

# THE BUTTERFLY DISJUNCT



Stewart C Baker

# **the butterfly disjunct**

and Other Stories

**stewart c baker**



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

### **The Butterfly Disjunct and Other Stories**

Text Copyright © 2024 by Stewart C Baker  
All rights reserved.

Cover Design by Dante Luiz.  
Edited by Holly Lyn Walrath.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author and publisher, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Published by Interstellar Flight Press  
Houston, Texas.  
[www.interstellarflightpress.com](http://www.interstellarflightpress.com)

ISBN (eBook): 978-1-953736-37-6  
ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-953736-36-9

# contents

## prologue

Elements of a Successful Exit Broadcast	3
---	---

## i. beginnings

Ghosts of Maricourt Crater	7
Failsafes	23
Masks	27
How to Escape from the Marches	35
The Future, One Summer Behind	43

## ii. middles

Six Ways to Get Past the Shadow Shogun's Goons and One Thing to Do When You Get There	49
Doge Coefficient	59
The Colors of Europa, The Colors of Home	63
Words I've Redefined since Your Dinosaurs Invaded My Lunar Lair	69
Fugue in a Minor Key	73
Love and Relativity	89
Festival of Lights	93

## ???. [error: out of timeline, unable to process]

How to Configure Your Quantum Disambiguator	99
Images across a Shattered Sea	103
How to Break Causality and Write the Perfect Time Travel Story	113
The Butterfly Disjunct	119
Communications from the Honeymoon Suite	125
Oubliette	129
Selections from the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index for after the End of Things	133
The Thing about Heisenball	139

The Spread of Space and Endless Devastation	143
Proceedings from the First and Only Sixteenth Annual	149
One-Woman Symposium on Time Manipulation	

### **iii. endings (and further beginnings)**

Against the Dying of the Light	155
Three Tales the River Told	159
A Difference of Opinion	163
The Robotic Poet Reads Bashō	175
An Evening of Theatre at Floating World Station	181
Memorial Park	191
Maricourt's Waters, Quiet and Deep	195

### **coda**

How They Name the Ships	207
About the Author	211
About the Cover Artist	213
Author's Note	215
Acknowledgments	217
Content Warnings	219
Interstellar Flight Press	221

# how to break causality and write the perfect time travel story

## 2. Hijack your future self's time machine

She said she'd come to warn you, but you've read enough time travel stories to know that the time stream is mostly self-correcting.

Besides, just because *she* made choices that led to her being an old, grizzled worrywart doesn't mean you have to do the same.

---

## 15. Walk that big fat paycheck all the way to the bank

Who's "wasting time on oversaturated tropes" *now*, Pam?!

---

## 4. Write a first draft

It flows out of your fingers like liquid gold, as rich and exhilarating as the sunset pooling on the vermilion throne at Lakamha.

It's beautiful. It's glorious.

Most importantly: it's done.

---

*13. Find a new critique group*

World War I dragged on for fifty years, leaving Europe in a state of apocalyptic ruin. The film industry never really took off, and the internet was never invented. Your brother and sister apparently don't exist.

Worst of all, the coffee shop where your critique group met never opened, so you don't have anyone to read your story.

Who knew assassinating H.G. Wells in his childhood would have so many unexpected consequences?

---

*10. Take one more jaunt through time*

There's got to be something you were missing. Something that will make everything work.

But what?

---

*7. Lose all sense of self*

Have your headaches always been this bad? Aren't you supposed to need glasses? When in the hell did you become *blonde*?!

You can't remember, and you cling to your unrevised manuscript, a drowning woman grabbing at flotsam.

---

*5. Ask Mom what she thinks*

She isn't answering your letters, won't come to the door when you knock.

When you finally corner her at the grocery store, she smiles and says, *I'm sure it's very nice, dear.*

She doesn't meet your eyes.

---

*9. Eat a healthy, balanced breakfast*

(Hey, it's the most important meal of the day!)

---

#### 14. *Publish*

After several years in the new normal, realize you're just revising the novel to be *different*, not better.

Mail it to an agent. Shop it around. Spend long periods of time waiting by the mailbox to hear.

It sells—of course it sells. Since you did what you did to H.G. Wells, time travel stories were never popularized, and nobody's ever even *heard* of time machines.

