



EDITED BY **JONATHAN STRAHAN**

THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY OF THE YEAR

VOLUME EIGHT

INCLUDING STORIES BY **K J PARKER // NEIL GAIMAN
GEOFF RYMAN // GREG EGAN // M JOHN HARRISON
CAITLÍN R KIERNAN // E LILY YU // MADELINE ASHBY
TED CHIANG // JOE ABERCROMBIE // IAN MCDONALD**

THE BEST
SCIENCE FICTION AND
FANTASY OF THE YEAR
Volume Eight

Also Edited by Jonathan Strahan

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(2004 through 2007)

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Science Fiction: The Very Best of 2005

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— EDITED BY JONATHAN STRAHAN —

**THE BEST SCIENCE
FICTION & FANTASY
OF THE YEAR
VOLUME EIGHT**

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For Bill Schafer, friend and maker of wonderful books...

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INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Strahan

WELCOME TO *THE Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year*. Sixty-five years ago two readers, Everett Bleiler and Ted Dikty, assembled the first science fiction ‘best of the year’ annual. It collected a dozen stories from *Astounding Science Fiction*, *Planet Stories* and other magazines of the time, a number of which, like Ray Bradbury’s “Mars is Heaven!”, went on to become classics and are now part of the SF canon.

That book, *The Best Science Fiction Stories: 1949*, was the first annual snapshot of the SF field, and it appeared at an interesting time. Up until 1950 SF had been published almost exclusively in pulp magazines. Pulp magazines were published on cheap paper in enormous numbers, often with huge print runs. They were low-cost productions with bright, garish covers and lurid sensationalistic contents. The first SF pulp, Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*, appeared in 1926 and was followed by magazines with titles like *Startling Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Fantastic Adventures*, and, most notably, *Astounding Science Fiction*.

Campbell took on the editorship of *Astounding* in 1937 and under his guidance it became the flagship publication of the first ‘Golden Age of Science Fiction’. Campbell preferred and promoted a particular sort of writing: hard SF stories with linear narratives where protagonists, almost exclusively white males, solved problems or countered threats often using technological or engineering solutions. It was a period that established many of the most enduring tropes of the field, and it was almost exclusively told in short stories in pulp magazines.

By the time Bleiler & Dikty assembled their book, though, that era was almost over. World War 2 paper shortages had a devastating effect on pulp magazine production, and there seemed to be a push for SF to grow up and move on. Robert Silverberg argued in a recent essay for the Library of America that the true Golden Age of SF was the 1950s, saying that, “Until the decade of the fifties there was essentially no market for SF books at all” and that the 1950s saw “a spectacular outpouring of stories and novels that quickly surpassed both in quantity and quality the considerable achievement of the Campbellian golden age.”

Bleiler & Dikty’s annual, the first of six they’d produce covering the first half of the 1950s, was an important part of that second Golden Age. Their books, and books like them that began to appear through the decade, provided the useful service to readers of presenting a selection of the ‘best’ and hopefully most enjoyable new stories, while also making an argument for what good SF was and what it might be. I also suspect that they were a symptom of a new self-awareness in SF, as it began to look back critically on its short history and forward to what it might become.

Bleiler & Dikty were followed by Judith Merril, who between 1956 and 1967 edited a series of annuals that deliberately pushed the boundaries of what was considered to be SF, reading widely and presenting stories that promoted higher literary standards in a series that actively worked to break down the barriers between SF and the mainstream. Edmund Crispin performed an equally vital role at a similar time in the UK. They, in turn, were followed in the mid-1960s by Donald A. Wollheim and Terry Carr, Lester Del Rey, Arthur Saha, Harry Harrison, Brian Aldiss, and others.

These books, these annual reports from one reader to the SF world, became a feature of the field, entertaining and rewarding readers and both arguing for a particular kind of SF (or fantasy) and reflecting the SF of the day. The most significant best of the year annuals of the modern era, the enormous books edited by Gardner Dozois, define the period from the mid-1980s through to the end of the 1990s, and continue to the present day. Dozois, a fine and literary writer and editor, assembled a

series of books that were definitive and all-encompassing, but very much aimed at what he considered 'core SF'. David G. Hartwell, editor of the other major SF annual anthology series of the time, often discussed in his annuals how he was deliberately attempting to shape the SF field by presenting a selection of stories that clearly belonged within the bounds of genre.

When I began this series in 2007 I hoped to steer a path between Judith Merril and David G. Hartwell, to assemble a book that was broad and wide-ranging, but didn't lose sight of science fiction's history or its core. It's an awareness that I hope you will find reflected in this latest volume of *The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year* where stories like Geoff Ryman's "Rosary and Goldenstar", an alternate history that sits on the boundaries of SF sits alongside a space opera like Yoon Ha Lee's "Effigy Nights" and the networked future of Ramez Naam's "Water", and where a slipstream fantasy like M. John Harrison's "Cave and Julia" is in the same volume as a Neil Gaiman fairy tale retelling in "The Sleeper and the Spindle" or Priya Sharma's powerful "Rag and Bone". I have restricted this book to stories that I believe are definitely SF or fantasy in some way. That's the contract I have with you, the reader, so some stories that I loved this year aren't here because I couldn't convince myself they belonged (the best example of this is Karen Joy Fowler's wonderful "The Science of Herself" which has a science fictional worldview, but isn't really SF at all), while the stories you're about to encounter will hopefully delight and entertain while providing a view of what SF was about in 2013.

I'm often asked, was this a good year? The stories in this book come from a 365 day period during which thousands of stories appeared in magazines, in anthologies and collections, shoehorned into the back of novels and downloaded as giveaways, featured on websites and sent as email. So many stories were published, and often on such short turnarounds, that I was still being sent new ones as I sat down to write this introduction. Was it a good year? Well, it depended what you stumbled upon. I think you could have had a great reading year, or a pretty ordinary one, based on nothing more than luck. It was certainly an interesting one. I was encouraged by the way SF stories in books like *Twelve Tomorrows*, *An Aura of Familiarity*, and *We See a Different Tomorrow* engaged with the world in a way SF sometimes manages to avoid, while I felt the fantasy in books like *Rags and Bones* and *Once Upon a Time* helped to push the boundaries of fantasy. It was a good year for me, and I think you'll see that as you read through this book.

