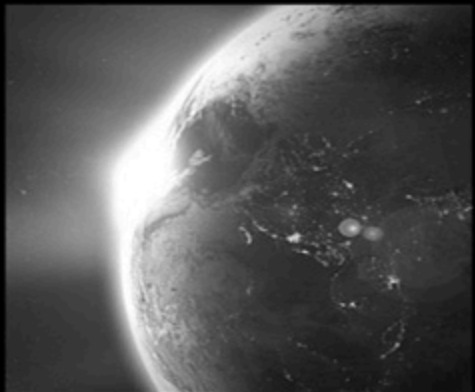


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CHRISTINA ENGELA'S  
**STRANGELY COMPELLING  
SCIENCE FICTION**

AN ANTHOLOGY OF SCI-FI THAT IS STRANGE, YET ALSO COMPELLING.

Edited by Christina Engela

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## CONVERSATION WITH A DEAD MAN – H. G. EMERT

*“WOULD SOMEONE PLEASE SHUT THAT KID UP?”*

Unfortunately, the little mother and her distressed child had become the focus of the Jerk at the end of the line. Since the earlier shuttle left, the Jerk had degraded almost everyone and everything related to their evacuation – however, Rob was more concerned about the bombardment that had herded a random assortment of people here, where they now stood – in the queue waiting for the last shuttle out. The impending destruction of his spaceport, on a little moon just inside the contested zone, made the Omicrons’ directive crystal clear – Get lost!

As the architect and construction manager responsible for the spaceport project, Rob had argued against the selection of this site for days. Notwithstanding, the Thurman Trusts’ reasoning for their selection might make a fitting epitaph if they didn't survive! “It’s fine,” they said. “No problem,” they said. “It gives us negotiating leverage,” they said. “Besides, we’ve already started the excavations.” Soon Rob’s finest work would be a bombed-out field of rubble – because

of what they said! A sudden, loud explosion nearby made everyone duck in unison.

“That was too close!” Rob muttered, pausing in his mental chastisement of his employers, casting critical glances this way and that. He breathed easier when his cursory inspections indicated no cracks among the endless waves of dust! Calmly straightening his clothes, Rob noted the various coping strategies of the outbound passengers – the teenagers stood huddled in the middle of the queue, more concerned with the battle raging high overhead than the imminent threat of the reality down there! Heads were bowed in various forms of prayer, others wept inconsolably, while some mumbled to themselves. A smile greeted Rob as the little mother sang softly to her child who was blissfully sleeping.

The evacuation order, when it came, had given Rob the romantic notion to stay behind, like the captain of a sinking ship, to perish with his masterpiece! Yet, his resolve faded to the point where he relented – it was better to live after all – and he sadly joined the line of foolish, unfortunate, or plain stubborn individuals waiting to get off this rock!

“Where’s that shuttle?” The Jerk – a man at the end of the queue demanded tersely. “It should’ve been here by now!” The man’s bellyaching faded into the whirlpool of low, tense conversation around them as Rob closed his aching eyes and covered them with the fingers of one hand. Rob's prognosis once they returned to Earth was dire – the outlook, no pun intended – was grim. Blindness. The migraines and pain in his eyes would soon end – not in relief, but in an all-consuming dark void, leaving Rob to wait

in the dark praying for a twenty-sixth-century medical miracle! Perhaps the initial impulse to remain behind was the better, after all? He mused on it.

“All outbound passengers please standby for the Shuttle arrival!” A voice announced the imminent arrival of their last hope of getting off. The announcement was made over an intercom, calmly, like it was any regular shuttle, and not immediately preceding obliteration by orbital bombardment! “Please wait while inbound arrivals de-shuttle.” The voice continued. “Outbound passengers, please standby.”

The crowd’s rising anxiety pressed the queue even tighter, toward the gate, and Rob felt the numbers pressing up around him.

“They must be deranged!” The Jerk was heard to remark. “No sane person would come to this god-forsaken port!” The Jerk’s words were met with cold stares all-round, which quickly faded at the sound of the airlock opening. But the Jerk was mistaken – there was an inbound passenger. One. A woman, tall, slender, and well dressed, exited the airlock and floated down the ramp, followed by, of all things, a self-propelled over-sized bag on wheels. Just as Rob observed that it was hard to tell yet if she was sane, all at once, the boarding cycle flashed, the gate released and the queue spilled, in a near-frenzy, toward the airlock.

