



**Portraits of
Disabled
Femmes
from
Speculative
Fiction**

by Laura Alison Nash

A zine by Laura Alison Nash

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SPOILERS: This zine contains spoilers for *Me Before You*, *Rain Man*, *The Magicians*, The Broken Earth trilogy, and the Imperial Radch trilogy

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Disabled lives are worth living.

As a child, I devoured books. I read in classes, concealing my book by keeping it low, behind my desk. I read under the covers with a flashlight at night. I turned friends away at the front door when they came to see if I could play, because I couldn't stop reading. My dad bought me six-packs of Nancy Drew books at Costco in an attempt to keep up with my appetite. I read my way into worlds with talking animal companions and flying ships, easy romances and close friendships. Fantasy was infinitely more appealing than reality. Why would I spend my time on activities like applying makeup, shopping at Abercrombie & Fitch and Victoria's Secret, participating in sports, when I could vicariously attend a school of magic or solve a murder? When I could try on the identity of a character who was charismatic and brave and effortlessly attractive?

In high school, it became more difficult to evade social expectations. A twelve-year-old can get away with wearing a matching t-shirt and capri set from L.L. Bean, showing up at school with bedhead, and ignoring her classmates in favor of a book. Teenagers not so much. I tried and failed to act the right way and say the right things. For my trouble, I developed social anxiety disorder and selective mutism.

Ten years later, I've been diagnosed with autism. I can look back and recognize that so many of my struggles stemmed from being autistic in a world created by and for neurotypical people. Not to mention immersing myself in stories that celebrated traits I didn't possess, like risk-taking, charm, and physical prowess.

I wonder if the books I read growing up and the movies and television shows everyone watched starred

awesome women who also happened to have sensory sensitivities, struggled to find the right words, were uncoordinated, and often preferred their own company, would I have felt pressured to change how I show up in the world? Could I have avoided developing anxiety and, later, depression?

If more books and movies portrayed disabled people as whole people with full lives, would disabled people in general face less social stigma?

Consider the popular romance novel and movie, *Me Before You*. In *Me Before You*, the main character, Louisa, a cheerful, working-class woman, becomes the caretaker of a wealthy, paralyzed man, Will. Will, once athletic and active, can't pursue his previous hobbies since he became paralyzed, so he mopes around his home all day, grumpy and rude. Louisa manages to break through this crusty exterior, of course, and they fall in love with one another. Louisa challenges Will to engage in the world again, and Will pushes Louisa to travel. In the end, despite their love, Will decides to end his life through assisted suicide. He tells Louisa life with him would be "half a life." He can't suffer anymore, and he can't watch her suffer. Will leaves Louisa money so she can pursue the "full" life he believes she deserves.

Admittedly, *Me Before You* is a compelling story. It hits all the emotional notes. There's hope and heartbreak and characters overcoming adversity.

It's also a classic example of the "kill-or-cure" trope common in stories about disabled people—the disabled character must die or be cured by the end. In *Me Before You*, Will's purpose is to help Louisa grow as a character and pull at the audience's heartstrings. Once he's accomplished this, he chooses death, because a disabled life isn't worth living.

This is the dangerous message conveyed by the

kill-or-cure trope: disabled lives aren't worth living. It leads non-disabled people to assume disabled people are all miserable and searching for a cure, and it leads disabled people to doubt the value of their own lives.

The truth is disabled lives ARE worth living. Disabled lives are whole. Disabled lives are valuable. And many disabled people aren't looking for a cure.

Let's also take a moment to think about *Rain Man*. In the critically acclaimed movie *Rain Man*, Dustin Hoffman plays autistic savant Raymond Babbitt. After their father dies, Raymond's brother Charlie retrieves Raymond from a mental institution in order to gain access to the \$3 million inheritance their father left Raymond. Raymond prefers to stick to routines, dislikes physical contact, avoids eye contact, expresses little emotion, and has an incredible memory. Charlie takes advantage of Raymond's talents by bringing him to Las Vegas to win money by counting cards.

Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of Raymond in *Rain Man* had some positive effects. The movie increased awareness of autism among the general public, debunked the myth that autism can be cured, and portrayed a person with autism forming a meaningful relationship. However, it also reinforced the myth that all people with autism have savant abilities. It contributed to the unfortunate trend of non-disabled actors receiving awards for playing disabled characters. And it bolstered the erroneous belief that autism is almost entirely a white man's disability.

