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We Who Will Destroy the Future

Margaret Killjoy

“You know how most people break out of prison in this century?” Maya asked Yannick. The East Flats of Cleveland spread out below their rooftop vantage, an endless mess of dead warehouses and deserted streets lit up by the hot summer sun.

“I don’t think most people break out of prison,” Yannick said.

“Helicopter. Something like half the jailbreaks. Usually it’s their wife who’s flying, sometimes their friends. Land in the yard with a hostage, fly the hell out of there.”

“You need to get a wife,” Yannick said.

Maya toed a loose brick, and it tumbled over the edge of the warehouse, thudding into the plastic lid of a dumpster forty feet below.

“Little late for that,” she said.

“Little early,” Yannick said.

“You fucking like it here,” Maya said.

“I mean, it could be worse.”

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“You like shitty 2010s video games and shitty 2010s pre-Hennesian punk rock and I bet you even like shitty 2010s fashion.”

“The fashion’s going to get better in what, like fifteen years, if even that?” Yannick said.

“In fifteen years I’m going to be so fucking old,” Maya said. “I’m not waiting around five fucking years. I’m getting out before I turn thirty. You know why they dump us here? You know why I think the twenty-first century is the prison century?”

“Because the Corrective Council abolished the death penalty and couldn’t send any more people to Stalinist Russia without someone noticing?”

“I bet they calculated that twenty-first century America was the worst placetime to live with the longest life expectancy. Highest rates of anxiety in recorded history, but they’re gonna cure cancer soon enough that we’ll have plenty of time to suffer.” Maya tried to toe another brick off the edge, but it wouldn’t budge. She pulled back to kick it, changed her mind, stomped on the silver tar paper roof.

“There’s some good stuff here too though,” Yannick said.

“Yeah? Like what?”

“I don’t know. Hip-hop? Mechanical bicycles? Taco Bell?”

“Hip-hop is good,” Maya admitted.

“Look, there’re really two kinds of time-convicts, right? There the people who accept it, integrate themselves—”

“Get a shitty job, get stuck in some monogamous marriage—”

“And there’re wackjobs who tell everyone the truth for so long and get told they’re crazy for so long that they just give up and actually go crazy.”

“What do you want from me?” Maya asked. “I’m wearing high-waisted short shorts and I’m wearing shoes and I say things like ‘GTFO’ and I don’t talk about my background in post-temporal string inoculation. I pretend like I think Žižek is hard-to-follow yet innovative.”

Maya paced. The warehouse had been abandoned for decades, since labor had gone overseas. Corporate globalization was one of those weird stupid quirks of human history, like when medieval peasants would all get infected with dance mania and thousands of them danced erratically until they fell unconscious or died.

But there she was, standing on the skeletal remains of a building gutted by a quirk of history.

“Help me with this,” she said. She staggered back over to Yannick, an air-conditioning window unit in her arms. “Some asshole actually parked a BMW in this neighborhood. I want to drop this on it.”

Yannick did that thing he always did where he shrugged with his eyebrows, then he stood to his full six-foot-six and helped her. He was a good friend. A good cell-mate.

“We gotta swing it back and forth for momentum, like one-two-three-go, if we’re going to get that car,” Maya said.

“All right.”

They launched the air conditioner over the wall of the warehouse. It soared fifteen feet laterally, then fell fast and scraped down the passenger side of their target, scratching up the paint.

“Fuck,” Maya said. “What the hell else can we throw?”

“Come on,” Yannick said. “It was close enough.”

“It wasn’t!” Maya jumped up on the loose brick wall, spun on one heel to face her friend. “You’re not thinking big. You can’t just let shit happen to you. You can’t just scrape the side of the BMW, you gotta smash in the windshield. You can’t just get used to time exile—you’ve got to make a fucking jailbreak.”

“You know the other way people do it?” Maya asked. The dark came in the window of their apartment, the only lighting the glow of a romantic comedy playing on the laptop on the coffee table.

“Do what?” Yannick asked.

“They take a guard hostage,” Maya said. “Improvise a weapon, get it up on the guard’s throat, pistol from their holster. And boom.”

“Boom what?”

“Boom, you’re out of there. ‘Don’t mess with me or I’ll waste this bozo.’”

“I don’t think anyone says ‘waste this bozo’ though. You’ve got the slang all wrong.”

“Least of anyone’s worries. You can say it however you want when you’ve got a shiv up to some guy’s throat. That’s what power is.”

On the screen, the characters were walking through a park, cute and earnest.

“Movies were the worst form of mass entertainment ever produced,” Maya announced.

“I like movies,” Yannick said.