Were there stories I'd like to have included that aren't here? Certainly. A handful of stories eluded me for contractual and other reasons, and practical limitations meant that I avoided really long stories. If I could encourage you to seek out one story that's not in this book (if I could sneak one more in) it would be Caitlín R. Kiernan's extraordinary and hallucinatory SF novella "Black Helicopters", which deserves to be here and to be seen as one of the best stories of the year.

There is one final thing I should mention here. This year sees *The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year* moving to a new home. After seven years in sunny California, the book now comes to you from Solaris Books in what sounds like an almost perpetually rainy part of England. I'd like to thank Jonathan Oliver (a talented anthologist in his own right and, very happily for me, my editor), Ben Smith and the Solaris crew for making me and the series feel so welcome and for doing such an incredible job on it. I'd also like to thank you for picking up this book. If you're a long-time reader: welcome back. If you're new to the series: pull up a chair, I think you're going to enjoy yourself.

Jonathan Strahan
Perth, Western Australia
January 2013

SOME DESPERADO

Joe Abercrombie

Joe Abercrombie (www.joeabercrombie.com) attended Lancaster Royal Grammar School and Manchester University, where he studied psychology. He moved into television production before taking up a career as a freelance film editor. His first novel, *The Blade Itself*, was published in 2004, and was followed by sequels *Before They Are Hanged*, *Last Argument of Kings*, and stand-alone novels *Best Served Cold*, *The Heroes*, and *Red Country*. His next book is young adult fantasy novel *Half a King*. Joe lives in Bath with his wife, Lou, and his daughters, Grace and Eve, and his son Teddy. He still occasionally edits concerts and music festivals for TV, but spends most of his time writing edgy yet humorous fantasy novels.

SHY GAVE THE horse her heels, its forelegs buckled and, before she had a notion what was happening, she and her saddle had bid each other a sad farewell.

She was given a flailing instant aloft to consider the situation. Not a good one at a brief assay, and the impending earth gave her no time for a longer. She did her best to roll with the fall – as she tried do with most of her many misfortunes – but the ground soon uncurled her, gave her a fair roughing up and tossed her flopping into a patch of sun-shrivelled scrub.

Dust settled.

She stole a moment just to get some breath in. Then one to groan while the world stopped rolling. Then another to shift gingerly an arm and a leg, waiting for that sick jolt of pain that meant something was broke and her miserable shadow of a life would soon be lost in the dusk. She would've welcomed it, if it meant she could stretch out and not have to run no more. But the pain didn't come. Not outside of the usual compass, leastways. As far as her miserable shadow of a life went, she was still awaiting judgement.

Shy dragged herself up, scratched and scuffed, caked in dust and spitting out grit. She'd taken too many mouthfuls of sand the last few months but she'd a dismal premonition there'd be more. Her horse lay a few strides distant, one foamed-up flank heaving, forelegs black with blood. Neary's arrow had snagged it in the shoulder, not deep enough to kill or even slow it right off, but deep enough to make it bleed at a good pace. With her hard riding that had killed it just as dead as a shaft in the heart.

There'd been a time Shy had got attached to horses. A time – despite reckoning herself hard with people and being mostly right – she'd been uncommon soft about animals. But that time was a long time gone. There wasn't much soft on Shy these days, body or mind. So she left her mount to its final red-frothed breaths without the solace of her calming hand and ran for the town, tottering some at first but quickly warming to the exercise. At running she'd a heap of practice.

Town was perhaps an overstatement. It was six buildings and calling them buildings was being generous to two or three. All rough lumber and an entire stranger to straight angles, sun-baked, rain-peeled and dust-blasted, huddled about a dirt square and a crumbling well.

The biggest building had the look of tavern or brothel or trading post or more likely all three amalgamated. A rickety sign still clung to the boards above the doorway but the name had been rubbed by the wind to just a few pale streaks in the grain. *Nothing, nowhere*, was all its proclamation now. Up the steps two by two, bare feet making the old boards wheeze, thoughts boiling away at how she'd play it when she got inside, what truths she'd season with what lies for the most likely recipe.

There's men chasing me! Gulping breath in the doorway and doing her best to look beyond desperat

– no mighty effort of acting at that moment, or any occupying the last twelve months, indeed.

~~Three of the bastards!~~ Then – provided no one recognised her from all the bills for her arrest – ~~They tried to rob me!~~ A fact. No need to add she'd good and robbed the money herself from the new bank in Hommenaw in the company of those three worthies plus another since caught and hung by the authorities.

They killed my brother! They're drunk on blood! Her brother was safe at home where she wished she was and if her pursuers were drunk it would likely be on cheap spirits as usual, but she'd shriek it with that little warble in her throat. Shy could do quite a warble when she needed one, she'd practiced it 'till it was something to hear. She pictured the patrons springing to their feet in their eagerness to aid a woman in distress. *They shot my horse!* She had to admit it didn't seem overpowering likely that anyone hard-bitten enough to live out here would be getting into a sweat of chivalry but maybe fate would deal her a winning hand for once.

It had been known.

She blundered through the tavern's door, opening her mouth to serve up the tale, and stopped cold.

The place was empty.

Not just no one there but nothing, and for damn sure no winning hand. Not a twig of furniture in the bare common room. A narrow stairway and a balcony running across the left hand wall, doorways yawning empty upstairs. Chinks of light scattered where the rising sun was seeking out the many gaps in the splitting carpentry. Maybe just a lizard skittering away into the shadows – of which there was no shortage – and a bumper harvest of dust, greying every surface, drifted into every corner. Shy stood there a moment, just blinking, then dashed back out, along the rickety stoop and to the next building. When she shoved the door it dropped right off its rusted hinges.

This one hadn't even a roof. Hadn't even a floor. Just bare rafters with the careless, pinkish sky above, and bare joists with a stretch of dirt below every bit as desolate as the miles of dirt outside.

She saw it now, as she stepped back into the street with vision unhindered by hope. No glass in the windows, or wax-paper even. No rope by the crumbling well. No animals to be seen – aside from her own dead horse, that was, which only served to prove the point.

It was a dried-out corpse of a town, long since dead.

Shy stood in that forsaken place, up on the balls of her bare feet as though she was about to sprint off somewhere but lacked the destination, hugging herself with one arm while the fingers of the other hand fluttered and twitched at nothing, biting on her lip and sucking air fast and rasping through the little gap between her front teeth.

