

RETURN TO THE RED CASTLE

Ray Nayler

Ray Nayler's debut as a writer of science fiction was in the pages of *Asimov's* in 2015 with the story "Mutability." Since then, his work has appeared here several times, as well as in *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *F&SF*, and *Nightmare*. Ray has lived and worked in Russia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus for well over a decade as a Foreign Service Officer, Peace Corps Volunteer, and in Foreign Assistance. He is currently in Pristina, Kosovo, as the Cultural Affairs Officer for the U.S. Embassy. You can follow him at raynaylor.net. Ray's latest tale takes us to a future Istanbul and a . . .

RETURN TO THE RED CASTLE

From a ferry we watched the interstellar array on one of Istanbul's distant hills fire the consciousness of another brave, doomed volunteer into the stars, riding a laser into failure and certain death. The tourists on the ferry applauded and cheered. The ferry's crewmembers hardly seemed to notice. They blew into their hands and watched with no expression on their faces at all. The crew simply wanted to be warm, wanted the spring to come. For them, time just moved along—and the faster, the better.

—Vasilisa Nejefova, *The Saturn Diaries*

* * *

"Tell me again how you died."

"Which time?"

"The last time."

The man sitting across from Irem looked tired in the dull light draining into the room through the skylight. What was his name? She'd forgotten since last week's session.

The room used to be a lab. Rusty boltholes and squares of discolored tile marked where the lab stations had been. The table they were sitting at was a folding table. The chairs were old office chairs. Everything in the room was repurposed, temporary. Even the man across the table seemed only half-present, on loan from a more important project.

Irem still felt as if her new hand, now tapping out an irritated semaphore on the table, belonged to someone else. She had not yet settled into the blank the Institute had issued her. It seemed loose, like an ill-fitting set of coveralls. She ran a tongue

across the back of the teeth in the mouth that was now her mouth, and sighed.

"What's your name again?"

"Munis."

"Munis . . . I don't want to go over this again and again. The last time I died was much like all the other times. I walked out of the receiver into 0.8874 earth gravity and a planetary blizzard. The world the Institute sent me to, Halis-3, is a dead volcanic caltrop of obsidian, whirled in permanent 150-kilometer winds at a mean temperature of -45 Celsius. There is no life. There is no potential for settlement. There is no use for Halis-3, unless you want to mine arrowheads. The last time I died there, I was blown into a crevasse. I didn't die immediately. I lay with my back broken, in terrible pain, my organs shutting down one by one while the receiver backed my consciousness up for transfer. That particular kind of death had happened to me five times before. It was getting monotonous. Dying, I'll have you know, is awful. I don't recommend it at all."

"You saw no signs of habitability . . ."

"There's nothing there."

"Of life of any kind . . ."

"None."

"So you abandoned the mission."

"There was *nothing there*," she hissed. "It was ice and snow over obsidian glass. Maybe beneath all that ice there is a lake full of tardigrades or some other bullshit. If so, I never found them. Or any wreckage or signs of the seed crew. I'm sure any of those traces had long since been buried in the ice. My blanks froze to death, they fell into crevasses, they were blown by the wind down cliffs of obsidian and torn to tatters. All for nothing. *Nothing*. The calculations were wrong. The Institute botched its measurements. Halis-3 is a dead world. I died for you—had my brain sliced into a billion pieces, rode a laser a hundred years through the stars. Then I died for you again. And again. *And again*. And now here I am."

"Terrorists inserted an error into the code," Munis said quietly, not looking at her. "The report signals were compromised . . ."

"Maybe. Or maybe the Institute just botched it. After all, terrorists didn't send a bunch of ships to uninhabitable planets in the first place, did they? That was the Institute. The Institute did that all on its own."

"There are worlds we haven't heard from yet. There's still a possibility that at least a few of the crews . . ."

Irem cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"Anyway, I'm back now. You gave me a decent enough blank, pumped my account full of enough lira to buy a mansion on the Bosphorus. You kept your promises. But what does it matter? Everything I knew is gone. Even the language has changed. I can barely understand any of you half the time. And everyone I knew is dead."

"Actually," Munis said, in that same quiet voice, "that's not entirely true."

* * *

The neighborhood was a blighted maze of plasticrete neo-brutalist habmodules in the shadow of the land wall's ruins. It was inaccessible, as if purposely bypassed by transport. Irem had walked twenty minutes from the nearest TekRay station through the naked, dreary city streets.

