

Skin ♦ Horse

Thanksgiving

By Shaenon K. Garrity



It was an orange afternoon on a normal street. Late sunlight through the oaks and sugar maples gilded everything in old gold, from the white clapboard on the colonial houses to the shadows under each neatly-trimmed hedge. The minivans were practical, the landscaping was passive-aggressively competitive, and leaves crunched underfoot on the sidewalks. A breeze carried a deeper chill and the scent of mesquite. On another afternoon there might have been a few children playing to complete the scene, maybe an old couple walking their dog, but on this afternoon everyone was inside their normal houses, cooking and gossiping and admiring their very nice, very normal decor. To Sergio, who had spent the last several months living in a giant robot, it was an alien landscape.

In his hand, his boyfriend's hand rippled. That happened when Artie transformed, but he wasn't transforming this time, at least not deliberately. He was losing cohesion. He was nervous. Sergio squeezed the hand.

"I have to say," he said, internally correcting himself that he didn't *have* to say it, in fact he was forcing himself to speak to break the tension, then telling his inner critic to hush up and let him have a relationship already, "I wasn't expecting a neighborhood this...Rockwellian."

“They told me they chose it for the schools,” said Artie. “It’s not a bad district, but I’m sure they have other reasons. They always have other reasons.” In his non-hand-holding arm, he shifted a large bowl. “She told us to bring mashed potatoes. Why did she tell us to bring mashed potatoes? How do they figure into her nefarious plan?”

“Maybe she just wanted mashed potatoes.”

“It’s never ‘just.’ In multiple senses. It’s always ‘and.’” Artie stopped and held Sergio in his unsettlingly deep gaze. “A mad scientist’s mind is an onion. A disaster onion. Don’t let your guard down.”

“Artie, I know. You’ve told me enough horror stories. But you’ve brought guys to meet them before.”

“I haven’t.”

“They met the astronaut—”

“They’ve met a few exes. Usually without warning. Often that was part of the reason they became *exes*. I’ve never been reckless enough to lead anyone to their lair.”

“I’ve worked in super-science, you know. I’ve met mad geniuses and lived to tell the tale.”

“Helen and Dave are...different. Maybe it’s the marriage. It’s not normal for mad geniuses to work together—usually they blow each other up after a day or so—but those two have been resonating off each other for years like a pair of funhouse mirrors. They try to be friendly, but they don’t really think like humans anymore...”

Another ripple traveled up his neck and past his hairline. Artie started walking again, faster this time.

“Keep it together. Remember your anti-anxiety mantra.”

“I can be larger than most common predators. I can be larger than most common predators. I can be... Yes. Thank you.” Artie’s face fell into an uncharacteristically human expression. “Irrationally, I want them to like you.”

Artie had spent the ride over describing some of the things that had happened to people his creator didn’t like, not to mention the cleanup afterward. Sergio was extremely motivated to be likable. He put a hand on Artie’s back, partly to reassure his boyfriend but mostly to steady his legs. “My

family liked you.”

“Your father was sorry you couldn’t have found a nice girl until he learned that I speak Spanish and like cheap beer, and now I’m invited to every wedding. I like your family, too. Very much. But it did remind me that I don’t precisely have a family. I have a laboratory of origin. Here we are.”

It was a little smaller than the surrounding houses, the yard a little less recently raked, and the lawn decor ran to plastic flamingos and ceramic gnomes rather than the affirmative messages carved into rocks favored by more up-to-date tacky suburbanites. But otherwise it was just another house.

“We don’t have to go in,” said Sergio. “I saw a Cheesecake Factory up the road.”

“There are no decent vegan options at a Cheesecake Factory. Not even on Thanksgiving, the night of quality plant-based side dishes.”

“Then no matter what happens,” said Sergio, with more confidence than he felt, “I’m with you.”

The door flew open. A streak of energy with a blonde ponytail flew out and latched on to Artie. For a moment Sergio thought it was Artie’s creator, but no, this was a teenager.

“You made it!” she was saying. “Holy, is this the guy? Is this Sergio? Hi, Sergio.”

“Hi,” said Sergio.

“Please don’t make me drop the potatoes,” said Artie.

“It’s called a hug, Artie. Warm greeting, cultural expression of peaceful intent, oxytocin trigger, mild love-bombing. Speaking of.” She hugged Sergio. “It’s basic sociology. Come on in! Get warm! Mom and Dad are in the back.”

And she was gone.

“That’s your sister, huh?” said Sergio.

“That,” said Artie stiffly, “is Helen’s daughter. It’s seldom a good idea to over-analogize. Now you’re smirking at me.”