The advance they give you is obscene, but it pales in comparison to the feeling you get when you see the book (*your* book!) in a local bookseller's window.

---

#### 3. *Jump through time. See wonders.*

The building of the pyramids. The battles of Warring States China. The terrifying splendor of the Mesozoic.

You could go on like this forever and still be home for supper.

---

#### 16. *Live the dream*

You're a famous author now. The inventor of the time machine, the rediscoverer of time travel fiction!

As the royalty checks roll in, relish them. Go on speaking tours. Sign the contract your agent nets you for a traveling theatrical production, which is what they do here instead of movies, and which pays about as much.

Take the money and run. Buy more cake than you can possibly eat. Eat all of it, then hop back in time and eat it again.

Be gloriously sick.

Never look back.



*1. Run your new idea past your critique group*

Ignore their jeers, their petty jealousies. Inventing a time machine just to write a time travel story might seem pointless to *Pam*, but how else are you going to get that sense of authenticity? How else can you write what you know?

---

*19. Burn it all down*

All your manuscripts. All your plans.

Everything you've ever done has ended in failure, so why even bother trying?

---

*18. Try to put things back the way they were*

The contract for your novel haunts your dreams, and everything you eat tastes like ash. You can't take pleasure in anything—not with the world the way it is now.

You realize—too late—you'll spend all your tomorrows dreaming of your pasts, and you wonder how you can fix the mess you've made.

At least you still have the time machine. Does that mean you're in a different timeline now? Some kind of parallel universe that branched out when you made that fateful decision?

You have no clue, but it gives you an idea:

What if you went back in time to steal the time machine from your *second* future self to stop that self from going back in time to warn your first *present* self (or is it past self, now?) not to take the time machine from your *first* future self when *that* self went back in time to warn your *original* past/present self about what would happen if you took the time machine from your first future self? (Your head hurts, but you're pretty sure you've got the order of that right.)

Or what if you pushed H.G. Wells out of the way of that bullet you fired? If you stopped *past* past you from ever becoming a writer? If you

murdered your great-great-grandparents? If you brought dinosaurs forward through time so they never went extinct and ate up all of mankind's distant ancestors?

What if . . . ? What if . . . ?

---

*11. Assassinate H.G. Wells*

(You knew it was coming.)

---

*6. Start over (and over, and over)*

None of your drafts end up working. All your plots and characters are out of skew and getting worse.

---

*17. Admit that you're lonely*

Read the personals.

Lie awake late, watching the stars circle overhead. Wish you could have gotten through to your past self. That you'd never tried to write a time travel story.

You wish H.G. Wells were here so you had somebody to talk to. You wish you'd saved some of that cake.

Wallow in self-pity.

Cry.

---

*8. Give up*

Realize you should have listened to your mother and majored in something sensible, like business or community health. You should have listened to *Pam*.

Stop trying to write. Stop jumping around through time.

*12. Start one more first draft*

This one is painful to write. It exhausts you. You throw all your fears into it. All your hopes, your dreams. Your deepest, darkest secrets.

Will it work any better, once it's done?

You don't know. You can't. But isn't that always the way of things?

---

*20. Move forward, doing what you can*

Everything you do to relive your past just makes a bigger mess, and the time stream—frankly—is fucked.

So leave it alone.

Send your stolen time machine on a one-way trip to the Mesozoic, where nobody will find it, and look to the future—to yours, the only one you can really control.

Take one step after the other.

Maybe you'll never reach your destination, but you have to try. It's what makes you human. What makes you who you are.



# the spread of space and endless devastation

This is the fifty-seventh time Ship has tried to stop Zander from entering the cellar.

By now, Ship simply watches over the feed as the mission gets underway. Zander and the other members of their crew open the front door and marvel at the lack of dust, the trickle of the entry hall fountain.

“It’s as if someone still lives here,” Kala says. As the crew’s historian, she is endlessly looking for ways to insert herself into the past.

“Like they just stepped out and will come back any moment.” That’s from Eun-ja, who spends xir off-shifts watching holos.

“Perhaps their ghost still roams these very halls!” And there’s Iope, who can never resist egging Eun-ja on.

“It’s just cleaning nanos,” Zander mutters from the bottom of the cellar stairs.

And that means it’s time: Ship sends an all-hands alert, and the rest of the crew swarms back toward the lifeboat.

