

Sampler

Aurora Awards

2012

The following works (authors, editors and artists - published under the **EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing** and **Absolute XPress** imprints) are eligible for the 2012 Aurora Awards. This PDF sampler contains the first few pages of each eligible work.

Artists

- Bartrop, Richard. Interior illustrations for *Opus 5: An Okal Rel Universe Legacy Anthology*, Lynda Williams & Sandra Fitzpatrick, eds., (Absolute XPress) September 2011
- Blaine, Janice. *Stolen Children*, Amber Hayward (EDGE) September 2011
- Milburn, Michelle. *Opus 5: An Okal Rel Universe Legacy Anthology*, Lynda Williams & Sandra Fitzpatrick, eds., (Absolute XPress) September 2011
- Mohr, Erik. *Technicolor Ultra Mall*, Ryan Oakley (EDGE) October 2011
- Mohr, Erik. *The Demon Left behind*, Marie Jakober (EDGE) May 2011
- Willicome, David. *Circle Tide*, Rebecca K. Rowe (EDGE) August 2011

Anthologies (Nominations Made Under “Best Related Work” Category)

- Broken Time Blues: Fantastic Tales in the Roaring '20s* Jaym Gates & Erika Holt, eds., (Absolute XPress) September 2011
- Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell; Lewd Did I Live*, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Gaslight Arcanum: Uncanny Tales of Sherlock Holmes*, J.R. Campbell & Charles Prepolec, eds., (EDGE) [?] 2011
- Opus 5: An Okal Rel Universe Legacy Anthology*, Lynda Williams & Sandra Fitzpatrick, eds., (Absolute XPress) September 2011
- Tesseract Fifteen*, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Novels (Over 40,000 Words)

- Galler-Smith, Barbara & Langston, Josh. *Captives: Druids Saga, Book Two*. (EDGE) February 2011
- Hayward, Amber. *Stolen Children: Children of the Panther, Part Three*. (EDGE) [?] 2011
- Jakober, Marie. *The Demon Left Behind*. (EDGE) February 2011
- Oakley, Ryan. *Technicolor Ultra Mall*. (EDGE) August 2011

Novellas (15,000 to 40,000 Words)

Anderson, Kryisia. Misfit on Gelion, (Absolute XPress) April 2011

Short Fiction (up to 7,500 Words)

- Armstrong, Kelley. "The List", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Bell, Eileen. "V-Link", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Beynon, David. "Symbiosis", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Bobet, Leah. "Stay", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- Boorman, Kate. "The Memory Junkies", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Braun, Shen. "Costumes", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Brown, Leslie. "The Windup Heiress", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Chen, E.L. "A Safety of Crowds", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Church, Suzanne. "The Needle's Eye", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- Clitheroe, Heather. "Forest-Bathing", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Cockle, Kevin. "The Bridge Builder", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Colangelo, Michael R. "Blacklight", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- Dorin, Ivan. "Nosangreal", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Eamer, Claire. "Ice Pirates", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Files, Gemma. "The Shrines", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- Friesen, Hal. "The Caddy", Opus 5. (Absolute Xpress) July 2011
- Gavin, Richard. "King Him", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- Greenwood, Ed. "Edge of Moonglow", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Greylyn, Jennifer. "Saving the Dead, or the Diary of an Undertaker's Apprentice", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Hayward, Brent. "The Carpet Maker", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011

- Holt, Erika. "The Deal", *EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Holt, Erika. "Just Dance", *Tesseract Fifteen*, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Huff, Tanya. "See Me", *Those Who Fight Monsters: Tales of Occult Detectives*, Justin Gustainis, ed., (EDGE) April 2011
- Jenkins, Michele Ann. "Take My Waking Slow", *Tesseract Fifteen*, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Kasturi, Sandra. "Foxford", *Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live*, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- (*) Kasturi, Sandra. "The Slowing of the World", *EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Kilpatrick, Nancy. "Sympathy for the Devil", *Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live*, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- Kirchmeier, Kurt. "Four Against Chaos", *Tesseract Fifteen*, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Lalumière, Claude. "Dead", *Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live*, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- Lalumière, Claude. "The Weirdo Adventures of Steve Rand", *Tesseract Fifteen*, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Lorenson, Michael. "Six Underground", *EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Lott, Jennifer. "Pet Peeves", *Opus 5*. (Absolute XPress) July 2011
- Luiken, Nicole. "Feral", *Tesseract Fifteen*, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- MacLean, Lynne M. "The Illumination of Cypher-Space", *Tesseract Fifteen*, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- McDonald, Cat. "The Road of Good Intentions", *Tesseract Fifteen*, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- McFadden, Ryan T. "Fight Night", *Broken Time Blues: Fantastic Tales in the Roaring '20s* Jaym Gates & Erika Holt, eds., (Absolute XPress) September 2011
- McFadden, Ryan T. "Homo Sanguinus", *EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Meikle, William. "The Colour That Came to Chiswick", *Gaslight Arcanum: Uncanny Tales of Sherlock Holmes*, J.R. Campbell & Charles Prepolec, eds., (EDGE), [?] 2011
- Meikle, William. "Out With the Old", *EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011
- Miller, Christopher K. "Cowboy's Row", *Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live*, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011
- Modugno, Virginia. "Every You, Every Me", *Tesseract Fifteen*, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011
- Moreno-Garcia, Silvia. "A Puddle of Blood", *EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011

Moser, Elise. "Darwin's Vampire", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Nicholson, Katrina. "A+ Brain", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Nickle, David. "Looker", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011

Pi, Tony. "The Tremor Road", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Ridler, Jason S. "Blood That Burns So Bright", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011

Ridler, Jason S. "Last Waltz", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011

Rimar, Mike. "My Name is Tommy", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Roden, Barbara. "404", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011

Rogers, Ian. "My Body", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011

Runté, Robert. "Split Decision", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Savory, Brett Alexander. "Safe", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011

Sellers, Peter. "Toothless", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011

Senese, Rebecca M. "Hide", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Strantzas, Simon. "The Deafening Sound of Slumber", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011

Sun, Amanda. "Fragile Things", Tesseract Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Tocher, David. "Chelsea Mourning", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011

Travis, Tia V. "The Weight of Stones", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011

Tremblay, Leanne. "Survival of the Fittest", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011

Vernon, Steve. "The Faith of Burning Glass", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011

Vincent, Bev. "Red Planet", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011

Wickham, Sandra. "Outwitted", EVOLVE Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead, Nancy Kilpatrick, ed., (EDGE) August 2011

Wiersema, Robert J. "Tom Chestnutt's Midnight Blues", Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd Did I Live, Michael Kelly, ed., (EDGE) March 2011

Woods, Elizabeth. "Forging Friendship", Opus 5. (Absolute XPress) July 2011

Poetry (Aurora Nominations Made Under “Best Poem/Song” Category)

Barker, Michelle. “You Always Knew”, Tesseracts Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Lewis, Francine P. “Adaptation”, Tesseracts Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Marshall, Helen. “The Oak Girl”, Tesseracts Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

Stenfeld, J. J. “Civility”, Tesseracts Fifteen, Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor, eds., (EDGE) September 2011

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R.J. Barthrop 2011



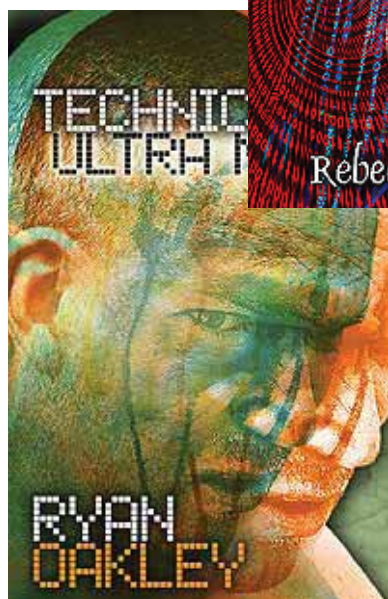
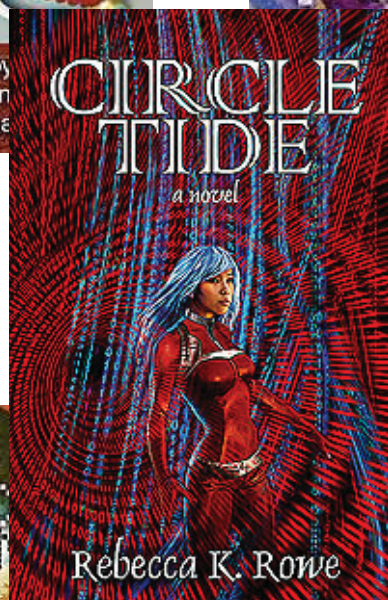
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BROKEN TIME BLUES

FANTASTIC TALES IN THE ROARING '20S

edited by Jaym Gates and Erika Holt



Absolute XPress

AN IMPRINT OF HADES PUBLICATIONS, INC.

CALGARY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Sharing — James L. Sutter.....	1
Chickadee — Frank Ard.....	16
Semele's Daughter — John Nakamura Remy.....	31
The Automatic City — Morgan Dempsey.....	43
Button Up Your Overcoat — Barbara Krasnoff.....	54
Nor the Moonlight — Andrew Penn Romine.....	64
Jack and the Wise Birds — Lucia Starkey.....	77
Madonna and Child, in Jade — Amanda C. Davis.....	86
Der Graue Engel — Jack Graham.....	100
The Purloined Ledger — Ari Marmell.....	115
Fight Night — Ryan McFadden.....	131
A Drink for Teddy Ford — Robert Jackson Bennett.....	142

INTRODUCTION

by Jaym Gates

A long time ago, I found a collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald stories in my favorite, little used bookstore. While reorganizing last year, I pulled the copy out and started reading again. Erika and I were in the “what’s next?” phase following *Rigor Amortis*, and this one just jumped at me: *What if we put together an anthology featuring new stories set in the 1920s? New stories, from a new perspective, when we’ve seen how it all turned out, and are watching the same sort of patterns taking place in our own time? What if we filtered it through the lens of speculative literature?*

Sandwiched between the horrors of the two Great Wars, the 1920s stand out as a glittering, transformative spectacle in history. Spurred by World War I, waves of immigration, innovation, and cultural change surged through America and the rest of the world. Not for nothing does that era bear the names the Roaring ‘20s, the Golden Twenties, and the Jazz Age. It was brief, glitzy, seedy, and marked by competing tensions; perhaps destined to crash in spectacular fashion.

For fictional purposes, the grit and glamour of the decade combine into the headiest of potions. Flappers and jazz stars; ugly racial inequalities; veterans in hidden gin joints drowning their sorrows with cheap alcohol brought from the mountains by men with fast cars and faster tongues.

Broken Time Blues captures the raging spirit of the times, both light and dark, and adds a twist of fantasy and science fiction. Come on a ride with us, through the speakeasies and the mountain stills. Grab a drink and read stories about things that might have been, or maybe were.

INTRODUCTION

by Erika Holt

Sometimes titles are easy, and sometimes they are hard. For Jaym and I's first anthology, *Rigor Amortis*, for example, the title preceded, and *demand*ed, the theme: zombie romance and erotica. But, for this project, we started with an idea — speculative fiction set in the 1920s — slapped on a working title, “20Spec,” (thanks Wendy!), and hoped a proper title would make itself known sooner or later. We cast our net broad, seeking fantasy, horror, and science fiction stories, and every sub-genre thereunder. It was vital that the stories capture the essence of the time; the razzle-dazzle and the seedy underbelly. But, other than that, the authors had free reign. We hoped this would result in a more interesting and varied collection, and weren't disappointed, but it also made finding a fitting title challenging.

The twelve tales we chose showcase the culture of the decade, including prohibition, bootlegging, flappers, and speakeasies, and also touch on social concerns and politics, such as racial tensions, the aftermath of WWI, and the lead-up to WWII. Most of the stories are set primarily in America, but two, “Nor the Moonlight” and “Der Graue Engel,” are wholly set in Paris and Weimar Germany, respectively.

The stories also feature an amazingly diverse cast of characters: shattered veterans, including a world champion boxer and a patchwork corpse; club dancers; a *fae* detective; a queer witch-hunter; rural bootleggers; deities, both hostile and benign; aliens; automations; Picasso (the artist, though not like you've seen him before);

and, surprisingly, an array of high-functioning birds. Yes, I said birds — the feathered variety.

But with such a broad range of characters, genres, situations, and settings, what were we to call this many-legged creation?

Appropriately enough, the title emerged from the signature sound of the decade. “Broken time” is a jazz music term referring to irregular, improvised syncopation. It also nicely reflects the nature of the times themselves, which *were*, in some ways, broken. The second half of the title we found by perusing popular songs of the day. A great number are entitled “[something] Blues.” So, *Broken Time Blues* it was.

And you know what? It works perfectly.

CHILLING TALES

EVIL DID I DWELL; LEWD I DID LIVE

edited by Michael Kelly



EDGE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY PUBLISHING
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CALGARY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: A Disquieting Solitude by Michael Kelly.....	1
Tom Chestnutt’s Midnight Blues by Robert J. Wiersema.....	3
King Him by Richard Gavin.....	24
404 by Barbara Roden.....	34
Stay by Leah Bobet.....	45
Blacklight by Michael R. Colangelo.....	67
The Deafening Sound of Slumber by Simon Strantzas.....	72
Last Waltz by Jason S. Ridler.....	88
Sympathy For the Devil by Nancy Kilpatrick.....	91
The Needle’s Eye by Suzanne Church.....	102
Looker by David Nickle.....	110
Cowboy’s Row by Christopher K. Miller.....	125
Safe by Brett Alexander Savory.....	134
The Carper Maker by Brent Hayward.....	142
Foxford by Sandra Kasturi.....	151
My Body by Ian Rogers.....	159
The Shrines by Gemma Files.....	169
Dead by Claude Lalumière.....	177
The Weight of Stones by Tia V. Travis.....	191
Contributors	207

A DISQUIETING SOLITUDE

Michael Kelly

There's been a renaissance in Canadian horror fiction.

The last few years have seen a steady increase in the amount of literature published in the horror genre. And the title of this volume, along with Les Edwards' gruesomely macabre artwork, brooks no argument—this *is* a horror anthology. One might argue that the proliferation of fiction dedicated to horror and dark fantasy is simply a by-product of the sagging world economies, of xenophobic governments, of worry generated from the on-going “War on Terror.” Or it may be that Canadian writers are merely doing what comes naturally—in this vast, sprawling land of ice and prairies, of wind and rock and water, of major urban centres encroaching on the barrens with spreading tendrils—exploring the *other*, that *vastness*.

Is Canadian horror different from other horror fiction?

This land is certainly fertile ground for imaginative minds. What I've discovered is that Canadian writers explore the same themes as their contemporaries. Inside you'll find tales of horror in urban and rural settings alike. There are stories of corporate horror; side trips into surrealism and modern supernatural horror. Tales of loss. And the all-too-real horrors of everyday life, of existing in harsh climates, whether literal or psychological. Not unlike any good horror fiction, then. Except I sense a distinctly Canadian worldview, a disquieting solitude, perhaps, or a tangible loneliness, that permeates all these stories and makes them truly chilling tales.

This book is a rarity, though, in the horror genre, in that all the contributors are Canadian, whether citizens, permanent residents, or expatriates.

I may be wrong, but I know of only 2 other *horror* anthologies in which all the contributors were Canadian: *Tesseract Thirteen*, edited by David Morrell & Nancy Kilpatrick, and *EVOLVE*, edited by Nancy Kilpatrick. Both those titles were published by EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing, not coincidentally the very same publisher of this current volume. For that, they should be applauded.

For a fascinating overview of Canadian horror literature I urge you to seek out Robert Knowlton's essay "Out of the Barrens," published in *Tesseract Thirteen* (EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing, 2009).

Indeed, there have been notable Canadian horror anthologies in the recent past: *Northern Horror* (Quarry Press, 1999), edited by Edo van Belkom, and the late, lamented *Northern Frights* series (Mosaic Press), which ran for five frightful volumes between 1992 and 1999, edited by the redoubtable Don Hutchison. Those anthologies, as good as they are, were not exclusively limited to only Canadian contributions. While the bulk of the tales included were penned by Canadians, writers of other nationalities did contribute. *Chilling Tales* is, then, a rarity. One of only a few horror anthologies devoted to truly *Canadian* horror writing.

But we don't want this to be a rarity, a curiosity. We want this to be the norm. Our hope is to make this an annual volume, highlighting the wonderfully diverse and talented Canadian writers penning horror fiction. We hope that you will enjoy this collection enough to make that a reality.

Bring on the brand new renaissance!

Michael Kelly
January, 2011

evolve

TWO

Vampire Stories
of The Future Undead

Edited by Nancy Kilpatrick



EDGE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY PUBLISHING
AN IMPRINT OF HADES PUBLICATIONS, INC.

CALGARY

Table of Contents

Introduction — Nancy Kilpatrick.....1

PRE-APOCALYPSE

The List — Kelley Armstrong.....	11
Nosangreal — Ivan Dorin.....	19
A Puddle of Blood — Silvia Moreno-Garcia.....	31
V-Link — Eileen Bell.....	43
Six Underground — Michael Lorenson.....	56
Outwitted — Sandra Wickham.....	69
Toothless — Peter Sellers.....	76
Symbiosis — David Beynon.....	85

POST-APOCALYPSE

Forest-Bathing — Heather Clitheroe.....	99
The Deal — Erika Holt.....	108
Homo Sanguinus — Ryan T. McFadden.....	121
Out With the Old — William Meikle.....	133
Chelsea Mourning — David Tocher.....	142
Blood That Burns So Bright — Jason S. Ridler.....	154
Survival of the Fittest — Leanne Tremblay.....	162
The Faith of Burning Glass — Steve Vernon.....	173

NEW WORLD ORDER

Soulglobe — John Shirley.....	181
Red Planet — Bev Vincent.....	201
Beacons Among the Stars — Anne Mok.....	211
The Big Empty — Thomas Roche.....	228
Beyond the Sun — Tanith Lee.....	248
The Slowing of the World — Sandra Kasturi.....	260

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Nancy Kilpatrick
Montreal 2011

INTRODUCTION

By Nancy Kilpatrick

“Why vampires?”

I’m asked that question a lot. I’m asked because I’m a writer and an editor and vampires have managed to infiltrate a fair chunk of my work. And I’m asked because I’ve been a collector of vampireabilia for thirty years and know quite a bit about the undead. Everywhere I am, when the nosferatu takes center stage, either in book, film, visual art or music form, I’m asked, especially at Halloween!

Once that ‘Why?’ question evaporates like a mist, it’s quickly followed by further why questions, for example: why are these creatures of the night rearing their fanged heads so often these days? And: why would anyone find a vampire attractive—what in the world is there to be attracted to?

Please bear with me. I’m going to wax a tad esoteric for a moment about the first ‘why’, the proliferation of the nosferatu, then (hopefully gracefully) ease gently into the second ‘why’, their attraction.

Psychologist Carl Jung coined the term ‘archetype’. It’s one of those hundred dollar words that sounds educated and sophisticated so, once the media got hold of it, the word was bandied about quite a bit over the last couple of decades. Consequently, the original meaning has been seriously diluted, if not polluted.

Today, when many people use the word ‘archetype’, what they really mean is ‘stereotype’. Most of us know that stereotypes are boring. Not to mention unfair. Nobody wants to be seen as a stereotype. It’s ridiculous to lump together people or situations and say they’re all the same, with no variations.

A stereotype is *not* an archetype. In fact, a stereotype is a *dead* archetype, one with the life sucked out (sounds like a vampire’s

victim!). An archetype is the original, a vibrant energy that is a pulsing template on which whatever comes after is formed. It's the spirit of the original. All that follows and emulates the original incorporates that spirit and is like it but also unique.

So, what does that mean when it comes to vampires? Picture this, if you can: If we took all the vampires that have ever existed in legend, mythology, literature, film, television, music and art and piled these thousands upon thousands of undead beings atop one another—(yeah, that's quite an image!)—what we would find is the one thing they all have in common. Each is different but there's a common thread in all of them and that thread is the archetypal vampire. What is the vampire archetype? Simply put: Vampires are predators; we are their prey.

And yes, even the sparklies like Edward Cullen can turn into a predator at any moment; it's in his nature, the nature of the vampire. No matter how polished and presentable the undead, our fear of their dangerous side is always percolating, as it should be, and the fear is also part of the allure.

According to Jung, archetypal energies kind of float around in our personal and collective unconscious, not doing much, just hanging out. Every archetype, including the Vampire archetype, has both a positive and a negative side and these powerful energies are eternal, shared by all humanity, although different cultures may ascribe different cultural traits to an archetype. We know that humans down through history have been aware of the vampire. The earliest writing, the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which dates to 2500 BC, is the first record of the death-bringer.

At least since then, the vampire has been lurking. Legends and folklore from many parts of the world talk about the vampire. We read about them in early English and French literature, we viewed them in German, British and American films from the silent cinema days, joined more recently by movies from Mexico, France, the Philippines, Russia, from all over the world. In one capacity or another vampires have appeared on our television screens through the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and onward. There is no shortage of art and music, board games, breakfast cereals, dolls, jewelry, and on and on. Everywhere we look in the present and the past we see the vampire.

Jung discovered that these floating archetypal energies only surface in our awareness when something triggers them. When many people become aware of an archetype, it says that collec-

tively we are bringing this energy out into the open for a reason. Something is up.

We all know that the vampire has become a big deal over the last few decades. We mortals are finding immortals *very* interesting indeed. We need something from them and, at the same time, we fear them. It's a paradox.

The current surge in their popularity started in the mid-1970s when several important books were published that shaped the vampire for modern readers and influenced film and television, art and music: *Interview with the Vampire* (Anne Rice); *Hotel Transylvania* (Chelsea Quinn Yarbro); *The Dracula Tape* (Fred Saberhagen); *Salem's Lot* (Stephen King). With the exception of King's novel/TV miniseries, these books presented the vampire in a new and evolving light. The vampire was more human, lived among us (although back in those works from the 1970s, that bit of info was known to only a select few fictional characters); and the vampire did not necessarily *always* have an evil intent.

That perception of the undead has grown and expanded. Today, nearly forty years after those ground-breaking novels, we have undead that not only live among us, but are a known entity, part of society. Some are bad asses, of course, but not all. And generally, they've grown more human and less feral.

What we as a species need from the vampire might be tied in with how we have allowed—even encouraged—the undead to evolve. The biggest question is: why did we want to humanize the vampire? Why take what is essentially 'other' and try to understand and then accept this non-human, supernatural force that is so threatening. Surely this goes against the traditional *Homo sapiens* distrust of 'other', the desire to defend ourselves and our loved ones from the unknown which is potentially threatening. And maybe that's the key to understanding why we want this creature which has always been loathsome to integrate into our world. It's almost as if there's a silent revolution on the go. What had previously been intolerable is now welcomed. We see that with a lot of groups; over the last decades, categories of people that were 'out' are now 'in', participating in society, winning their rights, which says that overall our species is more accepting. Despite the wars of today and the fear of those who are not like us and may even harm us, there seems to be almost a quiet but steady drive underway to accept what could not in the past be accepted. Our global village now includes vampires.

The vampire traits that we're all familiar with give a clue to why we find the undead an attractive lot and why we need them to evolve along with us. Vampires:

1. live forever, or at least more than one lifetime, but certainly long enough to gather some smarts so they can avoid the dumb mistakes we mere mortals seem hell-bent on making;
2. are youthfully gorgeous—despite not being able to see themselves in mirrors—and stay attractive *sans* Botox, or I should say they have *become* attractive in the last several decades—first we had to get rid of those old-school smelly, resuscitated corpses;
3. have no problem finding 'dates', to employ a euphemism. Their sexual charisma is legendary. What high school senior wouldn't love to take a vampire to the prom;
4. don't have to work. In fact, they are often wealthy, having managed some savvy investments over the centuries;
5. are physically powerful and mentally mesmerizing, and they refuse to play by normal human rules and regulations—unless they want to, of course. They're good manipulators, and this power in its myriad forms comes in handy when they fall outside the boundaries of behavior expected by mortals which, it seems, they do frequently.

Naturally, there are a few drawbacks to their existence, but the spin on those has changed too. Vampires:

6. traditionally sleep in a coffin and sometimes that casket must contain soil from their native land. More often today, though, they retire on satin sheets in darkened chambers that reek of opulence and/or edginess;
7. can be fried crispy by sunlight and are weakest in the daytime. But lots of humans are night people so a moonlit lifestyle isn't all that strange, especially for the young and palely attractive (see 2 and 3);

8. are allergic to garlic—but many people hate garlic—and wolfs bane (a plant in the buttercup family); most of us wouldn't know wolfs bane if we brushed against it and developed a rash;

9. will die if they are stabbed through the heart with a stake preferably widdled from hawthorn—but most of us would succumb to a stake through the heart made out of any material;

10. drink human blood to survive. Not all vampires drink blood—human or other—but it seems the majority do imbibe. For mortal vegetarians turned undead, this would be a hellish way to acquire nutrients. But, since most mortals will chomp on a medium-rare sirloin when they can get their canines into one, the liquid diet of the vampire might not be as repulsive as first envisioned.

As it turns out, most vampires don't kill their victims. It has become common for a vampire to take just a little blood and leave the human intact with a Band-aid to the neck. This makes them a tad more appealing to us.

And, more importantly, most vampires don't 'turn' those they bite. If they did turn their food source into ones such as themselves, well, check the stats on that: a vampire turns one tonight. Tomorrow night those two vampires turn two. The third night the four vampires turn four. In thirty-five days there will be 13,786,200,000 vampires (yes, that's thirteen *billion!*) wandering the planet, which is about 6,800,000,000 more than the total population of earth. (Total of Earth's population estimated as it increases daily.)

Even given contingencies like: the inability to move during daylight hours; the difficulty of long-distance travel which includes time zone changes and daylight savings time; a rebellious human population that fights back; turnings that don't 'take'; and vampires who, for one reason or another, murder each other—even with these variables factored in, it's pretty clear that in short order we mortals would be history. But, vampires are not stupid; they're not zombies (see 1). They would not intentionally kill off their food supply and starve themselves to death.

One of the biggest pluses and perhaps the one largely responsible for the popularity of vampires of late is their erotic

appeal. Vampires are charismatic, rock-star sexy, oozing glamour and seductiveness, so much so that there's a lineup of volunteers ready and willing to open a vein, just for the titillation of it all.

This has not always been the case (see 2). But even the ugly ones from the past had a certain *je ne sais quoi*. People *did* let them into their homes, and yes, in the old days, courtesy being what it once was, the vampire had to be invited in. But why would anyone invite into their home a stinky, dirt and maggot-covered, pale-as-death being with fangs that they *knew* had died recently and was buried at the local cemetery because in their small town or village, they'd witnessed this departure and/or interment with their own eyes! *Plus* they were also aware that it was their *relative* who had died. Traditional lore has the vampire going after family first. Then extended family. Then friends. And family and friends of friends. They were a pretty incestuous lot.

Despite the terror of the person opening the door, and against all odds, vampires *were* invited in. The reason was simple: the undead mesmerized their potential victims. Like a hypnotist on stage commanding: *Bark like a dog!* The vampires of old demanded: *Let me in!* And people did.

Nowadays, earth is getting crowded. Plenty of us live in cities or large towns where the vampire could be our neighbor, or a classmate, or a co-worker, or the overnight gas station clerk, for all we know, or don't know. We're wary and not inclined to let strangers into our homes. We've changed, but so have the undead. They seem to have gotten over their self-imposed ritual of having to be invited, perhaps at the same pace as humanity's abandonment of traditional etiquette. Vampires have also overcome their aversion to crosses, holy water, bibles, and other religious paraphernalia. Could this have faded as church attendance declined sharply?

Along the path of their evolution, a good many of what we deem traditional vampire traits altered, or even vanished altogether. The vampire identified in myths and legends and the ones that first appeared in literature, these are not the same vampires we see today. In the past, they were never part of our world. They lived apart from us, cold and undead, soulless, dwelling between realms, skulking amidst the shadows, spawns of Satan, frightening us, extending their existence by ending ours.

They were departed family members coming back for kin. They were aristocrats, using the advantages of wealth and elitism to prey upon both their peers and the lower classes. They were persons born with a caul over the face, or the seventh son of a seventh

son. They were religious heretics. Vampires in the past ran from the cross and drank blood until they were bloated and their victims drained. In some parts of the world they sucked souls, or energy, or the life force itself. Vampires were shapeshifters, able to become bats, wolves and rats. In some cultures they appeared more ghost-like or were invisible. They controlled the elements and the lesser creatures of nature, as well as humans. They were the ultimate supernatural force that only under a spell would a mortal perceive as intelligent, erotic and worth encountering a second time. The vampire was to be avoided at all costs if for no other reason than that you would very likely end up dead or undead yourself. That's why graves were opened, bodies exhumed, hearts staked, mouths filled with garlic bulbs and heads lopped off corpses which were then re-buried at a crossroads face down with a crucifix atop the casket.

But, all that's the past. Vampires have evolved. Considerably. Out with the old, in with the new. And almost everything we believed we knew about the nosferatu has undergone a shift.

Today's vampiric predators come in all flavors, from ethereal to sexy, dominant to submissive, tormented to torturer, and they can be the killer or the victim. They are everywhere at all times of day. They buy houses, register for night courses, own RVs and take vacations. And, they've learned restraint. They intermingle with us and interbreed. They drink blood substitute (although they probably prefer the organic stuff!).

Everything about the vampire has changed but one thing: they are still predators, we are still their prey.

A year ago I edited the anthology *Evolve: Vampire Stories of the New Undead*, composed of tales of the vampire we see today and would be seeing in the immediate future. It was a project I'd wanted to pursue for a long time. I'd hoped to extract this extraordinary creature from the past—which is how he/she has been commonly viewed—and show the new vampire, where the princes and princesses of darkness are at now and how that differs from where they were then.

Even before that innovative tome was in the hands of readers, I realized that I'd caught a glimpse into the further future and became excited by the idea of showing readers what I saw. The vampire. Beyond the year 2012.

I challenged writers to find the vampire we'd be seeing in 2025, 2075, 2175 and the year 3000. We know that the vampire

now lives with us and has integrated into society—that's been the most recent common theme in vampire fiction, film and art, so that wouldn't reverse. But how would, how *could* these enthralling creatures of the night evolve further without blunting their edge? Will our world be so accepting that we allow the undead to live next door, to occupy the cubicle behind ours at work, to date our daughters without worrying about it? Would future vampires be so civilized that we trust them to rein in whatever violent instincts they possess and not have us over for dinner in the strictest sense of the words?

What about catastrophes, natural and other types, and things like pandemics—we're seeing signs of such events now. When the going gets tough, maybe the vampire will get going in a way that doesn't suit us.

As the future unfolds, we will change, and the undead must as well. I was eager to find out how our two species will relate to and interact with one another because in the days ahead, at least regarding vampires, we mortals will be dancing with death on a daily basis. We might come to like and even appreciate them, but that doesn't mean we will ever feel entirely safe. And can the vampire ever fully trust us, or see us as more than potential nourishment? All is possible, but what is probable? The future will undoubtedly be challenging.

Evolve Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead shows how two species—us and them—may or may not co-exist in the decades to come. These stories investigate whether or not we can mutually inhabit the same planet and even on future worlds, despite the fact that vampires can rip out our throats. Vampire may or may not be working to control their urges. We mortals may or may not be struggling to keep from staking them first chance we get. Perhaps we will come to some mutually satisfying way of dwelling together. Perhaps.

Have a read. See what *you* think about the future undead. The range of stories in *Evolve Two* will twist and turn you in a lot of directions but, once you come out the other end of this book, you will likely agree with me about one thing: we definitely have not seen the last of the Undead!

Nancy Kilpatrick
Montreal 2011

GASLIGHT ARCANUM

UNCANNY TALES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

Edited by J. R. Campbell
and Charles Prepolec



EDGE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY PUBLISHING
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere Charles Prepolec.....	1
The Comfort of the Seine Stephen Volk.....	7
The Adventure of Lucifer's Footprints Christopher Fowler.....	37
The Deadly Sin of Sherlock Holmes Tom English.....	51
The Color That Came To Chiswick William Meikle.....	75
From the Tree of Time Fred Saberhagen.....	89
The Executioner Lawrence C. Connolly.....	101
A Country Death Simon Kurt Unsworth.....	117
Sherlock Holmes and the Great Game Kevin Cockle.....	141
Sherlock Holmes and the Diving Bell Simon Clark.....	156
The Greatest Mystery Paul Kane.....	175
The House of Blood Tony Richards.....	192
The Adventure of the Six Maledictions Kim Newman.....	212

I HEAR OF SHERLOCK EVERYWHERE...

by Charles Prepolec

Welcome to *Gaslight Arcanum: Uncanny Tales of Sherlock Holmes*, the third in our series of anthologies to pitch Sherlock Holmes into weird and supernatural stories. Yes, that's right; third. The book you now hold in your hands follows *Gaslight Grimoire: Fantastic Tales of Sherlock Holmes* (2008 EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing) and *Gaslight Grottesque: Nightmare Tales of Sherlock Holmes* (2009 EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing). Let me tell you a little story about how we got to this point....

It was twenty years ago today, Sgt. Pepper taught the band to play... okay, maybe not, but time flies when you're having fun, and I've definitely been having fun with Sherlock Holmes over the last few years. It was 2006 when my co-editor Jeff Campbell and I first set out to plunge that most rational of detectives, Sherlock Holmes, into the murky realms of supernatural, or weird fiction. At that point it had been three years since we had edited our small press anthologies of traditional Sherlock Holmes pastiche — *Curious Incidents: Volumes 1 & 2* — and we were looking to do something else, something new, something different, maybe something a bit 'out there' with the character. Most of all we wanted to do something that would be fun — fun for us to put together, but more importantly, fun for our readers. It set me to thinking about exactly which Sherlock Holmes stories, by authors other than Arthur Conan Doyle, had given me the most pleasure over the years. Which were the most memorable or had left some strong impression on me? Which ones made me

smile when I first read them? Given my lifelong enthusiasm for horror fiction, comic books and pulp tales, it should come as no surprise that my list was populated with books and stories that referenced these interests.

Fred Saberhagen's *The Holmes-Dracula File* and *Séance For A Vampire*, Loren D. Estleman's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Holmes*, Manly Wade Wellman and Wade Wellman's *Sherlock Holmes's War of the Worlds*, Martin Powell's *Scarlet in Gaslight*, Phil Farmer's *The Adventure of the Peerless Peer*, Cay Van Ash's *Ten Years Beyond Baker Street*, Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, P. H. Cannon's *Pulptime*, Mark Frost's *The List of Seven* and *The Six Messiahs*, Ralph Vaughan's *Sherlock Holmes in the Adventure of the Ancient Gods*, Sam Siciliano's *The Angel of the Opera*, Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula* and *Diogenes Club* stories, Reaves and Pelan's *Shadows Over Baker Street*, etc. ... are the books, comics and journals that have left a lasting impression on me and colored my view of what I enjoy the most in Sherlock Holmes stories. Some are mash-ups with other characters, some are pulpy adventure, some are science fictional, and some are just outright horror stories, but all of them take Holmes beyond the confines of straight mystery stories, or slavish pastiche, and have some fun with the character.

