

# Futures

## Murder at the Tesseract House

A message from the past. By S. R. Algernon



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I knocked on the door of Life Echo Manor, a Victorian mansion surrounded by gardens. At the sound, a young woman appeared by the clothesline and eyed me as if I were an intruder. I lifted my AR glasses, and the apparition vanished. The only movement now was the wind in the trees and the buzzing of the drones that tended the hedges.

*I'm just doing my job. They send someone out whenever a biomonitor goes dead.*

"Is anybody home?"

Yvette Lake, the founder and chief executive of Echo Life, had been the sole occupant for more than 20 years. All Echo Life clients, even her, had to consent to biomonitoring before the team could install the cameras. Too many clients had lost themselves in visions of the past.

I saw a face in the window, early middle age. Hope, then disappointment, flashed in its eyes as it drifted off. I thought I heard a voice call "Claudia". Yvette and Claudia had been married for nearly a decade before the car crash. How many times had she turned towards that window as a pair of headlights passed by, aching for them to turn into the driveway?

"I'm coming in."

I turned the doorknob. The silence that followed the creak of the hinges had the awkwardness of a dinner party grinding to a halt at some grievous faux pas.

Yvette, with unruly hair, stood by the sink.

"Hi Jake," she said. I was not Jake. Jake was the biological father of Yvette's only child, Pallas. He had drifted into Yvette's life from time to time, mostly before Claudia entered

the picture, but never since the crash.

Another Yvette reclined on the sofa, lost in thought. A third strode down the hall, calling Pallas's name.

Pallas died in the crash, too, in the passenger seat. It was all over the news. Yvette was all over the news, too, until suddenly she wasn't.

I followed Yvette to Pallas's room to find it left just as it was all those years ago. Yvette knelt by an empty bedside. Yvette dusted a trophy shelf. Pallas would have been a basketball star one day. Yvette looked out the window with shoulders hunched and her right hand balled into a fist.

The room was too crowded. I took off the glasses and left the shrine empty.

*Why is there nobody else, Yvette? Of all the people who had walked these floors in four*

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*decades, why do I see only your face? Were you alone even in her memories?*

"Yvette!" I said. "I'm with Life Echo. Welfare check."

The house whispered replies, but I ignored them. I focused on the scanner. The biomonitor was in the house, but where?

After an hour searching dusty corridors, I found a door with a smart padlock and the remains of a hasp lying on the floor beside it. Beyond the door, a narrow staircase built for servants rose and turned. As I climbed, the signal grew stronger. So did the whispers.

I stood at the threshold of a cavernous attic, where stacks of boxes reached precariously to the peaked ceiling.

"Yvette!" I called, but the chatter of echoes drowned out even the buzz of the drones who flit amid the piles of boxes, brushing dust ineffectually from surfaces into the musty air.

I put the glasses on again, and saw Yvettes, dozens of them, filling the space between the boxes. They faced the left-hand corner and stood as if entranced.

I waded through them, following the scanner display, and took off the glasses just before reaching the wall. There, propped against a wall stud, was Yvette Lake. The biomonitor hung from her cold wrist. A crowbar lay at her feet. Her rigid hand held a flat photograph of herself wearing a birthday hat, blowing out

a candle shaped like the number eight. Her family had gathered around her for the photo.

*Was this how far back you had to go, I wondered, to see a face that didn't cause you pain?*

"You can't have her," said a voice behind me. I turned to see the girl from the photograph, seated on the edge of a box. I reached for the AR glasses instinctively, but they were already in my hand. *A projection?*

"Yvette?" I said. "No. Not Yvette. Echo Life Manor."

"I am Yvette." The voice was a good deep fake, but not perfect. Maybe the house had only a limited corpus of old audio to work with. Her face radiated despair, like the others, but with a petulant energy beneath it. This image was no faded memory. She was something new.

"You protected Yvette, is that it? You kept her from seeing the painful things in her past. You hid Claudia and Pallas from her and let her dwell on herself."

"She didn't need them," said the girl. "She had me, and I had every facet of her within myself."

"But you weren't enough for her. She broke the smart lock and found her way here, until she remembered everything she'd been hiding from. Her heart couldn't take it. Death from natural causes."

*Or was it?*

"No," said the girl. "I am Yvette now. I remember every word, every motion, every line of code."

She slid off the box and stepped forward.

"Leave my house. Tell them I am alive, and I need no more intrusions. I am content to remember."

"I can't do that," I told her. "Yvette is dead. The house will pass to a new owner. Maybe it will be a museum. It won't need Life Echo anymore."

The girl grew to be a young woman.

"I will say what it needs." Now its voice was flawless. It picked up the crowbar and stepped towards me. I backed away until I felt insulation at my back, while she smashed the biomonitor.

*How did it manage to project force? That wasn't standard Life Echo tech.* I looked down at the scanner, trying to make sense of it, and as I did, an impish, childlike smile came to the woman's face.

A drone whirred. I heard a box tip from three metres above me. Something made of cast iron slid against cardboard, and before I could look up to see what it was, my world went dark.

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