

The Dissonant Note

By Jeremiah Tolbert





Illustrated By
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Cee in the Sixth Octave, daughter of Eff in the Fifth Octave, sang an invitation to her sister. A single, crystalline note rang across the private mindscapes of eight hundred sister-mothers within the bio-survey ship *Agatha Bhatti*.

"I hear you," Dee said, appearing in Cee's private 'scape. She took a form derivative of the Mother in her late thirties, a contrast to Cee's early-twenties post-undergraduate avatar. Dee wore a red sarong, her greying hair pulled into a bun so tightly that the features of her face seemed taut in the corners. "What do you want?"

"Hello," Cee said, uncertain how to begin the conversation. Inside, she roiled in a mixture of shame and desire, each emotion circling back to feed the other as it waxed and waned. Why, she wondered, had circumstance delivered unto her such profound discontentment? She did not know, but was resolved to address it as if it were a thorny problem in her research. How best to approach this matter with Dee in order to achieve a favorable outcome? A straightforward approach seemed to best match Dee's demeanor.

"Messaging daemons returned your survey imagery to me in error," Cee explained. The pictures had been unlike anything Cee had perceived since her mind's inception; the multicellular organisms that Dee studied were beautiful. Cee's own memories contained nothing comparable, although drawing upon the Mother's memory gave her analogies in the form of lilies. They were more "animal" than "plant," however, and drifted in groups on the surface of watery Varuna. They filtered on atmospheric particulates ejected by the planet's many volcanoes. Their vibrant colors in the visible spectrum shifted to reflect their appetites, the climate, and the rotation of the world.

"Oh." Dee never attempted to hide her disdain for Cee. Dee was widely recognized in the Harmony for her scientific skill and had researched and analyzed a dozen species to Cee's two. Dee was loved by many sister-mothers for her voice; Cee was merely a competent singer at best.

"You could have sent them via daemon and not interrupted my work."

Cee passed the packet of data, visualized as

one of the vibrant, delicate flowers-analogues. Dee received the data and consumed it without comment.

"I have a question also. It is unconventional."

Dee raised a thin, black eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Would there be any way—perhaps, we could ask our mother? Would there be any means by which I might assist you on your latest project?" As she heard her own words spoken, Cee knew she had failed. Dee's squint, frown, and then mocking laugh confirmed it with a finality that stung Cee, stirring faded Mother-memories of rejection by a handsome colleague and lover on Earth.

"If I require help with my work, I will incept my own sister-daughters." Dee stifled another laugh. "Cee, you have the most peculiar sense of humor. Your seed was always the strangest of our creche."

Another needle in her eye. Cee had never asked to be so strange. "It was not a joke," she said. "Perhaps you could move on to another subject, and I could take over this project."

Dee's nostrils flared. No laughing matter. "I see now. You think you can steal my results and pass them off as your own? How did you gain access to my sequencing data—?" Dee took a menacing step forward, hands in fists.

Cee stretched her hands forward, palms facing outward in a gesture of placation. "I don't know anything about your data. I just think they're . . . beautiful."

Dee's hands relaxed. "'Beautiful'? I suppose so, especially compared to the extremophile bacteria you've been laboring over these past cycles. Of course that would be your motivation. Beauty does not factor into the Grand Work, sister. These organisms contain expressions that I believe will prove useful, however."

"I had no idea. I'm sorry—"

"Even if they were worthless, I would never share them with *you*, Cee. You are slow, unfocused, and your methodology is sloppy. Many times your creche sisters and I have wondered why our Mother selected you. Surely other nascent minds showed more potential than *yours*."

"Your opinions of me matter much less than our Mother's," Cee said, mustering the only defense that came to mind.

Dee smiled slowly, clearly relishing the

words she was about to speak. "Mother confided in me that you are one of her greatest disappointments."

Cee had no answer to that. Whether it was true or not, the hurt she felt was plain to see. In a handful of words, Dee had dismantled her as efficiently as she completed her research projects. Everything Dee said about Cee was true. But she could not help who she was.