Of course there were also various other factors that influenced our decision to take Holmes down the supernatural road. There seemed to be something in the air at the time, maybe a premonition, maybe an educated guess that the time for Holmes and horror was at hand. Magic and the supernatural seemed to be on the upswing in popular culture with the likes of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* making it to the silver screen. Speaking of Mike Mignola, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that a *Batman* story written by Mike, for DC's Elseworlds line in 2000 — *Batman: The Hell That Came to Gotham* — was a direct influence, to say nothing of the *Hellboy: Odd Jobs* prose anthologies edited by Christopher Golden. The former showed me that you could pitch an established detective character into a supernatural world without missing a beat and the latter practically served as a template for the sort of book we set out to produce in terms of both style and approach. We wanted to bring in writers who could work effectively with Conan Doyle's creation in much the same way Christopher Golden had successfully brought in writers to work with Mike Mignola's *Hellboy*. In short, we wanted folks who were fans of Sherlock Holmes who would take the character beyond the realm of simple

pastiche. After a bit of thought Jeff and I put together a list of writers we thought would fit and deliver the sort of stories we were after. Some we'd worked with on *Curious Incidents*, others we'd admired for some time, and others still were friends and acquaintances within either the Sherlockian or fantastic fiction communities. In any event we were thrilled with the response and were delighted to have stories from Barbara Hambly, Kim Newman, Martin Powell, Barbara Roden, Chris Roberson and all the other talented writers we pulled together for our first Holmes/horror anthology. Rounding out the text was a fine foreword from noted Sherlockian, writer and my former editor at *Sherlock* magazine, David Stuart Davies. For the icing on the cake we commissioned an atmospheric cover by artist Timothy Lantz and interior illustrations from the amazing Australian Sherlockian Phil Cornell. We had our first book!

The question then became who would publish it? Happily, by the time we pitched the concept to Calgary-based publisher Brian Hades, of EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing in 2007, a few other factors had come into play that would add to our project's appeal. First off, a Sherlock Holmes film was announced as being in-development by Warner Bros, which would bring Sherlock Holmes back into the pop culture limelight, a place from which he'd largely been absent since the Sherlock Holmes boom of the late 1980s. Secondly, Calgary had won the bid to host the 2008 World Fantasy Convention. The theme for the convention was "Mystery in Fantasy and Horror" with one of our writers, Barbara Hambly, as guest of honour. The logo for the convention featured a dragon wearing a deerstalker hat. If you want to talk about a perfect fit, it doesn't get much better than that! Serendipity is a wonderful thing. So we had a concept, writers, a publisher, a target date for publication and a great venue for a release. Finally, in October of 2008, *Gaslight Grimoire: Fantastic Tales of Sherlock Holmes* hit bookstores around the globe ... selling out its initial printing in under seven weeks. The book went on to garner some fine reviews, was short-listed for an Aurora Award and released in an Italian translation (*Il Grimorio di Baker Street*) by Gargoyle Books in 2010. Two of the stories — Barbara Roden's *The Things That Shall Come Upon Them* and Chris Roberson's *Merridew of Abominable Memory* — were picked up for John Joseph Adams' reprint anthology *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* alongside stories by Stephen King and Neil Gaiman. Not too bad for our first effort!

Needless to say we immediately began work on a follow-up, practically commissioning stories on the spot, over pints of Guinness, from writers Stephen Volk, Mark Morris, Lawrence C. Connolly, Barbara Roden and Simon K. Unsworth, at the launch during WFC 2008. Within a few months we also added stories from William Meikle, Neil Jackson, Leigh Blackmore, James A. Moore, Hayden Trenholm, William Patrick Maynard and of course my co-editor Jeff Campbell. Add in another cover from Timothy Lantz, a beautiful Hammer Horror-inspired frontispiece by comic book artist Neil Vokes, a foreword from Leslie Klinger and at WFC San Diego in October 2009 we unleashed *Gaslight Grotesque: Nightmare Tales of Sherlock Holmes* into the world.

All of which brings us more or less up to date and leads directly to the genesis of *Gaslight Arcanum: Uncanny Tales of Sherlock Holmes*.

If you've ever wondered what might have set Sherlock Holmes on the path to becoming a detective, then you're going to love our opening story from BAFTA winning screenwriter Stephen Volk. *The Comfort of the Seine* is a haunting tale of sorrow, wherein a young Sherlock Holmes takes a trip to Paris and finds an all too brief and unexpected romance that leads not only to poetic heartbreak, but also places him in the path of a mysterious and career-defining mentor.

In *The Adventure of Lucifer's Footprints* Bryant and May author Christopher Fowler weaves a tight tale of military betrayal where the galloping ghosts of the wrongful dead come thundering out of a storm to seek their vengeance.

A ghastly grimoire, written in the blood of a madman, is stolen from the monks who have guarded its secrets for centuries. To stop a string of terrible and inexplicable murders they turn to Sherlock Holmes, but can even the Great Detective withstand the pull of these cursed pages? Find out in *The Deadly Sin of Sherlock Holmes* by Tom English.

The influence of H. P. Lovecraft rears its head and the odd tentacle in William Meikle's *The Color That Came to Chiswick* — a pulpy tale of cosmic angst, alien invasion and beer. I can assure you that you'll never look at a St. Paddy's day pint in quite the same way after reading this one.

World Fantasy Award nominated writer Simon K. Unsworth returns to our pages with a classic country house mystery that is anything but cosy and traditional. There is terror afoot when we learn the secrets of the aged beekeeper in *A Country Death*.

The late Fred Saberhagen was, as mentioned earlier, one of the writers whose work influenced the direction of our Gaslight series, but due to his illness we never had the opportunity to commission a story from him for *Gaslight Grimoire*. He passed away in 2007. While we make a point of only publishing original pieces, as a tribute to Fred Saberhagen we're very pleased to be able to reprint a short story of his, *From the Tree of Time*, wherein a certain Transylvanian Count comes to the aide of Sherlock Holmes.

One of the great perks of editing this series is that I get to work with authors whose books and short stories I've read and admired for many years. Yes, no question, I'm an overgrown fanboy and I'm not above abusing my position to squeeze more stories from some of my favorite writers. *Gaslight Grimoire* allowed me to work with Kim Newman, Barbara Hambly and Martin Powell. In *Gaslight Grotesque* I was able to work on stories by Stephen Volk, Mark Morris and James A. Moore. For this present volume I had the great pleasure of working with another of my heroes, Simon Clark. A ghostly voice, from a man long dead, rises along a telephone wire from the ocean floor in *Sherlock Holmes and the Diving Bell*.

I'm pleased to bring back the multi-talented (you should hear him play guitar and sing) Lawrence C. Connolly for another go-round with Sherlock Holmes. In *The Executioner* we finally learn the truth of how Sherlock Holmes managed to rise from his apparent death at the Reichenbach Falls.

Calgary writer Kevin Cockle's *Sherlock Holmes and the Great Game* gives us a Sherlock Holmes who is not at all what one might expect from Watson's reports. At times reminiscent of Hammer Films' *The Lost Continent* the story is a rollicking and mystical adventure of Aztecs in the Arctic.

Paul Kane pits Sherlock Holmes against the most implacable foe ever faced by man and forces him to unravel *The Greatest Mystery*. Eliminating the impossible is definitely not an option in this story.

Vegas, baby, yeah! Tony Richards takes us to that Mecca of lost souls in this 21st century tale of the immortal Sherlock Holmes. Bodies drained of blood turn up in the desert and Holmes must venture into *The House of Blood* to find out why.

Our final entry has Kim Newman returning to the Gaslight series with another fine and fun novella in his ongoing series of Moriarty and Moran stories. The rascally Moran learns firsthand the price of obsession in *The Adventure of the Six Maledictions* when the Professor assembles a collection of not-so-desirable trinkets ... and their owners come calling.

There you go, dear reader, twelve uncanny tales drawn around Sherlock Holmes and his weird world. I had a hell of a lot of fun bringing together these stories and hope you have as much enjoyment in reading them.

While the notion of combining Holmes and the supernatural seemed a might bit odd back in 2006, it appears to have caught on, as I write this in 2010. The big-screen film *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) had Holmes investigating an occult conspiracy, a cash-in film from The Asylum had him facing robotic dinosaurs and a villainous steam-punk Iron Man, Wildstorm comics had Holmes saving London from a zombie apocalypse, and the follow-up series pits him against Dracula. A television series placing Holmes in modern-day London has been released, to great acclaim, by the BBC, and various other 'fantastic' projects keep coming. The wheel turns and Sherlock Holmes is once more enjoying a boom. Enjoy it folks, but remember who sent you!

Cheers,
Charles Prepolec

Opus 5: An Okal Rel Universe Legacy Anthology

edited by Lynda Williams
and Sandra Fitzpatrick



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Table of Contents

Introduction by Lynda Williams.....	1
Pet Peeves by Jennifer Lott.....	3
Growing Season by Christina E. Rundle.....	13
The Caddy by Hal Friesen.....	41
Forging Friendship by Elizabeth Woods.....	65
Contributors	77

Introduction

by Lynda Williams

In *Far Arena*, part 5 of the *Okal Rel* Saga, Admiral Horth Nersal asks Rire for a breeding set of cats to take home with him. The reason? Cats have been extinct within the Gelack empire since the exile of the Lorels and even before that they were rare, and associated with Lorel power. Many Earth animals and plants are very common on the Green Worlds of Sevildom, of course. Just not cats. Horth's cats got enough laughs to inspire co-editor Sandra FitzPatrick to hit upon the idea of cat stories for *Opus 5*, the short story anthology associated with part 5 of the saga. Here, then, are cat stories set in the *Okal Rel* Universe by authors Jennifer Lott, Christine Rundle, Hal Friesen and Elizabeth Woods, organized to march backward in time from the companion volume of the saga, *Far Arena*.

Jennifer Lott portrays a private moment between saga characters Vras and Dela, following events in Part 6: *Avim's Oath*. Christine writes about the Nesak homeworld of *SanHome* in the period between Part 2: *Righteous Anger*, and Part 9: *Holy War*. Hal's hero, Nestor, fought in the Nesak war that concludes at the start of Part 2: *Righteous Anger*. He appears here with his Nesak wife, years later, living on Gelion. Elizabeth's heroine, Minerva, thrived in the time before the Lorel exile, hundreds of years before the start of the main saga. Here then, are cats across the empire beginning with an encounter on Fountain Court between Vras Vrel's Nersallian grab rat and one of Horth's Reetion imports.

Tesseracts fifteen

A Case of Quite Curious Tales

Edited by
Julie Czerneda & Susan MacGregor



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Table Of Contents

A Safety of Crowds — E. L. Chen.....	1
Fragile Things — Amanda Sun.....	16
Just Dance — Erika Holt.....	28
Adaptation — Francine P. Lewis.....	43
Saving the Dead, or The Diary of an Undertaker's Apprentice — Jennifer Greylyn.....	45
Feral — Nicole Luiken.....	58
A+ Brain — Katrina Nicholson.....	71
The Road of Good Intentions — Cat McDonald.....	77
The Windup Heiress — Leslie Brown.....	89
The Bridge Builder — Kevin Cockle.....	104
My Name is Tommy — Mike Rimar.....	118
Darwin's Vampire — Elise Moser.....	131
Costumes — Shen Braun.....	135
Civility — J. J. Steinfeld.....	144
Take My Waking Slow — Michele Ann Jenkins.....	146
The Weirdo Adventures of Steve Rand — Claude Lalumière.....	154
Every You, Every Me — Virginia Modugno.....	164
The Oak Girl — Helen Marshall.....	179
Edge of Moonglow — Ed Greenwood.....	181
Split Decision — Robert Runté.....	188
Hide — Rebecca M. Senese.....	200
Four Against Chaos — Kurt Kirchmeier.....	211
Ice Pirates — Claire Eamer.....	221
You Always Knew — Michelle Barker.....	231
The Illumination of Cypher-Space — Lynne M. MacLean.....	233
The Tremor Road — Tony Pi.....	246
The Memory Junkies — Kate Boorman.....	257

Foreword

by Julie Czerneda

The lid of the strange case in the corner creaks open, all by itself. An unseen cell receives a message, giving an intriguing chirp. A breeze from a nearby window wafts the scent of something unexpected past your nose. You pause. You pay attention. You must, you know. Why? Because you're curious.

Curiosity's primal. Our senses scan our surroundings, alerting us most urgently about sudden change. Useful, that. Change can mean opportunity. It can mean danger. Finding lunch or being lunch. We're hard-wired to notice the unexpected, then take action.

That hasn't changed with technology. Curiosity's about having a mind that's interested in, well, everything. A mind like that craves novelty and adventure. It searches for the good stuff.

Here it is. Take a look in the case and you'll find stories that startle. Plots to widen your eyes. Characters who'll dig into your heart when you least expect it. Wonder. Oh yes. That in great amounts.

What I won't promise? That you'll be satisfied.

Curiosity, fed by feats of imagination, can only grow.

Julie Czerneda

Foreword

by Susan MacGregor

When Brian Hades approached me at KeyCon in Winnipeg and asked me to co-edit *Tesseract's Fifteen* with Julie Czerneda, I was honored to be asked, but deep down I figured I was the wrong person to do it. For one thing, I didn't particularly like YA. Whenever we received a YA story at *On Spec*, I usually found the work below par or too young for the magazine. Naturally, I said nothing of this—editing *any* Tesseracts anthology is a huge privilege and I was not about to give that up. I also held my tongue when Julie suggested we ask for stories of “wonder and astonishment” that “engaged the imagination, inspired dreams and left hope in their wake”. I had never been a wide-eyed, awe-inspired sort of kid. Instead, I was an old soul who watched the world through narrowed eyes. At six, I discovered that Santa Claus was really Mr. Johnson, the school janitor, dressed up in red. I knew that eating the crusts of my toast would *not* make my hair curly despite adult assurances. I grew up in a time when children were expected to be seen but not heard; I learned this lesson so well that by the time I was sixteen, I was a master at invisibility. My parents neither saw nor heard me come into the house after a night of partying. Uncles drank too much at family reunions, my parents fought when they thought I was asleep, my fourteen-year-old cousin ran away to Vancouver to panhandle with the hippies. My youth was a vivid, furtive time, but gritty rather than wonderful, real rather than sweet.

So it was with a great deal of cynicism that I began to read the slush. I fully expected to be immersed into fluffy forays that

celebrated puppies left by Santa, club houses with “No Girls” scrawled on their doors, hockey triumphs and dreamy first loves. How wrong I was. Rather than these sappy sojourns, I was reminded of what it is to be young—*my* kind of young. Yes, there were moments of awe and happiness, but there were even more times of struggle, determination and endurance. As I read, I was often surprised by the honest and bitter-sweet portrayals that the best stories gave me.

A number of common themes emerged as the anthology evolved. Some of the pieces looked at the culture of today and tomorrow’s youth—of gaming, of the bombardment of cyber information and the mystique of celebrity, of tagging. Other stories dealt with youthful motivations that are universal, of the need to be “cool”, of that peculiar brand of youthful idealism where caution is thrown to the winds in favor of fertilizer and nitro, where the status quo is blown to bits. Some stories won me over because of their voice—their delivery so rushed, impulsive and fresh, that only a middle-schooler could make them, while others offered me vivid characterizations—the players as brash, nervous or practical as any of my childhood friends. Finally, every story I loved had a strong speculative element, a bright and glowing heart that brought the piece to life.

Editing this anthology has changed me in a way I didn’t expect. I no longer dismiss YA short fiction as candy-coated prose, a stuffed rabbit held too long in sticky fingers. Excellent writing is excellent writing, in no matter what genre it finds itself. As it did for me, may you find yourself in these pages.

Susan MacGregor

CAPTIVES

by

Barbara Galler-Smith and Josh Langston



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CAPTIVES

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DEDICATION

For John and Annie

Captives would not have been finished without the ongoing help, advice, sounding board, and general support provided by the JMPs, especially Martin and Abi Sutherland who called from Italy, Marg DeMarco who read in the middle of the night, Andrea D'Ambra, Ann Marston, and so many JMPish others. Special and deep gratitude goes to Barb's husband John, her hero, and to Josh's amazing family: Annie, Amanda and Brett, his conscience and inspiration.

PROLOGUE

Many were the secrets of the Ancients, and powerful were their gods. Though they fell before our ancestors and their gods succumbed to ours, we honor what they left us—the art of stone and the wisdom of trees. We seek these Ancients still, in dream and in trance, in waking and in slumber, for to know them is to become one with the gods and thus be purified.

—The Book of Mallec



Map Illustration by Tania Clarke Goruk

1

Armorica, western Gaul
Summer, 76 BC

The still, musty air reeked of dirt, as usual. The massive earthen walls obliterated sound and left the burial chamber in awesome isolation. As usual. Neither the bright summer sunlight nor the familiar warmth pouring through the hole in the blackness above offered any surprises. Amrec shifted on the unyielding stone floor and smiled as he imagined what it would say if it could speak. “Rise, Amrec—you live, yet again!”

He shut his eyes against the light and stretched lazily, working the stiffness of prolonged slumber from his bones. He flexed his muscles and worked his jaw and grinned until his hand came to rest on a body lying beside him.

Gods!

He rolled away in panic, coming up hard against a stone wall, and stared at the figure lying on the ground—a woman—his first sleeping companion in over eight hundred years.

She had the tattoo markings of a druid. Fair hair framed a face marked by creases whose origins he could only guess, though something about the set of her lips, even in sleep, told him the lines weren’t born in mirth.

When she shifted and groaned, he tensed, willing himself to become a part of the dark chamber. When she did not awaken, he calmed. What was she doing here? A stranger to godsleep, he thought, else she’d be awake by now. Grateful for the time given him, he pressed his forehead to the likeness of the Holy One’s breasts carved into the north wall and hurried through a prayer of thanks. He had little time to remove the woman from his sanctuary. He grabbed the remains of a cast-off robe, and draped her with it, then donned his own tunic, shoes, and cloak retrieved from the oilskin pouch that protected them from the passage of time and the nibbles of mice.

Feeling his way along the opposite wall, he located the trip stone and brushed away the dirt which made it feel like any other flat rock in the floor. He applied his weight to one end of

the stone until he heard the rumble of a hidden counterweight, then he leaned back against the rock wall and pushed. Slowly, a great central stone gave way revealing a tunnel just large enough for a man, or a bear, to crawl through. He gave another prayer of thanks that the gods woke him only during the summer when bears were too busy eating to block his path to the world.

Grabbing the woman by the ankles, he backed into the tunnel and pulled her through. Dirt showered down whenever he lifted his head too high and grazed the ceiling. She wasn't large, but removing her from the barrow proved time-consuming. He had to get her out before she woke. He had no intention of leaving her inside his haven, though the temptation to abandon her was strong. She'd likely starve to death unless someone heard her cries and pulled her up through the eye in the barrow's top. Neither option appealed to him. The less attention this place drew, the better.

Once clear of the tunnel, he restored the wall stone which blocked access to the interior. A low cloud of dust enveloped him as he returned to the woman's side and paused to catch his breath.

Piles of building stone lay jumbled around the base of the burial mound. Surely no one would build on such a sacred place. With dismay he spotted a chisel lying near the stones which suggested someone was doing just that. Soon the mound would be defiled. To resume the godsleep, he would have to find another bed.

The woman groaned again. Amrec squinted at her lying in the shade's cool comfort. The Midsummer sun had accomplished its task and completed her transformation. If the Holy One truly loved him, She'd make the woman stay asleep long enough for him to get away unseen. He knelt, pressed his forehead to the ground in obeisance, then hurried toward Mount Eban's druid enclave. Perhaps Master Fyrsil could offer an explanation.

He had much to do before he dared godsleep again.



Nestled in a natural harbor as protective as a mother's womb, Vannes boasted the best marketplace in all of western Gaul. Traders from the frigid bays of the North to the desert coasts of Africa were welcomed by the seafaring Veneti who ruled Vannes. Anything could be purchased in the market, though Druid Mallec searched for only two items.

When not loitering in the slave market in hopes of finding the dark-haired woman who frequented his dreams and visions, he haunted the narrow aisles and alleyways searching for paper and parchment, vellum or lesser skins—anything on which to record the history of his people.

A smallish man bumped him, but Mallec caught his hand before the thief could grab his coin purse. When the man looked up with rheumy eyes above hollowed cheeks, Mallec let him go. Thieves were as common in the market as pirates and Romans on the sea. Both plied the Armorican coasts with equal ardor, setting anchor in Vannes' still waters. Both dealt in slaves; the pirates sold, and the Romans bought. Mallec made little distinction between them.

The clang of iron meeting iron and a shouted order in the Roman tongue pulled the druid from a paper seller's stall. He snaked his way through the knots of people buying fish or apples or surrounding some itinerant bard to hear the latest news. Some stepped aside in recognition of his master's rank, but most ignored him. A wagon stopped directly in front of him blocking his access to the slave market, and he could only glimpse the commotion which had caught his attention.

By the time he climbed on the hub of a cart wheel for a better view, a dense crowd stood between him and the slave auctioneer's platform.

Nearby, a line of men and women leaned against each other in exhaustion. Dark like his old Iberian mentor, Druid Orlan, each slave wore an iron collar attached to a common chain. Most were filthy. Their clothing hung in tatters, and their bare feet were cut and swollen.

Though the guards wore short tunics in the style of Roman mercenaries, heavy woolen cloaks covered their shoulders in response to an unseasonable chill. The slaves had no such comforts, and shivered in Vannes' damp sea air.

Two wealthy men in brilliantly colored robes haggled from horse-drawn carts. Neither was Armorican, but which was the buyer and which the seller Mallec couldn't tell.

He pursed his lips in distaste. Slave markets abounded wherever Romans went, especially along the coasts. During his student years, Mallec had even seen a gang of chained Gauls at the druid enclave on the sacred isle of Mona.

He looked with pity at the bedraggled lot cowering on the platform. Once, his people had disdained trading in human flesh, now many viewed it as commonplace.

One of the mercenaries unchained a woman from the others and pulled her to the center of the wooden platform, two feet above the ground. She held a coughing baby tightly to her breast. It seemed to Mallec as if life seeped out of the child with every spasm of its tiny lungs, yet his despair for the child dissolved as he got a better look at the child's mother. Long dark hair framed her dirty face, and though he could not tell for certain if it was

the woman he'd seen a hundred times in his dreams, his heart thudded with excitement.

Memories of those visions tumbled forward like water over a cataract—unstoppable, irresistible. From childhood he'd seen just such a dark-haired beauty. She'd grown up with him, though only in his dreams. Yet in those brief shadowy glimpses of her the gods had granted him, he saw enough to love the sense of who she was. After waiting years, he'd finally seen her face for the first time only a few months before. He'd taken it as a sign—the gods' way of telling him it was time he found her. Could this woman, whose form was so similar, be the one?

He recognized fire in the way she held herself—a woman who would never acknowledge defeat. He could not see her face, for her hair, wild from neglect, covered most of it. He didn't care. Certain she was the woman he'd been waiting for, he pressed forward. All he had to do was reach her. Though he abhorred the notion of supporting a slave trader, he would buy and free both mother and child.

Two men in front of him closed the narrow gap. He grimaced and tried to squeeze between them.

"Let me through," he ordered, but the only one who seemed to hear him laughed.

"Wait yer turn, druid, or come earlier."

Mallec stumbled back, propelled by those at the rear of the mob. As he searched for another way in, the taller slave merchant turned to his stout companion. "What say you? Shall we leave them together?"

The Roman brushed at his chin with a fingertip, as if deep in thought. "It does our buyers little good to feed wailing infants who will only die before they reach Massalia—the voyage is far too long. Let's see if someone is willing to buy it." He waved to the guard who held the woman's arm. "Take the baby. We'll sell it separately."

The guard reached to pull the infant from its mother's arms. With a sudden, desperate motion, the woman seized the guard's belt knife. She waved it at him, shrieked, and forced him off the platform with a quick swipe.

"Get the child!" yelled the fat merchant.

The woman crouched, ready to spring at the first person to approach. Then, when three guards advanced from different sides, she laid her infant on the boards at her knees. With a defiant and fearless wail, she pierced the babe through the heart, then plunged the bloody knife into her own.

Mallec collapsed in shock at the foot of the platform and watched their blood mingle on the rough planking.

Another shout from the merchant and guards removed the bodies as if they were slaughtered cattle. Mallec turned away. He had no stomach to watch any more.

It took him nearly an hour to find his way back to the paper sellers where he'd promised to meet his friend Leuw. By the time Mallec arrived, the heavy-set bard was well into his second cup of unwatered wine at a stall nearby.

"Mallec, you surprise me," his friend said as he offered him a cup. "I expected you to be carrying enough paper to add ten more volumes to your library. What have you been doing?"

Mallec gulped the wine with gratitude, then extended the empty cup for a refill. He didn't know how to begin.

The bard raised an eyebrow but said nothing until after Mallec drained the second cup.

"Speak up. We've been friends too long for you to try to keep any secrets."

"I think she's dead, Leuw." The words were a spike of pain driven into him as if the woman had pierced his heart, too. Though she and her child were safe in the Otherworld, he was now left alone in this one.

Leuw's eyes widened. "Who's dead? Someone from Eban or Gillac?"

Mallec shook his head.

Leuw waited a moment, and then nudged him gently. "Who are you talking about?"

Mallec looked at Leuw with a greater sorrow than he'd ever known. "The woman I've dreamed of all my life—the woman in my visions."

"I remember you said you'd seen her face in your last vision, and that you thought she was enslaved. Now you know she's dead? Did you have another vision?"

Mallec leaned back and wrapped his palms around the cup though he did not drink. "No," he said slowly, letting the truth of it sink in. "I saw her just now, in the slave market. She killed herself rather than be separated from her child."

Leuw put a hand on Mallec's shoulder. "Oh, gods," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Mallec could not guess what greater purpose the woman's death served. His last vision of her had shown sorrow and grief etched deep in her eyes, but nothing of the desperation which would send her to the Otherworld so soon. He threw his cup down and wiped at his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"You saw her clearly?" Leuw asked after a while.

"Yes, though I couldn't get close. Her face was partly obscured by her hair."

Leuw sighed. "Then you can't be certain it was the same woman."

"Few others could have that same dark look."

"Nonsense," Leuw said. "Master Orlan came from Iberia and often told me about the dark-eyed women of his land. Though his hair was gray with age when he served here, it was once as black as a raven's wing. Surely many such women have been enslaved in Iberia."

Hope surged through Mallec. "Yes. She might yet live."

Leuw laughed and patted his shoulder. "Of course. Have you had any new visions of her?"

Mallec shook his head. In his last vision on Mount Eban, she'd stood in front of him, her triad healer's tattoo swirling up from her breast as if a perfect match for his own tattoos. Her cheek, marred by a single shallow scar, gave her a look of passion edged with ferocity.

He smiled. "You're right. The woman in the slave market had no tattoos."

"Then thank the gods your woman still lives and one day you will find her. For now we need but ask them to aid the souls of the woman and child who sought their company too soon."

Mallec said the words of prayer, and Leuw echoed him.

"So must it be," they said together.

"Your dedication to the woman in your dreams does you great credit," Leuw said, "but if you persist in avoiding all others while you wait, you will be sadly out of practice when you find her. You've lived in Armorica for the past five years and have never sought a companion for the cold winter nights, nor accepted a Beltane offer from those who admire your fine physique enough to want to couple. As a learned man, you value knowledge, but in this, my friend, you need tutoring!"

Mallec's cheeks burned at the truth of Leuw's words. He'd allowed his infatuation with a dream to blind him to other possibilities.

"Let's assume you're right. Where are these other women so keen for my attentions?" He wanted to laugh—he could think of none.

"Sioned, among the Lemarii at Trochu, offered you a cup at Beltane two years ago."

Mallec grinned. "So did her mother, as I recall. Alas, one was too old and the other too young."

"You have odd notions, even for a Belgican, Mallec. Here, we let the women decide for themselves if they are too young or too old. Be grateful they're interested in you at all." He rubbed his hands. "If I were a slender young man like you, I'd be looking to spend my time with Setaine's half-sister, Modlen."

"I haven't seen her since she was a child. She's been fostered here among the Veneti."

"I know," Leuw said. "I've been living here as well, and I've seen her often. She's as comely as Setaine is strong. Best of all, she's returning to Gillac. Perhaps if you spent some time with her, you could become proficient enough in the art of love to satisfy your dark-eyed driad when you finally do meet her."

"We'll see," Mallec laughed. "I don't have as much time as I once did. I'll stay busy from now until the Ollamh's Gathering in Carnute. Are you going?"

"I wouldn't miss an assembly of the bards for anything," Leuw said, "but the rest? I don't need anyone to remind me what my job is." He paused, and the smile slipped from his face. "But I don't think the same can be said of you, my friend."

Mallec was taken by surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about that written history of yours. The bardic students complained to me about it the last time I was there. How can they learn all they need to know if so much of their time is spent recording things better left unwritten? A bard is a poet and a musician, not a scribe."

"It's necessary, Leuw. I've been given this task by the gods. It's time we added to the old ways."

Leuw made a face. "It's heresy to record some of what you write down, Mallec. Putting that which is sacred on paper reduces its power and potency. I can't approve and neither would the High Ollamhs, either in Carnute or on Mona."

"Neither of them knows about it."

Leuw frowned. "Yet."



Dierdre woke to the fragrance of wild roses, the warmth of midday, and the drone of insects. She wanted to stretch but her body remained sluggish—she lay still and forced her eyes open. Squinting against the sunlight sparkling through a canopy of leaves, she turned her head in time to see a man hurry away. She tried to sit, but managed only to support herself on one elbow as she peered after him.

He wore a simple woolen tunic and appeared unremarkable except for a patch of white on the back of his head, as if a dollop of limewash had been splattered on his dark hair. From his lithe form and rapid pace, she guessed him no more than thirty. He vanished into the nearby trees.

She did not recall going outside and instead focused on how she felt, wondering if the man had harmed her in some way. As her head cleared, feeling returned to her arms and legs. She was entirely naked in the field beside the earthen mound. Beside her

she found some clothing—old and filthy—but serviceable. She dressed, licked her dry lips, and slowly remembered.

She'd inhaled baneweed fumes inside the Cavern of the Ancients, in spite of protests from Druids Mallec and Leuw. She studied her surroundings and recognized the mound of the Ancients—the Giant's Tomb.

She forced herself to her knees, then sat on her heels. Why had she been left here? Mount Eban and the Cavern were a day's walk away. Surely Mallec and Leuw had a reason. The meadow was empty except for a dozen kine grazing at the far end.

"Lugh's balls!" she muttered, and instantly regretted her words. Speaking made her parched throat ache.

She made her way to the stream where she knelt and gratefully scooped cool water into her hands to drink.

She wiped her wet chin on the sleeve of her soiled robe and sat to rest a little longer. What kind of men would leave a woman naked and alone in the forest? Anyone with a grain of compassion would have revived her in the comfort of her quarters at the enclave. Worse, though she'd risked her life to learn how to recover from woadsleep, she knew no more than before.

She breathed in the afternoon air and sighed. At least her throat felt better. In fact, despite her anger, she felt vigorous and well. Her hands, last seen scraped and gouged by her climb through the cavern, were healed. Not only were the cuts all gone, not even a scar remained. She smiled in elation. Her hands were smooth and healthy-looking, the way they'd been years before. She felt her face, probing her eyelids, her mouth, and her throat. The skin felt smooth and firm. There was a beneficial effect of the baneweed sleep after all!

Though she'd survived the powerful magic in fine form, her mood darkened. Mallec had deliberately denied her the secret of revival. That he would so casually toss her aside confirmed it.

She studied the meadow around her, lush with the full green of summer. When she had last closed her eyes it was on the first flush of a colorful fall. How many seasons had passed? How long had she lain here to be burnt as kindling or allowed to rot? It had to be Mallec! She ground her teeth. He and the sycophant bard had abandoned her. A fitting punishment for those two would be her first act of revenge.

Her thoughts drifted back to the man—he must have been near her when she awakened. Her transformation had likely frightened him. If she could find him, she might discover exactly what had happened. Surely that wouldn't be too hard. How many men bore such a white spot?

She rose to her feet without her usual stiff-jointed effort. Where to go? If Mallec had abandoned her, she could not go back to

the enclave—better to let him believe she remained a stick. The white-spotted man had run in the general direction of Gillac. Perhaps she might find him there, or at least locate a place to stay. She meandered around a pile of rocks clearly avoided by the masons working on the dwelling atop the huge burial mound. The stones mimicked the shape of a man, the whole pile topped by the skull of a sheep.

“Why, look who’s here!” she said, bowing casually toward the stones. “If it isn’t dear old Gar, witless chief of the Suetoni. How good of you to show yourself. But for you, this construction would be mine, not some Lemarii pup’s.” Though Gar had fathered her only child, she had no love for him, especially since their Beltane tryst came about only because Gar’s wife pitied her childlessness. By refusing to leave his wife, Gar earned Dierdre’s scorn, but for denying her claim to the land she now surveyed, he’d earned her hatred. And yet, whatever fate Gar had earned, the one she vowed for Mallec would be worse. Bringing it to pass would be simplified by keeping her presence a secret.

She’d take her time with Mallec until she knew the secret of restoration. Then, as the Ageless Man had, she would avoid death. She smiled. One who doled out death and yet avoided it herself was more than mortal. She would no longer be merely a driad—she would become a *goddess*.

Gar was therefore her first target. To Gillac then, where her son, Caradowc, and Gar, both lived. The boy might not be happy to see her, but unless he’d changed a great deal, he’d still do her bidding, especially if there was something in it for him. She laughed. There was definitely something in it for him.

2

Waves slapped against the steep sides of the Roman trading vessel, invading Rhonwen's dreams with their insistent pounding. She awoke with a start, wondering who could be banging on the door. Only with the pitch and roll of the merchantman did she remember she was no longer at her school in Iberia, but a prisoner on a slave ship bound for the eastern Mediterranean.

She listened to the waves, and let the ship's motion lull her. Her stomach no longer roiled with every wave—the reward for the long months she and her uncle, Orlan, had been at sea.

Soft moans from somewhere belowdecks roused her fully. While she was now used to the rock of the ship, she would never grow accustomed to the sounds of misery from the rest of the ship's human cargo.

Orlan slept, and she knew she should, too, but late at night alone with her thoughts, memories of their past returned, uninterrupted by whimpering slaves.

Every night she sought a dreamless sleep, but she always awoke, her thoughts always on Iberia where she'd run afoul of Quintus Sertorius, the expatriate Roman and military genius heralded by some as the King of Iberia. He had been her lover. Once she had dreamed of being in his arms. Now she dreamt only of strangling him to exact vengeance for the death of her son, Rede. Their son. She spat on the deck and, as she did every night, cursed him.

As much as she despised Sertorius, his lieutenant, Perpenna Vento, deserved worse curses. He had walled Sertorius away from the people who loved him, convincing him of their betrayal. The last time Rhonwen held Rede, he lay dead in her arms, coldly executed by Perpenna. No death could be slow enough nor painful enough for that man.

Vengeance had sustained her and given her a focus other than her grief. While Orlan had encouraged her to trust the gods, Rhonwen had smiled and contemplated yet another way for Sertorius and Perpenna to die.

"Are you cold?" Orlan whispered in the darkness. "You're shaking."

"I'm all right." Her voice lacked the calm she'd hoped for.

Orlan patted her shoulder. "You're a terrible liar. Next you'll be telling me Scotus will give us our freedom and enough money to live wherever we'd like."

"Then I'd go straight back to Iberia." Rhonwen felt Orlan shake his head in the dark.

"Yes," he said, "I know. But you might as well tie yourself to an anchor and throw yourself into the sea. It'd likely be an easier death than what Perpenna would demand."

"I'd find a way to kill him first."

"And Sertorius, too?"

"Yes!"

"And all who surround them? Will you kill them, too?"

