

The observer drifted formlessly among an alien landscape. Dirigibles sailed over pink soil and rockets cut streaks through a green sky. Slowly they found themselves drawn towards a once-great castle nestled among intractable mountains, now shoving the scars of recent battles. They passed through the stone walls as if they were not there. A strange figure sat in a stranger throne, surrounded by an array of spinning gyroscopic hoops rested a raccoon dressed in a brilliant gold jumpsuit and a cape that flowed to the floor. His fur was the richest blue they had ever seen on a mammal. "Welcome to Telluria." He greeted the formless observer. "We need your help."

The observer's thoughts raced. What did he mean? Where were they? How could they help?

"We are on a planet exactly 180 degrees around the sun from your world." The blue raccoon answered their thoughts as if they had spoken them out loud. "I am Prince Oleg Karedo of Ruhritania, captain in the rebellion against the dreaded Thermionic Brain that is rapidly conquering my world. Already it has turned its gaze towards Earth and unless we stop it soon your world will fall as quickly as mine has."

But what can I do? The observer thought again.

The castle shook around them. "We don't have much time." Prince Oleg said. "This Mindwave Amplifier will allow us to trade bodies across the gulf of space. On Earth I will be able to thwart the Thermions' agents while you can learn from us here. On Telluria we have sciences far in advance of your own, history going back millennia..."

But what of my life on Earth? The observer was tempted, but could they really just drop everything to live on some alien planet for God-knows how long?

"I will try not to place undue strain on your social relationships while I'm in your body." Another blast shook the ground, people in a wide variety of coats and colors scrambled around, gathering weapons and other objects. "Please, the Thermions are closing in. Will you help us?"

It only took them a moment more to consider it. "Yes."

An eerie glowing haze rose from the blue raccoon. It drifted towards the observer, closer, almost touching...

And then the roof fell on top of them.

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Alice Tiptree woke with a start. As she blinked away the sleep stuff in her eyes she stared down at her arm in the evening light. Gray, like it had been since she was a kit, just like the majority of raccoons. Why had she expected otherwise? It was just a dream after all. She reached for the dog-eared notebook and pencil that rested on her nightstand, thinking that at least she could get a story out of it. The sun's light faded to dusk as she scratched out notes on the life of Oleg Karedo, rebel prince of Telluria. Before she knew it she'd reached the end of the book, somehow she's managed to fill up two dozen pages in shorthand, where had all this come from?

She flipped through the pages she'd just written, the dream hadn't mentioned that he was 70 years old but still in the prime of his life thanks to the red spice. Or the names of his major lovers, both female and male, even one who identified as neither. Alice glanced at the clock next to her bed, the radium-painted numerals indicated it was well after eight. She sighed and closed the notebook, maybe some breakfast and coffee would help clear her head of these strange ideas.

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"It all seemed so real." Alice cut off another bit of pancake and stuffed it in her mouth. All around her at the diner other nocturnal people were just finishing breakfast while diurnal folks grabbed a sandwich on their way home from late shifts.

The waitress behind the counter, an opossum who went by "Flo", snorted. "Only you Alice. Only you would say a dream about trading bodies with a blue man seemed real."

Alice washed down her bite with a gulp of coffee. "I'm serious, it was so vivid, so detailed. For a moment I was, well, disappointed to wake up in my own body."

Flo poured a refill for her writer friend. "Well, at least 'James Sheldon' can get a good story out of it."

"I could write a dozen stories about Prince Karedo of Telluria, novels even." Alice sighed. "I just wish I could get them published under my own name."

Flo set down her coffee pot and leaned in to whisper in the raccoon's ear. "Look, you've published a few stories as yourself, haven't you?"

"Two." Alice confirmed. "But they weren't this kind of story. Every time 'Alice Tiptree' submits a swashbuckling adventure story to the pulps I get a rejection letter advising I stick to romances. But if James Sheldon or Tip Racona sends in the same story, to the same editor, they get published."

"I might not be one of those fancy European psychologists." Flo started to say. "But you don't suppose this dream about getting yourself a male body has something to do with your, what did you call it, nom-da-flume?"

"Nom-de-plume," Alice corrected. "And that's ridiculous, Tellurians don't care what gender you choose to present as. Only the Thermions would uphold such ridiculous ideas in their brain-dead conformity!"

When Flo went cross-eyed in confusion Alice stopped herself, wondering where that outburst had come from. She quickly glanced around, noticing a couple other patrons staring at her. So she shrunk back down to finish eating without their notice.

"Well, that's quite, imaginative." Flo blinked away her confusion and started to turn away. "I'd better get back to work, nice talking to you hon." She awkwardly shuffled away.

The bell over the door rang and a mangy mutt walked in, dressed in greasy overalls. He plopped down at the counter, right next to Alice, and barked for a burger. While Flo was writing down his order he turned towards the raccoon. "Bit late for breakfast, isn't it?" He commented, pointing at her half-eaten pancakes.

