

"Thursday."

"Doesn't matter, then. Thursday's guest mammal day."

"Outstanding, son."

"I'm a Good Partner."

The queers laughed. Erno did, too.

"You want I should show you?"

"Not now, son," Tyler told his dick. "You keep quiet for a minute, and let me explain to the people, okay?"

"Sure. I'm here whenever you need me."

"I'm aware of that." Durden addressed the audience again. "Remember what Mama says, folks: *Keep your son close, let your semen go.*" He recited the slogan with exaggerated

rhythm, wagging his finger at them, sober as a scolding grandmother. The audience loved it. Some of them chanted along with the catchphrase.

Durden was warming up. "But is screwing all there is to a dick? I say no!

"A dick is a sign of power. It's a tower of strength. It's the tree of life. It's a weapon. It's an incisive tool of logic. It's the seeker of truth.

"Mama says that being male is nothing more than a performance. You know what I say to that? Perform this, baby!" He grabbed his imaginary cock with both of his hands, made a stupid face.

Cheers.

"But of course, *they* can't perform this! I don't care how you plank the genes, Mama don't have the *machinery*. Not only that, she don't have the *programming*. But mama wants to program *us* with *her* half-baked scheme of what women want a man to be. This whole place is about fucking up our *hardware* with their *software*."

He was laughing himself, now. Beads of sweat stood out on his scalp in the bright light.

"Mama says, 'Don't confuse your penis with a phallus.'" He assumed a female sway of his hips, lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes: just like that, he was at archetypal matron, his voice transmuted into a fruity contralto. "'Yes, you boys do have those nice little dicks, but we're living in a *post-phallic* society. A penis is merely a biological appendage.'"

Now he was her son, responding: "'Like a foot, Mom?'"

Mama: "'Yes, son. Exactly like a foot.'

Quick as a spark, back to his own voice: "How many of you in the audience here have named your foot?"

Laughter, a show of hands.

"Okay, so much for the foot theory of the penis.

"But Mama says the penis is designed solely for the propagation of the species. Sex gives pleasure in order to encourage procreation. A phallus, on the other hand—whichever hand you like—I prefer the left—"

More laughter.

"—a phallus is an idea, a cultural creation of the dead patriarchy, a symbolic sheath applied over the penis to give it meanings that have nothing to do with biology..."

Durden seized his invisible dick again. "Apply my symbolic sheath, baby ... oohhh, yes, I like it..."

Erno had heard Tyler talk about his symbolic sheath before. Though there were variations, he watched the audience instead. Did they get it? Most of the men seemed to be engaged and laughing. A drunk in the first row leaned forward, hands on his knees, howling at Tyler's every word. Queers leaned their heads together and smirked. Faces gleamed in the close air. But a lot of the men's laughter was nervous, and some did not laugh at all.

A few of the women, mostly the younger ones, were laughing. Some of them seemed mildly amused. Puzzled. Some looked bored. Others sat stonily with expressions that could only indicate anger.

Erno did not know how he felt about the women who were laughing. He felt hostility toward those who looked bored:



why did you come here, he wanted to ask them. Who do you think you are? He preferred those who looked angry. That was what he wanted from them.

Then he noticed those who looked calm, interested, alert yet unamused. These women scared him.

In the back of the room stood some green-uniformed constables, male and female, carrying batons, red lights gleaming in the corner of their mirror spex, recording. Looking around the room, Erno located at least a half dozen of them. One, he saw with a start, was his mother.

He ducked behind a tall man beside him. She might not have seen him yet, but she would see him sooner or later. For a moment he considered confronting her, but then he sidled behind a row of watchers toward the back rooms. Another constable, her slender lunar physique distorted by the bulging muscles of a genetically engineered testosterone girl, stood beside the doorway. She did not look at Erno: she was watching Tyler, who was back to conversing with his dick.

"I'm tired of being confined," Tyler's dick was saying.

"You feel constricted?" Tyler asked.

He looked up in dumb appeal. "I'm stuck in your pants all day!"

Looking down: "I can let you out, but first tell me, are you a penis or a phallus?"

"That's a distinction without a difference."

"*Au contraire*, little man! You haven't been listening."

"I'm not noted for my listening ability."

"Sounds like you're a phallus to me," Tyler told his dick. "We have lots of room for penises, but mama don't allow no phalluses 'round here."

"Let me people go!"

"Nice try, but wrong color. Look, son. It's risky when you come out. You could get damaged. The phallic liberation movement is in its infancy."

"I thought you Cousins were *all about* freedom."

"In theory. In practice, free phalluses are dangerous."

"Who says?"

"Well, Debra does, and so does Mary, and Sue, and Jamina most every time I see her, and there was this lecture in We-Whine-You-Listen class last week, and Ramona says so too, and of course most emphatically Baba, and then there's that bitch Nora..."

Erno spotted his mother moving toward his side of the room. He slipped past the constable into the hall. There was the rest room, and a couple of other doors. A gale of laughter washed in from the club behind him at the climax of Tyler's story; cursing his mother, Erno went into the rest room.

No one was there. He could still hear the laughter, but not the cause of it. His mother's presence had cut him out of the community of male watchers as neatly as if she had used a baton. Erno felt murderously angry. He switched on a urinal and took a piss.

Over the urinal, a window played a scene in Central Park, on earth, of a hundred years ago. A night scene of a pathway beneath some trees, trees as large as the largest in Sobieski Park. A line of electric lights on poles threw pools of light

along the path, and through the pools of light strolled a man and a woman. They were talking, but Erno could not hear what they were saying.

The woman wore a dress cinched tight at the waist, whose skirt flared out stiffly, ending halfway down her calves. The top of her dress had a low neckline that showed the tops of her breasts. The man wore a dark suit like Erno's. They were completely differentiated by their dress, as if they were from different cultures, even species. Erno wondered where Rosamund had gotten the image.

As Erno watched, the man nudged the woman to the side of the path, beneath one of the trees. He slid his hands around her waist and pressed his body against hers. She yielded softly to his embrace. Erno could not see their faces in the shadows, but they were inches apart. He felt his dick getting hard in his hand.

He stepped back from the urinal, turned it off, and closed his pants. As the hum of the recycler died, the rest room door swung open and a woman came in. She glanced at Erno and headed for one of the toilets. Erno went over to the counter and stuck his hands into the cleaner. The woman's presence sparked his anger.

Without turning to face her, but watching in the mirror, he said, "Why are you here tonight?"

The woman looked up (she had been studying her fingernails) and her eyes locked on his. She was younger than his mother and had a pretty, heart-shaped face. "I was curious. People are talking about him."

"Do you think men want you here?"

"I don't know what the men want."

"Yes. That's the point, isn't it? Are you learning anything?"

"Perhaps." The woman looked back at her hands. "Aren't you Pamela Megsdaughter's son?"

"So she tells me." Erno pulled his tingling hands out of the cleaner.

The woman used the bidet, and dried herself. She had a great ass. "Did she bring you or did you bring her?" she asked.

"We brought ourselves," Erno said. He left the rest room. He looked out into the club again, listening to the noise. The crowd was rowdier, and more raucous. The men's shouts of encouragement were like barks, their laughter edged with anger. His mother was still there. He did not want to see her, or to have her see him.

He went back past the rest room to the end of the hallway. The hall made a right angle into a dead end, but when Erno stepped into the bend he saw, behind a stack of plastic crates, an old door. He wedged the crates to one side and opened the door enough to slip through.

The door opened into a dark, dimly lit space. His steps echoed. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light he saw it was a very large room hewn out of the rock, empty except for some racks that must have held liquid oxygen cylinders back in the early days of the colony, when this place had been an actual oxygen warehouse. The light came from ancient bioluminescent units on the walls. The club must have been set up in this space years before.

The tincture still leant Erno an edge of aggression, and he called out: "I'm Erno, King of the Moon!"

"—ooo—ooo—oon!" the echoes came back, fading to stillness. He kicked an empty cylinder, which rolled forlornly a few meters before it stopped. He wandered around the chill vastness. At the far wall, one of the darker shadows turned out to be an alcove in the stone. Set in the back, barely visible in the dim light, was an ancient pressure door.

Erno decided not to mess with it—it could open onto vacuum. He went back to the club door and slid into the hallway.

Around the corner, two men were just coming out of the rest room, and Erno followed them as if he were just returning as well. The club was more crowded than ever. Every open space was filled with standing men, and others sat cross-legged up front. His mother and another constable had moved to the edge of the stage.

"—the problem with getting laid all the time is, you can't think!" Tyler was saying. "I mean, there's only so much blood in the human body. That's why those old Catholics back on earth put the lock on the Pope's dick. He had an empire to run: the more time he spent taking care of John Thomas the less he spent thinking up ways of getting money out of peasants. The secret of our moms is that, if they keep that blood flowing below the belt, it ain't never gonna flow back above the shirt collar. Keeps the frequency of radical male ideas down!"

Tyler leaned over toward the drunk in the first row. "You know what I'm talking about, soldier?"

"You bet," the man said. He tried to stand, wobbled, sat down, tried to stand again.

"Where do you work?"

"Lunox." The man found his balance. "You're *right*, you—"

Tyler patted him on the shoulder. "An oxygen boy. You know what I mean, you're out there on the processing line, and you're thinking about how maybe if you were to add a little more graphite to the reduction chamber you could increase efficiency by fifteen percent, and just then Mary Ellen Swivelhips walks by in her skintight and—bam!" Tyler made the face of a man who'd been poleaxed. "Uh—what was I thinking of?"

The audience howled.

"Forty I.Q. points down the oubliette. And nothing, NOTHING's gonna change until we get a handle on this! Am I right, brothers?"

More howls, spiked with anger.

Tyler was sweating, laughing, trembling as if charged with electricity. "Keep your son close! *Penis, no! Phallus, si!*"

Cheers now. Men stood and raised their fists. The drunk saw Erno's mother at the edge of the stage and took a step toward her. He said something, and while she and her partner stood irresolute, he put his big hand on her chest and shoved her away.

The other constable discharged his electric club against the man. The drunk's arms flew back, striking a bystander, and two other men surged forward and knocked down the constable. Erno's mother raised her own baton. More constables pushed toward the stage, using their batons, and

other men rose to stop them. A table was upended, shouts echoed, the room was hot as hell and turning into a riot, the first riot in the Society of Cousins in fifty years.

As the crowd surged toward the exits or toward the constables, Erno ducked back to the hallway. He hesitated, and then Tyler Durden came stumbling out of the melee. He took a quick look at Erno. "What now, kid?"

"Come with me," Erno said. He grabbed Tyler's arm and pulled him around the bend in the end of the hall, past the crates to the warehouse door. He slammed the door behind them and propped an empty oxygen cylinder against it. "We can hide here until the thing dies down."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Erno."

"Well, Erno, are we sure we want to hide? Out there is more interesting."

Erno decided not to tell Tyler that one of the constables was his mother. "Are you serious?"

"I'm always serious." Durden wandered back from the door into the gloom of the cavern. He kicked a piece of rubble, which soared across the room and skidded up against the wall thirty meters away. "This place must have been here since the beginning. I'm surprised they're wasting the space. Probably full of toxics."

"You think so?" Erno said.

"Who knows?" Durden went towards the back of the warehouse, and Erno followed. It was cold, and their breath steamed the air. "Who would have figured the lights would still be growing," Durden said.

"A well established colony can last for fifty years or more," Erno said. "As long as there's enough moisture in the air. They break down the rock."

"You know all about it."

"I work in biotech," Erno said. "I'm a gene hacker."

Durden said nothing, and Erno felt the awkwardness of his boast.

They reached the far wall. Durden found the pressure door set into the dark alcove. He pulled a flashlight from his belt. The triangular yellow warning signs around the door were faded. He felt around the door seam.

"We probably ought to leave that alone," Erno said.

Durden handed Erno the flashlight, took a pry bar from his belt, and shoved it into the edge of the door. The door resisted, then with a grating squeak jerked open a couple of centimeters. Erno jumped at the sound.

"Help me out here, Erno," Durden said.

Erno got his fingers around the door's edge, and the two of them braced themselves. Durden put his feet up on the wall and used his legs and back to get leverage. When the door suddenly shot open Erno fell back and whacked his head. Durden lost his grip, shot sideways out of the alcove, bounced once, and skidded across the dusty floor. While Erno shook his head to clear his vision, Durden sat spread-legged, laughing. "Bingo!" He said. He bounced up. "You okay, Erno?"

Erno felt the back of his skull. He wasn't bleeding. "I'm fine," he said.

"Let's see what we've got, then."



Beyond the door a dark corridor cut through the basalt. Durden stepped into the path marked by his light. Erno wanted to go back to the club—by now things must have died down—but instead he followed.

Shortly past the door the corridor turned into a cramped lava tube. Early settlers had leveled the floor of the erratic tube formed by the draining away of cooling lava several billion years ago. Between walls that had been erected to form rooms ran a path of red volcanic gravel much like tailings from the oxygen factory. Foamy irregular pebbles kicked up by their shoes rattled off the walls. Dead light fixtures broke the ceiling at intervals. Tyler stopped to shine his light into a couple of the doorways, and at the third he went inside.

"This must be from the start of the colony," Erno said. "I wonder why it's been abandoned."

"Kind of claustrophobic." Durden shone the light around the small room.

The light fell on a small rectangular object in the corner. From his belt Durden pulled another tool, which he extended into a probe.

"Do you always carry this equipment?" Erno asked.

"Be prepared," Durden said. He set down the light and crouched over the object. It looked like a small box, a few centimeters thick. "You ever hear of the Boy Scouts, Erno?"

"Some early lunar colony?"

"Nope. Sort of like the Men's House, only different."

Durden forced the probe under an edge, and one side lifted as if to come off. "Well, well!"

He put down the probe, picked up the object. He held it end-on, put his thumbs against the long side, and opened it. It divided neatly into flat sheets attached at the other long side.

"What is it?" Erno asked.

"It's a book."

"Is it still working?"

"This is an unpowered book. The words are printed right on these leaves. They're made of paper."

Erno had seen such old fashioned books in vids. "It must be very old. What is it?"

Durden carefully turned the pages. "It's a book of stories." Durden stood up and handed the book to Erno. "Here. You keep it. Let me know what it's about."

Erno tried to make out the writing, but without Tyler's flashlight it was too dim.

Durden folded up his probe and hung it on his belt. He ran his hand over his head, smearing a line of dust over his scalp. "Are you cold? I suppose we ought to find our way out of here." Immediately he headed out of the room and back down the corridor.

Erno felt he was getting left behind in more ways than one. Clutching the book, he followed after Durden and his bobbing light. Rather than heading back to the Oxygen Warehouse, the comedian continued down the lava tube.

Eventually the tube ended in another old pressure door. When Durden touched the key panel at its side, amazingly, it lit.

"What do you think?" Durden said.

"We should go back," Erno said. "We can't know whether the lock door on the other side is still airtight. The fail-safes could be broken. We could open the door onto vacuum." He held the book under his armpit and blew on his cold hands.

"How old are you, Erno?"

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen?" Durden's eyes glinted in shadowed eye sockets. "Seventeen is no age to be cautious."

Erno couldn't help but grin. "You're right. Let's open it."

"My man, Erno!" Durden slapped him on the shoulder. He keyed the door open. They heard the whine of a long-unused electric motor. Erno could feel his heart beat, the blood running swiftly in his veins. At first nothing happened, then the door began to slide open. There was a chuff of air escaping from the lava tube, and dust kicked up. But the wind stopped as soon as it started, and the door opened completely on the old airlock, filled floor to ceiling with crates and bundles of fiberglass building struts.

It took them half an hour to shift boxes and burrow their way through the airlock, to emerge at the other end into another warehouse, this one still in use. They crept by racks of construction materials until they reached the entrance, and sneaked out into the colony corridor beyond.

They were at the far end of North Six, the giant lava tube that served the industrial wing of the colony. The few workers they encountered on the late shift might have noticed Erno's suit, but said nothing.

Erno and Tyler made their way back home. Tyler cracked jokes about the constables until they emerged into the vast

open space of the domed crater that formed the center of the colony. Above, on the huge dome, was projected a night starfield. In the distance, down the rimwall slopes covered with junipers, across the crater floor, lights glinted among the trees in Sobieski Park. Erno took a huge breath, fragrant with piñon.

"The world our ancestors gave us," Tyler said, waving his arm as if offering it to Erno.