“Outbound passengers, show caution as you enter the airlock.” The voice on the intercom calmly announced over the pressing surge of urgency. “Please be courteous and fill the back rows first.”

Rob grabbed hold of the railing, his head turned and his gaze followed the strange tourist and the queue shuffled by.

“Yo, bud!” the Jerk, called to him suddenly from the airlock door as the other outbound passengers jockeyed inside for their seats. “It’s the last shuttle out – ain’t you coming?”

Rob approached the Jerk considering many things he might say.

“Do you realize,” Rob began, “that this could be the one and only unselfish thing you’ve done since arriving at this spaceport? Let me offer you some advice, bud.”

Face to face with the Jerk, the other stared at Rob, not quite angrily, more frozen in the momentary confusion of a bully not accustomed to being talked back to.

“Last call for the shuttle to Earth.” The intercom announced. “Please stand clear of the airlock doors. This is the last call.” Menacingly, the wide airlock doors began to close – and in the rising atmosphere of tension, Rob couldn’t help but smile.

“The next time,” He continued, giving his sage advice, “you’re tempted to make a fool of yourself – just keep your trap shut! Goodbye!”

With that parting shot, Rob nudged the stunned Jerk backward into the airlock just as the doors sealed between them. This awakened a furious Jerk, who shook his fist behind the door and hurled impotent insults which Rob would never hear.

“Now let’s see what our late arrival is up to!” Rob smiled, appreciating the new, uncrowded space that surrounded him on the empty floor. Ignoring his bag and leaving it, he jogged down the ramp, looking for her. Which way did she go? Fortunately, there were few obstructions – they were now all

aboard the departing shuttle – and he set off towards the main promenade. The engines of the final shuttle's departure completely failed to drown out the thunderous bombardment as it rolled distantly overhead.

\* \* \*

On the promenade, the mystery lady gave Rob a friendly greeting as she was busy arranging a table and chairs.

“Hello, nice of you to join me!” She spoke while spreading out a tablecloth from her bag and setting up another chair. “I do prefer conversation, to waiting in silence, don't you? Please, join me?”

The surrealism of the situation struck Rob – and the Jerk's comment earlier led Rob to wonder if he'd chosen to spend his final moments with a nut-case! Either way, it was too late to worry about things like that now! Remembering to smile, Rob slid into his appointed chair and adjusted the seat.

“Do you hear that?” The woman asked, staring into the dusty void. Rob could only hear the bombardment, which sounded fairly homogenous and, by now, ordinary. “They've changed over to tectonic charges as agreed. It won't be long now.”

Her case revealed a portable bar, which she utilized in the production of the swirling mixture in the cup she offered him. She lifted her drink in the old tradition to toast, but suddenly stopped.

“I'm sorry – I forgot – we haven't been introduced, have we? I'm Diane Grace Thurman, please call me Di.”

“Call me Rob – Robert Lewis Latimer.”

“Cheers Rob. Thank you for being here.”

“Cheers Di. It’s nice to meet you.” Rob met her cup with his, and took a sip. The scent and flavor of the liquor released waves of sensation which danced across his palate. “I’ve never tasted anything like it?” He remarked, before eagerly emptying his cup and extending it for a refill. Time was running out, after all.

“I’m glad you like my little concoction – which I might add, is only made possible by decades of experimentation!” She smiled. “I found Talisman brandy does the most remarkable job filling out the flavor!”

“Isn’t Talisman brandy poison?” Rob coughed, feeling his throat suddenly constrict.

“Oh, if you’re anxious, I carry antitoxin... somewhere.” Di said, rooting through various compartments of her case. “Over time the addictive qualities, both emotional and physical, are the main issue... Ah, found it.” She questioned Rob with her look as she produced a little vial, and held it out to him, rolling it between her fingers, waiting on Rob’s response. “Though, considering the immediacy of our situation, antitoxin seems... a bit pointless.”