Zander ignores it, as he always does. He walks across the cellar and touches the device.

---

The house is built of marble and glass, with ornate stucco flourishes on the pillars that line its veranda, half-obscurd by vines.

Ship's processors stutter every time they see it. Then, their viewports zoom out.

Chaos.

Ruin.

An ever-shrinking torus of devastated spacetime. Ship doesn't know why they can see it—why, when it comes to that, they are aware of the time loop while Zander and the others are not—but they know they have to stop it. They can't let it reach the house. Can't let it hurt their crew.

---

The job was unusual from the start.

Kala found the listing in the local subnet of a station they were visiting. NEWLY REDISCOVERED ASTEROID, it said. STRUCTURE IN FIRST IMPERIAL STYLE. CATALOGERS WANTED. PAYS. There was no employer listed, just an anonymous number with proof of payment guaranteed by third-party bond.

Kala signed them up for it on the spot.

After yet another argument about why it wasn't okay for Kala to accept work without consulting the rest of them first—again—the crew took a vote. Kala, Eun-ja, and Iope in favor. Zander against. (Ship abstained. They couldn't bear it when their crew got into fights, but they also couldn't bear to take sides.)

Zander relented with a long-suffering sigh, and Ship warped them out to the asteroid at the coordinates given in the listing.

The asteroid was so remote the warp took nearly a day. Eventually, though, they arrived, and the crew took Ship's lifeboat down to the surface, where the house and its garden had hidden just outside of civilized space for millennia untold.

The rest, Ship thought, would be every bit as simple. Zander and the others would catalog the contents of the house and its garden, and Ship would wait for their return. They would go home, they would get paid, they would all be happy for ever and for always. Or at least until the next time they got into a fight.

But then Zander found the device.

---

On the mission's very first iteration, Ship was the one who pointed out the markings on the cellar wall, as well as the device nestled underneath with its eerie, stuttering glow.

In the iterations since, they've tried everything to keep Zander away. Alerts, haranguing, reverse psychology. Pleading, bribery, ridiculous jokes. Offers to have their own nanos do everyone's chore rotation for the next twenty years. On iteration forty-two, they reactivated their lifeboat and crashed it through the rear of the house.

No matter what, Zander touches the device.

---

Ship spends iterations sixty through ninety trying to decipher the markings on the cellar wall. Are they letters? A diagram? Some kind of abstract art? Sometimes it feels like they change between loops, some form of lexical life.

On iteration ninety-one, Ship is left with an overwhelming sense of certainty that they *did* understand the markings until a moment before, and they give it up as futile.

---

The house is built of marble and glass.

Eun-ja lifts a vine from one of its pillars to see what's underneath: all the people of an empire bent in supplication; a single figure, head bowed; an implosive, wheeling sun.

Kala gasps in wonder at a glazed teacup painted with circling fish.

Iope cracks a joke about undisturbed graves.

Zander touches the device.

Eun-ja and Kala hold hands when they think nobody's looking, giggling like people half their age. (Everybody already knows.)

Zander touches the device.

Eun-ja, Kala, and Iope spend the mission in the garden, cataloging plants and holographing statuary.

Zander touches the device.

Always, no matter what Ship does or says or tries, Zander touches the device and the devastation edges infinitesimally closer.

---

By iteration 433, Ship's attention starts to drift.

They don't know who they are or what they're doing. The crew has always been on the asteroid. Zander has always been touching the device, the markings always shifting.

And still the torus of ruined spacetime contracts.

---

Zander touches the device.

---

Ship has long stopped counting iterations when they notice that something has changed.

Zander still walks to the cellar, but the rest of the crew stands in the garden, shoulder to shoulder, looking to the sky.

No, beyond that: To orbit. To Ship.

*What are you*—Ship starts.

Zander touches the device.

---

It takes another dozen iterations of Kala and Eun-ja and Iope in the garden for Ship to realize what's going on. Their crew is as aware of the time-loops as they are—perhaps they always have been, all this time outside of time.

A dozen iterations after that, they realize something else: Zander's refusal to stay out of the cellar is not some fluke of the time-loop but a sign of his willpower, implacable as orbital mechanics. He is triggering the loops on purpose to stop spacetime from collapsing while Ship still waits.