Rhonwen leaned away from him in frustration. "Should I leave my son's death unavenged?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying!" He hugged her fiercely. "If you only live for revenge you're not living. Think how unrelenting hatred soured your mother's life." He let his breath out in a prolonged sigh. "You're a healer. You should concentrate on preventing death, not causing it."

Her life as a healer, travelling Iberia with her mother, seemed distant. "I should be happy tending sick slaves for Scotus?"

"Would you rather be one of those slaves?" he asked, his voice a whisper. "What kind of future do you think they have?"

"Slaves don't have futures. They only have the present—to live, or not, at the whim of a master. Perhaps you've forgotten we're slaves, too?" She rattled the chain attached to her iron collar.

He flicked his own slave collar with a finger. "Hardly, Rhonwen, but you're wasting yourself on thoughts of revenge. Look to the future. Someday the gods will present an opportunity for escape. You're better off preparing yourself to recognize it."

"I'll escape," she said, "though I'm not foolish enough to think someone will rescue me, take me back to Iberia, and hold Sertorius down while I cut out his liver and feed it to him. What's wrong with pondering the joy it would give me to do that?"

"I surrender," Orlan said. "If hate sustains you, then so be it. We won't be on this boat forever."

She smiled wolfishly into the darkness. "I'm counting on it."



The merchantman crashed into waves coming directly at the bow, making it hard for Rhonwen to examine her patient, a slight man of middle years. The flesh on his back bore the angry puckered weals left by a whip. Dead skin curled around fester-

ing sores layered between long dark bruises. Such injuries were usually inflicted during enslavement, not after, as most slavers were averse to spoiling their merchandise. Scotus, the man to whom Rhonwen and Orlan had been sold, rarely employed the whip. Instead, he relied on a calm demeanor which instilled more fearful obedience than any whip ever could.

The man shivered with fever and moaned as she dipped water from the rain barrel and poured it on his wounds. She wished Orlan would return from the shore excursion Scotus had allowed him to make in search of healing herbs. They'd been gone since before dawn and should have been back by now. Dusk neared.

"The gods may let you live," she told her patient, "but you must do your part. Sleep on your stomach. Leave your back open to the air." She scowled at his rags. "Is this your only tunic?"

"Aye," the slave said, his speech thick with an Iberian accent. "Master Scotus said I'd get a new one on Delos."

Rhonwen scowled at the mention of the slave port. She and Orlan had already made the trip once. She didn't relish seeing again the place where thousands of slaves from the world over were bought and sold in herds, like cattle.

"Come see me tomorrow," she said. "By then, my uncle will have returned, and we may have something to help you heal."

"Bless you, Driad," the man said as he shuffled away.

"Next," Rhonwen said, looking toward the shore to which Orlan and the overseer, Gamala, had traveled. A tiny triangle of white sail marked their return.

An old woman appeared at Rhonwen's elbow. "Will he live?" she asked.

Rhonwen grimaced. "Will who live?"

She pointed to the man walking away. "My son—you just saw him. The Romans whipped him for not telling them the way to the camp of Sertorius." She straightened with pride. "He stood up to them. Wouldn't tell 'em nothing."

At the mention of Sertorius, Rhonwen frowned. "And what did he earn for his trouble?"

"A slave collar. They burned our hut and took our livestock."

Rhonwen shook her head with renewed hatred. "He should've told them everything he knew."

The old woman waved an admonishing finger. "And endanger our king?"

Rhonwen spat on the deck in disgust. "He wears no crown. He's only a Roman—not worthy of an honest person's trust."

The old woman put her hands over her ears. "How can you speak of Sertorius that way? He's a great general."

"I know what he is," Rhonwen said bitterly. "He had my son killed and put me in slave chains. All because he listens

to a lying Roman pig instead of the trustworthy Iberians who fought for him."

The old woman's mouth hung open in surprise. "Go to your son," Rhonwen said. "Keep the flies from his wounds."

The woman backed away, and would not look Rhonwen in the eye. In her hurry she bumped into Scotus who pushed her aside.

He glared at Rhonwen. "What're you yelling about?"

"Nothing," she said.

The short, swarthy Roman stepped closer, took a double handful of her hair, and tightened his grip until her head moved in accord with his slightest whim. He forced her to look at him. "Do you think you hold some sort of privileged position here?"

She tried to shake her head, but he held her too tightly. She knew better than to attempt to remove his hands.

He lowered his face close to hers, his breath hot and reeking of garlic. "I thought you'd want to know we'll be parting company soon."

"When? Where?"

Scotus smiled broadly, and Rhonwen stared at his double chin rather than look at his brown teeth. He released her without answering and gestured toward the slaves on the deck. "Are any of them too ill to be sold?"

"A few aren't fit for farm work though most would survive. It'll help if Orlan can find the right plants." She looked back at the little boat now under full sail. "So, you'll leave us on Delos?"

"Us?" He laughed. "I'm only getting rid of you."

Rhonwen stared at him in shock. "But, you can't!"

"Orlan knows the healer's art nearly as well as you, and he can make his own medicines. Why keep you?"

Rhonwen's mind whirled. How many days away was Delos, and how many more to Rhodes? How much time did they have to execute their escape?

She turned to the rail and squinted at the little boat carrying Orlan and Gamala as it halved the distance from the shore. She waved and both men waved back. As it drew nearer, she formed her fingers into the ogham sign for danger. Orlan responded asking for details.

Though she'd turned her back to Scotus to keep him from seeing her make the finger signs, the wily slaver moved close enough to peer over her shoulder.

"What're you doing?"

Rhonwen stopped in mid-sign. "Nothing."

Scotus shaded his eyes against the setting sun and watched as Orlan made additional signs with his hands. The slaver smiled. "How clever! You converse without words."

Rhonwen shook her head. "They're merely wardings against any sea creatures which might upset the boat."

"And what sort of spells would Orlan be casting on this ship?" The slaver laughed humorlessly. "I'll be happy to see you gone. You think you can outsmart me?"

He crossed his arms and stared at Orlan as the two boats drew closer together. "Still, I've heard about this secret language of the druids. It might prove useful." He turned and faced her. "You will teach this language to me and Gamala."

Teach druidcraft to a Roman *slaver*? "That's impossible." Scotus chuckled. "We'll see."



Scotus talked to Gamala while the crew raised the boat he and Orlan had taken ashore. Satisfied the smaller vessel was secured, the ship's captain ordered his men to raise the sails and put back to sea. Scotus left Orlan chained to the deck beside Rhonwen.

"You signaled danger, then nothing more," Orlan said. "What's going on?"

Rhonwen hugged him. "I couldn't say anything else. Scotus was watching me." She whispered in his ear. "Scotus knows about the Ogham finger signs. He wants us to teach him."

Orlan chewed on his lower lip. "Such knowledge in the wrong hands is a terrible thing. The gods will be angry." He ran his hands through his thinning gray hair. "That's the danger you warned me of?"

"There's more," she said, her eyes burning at the thought. "Scotus plans to separate us. He intends to sell me in Rhodes." She clung to him. "I couldn't stand to lose what family I have left. I'd rather die."

Orlan hugged her close, stroking her hair as he had when she was a child. "Such talk profits no one. You've much to live for; you just don't realize it yet."

She wanted to argue, to tell him that since Rede's death, life was a burden she could not bear. If not chained to the ship, she would have long ago thrown herself into the waiting arms of the Great Mother.

They turned at the sound of Scotus laughing.

"Add some fuel to the brazier, Gamala," Scotus said, "and bring a lamp. We'll need the light soon, and the fire will take some of the chill out of the breeze."

Gamala instantly obeyed.

Scotus faced the druids. "I've decided you will teach me your silent language. I can put such a thing to good use. We'll be another fortnight reaching Rhodes. That should be enough time to get started."

"Time isn't the problem." Orlan said slowly. "You're not a druid, therefore we cannot teach you. It's forbidden."

The smile wavered on Scotus' face only for an instant. "Nonsense. You're no longer druids, yet you still use it."

"We'll always be druids," Rhonwen said. "A slave collar changes nothing."

Scotus laughed. "A slave collar changes everything! You belong to me. You must do as I command."

Orlan straightened. "Our gods—"

"Mean nothing to me," Scotus said. "Whatever prohibitions you once lived by do not apply here. My word is law."

Rhonwen crossed her arms. "We answer to a higher one."

Scotus glanced at Gamala. "I've never understood why some people require more than simple persuasion." He sighed, then looked at the druids. "You *will* share with me the secret of your hand signals. If not, I will scourge you both, then sell you the moment we arrive on Delos, and you can spend the rest of your miserable lives digging onions." He rid himself of anything resembling a smile. "Or worse."

"Your threats are wasted," Orlan said. "I've already lost more than you can take from me."

Rhonwen's heart twisted. Her uncle had fought, unarmed and alone, against the men Perpenna sent to kill her son. She'd prayed a thousand times for the gods to take her to her child's side. Their answer had always been silence. Perhaps if she tested Scotus, he would do their work and send her to the Otherworld.

The slaver chuckled, a cold mirthless sound that made her shiver, and gestured to the silent, black-skinned overseer at his side. "Is the brazier ready, Gamala?"

The slave nodded from his position beside a small forge perched on a three-legged stand, the kind used by an ironmonger for shipboard work. It held a mound of coals with a glowing red-hot center. When Gamala stepped on a small bellows which fed air into the forge, the center of the coals glowed white. An iron rod, the tip already bright orange, jutted from the fire.

"Now," Scotus said to the muscular overseer, "see that our fearless friend holds still."

Gamala wrapped his arms around Orlan and held him in a wrestler's grip. Orlan struggled, but Gamala increased the pressure until the older man could barely breathe.

"Will you teach me the sign language?"

Orlan gave his head a fierce shake.

Rhonwen grabbed Gamala's hands to break his grip, but the chain at her neck kept her too far away to be effective.

"Keep that up," Scotus said as he pulled the rod from the fire, "and I'll cool this iron in the old man's heart." He waved the tip

of the orange-hot brand in a short arc between the druids. "One of you will teach me."

"Never," whispered Orlan. He clenched his jaws, and Rhonwen saw strength in him she knew she didn't possess. He would bear the torture, even if it killed him. "I welcome death."

"Pain is not the same as death," Scotus said calmly, "but like death, it can be wasted. I've found pain very useful when applied in the proper place and time." He pushed the rod back into the coals and waited until the tip glowed brighter than before, then slowly extracted the rod from the fire. It sparked once, and he knocked it against the side of the forge.

"Death takes but a moment; pain may seem a lifetime."

Orlan shut his eyes.

Rhonwen watched in horror as Scotus held the hot brand close enough to Orlan's cheek that his skin turned pink in its yellow glow. The druid did not flinch.

"Look at me," Scotus commanded.

Orlan opened his eyes and stared fearlessly ahead.

The slaver smiled. "You think you can withstand this?"

Orlan mouthed a silent prayer.

Scotus turned and thrust the rod, sword-like, into Rhonwen's cheek.

She screamed and collapsed in agony as pain washed over her. She clutched at her cheek, but the pain sent waves of nausea through her, and she could do nothing.

"Rhonwen!" Orlan cried. "Oh, gods!" He tried to claw his way to her, but Gamala held him back.

Scotus picked up the ironmonger's dousing bucket and threw cold sea water into her face, but she barely felt it. She felt only the torment of her burn.

She writhed with agony, unable to touch the burn but unable to keep her hands away. She pressed the wet hem of her tunic lightly against it. Slowly she shut off that part of her brain which registered the hurt. The pain slowly diminished, and she struggled to her knees, propelled by anger.

"I'll die before I teach you anything."

"Both of you seem bent on dying," Scotus said, scratching at a louse in his chest hair. He signaled Gamala to release Orlan. "Chain them to the rail. They need time to reflect on my request." He shoved the rod back into the coals and waited while Gamala secured them, then the two men disappeared into Scotus' quarters.

Rhonwen slumped to the deck, and Orlan cradled her head in his lap.

She uncovered the wound and looked up at him in a silent query. He held her gaze in his own, and his brown eyes pulled down at the sides in grief. He bit his lip and focused on her

wound, then leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I'm so sorry. I don't understand why the gods won't let me protect you." He pressed the cloth back against the burn.

She grimaced. Nothing had ever hurt as much. As a healer she knew how serious a branding burn could be. Deaths from burns were common. By concentrating on her breathing and willing the pain to stop she managed to calm herself.

"I can't stand to see him hurt you any more," Orlan said, his face reflecting a mixture of grief and weariness. "You've suffered too much already. We both have."

"But what can we do?" she whispered, more from hoarseness than from fear of being overheard.

"We're not completely helpless," Orlan said. "We can choose to end our lives. Rhiannon will welcome us." He glanced toward the sea and was about to say more but closed his mouth slowly when Scotus approached.

The slaver knelt beside Rhonwen and stroked her hair as if she were a favorite hound. "I see the desire for death in your eyes. But, you must understand—you have no choice in your fate. You will live or die as I choose."

Rhonwen followed his gaze as the slaver stepped up to the brazier and poked the coals with the iron brand. "Are you ready to begin my instruction, or must I give you another lesson of my own?" He turned Rhonwen's head to expose her unburned cheek.

She tried to spit, but her mouth had gone dry.

"You may as well just kill us and be done with it," Orlan said. "We'll teach you nothing."

"But you've already taught me a great deal," Scotus said to Rhonwen. "I've watched you tending the other slaves, especially the children. You've even kept a few alive I thought had no chance, and fattened my purse as a result. For some reason, the little ones respond well to you." He put his hands on his hips. "Perhaps we can find out why." He turned toward his quarters and shouted, "Gamala!"

Rhonwen stared in dismay at the child in Gamala's arms—a girl no more than six or seven, her face and hands smudged from the pitch used to seal the boat's hull. She made no sound, though she was clearly frightened.

Scotus smiled when the slave reached him. "Hold the brat down," he said. "I don't fancy chasing her all over the ship."

Rhonwen recognized the child. Affa and her entire family had been taken aboard at a port in north Africa. Rhonwen had treated her for a fever. The little girl trembled as she stared into Rhonwen's eyes.

"You can't do this."

Scotus stirred the coals again. "Of course I can." He pulled the iron rod from the fire and turned toward the child. Affa, wide-eyed, instantly began screaming.

No pain Rhonwen had endured, either from the burn or from her skin, chafed to bleeding by her struggles against her irons, was as horrible as the realization she would not be able to save this child any more than she had saved her own.

"Silence her!" Scotus said.

Gamala clamped his hand tightly over Affa's mouth as the child kicked and flailed.

Rhonwen reached for her, but Gamala stood an arm's length beyond her grasp.

"Hold her *still!*" Scotus warned. "And move your hand, or I'll burn it."

Gamala gave him an annoyed look and uncovered the child's mouth as she writhed, screaming, in his arms.

Scotus drew closer with the brand.

Affa screamed louder.

Orlan grabbed the empty bucket from the deck, raised it over his head and hurled it with both hands toward the slaver. It slammed into his wrist, and he dropped the hot iron where it scorched his sandaled foot before landing on the deck.

He turned on Orlan like an enraged animal. "You'll pay for that!"

"Fine," Orlan said. "Burn me. Or kill me. You needn't harm the child."

Rhonwen pushed in front of him. "No, Scotus—burn me! I'll scream for you if that's what you want."

Scotus retrieved the iron rod and put it back amidst the coals. "What I want is the secret of your hand signs."

Rhonwen shook her head.

"Gamala," Scotus said, once again prodding the coals, "hold the girl tight. I imagine she's going to thrash a bit."

"I'll kill you for this," Orlan said.

Scotus laughed. "Do you really think I'd ever give you the chance?" He spit on the end of the rod and smiled at the resulting hiss. "Ready, Gamala?"

Affa shrieked in terror. "Rhonwen!"

"Stop," Rhonwen cried, her stomach tightened to the point of pain. She lowered her head in defeat. "I'll teach you."

Orlan stared at her in silence, his expression one of betrayal.

3

The ruts in the track to Eban enclave were deeper and more plentiful than Amrec remembered from the day before. For him, it *was* yesterday, though it had been a year since he last walked the earth, and four years since he secretly paid his respects to Master Fyrsil and received a handful of coins from the old man. Though Fyrsil was generous, bitter experience had taught Amrec to approach the enclave masters cautiously. A few welcomed him, but many had not, and some had been openly hostile. He wished he had some alternative, but none could answer his questions better than the druids, though his questions never changed.

He smiled hopefully. Perhaps this time he would get the answers he'd sought for so long. *Eight hundred years* he'd waited, and though each year was but a day for him, even one without his beloved Trina was too long.

When his wife died birthing their only child, he lived on only because she made him promise to care for the baby, but the Dark One took him, too, a year to the day after Trina's death.

As he mourned, the gods came with visions and a promise. "Keep vigil," they'd said. "When the Stone Fingers tumble, and stars fall from the night sky, your wait will be over."

Amrec ran from the graves and did not stop until he reached the Standing Stones at the base of the sacred mount that guarded the secret entry to the Land of the Dead. He lived by the Standing Stones through the planting and growing, and then the harvest, watching the night sky and waiting for the rocks to fall. People brought him food at first, thinking his vigil holy, but in time they mocked him for his grief.

Sometime in the second year the gods returned.

"How much longer must I wait?" he asked.

"Many years," they said.

They then showed him how to extend his life with godsleep. The cost however, would be terrible. Everyone he knew would age and die while he alone cheated the Dark One.

He had no regrets. For the chance to be reunited with his beloved Trina, he put aside his shaman's staff and his feathered cloak of office, everyone he knew, and everything he owned. Such baggage was unfit for a traveler on time's road.

He remembered the year he woke to find his old village destroyed and the people scattered. In time, others replaced them, raising new buildings from the rubble. They spoke a strange tongue, their gods bore odd names, and their wise men were not always wise.

The newcomers created the enclave, and every year he went to its Master hoping to hear of the signs which would mark the end of his wait.

Though eight centuries passed, his grief clung to him like a spider's gossamer threads, binding him through time. He stayed awake as little as possible, committing himself to godsleep the way another might simply extinguish a lamp until the next dawn. By his count, he was only nine years older than the day he'd started—still with the form and features of his prime.

Today, however, had been different. He'd awakened with a stranger, a woman with druid signs on her arms and whose bitterness marked her even in sleep. He had no desire to know more about her. Her mere presence meant he needed another place to safely sleep. He sighed. It could be weeks, even months, before he found or built such a place.

His stomach rumbled, and he hastened toward the enclave. As cantankerous as the old druid was, Fyrsil never failed to offer him sustenance. He never asked questions, nor answered any except those always on Amrec's mind: Have the stones at Mount Eban fallen, and has the sky rained stars? The answer to both had always been no.

He decided to pay his respects to Fyrsil and afterwards walk to the mount. There he could gather *baht* stems and find a place to sleep inside the cavern for a real night. In the morning, he'd inspect the great stones.

The enclave looked subtly different, and he paused to study the area before he identified the cause. A new cowshed stood beside the arms practice field now choked with vegetables. All else seemed the same.

He made his way to Fyrsil's house. The old man rarely left his rooms, and for as long as Amrec had known him, even before he grew white-bearded and short-tempered, he'd been stiff in his joints and bones.

He paused near the first house. A young, brown-haired woman looked up from where she sat on a wooden stool supervising the studies of three children. She held a scroll on her lap and smiled at them.

"Study your Greek letters," she said. "I'll be back."

The children giggled and shoved at each other as soon as she turned her back. Amrec thought little had changed after all. Children still played whenever possible.

The woman approached with an open hand. She appraised him with a steady look, seemed to make up her mind about him right away, and smiled. Her brown eyes sparkled with liveliness and intelligence, and the warmth of her smile enfolded him like a fur.

"Welcome, stranger," she said, glancing at his bare feet. "You come ill-accountered for long travel. Have you no horse or wagon?"

Every year the local accent became harder to understand. It took a moment to squeeze comprehension from her words, and then he bowed. "My thanks for your concern, but I'm in no distress. I'm called Amrec, and it's been some time since I was last here. I've come to pay my respects to Master Fyrsil."

Her smile faded. "Sadly, Master Fyrsil passed through the Cauldron of Life into the Otherworld."

Amrec shook his head. He'd lost count of the friends who'd died during his years of sleep. "Perhaps his stiff back and the pain in his knees will be eased by the loving touch of his gods."

The woman nodded with a smile, though for an instant some question touched her face.

Amrec silently chastised himself for giving away information he had not intended—Fyrsil's gods were not his gods, and this woman was more discerning than he'd imagined. He hoped his smile would not appear nervous. "Who leads the enclave now?"

"Mallec, from Belgica." She gestured toward the shade of the house. "It's nearly time for our afternoon meal. Join us, and I'll tell you what I know of Fyrsil's passing."

His stomach growled, and they both laughed at his body's assent to her offer. She shooed the children away, retrieved the scroll from her stool, and escorted him toward a larger house near the enclave center—one he recognized as the main hall. They still ate together, and the constancy of such things cheered him.

The woman settled him near the front of the room at a low table, then sat beside him on an old bear skin. "I'm Arie, the senior student here, though it won't be long before I take my druid's vows."

He pulled a piece of warm bread from the loaf a child placed in front of him and popped it in his mouth, then washed it down with cider. "You're young for such an achievement."

She smiled, flipping her braid over her shoulder. "Master Mallec says I know everything I need to know, and there's no reason why I can't begin. He says life and the gods will provide the rest of my education."

Amrec wondered how he had missed her in his previous visits. Such an attractive and confident young woman would not have escaped his notice. "You were about to tell me of Fyrsil."

She took a sip of cider. "I can't say much since I arrived shortly after his death, but I know the history of our enclave in the ten years since then."

Amrec choked as the cider caught in his throat. He coughed until his eyes watered, and Arie beat hard on his back between the shoulder blades.

Ten years? It couldn't be!

"Are you all right?"

He managed a nod. "Please, go on."

"Fyrsil died suddenly, some say mysteriously, on Samhain night ten years ago. Druid Orlan, an Iberian summoned by Fyrsil, took his place. He stayed with us only briefly until Mallec, his former student, arrived from Mona. Mallec has been master here ever since."

Amrec listened intently, the news proving both unexpected and discomfiting. If his secret was lost to the newest master, he had reason to worry about his future. Not only did he need a new sanctuary, without the enclave master's cooperation, he might never be reunited with Trina.

"Are you sure you're all right? You seem distressed."

He waved her concern away. "I knew Fyrsil a long time. His death shocks me."

Again she gave him a look that bespoke caution. He wondered if she thought him too young to have known Fyrsil a long time. He opted not to stretch the truth too far. "I stayed with Fyrsil on my journeys as a very young man, and he told me many stories. He was like a grandfather to me."

She relaxed and smiled in sympathy. "His friends are welcome among us. I hope you'll stay. I wish Druid Mallec were here to greet you personally."

"You're very kind. I need to rest and think about my next stop."

He paused as she seemed willing to talk, and he was desperate to know what had happened over the last ten years. Why had he not awakened at each summer solstice? "So much can change in ten years. Do you know if anything unusual has happened?"

She looked at him quizzically. "Like what?"

He tried to sound casual. "I don't know—anything. Sometimes the gods signal us when things are not as they should be."

Uneasiness settled on her like a cloak. "There *have* been a few such incidents—fires and the unaccountable deaths of livestock. The villagers hold my father responsible."

"Why?"

"He's the leader of our clan. Gar, son of Loriec, has been the Suetoni Chief for thirty years, but now some say the gods no longer favor him." She paused. "His own son speaks against him."

Amrec raised his brows in surprise. "If my brother spoke thus, I'd have words with him."

"I'd rather not speak with him at all."

She looked at him as if he might offer the explanation she sought to remove the blame from her kin. He raised a palm. "These are terrible times indeed, but I'm referring to even greater things—like the mountain itself protesting, perhaps even toppling the stones at the base, or some strange agitation amongst the stars."

Her dark eyes glistened, though with anger or unshed tears he could not tell.

"There's been nothing like that. Only these curses on our land and people." She stared at him. "Do you come from the gods with an answer to our prayers?"

"No," he said, softly. "I can't even find answers for my own prayers, but you can help me if you would."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Until I can decide where to go next, I gladly offer my services in exchange for food and lodging. I'll make short work of most chores, and you'll never hear me complain."

Arie flashed him a wan smile. "I can't speak for Master Mallec, but you're welcome to share our meals in exchange for help with the farm. I'm sure we can find plenty to keep you occupied until he returns in a day or two. Should you wish to stay longer, you'll have to speak with him."

A day or two. Surely he wouldn't need longer than that to decide what course lay open to him. He had no idea if this Mallec would help him, but he had time to find out.

Fyrsil dead? Strange druids *godsleeping* beside him? What other calamity could he look forward to?



Situated between the tin smith's shop and the potter's shed, Caradowc's house, once part of the old tannery, at least benefited from the prevailing breeze. Even in the mid-afternoon heat, when anything smart enough to crawl into a spot of shade had long since done so, the young warrior's one-room home remained comfortable. The old building's cool interior had served as the lure that brought the harness maker's young wife, Una, to Caradowc's bed, though he suspected any excuse would have served.

He patted the woman's smooth bare flank and once again marveled that she had taken up with a wizened craftsman twice her age. Then he smiled. While the harness maker toiled for her comfort, Caradowc did his part to keep her happy, though not

as often as he would have liked. Puh, one of the landless warriors who eagerly followed Caradowc's lead, had warned him that the harness maker knew where his young wife spent her afternoons, but Caradowc didn't care. What could the old man do about it? Few in the Suetoni clanhold of Gillac dared stand against him these days. As Gar's influence waned along with his health, more villagers sought the leadership of the strong son Gar himself favored. None of the young men opposed him, and the thought of the harness maker taking him to task was laughable. If Una's husband couldn't satisfy her, he ought not to have her at all.

"You could always leave him," Caradowc said.

"And handfast with you?" She flashed dark eyes under wildly disheveled hair. "Have you any prospects? Any plans? What reason would I have to walk away from a solid roof and steady meals?"

He reached for her hand and guided it across his flat muscled belly and down between his legs. "Is this reason enough?"

She giggled. "Will it keep me warm in winter?"

"It'll keep your mind off the cold."

"Will it put food on my table?" she asked, stroking him.

The effect was immediate, and made it difficult to concentrate.

"There's always food for a warrior." He reached for her, but she pushed him back on the sleeping pallet.

"I'm no warrior," she said, "I must work for my keep."

He rolled on top of her and pressed her legs apart with his own. "Work for me," he said.

She smiled up at him and wrapped her arms around his back. "Work?"

"Yes."

Her eyelids dropped, and her breathing came faster as they resumed a rhythm grown familiar during the past weeks. His chest slid against hers in a ritual of sweat and ecstasy.

She dug her fingers into his back and locked her heels behind him. "Don't stop," she groaned.

He grunted in response; he'd stop when he was done. Una clutched at him as he increased the speed of his strokes.

"Caradowc?"

He froze at the voice from the doorway. *Mother?* No, it wasn't possible.

Una writhed beneath him. "Don't stop!" she cried.

He clenched his teeth and tightened his embrace. Whoever it was could wait. "Go away."

"But I—"

"Not now!"

"Yes, Caradowc, *now*," Una gasped. "Right now!" She squeezed him harder.

He tried to respond, but the interruption had doused his fire. He rolled away from Una and fell back on the pallet, his forearm across his eyes. "Whoever you are, tell me why I shouldn't kill you."

"You don't recognize your own mother?"

Caradowc lowered his arm and stared at the woman in the doorway. *Bull's blood!* He thought he'd seen the last of her when he dropped the magical stick she'd become into the Giant's Tomb. Now she was back! Even the gods couldn't stand to have her around. He wondered if she knew he'd left her for dead. He watched cautiously, waiting for some clue.

"I'd have waited outside," Dierdre said, making a show of wiping sweat from her forehead, "but it's so much cooler in here." She grimaced at the harness maker's wife. "Who's she?"

"Who's *she*?" Una demanded as she pulled her tunic on over her head.

Caradowc slipped into thin breeks. "Go, Una. We'll talk later."

She glared at Dierdre, then belted her simple garment and combed her fingers through her wild hair. "I'll see you tomorrow, Caradowc."

Dierdre dismissed her with a gesture. "Not here, I hope." She held the door flap open as Una pushed past. When she was gone, Dierdre faced Caradowc with a familiar look of disapproval. He picked up his tunic, then tossed it aside. The room was warm enough.

"Have you no taste at all?" Dierdre asked as she sat in his only chair.

He liked women and wasn't fussy. "What's wrong with Una?"

"She's beneath you."

Frequently, he thought, biting back a smile. It broadened as he realized Dierdre didn't suspect him of abandoning her, though she undoubtedly had some motive for coming to him secretly. "I'm surprised to see you."

"I can imagine." She turned her head slowly and surveyed the room. "What are you doing in this hovel?"

"It was the best I could do with the money Father gave me." Let her think Gar a miser. She didn't need to know he'd spent Gar's gift on a fine horse and saddle, and got the harness maker's wife every afternoon, in the bargain.

Dierdre raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Gar paid for this?" She shook her head. "Whatever he paid was too much."

Caradowc snorted. "It's more than you left me." His mother's quarters had been lavishly furnished, yet she'd shared none of her wealth with him. When he came back to Gillac as a youth,

he had nothing. Gar might be an old fool, but he was a generous one. "Where've you been all this time? You didn't come here just to spoil my afternoon."

She sat back in the chair and sipped at the cup of ale he'd left on the floor beside it. Caradowc fumed. She had no right to take over his house. He wanted to snatch the cup from her hand.

"I haven't been gone by choice," she said. "I was deceived by that simpering fool, Mallec."

"Mallec came to me with an odd tale," he said slowly, letting his story form in his mind before he stammered something unbelievable. "He claimed you'd been turned into a length of wood. Can you imagine?"

"Only too well," she said. "He tricked me during a ceremony. I was transformed into a stick, and then today I awoke, filthy and disheveled, near the Giant's Tomb. I've no idea how I got there."

Caradowc tensed. If she accused him, he had no intention of admitting complicity. "I've always thought Mallec wanted you out of the way so he could elevate Arie."

Dierdre squinted at him. "You think Mallec left me out there?"

He shrugged. "Have you a better explanation?"

"No, but there is one who might be able to explain some of it."

He willed his face free of emotion—he was no child to blush when caught stealing honey cakes. "Who?"

"I saw an odd little man running away from me as I awoke," she said. "I didn't see his face, but he had a patch of white hair on the back of his head. If you see such a man, bring him to me."

Caradowc relaxed, certain in the knowledge no one had seen him drop the sticks in the hole in the top of the ancient tomb. "Of course. Where will I find you if I see him?"

She laughed and finished his ale. "I'm not going anywhere."

He stared at her—the words sinking in. *Lugh's balls!* "But, you can't stay here!"

"Of course I can."

His stomach tightened at the prospect of returning to her domination. "You wouldn't be comfortable. My friends—"

"Will understand," she said, "and your harlot can wait. Besides, we have a great deal of work to do, and I'd prefer to keep my presence a secret, especially from Gar and Mallec. So you see, I really can't leave."

Caradowc rubbed his face with his hands. Why did she have to show up now? Perhaps he could kill her in her sleep and dump her body where it would never be found. If no one had missed her in all this time, they'd hardly start looking for her now. He smiled.

"...and we'll begin immediately."

"Begin what?" he asked.

She slapped him.

Caradowc stepped back. She'd hit him often as a child, but he was a child no more. He moved away without speaking, retrieved his long knife from its place beside the door and pulled it free of the leather sheath.

As he approached, her eyes widened with interest, though she showed no fear. Not once in his life had he seen her back down from anyone, but she'd never faced him as a grown man.

He grabbed her elbow and wrenched her to her feet. The tip of his blade went to the soft tissue beneath her jaw and when he pressed, a thin line of bright red blood trickled down her neck.

She gasped, and he felt pride seeing real fear flicker across her eyes.

"Never slight me again," he said.

The alarm disappeared, and she flashed a smile, pushing the knife away. "Then pay attention. Unless you want to live in this pigsty forever."

When he lowered the knife, she patted his chest. "Gar is finished as chief. Do as I say, and you'll replace him."

If she had a plan, he'd listen. His own success was taking too long. Many villagers called for Gar's replacement, but in spite of Caradowc's efforts to undermine the old man, Gar remained chief.

Dierdre looked around at the cramped room and rubbed her palms together. "We're going to bring Gar down, and when we're finished with him, we'll go after Mallec."

Caradowc resheathed his blade. If Dierdre could help him hurry Gar into the Otherworld, he could tolerate her living with him for a while. Getting rid of Gar was one thing; getting rid of a druid was quite another. "Mallec isn't merely some country bard. He's the master of Eban Enclave."

"We all have someone to answer to. Gar must answer to the gods, Mallec to the High Ollamh, Benecin. There are many who would find Mallec's work questionable, if not simply sacrilegious. In the interests of our people, Benecin should be notified. If Mallec persists with his historical record, what need will there be for any of us to remain alive? Only dead civilizations leave written records."

Caradowc had no idea what she was talking about, but nodded amiably as if he did. "So much for Mallec's superiors, but how about Gar's. Prayer won't remove him. We need a bolt of lightning."

"Then," Dierdre said, "we'll have to provide one."

Children of the Panther: Part Three

STOLEN CHILDREN
by
AMBER HAYWARD



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Stolen Children
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Dedication

A novel is a journey. I dedicate *Stolen Children* to those who have shared my journeys with me — to my husband, Perry Hayward, partner in the running of the Black Cat Guest Ranch and partner on many memorable backpacking trips in the wilderness, to my mother, Mary Bond, who started me on the road of life-long engagement with this wonderful world and to my best friend, Darlene Dyck, who has been my companion in many real and imaginary journeys.

The process of travel is an engagement with the world through fresh eyes, and this is possible for us in our regular life as long as we keep alert, keep looking in directions that we don't normally look, keep asking questions and being interested. But nothing raises the bar like an actual journey to a place you've never been before and I feel grateful that I've had the opportunity to visit some truly fantastic places. During the months I was completing *Stolen Children*, my husband and I took an extended trip through Wyoming and Utah. I wrote every morning and we explored every afternoon. We enjoyed the wonders of Yellowstone Park at the tail end of tourism season, saw the incredible tufa waterfalls in Thermopolis, wandered through the stunning array of canyons and rock arches around Moab.

That fall I also spent two weeks at my favourite spot for intense uninterrupted writing — the Eagle Cove bed and breakfast at Sooke, British Columbia, with an inspiring view of the ever-changing sea.

Life is a journey. Thank you, dear readers, for joining me on the life journeys of my fictional but very real characters in the *Children of the Panther* trilogy. If you have questions or comments on these books, please visit my website, www.amberhayward.ca

Petit Thibideau, September 12, Winkletown (Choromos), Louisiana

Crouching behind a screen of scrubby willow bushes, Petit watched three young boys, maybe two years old, as they shuttled back and forth in a complicated game, bringing scraps of sawn wood, sticks and rocks to a man who stacked and interlocked them into a fantastic structure. Whenever the tower threatened to topple, one of the children appeared with a stick just in time to create a brace. Yet, aside from the occasional laugh of delight from the little boys, the entire process was conducted in silence. The man made not even a gesture to indicate what he wanted.

Petit could have watched for hours, just as she had as a girl, spying on her cousins while they built forts in this antebellum ruin, using waste wood scavenged from Mr. Prince's warehouse. Later, when she was fourteen, she'd spied on her *'Nonc* Martin, the one her father called 'the leech,' who'd squatted here for almost a year beneath the radar of nearly everyone in Winkletown. When no one was here, this old house had been her secret place, where she often came to be alone, to imagine a different life.

