



“Unnatural” by Eowyn Garringer
1st Place, Short Story 13-15

"Which is more unnatural, the wonders of heaven or the horrors of man?"

- Estaline 13:29 (The Third Testament)

"It feels... bad. I don't like the way you grew its eyes." Thompsan said softly.

"Bad is good." Kessian replied.

"I never liked him." Thompsan muttered.

Kessian looked up from her digi-pad. "Who?"

"Professor Fedrik. All the 'Bad is good' talk. He always seemed a little off."

"He loved you."

"He was slimy."

"Speaking of slimy, check the embryonic fluid in the second Womb. I think the filter is malfunctioning." Kessian gazed through the microscope. The psuedo-meat had an odd grain to it, nothing like the real stuff. She adjusted the focus deeper into the cells. "If we wreck that one there will be hell to pay, Oh Tee Kay's finally got some money but he can send fuck all with the supply routes this hostile."

Thompsan cringed. "Can you please call him 'Majesty' or something?" She crossed the cramped cement floor, weaving through the tangles of wires carpeting the floor.

Kessian sighed. "We're all Creationaries here, I don't see why it matters."

Thompsan removed the suspiciously stained bed sheet to expose the warm fleshy glow of the pod underneath. "Its disrespectful. He's the reason we're on this project and not stuck as mutation control at some Agri-production center."

"Yes, the thankless project we've devoted half our lives to that the Church will probably destroy on sight. Thanks a lot, One True King." Kessian changed the chemical inputs on the muscle formula with a

few quick swipes. It was easy to forget how angry she was with Thompsan around to pretend this was some sort of dream job.

Thompsan said nothing. That usually meant she was appalled.

“I’m sorry.” Kessian raised her thin wire glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I know you have a strong connection to him. I was raised to believe he was bullshit and then he did actually come to earth again and he chose me for some fucking reason but he didn’t fucking fix this fucked up planet. Wasn’t that part of the deal? I just-”

“You should read the Nova Fabula.” Thompson said softly. Kessian heard her snap on some rubber gloves. “They won’t print it in newer editions of the Holy Testaments because they only accept the first three but it’s still available on Amazon. Where’s the sampler?”

“In your pocket. ‘They’ don’t accept it? Who’s ‘They’?” Kessian asked, straightening her glasses and returning to her task.

“The Church.” Thompson triggered the vacuum seal on the inspection hatch. “They won’t even consider it. Probably because of the sex scenes. The Nova Prophetess was a romance novelist.”

Kessian silently thanked Thompson for accepting the task. The feeling of warm embryonic fluid and a half formed body floating inches from one’s hand was not Kessian’s cup of tea. An unfortunate aversion for an aspiring Holy Geneticist.

“He’s got a fondness for ‘Nova’ doesn’t he? He printed it on all the t-shirts.” Kessian checked her watch. “Ex-two should be back shortly with dinner.”

“Yes. Before the website was taken down.” Thompson sounded almost embarrassed, as if the One True King wasn’t constantly acting like a parody of himself. “Can you please not call them Ex-two?”

“He’s odd.” Kessian carefully removed the slide from the microscope and returned it to the small library. Ex-two was her mistake and she sure as hell wasn’t going to name it. “He’s everything that

made me hate the Creationary the religion in the first place. I'd swear he was fake if he hadn't solved the Equations."

"He's not fake." Thompsan said. The vacuum seal deactivated with a sucking noise and the inspection hatch fell back into place.

"No need to get defensive. I'm here, I'm just as convinced as you." Kessian realized it was a lie the instant it left her mouth.

Thompsan said nothing. Kessian listened to her softly deposit the sample in the milk jug that housed the comprehensive atom reader.

A knock sounded at the plastic door.

"That'll be it." Kessian started to extricate from the dilapidated gaming chair but Thompsan beat her to the door.

Ex-two ducked under the door frame and compressed their eight foot frame into the tiny lab. They had a Walmart bag in their left hand which they set gently on the nearby folding table.

"Ex-two, welcome back." Kessian said, feigning disinterest.

"Thank you." Ex-two said. Its voice was strange as usual accent shift through two or three nationalities in the space of a single word.

