

Hannah Shagan
Science Fiction/Fantasy Award
2022 Poul Anderson Writing Contest

Floating City

Once a normal man rushed out the doors of his gray, monotonous office building and fell. One moment his feet were on the doorstep, the next they were on nothing but the open air, and he was falling. He blinked and felt rather stupid as he watched the buildings recede above him. He should have just called a cab or driven or biked. He was still new to the city and forgetful of her ways, especially when he was in a hurry. (He was always in a hurry.) The wind swallowed his forlorn sigh and he hailed a cab, flailing his arm in hope that someone would spot him. An almost cute yellow cab glided down to him. He grasped for the handle and with a bit of effort yanked himself inside. He shook his head in self scorn, tried to pat down his windswept hair, and wondered why he chose to live in Void. Why couldn't he have just chosen an ordinary city like Chicago instead of picking the Venice of the sky?

"New here?" asked the cab driver with a laugh. She was a young woman with freckles and curly brown hair. She smiled at the normal man. He blushed.

"Yes, but I don't think I'll stay in Void for much longer. It just isn't my kind of place," he said.

"Oh," she said, a little sadder. The cab sank a little in the air, but the normal man didn't notice.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to it; I don't like falling," he said.

"But you always get back up," she answered, "you just have to call for a bit of help."

"What if no one comes?"

"Of course, someone will come. Void is a city full of people just like you, people who can't take a single step outside their door before gravity takes them; that's why we have the best public transit service in the world!" The man chuckled a bit then was quiet once more.

"No one gets used to falling," she admitted, "or catching people for that matter. It's harder to catch someone than it is to fall." And then he noticed how tired she was. He wished he could help her somehow, but all he had to offer was conversation.

"I've always wondered, what do the cabs run on?" the man asked.

“Optimism,” she laughed, “optimism and kindness. That’s why each year the city gets a little closer to the ground.”

“Do you think Void will hit the ground and become like all the other cities?” he asked.

“Become like all the other cities?” she wondered. “It already has as much in common with the other cities as they have with each other.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said, a bit afraid of what she would say but resolute in his curiosity.

“I think Void will touch the ground, but I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. Change is a part of life, like moving here. It might take some getting used to, but it can be a good thing. I think maybe when the buildings stop floating, the people will start to. Now, this is your place, right? It’s nice,” she said with a smile. The normal man blinked at it. It was just a quaint place with a little garden that he’d always worried would fall out from under him.

“Thank you. This is my number if you ever want to get coffee or something,” said the man gratefully and a bit awkwardly. The woman beamed, “I’d like that. Next time you fall, feel free to call me too. My name is Nora.” The normal man stepped into his little garden. The earth felt solid underfoot. He crossed the few steps to his house and paused in the doorway to look back. He smiled and his house floated just a little higher than it had before. He watched the cab drive away, and his smile broadened as he noticed that it was flying slightly higher too.