She was old enough now not to be skulking around like a young girl, yet here she was. She was here because at breakfast that morning, the sun just rising and the day already starting to heat, P re had remarked, "Those new people down at the big house, ain't they made a nice job of the place? But they're very private." He wasn't speaking to her. He had yet to speak to her in the six days since she'd phoned her parents from the bus depot in St. Xavier, waiting on the cracked and littered sidewalk without so much as a suitcase, waiting for them to come and take her home.

This morning P re had pretended to be speaking to Maman, but Petit knew he was giving her a message — stay away from that place — and Maman knew it too. Annoyed with him for his stubbornness in not talking to his daughter, Maman scraped her chair back and stomped off the porch and into the house. Petit, as soon as P re headed upstream to work at the warehouse, headed down the familiar bayou-side trail, inhaling the rich odors of sassafras and rot, to the very place he'd warned her about, curious to see the people who'd made him change his mind. "I should burn this house to the ground. That's the

last time anyone's gonna talk me into letting them stay here," he'd said when he found her partying with 'Nonc Martin and his friends. 'Nonc Martin had been gone by sundown. She'd taken off the next morning.

Walking beside the bayou now was like undoing everything which had happened to her in the last four years. Nothing seemed to have changed — pecan hulls crunched beneath her feet, crickets chirped in the underbrush, dew-spangled spider webs glistened in the morning sun. However, her private path into the woods didn't seem as hidden as it once was — someone must be using it.

Petit took a last look at the bayou, where a heron slowly lifted into the air, its feet dabbling in the water until it gained enough height, then she left the main trail and took her old path around to the back of the house, stopping behind the thicket of pale green willow where she'd traditionally hidden. The willows were bigger now, but so was she. Immediately, she saw that this tenancy was far more than the squatting 'Nonc Martin had done. The terrace, free of the weeds which once poked through the paving stones, was lined with benches and brightened by cascades of blue and red flowers in ceramic planters. The French doors into the kitchen, formerly broken and buckled, had been repaired or replaced; the stone walls and slate roof of the house had been scraped free of moss and ferns. The balcony, which had been a Swiss cheese of rotting wood to be negotiated gingerly if she wanted to sit at the edge like an undiscovered Juliet, was rebuilt in gleaming cedar, probably from Mr. Prince's warehouse.

As amazing as the house's revitalization was, Petit was more fascinated by the people on the terrace, the silent children and the oddly passive man who, without speaking, managed to convey to the children what was needed to continue building. Did all small children play this quietly? She had no idea. She was the youngest in her family. Although she was an aunt now, she doubted if she'd have been invited home to any holiday gathering to meet her new nieces and nephews, even if they had known where she'd been these past years, nor had her brother or sisters visited since her less than prodigal return.

Children hadn't much interested her before, but she was now eager to learn whatever she could about them in the short time she had left before she would have one of her own.

Angry voices preceded the arrival of two women on the other side of the terrace. One short and pillowy, the other tall and gaunt, all sharp angles. Petit recognized by their brightly

patterned skirts and long dark braids that they were members of the Gypsy band who frequently camped in an inaccessible corner of Mr. Prince's land.

"Where is she?" the tall one demanded, but the man didn't respond, or even react.

"Forget him. That's the dummy," the other one said, and turned to rap sharply on the French doors. A woman with honey-brown skin, a friendly expression and a smear of flour across one cheek answered the door. She appeared about the same age as Petit's mother, old enough to be a grandmother. Two young boys clung to her apron.

"Dulce!" the taller Gypsy woman snapped. "We told you not to let Nepata visit. It's too far, and too dangerous for her to cross the bayou."

Dulce's eyes widened with surprise. She scanned the group on the terrace, then spoke in a soft, accented voice, "She's not here, Jonica. The children know they should tell me if they see her. If I find her, I'll take her right home."

"Well, she's been missing for two hours," the Gypsy woman retorted, hostility in her voice, an evil scowl creasing her face.

Petit heard a tiny giggle behind her, barely louder than a sparrow's chirp. The children on the terrace had been grinning, now they laughed, and began to run toward Petit's willow hiding place. The man made a sound half way between a shout and a cough; his expression grew slightly more animated.

The two Gypsy women ran after the children and Petit realized she was about to become more than an observer to the scene. She turned, intending to hurry back down her path, but the girl who'd giggled, laughing still, stopped her in her tracks. She was hardly more than a baby, with curly black hair and a sweet heart-shaped face. Her little dress clung to her little body, soaking wet.

"Nepata! Nepata!" the women were shouting, one cross, the other furious.

Nepata stopped laughing and turned to toddle deeper into the bushes. Petit didn't blame her. But where would she go? They'd said she crossed the bayou, yet there was no bridge — she must have swum across. But it was deep and choked with weeds; alligators and water moccasins lurked there. Petit herself wouldn't swim in the bayou. Unthinkable to imagine that this tiny sprite had done so.

Petit ran after Nepata and soon caught her, pulling the small wet body tight against her chest. The child weighed no more than a Sunday ham. She didn't struggle.

"I've got her!" Petit called out, and headed to the terrace. She didn't want to turn the child over to the tall, angry woman but she needn't have worried. That woman stood back, face full of thunder, while the shorter Gypsy took her and fussed over her, saying, "My *shey*. My poor *shey*. Don't scare us like that."

Without a word to the woman in the apron, the Gypsy with Nepata headed along the path which led to a small dock on the bayou, where Petit assumed there was a waiting pirogue. The other woman, however, had plenty of words. "You tell them to stop calling her! It's not right. They'll get her drowned or killed. Make them tell her to stay home. *Me jostumal!* I'll talk to Yuray again and he'll make you leave this place. *Prastlo sheka!*"

Throwing down dry leaves from her skirt pocket and backing down the path while making arcane hand signals, she finally left. The woman by the French doors put a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes, breathing deeply for a moment, slowly shaking her head, then she walked out onto the terrace and sat beside the man. The two boys were still hanging onto her apron. She said to one of them, "Mauro, you and Cândido go help Rosie finish the cookies."

Mauro nodded in the woman's direction, not looking directly at her. His eyes were an odd, milky color. He took the other boy's hand and turned it over and wrote with his finger on Cândido's palm, whereupon the other boy nodded, then turned and pulled Mauro into the house. The woman, meanwhile, traced a message into the man's palm, something which made him moan and frown. "Bini, Jimmy, Stephen," she said, and the three small boys gathered at her knee, two dark heads of hair like tangled wool and one dark but cut short and neatly parted. "I want you to tell Nepata she can't come here anymore."

"No, we like Nepata!" one of them protested, the other two and the man nodding.

"If she comes again, I will never give you cookies ever again, and I won't let you play outside for a long time. I want you to tell her *right now* that she can't come here again."

"But *Tia Dulce*—"

"Tell her now! Then you go up to the nursery and think about how you'd feel if Nepata got eaten by an alligator."

They were quiet for a minute, frowning in concentration. "Did you do it," the woman asked.

"Yes, *Tia Dulce*," the three boys responded simultaneously, then trudged into the house, followed by the man.

Petit stood at the edge of the terrace, wondering what sort of strange community she'd stumbled into. She didn't know if she should stay or go. "You might as well sit," the woman said. "I'm Dulce. What's your name?"

"Petit. Petit Thibideau." She sat on one of the stone benches. Gardenias cascading from the planters filled the air with a cloying sweetness.

Dulce kneaded her forehead, adding to the flour frosting her honey brown skin. "You're Tib's youngest daughter, aren't you? The one who's been living on the street. So, you've come home."

"Yeah. I guess you can see why." Petit patted her bulging belly.

"Por certo. When are you due?"

"Just over a month to go. What ... what was all that?"

"Didn't your father tell you about us?"

Petit stayed silent for a moment. A fish eagle flew low over the terrace en route to the bayou, the passage of its black shadow across the terrace simultaneous with the sound of air scratching through its wing feathers. "Père isn't talking to me."

"Bem, come inside and have some cookies. I'll tell you as much as I can."

Shaun Payne, September 12, Miami (South Beach)

Shaun perched on the edge of a lounge chair on the roof patio of the Hibiscus Hotel in South Beach and watched crowds of people playing in the water below — jet skiing, surf jumping, boogie boarding, para-sailing — or near the water at volleyball and Frisbee and dog walking and girl-watching. It was a hot September day, the cloudless sky brassy yellow. The sunlight gave a bronze tinge to everything it touched and the air smelled of smoke from fires in the everglades. Shaun sighed.

"What's wrong?" Keja had come up behind him so silently, he hadn't heard her approach. She was always like that. Not sneaky, but certainly stealthy.

"It's my parents." He waved the letter in her direction. "They want me to come home."

"Isn't that good?" she asked and he instantly felt ashamed. He knew she missed her family. He knew she couldn't go home.

"But I don't want to go."

"Why not?"

"It's a long story. You should just go have your swim." She wore her pink one-piece bathing suit, with a gauzy cover-up and a floppy hat, obviously on her way to the pool at the far end of the roof. Like her friend, Ana, Keja was rail-thin, her legs curveless sticks, bony arms from a Somalian documentary, but unlike Ana she had womanly shape breasts and hips incongruously joined to her childlike limbs. Her hair was long, straight and dark as night, her eyes large and luminous. Shaun found her beautiful in every way.

"Don't worry. Ana and I are planning to swim together, but she's gone to visit on the third floor and you know how long *that* can take." She pulled up a lounge chair beside his, collapsing into a posture of insouciant repose. "So, why don't you want to go home?"

Shaun wasn't sure how to start. He'd known her for two years, yet there remained much they didn't know about each other. It didn't help that he once had been a guard keeping her prisoner. "Do you know how I ended up with Caldos?" he asked.

"Not really." She sounded bored but if Shaun had learned one thing in his painful high school years, it was that 13-year-old girls always sounded bored.

He stared out over the gilded ocean as he said, "I ran away from home to be with a woman I met on the Internet. My parents tracked me down in Louisiana, just before the wedding."

That got her interest. She leaned forward, saying, "Wow."

"That's not the half of it. I was 17, Shannon was 37. My parents jumped to the conclusion she was after money, because, you know, my dad, who he is..."

Keja patted his knee, sending shivers through him. "I have heard of Robert Payne, Shaun."

"But I don't believe it about the money. From the start, she never once lied to me. She was up front about her age, and the pictures she e-mailed were really of her. I was the liar. For the first six months, I pretended to be a 31-year-old race car driver."

Keja laughed. He laughed too, no longer embarrassed by the incongruity. It helped that he was 80 pounds lighter and a quantum leap more fit than he'd been in those days. He continued, "When I started to fall in love, I opened right up to her, and do you know what she said?"

"What?"

"She said she'd had her doubts that I was a race car driver, but she always thought I was as old as I said, because I was so

mature." He sighed again. "I really loved her, and I think she loved me."

Keja murmured something, but he couldn't hear her over a sudden outbreak of car honking from Ocean Drive. "What?" he asked.

"Then what happened?" she repeated.

"Well, my mother's pretty religious. I mean, for a long time she was Episcopal because it was the thing to be, but she was always getting into crystals, and feng shui, all that stuff. She got into Caldos' religion, the Golden Way, big time, and she told my dad if anyone could help me, Caldos could. They sent me to Teardrop Cay. Dylan, Kurt and Jeremy were already there."

"Yeah, pretty convenient for Caldos."

Her voice sounded bitter, and for good reason. As pleasant as the Bahamian Cay was, it had been a jail for her. "You mean because we became your guards?"

"No, I mean if the four of you end up controlling your parents' companies, and Caldos is controlling you, he just about has the U.S. in his pocket, especially if today's election goes his way."

"He's not controlling me," Shaun shot back.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. No way do I believe in his religion."

"What do you believe about him?"

This was a surprisingly difficult question. He'd been sent to the island against his will, and he'd been a virtual prisoner at first, although never locked in his room like she had been. He'd been bullied into losing weight and getting fit, forbidden to use a computer for a year and yet he bore no ill will toward Caldos. "I guess I think he's a great guy. And he helped me."

She jumped to her feet and held her hands out, fingers splayed. "What had you done that was *so* bad? I know Jeremy stole lots of money, and Dylan was a major druggie. And didn't Kurt get in trouble for beating people up? But all you did was fall in love."

"The problem was my heart, but not the way you think." He put a hand to his chest, felt the scars beneath the cloth. Standing up, he thought he might lift the shirt and show her, then changed his mind. "That's why I don't want to go home. They don't really want me there. I've been a disappointment to them since the day I was born. My dad bought tons of stuff the minute he found out I was going to be a boy — a big playground in the back yard and every type of sports equipment you can imagine. But I turned

out to be this faulty baby with a bad heart. Four operations didn't fix it. And when I was six, my sister came along, just perfect, and they made her into a little jockette, exactly what Daddy wanted. Now do you see why I was finding love on the computer?"

"So, Caldos fixed your heart?"

"Yeah, he did. But that doesn't mean I think he's some kind of god, the way so many people do. Still, you have to admit, he and Ana — they're amazing. I think they're the next step in human evolution. And I want to be part of that. Helping my dad run his company is boring in comparison."

She leaned against the parapet and snorted.

He challenged her. "You don't believe it?"

"I've seen Caldos' television specials, what he claims about his background, about Ana. But that's all lies. What he has is nothing new. Ana might be his daughter, but he didn't teach her how to be a healer. She was a healer when I met her, long before Caldos kidnapp her."

"So, it's automatic with her because she's got the right genes."

Keja leaned toward him, frowning with earnestness. "We all do. We all could learn it. But it's like talking — if no one taught you how to talk by a certain age, you would never learn to talk, or even to think properly. There was a Brazilian healer named Manoel, and he taught João how to be an *onça*."

Shaun had met João, a large deaf-mute man who'd been a prisoner at Teardrop Cay at the same time Ana and Keja were Caldos' guests against their will. João was the only one to get away when their friends attempted a rescue from the Bahamian island. "What's an *onça*?" he asked.

"That's the tribal name for the healers in their tribe in the rain forest. Manoel's ancestors were in that tribe. So were Caldos'. This goes back thousands and thousands of years, Shaun. João was just a baby when Manoel taught him the telepathy the *onças* use to communicate."

"But isn't João blind and deaf?"

Keja nodded enthusiastically, her eyes bright. She had never before opened up to him in conversation like this. Usually she acted cool and remote, unless she was talking to Ana. She said, "Exactly, which meant telepathy was the only way he could talk to anyone. And João is Ana's uncle, so he taught her when she was a tiny baby. And if you'd known him when you were a tiny baby, you could be an *onça* too."

He wasn't sure he believed her, but the idea was appealing. "I wish I could be."

"Yeah, me too." She sounded wistful and looked so sad, Shaun wanted to hold her or do something to make her feel better, but he had no idea how she would respond, or how she'd react if she knew that the major reason he didn't want to go home was that he'd fallen in love again.

His awkward moment ended with Ana's arrival. She was grinning. "Madison did 50 sit-ups and he walked around the room with hardly any help," she announced.

Caldos, September 12, Washington, DC

The party, for all its flowing liquor and jubilant voices, waving banners, the theme song played ad nauseum inspiring frequent impromptu dances of joy, was too tame for Caldos. But he knew Greystone was advisedly reserved in his triumph. The cameras were there — a newly elected President, even one with a generous margin of electoral victory, couldn't be seen to gloat. Caldos stepped to the podium to say his goodbye, the throng of admiring supporters parting to allow him access to the new leader of the country. Many reached out to touch him as he passed, but Caldos withheld the small boosts of endorphins he frequently dispensed. This was Greystone's moment and, besides, Caldos was saving his energy for later.

Greystone stood tall, his eyes clear and piercing, his expression calm and confident, his complexion glowing with health. Much of this was due to Caldos' ministrations. Possibly the man's good looks had done more to get him elected than his platform or the debates or even the endorsement of America's most powerful religious figure.

"Quite a celebration," Caldos said to Greystone, as he reached out to shake his hand. "Where's Julie?"

He didn't have to tell Greystone, a seasoned politician despite his youth, that having the wife on his arm at a time like this was essential. Yet, only two years earlier, Caldos had had to teach Greystone nearly everything, including how to feed himself. The new President leaned forward and whispered so quietly Caldos had to enhance his hearing, "I sent her home. She was feeling tired, and I thought she'd had enough excitement for one day." Greystone was perhaps too solicitous of his wife's health, her pregnancy achieved, after years of trying, as a result of Caldos' curative intervention.

“My friend, enjoy your evening. I have other responsibilities to attend to, so I’ll say goodbye for now and I’ll see you next week.”

There was a time when the young politician would have understood the purely personal nature of those responsibilities, would have taken part in the post-party party which Caldos had in mind. But for the new leader of the country, those days and those appetites were over. Powerful men have powerful needs, but Caldos had made sure no scandal would attach itself to Greystone.

As he left the room, everyone’s attention was on him. He smiled and waved.



Caldos stood taller than Greystone and more regal of bearing. His appearance was equally youthful although he was nearly 20 years Greystone’s senior. More than 50 years ago he’d lived in the green and humid depths of the Amazonian rain forest with his mother whose skill as medicine woman and whose ability to divine secrets from the hidden wells of people’s minds made her more powerful than the headman of the tribe. Caldos was her first born, the one destined to take her place, but a chance encounter with a visitor from the wider world outside gave the small boy a glimpse of how much further his abilities could take him than being feared and respected by a few backwoods natives.

For a bag of candy, he revealed what should not have been revealed. His mother punished him but it was too late — he’d set a chain of events into motion which led to the death of the entire tribe except for him. He was young. One could say he was too young to understand death, too young to know it was wrong to be gladdened by the death of children who’d shunned him for his differences, of adults who’d kept a wary distance, of the mother who’d punished him with excruciating pain caused entirely by her mind, just because he’d wanted some candy.

At that young age, Caldos promised himself that no one would again deny anything to him. Colonel Smith, his new friend, assumed the boy to be simply a novelty, with a freak talent to pluck hidden thoughts at a touch and perform minor healings, a sideshow act. Paired with Man of Peace, an older boy tattooed with snakes and panthers, impervious to the pain of the nails and knives he shoved through his flesh, they brought in a

passable living. However, Colonel Smith — like Caldos' mother — tried to control him and Colonel Smith's fate was the same.

Man of Peace became Caldos' first acolyte and they were together still.

Striding into the hotel's foyer, Caldos phoned his right hand man. "Bring the car around the front."

Outside the hotel, the usual pack of tabloid photographers, too sleazy to be allowed admittance to the celebration upstairs, waited in the anemic glow of mercury street lamps for a chance to snap shots of important people departing. Only one detached himself from the group and hustled toward Caldos, camera clicking as he walked.

Man of Peace held open the white limo's door for Caldos.

"Invite him over," Caldos instructed.

Looking confused and flattered, the young photographer approached, Man of Peace looming behind him. He stretched out his hand to return Caldos' proffered handshake and received much more than the celebrity glad-handing he'd expected. Caldos gave him the usual dose of endorphins and the easily-absorbed message, *Caldos is a great guy*, and, most importantly, a strong aversion to taking pictures of Caldos. Caldos had heard that photographers justified this aversion in various ways — some said religious leaders deserved their privacy, others said he never did anything photo-worthy; others developed curiously shaky hands when they attempted to satisfy the public's desire for shots of the Golden Way's illustrious high priest, its *babalão*. Caldos didn't care what reason they invented, he just didn't care to be hounded by paparazzi.

After leaving the young man standing goggle-eyed at the curb, Man of Peace drove them to Reagan airport where Caldos' plane and pilots waited. In three hours they were in Miami, and twenty minutes later, at Caldos' home on Moon Island, where they walked through a dank cement-lined tunnel connecting to a boat house which was on the property of one of the neighbors, although the neighbor was in fact an employee and the boat house in fact Caldos'. They motored to a different harbor and landed at a dock where they took a car from a locked garage and began to drive again, in random directions, until they were sure no one tailed them.

The ritual awaiting them was one Caldos had developed in Brazil. He'd named it the Darkness of the God and the only ones invited were especially trusted people and the disposable vessels for their sexual excess. Fulfilling dark appetites together

had many benefits. For Caldos, it recreated the initiation rituals of his long-lost tribe, rituals he'd surreptitiously observed but never participated in because he had been too young, rituals in which boys became men by first dancing and then copulating with Caldos' mother. Death had not been part of the ritual, but in Caldos' mind the memories of the ceremony and recurring dreams about the death of his tribe at the brutal hands of mercenaries hired by Colonel Smith had become pervertedly intertwined.

Those invited to enjoy the Darkness developed a deep loyalty to Caldos particularly because he'd seen them doing things they'd never want anyone to know of, seen them satisfy desires some of them never knew they'd had. In the past, there'd been little danger that he should squirm equally on the blackmail hook — they were too afraid of the revenge he could extract for their revelations.

Now that Caldos was so popular and so powerful and so much in the public eye, pursued by observers who didn't reveal themselves as openly as the major networks or the paparazzi, observers who never came forward for the neutralizing touch, the Darkness of the God had become a diminished event, attended only by himself and Man of Peace tonight, plus four illegal Guatemalan women of the required physical type, slim to the point of emaciation, dark-skinned and possessing a child-like, nearly surreal, beauty. The image of his mother.

The women had been procured fourth-hand, only the top man in the pyramid — his loyal Australian employee, Peter — knowing who would be their ultimate customer.

Peter waited in the remote bush of Cujo Key with the women, who were handcuffed and terrified. At Caldos' caress, they relaxed and were released with commands to pour drinks, play the drums and start to dance. After lighting the fire, Peter was sent to guard the road in. Whipped by a hot wind from the burning everglades, the fire's flames lashed around like flags in a brisk breeze, making shadows of people and vegetation leap darkly across the trodden circle of dirt where this primal ceremony had been enacted many times before. But tonight was different. Caldos danced and he drummed, he drank the strong thick jungle alcohol, he touched the women and made them seductive, he touched them again and made them catatonic with fear, yet nothing aroused him. In the end, he had to cause himself to be aroused and his anger at this humiliation, although only he knew of it, led him to be especially brutal with the women.

"Take care of the bodies in the regular way," Caldos told Peter as they drove away, Man of Peace humming contentedly, not looking in the rearview mirror to witness the frown on his boss' face.

Caldos used his powers on his own body in many ways — keeping his appearance youthful and his health at a peak, good cholesterol up and bad cholesterol down, diseases he might pick up from women like this easily diverted, his energy level optimized and the few hours of sleep he took each night more restorative than eight or ten hours for a lesser being, however he had never before had to intervene to give himself an erotic response. It wasn't the fault of the women that they weren't the one he most wanted.

The one he could not have.

There was another, a passable substitute, although he'd decided it was too risky to have her again. In light of tonight's failure, he changed his mind. It was worth the risk.

Petit, September 13, Winkletown

Petit's father was angry in the morning, banging things around in the bathroom and slamming the door behind him when he came out onto the *galerie* for breakfast. When he saw Petit sipping her café au lait and eating ketcheree, he sniffed and said to his wife, "So, supper last night wasn't good enough but this morning she wants breakfast, her."

Maman said, "She ate at the big house last night," at the same time that Petit cried out, "Why have you been lying to me all these years? Mr. Prince doesn't own this land, the Gypsies do! And I knew nothing about it."

Père stood at the edge of the deck, staring out over the swamp lake where feeding fish stippled the water and rafts of hyacinth clumped against blades of iris on the far shore. The sunlight touched the tops of the looming cypress trees. From behind, she saw his jaw working as he clenched and unclenched his teeth. At last he turned to her and said, "They should never have told you that."

"Why not?"

"The only one from this family supposed to know that is your brother, he's the oldest. But I ain't told him yet. I wouldn't tell him unless I was planning to die, me."

"Well, what if you died before you got a chance to tell him?"

"Mr. Prince would tell him." He turned away from the railing, scowling at her. "Goddammit, girl, why would they tell you that?"

"If it's any consolation, they made me promise to keep it a secret. But what's the big fucking deal? So what if Gypsies own the land?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Tib said, yanking a chair out from the table and sitting down to pour equal measures of thick chicory coffee and heated milk from two carafes into his mug.

"Gypsies are secretive," her mother said softly, trying to soothe the mood down a notch or two. "I think this is a place they come to hide."

Ignoring his wife, Tib muttered darkly, "Yeah, you can keep secrets. For four years you don't tell us where you are, then you come home like this." He jerked his head toward her belly, not directly looking at her. "You won't tell us who the father is. I don't even want to think about it, me. It's too late to do anything about it, but this is one baby who shouldn't be born."

Maman protested, "Oh, no. Tib!"

They were good Catholics. As a child, Petit had loved Bible stories and the saints with a sincere reverence unshaken until a certain Mardi Gras when she was 11 and chanced upon her father behind the church, kissing his sister-in-law, an urgent hand kneading her breasts beneath her tight sweater. Shocked, Petit had blurted out the tale to Remy, her brother.

"They were drunk, sis," he's said. "They do things like that when they're drunk, but it don't mean anything."

"But it's a sin."

"They'll go to confession, get the stain off their soul and carry on."

After that, she realized the adults around her gave no more credence to the Easter story than they did to the Easter bunny. For all the talk of Jesus, no one seemed to believe He really existed. She'd stopped worrying about sin. But when she discovered she was pregnant, down in the North Rampart squat where she lived in New Orleans, Petit had never once considered an abortion, despite the urgings of the other girls. Religion was gone from her world-view, burned away by the things she'd done to herself and others had done to her during her years on the street, but there existed something holy in the knowledge that her wrecked body, pock-marked face, needle tracks and all, could nurture a growing human being, something akin to blessed wisdom in the way she had not been able to tolerate drugs or booze from the

moment she'd conceived. She'd gone clean without one second's difficulty.

She wanted the baby, even though she knew who the father was, the john who refused to use a condom, who refused to pay her, the deathly pale man with white eyes who'd tied her up and raped her.

"I kicked you out once and I can kick you out again," Pére shouted, banging a fist on the plank table. "If you want to stay here and have this child, you have to show respect for once and do what I say. This is not a baby we are going to raise. You can have it, but you can't keep it."

Petit jumped up, spilling her coffee, "You didn't kick me out — I left! And I can leave again!" Without even going to her room to retrieve her few belongings, Petit ran off up the bayou, the sound of her mother crying growing fainter and fainter until, drowned out by buzzing insects and twittering birds and her own harsh breathing, so rapid it made her chest ache.



"Of course you can stay here, *querida*," Dulce told her, "but there might be a couple of problems. Come on out front and we can talk in the sun while we enjoy our *cafezinho*. The children are playing upstairs with Rosie. She'll come and get me if there's any trouble."

They left the kitchen which was warm from a huge wood stove and walked down a dark interior hallway, rooms opening to either side. Dulce said, "Consider this your formal tour of The Folly."

"Is that what you call it?"

"Yes." She pointed to the right. "That was the formal dining room — we use it as a therapy room for Luiz."

"Luiz? I don't remember..." Petit confessed.

"That's okay. It's a lot of children to remember. Luiz is autistic and he has a spinal injury. We do physical therapy, plus speech and interaction exercises with him. The library's across the hall. There were no books left and of course we didn't bring any, but your father and Mr. Prince helped us get the shelves repaired and refinished. They're cherry and oak. Harold, my husband, is using it as his office. Because it's an interior room with no windows to get broken, it was in better shape than most of the other rooms."

"I meant to tell you yesterday how amazing it is, what you've done with this place. It was empty for such a long time, it was falling apart."

“Por certo. That room—” She indicated another doorway, *“—must have been the ballroom. The floor’s parquet, but it’s all warped. There was a piano in there too. I was grieved to see the shape it was in. We’ve replaced the windows, but I don’t know if we’ll ever restore the room. Especially now.”*

As they walked through the immense foyer where a curved staircase ascended to the second floor and the remnants of a grand chandelier sparkled overhead, Petit could not repress a shudder. This was the haunted room, where everyone in Winkletown said Jean Paul Michelet had hanged himself. She didn’t mention this to Dulce. Either the woman knew the story or she didn’t. Instead, as they stepped out through the new front door, a massive and ornately-carved cedar edifice, Petit asked, *“What do you mean, especially now?”*

Dulce did not reply until they were seated on two bent-cane chairs. This side of the building had formerly consisted of a large front porch with a curved balcony overhead, both more rotten and saggy than the balcony on the back, facing a mess of tangled willow overgrown with kudzu which must once have been a lawn sloping down to the bayou. Now the decks were gone, the weathered worm-eaten timbers heaped in a pile, and some of the brush had been cleared away, although not enough to open a view to the water. A make-shift staircase led down from the front door to a rockwork foundation where the cane chairs sat in filtered sunlight.

The day was muggy, the heat nearly stultifying, but Petit relished the natural climate she’d grown up in rather than the artificially-enhanced heat of New Orleans, scalding car exhaust and hot outflow blowing from every privileged person’s air conditioning making street life a misery.

“We’re probably going to be asked to leave. It’s one of the things I needed to talk to you about,” Dulce said. *“I told you yesterday that the children are telepathic, the little ones and also João. And maybe that’s not so good.”*

She kneaded her forehead for a minute, puffed out a deep exhalation and continued, *“The two Gypsy women, Jonica and Pavlena, were here again first thing today.”*

“Is Nepata okay?” Petit felt again that tiny drenched body pressed against her chest.

“She’s fine. She doesn’t usually try again for about a week. It was another child. Much younger.”

“Younger!”

Dulce gripped the small cross she wore on a chain around her neck. "*Por Deus*, I'm so worried. The child is Perhan, Yuray's grandson."

"Yuray? He's the head Gypsy, isn't he?"

"Yes. And this baby tipped himself out of a wicker basket last night while his mother was washing the dishes and when they found him, he'd crawled almost all the way to the bayou."

"Oh, shit." Petit clapped a hand to her mouth, but Dulce didn't appear to have noticed her profanity. "How old is he?"

"*Quatro* — four months. The Gypsies are very angry. Pavlena says she wants us gone by tonight, but Yuray is the one we have our agreement with and he won't be back for two days. However, I know he won't let us stay now his grandson has been bewitched."

"Is that what they think?"

At Dulce's nod, Petit asked, "What's so bad about it?" Yesterday both she and Dulce had spoken of how envious they were of the children's special means of communication. "Don't Gypsies pretend to be psychic? Now they can really be."

"Think about it, Petit. These children have such a strong bond with each other that they'll risk their lives to be together. I love Bini and Stephen and Jimmy but they are so complete in themselves, sometimes I think I'm not much more than a food provider to them. If you stay with us, you might end up losing your baby, even if you keep it."

"I don't care." Petit stared overhead where a flock of egrets flashed white against the blue sky. At last she said, "It's like the French Immersion program in school. Lots of Cajun families have lost their language and they put their children in Immersion to get it back. But my best friend in grade 11, her parents weren't French at all; they just said they wanted her to have the advantage of knowing another language. I want my baby to have the advantage of being telepathic. And if he or she wants to be around others like him, I'll let him. If you let me stay, that is."

Suddenly she was crying, remembering the horrible realization she'd had as she ran down the bayou path, away from her home, that she might be asking too much of people she barely knew, people with enough troubles of their own, but she had nowhere else to go — her behavior after she started hanging out with *Nonc* Martin, doing drugs and partying with his low-life pals, had alienated her friends. She couldn't return to New Orleans and hope to keep her baby healthy; she couldn't go home and hope to keep her baby at all.

"*Querida, querida*. That's okay. We'll take you in. That's what we do. We ran an orphanage in Brazil — that's how we got all these children." Dulce moved her chair closer to Petit's and put a comforting arm around her shoulder.

"I'll wash dishes, scrub floors, whatever you want." She didn't know if she cried out of desperation or gratitude, she didn't know if she could stop, when she heard a wild splashing from the direction of the bayou.

"That's Harold," Dulce said, standing and giving Petit a final pat. "Even though he's Canadian, he never learned to paddle properly. He's been over talking to Ranko and Sandor — Nepata's great uncle and grandfather. Let's go find out what they said."

They walked down the path which led to the bayou, Petit wiping her eyes and trying to calm the quivers in her chest. She heard the pirogue hit the dock with a thump. A moment later, a tall gangly man came running up the path and collided with Dulce. He was fish-belly pale and freckled like a trout, his sparse red-grey hair revealed when his broad-brimmed hat was brushed off by an over-hanging branch.

"*Querida!*" he exclaimed, gripping Dulce by the shoulders. "I couldn't change their minds. They're planning to go after Ana!"

"Ana — but why?"

"They think she can 'remove the curse. It's the same plan they've had all along, to get Keja back. Only now, it's Keja *and* Ana. I tried to convince them it was a bad idea, but they wouldn't listen to me." Stopping for breath, he noticed Petit for the first time.

As he stared at her, Dulce introduced, "Harold, this is Petit Thibideau, the one who came by yesterday. Now calm down and let's go home, see if we can figure out what to do." She started up the path.

Harold scooped up his hat and followed, saying, "There's nothing to do. They've made up their minds. All we can do is wait and hope no one gets hurt."

When they entered the house, Harold smiled apologetically at Petit and pulled Dulce toward the library. "Could you wait in the kitchen for a moment?" he asked.

While she waited, Petit began to wash the breakfast dishes in a large basin which had been heating on the stove, wanting to give weight to her offer to help out. Before she'd finished washing the mugs, Harold and Dulce were back.

"Oh, honey, *obrigado*. You didn't have to do that."

Harold stood awkwardly near the doorway, wearing a regretful expression. Petit was afraid he'd told Dulce she couldn't stay. He said, "I'll check on the kids, then I'd better do Luiz's therapy with him. I'm already nearly half an hour late."

"Luiz likes a regular schedule," Dulce explained as Harold climbed a narrow staircase at the far end of the kitchen. She took a towel and began to dry the dishes. Petit took this as a signal to continue washing.

Dulce said, "Harold reminded me there's one more thing I need to tell you before you decide to stay with us. I told you yesterday that we had to leave Brazil because we'd gotten in trouble with someone powerful and unscrupulous, that he chased us through South America and Mexico, and we didn't find a refuge until we allied with the Gypsies and came here. But I didn't let you know who it was."

"I assumed it was some drug lord." She hadn't wanted to ask how they got on the wrong side of someone like that.

"It's Caldos Moreira."

"The guy who was just in the news? The Golden Way guy? Why would he chase you?" Petit recalled what the news story had said; more people belonged to his religion than all the others in the country combined.

Dulce put a soft hand on her arm, giving her a hard look. "Petit — I have to ask you. Are you a member of his sect?"

"Shit, no! I mean, there was a Golden Way outreach center on Basin Street and we'd drop in there for meals sometimes. But it was the same old fucking blah blah blah. I don't like being forced to swallow preaching with my red beans and rice." Petit blushed, embarrassed that she'd used profanity and spoken so freely to a woman who yesterday told her she once had been a nun. Petit's rough life at the edges of the French Quarter had taught her to express her opinions more openly than she had before. "Sorry," she muttered.

"That's okay. I'm glad you weren't taken in — far too many people are. The man's not religious. And he's certainly not a god. Many people in Brazil think he is, but he's another *onça*, a telepath, like Bini and the others."

"But he's a healer too." Petit and her family used to watch the television show, putting up with Caldos' sermon in order to see the high profile healings and the interesting documentaries about people's lives before and after their healings, until her mother heard Caldos speaking against the Pope, then his

shows were forbidden in their house. "Didn't he cure Senator Greystone, I mean, President Greystone, of brain cancer?"

"Petit, the children are healers too. Or they will be when they're older. When we met Ana she was just seven and before long she was able to cure many illnesses and injuries. It's all part of the same ability. They can touch you and see many things about your body."

"Is that why he was after you? Did he want them to help out with the healings?"

"He doesn't know about the little ones. He knew only about Ana and João. We thought he intended to make sure he was the sole individual with this power — we thought he would kill them. Instead, he's passing Ana off as his daughter. Haven't you seen her on his show?"