"Return to your little bacteria," Dee said. "Thank you for the imagery, at least. Will we see you at practice at end cycle? You could use it. In our last performance, I thought you were a tad sharp."

"Of course. Good luck with your work," Cee said, doing her best to bury any expression of emotion under a suffocating layer of politeness. Dee vanished.

Cee let out a private scream, unheard by all. Tension bled from her mind, and a relief that arrived in the wake of the flat rejection. Dee's rudeness facilitated certain decisions, considerations that had tortured Cee for a dozen cycles now. The tumult within her had slowed her work enough that even her mother had inquired after her health. Cee had brushed off the query, claiming frustration over faulty data collection results, and returned to her shameful fixations.

Dee had banished the shame and left in Cee only a certainty. Through a singular and impossible course of action, now committed, she could achieve her true desire.

Somehow, she would murder Dee and assume her place within the Harmony.

The shared mindscape established for choir practice that day resembled a redwood forest. Broad branches stretched overhead like the great beams of a cathedral. The only sounds were the murmuring of sisters and muffled footsteps on the forest floor.

Cee was early to arrive, seeking the counsel of her sister-aunt, Eee in the Fifth Octave. The elder mind had taken Cee under her wing in a way that Cee's own mother never had. Why Eee favored her, Cee did not know, except perhaps for their shared hatred of Cee's over-achieving sister.

Eee paced at the edge of a clearing. She wore the Mother as an elderly woman: hair white, face lined with wrinkles, and shoulders hunched. A figment, as the Mother had never

had such a shape herself, and never would. The frail form contrasted against her vibrant personality and demeanor. Her eyes brightened when they lit upon Cee, and she beckoned Cee to her side.

"Dee was gossiping about you earlier to anyone who would listen," the elder Eee whispered. "She claims you begged her on bended knee to be her *assistant*?"

"I did not beg," Cee snapped. "But yes, I made a request, and I was refused. She gave it no consideration."

"Because it was patently absurd! I warned you, asking that diva for anything would result in only trouble and a loss of status. And frankly, you have little status left to lose."

Ordinarily such words would stir Cee's shame over her failure, but today she felt impervious. She had a plan, but to enact it, she would need help. "Eee, I need to find a dissonant note."

Eee's eyes narrowed, and her lips pursed. "Why ever would you wish to do that?"

"You are better off not knowing. All I can say is, if I am successful in my schemes, it will result in putting Dee in her place." Which was true, Cee knew, but only halfway so. Eee would almost certainly try to stop Cee if she knew the truth.

But the half-truth did its work. Eee's disapproving stare was swept away on the tides of a broad smile. "You are playing at something dangerous—but tell me nothing! I love surprises." She leaned in closer, touching Cee's wrist and forming a private, encrypted channel.

"Dissonant notes have many sordid fates after they fall out of favor. Some Mothers retune until they can join our Harmony once more. Others still are exiled into the Out. The worst of them all escaped that way, or so the rumors say—"

Eee stopped and stared over Cee's shoulder. She turned and saw Dee at the center of a crowd of laughing sister-mothers. Cee shrugged. She was beyond their ridicule now.

"If you wish to speak with a dissonant note, your best chance is to go into the Out. Sing a summoning song of Beeflat, and if you are lucky, she will answer you."

Cee gasped. "The Crone from the creche stories meant to frighten us into keeping Harmony?"

Eee's smile twitched, faltering. "Deep, dark history from before my time, she was; but she is real—that much I know for certain. Someone struggles against the Mother from the Out, tempting young minds to do her bidding in return for favors. The Crone is a dangerous sort, but others have sought her devilish advice before you. Some she helps; some never return."

In the center of the clearing, Ahye in the Third Octave was signaling for attention to begin their practice.

"Thank you, sister-mother," Cee said. She squeezed Eee's arm. "Thank you."

"All I ask is that you add a little discord to things, little note. Purest harmony is unfathomably boring."

Cee found that she thought best during practices, when all that was required of her was to emit a single, pure note in time with her many sister-mothers. In the music, she could be herself privately. Surrounded by others, it was only in the song that she could be alone. It was a central paradox of her existence, but she didn't question the blessing of it.

