

miniMAG

issue163
the smartest warriors





The Dutiful Daughter

Marie Anderson

Lolly's five-mile run along city streets left her sweaty and too late for Father's birthday. Visiting hours were over.

Shoulda driven, Lolly thought. Oh well. Running busted stress, and Father wasn't going anywhere. Two more years before he was up for parole. His offense: drunk driving into a tree, Mum's injuries fatal.

"Next year I'll drive," Lolly murmured as she kicked off her shoes and headed to a hot shower. "Unless it's good running weather."

The Nazi

Alexei Raymond

“Come on, just one more picture! Please?”

Adam sat patiently in her chair while Natalie pointed the phone at him from the bed. She was dressed in soft, pink pj’s, and was trying to coax him into confidence. It was their second weekend together since he’d been drafted, and during the impromptu photoshoot, he wavered between embarrassment and flattery. Her excitement and renewed attraction to him were the result of his new look.

“Nat, I don’t know about this. Can we maybe do this later?”

“God, but you look so hot this way! I didn’t expect the buzz cut to suit you this much!” The comment broke him out of his resigned pose. He left the chair, climbed into bed, and hugged her while she reviewed the few shots she managed to take. His words came muffled from being spoken into her shirt:

“Please delete all the bad ones. Just—don’t even show me.”

“Come on, stop! You’re a hot soldier—have you seen yourself?” She turned the phone toward him, and he opened one eye to peek. The photo showed a sullen, eighteen-year-old IDF conscript, looking thin, pale, his hair buzzed off.

“It’s fine, I guess. I don’t know—” He turned away, and his hand found the edge of her shirt. His fingers slid under it in search of more direct softness and warmth. Suddenly she gasped.

“Adam! We have to take some photos of you while you’re in uniform!”

“Ugh, my dad said the same thing earlier today. Nat, I—I don’t really want to talk about it too much while I’m at home, ok? It’s already taking the rest of my time, and I just wanna relax while I’m here.”

“I’m only saying you look good—that’s all.” The sudden retreat in her voice made him feel he had to say more to prevent unnecessary hurt.

“But you understand why I’m saying this, right? I don’t want it to sound like I’m grumpy for no reason. It’s just that the twenty-one-day on-base stretch is coming up. And I don’t even know what to do about the rest of it—the service, three years of it.” He released her from the hug, noticing she’d stiffened, and pulled over a pillow instead.

“What do you mean, ‘the rest of it’? What are you thinking?”

“I guess—I guess I’m going to tell my mom that I want to get out. And then—and then, I don’t know.” He slapped the pillow.

“I have to think about how to actually do it.”

She didn’t hurry to answer, apparently weighing his words, the intent in them.

“Well. You’re not worried about telling her?”

“No, she’ll understand. I kinda hinted at it anyway and she already knows I always had other plans. But my dad—no, I can’t let him know. Actually, grandmother too. That side of the family.”

As he spoke, he sensed that the topic soured her mood and introduced fear into their night together. She was never good at masking her discomfort. And as much as he’d hoped to simply escape into her love—in true escapist fashion—discussing the ordeal felt inevitable. After another moment’s silence, Natalie spoke quietly, worried about being overheard by her parents downstairs.

“I thought you were ok with your dad.”

“I mean—I am, but I really don’t think he’ll understand. He’s...” Adam searched his memories for the key to understanding his father, “There’s this moment I keep thinking about from when I was like... I don’t know—how old are we in the third grade?”

“Um, I think like seven, or eight?”

“Right—so maybe I was a bit older. Anyways, I was over at his place for the weekend, and we were watching *A Star Is Born*, and there was this one contestant who made it to one of the late stages of the show. He was being interviewed about what led him to music—and I can’t remember the exact context—but he said that he got out of the

service, or like, avoided it from the get-go. I think he said his reason was pacifism, or maybe some aversion to handling weapons? I remember that when the guy said it, my dad reacted with this immediate disgust. He was just suddenly overwhelmed with anger towards the guy. He started saying something about... What was it? Like, duty to your country—I don't know—something about the guy probably lying and getting out of the service just because he's lazy. Then he went on a tirade about our position here in the Middle East. I forget the rest," he stared into the room's space, eyes searching for that moment long ago.

"And the funny thing is, right before the contestant said that we'd been cheering for him and talking about how he looked a bit like my



dad. I mean, they both had wavy long hair. It was funny—it's why I liked him in the first place."

