

Memes of Loss and Devotion

by darrenwhite

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MEMES OF LOSS AND DEVOTION

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ISBN-13: 978-1492875024

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First Printing: October, 2013
First Edition: October, 2013

For Melanie & Esme.

*Also for Mrs Ratcliffe,
my 5th form English teacher, who first encouraged me to make a
collection of my short stories, some 27 years before I eventually
got around to actually doing it.*

“If God wanted man to become a spacefaring species, He would have given man a moon.”

Krafft Arnold Ehricke

“Solitude, solitude, the eleventh commandment.”

Richard Edwards

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hope

He had come back for her.

He watched as the sun rose from behind the planet before him. The brilliant glare of the nuclear furnace escaped from the protective eclipse of the planet known to mankind as Hope. As it did, its radiance seemed to consume the colour in the sphere. The sudden eruption of light plunged Hope into comparative darkness. It became nothing more than an inky black circle, where only moments before, it had been a jubilant celebration of blue white, and green.

It took the briefest of moments for his enhanced eyes to compensate for the violent new light. He became aware of a spot of black silhouetted against the sun's blinding aura, a dark tumour within the confines of the otherwise unbroken luminescence. He knew it to be his destination, and he knew it to be the space island called Destiny.

As he stood on the observation platform of his ship, with the dispassionate void of space restrained only by the bubble of air protecting him, he felt a sudden swell of emotion. His heart raced, until he could feel the thumping of blood rushing through his head. He did not notice the overlays of information, nor the soothing drone of the ship's Consciousness, fed to him via his brain's neural interfaces.

His only thoughts were for what lay inside that station for him.

He had come back for her.

He wasn't aware of the closing distance of the space island as he sped through space, although TheHive whispered the information to him mentally. Neither did he give thought to the proximity of the deadly vacuum of space. His trust in the smart suit providing a protective skin of warmed air round him, was total and unquestioning. He wasn't even really aware of the occasional controlled lapse in the air bubble, which caused sudden rushes of air, leaving shimmering crystals of frozen

oxygen like a diamond trail, propelling him forwards.

His mind was elsewhere.

Half-whispers and snatches of thoughts caressed TheHive, yet he heard none of them. In his mind's eye, he saw her; long chestnut brown hair, decorating a face of ivory stillness and deep, dark brown eyes beneath rich, black lashes. He saw her mouth, defined by those sensuous, inviting, full lips. They formed a smile, displaying her small, perfect teeth. A figure-hugging royal blue dress delineated the outline of her body and revealing her pale, bare shoulders, gleaming in the warm glow of the deck illumination. This was how he had last seen her, and this was how he preferred to remember her, before they had both been placed in Slumber.

Now, in his mind's eye, he saw the medic who had revived him, his memory clouded in the haze of resuscitation. He remembered the feeling of sympathy that swept over him from TheHive, the distant voices that sighed in his head, the ecstasy of sorrow that threatened to engulf him, and the concentration of purpose that now drove him on.

He became aware of someone calling his name, repeating it over and over again. He realized that it was the ship's Consciousness, wrenching him from his melancholic remembrance. Before him stretched the seemingly endless expanse of the station. It hung in the black waste that surrounded him, revolving almost imperceptibly, the rough grey skin reflecting an imperfect image of the planet it shadowed. The station's form was shrouded in a random crystalline growth of the bio-metal-alloy that composed all off-world structures. He only half heard a distant Hive monologue, describing the nature of the substance, how it can be engineered to grow to design within a suitable ecoskin, and how it tempers once the skin is removed. The disembodied voice continued, describing how accelerated, uncontrollable growth could be used as a defence against damage.

Of course, he knew all of this already. Who didn't? Further, he had come fully prepared. Another voice, a familiar one, urged him to use the disrupter in his right hand to remove the cancerous growth surrounding the station.

He raised it, pointing it at the sights overlaid onto his vision by his implants. The notion of readiness, amplified by his brain interfaces and broadcast over TheHive, cranked the device into life. Its invisible influence ate into the metal hybrid, dissolving it into nothingness. As the ensuing rut grew to form a channel, a chink opened momentarily in the air bubble surrounding him, and a tiny spurt of ice propelled him gracefully forward.

A small, unnecessary voice had counted the time he had taken to reach the entrance platform, but he gave it only fleeting attention, even though some distant part of his brain now noted the elapsed time with interest.