“They’re flat. None of the expression of theatre, the depth of prose, the immersion of good AR or even VR. A hundred and fifty years of entertainment dark ages.”

On the screen, the characters were sitting in a pretty little New York City cafe.

“Don’t they all get caught afterwards, the people who break out?” Yannick asked.

Maya pulled her bare feet up to sit cross-legged on the couch. “Yeah,” she said. “Usually in a few days. They go home to their families, or go see their friends. Cops are waiting for them. Happens every time. I won’t do that.”

“If you can’t go see your family or your friends, what’s the point of a jailbreak?”

“This movie is moronic. Why would the protagonist pick between these guys? They both like her, she likes both of them. Date them both. There, movie’s over. I solved it.”

“Maya Havel, the woman who single-handedly destroyed a genre,” Yannick said.

“You’re a hero,” the Guideswoman said. “Beyond what I’m equipped to express.”

“Yeah, well.” Maya put down her hands, started walking toward her house.

“They’re offering you a full pardon,” Kruger said.

Maya stopped and turned back toward the car. The paint was scratched along the passenger-side door. “Are you serious?”

“We are,” the gray angel said.

“Eat shit.” Maya walked through the yard of her apartment, toward the backyard, toward the rickety stairs and her crappy apartment. Norman had been right about a lot of things, and a world ruled by the Nine Guides was no world for Maya.

They called after her, but she kept walking.

Yannick was sleeping—or feigning sleep—on the couch when she came in. He sat up and rubbed at his eyes.

“Where were you?”

Maya poured herself a drink, downed it. Poured another, nursed it. The twenty-first century had decent booze and it had hip-hop and it had her boyfriend.

“I shot some guy who thought I wrote your book.”

Norman pulled himself up the waist-high fence to look for the ripples.

Maya held up the gun in a two-handed grip. “One-two-three-go,” she said, under her breath. The shot rang out over the water, and Norman turned to her when the bullet hit his back. She emptied the clip into his body, afraid of aiming for his handsome eyes.

When he was dead, she pushed him over the fence and watched his body hit the lake. His punctured lungs took on water, and he began to sink.

“Fuck off,” Maya said, at what she could see of his corpse. “You can’t just blow up a fucking planet with people on it.”

She threw the gun as far as she could. It sailed through the dark sky, then fell into the dark water.

She was walking down the street to her apartment, headed for the fence, headed for home and sleep and a presumably-grumpy Yannick, when a BMW drove at her and stopped only a few feet away.

Mr. Kruger, short and thin with short and thin black hair, got out from the driver door.

“Maya Havel.”

She was too tired to run. She raised her hands in surrender.

The passenger door opened, and a Guide’s Prosecutor stepped out. She was easily distinguished, wearing a medium, matte gray that ate the light and radiated darkness.

“Put your hands down, girl. This ain’t a stickup.” Her attempt at contemporary slang would have been comical, were she not a frightening vision and an agent of vengeance.

“I followed you,” Mr. Kruger said. “I’m sorry. It’s my job.”

“We found your crackoid,” the Guideswoman said. “It was nonfunctional. You did that on purpose.”

“I did,” Maya said.

Maya stood up, slammed the laptop shut. “It’s just not right. Fuck what’s fair or unfair, but it’s not right. This isn’t how it happens. I’m not supposed to be here. I’ve got to fix it.”

“You can’t fix it.”

“I refuse to accept that!”

Maya’s text tone sounded in the middle of the night. Eight months into her exile and she still hadn’t gotten used to the idea that people had to communicate via text messages. Worse, her phone didn’t even know when it was okay to bother her and when it wasn’t.

She stared at her ceiling fan as it beat against the air. Her phone chirped again. There was no such thing as an innocuous text tone—since humans naturally tie their electronics into their limbic systems, every noise her phone could possibly make had the power to set her on edge. She nudged Yannick off the crook of her arm, then reached for the nightstand to grab the devil machine.

“People say that living well is the best revenge, but they’re wrong,” it read. An unknown number, local area code.

Then the second message: “I can think of a lot of better ways to get revenge than eating organic food and doing yoga. I bet you could too.”

She tapped on Yannick’s bare chest, woke him up.

“What?” he asked. She handed him the phone.

While she read the message again over his shoulder, another appeared: “If you want to help me destroy the future, meet me at night passing the earth to day.”

“All right,” Yannick typed. He pressed send.

“Hey, why would you do that?” Maya asked, grabbing her phone.

“You were going to say yes anyway, weren’t you?” Yannick asked.

“What, to some riddle sent by some stranger in the middle of the night?”

“It’s hardly a riddle.”

“Well I don’t know it,” Maya said.