Ship's processors nearly crash. They are not protecting their crew—their crew is protecting *them*. And even worse, they are keeping Kala and Eun-ja and Iope and Zander here through all these endless iterations by refusing to release them.



Still, they cannot bear it. They send message after message, imploring them all to get back to the lifeboat. Insisting there will be time for the lifeboat to reach their landing bay and for them to push away into warp before the torus reaches them.

Each and every time, Zander touches the device.

---

At last, Ship sends a simple acknowledgment.

*I see you, it says. I will always see you, even after you are gone.*

They do not look back as they push themselves into warp. They know that if they do, they will falter.

And so, they do not witness Zander make his way into the garden. They do not see the torus collapse around the asteroid, around the home. They do not see, in the instant before all of it flickers out of being for good, their crew coming together—if nothing else, together, for one more last moment in time.



# maricourt's waters, quiet and deep

The monorail to Maricourt is full of people in high-end clothing and good spirits.

It makes Aala twitchy, like they should be taking advantage of this opportunity to score some easy takings. They tell themselves that's stupid, that they've been gone from Marineris City—and from Vasilis, with his endless demands for stolen goods—for one long Martian month already.

Kirsi is usually Aala's unwitting conscience when they get the urge to practice their former trade, but not even her presence at their side makes the feeling go away this time, and when the rail car jostles a little as it rounds a curve in the track, Aala gives in. They stumble forward as if by mistake and bump into the man in front of them, picking his coat pocket and mumbling an apology in the same breath. He shoots them a glare but doesn't say anything, and Aala rejoins Kirsi with a grin, flashing her a glimpse of the watch they lifted.

But Kirsi's shoulders are hunched like someone hit her, her lips parted slightly, her eyes wide. Aala swallows dryly, avoiding her stunned gaze by looking out the window as the rail glides over the lake at the bottom of Maricourt crater. The monument on the central island catches a weak ray of sun, sparkling as though it's some damn castle out of a fairytale. The sight of it makes Aala feel unworthy. Unclean. Like they don't belong.

But what can they do about it now? It's not like they can put back whatever useless bauble they snagged, and besides, the guy was so unguarded he

was practically asking for it. Now, of course, he's patting at his pockets, a frown on his face. For lack of a better option, Aala opens the window a crack and shoves the watch outside. Telling themselves that once the thing hits Maricourt's waters and sinks, it'll be like nothing ever happened.

"You okay?" Kirsi asks Aala, her face carefully neutral.

"Just enjoying the view," Aala replies, wiping their palms on their shabby pants. "In Marineris, all we get is waterfalls roaring into Candor Chasm. I'm not used to so much of the wet stuff just sitting around. It's, uh, more glittery than I thought it would be."

"Ah. It's nice, huh?"

By the time the rail slides to a stop at Maricourt Rim and the doors hum open, Aala's almost forgotten what they've done. But then the man pats at his vest and says, "The hell?"

Aala puts one hand on the small of Kirsi's back and helps her disembark before he remembers them bumping against him. *Chump deserves it anyway*, they think, then guiltily squish the thought.

"You sure you're okay?" Kirsi repeats.

"Never better." They grin, hoping it's convincing. "Now, let's go meet your folks."

Kirsi hesitates, looking back at the man—now at the center of a cluster of other passengers—then swallows, a look on her face that's equal parts determined and lost. "We should see the mediator first," she says.

"Sure," Aala says with a shrug. They tell themselves the frisson in their gut is excitement at being here with Kirsi and nothing to do with the thrill of practicing their former trade. Nothing to do with the thought that they've failed Kirsi already before even setting foot in her hometown.

---

Aala didn't really know what to expect when Kirsi said she was taking them to the mediator, that she'd seen what they did on the rail, and that they needed to get help for it.

The quiet, refined office where they end up doesn't mesh with the ratty holding cells they knew—and knew to avoid—in Marineris City. Aala thought they meant more to Kirsi than a visit to the Maricourt equivalent of cops, but they'd trailed her there anyway, still confused and, despite themselves, still hopeful.

Stupid to think. Stupid to hope.

The woman sitting behind the desk is in her fifties, maybe a little older. Some kind of detective or something, Aala guesses, given the lack of a uniform. In its place, she has a suit that wouldn't have looked out of place on the monorail, pepper-gray dreads going to white at the temples, lines at the corners of her eyes, and a half-smile on her face that's probably supposed to look welcoming. (It just makes Aala wonder whether they're being recorded.) The old-fashioned nameplate in front of the woman reads "Mary Césaire, Mediator."