As he cut away the alloy that enveloped the platform, he mentally reached out to any receptors inside the station. His ship had cautiously warned him that no recognizable emissions were coming from the station. Only he knew how distant this place was from the rest of TheHive. He knew how much defences interfered with transmissions. He knew how weak those transmissions would be, and more importantly, he knew that there would be transmissions. He had felt it.

As he watched the boulder of alloy that he had just cut free float silently away into space, he became aware of its trajectory. He noted that it would harmlessly burn up in Hope's atmosphere, hundreds of miles `below` his unsupported feet. The majority of his mental efforts were concerned with trying to make contact with the interior. She was so close. He knew it. He could almost feel her presence.

He had come to get her, and he wasn't leaving without her.

He stretched out a foot and stepped onto the now cleared platform. He hadn't expected any response. He was resigned to the fact that no atmosphere would form about him. The ship had been monitoring energy readings from the island for some time now, and he was painfully aware of just how little of it still functioned.

Suddenly, a metallic hiss eased itself onto the sound stage of his mind. It seemed like an almost imperceptible attempt at contact. He knew that it had come from inside, and

the ship agreed. Something within awakened.

He allowed himself the briefest moment of elation, his spirits soaring, yet the signal was so weak, so indistinct, that it hardly existed at all.

The entrance panel failed to respond to his cerebral command to open. The entry plate before him remained resolutely solid. Again, this came as no surprise. The disrupter would gain him the entrance he sought. He raised the weapon, noting how the ship altered the dispersal field, and prepared to fire.

Something made him pause, compelling him to turn around. He glanced over his shoulder at the planet 'beneath' him. It bathed in the reflected glory of the light streaming from its parent sun, its still magnificence oblivious to the importance of this moment to him. A thought floated through his mind; he didn't know whether it was his or not, but it didn't seem to matter somehow. How majestic he had once thought the world beneath him to be, how pure from human faults, how almost divine in nature. Now he just felt insulted by its apathy to his plight.

She once adored this world beneath their former home.

He remembered how she gasped when she had first seen its beauty. He remembered their first night on the station Destiny, how they made love, with a hologram of Hope jacked into their minds, spinning serenely above them. The heavens sang to them, with the stars playing the role of a thousand silent voyeurs. That was the night he fell back in love with love.

She had decorated the walls of their unit with ever-changing scenes from the globe below and its moon children, places that they had intended to visit one day. Even the ChangeDeck, when it formed a bench to eat from, was decorated with a spinning mental hologram, a centrepiece to the countless mealtime discussions. On more intimate occasions, it formed the warm glow which illuminated the joy of their faces.

He knew how much this place had meant to her.

In his hand, the disrupter fired. A hole the size of a man opened in the panel before him, and two things screamed towards him. A rush of frozen air crystals buffeted the manufactured air skin around him; for a moment, he feared that

the membrane would be broken, and he would die. But then, almost as quickly as the assault began, it ended.

The second thing which assaulted him was more painful. It crashed into his head and, for a moment, engulfed him in a blind, sickening panic. It was a scream from the station's own Consciousness, a desperate distress call, a cry into the void for help. An almost human scream in pain.

It was the combined wail of a thousand dying minds.

But even this he had expected. The station's core was still intact and still functioning, he had sensed it via TheHive, and it was common knowledge that the station had been attacked all of those decades before.

He knew there had been no survivors.

Images of the assault flashed into his mind's eye from TheHive's collective, virtual memory, images as perfect as any actual experienced moment of his life. The images had been broadcast over TheHive by the occupants before they had died, made all the more vivid by the panic and despair experienced by the senders.

TheHive showed him the alien ships' glide towards the station, menacing black silhouettes against the eternal night. He bore the fear that swelled within the station's occupants, made even more terrifying by their inability to read the thoughts of the inhabitants of those ships, gripped by a terror born of uncertainty.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a narrator began to mumble all that was known about this race. He only half heard the disembodied voice say, "... a race whose fear and intolerance of others was so severe, that they are known only as the Xenophobes. No official contact was ever made. Their home world, a dry and ..." He saw the streaks of their weapons strike out and lick the station, as the metal crystal raced to engulf and protect the structure. The call rang out amongst the inhabitants to evoke the NetherBubble around them. A thousand pleading voices cried out in pain and confusion. One of them was hers. Somewhere in his head, the voice continued, "...the only actual premeditated attack occurred near the planet Hope, upon the aptly named Destiny space island."