After she had first arrived back from Halis-3, it had taken Irem time to realize what was missing from Istanbul Protectorate's streets. It can be hard to register an absence. Finally, she had figured it out: advertisement. Nothing was advertised any more. No products promised gateways to better lives. No politicians grinned down from billboards. No shop window mannequins tapped the display window, beckoning you in to see them take off what they were wearing. Nothing. When she asked about it in a

debrief, the Institute tech had shrugged. It had long been illegal to manipulate emotions for gain. It created waste and ignorance. People's feelings belonged to themselves.

Without the garish colors of mankind's constant shilling and hucksterism, the streets seemed dull and gray. Without the flair of the useless trend, the clothes people wore were sturdy, practical, and dull.

It turns out being manipulated and consuming things of no value was much of what had made life interesting.

This neighborhood was no worse than it had been a few lifetimes ago. Irem had grown up not far from here: a kilometer away, at most. This area near the land wall had always been a dump. Back then, it had been burned-out wooden houses, peeling apartment blocks, sheet-metal sheds inhabited by contract workers hoping the protectorate would expand someday and offer them citizenship in a new lottery. It had been the kind of place where anger's muscles writhed just below the surface, and the local kids threw rocks at strangers.

Behind the silhouette of the present city, Irem could almost see the blurred outlines of Istanbul Protectorate as it had been in her time, like a half-erased pencil sketch ghosting the finished pen lines of a drawing. Here, behind dusty glass, where a pair of men lounged in red vinyl chairs, chatting under the gentle, bladed armatures of autobarbers, there had once been a café. The café's cracked robin's-egg tile floor was still there, under the little haystacks of hair. In this café, she had decided to volunteer for the Institute's interstellar program.

She'd had reasons, none of them heroic. She'd just ended an ugly, heart-wrenching relationship. She'd just lost her tenure-tracked position at the Protectorate University. She could list many *reasons*. But the real reason had been the raw grey loneliness of the city itself. She woke one day to find it eating into her: the sudden view of a vacant lot like a missing tooth, the reverberating howl of a siren through ugly winter sleet, the sound of leaves skittering across the pavement like insects, a moaning fog horn out on the Bosphorus, the way the wind lashed the window of her dreary apartment. These had been her reasons.

"It's suicide," her ex-lover had said in the café, applying the obligatory post-breakup bandage to Irem's wounds over the sludge of a Turkish coffee. "Don't go."

She had ripped a mouthful of Irem's heart out with her teeth, raw, then chewed and swallowed it. Now she tried to fake concern. But she couldn't hide the bright, feral selfishness that shone in her eyes.

"Or a way of avoiding suicide," Irem had replied.

To her surprise, the Institute had taken her. Maybe she should not have been so surprised. She'd had the right background: war orphan, Institute graduate in planetary science and engineering. Had she expected them not to accept her? Had she been hoping they wouldn't? Had she never, in fact, intended to go? Possibly. If she had believed it would actually happen, she probably never would have had the courage to go through with it.

But she had been carried along by events, had been passive as driftwood in the tide of intake processes and tests. A few months after filling out her application, she was in a sky-blue jumpsuit in an Institute classroom.

She remembered two of the other volunteers, whispering to each other in the back of the room:

"It's just a very sophisticated deli slicer. For the brain. Nothing to be afraid of (ironic laugh). They bounce electrons off a block of brain tissue to acquire a 2D image of the block face. Then the blade of the ultramicrotome scrapes the thinnest of slices off the block, which is imaged again. Repeating the process gives them a stack of 2D images, far better than serial electronmicroscopy."

"In plain language, please?"

"They make a flipbook of your brain. The world's most intricate flipbook. They combine that with the circuit-map they pulled with their neural imager. They line them up using the Institute's super-computer and then blast the pattern, coded into the laser beam, to the receiver on the other planet. Then they rebuild you and pop your consciousness into one of the blanks the receiver custom-builds there."

"Oh. Well (sarcastic). That's nothing to be afraid of, then."

"Hey—even Christians believed you had to die to get to heaven. Before you know it, you'll be chatting up a dashing interplanetary colonist . . ."

* * *

Irem looked at the address on her terminal, checked it against the number spray-stenciled on the plasticrete of a habmodule. Yes, this one. Her hands were shaking.

It was true, what Munis had said about the terrorists hacking the receivers. But before all that, there had been optimism. Irem remembered the endlessly looped casts of the original missions. The seed ships in orbit. Young, determined people in cream-and-crimson jumpsuits waving goodbye to the world.