His visual memory clicked, and he could suddenly see the broad living room of his father's rented house in Ashdod, sometime in 2006, at the onset of the Lebanon war. Then he recalled his father's indignant face for a few seconds. He thought of how he'd never directly argued with his dad—over anything, really. Not a single fight. It was unknown territory. And even without any prior experience, Adam knew that this could be their first and last one. Natalie fell silent, lost in some thoughts of her own. He continued despite her silence, taking it as a space to fill.

“I don’t even think I had any opinions about the military back then. I mean, I was in elementary school, right? Like, do you remember how soldiers back then seemed like giants? It was so far away.”

“Mhm, it was.”

The space between them on the bed began to seem more foreboding. He hesitated to close the small distance.

“Well, in any case, I still didn’t like my dad’s reaction, even back then. I think maybe unconsciously I agreed with the guy, or at least I didn’t see anything wrong with it. And yeah, Dad’s reaction just stuck with me ever since. So I know I can’t tell him about—my plan, I guess. There’s no plan yet. Anyways. Do you remember that contestant?”

Perhaps the easier question would chip away at the tension.

“Hm, I don’t think so.” Her face still strained with worry.

“Adam, you know we’ll also have to hide this from my entire family, right?” Her tone lay somewhere between frustration and resignation.

“Yeah, obviously,” he threw his head back and scanned the ceiling tiles.

“I mean, there’s still time. I don’t think I’ll be able to get out that quickly—if at all. I just hope I don’t end up in jail. Or, like, a mental hospital.”

Natalie, looking suddenly determined to be close again, closed the distance between them on the bed, pushed him flat onto it, and laid her head on his chest. He placed his hand on her golden hair and began stroking it. He sighed momentary relief.

“Are you sure you want to do this? Maybe it won’t be so bad.”

“I am, I am. There’s no other way. Not in my case. They can’t make me participate, or use me. There’s just no way.” His thoughts sank as his upper lip twisted momentarily. He paused his stroking of her hair, then continued.

“Yesterday we had a small ceremony at the base. I think we finished the very first phase of basic training, so they gave us our shoulder tags.” He thought of the desert ground, the gravel, the dry shrubs around them, and the radio placed on a nearby plastic chair.

“It was such a... manipulative moment. One of the commanders turned on some emotional song while we stood in two rows. It went something like, ‘*Fly, fledgling, cut the sky.*’” Do you know it?”

She hummed it in recognition. He could feel it on his chest.

“Right, that’s the one. Well, the commanders put the shoulder tags on us, one by one, while that song played, and I couldn’t stop thinking about how hard they were trying to make it—I don’t know—almost romantic? To force an emotional connection between us and the service, the magnitude of duty.” She remained still, and he couldn’t be sure whether she’d fallen asleep. He continued stroking her hair and spoke on, only quieter—almost to himself.

“And I can actually imagine going along with it—giving in to it. If I just stop thinking. The guys there are funny—so funny—and I laugh a lot during the breaks, in the mess hall. And it looks like they respect me. Hell, even the commanders seem very satisfied with me. So, it’s easy in that sense.”

He looked around the room and imagined it closing in, becoming smaller.

“But, at the end of the day, I can’t ignore what it is. I wish—I wish it was just a simple camping trip. But I can’t unsee what it all leads up to.” She stirred. He couldn’t be sure whether he’d woken her up, or whether she adjusted herself in her sleep. He continued to gently stroke her hair, and when she seemed still, he whispered on.

“You know what the fucked-up thing about it is? I didn’t tell anyone yet, but the guys came up with a nickname for me.”

“What is it?”

He was slightly startled and suddenly regretted where his next words would lead.

“Adam?”

“They said—they said they were intimidated by how loud my voice is whenever I answer our commanders’ orders. They said I also have kind of a scary look in my eyes, or something like that. I follow orders to a T, and our commanders always point to me as an example of discipline. And it felt good. It did.”

“What do they call you?” His chest rose with shaky intake of air.

“The Nazi.”

His dry throat prevented him from further speech. Natalie was still and did not respond. Exhaustion caught up with him, and his lids grew heavy. The pull of sleep promised some momentary escape. And suddenly he is caressing Natalie’s golden hair, he is fully awake. She is looking him in the eyes; she is smiling and so loving. His hand, gray somehow, is moving fluently from her hair to her cheek, then smoothing the strands over his chest; gold over the olive-drab of his pristine, pressed uniform. No, he realizes, he is all gray; *feldgrau* from head to toe, and her head is sinking, sinking lower on his chest—then into his chest until it’s nestled behind his ribcage.