From somewhere a thought drifted through the ether.

"Irony, is it not, that the first and only contact with a sentient alien race should result in this." An instant later, another thought came to him.

"We only won because we found their home world first. Destroyed them before they destroyed us."

The web memory continued. He could see the blue sphere, spat from the alien craft, growing as it approached the station. Along its outer shell, forks of a denser blue formed and danced, like mobile veins under the skin of a giant hand. All about the edge of the ball, brilliant white sparks fizzed into the vacuum.

The mental screaming rose to a mind-killing intensity, then abruptly died, as the deadly globe engulfed its target. He felt the sudden nothingness of hundreds of minds being extinguished.

He knew that one of those minds was hers...
Enough.

He banished the intrusions from his mind, sending them back into the sprawling super mind that is TheHive. He conveyed his wish to his ship to be disconnected from it. Right now, he just wanted to be left alone, except for essential contact. He grimaced as all external perceptions left him. The icy fingers of loneliness seized his mind. All was quiet, all was still. He was alone in the frighteningly still void of self.

For a moment, he wondered how mankind had ever survived in this supreme isolation, before the neural interfaces, before TheHive, alone to the paranoia and blackness of the lone mind.

Except that he wasn't quite alone. As his mind adjusted, a subtle perception revealed itself to him. He could feel the presence of the ship's Consciousness and the weak core of Destiny. He drew slight comfort from their being.

As he stepped into the corridor of the station, an intimate knowledge of its interior flooded into his mind, courtesy of the core and TheHive, but he didn't really need it. It may have been more than three decades since he had last set foot here, but for him the trickle of time had been a tsunami. He was aware of the

ship noting the damage reports, relaying them back to TheHive.

The ChangeDeck behind him suddenly erupted, reaching to the ceiling, filling the hole he had made in the outer hull, sealing him inside the dead walls of the station. He felt a rush of cold, petrified air as the smart suit killed his protective membrane. It had obviously analysed the rush of frozen air that accosted him on his entrance, and deemed it adequate for his survival.

He noted the ship's time from its chronograph. He was also aware of the chatter of the ship interrogating and coercing the core into revealing its secrets. He recognized some of the techniques for counselling the damaged core back to health. From where, he didn't know.

He was also aware of the ship trying to find her location.

He stepped purposefully towards the sealing plate before him; he knew what he had to do. The plate melted back into the deck as he approached it. He turned to his right and began to make his way towards the station's power source.

As he walked along the familiar corridors, the island's core began to whisper to him like a child. It told a story, a sad tale, and he recognized it as his own.

It told him of a man who contracted an incurable disease, a man who elected to remain in Slumber, in forced hibernation, until a cure could be found. Then it told him of a woman. A woman who's love for this man was so great, so consuming, that she couldn't bear to be parted from him, and she too chose Slumber.

They laid in peace, as the island and its host had drifted through space, rotating around a warm sun.

Then, one day, he had been taken away from her, to a place far away where machines of truly loving grace hoped they had found a cure for his disease. It was an empty hope, as it turned out, because the cure was many more years away. Still, he had been aware of none of this.

Outsiders came, their reasons unknown. They murdered all those living on the island, making it a derelict, drifting tomb. She died without ever being aware of her passing. When, many years later, a cure had been found, the man treated, and his life

saved, he awoke to find that he had lost something much more precious.

The man had come back for her.

The taunting voice slipped slowly back into the hushed conversation between his ship and the core, its immature delivery giving way to the tech speak of the recovery.

"There is nothing here for you," it told him. "Just memories and pain."

"Oh, but there is," he told it. "There is so much here for me."

He stepped into the power chamber. The zero-point energy generator from the ship in his hand, his fingers wrapped tightly around it, protecting it.

He placed the generator block onto its receptor. As he did so, a number of things happened. Firstly, the gloom surrounding him vanished, replaced by the glare of full, stark lighting. The gravity increased slightly, pushing harder onto his shoulders, making him feel heavier. Then the room instantly warmed to a comfortable level, and the air became fresh, sweeping the putrid, dead atmosphere away.

But something much more important occurred, bringing a melancholic smile to his face.

He became aware of her location. He knew exactly where she was.