“Must have been the hug. The oxytocin worked.

She's a mad genius."

"Not yet. Just too clever for her own good." Artie smiled, too, a rare enough event that Sergio allowed himself to relax and enjoy it. "Like me. Well, we've crossed the threshold. Into the breach."

Artie led Sergio down a hallway cluttered with books and papers, a little untidy but hardly an evil laboratory. Sergio smelled gravy and cornbread stuffing. They emerged into a sunroom with wicker furniture and ceiling fans lazily revolving in the heat—

The heat?

The sunroom opened onto a sprawling deck, and the deck overlooked a jungle that unrolled toward white beaches and shimmering waves. The sun beat down. A macaw shrieked.

"The back," said Artie.

Sergio stepped up to the railing of the deck. He was familiar with creative physics, but it was always disorienting to walk around in some of it. "So the front of the house is in the nice school district, and the back is in...?"

"Honestly, I don't know anymore. It used to be off the coast of Brazil, but I think they move it around. Safer for everyone that way."

As Sergio's eyes adjusted to the tropical sunshine, he could make out structures rising from the jungle. Some looked like enormous Tinkertoy sets, some like the covers of old World's Fair catalogs, others like half-finished children's treehouses. One section of the island, far off, was domed in a shimmering mist. Another area looked like an immaculate rose garden. And was that a hedge maze?

The deck itself was rigged with ropes and cables and antennas. Most of the cables seemed to connect to some kind of network of...oh, of course, a skyway. A platform reaching from the deck was the right size and position for a small tram that could take passengers down into the jungle. Low-tech for the kind of inventors who could move islands and split a house into separate global hemispheres, but fun. Sergio had the growing sense that everything around him was a frighteningly advanced intelligence's idea of fun. He

was used to being the frighteningly advanced intelligence in any given situation, and he realized that he needed to adjust his thinking very quickly.

“Can we go down there?” he asked. “Is it safe?”

To his mild surprise, Artie didn’t reject the idea. “I’ll have to check. It’s safe for me, most likely. Helen’s creations generally like me; I’m one of them, after all. But I haven’t been home in a while, and I’m sure there are active experiments we ought to be warned about, not that it will occur to anyone to warn us. Oh, hello, Dave.”

Sergio had been about to comment that this was the first time he’d heard Artie refer to this place as his home, but now he was distracted all over again. While they’d been talking, a shaggy figure had been busying himself on the deck, adjusting pulleys and tying off ropes. How had Sergio failed to notice him? He hadn’t been hiding and he hadn’t been silent. He’d just been...there.

And this was Dave. Dave had blown up the Moon once, according to Artie, but he put it together later.

“Hi, Artie,” said Dave. He looked at Sergio, or at least he moved his eyes in Sergio’s direction. “Hi, Sergio. Have you met me?”

“No.” Of that, at least, Sergio was certain.

Dave grinned. “Okay, this is the first time! Lemme think.” He scratched his unruly thatch of hair. “Mell and the gang are already here. They went down to the Valley of Wandering Monsters.”

“Is that a good idea?” said Artie.

“Not for the wandering monsters, but try telling them anything. Oh, hey, you want a drink?”

“Please,” said Artie.

Dave opened a cooler and gestured for them to help themselves to beer. Artie had warned Sergio to take his coffee black and refuse any drink that might have been tampered with, but the beer cans seemed to be factory-sealed. After a nod from Artie, Sergio cracked one.

“What else?” said Dave. “Um, we’ll have dinner here on the deck if the sky’s mostly clear. Don’t tell Helen I said this, but I wouldn’t eat her turkey or anything birthed by her

turkey.”

“We’re vegan,” said Artie.

“Oh, yeah. Smart. Are those the mashed potatoes? You can hand them off to Doug.” A robot scooted up, took the bowl out of Artie’s hands, and placed it on the floor of the deck. “Thanks, Doug. And after dinner we can watch the fireworks.”

“It’s Thanksgiving, Dave,” said Artie gently. “Not the Fourth of July.”

“I know. I made a note.” Dave held up a hand. On his palm was a smear of ink that might once have read IT’S THANKSGIVING, DAVE, NOT THE FOURTH OF JULY. “I can’t always get events lined up to the right holidays. I mean, I try...”

A mynah bird landed on Dave’s shoulder. “Hey, boss,” it said. “I don’t tell you and the missus how to run your insanity island, but you maybe wanna deal with the approaching drone squadron?”

“In a minute,” said Dave. “Can you go in and tell Rosalind to set the table?”