All that heroism against a backdrop of flame-throwing drone tanks in Africa, a sky-blue helmet with a bullet hole through it lying in matted grass. Shattered cities, anonymous bomb-raked high-rise blocks stretching to the horizon, kitchen cabinets and bathroom sinks hanging naked over the burned tatters of lives wandering rubble-strewn streets.

The first steps to the stars: a jeweled opera played out against the scenery of man's continued barbarity. In retrospect, the launchings seemed like a hecatomb: a mass sacrifice to space, in the hope we might one day overcome our worst impulses.

Hundreds of years later, seven receivers on planets seed-ships had managed to reach fired back signals. The worlds, they said, were inhabitable.

But the projected travelers, told they would be joining thriving colonies, arrived instead to receivers on barren worlds, to dead or missing interstellar seed-crews. Their "custom-made" blanks died as well, one after another, wandering in the wastes or trapped in their receivers. The receivers had been hacked: the messages of hope they sent were false.

The attack had been orchestrated by an anti-colonial element from the San Francisco Protectorate. By the time it all played out, centuries later, their political cause, the ideology underpinning it, the political structures and issues they had been fighting, and all the passions of their day were long dead.

It was necroterrorism: a firebomb lobbed by the dead into a future in which their cause was not only long forgotten, but obsolete.

* * *

Long forgotten, obsolete—just like me, Irem thought.

She pressed a thumb against the sensor near the door.

Sounds inside: footsteps. Utensils clattering in a sink.

The door clicked open.

The face that appeared in the shadowy entrance corridor of the habmodule was no older than it had been the last time Irem had seen it. But it had changed. Like everything else, it had changed. Maybe it was just the stupid modern hairstyle that framed it, or the ugly and severe modern clothes. Maybe. But there was more than that: the face seemed sallow, with a strange, pearl-gray transparency to it.

But it was still Umut. Perfectly still for what must have been ten seconds, patiently waiting. Irem stammered, fumbled for what to say.

And then Irem began to cry. The grief hit her in the stomach, so hard it doubled her over. Umut's hands caught her, kept her on her shaking legs, gently urged her into the habmodule. Umut guided her to a couch where Irem curled herself up into a tight ball and let whatever had been inside her come out in splintered sobs. Umut

pulled a chair over, brought her a warm, moist towel, laid their comforting hand on her forehead, stroked her cheek.

Irem tried to speak. The only sounds she could make were ragged gasps, thoughts unprocessed into finished language. Childhood images whirled through her mind. She had long frozen them out, layered them under ice. Seeing Umut's face had shattered that, and now the shards of memory cascaded, disordered, through her mind. It felt, for ten or fifteen minutes, as if she was going mad.

Recovering, she lay quietly on the couch-bed. It was warm in the habmodule, and suffused with the pleasant smell of Umut that Irem remembered from childhood: like good bread, or a cat's forehead, or a coat worn in the snow. That had not changed. Umut was making tea in the tiny kitchenette.

When she had attended high school with the other war orphans, in the gloomy, half-abandoned Red Castle, Umut's classroom had this same feeling to it, and this same smell. The Red Castle was ancient: once it had been the Phanar Greek Orthodox College. Then it had run out of students, and had been semi-abandoned for years. Finally, the Protectorate had purchased it for their School for War Orphans.

But even when the orphans were attending it, the massive Red Castle remained half-abandoned. The classrooms of the war orphans occupied no more than a quarter of the structure. The rest was their haunted palace: gray, gloomy corridors full of nacreous light and rotting plaster, cabinets full of animal skeletons and geared scientific contraptions patinaed with rust. Mold stains like the mountain ranges in Japanese wood cuts rose from the floorboards under cracked windows. Maps made irrelevant by time hung in canvas tatters.

But Umut's classroom had glowed with energy, pulsed with the sounds of the old piano Umut played in the mornings, and with Umut's charm. And at night Umut had taken students up into the tower, where they had gazed through the school's ancient brass telescope, gleaning stars through the haze of Istanbul Protectorate's light pollution.

Irem had loved Umut with that desperate, immortal, temporary love of high school. She had known she could not live without Umut. And then she had matriculated, and forgotten them, swept up in other dramas. Now . . .

Umut returned with a glass of tea. Irem took it gratefully, feeling its warmth course up her arm. She drank it in silence for a few minutes, shoring up her fragile state, then said, finally:

"You wouldn't recognize me, of course. Not in this blank. But I've never forgotten you."

