

Prospects of Love Among Mages

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D. Moonfire

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Chapter 1

Getting Up

There were some days when getting out of bed was a trial. Viola cracked open her eyes and contemplated the distance to the bathroom, trying to decide if relieving the pressure in her bladder was worth the discomfort of leaving her blankets.

A pounding in her head made it impossible to drift back to sleep. Her body twinged and her skin crawled, increasing the pressure on her senses until she felt herself being dragged into wakefulness.

With a groan, she opened her eyes and threw back her covers. It was cold. She shivered and grabbed her blankets again. She could hold it in a little longer, at least until she could no longer ignore it.

The pounding continued steadily.

She rolled over. Her own smell, days without a shower, wafted over her and she pulled a face.

When the beating moved to the other side of her head, she realized it wasn't inside her. Someone was pounding at the door. The steady beat filled the room. It could almost be a metronome from the consistent rhythm and force. There was only one person who knocked like that.

Viola took a deep breath. "Go away, Mudd!"

Her partner continued to knock on the door, never varying from his beat. There were times when his consistency saved them from spoiling a crime scene or defending the evidence, but there were other times when it was just annoying.

"Mudd! Go away."

The pounding stopped. "I cannot, I need your assistance." He always spoke in an even tone. She was impressed he raised his voice enough to be heard through her door.

"No," she muttered and shoved her face into her pillow. It felt oily but she couldn't find the energy to find a cleaner section.

The pounding resumed.

After what felt like years, she finally forced herself out of bed. She started for the door but then decided to handle a more pressing need in her bathroom before answering it.

He stopped knocking only when she turned the door-knob. When she looked outside, he stood with his hands at his side staring directly at her.

Mudd was not imposing or impressive. He stood almost exactly five feet tall. The top of his head was bald with neatly trimmed fringe on the sides. His outfit was impeccable, neatly pressed and only had a few wrinkles around the shoulders. She could have sworn he was dressed for work. Reflexively, she looked down but didn't see his guard bracelet around his wrist. She breathed a sigh of relief, if he wasn't working, that meant he wasn't there to pull her into a forensics case.

"It's still the weekend," he said in a low, almost monotone voice. After years of working with him, she was always surprised when he raised it.

"Then why are you here?" She yawned and leaned against the door frame. Her sleeping shirt clung to her skin

and she caught another whiff of her scent. Afraid he would notice, she struggled to keep her nose from wrinkling. She desperately needed to bathe and his look of disapproval would be too much for her at the moment.

Mudd shrugged and looked down the hall toward the rest of the doors in the apartment. "I have work-adjacent tasks that need your attention."

"Work... adjacent?"

"Yes, related to work but not directly toward a case." He reached up toward her neighbor's door. His eyes were focused, he had noticed something. He stopped in mid-motion before he returned his attention to her. She could see the tension in his face and wondered what he saw. "Please?" he asked.

The idea of leaving left her cold. She shook her head and grabbed the door to shut it. "Not today."

"You have called in sick for four days."

"Well, I'm sick."

"No, you aren't."

Viola almost denied it. She wasn't sick, or at least she wasn't ill. She just wasn't ready to face the world after what happened with her date.

She turned away. "Don't do that. Just let me be... report being sick."

"As you wish, but I still would like your company. Please? Just an hour and then you can return."

She looked at her living room. Empty boxes were stacked up on the tables. She could see flies buzzing over a few and mold growing on the older dishes. Each one had been delivered over the last few days but she didn't realize how tall the piles were getting. Or the smell. She frowned and shook her head. "Mudd, I'm not ready."

"I know. But you need to get out."

A tear threatened to form. "I just need to sleep a little longer."

"Yes, but first, come out. You need to get away from... that." She could almost hear the disgust in his voice. She didn't blame him, it looked horrible.

Viola considered Mudd's request. He would have never come if he wasn't worried. She wasn't even sure he knew where she lived. He found out somewhere and felt the need to show up? She turned to him. "Who told you?"

The faintest of smiles cross his face. "I deduced, nothing more."

"I don't want to talk about what happened."