As Tyler turned to leave, Erno called out impulsively, "That was an adventure!"

"The first of many, Erno." Tyler said, and jogged away.

### *Celibacy Day*

*On Celibacy Day, everyone gets a day off from sex.*

Some protest this practice, but they are relatively few. Most men take it as an opportunity to retreat to the informal Men's Houses that, though they have no statutory sanction, sprang up in the first generation of settlers.

In the Men's House, men and boys talk about what it is to be a man, a lover of other men and women, a father in a world where fatherhood is no more than a biological concept. They complain about their lot. They tell vile jokes and sing songs. They wrestle. They gossip. Heteros and queers and everyone in between compare speculations on what they think women really want, and whether it matters. They try to figure out what a true man is.

As a boy Erno would go to the Men's House with his mother's current partner or one of the other men involved in the household. Some of the men taught him things. He

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learned about masturbation, and cross checks, and Micro Language Theory.

*But no matter how welcoming the men were supposed to be to each other—and they talked about brotherhood all the time—there was always that little edge when you met another boy there, or that necessary wariness when you talked to an adult. Men came to the Men's House to spend time together and remind themselves of certain congruencies, but only a crazy person would want to live solely in the company of men.*

## two

The founders of the Society of Cousins had a vision of women as independent agents, free thinkers forming alliances with other women to create a social bond so strong that men could not overwhelm them. Solidarity, sisterhood, motherhood. But Erno's mother was not like those women. Those women existed only in history vids, sitting in meeting circles, laughing, making plans, sure of themselves and complete.

Erno's mother was a cop. She had a cop's squinty eyes and a cop's suspicion of anyone who stepped outside of the norm. She had a cop's lack of imagination, except as she could imagine what people would do wrong.

Erno and his mother and his sister Celeste and his Aunt Sophie and his cousins Lena and Aphra, and various men some of whom may have been fathers, some of them Good Partners, and others just men, lived in an apartment in Sanger, on the third level of the northeast quadrant, a small place looking down on the farms that filled the floor of the crater they called Fowler, though the real Fowler was a much larger crater five kilometers distant.

Erno had his own room. He thought nothing of the fact that the girls had to share a room, and would be forced to move out when they turned fourteen. *Keep your son close, let your daughter go*, went the aphorism Tyler had mocked. Erno's mother was not about to challenge any aphorisms. Erno remembered her expression as she had stepped forward

to arrest the drunk: sad that this man had forced her to this, and determined to do it. She was comfortable in the world; she saw no need for alternatives. Her cronies came by the apartment and shared coffee and gossip, and they were just like all the other mothers and sisters and aunts. None of them were extraordinary.

Not that any of the men Erno knew were extraordinary, either. Except Tyler Durden. And now Erno knew Durden, and they had spent a night breaking rules and getting away with it.

Celeste and Aphra were dishing up oatmeal when Erno returned to the apartment that morning. "Where were you?" his mother asked. She looked up from the table, more curious than upset, and Erno noticed a bruise on her temple.

"What happened to your forehead?" Erno asked.

His mother touched a hand to her forehead, as if she had forgotten it. She waved the hand in dismissal.

"There was trouble at a club in the enterprise district," Aunt Sophie said. "The constables had to step in, and your mother was assaulted."

"It was a riot!" Lena said eagerly. "There's going to be a big meeting about it in the park today." Lena was a month from turning fourteen, and looking forward to voting.

Erno sat down at the table. As he did so he felt the book, which he had tucked into his belt at the small of his back beneath his now rumpled suit jacket. He leaned forward, pulled a bowl of oatmeal toward him and took up a spoon. Looking down into the bowl to avoid anyone's eyes, he idly asked, "What's the meeting for?"

"One of the rioters was knocked into a coma," Lena said. "The social order committee wants this comedian Tyler Durden to be made invisible."

Erno concentrated on his spoon. "Why?"

"You know about him?" his mother asked.

Before he had to think of an answer, Nick Farahsson, his mother's partner, shambled into the kitchen. "Lord, Pam, don't you pay attention? Erno's one of his biggest fans."

His mother turned on Erno. "Is that so?"

Erno looked up from his bowl and met her eyes. She looked hurt. "I've heard of him."

"Heard of him?" Nick said. "Erno, I bet you were there last night."

"I bet *you* weren't there," Erno said

Nick stretched. "I don't need to hear him. I have no complaints." He came up behind Erno's mother, nuzzled the nape of her neck and cupped her breast in his hand.

She turned her face up and kissed him on the cheek. "I should hope not."

Lena made a face. "Heteros. I can't wait until I get out of here." She had recently declared herself a lesbian and was quite judgmental about it.

"You'd better get to your practicum, Lena," Aunt Sophie said. "Let your Aunt take care of her own sex life."

"This guy Durden is setting himself up for a major fall," said Nick. "Smells like a case of abnormal development. Who's his mother?"

Erno couldn't keep quiet. "He doesn't have a mother. He doesn't need one."



"Parthenogenesis," Aunt Sophie said. "I didn't think it had been perfected yet."

"If they ever do, what happens to me?" Nick said.

"You have your uses." Erno's mother nudged her shoulder against his hip.

"You two can go back to your room," Aunt Sophie said. "We'll take care of things for you."

"No need," Nick grabbed a bowl of oatmeal and sat down. "Thank you, sweetheart," he said to Aphra. "I can't see what this guy's problem is."

"Doesn't it bother you that you can't vote?" Erno said. "What's fair about that?"

"I don't want to vote," Nick said.

"You're a complete drone."

His mother frowned at him. Erno pushed his bowl away and left for his room.

"You're the one with special tutoring!" Lena called. "The nice clothes. What work do you do?"

"Shut up," Erno said softly, but his ears burned.

He had nothing to do until his 1100 biotech tutorial, and he didn't even have to go if he didn't want to. Lena was right about that, anyway. He threw the book on his bed, undressed, and switched on his screen. On the front page was a report of solar activity approaching its eleven-year peak, with radiation warnings issued for all surface activity. Erno called up the calendar. There it was: a discussion on Tyler Durden was scheduled in the amphitheater at 1600. Linked was a vid of the riot and a forum for open citizen comment. A

Stories For Men  
*by John Kessel*

cousin named Tashi Yokiosson had been clubbed in the fight and was in a coma, undergoing nanorepair.

Erno didn't know him, but that didn't prevent his anger. He considered calling up Tyrus or Sid, finding out what had happened to them, and telling them about his adventure with Tyler. But that would spoil the secret, and it might get around to his mother. Yet he couldn't let his night with Tyler go uncelebrated. He opened his journal, and wrote a poem:

Going outside the crater  
finding the lost tunnels  
of freedom  
and male strength.

Searching with your brother  
shoulder to shoulder  
like men.

Getting below the surface  
of a stifling society  
sounding your XY shout.

Flashing your colors  
like an ancient Spartan bird  
proud, erect, never to be softened  
by the silent embrace of woman

No females aloud.

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Not bad. It had some of the raw honesty of the beats. He would read it at the next meeting of the Poet's Club. He saved it with the four hundred other poems he had written in the last year: Erno prided himself on being the most prolific poet in his class. He had already won four Laurel Awards, one for best Lyric, one for best Sonnet, and two for best Villanelle—plus a Snapple for best limerick of 2097. He was sure to make Bard at an earlier age than anyone since Patrick Maurasson.

Erno switched off the screen, lay on his bed, and remembered the book. He dug it out from under his discarded clothes. It had a blue cover, faded to purple near the binding, made of some sort of fabric. Embossed on the front was a torch encircled by a laurel wreath. He opened the book to its title page: *Stories for Men*, "An Anthology by Charles Grayson." Published in August 1936, in the United States of America.

As a fan of earth culture, Erno knew that most earth societies used the patronymic, so that Gray, Grayson's naming parent, would be a man, not a woman.

Stories for men. The authors on the contents page were all men—except perhaps for odd names like "Dashiell." Despite Erno's interest in twentieth-century popular art, only a couple were familiar. William Faulkner he knew was considered a major Earth writer, and he had seen the name Hemingway before, though he had associated it only with a style of furniture. But even assuming the stories were all written by men, the title said the book was stories *for* men, not stories *by* men.

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How did a story for a man differ from a story for a woman? Erno had never considered the idea before. He had heard storytellers in the park, and read books in school—Murasaki, Chopin, Cather, Ellison, Morrison, Ferenc, Sabinsdaughter. As a child, he had loved the Alice books, and *Flatland*, and Maria Hidalgo's kid's stories, and Seuss. None seemed particularly male or female.

He supposed the Cousins did have their own stories for men. Nick loved interactive serials, tortured romantic tales of interpersonal angst set in the patriarchal world, where men struggled against injustice until they found the right women and were taken care of. Erno stuck to poetry. His favorite novel was Tawanda Tamikasdaughter's *The Dark Blood*—the story of a misunderstood young Cousin's struggles against his overbearing mother, climaxed when his father miraculously reveals himself and brings the mother to heel. At the Men's House, he had also seen his share of porn—thrillers set on Earth where men forced women to do whatever the men wanted, and like it.

But this book did not look like porn. A note at the beginning promised the book contained material to “interest, or alarm, or amuse, or instruct, or—and possibly most important of all—entertain you.” Erno wondered that Tyler had found this particular 160-year-old book in the lava tube. It seemed too unlikely to be coincidence.

What sort of things would entertain an earthman of 1936? Erno turned to the first story, “The Ambassador of Poker” by “Achmed Abdullah.”

But the archaic text was frustratingly passive—nothing more than black type physically impressed on the pages, without links or explanations. After a paragraph or so rife with obscure cultural references—"cordovan brogues," "knickerbockers," "County Sligo," "a four-in-hand"—Erno's night without sleep caught up with him, and he fell asleep.

*Heroes*

*Why does a man remain in the Society of Cousins, when he would have much more authority outside of it, in one of the other lunar colonies, or on earth?*

For one thing, the sex is great.

Men are valued for their sexuality, praised for their potency, competed for by women. From before puberty, a boy is schooled by both men and women on how to give pleasure. A man who can give such pleasure has high status. He is recognized and respected throughout the colony. He is welcome in any bed. He is admired and envied by other men.

### three

Erno woke suddenly, sweaty and disoriented, trailing the wisps of a dream that faded before he could call it back. He looked at his clock: 1530. He was going to miss the meeting.

He washed his face, applied personal hygiene bacteria, threw on his embroidered jumpsuit, and rushed out of the apartment.

The amphitheater in Sobieski Park was filling as Erno arrived. Five or six hundred people were already there; other cousins would be watching on the link. The dome presented a clear blue sky, and the ring of heliotropes around its zenith flooded the air with sunlight. A slight breeze rustled the old oaks, hovering over the semicircular ranks of seats like aged grandmothers. People came in twos and threes, adults and children, along the paths that led down from the colony perimeter road through the farmlands to the park. Others emerged from the doors at the base of the central spire that supported the dome. Erno found a seat in the top row, far from the stage, off to one side where the seats gave way to grass.

Chairing the meeting was Debra Debrasdaughter. Debrasdaughter was a tiny sixty-year old woman who, though she had held public office infrequently and never for long, was one of the most respected Cousins. She had been Erno's teacher when he was six, and he remembered how she'd sat with him and worked through his feud with Bill Grettasson. She taught him how to play forward on the soccer team. On

the soccer field she had been fast and sudden as a bug. She had a warm laugh and sharp brown eyes.

Down on the stage Debrasdaughter was hugging the secretary. Then the sound person hugged Debrasdaughter. They both hugged the secretary again. A troubled looking old man sat down in the front row, and all three of them got down off the platform and hugged him. He brushed his hand along Debrasdaughter's thigh, but it was plain that his heart wasn't in it. She kissed his cheek and went back up on the stage.

A flyer wearing red wings swooped over the amphitheater and soared back up again, slowly beating the air. Another pair of flyers were racing around the perimeter of the crater, silhouetted against the clusters of apartments built into the crater walls. A thousand meters above his head Erno could spy a couple of others on the edge of the launch platform at the top of the spire. As he watched, squinting against the sunlight, one of the tiny figures spread its wings and pushed off, diving down, at first ever so slowly, gaining speed, then, with a flip of wings, soaring out level. Erno could feel it in his own shoulders, the stress that maneuver put on your arms. He didn't like flying. Even in lunar gravity, the chances of a fall were too big.

The amplified voice of Debrasdaughter drew him back to the amphitheater. "Thank you, Cousins, for coming," she said. "Please come to order."

Erno saw that Tyler Durden had taken a seat off to one side of the stage. He wore flaming red coveralls, like a shout.

"A motion has been made to impose a decree of invisibility against Thomas Marysson, otherwise known as Tyler Durden, for a period of one year. We are met here for the first of two discussions over this matter, prior to holding a colony-wide vote."

Short of banishment, invisibility was the colony's maximum social sanction. Should the motion carry, Tyler would be formally ostracized. Tagged by an AI, continuously monitored, he would not be acknowledged by other Cousins. Should he attempt to harm anyone, the AI would trigger receptors in his brain stem to put him to sleep.

"This motion was prompted by the disturbances that have ensued as a result of public performances of Thomas Marysson. The floor is now open for discussion."

A very tall woman who had been waiting anxiously stood, and as if by pre-arrangement, Debrasdaughter recognized her. The hovering mikes picked up her high voice. "I am Yokio Kumoisdaughter. My son is in the hospital as a result of this shameful episode. He is a good boy. He is the kind of boy we all want, and I don't understand how he came to be in that place. I pray that he recovers and lives to become the good man I know he can be.

"We must not let this happen to anyone else's son. At the very least, Invisibility will give Thomas Marysson the opportunity to reflect on his actions before he provokes another such tragedy."

Another woman rose. Erno saw it was Rosamund Demisdaughter.



"With due respect to Cousin Kumoisdaughter, I don't believe the riot in my club was Tyler's fault. Her son brought this on himself. Tyler is not responsible for the actions of the patrons. Since when do we punish people for the misbehavior of others?"

"The real mistake was sending constables," Rosamund continued. "Whether or not the grievances Tyler gives vent to are real or only perceived, we must allow any Cousin to speak their mind. The founders understood that men and women are different. By sending armed officers into that club, we threatened the right of those men who came to see Tyler Durden to be different."

"It was stupid strategy!" someone interrupted. "They could have arrested Durden easily after the show."

"Arrested him? On what grounds?" another woman asked.

Rosamund continued. "Adil Al-Hafez said it when he helped Nora Sobieski raise the money for this colony: 'The Cousins are a new start for men as much as women. We do not seek to change men, but to offer them the opportunity to be other than they have been.'"

A man Erno recognized from the biotech factory took the floor. "It's all very well to quote the founders back at us, but they were realists too. Men *are* different. Personalized male power has made the history of earth one long tale of slaughter, oppression, rape, and war. Sobieski and Al-Hafez and the rest knew that, too: The California massacre sent them here. Durden's incitements will inevitably cause trouble. This kid wouldn't have gotten hurt without him. We can't

stand by while the seeds of institutionalized male aggression are planted."

"This is a free speech issue!" a young woman shouted.

"It's not about speech," the man countered. "It's about violence."

Debrasdaughter called for order. The man looked sheepish and sat down. A middle-aged woman with a worried expression stood. "What about organizing a new round of games? Let them work it out on the rink, the flying drome, the playing field."

"We have games of every description," another woman responded. "You think we can make Durden join the hockey team?"

The old man in the front row croaked out, "Did you see that game last week against Aristarchus? They could use a little more organized male aggression!" That drew a chorus of laughter from the crowd.

When the noise died down, an elderly woman took the floor. "I have been a cousin for seventy years," she said. "I've seen troublemakers. There will always be troublemakers. But what's happened to the Good Partners? I remember the North tube blowout of '32. Sixty people died. Life here was brutal and dangerous. But men and women worked together shoulder to shoulder; we shared each other's joys and sorrows. We were good bedmates then. Where is that spirit now?"

Erno had heard such tiresome sermonettes about the old days a hundred times. The discussion turned into a cacophony of voices.

"What are we going to do?" said another woman. "Deprive men of the right to speak?"

"Men are already deprived of the vote! How many voters are men?"

"By living on the colony stipend, men *choose* not to vote. Nobody is stopping you from going to work."

"We work already! How much basic science do men do? Look at the work Laurasson did on free energy. And most of the artists are men."

