

ENTER The Next Great American "Idle" Contest

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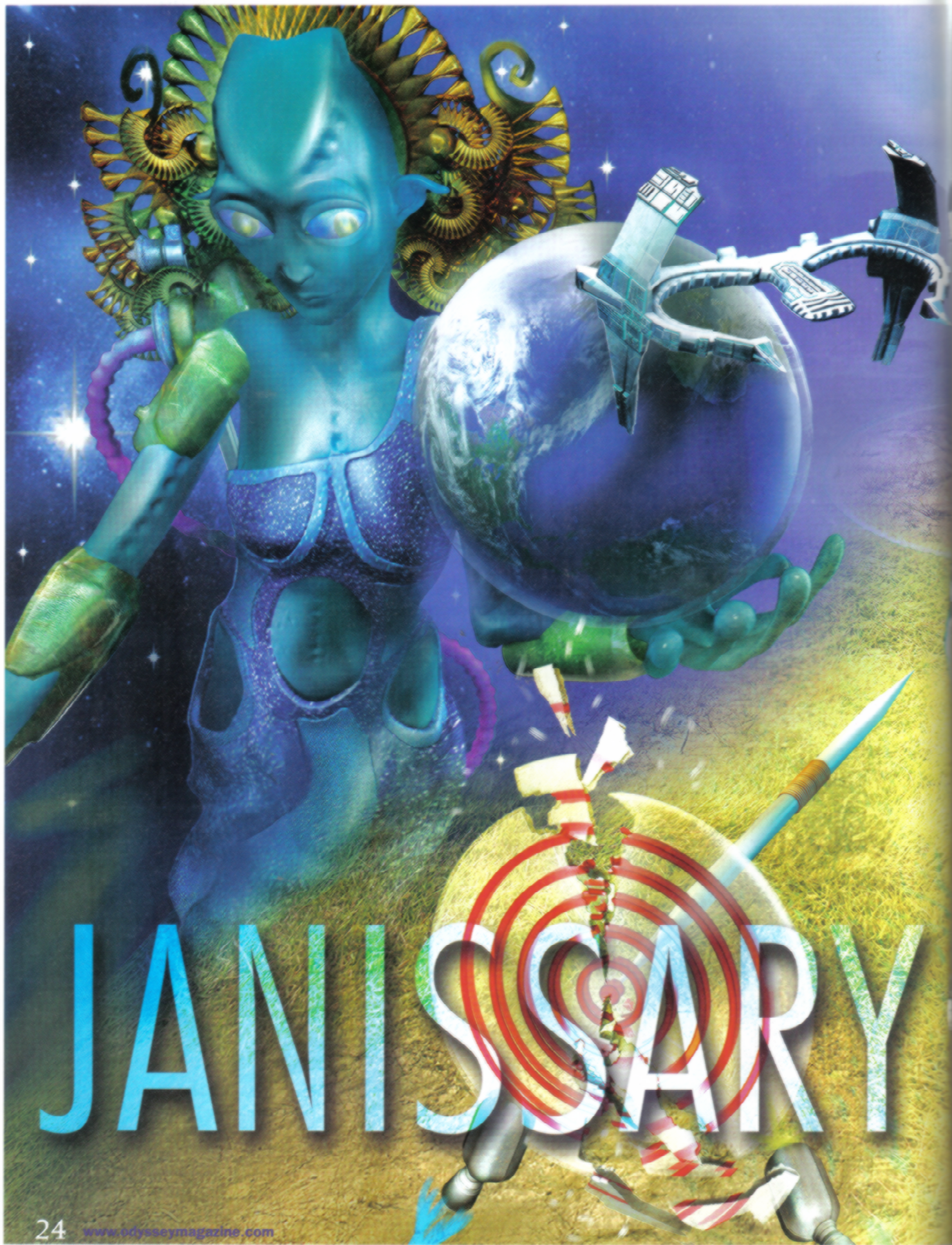
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let's play!