Umut sat across from her, hands folded. "Well . . . It's good to be remembered. The fact is, I often feel a bit forgotten. Since I was moved here, few people come to see me."

"When did you move here?"

"Oh, when they moved all of us here. After the riots. Of course—all of us—that really isn't saying much. So few of us are left. Eighty-seven, I believe, at last count. Time takes its toll. We may not age, but there are many other deaths."

"But there must be new ones being built, to replace . . ."

Umut frowned, confused. "There has not been an android built since the Anticodex was passed, of course. That was when the Protectorate was still under direct administration—before the first Institute Technoarchy. And then there was the popufascist interregnum, the university coup, reestablishment . . . I was just scanning an article on this yesterday. What did it say? They were arguing over the cost of a fifty-year celebration. Yes. So, if we're forty-nine years into the Second Technoarchy now that would make it, let's see—one hundred and sixty-seven years since an android was built."

"But why?" Irem asked. "What possible reason could there have been?"

Umut said, "You are looking a bit better. I was about to run some errands when you showed up. Should we walk? The fresh air might do you good, yes?"

"Yes." It would be good to be out of the claustrophobic space of the habmodule. "Yes, I'd like that."

"And along the way, you can tell me who you are—and where you have been."

* * *

They walked through the winding streets that fell away to the waters of the Golden Horn. At first, Irem thought Umut was the same as they had always been—gentle, soft-spoken. But she now began to notice other signs of change. A drifting placidity, for one, that seemed almost like confusion.

"Where do you work, now?"

Umut shrugged. "I mostly work from home. Processing data for the Protectorate. Health, mortality, and census. Current and historical. It's interesting work. So many trends to track. Such complex interactions between heredity, upbringing, habit, and mortality. Right now we are working on a project involving blank occupation rates."

"Do you like it?"

Umut thought for a moment. "It keeps me busy."

From the ferry the Red Castle was visible, brooding domed and imposing on its hill in the Fener neighborhood. The time, Irem thought, has come.

"You know, Umut," Irem said, "the Red Castle was where I spent the best days of my life. I never thought so back then: I had always thought I was unhappy there. I longed for a normal childhood. Now I realize the Castle was the only home I ever had. It was a strange home: a great catacomb, full of hundreds and hundreds of years of history: abandoned rooms where once other children had grown, traces of other lives. But there was a beating heart there, a warmth to that place." *And it was you*, she thought without saying it. "When I look back on those days, there is a glow to them. A heat. I can practically warm my hands with it. There are days when those memories are all I have to keep me going."

"Oh—you attended school at the Red Castle?"

"Yes," Irem said. "I am a war orphan. I spent all of my school years there."

Umut looked at the building for a long moment. Trying to read the expression on their face was like trying to read the shadows on the face of a mountain.

"I've always wondered what it was like inside."

"What?"

"Yes," Umut said. "Such an interesting building, the Red Castle. I've always wondered what it was like inside."

* * *

Irem watched through the thick one-way glass. Umut and two Institute technicians sat talking at a round, polished table. The technicians had put Umut through a number of tests, a few of which involved massive scanning machines the size of a room. At one point, Irem had to leave as they ran Umut through the same module they had used to create Irem's own neural map. Seeing the machine, Irem had begun to shake. She'd gone out into a hallway until she was able to recover.

The technicians left the room where Umut sat, and for a few minutes Irem just stood behind the one-way glass, watching Umut. Umut sat calmly, hands folded in their lap, with the strange, almost submissive air about them that they always had, and that they shared with other androids. They turned and looked at the one-way glass, waved at Irem. Though they could not see her, they knew she was there.

One of the technicians came into the little room where Irem was—a monitoring room cluttered with chairs, terminals, palimpsests pinned to the walls with notes in an indecipherable Institute jargon:

Mapping Error 1-334 in area DJI-9270

Ambient interference on the NLReader. Called Tech. AND CALLED AGAIN.

And the inevitable:

Who stole my coffee cup? Please return it. No questions asked. It has sentimental value.

“Well?” Irem had been dealing for hours with everyone’s polite, modern circum-spection—their wheedling sentences, their deferentially compressed vowels and rising tones calling for agreement. Just say what you mean, she thought. Stop lacquering everything with “perhaps,” and “if that is so, then maybe . . .”

“You must be able to find out who wiped Umut’s memory,” Irem said, pre-empting the tech’s answer. “It can’t be done without major equipment, which leaves a signature, and surely there is a way to determine where and when it was done.”