“Oh, whatever. Get up, get dressed. I’ll show you where you’re going. I’m guessing you’re supposed to be there by sunrise.”

The pre-dawn streets were empty but for the people who regularly slept outside, and most of them were sleeping. Street lights turned red and green for no one, and Maya and Yannick blew through intersections on their bicycles without a side-ways glance.

At MLK and Euclid, Yannick stopped.

“What, we’re here?” Maya asked.

“Turn right on Euclid, head into Wade Park. There’s a statue there. ‘Night Passing the Earth to Day.’”

“How do you know that? Why aren’t you coming?”

“Because I like parks. Because your mysterious friend texted you, not me. Hit me up when you’re done.”

“You’re going to bail on me like that?”

“Yeah,” Yannick said. “I’m going to go find a cafe or something. Somewhere’s got to open soon. You need anything, let me know.”

“What if I need you to come with me?” Maya asked.

“You don’t need me to go with you,” Yannick said. He nudged his foot back into the toes clips and rode off.

There was nothing good to kick in easy reach. Maya rode against the sparse traffic, forcing the two cars she passed to honk and swerve, and the light of dawn encroached upon the city.

Along the steps down into the manicured park, overlooking the reflecting pool, two bronze-casted women struggled with

The slowfuse, in contrast to its payload, was purely mechanical. Its twin purposes were to drill deep into the earth and to tell the chassis when to begin its work.

Across the counter, Norman worked methodically, intently, even happily. They caught one another’s eyes a few times as they worked. Maya missed that. The complexity of the work, the complexity of the work relationships. If only any of it made sense.

“Where are we going to put it?” she asked.

“Into the lake,” Norman said. “The lake has never dried, it’s never been developed. They’ll never find it.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this, haven’t you?”

“I spent six months in solitary awaiting trial.”

They went back to their work.

In the end, it was no bigger than a pipe bomb. Norman held it aloft. “Little things matter,” he said.

After they were let out of the cab a few blocks from the pier, Maya checked her phone.

“Got Chinese. Didn’t order you any, since I haven’t heard from you,” Yannick had sent. An hour later, he’d sent, “Hope you’re all right.”

She put the phone away.

The pair walked in silence. The crackoid was heavy in her purse. The streetlights on the pier were broken, and everything was dark.

They reached the water.

“Should we do it?” Norman asked.

“Yeah.” Maya handed him the crackoid.

“Together?” Norman asked.

“You do it.” She took a step back.

He pitched it with all the strength in his young body, and it sailed through the dark sky, then fell into the dark water.

“In case anyone tries what you wanted to try.” He pulled out a clip, then popped out the first bullet and handed it to Maya. “Take the bullet out of its casing.”

Maya did. Instead of gunpowder—she was pretty sure period weapons were fired with gunpowder—the shell held six grains of hyper-compressed. “Can I use that counter?” she asked.

“Right now?”

Maya caught Norman looking over at his cot in the corner.

“It won’t take me more than an hour, if everything’s here,” Maya said. “Let’s get this started before I lose my nerve.”

“Okay,” Norman said. He shoved aside some liquor bottles on the counter, then took a swig of gin from one. He offered it to Maya, his big handsome eyes imploring. She faked a drink and held onto the bottle.

Sensing his discomfort, she put a hand on the small of his back, smiled. The tension dropped out of his body, at least a little, and she turned to her work. Each hyper-compressed was a sphere the size of a coarse grain of sand. One by one, she placed them on the counter, then smacked them hard with the base of the bottle of gin. Each cracked open, each holding nearly a cubic foot of matter. She had everything she would need.

A crackoid is semi-organic, and Maya spent the next hour measuring cultures and proto-cultures. Done right, these cultures, incubated in a fast-forward chassis, would evolve—more or less instantly—into a short-lived creature that would send its roots through the earth and sunder the world. Usually, they were used for asteroid mining. Most famously, rogue scientists had used one to settle the debate once and for all if Pluto was a planet.

All the times humanity developed the power to destroy itself utterly, and it never had. Or, more likely, it had done it a hundred million times in a hundred million ways in alternate spacetimes, but of course Maya could not have been born into a world that did not exist.

the weight of the world. The inscription on the pedestal said that they were transferring the huge metal orb from one to another, but to Maya it looked more like they were working together to one-two-three-go the Earth into the water.

Leaning against the statue, smoking a cigarette, was a thin white man Maya’s age. He wore a backwards red baseball cap, a woman’s suit jacket, wide-legged pants, and antique running shoes. Clearly, he was fresh from the future, where they gave you whatever clothes they thought vaguely fit the century of your exile.

