

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.imaginaryyear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

52 / TIRED OF MEN

Clark is tired of men.

She's tired of men in politics. Right now she is looking into the trash can in her office and Dick Cheney stares up at her. She has thrown away an old issue of *Vanity Fair* that she found lying out in the reception area: it has a photo of Cheney, George Bush Jr., and Colin Powell on the cover, and a big pictorial of “the White House during wartime” on the inside. Even under the best of circumstances, she thinks of *Vanity Fair* as a magazine written entirely by sycophants, people who believe that flattery will be their ticket into the aristocracy. Even so, the utter bald-facedness of this particular display of submission before power struck her as particularly icky. Pulling the magazine out of the reception area and throwing it away is almost not enough. She is tempted to flick a match into the can and watch it ignite.

She remembers when she was younger, still living at home: she had a dartboard up in her room (she kept it up over the protestations of her parents, who didn't like seeing dart-holes accumulate in the walls). For a time the dartboard was adorned by a full-page photograph of Ronald Reagan. He served as the target of her frustrations for months, until she had him eaten down to a pockmarked ruin.

She's tired of men at work. She's recently been struggling, in particular, with this one guy, Bjorn, a guy who works *underneath* her, a guy who she is officially the *boss* of.

Clark is Chief World Editor here at Perihelion. Right now Perihelion has only one World for her to work on: Chordworld. Everything in Chordworld that falls under her jurisdiction can basically be considered to belong to one of four groups: Rooms, Objects, Puzzles, and Quests. Rooms are places that the players experience, regardless of whether they're actually rooms, or outdoor spaces (forests and grasslands factor highly into the game, and Clark is working on developing a sea) or even abstract environments (the advanced levels of the game have you exploring the interior of particular colors and sounds). Objects are items that exist within Rooms, which can be manipulated by players in various ways. A Puzzle is a problem, generally located within a single Room, which requires the players to perform a particular sequence of actions before they can receive some kind of reward (generally either useful information or access to another Room or Object). And Quests are larger goals for the players: completing them generally involves moving through many Rooms and solving several Puzzles. Some can be completed in an afternoon or so, and others are complex enough that they should take months even for the hard-core players.

She can make up as many Rooms, Objects, Puzzles and Quests as she likes, but her job—the job she was *hired* and is *paid* to do—is to approve bits written by the two other writers and, perhaps most importantly, to *deny* approval to any bits inconsistent with the overall continuity and quality of Chordworld's Story. She is an Editor, so she bloody well has to edit.

Clark has always edited out all Quests that are any sort of variation on a rescue-the-princess / get-the-girl kind of storyline. It's a small point of pride. She thinks of herself as a person who is highly political, and some days she wakes up and thinks about the fact that she is going in to spend eight hours working on a multiplayer videogame, and she has trouble thinking of anything she could work on that could be *further* from her political ideals.

(She does it mainly because the money is good and as a favor to David, the CEO, who she has history with.) But other times she thinks about videogames as one more arena where the politics of representation play out, and she knows that there needs to be more women, political women, active in that arena, and so she edits with that in mind.

Bjorn is one of her writers, 23, fresh out of the Art Institute, and he seems determined to develop a damsel-in-distress Quest somewhere in Chordworld. She rejected the first two he turned in, without really explaining why—*they just don't really seem to fit the overall feel of the world*, was all she'd said, figuring that he'd get it. When he turned in a third Quest along those lines, and she rejected it as well, Bjorn came into her office and demanded, with visible irritation, to know why. *I think it's some of my best work*, he'd said. Clark had sighed and said, *frankly, I find it to be sexist*. Bjorn had rolled his eyes and made a kind of *pff* sound through his lips, and if Clark had the power to fire him she might have fired him right at that very moment, to teach this little fuck a lesson, but instead she counted backwards from ten (this is what people without power have to do) and she gave him a quick, pointed lecture: Issues in Gender Representation 101. And after that he seemed to cool down: he spent a lot of time building a forest and developing a suitably complex and weird Quest for the regions of Pale Green and A Major, and Clark approved all of it happily, feeling that perhaps they had come to some sort of understanding.

But then recently, in a conversation with David, David mentioned that he really enjoyed some bits of World that Bjorn had submitted directly to him. Clark was like *what?* and David pulled some World forms out of a file. Clark flipped through these forms, and quickly realized that the Quest outlined in them basically constituted a slight cosmetic alteration of Bjorn's first damsel-in-distress Quest, which she'd rejected. *These don't have my approval*, Clark said. *He submitted them directly to you?*

Yeah, David said. They're not bad, he said. I think that they should go in.

For Bjorn to submit World to David directly is a significant violation of protocol. Clark is not always a blind believer in protocol: she thinks that often it is used as a justification for further disciplining the powerless in a workplace. But here was an instance where a man, refusing to acknowledge her power, was doing a run around her, taking his case directly to another man, forming a circuit of power-flow that bypassed her, an instance which protocol should have prevented, and David didn't even blink. *Protocol is on her side*, and yet somehow she lacks the ability to invoke it. It is because invoking protocol is the prerogative of men. Oh, she could have insisted, probably—demanded that Bjorn be fired or reprimanded, but she wonders how David would have responded. She suspects he would have doubted her *rightness* in this situation, and written her off instead as hysterical. Premenstrual.

And so now there is this glitch in continuity, a glitch which takes away the moral edge to her work, and there is a corresponding glitch in her authority, and she can see that Bjorn knows this when he looks at her or addresses her, and this is now a thing that she will need to figure out a way to *work around*, because it is women, in this world, who need to figure out ways to *work around* men, not the reverse, never the reverse.

And she is tired of men in bed. Tired of their grim relentlessness. She broke up with Elliot in January and they'd stopped having sex a while before that, so it's been probably six months since she last got laid. She can't even really say that she misses it.

She wonders about Janine. Clark feels pretty certain that Janine is interested in her. She can't really recall a conversation where Janine definitively identified herself as bisexual, but she gets that feeling—she catches Janine looking at her often enough, and she

remembers that Janine once mentioned, rather pointedly, that she was involved in a relationship, but a nonmonogamous one.

She wonders what it would be like. She has never had her clothes off with another woman in a sexual context. And she wonders if thirty is too old to experiment around with her sexual orientation: she thinks of that as being a younger person's game.

But she thinks of the women she has known who were bisexual, or lesbians. She thinks of Vonda and Doris. (A momentary regret, here, about Doris, a fleeting wish that the two of them were back to being on good terms, the way they were years ago.) Vonda and Doris are some of the strongest women she knows. She sometimes feels like she lacks the strength that she admires in them: especially times like now when she feels broken-down, frustrated, tired. And she wonders if a relationship with a woman might help to change that. Maybe not. But maybe so.