Even by recent standards, it was a low moment. But if she'd learned anything the last few months it was that things can always get lower. Looking back the way she'd come Shy saw the dust rising. Three little grey trails in the shimmer off the grey land.

“Oh, hell,” she whispered, and bit her lip harder. She pulled her eating knife from her belt and wiped the little splinter of metal on her dirty shirt, as though cleaning it might somehow settle the odds. Shy had been told she had a fertile imagination, but even so it was hard to picture a more feeble weapon. She'd have laughed if she hadn't been on the verge of weeping. She'd spent way too much time on the verge of weeping the last few months, now she thought about it.

How had it come to this?

A question for some jilted girl rather than an outlaw with four thousand marks offered, but still a question she was never done asking. Some desperado. She'd grown expert on the desperate part but the rest remained a mystery. The sorry truth was she knew full well how it came to this – the same way as always. One disaster following so hard on another she just bounced between 'em, ping-ponging about like a moth in a lantern. The second usual question followed hard on the first.

What the fuck now?

She sucked in her stomach – not that there was much to suck in these days – and dragged the bag out by the drawstrings, coins inside clicking together with that special sound only money makes. Two thousand marks in silver, give or take. You'd think a bank would hold a lot more – they told depositors they always had fifty thousand on hand – but it turns out you can't trust banks any more than bandits.

She dug her hand in, dragged free a fistful of coins and tossed money across the street, leaving it gleaming in the dust. She did it like she did most things these days – hardly knowing why. Maybe she valued her life a lot higher'n two thousand marks, even if no one else did. Maybe she hoped they'd just take the silver and leave her be, though what she'd do once she was left be in this corpse town – no horse, no food, no weapon – she hadn't thought out. Clearly she hadn't fixed up a whole plan, or not one that would hold too much water, leastways. Leaky planning had always been a problem of hers.

She sprinkled silver as if she was tossing seed on her mother's farm, miles and years and a dozen violent deaths away. Whoever would've thought she'd miss the place? Miss the bone-poor house and the broke-down barn and the fences that always needed mending. The stubborn cow that never gave milk and the stubborn well that never gave water and the stubborn soil that only weeds would thrive in. Her stubborn little sister and brother too. Even big, scarred, soft-headed Lamb. What Shy would've given now to hear her mother's shrill voice curse her out again. She sniffed hard, her nose hurting, her eyes stinging, and wiped 'em on the back of her frayed cuff. No time for tearful reminiscences. She could see three dark spots of riders now beneath those three inevitable dust trails. She flung the empty bag away, ran back to the tavern and –

“Ah!” She hopped over the threshold, bare sole of her foot torn on a loose nail head. The world's nothing but a mean bully, that's a fact. Even when you've big misfortunes threatening to drop on your head, small ones still take every chance to prick your toes. How she wished she'd got the chance to grab her boots. Just to keep a shred of dignity. But she had what she had, and neither boots nor dignity were on the list, and a hundred big wishes weren't worth one little fact – as Lamb used boringly to drone at her whenever she cursed him and her mother and her lot in life and swore she'd be gone in the morning.

Shy remembered how she'd been, then, and wished she had the chance now to punch her earlier self in the face. But she could punch herself in the face when she got out of this.

She'd a procession of other willing fists to weather first.

She hurried up the stairs, limping a little and cursing a lot. When she reached the top she saw she'd left bloody toe prints on every other one. She was working up to feeling pretty damn low about that glistening trail leading right to the end of her leg, when something like an idea came trickling through the panic.

She paced down the balcony, making sure to press her bloody foot firm to the boards, and turned into an abandoned room at the end. Then she held her foot up, gripping it hard with one hand to stop the bleeding, and hopped back the way she'd come and through the first doorway, near the top of the steps, pressing herself into the shadows inside.

A pitiful effort, doubtless. As pitiful as her bare feet and her eating knife and her two thousand marks haul and her big dream of making it back home to the shit-hole she'd had the big dream of leaving. Small chance those three bastards would fall for that, even stupid as they were. But what else could she do?

When you're down to small stakes you have to play long odds.

Her own breath was her only company, echoing in the emptiness, hard on the out, ragged on the in, almost painful down her throat. The breath of someone scared near the point of an involuntary shitting and all out of ideas. She just couldn't see her way to the other side of this. She ever made it back to

that farm she'd jump out of bed every morning she woke alive and do a little dance, and give her mother a kiss for every cuss, and never snap at her sister or mock Lamb again for being a coward. She promised it, then wished she was the sort who kept promises.

She heard horses outside, crept to the one window with half a view of the street, and peered down as gingerly as if she was peering into a bucket of scorpions.

They were here.

Neary wore that dirty old blanket cinched in at the waist with twine, his greasy hair sticking up at angles, reins in one hand and the bow he'd shot Shy's horse with in the other, blade of the heavy axe hanging at his belt as carefully cleaned as the rest of his repugnant person was beyond neglect. Dodd had his battered hat pulled low, sitting his saddle with that round-shouldered cringe he always had around his brother, like a puppy expecting a slap. Shy would have liked to give the faithless fool a slap right then. A slap for starters. Then there was Jeg, sitting up tall as a lord in that long red coat of his, dirt-fringed tails spread out over his big horse's rump, hungry sneer on his face as he scanned the buildings, that tall hat which he thought made him look quite the personage poking off his head slightly crooked, like the chimney from a burned-out farmstead.

Dodd pointed to the coins scattered across the dirt around the well, a couple of 'em winking with the sun. "She left the money."

"Seems so," said Jeg, voice hard as his brother's was soft.

She watched them get down and hitch their mounts. No hurry to it. Like they were dusting themselves off after a jaunt of a ride and looking forward to a nice little evening among cultured company. They'd no need to hurry. They knew she was here, and they knew she was going nowhere, and they knew she was getting no help, and so did she.

"Bastards," Shy whispered, cursing the day she ever took up with them. But you have to take up with someone, don't you? And you can only pick from what's on offer.

Jeg stretched his back, took a long sniff and a comfortable spit, then drew his sword. That curved cavalry sword he was so proud of with the clever-arsed basketwork, which he said he'd won in a duel with a Union officer but Shy knew he'd stolen, along with the best part of everything else he'd ever owned. How she'd mocked him about that stupid sword. She wouldn't have minded having it to hand now, though, and him with only her eating knife.

