

Encounter: Pathway to the Margin
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Pathway to the Margin

She was attractive, no doubt about it. Standing at my door, blocking the view of the dirty rubbish strewn corridor, she was the stuff of dreams; high cheekbones, brightly glossed and sensuous lips, a cute dimpled chin, and a delicate neck. Her eyes, however, were less attractive. They were bright, alert, and predatory. I'd seen these eyes before, in the faces of zealots and politicians.

"Major Boyce."

It wasn't a question, so I threw one back at her; "Who wants to know?"

"You wanted to meet me."

That threw me. I gave her the once over, from toe to the peak of her fashionable little hat. I liked what I saw. "I think I'd remember."

"You were high at the time." Those luscious lips curled into a provocative but cold little smile. "On pain killers."

Her gaze dropped to my left leg, then travelled slowly up to my right arm. It was an evaluation, like she was checking out the merchandise. She wore the expression of someone who was considering buying a housebot, or a gun. As her appraisal continued I felt more like a piece of meat, though that was probably because I was wearing only shorts.

She nodded absently to herself. Evidently I'd come up to scratch. "May I come in?"

"Don't mind the mess," I said. "The maid is on the fritz."

She stepped past me and I caught the whiff of money; expensive pheromone laced perfume that matched her tight, expensive belted tube dress, high tech microfiber with subtly pulsating kaleidoscopic shading. The scent and dress responded to her body chemistry, expressing her inner mood, or so the late night shopping channel informed me.

She gave my apartment the same consideration she'd given my physical attributes. For the first time in ages I was conscious of what a dump it was, but I nudged that thought away. I had other things to focus on. Again she gave that slight nod of decision before she turned back to face me, which was something of a pity. I quite enjoyed the view. She had an ass to die for.

"My memory still comes up blank," I said, closing the door.

"You wanted to kill me."

I think I'd remember something like that. "Why would I want to do a terrible thing like that?"

She gave an amused smile and stepped towards the window that gave a panorama of the smoggy cityscape. She didn't open it. "You're right on the inversion level," she observed. Her voice had the clear, cultured lilt of the elite. "The air is cleaner below you."

"This floor goes for half price."

Her gaze fixed me like an eagle's before the kill. "Do you still hate me for saving your life?"

I took only a moment to piece it together after that. Her interest in my leg and arm, her superior, all knowing tone, it all added up to one thing. "You're the precog."

"That's right." She gave a little laugh. "I note you didn't say *a* precog, but *the* precog."

Sudden anger filled me. The arrogance of her, after what she'd done to me, invading my ramshackle life, taunting me in this wanton manner. I wanted to smash her face in. I wanted to destroy that self-satisfied smile. I wanted to choke the life out of her, and then fuck her lifeless body with my synthetic dick.

I wouldn't, of course. She knew that. That was why she was here, standing so boldly in my one room shit heap.

"Has our conversation gone as expected?" I asked finally, trying to inject sarcasm when I felt only hatred.

“Pretty much.” She perched her perfect behind on the edge of my bed. The month old unwashed sheets didn’t faze her. I guess her dress was the self cleaning kind. “I have an offer of employment for you.”

“I have a job.”

“Only for the next nine days. Then your contract with the Colonial Marines terminates.”

“So?”

“I suppose you can survive. Your pension will feed you, just. The marines will cover your medical expenses, and keep your new parts nice and shiny while the rest of you fades away.”

“You have a rotten way with words.”

“I admit it, words are not my forte.”

“And prophesying the future is? You led us into a trap, you bitch. It was a killing field. None of my men survived, thanks to you.”

I hardly recognized my own voice. I was choking up with the pain, the grief. I’d gotten to her in a heartbeat, my hands reaching for her throat, but she was quicker than me. She would be because she had seen me coming, days, weeks ago, whenever she’d had her vision of this moment. As I leapt at her in blind fury she’d pressed the fibber she had concealed in her belt to my chest, and pressed the trigger. In the space of a stuttering heartbeat I was thrashing on the bed beside her in the throes of a temporal lobe seizure.