"I haven't watched it for a long time."

"We tried to rescue her. Someone got killed. A doctor named Glen who helped us when we were running away from Caldos. We got João away from Caldos but not Ana and Keja."

"Who is Keja? I heard Harold talking about her."

"She's a Gypsy girl, Jonica's daughter. Caldos probably took her so he could threaten to hurt her if Ana didn't do what he said. But we know Ana has decided to stay with him — she broadcast a message and we knew it was meant for us. She said she didn't want anyone else to get hurt and she didn't want anyone to try to rescue her again. When we see her on television it looks like she's with him willingly. We don't know why he's still keeping Keja."

Petit stared at the blue and white tiles of the floor, losing herself in their pattern for a moment as she contemplated the turn her new friends' story had taken. She speculated, "Maybe Caldos wanted Ana for the same reason Nepata and that other baby want to come here. Maybe he was lonely for his own kind."

Dulce compressed her generous lips into a tight stubborn line, then said, "I don't care if he's lonely. The man's a monster with no human feelings. Petit, you have to realize he might come after your child if you stay with us."

"Dulce, I would risk anything if my baby could become a telepathic healer."

Keja, September 15, Hibiscus Hotel

"No!" Keja had shouted in the dream she was having just as she was catapulted from sleep that morning. It woke her as well as Ana in the next bed.

"Are you having that dream again?" Ana asked, sitting up in a tangle of pastel pillows and teddy bears.

"I don't know. I can't remember now I'm awake." Keja couldn't remember a single detail except that she'd been terrified. She still felt scared but she forced herself to smile at her friend.

"Keja," Ana said, hopping over to sit on Keja's bed which was also heaped with pillows but merely one plush toy, a whimsically smiling hedgehog. "You're my best friend in the whole world."

"You're my best friend too." She hugged the younger girl, knowing what Ana would say next, wishing she wouldn't say it.

"Why don't you go home? If I asked him, I know Caldos would let you go."

"I don't want to. I'd worry about you if I wasn't here."

"I'd be fine. I worry about you. I know you're lonely for your family. And you're bored too, aren't you?"

It was true. Keja was bored, but she said, "I'm fine. I read and do stuff on the computer. I talk to Shaun. I play dominoes with Madison."

Keja was sure it was going to be one of those days that Ana pestered her non-stop until Dr. Burns, her tutor, arrived, but even before they had breakfast, Caldos announced over the intercom, "I'm coming up." They barely had time to get dressed before he came striding into their suite from the elevator. He wore a white suit with a gold-colored tie and a gold handkerchief tucked into a pocket. It was the way he always dressed.

"*Bom dia*, girls," he said with a smile. Ana greeted him politely, as she always did, but Keja was never able to do more than tolerate him. Because of him, their friend Glen was dead and Madison had nearly died too. Keja didn't think Ana's gratitude over the way Madison received the best in medical care should override the fact that Caldos had crushed Madison's neck and made him nearly die in the first place.

Keja hated to remember that night, the night Glen, Harold and her father came to Teardrop Cay to rescue them. She'd gotten onto the boat, she was on her way to safety, but she fell off and had to swim to shore or else she would have drowned. When she got there, everything was black and confused on the beach.

Other than a dim glow of phosphorescence from the crashing waves, there was no light but she could hear Ana screaming, "Help him! Help him! I'll do anything you want, just help him!"

Keja had assumed Ana wanted Caldos to heal Glen, who'd been shot while they were getting to the boat, but when she stumbled over to Ana, she found her kneeling above a motionless body, weeping, "Madison! Madison!" The little Bahamian man had been kind to them, the sole member of Caldos' island staff who'd disregarded the religious leader's dire warnings that two small girls and a deaf-blind man were dangerous prisoners who should never be touched. Keja began to cry too.

A minute later a woman with a flashlight arrived. Caldos was revealed, standing a short distance away, holding a gun. But he dropped the gun, and leaned toward Madison, felt his neck. "Go get the oxygen and your medical bag," he told the woman.

When she left, he said to Ana, "You'll have to help me. Breath into his mouth." Caldos began to press his hands forcefully against Madison's chest.

Ana stood back and screamed at Caldos, "Just *fix* him!"

"You know he's closed off to us. If he's going to live, he needs air. So breathe for him."

More people arrived — Captain Willie and the boys who were their guards. They had flashlights and Keja saw Ana, holding Madison's nose and blowing into his mouth. "It won't go in!" she wailed.

Then the lady came back. Caldos grabbed the bag, pulled out a little knife. He touched his own neck, then plunged the knife into Madison's neck. Ana screamed, but Caldos ignored her as he threaded a tube into the hole he'd made and attached a metal tank to the tube. They began to carry Madison away from the beach.

No one had noticed Keja there, until she started crying loudly, pointing at the body lying on the beach in the waning light from their flashlights, asking, "What about Glen? Isn't anyone going to help Glen?"

Ana came and put her arms around her saying, "The spark of life is gone from him. Madison hardly has any, but Glen has none."

Now, in the penthouse suite of the Hibiscus Hotel on Ocean Drive in South Beach, in a designer kitchen used only for washing dishes as all their food was sent from a kitchen downstairs or ordered in, the best computers on their desks, expensive clothing hanging in their closets, most of it never worn, Keja grinned

at her hated benefactor, but it was more of a grimace. He wasn't looking at her anyway.

"Ana," he said, "how would you like to visit the clinic and pick anyone you want from the crowd outside to heal?"

"Really?" she squeaked. This was an unprecedented offer.

A year earlier, a woman had gotten past everyone and made it to their suite bringing her baby who had a bad ear infection. Ana had healed the child but it made Caldos angry. Keja knew why — the problem was something an ordinary doctor could fix. The woman couldn't afford a doctor, but that didn't matter to Caldos. He wanted a big fuss made over him because he could cure AIDS or cancer or other things that doctors couldn't. Next thing they knew, there were guards in the lobby and at the front door, and bars on the windows of their suite, although they were on the fifth floor.

Ana asked Caldos, "Will there be a camera crew?"

"No, this is a treat for you. I know you don't like the cameras."

"Why are you letting me do this?"

"Think of it as a celebration. You know Mr. Greystone won the election yesterday. This is my way of saying *obrigado* for helping me heal him."

"Can Keja come?"

"No. You know she can't. I'll have your breakfast sent now and I'll be waiting for you downstairs."

After Ana left, Keja busied herself, tidying the kitchen. She didn't realize the elevator had come back until the bell rang. The doors opened and Caldos entered the suite. Alarmed to see him there, she shrank against the counter. He quickly approached and seized her arm, saying, "Remember."

Instantly, she felt her body relax. A hidden room opened in her mind and memories streamed into her awareness. She recalled the truth about that night on the beach. She hadn't fallen out of the boat. She had jumped. She had jumped because she remembered—

Caldos had raped her!

When she remembered that, she remembered the name he'd called her while he healed her of the wounds he'd caused. She knew if she wasn't there, Caldos would rape Ana. Keja had been willing to be raped again if that was the only way she could protect her friend. However, she hadn't been raped again. Caldos had apologized and said he'd never do it again. He said he knew Ana would kill him if she found out about it, so he helped Keja

to hide her memory, even from herself, only to be brought out at times like this when he needed someone to talk to.

Caldos was her friend. As she watched him walk into their living room and stand in the middle of the white carpeted expanse, stretch his arms high before folding down to touch his toes, then sink gracefully onto the long white couch, she couldn't repress a shudder as she walked across the room to sit beside him.

It like being friends with a tiger. He was beautiful and fascinating, but deadly.

"Keja," he put a hand on her knee, "I'm going to be a daddy. Felicity is pregnant."

It was happy news but he didn't appear happy. "What's the problem?" she asked him.

"She expects me to marry her but I don't want to." He gazed at her, his remarkable green eyes wide and seemingly guileless.

"Why not?"

"She's always been accepting of my needs, she'd do whatever I wanted her to do, sexually. She'd let me hurt her because she knew I could fix it later. She knew I had other partners. But now she's asking me to be gentle. And she's suspicious, always wanting to know where I went, who I was with."

"That's normal for someone who's going to be a mother. When my cousin Lula was pregnant—"

He snapped, "She wants to be a normal wife, fine. But I'm not about to be a normal husband. I'd like to marry her off to Peter."

"You should!" Peter, a loud-mouthed Australian, was one of Caldos' top men, although he wasn't very smart. He was loyal to Caldos, rushing to carry out his every order, cringing like a whipped dog when he screwed up, but when Caldos wasn't there he liked to push people around, especially women. Gypsy men could be like that too, so it didn't bother Keja but she didn't like the way he bullied Shaun, his jealousy over the young man's intelligence revealed with each mock-friendly punch, "Hey, mate!" and back-handed compliment, "Mate, good on ya for dropping those pounds. Only 50 more to go, right?"

Felicity was not a loud-mouth and not at all stupid, but she was nevertheless also a bully. Secure in her position as Caldos' executive assistant and his most frequent sexual partner — something Keja knew she didn't know except at these times when Caldos allowed her to remember — Felicity used her power to express an innate meanness, the way a bad boy might

pull the wings off a moth, just because he could. Felicity had often tattled on them to Caldos, telling him Ana tore a dress he bought her, or Keja carelessly dropped one of their laptops. Some of it was true and some of it was lies, but it was done with an aim to come between Caldos and the girls, out of spite. Caldos finally had to forbid her to visit the suite. Undeterred, she next made it her mission to interfere in the healings, advising Caldos against granting requests in cases she knew would be especially gratifying to Ana — children or common people rather than celebrities or anyone blind or deaf. Caldos knew her tricks, but in every other arena she was his chief advisor, so too often she got her way.

She and Peter would make a good pair.

"She doesn't want to marry him," Caldos said.

"Can't you make her? I mean, touch her and make her want to?"

"I could but it's hard to make a person change their desires and behavior on a permanent basis. I can do this..." He took her hand and instantly she jumped up, terrified out of her skull, heart-pounding, as if the couch was about to grow teeth and devour her. Caldos still had a grip on her hand. He said, "Or this..."

Now she was insanely happy, shouting with laughter.

Abruptly, the mood washed out of her. She sat back down.

"That's just hormones. They don't last long. I can give someone a fixed idea — such as *alcohol tastes bad* — but if they want to drink, they'll do it anyhow. I can force a change, burn it into their brain, but there's usually collateral damage. Felicity's too valuable to me in every way. I can't risk losing her abilities."

Keja turned toward him, sitting cross-legged on the couch. "If you can't get your way with your powers, you'll have to do it in the ordinary way."

"How's that?"

"Lie to her. Say..." she thought for a moment, "say you really love her, but..." She tapped a finger to her mouth, "Yeah, you're afraid to marry her because she'll be a target, people have been sending threats. You can make that happen. Tell her she'd be a prisoner of your fame, just like we are."

He grinned, nodding. "Yes, and I could give her a little push, no more than the confidence-boosting I give her all the time. I could suggest she worry about kidnapers, suggest she find Peter attractive. And I can make sure he's gentle with her, the first couple of times at least."

Keja wasn't listening. She was remembering something else which had seeped out from the locked room in her mind. She had been at Miami's Golden Sunshine *palácio*, nearly a year ago, waiting in the wings while Ana and Caldos worked together in front of the cameras to cure a boy with spinal bifida. Clad in white robes, their faces serene in their healing trances, they held the total attention of everyone in the room, including Keja. She hadn't noticed the man come up behind her until a hand clamped hard over her mouth, the other hand gripping her arm. Romany words whispered in her ear, "Your father sent me. I'll take you home."

At the time, she didn't remember her reason for staying with Ana, yet she felt reluctant to leave. "Ana," her muffled voice moaned and she pulled against the man's grasp.

"If she wanted to come, she would," he said, forcing her head around to stare at the trio at the apex of the camera angles. She saw it was true. Standing over the boy in his wheel chair, one hand on his forehead and the other holding Caldos' hand, Ana looked perfectly at peace. Without further struggle, Keja allowed the man to hustle her down a deserted hallway and out into the parking lot.

"It's the van down there. Just act natural and keep walking."

A few Golden Way employees stood outside the cargo bay doors, diehards who hadn't taken advantage of Caldos' easy 'one touch and you'll stop smoking' plan, but they paid no attention to Keja and the Gypsy man. She didn't know why she kept silent when she saw Caldos' white limo parked across the lot, why she didn't warn the man that Caldos' Brazilian bodyguard was always with the car. If she had known what would happen next, she would have said something. How could she have known that Man of Peace wouldn't step out of the limo and shout at the man, something like, "Bring that girl back!" Or that he wouldn't run over and grab her away from her abductor? How could she have known that he'd roll the window down a little way and take aim with such a silent gun that no one heard the shot, no one noticed the man's body fall, no one saw anything, not even when Man of Peace drove over and scooped the man into the back seat, saying to her, "Get in the front. I'm driving you home right now!"

She hadn't left the hotel once since then and Caldos had told her she'd have no liberty until they returned to Teardrop Cay after all the television shows had been filmed. When she wasn't in this state of remembering, she didn't know why her freedom had been curtailed, but she knew now why Caldos wouldn't let

her remember. It would break Ana's heart to know someone else had died.

Caldos reached toward her saying, "It's time for you to forget."

"Wait," she protested, wanting to ask him to help her contact her family and convince them not to try again to take her home. However, Caldos didn't hesitate as he clamped his slender fingers around her wrist, his smile broadening, as if he expected something wonderful.

Caldos, September 15, Hibiscus Hotel

"Remember more," he told her, one hand on her arm to keep her near him when the final door opened and she again knew that he had fucked her more than once. Naturally, she tried to run, but he held her, telling her, "You are at a Gypsy festival, dancing for the men." Like a stage show hypnotized subject, she complied and began to sway her hips and snap her fingers, giving him flirtatious glances as she spun around to the music in her mind. On other occasions, he'd made her perform the tribal dance, his mother's dance, but it wasn't natural to her. Although that dance was more erotic, her awkwardness spoiled it. This dance was erotic enough, he realized, and stood up, grasping her again by the wrist.

He relaxed her and led her to the elevator, taking her down one floor to a suite he kept for his personal use. They immediately entered a bedroom paneled in dark wood, the massive bedspread a green leafy pattern, a hammock in the corner for the times he preferred a bed true to his traditions. A fresh bouquet of exotic orchids exuded their rich, dark scent.

"Take your clothes off," he instructed, as he stepped across the room to lower the shade. Too much damage control would be needed if the wrong people got photographs of what was about to happen. She sat on the bed, holding her t-shirt and shorts in front of her body as she cried. The relaxation was wearing off. He restored it and watched the battle in her face — panic trying to express itself through muscles and hormones unable to rally — as he penetrated her quickly, aware to his annoyance that he felt grateful to her for his erection and his orgasm. Needing to punish her for being an unwitting witness to his humiliation, he allowed her fears free reign as he took her again, forcing her body to cooperate in a violent coupling while she screamed and sobbed.

"Stop it! Stop it, please," she pleaded, but he sprang instantly ready again, this time touching her to bring her into a relentless

series of shuddering climaxes and an insatiable desire for more. Now she ravaged him, kissing him with a wild passion, offering him her budding breasts to bite and suckle, scratching and licking him all over, finally mounting him and riding him in a howling frenzy.

The door burst open and two men with guns rushed in. Olive-skinned, dark eyes glaring from beneath promontory eyebrows, they looked alike enough to be brothers. One was slim, the other had a pendulous gut hanging over his belt buckle.

"Daddy?" Keja quavered, jumping off Caldos and scuttling to the far corner of the bed, her shock and shame eliminating the arousal he'd induced in her.

The slimmer man, Caldos assumed it was Keja's father, stood staring, his expression pure amazement. Slumping in defeat, understanding what he had seen, he allowed the hand holding his gun to fall limply at his side, but the other man still aimed a pistol at Caldos.

"Unless you can cure yourself of a bullet to the brain, you'd better do as I say. Let the girl come with us."

"*Nai!*" Keja's father cried and unleashed a stream of furious words in Romany, concluding as he brought his gun up and aimed at Caldos' belly, "The only one we want is Ana. Take us to her now!"

"Certainly," Caldos murmured and stood, not making any effort to hide his tumescent state as he pulled on his trousers and shirt. The two men retreated to the side of the room as he strode toward the doorway. Keja's father ignored her as she knelt, reaching toward him, begging, "Daddy! Daddy!"

In the hallway, a third Gypsy man, scrawny and bandy-legged, stood by the stairwell door with Dr. Burns, Ana's tutor. The short man had one arm levered around the tall doctor's neck, pulling him sideways and down toward the barrel of his gun.

The fat Gypsy stabbed his gun toward Caldos. "Tell us where the girl Ana is!"

"She went to the clinic this morning. I can take you there now."

"No!" Keja's father barked. "You will stay with us while someone else gets her." He held a small radio to his mouth and spoke into it, but received no reply.

"That won't work in here," Caldos said. "The whole building's shielded."

"Then I'll go down," the Gypsy said. "Sandor, you and Valentin stay with him. Don't get too close. Don't hesitate to

shoot him if he tries anything. I'll come back after I send the others to the clinic."

Caldos stood without moving, a slight smile on his face, perfectly relaxed although he felt annoyed with himself for allowing his erotic enjoyment to diminish his awareness. While he and Keja were together, he'd heard footsteps in the suite overhead but had assumed it was Shaun. He'd forgotten completely about Dr. Burns, now squirming and sweating in the wiry Gypsy's grasp.

Years ago, Caldos had walked the streets of Bahia, Brazil, without even his bodyguard, confident he could reverse the effects of any mishap, but he'd been struck by two cars, knocked unconscious and mortally injured. Were it not for the timely intervention of another *onça*, he would have died. Caldos felt no guilt over the way he had repaid his healer, Manoel — the man had no idea of the potential their mutual gift represented. The incident taught Caldos he was not invulnerable. Since then, others had unsuccessfully tried to harm him on occasion — it was impossible to be as famous as he was without incurring resentment. His buildings now had state-of-the-art security. This hotel, because Ana was precious to him, was more of a fortress than the others. Human error obviously had allowed these men to enter, and Peter would pay dearly for that error, but the non-human aspect of the fortress remained in place.

"Code four, tear gas," he said, and closed his eyes. He triggered his personal defenses as everyone else's were lost. Opening his eyes, he stepped forward, plunged both men into deep unconsciousness, then hurtled down the stairs. Keja's father had made it almost to the ground floor, although the concentrated dose of gas in the stairwell had blinded him. One hand to his face, he was stumbling downward when Caldos caught him. Leaving him comatose at the foot of the stairs, Caldos entered the hotel's lobby.

Peter and the guard from outside the building were both there, coughing and writhing on the tiled floor along with four more Gypsy men. After taking care of the intruders, Caldos yanked Peter upright, quickly suppressing his reaction to the tear gas.

"Go wash your face, then come back and tell me what happened."

He flung open the front doors to air out the place, but too many curious on-lookers were clustered outside the gate, so he closed them again.

Madison's wife, Viola, who cooked for the girls, came out of the kitchen wearing a gas mask. "I hid under de counter," she told him. "Dey didn't see me. But after de shot, I was too afraid to come out."

"Who was shot?" he demanded.

"No one bloody well got shot," said Peter, returning from the bathroom, wiping his eyes with wads of toilet paper. "That fucking Rafe appears at my office door, says, 'We got a problem,' and the minute I come out, boom, they hit me from behind. They fired the gun just to get everyone's attention."

"And how did they get in the front door?"

Peter took a step back. Possibly, after all these years, he had figured out that when his boss' voice became quiet like this, someone was in big trouble. Still hoping that *someone* wasn't him, he pointed wordlessly at Rafe, huddled in a corner between a wicker couch and a potted fern, wheezing and retching. Caldos hauled the man up, overrode his reaction to the irritant and repeated the question.

Rafe, a second-generation Cuban American built like a welter-weight boxer, said, "I guess maybe I left the gate unlocked after Dr. Burns came through. I remembered Ana was gone so I figured he'd be back down right away."

"Your first mistake. And how did they get in the front door?"

"They had a gun to my head," he said, calmly, not cringing and defensive like Peter.

"And isn't there a code word you're supposed to use, should anyone take you hostage?"

"Yeah!" Now Rafe sounded aggrieved. "And it's 'effing.' And that's what I said. I didn't say 'we got a problem.' I said 'We got an effing problem.' Honest!"

"Well?" he asked Peter.

Peter wouldn't meet his eyes. "Oh, maybe he did. I just thought it was his way of talking."

"And didn't you agree on the code word between you?"

"Yeah, but he says that all the time," Peter whined.

"I do not. I say 'fucking,' not 'effing. I never say 'effing'!"

Restraining himself from knocking their heads together, Caldos said, "Well, the code word has to be natural to the circumstances. It can't be 'marigold' or 'ephemeral'."

"What?" they both said.

"Never mind. You'll both be taken off guard duty. When Miami Virtue installed the security system, they offered to provide guards but I told them I preferred to use my own men,

people I expected to be more loyal and more willing to risk their lives to protect me and those who are dear to me. I was wrong. I'm going to take them up on that offer."

"If I'm not guarding, what'll I be doing?" Peter asked.

"To start with, you'll be washing every inch of this hotel. But first you can get restraints on the fellow in the stairwell and two just outside my suite, plus these four, and put them in the banquet room." Caldos walked toward the front door.

"Are you leaving?" Peter sounded plaintive.

"I'm stepping outside to make a phone call." He reached Man of Peace immediately and who assured him Ana was fine. Caldos was still talking to him when the police arrived.

"Sir? Mr. Moreira, sir?" a uniformed cop said, but Caldos waved him off while he continued to speak on the cell phone. "Is she finished the healing yet?"

"Not quite."

"As soon as she's done, take her to Moon Island. This place won't be habitable for a while." He clicked off and turned his attention to the officer, who'd been standing near enough to overhear the conversation, tapping one foot impatiently.

"Mr. Moreira, we have reports of shots fired at this location."

Caldos smiled at the man and took a step closer. "Yes, there was an accidental discharge of a gun."

"Was anyone hurt?" The man flipped open a notebook.

"No, just the ceiling as far as I could see." Caldos chuckled and pointed upwards, taking another step. His chest now nudged the notebook.

The policeman didn't retreat, didn't back down. Pressing back against Caldos with the notebook, he said, "Sir, we'll need to come in and make sure everyone's okay. And we'll need to talk to the person who was handling the firearm."

Caldos put one hand on the policeman's back, hooking a finger above his collar to touch his neck. "That won't be necessary. The young man's feeling bad about it and I've already spoken severely to him."

"Of course, sir. No need to make a fuss over this," the man said, pocketing his notebook. The other cop came out of the patrol car, scowling suspiciously until Caldos shook his hand, saying, "Thank you so much for responding, but it wasn't anything. And I hope we'll see you at one of our services this week. If you aren't a member now, you can go online and find out the address of the nearest *palácio*. I'm sure you'll find it exactly what you need."

The cops returned to their car, both grinning idiotically. He heard one say to the other, "I had no idea he was such a great guy."

After calling the security company, he returned inside and found the lobby deserted. Peter and Rafe were dragging the last groggy Gypsy up the stairs to the banquet room. "Are the coppers coming in?" Peter asked.

"No, I told them it was nothing."

"What are we going to do with this lot?"

"I'm going to let them go. With a little something to convince them that they, and their friends, better stay away from me from now on." He stepped into the banquet room, saying, "You two get Shaun, Madison and Viola loaded into one of the limos. Tell them they'll be my guests at Moon Island until you've cleaned this place up. I'll take care of Keja myself."

As soon as they were gone, he closed the door.

Shaun, September 15, Hibiscus Hotel

Shaun had been at work that morning in his office on the second floor of the hotel. The banquet room just across the hall had the ocean view, so his view was of the alley, garbage bins and the back doors of a blue plastered row of storefronts, one slim royal palm rearing overhead. The view didn't matter. Most of the time his eyes were on the screen as he did research for Caldos on the one computer in the hotel directly wired to the Internet. His earplugs in, listening to Paffendorf, he also kept one eye on the security monitor. It wasn't his job to watch, but he knew Peter spent the bulk of his time playing Test Drive on the computer in the lobby office, ignoring the bank of monitors. Shaun had just one monitor screen, which cycled through images from 22 cameras.

Ana and Keja's suite was monitored only at the elevator door. When Shaun started work at nine, he'd seen Ana leave the suite. She'd passed through the lobby and next appeared on the hotel's front outside camera, getting into a white limo. Caldos arrived at the suite shortly after that. Shaun found that strange, since Ana wasn't there, so he changed the setting to keep images from the fifth floor camera permanently on his screen. Caldos reappeared at the elevator about half an hour later with Keja. She looked spaced out. Shaun hoped she wasn't sick or anything.

They descended one floor, Shaun following their progress on the elevator monitor. They entered Caldos' suite. Like the

penthouse, that floor had no cameras other than the one just outside the elevator. Wondering what was going on but feeling guilty for spying, he set the monitor back to scan and tried to return his attention to his task for the day, getting information for Caldos about Afghanistan in preparation for his coming trip to the country. Shortly after that, a flicker of activity from the penthouse monitor caught his attention. Dr. Burns emerged from the elevator. Three men came into the suite with him, men with swarthy complexions, wearing tattered fedoras and grey suits that looked like they came from second hand stores. They all had guns.

One man stayed with the doctor and the other two disappeared off-screen. Shaun checked the lobby monitors and saw Peter and Rafe both being held at gunpoint. Viola didn't show on the kitchen monitor, but one of the third floor cameras showed Madison strengthening his legs on an elliptical cycle machine. Shaun returned his view to the fourth floor. Besides Caldos' suite, that floor held Shaun's room and a room for Man of Peace to use if he stayed overnight. The monitor showed nothing, but Shaun was sure Caldos and Keja were still in the suite. Although cell phones didn't work in the hotel, there were intercoms. He tried to contact the suite, with no response. He knew he had to sneak upstairs to warn them of the intruders.

The minute he entered the stairwell, feeling breathless but determined, he heard voices in a foreign language from above and footsteps clumping down toward him. He darted back to his office and watched on the monitor as the men, with the terrified doctor in tow, entered the fourth floor lobby, then picked the lock on the door to Caldos' suite and went inside. Desperately afraid for Keja, Shaun took out his gas mask and spoke the phrase, "Code four, tear gas," knowing it was futile. The system had been programmed to respond only to Caldos or Ana or Peter. And Peter always forgot the codes. Shaun had to help him with them every day when he did the security check. Shaun kept the mask on, assuming Caldos would trigger the defense himself. And he did, shortly after emerging from the suite with the men.

Keja did not come out of the suite. As soon as the tear gas was deployed, Shaun headed for the fourth floor. He emerged from the stairwell just in time to see Caldos step into the elevator. Two men lay on the carpet, alive or dead Shaun didn't know nor did he take the time to find out. Dr. Burns was coughing uncontrollably.

"Take the stairs to the roof," Shaun urged him. "You can wash at the pool's shower. Do you know where Keja is?"

Eyes streaming, the man shook his head.

As soon as Shaun entered the suite, he heard Keja coughing. He found her in the bedroom, curled into a ball in the corner. She was naked and so covered with scratches she looked as if she'd been whipped.

"Keja! Are you all right?" She covered her face with her hands and did not reply. He grabbed at the bedspread to cover her but it was too big and heavy, instead he yanked the sheet from underneath. As he draped it around her shoulders, he couldn't understand how she had been hurt this badly. The men weren't here that long, and they hadn't done anything to Caldos. He'd looked fine when he emerged from the room.

Maybe Shaun had counted wrong. Maybe one of the men remained in the suite. He ducked to look under the bed and then started toward the closet, his breath so loud in his mask that he barely heard Keja choke out, "Find my clothes, please, Shaun."

He scrambled to comply, untangling them from the bedspread. After snatching the clothes from him, she stood to dress herself, weeping. He quickly turned away but couldn't help but see the bite marks on her breasts and a thin trickle of blood inside one thigh. She leaned against the wall and began to cough violently. He tried to open the window to give her fresh air but, like every other window in the building, it wouldn't open. "You'll feel better if you wash your face in the bathroom," he told her.

"No." Her voice was low and strained. "I just want to get out of here."

"Let's go to the roof," he said, thinking Dr. Burns could help her. He put his arm around her waist and helped her walk to the elevator. As they emerged beside the pool, he saw that Dr. Burns wasn't there. In that moment, feeling an irrational relief that no one else would see the state she was in, he allowed himself to know what had happened to her. She'd been raped and the intruders hadn't done it — there hadn't been enough time. Caldos must have done it.

Something inside him wanted to deny this, to say it was impossible for Caldos to do this — Caldos was a holy man, wise and fair, trustworthy, a great guy — but the evidence in front of him was incontrovertible.

He led Keja to the shower and helped her wash her eyes and face, cleansing her of the chemical irritant. "I'll get you dry clothes," he told her, but she seized him by the arm.

"You've got to get out of here," she hissed at him. "Don't let Caldos know you saw me, or he'll make you forget. And you have to remember, remember this for me. He raped me, he's done it lots of times. Don't let him touch you. He'll make you forget and you can't forget until you tell me. And tell me ... tell me my father saw it, but he thought ... he thought I liked it. Tell me that I'm *marime* now."

"What's that?"

"It's not important. Just leave now. Tell me everything the next time you see me."

Keja, September 15, Hibiscus Hotel

After Shaun left, Keja stood in the shower, water streaming over her body, soothing the stinging of scratches and other injuries which had burned painfully after the tear gas sprayed down from the ceiling. She was sorry she'd told Shaun. Her anger and her despair had made her forget, briefly, why it was important for her not to know about the rapes. If she knew, Ana would know.

Ana and Caldos couldn't read minds but secrets were like red flags to them. Even if an *onça* couldn't pluck a secret from your brain, they sensed its existence — they could order you to speak it aloud. Caldos always helped her mind and her body to forget what had been done to her, otherwise Ana would find out. If Ana found out, Keja knew she would try to kill Caldos. The last time they'd fought like that, just after he kidnapped them, each had stopped the other's heart. They'd both survived, but Keja didn't know if either would come out alive if they had another battle.

She heard the elevator, saw Caldos come onto the roof. She didn't care if he discovered what she'd told Shaun. She hoped he would. She didn't want to remember anything that had happened that day.

Caldos, September 15, Hibiscus Hotel

After finishing with the Gypsy men, Caldos came out of the banquet room to find Peter and Rafe restraining an angry and upset Dr. Burns. "He wanted to come in," Peter reported, proud of himself, "but we wouldn't let him. We told him—"

The doctor cut in, "I signed on to teach your girl, but I didn't sign on for this. Those men could have—"

It was Caldos' turn to cut in. He seized the man's hand, silenced him, adjusted his hormones and said, "You were very brave. You weren't afraid. The security here is excellent and you're completely relaxed about coming back."

When he dropped Dr. Burns' hand, the man blinked a couple of time and asked, "Do you want me at the usual time tomorrow?"

"Yes, but it'll be at a different location. I'll have Man of Peace pick you up. You can go home now."

Dr. Burns walked away, a new spring in his step. Caldos turned to return to his suite and look after Keja, but Peter stopped him to report, "We got Madison and Viola washed and in the car, but we can't find Shaun."

"I'll find him," Caldos snapped, summoning the elevator. It took too long to arrive, so he sprinted up the stairs. First he checked his suite, but no one was there. The door to Shaun's room stood open and as Caldos entered, the young man's masked face peered out from the closet, his voice squeaking like a 12-year-old's, "Are they gone yet?"

"Yes," Caldos replied. "Go to the parking garage and wait in the car with Madison and Viola." He hurried upstairs, berating himself for not remembering to do this supremely important thing.

Not finding Keja in the penthouse, he checked the roof and was relieved to find her alone. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

"No." She clung to the shower standpipe, cold water cascading over her, soaking her dress. The morning sun struck bright coruscations from the swimming pool. In the sparkling air, he stepped toward her, but she jumped back. "What did you do to my father?"

"I let him go." This wasn't strictly true, but he'd given the Gypsy men instructions they were compelled to obey, to wait half an hour and then to leave.

"Did you hurt him?"

"No, but I did punish him and the others." He smiled at the thought of what he'd done.

"How?"

"A small thing. I took away their manhood."

Warily, she asked, "In what way?"

"Just some constriction in important blood vessels. They won't be able to get it up. They could have it fixed by a doctor, if

they're not too embarrassed. I wanted to make a point — I don't want them coming after you again." He didn't tell her about the final warning he'd given the Gypsy men — that he could have just as easily made their dicks shrivel up and fall off.

"They won't. I'm *marime*."

"Outcast?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't matter. Come here." She approached him meekly and allowed him to touch her and put the memories back in their box, as he told her new memories to overlay what had actually happened. He also healed her cuts and tears.

The elevator opened and Rafe came out, saying, "I found a woman in the alley with a walkie-talkie. She's tied up downstairs. I maybe broke her arm when I grabbed her."

Caldos turned and answered him, "That's fine. Take Keja with you now and you and Peter can drive everyone to Moon Island," not realizing he'd forgotten one small item.

Petit, September 15, Choromos

Petit returned home that day, as she did every morning, waiting until her father had left for work. The first morning, she'd gathered her few remaining possessions; subsequent visits had been because she wanted to see her mother. Maman worried about her, she was unhappy about her husband's attitude toward his daughter but unable to convince him to change his mind. Although grateful that the people at The Folly had taken Petit in, Maman felt nervous about entrusting her so recently regained child, not to mention her future grandchild, to strangers, especially strangers as strange as that group of assorted people whose relationships were impossible to figure out.

Today, Petit found Maman at the plank table on the *galerie*, drinking café au lait, wiping away tears. "I told him it was wrong to drive you away, you should be home at a time like this, not with a bunch of fugitives."

Petit tried to reassure her. "They aren't criminals, Maman. In fact, that woman called Dulce is a nun." Maman's brightening expression encouraged her to continue. "And Harold, the man from Canada — he's some kind of missionary. He helped Dulce run an orphanage in Brazil."

The smile Petit earned with this tidbit of information was brief, Maman's tears resumed, "Your Père made you leave once,

and you weren't a bad girl, not at all. Now, just when I've got you back, he drives you away again."

"It's okay, Maman. I don't mind. They're kind to me and I can be a help to them, to repay their kindness. Plus it's near enough for me to visit you. And you can visit there too. You'd love the children." She described them all, pausing periodically to pour more hot coffee and milk for both of them. Maman didn't keep up her end of the conversation, too near the edge of weeping, but Petit didn't mind — she discovered she had lots to say about her new friends, even without being able to mention the telepathy. "João is a big guy, but gentle as a lamb. He's deaf and blind, but he plays with the babies, nice as can be. Rosie's a dwarf, she's over twenty but tiny. Plus there's Dolly, she's Stephen and Jimmie's mother. Père would know her; she works at Mr. Prince's warehouse. And there's another woman, Heather, who is a nurse, but she's away with a group of Gypsies. I've never met her."

"Only one man with so many women?"

"There was another man. He was a doctor and his name was Glen. He died. And Dolly's husband is dead too." She didn't want to say that Glen and Madison had died during a fight with Caldos Moreira. That would make Maman more worried.

"Was he this Heather's husband? Or is Harold married to Heather?"

"Oh no, Heather doesn't have a husband. Harold is married to Dulce."

"He's married to the *nun*?"



Petit left soon afterwards, trudging along the trail beside the bayou, oblivious to the squawking of mallards flying low over the water and the splashing of fish rising to leap into the haze of hovering bugs, knowing she had no chance now to change Maman's opinion that her refuge was a bad choice; inescapable, but bad. Thank goodness she hadn't mentioned the telepathy. She arrived at The Folly to find everyone in a tizzy. Dulce, carrying Stephen, was hurriedly leading João upstairs from the kitchen. Harold, with Bini and Jimmy, was behind her, followed by a weeping Rosie.

