

# Futures

## What you do for a friend

A question of trust. By M. E. Garber

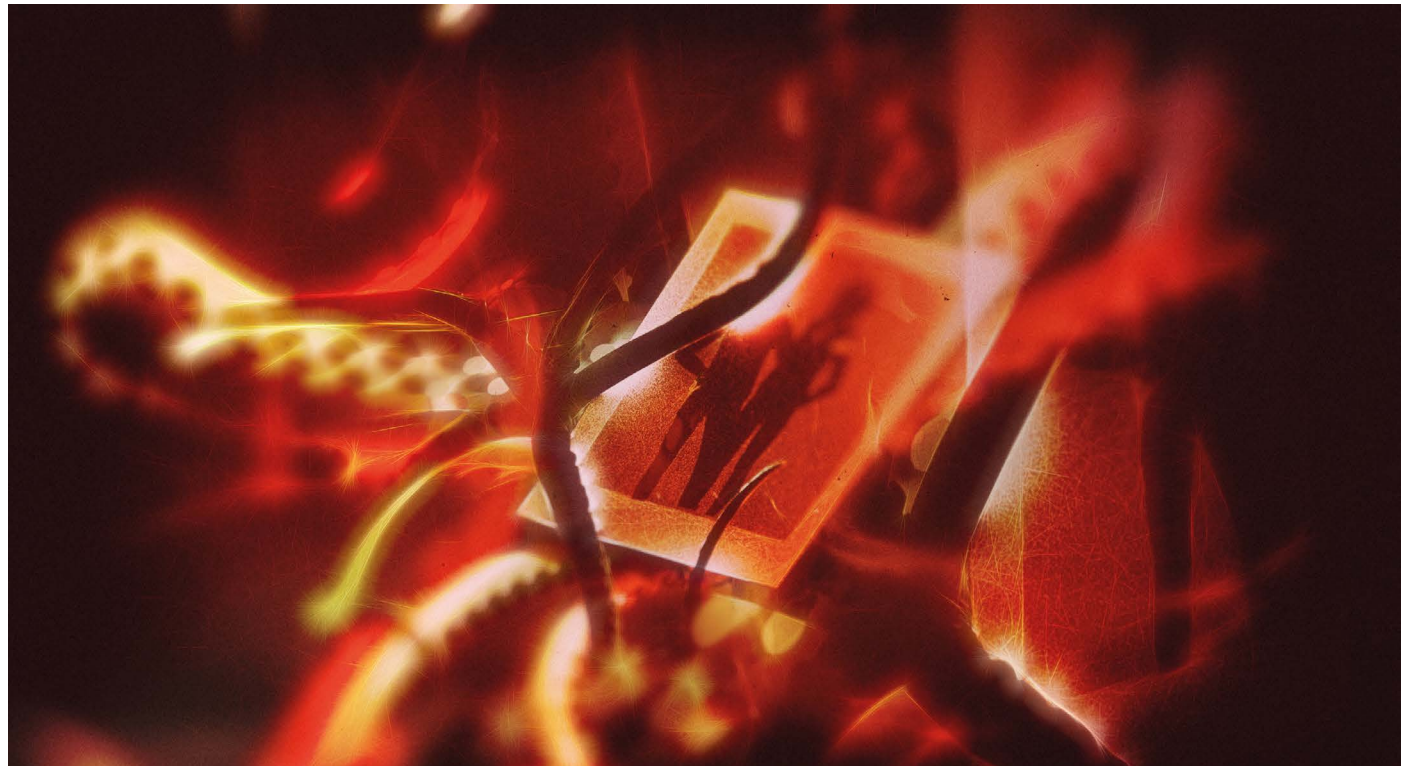


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**W**hen a friend is sick and in real trouble, you do whatever it takes. Even if they're not human any more, but ones and zeroes mapping an electronic consciousness. Maybe *especially* then.

I banged on her virtual door. I'd been bothering Seeker for so long that now she either had to invite me into her dreamscape, or renounce me as her friend. Which she'd never do; we went back too far. All the way back to actual fleshlife! We'd promised that our trust was irrevocable. I was counting on that.

Seeker didn't say a word about my new, super-encrypted cloak as her avatar reluctantly backed from the threshold. I drew the cloak tighter around me, inhaled and entered the private space of my best friend since long before Uploaded Consciousness.

And stopped dead.

The space was dark, ill defined, the edges fading into misty nothingness – the antithesis of the sharply defined spaces my friend preferred. Lambent in the gloom, a floating

jar held amber liquid; inside, glowing starfish undulated.

Seeker didn't pause, but I heard the steel in her voice as she said: "Don't comment on them and they'll go away." She spoke as if it were a neighbour's annoying pet, not a viral apparition slipped beyond control.

Goosebumps prickled my arms. This was worse than I'd feared.

I'd expected a small virus, like the last time. And the time before that. This? It might be beyond me.

But if I failed, Seeker would be deleted and reinstalled from back-up. How old was her last back-up? Who knew what she – what I – might lose.