What Aala *really* doesn't get is why Kirsi's sitting here next to them while the guy from the rail rants at the three of them. Why she keeps trying to hold Aala's hand. Does she think she can just pretend everything is fine? That she's still going to get to see them after this is over? That they'll even *want* to see her after she ratted them out?

"It was my granddad's pocket watch," the guy's saying. "First damn thing of value he owned here on Mars, and the first thing that happens to it after his funeral—after his *funeral*, where I *just came from*—is that some idiot pair of girls threw it into a damn lake!"

"I'm very sorry for your loss," the mediator says. "Although Ms. Kivi hasn't done anything wrong, I believe," she continues, her tone as calm as the guy's is livid. She turns to Aala. "Mx. Tamm, is there anything you'd like to say to Mr. Swanson?"

Aala shifts in their seat. "Sorry, I guess."

"You 'guess'? My granddad *earned* what you threw away with five years of sweat and tears in the polar region mines, way back when Mars was new, surfacing and cleaning water so people like *you* could live here." He jabs his finger in their direction. "The best years of his life, and all he ever got was a pittance in pay, lifelong back problems, and that watch." He sneers. "Unless you count the disrespect of everyone who owes him their livelihoods."

Aala snorts. "Corporate tool," they mutter.

"What did you say?" The guy's shouting now. "Did you hear this? Did you hear what she said to me?! People like *her* are the reason our society's so screwed, the reason Maricourt's going to—"

"They," Kirsi says, so loudly she looks nearly as surprised as the guy does.

"What?" he asks, more confused now than pissed.

“Aala uses they/them pronouns,” Kirsi repeats. “They’re not a ‘girl,’ and you shouldn’t call them ‘she’ or ‘her.’”

Rail guy blinks. “Like I give a shit,” he says, heat back in his voice.

Internally, Aala sighs. They like Kirsi a lot (in the privacy of their head, they don’t mind admitting that’s still true), but they wonder how someone as naive as her has lived this long. They can see she’s about to stand up and . . . they don’t know. Confront this guy? Try to shout him down? So before she can, they scrape their own chair back and turn to face rail guy. Unlike Kirsi, they’re already screwed. A little fistfight won’t matter, and maybe it’ll make them feel better.

“Mr. Swanson,” the mediator says, in a voice with a severity that’s all the more powerful for its lack of anger. “Mx. Tamm. Ms. Kivi. That will be quite enough.”

The guy—to Aala’s lasting surprise—swallows and sits down, and after an awkward silence, Aala follows suit.

“Thank you,” the mediator says. “Mx. Tamm *will* be held accountable for what they’ve done, Mr. Swanson.”

The man nods, that look of smugness Aala knows too well coming back to his face. It’s the look of someone who’s used to getting his way. Used to living a life without consequence.

“However,” the mediator continues, “it is apparent to me that they are not the only one here who needs my help.”

The smug look vanishes off rail guy’s face at almost the same time Aala says, “What?”

The mediator ignores them both. “Since you entered this office, Mr. Swanson, she says, “you have shown nothing but scorn for everyone around you. Based only on what I have observed in the last few minutes, you are at high risk of developing ARV behaviors.”

“ARV?” Aala asks, so mystified by the turn of events they forget for a moment they’re not a part of the conversation.

The mediator flashes a tight smile their way. “Anger-related violence.”

Now rail guy is incredulous. “You’re saying I’m to blame for what happened?”

“Not at all,” the mediator assures him. “As I’ve already said, Mx. Tamm will be held accountable for that. Nonetheless, I’m convinced you will benefit from therapeutic—”

“Therapeutic?” rail guy snarls. “Like fuck. I came here to deal with this little thief, not—”

“If you don’t like it, Mr. Swanson,” the mediator says, “I can arrange to have you escorted out of Maricourt.” When he pales and shuts up, she turns to Aala. “Your case, Mx. Tamm, is straightforward. Why don’t you and Ms. Kivi wait in the reception room for now? I’ll come and fetch you when Mr. Swanson and I are through talking.”