"Of course," he said holding up his hands. "You don't have to say a single word. I just ask that you come out with me for one hour." He waved his hand and a spectral time-piece appeared over his shoulder. "I'll even set the clock."

Viola couldn't handle it. She shook her head. "No, maybe later."

Closing the door, she shuffled back to her bed. The mess pressed against her senses, a disorder from her normally clean house. She liked order, that is what made magic possible. Taking a deep breath, she winced at the smells that assaulted her.

The idea of crawling into her blankets suddenly seemed just as undesirable. She flipped back the blankets and stared at the cozy spot that she had enjoyed for days. Well, enjoyment wasn't the right term.

She shook her head. "Damn him."

Turning on her bare feet, she returned to the door. Maybe she could catch up with him. Opening it, saw him standing in the same place and jumped.

Mudd looked at her. "Please?"

"Fine, just an hour."

He sniffed. "An hour after your shower."

For a moment, she almost slammed the door on his face but she knew it wouldn't perturb him. He would be standing there until she came with him. If there was one thing about her partner, he was patient. "Fine, I'm going to take a long hot shower and then—"

"Get some clean clothes."

Her jaw tightened. "... then I'm going to get some clean clothes and join you for an hour. Then I'm coming home."

He nodded. "Thank you."

"Come inside?"

He shook his head. "No, thank you, I'd rather wait right here."

"The mess?" she asked a little apologetically.

"No, one mage should never enter the home of another." There was no hint that he was lying, none of the tell-tale signs she had picked up in years of being a city guard. He was being honest and, somehow, that made her feel a little better.

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Chapter 2

Deceptions

Her good mood only lasted a few blocks. By then, she was out in the sun with the warmth sinking into her skin and fresh air blowing against her. It wasn't so bad.

They walked side-by-side along the sidewalk, moving with the easy grace that partners of ten years had. Their relationship was purely professional. They worked on cases together and then drifted apart. Mudd had never approached her like this, which worried her. Was he trying something else? Did he know that she and Ravin were no longer together? The discomfort crawled up and down her spine.

Mudd stopped at a small outdoor cafe off of a minor street. He pushed open the cast iron gate and gestured for her to enter the fenced-in area and toward a table in the sunlight.

"What is this?"

"Lunch."

"I'm not—" Her stomach gurgled. She tightened her jaw. "I'm not hungry."

"I know, but at least a coffee. Then we can address my request."

"I didn't bring my wallet."

"I'm fully aware of this. I'm paying; you are not." He led her to a large empty table and sat down at the end. He gestured for her to sit next to him, around the corner.

Viola sat down on the warm metal seat. "Mudd, what are you doing?"

He looked at her, his face still serious. "I'm paying for lunch."

"Why?"

Mudd stared at her. The seconds stretched out, the tension increasing.

Then a waiter came up. "How may I help you?"

Mudd carefully pushed the stack of menus away from the waiter and himself before addressing Viola. "Order?"

"Um, just a black tea with two sugars."

"And you, Sir?"

"An omelet, belly pork and greens and onions. And then an order of steak and pancakes, extra butter with a side of strawberry preserves."

Viola's stomach rumbled. She loved steak and strawberries.

The waiter wrote down the order and then held out his hand for the menus.

Mudd pushed them further away.

A flash of annoyance crossed the waiter's face. Then he turned and left.

"Mudd, I said I wasn't hungry."

"Oh? Did I order for you?"

"Yes!" She smacked the table.

"It must have been a mistake. No matter, I'll eat it later."

Viola glared at him. "You don't like steak and you don't like preserves."

He shrugged. "Then it was a mistake. No matter." His monotone voice didn't waver.

She knew he ordered for her, but she wasn't going to give him the comfort of knowing that it sounded good already. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine, we ordered, what do you need me to do?"

"We should eat."

"No," Viola pointed at him sharply. "Stop stalling, what? Why?"

Mudd suddenly smiled. "Because you are my partner."

"And...?"

"You need a break."

She started to speak but he silenced her by holding up a finger.

"No, you need a break from yourself. The observations I made worried me and I was concerned for you."