The Science of Fun

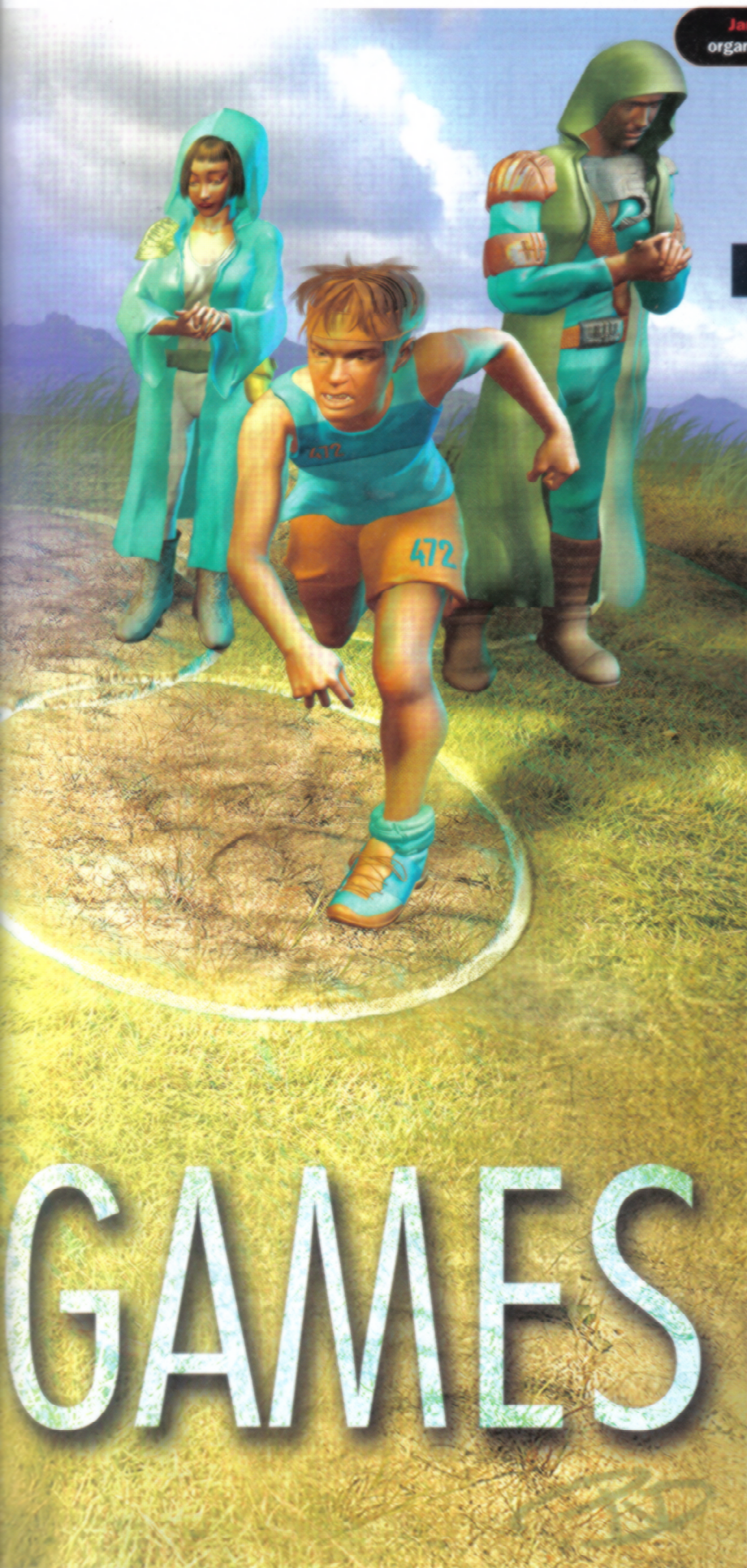




JANISSARY

Janissary — A soldier in an elite Turkish guard organized in the 14th century and abolished in 1826

a short story by Angie Smibert
illustrated by Ryan Durney




The first time Love O'Connor had seen a *Janissary* she thought he was praying to the Ghazi above. She had been such a child then.

Now, almost 14, she tugged the hood of her cowl down over her eyes just enough to block the noon-day Sun. She tried to imitate Master Damon's stance as they stood on the edge of the playing fields. Feet wide. Hands folded in front of her. Head slightly bowed. She felt more like a monk than a soldier.

"Watch," the elder Janissary instructed her. "Use your eyes first."

Love watched. The candidates lined up for the next event, a relay race. A year ago, she'd been standing in her trainers, or sneakers as they called them here. She'd competed because her father wanted her



Wolf cubs, her father had told her, but they only practiced the things

to be more than a farm tech. That, and the family needed the money. She'd never been sure why, though, she'd been chosen after the Irish Regionals. Sure, she'd placed a few times, but she'd never lived for the games like some kids. For her, it was fun.