Fortunately, it seems like popular television, movies, and books are beginning to star more well-rounded disabled characters, including women and BIPOC, who live, aren't cured, and kick ass. I believe audiences are at least partly responsible for this shift. When audiences clamor for characters who reflect them, form

fandoms around and spend money on media that is made by marginalized creators and casts marginalized characters, media producers respond. Not only do media companies recognize they have the opportunity to make money by capitalizing on this type of content, audiences also support independent creators to produce this type of content as well.

I created this zine, as a fan and a disabled woman, to celebrate narratives that uplift disabled women, that depict disabled women as powerful agents in their own lives and others'. Because I want to see more media that uplifts disabled women, and I want to live in a world where disabled women are recognized as whole, valuable people and leaders.

This zine features portraits and profiles of three characters from speculative fiction: Margo Hanson from Syfy's television series *The Magicians*, Essun from N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy, and Breg from Ann Leckie's Imperial Radch trilogy. While these characters are not without their flaws, they are well-rounded protagonists in leadership roles. They all face oppression in their respective worlds, and they strive to disrupt existing systems to end oppression. Their disabilities affect their lives but are only one aspect of their characterization.

I chose characters from speculative fiction, because speculative fiction allows both creators and audiences to stretch our minds, play with possibilities, and envision worlds that don't yet exist.

This zine also includes a short cross-over fan fiction story, written for the pure pleasure of imagining these characters in conversation with one another.

As creators and fans, I hope you will join me in imagining, consuming, and celebrating narratives that portray worlds we want to live in.



Margo Hanson The Magicians on SyFy

World: Born in the U.S., Margo splits her time between Earth and Fillory (a magical world with talking animals, sentient ships, and clocks growing out of tree trunks)

Career Trajectory: We first meet Margo in her second year at Brakebills University, a graduate school for magicians. She's soon crowned "High Queen Margo, the Destroyer" of Fillory, and later she's democratically elected High King of Fillory.

Personality: loyal, cunning, flirtatious, blunt, knows pop culture backward and forward, incredible fashion sense

Disability: When Margo travels to the Fairy Realm, the Fairy Queen takes her right eye as payment. However, after Margo proves herself, the Fairy Queen gives her a fairy eye to replace the missing one. The fairy eye is sometimes troublesome, sometimes useful.

Good to know: Margo is played by American actress Summer Bishil who does not publicly identify as disabled, as far as I know.



Breq Imperial Radch trilogy by Ann Leckie

World: The Radch Empire, a colonial empire of human-occupied planets that answer to the tyrant Anaander Mianaai

Career Trajectory: Breq is the only surviving ancillary (human body controlled by starship AI) of the troop-carrying starship Justice of Toren. Originally a servant of the crew aboard Justice of Toren, by the end of the trilogy she's a fleet captain.

Personality: perceptive, quick, justice-seeking, caring, sometimes diplomatic, sometimes straightforward

Disability: Previously an AI with a starship and ancillaries, Breq is bereft of the machine and multitudinous bodies she formerly occupied. She could also be considered neurodivergent as a ship AI living among humans.

Good to know: The Radchaai don't differentiate between genders. Everyone in the Radch Empire uses she/her pronouns.

Ann Leckie didn't write Breq as an autistic character, but many people have read her as autistic, including me.



Essun

The Broken Earth trilogy

by N.K. Jemisin

World: The Stillness, a continent wracked by frequent earthquakes

Career Trajectory: Essun is trained to be a Fulcrum orogene—a person with the power to magically manipulate earth, who is forced to work for the government to quell shakes and do whatever else they need an orogene to do. After escaping from the Fulcrum, she hides in a far-off town and works as a teacher. Later she becomes a nomad, fighting to survive a massive environmental catastrophe like everyone else in The Stillness.

Personality: reserved, separate, self-assured, quick to anger, usually practical, fierce mother

Disability: When Essun pushes her power too far, pieces of her body turn to stone—one of her arms, a breast, eventually her whole body.

Good to know: Essun doesn't die when she turns into stone. She becomes a new kind of person, a Stone Eater, who can travel through earth.

The Olympus Games

Content warning: mention of rape

High King Margo and Breq stood at the edge of the forest, positioned so they could see without being seen.

“I’ve never...” began Breq.

“Pardon?” Margo interrupted, leaning in. Large, dangling gold earrings swung from her ears like chandeliers. “I couldn’t hear you over all the noise.” The trees surrounding them murmured in concert, talking over one another.