"Just because I was sick for a week?"

His eyes hardened. "You called in sick but you were not sick. Judging from the events you had planned that night, your lack of response, the way you had failed to hang up your dress, and the advanced state of decay of delivered food, I suspect events went poorly."

A memory rose up, one of Ravin calling her an "overly controlling queen" before storming out of the play. He had left her standing in the middle of the seats with everyone staring at her. The actors had to stop due to the disruption of him trying to force his way past the ushers. She felt sick for a moment and she shook her head to clear it.

Mudd continued, "I will not discuss it unless you ask, nor will I let the others do so until you are ready. But you are my partner and remaining in bed for five days eating fatty foods is not the best way to remain healthy or sane."

"So you decided to drag me out of my apartment?"

"Yes, for fresh air, healthy food, and the brief company of your friends."

He grinned briefly, a smile that crossed his face before disappearing. "In addition, if you choose, I will hire cleaners to work on the mess of your place to prevent you from being overwhelmed with the clutter."

Viola frowned for a moment and then sighed. "When?"

"They can start now, if you wish. By the time we are done with lunch, they can have your place in a much cleaner state."

"And you've vetted them to work around mages?"

"They are bonded. They also clean my house during working hours. They understand a mage's need for order."

She wasn't sure if she should be upset or not. The idea of having clean sheets or at least less rotting food was appealing. "Thank you. I would like that."

The Gathering

Viola glanced at the steaming plate next to her. The smells of roasted meat caused her stomach to rumble and her mouth to water. She knew Mudd had ordered it for her but a stubborn part of her didn't want to give him the satisfaction of eating it.

She listened to Mudd finishing his long-winded rant about one of the articles in the latest *Emerging Wizardry*.

"... though I'm not sure about the claims that using a layering method for creating the spell would be any different than the normal matrix. Energy leaks out of the frame no matter how you put it in there, the very fact the stasis spell is arresting decay means it has to leak."

Mudd sighed and tapped on the table twice. "Naturally, we're going to see grifters going around the victim's families saying their way will keep the evidence clean as long as they hand over a few thousand marks."

She let herself be pulled into the conversation. "Don't you love *Emerging Wizardry*? A new crisis every other month. Unfounded theories in the issues."

"I almost wish they would go back to their monthly drooling over those damnable steam engines."

Viola smiled. "You hate those things."

"I hate that everyone seems to think wrapping a rune in a ton of metal is going to prevent feedback. We have felony feedback laws for a reason."

An itch crawled down Viola's left arm. She scratched but it burrowed deeper into her bones. With a squirm, she twisted her hand a little to ease the discomfort.

Someone walked behind her and the itching grew more intense.

Viola didn't have to look up. "Good afternoon, Able."

Able sat down heavily in the chair next to her. His tall, lanky body seemed to slither underneath the table until his shoulders rested on the top of the chair. "How are you doing, Viola?"

"Mudd dragged me out of the house."

Able chuckled. "I heard."

"How?"

He shrugged but didn't answer her question. His large eyes rotated down. "Are you going to eat that? You should."

Then it registered. Viola turned to Mudd who looked at her impassively. "Is that your game? Peer pressure to eat?"

"Yes." Mudd didn't even smile.

"Fine," she muttered as she rolled her eyes. Making a big deal of dragging the plate over, she finally allowed herself to eat the first hot food in days, at least the first that didn't come delivered in a box.

Able pulled out his pocket watch and a small notebook. Opening the cover on both, he peered at the time and then noted something in the book.

Viola leaned over to butt him with her shoulder. "You still don't have to write down everything we eat. None of us are working today."

"My coworkers are the best control group I have access to. You have to eat, you are willing to do so in my presence,

and you understand why I record it.” It was a long argument between them, which also made it comforting to bring it up.

“True,” said Mudd. “However, despite city guard being the sixth most dangerous job in this city, we have pretty good chance of surviving.”

Able sighed. “It just takes one.”

All three of them bowed their heads in silence. He was right. None of them knew when they were going to die. As city guards, there was always a chance that someone had a personal grudge, or a trap spell was missed, or a violent prison escape.

