

The Gao Yao Engine

By Rachel Aukes

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The guard handed me a manila envelope containing my wallet and watch and handed me a bag of brown pill bottles. "Instructions are in the bag. Follow them or else you'll regret it. Your eighty-year sentence is complete. You're free to go," he said and pointed at the door. My shoes squeaked on the linoleum as I walked across the floor. My muscles spasmed just before I stepped outside and shaded my eyes against the day's bright light. The sun looked no different than the day I went in. But that was eighty years ago.

It was also today.

My clothes still fit. I looked the same. Yet, in my mind, eighty years had passed.

They called it the Gao Yao Engine and it today's most advanced biotechnology. *Induced time manipulation*. The Chinese had come up with the idea. They designed the system to save money and turn criminals into productive citizens. All the old prisons were eliminated. The Gao Yao Engine powered an entirely new worldwide prison system.

Drugs, nothing like the methamphetamine that got me in here in the first place, had slowed my mind down while the doctors uploaded their own "corrective" programming. It had *felt* like I served an eighty year term. But, I'd been in prison for only three hours.

By year twelve, things had gotten rough. I'd wanted to die, begged them to let me die, but they'd ignored me. Just kept pumping the drugs through my system. By year sixty, I had arthritis so bad that waking up was a daily lesson in misery. By year seventy, cataracts had clouded my vision, preventing me from reading, which had been the one thing that had kept me sane.

And, I woke up to find that none of it had been real.

Phantom pains echoed in my joints. Everything I looked at was in exaggerated colors. A headache throbbed behind my eyes. Another spasm racked my muscles. They'd said muscular anxiety would be a possible long term side effect. I climbed into the waiting taxi.

"312 Eisenhower Street," I said before rifling through the plastic bag. I didn't bother reading the dosage instructions. I opened each of the three pill bottles and popped the drug cocktail intended to keep Gao candidates from losing it once they were tossed back into the real world. I leaned back and felt the pills work their magic.

I sensed someone watching me and I opened my eyes. "What?" I growled.

"Is the Gao treatment as bad as they say?" the driver asked.

I closed my eyes again. "Yeah. It's bad."

"I have a nephew that's had a couple brushes with the law. I keep telling him he's got to behave or else they'll Gao him. But he don't listen. He's young and stupid. What'd you get caught for?"

"Possession of illegal substances," I replied.

The driver continued. "So does it work? They say you can't go near crime without getting sick. That true?"

"I haven't had a chance to find out yet."

The interminably long ride ended with the driver still asking questions like he was Anderson Cooper. I didn't leave him a tip and headed into my dump of a house. I half-expected to see everything covered in years of dust and my goldfish floating corpses, but the house was exactly as I'd left it this morning.

I headed straight for the drawer with the hidden back and reached for my stash. As soon as my fingers touched the plastic, a wave of nausea swept over me. I tried again and found myself lurching to the sink to puke.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand before laughing uncontrollably and without humor. They'd really done it. I was still me, but they were in my head, too, and I hated them for it.

Slamming the drawer closed, I headed outside and to the bar.

It took me three months to adjust to having two realities shoved into my brain. I learned what I could control and what the Gao programming controlled. I turned in my best friend, the neighborhood's biggest drug dealer, to the cops two weeks after I was Gao'd. Things got a bit easier each day after that.

"What do you want me to do with this punk?"

I cracked my neck from side to side before examining the man bleeding on my floor. Two of my henchmen held him to keep him from collapsing. If he was conscious, he showed no signs.

"Put a bullet in his head," I said. "And leave his body out for his friends to find him first." I took a step closer, careful not to touch him or risk the Gao nausea. "No one sells drugs in my neighborhood. No one except me."

I motioned to my boys to take him away, and I looked through my office window to watch the manufacturing line below. A muscle spasm shot through my body, but I was used to it. Instead, I smiled. My empire was growing.

I couldn't touch drugs after I'd been Gao'd, and that helped me keep my head on straight. I couldn't get my hands dirty, and that kept me off the cops' radar. I'd always known I could run the business twice as good as my old buddy could. He enjoyed sampling his own stuff too much, and without the Gao programming, I would've been just like him.

No, I knew I could do it better than he'd done. I'd just needed to a plan, and that was easy enough. After all, I'd had eighty years to work out the details.