The egg timer went off. Thompsan unscrewed the cap on top of the jug. "Please don't call them that."

Kessian threw her hands. Ex-two was barely alive by technical definition much less sentient. "Fine. Fucking ask it what it fucking wants to be called then."

"You were right. Its too acidic." Thompsan said. "What would you like to be called?"

Ex- two folded its legs beneath it and sank robotically to the floor. "How do you know what you are called?"

Kessian looked up from her molecular formatting. Ex-two rarely spoke more than three words at a time. This was unprecedented. “It depends on your circumstances.” She spoke, weighing every word carefully. “My parents gave me my name.”

Ex-two blinked. Always a bit odd to watch as it’s eyelids were asymmetrical. “What about Thompsan?” “Well...” Thompsan looked at Kessian, as if to confirm this wasn’t a hallucination. It knew their names? “Do you know what ‘son’ means?”

“In the sky? Offspring, male?” Ex-two was strangely coherent. Kessian quietly removed the pen microphone from her lab coat pocket and began recording.

“Male offspring in this case.” Thompsan was flustered but hiding it well. “Do you know the archaic tradition of adding ‘son’ to the fathers name to indicate who they are related to.”

Ex-two paused, strange reptilian face wrinkled in concentration. “Yes. I understand the concept.”

“‘San’ is meant to sound similar to that. It was borrowed from Japan, but the meaning was changed. It is an abbreviation for Sanctified. I was created by High Professor Thomp of the Academy of Holy Genetics.”

Ex-two stared at the floor for a second, seemingly deep in contemplation. Kessian turned to Thompsan and mouthed ‘What the fuck’. Thompsan shrugged.

“Why create?” Ex-two asked. “Why all of this?” It gestured around the room with its monstrous arm. Thompsan’s eyes were wide as satellites. Ex-two had *never* displayed higher thinking. Until a minute ago, Kessian hadn’t believed its scrambled brain was capable of something like this.

“Do you understand religion?” Thompsan asked hesitantly. Kessian often got the feeling Thompsan lived constantly terrified something might throw doubt on her faith.

“Yes.” Ex-two said. “No. What but not why.”

“We are Creationaries.” Thompsan said, cautious as a Holy Geneticist creating a new virus. “We believe that if we can create life, then we must.”

Ex-two looked at the floor again. Its pupils were fluctuating. Kessian hadn't seen that before. Its synapses might be corrupted. "You create because you... must?"

"Yes." Thompsan said.

"What is all of this?" Ex-two once again gestured around the lab.

"We have been called by the One True King to create a new living planet." Thompsan said. Kessian liked when Thompsan spoke about their project. It made it sound like a miraculous undertaking instead of endless irritating work.

"Who created me?" Ex-two asked.

"Kessian did." Thompsan said simply.

Kessian resisted the urge to hide beneath the table. She wasn't proud of her creature. She had done a shoddy job, stitching animals and humans together with no regard in the back of her academy's lab by flashlight. Back then she had only wanted to make the Church angry.

Now she wasn't so sure she wanted the Church angry with her, but she kept finding her way onto their shit list.

"Kessiansan?" Ex-two asked, almost to itself.

Kessian could have died in her chair. It wasn't supposed to go like this. The only small mercy had been that her mistake couldn't think well enough to know she was cruel, that she had brought it into a world that wanted to kill it.

Sometimes after a long talk with Thompsan, she could fully put her hope in the Creationary cause.

Other times she looked at her creature wasn't so sure.

"Is that what you would like to be called?" Thompsan asked, voice half shocked, half amazed.

The creature's slit-pupil's latched onto Kessian.

For a second everything went strange and she felt as if she had lost her balance.

And then nothing. The ratty cushions of the gaming chair against her spine. Her arm against the table.

The pen recorder in her hand.

“No.” Ex-two said.

“Should we call you Ex-two?” Thompsan spoke as if she was treading on holy ground.

“No.” It said. “Call me... Creature.”

“Are you sure?” Thompsan looked at Kessian curiously.

“Yes” Creature said.

It fell silent and did not speak for the rest of the evening.