Viola’s scalp began to crawl. Next to her, Able groaned and twisted in his chair. On the other side, Mudd tensed and closed his eyes. Another mage was approaching, Wathin.

Neither Mudd or Able looked up. “Afternoon, Wathin.”

Wathin planted his weapon, a spear crackling with spells, against the fence and used it to step over the points of the railing. On their side, he sank neatly into a chair while flipping his spear around to nestle it against his shoulder. It was a flashy maneuver that brought the bitter taste of his magic rolling over all three of the mages.

The newcomer wore his heavy red cloak and bracelet that identified him as a Mage-Captain of the city guard. They all had the same rank.

The waiter came back, jumping with surprise at the new people at the table. “May I take your order?”

Wathin straightened his back. “Yeah, Honey, why don’t you throw some big hunk of dripping meat on a plate, add some thick potatoes next to it, drizzle the whole thing in cream, and then feed it to me? I like it rare.” He had a southern accent from his parents. It was just a hint of sounding exotic despite being born and raised in the city.

The waiter's mouth opened in surprise and probably an unexpected interest. It also meant that Wathin picked up on at least a curious interest in the other man.

The armed mage winked with a smile.

"I'd like one half piece of every pie you have on the menu," Able added.

The waiter looked confused. Slowly, he turned around and headed back to the kitchen.

Viola leaned closer to Mudd. "Intervention?"

"No, just some friends," he said with a smile. "Though if you resisted me much longer, they were related to a contingency plan I had in mind."

"You didn't have to."

"Yes, I did. I don't have many associations in my life and the ones I do have are precious to me. Friendship is difficult to establish, as you know. I am also concerned with your well-being but I'm afraid I'm poorly equipped to handle in a more effective methods in providing comfort or empathy."

The waiter came back with a platter. He handed a large plate with seven pieces of pie in front of Able. When he sat down the food in front of Wathin, he lingered for a moment.

Wathin smiled but said nothing.

Viola watched with amusement. Wathin was somewhat of a slut when it came to erotic partners. She wondered how long it would be until one of them was on their knees in the back room.

When the waiter pulled himself away, he stared at a cup of coffee still on his platter. He picked it up and held it out. "Did one of you order this?"

An older woman came up and held out her hand.

Without looking, the waiter handed it gently to her and then left without a word and a quizzical look on his face.

The woman sat down next to Wathin. “You shouldn’t tease that poor boy.”

Wathin shrugged. “Who says I’m teasing? I’m planning on heading right in there as soon as I’m done eating.”

“Hello, Eulen,” said Mudd.

Eulen favored him with a beaming smile. She was about his age, late forties or early fifties. She had blonde hair with white-tips, an easy smile, and eyes that looked like crystals. When she turned to Viola, her gaze seemed to pierce her. “How are you doing, Love?”

Viola was speaking before she realized it. “We had a fight and he tossed me aside.”

Able and Wathin froze mid-bite.

Mudd cleared his throat in a warning.

Eulen looked apologetic. “I didn’t mean to push. You don’t have to answer, you know that.”

Viola nodded. “Just... just not right now.”

Mudd cleared his throat again. “What did you think about this month’s *Emerging*?”

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Options

Viola used the last of her bread to sop up the meat around her plate. The steak was cooked almost perfectly, with the smokey taste of wood and charcoal instead of the bitter taste of magic. She wadded up the bread and popped it into her mouth.

Knowing the other mages wouldn't ask about her situation was nice, almost calming. She could relax without worrying about the constant questions about the date or her now ex-fiance.

Sitting at the table, however, made her feel like she was sitting in isolation. Her thoughts still brought up Ravin's face when he stormed away, or the next morning when he came to gather his supplies without a word. She sniffed as the emotions rose up.

"Where is Wathin?" Eulen interrupted a debate on magic techniques between Able and Mudd.

Able shrugged.

Viola knew the answer. It was strange that Eulen was asking though. It was her job to track every mage and guard across the city.

Mudd looked around with a frown on his face. He sat back. "Probably having sex in the alley behind the restaurant. He should be back in three minutes. Why?"