“They’re armed with nukes, boss.”

“Small nukes. Barely suitcase nukes.”

“Sorry,” said Artie, “but why are nuclear-capable drones on the way? Where does this rank on the weighted list of things I need to worry about?”

“It’s like this,” said Dave. “Remember when you didn’t ask us to help with that sapiocidal war you got involved in?”

“I spent years trying to head off the New War,” said Artie, “and when it broke out despite my efforts, I opted to keep you and Helen out of it—”

“Well, Helen said we should respect that, but one night we thought it’d be fun to build a few pocket universes, just to run strategic scenarios, see if there were some tips we could pass on. The math was pretty fun, you know, pinpointing spots in fractal spacetime...”

“We understand the math,” said Artie. “Sergio invented gate theory.”

Dave looked blank.

“Gate theory,” said Artie, “is the sane-science version of what you and Helen apparently came up with one night after too much terrible pink wine.”

“*And terrible beer!*” said Dave. His unfocused gaze turned back to Sergio. “Okay, so you get how linking to an alternate reality works. I bet that means you know it’s possible for the inhabitants of that reality to breach the quantum membrane and enter ours.”

“Theoretically, yes,” said Sergio. “It’s one of the reasons I abandoned that entire branch of research and tried to keep it out of evil hands.”

The mynah laughed. “Like that ever works.”

Artie pinched his nose. “Let me see if I follow this. You and Helen created a series of pocket universes containing alternate versions of the New War. A swarm of battle drones escaped from one of these universes. And now said drones are converging on the island to drop nuclear bombs on us.”

“We were trying to help.”

“Yes, this is more or less precisely why I didn’t ask for your help.”

“Yeah, so, here they come,” said the mynah. It gestured with one wing toward a cloud of black dots approaching over the horizon.

Artie spun on Dave. “And you didn’t think to warn us ahead of time?”

“Well. You know.” Dave shrugged. “We didn’t want you to miss Thanksgiving.”

“That is such...such a Helen thing to say!” Artie waved an arm wildly in Sergio’s direction. “I brought Sergio here! I knew I was putting him in danger, but not incipient nuclear danger!”

Sergio had seen Artie upset before—Artie was nearly always upset about something—but he’d never seen him angry. All the layers of intellectualizing and second-guessing and polite trepidation had fallen away, leaving a very large man with very large fists. No, not a man, exactly. Something else, something more. Artie had told Sergio that his creator had made him to take over the world, and they’d laughed about it, but in that moment Sergio could see the outlines of

that mad idea.

“Artie,” he said, “calm down. We’ll deal with it—”

“I’ll deal with it,” said Artie. “You stay safe. As safe as you can be in this place, at least. Safe-ish.” He downed the rest of his beer in one gulp. He pulled Sergio in and squeezed him, more gently than Sergio expected. Then he yanked on one of the ropes hanging over the deck. A bamboo tram popped into view. Artie leapt in. He was usually a little clumsy in human form, but this time his movements were smooth and certain.

“I’m going to get Mell,” he said. “Dammit, Dave.” The tram flew down a cable and vanished into the jungle.

“Poor guy,” said Dave. “He needed a project.” He clapped Sergio on the back. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

Sergio squinted into the trees, trying to catch a final glimpse of Artie. “The drones—”

“I said I’d take care of them, and I did. Remind me to go back a couple of hours and leave some extra rocket launchers in the monster valley.” Dave looked at his palm. “Nope, never mind, got it written down. Come on.”

They climbed a flight of stairs that wound back into the house, past landings that seemed tacked on at random, defying both conventional floor plans and actual spacial possibility. The blonde teenager nearly collided with them on her way down. “Dad! Where’s Mom and who’s strafing the island?”

“Surprisingly, those questions aren’t directly connected,” said Dave. “Don’t worry, honey. It’s just an alternate-universe drone squadron.”

“With nuclear weapons, apparently,” said Sergio, feeling he ought to contribute.

The girl made an irritated adolescent noise. “Right before dinner? I bet Artie’s having a conniption.”

“It’ll be okay,” said Dave. “After all, he and his friends already destroyed the drone fleet in this universe.” He turned to Sergio. “How’d you guys defeat the drones, anyway?”

“They had a technopath, Dad,” said the girl in

exasperation. To Sergio, she added, “Mom and Dad wouldn’t let me join the rebellion, but I followed the whole thing online. I designed some killer memes with embedded subliminal and subaural elements to disrupt reality blindness. Hope it helped.”