The minutes that elapsed as he made his way towards her were spent deep in private thoughts. He contemplated the true consequences of finally finding her, the end of his search, and as he reached his destination, he wondered what lay in store for him, on the other side of that storage bay plate.

He knew, as he stood before the final barrier to her, just one more step would cause the plate to melt, and he would be with her again. He could take her back to her home world, and give her a proper, decent burial.

Then he could finally come to terms with her death, with his overwhelming loss, and begin to truly absorb it into his life and learn to live with it. He could find the forgiveness he needed for leaving her here. He could believe that she was no longer alive, no longer with him. He could plead for mercy for living,

when she didn't.

He could move on.

All of this was just one step away.

As he stepped on to his ship's entry platform, the familiar dome of air formed round him, and he sensed his own protective sheath of air dissipate. He looked about, and for the first time in an age, he saw the beauty of the stars, rather than the darkness between them. The entry plate beside him dissolved, and he saw the interior of the ship beyond the hole it formed.

Once inside, he let his hand slide over the interior wall of the ship. As always, it felt like nothing, like the fault in the fabric of space-time that it is. He heard the entry plate reform behind him.

He crouched down to sit, and the ChangeDeck formed a seat which rose up to meet him. He sunk into its welcome comfort and rubbed his tired eyes.

"Can I have something to drink, please?" he thought. "Water?" A pedestal rose up from the floor beside him. A clear container grew out of the pedestal and filled with water. He took the flask in a shaking hand and drank deeply, sighing when he had had his fill. He commanded his brain augments to take the edge off his weariness. He welcomed their soothing effects washing over him.

"I have a question-" the ship informed him. "Why have you come back to the ship without that which you came here for? Why have you left her behind?"

He ignored the question.

"Take me home." He said, out aloud. Again the dulcet, soothing tones of the ship drifted through his mind.

"Why did you leave her behind?" It asked.

He opened his mind to TheHive and felt himself slip back into its comforting embrace, like sliding slowly into warm water. He felt the tingle of a thousand possibilities, and became aware of countless voices at once.

"Because I had to..."

The navy explorer ship turned deftly in the void of space. For a moment, it rippled as the Noeske bubble enveloped it. Then it began to glow a vague greenish colour before it finally disappeared into the distant reaches of the eternal cosmos. In the shadow of a beautiful blue, white, and green planet, known to mankind as Hope, a new star twinkled briefly, as the space island Destiny reduced itself to tiny fragments of its former wondrous whole.

Then, when the light had consumed itself, nothing remained.

Nothing, except Hope.

seduction games

He strides purposefully into the high class hotel lobby, leaving the streets teeming with impoverished pensioners and teens sporting face paint designed to defeat any facial recognition, behind in the frigid, moonless night air. The artificial implants in his head feed directions to his ocular implants, and overlay an arrow pointing to the hotel bar onto his enhanced vision.

He follows the virtual arrow into the tastefully expensive saloon. Small, discreet groups and silent individuals sit unassumingly at the wooden tables, bathed in pools of stylized light. He surveys the room, studying the occupants in the spaces around the islands of illumination. Name labels appear in his augmented vision, superimposed over the heads of those broadcasting mini biographies.

They are mostly corporate types away from home, looking for connectionless, uncomplicated sex, or their desperate counterparts, the lonely spouses of the business class. His dating application plays the more lurid adverts of those practiced in casual liaisons. Bodies contort and spread in fleshy displays, but he sees none of it. He scans the room slowly, carefully searching for his target. He finds her sitting quietly in the corner, offering only her arched back to the indifferent room.

He silently creeps towards the woman at the bar. As he approaches, he reaches out with the networking implants enhancing his mind, probing the defenses of the woman's implants, searching for weaknesses, a way in perhaps. He doesn't really expect to break her mental firewall, not with the blunt, brute force attacks at his disposal. The most he can hope for is that he can map her defenses, and plan a second attack later.

To his surprise the attack succeeds, and the interfaces in her head suddenly open themselves up to him. It's so effortless that he wonders if he has the wrong woman. A quick query of her emergency information confirms that she is indeed the

woman he seeks.

He immediately searches for her copy of the “BeerGoggles” application, activating it in a hidden stealth mode. From that moment on, her ocular Artificial Intelligence will overlay a more attractive, computer-enhanced version of him into her vision, and she won’t even know that it isn’t real.

