

Love and Other Constructs

by Kelly Jensen

Death rode in with the dawn breeze. The air on Zemlya always smelled like decay, but this was stronger than the omnipresent tang of methane that curled nostril hairs and curdled stomachs. Something had died out there.

Anton stopped sniffing the air and gazed instead at the land rolling away from the porch. To the east, furrows stretched toward the lip of sun blazing along the horizon. To the north, the regular rows of tilled earth cast deeper shadows. The smell came from the south. Anton pointed himself in that direction. He had yet to plough the south. Hadn't, in fact, been sure if he would. What he ploughed, he'd have to seed. What he grew, he'd have to harvest. And he was only one man.

But he needed sleep and that particular solace only came during the daylight hours, in the seat of the tractor.

Fingers of sunlight stroked the porch by the time he stepped back out, clad head to toe in Toxy-Weave. Having been born and raised on Zemlya, he could work without protection. He'd been inoculated by generations of genetic manipulation. He'd never even noticed the smell until he returned from the war. He knew about it. Zemlya had long been the butt of galactic jokes. But the chemical compounds that produced the famous stench were worth more than tourism credits.

It was more than the smell, though. Anton stepped down onto the soft soil and made a trail toward the shed, his left boot leaving a deeper impression than his right. Wearing the suit would prevent him from being seduced by the life that had suited his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather. Anton didn't want to be a farmer, not like this. Not on the land that *should* be his. But he was a broken toy. A soldier who'd been sent back to the factory, not to be repaired, but to be refurbished. The IGF didn't want him back on the front lines. They had newer toys. Better soldiers. They wanted him to work this land, grow crops to support the machine.

The world retreated as he stepped inside the shed. He'd noticed the effect as a kid, when all the outbuildings were exotic destinations. Places he only got to visit now and again. Corners he'd discovered, hidey holes he'd carved out behind loose panels and piles of junk. Now, the inside of the main shed echoed with nothingness. Made him feel lonely, like he was the last man on Zemlya. He wasn't, of course, though the IGF had strip-mined his generation. It was more that he was alone. Family gone, friends gone. Lover so long dead his memory felt like dust.

The electric motor of the tractor whined as it drew charge from the solar cells. While he waited for a green light, Anton scrolled through his options, gloved finger flicking up and down over the holographic interface. Drive mode, then till. Satnav coordinates pulled down and locked in. He selected the ridging plough for the southern fields. They'd lain fallow for nine seasons, but shouldn't be compacted. The potatoes he wanted to plant were as genetically modified as he was. They'd thrive, regardless.

Funny how he remembered small details like that. Must be in his blood.

Green lights rippled across the bottom of the display, indicating battery readiness. Anton activated his program.

Insulated by his suit, he forgot the smell of death. The satnav hadn't indicated any 'roadblocks' on his route. Just acres and acres of dirt that stank like rotten eggs. He didn't need to be here. The tractor would follow its route without his help. But he had nothing better to do.

The gentle rock of his ride quickly lulled him to sleep.

The dream always began the same way. Bodies moving together, his and Luka's. The smell of sex, the odd taste of his lover's sweat. The feeling he'd climbed a mountain and launched from the peak. That he could fly, would remain aloft until an air current guided him gently down. Making love to Luka had always felt like that and the sensation of it, the desire and euphoria, was his most treasured possession. The memory of them had sustained him throughout the war, even though Luka was gone. Dead and disassembled.

The dream always changed at exactly the same point. Luka's features would blur and fade, and then he would be ripped away. Anton sometimes woke to the sound of his own screams. More often he rolled deeper into the nightmare, reliving the cost of his deviancy: the kaleidoscope of horror following his trial. His entire family being drafted. Reprogramming and basic training. His first experience of zero-g. Battle. Coming face to face with an enemy other than his own kind. Blood, red and blue, the latter blistering his body armor. The stink of death. Losing his leg, rejecting limb after limb until the model he wore now. The one not rated for soldiering. The price of his retirement.

Rocked awake by a sudden stop, Anton blinked away his memories. His cheeks felt stiff beneath dried tears and his throat hurt. But it hadn't been the worst version of his dream. The motion of the tractor helped. That was why he slept out here, during the day.

The engine quit and silence fell across the field. Anton clambered out of the cab and walked around to the rear of the vehicle, expecting to find a shelf of stone. Something that had tripped the blades. Instead, he saw a faded tatter of cloth. Dropping to his knees, his robotic one bending more smoothly than his flesh and blood joint, Anton pushed aside mounds of dirt until he had uncovered the obstruction. It was a body. Was this the source of the smell? He pushed aside his rebreather and tasted the air. Rot gagged him and Anton rolled back on his haunches.

One would think he'd be used to the smell of death.

Beneath the outline of a human female—identified by the pin-striping on her decrepit tunic—a skeletal hand protruded from the dirt. A strip of flesh that looked like jerky banded the wrist. A boot was tucked beneath that. Anton glanced away from the mass grave, intending to rest his gaze. A hedgerow edged the lower end of the southern field. Beyond, a road followed the contour of the property all the way to town. Soldiers had marched down that road, he'd heard, and had met resistance. Was this his family? Had they been returned to the land just to fight and die? He'd assumed they'd been farmed out to fleet, just as he had been.

It took him two hours to unearth all the bodies but one. He couldn't identify any of them, they were too far gone. The final body was oddly intact, though, the limbs waxen and pale, just like his leg. A construct? Here on Zemlya? Anton heaved at the corpse, arms straining under the dead weight. Then he rigged a tow line to the back of the tractor and hauled the body out of the bottom of the pit.

The construct lay supine, the nanotube fiber looped under the arms its only garment. It was perfectly formed, right down to the pale and limp genitalia. Kneeling down again, he studied the face more closely. A prickle of warning crept across his skin—or maybe it was just sweat. His exertions had probably taxed the suit's scrubbers. That face, though. Anton blinked and it seemed as if he fell back into his dream. Back twenty years, the sound of his screams freshly loud in his ears.

He opened his eyes and stared at the construct. Its eyes opened and stared back at him. Fear should have rocked him back on his ass, had him scrabbling through the dirt until he could find his feet and run. But something stronger kept him bowed forward, staring down into a face that had suddenly come alive.

Those eyes—soft and gray like storm clouds. He knew those eyes.

“Luka?”