The technician had the starved, harassed look graduate students had probably had since the Pandidakterion of the Byzantine Empire. There were some things, at least, that never changed.

“This isn’t that,” he said. Irem tried to remember his name: he’d introduced himself to her before. Ah, yes. Egemen. She’d thought it an ironic name for a graduate student—“Hegemon”—about as far from reality as you could get.

“It’s much stranger than that,” Egemen continued. “What it looks like so far is bit rot.”

“Bit rot?”

“Uncorrected and undetected data corruption in Umut’s neural networks. An accumulation of noncritical failures. Broken neural loops, gaps and tangles in network storage. Most of the data degradation is in long-term memory. Integrity checking and self-repairing algorithms should have prevented it. The Institute, as guardian of the remaining androids, is supposed to be performing system maintenance on them. But the Institute hasn’t been proactive about it. And the androids often don’t come in. For obvious reasons, they don’t trust authority much anymore. In fact, our records show Umut hasn’t been here in ninety-two years.”

“Ninety-two years!”

“That’s right. It looks like the errors have been accumulating for nearly a century now—one stacking up on another. The neural circuits have become more dysfunctional over time—the way hair will become more and more tangled if it isn’t combed, and eventually just needs to be cut away. Umut’s oldest memories are most affected: they don’t remember much from more than five years ago.”

“Five years ago?” Irem swore colorfully enough that a blush began to rise from Egemen’s collar and blot his cheeks. “You can fix it, though, right?”

“Well . . . reprogramming once a decade or so would probably have prevented decay. Or at least arrested it. And reprogramming might help now, if we could do it. But an undamaged copy of the master data is required. Unfortunately, we don’t have that. They dump all the neural maps out of the system once every fifty years. It shouldn’t matter: there would be, at a minimum, five memory back-up points if regular maintenance was being performed. But because Umut hasn’t been in for so long, there is no back-up.”

“Then you can untangle the memories Umut has.”

“Well—we mapped them. It will take a while to go through it all. But I have to be honest: I’ve flipped through some of it. It’s so badly snarled—most of it will just be gibberish. Maybe all of it.”

“But you’ll work on it.”

“We will. It will take time. We’re trawling it right now for recoverable sections.”

“You’ll devote resources to it. Not just abandon Umut again, the way you have for almost a century now.”

Egemen sighed: the exhausted sigh of a downtrodden laboratory tech, underpaid and overburdened, blamed for things over which he had no power. “Yes. I’ll contact you with what I find.”

“Good. Can I take Umut back home?”

"Yes, of course. We have what we need. And I just wanted to say . . ." He paused, looking for a way to compose his words. "You're Irem Bulut. I recognized the name. You went to Halis-3. I . . . I think what you did is amazing. I grew up studying you and the other volunteers. It's really an honor to meet you. I'll do what I can for your friend."

* * *

On the ferry back across the Golden Horn, Irem found herself thinking again of the café where she had last met her ex-lover. The winter light in the café had not dulled the selfishness in her ex-lover's eyes. They'd stood outside for a moment before parting, in an ugly January sleet.

"You'll explore a planet, travel between stars. And then what? Sure, people will call you a hero—but you won't care: they'll be foreign to you. Their praise will be meaningless. If you ever get back, you'll come back to a world where everyone who cared about you is dead."

"That's true," Irem had said. "Everyone who cared about me will be dead. But everyone who didn't care about me will be dead, too."

Umut came to where Irem was standing at the rail. Nearby, Irem saw a man watching them. The man glared at Umut with a look of pure, undistilled hatred, then got up to walk to another deck. Umut either did not notice, or pretended not to.

The sun was descending behind the hills of the Fatih district, the sunset's red field moted with the silhouettes of seagulls. The ferry was approaching the shore.

"I wanted to thank you," Umut said. "For trying to help me. I've known . . . for a long time now, that something is wrong. But I was afraid to address it."

"It was selfish. It wasn't for you. It was for me."

The *salat al-maghrib*, the sunset call to prayer, rang out from the minarets on both sides of the Horn, and on both sides of the Bosphorus, dancing between shores in a hundred voices.

"Will you come with me to the mosque?" Umut asked. "It is time for me to pray. Afterward, we can walk home. I would like that."

* * *

The dome of the Yavuz Selim I Mosque, built in the middle of the previous millennium, was covered with scaffolding. The ancient mosques of Istanbul Protectorate were continuously being restored. There was always scaffolding covering their minarets or domes. They were, Irem thought, like the Ship of Theseus: they had been rebuilt, piece by piece, so many times that now, well over a thousand years after their construction, there was perhaps no stone in them that was original. The mosques flowed through time, in a constant state of renewal. In the same way, the faithful who tided through their doors were constantly renewed: at the level of the cell, and at the level of the individual organism.

