

PRODIGY



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This was my first round second challenge entry into the NYC
Flash Fiction Challenge, 2016.

I was tasked with writing a maximum 1000 word short story
with the following details:

Genre: Science Fiction
Location: A hot air balloon
Subject: A four-leaf clover

Title: Prodigy

Synopsis: The lower class seek only to rebel, with hope of escaping the
walls they're trapped behind. Meanwhile, several thousand feet above,
two intelligent minds engage in a battle of will.

“They told me this was a hot air balloon.”

He laughs.

“Okay, okay. So it’s more of a blimp.”

“Blimp?” she cries, “Quentin, this is practically a fully-armed warship! Why on Earth do you need all this for surveillance work?”

“Think of it as a warning, Sweetheart.”

“Ugh.”

He eyes her with a renewed curiosity, unnerved by her attitude. He’d been so hopeful when she stepped onto his ship; she was already legendary even at her tender age. Bright eyed, bushy tailed, with an IQ in the low 200s. His expectations had been shattered, though, the moment she’d stepped onto the deck. The way she’d looked down at the ground below them, revulsion in her eyes.

“I don’t understand why you’re defending them,” he mutters, “the people down there are stupid, Marianna. They don’t know what’s best for themselves, that’s why we have to do it for them. It’s for their own protection, really.”

She shoots him a disbelieving look. Despite the teachings of the Citadel, she’s never bought into the idea that the people below were any less human than the so-called ‘geniuses’ on this testosterone-filled balloon ride. She supposes her view might be somewhat marred by her childhood within those walls, and the memories of being raised amongst those ‘stupid’ people. Back before they realised her unusual genius and took her to the Citadel.

When he doesn’t react she turns away, fixing her gaze on the walled-off slums. The place where low-IQ individuals are kept sealed away. For their own protection, they say – but she’s no fool. It’s just keeping the groups separate. Keeping those with inferior DNA from dipping their toes into the carefully-crafted gene pool. The slums are split into four settlements, each a large oval, pressed together like some bizarre little plant. It’s no wonder everyone refers to them as The Clover. Strange feelings conflict in her chest and she sighs.

“Don’t worry about it,” he tells her, “just be happy that you’re finally out of there.”

She nods. That much is true. Life within The Clover isn’t exactly luxurious, unlike the Citadel. It had taken her a long while to become accustomed to the technology there. The wide open spaces, the

towering spires springing from the ground. Suddenly, she remembers the Eyescreen perched on her nose, and fiddles with the dial on the side.

It's only day three of field testing, and already she's sick to death of seeing people's IQ pop up next to them at first glance. She can't quite understand the Citadel's insistence that a person's IQ be public knowledge, but it isn't her place to question things. She's here to road test the Eyescreen's distance capabilities, and that's it.

A strange sound rings out across the deck, sending shudders through the metal underfoot.

"What's that?" Marianna cries. Quentin stares, but then his face breaks into a smile.

"Escape attempt."

She follows his gaze down to The Clover and sure enough, he's right. The people have built a vast ladder to climb the concrete walls. It seems rickety at best, slats of rotten wood tied together with uneven lengths of rope, but they still scream and cheer as the first daring individual starts their ascent. More quickly follow, seemingly encouraged by the ladder holding up. She does a headcount. Seventeen potential escapees.

She tries to remember a time this happened before, back when she lived in The Clover – but nothing comes to mind. Her days had been spent with her nose stuck in books, with little attention paid to the goings on around her. Even if she hadn't been that way, she wouldn't have dared to take part in an escape attempt, anyway.

Beside her, the man's lips draw back into a sly smile. He plucks at his chest, speaking into the microphone pinned to his lapel.

"Showtime, everyone. You know what to do."

"What are you going to do?" she demands. He ignores her.

"Give 'em hell, boys!"

For a moment, Marianna's certain she's gone blind. The bursts of light that emit from the ship's arsenal are bright – so bright that she finds herself wondering if they might be nuclear. She wouldn't be surprised. A split second later they hit their target, sending a shockwave of electricity through the ladder.

Seventeen figures fall limply to the ground.

Quentin punches the air, a triumphant cry bursting from his throat.

"Yes! Take that!"

Cheering erupts across the ship as crew and non-crew alike celebrate yet another thwarted escape attempt. Another job well done. Another success. They clap one another on the back as congratulations for having refused the inferior access to society.

Horror settles in the pit of Marianna's stomach.

It's late afternoon when the ship rocks uncertainly, tilting as though controlled by a slightly inebriated two-year-old. Its inhabitants feel the shudder and exchange confused glances; but there's no

immediate need for concern. The pilots are geniuses, too. The best at what they do. Right?

Another, particularly sharp jolt sends Quentin barging into the cockpit, fury twisting on his face.

“What the hell’s going on?” he snarls.

Marianna stares at him from the helm. Screens flash red behind her. The navigation’s set to drive the airship straight into the ground, and the engines are somehow aflame under her feet – but she smiles prettily at him nonetheless.

“Good evening.”

“Marianna? Where are the pilots?”

“I excused them. They were pretty pleased to take a break once I told them I’d take over for an hour or so. They’re drinking down below. Don’t worry, though. I know how to fly this thing. I’m a genius, remember?”

Smoke fills the space between them, making him choke.

“We can’t survive a drop from this high up! Why are you doing this?”

She smiles brightly as the airship burns.

“Think of it as a warning, Sweetheart.”