"I was having fun outside," the short girl declared. "I want to help you teach Luiz to talk. I don't want to be with the babies. I'm twenty-two. I'm not a baby!"

THE DEMON LEFT BEHIND

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1

Speaking of Aliens

The big house stood alone, like the final survivor of a half-forgotten war. All its old comrades on the quiet street were gone, gentrification having quietly gobbled up the homes and the hedges, the gardens and the picket fences and most of the trees. The whole block was lined with pricey condos now, along with a scattering of infills, all of them propped up in respectable pairs like newly separated Siamese twins.

The defiant resistance of that single house, I thought, said a good deal about its owner. We nodded to each other, after our fashion, and went to have a closer look. Geminian swooped up to the roof and down the chimney; he thinks such nonsense is great fun. The rest of us entered in a more conventional fashion, through a slightly opened kitchen window. It smelled of recently cooked food—spicy and meaty and sweet. In the next room was a huge desk with a computer, several old chairs, and a veritable ton of books. Many were classics, by authors whose names I recognized: William James, Emily Brontë, Niccolò Machiavelli, Hannah Arendt. Lying on the desk and the coffee table were several works by a certain Jeremy Pinkpasture, whose name I also recognized—not as a writer of classics, but of the New Age best-seller, *The Celestial Prophecy*.

These latter were marked throughout with sticky notes, and seemed rather worn with use.

I was sure it was the right place, but nonetheless I slipped back through the window and climbed into the mailbox. There were two letters in it, a telephone bill, and a science fiction magazine, all variously addressed to a Mr. P. or Mr. Paige Ballantyne.

We had found him. We settled down on a sunny ledge of windowsill and waited for Paige Ballantyne to come home.

It must be obvious to you now, from what I've said, that I and my comrades aren't people like yourselves. But when I tell you outright that we're demons, I know the sort of reaction it's likely to provoke. Panicky gulps of horror and frantic signs of the cross. All manner of demands for secret knowledge. And, from some of you, a great many rude questions, mostly regarding our supposed private parts. On the other hand, if I didn't tell you, you'd eventually figure it out for yourselves, and that would be worse. We know how suspicious you are, you Visibles; in no time at all you'd be wondering how many more of us there were, and suspecting your mother-in-laws and your teachers and your cats. You'd be in a howling flap over us, and that wouldn't do at all. So I may as well just tell you straight: I'm a demon. My name is Melusine. My comrades are Bashemath, who is female like myself, and Geminian, who is male. And, just in case you're wondering, we haven't come from hell—if any such place exists at all—but from the Otherworld, a place where only spirit beings live.

And where is this Otherworld, you're wondering? Right here, on the same planet as your own, under the same sun and moon, amidst the same chaos. Which is why all this trouble started. Oh, we were certainly used to human chaos; we'd seen a fair bit of it through the centuries. But the Twentieth Century upped the ante, big time, what with nuclear weapons and other inventive Visie toys. And for all the hopeful talk about a promising Third Millennium, the next century wasn't shaping up any better. New wars starting, more hunger, more hatred, more destruction; a whole lot of humans on one side of the world putting bombs in the sand, and a whole lot of them on the other side putting their heads there....No, indeed, the Third Millennium wasn't looking millennial at all.

Our leaders were noticing the same things, of course, and eventually it was decided that we should spend some serious

time among you. Demonic reconnaissance, you might call it—checking out the social, political, environmental, and in particular, the moral terrain of your Twenty-First Century. Things went swimmingly for oh, a year or so, until most of the teams had finished their preliminary work and were reporting back to *Alari* Central. That was when, for one particular reconnaissance team, things began to go terribly wrong.

Imagine, if you can, standing before a wise and powerful leader, and explaining to her how it came about that you, a ranking member of an investigative elite—the renowned *alarien*, no less—could lead a small task force among mere humans and *lose* one of your precious number? Lose the youngest in all the service, the one everybody loved, the one she'd mentored herself? Lose him and not even know it till you got back?

And if that wasn't bad enough, imagine discovering that young Wye-Wye, whom you loved as well as anyone did, despite his occasional lack of discipline, wasn't merely roaming unsupervised among the bipeds, he was seriously missing. Not showing up on scans. Not responding to a command summons, sent out across the entire planet with the most powerful signals the High Ones can send. No loyal demon had ever willingly defied such a summons. Those who failed to respond were dead, or they were, as you *Visies* might say it, in very serious shit. Which is why we ended up on a quiet residential street in a place called Calgary, sitting anxiously on Paige Ballantyne's windowsill.

Originally, Ballantyne's name had been merely one of a hundred or so that we were checking, names garnered from a variety of sources, including the local media—people who were named in incidents that might have caught Wye-Wye's attention; people who'd given lectures, or belonged to organizations, or taught courses, or simply possessed expertise in the fields that enthralled him. It was, as you can well imagine, a clumsy and discouraging way to search, but it was all we had, and so we pursued it, relentlessly, name by name.

I'd been on number forty-three or so, a professor of comparative religion at the university. I was moments too late to catch him at his office; all I caught was a phone call saying he'd meet someone at Paddy's. I didn't know if Paddy was a friend or a bar, much less where Paddy was located; the only thing to do was follow the man.

Thus I ended up on a Calgary C-train, and overheard a conversation never intended for demon ears. (Of course, in our natural state we don't have ears, or eyes, or any other sensory organs. Nonetheless we perceive most of the same things you do. We have different and complicated ways of describing these perceptions to each other; here, in speaking to you, I will simply use the words you know.)

Anyway, there I was in the noon hour rush, profoundly grateful that I was spirit life, and could rest cheerfully on the overhead railing while the poor squashed humans struggled in and out. The professor, having got on long before the city core, had found a seat and buried himself in a book, so I eavesdropped on the Visies.

Demons can hear more keenly than humans, and process information more efficiently, so we can listen in on many conversations at once. I listened and sorted, giving up quickly on fashions, football, and the stock market. Then I heard a woman talking about aliens. She was thirty or so, conservatively dressed and carrying a briefcase—an office worker, I decided, or maybe a teacher. She and her seatmate obviously liked science fiction; they were arguing amicably about the relative charm or nastiness of television aliens: Klingons and Cylons and various others. They seemed to know them all.

And then she said, laughing, "Do you know, I met someone once I halfway thought might be an alien."

"Oh, tell me," said her companion. "Did he have funny ears?"

"No, of course not. He was, I don't know, maybe twenty-five, tall and rather skinny. He wore glasses and this big sweater with way-too-long sleeves. He was geeky-looking, actually, but rather cute."

"If you think that's an alien, don't go anywhere near the university."

"Oh, it wasn't his appearance—or it wasn't *just* his appearance. Everything about him seemed a bit off. He spoke good English, he was polite, he looked perfectly human, but he was, I don't know, peculiar. And he moved funny—as if his body were strange to him somehow."

I started listening with real attention. Wye-Wye sometimes materialized as the sort of young man she described; he said it made people more comfortable with his questions. And when he was intensely involved in his work, he could sometimes forget that he was embodied, and move in clumsy or unexpected

ways. It was not uncommon; even older, more experienced demons faltered occasionally. The young did so more often.

I shut out all the other conversations as the lady went on:

“And another thing—he kept asking about angels. There were people who claimed to have been visited by angels, he said. What *were* angels? —or rather, what did the people who’d seen them think they were? In what form did they appear? What did they do? I told him I didn’t know; I didn’t care a fig about angels. I told him he should talk to Paige Ballantyne—”

“The reporter? Why him?”

“He knows all about that crap—pseudoscience, pop religion, the whole ball of wax. Matter of fact, he was giving a lecture on it the following week, my husband was going, which is why I thought of it. I told the geek he should go, too. Then he wanted a crash course on Ballantyne—did I know the man, why was he lecturing on angels, had he seen them himself, where was he speaking—the kid just never stopped. It seemed like, well, a more than natural interest....”

There was a brief pause as they gathered their belongings to leave the train.

“You didn’t really think he was an alien, did you? I mean, if you come by my office I can show you three or four others.”

“No, I didn’t think so, not really. But sometimes those ideas just come into your head; you can’t help it. There was something odd about the kid. And do you know, even now, all these months later, I still think so.”

So it came about, after seven weeks of futile searching, that I felt the first small nudge of hope. Do you have any idea what it’s like, even for beings as powerful as ourselves, to find the trail of a missing demon? A demon who might have materialized in any human form, who might have gone to any part of the planet, who might be using any human name? We began in California, because that was where he’d left us. We combed the northwestern states, using both human and demon strategies; we never found a trace. And the other alarien who were searching elsewhere, scores of them, who stayed faithfully in touch with Alari Central—they found nothing, either. Finally, a tiny clue emerged: a large cash withdrawal was made in Victoria, from the account of the *alarien* depot in San Francisco. It was the account we’d been sharing as a team, but none of us were anywhere near Victoria when the withdrawal was made, and nor were any of the San Francisco staff. We dashed off to

Victoria, armed with the exact address of the relevant ATM, which the California staff had kindly pilfered from the bank records. We found it in a supermarket; nearby was a rooming house where, apparently, a young man named William Dais had stayed for a few weeks before heading off to Calgary. A young man with certain remarkable traits—maybe Wye-Wye, maybe just a youth like a thousand others, travelling the continent. We followed him east, and finally, on a rainy afternoon on a Calgary C-train, I heard a tired science fiction fan talk about someone who made her think of aliens, and I allowed myself to hope....

I called in Bashemath and Geminian to tell them what I'd heard. All we knew of Ballantyne, at that point, was from a schedule of events for the University's Continuing Education department—a series of lectures by various individuals, themed around challenges to the contemporary status quo. The theme fell within the broad parameters of interest that we'd set; Ballantyne's address was given on the twelfth of May, a time when Wye-Wye might have been in the city. So we'd noted it merely as something to look into, along with a hundred and seven others. Now, my eavesdropped conversation lifted it to top priority.

We did a rapid inquiry on Ballantyne. He began his career with newspaper journalism and moved on to radio, serving as Middle East correspondent for the CBC for seven years. Now a free-lance journalist, he'd acquired an excellent professional reputation doing no-nonsense investigations into high-profile issues. He was considered an agnostic with a scientific bent of mind, equally cynical about That Old-time Religion and the trendier New Age varieties. He had been that way for years, apparently, but when his fiancée left him to join the Celestial Prophecy movement, his feelings became decidedly more pronounced. There was more, of course, but those bits were the ones that caught our interest.

Then we looked at what we had. Maybe the possible alien was Wye-Wye. Maybe he went to Ballantyne's lecture. Maybe they met. Maybe the man knew something. Maybe we could persuade him to tell us....

It was all grasping at straws, of course it was. But when there's no land anywhere in sight, and a single straw is all you find, you grab it. We headed off to Paige Ballantyne's quiet house in Sunnyside to have a look at him in person.

Shortly after three, a small, lower-end Toyota pulled into the driveway. The man who emerged was thirty-five or so, medium height and medium build, casually dressed in a sports jacket and pale blue shirt open at the collar, with no tie. His light brown hair was cut rather too long for a bank clerk and rather too short for a hippie, but his features were even and finely chiselled; he might have seemed attractive, if you didn't look closely at his eyes. His eyes were sad, and angry, and bitter, all at the same time.

A pretty orange cat came running along the side of the house as he arrived, and rubbed its head on his ankles. He brought the mail and the cat inside, and we slipped in behind them.

"Hungry, Spook?" he asked.

The cat looked up at him, all ears and green eyes, forgiving him implicitly for asking such a stupid question. He poured a saucer of milk for his pet, and a large glass of spirits for himself, and flung himself down on the chesterfield. I sat on his shoulder while he opened his letters. One was a commercial solicitation; he folded it into a paper airplane and sailed it neatly into the trash can. By then the orange cat had cleaned out its saucer and climbed onto the chesterfield beside him.

The other letter appeared to be personal. His address was handwritten, and there was no return address. He picked it up with what seemed a mixture of desperate eagerness and very real dread.

Dear Paige,

I hope you will be patient and try to understand what I'm trying to tell you. If you would only give the insights a chance you would find everything different; all the energies of the universe would be available to you, and so many things you think are important would not seem important any more. That was why I was able to understand the Eighth Insight and realize we had to separate. Someday when we both understand all the insights we'll be together again and realize how much we gained by giving up a merely physical relationship for something so much more important. I already understand why the world has so many problems. People are not in touch with the energies of the universe and so they harm each other and make war and ruin the environment. When they understand they only need to open their consciousnesses to the universe and get everything they need from it, they will stop doing these things and the world will

be a good place to live. So you see it's not just for our own sake we should learn the insights; it's for everyone's sake. Please try.

Your friend, Jennifer.

He read the letter twice, folded it carefully, and put it back in the envelope. He scratched the orange cat's ears.

"You don't know anything about the Eighth Insult, do you, Spook? It's just old medieval puritanism in a nice New Age gown. Copulation interferes with meditation, see, and we just can't have that. Can't have a man spending money on his girl when he ought to be spending it on spiritual enlightenment. Hell, the old monks figured that one out when your ancestors were still on plague ships. *Plus ça change, kitty, plus c'est la même chose....*The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, the earth is getting sicker, the nuts are getting nuttier, but is it anything to fret about? Naw, Spook baby, not a bit. Back in the days of the plague ships, God was going to take care of everything, and now the universe is going to. Nice, isn't it? So easy. No complicated economics to figure out. No political tightropes to walk. No risks to run. You won't lose your job, or your tenure, or your life. You can have wonderful cocktail party conversations about the coincidences in your life—oh, and I should tell you, Spook, I saw an old gray cat in the alley this morning when I went out and it came right up and spoke to me. It said, very distinctly, 'Miaow,' which was so incredibly similar to the way you speak, it had to be communicating some profound spiritual truth. Don't you think so?"

"Miaow," said Spook.

"You're such a cynic. Do you realize, if you and I had the wisdom of Jeremy Pinkpasture, we could find extraordinary spiritual meaning in that extraordinary miaow, and we could be rich?"

The cat blinked at him, adoringly.

"Well, we could. We wouldn't even have to know how to write. We could just tell everyone we went to a distant country where there were large trees with large leaves and some other trees with different leaves and where a man was murdered and it was probably done by his enemies. And we'd be rich."

He drained his liquor glass and laid his head back. He seemed very sad.

"Do you think she'll come back, Spook?" he murmured.

We looked at each other, after our fashion, and withdrew into a corner of the room.

Among ourselves, of course, we demons don't use speech. We can send and receive messages quickly and across great distances, without needing nerve paths, or wires, or any other physical apparatus—the sort of thing I believe you would call telepathy. However, I cannot communicate with you in that fashion, so I must approximate human speech, or more correctly, human thoughts.

—*What is the best way to approach this man, do you suppose?* I began. I asked because it was polite, but I was the leader and I had pretty much made up my mind.

—*Friendly humans*, Geminian said.

—*You always say that*, Bashemath grumbled.

—*It works*.

—*Not always. A lot of times, scaring the shit out of them works better*.

—*Is that what you'd recommend, Bash?* I asked.

She shrugged, as we do in our fashion. —*Maybe not right off. He seems approachable*.

—*Friendly humans it is, then*.

We materialized in the garage, so we could take our time about it, and check on ourselves afterwards to be sure we resembled the honest, respectable Visies we were pretending to be. I chose a professional look for myself, as I often did: slender, but not excessively so; hazel eyes graced by fine cheek bones and shoulder length brunette hair, a classic pantsuit that minimized, but did not altogether hide, a smooth, shapely body. Then we slipped out into the alley, two attractive women in their twenties and a middle-aged man with a cane. On the street we found a pay phone. Ballantyne's personal number was unlisted, but he had a business line in his home. My colleagues, of course, listened in on the conversation.

It wasn't easy to arrange a meeting. Ballantyne wanted more information than we were prepared to give him over the phone; I suppose he thought we might be cranks, or people who would merely waste his time. But eventually he agreed to meet at Dennison's Coffee House in Kensington shortly after five.

—*What did he mean, he's not free right now?* Bash grumbled to me after I'd hung up the phone. *When we were in there, he wasn't doing anything except talking to his cat*.

I looked at the sun. By Visie time-keeping, five was a good hour off. It was a long time to spend waiting, but not really time enough to attempt a different contact. Besides, we'd been going non-stop since we arrived. A break might be good for all of us.

—*Shall we stay up, then?* Bash asked.

—*Yes. We might as well.*

Staying up, in demon talk, means remaining materialized. I know you Visies read and watch a lot of science fiction, in which powerful beings take on bodies, or change their bodies, or abandon their bodies, as nonchalantly as you might change a glove. So I should tell you, we demons are powerful indeed, but it eats up our energies the way a long and rapid hike might eat up yours. Once embodied we can restore ourselves by drawing energy from the sun—but only slowly, and far less effectively than we would in our natural state. Needless to say, remaining changed too long, or changing too often without rest can weaken a demon terribly—even, in extreme cases, to the point of death.

But it was a summer afternoon in Calgary, and Dennison's Coffee House had a lovely outdoor patio, where we could thrive on the sun. So we sat for a considerable time, quite pleasantly, eavesdropping on the Visies around us, who had no idea how sharp their neighbors' hearing was. Ballantyne showed up about a quarter past five, carrying a briefcase. He stood for a moment, scanning the area, and then came over to our table.

"Good afternoon. You're Miss Davis, I believe?"

"Yes. We're so glad you could come." I introduced my sister Bella, my uncle Jim. He greeted everyone easily, graciously, and placed a quick order with the waitress. Then the briefcase was laid on the table, along with a pen and paper, and a small, flat object, considerably smaller than a deck of cards. I assumed it was a recording device.

"You're not Calgarians yourselves, I take it?" he said.

"No. We're from the States. Springfield, Illinois."

"Ah. I thought your accent was a little different. When did you get in?"

"A couple of days ago."

We chatted about nothing very much for a minute or two. His coffee came. He took a sip of it, and slid the small object to the center of the table. "I'd like to record our conversation if you've no objection. I've found it's always better to have

an exact record of what was said, so no one has to depend on memory for every detail. Is that all right?"

"Yes, of course."

He pushed a button, tested the device, pushed more buttons.

"All right. It's July 24, and I'm at Dennison's Coffee House in Calgary with Melanie and Bella Davis and their uncle James Davis. You said you wanted to talk about a missing person's case, Miss Davis, and that you had reason to believe I might have some information that could help you. For the record, would you state again who is the missing person?"

"My brother, William Davis—though he usually goes by Will." I paused. I wasn't merely pretending to be groping for words. My comrades and I had talked at length about how to present the story, but even after all the discussion, I still wasn't sure. "The thing is, Mr. Ballantyne, Will was travelling when he went missing, so we're not sure where he was when whatever happened to him happened—"

"Why do you think something's happened to him?"

"Because he doesn't write anymore. Doesn't call. It's like... it's like he just isn't there anymore."

"When was the last time you heard from him?"

"Mid April. Just after his birthday," I added, looking sad. I didn't have to fake it. I liked Wye-Wye enormously. He was an *alari*, a member of my team, but he was also my friend.

"And where was he at that time?"

"Victoria. He said he'd be moving on soon, but he wasn't sure where."

"How old is your brother?"

"He's just twenty. He's a university student. But he went through a bit of a bad time last year, so he decided to take a semester off and tour the continent." I linked my hands together and leaned across the table. "Mr. Ballantyne, we haven't gotten anywhere with...with the usual agencies. It seems to us the police aren't even taking it seriously. You know: the kid's travelling and doesn't call home for a while, big deal. That sort of thing. So we decided to try and retrace his steps ourselves."

"You decided to do what?"

"Follow his trail. Will is...he's insatiably curious, and very sociable. He talks a lot, asks everyone questions; in fact, sometimes people really wish he'd shut up. So we thought we could maybe find out where he went by tracing where he'd been...."

Ballantyne was a professional; his face didn't show much. But I had a fair idea of what he was thinking. *You're going to*

find a person who's travelling the continent, merely by going to the cities where he's been and finding the people he's talked to—people you've never met and whose names you don't know, people who live among populations of millions? You'd show more sense searching for a penny in the North Atlantic.

"It's not as crazy as it sounds," Gem said calmly. He played the middle-aged uncle rather well. "Will has some very unusual interests. As it happens, they're interests you share. And we have a reason to think—or rather, a reason to desperately hope, that you might be one of the people he spoke to."

"And what interests are those?" Ballantyne asked, very calmly.

"Exotic religions," I said. "Weird scientific theories. He wasn't...he didn't *believe* the stuff. He was just endlessly curious—rather like a kid at a circus, wondering what other freaky thing might be in the next tent." I paused for the briefest moment. "That's why we think you may have met him. He'd been in Victoria for a couple of weeks, at a rooming house, and when we went there one of the other tenants remembered him. He said Will left for Calgary early in May, but had talked about stopping over in the mountains for a bit. So we came here, and as luck would have it we heard about a young man who resembled Will—and we heard that he'd been told to talk to you, as the expert in all those things he was so interested in."

Ballantyne's visible interest clearly went up a notch, but he let me go on.

"You gave a lecture in the spring—I believe it was called 'Medievalism and Modernity'—talking about the rise of pseudoscience and far-fetched religious theories and the like. Will would have gone to that lecture, Mr. Ballantyne, and I'm sure he would have talked to you about it, either at the time or afterwards."

Please the Fates, this would be the moment he'd look up at us with sudden recognition: *Ah, yes, of course, now I remember the lad, and a wonderful bright lad he was, too.* But no. He merely studied the tablecloth for a time before he spoke again.

"If I recall correctly, you said this information came to you 'as luck would have it.' Yet you're strangers in the city, arrived only two days ago. Just how did this extraordinary bit of luck come about?"

The only safe thing to tell him, I thought, was the truth. "Would you believe it was mostly an overheard conversation?"

He smiled faintly. It had no particular effect on me, but a human female, I thought, might find that wry smile decidedly attractive.

"I've no trouble believing it," he said. "After fifteen years in my profession I wonder if half the world's history isn't shaped by overheard conversations."

We smiled, too. I leaned forward again. "Do you remember him at all, Mr. Ballantyne? Was he there? At your lecture?"

"There were a lot of people there, I'm afraid, and quite a few of them spoke to me after. Can you describe your brother?"

I gave him the geeky-looking Will, well aware that for a lecture at the university, with a respected journalist and author, Wye-Wye might have opted for an altogether different look.

Ballantyne shook his head faintly. "Offhand, I don't remember anyone like that. But as I said, there were a lot of people, and it was some time ago. Was there anything distinctive about him I might have noticed—you know, like a scar from an old injury, or an unusual ring—anything like that?"

"No. Only that he would have seemed *very* inquisitive. And very bright."

"Well, it's possible. I recall some exceptional questions. But let's digress for a moment. What *have* the authorities managed to come up with?"

Then he started on the subject we dreaded, all those routine things that would be looked at in a missing person case, if the person was actually human—airline passenger records, hotel and hostel registries, bank account withdrawals, et cetera, et cetera. To all of it we could only give the same answer, over and over: nothing had been found. Will Davis had left no trace of himself since he left Victoria in May.

"And when did you contact the police?"

We had not contacted the police at all. We had considered it—indeed it had been seriously debated among a number of senior *alarien*. In the end, we saw no point in it. Even in the time he'd been with us, Wye-Wye had used many different human names and materialized himself in several different bodies. Even if he used the geeky look again, or called himself William Davis from time to time, it would not help much; both the look and the name were common, and hundreds, probably thousands of false leads would result.

It was decided, finally, that our energy and our skills would be better spent searching in our own fashion. But this was hardly something we could tell Paige Ballantyne.

"We reported him missing around the middle of June. Will never went longer than a couple of weeks without calling, and by then it was more than a month. But like I said, I don't think they ever took it seriously."

Ballantyne turned his pen in his hand a few times. He had not used it to write anything; he just played with it. "Please don't be offended if I ask you this, but was everything okay between your family and Will? I mean, no disagreements or anything? You weren't angry because he quit college and went on the road?"

"It was his decision. Maybe Mom and Dad would've preferred he finish his studies at one go, but they knew he'd go back. They didn't give him any flak about it. None of us did."

"And there isn't anything else? Some reason why he might be...avoiding you?"

"No way."

Ballantyne nodded faintly, as if it were the answer he expected, then he shoved back his chair. "I'm sorry, but would you excuse me for a couple of minutes? Don't go away; I'd like to pursue this further." He stopped the recorder, tucked it into his pocket, and headed for the men's room.

—*Well, what do you think?* I asked the others.

—*He doesn't give much away,* Gem said.

—*No. He certainly doesn't. Bash?*

She made an iffy motion with her hand, that was all.

I played at drinking my coffee. I thought we'd handled ourselves well, that everything we'd said was credible. Yet I'd grown more and more uneasy as the interview went on. I had no way to know what the man was thinking. Despite what gets printed in a lot of silly novels, no demon can penetrate a human mind. Our knowledge of you Visies depends on all the same tools and skills you use with each other—judgment and experience, reading the language of the human face and body. And all of these were warning me that the man was leading us on, that he would continue asking sensible questions as if nothing were amiss, right up until the moment when he leaned back in his chair, called me a damn liar, and asked me what my game was.

As it turned out, I was only slightly wrong.

He smiled at us when he came back, apologized again, and sat down as if he intended to stay for a while. "I'm

feeling a bit peckish," he said. "Would you care for a doughnut or a muffin or something? My treat."

"You're very kind," Gem said. "But we had a snack just before we came."

"Well, more coffee, then?"

"Yes," I said. "Thank you."

He ordered a muffin for himself, and coffees for all of us. But when it came, I used what we call a lure in the demon world, to distract him. The waitress was paid, tipped and gone before Ballantyne realized the food was on the table. He looked at his plate, and then at us, obviously astonished.

"*Our* treat," Gem said cheerfully. "You're giving us your time."

"Well," he said. There seemed to be a world of meaning in the simple word, but for the life of me I couldn't read it. He raised his cup. "Well, then. Thank *you*."

I watched him eat a portion of his muffin, drink most of his coffee, wipe his mouth and then his fingers with the paper napkin. I wondered, just for a moment, what it was like to be a human—what it was *really* like. How would it feel to live so briefly, to be so dependent on physical things, endlessly in need of food and garments and warmed boxes to live in? I wondered, too, how Visies would feel about us if they knew us—if they would shake their heads in the same fashion, and wonder how we could bear to live without bodies, if we wouldn't be bored silly, or worse.

Gently, so gently an ordinary human might scarcely have noticed, Ballantyne got us talking about ourselves. He started by asking about Willie: what was he studying, what did he plan to do when he graduated; that led quite naturally into what we did, and what he did himself, and various similar things. This took care of at least fifteen minutes, along with the rest of his muffin and most of the coffee. Then, in the midst of it, a small melodic noise came from somewhere near his ribs. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a cellphone.

"Ballantyne....Ah, Leslie, hello...." He bent over slightly, listening with obvious attention.

Bash shot me a critical look, as if to ask why I hadn't disabled the damn thing. Truth be told, I'd forgotten to scan for one. But given the sort of man Paige Ballantyne turned out to be, I don't think it would have mattered a fig.

"Yes, yes, got it," he was saying. "Thanks, Les; you're a brick. I'll buy you dinner. What?....Yes, that's a promise. Bye."

He closed the phone and put it away. He looked at us each in turn. He didn't, as it happened, lean back in his chair. That was the only part of my premonition that was wrong.

"Miss Davis. Mr. Davis. I don't know how much of what I've heard here this afternoon is true. But one rather important thing is not. As you might expect, given my line of work, I know a lot of people. Some of them have access to useful data bases. It seems no missing person's report was filed on William Davis anywhere in British Columbia or Alberta in June, or any time since. And just in case there was some confusion over names, or over ages, I asked for a check on any report for a male between the ages of fourteen and forty. There were none in that period in Victoria, and only three in the entire region; all have since been located.

"So." He played again with his pen. "So I ask myself a number of questions. Is William Davis missing, or is he hiding? Are you, in fact, his concerned family, and if you are, why did you fail to report his disappearance? If you aren't, then who are you, and why are you hunting for him?"

"Those are rather serious questions, my friends. I don't know if I could help you in any case, but even if it turns out that I can, until those questions are properly answered, I won't. Would you like to start answering them now? —oh, and I should say, anything you tell me is going to be checked, and double-checked, and maybe triple-checked. Let's start with a complete family history. Who is William Davis's father—full name, date and place of birth—"

"Don't bother, Mr. Ballantyne," I said wearily. "The family and all that, we made most of it up."

"Ah." He didn't seem especially surprised. "And why, might I ask?"

"It was simpler than telling the truth. Besides, we were afraid you wouldn't believe us anyway. We hoped you might... we were...we were so scared for Willie, we just wanted to get information, any way we could. That's one thing we didn't lie about, I swear it. He *is* missing, and we're desperately worried about him."

He said nothing. I figured he was about thirty seconds shy of telling us to bugger off because he was going home to watch the Loony Tunes.

The friendly humans approach hadn't worked worth a damn, I thought. Maybe Bash was right. Scare the shit out of them instead. I looked about at the glut of customers, noticing

all at once how crowded the coffee house had become. How unpleasantly noisy.

"Can we speak somewhere more...private?"

He shrugged. "A park bench is about as private as I'm prepared to get."

"It'll do."

We got to our feet. He glanced at Gem, or more precisely at his cane. "Are you okay with walking a few blocks? I can call you a cab if you like."

"Oh, heavens no," Gem said. "We'll walk."

And so we left the clamor of Dennison's Coffee House, and moved out into the warm summer streets.

2

The Skeptic

We walked mostly in silence. All of us, I suppose, were thinking about how we would handle the conversation ahead of us, what we should and shouldn't say. I thought we'd cross the river to Prince's Island, but instead Ballantyne led us to a small community park a few blocks away. It had a playing field where kids of various ages were kicking a ball around. It had swings and monkey bars. In one corner, close to a nearby apartment building, a picnic table nestled under a tree, unoccupied, as if it were waiting just for us.

"Ladies, Mr. Davis..." Ballantyne spoke just as we were moving around the table to sit. He seemed to be choosing his words with exceptional care. "I want you to know, I've met a number of people—mostly in other countries—who were searching for people they loved who'd disappeared. I know it can be a desperate and agonizing thing, and if I've seemed insensitive, I'm sorry. But I can't—I have no *right* to get involved until I'm satisfied no harm will come of it. Can you understand that?"

—*He knows something*, Bash murmured, softly even as thoughts are reckoned.

—*Yes*.

"I do understand," Gem told him. "And though it may surprise you, I admire you for it."

"That's kind of you." He laid his briefcase on the table, turned on his recording device, and sat down. "Then will you in God's name tell me what's going on? I've been all over this bloody planet; I've been in war zones, prisons, mental asylums, you name it. There isn't much human beings get up to that I haven't seen, and some of it from pretty close up. And I think you know as much, if you know anything about me at all. So why do you say I wouldn't believe it if you told me the truth?"

"Because we're not human beings."

It was lovely to watch his face. He had, I think, been ready for almost anything. We could have claimed to be fugitives from the Mafia or agents of the Mafia, fugitives from a foreign tyranny or representatives thereof. We could have whispered about ancient manuscripts or lost Aztec treasure or Al Quaeda spies in the local kindergarten. We could have offered him ten million dollars or threatened to roast him over a slow fire. None of it would have put that look on his face, a look of absolute *I-can't-possibly-have-heard-what-I-think-I-just-heard!* disbelief, shading slowly but distinctly into laughter.

"Well," he said, "I'll give you credit for balls. Not many people would try to sell me that one."

"It's true."

"Right. And I'm the queen of England."

"It's absolutely true, Mr. Ballantyne. We are not human."

Our eyes met, hard. "My God," he said. "You really are serious."

"Yes, I am."

He looked at Gem, at Bash; they both nodded.

"Well, then I'm out of here. I don't have time for crap."

He reached for his recorder. Before his hand closed on it I whisked it away with a thought, whisked his cell phone out of his pocket at the same time. They scampered down onto the grass as though they had legs, chased each other all around the table, scrambled back and stood like little sentinels in front of me. He reached for them again; they backed away.

"How the devil did you do that?" he whispered.

"The same way you'd kick a ball around," Bash said. "Nothing to it." Just to prove the point, she hung his briefcase up in the tree.

—*Careful*, I told her. *There's Visies over there.*

—*Bugger them*, she flung back. Nonetheless she put a shield around the briefcase and it vanished from sight.

Ballantyne looked more than a tad uneasy, but he held his ground. "Fine," he said. "You're the best magic act since Houdini. You still haven't told me what this is really about."

"Magic act?" Bash growled. "Put a shield up, Mela, will you? I'll give this twit magic."

She held out her hand. Slowly—and I think to a Visie, rather horribly—it began to dissolve, fingers melting into claws, skin into fur, beautifully striped tiger fur, long deadly tiger claws. She flexed the paw once or twice, ominously, scratched it across the picnic table. It left distinct, ugly marks. She changed it again, into a shining stump of polished wood, and held it out to him.

"Touch it," she said.

"I don't think so."

"Oh, come on," I challenged him. "You've been in war zones, prisons, madhouses, wasn't that what you said? She won't hurt you; you have my word. Touch it."

He did, and grimaced. "It's like bloody marble," he said.

She changed it back to a human hand, and he touched it again. I knew it would feel like any other human hand, with flesh and bones and soft, warm skin.

"Do you know any magicians who can do this?" Gem asked.

"No," he admitted. "So who are you?"

"I am known as Melusine," I said. "This is Bashemath, this is Geminian. The friend we are looking for is Wye-Wye. He's much younger than we are, and he is...well, inclined to be more curious than is good for him. As I said when we left the coffee house, that much of the story is true."

"But who are you? Where are you from? You can't... Extraterrestrials can't get here without some kind of vessel... can you?"

I could see a certain excitement building in Paige Ballantyne. He was an intelligent man, a man with imagination. He had scores of science fiction books in his house. And I was quite sure he was thinking something like: *Are they aliens? My God, is it possible? Am I talking to people from outer space...?*

"We have no idea what extraterrestrials can or can't do," Gem told him. "We've never had any contact with them."

"Never had any contact...?"

It was almost sad, seeing that excitement die, seeing the delight in him turn to something much like scorn. If we weren't aliens, then we could only be fakers of some sort, possibly ludicrous, possibly nasty, but interesting only as fakers, and

in Paige Ballantyne's view, the world had more than enough of those already.

"So. What are you then? Leprechauns on growth hormones? Delinquents from Hogwarts, out to torment the poor dumb Muggles for a while?"

"Visies," Bash said. "We don't call your sort Muggles. We call you Visies."

"Well, you still haven't told me what I should call you. Though I dare say I have some ideas of my own."

"We're demons," I said, and before he had a chance to answer or even to think, I started explaining. I told him what demons were, how we lived in the Otherworld that was really part of this world, but not quite, and how most of us weren't evil although we could get properly pissed off just like any other creature. I told him all the stuff I told you at the outset, and probably more, and when I was done he just sat there, looking like a man who'd been whacked on the head several times and wasn't quite sure where he was.

"Do you really expect me to believe all that?" he said finally.

"That's your choice," I said. "But if you choose to disbelieve it, then you have to explain to your own satisfaction what you saw here. Can you do that?"

"Of course not."