Next, he switches her “AllLife” recorder into sleep mode, and her implants stop streaming her vision into the data repositories in TheCloud. Even given his plans, it seems unnecessarily cruel to rob her of moments of her life, but leaving behind ultra-definition, three-dimensional video just is not part of them.

She twitches, beginning to turn her head towards him, perhaps forewarned by a proximity alert. He reacts instantly, dropping onto the vacant barstool beside her.

“Lilah, are you offline? I can’t---”, He stops abruptly in mid-sentence, a practiced look of disbelief on his face. She jumps in alarm, looking at him with a mixture of anger and curiosity. “You’re not Lilah, are you?” He asks unnecessarily, smiling invitingly. The look of surprise drains from her face as her gaze flicks over the enhanced image of him, tailored to her personal tastes.

He chooses that moment to command her hacked neural implants to release a carefully controlled cocktail of dopamine and opioids; dopamine will give her a powerful jolt of wanting and the opioids will simulate a feeling of enjoying something – hopefully him.

With a sense of immense satisfaction, his ocular implants highlight the involuntary dilation of her pupils. His illicit access to her medical augments highlight the sudden leap in her heart rate, and thermal imaging implants betray a slight blush in skin temperature radiating over her body.

“I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

“Not at all.” She replies with a warm, almost embarrassed smile. Her nostrils flare. His enhanced eyes can detect the river of blood pulsating to her breasts beneath the thin material stretched over them. Tiny, almost imperceptible mounds reveal where some of that blood terminates. He shakes his head

politely.

“I’ll leave you in peace.” He rises from the stool, preparing to walk away. A flick of his eyes reveals the river of warm blood coursing to her lap.

She gives him a micro expression of disappointment and he truly notices her for the first time. She seems far younger than her forty-plus years. Her face, obviously benefitting from de rigueur collagen replacement technology, could easily pass for mid-twenties, but that is the end to any obvious artificial enhancements. She is consummately pretty without being overtly beautiful or alluring. Her stance is confident and finessed yet with an apparent vulnerable openness.

Some trivial imperfections remain, a slightly protruding chin and a nose just too long to be classically beautiful, but for all this, her many charms easily overcome the potential flaws. Her playful, curved smile over gleaming tiny teeth is effortlessly disarming. Her skin is unblemished, the shape of her face beyond reproach. Her silky, rich, dark hair cascades over her forehead, down past a tiny earlobe, and around the turn of her neck to highlight a smooth upper chest, above just a hint of cleavage. A thin necklace offers exactly enough adornment to highlight the expanse of skin, and to make him yearn to dive into its milky smoothness.

But it is her eyes that draw him in. Perfect, trusting blue orbs, slightly pleading for tenderness, making him feel like he could give himself body and soul to her. That here is someone utterly unable to ever hurt him. She blinks and long, luxurious eyelashes bat over those smoldering eyes.

He is pulled from his thoughts and the moment rudely shattered by an internal alarm. His first thought is that he has somehow betrayed his hidden intent, but a heartbeat later he realizes that it is just his dating app. A flashing ‘mutual attraction’ flag blinks in the corner of his vision. Both of them have been secretly transmitting their attraction to the other, but it remained hidden until the mutual attraction was confirmed. The same app is also busy trying to data mine useful information about her, while it suggests clever lines and even watches her body language for tell-tale signs. The app designed

to shortcut the flirting game has them both laughing in embarrassment,

"I'm sorry," he apologizes, "That's embarrassing." His eyes flick down in apparent humility. "I should have turned that off." The dating app had been part of the plan, but much later. He curses his sloppiness. She seems equally embarrassed.

"I'd forgotten it was even on!" She gives him an almost astonished look. They laugh again. The moment stretches to the cusp of an uncomfortable silence.

"I'll definitely leave you in peace." Again he violates her firmware defenses and releases a macro of commands to her implants, causing them to flood her brain with serotonin and serotonin transporter inhibitors. A feeling of euphoria combined with a sense of intimacy washes over her. Any anxiety she feels washes away. Her smile widens.

"Are you sure?" She pauses, considering. Then she hesitantly adds, "You could always join me." She suddenly glances swiftly around the bar. "But aren't you meeting someone?" He drops back onto the stool.

"I think I just did." She flicks her head back as she lets out a nervous giggle. He turns and tries to attract the attention of the bar staff. A glance back at her reveals a glazed stare as she twists her hair absent-mindedly around her long, slender index finger.

