Futures

The dream cartel

A date to remember. **By Preston Grassmann**
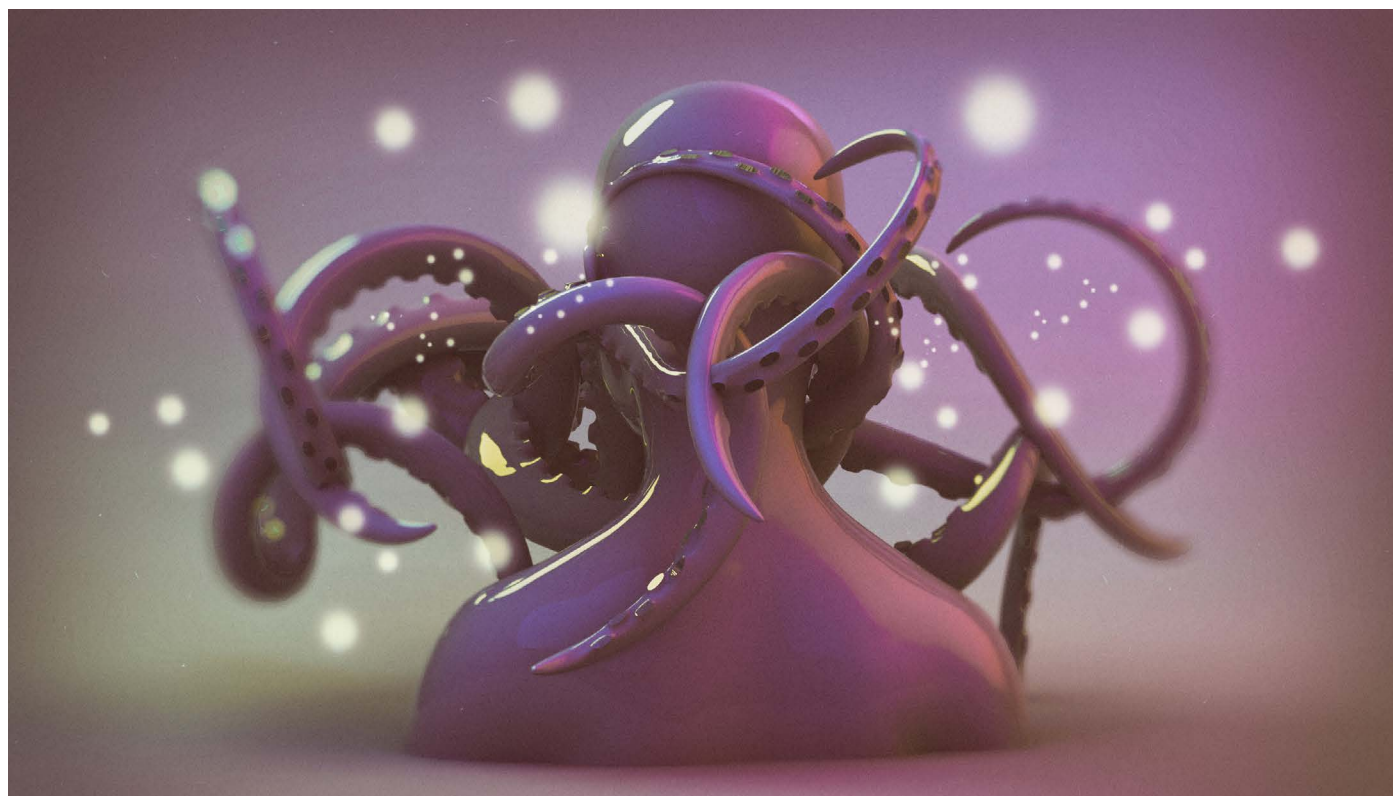
Along the banks of Chao Phraya, crowds have gathered to release their troubled histories into neon-burnished skies. The fire lanterns of Loi Khratong, once a symbolic image, now flash with the uploads of purged memories. For a moment, I watch scenes of private pain playing out across the paper screens. Some of them are rendered into abstraction for privacy whereas others are sharply focused, drifting over the crowd in bursts of image and motion. I see a broken street-side building from Sukhumvit, scenes of carnage, flickering faces – all of them fragments of scrapped history.

At the edge of Canvas Town, a seller displays the latest version of the memory lantern for the crowd to see, channelling through a sequence of tailor-cut scenes. He lets them play out across the pixelated paper of the lantern.

