

# Love in the Time of Immuno- Sharing

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## 1

“The young coupled with the old, the ugly with the beautiful. Sworn enemies lay down together, and the darkest incests were commonplace. This was the new love.”

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

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Beyond the towers of Antigen Bay, the other floating cities of the Moveable Feast mingled in sunset glamor.

“We’re young and rich,” Aerd said with annoyance. “Stop moping.”

What else could Vedrum do? He was just out of the post-coupling bliss stage of immuno-sharing. His heart was broken. His paramour was an ancient man, an ancient immuno-soul. Bridio’s antibody-universe had been complex. Now that it was over, Vedrum just wanted to brood at the fringes of parties. This one sprawled across the Grand Arcade, a vast choreography of flirtation and coupling. Flotsam like Vedrum and Aerd strolled the balconies, which commanded views of the bay.

“This is depressing,” Aerd said. “Unlike you I don’t relish depression. Let’s go down there and find you someone divergent.”

Vedrum considered the word *divergence*. He thought of it as a precious substance to be consumed, rather than what it was: a measure of the immunity two people had to offer each other. Which also made it a metric of bliss. “I’ll never want anyone else,” Vedrum replied.

Aerd was laughing. “You say that about once a year, Ved. Sometimes I wonder about you.”

Vedrum wasn’t too depressed to be offended. Aerd liked to call him a “defective *immuno sapiens*.” These post-coupling funks got in the way of spreading immunity. On the other hand, he’d never indulged in reproductive sex, like Aerd had. Vedrum might be defective, but his life

revolved around immuno-love. He kept track of the high divergence ratings in the Moveable Feast. That's how he'd targeted Bridio.

"I mope," Vedrum said, "and you have repro-sex. What a pair we are."

That did the trick: Aerd stopped laughing. Many people dabbled in old-fashioned sex, but Aerd did it more than most. He gazed out at the bay, probably thinking of his great love, Brea. They'd consummated a high divergence several years ago, and then, because Brea was female and they aligned hetero—whatever that meant—they'd had repro-sex.

Vedrum regretted bringing it up. He didn't like to think about the ancient sport. For him, as for most of humanity, immuno-sharing was the epitome of romantic communion.

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2

"Give yourself away. Give everything to everyone. Enlightenment is whoredom."

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

Brea knew that Jiang was a second cousin—it was one of many details that weren't germane to the coupling at hand. Brea had condescended to reproductive sex and knew she aligned hetero. Jiang was bi. They mulled these curiosities at dinner, their heads swimming with each other's scents. The restaurant afforded a view of the Moveable Feast, glowing jewel-cities scattered across a Pacific-reflected star-field—and a sculpture garden in the foreground: spikey spheres and complex geometries, renderings of man-made pathogens, the fast-mutators that inspired immuno-love.

Brea smelled that this consummation would be profound. They'd be joined for hours, then wallow in the afterglow for days. They didn't need a divergence assay to tell them this—pheromones were enough. Brea and Jiang had worlds to offer each other.

"I passed you on the arcade," Jiang said. "I followed you."

At their high divergence, Brea saw immortality in Jiang's eyes. "It's been a while for me." She didn't know how to continue. She hadn't felt attraction like this since Aerd, and she didn't like to think about Aerd. But Aerd had everything to do with why she'd been celibate for two years.

Jiang took her hand. "I know you were in lockdown."

Two years in punitive stasis, her immunity fed to her by machines, childhood all over again. Of course Jiang knew. At their divergence she would've looked Brea up. Lockdowns were as public as divergence ratings.

"You don't have to tell me why," Jiang said. "I don't care why."

Brea gulped. "Do you watch the assays?" Everyone knew a lull was coming: perfect immuno-distribution throughout the Feast. No one knew how long it would last. That depended on the pathogens.

"Yes," Jiang said, growing serious.

"You're my last divergence rating above an eighty." Her last chance, in other words, for real distraction from herself. From memories of lockdown and Aerd, and what they'd done. From her nagging, antisocial need to be a mother.

"I love you," Jiang said, her skin erupting with beautiful sores.

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3

"Feverish and weak, our universes mingle. So unique, what I ache to destroy in you. I savor your imperfections as I erase them. We trade messengers and scribes, dealing in ancient lore. I want to do this forever. I love your hunger as much as your antibodies. Infinite disease, endless plague, holy fevers of childhood! Do you remember reproductive sex? Maybe you never bothered. Out there it's a disassortative springtime, a rolling season of love. Spring can happen any time of year now."