When he opened his eyes, they were murky, leaking pools in the darkened room. The darkness didn’t allow him to verify the color of his skin.



I don't want to die and go to Hell when

Gale Acuff

I do, *die* that is, but I bet I do,
go to Hell, that is, not die. but then I'll
die as well, as I tried to explain to
my Sunday School teacher, who says that be

-cause Jesus died *everyone* gets a free
trip for Eternity into Heaven,
that's how big a sacrifice was God's, one
man's death buying the lives of far more souls

than almost imaginable, I mean
there's sacrifice and then there's *sacrifice*
so maybe you can die for the many
as well as the one, if you're Jesus.

Me, I'd die for everybody one by
one if it includes me. I'll serve death right.

Sunflowers

Salvatore Difalco

A yellow that shouts a yellow applied
with a switchblade or a lame à cran d'arrêt.

You'll feel alone.
Don't feel alone.

Let them come out. They will thud you.
They will squeeze your heart.

Remember the universal, the universe.
Their place in it. Yours.

Superseding sublime
they touch the divine.





Drenched in Auburn Light

Mark Moran

The bus departed Marrakesh at dawn. No air conditioning, just heat seeping in, thick and deliberate. July plastered itself to the windows. I sat near the back, staring at grubby glass that would not give. The city blurred into a shimmer of souks, shouts, and colours, then dissipated. We pushed westward, toward the Agafay Desert, and the road buckled, almost imperceptibly. Ochre dust billowed, clinging uncomfortably to my skin. The engine coughed, and relief crept in as Marrakesh faded. Faded. Faded. Gone.

Agafay sprawled, red and raw, like a seared wound against the earth's flesh. The Atlas Mountains cleaved the hazy blue sky, a wall of stone holding back the seas of sand beyond. The bus lurched to a stop, and I stepped out. The ground felt wrong. Too hard, like it had been compressed by a heavy book. The air thrummed, thick as tar, and the scarred ridges sprawled out, barren and twisted. A jaw full of red, jagged teeth. Not lunar. Not Martian. Just off. Too still, too red, like blood dried under the unyielding sun. The bus creaked behind me, its frame tilting, and its shadow stretched, stretched, pooling where it shouldn't.

The sun bore down, gold spilling over dirt. Hard. Unrelenting. I walked a little away from the others. The rocks shimmered, slick with a glow that warped the air. The silence thickened, and my shadow fractured. Two now, one pursuing me, one sliding the other way, consumed by the red sand. I stopped, looked back. The bus seemed lower, its wheels half-swallowed, dust creeping up its sides. The others milled around, voices soft and far. No one noticed. I stood apart, watching the desert breathe. Slow. Slow. Slow.

They pitched the tent later. Canvas sagging, and rippling, in a wind that wasn't there. I sat inside, legs tucked, as someone poured mint tea. Steam coiled, green and sharp, twisting into threads that lingered too long. Bedouin music began to play – soft, then loud, piercing the hush and needling through the tent out into the desert. Time slipped by, and nobody cared. The floor shifted, just a little, and I gripped the cup tight. The tea tasted fine, then acrid. Mint, then dust. I drank anyway.

The sun sank fast. The heat peeled away, and a breeze stalked the desert floor, cold and fast. I stepped outside, and the stars blinked like watchful eyes. Too many, too bright, too close together. The Atlas blurred, edges bleeding into dusk, and Agafay transformed. The auburn earth paled to silver. The ridges glinted, sharp, like polished knives. The tent flapped behind me, and the music stretched, thinning into a whine that wasn't quite right. I walked further. The sand undulated beneath my feet, soft, then firm.

The desert moved then. Not fast, not loud. The ridges twitched, just once, and the sand sighed and slithered. I squinted, and the horizon dipped lower than it should. The air tasted dry, and metallic. My shadow returned, whole now, but too tall, its head grazing the tent. I turned, and the bus sat lower still, its windows dark, reflecting a sky that flickered, unsteady, like a filament on the verge of burning out.