"Smoke!" bellowed Jeg, and Shy winced. She'd no idea who'd thought that name up for her. Some wag had lettered it on the bills for her arrest and now everyone used it. On account of her tendency to vanish like smoke, maybe. Though it could also have been on account of her tendencies to stink like shit and stick in folks' throats, and drift with the wind.

"Get out here, Smoke!" Jeg's voice clapped off the dead fronts of the buildings and Shy shrank a little further into the darkness. "Get out here, and we won't hurt you too bad when we find you!"

So much for taking the money and going. They wanted the price on her too. She pressed her tongue into the gap between her teeth and mouthed, "cocksuckers." There's a certain kind of man, the more you give him, the more he'll take.

"We'll have to go and get her," she heard Neary say in the stillness.

"Aye."

"I told you we'd have to go and get her."

"You must be pissing your pants with joy over the outcome, then, eh?"

"Said we'd have to get her."

"So stop pointing it out and get it done."

Dodd's wheedling voice. "Look, the money's here, we could just scrape this up and get off, there ain't no need to –"

"Did you and I really spring from between the same set o' legs?" sneered Jeg at his brother. "You a

the stupidest bastard.”

“Stupidest,” said Neary.

“You think I’m leaving four thousand marks for the crows?” said Jeg. “You scrape that up, Dodd, we’ll break the mare.”

“Where do you reckon she is?” asked Neary.

“I thought you was the big tracker?”

“Out in the wild, but we ain’t in the wild.”

Jeg cocked an eyebrow at the empty shacks. “You’d call this the highest extent of civilisation, would you?”

They looked at each other a moment, dust blowing up around their legs, then settling again.

“She’s here somewhere,” said Neary.

“You think? Good thing I got the self-described sharpest eyes west of the mountains with me, so I don’t miss her dead horse ten fucking strides away. Yes, she’s here somewhere.”

“Where do you reckon?” asked Neary.

“Where would you be?”

Neary looked about the buildings and Shy jerked out of the way as his narrowed eyes darted over the tavern.

“In that one, I reckon, but I ain’t her.”

“Course you ain’t fucking her. You know how I can tell? You got bigger tits and less sense. If you was her I wouldn’t have to fucking look for her now, would I?”

Another silence, another dusty gust. “Guess not,” said Neary.

Jeg took his tall hat off, scrubbed at his sweaty hair with his fingernails, and jammed it back on at an angle. “You look in there, I’ll try the one next to it, but don’t kill the bitch, eh? That’ll half the reward.”

Shy eased back into the shadows, feeling the sweat tickling under her shirt. To be caught in this worthless arsehole of a place. By these worthless bastards. In bare feet. She didn’t deserve this. All she’d wanted was to be somebody worth speaking of. To not be nothing, forgotten the day of her death. Now she saw that there’s a sharp balance between too little excitement and a huge helping too much. But like most of her lame-legged epiphanies, it had dawned a year too late.

She sucked air through the little gap between her teeth as she heard Neary creaking across the boards in the common room, maybe just the metal rattle of that big axe. She was shivering all over. Felt so weak of a sudden she could hardly hold the knife up, let alone imagine swinging it. Maybe it was time to give up. Toss the knife out the door and say, “I’m coming out! I’ll be no trouble! You win!” Smile and nod and thank ’em for their betrayal and their kind consideration when they kicked the shit out of her or horsewhipped her or broke her legs and whatever else amused them on the way to her hanging.

She’d seen her share of those and never relished the spectacle. Standing there tied while they read your name and your crime, hoping for some last reprieve that wouldn’t come while the noose was drawn tight, sobbing for mercy or hurling your curses and neither making the slightest hair of difference. Kicking at nothing, tongue stuck out while you shat yourself for the amusement of scum n better’n you. She pictured Jeg and Neary, up front in the grinning crowd as they watched her do the thief’s dance at rope’s end. Probably arrayed in even more ridiculous clothes secured with the reward money.

“Fuck them,” she mouthed at the darkness, lips curling back in a snarl as she heard Neary’s foot on the bottom step.

She had a hell of a contrary streak, did Shy. From when she was a tot, when someone told her how things would be, she started thinking on how she’d make ’em otherwise. Her mother had always called her mule stubborn, and blamed it on her Ghost blood. “That’s your damn Ghost blood,” as though

being quarter savage had been Shy's own choice rather than on account of her mother picking out a half-Ghost wanderer to lie with who turned out = no crashing surprise = to be a no-good drunk.

Shy would be fighting. No doubt she'd be losing, but she'd be fighting. She'd make those bastards kill her, and at least rob 'em of half the reward. Might not expect such thoughts as those to steady your hand, but they did hers. The little knife still shook, but now from how hard she was gripping it.

For a man who proclaimed himself the great tracker, Neary had some trouble keeping quiet. She heard the breath in his nose as he paused at the top of the steps, close enough to touch if it hadn't been for the plank wall between them.

A board groaned as he shifted his weight and Shy's whole body tensed, every hair twitching up. Then she saw him – not darting through the doorway at her, axe in his fist and murder in his eyes – but creeping off down the balcony after the bait of bloody footsteps, drawn bow pointed exactly the wrong way.

When she was given a gift, Shy had always believed in grabbing it with both hands rather than thinking on how to say thank you. She dashed at Neary's back, teeth bared and a low growl ripping at her throat. His head whipped around, whites of his eyes showing and the bow following after, head of the arrow glinting with such light as found that abandoned place.

She ducked low and caught him around the legs, shoulder driving hard into his thigh and making him grunt, her hand finding her wrist and clamping tight under Neary's arse, her nose suddenly full of the horse and sour sweat stink of him. The bowstring went but Shy was already straightening, snarling, screaming, bursting up and – big man though he was – she hoisted Neary right over the rail as neat as she used to hoist a sack of grain on her mother's farm.

He hung in the air a moment, mouth and eyes wide with shock, then he plummeted with a breathy whoop and crashed through the boards down below.

Shy blinked, hardly able to believe it. Her scalp was burning and she touched a finger to it, half-expecting to feel the arrow stuck right in her brains, but she turned and saw it was in the wall behind her, a considerably happier outcome from her standpoint. Blood though, sticky in her hair, tickling at her forehead. Maybe the lath of the bow scratched her. Get that bow, she'd have a chance. She made a step towards the stairs, then stopped dead. Jeg was in the doorway, his sword a long, black curve against the sun-glare street.