Alice turned away from the dog. "I just got up actually."

"Oh, a night owl, are we?" He leaned in, not getting the hint. "Doesn't that get lonely for you?"

Alice glanced at a family of bats over in the corner. "No," she said dismissively.

"Well, I might have just gotten off a long shift at the docks, but I've still got plenty of energy." He reached a paw around her shoulder. "I could keep going all, night, long."

Before Alice knew what she was doing she'd shoved the dog off his stool onto the floor, grabbed her butter knife, and leapt on top of him with the knife to his throat. "Unhand me you ruffian!" She shouted. "You know not who you are dealing with!"

A loud thud drew the raccoon's attention back to the counter. She peered over it to see Flo laying supine on the diner floor, her tongue lolling out and her limbs jutting stiffly upwards. The kitchen doors swung open to reveal the cook, a portly rat, carrying a butcher's knife. He glanced down at Alice and the mutt on the floor. "This fella bothering you lady?" He asked.

Alice slowly set the blunt knife back down on the counter. "Yes," she said. "He was just telling me that he should go home and sleep it off. Right?" She glared at him.

"Yeah," the dog got up and backed towards the door. "See you again soon, lady."

Once he was out of sight the cook got some smelling salts and waved them in front of the passed-out opossum's nose. Alice dug around in her purse for a few bills to pay for her half-uneaten meal. Flo shot up and looked around frantically for any sign of the dog. "Is he gone?" She asked. After Alice nodded she continued. "Are you going to be alright hon? He might come back with some friends."

Alice continued to rifle through her purse after finding the money and found the revolver she'd bought a few years ago. "I used to be a crime reporter, I'll be fine." Though, now that she took a look at it, the dull grey device seemed rather... primitive. She could make a few improvements given the proper materials, maybe from that junkyard on Stucki Island.

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A couple hours later Alice examined her handiwork, the snub-nosed barrel had been extended to double the gun's total length with a cylinder of scrap metal. The faint glow of radium paint scavenged from discarded watches leaked out of the end of the barrel. Rather than lead slugs the cartridges now held shards of uranium glass from a broken tableware set. It was crude, but the radioactive grains of silica it shot should make short work of any Thermion agent, it might even put a dent in one of the Brain's mechanical servants.

Alice blinked, why had she thought to make a gun to fight some aliens she'd dreamed up? It was probably useless now, she'd never taken any shop or physics classes like her brothers. She could remember learning how to make improvised atomic weaponry from royal tutors on Telluria but they weren't real.

A bottle crashed into the ground next to her, releasing the acrid odor of bathtub gin cut with methanol. Alice spun around, gun in hand, to spy the mutt from before glowering at her

from behind a pile of junk. “Well, look at you now. Picking through the trash like a feral. Not very ladylike of you is it?”

“Don’t come any closer.” Alice’s voice quavered as she raised her gun towards the dog.

“Or what? You’ll shoot me?” The drunken dog staggered towards her. “Do you even know how to use that piece of junk missy?” He caught himself as his foot snagged on a bit of debris. “You’re going to regret turning me down earlier. Hey boys!” He turned to the side and almost stumbled as he continued to approach her. “We got ourselves a...”

He was cut off as Alice’s finger depressed the trigger, shooting out a glowing green jet that momentarily enveloped the dog’s head. When the glow faded the drunkard’s flesh had been burned away, leaving nothing but a blackened skull. Alice stared at the smoking gun in her hands in disbelief. She couldn’t pretend it had been just a dream anymore.

Somehow, something in the mindwave transference process had gone wrong. Instead of Alice’s consciousness flowing into Prince Oleg’s body it had remained on Earth while Oleg’s memories and personality traits entered Alice’s brain.

The sound of many paws stumbling through the junkyard drew their attention, and they broke off running back up the path they had taken in the first place. They heard their pursuers shouting in puzzlement as they found their friend’s partially atomized corpse, and the gestalt of writer and prince took the opportunity to duck into a disused garage.

Once their pursuers had left they allowed themselves a laugh. Oleg had been worried that he wouldn’t be able to make his way in this strange land in a strange body, instead he had the knowledge and connections of a Shaysen City reporter at his disposal. Alice had been worried about trusting her social life to a complete stranger, but now it all seemed so petty compared to the threat of the Thermionic Brain. Yes, the only thing that mattered now was safeguarding Earth’s supply of Tellurium-307 from the Thermions. The Brain needed it to launch its’ invasion fleet and the Rebellion needed it to power their Mindwave Amplifiers. But with Alice’s contacts in the news and Oleg’s advanced sciences the Brain’s agents wouldn’t stand a chance.

The gestalt’s eyes caught on an in-operative animatronic band, more primitive than even the lobotomized automatons still used in Ruhritania. It gave them an idea. Surely this planet’s radio networks were too simple for the Thermionic Brain to infect them as it had Telluria...