"Can I get you a drink?" he asks. Her hacked medical implants show her blood alcohol levels are already high.

"Champagne Cosmo, please," she requests, pushing her empty flute glass forward. As he signals his order to the bartender, he contents himself with the knowledge that she is probably reading the fake personal, career, and social media information he planted in advance, complete with ambiguous video, never quite revealing his face.

"Martyn Fogg," she finally reads aloud, "Geomicrobiology Consultant? Impressive." She glances his way, nodding appreciatively, a single arched eyebrow raised. He discreetly completes giving his order to the barman before turning back to her.

"It's just throwing together the geology, environmental

science, and microbiology to make the world a better place, one contamination black spot at a time.” She swivels sideways towards him, crossing one long, shapely leg over the other, pointing her foot at him before bouncing it nervously. She strokes her lower thigh as she asks,

“So, found any microbiology-based medicines recently?” He nods before repeating the carefully rehearsed line.

“That’s not really my area of expertise. I don’t save the world, I just clear up its messier spills.”

“And how do you do that?”

“I’m sorry I can’t really talk about it.” He shrugs apologetically.

“I understand.” The conversation descends into a lull.

Careful, he thinks to himself. Don’t do anything to dispel the image she’s created of you. Don’t talk yourself out of this. He moves quickly.

“Wow, that killed the mood didn’t it?” He rolls his eyes. She smiles encouragingly. “Note to self, not a good topic for flirting.”

“Is that what this is?” she asks with fake indignity. He shakes his head, laughing.

“I thought so.” Their drinks arrive, and he holds his up to her.

“Cheers.” She taps her glass against his, all the time maintaining eye contact. He notices the exposed white skin of her inner wrist. They both take a sip, and hard alcohol burns a hot track down his throat while fizzy bubbles caress hers.

“And now it’s my turn.” He focuses slightly away from her. In his vision, a multitude of channels of information appear around her. Clusters of looping video, sliding text, and still images remind him of the extensive research he has conducted on her. The information is drawn from all available sources, social media, news, and even her cracked employment records. He ponders for a second, wondering what to say first, before an approach occurs to him,

“Er, you’re not transmitting anything, not even a biog. Not even your name?”

“Halina Howard,” she volunteers. He smiles.

"Hello Halina."

"Hello Martyn." She drinks again. He pauses, confused.

"Facial recognition doesn't know you." Then puzzled, he asks, "Are you off grid?" She beams in amusement.

"I've given you my name. Perhaps I should give you my rank?" His face drops in fake horror.

"Rank?"

"I'm *Colonel* Halina Howard."

"Colonel? You're military?" His smile fades in a practiced manner.

"I was. Honorable discharge." She puts a comforting hand on his arm, letting the contact endure slightly too long, maintaining intense eye contact throughout. "Don't look so worried. I'm not here to arrest you. I'm out." He allows himself to visibly relax. Then he smiles again, pointing behind himself.

"You are aware that the military have their own bars? They even admit the ones who got away." She holds eye contact again, and her gaze smolders with intent.

"I thought I'd have more luck in here."

"And did you?"

"I'm not sure yet." He takes another sip from his drink. She copies the motion. A thought occurs to her.

"Who's Lilah?" she hurriedly asks. He shakes his head, leaning forward, smiling knowingly.

"No one," he answers with an almost arrogant smirk. She seems confused.

"No really, who is she? Are you meeting her here?"

"Really? She's no one. I made her up." She gasps in a comically exaggerated way, pretending to be appalled by the deception. "I just needed a reason to come over and talk to you."

"Needed?" She stares intently into his eyes while playing with her necklace,

"Needed." He confirms. Sensing that he's being too intense, he visibly backs off.

"Seriously, it's really none of my business, but when I saw you from over there you seemed..." He pauses, searching for the right word, "*Burdened* by something?" He raises a

quizzical eyebrow. She shrugs, staring at her drink.

"Is it that obvious?" He nods, thinks, and then offers,

"You know what I do with burdens?"

"Tell me?" she encourages.

"I get rid of them. Give them a kick." She nods slowly.

"If only it were that easy." Another lull. She pulls a hair from her clothing, preening herself.

He starts to say something, but her piercing blue eyes take his words away. There is something in the yearning, innocence of them that transports him to a different time, a time when he did this for real, when it was genuine and not a premeditated, performed deception.