"Smoke!" he roared, and she was off down the balcony like a rabbit, following her own trail of bloody footprints to nowhere, hearing Jeg's heavy boots clomping towards the stairs. She hit the door at the end full tilt with her shoulder and burst into the light, out onto another balcony behind the building. Up onto the low rail with one bare foot – better to just go with her contrary streak and hope somehow carried her through than to pause for thought – and she jumped. Flung herself writhing at a ramshackle balcony on the building across the narrow lane, as if flapping her hands and feet like she was having a fit might carry her further.

She caught the rail, wood smashing her in the ribs, slipped down, groaning, clawing for a grip, fought desperately to drag herself up and over, felt something give –

And with a groan of tortured wood the whole weather-blasted thing tore from the side of the building.

Again, Shy was given a flailing instant aloft to consider the situation. Again not good, at a brief assay. She was just starting to wail when her old enemy the ground caught up with her – as the ground always will – folded up her left leg, span her over then smashed her in the side and drove her wind right out.

Shy coughed, then moaned, then spat more grit. That she had been right about her earlier sandy mouth not being her last was scant comfort. She saw Jeg standing on the balcony where she'd jumped. He pushed his hat back and gave a chuckle, then ducked back inside.

She still had a piece of the rail in her fist, well rotted through. A little like her hopes. She tossed it away as she rolled over, waiting again for that sick pain that told her she was done. Again it didn't come. She could move. She worked her feet around and guessed she could stand. But she thought she might leave that for now. Chances were she'd only get to do it one more time.

She floundered clear of the tangle of broken wood against the wall, her shadow stretching out towards the doorway, groaning with pain as she heard Jeg's heavy footsteps inside. She started wriggling back on her arse and her elbows, dragging one leg after, the little knife blade hidden up behind her wrist, her other fist clutching at the dirt.

"Where are you off to?" Jeg ducked under the low lintel and into the lane. He was a big man, but he looked a giant right then. Half a head taller than Shy, even if she'd been standing, and probably not much short of twice her weight, even if she'd eaten that day. He strutted over, tongue wedged into his lower lip so it bulged out, heavy sword loose in his hand, relishing his big moment.

"Pulled a neat trick on Neary, eh?" He pushed the brim of his hat up a little to show the tan mark across his forehead. "You're stronger'n you look. That boy's so dumb he could've fallen without the help, though. You'll be pulling no tricks on me."

They'd see about that, but she'd let her knife say it for her. Even a little knife can be a damned eloquent piece of metal if you stick it in the right place. She scrambled back, kicking up dust, making it look like she was trying to push herself up then sagging back with a whimper as her left leg took her weight. Looking badly hurt was taking no great effort of acting. She could feel blood creeping from her hair and tickling her forehead. Jeg stepped out of the shadow and the low sun shone in his face, making him squint. Just the way she wanted it.

"Still remember the day I first put eyes on you," he went on, loving the sound of his own bleating. "Dodd come to me, all excited, and said he met Smoke, her whose killer's face is on all them bills up near Rostod, four thousand marks offered for her capture. The tales they tell on you!" He gave a whoop and she scrambled back again, working that left leg underneath her, making sure it would work when she needed it. "You'd think you was a demon with two swords to a hand the way they breathe your name. Picture my fucking *disappointment* when I find you ain't naught but a scared girl with gappy teeth and a powerful smell o' piss about her." As if Jeg smelled of summer meadows. He took another step forward, reaching out for her with one big hand. "Now don't scratch, you're worth more to me alive. I don't want to –"

She flung the dirt with her left hand as she shoved up hard with her right, coming onto her feet. He twisted his head away, snarling as the dust showered across his face. He swung blind as she darted at him low and the sword whipped over her head, wind of it snatching at her hair, weight of it turning him sideways. She caught his flapping coat tail in her left hand and sank her eating knife into his sword-shoulder with the other.

He gave a strangled grunt as she pulled the knife clear and stabbed at him again, blade ripping open the arm of his coat and the arm inside it too, almost cutting into her own leg. She was bringing up the knife again when his fist crunched into the side of her mouth and sent her reeling, bare feet wrestling with the dirt. She caught hold of the corner of the building and hung there for a moment, trying to shake the light from her skull. She saw Jeg a pace or two off, bared teeth frothy with spit as he tried to fumble the sword from his dangling right hand into his left, fingers tangled with the fancy brass basketwork.

When things were moving fast Shy had a knack for just doing, without thoughts of mercy, or thoughts of outcomes, or thoughts of much at all. That was what had kept her alive through all this shit. And what had landed her in it in the first place, for that matter. Ain't many blessings aren't mixed blessings, once you got to live with them, and she'd a curse for thinking too much after the action, but that was another story. If Jeg got a good grip on that sword she was dead, simple as that, s

before she'd quite stopped the street spinning she charged at him again. He tried to free an arm but she managed to catch it with her clawing left hand, pressing up against him, holding herself steady by his coat as she punched wildly with the knife – in his gut, in his ribs, in his ribs again, her snarling at him and him grunting at her with every thump of the blade, the grip slippery in her aching hand.

He got hold of her shirt, stitches tearing as the arm half-ripped off, tried to shove her away as she stabbed him again but there was no strength in it, only sent her back a step. Her head was clearing now and she kept her balance but Jeg stumbled and dropped on one knee. She lifted the knife up high in both hands and drove it right down on that stupid hat, squashing it flat, leaving the blade buried to the handle in the top of Jeg's head.

She staggered back, expecting him just to pitch on his face. Instead he lurched up suddenly like a camel she'd once seen at a fair, brim of his hat jammed down over his eyes to the bridge of his nose and the knife handle jutting straight up.

"Where you gone?" The words all mangled as if his mouth was full of gravel. "Smoke?" He lurched one way then the other. "Smoke?" He shuffled at her, kicking up dust, sword dangling from his bloody right hand, point scratching grooves in the dust around his feet. He reached up with his left, fingers stretched out stiff but the wrist all floppy, started prodding at his hat like he had something in his eye and wanted to wipe it clear.