Again, Breq spoke, but to no avail. Margo couldn’t hear him. Breq wondered idly if talking trees counted as significant beings. Then she sighed, reminded of all the work left to do at home. Attempts to assemble a conclave to decide whether artificial intelligences should be considered significant beings were moving slowly. A long list of logistical and diplomatic to-dos, conflicts to smooth over, awaited her back in Radchaai space.

“Shush!” Margo shouted. The trees harrumphed, but they stopped gossiping. “Sorry about that,” Margo continued at a conversational volume. “Now what were you trying to say?”

“No matter,” responded Breq politely, hands clasped behind her back. Her jacket and pants were immaculate. Kalr Five, Breq’s personal attendant, had insisted on pressing them before she descended to Fillory. As a final touch, a small, round memorial pin decorated her lapel. “I meant to say, I’ve never seen a god in person. They’re not what I expected.”

Margo nodded, ruby-painted lips pursed. “You

thought they’d be... more serious? Answering prayers? Blessing babies?”

“I thought they’d have more arms.” Breq pictured the idol sitting in her bedroom aboard the starship Mercy of Kalr.

They peered through the leaves at a gathering of shiny-haired, perfectly proportioned figures with what appeared to be servants swooping around them, offering refreshments and waving fans. Many of the gods lounged on cushions, eating and drinking, on the edge of a sports field. A handful of gods—clearly competitors in a game of some kind—congregated beside a circle of bare, packed earth at the corner of the field. They stretched, flexing their legs, swinging their arms. A single shirtless god stood in the center of the patch of bare earth. She spun around several times, muscular arms extended, and finally flung a discus into the air. It disappeared from sight. A moment later, the ground shook and a large cloud of dust rose in the distance. The trees announced their distaste with cries of outrage. The gods and their acolytes cheered. Margo and Breq grabbed tree trunks to steady themselves.

“So, you see my problem,” said Margo dryly.

“They’re quite destructive,” agreed Breq. “But I’m not sure what you think I can do to help.” Even with her ancillary-quick reflexes, Breq couldn’t imagine she’d be a match for any god.

“I heard,” Margo smiled slightly, raising her carefully shaped eyebrows, “you possess a certain gun with bullets that can penetrate anything.”

Breq frowned, suspicious. “How do you know about that?” Although, on second thought, since she’d used the Garseddai gun so effectively in her recent confrontation with the tyrant Anaander Mianaai, it stood to reason that word would have spread. “Never mind,

it doesn't matter. I don't have that gun anymore. I returned it to the Presger." Even if she did still have it, she probably wouldn't have lent it to Margo. Kill a god? Wouldn't that cause more trouble than it would resolve?

"Shit!" exclaimed Margo under her breath and drummed her fingers pensively on her silk-sheathed leg.

"Have you tried talking to them?" Breq asked.

"Have I tried talking to them?" Margo muttered through gritted teeth as another competitor prepared to throw her discus. "I've had enough talking with gods to—"

But before she could finish, the god spun and tripped, falling on her ass. Laughter and jesting arose from the spectators. "Achilles got your heel?" someone heckled. The god fumed but wound up to try again. She spun, released, and a person appeared out of nowhere, the discus firmly clasped in her hand. The god's face turned red, and she tried to snatch the discus back, but the newcomer's grip held.

"Athena's twat," said Margo. "I don't know who that bitch is, but things are going to get a lot worse if she makes them angry."

"Where did she come from?" Breq wondered. The interceptor had appeared in a blink, as if she'd traveled through a gate. She also looked... strange, bulky and grey.

The god whose discus had been seized shouted and stomped, loudly demanding a do-over. A flock of startled birds fled from the trees.

"Great," said Margo, her brow furrowing. "Well, I guess we better try this talking thing you speak so highly of after all." She turned on her three-inch heel and strode toward the gods. Breq hurried to follow, surprised by Margo's quick shift in tactics. As a starship

AI, she'd become used to accessing biometric data for all of her human passengers and, thus, could anticipate their every mood and move. Now all she had to rely on were her senses.

"Excuse me," projected Margo as they hastened toward the hedonistic gathering. "Excuse me! Would it be possible to move this party somewhere else? Like the Sahara Desert maybe?"

A god with golden locks, a square jaw, and bulging muscles stepped forward. "Ha! That's funny." She didn't look the least bit amused. "This isn't a party. Your kingdom was selected for the great honor of hosting the Olympus Games a century ago. It was announced during the closing ceremony of the last Olympus Games."

"Shouldn't the Olympus Games be held on Mount Olympus?" Margo demanded.

The god merely frowned.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I didn't know that, and I didn't agree to that," spat Margo, clearly not sorry.