"You have the most beautiful eyes," he blurts out. His words shock even him. She smiles warmly, accepting the compliment.

For fuck's sake, he berates himself, get it together. Focus. He tries not to let his expression betray his thoughts. Romantic love is just the brain tricking you with chemically induced OCD, he thinks to himself curtly.

"You know, maybe it's too early and I shouldn't tell you this, but my therapist says I have a preoccupation with vengeance." He nods as the words sink in. "We'll see about that!" She laughs a laugh out of all proportion to the humour.

"Light travels faster than sound," he tells her. "This is why some people appear bright until you hear them speak." She laughs again. "I intend to live forever. So far, so good."

"You're really funny," she says to him, chewing her bottom lip. He decides to up the ante and steer the conversation towards riskier ground,

"You know 69% of people can find something dirty in every statistic they hear." She laughs harder, resting her hand on his.

"You know funny men can always laugh me into bed," she says, raising an eyebrow as if to challenge him.

"Is that so?" He smiles coyly, sipping his drink. *Really? Don't you mean if you fancy them then you'll laugh at any old bullshit?* Again, his good humoured expression hides his thoughts.

"I think I've had enough to drink." She abruptly rises from her seat. "I'm going to my room." He gives her a quizzical look and she starts to walk away before pausing and shooting him a look over her shoulder. "Coming?"

"Are you sure?" he asks, motioning slightly towards her empty glass.

"Why should I be lonely tonight?" she says simply.

"Why indeed?"

As he drains his glass, he works quickly. Penetrating her inner firewalls, he injects dream-seeding and hypnotic-suggestion viruses into her augments. They begin to surreptitiously insert urges, beliefs, and images subliminally into her subconscious, subtly rewriting memories, altering their recall in real time. In the long term, they will rule her dreams, turning most of them into nightmares.

In moments, she will believe exactly what he wants, and she will act exactly as he planned, giving him exactly what he came for.

She pauses, thinking for a moment. He wonders if she has detected the viruses.

"Can you just give me a minute, please?" He nods, slightly confused. "I just need to make myself even more irresistible." She slinks away towards the female toilets, exaggerating the sway of her hips as her long legs eat up the ground. As she reaches the door, she takes a triumphant look over shoulder at his attentive gaze.

Once inside, she makes for the giant mirror running over the hand basins, removes a small pot of lip-gloss from her clutch bag, and begins to apply it carefully with her finger. As she touches up her make-up, she makes a video call with her implants, navigating the menus with a series of eye flicks, calling the mystery number she had been given earlier. The recipient of her call answers, an empty head silhouette taking the space in her vision where an image should be.

"Well?" the recipient barks bluntly via her personal, internal surround speakers. "Did he take the bait?" She glances around the apparently empty bathroom, unsure if the closed stall doors denote occupancy. She silently mouths her words

into the mirror, allowing her software to lip read them. They appear as overlaid subtitles in her vision.

He went for it, she tells the mystery man. I don't think he suspects a thing.

"He'd better not," the caller warns gruffly. "Tonight took some very careful organizing. We won't get such a good opportunity again anytime soon."

I need to raise my defenses. I'm wide open here, she complains. God only knows what he's doing to my augments. Then with disdain, I can feel his vile wetware sloshing around inside me.

"Just see this through. Let it play out and take its course". She looks at the mirror in derision, harshly miming the words.

Are you saying what I think you're saying?

"I'm just telling you to do your duty," he states coldly. "After all, it's not like you've not done it before." She furiously screws the lid back onto her lip-gloss and throws it into her bag.

And they say romance is dead.

"You know why you're here."

I'll do my best.

"I know you always do."

Good to know that I have some skills you value, she mouths in sarcastic contempt. She kills the call and strides to the door, pausing to smooth down her dress and smile, before pulling it open. Back at the bar, she can see him still sitting obediently where she left him. She widens the smile, giving the appearance of being pleased to see him, then manages to retain it while she walks over, laying her clutch bag on the barstool.

"You *are* even more irresistible," he tells her. She accepts the compliment with a girlish laugh, caressing his cheek and staring deeply into his eyes. Then she turns sharply and walks briskly away.

He rises from his stool and strides eagerly after her. He allows himself a self-congratulatory smile as a thought crosses his mind. *She thinks she's found the man of her dreams, but instead she's found the stuff of nightmares.*

He catches up to her, escorting her from the bar with a

guiding arm around her smooth, bare shoulder. She puts her hand over his.