Night settled in. The others stayed in the tent, sipping tea, their faces calm, unworried. I couldn't take it. I went out again, stood alone. The desert spilled outward, infinite, beneath the stars. The wind sharpened, slicing through. The ridges were too bright, as if sweating. The tent sagged behind me, canvas drooping lower, brushing the ground. The music faded, devoured by that ceaseless hum. Marrakesh felt like a distant pinprick I couldn't quite reach, and Agafay coiled around me, far too close.

Later, I lay back later, outside, on the sand. Cold, then warm, pulsing beneath me, indecisive. The sky pressed down, stars pulsing—pulse, pulse, pulse—and the Atlas was gone, melted into the black. The air

smelled of mint and stone, then something sharper, like charred earth. I closed my eyes, and the desert hummed louder, steady, under my ribs. Agafay did not rest. It waited. Waited. Waited.

The bus would leave at dawn, they said.

But I wasn't sure.

The sand rippled once, soft against my back, and I stayed.

Caught in the red. The quiet. The wrongness of it all.



Observation of Blood

Tao Yucheng

Today, the museum closes its doors early,
waiting;
how much of the night's bleakness
seeps into it, enjoying the dark corridors.
The Indian tents with pointed frames,
like spears of bone, stand pierced
in the empty lobby, lonely,
waiting;
how the winter wind cuts through it.
As the cold artifacts of the museum
catch the outside glow,
the carnivalesque slaughter brings
laughter to civilization.

Denver's rain is absent and dry,
the natives of the Arapaho
meditate on the sacred mountain
when the invaders come.
I watch how blood spreads—
past and present—and death favors
their flesh, buried under black moonlight
by fire and sword.
Left with sword marks,
they dye the river bend with blood,
winding like red silk;
now it leaves collections
lying in the museum of darkness.
Their bones cannot be read,
as their residues are covered
under the ash of death.
Inside or out, there is no sweetness—
only the salty taste of blood.
The truth sinks and vanishes;
as for the sleeping city folks,
the moon is clear tonight.



Good Vibrations

Seth Bleuer

The ship vibrates and rumbles gently as it penetrates the planet's atmosphere, then immediately shudders from the impact of artillery shells slamming into its armored hull as I scurry quickly through the corridors. The counter battery fire from the frigate's guns thud, then vibrates the ship gently. When you've been on board a Federation frigate as long as I have you learn the different vibrations so that even in your sleep you know the difference between incoming and outgoing artillery, and the almost magnetic hum of drop ships launching or the sharp metallic scraping of them landing back onboard.

Another impact against the ship's hull sends me bouncing off the wall before falling face first onto the hard steel planks of the floor. "What the hell?" I murmur as I struggle to my feet. The ship's guns thud rhythmically in reply. Almost there.

The maintenance corridor is empty as I slip through the secure door. I can see my rathole from here. Desmond rounds the corner and my heart flutters against my ribs. "Dammit," I murmur under my breath, pretending to be disappointed to see her. She grins and holds out her hand as I approach.

"Hey Johnny," she says cheerfully.

“Hey Dizzy,” I mumble as I tap my credstick against hers, transferring one hundred creds.

She frowns.

“What?” I ask.

“This doesn’t feel like no little skirmish, Johnny.” She says.

“Well, intel said it was.” I reply.

“What kind of podunk little planet has firepower like that?” She asks.

I shrug. “Intel said-”

“Yeah yeah, I heard ya.” Desmond interrupts. “But if it turns out not to be, you pay the other fifty later. Yeah?” Desmond asks.

“Sure thing Dizzy.” I reply as another shell hits the ship. This time the hull shudders and groans. Desmond cocks her head to the side, listening.

“It’s probably best you’re holing up for this one. They are going to catch hell planet-side.”

Her chocolate eyes lock onto mine. I lean in.

“Dizzy, I love-”

The ship rocks violently, the lights overhead flicker. An alarm sounds from somewhere further into the maintenance section.

“Shit, I gotta go, Johnny. Tell me later,” she says, brushing past me.

“Is that bad?” I call after her. She turns her head; her lips move, but the thud of guns raining hell down on the planet below drowns her voice out. She rounds the corner and she’s gone. I hurry down the corridor and slip into the latrine. Frigates have lots of good hiding places if you know where to look, know the right people or have the credits to pay. It’s usually a combination of the three.

I slip into a stall, locking the door with a small whir and click behind me. Sitting, I admire the familiar old graffiti. My palms sweat. My heart beats faster and faster. I’ve hidden in this rathole so many times I’ve lost count. This is the first time I’ve felt like this. A new poem on the door in front of me catches my eye.