"That explains the poor hospitality and abysmal ticket sales," responded the god.

"Maybe you didn't notice that your little game is destroying our agricultural fields. We just recovered from one famine. We won't survive another. Not that I expect gods to care about the welfare of mortals."

"Hmm..." The golden-headed god's eyes scanned Margo from head to toe, resting for a moment on her breasts. "I'm Zeus by the way."

Margo cocked her head. "Zeus, huh?" She mimicked the god, scanning Zeus' body appreciatively. Her eyes paused on the god's crotch.

Breq watched, amused. Apparently humans and gods had something in common when it came to sex. Wait, thought Breq, noting the bulge under Zeus' toga

and shadow of hair on her chin. *He*, not her. Right? I always forget these things outside the Radch. I'd better be careful. This is a precarious situation, and I don't want to offend anyone.

Breq was just pondering how to deescalate the situation, perhaps by recommending a cup of tea, when they were interrupted by a gravelly sound, like a boulder clearing its throat.

"Hello," a smooth voice emanated from the vicinity of the person who had intercepted the discus. Everyone turned to look at her. They all seemed to have forgotten she was there.

Her skin isn't grey, Breq realized. She's made of rock. She resembled a human with a square face, breasts, broad hips, and locs, but she was made of grey stone and stood as still as a statue.

"Hello. How can we help you?" asked Breq, erring toward politeness.

"What are you?" asked Margo.

"I am a Stone Eater," said the newcomer, her lips motionless, face immobile, eyes pure white. "I came here for advice, but I'm beginning to think I came to the wrong place." Somehow, she managed to convey derision while remaining as still as a statue.

Margo closed her right eye and peered at the newcomer with her left eye. She opened her right eye and closed her left. "Interesting," she murmured.

"My name is Breq, and this is High King Margo." Breq gestured toward Margo with a single hand, not taking her eyes off the Stone Eater. "That's Zeus over there. What's your name?"

"I've had many names, none of them better than any other. Call me what you want."

"Great," said Margo. "So, Roxy, we're kind of in the middle of something. Could you give us a minute?"

The Stone Eater disappeared and reappeared in a seated position, her chin resting on her hand, elbow braced against her knee. The discus clattered to the ground in front of her.

"All right then," said Margo, turning back to Zeus. "How about we make a deal? What if you move your God-Olympics somewhere else this year and come back to Fillory next century?"

"What do we get out of it?" asked Zeus, moving a step closer to Margo. He loomed over her.

"A warm feeling deep inside for doing the right thing?" answered Margo. Breq noticed, impressed, that she didn't cower or belie even a smidge of fear. Perhaps this sort of thing happened frequently in Fillory.

"There's another warm feeling deep inside I'd rather have."

Breq noticed Margo wrinkle her nose momentarily before softening her features. Then she dipped her chin and fluttered her eyelashes.

Zeus continued, "Accompany me into that forest for an hour or two, and we'll postpone the Olympus Games to next year. That should be plenty of time for you to move your agricultural fields and build us a proper stadium."