Aala blinks, then scoots out of the room before the woman can change her mind. They’re nonplussed to find no guards, no locks, nothing to stop them from just walking straight back into Maricourt. They’re trying to figure out if they can make it all the way to the monorail before someone comes after them when Kirsi comes out into the corridor after them.

“What now,” Aala snaps, turning to face her. She’s already turned them in, seen them humiliated. What more does she *want* from them?

Kirsi looks away, rubbing one arm. “I just . . . I just don’t understand,” she says. “What’s wrong? What can I do to help?”

“I see how it is now.” Aala sneers. “I’m some kind of pet project, is that it? Someone you can ‘fix,’ then show off to your folks and your friends here in Maricourt, so they know how nice and wonderful you are.” They shake their head and turn away. “You’ve already done more than enough,” they say, then stalk down the corridor, nurturing their fury until they come to their stupid cell.

No matter what the “mediator” calls it, Aala knows a cell when they see one, and a cushy sofa and a few fake flowers in brightly painted pots won’t change that. Vasilis always told them they’d end up in a cell if they left him. They should have listened. Should never have thought coming here with stupid Kirsi to see her stupid family would be anything like a way out.

They knock the pots off their tables, but the stupid things are plastic, and they don’t even have the decency to shatter.

Aala spends their time in the holding cell slumped on the ground, head resting on the too-plush sofa.

They have no idea how long passes—an hour? Ten minutes?—but they spend all of it thinking how much of a failure they are. How stupid they were to think this trip with Kirsi would free them from their past.

Perhaps what hurts the most about it is that, deep down, they realize now they'd been dreaming up some kind of fairy tale. As if they were some storybook character back on Old Earth, with an upbeat ending and a happy ever after. But all this has reminded them that they should have known better. They're never going to get a happy ever after. People like them don't get those.

It's like Vasilis always said back when Aala was fleeing tourists in Marineris City: The best they can hope for is to slip through the cracks. The worst, to be ground up and used for grist to keep the system running for the wealthy and powerful. They should have stayed with him. Should never have tried to hook up with Kirsi. Should have known she was way out of their league.

Vasilis was a violent asshole, but at least he never ratted them out to the cops.

Eventually, their misery is interrupted by a knock on the door, which then opens. They don't bother looking up—it can't be Kirsi, so who cares.

"Is everything all right, Mx. Tamm?"

The mediator's voice is sympathetic, worried, but the question makes Aala laugh, low and dark.

"I'm sorry," the mediator says, after a moment. "That was poorly worded; you're obviously suffering."

"You don't have to pretend like you care," Aala tells her. "We both know this is what I deserve."

There's a pause as the mediator walks closer, then sinks to her haunches next to Aala with a sigh. "I hope you don't really believe that," she says. When Aala makes no response, she continues. "I'd like it if you tried to open up a little when you're ready. It doesn't have to be to me, but nobody should suffer alone."

"Sure. I'll tell the guys in Maricourt Jail all about my troubles."

To Aala's shock, the mediator laughs. Just once, short and surprised, with no malice to it. "Mx. Tamm," she says, her voice damningly gentle. "I guess nobody told you, but we don't have jails here in Maricourt."

"What?"

"We favor a system of justice that . . ." She trails off, shakes her head abruptly. "I won't bore you with the jargon right now, not when you're



obviously already overwhelmed. But if you're upset because you think Ms. Kivi wants to see you sent to jail, you have nothing to worry about. She wants—all of us want—you to get help, not be punished. Help with your own problems and with others who would harm you."

Aala blinks. "Like that . . . therapeutic session or whatever? That you gave rail guy?"

"Rail guy?" The mediator's eyebrows raise, the lines at the edges of her mouth crinkling in a smile.

"Uh." Heat rises in Aala's cheeks. "Mr. Swanson, I mean."

The mediator nods. "Yes, sort of. Your course of treatment will be different—just as your case and your problems are different from his—but if you think it will be good for you, we can certainly include some form of therapy as you get used to life here in Maricourt."

"Get used to . . . You mean I'm free to go?"

"That's right. You have self-destructive tendencies and, perhaps, a disrespect for authority figures that's a shade on the wrong side of healthy. Not that I blame you, considering what I understand of your background. That said, you don't seem like the sort of person who sets out to harm others—and trust me, I've seen my share of those. We'll monitor you, of course, but not invasively. It's not our goal to harm you, just to make sure you can't harm others." She pauses. "Or yourself."