The door to the bathroom opens with a whir.

“Hello? Sarge?”

Holding my breath, sweat beads upon my forehead.

“Sergeant John 237? I saw you come in here.”

“Who’s there?” I hiss.

“It’s Private Adam 101.”

“What do you want?”

“Sarge, our drop ship is set to depart any minute. I saw you were leaving and wanted to make sure you didn’t miss the drop.”

“I’m not going, Private whatever the hell your name is.” I reply.

“But Sergeant. You have to.”

“I don’t have to do shit, Private.”

“But if you miss the drop, that’s dereliction. They’ll make you walk the plank, Sarge.”

I shudder. “That’s only for capital crimes.” I reply weakly.

“Dereliction is a capital crime, Sarge.” He whispers.

Fuck. “Yes, it is. But in order to be tried, you have to get caught. And I’m not going to get caught. Am I?”

“Sarge. I have to-”

“Listen, dipshit. I can tell you are new, so let me educate you. I’m a veteran of over three dozen major battles, and I don’t even know how many skirmishes. You wanna know the trick to surviving battles?”

“Uh, yes, Sarge,” he replies timidly.

“To not fucking be in the battles! I wasn’t there for more than half of them. That’s why I’m still here. What’s your name again?”

“Um, Private Adam 101, Sarge. But-”

“But nothing. There are hundreds of Adam’s loading up on drop-ships right now. No one is going to miss one, just like no one notices that John 237 isn’t there half the damn time. Here’s what I’m going to do. I’ll let you hole up in here with me and then follow my lead after the-”

A sound like thunder and ripping metal bursts my right eardrum. The ship shakes violently, throwing me face first into the graffitied door. A rush of wind takes my breath away. A muffled scream, then a loud pop as the stall door rips from its hinges penetrates the ringing in my ears. For a brief second, I see sky through a hole in the ship’s hull, then I’m tumbling. The door slams into the hole, catches and holds as I slam face first into it. The ship spins. My vision grows blurry, then dim around the edges until all I can see is the poem.

Here I sit all broken hearted

Tried to shit but only farted

Then I thought I’ll take a chance

Tried again and shit my pants

I’m going to die in the fucking bathroom. I laugh as my vision fades to a pinhole, then black.

Everything hurts. I’m alive. I open my eyes slowly. Flames dance in my vision from the wreckage of the ship in front of me, burning in places. Sitting up, I realize I’m still on the door. Drag marks in the dirt and debris of the ship show my path where someone must’ve dragged me to safety. Troopers are already setting up in defensive positions and maintenance workers have the rescue beacon set up. Its red light pulsating gently, blasting a signal back to the Federation.

“Good morning sleepy head.”

Painfully, I turn my head. “Hey Dizzy,” I mumble.

She holds her hand out. I reach for it, and she slaps it away with her other hand, then shakes the credstick in my face. Laughing, I retrieve mine from my pocket and transfer fifty credits to her. She smiles.

“Hey Dizzy.”

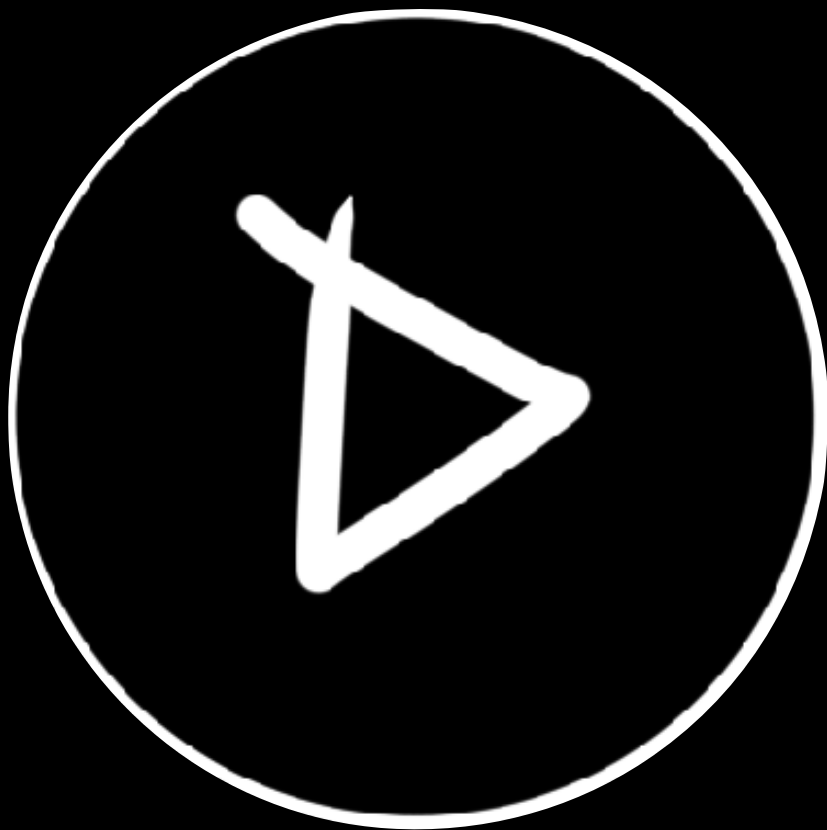
“Yeah, Johnny?”