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

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Vedrum awakened the skiff as it banged around in the dock tunnel. The walls of the tunnel were pre-immuno-sharing—rough sheet-carbon quarried from a previous floating city—all mismatched Chinese pictographs. Moveable Feasters didn't care much for history. The past was an uncomfortable contradiction: the ancients had crafted immuno-love, to answer the rapidly-evolving pathogens they'd inflicted on the world. Many Feasters claimed to love pathogens. It was fashionable to say so, but Feasters had pathogen-suppression tech. They didn't have to worry about the death-suffused air.

Vedrum was headed for the mainland. Things were different there. As his suppression ration wore off, he would be truly plague-exposed for the first time in his life.

Someone else was braving the dock tube. Aerd dove into the cabin with a flood of seawater.

"So you decided to come along," Vedrum said.

"I talked with Brea." Aerd grabbed a railing and made for the control deck.

The outcome was rarely good after a Brea-chat. Their repro-sex had resulted in an unscheduled child, and they'd chosen to have it in secret. They were the first couple in a generation to be slapped with the well-known penalty: denial of all contact with the child. Then Brea had done something to get herself locked down. No one knew what, but Vedrum had a theory. The couple resented each other, while suffering the bond that comes from consummating a divergence of ninety or more. "It wasn't like you're thinking," Aerd said. "She convinced me to seize the moment. Not only that, she admitted she was afraid to herself."

"Are we talking about the same Brea?" Vedrum couldn't picture her admitting weakness of any kind.

Aerd strapped himself into the couch. "Can't let you pillage the mainland on your own. You won't appreciate it."

Vedrum wiped a screen and checked the assays: grim, no divergence above ten in the Feast. Soon there would be equilibrium, which meant boredom to a Feaster. People would resort to repro-sex. Another season of longing for plague. Vedrum was the first to waken a skiff, but all Feasters were weighing risk against desire. Equilibrium hadn't loomed so close in a very long time.

He heard someone else in the docking tube and wasn't surprised to see that Brea had overcome her fear. The woman who followed her into the cabin though: he recognized her from the assays, but couldn't remember her name.

"Jiang," Aerd said.

The two women landed in the couch. "Why should you have all the fun?" Brea said to Aerd.

Jiang nuzzled Brea's neck, ignoring the two men entirely. "I wish we were aligned."

"Aligned?" Brea giggled nervously. "Revoltin'!"

The result of her alignment with Aerd was in deep-interface education, as far as Vedrum knew. It would remain thus, like all Feast children, until its coming-out ball. Aerd and Brea would never know its identity. It was even possible they'd immuno-share with it. That kind of thing bothered a small fraction of the population.

Vedrum wondered if it was why they were leaving the Feast.

"Let's go," Aerd grumbled. "Four's enough for this jaunt."

Vedrum released the dock tube and sealed the cabin. The skiff lurched toward the dazzle of the open sea. It was a twenty-hour crawl to the Alaskiformian coast—just long enough to consummate the small divergences among them. Beautiful sores already perfected their flesh. The couch reshaped to accommodate them, as they stripped, then writhed into the tangle of a four-some.

Vedrum felt drawn to Brea more than the other two. He didn't know what to make of this. Divergence couldn't explain it, and he didn't know how he aligned, repro-wise. It had never come up. Did he want her in the ancient way? Or another way entirely?

Their sores found each other and merged, crusting over to seal.

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“The ancients debated this. If immuno-love proliferated, what would become of institutions, parental instinct? But we were young. We’d killed the olds within ourselves, so we killed the old. Call it revolution if you like. I call it a biological event. We made something new.”

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

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The pop song was based on Broichin, howled by a pretentious mainland idol, a broadcast from the towers of Nova Astoria: “Take off your veil, I’ll take off my armor! Which of us stands more naked?”

The piercing electric music came from cabin speakers, waking Brea first. She’d spent more time than most in Feast archives. How could you characterize mainland culture? The city-states of this tenuous league—from Aleutia in the north to McMurdo in the south—varied greatly, but they had one thing in common: they knew to steer their rusted hulks clear of the Moveable Feast, or risk its EMP.

“Come down from your father’s tower! Why have towers anymore?”

Brea disentangled herself in the pre-dawn gloom. The old sores flaked away. She studied the console groggily, still lost in the mystery of her partners, wandering their immuno-libraries. Fore was the rolling green of the Astorian coast. The skiff offered up a hailing ping.

“Hello?” Brea said.

“Is that the Archipelagic vessel?”

That’s what the Moveable Feast was to the mainland: a roving archipelago. “Yes, who is this?”

“I don’t represent any government. I’m . . . a man of some means. I have land on the coast. I listen for Archipelagic broadcasts. I never thought I’d spot a boat!”