"Shmoke?" One side of his face was twitching, shuddering, fluttering in a most unnatural way. Or maybe it was natural enough for a man with a knife lodged through his brains. "Thmoke?" There was blood dripping from the bent brim of his hat, leaving red streaks down his cheek, shirt half way soaked with it, but he kept coming on, bloody right arm jerking, hilt of his sword rattling against his leg. "Thmoe?" She backed away, staring, her own hands limp and all her skin prickling, until her back hit the wall behind her. "Thoe?"

"Shut your mouth!" And she dived at him with both palms, shoving him over backwards, sword bouncing from his hand, bloody hat still pinned to his head with her knife. He slowly rolled over, onto his face, right arm flopping. He slid his other hand underneath his shoulder as though he'd push himself up.

"Oh," he muttered into the dust. Then he was still.

Shy slowly turned her head and spat blood. Too many mouthfuls of blood the last few months. Her eyes were wet and she wiped them on the back of her trembling hand. Couldn't believe what had happened. Hardly seemed she'd had any part in it. A nightmare she was due to wake from. She pressed her eyes shut, and opened them, and there he still lay.

She snatched in a breath and blew it out hard, dashed spit from her lip, blood from her forehead, caught another breath and forced it free. Then she gathered up Jeg's sword, gritting her teeth against the urge to spew, rising in waves along with the thumping pain in the side of her face. Shit but she wanted to sit down. Just stop. But she made herself turn away. Forced herself up to the back door of the tavern. The one Jeg had come through, still alive, a few moments before. Takes a lifetime of hard work to make a man. Only takes a few moments to end one.

Neary had dragged himself out of the hole his fall had put through the floorboards, clutching at his bloody trouser leg and looking quite put out about it. "Did you catch that fucking bitch?" he asked, squinting towards the doorway.

"Oh, no doubt."

His eyes went wide and he tried to drag himself towards his bow, not far out of reach, whimpering at the way. She hefted Jeg's big sword as she got close and Neary turned over, eyes wide with terror, holding up one desperate arm. She hit it full-blooded with the flat of the sword and he moaned, clutching it to his chest. Then she hit him across the side of the head and rolled him over, blubbering into the boards. Then she padded past him, sliding the sword through her belt, picked up the bow and

dragged some arrows from his quiver. She made for the door, stringing one as she went, and peered out into the street.

Dodd was still scraping coins from the dust and into the bag, working his way towards the well. Insensible to the fates of his two companions. Not as surprising as you might suppose. If one word summed up Dodd, it was insensible.

She padded down the steps of the tavern, near to their edges where they were less likely to give a warning creak, drawing the bow halfway and taking a good aim on Dodd, bent over in the dust with his back to her, dark sweat patch down the middle of his shirt. She gave some long, hard consideration to making that sweat patch the bull's eye and shooting him in the back right there. But killing a man is easy, especially after hard consideration. She watched him pick up the last coin and drop it in the bag, then stand, pulling the drawstrings, then turn, smiling. "I got the –"

They stayed there a while. He crouched in the dusty street, bag of silver in one hand, uncertain smile lit up in the sun, but his eyes looking decidedly scared in the shadow of his cheap hat. She on the bottom step of the tavern – bloody bare feet, bloody split mouth, bloody hair plastered across her bloody forehead – but the bow good and steady.

He licked his lips, swallowed, then licked them again. "Where's Neary?"

"In a bad way." She was surprised by the iron in her voice. Sounded like someone she didn't even know. Smoke's voice, maybe.

"Where's my brother?"

"In a worse."

Dodd swallowed, sweaty neck shifting, starting to ease gently backwards. "You kill him?"

"Forget about them two and stop still."

"Look, Shy, you ain't going to shoot me, are you? Not after all we been through. You ain't going to shoot. Not me. Are you?" His voice was rising higher and higher, but still he edged back towards the well. "I didn't want this. It weren't my idea!"

"Course not. You need to think to have an idea and you ain't up to it. You just went along. Even if it happened to mean me getting hung."

"Now look, Shy –"

"Stop still I said." She drew the bow all the way, string cutting tight into her bloody fingers. "You fucking deaf, boy?"

"Look, Shy, let's just talk this out, eh? Just talk." He held his trembly palm up like that might stop an arrow, his pale blue eyes were fixed on her, and suddenly she got a memory rise up of the first time she met him, leaning back against the livery, smiling free and easy, none too clever but plenty of fun. She'd had a profound lack of fun in her life since she'd left home. You'd never have thought she left home to find it.

"I know I done wrong, but... I'm an idiot." And he tried out a smile, no steadier than his palm. He'd been worth a smile or two, Dodd, at least to begin with, and though no artist of a lover had kept the bed warm, which was something, and made her feel as if she weren't on her own on one side with the whole rest of the world on the other, which was something more.

"Stop still," she said, but more softly now.

"You ain't going to shoot me." Still he was edging back towards the well. "It's me, right? Me. Dodd. Just don't shoot me, now." Still going. "What I'm going to do is –"

She shot him.

It's a strange thing about a bow. Stringing it, and drawing it, and nocking the arrow, and taking your aim – all that takes effort, and skill, and a decision. Letting go the string is nothing. You just stop holding it. In fact, once you've got it drawn and aimed it's easier to let fly than not to.

Dodd was less than a dozen strides distant, and the shaft flitted across the space between them,

missed his hand by a whisker and stuck silently into his chest. Surprised her, the lack of a sound. But then flesh is soft. Specially in comparison to an arrow-head. Dodd took one more wobbly pace, like he hadn't quite caught up with being arrow-stuck yet, his eyes going very wide. Then he blinked down at the shaft.

"You shot me," he whispered, and he sank to his knees, blood already spreading out into his shirt in a dark oval.

"Didn't I bloody warn you!" She flung the bow down, suddenly furious with him and with the bow too.

He stared at her. "But I didn't think you'd do it."

She stared back. "Neither did I." A silent moment, and the wind blew up one more time and stirred the dust around them. "Sorry."

"Sorry?" he croaked.

Might've been the stupidest thing she'd ever said, and that with some fierce competition, but what else could she say? No words were going to take that arrow out. She gave half a shrug. "I guess."

Dodd winced, hefting the silver in one hand, turning towards the well. Shy's mouth dropped open, and she took off running as he toppled sideways, hauling the bag into the air. It turned over and over, curving up and starting to fall, drawstrings flapping, Shy's clutching hand straining for it as she sprinted, lunged, fell...