"—they have the time to devote to science and art, *because of* the material support of the community. They have the luxury of intellectual pursuit."

"And all decisions about what to do with their work are made by women."

"The decisions, which will affect the lives of everyone in the society, are made not by women, but by voters."

"And most voters are women."

"Back to beginning of argument!" someone shouted. "Reload program and repeat."

A smattering of laughter greeted the sarcasm. Debrasdaughter smiled. "These are general issues, and to a certain degree I am content to let them be aired. But do they bear directly on the motion? What, if anything, are we to do about Thomas Marysson?"

She looked over at Tyler, who looked back at her coolly, his legs crossed.

A woman in a constable's uniform rose. "The problem with Thomas Marysson is that he claims the privileges of artistic expression, but he's not really an artist. He's a provocateur."

"Most of the artists in history have been provocateurs," shot back a small, dark man.

"He makes *me* laugh," said another.

"He's smart. Instead of competing with other men, he wants to organize them. He encourages them to band together."

The back-and-forth rambled on. Despite Debrasdaughter's attempt to keep order, the discussion ran into irrelevant byways, circular arguments, vague calls for comity, and general statements of male and female grievance. Erno had debated all this stuff a million times with the guys at the gym. It annoyed him that Debrasdaughter did not force the speakers to stay on point. But that was typical of a Cousins meeting—they would talk endlessly, letting every nitwit have her say, before actually getting around to deciding anything.

A young woman stood to speak, and Erno saw it was Alicia Keikosdaughter. Alicia and he had shared a tutorial in math, and she had been the second girl he had ever had sex with.

"Of course Durden wants to be seen as an artist," Alicia said. "There's no mystique about the guy who works next to you in the factory. Who wants to sleep with him? The truth—"

"I will!" A good-looking woman interrupted Alicia.

The assembly laughed.

"The truth—" Alicia tried to continue.

The woman ignored her. She stood, her hand on the head of the little girl at her side, and addressed Tyler Durden directly. "I think you need to get laid!" She turned to the others. "Send him around to me! I'll take care of any revolutionary impulses he might have." More laughter.

Erno could see Alicia's shoulders slump, and she sat down. It was a typical case of a matron ignoring a young woman. He got up, moved down the aisle, and slid into a spot next to her.

Alicia turned to him. "Erno. Hello."

"It's not your fault they won't listen," he said. Alicia was wearing a tight satin shirt and Erno could not help but notice her breasts.

She kissed him on the cheek. She turned to the meeting, then back to him. "What do you think they're going to do?"

"They're going to ostracize him, I'll bet."

"I saw him on link. Have you seen him?"

"I was there last night."

Alicia leaned closer. "Really?" she said. Her breath was fragrant, and her lips full. There was a tactile quality to Alicia that Erno found deeply sexy—when she talked to you she would touch your shoulder or bump her knee against yours, as if to reassure herself that you were really there. "Did you get in the fight?"

A woman on the other side of Alicia leaned over. "If you two aren't going to pay attention, at least be quiet so the rest of us can."

Erno started to say something, but Alicia put her hand on his arm. "Let's go for a walk."

Erno was torn. Boring or not, he didn't want to miss the meeting, but it was hard to ignore Alicia. She was a year younger than Erno yet was already on her own, living with Sharon Yasminsdaughter while studying environmental social work. One time Erno had heard her argue with Sharon

whether it was true that women on Earth could not use elevators because if they did they would inevitably be raped.

They left the amphitheater and walked through the park. Erno told Alicia his version of the riot at the club, leaving out his exploring the deserted lava tube with Tyler.

"Even if they don't make him invisible," Alicia said, "you know that somebody is going to make sure he gets the message."

"He hasn't hurt anyone. Why aren't we having a meeting about the constable who clubbed Yokiosson?"

"The constable was attacked. A lot of cousins feel threatened. I'm not even sure how I feel."

"The Unwritten Law," Erno muttered.

"The what?"

"Tyler does a bit about it. It was an earth custom, in most of the patriarchies. The 'unwritten law' said that, if a wife had sex with anyone other than her husband, the husband had the right to kill her and her lover, and no court would hold him guilty."

"That's because men had all the power."

"But you just said somebody would send Tyler a message. Up here, if a man abuses a woman, even threatens to, then the abused woman's friends take revenge. When was the last time anyone did anything about that?"

"I get it, Erno. That must seem unfair."

"Men don't abuse women here."

"Maybe that's why."

"It doesn't make it right."

"You're right, Erno. It doesn't. I'm on your side."

Erno sat down on the ledge of the pool surrounding the fountains. The fountains were the pride of the colony: in a conspicuous show of water consumption the pools surrounded the central spire and wandered beneath the park's trees. Genetically altered carp swam in their green depths, and the air was more humid here than anywhere else under the dome.

Alicia sat next to him. "Remind me why we broke up," Erno said.

"Things got complicated." She had said the same thing the night she told him they shouldn't sleep together anymore. He still didn't know what that meant, and he suspected she said it only to keep from saying something that might wound him deeply. Much as he wanted to insist that he would prefer her honesty, he wasn't sure he could stand it.

"I'm going crazy at home," he told Alicia. "Mother treats me like a child. Lena is starting to act like she's better than me. I do real work at Biotech, but that doesn't matter."

"You'll be in university soon. You're a premium gene hacker."

"Who says?" Erno asked.

"People."

"Yeah, right. And if I am, I still live at home. I'm going to end up just like Nick," he said, "the pet male in a household full of females."

"Maybe something will come of this. Things can change."

"If only," Erno said morosely. But he was surprised and gratified to have Alicia's encouragement. Maybe she cared for

him after all. "There's one thing, Alicia ... I could move in with you."

Alicia raised an eyebrow. He pressed on. "Like you say, I'll be studying at the university next session..."

She put her hand on his leg. "There's not much space, with Sharon and me. We couldn't give you your own room."

"I'm not afraid of sharing a bed. I can alternate between you."

"You're so manly, Erno!" she teased.

"I aim to please," he said, and struck a pose. Inside he cringed. It was a stupid thing to say, so much a boy trying to talk big.

Alicia did a generous thing—she laughed. There was affection and understanding in it. It made him feel they were part of some club together. Erno hadn't realized how afraid he was that she would mock him. Neither said anything for a moment. A finch landed on the branch above them, turned its head sideways and inspected them. "You know, you could be just like Tyler Durden, Erno."

Erno started—what did she mean by that? He looked her in the face. Alicia's eyes were calm and green, flecked with gold. He hadn't looked into her eyes since they had been lovers.

She kissed him. Then she touched his lips with her finger. "Don't say anything. I'll talk to Sharon."

He put his arm around her. She melted into him.

In the distance the sounds of the debate were broken by a burst of laughter. "Let's go back," she said.

"All right," he said reluctantly.



They walked back to the amphitheater and found seats in the top row, beside two women in their twenties who joked with each other.

"This guy is no Derek Silviasson," one of them said.

"If he could fuck like Derek, now *that* would be comedy," said her blond partner.

Debrasdaughter was calling for order.

"We cannot compel any cousin to indulge in sex against his will. If he chooses to be celibate, and encourages his followers to be celibate, we can't prevent that without undermining the very freedoms we came here to establish."

Nick Farahsson, his face red and his voice contorted, shouted out, "You just said the key word—followers! We don't need followers here. Followers have ceded their autonomy to a hierarchy. Followers are the tool of phallocracy. Followers started the riot." Erno saw his mother, sitting next to Nick, try to calm him.

Another man spoke. "What a joke! We're all a bunch of followers! Cousins follow customs as slavishly as any earth patriarch."

"What I don't understand," someone called out directly to Tyler, "is, if you hate it here so much, why don't you just leave? Don't let the airlock door clip your ass on the way out."

"This is my home, too," Tyler said.

He stood and turned to Debrasdaughter. "If you don't mind, I would like to speak."

"We'd be pleased to hear what you have to say," Debrasdaughter said. The trace of a smile on her pale face

made her look girlish despite her gray hair. "Speaking for myself, I've been waiting."

Tyler ran his hand over his shaved scalp, came to the front of the platform. He looked up at his fellow citizens, and smiled. "I think you've outlined all the positions pretty clearly so far. I note that Tashi Yokiosson didn't say anything, but maybe he'll get back to us later. It's been a revealing discussion, and now I'd just like to ask you to help me out with a demonstration. Will you do this little thing for me?"

"I'd like you all to put your hand over your eyes. Like this—" He covered his own eyes with his palm, peeked out. Most of the assembly did as he asked. "All of you got your eyes covered? Good!

"Because, sweethearts, this is the closest I am going to get to invisibility."

Tyler threw his arms wide, and laughed.

"Make me invisible? You can't see me now! You don't recognize a man whose word is steel, whose reality is not dependent on rules. Men have fought and bled and died for you. Men put their lives on the line for every microscopic step forward our pitiful race has made. Nothing's more visible than the sacrifices men have made for the good of their wives and daughters. Yes, women died too—but they were *real* women, women not threatened by the existence of masculinity.

"You see that tower?" Tyler pointed to the thousand-meter spire looming over their heads. "I can climb that tower! I can fuck every real woman in this amphitheater. I eat a lot of food, drink a lot of alcohol, and take a lot of drugs. I'm *bigger*

than you are. I sweat more. I howl like a dog. I make noise. You think anyone can make more noise than me?

"One way or another, Mama, I'm going to keep you awake all night! And *you* think you're the girl that can stop me?"

"My Uncle Dick told me when I was a boy, son, don't take it out unless you intend to use it! Well, it's out and it's in use! Rim ram god damn, sonafabitch fuck! It is to laugh. This whole discussion's been a waste of oxygen. I'm real, I'm here, get used to it.

"Invisible? Just *try* not to see me."

Then Tyler crouched and leapt, three meters into the air, tucked, did a roll. Coming down, he landed on his hands and did a handspring. The second his feet touched the platform, he shot off the side and ran, taking long, loping strides out of the park and through the cornfields.

A confused murmur rippled through the assembly, broken by a few angry calls. Many puzzled glances. Some people stood.

Debrasdaughter called for order. "I'll ask the assembly to calm down," she said.

Gradually, quiet came.

"I'm sure we are all stimulated by that very original statement. I don't think we are going to get any farther today, and I note that it is coming on time for the swing shifters to leave, so unless there are serious objections I would like to call this meeting to a close.

"The laws call for a second open meeting a week from today, followed by a polling period of three days, at the end

of which the will of the colony will be made public and enacted. Do I hear any further discussion?"

There was none.

"Then I hereby adjourn this meeting. We will meet again one week from today at 1400 hours. Anyone who wishes to post a statement in regard to this matter may do so at the colony site, where a room will be open continuously for debate. Thank you for your participation."

People began to break up, talking. The two women beside Erno, joking, left the theater.

Alicia stood. "Was that one of his routines?"

Tyler's speech had stirred something in Erno that made him want to shout. He was grinning from ear to ear. "It is to laugh," he murmured.

Alicia grabbed Erno's wrist. She pulled a pen from her pocket, turned his hand so the palm lay open, and on it wrote "Gilman 334."

"Before you do anything stupid, Erno," she said, "call me."

"Define stupid," he said.

But Alicia had turned away. He felt the tingle of the writing on his hand as he watched her go.

### *Work*

*Men are encouraged to apply for an exemption from the mita: the compulsory weekly labor that each Cousin devotes to the support of the colony. The cost of this exemption is forfeiture of the right to vote. As artists, writers, artisans, athletes, performers, and especially as scientists, men have an easier path than women. Their interests are supported to*

the limits of the Cousins' resources. But this is not accorded the designation of *work*, and all practical decisions as to what to do with any creations of their art or discoveries they might make, are left to voters, who are overwhelmingly women.

Men who choose such careers are praised as public-spirited volunteers, sacrificing for the sake of the community. At the same time, they live a life of relative ease, pursuing their interests. They compete with each other for the attentions of women. They may exert influence, but have no legal responsibilities, and no other responsibilities except as they choose them. They live like sultans, but without power. Or like gigolos. Peacocks, and studs.

And those who choose to do *work*? Work—ah, work is different. Work is mundane labor directed toward support of the colony. Male workers earn no honors, accumulate no status. And because men are always outnumbered by women on such jobs, they have little chance of advancement to a position of authority. They just can't get the votes.

#### "Twenty-Five Bucks"

Erno began to puzzle out some of the *Stories for Men*. One was about a "prize fighter"—a man who fought another man with his fists for money. This aging fighter agrees with a promoter to a fight a younger, stronger man for "twenty-five bucks," which from context Erno gathered was a small sum of money. The boxer spends his time in the ring avoiding getting beaten up. During a pause between the "rounds" of the fight, the promoter comes to him and complains that he is not fighting hard enough, and swears he will not pay the boxer if

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he “takes a dive.” So in the next round the boxer truly engages in the brutal battle, and within a minute gets beaten unconscious.

But because this happens immediately after the promoter spoke to him, in the sight of the audience, the audience assumes the boxer was *told* by the promoter to take a dive. They protest. Rather than defend the boxer, the promoter denies him the twenty-five bucks anyway.

The boxer, unconscious while the promoter and audience argue, dies of a brain hemorrhage.

The story infuriated Erno. It felt so *wrong*. Why did the boxer take on the fight? Why did he allow himself to be beaten so badly? Why did the promoter betray the boxer? What was the point of the boxer's dying in the end? Why did the writer—someone named James T. Farrell—invent this grim tale?

## four

A week after the meeting, when Erno logged onto school, he found a message for him from "Ethan Edwards." It read:

I saw you with that girl. Cute. But no sex, Erno. I'm counting on men like you.

Erno sent a reply: "You promised me another adventure. When?"

Then he did biochemistry ("Delineate the steps in the synthesis of human growth hormone") and read *Gender & Art* for three hours until he had to get to his practicum at biotech.

In order to reduce the risk of stray bugs getting loose in the colony, the biotech factories were located in a bunker separate from the main crater. Workers had to don pressure suits and ride a bus for a couple of kilometers across the lunar surface. A crowd of other biotech workers already filled the locker room at the north airlock when Erno arrived.

"Tyrus told me you're fucking Alicia Keikosdaughter, Erno," said Paul Gwynethsson, whose locker was next to Erno's. "He was out flying. He saw you in the park."

"So? Who are you fucking?" Erno asked. He pulled on his skintight. The fabric, webbed with thermoregulators, sealed itself, the suit's environment system powered up, and Erno locked down his helmet. The helmet's head's-up display was green. He and Paul went to the airlock, passed their ID's through the reader and entered with the others. The exit sign posted the solar storm warning. Paul teased Erno about Alicia

as the air was cycled through the lock and they walked out through the radiation maze to the surface.

They got on the bus that dropped off the previous biotech shift. The bus bumped away in slow motion down the graded road. It was late in the lunar afternoon, probably only a day or so of light before the two-week night. If a storm should be detected and the alert sounded, they would have maybe twenty minutes to find shelter before the radiation flux hit the exposed surface. But the ride to the lab went uneventfully.

A man right off the cable train from Tsander was doing a practicum in the lab. His name was Cluny. Like so many earthmen, he was short and impressively muscled, and spoke slowly, with an odd accent. Cluny was not yet a citizen and had not taken a Cousins name. He was still going through training before qualifying to apply for exemption from the *mita*.

Erno interrupted Cluny as he carried several racks of micro-environment bulbs to the sterilizer. He asked Cluny what he thought of Tyler Durden.

Cluny was closemouthed; perhaps he thought Erno was testing him: "I think if he doesn't like it up here, I can show him lots of places on Earth happy to take him."

Erno let him get on with his work. Cluny was going to have a hard time over the next six months. The culture shock would be nothing next to the genetic manipulation he would have to undergo to adjust him for low-G. The life expectancy of an unmodified human on the moon was forty-eight. No exercise regimen or drugs could prevent the cardiovascular



atrophy and loss of bone mass that humans evolved for earth would suffer.

But the retroviruses could alter the human genome to produce solid fibrolaminar bones in 1/6 G, prevent plaque buildup in arteries, insure pulmonary health, and prevent a dozen other fatal low-G syndromes.

At the same time, licensing biotech discoveries was the colony's major source of foreign exchange, so research was under tight security. Erno pressed his thumb against the gene scanner. He had to go through three levels of clearances to access the experiment he had been working on. Alicia was right—Erno was getting strokes for his rapid learning in gene techniques, and already had a rep. Even better, he liked it. He could spend hours brainstorming synergistic combinations of alterations in mice, adapting earth genotypes for exploitation.