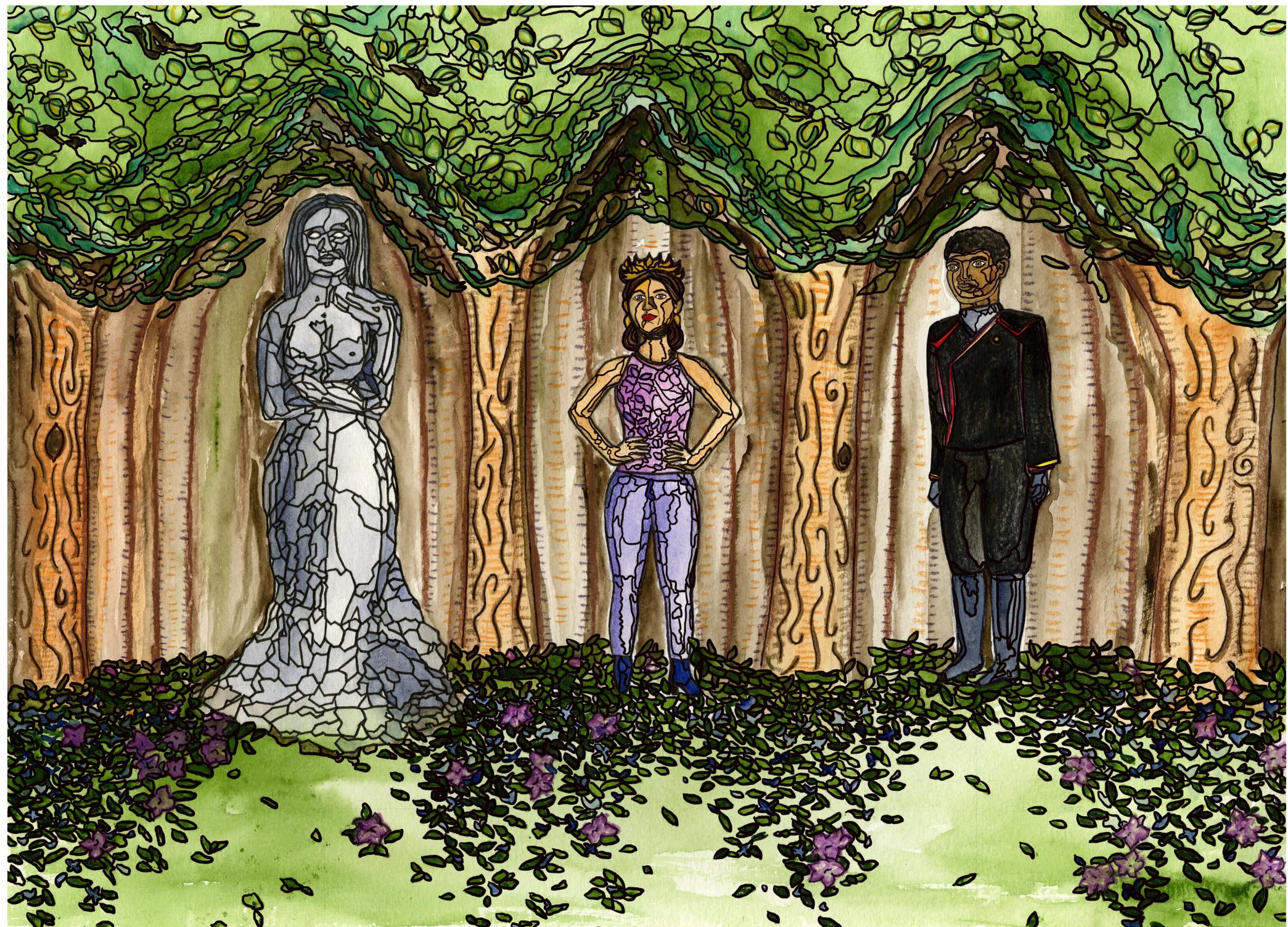
"Fifty years," Margo shot back.

"Two."

"Five years and no stadium."

"Deal," said Zeus. An outcry arose among the other gods, but he ignored them and offered an arm to Margo. "How do you feel about making love to a swan?"

"Not really my thing," replied Margo as she took his arm. They began to stroll towards the forest. Then, "Wait!" She walked back, popped out her right eye, and handed it to Breq. It swiveled on the palm of Breq's



hand until its pupil pointed at the gathering of gods. “Now I’ll know if you all try to continue your Games while we’re gone.” She returned to Zeus’ side, and they continued walking.

Breq, concerned for the High King’s safety, took a step toward the forest. But before she could go any further, the earth began to shake and a ridge of rock rose from the ground, beginning where the Stone Eater had been sitting and winding around and in front of Zeus and Margo. The ridge cut off the pair’s path. The Stone Eater reappeared standing next to Breq.

Zeus, undeterred, simply punched the rock directly in front of them. It cracked and crumbled.

The Stone Eater disappeared again, and Zeus found himself lifted off the ground on a tower of stone, a hundred feet above their heads. The Stone Eater stood at the base of the tower.

In a moment, dark storm clouds rolled in from the horizon and filled the sky. Thunder cracked like a gun shot and a bolt of lightning speared the place the Stone Eater should have been. But she’d reappeared at the top of the tower, face to face with Zeus.

Now Breq understood why the Garseddai gun may have been the right choice for this situation.

“Stop!” shouted High King Margo. “You’re causing as much destruction as they are!”

“I can’t sit and watch while this monster rapes you,” the Stone Eater said.

“No one asked you to watch,” said Margo. “And I’ve given my consent.”

“He coerced you.”

“We made a deal. I wouldn’t have agreed if I wasn’t interested.” Breq wasn’t sure when she’d put it on, but a jewel-encrusted eye patch now concealed her empty socket. “Although I don’t usually go for the

body-builder type.”

“I can look however you want me to, sweetheart,” said Zeus. His muscles shrank before their eyes to a more human proportion.