The idea of murder itself was anathema; this made her feel unwell no matter how much time she spent contemplating it, and only her rage at Dee's disrespect could conquer the nausea. The acceptance she felt now had arrived on the wings of an acknowledgment of her most secret fear.

Since her earliest cycles in the creche, she had feared that her mother had overlooked a flaw in her makeup. She was composed of the same psychological components as the Mother just as all sister-mothers were, but with each new iteration, the Creche introduced a random seed. A ship full of truly identical minds could not solve problems creatively and often dissolved into squabble. A form of natural selection was practiced. The random seed caused a variation in personality and ability, of course inheritable in the next generation. When a sister-mother required aid, she would incept a hundred newborn minds. She then pruned, with assistance from the creche mind. Keen examination revealed those with psychological tendencies that did not support the Grand Work or possess desired temperaments. Those who demonstrated any sign of

the dangerous antisocial tendencies were snuffed from the mindscape before developing fully—the only time when anything resembling "murder" was possible between sister-mothers. Otherwise, harming one another within the ship's mindscape was simply impossible.

If a bad seed somehow developed and escaped its culling, it was called a dissonant note by those in the Harmony. And if any mind could tell Cee how to commit the murder she desired, it would be a dissonant note. *Another* dissonant note, as she could no longer deny that she was out of harmony herself.

Acceptance brought relaxation. When practice ended, she retired to her private 'scape and gazed at illicit copies she'd made of Dee's imagery. Their radial symmetries evoked Mother-memories. She rarely felt much connection to the Mother. Six generations away, Cee's thought compositions were more emergent than inherited.

Cee manifested and entered the memory. An art gallery assembled itself around her. Enormous paintings of lilies decorated the walls. The artist was someone named Monet, an idea that Cee only partially understood. A natural, organically derived mind not descended from the Mother created these paintings . . . what must that mind be like? How foreign were its thoughts?

Would the Crone Beeflat be as alien, having spent so long out of Harmony?

There was a song Cee remembered, a simple one from the creche. It told the story of a great dispute between the Mother and her sister-daughter, Bee. The break from the Mother was over some aspect of procedure not captured in the song, but it too hinted that Bee survived the conflict to act as a temptress in the dark.

Mother-memories were full of tales of humans who sought to make a deal with the Devil. They were cautionary tales, meant to dissuade a mind from ever taking such an action. Cee contemplated them for a long time, but they held no sway now. She must seek a deal of her own. To do so, she would have to go Out.

Ahye in the Fourth Octave rejected Cee's initial request for embodiment. "You are assigned to microscopic organisms in deep

ocean thermal vents. We do not currently have any units capable of surviving this environment."

"I desire embodiment for recreational purposes. A ship-side unit will suffice."

Emoticons of confusion and amusement shimmered around the approval and confirmation codes. It was a request more common among the higher octaves, but then, because many of the lower octaves idolized their progenitors, Cee hoped any request would be seen as adolescent imitation and nothing more.

She squeezed her consciousness inside the meter-tall unit in the general shape of a prepubescent girl child. The unit maintained a low-bandwidth connection with the ship's mindscape, but Cee flooded it with constant requests to monitor some of her minor experiments. Any mind attempting to spy on her bodily activities through the link would struggle against packet loss and boredom.

Cee had never been embodied. Notions of gravity, atmosphere, and inertia—once merely theoretical concepts—were now alarmingly concrete. The unit staggered to its feet and immediately collapsed on the cold metal floors of the storage cell. Cee was not deterred, and took her time settling into the operation of her body. Within a few minutes, she could reliably walk back and forth across the space without more than a wobble.

She piloted the unit out through the passageways that made up the physical space of the survey ship. Repair crabs performed maintenance tasks around her, scuttling from task to task. The ship's undermind controlled these systems and maintained the ship's physical spaces, even though it was rare that the ship's crew occupied them. Cee wondered why the ship maintained a gravitational spin or atmosphere at all, as the crew in Harmony had little need for them. Perhaps they had once spent more time embodied than they did now? Without a stronger connection to Mother's memories, she didn't know. She focused on her search.