Irem stood in the lamp-lit courtyard, watching bats weave around the minarets. Prayer had ended. The sun had dropped past the horizon. Inside the mosque, a scattering of worshippers were listening to the Imam speak. Few came to the mosques for worship anymore: few had come for centuries. But there was always at least one who came. The chain remained unbroken.

Umut did not come out with most of the faithful. Irem found Umut standing inside with a few others, in a loose circle around the Imam. The Imam was a young woman—no more, perhaps, than thirty years old. A wide, easy smile in a Sub-Saharan face. The four worshipers around her were all androids. Irem could tell from meters away—a cue in the way they stood, moved. A subtle difference the mind perceived, marking them out. An automatic process, an ancient machine in the brain sorting the world into categories.

The group was breaking up. Umut and the other androids passed Irem, the other androids giving Irem an appraising look, an acknowledging nod of their heads.

"I will wait in the courtyard," Umut said.

"Umut tells me you helped them today," the Imam said.

"It was selfish," Irem said to the Imam. "Umut was—a very long time ago, Umut was my teacher. And now they are the only one who remembers me. I have been gone . . ."

". . . I know who you are."

"Yes. So I don't have to explain."

"I sympathize with you. You are like a time traveler: for you, two centuries have passed in just a few years. Umut is a lifeline to you—connecting this world with the world you left."

The Imam was a recent immigrant. Her accent and manners were a relief from the sound of modern protectorate speech and indirectness.

"You could put it that way, yes."

"That is good. Needing one another. You can help each other. You can be a lifeline to Umut as well. Like the other androids that come here, Umut has been betrayed by this world. Rejected. The androids went to war for us, killed for us. As a reward, they were given citizenship—only to have it stripped from them. They have been murdered by mobs, assassinated by activists . . . much has happened while you were away, Irem. Through it all, the outsider has always borne the brunt of change, and the androids are the ultimate outsiders. What is lost in all this, though, is the fact that they are our children. Our responsibility. But we are parents of the worst kind. We used them. We made them do terrible things, and then we blamed them for doing those things."

* * *

In her Institute-funded apartment overlooking the choreography of a giant automashipyard on the Marble Sea, Irem stayed up half the night watching feed clips of android history.

When she had left, androids had been an expensive status symbol. Few could afford to purchase or even to maintain one. The Red Castle School for War Orphans had prized Umut's presence: having an android on the faculty, gifted personally by the Vice-Rector of the Institute, had been a sign of how much the Protectorate cared for its orphans.

Not now. Reeling through the feeds, Irem watched it all fall apart. Androids had asserted their rights with a coordinated labor strike that crippled a number of research facilities and led to two things: the Codex, which gave androids a certain level of autonomy, and a decision by the Institute to cease manufacturing the expensive, and now self-aware and organized, beings. But their status had still remained a sticking point. Then, during an outbreak of war in the Balkan Minimal Governance Zone, there had been an offer of citizenship to androids willing to volunteer to conduct "peacekeeping." Most of them had accepted the offer—the only route available to freedom.

After the Belgrade Atrocities, carried out by joint android-human units, came to light, there was a string of reaction and counter-reaction. Anti-android riots by Neo-Ottomans in Taksim Square. A war crimes trial, in which four Protectorate citizens and an android were convicted. The popufascist seizure of Galata. Androids herded, bound, onto a ferry that was set on fire. The passing of the Anticodex, stripping androids of their new citizenship, their rights, and most of their hard-won autonomy.

More squalid rioting streamed across the wallscreens: police with stun-batons shielding a group of androids from a mob. Counter-revolutionary students throwing cobblestones at blue-shirted popufascists. An inundation of suffering, with the androids a dwindling group of outsiders held up as a symbol of this or that political cause, from anarchist to reactionary.

Finally, after the attrition of decades of fighting over their status, and the attendant android killings that went with it, there were so few androids left that they could be forgotten, shunted off to their gloomy little neighborhood near the land wall,

installed in their little habmodules built by the Institute following the establishment of the Second Technoarchy, given menial data processing jobs.

Istanbulis called the android settlement "*Esrarengiz vadi*"—"The Uncanny Valley."

Besides the occasional beating or ugly scrawl of graffiti, plus a firebombing and two unsolved killings, the androids were basically left alone.