“You’re right. I’m as good as dead anyway, fill me up!” Diane dropped the little vial of antitoxin back in the compartment and refilled his cup. Rob made a grand gesture at the structure around them before proceeding. “So, do you like my spaceport?” Then he pointed upwards to the ceiling. “They’re anxious to destroy my masterpiece because it sits within ‘Omicron Sovereign Territory.’”

“Your spaceport?” Diane asked.



“Well, I feel a sense of ownership as the designer, architect, and construction manager!” Rob clarified. “It’s a mess now, but the 3D design model was amazing.” Rob could now barely feel the throbbing in his eyes – and supposed it was an unexpected blessing from the forbidden Talisman brandy – or from Diane’s elixir in general.

“You’re the architect, Robert Latimer? Oh my, I’m so sorry about all this – I loved your design!”

“Why’re you sorry? Those fools at...” Rob’s mind raced to the connection. “Diane Grace Thurman... wait a minute – you’re part of the Thurman Trusts, Thurman Futures, Thurman Exo-Enterprises, the financiers and speculators who funded this farce?”

“Guilty on all counts and more.” Diane acknowledged. Then, after a sip from her cup, the lady continued. “We funded the planning and construction of this port; but also arranged negotiations, hosted conferences, influenced diplomats, hampered negotiations, toyed with the media, fanned the fires of animosity, and armed both sides!” Diane paused to giggle. “You’re the only one to connect the dots to the Thurman Group too! I sold those tectonic charges – the ones they’re hitting us with – to the Omicrons, and their cruisers. I felt it important to level the playing field... a little. Oh, they’re skilled engineers, but mediocre warriors – probably why they’re taking so long to finish the job – another refill? So, Would you like a refill?”

Rob nodded. Despite the numbing effects of Diane’s elixir, his head felt like it was bursting with things to say – or just bursting.

“I need to say this out loud... before my brain explodes!” He blurted, “You, Diane Thurman, committed treason with an alien race, to sell them weapons and build a spaceport in a contested zone ...in order to create ...this mess? But why would you waste countless trillions on this? Is this how the unimaginably rich commit suicide? Are you trying to go out with some kind of ...unfathomable style?”

“You’ve put your finger on the pulse of my plans, but they’ve more to do with certainty than style!” Diane replied appreciatively, changing the subject a little, “But tell me – why’re you here? You’re a talented young architect – why throw that away by staying behind?”

It was Rob’s turn to take a pull of Diane's concoction.

“That’s all history.” Rob retorted not without a note of bitterness. “Once my eyesight fails, I might as well be dead. Who’d want to hire a blind architect?”

“What about surgery?”

Rob shook his head.

“My disease is degenerative which makes surgery a 50/50 proposition. It could prolong my eyesight, or leave me in the dark earlier. It’s not a permanent solution.”

“Transplants then?”

“I have a rare blood-type, compatible donors are nonexistent – and bio-tronic replacements are very expensive with no guarantee my immune system wouldn’t reject them also.”

“Nanite regeneration?”

“Again, incompatible with my immune system. I’ve investigated every possible option – either way, I’m as good as dead. I was waiting to board the last shuttle out... until you

emerged from the airlock. What would make someone come here, now, when everyone else was trying to get off? You peaked my curiosity. Against the odds, I revisited a desire to die here... with my masterpiece. Besides, if you could ramble along into extinction why shouldn't I join you?"

Diane burst into a wave of giggles.

"I'm sorry!" She said, apologizing, "It's not your situation, but the irony that you've been so intimate with my death-wish all this time and were – in your own way, encouraged to join me! We make an extremely odd couple, don't we? Here at the end of the world – well, this world anyway." Diane noticed his expression – it was laced with introspection – and curiosity. "You see, this whole elaborate scheme of mine is another attempt to rid me of immortality's curse."

"Immortality... a curse... how do you define immortality, and how is it possibly a curse?" Rob wondered aloud.

"From a mortal's point of view, it would resemble an incredible blessing." Diane explained, sounding philosophical. "But, consider watching the children you love, friends, and family grow old and fade away to dust? That is how the curse itself takes shape – the scars of the curse grow and grow and slowly push you away from everyone, and the lonely decades turn into centuries. You might busy yourself with charities to try to regain your lost humanity, but well-doing alone offers little comfort: There are always people who need help, and those who only want to take advantage of your charity. If you're really unlucky, someone figures out your 'dirty little secret' and tries to sell you for medical experimentation... I suppose ultimately, I own the curse."