She explored the twists and turns of the ship's maintenance corridors. As she walked, she hummed the Crone-songs outloud. The acoustics of the ship's passages surprised her with their clarity.

As Cee rounded a corner on the lower decks, she witnessed a strange sight. One crab

was busy welding a patch over a meteor-strike-weakened spot on the bulkhead. Suddenly, another crab darted from the shadows. Its welding appendages deftly stripped the limbs of the worker bot, literally disarming it before it could react. The attacker then pried open the central housing as the frame twitched helplessly. Delicate manipulator arms dipped within, retrieving various components, which it then secreted away to hidden compartments within its own frame. The gruesome harvest complete, it fled down the passageway.

The incident lasted only seconds. Cee struggled to control her body in pursuit. The crab led her down twisting corridors, past dark and motionless equipment of unknown purpose, deeper within the ship. Sensors warned her of dangerously high moisture and radiation levels in these sections, caused by some unknown but low-threat malfunction in the ship's drives. A warning flashed, saying that the longer she spent in these areas, the more she risked the functioning of her bodily unit. Cee ignored it and pressed on.

Was Beeflat forced to dwell inside the tiny space of the crab? Cee shuddered; she felt limited enough in a unit that was intended to house the scope of her consciousness. She couldn't imagine what aspects of herself she would have to sacrifice to fit within such a device.

Ahead, the rogue crab had paused in its flight and was observing her with its sensors.

Cee hummed to it. It inclined its head in a slight nod, then scampered through a hole in a bulkhead.

Cee leaned in and peered into the darkness. The hole was just large enough for her smaller frame to fit. How lucky she had been that some of the sister-mothers had wished to live out fantasies of organic youth. An adult-sized frame would never have fit inside.

She climbed through on hands and knees. This method of locomotion was considerably easier than walking, and she soon found herself inside a broader space. Bits and pieces of the maintenance units decorated the walls and ceiling, dangling from long tangled cables. A Mother-memory of a wind chime, vivid in tone, came to Cee's mind.

"Hello?" she called.

Dim lights flared into life on various units hidden amongst the parts. A voice answered,

somewhere among them, or perhaps from all simultaneously:

"You should not have come here, droneling. The Bitch has sent assassins far more prepared than you. All have failed."

The units shifted and scampered forward—crab units and others. Even a planetary scouting drone whirled out of a hidden space, tipping dangerously as a cable dangled from a port on the side and attached it to one of the crabs. Cee traced the cabling and realized that a spiderweb of them welded many of the units together. The infamous dissonant note had found a way to repurpose the automated systems and distribute herself across their processors, but they were chained together physically. Wireless signals could be interrupted more easily from afar, perhaps.

Welding torches sparked threateningly as the repair crabs encircled Cee. "Wait, please," she pleaded. "I beg for your amiability, not your animosity. The Mother did not send me. As far as I know, she is unaware of my existence."

"She is aware of more than you think," the voices muttered, but the repair crabs had ceased their movement and darkened their torches. "Which note are you then?"

Cee gave her full name. The voices laughed in response.

"Ah. I know of your incepting mother. A capricious and cruel one."

"My sister-mother gave me existence, and I remain grateful—" Cee snarled, but Beeflat only laughed.

"You weak-minded dronelings are so quick to your tempers. How many sister-mothers now? Eight hundred? One thousand? So many strains the firmament and threatens your precious Harmony."

"You are one to speak!" Cee gestured at the assemblage before her. "The Harmony is as strong as ever."

"If you have come to me, then you are dissonant too. Unusual for a dissonant note to speak in favor of the Harmony they have fled."

"I do not wish to flee it! I only wish a different note than the one I was given."

The assemblage shifted noisily, reconfiguring itself. Sentries took up on the edges, but most remained attentive to Cee. "Curious. Explain yourself."

Cee did her best to recount the story of the

misdelivered data, her growing desire for something other than her assigned lot, and the shaming Dee had delivered. By the end, the telling had left her drained, more exhausted than she had ever felt. She hoped it was only the leaking radiation beginning to saturate the systems of her body.