Right now he was assigned to the ecological design section under Lemmy Odillesson, the premiere agricultural genobotanist. Lemmy was working on giant plane trees. He had a vision of underground bioengineered forests, entire ecosystems introduced to newly opened lava tubes that would transform dead, airless immensities into habitable biospheres. He wanted to live in a city of underground lunar tree houses.

Too soon Erno's six-hour shift was over. He suited up, climbed to the surface, and took the bus back to the north airlock. As the shift got off, a figure came up to Erno from the shadows of the radiation maze.

It was a big man in a tiger-striped skintight, his faceplate opaqued. Erno shied away from him, but the man held his

hands, palms up, in front of him to indicate no threat. He came closer, leaned forward. Erno flinched. The man took Erno's shoulder, gently, and pulled him forward until the black faceplate of his helmet kissed Erno's own.

"Howdy, Erno." Tyler Durden's voice, carried by conduction from a face he could not see, echoed like Erno's own thought.

Erno tried to regain his cool. "Mr. Durden, I presume."

"Switch your suit to Channel Six," Tyler said. "Encrypted." He pulled away and touched the pad on his arm, and pointed to Erno's. When Erno did the same, his radio found Tyler's wavelength, and he heard Tyler's voice in his ear.

"I thought I might catch you out here."

The other workers had all passed by; they were alone. "What are you doing here?"

"You want adventure? We got adventure."

"What adventure?"

"Come along with me."

Instead of heading in through the maze, Tyler led Erno back out to the surface. The fan of concrete was deserted, the shuttle bus already gone back to the lab and factories. From around a corner, Tyler hauled out a backpack, settled it over his shoulders, and struck off east, along the graded road that encircled Fowler. The mountainous rim rose to their right, topped by the beginnings of the dome; to their left was the rubble of the broken highlands. Tyler moved along at a quick pace, taking long strides in the low G with a minimum of effort.

After a while Tyler asked him, "So, how about the book? Have you read it?"

"Some. It's a collection of stories, all about men."

"Learning anything?"

"They seem so primitive. I guess it was a different world back then."

"What's so different?"

Erno told him the story about the prizefighter. "Did they really do that?"

"Yes. Men have always engaged in combat."

"For money?"

"The money is just an excuse. They do it anyway."

"But why did the writer tell that story? What's the point?"

"It's about elemental manhood. The fighters were men. The promoter was not."

"Because he didn't pay the boxer?"

"Because he knew the boxer had fought his heart out, but he pretended that the boxer was a coward in order to keep the audience from getting mad at him. The promoter preserved his own credibility by trashing the boxer's. The author wants you to be like the boxer, not the promoter."

"But the boxer dies—for twenty five bucks."

"He died a man. Nobody can take that away from him."

"But nobody knows that. In fact, they all think he died a coward."

"The promoter knows he wasn't. The other fighter knows, probably. And thanks to the story, now you know, too."

Erno still had trouble grasping exactly the metaphor Tyler intended when he used the term "man." It had nothing to do with genetics. But before he could quiz Tyler, the older man stopped. By this time they had circled a quarter of the colony

and were in the shadow of the crater wall. Tyler switched on his helmet light and Erno did likewise. Erno's thermoregulator pumped heat along the microfibers buried in his suit's skin, compensating for the sudden shift from the brutal heat of lunar sunlight to the brutal cold of lunar darkness.

"Here we are," Tyler said, looking up the crater wall. "See that path?"

It wasn't much of a path, just a jumble of rocks leading up the side of the crater, but once they reached it Erno could see that, by following patches of luminescent paint on boulders, you could climb the rim mountain to the top. Where are we going?" Erno asked.

"To the top of the world," Tyler said. "From up there I'll show you the empire I'll give you if you follow me."

"You're kidding."

Tyler said nothing.

It was a hard climb to the crater's lip, where a concrete rim formed the foundation of the dome. From here, the dome looked like an unnaturally swollen stretch of *mare*, absurdly regular, covered in lunar regolith. Once the dome had been constructed over the crater, about six meters of lunar soil had been spread evenly over its surface to provide a radiation shield for the interior. Concentric rings every ten meters kept the soil from sliding down the pitch of the dome. It was easier climbing here, but surreal. The horizon of the dome moved ahead of them as they progressed, and it was hard to judge distances.

"There's a solar storm warning," Erno said. "Aren't you worried?"

"We're not going to be out long."

"I was at the meeting," Erno said.

"I saw you," Tyler said. "Cute girl, the dark skinned one. Watch out. You know what they used to say on earth?"

"What?"

"If women didn't have control of all the pussy, they'd have bounties on their heads."

Erno laughed. "How can you say that? They're our sisters, our mothers."

"And they still have control of all the pussy."

They climbed the outside of the dome.

"What are you going to do to keep from being made invisible?" Erno asked.

"What makes you think they're going to try?"

"I don't think your speech changed anybody's mind."

"So? No matter what they teach you, my visibility is not socially constructed. That's the lesson for today."

"What are we doing out here?"

"We're going to do demonstrate this fact."

Ahead of them a structure hove into sight. At the apex of the dome, just above the central spire, stood a maintenance airlock. Normally, this would be the way workers would exit to inspect or repair the dome's exterior—not the way Erno and Tyler had come. This was not a public airlock, and the entrance code would be encrypted.

Tyler led them up to the door. From his belt pouch he took a key card and stuck it into the reader. Erno could hear him humming a song over his earphones. After a moment, the door slid open.

"In we go, Erno," Tyler said.

They entered the airlock and waited for the air to recycle.

"This could get us into trouble," Erno said.

"Yes, it could."

"If you can break into the airlock you can sabotage it. An airlock breach could kill hundreds of people."

"You're absolutely right, Erno. That's why only completely responsible people like us should break into airlocks."

The interior door opened into a small chamber facing an elevator. Tyler put down his backpack, cracked the seal on his helmet and began stripping off his garish suit. Underneath he wore only briefs. Rust-colored pubic hair curled from around the edges of the briefs. Tyler's skin was pale, the muscles in his arms and chest well developed, but his belly soft. His skin was criss-crossed with a web of pink lines where the thermoregulator system of the suit had marked him.

Feeling self-conscious, Erno took off his own suit. They were the same height, but Tyler outweighed him by twenty kilos. "What's in the backpack?" Erno asked.

"Rappelling equipment." Tyler gathered up his suit and the pack and, ignoring the elevator, opened the door beside it to a stairwell. "Leave your suit here," he said, ditching his own in a corner.

The stairwell was steep and the cold air tasted stale; it raised goose bumps on Erno's skin. Clutching the pack to his chest, Tyler hopped down the stairs to the next level. The wall beside them was sprayed with gray insulation. The light from bioluminescents turned their skin greenish yellow.

Instead of continuing down the well all the way to the top of the spire, Tyler stopped at a door on the side of the stairwell. He punched in a code. The door opened into a vast darkness, the space between the exterior and interior shells of the dome. Tyler shone his light inside: Three meters high, broken by reinforcing struts, the cavity stretched out from them into the darkness, curving slightly as if fell away. Tyler closed the door behind them and, in the light of his flash, pulled a notebook from the pack and called up a map. He studied it for a minute, and then led Erno into the darkness.

To the right about ten meters, an impenetrable wall was one of the great cermet ribs of the dome that stretched like the frame of an umbrella from the central spire to the distant crater rim.

Before long Tyler stopped, shining his light on the floor.  
"Here it is."

"What?"

"Maintenance port. Periodically they have to inspect the interior of the dome, repair the fiberoptics." Tyler squatted down and began to open the lock.

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to hang from the roof like little spiders, Erno, and leave a gift for our Cousins."

The port opened and Erno got a glimpse of the space that yawned below. A thousand meters below them the semicircular ranks of seats of the Sobieski Park amphitheater glowed ghostly white in the lights of the artificial night. Tyler drew ropes and carabineers from his pack, and from the bottom, an oblong device, perhaps fifty centimeters square,

wrapped in fiberoptic cloth that glinted in the light of the flashlight. At one end was a timer. The object gave off an aura of threat that was both frightening and instantly attractive.

"What is that thing? Is it a bomb?"

"A bomb, Erno? Are you crazy?" Tyler snapped one of the lines around a reinforcing strut. He donned a harness and handed an identical one to Erno. "Put this on."

"I'm afraid of heights."

"Don't be silly. This is safe as a kiss. Safer, maybe."

"What are we trying to accomplish?"

"That's something of a metaphysical question."

"That thing doesn't look metaphysical to me."

"Nonetheless, it is. Call it the Philosopher's Stone. We're going to attach it to the inside of the dome."

"I'm not going to blow any hole in the dome."

"Erno, I couldn't blow a hole in the dome without killing myself. I guarantee you that, as a result of what we do here, I will suffer whatever consequences anyone else suffers. More than anyone else, even. Do I look suicidal to you, Erno?"

"To tell the truth, I don't know. You sure do some risky things. Why don't you tell me what you intend?"

"This is a test. I want to see whether you trust me."

"You don't trust *me* enough to tell me anything."

"Trust isn't about being persuaded. Trust is when you do something because your brother asks you to. I didn't have to ask you along on this adventure, Erno. I trusted you." Tyler crouched there, calmly watching Erno. "So, do you have the balls for this?"



The moment stretched. Erno pulled on the climbing harness.

Tyler ran the ropes through the harness, gave him a pair of gloves, and showed Erno how to brake the rope behind his back. Then, with the maybe-bomb Philosopher's Stone slung over his shoulder, Tyler dropped through the port. Feeling like he was about to take a step he could never take back, Erno edged out after him.

Tyler helped him let out three or four meters of rope. Erno's weight made the rope twist, and the world began to spin dizzily. They were so close to the dome's inner surface that the "stars" shining there were huge fuzzy patches of light in the braided fiberglass surface. The farmlands of the crater floor were swathed in shadow, but around the crater's rim, oddly twisted from this god's-eye perspective, the lights of apartment districts cast fans of illumination on the hanging gardens and switchbacked perimeter road. Erno could make out a few microscopic figures down there. Not far from Tyler and him, the top of the central spire obscured their view to the west. The flying stage, thirty meters down from where the spire met the roof, was closed for the night, but an owl nesting underneath flew out at their appearance and circled below them.

Tyler began to swing himself back and forth at the end of his line, gradually picking up amplitude until, at the apex of one of this swings, he latched himself onto the dome's inner surface. "C'mon, Erno! Time's wasting!"

Erno steeled himself to copy Tyler's performance. It took effort to get himself swinging, and once he did the arcs were

ponderous and slow. He had trouble orienting himself so that one end of his oscillation left him close to Tyler. At the top of every swing gravity disappeared and his stomach lurched. Finally, after what seemed an eternity of trying, Erno swung close enough for Tyler to reach out and snag his leg.

He pulled Erno up beside him and attached Erno's belt line to a ringbolt in the dome's surface. Erno's heart beat fast.

"Now you know you're alive," Tyler said.

"If anyone catches us up here, our asses are fried."

"Our asses are everywhere and always fried. That's the human condition. Let's work."

While Tyler pulled the device out of the bag he had Erno spread glue onto the dome's surface. When the glue was set, the two of them pressed the Philosopher's Stone into it until it was firmly fixed. Because of its reflective surface it would be invisible from the crater floor. "Now, what time did Debra Debrasdaughter say that meeting was tomorrow?"

"1600," Erno said. "You knew that."

Tyler flipped open the lid over the Stone's timer and punched some keys. "Yes, I did."

"And you didn't need my help to do this. Why did you make me come?"

The timer beeped; the digital readout began counting down. Tyler flipped the lid closed. "To give you the opportunity to betray me. And if you want to, you still have—" he looked at his wristward, "—fourteen hours and thirteen minutes."

*Male Dominance Behavior*

*Erno had begun building his store of resentment when he was twelve, in Eva Evasdaughter's molecular biotechnology class. Eva Evasdaughter came from an illustrious family: her mother had been the longest serving member of the colony council. Her grandmother, Eva Kabatsumi, jailed with Nora Sobieski in California, had originated the matronymic system.*

It took Erno a while to figure out that that didn't make Evasdaughter a good teacher. He was the brightest boy in the class. He believed in the Cousins, respected authority, and worshipped women like his mother and Evasdaughter.

Evasdaughter was a tall woman who wore tight short-sleeved tunics that emphasized her small breasts. Erno had begun to notice such things; sex play was everyone's interest that semester, and he had recently had several erotic fondling sessions with girls in the class.

One day they were studying protein engineering. Erno loved it. Though he hated making mistakes, he liked how you could make a gene jump through hoops if you were clever enough. He got ahead in the reading. That day he asked Eva Evasdaughter about directed protein mutagenesis, a topic they were not due to study until next semester.

"Can you make macro-modifications in proteins—I mean replace entire sequences to get new enzymes?" He was genuinely curious, but at some level he also was seeking Evasdaughter's approval of his doing extra work.

Approval was not what he got. She turned on him coolly. "Are you talking about using site-directed mutagenesis, or chemical synthesis of oligonucleotides?"

He had never heard of site-directed mutagenesis. "I mean using oligonucleotides to change the genes."

"I can't answer unless I know if we're talking about site-directed or synthesized oligonucleotides. Which is it?"

Erno felt his face color. The other students were watching him. "I—I don't know."

"Yes, you don't," Evasdaughter said cheerfully. And instead of explaining, she turned back to the lesson.

Erno didn't remember another thing for the rest of that class, except looking at his shoes. Why had she treated him like that? She made him feel stupid. Yes, she knew more biotech than he did, but she was the teacher! Of course she knew more! Did that mean she had to put him down?

When he complained to his mother, she only said that he needed to listen to the teacher.

Only slowly did he realize that Evasdaughter had exhibited what he had always been taught was male dominance behavior. He had presented a challenge to her superiority, and she had smashed him flat. After he was smashed, she could afford to treat him kindly. But she would teach him only after he admitted that he was her inferior.

Now that his eyes were opened, he saw this behavior everywhere. Every day Cousins asserted their superiority in order to hurt others. He had been lied to, and his elders were hypocrites.

Yet when *he* tried to show his superiority, he was told to behave himself. Superior/inferior is wrong, they said. Difference is all.

## five

One thing Tyler had said was undoubtedly true: this was a test. How devoted was Erno to the Society of Cousins? How good a judge was he of Tyler's character? How eager was he to see his mother and the rest of his world made uncomfortable, and how large a discomfort did he think was justified? Just how angry was Erno?

After Erno got back to his room, he lay awake, unable to sleep. He ran every moment of his night with Tyler over in his mind, parsed every sentence, and examined every ambiguous word. Tyler had never denied that the Philosopher's Stone was a bomb. Erno looked up the term in the dictionary: a philosopher's stone was "an imaginary substance sought by alchemists in the belief that it would change base metals into gold or silver."

He did not think the change that Tyler's stone would bring had anything to do with gold or silver.

He looked at his palm, long since washed clean, where Alicia had written her number. She'd asked him to call her before he did anything stupid.

At 1545 the next day Erno was seated in the amphitheater among the crowds of Cousins. More people were here than had come the previous week, and the buzz of their conversation, broken by occasional laughter, filled the air. He squinted up at the dome to try to figure out just where they had placed the stone. The dome had automatic safety devices to seal any minor air leak. But it couldn't survive a hole

blasted in it. Against the artificial blue sky Erno watched a couple of flyers circling like hawks.

1552. Tyler arrived, trailing a gaggle of followers, mostly young men trying to look insolent. He'd showed up—what did that mean? Erno noted that this time, Tyler wore black. He seemed as calm as he had before, and he chatted easily with the others, then left them to take a seat on the stage.

At 1559 Debra Debrasdaughter took her place. Erno looked at his watch.

## 1600.

Nothing happened.

Was that the test? To see whether Erno would panic and fall for a ruse? He tried to catch Tyler's eye, but got nothing.

Debrasdaughter rapped for order. The ranks of cousins began to quiet, to sit up straighter. Near silence had fallen, and Debrasdaughter began to speak.

“Our second meeting to discuss—”

A flash of light seared the air high above them, followed a second later by a concussion. Shouts, a few screams.

Erno looked up. A cloud of black smoke shot rapidly from a point against the blue. One flyer tumbled, trying to regain his balance; the other had dived a hundred meters seeking a landing place. People pointed and shouted. The blue sky flickered twice, went to white as the imaging system struggled, then recovered.