Brea didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t an official envoy. How did one go about becoming a Dionysian god? The gentleman’s laughter interrupted her thoughts. “You’re bringing sport, aren’t you?”

“Pardon me?”

“Novel immunity?”

“We are.”

“How many are you?”

“Four.”

There was a pause. “You’re going to be quite the sensation.” The man sounded mystified. “We haven’t had offshore sport here in a century. I study these things. Your Archipelagic germs are a breed apart, quite determined to crack your defenses. Some of my colleagues think your island is protected by a force field.”

“Of course not,” Brea said. “We have suppression tech. We allow pathogens into ourselves, to inspire immunity. Why live without divergence? But if an infection gets uncomfortable, we suppress it.”

“You can do that?”

Brea wondered how much to reveal. Did it matter? The Moveable Feast was in decline. It had lost the art of suppression but preserved a glowing coal. Suppression was carefully rationed—that’s why she and Aerd had been punished. “Twenty years ago we ran short of suppression,” she said. It was true, after all. “Many of us died. Of course, it was also a season of bliss. We’re like you that way.”

“Pardon?”

“The great contradiction. Pleasure and plague.”

The channel went dead for a long time, minutes. Brea said, “Hello?” She was fully awake now. Her companions were stirring.

“I’ve ordered my beacons lit,” the gentleman said. “My name is Torquil, and I invite you to be my guests. Let me introduce you to society here. You’ll want to bask in the glow before diluting your appeal?”

Brea hadn’t thought of this. She was intrigued: prolonging the inevitable, delaying pleasure.

She'd never managed it with immuno-sharing.

"If you fall into the wrong hands, you won't have the adventure you seek. As I said, I'm a man of means. I can protect you. I ask only one thing in return. Let me be first, with one of you four, when it's time."

Brea didn't want to think about repro-sex anymore. She didn't want to think about her hack of the Feast archives, seeking her child's identity. Or the redaction, or her rage. She was tired of wondering if her contraceptive tech—reinforced after it failed—would run out on the mainland, like her plague-suppression would.

She didn't want to think about her hidden motive for leaving the Feast. She couldn't look at Aerd without thinking about it. At some point she would have to give him the slip.

She thrust her hand into the control space, scanning the dark hills for Torquil's fires.

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## 5

"Why go out into the world? Stay in bed, my love. We have worlds to show each other."

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

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Night had fallen on Nova Astoria, and the crowd resembled a twentieth-century pop concert.

Brea had seen video in the Feast archives: girls driven to frenzy, hysteria bordering on possession. There'd been four young men with guitars. She stared out the window of Torquil's car at the scrolling multitude. It was hard not to throw open her door. She wanted to leap into their arms. Their pheromones were an atmosphere of lust, and this ancient, oil-fed car was not airtight. Her companions fared no better, huddling in their seats.

Torquil opened a leather case of glass vials. "Tincture? I couldn't be near you without one."

A man as ancient as Torquil rocked beside him, a life-mate. They'd obviously consummated a fierce divergence long ago. The old mate was dosed to the gills on a potion.

Jiang glared at Torquil with resentful desire. "You'd better give me one," she said. Her precious Brea was forgotten now. Of course they all wanted Torquil, and the driver, and the multitude—but Jiang was the boldest of the four.

The shriveled gentleman passed the case. "Try the cannabis indica and opium. Half the vial."

Aerd ran a hand along Torquil's bony shoulder.

Brea distracted herself with the scene outside: the legion waifs were like a medium, a context for the adult crowd. They flooded through the city, thieving to live, barely tolerated by their parents, whose instincts were as eroded as Feasters'. But here no provision was made.

Brea suffered a complicated dread.

"We're almost to the governor's house," Torquil said.

Despite his drugged stupor, he succumbed to Aerd and Jiang's charms. The three languidly fondled each other. Brea wanted to join them, but her stomach clenched. The four were awash in man-made germs, like all of humanity was—but now that they'd left the Feast, their protection would run out. They would have to develop immunity, or borrow it, or die, like mainlanders. How long they had was a mystery. Brea's fear smothered her immuno-lust.

The crowd broke its barrier and washed against the car, smearing itself on the windows. Brea knew that Jiang didn't give a damn about the dwindling suppressant levels in her blood. Yet another reason to love her.

Vedrum curled in his seat by the bar, taking shots of whatever ferment Torquil had in stock. Poor sensitive Vedrum.

"What are you looking at?" he said. The spacious car rocked with a crowd current. "At least I'm over Bridio, right?"