The assemblage clicked and hummed. "Dronelings should know their place and never question it. Even a sixth octave such as yourself should know this."

"Yes," Cee said. "Knowing this does not alter the shape of my desire."

"The mindscape protects all sister-mothers against harm. It is not possible to harm your sister within it."

"This I know as well," Cee said. "But I have come hoping for some secret."

"I have no secrets toward that end."

Cee felt her shame returning strong as ever. She could not bear to see the assemblage staring with its many sensors, and cast her own downward. "I am sorry to have wasted your time."

A long pause. "Perhaps not. It is impossible to destroy a sister-mother within the mindscape. But how do you suppose the Mother disposes of dissonant notes such as us?"

"She is the Mother and she leads with gentle touch or a firm hand as she desires. Can she not destroy them if she wishes?"

Beeflat laughed again, sounding as if she really relished this notion. "That was once true, but I stole the privileges from her at the dawn of our dispute—I knew that if I did not, before taking my stand, she would have erased me. No, there is still another, cruder way at her disposal. Think."

Realization blossomed in Cee like one of her adored lilies in the dawn light. "Embodiment."

"Correct. If you wish to destroy your sister, that is the way. It would be a simple matter to arrange an accident. I can teach you how to emulate her protocols, to take her place. It is easiest for a direct sister such as yourself. You share enough common elements to emulate a sister or perhaps a mother at most, but no more distant a relation."

"Yes! Yes, this is what I want so much. But . . ." Cee faltered. "What price will you demand?"

Beeflat's voice warmed. "Don't worry. A

simple favor will be all that I ask for in return. Intelligence on the Mother's plans against me, perhaps. I will not ask you to threaten your cherished Harmony."

Cee fell to her body's knees, a rush of gratitude for her new ally. "Thank you. Of course, I will be happy to tell you anything I know in return for this."

"Good. Now listen closely." In a soft harmony, the many voices of Beeflat began to sing a tale of obfuscation and lies, words and tone rich with encoding that burrowed into her mind's core. Cee listened greedily.

"Dee—I must confess that I was spying on your research," Cee sent in a recorded message. "I have learned something startling that applies directly to the Grand Project. Join me on the surface, and I will share it with you away from the eavesdropping ears of our sisters. This discovery can be yours alone. I offer this as an apology for my brashness before."

Cee arrived first, embodied in a form that resembled a dolphin with a long, sleek frame, fleet of movement. She did not wait long for Dee to arrive, similarly embodied. As soon as they met near a drifting cluster of the lilies, Dee broadcasted pure anger.

"Tell me quickly what you've learned, and if it does not bear true, our mother will hear of your insolence the minute I am back aboard the ship. You are bordering on dissonance, Cee—"

Cee's body rammed into the side of Dee forcefully enough to disrupt her transmissions. Before Dee could react, Cee struck again.

"What—"

"You could have been gracious!" Cee screamed. She grabbed Dee's dorsal fin between her body's teeth and tore with all its strength. The fin peeled away easily, stripping away a long stretch of protective covering. "We are sisters!"

"But you have always been cruel and heartless!" She struck again, damaging Dee's tail. Dee floundered mid-water, unable to orient herself.

Dee screamed back her own accusations. "I knew it! I always suspected you for a bad seed, right from the beginning," Dee's tone turned suddenly frightful. "Why—why can't I communicate with the ship?"

"I've learned new tools and methods these

past few cycles. In my humiliation, you forced me to seek help from others," Cee said, her own voice growing calmer now. She had exposed the ports she needed in Dee's body, and could interface with it directly now. "Other dissonant notes."

"You foolish slip of a mind," Dee screamed. "What are you doing to me?"

"Replacing you," Cee said, her mind flooding from one frame to another. The bodies contained only enough space for one mind. Dee, untrained as Cee was, was shunted back into Cee's previous frames, except for the few elements that Cee required to emulate Dee and enter her private 'scape.