“I’m...sure it did,” said Sergio. “But she’s right. We had a cyborg who was able to neutralize the drones, and I will never be able to say sentences like that without suspecting I took a deeply wrong turn somewhere in my life. We can’t do the same thing now, unless you have similar technology...”

“Nah, that’s too practical for mad tech,” said Dave. “Anyway, Mell would be upset if we stopped them without a bunch of explosions. Oh well.” He continued up the stairs.

From outside came the sound of artillery fire.

“Go on,” said the girl. “If worst comes to worst, Mom’ll take care of it.” Behind her glasses, her eyes darkened. “Pray it doesn’t get that bad.”

“What will she do?”

“No idea.” The girl shuddered. “Gotta fold the napkins. I’m gonna make them look like turkeys. Bye!” And she was gone.

The house shook. Just a small incendiary missile, Sergio thought wildly, they hadn’t deployed the nukes yet. He thought of going back downstairs, maybe figure out how to summon a tram and go after Artie, but when he turned around the stairs below branched off in bewildering directions, spitting out into hallways and landings he didn’t recall passing. Reluctantly, he continued up.

He emerged into a silent, sun-drenched room that smelled of pine oil. Dozens of colored glass balls hung from the ceiling, some too large for his arms to fit around, others barely more than marbles. They cast rainbow light and tinted shadows. It was so beautiful that, for the briefest of moments, Sergio forgot to worry about anything.

“Nice, huh?” said Dave, who suddenly had been there all along, sweeping up. “They’re my universes.”

Sergio gazed into a rose-colored globe that hung at eye level. Light and particles swirled inside, following the mathematics of cosmic winds. “They are, aren’t they? It’s

the same principle as the dimensional gate I engineered at Anasigma, only..." Only beautiful. And illogical. Bleeding-edge physics turned into an amusing craft project.

"Here's the one the drones escaped from," said Dave. He held out a dustpan full of broken green glass. Behind Dave's back, Artie noticed a hastily patched-over hole in the wall. "My bad for keeping it around. There were some guys in there I liked watching."

Sergio had spent years monitoring alternate universes through his gate at Anasigma, and he understood the fascination. Sort of. "These are all different universes? Different realities?"

"Yeah. Not all of them branch from our timeline. Some of them we made from scratch." Dave tapped a small globe that shone like carnival glass. "This is our retirement universe. We spent a lot of time getting it just right."

"You're planning to retire?"

"Oh, we already have. We're in there. We're in a few different places." A look of unfiltered concern crossed Dave's face. "That's one of the reasons it's getting hard to focus on this level of reality, I guess. That war you guys had, the drone attack on Thanksgiving, the bite from the wedding bouquet..."

"The what?"

"Hasn't that happened yet? I thought it had. That's what I'm talking about. When there's so much going on in so many times and places, it's hard to understand what to care about. Sometimes I get it wrong, and then Artie's mad again." Dave dumped the broken glass into a wastebasket in the corner. "So we try to stick to caring about each other, and Rosalind, and Artie. Have you met Rosalind?"

"We just passed her on the stairs."

"Really? Time flows *that* way? Oops."

A flash of light out the window caught Sergio's attention. Drones swooped by, firing into the jungle. The air rippled for a moment and they were gone. Hot ash pattered on the treetops.

"Mell found the sonic disruptor," said Dave, in the tone of a parent glancing around for paper towels to wipe up

some soon-to-be-spilled apple juice.

“This,” said Sergio, backing away from the window, “looks like something to care about.”

“You’d think, huh? But Mell and Artie can handle it better than I can.” Another group of drones flew by, spraying laser beams. “Probably.”

Sergio was surprised to find his pulse slowing. He was getting used to this house. If he was killed here, at least it wouldn’t be out of malice. The thought shouldn’t have been comforting, but it was. “You said you wanted to show me something.”

“Oh yeah! Over here.”

They walked among the glass globes. “Because there aren’t many Arties,” said Dave, as if answering a question that was still forming in Sergio’s mind. “Helen has to exist and be Helen, she has to go mad from the laughter of a fool—”

“The laughter of a fool?”

“Yeah, we hate that stuff. She has to meet me, which almost never happens, and that has to inspire her to focus her research on superintelligence and mad genius. And even then, the byproducts of her early experiments don’t usually produce Artie. He’s vanishingly rare across the multiverse.”

Sergio was on firmer ground now. He understood the multiverse as well as any sane person could. “At the same time, that’s potentially true of anyone and anything, isn’t it? The billions of randomized factors that go into every deviation along a timeline—”

“Some people happen a lot. You have any idea how many Mells there are?” Fear crept into Dave’s voice. “But Artie doesn’t come along often. Neither do you.”