“I don’t want to be John 237 anymore. I just want to be Johnny.” I say, searching her eyes.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. John 237 and Desmond 053 died in the crash. My name is Dizzy.” She leans down and kisses me, then hauls me to my feet.

We walk away, hand in hand, into the unknown, our old lives burning behind us. Just Johnny and Dizzy, in search of a new life.





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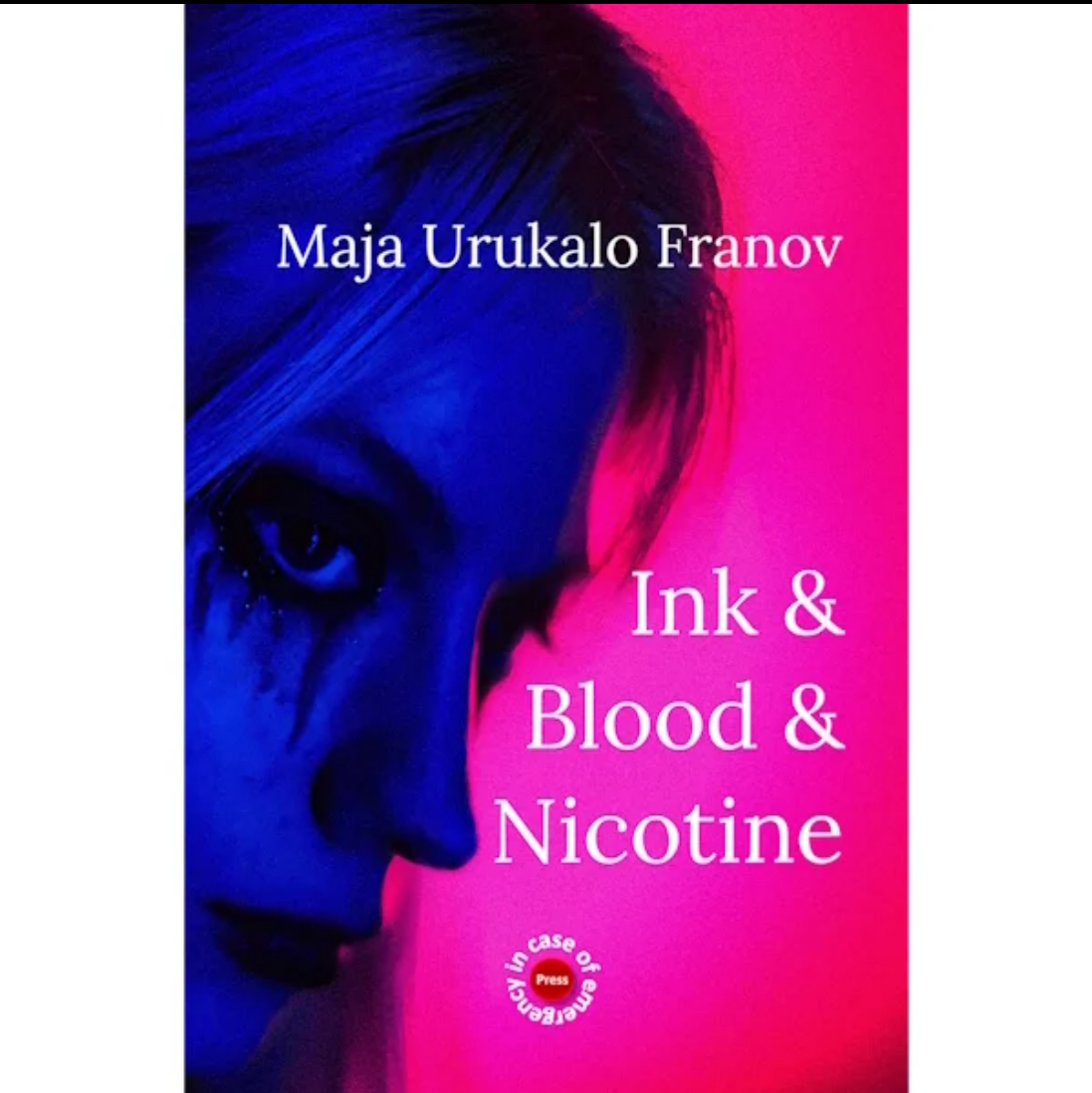
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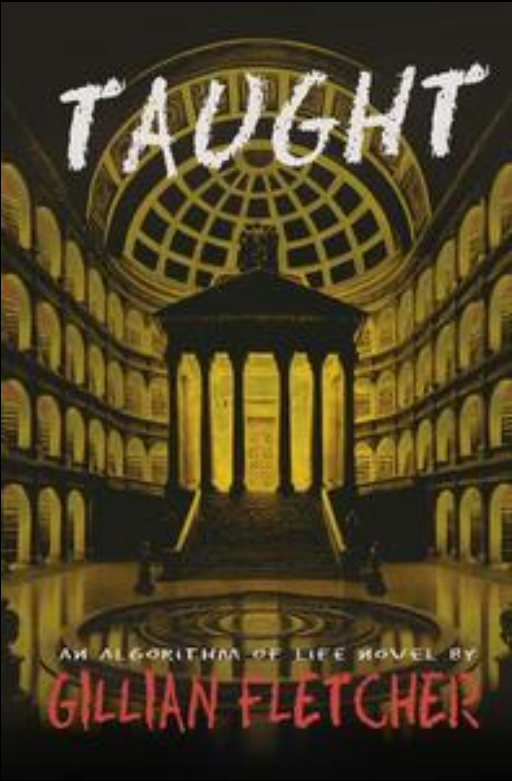
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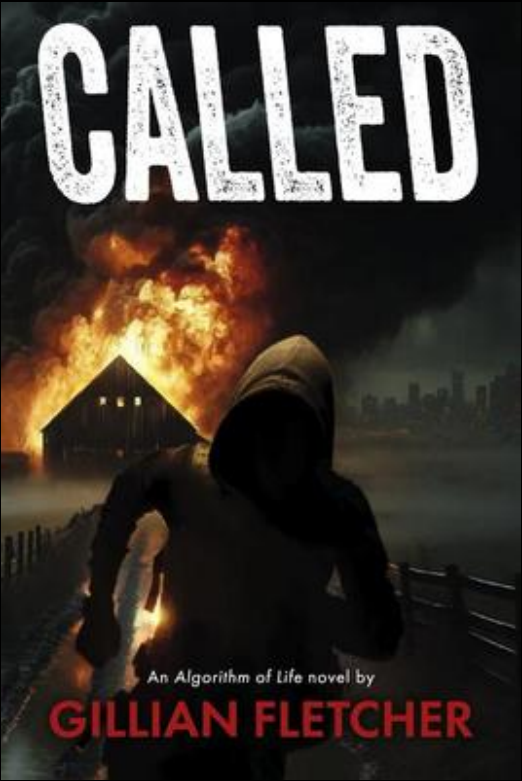