Now she was the one choosing, but she still had no idea what she was looking for. Master Damon wasn't a big explainer. *Learn by doing* was his mantra.

"Focus," he grumbled from beneath his hood. He muttered a few more commands under his breath that Love knew weren't meant for her. He was accessing the Corps database through the chip planted in his skull. DNA. Medical records. IQ scores. She could hear it through her newly implanted chip as if it were a whispered conversation in another room.

Love focused on candidate 472. He was nearly too old for the games, maybe 16 already. He paced like an animal in a cage waiting for the relay to start. Definitely one of those live-to-train kids, she thought. A kid in the Cork games had been like that. She'd envied the ease with which he won everything. He kept to himself, though, doing pushups while the rest of them kicked a ball around between events.

The starter pistol banged, and 472's leadoff runner stumbled out of the blocks. His teammates fell further behind with each handoff — until the baton was slapped into 472's hand. He

tore around the track, gaining on the other runners like a wolf chasing down its prey. Love had seen a wolf once. It brought down a lamb in the high meadow of the agricultural station she'd grown up on. She'd set the dogs on it and carried the injured lamb back to her father. It had bleated softly in her arms as its life trickled away. A shiver ran down Love's spine.

Candidate 472 crossed the finish line two meters ahead of the pack. He loped off to the next event. Boxing.

Love pointed him out to Master Damon as the young man entered the ring.


Master Damon shook his head. "I've seen him before."

The match was over in a few punches. Candidate 472 quickly knocked his opponent out of the ring.

"Why do you think 472 has never been chosen?" Master Damon asked, pushing back his cowl as he turned to her.

Love shrugged. She thought 472 would be a far better soldier than she'd ever be.

"Remember we're so much more than soldiers," her Master said as if he knew what she was thinking. "We watch over the flock for the Ghazi. We make sure the roads get built. The water flows. The food gets to market. We keep order. We keep the flock moving in the right direction. And one day a lucky few of us may get to move on — when the



played with each other in the wild, they needed to know to survive.

flock can take care of itself — to the next world that needs the Ghazi's help.”

Love had never seen the Ghazi. Apprentices didn't get to meet the aliens until they'd completed training. The Ghazi, she knew from her early lessons, had saved Earth from ecological disaster, war, and famine centuries ago. However, since they were a space-faring race, one that had adapted to weightlessness during the long voyages between worlds, the Ghazi's thin, elegant bodies couldn't stand Earth's gravity for long. So they trained the *Janissaries*, a name they borrowed from the history books, to govern for them as they watched from ships high above the Earth.

“But, Master, why wouldn't 472 make a good Janissary?”

“See how the others play?” He was looking at the kids in line for the next event, an obstacle course. Some, like 472, stood apart. Others laughed and played rock-paper-scissors with each other. “You were like that. Smart, athletic but still playful.”

Love saw her younger self laughing and kicking a hacky-sack around with Tommy Conway. She'd heard he was apprenticing in South Africa now. She didn't see what that had to do with anything, though.

“Eons ago we humans took wolf cubs into our caves and raised them to be helpers and companions,” Master Damon explained. “We chose the most intelligent, eager to please, and playful

pups — the tamest ones — and turned them into loyal, hard-working dogs.

Animals we trusted with our children and our livestock.”

Love saw it now. She and the Tommy Conways of the world were the dogs — the smartest, swiftest yet most playful and thus safest of the pups — who were being raised to watch over the sheep. Wolf cubs, her father had told her, played with each other in the wild, but they only practiced the things they needed to know to survive. Chasing. Stalking. Killing. Grown, they stopped playing. Dogs didn't. Candidate 472 was still too wolf-like for the shepherds to trust.

Love watched as 472 split the target with his javelin. She remembered something else her father told her. The wolf had only recently returned to Ireland, thanks to the Ghazi. Centuries ago, humans had exterminated all the wolves in Love's home country because they were a threat to livestock.

“What will happen to 472?” Love asked.

Master Damon pulled the hood of his cowl back over his face.

Another shiver ran through Love. She peered up at the skies and whispered a little prayer for 472. 🍀

Angie Smibert worked for NASA's Kennedy Space Center for over a decade, before turning to writing full time. Her work has appeared in *Pedestal*, *Alien Skin*, *Antipodean Science Fiction*, and several other magazines. She is a frequent contributor to *ODYSSEY*.