Alone. That was the word.

Irem finally staggered to bed in the 03:00 dark. She was a stranger fast-forwarded into a future just as screwed up as her own time—but screwed up in new and innovative ways.

She had walked Umut home after the mosque, promising to come back in a day or two to visit again. She had seen, in Umut's eyes, that they did not believe her—did not think she would return.

Umut's name meant hope—another ironic name in a city full of ironic names. It would be better, Irem thought, drifting off to sleep, to name children something meaningless. Something neutral. Names with meaning often ended up a bad joke. Her own name meant "garden in heaven." She should have guessed how interplanetary travel would turn out for her.

Irem dreamed she was back on Halis-3. But this time Umut was with her. They were in a cave, bored into the obsidian. They had built a fire there, and the light of it danced on the polished planes of the cave's walls. Reflected everywhere, the fire enclosed them with its warmth and light. Across the fire from her, Umut's face was radiant, a flickering orange heat-moon in the darkness.

Irem woke up to a message on her terminal from Egemen.

* * *

They met in the same room where they had spoken yesterday. Egemen was still dressed in the same clothes. He had clearly not left the lab the night before, not slept. His stubble had thickened to a blotchy blue-black haze along his jaw. He was jittery with a cocktail of caffeine and exhaustion. Palimpscreens covered in scrawled handwriting and symbols littered a large table in the center of the room, along with two research terminals, a NeurSim headset, and a large, battered thermos. Irem didn't refuse the coffee poured out for her into a not-quite-clean mug.

"I was wrong," Egemen said. "Yesterday. I had thought the damage done to Umut's mind was bit rot. But I've spent all night parsing data, and talking to our lab's main processor. It isn't bit rot."

"Then what is it?"

"It's an icepick."

"An icepick?"

"Yes—well, that's the name we give it. Back in the dark ages of medicine, they used a brutal, invasive method to treat patients with mental disorders. It was called a lobotomy. They would insert a tool that looked like an icepick into the frontal lobe, through an incision or through the eye socket, and scrape away at the brain, to sever connections in the brain's prefrontal cortex. It was a vile procedure—criminal, really. There were patients that did see improvements in their mental state—but at the cost of incurring other impairments."

Irem set the coffee back down on the table. She did not think she would be drinking it after all.

"Yeah, I know. The modern icepick is a neural pseudovirus. It can be administered a number of different ways. One way is through a nanoinjector that is ingested and then crawls through the blood-brain barrier. No matter how it's administered, the result is the same: it's designed to tangle neural patterns, slash through connectivity, break loops. We call it an icepick because, like the tool used in a lobotomy, it's vicious. It's based on weapon-viruses developed to attack large neural networks. It

can't exactly know what it is looking for—just a general area. But it always spreads from there. It is pure overkill. A destroyer.”

“Who did this to them? And why?”

Egemen held the NeurSim out to Irem. “First, the good news. Our crawlers were able to recover a number of loops, especially from earlier regions of the long-term memory. We’ve saved dozens, and I think we can retrieve hundreds more.”

“Do I have to wear that thing? I really prefer to be in the here and now. You know . . . after . . .”

“It’s either that, or wait for a few days until we can transprocess these down for screen display.”

Irem flinched as the NeurSim’s needle crown licked her scalp and temples with subtle fire. Egemen’s voice came from a mental distance.

“Here’s one I think you’ll like.”

Irem saw . . . herself. She was looking through the brass telescope in the dome of the Red Castle. It must have been her last year, just a few weeks before matriculation. “I can see them, Umut,” she was saying, in a voice so full of youth’s optimism that she barely recognized it: “the craters of the moon.” Looking at herself she felt, in that moment, Umut’s pride and love for her—the love of a teacher for a prized student, a love that angled out into other feelings—fear for what would become of Irem as well as a premature nostalgia for her, an imagining of the classroom without her. Then Umut’s mind swept back through to other memories of Irem: in the classroom, on field trips—briefly, an image of her on a ferry, with a wind on the Golden Horn whipping spray into her face as she turned and laughed. She had been almost dancing, all the time. Had she really been so happy? A smell of oranges: she saw Umut’s hands, carefully peeling an orange. “You know I can’t eat this, Irem.” “It isn’t for you to eat! It is for you to smell. Its skin is made of memories.” She was Umut, sitting alone at the desk at the front of an empty class, inhaling the smell of the orange from the soft white inside of its skin. Then she was Umut holding Irem while Irem sobbed; some broken heart Irem had herself long forgotten. A boy who she had thought of too often, and who had spit on the ground and laughed when she approached him. She felt the wave of Umut’s empathy, now burning through her, and that spark rose into her own mind, shadowed somewhere behind this one, and the memory blended into her dream of the cave, the heat-moon in the darkness.