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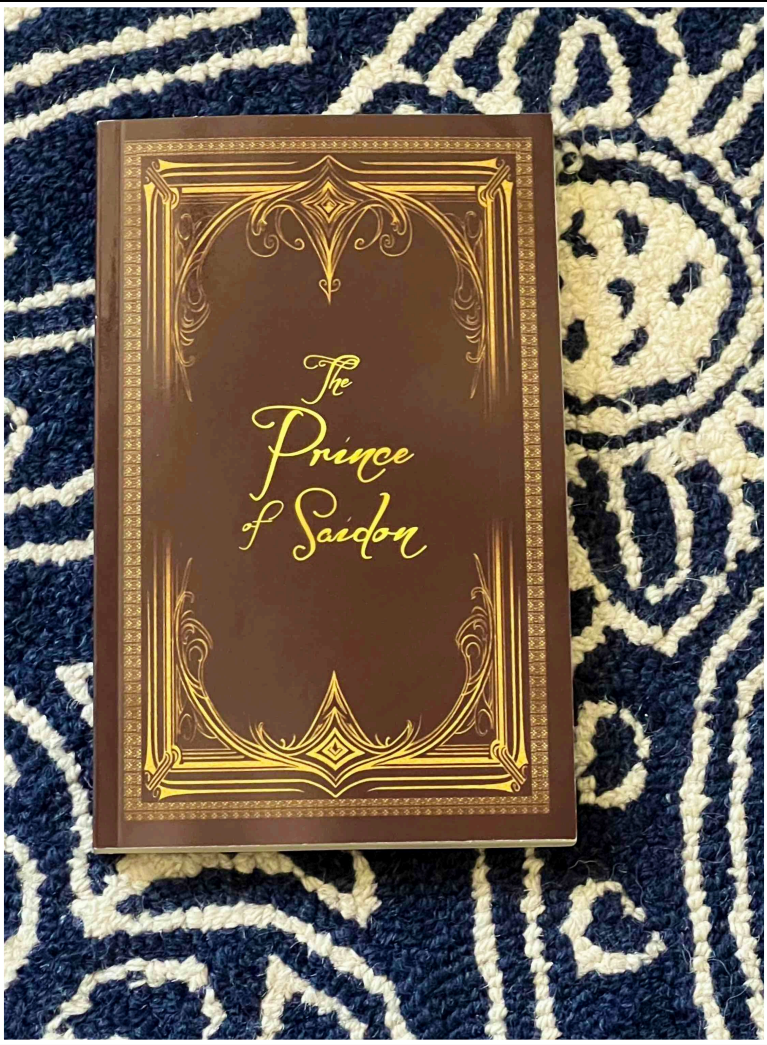
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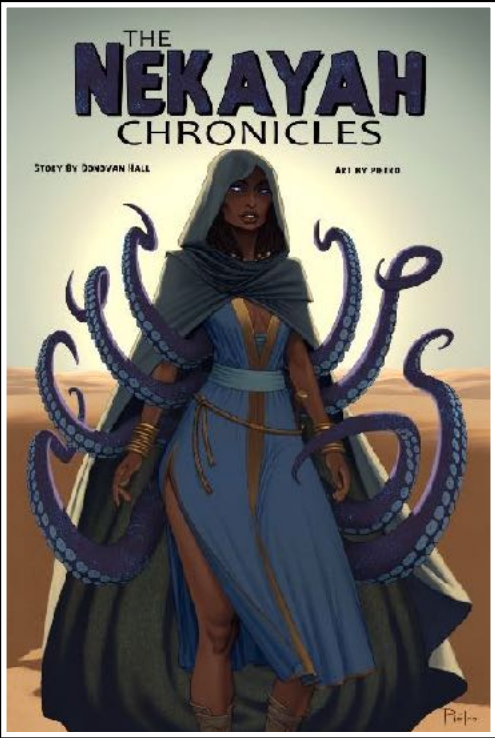
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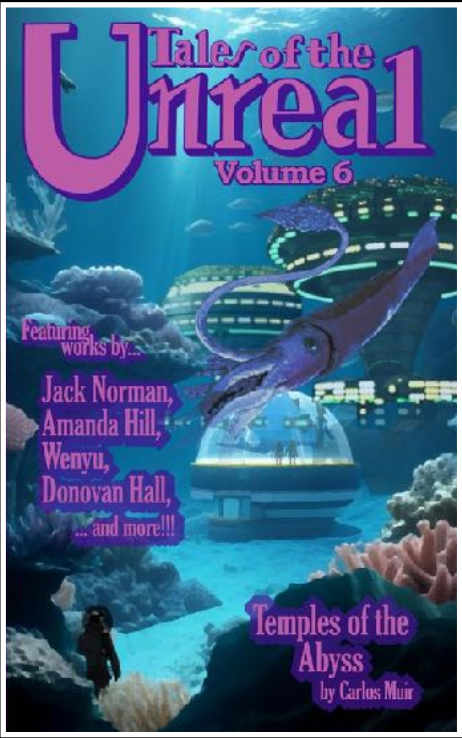
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