“What do you mean, you own the curse of immortality?”

“For me, it started outside Baltimore, Maryland, in the old United States of America in the late twentieth century. I was known then as Coleen Corbel. I was a doctor, a leading medical researcher at University Hospital.

One cold wintry night in January 1983, an airliner crashed outside Washington DC. The old airplanes then were less reliable than shuttles are now. I felt it quite paradoxical that an airplane from warm Florida fell into the icy waters of the Potomac River. More than eighty people died, leaving authorities to scramble for space to house the dead until they could be claimed by relatives. Due to our proximity, my hospital became one of many storage facilities. Most of the passengers were claimed in only a few weeks, yet there was this one body that remained on ice. Months passed, the powers that be could find no family.” She paused, searching her memory. “Sad really, I can't remember his name... I wrote it down... somewhere.” She shook her head. “Anyway, with no relatives, they signed him over to our hospital. His organs would be donated and that would be the end of it. However, as we began to thaw him out... he revived! It scared me half to death! The man had been dead, frozen! How had he survived? There was no degeneration, nothing appeared damaged from hypothermia – it was like he was the first person to survive cryostasis! He had to be studied for the good of Medicine and Science, or so I thought!”

Rob looked at Diane incredulously.

“So you're telling me this person frozen for months in a morgue, turned out to be immortal?” He asked. “So what

happened next, did you catch his immortality? Was it like a virus?”

“It wasn't a virus, no. But it was a kind of transference. For months, he had no pulse, no brain activity, no respiration, nothing except a mild persistent magnetic field that seemed to surround him – and which I couldn't pin down. In a 'safe' part of my hospital, I isolated him and performed several... experiments...”

“That seems awfully dark, Doctor Frankenstein.” Rob quipped, not entirely sure if she was serious... or insane. After all, he didn't know her. “Did you forget the part of your oath that says ‘Do no one harm’?”

“In my world at the time, dead stayed dead. My course seemed valid at the time – I had to see if it was a fluke or something science could use to save lives.” A series of peaks in the rolling bombardment overhead accented her words. “Please, I don't want to waste our precious time discussing my lack of moral judgment! I've paid for my weakness in time. I did horrible, despicable things which I deeply regret.” Diane shook her head in disbelief. “It ended with his escape – he stole an ambulance and took the police on a high-speed chase, but they caught him at a train bridge, which they blocked at the opposite end. My patient drove up and off the bridge – the ambulance collapsed onto the tracks below like a heavy cardboard box! I kept up with the chase as best as possible, you see – I saw it all, I was there! I suppose I needed of some sort closure, I don't know. A train was on its way – and he was trapped in the wreckage, pinned on the tracks. I reached inside... He smiled at me when our hands touched. Police officers pulled me out at the last second. We

were all thrown clear by the impact... One policeman suffered injuries, and my patient died – for real this time. I came through without a scratch. I examined his body every day for months before decay and spoilage convinced me he was really dead this time, and forced me to cremate the remains. None of my research data was any good. In the end, everything pointed to the persistent inexplicable magnetic field; but, there's no evidence beyond that.”

“How long did it take to realize you were immortal?”

“After a short time, I was plagued by unusual dreams. Intimate memories of strangers and places I wasn't unfamiliar with. Then one day, a crazed patient attacked me with a scalpel, sliced my shoulder. Just an hour later the gash had closed on its own, with little blood loss. The next day, there was no scar, nothing. Finally, during a testimonial dinner for my service, I realized that all my colleges were old and gray – and that's when I found the same magnetic field around my own body!

I staged my own death – and Coleen Corbel died in a boating accident a few years later. Over the last few centuries I've done all I could to end my life – using increasingly inventive and complicated scenarios. I would always wake up, new faces, new places, same old me. I tried to have a family more than once – it always failed. Of course, it was probably better that way.”

Diane pulled out a phone, stopped to enter something on the touch-screen, then smiled as she looked at him. “I'm sorry, Rob – I needed to contact my lawyer quickly, would you excuse me for a moment?”

“Of course.”

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