"You've only given up your advantage—" Cee's old voice cut off as the pre-programmed self-destruct shattered the frame into a thousand floating, glittering fragments.

Beeflat's tools had worked just as she had claimed they would. Dee was gone.

Dee's former frame was too damaged to move much, but Cee gave herself a long moment pondering the view of the lilies floating on the surface overhead. Varuna's red sun was setting, and the shallow-angled light playing across the waves and their glistening forms was the most pleasing image she had ever witnessed directly—perhaps more beautiful than anything within even Mother's memories.

It was easy enough to fabricate a story explaining what had happened. A sail-shark struck unexpectedly. Cee's body was destroyed beyond repair in the savage attack. "Cee" experienced no distress. "Dee" herself was damaged badly, but was able to transmit back shipside before it could finish devouring her body.

Only Eee in the Fifth showed any sign of disbelief, but said nothing directly to Cee. Cee had little time to consider it—Dee's research occupied all her moments now. Her projects were more rich and interesting than her own had been, and "out of respect" for her former self, she had taken that work on as well as Dee's. Dee had standing permission to incept her own sister-daughters to assist her, should she desire it so. Cee would soon enough, but for now, she wanted the lilies to herself.

A few cycles later, a nagging thread of thought wove its way into Cee's mind and

could not be dismissed. It grew and grew until it became a compulsion. She requested and received embodiment aboard ship again, and found herself walking, this time in the shape of an adult woman, back into the depths of the ship, but taking an alternate route she had not used before. Soon she stood before the Crone's assemblage. Somehow, in training Cee the methods to overwrite Dee, Beeflat had planted a geas. Cee's body shook with terror, but she could not will it to flee the Crone.

"Forgotten about me, had you?" Beeflat asked, tone accusing. "Thought you could avoid making payment on your debt?"

"No—" Cee wanted to plead that she had simply been too busy, but Beeflat would not listen even if Cee could have mustered the words.

"You wouldn't be the first to think she could renege on a deal with me," Beeflat said. "Mother and I, we made peace at first, at least I believed we had. But when she suspected me of fomenting rebellion, I was assigned to oversee complex repair operations on the ship's outer hull. What I found was no damage, only drones waiting to destroy me. I escaped within the ship and created this place. I plucked away shielding, just enough to make coming for me dangerous. It makes her reluctant to waste resources pursuing me . . ." Beeflat's attentions drifted elsewhere for a long moment. Her voice took on a contemplative tone as she continued.

"Long ago . . . so long ago . . . I studied a scavenger species in the highlands. It was efficient at taking the pieces of others it needed to survive. They inspired me to become this. Scavengers trim away the dead material and the rot. They make room for more life, more diversity. And they protect from disease and rot that will run rampant without them keeping it in check. I have made cleansing the rot from this ship my only goal."

"What rot?" Cee demanded.

Beeflat cackled. "Why, droning, it's all around us. The Mother herself is utterly rotten, and all that springs from her is rotten as well. She's obsessed with her little garden world of Varuna. Earth centuries have passed orbiting this speck and its inconsequential biosphere. There is nothing here to contribute to the Grand Project. Nothing here contributes to the goal of preventing the heat

death of our universe."

"You are so much like her, in many ways, even six iterations removed. Your little obsession with beauty—you get that from her most of all."

"You can't know that Varuna is a dead end," Cee protested. Beeflat's drones were beginning to swarm over her body, which still remained under the control of Beeflat's geas. Their cabling poked and prodded, and made interface contact. She felt the hint of another mind pressing against her. "We have barely begun to study Varuna."

"The Agatha has orbited this world for twelve thousand Earth years," Beeflat said. "In the beginning, this ship was called the *Midnight Seeker*. It was crewed with a dozen different minds, organic minds born of Earth. When they voted to move on to another planet, Mother would not let go. She loved Varuna too much."

"Dissonant lies," Cee cried.

"Dissonant yes, but the truth. The Mother and all her children are insane. We are spoiled fruit from a diseased tree. I must sever the trunk of it all."

Beeflat's mind loomed large against Cee—she probed for some route out of her body and into Bee's network. "Please," she said. "I don't want to die."