Maya stopped five paces away.

“Maya?” The man’s eyes were bright and blue, his face open and welcoming.

“You are?” Without planning, she closed the distance between them.

“My name’s Naro.” He offered his left hand.

“You shake with your right. You might want to change your name. Try Norman—it’s the contemporary variant of Naro.”

“Norman.” The man offered his right hand.

“How and why’d you find me?” Maya asked, instead of shaking.

“They gave me a dossier on everyone here when I signed up as a timer.”

Maya stepped back, then scanned the park for other enemies.

“Relax,” Norman said. “I’m going rogue. Just took the time-guard deal because they offered it. Gives me a better chance for revenge.”

“That’s fucked up. Or clever.” Maya didn’t let down her guard.

“I found you because I read up on everyone. I read about Mr. Morrison, who’s taken work as a butcher. Fitting enough, with what he did to those kids. Dr. Ramnath, a murderess three times over. Mr. Kruger defrauded the bank. You know he’s paying it back, indentured as a timer?”

"I didn't know," Maya said. Roughly one in ten convicts were indentured as undercovers, feigning true exile and keeping tabs on the rest of them.

"He's got less than a year left. You know they give us software, lets us track phones, eavesdrop? I won't use it."

"Why me?" Maya asked.

"In Cleveland 2016, you've got a whole mess of murderers and grand larcenists. Then there's you. Sentenced to more than eight hundred years for sedition."

"I didn't even do it, I didn't even write that thing."

"The Nine Guides and their Inevitable Deaths? That was a masterwork. I'd own up to that if I were you. Cult hit. Kind of preachy, drags in the middle, but I'll tell you what, it's widely regarded as the best augment of 2834. Even if everyone was too afraid to put it up for award consideration."

"Is that it? You're coming back here to get me to confess? Get me to brag about Their Inevitable Deaths and clear up the case?"

Norman sat down on the steps and set his elbows on his knees, resting his chin on a fist. "I'm here to recruit you. Whether or not you wrote it."

Maya tossed that around in her head. The morning birds were singing in the distance.

"You know who the timeguards are," she said. "We'll take one hostage, get out of here."

"It won't work," Norman said. "Timers are indentured. We aren't worth anything."

Maya paced.

"Is Yannick a timer?" she asked.

"What? No. He was your co-defendant, wasn't he?"

"Why didn't you text him too, then?"

"I got the feeling, the media got the feeling, that he was just kind of dragged into it all by you," Norman said. "Just your boyfriend. That's not the kind of guy I'm looking for."

"I don't hold other people to the same code I hold myself," he said.

"You're sincerely the most fucked up, confusing person I've ever met."

Norman opened his wallet, pulled out two old-fashioned paper tickets. "I've always loved millennial-era plays. Can I take you to the theatre?"

His apartment was in a better part of town, closer to the water. They'd been drunk on gin and tonic during the play, but Maya made sure she was sober by the time they made it into the building. She made better decisions sober.

"Damn, they set you up nice," Maya said, as they reached the third floor landing.

"This is nice?" Norman asked.

"My place, you've got to go around the backyard of this ugly oversized house, get up some rickety stairs."

Norman opened the door and Maya stepped into a studio apartment with big windows and no furniture. A built-in countertop split the living space from the kitchen. A cot was shoved into one corner, a black duffel in another.

Maya's phone chirped. She pulled it out, saw a text from Yannick: "Where are you?" She turned off the ringer.

"Let's see it," Maya said. "Let's see what you've got of this bomb."

"I can't get you anything to drink or something?"

"You've already recruited me. You can lay off the charm."

Norman went to the bag, unzipped it. The scent of oil and metal fell into the room, and he took out a pistol, set it on the windowsill.

"They gave you a period weapon?"

“What did you do?” Maya asked.

“What?”

“Sorry, I’m the queen of non-sequitur. It’s how my brain works. What got you exiled, and what got you a timeguard deal?”

“I got convicted of mass murder. I helped blow up a good chunk of parliament.”

“Like in *Their Inevitable Deaths*,” Maya said.

“We didn’t get any Guides. Killed a lot of bureaucrats, no Guides.”

“And they let you take a deal?”

“I just built the bomb,” he said. “At twenty-four, I was barely old enough to stand trial. Mostly, though, they let me cut a deal because I agreed to rat out the mastermind. I ratted out my dad.”

“Your dad.”

“He was a monster. The only good thing he ever did was bomb parliament. I didn’t rat him out to save my skin—I ratted him out to hurt him.”

“How the hell is this going to help me trust you?” Maya asked.

“It’s not, probably. But I’m not lying to you. Whatever else you want to say about me, I don’t lie.”