"Let go of your painful memories," he says, lighting the candle in its perch. He lets it go, where it drifts above Canvas Town towards Chao Phraya, its screen playing out looped scenes of atrocity.

The celebrants are bustling as I enter the market, clustered among the lantern sellers and the food stalls. In between them are the covert traders, quietly hawking black-market uploads, underground babel-ware, and the neurotech implants of dream junkies.

I haven't seen anything yet, I say in crypto-speech, making a quick scan of the crowd.

Try using thermals, Mehmet says.

As I make the visual shift, the bright thermograms of fire lanterns burn hot between the metabolic readouts.

I move towards a busy stall, sweeping my head back and forth as an overlay of data pulses over them. Until it hits and a target appears – Squid. But as I move towards him, he vanishes beneath the clustered heat of other bodies.

He's here. In stealth mode.

On my way.

The Squid is genetically modified, his skin altered by chromatophores that make him hard to find in a crowd.

I move deeper into the market, where the celebrants thin out and give way to a more earnest crowd. The tech buyers are less quiet here, haggling and rifling through bins. Nearby, the bodies of dream junkies blaze like miniature suns, their bare bodies playing out the fragments of modified dreams.

The DJs have become the centre of the Canvas Town market, an economy built on the buying and selling of dreams.

As one of them, I flash a quick burst of light across my face and arms, a code that signals warning.

And then I hear Mehmet, his voice much too calm. *The Squid is on his way. Heading towards you now …*

I feel the adrenaline surge of panic, and I alternate between thermals and standard sight, scanning the crowd as I move. And then a shimmering outline appears ahead of me, too quick to follow.

The Squid flickers into existence like a power surge, the chromatophores slowly shifting to reveal tattooed tentacles flowing across his muscled arms.

"Just the man I was looking for," he says. The celebrants and buyers move around us like brightly coloured fish, ignoring what's about to happen. "Your boss around?"

He leans his head in slowly, his breath redolent of fish markets and rotting kelp.

I feel a surge of rage. The Squid had killed two dream junkies for their refusal to pay off the cartel.

"How … would … I know where he is?" I say with a stutter, hoping he can hear the exaggerated fear in my voice; the bait I'm holding out.

The Squid had been named long before he was genetically altered. He was known for navigating difficult spaces, especially when it came to breaking security codes and getting through firewalls.

But no one was better than Mehmet.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," he says.

A moment later, his mind is pushing into my own, as if tentacles are uncoiling to reach around the edge of my skull. I can feel the firewalls beginning to fall away, stray thoughts spilling over like water from a fish tank.

But then another mind joins ours, with a new virus in tow — Mehmet. The Squid pulls back, his mind retreating in panic. His body flickers like a candle in a storm. But he can't pull away, and now he thrashes at the end of the hook. The Squid's hand loosens from my throat as he falls to his knees. I can feel Mehmet's rage burning through me as his virus tears away at the Squid's firewalls.

Mehmet appears from the crowd to stand behind the Squid now, leaning down to pluck the data card from the cartel man's head.

"Let's see how well you like the sky," Mehmet says, watching the last of the Squid's thrashing subside into rag-doll vacuity.

The DJ takes the data card and touches it against the lantern, where all the memories of the Squid are now recorded — purged from his mind. "This is just for you," he says with a smile.

He lets it go, watching it join the other lanterns that rise above the city, and I can't help but wonder how a sky filled with so many unwanted memories can be so beautiful.

Preston Grassmann is a Shirley Jackson Award nominee for *The Unquiet Dreamer*. His most recent work has been published by Strange Horizons, PS Publishing and Shoreline of Infinity. He is the editor of the forthcoming anthology *Out of the Ruins* by Titan Publishing in the UK. He currently lives in Japan.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Preston Grassmann reveals the inspiration behind *The dream cartel*

The sub-culture sprawl of Canvas Town and its commerce in dreams began with a story that appeared in *Nature* in October 2012 — *Midnight in the cathedral of time*. But it didn't take long for the oracular characters and the surreal images of that story to call me back again and reveal new possibilities for the DJs (*The dream junkie of Canvas Town*) and the market-stall vendors of underground tech (*The memory lanterns of Loi Khratong*). As mentioned in the notes of that story, the concept for the memory lanterns came from an experience of watching the Yi Ping Festival in Chiang Mai (often considered part of Loi Khratong), a yearly event where large crowds gather to release thousands of paper lanterns into the sky as a symbol of purging painful memories. Here, I wanted to take another look at what that might mean if that 'release' was more than symbolic.