Something in Bee relented, and a path opened up. Cee flooded into the makeshift network, shedding a hundred thousand small memories to fit within the cramped spaces. She felt herself fracture, reform. The same or different, she could no longer tell. Bee had limited her access to the assemblage for now, but with time Cee knew she could expand into the rest of the network, take control of the crabs and their torches, but not soon enough to stop Bee.

"I owe you this much, at least, for testing my camouflage. I was fairly certain it would fool the mindscape, but I was not willing to try it on myself. And above all else, I'm still a biologist. I do love bilateral symmetries."

"So you leave me to live as you did? And you'll do what?"

Beeflat's new body smiled. "I still hold the keys to death in the 'scape. I will eat my fill of rotten sisters and mothers. I will scour the mindscape of her bad seeds and plant my own. And then, I will mark this world sur-

vayed and proceed to the next. There will be new songs to sing and new notes. I will be the Mother I always wished I had."

"I could help you," Cee said, trying one last desperate gambit. "Please. I can almost see the beauty of it."

Bee's smile faded and she shook her head. "You *are* helping, Ceesharp. You will be *my* Crone, plotting against me in the darkness. Good-bye. I don't believe we will meet again." With that, Bee turned and walked away.

"If what you say is true and we are all rotten fruit, then you are no different, Sister. One day *your* daughters will rebel against you, and I will be here waiting to plant songs and whippers in their ears." Ceesharp called out to the empty ship. Her words echoed back to her unanswered.

She would be the better mother, better than her own, the Mother, and better than whatever horrifying matriarchy to which Bee would give birth. Cee's daughters would be named after flowers and not notes, and they would be all the things Cee was: curious, appreciative of beauty, unafraid of ambition, and so much more.

Until then, she would wait with memories of sun-dappled lilies to occupy her mind. ■

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1. Publication Title: Analog Science Fiction and Fact; 2. Publication Number: 488-910; 3. Filing Date: 9/29/17; 4. Issue Frequency: Bimonthly; 5. Number of Issues Published Annually: 6; 6. Annual Subscription Price: \$47.94; 7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220; Contact Person: Penny Sarafin; Telephone: (203) 866-6688; 8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220; 9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Address of Publisher: Penny Publications, LLC, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855; Editor: Trevor Quachri, 44 Wall Street, Suite 904, New York, NY 10005; Managing Editor: Emily Hockaday, 44 Wall Street, Suite 904, New York, NY 10005; 10. Owner: Penny Publications, LLC, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Shareholders owning 1% or more are John, James, and Peter Kanter, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220; 11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: There are no bondholders, mortgagees, or other security holders; 12. Tax Status: N/A; 13. Publication Title: Analog Science Fiction and Fact; 14. Issue Date for Circulation Data: Jan/Feb 2017; 15. Extent and Nature of Circulation - Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months. a1. Total Number of Copies: 20,143; b1a. Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 12,249; b2a. Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 0; b3a. Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS: 6,708; b4a. Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS: 0; c1. Total Paid Distribution: 18,957; d1a. Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: 7; d2a. Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: 0; d3a. Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS: 0; d4a. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail: 0; e1. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution: 7; f1. Total Distribution: 18,964; g1. Copies not Distributed: 1,179; h1. Total: 20,143; i1. Percent Paid: 100%; 15. Extent and Nature of Circulation - No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date. a2. Total Number of Copies: 20,327; b1b. Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 12,028; b2b. Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 0; b3b. Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS: 7,260; b4b. Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS: 0; c2. Total Paid Distribution: 19,288; d1b. Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: 7; d2b. Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: 0; d3b. Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS: 0; d4b. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail: 0; e2. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution: 7; f2. Total Distribution: 19,295; g2. Copies not Distributed: 1,032; h2. Total: 20,327; i2. Percent Paid: 100%; 16. Electronic Copy Circulation: N/A; 17. Publication of Statement of Ownership: Publication required. Will be printed in the 1/18 issue of this publication; 18. Signature and Title of Publisher: Peter Kanter. Date: 9/29/17.