

# THE VERMILION MARKET

*Where thoughts crystallize.*

BY PRESTON GRASSMANN

The crystals turned the sunlight into fragments of story across the market stalls. There were crystals that hung from strings or were set in place on ornate stands. Some even adorned the bodies of carvers, jewels that bevelled the fragments of poems and flash-stories. One woman wore a pair of haiku earrings; another, a bracelet that was carved in such detail that its planes cast more than a thousand phrases at once. Parents and children stood among them, pointing up at the fountain that would soon bring the off-world buyers to our city. I followed the gaze of a child as she stared up at the tower, waiting for the moment when it would light up and sway with the motion of their descent.

Like my parents, I am a carver of stories, born into a life at the brightest edge of visibility. I looked up at the spires of our seven towers, and remembered how my mother taught me to carve, when I first learned how light could refract into language and meaning. As the rooms were emptying for the annual market, these memories began to fill the empty space. Most of the children were content to live in the glass story-worlds of their carvings, but there was never a time that I didn't dream of what life might be like on other worlds. I wanted to see the Old Yards of Amethyst, where the starships and other machines were being built. I wanted to walk over the Ice Bridge of Cerulean to view the aurora veils of the northern sky.

"Wouldn't our stories offer more if we could experience those other worlds?" I had asked my mother, but she had only smiled and looked up at the spire. "Someday, you will experience them," she had said. "But for now, use that desire in what you create, turn it into light."

From my father's stall, I watched the platform descend. I could hear the sound of it sliding along the cable. When it reached the ground level, there was a thundering sound as the locks slid away. A moment later, the buyers emerged and began to flow down from the hill. They approached the crystal market in small groups. It was easy to tell which world they were from by the colours they wore and the style of their clothes. But many also had

**NATURE.COM**  
Follow Futures:  
Twitter: @NatureFutures  
Facebook: [go.nature.com/mtoodm](http://go.nature.com/mtoodm)

orbiting over their heads like orreries.

I watched a man from Indigo break away from the group and walk through the stalls, ignoring the call of vendors. He finally stopped in front of our stall. I felt my heart racing as he bent over and began examining the crystals. I saw him lift one that I had known well, turning the phrases slowly in his hand. He smiled as the words opened up around him. I remembered how pleasant it had been to carve that story, as if the light, travelling all the way from the sun, had carried something of all the worlds in between. But those phrases seemed so much more surreal then, as I tried to imagine what he saw in them. He looked away and squinted at my father, saying: "She carves so beautifully... doesn't she?"

"Thank you," I said, before my father could answer.

The stranger's smile flickered for a moment and then brightened as he turned to stare at me. I could see a reflection of the glass fountain in his eyes.

"You wrote this?" he asked.

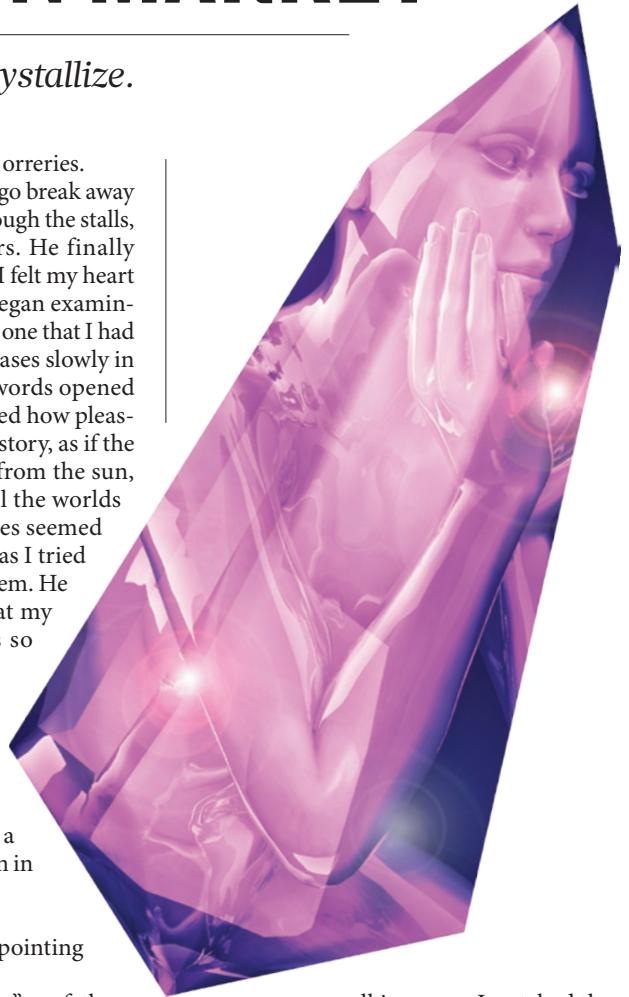
"With a little help," I said, pointing to my father.

"It was your story, Clarity..." my father said. Through the years, my father had spent long hours teaching me how to work at each angle, carving the planes to make the refractions as precise as they could be.

"It can't be as exciting as what you've seen out there," I said, looking up at the hologram. His home-world spun above him, swirls of white cloud over indigo. A single moon orbited the planet, shadowed with the chasm cities of World Engineers.

"Out there, it's all about merchant wars and political struggles and economic divisions. The stories of your world offer something more than all that... obfuscation. They bring..." he looked at me as if I was part of a bigger story, a prism carved not by time and memory, but by an image of what I was to him "... Clarity," he said, reading my name through the glass, saying it as if it was the word he had been looking for. His eyes seemed to turn the sun into words, luminous phrases set against the fountain. "Thank you for your stories," he said. It almost seemed gratuitous as he handed me the payment. "I will return again for your next crystal."

He held the crystal in his hand and read the words out loud for a moment before



JACEY

walking away. I watched the hologram world and its moon spinning above him as he went.

"Congratulations, Clarity," my father said. "You have another admirer."

I turned and saw the warmth in my father's eyes, and I knew what he meant.

"You remind me of your mother," he said. "She moves in you like light through a crystal." He took one of mother's stories from the stall and turned it in his fingers. The colours flared up around us. I could feel the warmth of its refractions against my skin.

I looked up at the fountain. It seemed to rise into the sun, a diamond-glass shard piercing its molten heart. "Someday, I'll go out there, like her. But for now, I have an idea for my next story," I said, watching the fountain sway as passengers returned back to their ships above Vermilion. For the first time, I was eager to carve my dream into glass. ■

*Aside from occasional forays into Tokyo's theatre scene, Preston Grassmann has been known to cover canvases in garish swathes of paint. His most recent work was published in Caledonia Dreamin', and is forthcoming in Daily Science Fiction.*