

Futures

The world in a bottle

A place to call your own. By C. L. Holland

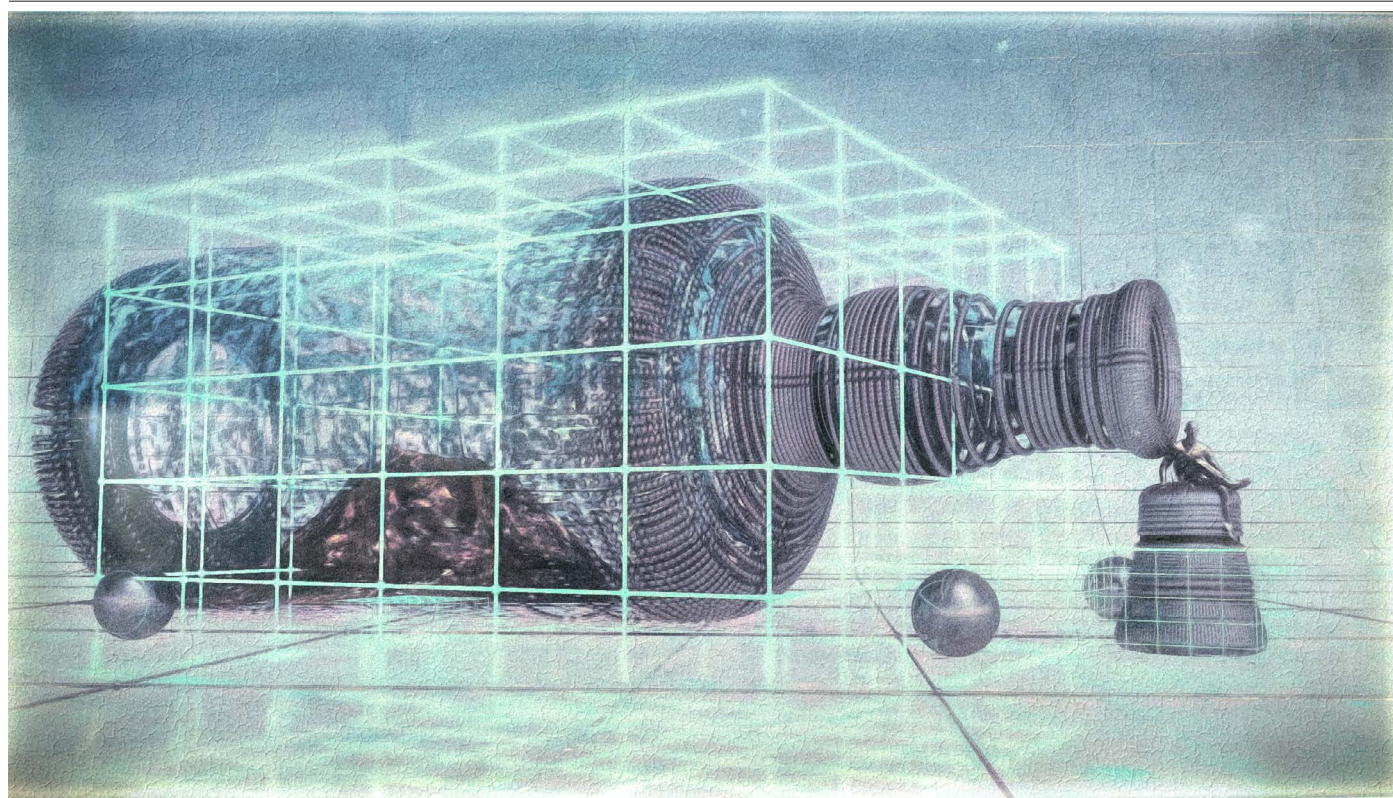


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

She found Alex on the beach, watching the storm he'd created.

"Hello, Kaya." He didn't turn, and she couldn't read anything from the soft greeting.

"Alex," Kaya replied, stopping alongside him. She glanced sideways at his spiked bleach-blond hair, the implant tattoo that snaked up the left side of his neck, shimmering blue. "You look well."

He turned and she saw the same shimmer in the depths of his eyes, in the lightning that crackled out over the waves. "Considering?"

"Considering," she agreed. She still had nightmares about the bullets she'd put into him, his dead weight in her arms, his blood soaking into her trousers. All necessary, as her therapist liked to remind her: he'd almost destroyed a country. She tried not to let it colour her thoughts – Alex was good at reading people even without an interface.

"Anyway," he went back to watching the storm, "isn't that the point of all this?" His

gesture encompassed the beach and the sleepy seaside town behind them.

"You're not angry?" There'd been some concern that he would react badly to realizing it was all a simulation, to seeing her, but he didn't seem upset.