"Is that why you came?" Brea said.

Everyone took a draught from Torquil's case. The car passed through a line of club-wielding thugs, through an iron gate that shut behind them. They were climbing a hill. Brea saw a large

house on the summit, a shape against the stars until it blazed with floodlights. She felt relief, with the potion and the distance from the crowd—but she still wanted Torquil, and Torquil’s mummified mate, and the driver. Fear and desire went hand in hand: the faster she acquired mainland immunity, the better her chance of survival.

Just how bad did she want a child?

The car stopped in a courtyard before the governor’s house. The door opened, making Brea dizzy. Someone took her hand. Absurdly-dressed people surrounded her. Which was the governor? She wanted each drugged aristocrat in turn. They ushered her to a stone railing, where she looked down on ecstatic commoners. Their roar came up, and the rising thermal of their scent.

Jiang leapt onto the railing and teetered there.

Brea knew her lover well: Jiang would jump. The crowd was stirred to new ardor. A sea of entreating arms went up, but Jiang’s handlers dragged her from the brink.

Vedrum swooned, and his aristocrats kept him upright. Aerd peered around in amazement. Of the four, only Brea remained self-possessed. She waved at the crowd, evoking screams like some kind of magician. She wanted them as much as they wanted her—but she had their idolatry. This kept her from taking the plunge that Jiang craved.

Torquil and his mate accompanied a haggard woman to the railing. She wore a fur robe and a skullcap over cropped hair. When she addressed her microphone, her voice suffused the town via hundreds of radios: “Astorians, a warm welcome for our guests!”

The people’s response drowned out their governor’s laughter.

“Are we surprised these travelers chose Astoria?”

They replied in the uproarious negative.

“Where else in the League would they find such an enlightened welcome? McMurdo? The Incan Empire? No, advanced societies prefer each other’s company. Tonight we uphold our long tradition of hosting Archipelagics.”

Brea began to sense what she’d stumbled into.

“The new immunity will flow from my house,” the governor said. “It will never be withheld from patriots and friends of Astoria!”

There were gunshots beyond the applause—barely audible, perhaps from outside the town. Brea was ushered inside.

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6

“I looked upon the piled dead and felt joy. Covered in lime, they were smiling, vanguards of the new love.”

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

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Vedrum strode naked through the chambers of the masked orgy. He stepped among languorous couplings, counting beautiful sores on anonymous bodies. A throbbing drumbeat suffused the governor’s house, lending a primal urgency to Vedrum’s assay. He could reckon the approximate divergence of a couple—or triad or larger grouping—by the number of interface sores. Most of these consummations were of minor divergences between Astorians. Some were more profound. He and his companions weren’t the governor’s only foreign guests. A delegation from plague-wracked Aleutia was at play tonight.

He hadn’t found sores indicating a divergence in the nineties. Maybe his companions were like him, still savoring their uniqueness. Perhaps they’d found lovers and repaired to private rooms.

Vedrum turned in the hall of hearths, facing the crowd of admirers that followed him.

The mask didn’t do him much good, with his Feast scent flagging him. He flung it off and flashed a devastating smile, then took off running, leaping islands of immuno-sex that covered the vast floor. His laughing mob pursued him.

From firelight into dim curtained halls, past alcoves of somnolent revelers. Torquil’s potion wore off. Vedrum emerged from the dream that began in the car. After the governor’s speech

there'd been meals, formal introductions. Vedrum had floated through it all, intoxicated, then lost track of his friends.

He knew he'd been moved like a chess piece. He knew he was the pawn of a teetering regime, and he didn't care.

Something strange happened to a wall mural: one of its oxidized saints vanished, replaced by a masked woman, who beckoned him. He went through the hidden door into a small room of rough stone, which struck him as older than the rest of the governor's house—something carved into its bones. A dim bulb lit a pile of furs.

"Do you require sanctuary?" the woman said.

Vedrum gulped. "Sanctuary?"

She removed her mask as the sores erupted. She pulled him onto the furs. At such high divergence there were sores everywhere, so interface didn't need much squirming. Vedrum soared out of Nova Astoria. He sampled ten thousand pleasures, browsing her strange immunity.

She watched him solemnly. They were in the aftermath, back in the furs. "I have to tell you something," she said.

"Uh oh." He was himself again, or what was left. He'd only pretended to understand love before. This one was dangerous. "What's your name?" he said.

"Eidre."

"I'm at your mercy, Eidre."

"I'm with the Midnight Dawn. Do you know what that is?"

"No, but I don't like it."

She kissed him—a quaint, endearing gesture. "I'm leaving the palace tonight. New immunity belongs in the hands of the people." She took his hand. "Come with me, darling?"

