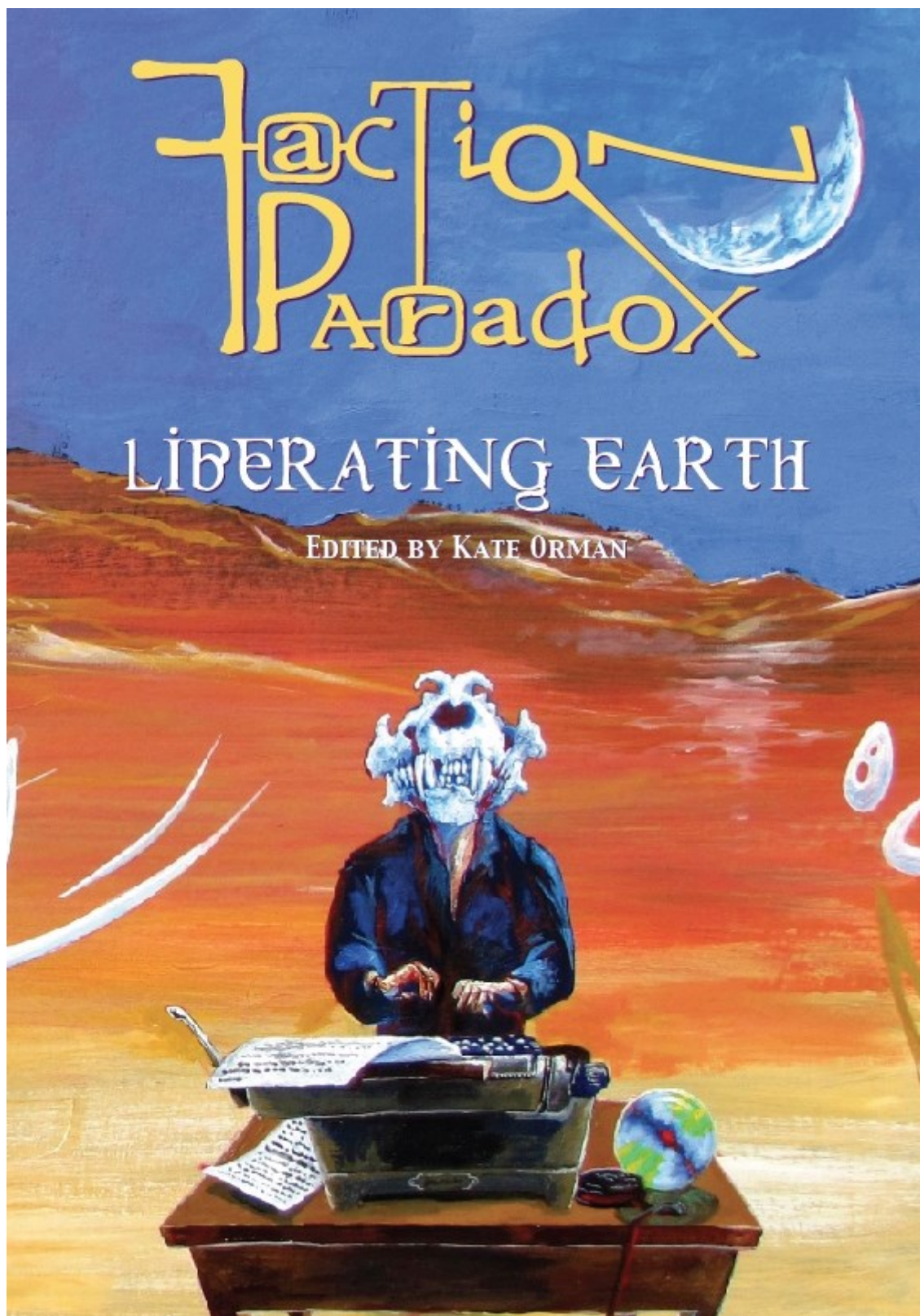


Faction Paradox

LIBERATING EARTH

EDITED BY KATE ORMAN



Playing For Time I

Kate Orman

This isn't the first time Tefen has been in trouble. It's not the first time he's seen the inside of Mrs. Triphis' office, either. The carpet is three inches thick. The tips of Tefen's boots left a double trail through it as the twin security drones dragged him in. Now he stands at the end of his skidmark, pinched between the guards, glaring at the crimson pile.

The security men wear identical black suits and have the same haircut. Their dark glasses flicker softly with heads-up displays. He can't remember their names. 'Which one of you is Mr. Park?' he asks. They both turn to look at him, but they don't answer. They haven't said a word the entire time. Maybe they're both called Mr. Park.

He's starting to think this might be serious.

The windows have been blanketed with red and orange drapery. The only light is the reading lamps and the computer monitors on the desk - real wood, carved with spidery designs. There are a handful of ornaments scattered about the room, all shimmering silver, all new as the day they were made - proto-Elamite, pre-Columbian. She loves to be surrounded by beautiful things, does our Triphis. Beautiful, but sadly neglected.

He looks up as one of the side doors slides open, but it's not Mrs. Triphis, it's a third suit from security. This one's a woman, and she's carrying something long, wrapped in a tasselled shawl. She hasn't got anything to say, either - she just stands there.