"No. You did what you had to."

"Then why the storm?"

"To get your attention." Abruptly the sea calmed and the clouds scudded away to reveal a full Moon. Kaya wondered how deep his control of the system went. "How bad is it? Outside?"

The simulation was designed to reflect his physical form as he remembered it, to provide a peaceful location for his shattered psyche to recover, and was contained by a firewall that kept him in and data out. He'd have no way of knowing what had happened to him, to the world.

"We stopped you." Kaya wondered if he remembered it. "Shut down the hack before the damage was too extensive. Security is

being tightened, civil order was restored and the economy's recovering. So are you."

He grimaced. "And the malware?"

"We wiped it from your system as best we could. There's enough evidence you weren't acting of your own free will that you won't be charged with treason."

"But?" His tone was brittle.

"But we had to talk very fast to keep you out of jail." There'd been talk of a plastic cell wrapped in a Faraday cage. He'd have gone mad by inches, if he recovered at all.

"You built me the world in a bottle instead."

"This was the compromise. The illusion of freedom, so you could recover in your own time."

"And now I am recovered?"

She paused a fraction too long, and felt his gaze on her. This was the real test, the reason they'd sent her even though she'd looked Alex right in the eye and shot him four times. Because "as best we could" wasn't good enough. Pieces of Alex had shredded away as

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they tried to save him, so closely was the virus intertwined with him. And now, standing on this beach, Kaya couldn't tell how much was the Alex she knew and how much was something else entirely. Something that could never be allowed to roam freely.

"How did you work out it was a simulation?" she asked.

He allowed the change of subject. "It was too quiet," he said. "Too perfect. Too cut off – even dead zones have somewhere to interface manually. And then, after about six months, I realized I couldn't remember how I got here, or why I'd come. You didn't answer my question."

Kaya nodded. "You're recovering, not recovered. It will be long and painful. You're facing years of physio and psych evals before they even think of letting you near a desk job, let alone put you back in the field."

"Of course."

"You don't have to go through that. You can stay here."

"I want my life back." He looked at her and she saw that spark deep in his eyes again. "I'll

do whatever it takes."

"OK." Kaya hadn't really expected him to stay. She gestured and a fire exit appeared halfway down the beach. "I'll see you on the other side."

There was a brief, awkward pause. She wanted to hug him, to say she was sorry for what had happened and what was to come, but she couldn't make physical contact.

She watched him walk down the beach, then closed her eyes and disengaged from the data-jack. Unlike Alex's, her interface only allowed for manual connection. She didn't doubt he could have hacked her via the simulation if he was really determined, but there were no alerts.

In a hospital bed in front of her, Alex lay, pale and bandaged, in an artificial coma. On the other side of the bed, Dev opened his mouth to speak and Kaya pressed a finger to her lips. Alex was unconscious; that didn't mean he wasn't listening. She moved to Dev, where a monitor showed another bed, another Alex, and took the second earpiece. This Alex stirred

as he fought his way back to consciousness. Kaya listened as he croaked for water, watched another Kaya greet him tearfully before being hustled away by a brisk and businesslike doctor.

When they were happy the new simulation had been accepted, Dev thumbed off the tablet and they left, closing the door behind them.

Through the second door, which the Faraday cage kept closed like an airlock, they retrieved their wireless devices and signed out of the facility. Outside, Kaya took a deep breath of heavy air that smelled like rain.

"You think he'll be happy in there?" Dev asked.

"We built him the world in a bottle," Kaya said. "A bigger, better one. Hopefully he'll never know."

In the distance, thunder rumbled.

C. L. Holland is a British writer of science fiction and fantasy, and has been published in venues such as *Daily Science Fiction*, *Cats in Space* and *Flash Fiction Online*.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

C. L. Holland reveals the inspiration behind *The world in a bottle*.

Like many of my stories, *The world in a bottle* came from the characters. It started with an image of two people on a digital beach, watching a storm that one of them had created.

It stayed like that for a while, trapped like Alex himself.

The problem was that I had a very clear impression of the characters — Alex with his shimmering implants, Kaya with her concern for her friend — and why Kaya was there, but something wasn't working.

The building blocks were the same. Alex was there because of injuries sustained after a malware attack, and Kaya was there to offer him a choice, but because the choice was 'stay here and recover, or come back to work' there was no conflict. Of course Alex would want to return.

What if, I thought, she's actually there to persuade him to stay? Then, what if he can't know that? That set up the conflict between the characters. The final part fell into place when I realized that Kaya was the one who shot Alex. That set up conflict within Kaya herself: having almost killed him, now she has to lie to him.

In the end, the story came out a lot darker than I was expecting, but stronger for it.