I came to my senses sometime later. She was lying beside me, smoking a sweet smelling cigar. She held it out to me. I took it with trembling fingers.

She gazed at the spotty ceiling and blew a thin stream of smoke into the air. “Let me explain something to you. The future is a strange place. In a manner of speaking, all things are possible there. The temporal probability function is wide, very wide. But the present, this very moment, it is now fixed in reality, and the time line behind it, the past, has collapsed into a single well delineated path.

That's what I see. A single future event and the trail that leads back from it. It's not the only possible event, theoretically at least, but it is the one I see."

She snapped her long delicate fingers, and I returned the cigar. She took a long draw and passed it back to me. She blew another stream of smoke, only this time she moved a forefinger through it, separating it into fine tendrils which swirled and curled around each other like the silky strands of her platinum hair.

"This very moment is fixed. Everything that has ever happened, all of recorded history and before, moment by micro moment, lead to this single point in time. Think of it, the actions of our ancestors all the way back to Cro-Magnons, everything they did inevitably lead to this precise place in time; you and me, lying on a dirty bed in a hovel you call home. And this moment will lead onto the next, and the next, and the next for all of eternity. What do you think of that?"

"It's wonderful," I murmured.

"It is, isn't it?"

"I meant this cigar. Where is it from?"

She chuckled as if she hadn't already heard my lame joke in her vision.

"Somewhere in the Sagittarian Sector, I believe."

"I'll have to order some."

"On your pension? Dream on."

I took a long draw of the cigar. "So what is this offer? A job you said. But doing what?"

She turned on her side to face me. Her breath, carrying the cigar's heady aphrodisiac, was warm and heavy against my cheek. "You know what surprised me about my vision?"

"I can't possible imagine."

"We made love."

"We did? I find that hard to believe. What with you leading me and my men into a firefight we could not win, and me getting all busted up. I find it impossible to imagine, quite frankly."

"It's true. Believe me. In less than five minutes time you reach across and unlatch my dress. You slip it off my shoulders. Then you kiss my breasts, taking each nipple in turn between your teeth, and flicking them with your tongue."

"I've never done that with any woman," I lied, embarrassed and angry that she knew something like that about me.

"You do with me."

"And then what?"

"Do I need to draw you a map?" she said playfully. "Your fingers dance across my flesh, exploring every centimeter of my skin, all the way down between my legs."

Her sultry voice washed over me like a tropical breeze. My shorts were tight against my groin, but I resisted the desire with the only thing I had -- anger. "You could have saved my men. The whole fucking point of seeing the fucking future is to avoid fucking disasters."

Her eyes dimmed under the weight of something. I hoped it was regret. "You really don't understand, do you?"

"I know that only half of me is flesh and blood, the other half..."

She pressed a finger against my lips. "There are all sorts of disasters. The path to that single event I witnessed has many disasters along the way. Yours was only one. Your sacrifice, and that of your men, avoided something so much worse."

"What was it?"

"That's above your pay grade, I'm afraid."

The precogs were the great military secret, the great advantage the Colonial Marines and our political masters had over all our enemies. For me, the military strategy of cause and effect based on temporal probability functions was

always an elusive concept, and I realized this was as close as I was going to get to an apology from anyone.

The job she was offering, with her body as a delectable side dish, was to go to some God forsaken planet out on the Margin to protect a school teacher.

Whatever. It was a job.

“My contract extends, and I retain my rank?”

“Of course. Now fuck me.” Her voice was thick and husky, all pretense gone. “Just for the hell of it.”

“Why not?” I laughed as I imagined that probability function she’d mentioned collapsing all around me. “Just for the hell of it.”

Much later, as we shared another cigar, I thought about what it must be like to see an eternity in a vision, to experience the pain and suffering of the ages to come. I wondered if she really had seen us make love, or if some rebellious spirit had taken hold of her, motivating her to shake up the future just a little. Maybe give it a nudge, so to speak, just for the hell of it. If so, what new path had she set in motion, and where did that path lead?

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