

Futures

Beware of rainbows

The sacred and profane. By S. R. Algernon

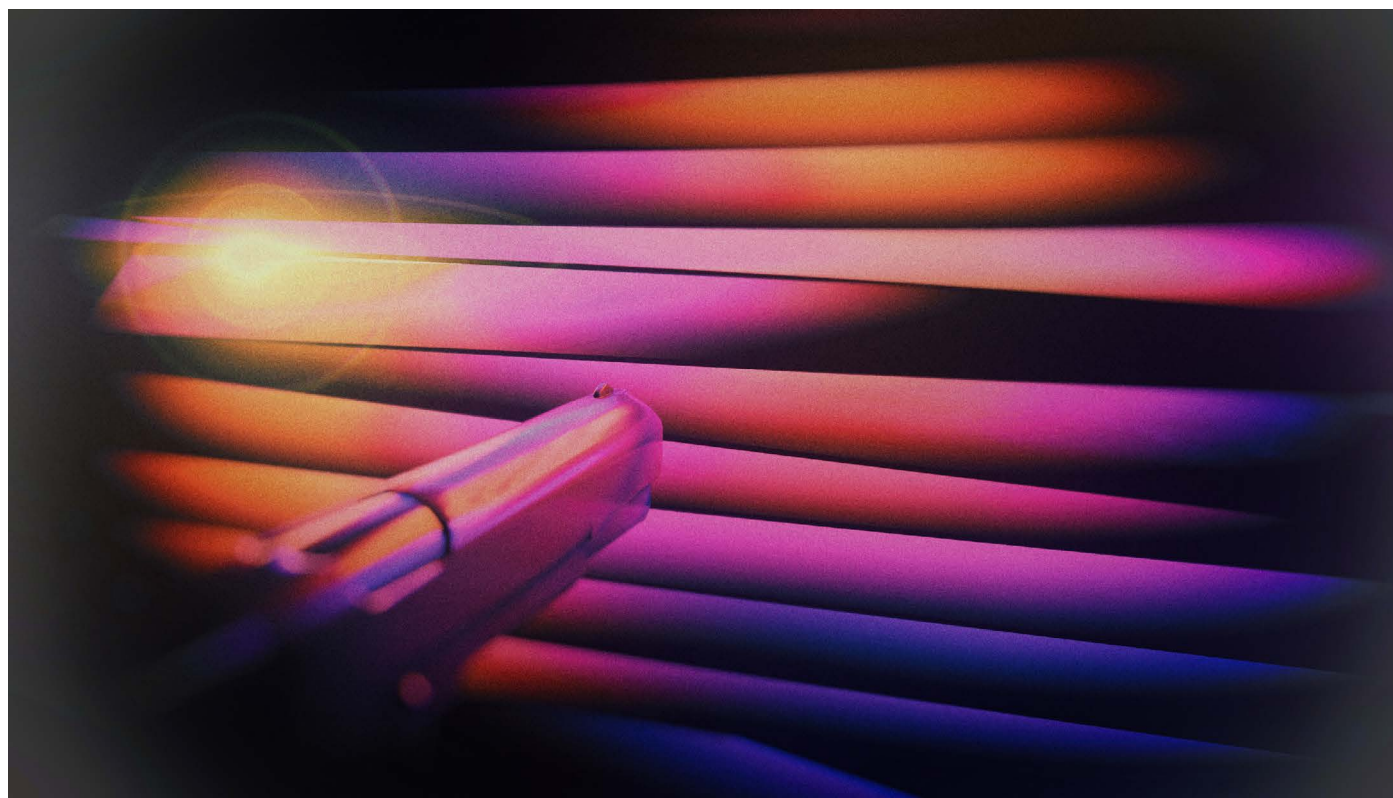


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Salve, pontifex... The voice rises from the back of your skull as you hold the Baetylus diamond to the light. Even at a glance, you know its value is ten times that of any other diamond discovered on Earth, but you look past it, to the walls of a dingy hotel room. Its shadow ripples and flickers like a candle flame seen through water.

Could it be a true Baetylus, house of a god? You glance up at a cracked hotel mirror, checking for signs of a psychotic break. Satisfied that you are sane, you translate the voice in your head from Latin.

Our photomancers tell us that you perceive light and that the photons of our universe interfere with yours, allowing even your kind a few glimpses of the True Sun.

We are Children of the Light. Our Sun, Sol Invictus, Sol Omniscius, guides us. We grew as a species awash in its rich patterns, evolving to receive its transmissions, and parts of its vast soul took root within us.