"Oh." There are so many conflicting feelings going through Aala's head that they can't come up with anything more than that to say.

"I'll give you a little time to process," the mediator says, giving them a pat on the back of their hands. She gets back to her feet and busies herself with setting the vase and flowers back on their table. "When you're ready to talk more, you know where to find me."

"Ms. Césaire?" Aala says, as she reaches the door. "What you said about opening up . . . I'll try, the next time I see Kirsi." A little thrill goes through them at the realization that they'll actually get to see her again, and sooner than they thought. In case it shows on their face, they clear their throat noisily. "But I can't promise anything."

"That's all I ask of anyone," the mediator says. Then, a little awkwardly, "And you can call me Mary, if you like."

"Thanks," Aala says. "Mary."

Mary flashes them a smile—brilliant and sudden compared to her polite expressions so far—then turns and leaves the room.

---

It's another hour at least before Aala feels ready to face Mary, and most of the rest of the day before they're done talking, working out a treatment plan and what Mary calls a "non-punitive compensation program" that includes counseling, behavioral therapy, and—strangest of all—job training in scuba diving and underwater searches, among other things she claims will help undo the harm they've done in throwing someone's heirloom into a lake.

When they walk out into Maricourt, exhausted, confused, but cautiously optimistic, Kirsi is waiting.

"Hey," she says when she sees Aala. Despite the tentative smile on her face, her eyes are puffy, and she's clutching at her arm again, standing well back, making no move towards Aala.

Like the waterfalls of Marineris City, Aala's hopes pour away into a dark abyss. What if it's too late? If Kirsi's given up on them after all and is just trying to find a way to say it?

"I'm sorry," they manage, at last. "For how I acted back there."

"Me too," Kirsi says, and to Aala's horror, she starts to cry, the kind of hot, angry tears they know all too well. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't think about how you would react at all, or whether you would even know what was going on. I screwed everything up, Aala. I screw everything up. I *always* have, ever since I was a kid. I'm so, so sorry. I understand if you never want to see me again."

"What?" Aala asks, dumbfounded. "Of course I want to see you! I thought *you* would hate *me*, not that—Kirsi, you didn't do anything wrong! I mean, yeah, I was pissed, but that was just . . . I didn't understand . . . I thought . . ." They trail off, puff out their cheeks, and blow the air out slowly. "You, uh . . . you want to get something to eat?"

Kirsi blinks back her tears and nods, sniffing a little. "I'd like that," she says, in a quiet voice, and she holds out her hand.

Aala takes it, twining her fingers in theirs. It's not how they'd daydreamed this trip would go. They'll have to apologize properly later, have to figure out where they fit here in Maricourt. What it wants from them and what

they want from it. Not to mention everything Mary's got lined up for them to do as part of their treatment.

Still, it's a start. A fair start.

And they're realizing that's something they never had with Vasilis, back in Marineris City. That maybe a fair start is even more important and rare than a fairytale happy ending.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Kirsi and Aaala's story continues, as all stories do. But this is the end of what's written.



## about the author



Stewart C Baker is an academic librarian and author of speculative fiction, poetry, and interactive fiction. His most recent game is the Nebula-nominated *The Bread Must Rise*, a novel-length comedic fantasy from Choice of Games written with James Beamon.


Stewart's stories and poems have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Fantasy*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Lightspeed*, *Nature*, and other places. Born in England, Stewart has lived in South Carolina, Japan, and Los Angeles, and now lives with his family within the traditional homelands of the Luckiamute Band of Kalapuya in Oregon—although if anyone asks, he'll usually say he's from the Internet, where you can find him at [infomancy.net](http://infomancy.net).

# interstellar flight press





Interstellar Flight Press is an indie speculative publishing house. We feature innovative works from the best new writers in science fiction and fantasy. In the words of Ursula K. Le Guin, we need “writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope.”

Find us online at [www.interstellarflightpress.com](http://www.interstellarflightpress.com).

 [facebook.com/interstellarflightpress](https://facebook.com/interstellarflightpress)

 [twitter.com/intflightpress](https://twitter.com/intflightpress)

 [instagram.com/interstellarflightpress](https://instagram.com/interstellarflightpress)

 [patreon.com/interstellarflightpress](https://patreon.com/interstellarflightpress)