People boiled out of the amphitheater, headed for pressurized shelter. Erno could not see if the dome had been breached. The smoke, instead of dissipating, spread out in an

arc, then flattened up against the dome. It formed tendrils, shapes. He stood there, frozen. It was not smoke at all, he realized, but smart paint.

The nanodevices spread the black paint onto the interior of the dome. The paint crawled and shaped itself, forming letters. The letters, like a message from God, made a huge sign on the inside of the clear blue sky:

"BANG! YOU'RE DEAD!"

"You're Dead!"

One of the other *Stories for Men* was about Harry Rodney and Little Bert, two petty criminals on an ocean liner that has struck an iceberg and is sinking, with not enough lifeboats for all the passengers. The patriarchal custom was that women and children had precedence for spaces in the boats. Harry gives up his space in a boat in favor of some girl. Bert strips a coat and scarf from an injured woman, steals her jewelry, abandons her below decks, and uses her clothes to sneak into a lifeboat.

As it happens, both men survive. But Harry is so disgusted by Bert's crime that he persuades him to run away and pretend he is dead. For years, whenever Bert contacts Harry, Harry tells him to stay away or else the police might discover him. Bert never returns home for fear of being found out.

**six**

In the panic and confusion, Tyler Durden disappeared. On his seat at the meeting lay a note: "I did it."

As a first step in responding to the threat to the colony, the Board of Matrons immediately called the question of ostracism, and by evening the population had voted: Tyler Durden was declared invisible.

As if that mattered. He could not be found.



## seven

It took several days for the writing to be erased from the dome.

A manhunt did not turn up Tyler. Nerves were on edge. Rumors arose, circulated, were denied. Tyler Durden was still in the colony, in disguise. A cabal of followers was hiding him. No, he and his confederates had a secret outpost ten kilometers north of the colony. Durden was in the employ of the government of California. He had stockpiled weapons and was planning an attack. He had an atomic bomb.

At the gym entrance, AI's checked DNA prints, and Erno was conscious, as never before, of the cameras in every room. He wondered if any monitors had picked up his excursion with Tyler. Every moment he expected a summons on his wristward to come to the assembly offices.

When Erno entered the workout room, he found Tyrus and a number of others wearing white T-shirts that said, "BANG! YOU'RE DEAD!"

Erno took the unoccupied rowing machine next to Ty. Ty was talking to Sid on the other side of him.

A woman came across the room to use the machines. She was tightly muscled, and her dark hair was pulled back from her sweaty neck. As she approached, the young men went silent and turned to look at her. She hesitated. Erno saw something on her face he had rarely seen on a woman's face before: fear. The woman turned and left the gym.

None of the boys said anything. If the others had recognized what had just happened, they did not let it show.

Erno pulled on his machine. He felt the muscles in his legs knot. "Cool shirt," he said.

"Tyrus wants to be invisible, too," said Sid. Sid wasn't wearing one of the shirts.

"Eventually someone will check the vids of Tyler's performances, and see me there," said Ty between strokes. "I'm not ashamed to be Tyler's fan." At thirteen, Erno and Ty had been fumbling lovers, testing out their sexuality. Now Ty was a blunt overmuscled guy who laughed like a hyena. He didn't laugh now.

"It was a rush to judgment," one of the other boys said. "Tyler didn't harm a single Cousin. It was free expression."

"He could just as easily have blown a hole in the dome," said Erno. "Do they need any more justification for force?"

Ty stopped rowing and turned toward Erno. Where he had sweated through the fabric, the "Bang!" on his shirt had turned blood red. "Maybe it will come to force. We do as much work, and we're second class citizens." He started rowing again, pulled furiously at the machine, fifty reps a minute, drawing quick breaths.

"That Durden has a pair, doesn't he?" Sid said. Sid was a popular stud-boy. His thick chestnut hair dipped below one eye. "You should have seen the look on Rebecca's face when that explosion went off."

"I hear, if they catch him, the council's not going to stop at invisibility," Erno said. "They'll kick him out."

"Invisibility won't slow Tyler down," Ty said. "Would you obey the decree?" he asked Sid.

"Me? I'm too beautiful to let myself get booted. If Tyler Durden likes masculinists so much, let him go to one of the other colonies, or to earth. I'm getting laid too often."

Erno's gut tightened. "They will kick him out. My mother would vote for it in a second."

"Let 'em try," Ty grunted, still rowing.

"Is that why you're working out so much lately, Ty?" Sid said. "Planning to move to earth?"

"No. I'm just planning to bust your ass."

"I suspect it's not busting you want to do to my ass."

"Yeah. Your ass has better uses."

"My mother says Tyler's broken the social contract," Erno said.

"Does your mother—" Ty said, still rowing, "—keep your balls under her pillow?"

Sid laughed.

Erno wanted to grab Ty and tell him, *I was there. I helped him do it!* But he said nothing. He pulled on the machine. His face burned.

After a minute Erno picked up his towel and went to the weight machine. No one paid him any attention. Twenty minutes later he hit the sauna. Sweating in the heat, sullen, resentful. He had *been* there, had taken a bigger risk than any of these fan-boys.

Coming out of the sauna he saw Sid heading for the sex rooms, where any woman who was interested could find a male partner who was willing. Erno considered posting

himself to one of the rooms. But he wasn't a stud; he was just an anonymous minor male. He had no following. It would be humiliating to sit there waiting for someone, or worse, to be selected by some old bag.

A day later Erno got himself one of the T-shirts. Wearing it didn't make him feel any better.

It came to him that maybe this was the test Tyler intended: not whether Erno would tell about the Philosopher's Stone before it happened, but whether he would admit he'd helped set it after he saw the uproar it caused in the colony.

If that was the test, Erno was failing. He thought about calling Tyler's apartment, but the constables were sure to be monitoring that number. A new rumor had it Tyler had been captured and was being held in protective custody—threats had been made against his life—until the Board of Matrons could decide when and how to impose the invisibility. Erno imagined Tyler in some bare white room, his brain injected with nanoprobes, his neck fitted with a collar.

At biotech Erno became aware of something he had never noticed before: how the women assumed first pick of the desserts in the cafeteria. Then, later, when he walked by their table, four women burst into laughter. He turned and stared at them, but they never glanced at him.

Another day he was talking with a group of engineers on break: three women, another man, and Erno. Hana from materials told a joke: "What do you have when you have two little balls in your hand?"

The other women grinned. Erno watched the other man. He stood as if on a trapdoor, a tentative smile on his face.

The man was getting ready to laugh, because that was what you did when people told jokes, whether or not they were funny. It was part of the social contract—somebody went into joke-telling mode, and you went into joke-listening mode.

"A man's undivided attention," Hana said.

The women laughed. The man grinned.

"How can you tell when a man is aroused?" Pearl said. "—He's breathing."

"That isn't funny," Erno said.

"Really? I think it is," Hana said.

"It's objectification. Men are just like women. They have emotions, too."

"Cool off, Erno," said Pearl. "This isn't gender equity class."

"There is no gender equity here."

"Someone get Erno a T-shirt."

"Erno wants to be invisible."

"We're already invisible!" Erno said, and stalked off. He left the lab, put on his suit, and took the next bus back to the dome. He quit going to his practicum: he would not let himself be used anymore. He was damned if he would go back there again.

A meeting to discuss what to do about the missing comedian was disrupted by a group of young men marching and chanting outside the meeting room. Constables were stationed in public places, carrying clubs. In online discussion rooms, people openly advocated closing the Men's Houses for fear conspiracies were being hatched in them.

And Erno received another message. This one was from "Harry Callahan."

Stories For Men  
by John Kessel

Are you watching, Erno? If you think our gender situation is GROSS, you can change it. Check exposition.

*Crimes of Violence*

*The incidence of crimes of violence among the cousins is vanishingly small. Colony archives record eight murders in sixty years. Five of them were man against man, two man against woman, and one woman against woman.*

This does not count vigilante acts of women against men, but despite the lack of official statistics, such incidents too are rare.

## eight

"It's no trick to be celibate when you don't like sex."

"That's the point," Erno insisted. "He does like sex. He likes sex fine. But he's making a sacrifice in order to establish his point: He's not going to be a prisoner of his dick."

Erno was sitting out on the ledge of the terrace in front of their apartment, chucking pebbles at the recycling bin at the corner and arguing with his cousin Lena. He had been arguing with a lot of people lately, and not getting anywhere. Every morning he still left as if he were going to biotech, but instead he hung out in the park or gym. It would take some time for his mother to realize he had dropped out.

Lena launched into a tirade, and Erno was suddenly very tired of it all. Before she could gain any momentum, he threw a last pebble that whanged off the bin, got up and, without a word, retreated into the apartment. He could hear Lena's squawk behind him.

He went to his room and opened a screen on his wall. The latest news was that Tashi Yokiosson had regained consciousness, but that he had suffered neurological damage that might take a year or more to repair. Debate on the situation raged on the net. Erno opened his documents locker and fiddled with a melancholy sonnet he was working on, but he wasn't in the mood.

He switched back to Tyler's cryptic message. *You can change it. Check exposition.* It had something to do with biotech, Erno was pretty sure. He had tried the public

databases, but had not come up with anything. There were databases accessible only through the biotech labs, but he would have to return to his practicum to view them, and that would mean he would have to explain his absence. He wasn't ready for that yet.

On impulse, Erno looked up Tyler in the colony's genome database. What was the name Debrasdaughter had called him?—Marysson, Thomas Marysson. He found Tyler's genome. Nothing about it stood out.

Debaters had linked Tyler's bio to the genome. Marysson had been born thirty-six years ago. His mother was a second-generation cousin; his grandmother had arrived with the third colonization contingent, in 2038. He had received a general education, neither excelling nor failing anything. His mother had died when he was twenty. He had moved out into the dorms, had worked uneventfully in construction and repair for fourteen years, showing no sign of rebelliousness before reinventing himself as Tyler Durden, the Comedian.

Until two years ago, absolutely nothing had distinguished him from any of a thousand male cousins.

Bored, Erno looked up his own genome.

There he lay in rows of base pairs, neat as a tile floor. Over at biotech, some insisted that everything you were was fixed in those sequences in black and white. Erno didn't buy it. Where was the gene for desire there, or hope, or despair, or frustration? Where was the gene that said he would sit in front of a computer screen at the age of seventeen, boiling with rage?



He called up his mother's genome. There were her sequences. Some were the same as his. Of course there was no information about his father. To prevent dire social consequences, his father must remain a blank spot in his history, as far as the Society of Cousins was concerned. Maybe some families kept track of such things, but nowhere in the databases were fathers and children linked.

Of course they couldn't stop him from finding out. He knew others who had done it. His father's genome was somewhere in the database, for medical purposes. If he removed from his own those sequences that belonged to his mother, then what was left—at least the sequences she had not altered when she had planned him—belonged to his father. He could cross check those against the genomes of all the colony's men.

From his chart, he stripped those genes that matched his mother's. Using what remained, he prepared a search engine to sort through the colony's males.

The result was a list of six names. Three were brothers: Stuart, Simon and Josef Bettesson. He checked the available public information on them. They were all in their nineties, forty years older than Erno's mother. Of the remaining men, two were of about her age: Sidney Orindasson and Micah Avasson. Of those two, Mica Avasson had the higher correlation with Erno's genome.

He read the public records for Micah Avasson. Born in 2042, he would be fifty-six years old. A physical address: men's dormitory, East Five lava tube. He keyed it into his notebook.

Without knocking, his mother came into the room. Though he had no reason to be ashamed of his search, Erno shoved the notebook into his pocket.

She did not notice. "Erno, we need to talk."

"By talk do you mean interrogate, or lecture?"

His mother's face stiffened. For the first time he noticed the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes. She moved around his room, picking up his clothes, sorting, putting them away. "You should keep your room cleaner. Your room is a reflection of your mind."

"Please, mother."

She held one of his shirts to her nose, sniffed, and made a face. "Did I ever tell you about the time I got arrested? I was thirteen, and Derek Silviasson and I were screwing backstage in the middle of a performance of *A Doll's House*. We got a little carried away. When Nora opened the door to leave at the end of the second act, she tripped over Derek and me in our second act."

"They arrested you? Why?"

"The head of the Board was a prude. It wouldn't have mattered so much but *A Doll's House* was her favorite play."

"You and Derek Silviasson were lovers?"

She sat down on his bed, a meter from him, and leaned forward. "After the paint bombing, Erno, they went back to examine the recordings from the spex of the officers at the Oxygen Warehouse riot. Who do you suppose, to my surprise, they found there?"

Erno swiveled in his chair to avoid her eyes. "Nick already told you I went there."

"But you didn't. No only were you there, but at one point you were together with Durden."

"What was I doing?"

"Don't be difficult. I'm trying to protect you, Erno. The only reason I know about this is that Harald Gundasson let me know on the sly. Another report says Durden met you outside the North airlock one day. You're likely to be called in for questioning. I want to know what's going on. Are you involved in some conspiracy?"

His mother looked so forlorn he found it hard to be hostile. "As far as I know there is no conspiracy."

"Did you have something to do with the paint bomb?"

"No. Of course not."

"I found out you haven't been to your practicum. What have you been doing?"

"I've been going to the gym."

"Are you planning a trip to earth?"

"Don't be stupid, mother."

"Honestly, Erno, I can't guess what you are thinking. You're acting like a spy."

"Maybe I am a spy."

His mother laughed.

"Don't laugh at me!"

"I'm not laughing because you're funny. I'm laughing because I'm scared! "This is an ugly business, Erno."

"Stop it, mother. Please."

She stared at him. He tried not to look away. "I want you listen. Tyler Durden is a destroyer. I've been to Aristarchus, to Tycho. I've seen the patriarchy. Do you want that here?"

"How would I know? I've never been there!" His eyes fell on the copy of *Stories for Men*. "Don't tell me stories about rape and carnage," he said, looking at the book's cover. "I've heard them all before. You crammed them down my throat with my baby food."

"They're true. Do you deny them?"

Erno clenched his jaw, tried to think. Did she have to browbeat him? "I don't know!"

"It's not just carnage. It's waste and insanity. You want to know what they're like—one time I had a talk with this security man at Shackleton. They were mining lunar ice for reaction mass in the shuttles.

"I put it to him that using lunar ice for rocket fuel was criminally wasteful. Water is the most precious commodity on the moon, and here they are blowing it into space.

"He told me it was cheaper to use lunar ice than haul water from earth. My argument wasn't with him, he said, it was with the laws of the marketplace. Like most of them, he condescended to me, as if I were a child or idiot. He thought that invoking the free market settled the issue, as if to go against the market were to go against the laws of nature. The goal of conquering space justified the expenditure, he said—that they'd get more water somewhere else when they used up the lunar ice."

"He's got an argument."

"The market as a law of nature? 'Conquering space?' How do you conquer space? That's not a goal, it's a disease."

"What does this have to do with Tyler Durden?"

"Durden is bringing the disease here!"

"He's fighting oppression! Men have no power here; they are stifled and ignored. There are no real male Cousins."

"There are plenty of male Cousins. There are lots of role models. Think of Adil Al-Hafaz, of Peter Sarahsson—of Nick, for pity's sake!"

"Nick? Nick?" Erno laughed. He stood. "You might as well leave now, officer."

His mother looked hurt. "Officer?"

"That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Erno, I know you don't like me. I'm dull and conventional. But being unconventional, by itself, isn't a virtue. I'm your mother."

"And you're a cop."

That stopped her for a moment. She took a deep breath. "I dearly love you, Erno, but if you think—"

That tone of voice. He'd heard it all his life: all the personal anecdotes are over, now. We're done with persuasion, and it's time for you to do what I say.

"You dearly love nothing!" Erno shouted. "All you want is to control me!"

She started to get up. "I've given you every chance—"

Erno threw *Stories for Men* at her. His mother flinched, and the book struck her in the chest and fell slowly to the floor. She looked more startled than hurt, watching the book fall, tumbling, leaves open; she looked as if she were trying to understand what it was—but when she faced him again, her eyes clouded. Trembling, livid, she stood, and started to speak. Before she could say a word Erno ran from the room.