Their divergence had been high nineties, but she'd sought him for political ends. How could he take the plunge with this intriguer? It had been hard enough with Bridio. And yet he stood with her. She handed him a servant's uniform, and he put it on.

He saw what her cause meant to her. He prized her happiness above all.

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7

"Ironic that a virus delivered immuno-love to humanity, but the roots of sexual reproduction aren't so different. Plague and love always walked hand in hand."

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

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Brea came to the gate at dawn and performed her magic a third time. The guard looked up from his folded Astorian Gaze. He gaped at Brea, who shivered and sweated before the gatehouse. "You're . . . the one," he said, coming down from his post.

"Put that gun down."

He dropped his pistol on the cobblestones. "Anything!" His passion was kind of frightening.

Brea tried not to swoon, ill with a mainland pathogen. She'd barely managed to voice-command her assembler palette. The implant was a family heirloom, and nearly used up—like all Feast tech.

"Keys," she whispered.

He gave her the key ring. "Anything!"

It was the last of her divergence-pheromone-booster. She'd used the rest on inner-palace guards, immuno-eunuchs. She was feverish and leaving behind three lovers that rivaled Aerd. Each represented a lifetime. It had been such an intense night that she was seeing through immuno-love. She was tired of its distractions, of bliss and hellish withdrawal. She wanted something more for herself. What did Aerd call Vedrum? A defective *immuno-sapiens*. That's what she was.

She tried the keys one by one in the gatehouse control panel. She dropped the keys, knelt to retrieve them, realized she was still wearing the homespun gown she'd snatched on her way out.

What had their names been? Three lifetimes in a night, two women and a man. After consummating with the latter, she'd asked him to get her pregnant, but it turned out they weren't aligned. Now he was probably in love with another. Feast immunity was spreading through the palace like wildfire.

The gate trundled open, and the guard followed her down the hill. As they descended, the screams and alarms of Astoria grew louder. The sun was over the town's eastern battlement. Heaps of bodies burned in Pioneer Square. A mourning procession in black collided with what looked like a revolutionary march: young people wearing green armbands, brandishing pistols as they chanted. Naked revelers ran through the confusion.

Brea kept to the perimeter of the square as shots rang out. She ducked down an alley, hurried by a body-collector and his horse-drawn wagon. His calls for dead struck a chord in Brea. This was a savage world she'd muddled into.

Brea's guard dragged her to a halt. Embracing, they stumbled through the nearest doorway. She smelled the plague-bodies within, but they were irrelevant as her sores erupted. The gunshots got closer. The lovers landed on a bed, barely noticing they shared it with a corpse.

Her olfactory spell had worn off. The guard was in possession of his faculties, but nevertheless divergent, and now they were on equal footing. They writhed for interface, but the new part of her stood aloof. She allowed the coupling to proceed because she was ill. Astoria was far from immuno-equilibrium. It might have taken her just one partner to get the region's antibodies. Perhaps she was the first *immuno sapiens* to consummate four ninety-or-aboves in so short a time.

Broichin wrote of the first orgies. He never mentioned transcending immuno-love.

They came to their senses. The stench of the room overwhelmed them. They crept naked into the alley, she still sick. Finally she remembered her purpose.

"Put it in me," she said.

"What?"

"I need your sperm."

She backed him against a wall and grabbed his penis. He seemed scandalized, but he stiffened in her hand. She couldn't seem to catch her breath. Repro-arousal or illness? She had no idea if her contraceptive treatment was still working. There was only one way to find out.

They were standing in a small kitchen. The meat on the counter hadn't gone bad yet. She was stroking his organ when the kitchen window, and the young man's head, exploded.

For a ludicrous moment she thought she'd caused this. The gunfire had become background noise. He crashed against the counter, skull spouting blood. A clamorous mob rushed by the front door. Brea watched blood saturate a loaf of bread. She went naked down the alley, benumbed. The air buzzed with bullets. She passed fey through an abandoned market warren.

There was a child standing in her path.

One of the mainland's countless urchins: grimy, holding a chunk of raw meat to its mouth. It watched her with feral concentration. She found herself kneeling, extending a hand. In other circumstances, this creature would've fled, but Brea's scent calmed it. The meat hit the pavement. The child came at Brea, arms outstretched. "Mamma," it squeaked.

This kind of thing didn't happen in the Feast, where children got immunity from machines. People equated immuno-sharing with sex, because it created something like romantic attachment between adults—but it wasn't sex.

And on the mainland, this "perversion" kept children alive.