'Look,' says Tefen. 'I've been waiting here for more than an hour.'

Suddenly, Mr. Park and Mr. Park have got him by the arms, and they've shoved him down on his knees.

Mrs. Triphis makes her entrance. Tefen gawps. It isn't the mask that throws him, the Coelophysis skull on its oval of red velvet. It's that instead of a prim business suit or a chiffon kemis, she's wearing nothing at all but a black leather butcher's apron.

'I'm told you've been rummaging about in my drawers, you naughty little thing.'

The security woman carefully unwraps the object she's carrying. It glitters horrifyingly in the dim light, and Tefen gets the first inkling of how much trouble he's actually in. He swallows hard, over and over, the topmost of the tight straps crossing his jacket pressing against his Adam's apple. Is that why the carpet's this colour - so the stains won't show?

'Oh, fuck,' he says.

'That's the spirit!' Triphis perches on the edge of her desk, crossing her legs girlishly. 'What have you been up to? I want a full and frank confession, my little trinket, or you and my head woman are going to have a short, sharp conversation.' The silent woman with the sword stands ready, the shawl draped neatly around her shoulders. 'You know I can't stand fibbers.'

The Parks let go of his arms. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Tefen kneels with his hands on his knees, takes a deep breath, and looks her in her bony eye. 'I get bored.'

'Bored!' says Triphis.

'There are a lot of hours in the day when I don't have anything to do. I ran out of places on the ship I hadn't already visited, so of course I started sneaking in where I wasn't supposed to be.'

'You utter brat. Go on.'

'I don't mean to piss off Mr. Park and his pals,' says Tefen, 'but your security isn't up to scratch.'

'You know I don't employ you for your mechanical skills,' says Triphis. 'Or to test my security.'

'You own so many remarkable objects - you must know how much potential is trapped inside some of those things. Beautiful things! Just waiting for someone to recognise them for what they are. All the chronomasticon needs is the gentlest touch -'

'Say that again.'

Tefen stammers, 'All the chronomasticon -'

'You found a chronomasticon.'

'Yes.'

'On my ship.'

'Yes.'

'I'll have those cataloguers revived as slime moulds,' grumbles Triphis. 'Do you know how long I've been looking for a chronomasticon?' She leans down, putting her hands on her knees, pushing her skull-mask close to his naked face. The mask is no fossil; it's real dinosaur bone, lacquered ghost-white. 'You'd better be sure.'

'Well of course I'm sure! It's not the sort of thing you can mistake for something else, is it?'

'I've been looking for one,' says Triphis, 'because of that.' She walks to her desk, pushes a button, and one of the vermilion curtain rolls silently aside, showing the black sky half-filled with the shockingly bright colours of planet Earth.

She gestures, and the drones release their painful grip on Tefen's shoulders. He joins Triphis at the window. From here you can see the long axis of her ship, a trail of shimmering bubbles, some small as rooms, some big as buildings, a few transparent, most kaleidoscoping gorgeously like oil on a wet road.

'When are we?' he asks.

'Mid-third millennium BCE,' says Triphis. 'They haven't even built the pyramids yet.' South America is directly below them, dazzling. 'There are Martians down there right now telling outrageous porkies to the Norte Chico.' Tefen laughs politely. 'Down there, it's all getting started. All those groups of human beings aren't satisfied with their own little bit of planet any more. They're not just expanding and exploring – they're turning to armed robbery. Greedy, greedy gluttons. Quite quenchless. And full of rationalisations and lies. They've got the bow and arrow now. Soon they'll have the chariot and the battering ram, and the gun and the mine and the bomb. Enough will never be enough for us, ever again.'

'You're an idealist,' says Tefen.

'An idealist is someone who believes in a world that could never happen,' sniffs Triphis. 'With a chronomasticon there's no such thing as a world that could never happen.'

'You'll have to do more than tweak the timelines to create an Earth without war. You'd have to revivify the whole human race into something less... I think the word I'm looking for is "insatiable".' He winks at her.

'Cheeky tchotchke!' she says. 'The human race had every opportunity. We blew it. Darling, frankly, we don't have it in us to run a planet. Somebody else should be given a go.'

Tefen lets a slow, wicked smile drift over his face. 'There's more to the chronomasticon than a catalogue of the touch-points between different histories,' he says. 'It also lists the intersections between different laws of reality.'

'Gravity and things?'

'Much more basic than that.'

'What's more basic than the laws of physics?'

'Maths. Logic. The causal nexus.'

'I love it when you talk dirty.'

At last Tefen feels like he can relax a little. She's sold. He steps up behind her, slowly so as not to worry the security, and presses his strap-crossed chest against her naked back. 'Plus we're in the best possible position to put it to use. We can pick one of those unstable points, travel right there, and give it a good kick. Anyone else would only be able to affect local, um, loci. If you think someone else should be in charge down there, that someone is limited only by your flourishing imagination.'

'Essentially,' says Triphis, 'You're selling me the history of Earth to save your own small but perfectly formed arse.'

Tefen grins into her ear. 'Give it a twist, a flick of the wrist.'

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