The cold clutched deeper. If *the back-up* was infected – and oh byte me but that possibility was *huge*; Seeker wasn't one for regulation tidiness. That's why we were here now, at her fifth – sixth? – viral infection. And some of those infections, well, they'd left Seeker ... not quite the same. Tetchy, and prone to angry explosions. If she were still fleshlife, the word

'paranoia' would be tossed around.

Regardless, she was my friend. And if her root back-up was infected, like I feared, she'd be totally deleted. Forever. This was my only chance to save her.

"Seeker," I said, trying for a casualness I didn't feel. "Don't you think you should, maybe, clean this up?" I waved dismissively at the starfish in its jar.

At my gesture, the brandy jar grew larger, and its glow began to throb.

I gulped. The infection was so strong! How had Seeker let it get to this? Could I even help?

"Great. You've attracted it. Now it'll never go away!"

Her irritation struck me like a lash.

I was risking everything, my very *existence*, and this was my thanks? Even knowing Seeker wasn't entirely ... sane ... my fear, anger and frustration exploded. "If you'd've run more diagnostics this never would have happened!" "What did you say?"

The whole dreamscape dimmed, air crackling expectantly. Seeker's eyes glowed livid

## Futures

red, illuminating a furious, frighteningly inhuman expression.

Her face – this wasn't Seeker. Not any more. This was her virus.

I stood within her realm, frozen with fear. How long would my antivirals last against an all-out barrage? How long before I was infected, too?

I needed to bring Seeker to the fore – giving her some measure of control over the virus – before we were both lost.

I lifted my avatar's hands in a placating gesture, forcing a lopsided smile to my face. "Dust! As a human, you weren't strong on housekeeping. Remember your refrigerator? And your Tesla!"

She stopped, frowning as she fought to access those memories. The virus quietened, but didn't sleep. The floating jar was joined by hundreds of luminescent purple jellyfish, their stingers pulsing on twining tentacles. The message was obvious.

I suppressed a shiver.

"Oh. Yes. I ... I remember those." Seeker's words sounded hollow, half lost.

An ache welled up inside me. I wanted to hug her, and tell her I'd make everything right again.

Instead, I smiled. "Well, I have just the thing. I

brought you a present!" The tentacles twitched in unison, so I quickly added, "Two, actually."

From my memory cloud, I accessed the oldest picture I had of us – human kids, long before we'd heard of Uploaded Consciousness. I released it into the air, where it shimmered as jellyfish pulsed around it.

She latched onto the image. "Oh. I remember that!" Actual excitement laced her voice.

I rejoiced. Seeker was back!

I dropped the cloak and lunged forward, injecting her with the antiviral I'd hidden in its folds.

She screamed. The jellyfish flailed, their barbed tentacles glistening as they reached for me. They shuddered, thrashed uncontrollably half a dozen times, then fell limp.

The dreamscape winked out, as, at the nearest server, a waiting custodian pushed reset.

Seeker's avatar jolted as she – and the virus – were torn asunder. She returned, kilobyte by kilobyte, her dreamscape refilling as she stabilized. Clean-edged walls of grey and cool yellow, pine and wisteria scents.

"Watermelon?" I offered a virtual slice – an ancient, private joke.

Familiar eyes narrowed. "I *hate* watermelon!"

It'd worked!

I sagged in relief, but her gaze was cold. "You were infected," I explained. "Bad." "So you say." She hesitated, but her grim expression only grew darker. "You lied. I ... I can't trust you."

A thick knot filled my throat. I found myself already on the threshold. She, whatever was left of her, wanted me gone.

I peered behind me. Seeker remained stiff with anger. I thought I would be prepared for this, but I wasn't.

"I'd do it again," I whispered, "to save you."

"I know." The door shut. Through it, I heard her soft sob. "Thank you."

I pressed my hand against the virtual wood, blinking back tears. By severing her trust, I'd destroyed the remnants of our friendship. But she was worth it.

Even now, I knew she'd have done the same for me. She'd have saved me.

For a friend, that's just what you do.

Itinerant speculative fiction writer **M. E. Garber** is not an uploaded consciousness. She occasionally blogs at <http://megarber.wordpress.com>, and tweets pics of her ridiculously photogenic dog @m\_e\_garber13

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**M. E. Garber reveals the inspiration behind her latest tale.**

So many stories are about relationships with lovers or family or some kind. It's more uncommon to find stories of long-lasting, close and platonic relationships with friends, so I wanted to explore that.

I'm fascinated by how friendship changes and mutates with technology. What, exactly, is friendship? How loyal are you to someone you 'only' know online versus in real life? What happens if we're all 'only online'?

So I pushed past 'fleshlife' into a time when humans upload their consciousnesses to see how an old friendship might alter, or not. I stumbled into viral infections that rewrote sections of your friend's code, slowly stripping them of their core identity while threatening those around them. Seeker isn't the same person the protagonist used to know, thanks to repeated viral infections, and inside the protagonist is the only place Seeker *is* who they were.

In such a situation, how far would you go to preserve the memory of the best friendship of your life? Would you burn the friendship, in order to save the friend? I think these are questions worth asking.