She cradled the child and wanted to nurse it. This was nothing like immuno-sharing with an adult. There was no urge to dominate or submit, tease or withhold. Brea had never thought of immuno-sharing as human. After all, a virus had delivered humanity's new immune system, and noses. Romantics like Broichin and Vedrum called it love.

And now, unfortunately, Brea wasn't experiencing maternal love, which she knew firsthand. She'd failed in her quest.

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“The virus that delivered our new immune systems spread itself by extended phenotype, inspiring the old lust to establish the new.”

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

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Revolutionaries dragged Torquil from his burning car. The old man was given a paper bib and dunce cap to wear, then shoved into a parade of reactionaries. His adornments proclaimed him an “immunity hoarder” and “plague rat.” He walked with “infection-roaders,” “secondary vectors,” and other pitiful specimens.

Vedrum watched the shaming parade from a safe distance. He let the revolutionary mob carry him toward Pioneer Square, where reactionaries burned alive on pyres of plague bodies.

“Brother, did you hear?” Did she mean revolutionary brother, or fellow mansion staff? The woman beside him wore the same uniform as he. “The governor’s house is bombed,” she said. “Ruined!”

Vedrum tried to see the hilltop through the pall.

“Don’t I know you?” the woman said.

He shouldered away through the crowd, crying plague on newspaper photographs: the four of them at the railing, dazed and aglow, surrounded by immunity hoarders. It had only been a few days ago. Vedrum had taken five lovers since his revolutionary, five dissolutions of self. He’d experienced illness. He felt older, if not wiser.

Astoria had been far from equilibrium before he arrived: at a confluence of plagues. A powder keg waiting for an Archipelagic spark. Vedrum struggled with profound attractions. He would consummate again soon, but first he wanted news of his companions.

At the south gate of the square, a firebrand on an upturned cart bellowed: “. . . *plague rats!*” The man seemed stricken himself, with Archipelagic plague, or Aleutian or Incan. Many in the crowd, revolutionary and plague-rat alike, were sick.

Vedrum snatched a newspaper from a pile by the gate. The Gaze had become a revolutionary organ; the front page celebrated the palace bombing. Vedrum scanned as he walked. He stopped just inside the square and read:

“. . . but some of the governor’s foreign guests survived. The Archipelagic Jee-ang, the one that tried to jump, is coupling as fast as she can at Midnight Dawn headquarters. The swoony one, Virdrim, is at large in the city. We also have an Incan and a McMurdoan in stable condition . . .”

Vedrum dropped the pages. So he was the “swoony” one—wonderful. No word of Aerd or Brea. He hurried through the square and tried not to see the screaming, burning reactionaries. On the smoldering hilltop, he picked through the ruin with the other crows, but he sought something specific. Burnt bones littered pits of blackened rubble. Vedrum tapped his left temple as he scanned the craters, waking his vizcort implant. This would light up other vizcorts in the area. They were tough little buggers, some kind of spooky-ceramic. They fed on body movement, on any kinetic energy, and were basically immortal. Vedrum’s flagged Aerd on the lip of a crater.

Aerd’s icon flashed yellow. He was dead, the selfish bastard.

Now who would mock Vedrum during his funks? He bent and vomited a gruel of Astorian bread. When he looked up there was another flagged vizcort approaching Aerd’s: Brea.

They met near the rubble-buried body. Brea wore a deep hood that hid her face. “He wanted children more than me,” she said, her breath hitching. “I’d never met anyone like that before. He wanted to be a parent, but he didn’t shout about it like I did.”

She was sobbing, and Vedrum joined her, and then they were hugging. They’d consummated once before the skiff journey—something under a twenty-five. They’d gone into it with the usual curiosity: divergence was a measure of potential benefit to both parties, so a low rating could mean that one immune system stood to gain much more than the other. It chanced that Vedrum had more to give on that long-ago night.

They’d never been close friends, but they had Aerd in common. Every few years or so they had an all-night conversation about him. It seemed inevitable that they were alone together at his wake.

"I've been ill," Brea said, "really ill. Our suppression ran out fast. I never could have imagined . . . it changes you."

"I know."

Vedrum had been deathly ill four lovers ago. Through much of it he'd thought back on the Feaster custom of belittling plague, joking about it—even lauding it. Vedrum had been no different. Now it made him cringe. His infection, unsuppressed and nearly fatal, had burned something out of the core of him. Feasters mapped pathogen genomes, but they didn't truly understand plague. How could they?

"I can't go back to the Feast, Ved."

He held her at arm's length and studied her eyes. She always seemed to know what he was thinking. It used to annoy him, but now he found it oddly comforting. "You had me figured out back in Torquil's car. I guess I'm a simple sod. But why did you come?"