"Just curious," said the older woman.

Viola inhaled.

Eulen's eyes flickered toward her.

There was a tension, a moment where the question teetered between spilling out of Viola's lips or sinking back into the darkness. She thought about the days of crawling underneath blankets and the growing joy of just being outside. The question came out. "How does he do that?"

Eulen smiled. "Do what?"

"Have so many relationships? I never hear of him getting dumped out the window. There is always some beautiful guy or girl on his arm when he's off duty."

Mudd picked up his fork. "They don't last long. Wathin doesn't let anyone in his life beyond a few months at most."

There was a sudden tightness in his face and hand but then he relaxed. Viola noticed but decided to pay attention later. It was rare when Mudd lied.

She felt tears rising. "How does he avoid getting dumped?" she asked in a quieter voice.

"He's an asshole." Eulen shook her head before sitting forward. "He is also good about being up front with his nature. His lovers know that he's going to dump them before they take off their clothes. It isn't personal, it's just games."

"Six days, three hours average," Mudd said impassively. "I think the longest he's gone is three months."

Viola thought about the other mages. She knew that Mudd and Able didn't have lovers, none of them had ever talked about family or friends. They didn't wear marriage rings or torcs.

With a sigh, she leaned against the table. "Is that how it ends? Being lonely?"

“No,” said Eulen and Mudd at the same time.

Wiping her face, she turned to her partner. “How can you say that? You are the pickiest man I know. What Ravin hated, that’s you too.”

The wrinkles on Mudd’s face deepened. “He tried to organize?”

She sighed and slumped back. “My books on the shelves.”

The other three mages groaned.

“Always the books,” Eulen. “Or covering sigil, losing time keepers, or moving artifacts from one side of the house to the other. My husband is always putting my guard cloak in the hall closet instead of the bedroom where I need it.”

Viola shook her head. It was frustrating. How could she have lost Ravin because she needed books in a certain order. “Is it bad? I have them that way for a reason. Why couldn’t he just respect—?”

Then Eulen’s words registered. “You’re married?”

The other woman nodded. “Forty-three years now. We got married when I was twenty-two.” That made her sixty-five, older than Viola guessed.

“How did it work?”

Eulen held up her hands. “He’s a farmer out of Klostens-Meyers. Most of the year we live separately. In winter, he comes into town for the snow. In summer, I visit for a few weeks.”

That sounded painful. “How... how can you be apart that long? Don’t you get...” She held out her hand before she finished, “... lonely?”

Eulen chuckled. “The books. Like you, I’m an ordered mage. I plan my magic, I use rituals and guides. My house is arranged exactly the way I want it. But, when he visits, I adapt. Move things when they are out of place, try not to get upset when he doesn’t understand why the blue glasses

have to be on top or why I don't like him touching my small clothes."

"It sounds exhausting."

"It is, but I'm willing to make it work. It doesn't always, I have divorced him three times now." Her smile softened. "But he stole my heart... but literally only once."

Mudd leaned over. "He's also a licensed mortician and a former guard. He was Able's old mentor."

Able nodded and returned to writing notes.

"There is a reason we tell you to never get involved with guards," Eulen said. "I made that mistake twice."

"So all it takes is just more work?"

Eulen held up one hand. "Finding a mate is exhausting. You have to change your thoughts and beliefs to mesh with theirs. They have to grow into you at the same time. It takes time and hurts."

She held up her other hand and continued, "Being a mage requires growing away from humanity and embracing the arcane. You have to change, alter, and adapt to rules that humans don't follow. It also hurts."

Viola knew the pain of learning new magic too well. Learning how to mesh with the telepathy network—that Eulen maintain—had given her a headache for a month.

Eulen's hands came together. "To do both? Extra hard. I have to schedule time for my husband. I force myself to pull away from magic to spend time with him just as I find myself giving up time with him to focus on my craft. So, I had to create rules for myself. I had to work it out with him because I needed to enforce balance between the two."

Viola frowned. She never thought about being explicit about rules. Maybe that was what went wrong with Ravin? She glanced at Mudd. "Is that why you don't go out?"