*Property*

*A man on his own is completely isolated. Other men might be his friends or lovers, but if he has a legal connection to anyone, it is to his mother.*

Beyond a certain point, property among the cousins is the possession of the community. Private property passes down from woman to woman, but only outside of the second degree of blood relation. A woman never inherits from her biological mother. A woman chooses her friends and mates, and in the event of her death, her property goes to them. If a woman dies without naming an heir, her property goes to the community.

A man's property is typically confined to personal possessions. Of course, in most families he is petted, and has access to more resources than any female, but the possessions are gotten for him by his mother or his mate, and they belong to her. What property he might hold beyond that belongs to his mother. If he has no mother, then it belongs to his oldest sister. If he has no sister, then it goes to the community.

A man who forsakes his family has nowhere to go.

## nine

The great jazzmen were all persecuted minorities. Black men like Armstrong, Ellington, Coltrane, Parker. And the comedians were all Jews and black men. Leaving his mother's apartment, Erno saw himself the latest in history's long story of abused fighters for expressive freedom.

Erno stalked around the perimeter road, head down. To his left, beyond the parapet, the crater's inner slope, planted with groundsel, wildflowers, and hardy low-G modifications of desert scrub, fell away down to the agricultural fields, the park, and two kilometers distant, clear through the low-moisture air, the aspen-forested opposite slopes. To his right rose the ranks of apartments, refectories, dorms, public buildings and labs, clusters of oblong boxes growing higgledy-piggledy, planted with vines and hanging gardens, divided by ramps and stairs and walkways, a high-tech cliff city in pastel concrete glittering with ilemenite crystals. A small green lizard scuttled across the pebbled composite of the roadway and disappeared among some ground cover.

Erno ignored the people on their way to work and back, talking or playing. He felt like smashing something. But smashing things was not appropriate cousins behavior.

In the southwest quad he turned up a ramp into a residential district. These were newer structures, products of the last decade's planned expansion of living quarters, occupied for the most part by new families. He moved upward

by steady leaps, feeling the tension on his legs, enjoying the burn it generated.

Near the top of the rimwall he found Gilman 334. He pressed the door button. The screen remained blank, but after a moment Alicia's voice came from the speaker. "Erno. Come on in."

The door opened and he entered the apartment. It consisted mostly of an open lounge, furnished in woven furniture, with a couple of small rooms adjoining. Six young women were sitting around inhaling mood enhancers, listening to music. The music was Monk, "Brilliant Corners." Erno had given it to Alicia; she would never have encountered twentieth century jazz otherwise.

There was something wrong with Monk in this context. These girls ought to be listening to some lunar music—one of the airy mixed choral groups, or Shari Cloudsdaughter's *Drums and Sunlight*. In this circle of females, the tossed off lines of Sonny Rollins' sax, the splayed rhythms of Monk's piano, seemed as if they were being stolen. Or worse still, studied—by a crew of aliens for whom they could not mean what they meant to Erno.

"Hello," Erno said. "Am I crashing your party?"

"You're not crashing." Alicia took him by the arm. "This is Erno," she said to the others. "Some of you know him."

Sharon was there, one of the hottest women in Alicia's cohort at school—he had heard Sid talk about her. He recognized Betty Sarahsdaughter, Liz Bethsdaughter, both of them, like Alicia, studying social work, both of whom had turned him down at one time or another. Erno liked women as



individuals, but in a group, their intimate laughter, gossip, and private jokes—as completely innocent as they might be—made him feel like he knew nothing about them. He drew Alicia aside, “Can we talk—in private?”

“Sure.” She took Erno to one of the bedrooms. She sat on the bed, gestured to a chair. “What's the matter?”

“I had a fight with my mother.”

“That's what mothers are for, as far as I can tell.”

“And the constables are going to call me in for questioning. They think I may be involved in some conspiracy with Tyler Durden.”

“Do you know where he is?”

Erno's defenses came up. “Do you care?”

“I don't want to know where he is. If you know, keep it to yourself. I'm *not* your mother.”

“I could be in trouble.”

“A lot of us will stand behind you on this, Erno. Sharon and I would.” She reached out to touch his arm. “I'll go down to the center with you.”

Erno moved to the bed beside her. He slid his hand to her waist, closed his eyes, and rubbed his cheek against her hair. To his surprise, he felt her hand between his shoulder blades. He kissed her, and she leaned back. He looked into her face: her green eyes, troubled, searched his. Her bottom lip was full. He kissed her again, slid his hand to her breast, and felt the nipple taut beneath her shirt.

Leave aside the clumsiness—struggling out of their clothes, the distraction of “Straight, No Chaser” from the other room, Erno's momentary thought of the women out there wondering

what was going on in here—and it was the easiest thing in the world. He slid into Alicia as if he were coming home. Though his head swirled with desire, he tried to hold himself back, to give her what she wanted. He kissed her all over. She giggled and teased him and twisted her fingers in his hair to pull him down to her, biting his lip. For fifteen or twenty minutes, the Society of Cousins disappeared.

Erno watched her face, watched her closed eyes, and parted lips, as she concentrated on her pleasure. It gave him a feeling of power. Her skin flushed, she gasped, shuddered, and he came.

He rested his head upon her breast, eyes closed, breathing deeply, tasting the salt of her sweat. Her chest rose and fell, and he could hear her heart beating fast, then slower. He held her tight. Neither said anything for a long time.

After a while he asked her, quietly, "Can I stay here?"

Alicia stroked his shoulder, slid out from beneath him, and began to pull on her shirt. "I'll talk to Sharon."

Sharon. Erno wondered how many of the other women in the next room Alicia was sleeping with. Alicia was a part of that whole scene, young men and women playing complex mating games that Erno was no good at. He had no idea what "talking to Sharon" might involve. But Alicia acted as if the thought of him moving in was a complete surprise.

"Don't pull a muscle or anything stretching to grasp the concept," Erno said softly.

Alicia reacted immediately. "Erno, we've never exchanged two words about partnering. What do you expect me to say?"

"We did talk about it—in the park. You said you would talk to Sharon then. Why didn't you?"

"Please, Erno." She drew up her pants and the fabric seamed itself closed over her lovely, long legs. "When you're quiet, you're so sweet."

Sweet. Erno felt vulnerable, lying there naked with the semen drying on his belly. He reached for his clothes. "That's right," he muttered, "I forgot. Sex is the social glue. Fuck him so he doesn't cause any trouble."

"Everything isn't about your penis, Erno. Durden is turning you into some self-destructive *boy*. Grow up."

"Grow up?" Erno laughed bitterly. "You don't want me grown up. You want the sweet boy, forever. I've figured it out now—you're never even there with me, except maybe your body. At least I think it was you."

Alicia stared at him. Erno recognized that complete exasperation: he had seen it on his mother. From the next room drifted the sound of "Blue Monk," and women laughing.

"Sharon was right," Alicia said, shaking her head. And she chuckled, a little rueful gasp, as if to say, *I can't believe I'm talking with this guy*.

Erno took a step forward and slapped her face. "You bitch," he breathed. "You fucking bitch."

Alicia fell back, her eyes wide with shock. Erno's head spun. He fled the room, ran through the party and out of the apartment.

It was full night now, the dome sprinkled with stars. He stalked down the switchback ramps toward the perimeter road, through the light thrown by successive lampposts, in a

straight-legged gait that kicked him off the pavement with every stride. He hoped that anyone who saw him would see his fury and think him dangerous. Down on the road he stood at the parapet, breathing through his mouth and listening to the hum of insects in the fields below.

In the lamplight far to his left, a person in a green uniform appeared. On impulse Erno hopped over the parapet to the slope. Rather than wait for the constable to pass, he bounced off down toward the crater's floor, skidding where it was steep, his shoes kicking up dust. He picked up speed, making headlong four or five-meter leaps, risking a fall every time his feet touched.

It was too fast. Thirty meters above the floor he stumbled and went flying face forward. He came down sideways, rolled, and slammed his head as he flipped and skidded to a halt. He lay trying to catch his breath. He felt for broken limbs. His shirt was torn and his shoulder ached. He pulled himself up and went down the last few meters to the crater floor, then limped through the fields for Sobieski Park.

In a few minutes he was there, out of breath and sweating. At the fountain he splashed water on his face. He felt his shoulder gingerly, then made his way to the amphitheater.

At first he thought the theater was deserted, but then he saw, down on the stage, a couple of women necking, oblivious of him.

He stood in the row where he had spotted Alicia some weeks before. He had hit her. He couldn't believe he had hit her.

## ten

Erno slept in the park and in the morning headed for his biotech shift as if he had never stopped going. No one at the airlock questioned him. Apparently, even though his mind was chaos, he looked perfectly normal. The radiation warning had been renewed; solar monitors reported conditions ripe for a coronal mass ejection. Cousins obliged to go out on the surface were being advised to keep within range of a radiation shelter.

When Erno arrived at the bunker he went to Lemmy Odilleson's lab. Lemmy had not arrived yet. He sat down at his workstation, signed onto the system, pressed his thumb against the gene scanner and accessed the database.

He tried the general index. There was no file named exposition. Following Tyler's reference to "gross," he looked for any references to the number 144. Nothing. Nothing on the gross structures of nucleotides, either. He tried coming at it from the virus index. Dozens of viruses had been engineered by the Cousins to deal with problems from soil microbes to cellular breakdowns caused by exposure to surface radiation. There was no virus called exposition.

While he sat there Lemmy showed up. He said nothing of Erno's sudden appearance after his extended absence. "We're making progress on integrating the morphological growth genes into the prototypes," he said excitedly. "The sequences for extracting silicon from the soil are falling into place."

"That's good," Erno said. He busied himself cleaning up the chaos Lemmy typically left in his notes. After a while, he asked casually, "Lemmy, have you ever heard about a virus called 'exposition?'"

"X-position?" Lemmy said vaguely, not looking up from a rack of test bulbs. "Those prefixes go with female sex-linked factors. The Y-position are the male."

"Oh, right."

As soon as Erno was sure Lemmy was caught up in his lab work, he turned back to the archives. First he went to Gendersites, a database he knew mostly for its concentration of anti-cancer modifications. X-position led him to an encyclopedia of information on the X chromosome. Erno called up a number of files, but he saw no point in digging through gene libraries at random. He located a file of experiments on female-linked syndromes from osteoporosis to post menopausal cardiac conditions.

On a whim, he did a search on "gross."

Up popped a file labeled Nucleotide Repeats. When Erno opened the file, the heading read:

Get  
Rid  
Of  
Slimy  
girls

The sounds of the lab around him faded as he read the paper.

It described a method for increasing the number of unstable trinucleotide repeats on the X chromosome. All

humans had repeat sequences, the presence of which were associated with various diseases: spinal and bulbar muscular atrophy, fragile X mental retardation, myotonic dystrophy, Huntington disease, spinocerebellar ataxia, dentatorubral-pallidoluysian atrophy, and Machado-Joseph disease. All well understood neurological disorders.

In normal DNA, the repeats were below the level of expression of disease. Standard tests of the zygote assured this. The GROSS paper told how to construct two viruses: the first would plant a time bomb in the egg. At a particular stage of embryonic development the repetition of trinucleotides would explode. The second virus would plant compensating sequences on the Y chromosome.

Creating the viruses would be a tricky but not impossible problem in plasmid engineering. Their effect, however, would be devastating. In males the Y chromosome would suppress the X-linked diseases, but in females the trinucleotide syndromes would be expressed. When the repeats kicked in, the child would develop any one of a host of debilitating or fatal neurological disorders.

Of course once the disorder was recognized, other gene engineers would go to work curing it, or at least identifying possessors pre-natally. The GROSS virus would not destroy the human race—but it could burden a generation of females with disease and early death.

Tyler had led Erno to this monstrosity. What was he supposed to do with it?

Nonetheless, Erno downloaded the file into his notebook. He had just finished when Cluny came into the lab.

"Hello, Professor Odillesson," Cluny said to Lemmy. He saw Erno and did a double take. Erno stared back at him.

"I'm not a professor, Michael," Lemmy said.

Cluny pointed at Erno. "You know the constables are looking for him?"

"They are? Why?"

Erno got up. "Don't bother explaining. I'll go."

Cluny moved to stop him. "Wait a minute."

Erno put his hand on Cluny's shoulder to push him aside. Cluny grabbed Erno's arm.

"What's going on?" Lemmy asked.

Erno tried to free himself from Cluny, but the earthman's grip was firm. Cluny pulled him, and pain shot through the shoulder Erno had hurt in yesterday's spill. Erno hit Cluny in the face.

Cluny's head jerked back, but he didn't let go. His jaw clenched and his expression hardened into animal determination. He wrestled with Erno; they lost their balance, and in slow motion stumbled against a lab bench. Lemmy shouted and two women ran in from the next lab. Before Erno knew it he was pinned against the floor.

"Dead Man"

Many of the stories for men were about murder. The old Earth writers seemed fascinated by murder, and wrote about it from a dozen perspectives.

In one of the stories, a detective whose job it is to throw illegal riders off cargo trains finds a destitute man—a "hobo"—hiding on the train. While being brutally beaten by



Stories For Men  
*by John Kessel*

the detective, the hobo strikes back and unintentionally kills him.

The punishment for such a killing, even an accidental one, is death. Terrified, knowing that he has to hide his guilt, the hobo hurries back to the city. He pretends he never left the flophouse where he spent the previous night. He disposes of his clothes, dirty with coal dust from the train.

Then he reads a newspaper report. The detective's body has been found, but the investigators assume that he fell off the train and was killed by accident, and are not seeking anyone. The hobo is completely free from suspicion. His immediate reaction is to go to the nearest police station and confess.

## eleven

Erno waited in a small white room at the constabulary headquarters. As a child Erno had come here many times with his mother, but now everything seemed different. He was subject to the force of the state. That fucking cow Cluny. The constables had taken his notebook. Was that *pro forma*, or would they search it until they found the GROSS file?

He wondered what Alicia had done after he'd left the day before. What had she told her friends?

The door opened and two women came in. One of them was tall and good-looking. The other was small, with a narrow face and close cropped blonde hair. She looked to be a little younger than his mother. She sat down across from him; the tall woman remained standing.

"This can be simple, Erno, if you let it," the small woman said. She had an odd drawl that, combined with her short stature, made Erno wonder if she was from earth. "Tell us where Tyler Durden is. And about the conspiracy."

Erno folded his arms across his chest. "I don't know where he is. There is no conspiracy."

"Do we have to show you images of you and him together during the Oxygen Warehouse riot?"

"I never saw him before that, or since. We were just hiding in the back room."

"You had nothing to do with the smartpaint explosion?"

"No."

The tall woman, who still had not spoken, looked worried. The blond interrogator leaned forward, resting her forearms on the table. "Your DNA was found at the access portal where the device was set."

Erno squirmed. He imagined a sequence of unstable nucleotide triplets multiplying in the woman's cells. "He asked me to help him. I had no idea what it was."

"No idea. So it could have been a bomb big enough to blow a hole in the dome. Yet you told no one about it."

"I knew he wasn't going to kill anyone. I could tell."

The interrogator leaned back. "I hope you will excuse the rest of us if we question your judgment."

"Believe me, I would never do anything to hurt a Cousin. Ask my mother."

The tall woman finally spoke. "We have. She does say that. But you have to help us out, Erno. I'm sure you can understand how upset all this has made the polity."

"Forget it, Kim," the other said. "Erno here's not going to betray his lover."

"Tyler's not my lover," Erno said.

The blond interrogator smirked. "Right."

The tall one said, "There's nothing wrong with you being lovers, Erno."

"They why did this one bring it up?"

"No special reason," said the blonde. "I'm just saying you wouldn't betray him."

"Well, we're not lovers."

"Too bad," the blonde muttered.

"You need to help us, Erno," the tall one said. "Otherwise, even if we let you go, you're going to be at risk of violence from other cousins."

"Only if you tell everyone about me."

"So we should just let you go, and not inconvenience you by telling others the truth about you," said the blonde.

"What truth? You don't know me."

She came out of her chair, leaning forward on her clenched fists. Her face was flushed. "Don't know you? I know all about you."

"Mona, calm down," the other woman said.

"Calm down? Earth history is full of this! Men sublimate their sexual attraction in claims of brotherhood—with the accompanying military fetishism, penis comparing, suicidal conquer-or-die movements. Durden is heading for one of those classic orgasmic armageddons: Masada, Hitler in the bunker, David Koresh, September 11, 2001, the California massacre."

The tall one grabbed her shoulder and tried to pull her back. "Mona."