She grunted as her sore ribs slammed into the wall around the well, right arm darting down into the darkness. For a moment she thought she was going in after the bag – which would probably have been a fitting conclusion – then her knees came back down on the dirt outside.

She had it by one of the bottom corners, loose canvas clutched by broken nails, drawstrings dangling as dirt and bits of loose stone filtered down around it.

Shy smiled. For the first time that day. That month, maybe.

Then the bag came open.

Coins tumbled into the darkness in a twinkling shower, silver pinging and rattling from the earthy walls, disappearing into the inky nothingness, and silence.

She straightened up, numb.

She backed away slowly from the well, hugging herself with one hand while the empty bag hung from the other.

She looked over at Dodd, lying on his back with the arrow sticking straight up from his chest, his eyes fixed on her, his ribs going fast. She heard his shallow breaths slow, then stop.

Shy stood there a moment, then doubled over and blew puke onto the ground. Not much of it, since she'd eaten nothing that day, but her guts clenched up hard, and made sure she retched up what there was. She shook so bad she thought she was going to fall, hands on her knees, sniffing bile from her nose and spluttering it out.

Damn but her ribs hurt. Her arm. Her leg. Her face. So many scrapes, twists and bruises she could hardly tell one from another, her whole body was one overpowering fucking throb.

Her eyes crawled over to Dodd's corpse, she felt another wave of sickness and forced them away, over to the horizon, fixing them on that shimmering line of nothing.

Not nothing.

There was dust rising there. She wiped her face on her ripped sleeve one more time, so filthy now that it was as like to make her dirtier as cleaner. She straightened, squinting into the distance, hardly able to believe it. Riders. No doubt. A good way off, but as many as a dozen.

"Oh, hell," she whispered, and bit her lip. Things kept going this way she'd soon have chewed right through the bloody thing. "Oh, hell!" And Shy put her hands over her eyes and squeezed them shut and hid in self-inflicted darkness in the desperate hope she might have somehow been mistaken. Would

hardly have been her first mistake, would it?

~~But when she took her hands away the dust was still there. The world's a mean bully, alright, and the~~
lower down you are the more it delights in kicking you. Shy put her hands on her hips, arched her back
and screamed up at the sky, the word drawn out as long as her sore lungs would allow.

“Fuck!”

The echoes clapped from the buildings and died a quick death. No answer came. Perhaps the faint
droning of a fly already showing some interest in Dodd. Neary's horse eyed her for a moment then
looked away, profoundly unimpressed. Now Shy had a sore throat to add to her woes. She was obliged
to ask herself the usual questions.

What the fuck now?

She clenched her teeth as she hauled Dodd's boots off and sat in the dust beside him to pull them on.
Not the first time they'd stretched out together in the dirt, him and her. First time with him dead,
though. His boots were way too loose on her, but a long stride better than no boots at all. She clomped
back into the tavern in them.

Neary was making some pitiable groans as he struggled to get up. Shy kicked him in the face and
down onto his back, plucked the rest of the arrows from his quiver and took his heavy belt-knife too.
Back out into the sun and she picked up the bow, jammed Dodd's hat onto her head, also somewhat off
the roomy side but at least offering some shade as the sun got up. Then she dragged the three horses
together and roped them into a string – quite a ticklish operation since Jeg's big stallion was a mean
bastard and seemed determined to kick her brains out.

When she'd got it done she frowned off towards those dust trails. They were headed for the town
alright, and fast. With a better look she reckoned on about nine or ten, which was two or three better
than twelve but still an almighty inconvenience.

Bank agents after the stolen money. Bounty hunters looking to collect her price. Other outlaws got
wind of a score. A score that was currently in the bottom of a well, as it went. Could be anyone. Shy
had an uncanny knack for making enemies. She found she'd looked over at Dodd, face down in the
dust with his bare feet limp behind him. The only thing she had worse luck with was friends.

How had it come to this?

She shook her head, spat through the little gap between her front teeth and hauled herself up into the
saddle of Dodd's horse. She faced it away from those impending dust clouds, toward which quarter of
the compass she knew not.

Shy gave the horse her heels.

ZERO FOR CONDUCT

Greg Egan

Greg Egan (www.gregegan.net) published his first story in 1983, and followed it with twelve novels, six short story collections, and more than fifty short stories. During the early 1990s Egan published a body of short fiction – mostly hard science fiction focused on mathematical and quantum ontological themes – that established him as one of the most important writers working in the field. His work has won the Hugo, John W Campbell Memorial, Locus, Aurealis, Ditmar, and Seiun awards. His latest book is the novel *The Arrows of Time*, which concludes the “Orthogonal” trilogy.

1

LATIFA STARTED THE web page loading, then went to make tea. The proxy she used convinced her internet provider that every page she accessed belonged to a compendium of pious aphorisms from uncontroversial octogenarians in Qom, while to the sites themselves she appeared to be a peripatetic American, logging on from Pittsburgh one day and Kansas City the next. Between the sanctions against her true host country and that host’s paranoia over the most innocent interactions with the West, these precautions were essential. But they slowed down her already sluggish connection so effectively that she might as well have been rehearsing for a flight to Mars.

The sound of boiling water offered a brief respite from the televised football match blaring down from the apartment above. “Two nil in favour of the Black Pearls, with fifteen minutes left to play! It’s looking like victory for the home team here in Samen Stadium!” When the tea had brewed, she served it in a small glass for her grandfather to sip through a piece of hard sugar clenched between his teeth. Latifa sat with him for a while, but he was listening to the shortwave radio, straining to hear Kabul through the hum of interference and the breathless commentary coming through the ceiling, and he barely noticed when she left.

Back in her room after fifteen minutes, she found the scratched screen of the laptop glistening with a dozen shiny ball-and-stick models of organic molecules. Reading the colour coding of the atoms was second nature to her by now: white for hydrogen, black for carbon, cherry red for oxygen, azure for nitrogen. Here and there a yellow sulfur atom or a green chlorine stood out, like a chickpea in a barrel of candy.