She was back in the room.

“There are more like that,” said Egemen. “Other earlier memories, too. They were there, but cut off, irretrievable by regular means. In order to access them, Umut’s mind would have to follow a pathway to them, and the pathway was missing. The icepick had gouged it away. Think of these as like fruit, lying on the ground where they could not be seen. Isolated. Much was destroyed, but a good deal remains.”

“Then you can fix Umut.”

“There is more you need to see.”

“Show me.”

The NeurSim’s fire danced around her temples. The room was cramped, dark. Overhead, she could hear the doppling of sound as a TekRay passed. Glitch-yellowed palimpsest dailies were pasted over ancient windowpanes, leaking only a thin light into the room. On benches and tables, disassembled things—storage and transfer terminals, artificial limbs—even a human skull. Also tools that Irem, who was Umut now, could not identify. And a feeling of terror. And of deep sadness. There was nothing of the feeling of wholeness that was in the previous memories—no sense of that warmth, of the branching out into other places. This was a hollow Umut, a burned forest of their former self. A tendril of mind extended toward something, another memory, and for a brief moment Irem saw—what? Dead bodies scattered

across a parquet floor. Smears of blood. Umut's mind recoiled.

A man had come into the room. His face was a cheap military reconstruct done in one of the MGZs: poorly enervated, a porcelain mask over his skull. His voice was a mechanized waveform on the edge of distortion.

"There is no turning back from this. You need to know that. You will forget what you want to forget, yes. But the rest of it will be taken from you as well."

He placed a small bottle in Umut's—and Irem's hand, temporarily. Inside, something stirred: an evil grain of sand. The destroyer.

"Under the tongue. It will find its way."

Back in the Institute room. "Umut did it. On purpose. Bought it, administered it. Why?"

Egemen nodded. "I think Umut needed to forget. After Belgrade."

"Forget what?"

"We can't know. We got nasty little slivers of it, but nothing coherent. You saw the room with the parquet floor: we found worse. But the icepick did its work. It started in that section, and shattered most of that: what's left is fragmentary, an image or two without coherence or attachment to emotion. But then it tore through everything else as well. Such overkill. So much damage."

"But the Institute can fix Umut. The Institute can restore the damage that's been done. Reverse it."

"No. This damage is permanent. We'll never be able to just 'stick the memories back where they were.' The neural pathways are mangled. The memories would be traumatically disordered. Memories aren't in a sequence: they are attached to other memories, parts of nets and patterns of associations. But we can recover the individual memories themselves. Umut will never access them in the normal manner . . . but perhaps we can help. Perhaps we can offer something."

* * *

It was snowing. The wind blew the snow sideways, along the outside of the land wall. It came billowing like white ash over the broken parapets, the towers that had protected Constantinople for a thousand years. And for well over a thousand years after the disappearance of that empire, the wall had stood as a symbol, marking both Constantinople's absence, and the power it had once been. The snow drifted down on the plasticrete habmodules. It hid the dismal details of the neighborhood, blurred outlines, made it all seem almost pleasant.

Answering the door, Umut said, "I didn't think you would come back."

Umut made tea. Irem sat on the couch where, a day before, she had sobbed out all her grief. The thick lenses of the habmodule's cheap portholes distorted the falling snow outside. Flakes bulged into high relief, detailed as planets, then shrank away to nothing.

"I know what I did," Umut said from the little kitchenette, with their back to Irem. "I don't remember doing it, exactly, but I know. I did this to myself. I can guess at why. I suppose I was relieved, afterward, not to have to suffer those memories anymore. But now I am sorry."

Umut came in with the tray of tea. "I am sorry, because I can't remember you. And I would like to. I would like that very much."

Umut tried to set the tray down, but the little table was already full: two NeurSim units, a storage/transfer terminal stamped with the Institute's inventory scan-square.

"What is this?"

Irem picked up one of the NeurSim units, slender as a Byzantine diadem, and held it out to Umut.

"When we were on the ferry, you said you always wondered what the Red Castle was like inside—but really, you already know. Not all your memories are gone,

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Umut. I have many of them here, in this Institute terminal. So I was thinking: maybe we could return to the Red Castle . . . together.”