Mona threw off the restraining hand, and pushed her face up close to Erno's. "If we let this little shit go, I guarantee you he'll be involved in some transcendent destructive act—suicidally brave, suicidally cowardly—aimed at all of us. The signs are all over him." Spittle flew in Erno's face.

"You're crazy," Erno said. "If I wanted to fuck him, I would just fuck him."

The tall one tried again. "Come away, officer."

Mona grabbed Erno by the neck. "Where is he!"

"Come away, now!" The tall cop yanked the small woman away, and she fell back. She glared at Erno. The other, tugging her by the arm, pulled her out of the room.

Erno tried to catch his breath. He wiped his sleeve across his sweating face. He sat there alone for a long time, touching the raw skin where she had gripped his neck. Then the door opened and his mother came in.

"Mom!"

She carried some things in her hands, put them on the table. It was the contents of his pockets, including his notebook. "Get up."

"What's going on?"

"Just shut up and come with me. We're letting you go."

Erno stumbled from the chair. "That officer is crazy."

"Never mind her. I'm not sure she isn't right. It's up to you to prove she isn't."

She hustled him out of the office and into the hall. In seconds Erno found himself, dizzy, in the plaza outside the headquarters. "You are not out of trouble. Go home, and stay there," his mother said, and hurried back inside.

Passers-by in North Six watched him as he straightened his clothes. He went to sit on the bench beneath the acacia trees at the lava tube's center. He caught his breath.

Erno wondered if the cop would follow through with her threat to tell about his helping with the explosion. He felt newly vulnerable. But it was not just vulnerability he felt. He had never seen a woman lose it as clearly as the interrogator had. He had gotten to her in a way he had never gotten to a matron in his life. She was actually *scared* of him!

Now what? He put his hand in his pocket, and felt the notebook.

He pulled it out. He switched it on. The GROSS file was still there, and so was the address he'd written earlier.

*A Dream*

*Erno was ten when his youngest sister Celeste was born. After the birth, his mother fell into a severe depression. She snapped at Erno, fought with Aunt Sophie, and complained about one of the husbands until he moved out. Erno's way of coping was to disappear; his cousin Aphra coped by misbehaving.*

One day Erno came back from school to find a fire in the middle of the kitchen floor, a flurry of safetybots stifling it with foam, his mother screaming, and Aphra—who had apparently started the fire—shouting back at her. Skidding on the foam, Erno stepped between the two of them, put his hands on Aphra's chest, and made her go to her room.

The whole time, his mother never stopped shouting. Erno was angrier at her than at Aphra. She was supposed to be the responsible one. When he returned from quieting Aphra, his mother ran off to her room and slammed the door. Erno cleaned the kitchen and waited for Aunt Sophie to come home.

The night of the fire he had a dream. He was alone in the kitchen, and then a man was there. The man drew him aside. Erno was unable to make out his face. "I am your father," the man said. "Let me show you something." He made Erno sit down and called up an image on the table. It was Erno's

mother as a little girl. She sat, cross-legged, hunched over some blocks, her face screwed up in troubled introspection. "That's her second phase of work expression," Erno's father said.

With a shock, Erno recognized the expression on the little girl's face as one he has seen his mother make as she concentrated.

"She hates this photo," Erno's father said, as if to persuade Erno not to judge her: she still contained that innocence, that desire to struggle against a problem she could not solve. But Erno was mad. As he resisted, the father pressed on, and began to lose it too. He ended up screaming at Erno, "You can't take it? I'll make you see! I'll make you see!"

Erno put his hands over his ears. The faceless man's voice was twisted with rage. Eventually he stopped shouting. "There you go, there you go," he said quietly, stroking Erno's hair. "You're just the same."

Erno woke.

## twelve

On his way to the East Five tube, Erno considered the officer's rant. Maybe Tyler did want to sleep with him. So what? The officer was some kind of homophobe and ought to be relieved. Raving about violence while locking him up in a room. And then trying to choke him. Yes, he had the GROSS file in his pocket, yes he had hit Alicia—but he was no terrorist. The accusation was just a way for the cop to ignore men's legitimate grievances.

But they must not have checked the file, or understood it if they did. If they knew about GROSS, he would never have been freed.

Early in the colony's life, the East Five lava tube had been its major agricultural center. The yeast vats now produced only animal fodder, but the hydroponics rack farms still functioned, mostly for luxury items. The rote work of tending the racks fell to Cousins who did not express ambition to do anything more challenging. They lived in the tube warrens on the colony's Minimum Living Standard.

A stylized painting of a centaur graced the entrance of the East Five men's warren. Since the artist had not likely ever studied a real horse, the stance of the creature looked deeply suspect to Erno. At the lobby interface Erno called up the AI attendant. The AI came onscreen as a dark brown woman wearing a glittery green shirt.

"I'm looking for Micah Avasson," Erno asked it.

"Who is calling?"



"Erno Pamelasson."

"He's on shift right now."

"Can I speak with him?"

"Knock yourself out." The avatar pointed off screen toward a dimly lit passageway across the room. She appeared on the wall near the doorway, and called out to Erno, "Over here. Follow this corridor, third exit left to the Ag tube."

Outside of the lobby, the corridors and rooms here had the brutal utilitarian quality that marked the early colony, when survival had been the first concern and the idea of humane design had been to put a mirror at the end of a room to try to convince the eye that you weren't living in a cramped burrow some meters below the surface of a dead world. An environmental social worker would shudder.

The third exit on the left was covered with a clear permeable barrier. From the time he was a boy Erno had disliked passing through these permeable barriers; he hated the feel of the electrostatics brushing his face. He took a mask from the dispenser, fitted it over his nose and mouth, closed his eyes and passed through into the Ag tube. Above, layers of gray mastic sealed the tube roof; below, a concrete floor supported long rows of racks under light transmitted fiberoptically from the heliostats. A number of workers wearing coveralls and oxygen masks moved up and down the rows tending the racks. The high CO<sub>2</sub> air was laden with humidity, and even through the mask, smelled of phosphates.

Erno approached a man bent over a drawer of seedlings he had pulled out of a rack. The man held a meter from which

wires dangled to a tube immersed in the hydroponics fluid. "Excuse me," Erno said. "I'm looking for Micah Avasson."

The man lifted his head, inspected Erno, then without speaking turned. "Micah!" He called down the row.

A tall man a little farther down the aisle looked up and peered at them. He had a full head of dark hair, a birdlike way of holding his shoulders. After a moment he said, "I'm Micah Avasson."

Erno walked down toward him. Erno was nonplused—the man had pushed up his mask from his mouth and was smoking a cigarette, using real fire. No, not a cigarette—a joint.

"You can smoke in here? What about the fire regulations?"

"We in the depths are not held to as high a standard as you." Micah said this absolutely deadpan, as if there were not hint of a joke. "Not enough O<sub>2</sub> to make a decent fire anyway. It takes practice just to get a good buzz off this thing in here without passing out."

Joint dangling from his lower lip, the man turned back to the rack. He wore yellow rubber gloves, and was pinching the buds off the tray of squat green leafy plants. Erno recognized them as a modified broadleaf sensamilla.

"You're using the colony facilities to grow pot."

"This is my personal crop. We each get a personal rack. Sparks initiative." Micah kept pinching buds. "Want to try some?"

Erno gathered himself. "My name is Erno Pamelasson. I came to see you because—"

"You're my son." Micah said, not looking at him.

Erno stared, at a loss for words. Up close the lines at the corners of the man's eyes were distinct, and there was a bit of sag to his chin. But the shape of Micah's face reminded Erno of his own reflection in the mirror.

"What did you want to see me about?" Micah pushed the rack drawer closed and looked at Erno. When Erno stood there dumb, he wheeled the stainless steel cart beside him down to the next rack. He took a plastic bin from the cart, crouched, pulled open the bottom drawer of the rack and began harvesting cherry tomatoes.

Finally, words came to Erno. "Why haven't I ever seen you before?"

"Lots of boys never meet their fathers."

"I'm not talking about other fathers. Why aren't you and my mother together?"

"You assume we were together. How do you know that we didn't meet in the sauna some night, one time only?"

"Is that how it was?"

Micah lifted a partially yellow tomato on his fingertips, then left it on the vine to ripen. He smiled. "No. Your mother and I were in love. We lived together for twenty-two months. And two days."

"So why did you split?"

"That I don't remember so well. We must have had our reasons. Everybody has reasons."

Erno touched his shoulder. "Don't give me that."

Micah stood, overbalancing a little. Erno caught his arm to steady him. "Thanks," Micah said. "The knees aren't what they used to be." He took a long drag on the joint, exhaled at

the roof far overhead. "All right, then. The reason we broke up is that your mother is a cast-iron bitch. And I am a cast-iron bastard. The details of our breakup all derive from those simple facts, and I don't recall them. I do recall that we had good fun making you, though. I remember that well."

"I bet."

"You were a good baby, as babies go. Didn't cry too much. You had a sunny disposition." He took a final toke on the joint, and then dropped the butt into the bin of tomatoes. "Doesn't seem to have lasted."

"Were you there when I was born?"

"So we're going to have this conversation." Micah exhaled the last cloud of smoke, slipped his mask down, and finally fixed his watery brown eyes on Erno. "I was there. I was there until you were maybe six or seven months. Then I left."

"Did she make you leave?"

"Not really." His voice was muffled now. "She was taken with me at first because of the glamour—I was an acrobat, the *Cirque Jacinthe*? But her sister was in the marriage, and her friends. She had her mentor, her support group. I was just the father. It was okay while it was fun, and maybe I thought it was something more when we first got together, but after a while it wasn't fun anymore."

"You just didn't want the responsibility!"

"Erno, to tell you the truth, that didn't have much to do with it. I liked holding you on my lap and rubbing you with my beard. You would giggle. I would toss you up into the air and catch you. You liked that. Drove your mother crazy—you're going to hurt him, she kept saying."

Erno had a sudden memory of being thrown high, floating, tumbling. Laughing.

"So why did you leave?"

"Pam and I just didn't get along. I met another woman, that got hot, and Pam didn't seem to need me around anymore. I had filled my purpose."

Emotion worked in Erno. He shifted from foot to foot. "I don't understand men like you. They've stuck you down here in a dorm! You're old, and you've got nothing."

"I've got everything I need. I have friends."

"Women shit on you, and you don't care."

"There are women just like me. We have what we want. I work. I read. I grow my plants. I have no desire to change the world. The world works for me."

"The genius of the founders, Erno—" Micah opened another drawer and started on the next rack of tomatoes, "—was that they minimized the contact of males and females. They made it purely voluntary. Do you realize how many centuries men and women tore themselves to pieces through forced intimacy? In every marriage, the decades of lying that paid for every week of pleasure? That the vast majority of men and women, when they spoke honestly, regretted the day they had ever married?"

"We have no power!"

Micah made a disgusted noise. "Nobody has any power. On earth, for every privilege, men had six obligations. I'm sorry you feel that something has been taken from you. If you feel that way, I suggest you work on building your own

relationships. Get married, for pity's sake. Nothing is stopping you."

Erno grabbed Micah's wrist. "Look at me!"

Micah looked. "Yes?"

"You knew I was your son. Doesn't that mean you've been paying attention to me?"

"From a distance. I wish you well, you understand."

"You know I was responsible for the explosion at the meeting! The constables arrested me!"

"No. Really? That sounds like trouble, Erno."

"Don't you want to ask me anything?"

"Give me your number. If I think of something, I'll call. Assuming you're not banished by then."

Erno turned away. He stalked down the row of hydroponics.

"Come by again, Erno!" Micah called after him. "Anytime. I mean it. Do you like music?"

The next man down was watching Erno now. He passed through the door out of the Ag tube, tore off the mask and threw it down.

Some of the permeable barrier must have brushed Erno's face when he passed through, because as he left East Five he found he couldn't keep his eyes from tearing up.

"The Grandstand Complex"

Two motorcycle racers have been rivals for a long time. The one telling the story has been beating the other, Tony Lukatovich, in every race. Tony takes increasing risks to win the crowd's approval, without success. Finally he makes a bet

Stories For Men  
by John Kessel

with the narrator: whoever wins the next race, the loser will kill himself.

The narrator thinks Tony is crazy. He doesn't want to bet. But when Tony threatens to tell the public he is a coward, he agrees.

In the next race, Tony and another rider are ahead of the narrator until the last turn, where Tony's bike bumps the leader's and they both crash. The narrator wins, but Tony is killed in the crash.

Then the narrator finds out that, *before the race*, Tony told a newspaper reporter that the narrator had decided to retire after the next fatal crash. Did Tony deliberately get himself killed in order to make him retire?

Yet, despite the news report, the winner doesn't have to retire. He can say he changed his mind. Tony hasn't won anything, has he? If so, what?

## thirteen

Erno had not left the apartment in days. In the aftermath of his police interview, his mother had hovered over him like a bad mood, and it was all he could do to avoid her reproachful stare. Aunt Sophie and Lena and even Aphra acted like he had some terminal disease that might be catching. They intended to heap him with shame until he was crushed. He holed up in his room listening to an ancient recording, "Black and Blue," by Louis Armstrong. The long dead jazzman growled, "What did I do, to feel so black and blue?"

A real man would get back at them. Tyler would. And they would know that they were being gotten, and they would be gotten in the heart of their assumption of superiority. Something that would show women permanently that men were not to be disregarded.

Erno opened his notebook and tried writing a poem.

When you hit someone

It changes their face.

Your mother looks shocked and old.

Alicia looks younger.

Men named Cluny get even stupider than they are.

It hurts your fist.

It hurts your shoulder.

The biggest surprise: you can do it.

Your fist is there at the end of your arm

Waiting



At any and every moment  
Whether you are aware of it or not.  
Once you know this  
The world changes.

He stared at the lines for some minutes, then erased them.  
In their place he tried writing a joke.

Q: How many matrons does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Light bulbs don't care to be screwed by matrons.

He turned off his screen and lay on his bed, his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling. He could engineer the GROSS virus. He would not even need access to the biotech facilities; he knew where he could obtain almost everything required from warehouses within the colony. But he would need a place secret enough that nobody would find him out.

Suddenly he knew the place. And with it, he knew where Tyler was hiding.

The northwest lava tube was fairly busy when Erno arrived at 2300. Swing shift cousins wandered into the open clubs, and the free enterprise shops were doing their heaviest business. The door to the Oxygen Warehouse was dark, and a public notice was posted on it. The door was locked, and Erno did not want to draw attention by trying to force it.

So he returned to the construction materials warehouse in North Six. Little traffic here, and Erno was able to slip inside without notice. He kept behind the farthest aisle until he reached the back wall and the deserted airlock that was being used for storage. It took him some minutes to move the

building struts and slide through to the other end. The door opened and he was in the deserted lava tube.

It was completely dark. He used his flashlight to retrace their steps from weeks ago.

Before long Erno heard a faint noise ahead. He extinguished the flash and saw, beyond several bends in the distance, a faint light. He crept along until he reached a section where light fell from a series of open doorways. He slid next to the first and listened.

The voices from inside stopped. After a moment one of them called, "Come in."

Nervous, Erno stepped into the light from the open door. He squinted and saw Tyler and a couple of other men in a room cluttered with tables, cases of dried food, oxygen packs, scattered clothes, blankets, surface suits. On the table were book readers, half-filled juice bulbs, constables' batons.

One of the younger men came up to Erno and slapped him on the back. "Erno. My man!" It was Sid.

The others watched Erno speculatively. Tyler leaned back against the table. He wore a surface skintight; beside him lay his utility belt. His hair had grown out into a centimeter of red bristle. He grinned. "I assume you've brought the goods, Erno."

Erno pulled his notebook from his pocket. "Yes."

Tyler took the notebook and, without moving his eyes from Erno's, put it on the table. "You can do this, right?"

"Erno's a wizard," Sid said. "He can do it in his sleep."

The other young men just watched Erno. They cared what he was going to say.

"I can do it."

Tyler scratched the corner of his nose with his index finger.

"Will you?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know? Is this a hard decision?"

"Of course it is. A lot of children will die. Nothing will ever be the same."

"We're under the impression that's the point, Erno. Come with me," Tyler said, getting off the table. "We need to talk."

Tyler directed the others to go back to work and took Erno into another room. This one had a cot, a pile of clothes, and bulbs of alcohol lying around. On a wall screen was a schematic of the colony's substructure.