Our argilomancers tell us that your sun is dead, a funeral pyre to an intelligence that died too soon, or never was. They say that you evolved from clay and ash, that your souls are made of carbon, and this is why you prize diamonds above all other stones. We hope they are right. We hope we are not too late.

You close your eyes. The voice stills and you persuade yourself that it is just a hallucination. The buyer will arrive in 30 minutes with 500,000 in cash – your fee for smuggling the diamond out of Syria.

Just keep your eyes closed. Another half hour and you can retire, be out of the game for good. Let the buyer listen to voices.

And yet, you can't not listen. You open your eyes.

—relius Antoninus saw only a glimpse of the threat and it drove him mad. We implore you. If you hold any sway with the new Emperor, persuade him to ready his defences. If we can find a way to reach you, they will not be far behind.

Whatever battles Emperor Severus

Alexander fought, they were won or lost long ago. You pull your nine-millimetre out of your suitcase, just in case.

They will try to turn you from the path. They will bribe you. They will sing the siren's song. They will fight. Do not let them.

You turn away to close the blinds. The voice stills, and when you return to the now reduced pattern, it whispers.

May Hermes speed your journey, and Minerva protect you. You will need them both.

Stay clear of sunlight until the Baetylus is in safe hands. Even your enervated photons carry echoes of the True Sun.

Beware of light in the darkness. The harvesters of souls draw light from living things. It gives them power over the dark.

Lucifer had once been a god, son of the dawn. Now he was a fallen angel, a deceiver, a devil. You wonder – could an invasion of light-bearers in the waning days of the empire have tarnished Lucifer's standing?

Beware of rainbows, for they are fractured

Futures

and twisted souls.

Outside the window, an ambulance siren wails. As it draws near it becomes the call of a banshee, harbinger of death.

Maybe the war never ended, you wonder. Maybe the invaders still have footholds in the fringes of the old empire. Maybe leprechauns still hide behind their rainbow snares.

Maybe they really did learn how to harvest carbon souls. Or maybe the human soul is more than carbon chemistry. Maybe you do have something to lose. You won't know, will you? Not until they tear it from your body.

Waves of blue and red light stream in through the blinds. At first, you think an ambulance or police car has pulled up in the parking lot, but violet, orange and yellow join the swirling pattern.

Cave irides. Beware of rainbows. The pot of gold is never worth the price.

You have sold your soul so many times, long before you made a career out of plunder, long before you became the latest vulture to pick at the bones of Syria.

In the end, do you have anything left worth

claiming?

The lights beat against the window like a silent hailstorm. The scream rises to a crescendo of grief and loss. The voice of every Syrian, from emperor to refugee, echoes in that cry.

Give us back what is ours. Our blood. Our nation. Our future.

You hold the Baetylus up to the window, then pause.

In dubio abstine.

The voice is no more Syrian than you are Emperor. It will say whatever it needs to, to loosen your grip. It is the barbarian at the gates.

You text the buyer to abort the sale.

You pull the mirror off the wall, and say a prayer to Helios and Archimedes for good measure.

Ἦταν ἢ ἐπὶ τὰς

With it or on it, as Plutarch said. Do not throw down your shield and flee the battle. Return victorious, shield in hand. Failing that, return slain, carried on your shield by your comrades-in-arms.

You aim your nine-millimetre over the top of the mirror, waiting for the window to give way. You feel relief in that moment, now that money doesn't matter and retirement is just a faint memory.

Male parva male dilabuntur. Easy come, easy go.

You rise, mirror shield in hand, and pull back the blinds.

You think back to the games you used to play as a child, back when you could still take comfort in rainbows.

Rock beats scissors. Scissors beat paper. Paper beats rock. That was how the game worked.

Does lead conquer light? There is only one way to find out.

Window glass shatters. You fire into a prismatic void as consciousness slips away from the inside out.

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

S. R. Algernon reveals the inspiration behind *Beware of rainbows*.

This story arose from a musing on one of my earlier stories, *The Eye of Reason*, which featured a middle school 'Magic Fair' in a world where physical forces are animal spirits and concepts like 'atomic power' and 'electric charge' are pseudoscience (or pseudo-magic). I wondered how life would develop in such a world. I realized that the sun would be alive as well, and probably a vast intelligence. The Sun could radiate intelligent signals to Earth and other planets. Life would evolve in synchrony with these signals and grow to depend on them. Researchers in their world would learn to wield its considerable power.

I wondered if these worlds could intersect, and I thought of Sun gods in the past. Could our legends be the result of ancient contacts between the worlds? What would happen if someone from our modern world found an artefact that bridged the gap between worlds? That started my story, a conflict between an artefact hunter and photomancers who very much want the artefact for themselves.