A Feast study had found that 10 percent of its population were unreformed breeders. During blissful post, when many resorted to repro-sex, breeders might conceive, overcoming their Feast contraceptive tech. There was a correlation between this ability and strong parental instinct. Brea and Aerd were of the 10 percent. Vedrum suspected it long before their conception and legal problems. Long before he introduced them, in fact.

Brea used to dismiss immuno-love as a fad, shocking many with her repro leanings. Vedrum and Aerd had both fallen for that. "Let me help you," he said.

"With what?"

"Whatever you're up to. Do you need sperm? I can put my penis in you, if that will help."

"Thanks anyway Ved. I'm through trying to get pregnant."

He thought for a moment. "Not sure what else I have to offer."

Brea smirked, and suddenly Vedrum was afraid. "There is something you can help me with. . . ."

\* \* \*

## 9

"You can't be healed without first falling ill. To consummate divergence, you must roam a plague-wracked world, imperiled."

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

\* \* \*

Jiang's ulcerated corpse was naked but tastefully decked in flowers. The funeral litter floated on a sea of hands toward the square. Mourners sang. Brea's impetuous Jiang had become a folk hero. She who nearly jumped to her death for revolutionary ardor—so the songs went. A true revolutionary would die to bring the people immunity. Photos of Jiang on the railing were plastered all over the city.

Brea followed the procession to the square, where Vedrum waited in his ridiculous servant uniform.

"I'm sorry," he said. "She seemed . . . nice?"

"She was avaricious and headstrong," Brea said, watching the body glide past. "She was never nice to anyone, not even me. Yet I loved her. Whatever that means."

Brea thought this would put Vedrum at a loss, but he surprised her: "I know what that's like. I've loved scoundrels and maniacs. I was just being polite."

"Thanks," she said briskly. "What did you get?"

Vedrum pulled a hefty antique pistol from his coat. "One shot," he said, "but it packs a wallop."

Brea produced her drum pistol. She'd made her latest lover, a revolutionary guardsman, show her the way of this primitive weapon. He'd been a marked step down from previous lovers. She was on the steep slope of the divergence curve now. "I'm hoping security is lax. Nobody tries to enter these dens, I'm told."

Vedrum made his disapproving face.

"I'll talk our way in," she said, moving toward the alley gate. The way snaked through an

organic tangle of tenements. The local waif-master's den was near, according to intelligence from Brea's recent lovers—some of whom had children under the man's tutelage. She couldn't fathom this. In another life she'd objected to the Feast's system of deep-interface education, but mainland complacency had it beat. Mainland children accrued to grown-up thieves. They learned to survive, or perished.

She couldn't abandon her child to this fate.

Around a bend stood a hulking man twirling a riot club. Summoning her best Astorian accent, she said: "Business with Master Dresht! Step aside!"

"Dresht ain't receivin' today."

She stepped closer, leveraging their divergence. "Why be that way?" Smelling him, the divergence felt low. She couldn't guess like Vedrum, but she put it under fifty. Charm would only get her so far. "He'll want to see us," she said, producing a handful of banknotes and gold.

A bequest from her lover before the revolutionary: the old woman, that mad complex one. It was strange, the weight of actual "money" in her hand. These mainlanders were so primitive. Brea tossed the fortune at the thug's feet. "Move?" she said.

He fell to gathering the bribe, and they walked by, Vedrum glaring in amazement. They hadn't gone far when children began to emerge from doorways and warrens. They chattered in their street cant, clogging the alleyway. Brea and Vedrum swatted at clever questing hands. Brea scanned their grimy little faces.

No sign of her boy. She'd woken from their post-sharing haze to find him gone. The maternal love she sought had awakened at that point. With a vengeance.

Vedrum pulled out his weapon, to save it from pilfering, and children scattered. Brea forged ahead and came to a crumbling gateway. She stepped over the ghost jamb, and entered a courtyard swarming with children.

Master Dresht, a striking young man in a patchy fur coat, stood in their midst. The children chanted in their thieves argot. Brea's boy stood sleepily in a clamoring mass of children. His sores flaked away like rice paper. The roiling knot of little ones was a divergence frenzy. Her boy had brought new immunity here. Beside him was another grimy child, male or female wasn't clear, also with flaking sores. The two of them were at a premium, jostled by vying suitors.

Dresht held a machine pistol at his side, pointed earthward. His gaze was dreamy. "You must be here about . . ." He gestured at her boy, ". . . little Liam."

Liam. Her child's name was Liam.