"It's not as strange as it might seem," Gem told him. "I believe you know some physics. You know that as we approach the core of being, matter and energy are almost indistinguishable. You know that everything you think of as solid, if you could examine it with a sufficiently powerful microscope, would turn out to be mostly empty space, held in the shape you see by the ferocious motion of its tiniest particles. Reality is mostly perception, and perception is...shall we say...unreliable? There is no reason why a conscious being could not exist in its natural form as energy. That is what you call pure spirit, is it not? Energy that has consciousness but is not embodied?"

"As in gods? Is that what you're claiming to be?"

Gem laughed. "Certainly not. We're demons, nothing more."

The sun was low. Paige Ballantyne studied the jigsaw of rectangular buildings across the river. He was an investigative reporter with a reputation for judging by the evidence. He was also a skeptic who'd publicly criticized many forms of irrationalism. End Times predictions, astral travel, past life recollection, Ouija boards—he had taken journalistic pot shots at all of them, one time or another. Now he had to persuade

himself he was sitting at a picnic table in his own home town, in broad daylight, conversing with a batch of demons.

"All right," he said. "I still don't think you're telling me the truth. But let's for the moment say you are. If you're such powerful beings, how can one of you get lost? And why the devil do you need a *human* to help you find him? What can a human possibly do that you can't do a hundred times better and faster for yourselves?"

"Provide information." I leaned my elbows on the table and linked my hands. "Your question is right to the point, Mr. Ballantyne. It's very rare, very unusual for one of us to become, as you put it, lost. We have powerful communication signals that reach over long distances. We can travel extremely fast and search places no human can enter easily or, in some cases, at all. Yet all those methods have failed to turn up a trace of Wye-Wye."

"So maybe he doesn't want to be found. Maybe he's gone AWOL."

I shook my head. "I'm sure he wouldn't. But even if he wanted to, demons emit energy signals, sort of the same way a human body emits heat. The strength of the signal varies, depending on the strength of the demons, and on whether they're active or quiescent. Other demons, of course, immediately recognize the signal: 'Ah, there's one of us around here somewhere.'"

"But can't a demon block the signal? Hide it, the way you hid my briefcase?"

This Visie, I thought, was pretty quick on the uptake. "Yes," I said, "but only to a point. The trouble with shielding is that the shield itself is demon energy, and at close range we can pick that up, too. So no, I don't think Wye-Wye is hiding—not from the kind of search that's happening now."

"But how did you lose him in the first place?"

Ah yes, that. I looked at the table briefly, at my hands, at the grass wagging softly in the wind. It's hard to contemplate one's own mistakes, most especially when those mistakes have brought a friend to harm, perhaps even to destruction.

"My friends and I belong to a body of demons known as *alarien*. We are...In most human situations I suppose you'd call us researchers. In some you'd call us tactical squads. And in a few, I suppose, you'd call us spies. We deal with certain problems among our own kind, and keep track of whatever the Visible world is up to. We meddle very little in your affairs,

though I know your stories say otherwise. But we like to keep an eye on things, not least for our own welfare—”

“Your welfare? How could we possibly affect your welfare?”

“In the ordinary course of affairs, you can’t. But you’re such inventive creatures when it comes to violence, and there’s certain varieties of it we prefer to avoid. So between all the Millennium noises and all the war talk and signs of impending chaos coming from your world, it was decided we should spend some time among you and see what was going on.

“There were a lot of us, of course, across the planet, but I was with a team of eleven here in the west of North America. Wye-Wye was an *alari* in training. He was insatiably curious; he always had a question or a new idea for something different we should try, and being young, he was sometimes a little reckless. Eventually our team split up, so we could cover more ground. The second group was under the leadership of an old *alari* named Harmund. He sent us some very interesting news a few weeks later and Wye-Wye said he’d like to switch over and join Harmund’s group. I cleared it with Harmund and away Wye-Wye went. Only what the young rascal did was contact Harmund himself, right after, and say there’d been a change of plans, that he was staying with me after all. And then he went off on his own. Foolishly, Harmund never checked back with me. And I, even more foolishly, never followed up to see how the lad was getting on. We didn’t miss him till we were home, standing in front of Central Command like the pair of fools we were, saying, *But he was with you! No, he wasn’t; he was with you!*

“Needless to say, our leaders weren’t happy. After their scans were unsuccessful, they sent out what’s called a command summons, transmitted all across the planet, with the most powerful signals we have. That kind of summons is a very serious matter; the nearest thing among your own kind might be a military order under fire.”

“In other words, obey or else.”

“Yes. Except for the worst sort of renegades, the only demons who’ve ever failed to respond were in appalling trouble, or they were dead.

“So now more than half of the recon teams are out looking for Wye-Wye. Harmund is in disgrace, talking to penguins in Antarctica. As for me, since I was the team leader, and Wye-Wye’s safety was ultimately my responsibility, I’m under bond to find him. Forever. I can’t return unless he does.”

"Dear heavens," Ballantyne murmured. "The legend of the Wandering Demon."

Bash had a dreadful glower on her face. She was the best bad cop I'd ever worked with. "What do you think, Mela? Should I set his hair on fire?"

"No. He's only saying dumb things like that because he doesn't believe us."

"If I set his hair on fire I wager he'll believe us."

I merely smiled. I teleported his briefcase back to the table and his cell phone back to his pocket, and handed him his recording device. He did not appear to consider it a peace gesture.

"Who sent you, anyway?" he asked. Somebody must be pretty mad at me to shell out the sort of money a charade like this would cost. Those are programs the entertainment industry would kill for, to say nothing of the CIA—"

"Programs?" Ah yes. Computer programs. "You believe everything you saw and touched was a form of computer-generated deception?"

"What else? I'll grant you, it's a pretty fancy scam. You get me to believe you really *are* demons—maybe even get me running around with you looking for Wee Willie Wye-Wye, asking stupid questions and generally making a complete ass of myself. You record everything and take it back to your friends in the Silly Circle, they send it to the talk shows and plaster it all over the internet, and *voilà!* that's the end of Paige Ballantyne's reputation as a serious journalist. All I'd like to know is who put you up to it."

—*Don't, Bash!* I said fiercely, sensing where her mind was headed.

—*Don't worry, Mela, I wasn't going to drop him.*

—*Never mind; just let him be.*

"Except," I said, "if there was a young man named Willie Davis at your lecture, asking unusual questions, then maybe—just maybe—it's not a scam?"

"With five hundred people there, and most of them asking questions? You could have picked a name out of a hat." He got to his feet. "I'm sorry. For a while there I really thought you people were on the up and up, but...." He shrugged, smiled faintly, tiredly. "I guess not. Good night."

He walked away without a backward look, vanishing down the sidewalk as the lowering sun laid shadows all around him. He walked to his quiet house in Sunnyside, unlocked the

door, muttered "Hello, Spook" at the orange cat who leapt off the armchair and ran to greet him. He walked into the living room, and there we were, all three of us, sitting calmly on his chesterfield as though we were his supper guests, and he had merely stepped out of the room to fetch our drinks.

3

A Bargain Made

I'll give Paige Ballantyne credit: he has very quick reflexes. He had the cellphone in his hands in what seemed, literally, the very instant he saw us. Trouble was, I had disabled it when he entered the building. He tried it a couple of times, then flipped it shut and slid it back into his pocket.

"How the devil did you get in here?"

"The devil had nothing to do with it," Gem said amiably. "I came through the kitchen window. Then, since I'm a courteous gentleman, I let the ladies in through the door."

"I know how big the opening in that window is, Mr. Davis. You won't fit. I also know the screen was safety-locked; I checked it before I left this afternoon. So. A real-world answer, please. How did you get in here?"

"Show him, Bash," I said.

She stood up with the most elegant insouciance you can imagine, tossed her hair just a bit, and began, very slowly, to dematerialize, her edges blurring, fading as if into vapor, and then into nothing. The last of her wisped away like the dust of a broken puffball caught in flutter of wind. For the first time since we'd encountered Paige Ballantyne, he looked shaken, as though the earth were crumbling under his feet and he had nothing, absolutely nothing, to grab for safety.

He looked briefly at me, then again at the spot where Bash had been standing.

"What in God's name have you done to her?"

"I did nothing to her," I said. "She merely returned to her natural state. We have to persuade you somehow that we're telling you the truth."

He didn't seem particularly persuaded. "Was she ever here at all?"

The back doorbell rang; he ignored it.

"Why don't you answer the door and see for yourself?" I suggested.

He muttered something that sounded vaguely profane, but he complied. And there, of course, was Bash, dressed to kill in tight black pants, skimpy black halter, straight black hair, long black nails, all manner of silver studs and silver rings, and black stiletto heels. He took in the face, the outfit, the face again. It was a radically different look, but it was most definitely the same Bash.

"I wanted to dress for dinner," she said, "and the stuff in your closet is *so* boring."

"All right," he said. "You've made your point." He stepped back with a small gesture to invite her in. We returned to the living room; the three of us resumed our seats. He remained standing, like a man who meant to take some desperate action, but simply could not decide what it should be.

"Why don't you sit down, Mr. Ballantyne?" I suggested. "We're not going to rob you, or trash your house, or hang you upside down over the toilet bowl. I promise."

"I'm touched," he said. But he sat. He seemed, all at once, rather weary.

"When you left us at the park," I went on, "you said we were playing a charade. Did you really believe that, or was it merely your exit strategy?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Everything you showed me could be put on film, of course, nothing to it. But to do it the way you did, in real time and three dimensional space...no, I didn't see how it was possible. But...." He made a small confident gesture, and said nothing more.

"But you didn't care for the alternative," Gem suggested.

"Would you care for it, in my place? You...*people*...have just kicked the wheels out from everything I thought I knew about the world."

"The man has a bent for wild exaggeration, doesn't he?" Bash said.

"He does indeed." I walked over to the little bar in the corner. "I know guests don't usually serve their hosts, but we're not the usual sort of guests. What can I get you? And don't look at me like that. I'm not going to poison it."

"Sorry," he said. "I'll take a glass of port. And please do help yourselves."

If that last bit was sarcastically intended, he hid it well. I brought him a generous portion in the nicest glass I could find, and settled in the armchair nearby.

"Tell me," I said, "you read a lot of science fiction, judging by your bookshelf. Do you think there might be intelligent life on other worlds—perhaps life of a radically different order than the life you know? Do you consider that a reasonable possibility?"

"Yes, of course. Lots of people do."

"Well, all we've shown you is that life of a radically different order also happens to exist here, in this world, in what you might call another dimension. That's all. That's the sum total of our assault on your wheels."

"But demons? Next thing I know you're going to tell me there's ogres and dragons and landing pads for fuzzy little men from Mars—"

"He's had a bad shock," Gem said. "Get a few more drinks into him and he'll be all right."

"Don't listen to those two," I said; "they can be such twits." I leaned closer. "Would you find it less outrageous if we called ourselves, say, mathori, or dakshis, or wedabegawadalas? We call ourselves demons because that's the common English word—it was daimon in the old Greek—the word for the spirit life Visies once believed lived in the water and the air and the trees. It's not precisely where we live, but I'm sure they sensed our presence there sometimes. We're just a life-form, Mr. Ballantyne. Just your ordinary, comes-in-all-shapes-and-sizes, garden variety bodiless being. We're not all nice like me, but we aren't devils kicked out of some supreme creator's heaven. If such a creator exists, or such a heaven, we're as much in the dark on the matter as you are. If you think you might someday find such life out there, why is it such a stretch to find it here?"

"In theory, it isn't." He drank a bit of port, and turned the glass in his hands. "But...but how could you be here...so many of you, for so long, without anybody knowing? I mean *really*

knowing, not just sensing a presence in the trees, or deciding that a god must have turned back the storm. Why don't you interact with us?"

"We do now and then. Though now, in what you call modern times, the Visies rarely imagine that we're anything but Visies ourselves. When we were more...open...it didn't always work out the way we intended. And the other thing is, between our two worlds, the realities are unimaginably different. So there are demons—a lot of demons, actually—who just aren't very interested."

"In other words, we're not the center of the universe, even here."

"Something like that."

He ran one hand over his face and into his hair. "God, do you have any idea how weird this all sounds to me?"

"I've some idea. And for what it's worth, I think you're taking it well."

"Probably because I'm too stupefied to do anything else. When I finally wrap my brain around this I'm going to have about two million questions. Without stopping for breath."

"Then I'd best ask my questions first. Did anyone cross your path here who might have been Wye-Wye?"

"Wye-Wye? Oh, right. The little bugger who started it all." Once again he hesitated. Perhaps he realized that in answering my question he would finally, irrevocably, acknowledge my reality.

"I can tell you this much: there was a young man at the lecture who introduced himself as Will Danford. Physically, he didn't look at all the way you described him—" Ballantyne caught himself suddenly, and looked over at Bashemath in her wild Goth garb—"but I guess that doesn't mean a whole lot. He certainly behaved the way you described him, witty and bright and insatiably curious. And more than just curious. His questions weren't the sort people usually ask, least of all young people. He wasn't simply interested in what happens in the so-called paranormal. He wanted to know *how* it happens, and even more so, what it means. He made a considerable impression on me."

—*It's Wye-Wye*, Gem said. *It has to be.*

"What kind of paranormal are we talking about?"

"Well, mostly the material of my lecture—the Celestial Prophecy, of course. Alien abduction, angels, demonic possession and exorcism—he was very interested in those. And there

was one other thing I didn't talk about much, but it seemed to have caught his attention in a big way. The Rapture."

"You mean Armageddon and all that?"

"You got it. The beginning of the End Times, when God whisks the chosen into heaven, right out of their office chairs and car seats and even their mothers' wombs—after which all hell breaks loose on earth, literally, and the Antichrist comes and they fight it out for seven years or so."

I'd heard about the Rapture, of course—part of the belief system of a Christian group called dispensationalists. We'd even talked to a few of them during our last tour among the Visies. I found them strong on faith and weak on methodology. I wondered if Ballantyne had any explanations.

"When God takes the chosen," I asked, "will they dematerialize, as we do? I thought bodied life couldn't do that sort of thing."

"Who knows? Maybe they dematerialize, maybe they just pass miraculously through car roofs and airplane fuselages and concrete buildings. I asked a couple of the Armageddonists once, and they said, What does it matter? —looking at me as if I were an idiot for even wondering. Which I suppose I was. I mean, who bothers his head about whether a leprechaun can fit inside a glove?"

"I'd bloody well care if it was my glove," Bash said. "The little buggers poop on everything."

Ballantyne looked at me. I smiled. "I've never seen a leprechaun," I said, "much less any leprechaun poop."

"Spoilsport," Bash grumbled.

I returned to the business at hand. "Did Wye-Wye...did Will Danford say anything that might have hinted at his plans—where he might go or what he might do next?"

"Well, he certainly gave me the impression that he wanted to have a real good look at the denizens of the Silly Circle. In fact, I wondered if he was planning to do a book on it, and I thought: why should I help him when I want to write one myself? And then I sort of kicked myself. I'd been thinking of writing that book for five years, and I never got past making outlines and collecting references. I thought, hell, maybe the only way it'll get written is if he does it. So when he asked me if I could point him to any good sources or good contacts I gave him what I had."

"Which was?"

"It's on my computer. I'll print you off a copy if you like."

The file was over a hundred pages, most of it book and article citations. It was divided into sections, each with a title that obviously reflected Ballantyne's take on the subject matter. *Angels in my Oatmeal. Beam me Up, Jesus. The Celestial Puffery. Support Your Local Exorcist. Hot Saucers; a Guide to Alien Sexual Abduction. Living Again...and Again...and Again. Travel Cheap; Leave Your Body Behind.* Each section listed relevant names, dozens and sometimes scores of them. Many included a general location, such as "Daniel Ferris, Cambridge, Massachusetts;" a minority had complete street addresses.

"It should be reasonably current," he said. "But only reasonably. These things mutate like a flu virus. Also, some of the people who write the books and give the lectures use a pseudonym, so nobody knows who they really are except their publishers and agents."

"Oh," I said, "I think a demon could find out."

"Yes, I expect so." He was silent a moment. "You could find out most anything you wanted, couldn't you? Access most anything? Classified documents, technical reports, military secrets, dirty money trails—I dare say police forces and intelligence services would kill to have a few demons on the payroll."

"Not if they thought about it for five minutes, they wouldn't. What makes you think we'd all sign up on the same side?"

He took that in and chewed on it for a bit. I used the moment to reactivate his cellphone and undo the two or three other small shields I had put in place. Then I got to my feet.

"I want to thank you, Mr. Ballantyne. You've been very helpful, and we're truly grateful. When this is all over, I'll make sure you're given some suitable reward."

"That's kind of you," he said. "But I can tell you right now what I'd like."

"Really?"

"Yes. You've been studying our world, you said, and that's all well and good. But I wonder if you've actually ever lived as a human—and I don't mean doing reconnaissance, I mean *living*. Eating and drinking, dancing, hiking in the mountains, listening to music, talking politics, being with friends. When this is all over, come back for a few days and hang around with me. You can answer some of my questions and I can show you how the other half lives."

"May the Fates preserve us. I believe you're asking me for a date."

"If you put it so, yes, I suppose I am."

Bash and Gem seemed both too bowled over to breathe. For myself, if I'd had a demon's tail, it would have been twitching with delight just then.

"Then I have a counter-proposal for you, Mr. Ballantyne. How would you like to work with us?"

—*Mela, you can't! He's a Visie!*

—*He's a smart Visie, Bash.*

"It'll be complicated, of course," I went on quickly. "There'll be times we'll have to go off on our own and leave you to catch up as best you can. But like you said, you know a lot of people, and some of them have access to valuable data bases. I think you could help us a lot. We'll pay you, of course—pay you well. And while I don't anticipate running into any danger, if it comes to that we'll certainly protect you. What do you say?"

He didn't give an immediate response. He settled back in his chair.

"You'll pay me?" he mused. "Forgive me for asking, but how the devil does your lot get its hands on money? I mean real, usable money. I'd hate to find myself with a stack of marked bills from a bank heist. Or no bills at all, because they all turned to dust when I wasn't looking."

"We go to casinos."

"Casinos." He laughed softly. "Jesus Christ. It would work, too, wouldn't it? You can fiddle with the wheels and levers, read everybody else's cards—you could walk out with a killing, and nobody'd ever know."

"We're honor bound not to steal from ordinary people," Gem explained. "And that includes banks and payrolls. We've waylaid a drug pay-off here and there when one came to our attention. But mostly it's the gaming houses. It's simple, efficient, and technically it's not even illegal."

"That's a very interesting technicality," Ballantyne said dryly. "So. If I was to agree to this, what would you actually expect of me? I mean, no one has ever accused me of false modesty, but in all truth I'm not sure how much use I'd be."

"Well, for starters, there's some things you can do faster than we can, because you have the contacts—and speed is our most pressing need. I recall you were able to check those missing person reports in twenty minutes or so, with one phone call from a public washroom—"

"Actually, it was three phone calls. But I take your point. I'm curious, though. Why can't you access the data bases yourselves?"

As pure energy, couldn't you go right into the systems and strip everything you wanted right from the hardware?"

"Unfortunately, no. Though it's the sort of question we always get asked: why can't we do all the things other forms of energy can do? But there's all sorts of things other materials can do that humans can't. Prop up skyscrapers, for instance. Survive extreme temperatures. The substance of your body might remain, but the life in it would be destroyed. It's the same for us. We're *living* energy, and the systems that sustain our lives have limits. So no; we can't turn ourselves into some kind of electronic search engine. If we want somebody's data, we find out where it is, get into the building, and snoop. Or we ask someone with contacts. Like you."

"Okay. Fair enough."

"Also, you also have a reputation, a profile. I'm sure there are people who'd talk to us if you made the introduction, who wouldn't give us the time of day if we just turned up and asked."

"Probably."

"And," I added, "perhaps most important of all, you're human. You know the human world in a way we never can. You see, there might be situations—perhaps several of them—when the human option will be the only one we have."

"I don't follow you."

"There's a code in the Otherworld that limits what we can do in yours. You recall I told you that our interventions in the past mostly didn't work out the way we intended? Well, that was something of an understatement. They actually caused a great deal of trouble, even for us. In fact, on one occasion they almost led to open conflict in the Otherworld. So the various councils and chief demons eventually held a sort of summit meeting, where they haggled and insulted each other for a considerable time, months, I understand; it was long before my making. Finally old Sofia had enough. The Visie world was a radically different kind of world, she told them. If we couldn't agree on what to do for it, then maybe that meant we should leave it alone. Let them be, she said. Let them find their own way."

"The Prime Directive," Ballantyne murmured, and then added, in response to Gem's obvious bewilderment: "Star Trek."

"The same general idea, yes," I said. "But considerably stricter. You see, as soon as Visies get a glimpse of our Otherworldly powers, standing around in a crisis and saying 'Sorry, we can't

be involved’—well, that gets them really ticked off. Worse, it gets them believing all manner of nasty things—”

“Like you’re big time baddies and you’re obviously working for the other side?”

“You got it. And that can lead to the Fates know what; it becomes a kind of intervention in itself. So there’s a second rule. Non-visibility. As far as the human world is concerned we don’t exist.”

“Oh, come on,” he said. “What about all the people writing about you and warning their kids about you and exorcising you all over the place?”

“Those demons?” Gem said, laughing. “They *really* don’t exist.”

“Gem’s right, Mr. Ballantyne. Most of the humans who think they’ve encountered one of us, haven’t. The demons they write about and exorcise are creations of their own minds. The humans who do encounter us are rare, and most of them never know it. We’re a belief in the Visie world, not a fact. And as far as our superiors are concerned, it has to stay that way. We can materialize as humans and spend time with humans. But we’re absolutely forbidden to reveal our true nature to humans except in very unusual circumstances, and then only privately, as we did with you.”

“And are those rules actually enforced?” he asked. He looked truly fascinated by all of this, I thought.

“The non-visibility restriction is taken very seriously. As for intervention, it’s sometimes a matter of how you define it; that can get very tricky. But, yes, by and large, the code is enforced.

“So....” I shrugged. “From time to time, down the road, the neat, efficient demonic solution to a problem might simply be unavailable for us, and a human solution might be needed. You.”

“Me. Well.” He reached for the bottle of port, offered it with a gesture. We accepted, and he poured. “Me, a solution for demons. Heaven forbid, what would my poor mother say?”

“Wye-Wye is young,” Gem said, “in demon age, he’s really just a boy. If you helped us to find him, then what would your poor mother say?”

“That, Mr. Davis, is a diabolical question.” But he smiled faintly as he said it, and raised his glass. “Here’s to finding lost boys.” We toasted and drank. “How old is the little rascal, anyway?” he went on. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Four hundred and fifty,” I said, “give or take a decade.”

His wine glass almost slopped over. "God almighty." He tried not to look at me. Tried very hard, I think, not to realize how old I might be.

"Ours is truly a different world, Mr. Ballantyne. You can't compare them; the same facts don't have the same meaning when all the parameters of being are changed. All of us here"—I wagged my hand to include everyone in the room—"are in what humans would call the prime of life—"

"Even him?" Ballantyne asked, looking at Gem's gray hair and cane.

"Oh, he's the youngest of us all. We simply wanted him to look like an uncle. So...." I smiled. "To business. Would a thousand dollars a day be acceptable for your services? We shouldn't need you for long, but while you're with us you probably won't get much sleep."

"That would be acceptable." He didn't add, *If I actually ever see any of it*, but I was quite sure the thought lay softly somewhere in his mind. "There is one caveat, however."

"Go on."

"I don't know what you and your friends actually mean to do, out in the world. But there are things I won't be part of. If I work for you, I keep the option to back out any time—from a particular undertaking, or from the whole ball of wax. And that's non-negotiable."

"My, my," Bash murmured. "Dictating terms to demons. Can you imagine what Fred LeBatti would make of this moment?"

"I can indeed. You know LeBatti's books, I presume, Mr. Ballantyne?"

"Oh, God help me, yes. I even had to review one of them once. *Piercing the Shadows*, it was called. Did you ever read it? Horrible evil demons crawling all over the place—universities, publishing houses, child protection agencies, the Civil Liberties Union—hell, even the health food stores were suspect. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so arrogant. Us good, everybody else very, very bad."

"And when have we heard that song before?" Bash murmured.

"A million times at least," I said. "Mr. Ballantyne, we accept your caveat." I held out my hand. "Do we have a deal?"

"We do."

He took my hand rather more warmly than he needed to, and held it a trifle longer. He was attracted to me, I thought, strange though the notion was. He was also—or perhaps more so—attracted to the operation, excited by the very notion of

working with non-humans, spending time with them, learning from them. I doubted that we could have found a more suitable human ally anywhere on the planet, and I silently thanked the Fates for bringing us together.

I had yet to learn how much it was going to cost me.

TECHNICOLOR ULTRA MAIL

by
Ryan Oakley



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Dedication

FOR

Hughie Beauchamp

Not everyone can see the green line at dusk

THEME SONG



“You will see a procession of game shows, violence, audience-participation shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence and cartoons. And, endlessly, commercials—many screaming, cajoling and offending. And most of all, boredom.”

—Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow, speech to the National Association of Broadcasters on May 9, 1961

PRODUCT PLACEMENT (1)



The other night I went to this Barcode bar and I was the only Rascitt there. On my way out I bumped into some guy. He started making a big deal about it and I told him to go fuck himself. He took me into the street and beat me senseless. I went home to my room in the housing complex, still drunk, and staggered to the shared washroom to throw up. Not sure what happened next but some Chinese guy woke me up. I was laying on the floor covered in blood, shit and vomit. My pants were around my ankles and my wallet was gone. So was my watch. Guess I'm on the edge.

—TheEdge.dump
Today's Music

ROBOT FIGHT TONIGHT!! ALL RIGHT!!

Place your bets for tonight's brawl! New Battle Bots with uber violent upgrades. Model Ivanna Suckyou performs her ping-pong lottery ball spectacular between fights. Get your odds and place your bets at Fatman's Casino and Battle Dome. You can win! Try long enough and you WILL!!

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*offer subject to the discretion of individual franchises and anti-competition bylaws.

"Today, an Edge ReOrbs Store was robbed by a white breed male in a suit. The bandit escaped with blank reOrbs and severely wounded the clerk, Maxwell Silver. We have that story and more at 11 o'clock. Join us then and we will ask Mall Security Chief, Rock Cockett, what can be done about this latest crime wave."

GOT IT? NEED IT? Today's synapacide. Not just the same old buzz. **GET IT NOW!**

Total Conformity—it's the new black. Buy rude boy surplus uniforms. Sharp collared, silver buttoned, black or scarlet tunics.* Complete your ensemble with a purchase of decorative powerbars. Stand out by fitting in! **EDGE CLOTHING.**

*not self cleaning.

FEATURE PROGRAM (1)



“What the fuck?” Sputnik said.

Budgie squinted at a man pushing through the crowd, wearing a gray ushanka with the earflaps pulled down and a golden emblem pinned upon its front. Budgie sniffed for gang odor but only smelled sweat.

Something about that was wrong. Budgie looked at the sigil on the guy’s hat. A jolly roger with dollar sign eyes and a gold tooth.

“Fuck,” Budgie stepped back. “Wolfe.”

“Huh?” Sputnik tilted his chin into the air. His nostrils flared as he tried to catch the scent. “I don—”

Wolfe ran at him, the metal in his hand aflame with reflected red light. His arm swooped up and the blade caught Sputnik just beneath the jawbone. Wolfe bounded past.

Budgie pulled his dagger and brass knuckles off his magnetic belt. Sputnik stumbled towards him, gripping his bleeding neck with one hand. His other arm flapped at his side. Looked like a wounded bird trying to take flight. Bubbles of blood popped out of his nostrils and poured red down his face. Budgie didn’t have time to watch the gore.

He spun, expecting to see Wolfe running away. But the guy stood in front of him. Looked plenty distorted. He wasn’t even wearing a uniform. Just that stupid hat, a faux fur vest, filthy blue pajama pants and big, untied boots. His lips pulled into a skeleton grin.

Budgie stuck his tooled fists into the air. Panted. He regretted taking those acid-dipped OxyContin caps. They pixilated his brain. Everything except Wolfe looked digital slush, shoppers melting into a Jackson Pollack blur. Wolfe stood out in stark 3D focus. Sputnik gurgled and spat blood onto the advert covered floor.

Wolfe mouthed something. No words came out. Just white noise. His eyes flickered a blizzard and he swung the knife in front of him—back and forth and forth and back—like some idiot zombie on the late night.

Budgie waited for the blade to reach the far end of the arc then charged. His metal sheathed fist left a scarlet tracer in the air and he heard the impact of steel against skull before he felt the shock-wave up his arm.

Wolfe stumbled backwards and Budgie came at him low and hard with his blade, stabbing it deep into his stomach and twisting while he hugged Wolfe with his other arm.

His face next to Wolfe's, Budgie inhaled the chemical stink of hot breath. Orbs of sweat glistened on Wolfe's pale forehead and for a moment, Budgie saw his own bent reflection in them.

His hand worked the gut. His knife gnawed. Beneath his blade, Wolfe's meat felt as insubstantial as a balloon.

Over Wolfe's shoulder Budgie saw a man in a bright blue suit advertising Colgate Whiskey, pushing a shopping cart full of speakers, barking jingles and deals. Smelling something dank and awful, Budgie slipped his knife free and shoved Wolfe towards the man, who swore once, loudly, before stepping back. He slipped on the gore.

Wolfe's stomach was a huge red mouth that vomited a rainbow of intestines. His knees buckled and he fell to the floor. Laid there. Twitched.

Budgie stood very still and looked at the gawking shoppers. Some were tourists from the greens, identifiable by their understated clothes and overstated faces. They'd got more than they bargained for tonight. None met his eyes.

Budgie's heart pounded in his skull. Behind him, he heard another gurgling spit. Another splat.

Sputnik lay on the floor, holding both hands to his throat and looking at Budgie with feral eyes.

Doctor, Budgie thought. "Where the fuck is the doctor?" He attached his weapons to his belt and pulled out his gizmo. His hand convulsed. The machine blundered out of his grip and onto the floor. He just stared at it.

A rude boy doesn't drop his gizmo at a moment like this. He's cool, calm and collected. Shit, even those tourists were probably judging him now. Embarrassed by his hands gone wild, he reached down to pick it up. Wanted to glare at the spectators, to say: WHAT? YOU NEVER FUCK UP?

His gizmo still worked. Not like that one in the commercial where the guy drops it, and breaks it then kills himself. Not like that at all.

Budgie knelt next to Sputnik, tapped SNORT DONKEY and hit a synced-all-channel-dial.

Beeping, ringing.

Alone, surrounded by this gawking crowd, shook deep. Watching his friend bleed. Making a call. Waiting for an answer. He gripped Sputnik's elbow with his free hand.

Finally, he heard: "Yeah, Budge?"

"I need a doctor, fast." That was gibberish. Snort Donkey would think Budgie needed a doctor when Budgie was fine and it was Sputnik

who needed the doctor. This was not calm. This was not collected. His next words blurted worse than the first: "Spu-Spu-Sputnik got loved."

"Really?" The voice was maddeningly relaxed. "At this time of night? By who?"

"Wolfe, but I need a doctor now, right now. Sputnik's pretty fucked up." The gizmo slipped in Budgie's sweaty palm. He gripped it hard, his knuckles white. He would not drop it again. Not ever. Not. "Now!"

"Simmer Budgie. Just getting your latitude. Okay, this is what I want you to do, look at his powerbar on his tunic and tell me where it is."

"Move your hand so I can see your bar," Budgie yelled. Sputnik just moved his mouth like a fish.

Budgie grabbed his fingers and shifted them. Blood leaked onto his palm. "Gone into yellow. Still dropping."

"Okay, I'm sending you the co-ordinates of a doctor now. He'll be waiting for you. I'll come by too, just to—"

Budgie hung up and looked at the directions. Memorizing them, he pocketed the gizmo and grabbed Sputnik by the armpits. "We're going to a Doctor." He pulled him up and walked him forward. "Get you patched."

People parted in front of him. The excitement over, they returned to their shopping. Some kids checked Wolfe's body for anything of value, found nothing and moved on. The ghouls would be by later to pick up the flesh. Budgie knew he should stay with it. Given the choice, protecting the dead trophy and confirming the kill was more important than saving his friend. But Sputnik's body was becoming limp. Budgie dragged him. Some of the kids followed like rats behind a food cart. Budgie glared.

The kids hesitated but raised their eyebrows with the same expression of haughty shock. Right about now, Budgie should be negotiating a price for any pocket litter on Wolfe. Instead, he hardmugged them. Had the kids monocles, they would've shattered then dropped. Budgie didn't care.

He rubbed his friend's head. "Guess we should have taken those coagulants tonight."

Sputnik mumbled something. It took Budgie a moment to understand—

"I should've flinched."

Yeah, Budgie thought. He dug a pack of gum out of his pocket. Unwrapped a piece and chewed. If Sputnik got too bad, if his powerbar hit black Budgie could stick that in the wound. It'd do a fast and dirty job of knitting the flesh back together. Very fast. Very dirty. Last ditch.

A middle-aged man gawked, his face a crumbled bag of loose white skin. Budgie flashed his blade and the guy retreated back into the crowd.

Everyone else just kept moving, eyes busy looking anywhere else. No one would report this to security. Even if they did they wouldn't be able to give a description. What would they say? A couple of skinny white kids in scarlet tunics, short hair and blue lines running up the side of their black pants. Other than the color of the skin and the color of the pant-line, that described every rude boy in the reds. Besides, the only people who would even think about making a report would be from the greens and what would they say they were doing down here? Window shopping? Channel surfing through the whorehouses and drug dens?

Yeah, they might think. They might judge, but none of them would do anything.

Budgie's gizmo beeped. They were getting close to the doctor.

A grinning man in a white coat waited in a doorway and waved them inside. "You must be Budgie," he said. "And that must be Sputnik. Knife wound?"

"Yeah." Budgie followed the man into a shabby waiting room, and through into an operating theater.

"Put him on the table."

Budgie dragged Sputnik to the metal slab in the center of the room. A small but boisterous audience drank beer and ate snacks in the surrounding ring of seats.

A fetish nurse in a latex uniform and white stockings organized the doctor's tools, only pausing to squeeze her inflated cleavage together and wink at the hooting fans. Budgie flopped the body onto the table. Sputnik's eyes rolled back in his head. His swollen purple tongue jutted out between his teeth.

The doctor pushed past Budgie and, with a magician's flourish, unbuttoned Sputnik's tunic. "You can't stay." He smiled at the crowd, some of whom booed. "Unless you buy a ticket. Mid-week special."

"No, that's fine." Budgie took a step back. Without meaning to, he stared at the doctor's mouth. The smile was a fake. Some sort of realistic makeup job painted on his face. Budgie's knees went mushy. "Where can I wait?"

The doctor ninja-flicked his eyes. "Grab a seat in the back room. I'll work this one fast." He looked back at Sputnik and sighed. "I've seen worse. So have they."



"One, two, three, four..."

Dim yellow light. A red leather chair that squeaked every time Budgie moved. A waiting room. Budgie waited.

He stared at his hands, counted to ten and then started again. Then backwards. No good. His long, pale fingers stuck out of his sleeves and trembled. He picked dried blood off them then waved them back and forth, watching the tracers. He had to get his shit together.

In a few days, this would be just another battle story, told over a few strong drinks to a few dumb sluts from the mini-putt or a couple of gape-mouthed prospects. This sort of thing impressed them. He tapped through his pockets, searching for caps. No good. Sputnik carried all the dope. "Fuck," Budgie said.

He thrust his body back into his seat and closed his eyes. A blue pattern of squares and triangles shifted in darkness. Puzzle like, these shapes snapped together into Wolfe's face. Budgie flinched and crossed his arms against his stomach. Rocked his body back and forth, in time to that backwards ten count.