All the molecules that the ChemFactor page had assigned to her were nameless – unless you counted the formal structural descriptions full of *cis*-1,3-dimethyl-this and 2,5-di-*tert*-butyl-that – and Latifa had no idea which, if any of them, had actually been synthesised in a lab somewhere. Perhaps a few of them were impossible beasts, chimeras cranked out by the software’s mindless permutations, destined to be completely unstable in reality. If she made an effort, she could probably weed some of them out. But that could wait until she’d narrowed down the list of candidates, eliminating the molecules with no real chance of binding strongly to the target.

The target this time was an oligosaccharide, a carbohydrate with nine rings arranged in pleasingly asymmetric tiers, like a small child’s attempt to build a shoe rack. Helpfully, the ChemFactor page kept it fixed on the screen as Latifa scrolled up and down through the long catalogue of its potential suitors.

She trusted the software to have made some sensible choices already, on geometric grounds: all of these molecules ought to be able to nestle reasonably snugly against the target. In principle she could

rotate the ball-and-stick models any way she liked, and slide the target into the same view to assess the prospective fit, but in practice that made the laptop's graphics card choke. So she'd learnt to manipulate the structures in her head, to picture the encounter without fretting too much about precise angles and distances. Molecules weren't rigid, and if the interaction with the target liberated enough energy the participants could stretch or flex a little to accommodate each other. There were rigorous calculations that could predict the upshot of all that give and take, but the equations could not be solved quickly or easily. So ChemFactor invited people to offer their hunches. Newcomers guessed no better than random, and many players' hit rates failed to rise above statistical noise. But some people acquired a feel for the task, learning from their victories and mistakes – even if they couldn't put their private algorithms into words.

Latifa didn't over-think the puzzle, and in twenty minutes she'd made her choice. She clicked the button beside her selection and confirmed it, satisfied that she'd done her best. After three years in the game she'd proved to be a born chemical match-maker, but she didn't want it going to her head. Whatever lay behind her well-judged guesses, it could only be a matter of time before the software itself learnt to codify all the same rules. The truth was, the more successful she became, the faster she'd be heading for obsolescence. She needed to make the most of her talent while it still counted.

LATIFA SPENT TWO hours on her homework, then a call came from her cousin Fashard in Kandahar. She went out onto the balcony where the phone could get a better signal.

"How is your grandfather?" he asked.

"He's fine. I'll ask him to call you back tomorrow." Her grandfather had given up on the shortwave and gone to bed. "How are things there?"

"The kids have all come down with something," Fashard reported. "And the power's been off for the last two days."

"*Two days?*" Latifa felt for her young cousins, sweltering and feverish without even a fan. "You should get a generator."

"Ha! I could get ten; people are practically giving them away."

"Why?"

"The price of diesel's gone through the roof," Fashard explained. "Blackouts or not, no one can afford to run them."

Latifa looked out at the lights of Mashhad. There was nothing glamorous about the concrete tower blocks around her, but the one thing Iran didn't lack was electricity. Kandahar should have been well supplied by the Kajaki Dam, but two of the three turbines in the hydroelectric plant had been out of service for more than a year, and the drought had made it even harder for the remaining turbine to meet demand.

"What about the shop?" she asked.

"Pedalling the sewing machine keeps me fit," Fashard joked.

"I wish I could do something."

"Things are hard for everyone," Fashard said stoically. "But we'll be all right; people always need clothes. You just concentrate on your studies."

Latifa tried to think of some news to cheer him up. "Amir said he's planning to come home this Eid." Her brother had made no firm promises, but she couldn't believe he'd spend the holidays away from his family for a second year in a row.

"Inshallah," Fashard replied. "He should book the ticket early though, or he'll never get a seat."

"I'll remind him."

There was no response; the connection had cut out. Latifa tried calling back but all she got was a

sequence of strange beeps, as if the phone tower was too flustered to offer up its usual recorded apologies.

She tidied the kitchen then lay in bed. It was hard to fall asleep when her thoughts cycled endlessly through the same inventory of troubles, but sometime after midnight she managed to break the loop and tumble into blackness.

“AFGHANI SLUT,” GHAMZEH whispered, leaning against Latifa and pinching her arm through the fabric of her manteau.

“Let go of me,” Latifa pleaded. She was pressed against her locker, she couldn’t pull away. Ghamzeh turned her face towards her, smiling, as if they were friends exchanging gossip. Other students walked past, averting their eyes.

“I’m getting tired of the smell of you,” Ghamzeh complained. “You’re stinking up the whole city. You should go back home to your little mud hut.”

Latifa’s skin tingled between the girl’s blunt talons, warmed by broken blood vessels, numbed by clamped nerves. It would be satisfying to lash out with her fists and free herself, but she knew that could only end badly.

“Did they have soap in your village?” Ghamzeh wondered. “Did they have underwear? All these things must have been so strange to you, when you arrived in civilisation.”

Latifa waited in silence. Arguing only prolonged the torment.

“Too stuck up to have a conversation?” Ghamzeh released her arm and began to move away, but she stopped to give Latifa a parting smile. “You think you’re impressing the teachers when you give them all the answers they want? Don’t fool yourself, slut. They know you’re just an animal doing circus tricks.”

WHEN LATIFA HAD cleared away the dinner plates, her grandfather asked her about school.

“You’re working hard?” he pressed her, cross-legged on the floor with a cushion at his back.

“Earning their respect?”

“Yes.”

“And your heart is still set on engineering?” He sounded doubtful, as if for him the word could only conjure up images of rough men covered in machine oil.

“Chemical engineering,” she corrected him gently. “I’m getting good grades in chemistry, and there’d be plenty of jobs in it.”

“After five more years. After university.”

“Yes.” Latifa looked away. Half the money Amir sent back from Dubai was already going on her school fees. Her brother was twenty-two; no one could expect him to spend another five years without marrying.

“You should get on with your studies then.” Her grandfather waved her away amiably, then reached over for the radio.

In her room, Latifa switched on the laptop before opening her history book, but she kept her eyes on the screen until she’d read half the chapter on the Sassanid kings. When she finally gave herself a break the ChemFactor site had loaded, and she’d been logged in automatically, by cookie.

A yellow icon of a stylised envelope was flashing at the top of the page. A fellow player she’d never heard of called “jesse409” had left her a message, congratulating “PhaseChangeGirl” on a cumulative score that had just crossed twenty thousand. Latifa’s true score was far higher than that, but she’d changed her identity and rejoined the game from scratch five times so far, lest she come to the notice

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