"I'll have him back." She produced another handful of gold coins. "Surely this is enough. He's already spread the immunity."

"My chucks bring me plenty of coin. What else ya got?"

Vedrum was beside her. He raised his weapon, leaving her no choice but to draw.

Dresht seemed unphased. "You won't use those." For all his sordid surroundings, the man cut a dashing figure. She realized their divergence was at play—a high divergence, considering the way things were going. "Clearly you're a breeder," he said. "Why else come after Liam? Ain't in you to endanger children, so let's talk this out. Gold's fine, but I think you got something better. Like little machines in your blood? That's a shaky bead you got there. I don't think you know guns. I think you're one of them Archipelagics. Ain't that right, Feaster?"

Maybe he had greater immuno-detachment than she. The children brought him immunity, along with wallets and watches, but he hadn't taken Brea's immunity from Liam yet. The concept of this man suddenly repulsed her. The world he embodied made her sick. And now he wanted her blood.

"Fucking mainland savage," she said.

"Savage? Would you like to see mainland savagery?"

Dresht raised his weapon, aiming at Liam. Her boy was cuddling fiercely with a new child while others tried to pull them apart.

Brea fired and missed—a terrific concussion in this little courtyard, but she fired again in

the ringing silence, and again. Automatic fire squirted from Dresht as he fell. Vedrum's wallop came too late, tearing through Dresht's middle as he landed.

The children were scattering, except for Liam and his new partner—and the three that Dresht's burst had killed. The vague hiss of the city returned, and the muffled gunshots of revolution.

Brea stepped over the dead children to reach Liam. She guessed that in a time before immuno-sharing, she might have shrunk from such carnage. The little bodies were horrible, of course, and she was to blame, but part of her remained cold. They were not hers.

She lifted Liam, along with his sore-fastened partner—a frail girl who would have to come along for the ride. Brea wouldn't sunder their coupling. She'd heard stories of how that felt. She couldn't do that to her boy.

Vedrum sat down on the ghost jamb. He hung his head between his knees, rocking back and forth.

"We should get back to the skiff," Brea said. "It won't have opened for mainlanders." Gunfire echoed from Pioneer Square, challenges and answers. Perhaps the surviving reactionaries were being rescued. "Get up, Ved." He couldn't seem to catch his breath, the poor thing. She could no more abandon him than Liam. "I'll drop you off at the Feast. Think of the sensation you'll be!"

That got his attention. His breath found its pace. "What about you?"

"I told you, I can't go back. I'm a defective *immuno-sapiens*."

\* \* \*

## 10

"Our love is based on corpse fires, the pus of lanced boils. Therefor I love these things. What greater assurance of love could there be? To love you is to love death."

—Broichin, *Pleasure and Plague*

\* \* \*

Vedrum got lost in Brea's gaze. The horror of the courtyard receded. His heart stirred, and for once it had nothing to do with divergence. He and Brea had never been great. Now it was next to nil.

If he returned to the Feast, he would indeed be a sensation. Doubtless other Feasters had ventured to the mainland by now, but he'd likely be the first—or one of the first—to return. Another season of immuno-celebrity, this time in the comfort and safety of the Feast. But then what? Life, at any rate. Pathogen suppression, political stability. The Feast was in decline, but had a few more generations in it. He'd had his mainland adventure. It made perfect sense to return.

"I can't go back either," he said.

"Really?" Brea said.

In saying it, he'd realized it. The thrill in his breast was something new—new to him, anyway. He sensed that actually it was something older than immuno-love, something ancient. Did he want to put his penis in her? Maybe, but that wasn't the crux of it.

"The skiff is alive," she said. "If we treat it right, we could live in it for a long time. Head north around the Rim, explore Asia."

Vedrum hadn't known the skiff was alive—or hadn't thought of it that way. Her novel perspective had been surprising him for years—quickenning him. He'd been taking that for granted, he realized.

"Get up, Ved."

He did, and she put the dozy children in his arms, then retrieved Dresht's machine pistol. Vedrum was going to leave his civilization behind for her. This fact struck him with fear and wonder. Why was he doing this? He didn't know, and maybe he never would. There was just something about her.

*Andy Dudak's stories have appeared (or are forthcoming) in Analog, Apex, Clarkesworld, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Rich Horton's Year's Best, and elsewhere. His translations of Chinese science fiction can be found in Clarkesworld, Apex, and Pathlight. He keeps trying to write romance stories and ending up in strange territory like "Love in the Time of Immuno-Sharing," or "Cryptic Female Choice" (Interzone 271). He resides in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where he actively avoids learning Russian.*