“I’m not your sweetheart,” said Margo.

The god floated gently down from the rock tower. This time Margo offered her arm to Zeus.

“So, where’s your wife? Isn’t she notoriously jealous of your exploits?” Breq overheard Margo ask Zeus as the two faded into the forest together.

“Um,” answered Zeus. “Hera’s not a fan of sports.”

Grumbling, the servants began to disassemble canopies and pack up food and wine. The gods clustered to gossip. The Stone Eater appeared beside Breq.

“She’ll be all right,” said Breq, as much to reassure herself as the Stone Eater. “The trees are watching over her. Now, what sort of advice were you looking for?”

Silence for a few moments, then, “I come from a place called the Stillness,” said the Stone Eater. “We recently experienced a catastrophic event. The majority of life on Earth has died, but the skies should clear in the next hundred years or so. I’m traveling to other worlds to learn what I can from them, so the Stillness will come back stronger and better.”

Breq nodded thoughtfully and lowered herself to sit on the grass. “That’s a difficult situation. I’m also in the middle of building a new government. Perhaps we can help each other. Tell me more about the Stillness.”

They talked for a long time, and one by one the gods dissipated. When Margo emerged from the forest, alone, they were the only three left in the field.

“They’re gone.” She sighed in relief and popped

her eye back into her head. Her cheeks were flushed, but otherwise she seemed unfazed by her encounter with the god.

"I guess you didn't need my help after all." Breq smiled.

Margo shrugged. "I still say the gun would've been easier. Now we have that to look forward to in five years." She gestured at empty bottles, oyster shells, and other detritus littering the ground. "What did I miss?"

Breq looked at the Stone Eater. How to sum up the conversation they'd had in a few words? "We were just discussing politics."

"Right, you were asking for advice, weren't you?" Margo turned to the Stone Eater.

"I got what I needed from Breq, thanks."

"Maybe you don't know, I'm actually the first democratically elected High King of Fillory, and the first woman. I was elected by talking animals."

Talking animals with voting rights? Maybe Als had a chance after all. Did the trees have voting rights, too? Aloud, Breq said, "Elected? I would love to hold an election, but I think Lieutenant Tisarwat might kill me in my sleep if I did that."

"Hmm," said the Stone Eater. "Well, thank you so much for your time. I should be moving on."

"Before you go," said Margo, "I'm curious. What's going on with all... this." She wiggled her fingers at the Stone Eater. "When I look at you with my human eye, you're stone. But when I look at you with my fairy eye, you're human. Shining with silvery latticework, sure. But still human."

"You can see all that?" asked the Stone Eater. For the first time since they'd met, she seemed to take Margo seriously.

Margo nodded.

"I used to be human," said the Stone Eater. "Well, I used to be an orogene. Then I pushed myself too far; I channeled magic, and it crystallized in my flesh."

"Do you miss being human?" asked Margo.

"Sometimes. I miss holding my children, and my lovers."

There was a long moment of contemplative silence.

Breq stood, dusting off her pants. "It was fantastic to meet you both."

Breq and Margo shook hands, and the Stone Eater briefly assumed a bowing position. Then they went their separate ways.

Back on Mercy of Kalr, Breq looked down on the marble-sized planet from the observation deck and thought, I wouldn't mind visiting again.

Mercy of Kalr spoke. "How was your meeting?"

Breq shook her head and laughed. "I have so much to tell you. Have you ever heard of democracy? Or how about consensus government?"

Recommended Reading

I want to learn more about...

disability and representation.

Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation by Ato Quayson

Disability Rhetoric by Jay Timothy Dolmage

Literature and Disability, edited by Alice Hall

Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse by Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell

disability and speculative fiction.

Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction by Sami Schalk

Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure, edited by Kathryn Allen

The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 7: Shattering Ableist Narratives, edited by JoSelle Vanderhooft

Uncanny Magazine: Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction!, edited by Elsa Sjunneson-Henry and Dominik Parisien

the liberatory potential of speculative fiction.

Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements, edited by Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown

general disabled badassery.

autistichoya.com, a blog by Lydia X. Z. Brown

Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure by Eli Clare

Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability by Robert McRuer

disabilityvisibilityproject.com, founded and directed by Alice Wong

Feminist, Queer, Crip by Alison Kafer

leavingevidence.wordpress.com, a blog by Mia Mingus

Skin, Tooth, and Bone: the Basis of Movement Is Our People: a Disability Justice Primer, published by Sins Invalid

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