“I know,” Sergio admitted. “I’ve poked around a little.”

“So I think you two should probably, you know, stick together. And take care of each other.”

This was an unexpectedly tender swerve in the conversation, and despite himself Sergio was touched. “That...that’s the plan, I think.”

“You know what else doesn’t show up in the

multiverse too often?”

“The Cobb salad?”

“Yeah, but also a world where people haven’t wrecked everything or wiped themselves out. A world with hope in it. Like this one.”

Sergio gazed at the glass spheres, remembering his own experiments. “That’s true. This is, amazingly enough, one of the better timelines.”

“Exactly! Right? So I think you need to keep caring. If it helps, you’re on the short list of people Helen and I care about.”

“But I haven’t even met Helen, and you just met me.”

“Did I? Cool.” Dave dropped something into Sergio’s hand. “Here. I made a thing for you.”

It was one of the smallest globes, the size of a gumball. The color matched the sky outside, now that the sun was setting. Artie wondered what time it was, heard another volley of explosions, and decided there were more pressing questions. “Is this one of your universes?”

“Yup,” said Dave. “But this one’s a little different. I made it inside out.”

Sergio frowned at the little globe. “Meaning...?”

“The inside’s empty. The universe is on the outside.”

“On the outside?”

Dave waved an arm expansively, taking in himself, Sergio, the glass globes, the coppery sunlight on the broom and dustpan, the trees on fire just outside the window.

“You’re saying our universe is the universe outside the globe.”

“Yeah! The entire universe! Neat, huh?”

“The entire universe is outside every object. That makes it an ordinary glass sphere.”

“You think?” Dave scratched his head. “Oh well. They can’t all be winners. Let’s go get dinner on the table.”

On the way downstairs, Dave said, “With the war over and reality blindness lifted, things are going to change. The world is gonna be more like...well, like this island.”

“I was hoping the end of the war would mean fewer drone attacks,” said Sergio.

“People won’t be able to ignore the weirdness around them. Humans and nonhumans will have to get along. Space aliens, demons from Hell, dogs and cats living together, et cetera. It’ll feel like madness. A little bit, anyway.”

“Artie and I have been talking about that,” said Sergio. “We’re trying to prepare...”

“I figured. That’s why I entrusted you with the universe. You guys are pretty responsible. Okay, this is interesting.”

They had emerged onto the deck. Overhead, drones hung frozen in midair. Sergio barely had time to register this before he was swept up in a pair of muscular arms and the familiar scent of cedar.

“Are you all right?” said Artie. “Where have you been?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” Sergio pulled out of the embrace. Artie’s hair was tangled, his face streaked with mud, his shirt ripped. Sergio was torn between the desire to jump him right there and to make him soup. “What about you?”

“Fine now.” Artie looked up at the drones. “The virus I uploaded seems to have stopped them. Once we remove the heavy weaponry, we can set the drones to self-destruct. Extradimensional menace eliminated, probably, until the next one.”

“You’re all muddy and ripped...I mean, your shirt is ripped...”

Artie looked himself over. “Oh, the drones didn’t do this. It was Mell’s kids. When they get back here, check for knives.”

“You know something, Artie?”

“Mm?”

“I like your family.”

Another rare smile. “Thank you. Now don’t let it make you complacent. There are layers to these people, Sergio. Layers. There’s always some level of scheming and manipulation that defies rational understanding.”

“I think you might be overestimating—”

There was a metallic creak overhead. Sergio looked up in time to see a lead canister slip from one of the drones,

almost directly overhead, and hurtle toward them.

“That’s a nuke,” said Artie dully.

Sergio opened his mouth, but no sound came out. His brain went into overdrive, zipping through possible courses of action before returning with the unhelpful suggestion that he try ducking and covering. There was no time for anything else. The bomb plummeted to the deck—

—and landed with a squelch in the bowl of mashed potatoes.

Artie and Sergio stared down at it. A nuclear explosion failed to occur. At last Artie looked up, his face impassive save for a certain tightening at the lips. “I,” he said, “am going inside to change my shirt.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Sergio. In his pocket, the universe rolled over. “And I want to meet your mom.”

“I don’t like to call her that.”

“I know.”

There was still a lot to do. The family had to set the table, and extract the rest of the nuclear weapons, and fight the turkey, and pour the wine. But in the end it was the best Thanksgiving dinner in years. And after dinner, as the southern constellations winked on, Artie set the drones to self-destruct and they all watched the fireworks.

the end