"Mr. & Mrs. Ayckburn!" someone shouts from behind them. They ignore the voice and continue to walk across the bustling hotel lobby. A thin man wearing a hotel uniform steps in front of them, barring their path. He holds out her clutch bag. "You left this on your stool, Mrs. Ayckburn". She takes the bag from him with a smile,

"Thank you." She quickly accesses her implants to retrieve his name but finds nothing. Undeterred, she replies, "That's very kind of you." She waves the bag slightly.

"Don't mention it. Enjoy your stay with us." He smiles at her before turning slightly to nod knowingly at Martyn. "Have a good night." Before either of them can answer, he excuses himself and melts back into the busy lobby.

They glance at each other before laughing in exasperation, as their carefully crafted ruse collapses.

"Well that's ruined that then!" Martyn remarks in mild irritation. She laughs again, letting her head drop before throwing her arms around him in a loving embrace. He returns it warmly, fondly kissing the top of her head. They hold the clinch for a long moment, their little game unraveled. She pulls back and looks up at him.

"You were a bit harsh on the call, you know." An instant of confusion crosses his face before he realizes what she means and regains control.

"Well, I guess that's it all over," he says simply, changing the subject.

Her expression changes abruptly. Pulling herself from his hold, she steps back and takes his hand, leading him eagerly towards the elevators.

"No it's not!" she tells him. She stabs the lift call button. "I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to get into that lift, and when the lift doors close, we go back into our roles." She points a determined finger towards the brushed aluminium doors. "And we're not going to break character for the rest of the night." He beams an enthusiastic smile at her.

"You are crazy."

“Absolutely! But the moment the lift doors close, we’re back in the game!” The lift arrives and the door opens. She steps across the threshold, still holding his hand at arm’s length. “Are you in?” He laughs.

“Of course.” A moment later, he follows her in. She touches the button for her floor. They wait for the doors to close.

“What suggestion did you put in my head anyway?”

“What?” he asks absent mindedly, as if he’s not heard her.

“When we were roleplaying, you hacked me and put some thought, some suggestion in my mind.” She looks up at him inquisitively. “What was it? What did you make me think?”

The lift doors begin to slowly slide closed. He seems to ignore her, waiting for them to finally close and for them to drop back into their roles. Just as they are about to meet, he smirks before finally answering,

“I made you think you’re my wife.”

The doors snap tightly shut.

For more information about the stories in this book visit:

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Biography

Darren White
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Darren is a British writer. He was born in the North of England but he now lives in the South with his wife and daughter.

He grew up in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, in the heart of Robin Hood country. He attended University in Sheffield, where he read Computer Science, gaining an Honours Degree in 'Business Information Systems'. Post university he lived in West London for seven years. "Memes of Loss and Devotion" is his first collection of short stories.

Since the mid 1990's he has worked in the information technology industry. He is a Chartered Information Technology Professional, a Chartered Member of the British Computer Society and an Incorporated Engineer.

He lists his interests as popular physics, molecular biology, astro physics and technology. He notes wilyly that he knows just enough about all of them to be able to Google more information. He pursues a low carbohydrate lifestyle and also practices intermittent fasting.

He is a fan of Sunderland Association Football Club (of the English Premier League).

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Coming Soon

The Fomalhaut Plague

by darrenwhite

Mankind has successfully destroyed the only sentient race it has ever encountered - the former inhabitants of a desert world orbiting the bright, young star Fomalhaut. But why? The consequences of this act explode across time and space, destroying the lives of those caught in its terrible wake.

Three decades later, archaeologists studying the dead world, accidentally discover the weapon that destroyed the alien race, a battered box the size and shape of a child's coffin. News of its existence spreads. It is coveted by a dangerous socio-pathic criminal, who will stop at nothing to possess it. His assault on the ship transporting the device back to Earth has dire consequences for the lead xeno-archaeologist, her self-made industrial magnate lover, and the crew of the ship *The Solidrus*.

On a future Earth, the haunted survivors struggle to come to terms with their grief. As they rebuild broken lives, answers are found and a plan is hatched to transform the chaos into order.

Meanwhile, back in the Fomalhaut system, the true nature of the vile weapon is revealed!

Twenty-five light years, two star systems, one destiny.

***The Fomalhaut Plague* will be released in print & ebook in 2014.**

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