Tyler pushed a pile of clothes off a chair. "Sit down."

Erno sat. "You knew about this place before we came here the night of the riot."

Tyler said nothing.

"They asked me if there was a conspiracy," Erno continued. "I told them no. Is there?"

"Sure there is. You're part of it."

"I'm not part of anything."

"That's the trouble with men among the Cousins, Erno. We're not part of anything. If a man isn't part of something, then he's of no use to anybody."

"Help me out, Tyler. I don't get it."

"They say that men can't live only with other men. I don't believe that. Did you ever study the warrior culture?"

"No."

"Men banding together—for duty, honor, clan. That's what the warrior lived by throughout history. It was the definition of manhood.

"The matrons say men are extreme, that they'll do anything. They're right. A man will run into a collapsing building to rescue a complete stranger. That's why, for most of human history, the warrior was necessary for the survival of the clan—later the nation.

"But the twentieth century drained all the meaning out of it. First the great industrial nations exploited the warrior ethic, destroying the best of their sons for money, for material gain, for political ideology. Then the feminist movement, which did not understand the warrior, and feared and ridiculed him, grew. They even persuaded some men to reject masculinity.

"All this eventually erased the purpose from what was left of the warrior culture. Now, if the warrior ethic can exist at all, it must be personal. 'Duty, honor, self.'"

"Self?"

"Self. In some way it was always that. Sacrifice for others is not about the others. It's the self, after all, that decides to place value in the other. What's important is the *self* and the *sacrifice*, not the cause for which you sacrifice. In the final analysis, all sacrifices are in service of the self. The pure male assertion."

"You're not talking about running into a collapsing building, Tyler."

Tyler laughed. "Don't you get it, Erno? We live in a collapsing building!"

"If we produce this virus, people are going to die."

"Living as a male among the Cousins is death. They destroy certain things, things that are good—only this society defines them as bad. Fatherhood. Protection of the weak by the strong. There's no *force* here, Erno. There's no *growth*. The Cousins are an evolutionary dead end. In time of peace it may look fine, but in time of war, it would be wiped out in a moment."

Erno didn't know what to say.

"This isn't some scheme for power, Erno. You think I'm in this out of some abstract theory? This is life's blood. This—"

Sid ran in from the hall. "Tyler," he said. "The warehouse door has cycled again!"

Tyler was up instantly. He grabbed Erno by the shirt. "Who did you tell?"

"Tell? No one!"

"Get the others!" Tyler told Sid. But as soon as Sid left the room an explosion rocked the hall, and the lights went out. Tyler still had hold of Erno's shirt, and dragged him to the floor. The air was full of stinging fumes.

"Follow me if you want to live!" Tyler whispered.

They crawled away from the hall door, toward the back of the room. In the light of the wall screen, Tyler upended the cot and yanked open a meter-square door set into the wall. When Erno hesitated, Tyler dragged him into the dark tunnel beyond.

They crawled on hands and knees for a long time. Erno's eyes teared from the gas, and he coughed until he vomited. Tyler pulled him along in the blackness until they reached a

chamber, dimly lit in red, where they could stand. On the other side of the chamber was a pressure door.

"Put this on," Tyler said, shoving a surface suit into Erno's arms. Quickly!"

Erno struggled to pull on the skintight, still gasping for breath. "I swear I had nothing to do with this," he said.

"I know," Tyler said. He sealed up his own suit and locked down his tiger-striped helmet.

"Brace yourself. This isn't an airlock," Tyler said, and hit the control on the exterior door.

The moment the door showed a gap, the air blew out of the chamber, almost knocking Erno off his feet. When it opened wide enough, they staggered through into a crevasse. The moisture in the escaping air froze and fell as frost in the vacuum around them. Erno wondered if their pursuers would be able to seal the tube or get back behind a pressure door before they passed out.

Tyler and Erno emerged from the crevasse into a sloping pit, half of which was lit by the glare of hard sunlight. They scrambled up the slope through six centimeters of dust and reached the surface.

"Now what?" Erno said.

Tyler shook his head and put his hand against Erno's faceplate. He leaned over and touched his helmet to Erno's. "Private six."

Erno switched his suit radio.

"They won't be out after us for some time," Tyler said. "Since we left that Judas-book of yours behind, they may not even know where we are."

"Judas book?"

"Your notebook—you must have had it with you when the constables questioned you."

"Yes. But they didn't know what the download meant or they wouldn't have returned it to me."

"Returned it to you? Dumbass. They put a tracer in it."

Erno could see Tyler's dark eyes dimly through the faceplate, inches from his own, yet separated by more than glass and vacuum. "I'm sorry."

"Forget it."

"When we go back, we'll be arrested. We might be banished."

"We're not going back just yet. Follow me."

"Where can we go?"

"There's a construction shack at an abandoned illemenite mine south of here. It's a bit of a hike—two to three hours—but what else are we going to do on such a fine morning?"

Tyler turned and hopped off across the surface. Erno stood dumbly for a moment, then followed. Once again he was following Tyler on an unknown mission, across the lunar surface.

They headed south along the western side of the crater. The ground was much rockier, full of huge boulders and pits where ancient lava tubes had collapsed millennia ago. The suit Erno wore was too tight, and pinched him in the armpits and crotch. His thermoregulators struggled against the open sunlight, and he felt his body inside the skintight slick with sweat. The bind in his crotch became a stabbing pain with every stride.

Around to the south side of Fowler, they struck off to the south. Tyler followed a line of boot prints and tractor treads in the dust. The land rose to Adil's Ridge after a couple of kilometers, from which Erno looked back and saw, for the first time, all of the domed crater where he had spent his entire life.

"Is this construction shack habitable?" he asked.

"I've got it outfitted."

"What are we going to do? We can't stay out here forever."

"We won't. They'll calm down. You forget that we haven't done anything but spray a prank message on the dome. I'm a comedian. What do they expect from a comedian?"

Erno did not remind Tyler of the possible decompression injuries their escape might have caused. He tucked his head down and focused on keeping up with the big man's steady pace. He drew deep breaths. They skipped along without speaking for an hour or more. Off to their left, Erno noticed a line of distant pylons, with threads of cable strung between them. It was the cable train route from Fowler to Tsander several hundred kilometers south.

Tyler began to speak. "I'm working on some new material. For my comeback performance. It's about the difference between love and sex."

"Okay. So what's the difference?"

"Sex is like a fresh steak. It smells great, you salivate, you consume it in a couple of minutes, you're satisfied, you feel great, and you fall asleep."

"And love?"



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by John Kessel

"Love is completely different. Love is like flash-frozen food—it lasts forever. Cold as liquid hydrogen. You take it out when you need it, warm it up. You persuade yourself it's just as good as sex. People who promote love say it's even better, but that's a lie constructed out of necessity. The only thing it's better than is starving to death."

"Needs a little work," Erno said. After a moment he added. "There's a story in *Stories for Men* about love."

"I'd think the stories for men would be about sex."

"No. There's no sex in any of them. There's hardly any women at all. Most of them are about men competing with other men. But there's one about a rich man who bets a poor young man that hunger is stronger than love. He locks the poor man and his lover in separate rooms with a window between them, for seven days, without food. At the end of the seven days they're starving. Then he puts them together in a room with a single piece of bread."

"Who eats it?"

"The man grabs it, and is at the point of eating it when he looks over at the woman, almost unconscious from hunger. He gives it to her. She refuses it, says he should have it because he's more hungry than she is. So they win the bet."

Tyler laughed. "If it had been a steak, they would have lost." They continued hiking for a while. "That story isn't about love. It's about the poor man beating the rich man."

Erno considered it. "Maybe."

"So what have you learned from that book? Anything?"

"Well, there's a lot of killing—it's like the writers are obsessed with killing. The characters kill for fun, or sport, or money, or freedom, or to get respect. Or women."

"That's the way it was back then, Erno. Men—"

Tyler's voice was blotted out by a tone blaring over their earphones. After fifteen seconds an AI voice came on:

"SATELLITES REPORT A MAJOR SOLAR CORONAL MASS EJECTION. PARTICLE FLUX WILL BEGIN TO RISE IN TWENTY MINUTES, REACHING LETHAL LEVELS WITHIN THIRTY. ALL PERSONS ON THE SURFACE SHOULD IMMEDIATELY SEEK SHELTER. REFRAIN FROM EXPOSURE UNTIL THE ALL CLEAR SOUNDS.

"REPEAT: A MAJOR SOLAR RADIATION EVENT HAS OCCURRED. ALL PERSONS SHOULD IMMEDIATELY TAKE SHELTER."

Both of them stopped. Erno scanned the sky, frantic. Of course there was no difference. The sun threw the same harsh glare it always threw. His heart thudded in his ears. He heard Tyler's deep breaths in his earphones.

"How insulated is this shack?" he asked Tyler. "Can it stand a solar storm?"

Tyler didn't answer for a moment. "I doubt it."

"How about the mine? Is there a radiation shelter? Or a tunnel?"

"It was a strip mine. Besides," Tyler said calmly, "we couldn't get there in twenty minutes."

They were more than an hour south of the colony.

Erno scanned the horizon, looking for some sign of shelter. A crevasse, a lava tube—maybe they'd run out of air, but at

least they would not fry. He saw, again, the threads of the cable towers to the east.

"The cable line!" Erno said. "It has radiation shelters for the cable cars all along it."

"If we can reach one in time."

Erno checked his clock readout. 0237. Figure they had until 0300. He leapt off due east, toward the cable towers. Tyler followed.

The next fifteen minutes passed in a trance, a surreal slow motion broken field race through the dust and boulders toward the pylons to the east. Erno pushed himself to the edge of his strength, until a haze of spots rose before his eyes. They seemed to move with agonizing slowness.

They were 500 meters from the cable pylon. 300 meters. 100 meters. They were beneath it.

When they reached the pylon, Erno scanned in both directions for a shelter. The cable line was designed to dip underground for radiation protection periodically all along the length of its route. The distance between the tunnels was determined by the top speed of the cable car and the amount of advance warning the passengers were likely to get of a solar event. There was no way of telling how far they were from a shelter, or in which direction the closest lay.

"South," Tyler said. "The colony is the next shelter north, and it's too far for us to run, so our only shot should be south."

It was 0251. They ran south, their leaps no longer strong and low, but with a weary desperation to them now. Erno kept his eyes fixed on the horizon. The twin cables stretched

above them like strands of spider's web, silver in the sunlight, disappearing far ahead where the next T pylon stood like the finish line in a race.

The T grew, and suddenly they were on it. Beyond, in its next arc, the cable swooped down to the horizon. They kept running, and as they drew closer, Erno saw that a tunnel opened in the distance, and the cable ran into it. He gasped out a moan that was all the shout he could make.

They were almost there when Erno realized that Tyler had slowed, and was no longer keeping up. He willed himself to stop, awkwardly, almost pitching face first into the regolith. He looked back. Tyler had slowed to a stroll.

"What's wrong?" Erno gasped.

"Nothing," Tyler said. Though Erno could hear Tyler's ragged breath, there was no hurry in his voice.

"Come on!" Erno shouted.

Tyler stopped completely. "Women and children first."

Erno tried to catch his breath. His clock read 0304.

"What?"

"You go ahead. Save your pathetic life."

"Are you crazy? Do you want to die?"

"Of course not. I want you to go in first."

"Why?"

"If you can't figure it out by now, I can't explain it, Erno. It's a story for a man."

Erno stood dumbstruck.

"Come out here into the sunshine with me," Tyler said.

"It's nice out here."

Erno laughed. He took a step back toward Tyler. He took another. They stood side by side.

"That's my man Erno. Now, how long can you stay out here?"

The sun beat brightly down. The tunnel mouth gaped five meters in front of them. 0307. 0309. Each watched the other, neither budged.

"My life isn't pathetic," Erno said.

"Depends on how you look at it," Tyler replied.

"Don't you think yours is worth saving?"

"What makes you think this is a real radiation alert, Erno? The broadcast could be a trick to make us come back."

"There have been warnings posted for weeks."

"That only makes it a more plausible trick."

"That's no reason for us to risk our lives—on the chance it is."

"I don't think it's a trick, Erno. I'll go into that tunnel. After you."

Erno stared at the dark tunnel ahead. 0311. A single leap from safety. Even now lethal levels of radiation might be sluicing through their bodies. A bead of sweat stung his eye.

"So this is what it means to be a man?" Erno said softly, as much to himself as to Tyler.

"This is it," Tyler said. "And I'm a better man than you are."

Erno felt an adrenaline surge. "You're not better than me."

"We'll find out."

"You haven't accomplished anything."

"I don't need you to tell me what I've accomplished. Go ahead, Erno. Back to your cave."

0312. 0313. Erno could feel the radiation. It was shattering proteins and DNA throughout his body, rupturing cell walls, turning the miraculously ordered organic molecules of his brain into sludge. He thought about Alicia, the curve of her breast, the light in her eyes. Had she told her friends that he had hit her? And his mother. He saw the shock and surprise in her face when the book hit her. How angry he had been. He wanted to explain to her why he had thrown it. It shouldn't be that hard to explain.

He saw his shadow reaching out beside him, sharp and steady, two arms, two legs and a head, an ape somehow transported to the moon. No, not an ape—a man. What a miracle that a man could keep himself alive in this harsh place—not just keep alive, but make a home of it. All the intellect and planning and work that had gone to put him here, standing out under the brutal sun, letting it exterminate him.

He looked at Tyler, fixed as stone.

"This is insane," Erno said—then ran for the tunnel.

A second after he sheltered inside, Tyler was there beside him.

## **fourteen**

They found the radiation shelter midway through the tunnel, closed themselves inside, stripped off their suits, drank some water, breathed the cool air. They crowded in the tiny stone room together, smelling each other's sweat. Erno started to get sick: he had chills, he felt nausea. Tyler made him sip water, put his arm around Erno's shoulders.

Tyler said it was radiation poisoning, but Erno said it was not. He sat wordless in the corner the nine hours it took until the all-clear came. Then, ignoring Tyler, he suited up and headed back to the colony.

## **fifteen**

So that is the story of how Erno discovered that he was not a man. That, indeed, Tyler was right, and there was no place for men in the Society of Cousins. And that he, Erno, despite his grievances and rage, was a Cousin.

The cost of this discovery was Erno's own banishment, and one thing more.

When Erno turned himself in at the constabulary headquarters, eager to tell them about GROSS and ready to help them find Tyler, he was surprised at their subdued reaction. They asked him no questions. They looked at him funny, eyes full of rage and something besides rage. Horror? Loathing? Pity? They put him in the same white room where he had sat before, and left him there alone. After a while the blond interrogator, Mona, came in and told him that three people had been injured when Tyler and Erno had blown the vacuum seal while escaping. One, who had insisted on crawling after them through the escape tunnel, had been caught in there died: Erno's mother.

Erno and Tyler were given separate trials, and the colony voted: they were to be expelled from the society. Tyler's banishment was permanent; Erno was free to apply for readmission in ten years.

The night before he left, Erno, accompanied by a constable, was allowed to visit his home. Knowing how completely inadequate it was, he apologized to his sister, his aunt and cousins. Aunt Sophie and Nick treated him with stiff



rectitude. Celeste, who somehow did not feel the rage against him that he deserved, cried and embraced him. They let him pack a duffle with a number of items from his room.

After leaving, he asked the constable if he could stop a moment on the terrace outside the apartment before going back to jail. He took a last look at the vista of the domed crater from the place where he had lived every day of his life. He drew a deep breath and closed his eyes. His mother seemed everywhere around him. All he could see was her crawling, on hands and knees in the dark, desperately trying to save him from himself. How angry she must have been, and how afraid. What must she have thought, as the air flew away and she felt her coming death? Did she regret giving birth to him?

He opened his eyes. There on the terrace stood the recycler he had thrown pebbles at for years. He reached into his pack, pulled out *Stories for Men*, and stepped toward the bin.

Alicia came around a corner. "Hello, Erno," she said.

A step from the trash bin, Erno held the book awkwardly in his hand, trying to think of something to say. The constable watched them.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," he told Alicia.

"I know you didn't mean this to happen," she said.

"It doesn't matter what I meant. It happened."

On impulse, he handed her the copy of *Stories for Men*. "I don't know what to do with this," he said. "Will you keep it for me?"

Stories For Men  
*by John Kessel*

The next morning they put him on he the cable car for Tsander. His exile had begun.

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