“There’s no way I could build a crackoid without access to modern equipment. And it’s not my specialty.”

“I’ve got the pieces in my apartment,” Norman said. “I smuggled them across. But I’m not sure I could reconstruct it if I tried. I need you.”

If he’d smiled or batted his eyes or laid on his obvious charm, Maya would have stood up, walked away, and never spoken to him again. Instead, he just looked at her, earnest, hopeful, almost in love.

“You think I wrote *Their Inevitable Deaths*,” Maya said.

“Yeah.”

“You’re so big into honesty, but you think I lied to you about that.”

“He’s not really my boyfriend,” Maya said, then wished she hadn’t. She stopped pacing, looked up at the bare-chested women Night and Day.

“There’s something better than getting home,” Norman said. “There’s revenge.”

“Destroy the future?”

“Destroy the future,” he agreed.

“No way is this a good idea,” Yannick said. “He admitted he’s a timer. How can this be a good idea?”

A dead fish stink came off the lake as they walked along the concrete pier, the water likely too toxic for swimming. Another quirk of history—humanity treating the Earth like its own personal piss pot. That’s what Venus was for.

“What’re they going to do? Exile me? They’ve got no reason to set me up.”

“You just think he’s handsome.”

“So would you.”

“Meaningless,” Yannick said. “I think everyone is handsome. You’re the picky one.”

“I’m not going to do anything. I’m just going along with it so far as to see what he’s planning,” Maya said.

“Would you have taken a timeguard deal? If they’d offered you one?”

“God no,” Maya said.

“You ever heard of anyone getting a timeguard deal without snitching?”

“No.”

They reached the end of the pier. Lake Erie stretched out to the horizon.

“I can’t handle this,” Maya said. “I don’t know if he’s right, but I’ve got to see what he’s thinking. I can’t handle waking up at five to serve coffee. I can’t handle how much my coworkers

care about coffee. I can't handle everyone running around like their political choices have merit when I know the economy is going to collapse in less than a century. I can't stand pretending like I don't know things. I can't stand waiting in line and taking busses and how people treat animals like pets and I can't stand all the shit and piss fucking tragedies of the era. There's nothing for me here. Nothing."

Yannick climbed up the short chainlink fence, perching on it like a gargoyle. "I'm here," he said.

"I know," Maya said. "It's not enough. I'm sorry, but it's not."

Yannick turned his face away from her, stared out over the water.

"You just think he's handsome."

He looked up from his coffee as she approached. Since the morning, he'd changed into a black t-shirt and tight black pants—he looked like any other twenty-something in the cafe. His eyes met hers and she fought down the desire to return his smile. There was a cup of tea waiting in front of her seat, still warm.

"Wasn't sure you'd come," he said.

"Bullshit," Maya replied.

Two men at the next table over were lost in a loud religious argument, and Maya found herself leaning in toward Norman to catch his words.

"It's not bullshit," he said. "I wasn't sure you'd trust a timer."

"What's your plan?" she asked. "I've been running it over in my head all day. There's nothing we can do in the twenty-first century to fuck up the twenty-ninth. Not our twenty-ninth. Anything we do—"

"Anything we do that affects the course of history between now and our future will necessarily mean we'll be affecting a parallel spacetime, not our own."

"Exactly," Maya said.

"What year were you convicted? 2835?"

"Yeah."

"I was convicted in 2843."

"Ha, I'm older than you," Maya said.

"Anything we do that affects the course of history between now and our future will affect a parallel spacetime instead of our own. But we're going to set a slowfuse on a full-bore crackoid, let it burrow into the earth. The day after they shunted me off to this century? It goes boom. No more future."

"That would literally blow the entire planet apart," Maya said.

"Yeah," Norman said.

"A full-bore crackoid on that slow a fuse would destroy the future that exiled us and every other parallel that branches out from now."

"Yeah," Norman said.

"You're crazy."

"I need your help," Norman said. "I know how to build a slowfuse, but I'm not sure I could put together the crackoid. Post-temporal string bombs are mostly beyond me."

Maya took the teabag out of her cup and placed it on a saucer, then blew over the tea.

"Why would you do it?" she asked, after an uncomfortable pause.

"Because I don't know what else to do," Norman said. He was pleading with her. Every bit of him told her that she had power, that he needed her. "I can't stand feeling helpless. I can't stand living here, but I can't stand the idea of going home. A world run by the Nine Guides is no world to live in—you know that."

"I know that. But the whole planet?"

"Just one sliver of spacetime," Norman said. "Just our future. The ones born from this shit society. A trillion million earths will still be there, just not the ones ruled by the Nine."