His eyes crinkled for a moment. "I have never been able to relax enough to allow someone into my life. I'm too limited by magic to allow another."

"Me either," Able said from his plate. "Never had sex, never going to."

Viola frowned. She didn't like that idea. As much as she struggled with Ravin, he was an excellent lover.

Mudd held up his finger. "I don't have a wife but I do enjoy the company of women. I just happen to pay for it on the rare occasions I'm looking for human comfort. Just bringing it up as an option."

"Isn't prostitution illegal for city guards?"

His eyes narrowed. "Discouraged, not illegal."

"I never realized that."

"Well, it's kind of rude running around telling people whom you paid to have sex with." Mudd gestured toward the restaurant. "Ignoring Wathin's lack of manners, I prefer to keep the specifics private."

The armed mage came strolling out of the restaurant with a smile and rubbing his hands. "Wathin did who else?" asked Wathin looking around.

Eulen said, "Fucking random waiters for a good time."

Wathin grinned. "He didn't mind. Why should you?"

He brought his spear up to his shoulder. He waved. "I have to run, there was a robbery on Oats and Agate. A pawn shop, at least two dead."

Able stood up. "I'll go with you, that's closer to my place."

Wathin gave the medical examiner a hard look. "You live in the fucking sewer."

"Well, I live in the sewer near that intersection."

Together, they hurried off.

Viola sighed.

The three mages said nothing for a long moment.

Mudd broke the silence. "Your apartment should be cleaned by now. I have already paid them, so don't unless you feel like giving them a tip. Average is twenty-two marks for a good job."

"You need to go?"

He favored her with a short smile. "I feel... you are..." He sighed.

Eulen interrupted. "The goals he had in mind to help you out of your depression appear to have worked and he is now withdrawing because he feels uncomfortable getting too close to anyone."

Mudd glared at her.

"Oh, and the telepath shouldn't speak for him." She winked at him.

"Yes," he finally said. He pulled out a wad of bills and set them carefully down on the table. "Are you okay, Viola?"

After thinking a moment, she nodded. "I think so."

"Good. If you call in sick for three more days, I'll probably be back."

"I won't. I'll be in work tomorrow."

He rested his hand on the table next to her for a moment before withdrawing.

Chapter 5

Home

Viola and Eulen walked home quietly. It was peaceful and relaxing. Mudd's suggestion had helped but she knew it wasn't only him. It was hearing others struggling with similar problems. That gave her hope there would be someone else after Ravin.

She smiled to herself.

"You are in better spirits."

"Thank you."

Eulen stopped in front of Viola's apartment. She held out her hands. When Viola rested her palms in them, the older woman gave a quiet squeeze. "Ask for help when you need it. You have good friends who won't judge you, we are all different in our own ways."

"Y-Yeah," Viola said with a smile of her own.

"Any time. Just yell, or project, you know it works. Either my sister or I are always on duty. One of us will hear it."

"I just have to work at it?"

Eulen shrugged. "If that is what you want, you need to make it a conscious choice, like casting a spell. Man, woman, animated statue, everything requires effort. If that

makes you happy, then make that effort. If you want to give up on romance, then just make that a choice also.”

She gave Viola a kiss on the cheek before slipping away.

Viola watched her go down the street.

Eulen stopped half a block away and turned around. “And if he won’t honor those damn books, dump him!”

Viola laughed. “I will!”

Make romance part of her life instead of stumbling through it? Viola could do that. She wasn’t willing to turn her back on love quite yet but now she had new ways of approaching romance.

About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

D. Moonfire

Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

When an unexpected epiphany seemingly breaks the laws of resonance, everything changed. Artifacts no longer exploded when exposed to spells, but only if they were wrapped in cocoons of steel and brass. The humble fire rune becomes the fuel for new devices, ones powered by steam and pressure. These machines herald the birth of a new age, the Industrial Age.

Now, the powers of the old age struggle against the onslaught of new technologies and an alien way of approaching magic. Either the world will adapt or it will be washed away in the relentless march of innovation.

To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.

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