A layer of smoker's grime covered the walls. Sticky rings of coffee and soda marked the coffee tables like the ghosts of dead drinks. Would it kill them to have coasters? No surprise the lights were dim. The glass ashtray overflowed. A mass grave for cigarettes.

Budgie needed a smoke. They had been about to buy a pack when Wolfe came at them. The butts in the ashtray wiggled like maggots. Budgie looked away. A deflated cot sat in the corner.

Doc must live here. And if this was the best a doctor could do on the Reds how much future did a rude boy have? True, Budgie could get to the top of the food chain but that wasn't likely. You had to be sharp to make beta. Needed to get past age twenty-five without getting chipped or crashing your brain into the hard drugs, and what were the odds he'd do that? He wasn't clever enough. It was only a matter of time before mall security caught him stealing or making runs. Security would chip him and he wouldn't be able to go onto the greens without having alarms go off. Would have to stay on the reds where they didn't much care what you did. Then it was only a matter of time before the dope got on top on him.

He dumped the ashtray into the garbage. He wished he could clean this whole dingy room. Messes bothered him. Messes were living monsters, building their bodies out of trash and creeping into well-ordered lives, feasting on the useful and clean, staining and breaking them, just to shit out more mess. This room was beyond infected. It was a burrow from which messes would crawl out. There weren't even any adverts on the walls, just cleaner spots where posters hung before the mess ate them.

The door to the street opened.

"Wasabi?" It was Snort Donkey.

"Not much." Budgie wiped his palm on his pant-leg. If they shook hands, he didn't want Snort Donkey to feel the sweat. It'd look wrong. They tapped knuckles. "Waiting."

"He hurt bad?"

"Pretty bad. Stabbed up here." Budgie pointed to the soft spot behind his chin and in front of his throat. "Uppercut."

"Fecal." Snort Donkey pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. Budgie asked for and was given one. Snort Donkey stared at him. "You gonna make me say 'Ahem'?"

"I'll pay you later." He pinched the cigarette tube. "When I pick up some tokens." Too hard. He broke the smoke. His eyes wide, he looked back at Snort Donkey.

"Two for the price of three."

"Fine."

Snort Donkey passed him another.

Not trusting his hands to feel up the smoke, Budgie stuck it between his lips, trying real hard to be gentle. "Lacy?"

"No, got a pack that's wet but we'd have to go outside. Doc thinks formaldehyde is bad luck."

"Nah, this is fine," Budgie said. Just what we need, a superstitious doctor. "I'm nuff fucked."

"Where's Wolfe?"

"He well dead."

"So...Where the fuck is he?"

"Left him in the hall."

Snort Donkey blinked and lit both cigarettes. Smoke leaked from his face. His black, laser-shaved head was holo-tattooed with silver and gold fighting dogs. They interlocked like one of those M.C. Escher adverts, battling between ridges of exposed skull. Shifted with every change in angle. From this way, silver dog wins: from that, gold dog wins. Snort Donkey tilted his head this way and that, showing it off, fishing for a compliment.

"Nice mod," Budgie said. "When you'd get that?"

"Couple weeks back."

Had it been that long since they'd seen each other?

Budgie thought of the last few weeks. His memory didn't work so great anymore but, as he recalled it, he'd been on steady patrol with Sputnik, just mopping up the remains of Wolfe's chapter. Not much had happened. Every time those swishes saw Vidicons they ran back to their hovels. Sometimes got yanked out and stomped. Past few days, none of them had been around. Not until tonight and it looked like Wolfe had to get plenty distorted to pop up.

"So help me out here," Snort Donkey said. "I'm trying to get this straight. You loved Wolfe but you left him in the hall? Unattended?"

"Yeah."

"So you could bring Sputnik to a doctor? For a fucking face wound? That's why we're gonna have to deal with ghouls to get confirmation on the kill?"

"Look, I know it ain't strict cricket but—"

Snort Donkey spat. "You sure you loved him?"

"Yeah," Budgie said.

"I'll take your word for it." He sighed. "That ain't no small thing."

"I guess not." Budgie knew he should be proud of the kill but just couldn't feel it. Kept thinking of Sputnik in that next room. Hoping he'd be okay but knowing it was just moving capital. If a dead Wolfe cost a living Sputnik, it was a good deal.

Problem was, he did not want to make that deal.

It felt like a straight rip off. Probably don't matter anyway. Wolfe was dead. Sputnik was getting help. That was a bargain and you'd have to be an idiot to turn that down. Still, Budgie wanted more return. Something.

Snort Donkey slapped him on the back.

Would that have to do?

It didn't.

"Guess that's it for the Dog Goblins," Budgie said. "Guy didn't even put up a fight. Just stood there, swinging his blade around." He wondered if that was really it for the Dog Goblins and if that'd make it all right. How highly did he value Sputnik? Puffed on the smoke. His hands finally stopped shaking. "Maybe I'm high but..."

"That your excuse for leaving him?"

"Nah, I mean maybe. But wasn't what I was gon say."

"Then what?"

"You ever see what a television looks like when it's not getting a signal?"

"Uh-huh."

"Wolfe's eyes looked like that. Snowy." Budgie remembered something else. "When he came at us he was running. He was out of uniform too. Looked like a mental." He pulled on the smoke. "That's why he ambushed us. Never seen anything like it. No gang with him or nothin'."

"I have." Snort Donkey shook his head. "Wolfe cranked some robo."

"Don know what that is." Snort Donkey was the Vidicon's chemist and Budgie got most of his chucking dope off him. But he stuck to basics. "Never heard of it."

"Yeah, well, you don't want to. Hardly anyone ever—ever—uses it. And I mean never." Snort Donkey smiled. His teeth were sharpened gold with a little green dragon slithering back and forth across them. Expensive work but he could afford it. "Gotta say, I'm kinda disappointed in him."

"Why's that?"

"Cause he gave up. Via Robo. You only click onto that shit once. It's suicidal. Cranks you up to thirteen and burns you out in one night. Turns your brain into fucking plasma. You pick up every free floating radio or microwave. And it all feeds into some central conceit, like he wants to kill Vidicons so every noise he hears is like a coded message telling him to do that. Pumping info through jungle telegraph. Kamikaze drug, you know. Not recreational. Just plain desperate shit." He shrugged. "Shit, I only cook and move it once a year when the betas up their supply. They don't take it, just keep some on them. Just in case."

"Of what?"

"I dunno. If they ever have to start using robo, well, let's just say it'll be too late for it to do us any good. But I keep some on me too. Just like, if anyone fucks with me and there's no way out 'cept running, guess I can see cranking it. Sorta." He sat down beside Budgie. "Must be cause Harmony Kink notched his brothers."

"Harmony did that?"

"Truth: That little bitch is sick deadly. No one sees her coming. Sexism right?" He smiled. "Picked up Wolfe's brothers at some dimlight orgy and—



Harmony locked the door. "Take off your clothes." She turned to face Copland and Wax.

They glanced at each other and shrugged. Copland, on the left, ripped off his Velcro fastened pants and tripped out of them. Still wore his boots. No underwear. The younger bro, Wax, blushed and looked at the floor while he undressed. Funny he should be so shy at an orgy.

She knelt in front of them.

"Oh yeah, bitch," Copland said as she took his stiff cock into her mouth. It tasted like cheap orange soap. Her hands traveled up between both of their legs, while her head bobbed, chicken-like, in front of them. She played with Wax's balls. He was still limp.

"Close your eyes," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"Okay."

Each of her index fingers stroked their hard butts.

"I'm ticklish." Wax squirmed.

Then you're not going to like this. Harmony plunged her fingers into their rectums.

"Hey!" Wax's eyelids bounced open and he flinched forward.

Not far enough to dislodge her finger. Copland had a big juicy smile and she stuck her digit further up. She worked it around and pulled out. Left her rapid-dissolving fingernails inside. They weren't fatal but they wiped out motor functions. Copland swayed and stepped back, his cock slipping out of her mouth. Wax turned to face him then went lax.

Harmony wiped her mouth. The brothers stumbled to the bed and sat down like broken marionettes. Copland mumbled something. Harmony pulled a butterfly knife out of her back pocket. Flipped it open and strode towards him.

They weren't numb, just incapable of ordering their bodies. Good. Harmony wanted them to feel this. Wanted them to get the message. You don't fuck with the Vidicons. If the Vidicons want to throw the Friday night parties for mall rats from the greens they got to throw the parties. There was a lot of cash in that scheme and the Dog Goblins were not welcome a single global of it.

She grabbed Copland by the ball sack. Looking him in the eye, she sawed upwards. She plucked off his warm, bleeding genitals and held them in her hand. Shoved them into his brother's gaping mouth. Did the same to Wax.

Then she carved her tag, a musical note, into both their chests.



"Harmony did that?" asked Budgie. "That's fucked up."

"Yeah, man. Truth. Little bitch has these dead birds too. Hawk babies, like fetal hawk babies, that she nicks outta one of the bio-schools on the greens, so she put those on 'em too. Just so Wolfe would know who did it."

"Santa." Budgie cupped his nuts in his hand. "Don't seem cricket."

Snort Donkey laughed like a buzz-saw. Sent shivers right up Budgie's spine. "Nothing cricket bout that little psycho."

"Always been nice with me."

"Yeah, well, she has that candy dispo but it's mod. She's cold inside. Take my word for that." Snort Donkey frowned. "Few years back, saw her go to work on a tourist who tried to rent her. Some old gray yute who liked young pussy and mistook her for product." Snort Donkey didn't say anything else. When you talked as much as he did and something made you go quiet—well, that said it all.

The operating theater door creaked and Doc stepped into the waiting room, specks of blood freckling his white coat. He carried a small black box.

"Sorry," The doctor handed Budgie the little coffin. "Not much I could do."

Budgie looked behind the doctor, waiting for Sputnik to pop out of the operating theater. His friend had always been a joker and this must be one of his pranks.

I'm gonna beat his ass for this.

But the door didn't open. Snort Donkey's cigarette crackled.

"This for real?" Budgie asked.

"Afraid so," the doctor said. "He lost a lot of blood but that wasn't the main problem."

"Knife dressed?" Snort Donkey puffed on his cigarette.

Doc nodded and rubbed his chin.

Budgie's body shook. His head burned. Eyes went blurry. Rubbed them fast and hard. Couldn't cry. He had to get himself under control. This was business. That's all, just business. Money cost blood. Everyone knew that. Sputnik was worth forty globals. His death was profitable. No reason to grieve. Budgie knew all that.

"Motherfucker," said Snort Donkey. "So you left Wolfe for nothin'."

Budgie wobbled and his nose dripped watery snot. And he was afraid to speak because he knew his voice would sputter and sob. There was something swish about friendship. It made you look too emo to be trusted. Budgie pulled his face into a meat mask. Pulled it tight. Pulled until he thought it might snap over his skull. "Gimmee that," he said and grabbed the coffin from the doctor. "The blade was dressed?"

"Afraid so."

Poison. Not cricket. Went against the system. Wolfe had probably told himself it didn't matter, not after what happened to his brothers. And he was right. That's why people didn't fuck with the rules. It just escalated. Things had to be kept on a certain level.

That little bitch Harmony had killed Sputnik just as surely as if she'd poisoned the knife herself.

Budgie couldn't look at the doctor's pudgy face with that ridiculous makeup smile. It was an abomination. What did that guy care? He'd just farm the body for parts and sell the unusable bits as pet food or fishing bait. Obscene to think of some animal eating Sputnik. Budgie looked away; tried to think about something else.

He flipped the box open and looked at Sputnik's pocket litter. His wallet was there, some wadded up Kleenex, a credit card and the little rock from outside the mall that he kept for luck. No caps though. *Fuck. I need those.* "Where's his dope?"

"That's part of my fee."

"Don't worry bout it," Snort Donkey said and put his hand on Budgie's shoulder. "I'll hook you up. You can pay me tomorrow. Won't even charge you interest."

Budgie knocked his hand away and stood.

Snort Donkey and the doctor stepped back. Doc found something on the ceiling to look at but Snort Donkey held Budgie's glare. He stepped forward. Very slow, like a dare, he leaned in close to Budgie's face. Their noses almost touched. He spoke soft. "You gonna make another bitch noise?"

Budgie suddenly heard Sputnik's last words: *I should've flinched.*

Budgie blinked. Averted. He looked away and shrank down. "No, man, sorry, just fucked up, ya know. Sorry. Thanks. No interest on the dope?"

"I don't remember saying that."

Budgie stared at his boots.

"You can pay me for those smokes when we get outta here."

"Yeah, thanks." Budgie looked back at Snort Donkey but did not dare to meet the eyes. He'd flirted with enough danger tonight. Anymore and he might get loved too.

That's not what he needed. What he needed was something hard and numb before he told Sputnik's mom that her only remaining son was dead.



"Why'd they call him TeeVee?"

Sitcom's hand hesitated above the door. "Pull your fists out of your shirt." Slug was big and dumb, but smart enough to let other people think for him. His sleeves hung over his hands. "Don't want him thinking you're tooled."

"Oh yeah, sorry." Slug rolled his sleeves halfway up his forearm, a shaggy smile on his clean-shaven face. The skin above his wrists shimmered with holographic tattoos.

Stupid move. Tattoos made it too easy to be eye-deed. Not that it mattered to Slug. The lout was chipped anyway so he had to stay on the red levels. "They call him that cause he went television a while back."

"What'd you mean?"

"A sickness in the memes. Got it from watching too much." Sitcom knocked, memories of those bad days surfacing. TeeVee had gone weird, you couldn't talk to him without him spouting one liners from comedies, couldn't tell him anything without him describing a similar scenario in a soap opera. No advice or wisdom. Just analogy after analogy. Total brain infection.

After a while, Sitcom and a few of TeeVee's betas, came by and kicked in his television screen. They could've just taken it but the situation called for high drama. TeeVee hadn't even cried or yelled or fought or nothing. Just sat there. It was spooky. The way he looked all zombified, blue electric light still throbbing in his eyes.

They'd left him with a couple of whores, hoping the product would bring his head back to the basement and it seemed to work. Sort of. That television had wrecked some neural pathways and killed something in him. You still couldn't get him out of his apartment but at least you could talk to him now. Better than nothing.

The ENTER sign flashed red and bolts clanged. Sitcom pushed the door open and stepped into the dim apartment. Church quiet in here. Pumpkin orange light and oily shadow puddles. Although TeeVee was a notorious hoarder, the hutch was neat, organized and cramped. Everywhere you looked there was another pop culture artifact. Shelves from the floor to the ceiling where dolls stood silent watch in front of gadgets, papers, books, collectible bottles and other mall flotsam. It all washed up here like kitsch driftwood on a commercial tide.

"What's that smell?" Slug asked. His voice sounded loud and coarse here.

"Opium." Sitcom sniffed. "You never scented the real thing?"

"Guess not."

"Shame." Sitcom led the way. "He must be in his reOrb room. C'mon."

TeeVee, long, thin and louche, lounged on his red couch. A sleek mongoose curled on his chest and a big hookah sat on the floor next to him. TeeVee took a drag on a tube and blinked slowly, his eyes hesitant and blurry before they clicked into sudden focus. "I know you, Sitcom," he said. "But who is this fat comrade of yours?"

"This guy's all fucked up." Slug stood with his hands on his hips like he owned the place. Cocky bravado. Offensive in someone else's house. Shit, Sitcom thought. You couldn't dress Slug up and you couldn't bring him anywhere. "But look at all these reOrbs." He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "You record these or you some geeked out collector?"

TeeVee's hand slipped beneath the cushions of his couch. There was no way to stop it. Not that Sitcom would even think about trying. TeeVee was an alpha and you did not, hyperlinked DID NOT, fuck with those guys.

TeeVee's left hand came out of the couch in a smooth underarm arc, a dagger gripped between the fingers. With a wrist flick, he tossed it. The blade cartwheeled.

Too late and too slow, Slug realized the trouble. His eyes widened just as the dagger penetrated the wall next to his throat. It didn't even make a noise.

Damn that's sharp, Sitcom thought.

Blade a third buried.

Slug stood statue still and then looked at the ivory hilt. The blade touched his chin and cut him. Not bad, just like something you'd get shaving. Slug's face reddened. The blush pushed out more blood.

"Hey Sitcom." TeeVee's voice was more silence than sound. A space between every syllable and no expressive inflection to the words. "Tighten the leash around your poodle's neck before I fasten a noose to it. No one calls me fucked up in my own home. And I do not want that thing leaving eye trails on the reOrbs. Let alone its greasy prints." He smiled. Smooth metal teeth, crackling blue electricity. "Just the thought puts me in a murderous dispo."

"You know, you're fucked up." Sitcom pulled the dagger from the wall and wagged it at Slug's wide eyes. "Say you're sorry to the nice man."

"Sorry."

"Your aim is getting worse." Sitcom gave the dagger back to TeeVee. "Either that or you're getting soft."

"Neither," TeeVee said. "I just hired a girl last night to clean my floor and your poodle looks like it has a lot a blood in it..." He shrugged, the thought lost. "You would have been amused by her face when she came up. She believed I wanted sex and was removing her shirt when I gave her a mop. I don't think she had ever seen one before. Thought I wanted to shove it up her ass. And then tried to charge me extra to do so. This is, of course, the sort of thing you find amusing."

"I guess," Sitcom said. Visiting TeeVee never really put him in a chuckling sort of dispo. "Your delivery could use some fuckin' work."

"Communication is never easy." TeeVee looked over Sitcom's shoulder at Slug. "Don't get any blood on my fucking floor and if you so much as smear a reOrb with a foul-eyed look, I will choke you. To death. Right until you fucking die. You get me?"

"Yeah, okay. That's fine, man. Easy like," Slug held his sleeve to his chin. "I'll be careful."

"Was that better?" TeeVee asked Sitcom.

"Exactly perfect."

Slug was like a dog. You just had to show him who was boss and he'd take any shit, follow any order. It came in handy but it made Sitcom feel a little sick.

"Speaking of reOrbs," Sitcom dragged a red plastic chair out from the wall, "I need a mix. Something retro current but not too esoteric. Hosting a party of slummers down from the green. They want—"

"I can imagine," TeeVee said. "Something rude but not too rude. Just twisted enough so they can think they're in an authentic red level bash and can thus increase their social cache with one another."

"Well, I think they prolly wanna dance." Sitcom took a breath. "But speaking of social cache—"

"You're concerned about my marketing of you?"

"I appreciate it and all but you've flooded the green forum with bots. I don't see the point."

"When gathering information, the studios use simple tactics. They look for mentions of a name and its use in conjunction with certain key words. It's a counting game."

"Yeah but you get marked as spam and they stop counting. And what good is that?"

"It's safe." TeeVee pulled on his hookah and stared at the ceiling. The mongoose stretched, hopped off his lap and vanished beneath the couch. "I have their algorithm."

"All right if I smoke?" Sitcom asked, knowing that this conversation was over, not wanting to know how TeeVee came into that sort of information but never doubting that he had. "Tobacco."

"Yeah, that's fine." TeeVee's glass eyes blinked barcodes. "I'll be right back."

"No hurry." Sitcom sighed. TeeVee would never leave his seat but could be gone for a while. He'd trance out, travel through the info dump and then return with the right mix. Sitcom smoked and waited. Slug stayed quiet.

"They bored of KlashBan yet?" TeeVee asked.

"Everyone is bored of that shit."

"You never know. It takes a while for anything to percolate to the upstairs. And it's always some soft derivative nonsense. They put it through the production machines. Most of the time they just want to hear the wet version of the dried out corpse they get."

"Arid," Sitcom said. "Fucking mummified."

"Dry as outside," Slug agreed.

"Got some good PsychoTwist." TeeVee ignored Slug's comment, which was really too bad. That was about as witty as Slug got. Even considering that there might be a world outside of the mall took some work for the guy. Sitcom looked at Slug and smiled so he wouldn't feel like his sally had gone unnoticed.

"It's danceable but the visuals might be a bit ahead of them," TeeVee continued. "Bit too far, bit too fast."

"That shit's ahead of me," Sitcom said. "What is it?"

"I should lend you some. Not for the party. It'd be too intense for slummers but you'd like it. It's a real electric fucking current. Real fucking wet. Like a newborn. A yowling newborn."

"Sounds good. But what I need right now—"

"I know what you need and I have it." Sitcom blinked. "Now we discuss the price."



Budgie snorted a nose burning line off the table and vibrated back into his chair. He tried to ignore the blond mop of hair bobbing up and down in Snort Donkey's lap.

The chemist closed his eyes and grunted. Budgie looked away. It was impolite to watch an orgasm.

Nothing else to see though. The Fuck Palace was midweek quiet. All the slummers were sleeping with their wives. Budgie supposed everyone needed a change.

The product wiped her mouth. Her light bulb, lip-triggered teeth glowed florescent white but her eyes had gone out a long time ago. Now they were bloodshot embers.

"Your turn," she said to Budgie.

"Nah, I'm good."

"You gone queer?" Snort Donkey asked.

"Too high to get up," said Budgie. That might even be true. He didn't know. Fact was, he never liked hookers and tonight he just didn't feel like pretending anything more than he had to. "Can't even feel my fingers, don want someone fiddling round with my dick."

Snort Donkey took a long and funny look at Budgie and said to the product: "Go get us another drink."

She stretched like a cat and walked off.

"Sorry." Budgie watched her go. "Don mean rudeness."

"We are fucking rude boys after all," Snort Donkey said. "Besides, can't blame you. Worst head I've had this week."

The girl came back with the drinks.

"Thanks," Budgie said.

She shrugged and left. Snort Donkey hissed and glared. He leaned across the table. "How you holding up?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just seem shook."

"I got two bodies on me tonight. Not allowed to shake?"

"Not like that, you're not. That's not a good shake."

"What's that mean?"

"Just seems like you're touched." He leered. "You guys were friends, eh? A bit sweet on each other?"

Budgie heard the sour note in Snort Donkey's voice and clenched his fists. He wanted to tell Snort Donkey that yeah, he and Sputnik were friends but knew what that confession would set off. So he shrugged and looked at his whiskey. "Worked with him for a long time."

"Too long." Snort Donkey cut another line. "You think I'm snitch or some shit? That I'm gonna go up the ladder on you here singing, 'Budgie had a friend. Let a little light into his heart and got all soft?'"

"Trap like that? How am I supposed to answer?"

"Fucking pathological." Snort Donkey inhaled the line. "That glowing heart of yours leads to mistakes. Like leaving Wolfe in the hall for one. Wonder what the second will be? A good friend is a bad comrade."

"Yeah, I read the rule book too."

"I bet you do a lot of reading. Clever, sensitive sort like you." Snort Donkey decked his drink and wiped his nose. "At least Wolfe is done. That's it for the Dog Goblins. Or so you say. Without the trophy, it's a bit hard to have the triumph."

"What the fuck you want from me? Made my choice. Stick by it. Wolfe is dead. Some parta him will turn up to confirm it."

"You sure?"

"Yeah." Budgie said.

"And what the fuck does that matter anyhow? Gonna cost money to deal with the ghouls. That cuts into the profit margin on this. Heavily. You know a dead Wolfe is worth more than a living gamma? You know that, right?"

"I know that."

"Then?"

"Fucking leave it the fuck alone." Budgie spilled whiskey down his chin. Knew what that meant. He was drunk. "Shit happens."

"Truth."

"Sputnik was still trying to scent him when he got loved. It was a fuck up. Top to bottom. You think I feel good bout all that? That I wanna hear bout it all night?"

"I'm just sayin'—"

"I don't wanna hear, know or think bout what you just sayin'. Don care. Fuck it. Cut another line."

"You're not the first to freeze up." Snort Donkey leaned back and lit a spine of synapacide. "Not by far. A lot of people go statue. Especially when some robo-cranked idiot comes at them. It's cause they burst right into your routine, right out of the nothing. Just BAM!" He clapped his hand against the table. "They're there. Violence."

Budgie could make that excuse and maybe he could even believe it, but he didn't want to. His friend was dead and he was to blame. The guilt felt worse than the excuse but it also felt real. That had to count for something. "How'd you know the knife was dressed?"

"Sputnik died. Doc might drag out the operation for the popcorn eaters but he don't lose many people." Snort Donkey rested his forearms

on the table and held his glass with both hands. "You gonna tell his Mom?"

"Not looking forward to that." Budgie looked at the little black box on the table. "What should I buy her?"

"You kidding? She gets a twenty percent cut from the wake. I think that'll do."

"Okay. Fuck, do I have to set that up too?" Weight piled on top of Budgie. He'd never had anyone close to him get notched; never really had anyone close to him. And he wasn't sure what the standard reaction was supposed to be. All he knew was that he felt awful and wanted out. But there was nowhere to go. He hadn't felt like this since he was a kid with a heavy nervous stutter. He'd wanted to talk right but just couldn't make his tongue work. The words were weights piled up atop him.

The more words he tried to carry, the worse it got. What might've sounded like something at some point just became gasping gibberish. When he'd given up on it, his concentration maybe broken by a joke, his mouth would finally co-operate and the words would pour forth. He'd speak. Just like a normal person.

Maybe he should give up on remembering Sputnik. *No. Won't do that. Not even if I can.* After all, Sputnik had never cared how Budgie talked. Usually, it was Sputnik who made the joke that rescued him from his own tongue. Budgie didn't need that anymore. But he still needed his friend.

"Partner setting the wake up is strict kosher," said Snort Donkey. "But who's that strict? I'll do it for your cut and you get paid a flat fee."

"How much?"

"Seven globals."

"Fuck that." Budgie was sad, confused and drunk but he wasn't stupid. "Ten. Not negotiating."

"Aight," Snort Donkey said too quickly.

Budgie assessed him for a long moment. Maybe he was getting ripped off but who cared. His only friend was dead and that's all that mattered. He looked away from Snort Donkey's weasel eyes and glanced around the bordello, the room moving out of focus. "I'm fucking fogged," he said. The booze clogged his senses and motor functions. The acid played a harpsichord on his mind. He felt like a psychotic ghost trapped in a meat cage. He needed out, to be anywhere but here. "We gon do this all night?"

"Can you think of anything else?"

Budgie thought and came up with nothing. It was funny. There was option piled on top of option but you just ended up bored. It came too easy. Fucking, drugs, whatever. It all had its price and it could all be had. Thing was, he didn't want any of it. *There must be*

something wrong with me, he thought and downloaded the last of his whiskey. "I gotta go tell Sputnik's ma."

"You're going drunk?"

"Sure as Santa ain't going sober," Budgie said.

CHANNEL SURFING (1) GONE FISHING



"That's the sort of rod that'll catch the Widow Maker."

"Yup," Dino Mondo clicked the last section into place. The salesman was right. Good balance, nice weight. This device was excellent. "How much is it?"

"Eight globals but, for a good customer like you, I could see my way to seven and a half."

"Can you see your way to seven?"

"I don't know, it's pretty dark in here." The salesman closed his eyes and stuck his arms out to grope the air. Opened his eyes and winked. "Okay, I see the light. Seven! Done."

"You're a real character, Sam." Dino paid with his card. "My boat available today?"
"Waiting for you on the lake."

"Good, good," Dino rented a fine boat here and occasionally sublet it through the store to help pay his costs. Unless it was too busy or they got a bribe, they always kept his boat available for him. He took his card back, pocketed it and walked out of the store to the fish stocked lake. Breathed deep.

It was a nice day. The fog machines had put a layer of mist over the water and the speakers played nature sounds. Long extinct birds welcomed a dawn that Dino had never actually seen. Never having witnessed a real sunrise, he was always surprised by his longing for them. He supposed that history was full of people like him, attracted to a glamorized vision of the past. Some people liked the plastic age and some people liked the Victorians.

Dino wasn't nearly that fussy.

He just liked the idea of being outside.

But it was hard to criticize the mall when the lake was like this: When you couldn't see the adverts or shoppers milling around. Sometimes, if the fog was thick enough, you could even smoke a pipe out in the center, far away from the electronic noses of robotic birds. That always completed the fantasy.

He strode to the dock, breathing in the scent of water and weeds. Just lovely. Sat down in his boat and opened his tackle box. Its familiar, worm and rubber stink smelled like good days. He attached his old reel to the new rod, threaded a hook and then untied his boat. The small electric motor carried him into open water, trolling as he went. Not because he ever caught anything doing that but because he might. You can't win it if you're not in it.

He steered towards the secret spot he fished on mornings like this, when no one could see him there. It was a quiet corner away from the well-traveled alleys and noisy adverts. Most people avoided this area, said that there was nothing in those lilly pads except snags and sunfish. And they were right except for one thing.

The Widow Maker lived here.

It was a huge, mythical beast and the source of much controversy. The old guys at the dock believed in the Widow Maker but said she was uncatchable. "If she ain't caught yet, she ain't never gonna be caught." The young guys were a bunch of cynics. "It's just a marketing scam set up by the sports store to sucker old men into snagging up and losing tackle in the worst part of the lake." But the young and old had something in common: They were both wrong. The Widow Maker was real and she could be caught.

Dino had glimpsed her.

Once upon a time on a morning just like this. (Well, every morning was just like this. They were standardized.) He'd been reeling in his line when something shook his boat. He looked into the water to see a massive bass staring up at him through the murky water. It must have been forty pounds of genetically modified fury. It passed beneath his boat, rocking it with its wake, and vanished. Dino cast in but nothing had hit. Not even a perch.

Certainly not the Widow Maker.

Really, the fish should be called the Divorce Causer. It had driven men to obsession and their wives to desperate boredom. What was the point of having a husband if you never saw him? Just ask Dino's wife. Another woman might have suspected a mistress but she knew him too well. He was in love with a fish and wanted it with every aching ounce of his being.

He didn't even know if he could afford to keep it—he'd have to pay the sports store for poundage. But it wasn't about keeping the fish. It was about the glory of catching it. About holding the Widow Maker over your head, about becoming a legend, an awed whisper spoken by the old guys when there was a special occasion or just a quiet moment. About proving the young guys wrong. If you caught something like that, the store would put your picture up in their window. You might even be in their adverts.

Besides how much time did his wife want him to spend at home anyway? He was retired. A man needed something in his life. Couldn't just sit on the couch watching television and playing on the gizmo. A man needed his mammoth hunt. She should understand that. He supposed she did. For that, he counted himself lucky.



Dino closed his front door, swinging his tackle box at his side, still excited about seeing The Widow Maker. The television made a racket in the next room and, after getting out of his shoes and into his slippers, Dino joined Jill on the couch.

"Catch anything?" she asked.

"Nothing good."

She smiled at him as he put his feet up on the coffee table and relaxed into the tempurpedic couch with a grunt.

"Few sunfish. But I..."

"You what?"

"I saw The Widow Maker again."

She laughed, her light purple curls bouncing around her head. "You and your Window Maker."

"Widow Maker," he corrected. This was an old game. She didn't mean any harm by it. Wasn't mocking him, just asserting her authority over his home life. Leave it at the lake, she said. It was sound advice. "Anything good on?"

"Just the usual garbage. Seems like there's more advertising every day. I was trying to watch Coronation Street, and I swear, they're interrupting it every two minutes. Disgusting. I have a mind to send an email to the Mall Trade Organization."

"For all the good it would do."

"The CEO listens." His wife patted his thigh. "As much as any man. More than some I could name."

"I like ads," Dino said. He used to work in an advertising firm though he hadn't been promoted as fast or as far as he'd like. "Good for the economy."

"They just get on my nerves. All that sex."

"This from a woman who likes Coronation Street?"

"That's different," she said. "And you know it."

"I'm going to fix myself a sandwich, you want anything, maybe a cup of tea?"

"That would be nice."

"It's in the cupboard." Another old joke.

As the water boiled, Dino made a cheese and mustard sandwich. He thought of the Widow Maker breaking water next to his boat today. Looking him right in the eye before it crashed back into the lake. The kettle clicked.

Dino poured the water into a cup with a lot of milk and carried it all back to the living room where he handed his wife the mug before sitting. The food tasted good. He always brought a meal and thermos of coffee out on the lake but fishing worked up a healthy appetite. His wife sniffed him.

"Have you been smoking again?"

"No," he said. "Some of the boys in the tackle store must have been. Didn't really notice."

"You know you can't smoke in open air until after teen curfew," she said. "I want you to quit. And quit lying about it too. You look so stupid when you lie."

"Yes Dear," Dino said. He was never much of a liar. The boys in the ad firm used to call him Honest Dino behind his back. But he'd heard. "Did the kids call today?"

"No."

"Maybe tomorrow then."

"Yes Dear," Jill sipped her tea and squeezed Dino's thigh. "Maybe." She flipped the channels on the remote, looking for a show instead of advertising and finally settled on "You're a Crazy Lying Bastard" with Bob Anger.

Dino shuddered. He couldn't stand that blowhard.



Dino's bladder kicked him awake at one thirty in the morning. While his wife snored, he snuck out of bed and navigated through the dark living room. He switched on the washroom light and urinated. Some pee sprinkled onto

the seat and Dino bent over to wipe it off with a piece of synth-cashmere toilet paper. He couldn't afford the real stuff. Dino flushed the toilet and flicked the light off.

As he stepped into the living room the television turned on, painting the walls electric blue.

But—he'd disabled the motion detector. So what was this?

"Don't be broken," he whispered and crouched in front of the snowy screen. The warranty had just expired on this television and he didn't want to fork out good money on a new one. But used was worse. The ones they gave away at the charity shops had awful pictures and lacked a decent memory. Besides, that was charity.

He stared at the static. Something hypnotic about it. Pictures moved in the flickering white and black. After a moment he tapped the screen. It left a mark. He drew a crude face in the snow.

"Is that you?" the face said in a soft, fuzzy voice. "That is you. Dino Mondo. Hello."

Dino stumbled backwards and fell on his ass. His mouth dropped open. Alzheimer's. Senility. An old man's nightmare.

"You aren't mad," the television said. "You worked in advertising. You must know about biometric cameras."

Dino nodded.

"I'm in the red levels. You can call me TeeVee."

"Is this a robbery? Extortion?" Dino looked over his shoulder at the door. Any second now criminals would burst in just like Bob Anger had warned. "A home invasion?"

The television made choppy bursts of white noise. Laughter? "You have nothing to extort. And robbery is a bit crude. I want to make a deal with you."

"I don't make deals with—"

"I can get you the Widow Maker."

"What?" Dino's voice was too loud. He turned down the volume on the television. "What?" he whispered.

"I control that fish by remote. It's a real fish but I infested its brain when it was a fingerling. That's why it's never been caught. I've seen you out there every day, trying to bring her in. I recognize your lure and boat. Today I had her jump up to get a look at your face, put it through the biometric files and got your info."

"What do you want?"

"I need some help financing a project I'm working on. A hundred globals should do the trick."

"What sort of project..." Dino let the words fade. There were some questions you were better off not asking. "I don't have that kind of money. Not to spend on a fish. Not without guarantees."

"I'll tell you what," the face said. "You go fishing tomorrow and I'll make the Widow Maker circle your boat three times. If I do that, we should have a deal, yes?"

"I have to think about it."

"You have until tomorrow night. Then we'll talk again. And Dino, please don't make the error of thinking you can report this."

"I won't." Dino could imagine what they'd say about an old man with a talking television. They'd ship him off to a Granola Village with no lakes to fish. Just golf simulators and stores selling bedazzled Depends undergarments. Was this even a crime? It felt like one but he doubted it was on the books. Of course, the books changed depending on your finances. "I won't."

"I believe you. But believe me when I say that you aren't the only fisherman who wants the Widow Maker. You are the first I've contacted, because frankly, I respect obsession. And you should know, if I let that fish think for herself you would have caught her long ago."

The television switched off. Dino sat in the dark for a few long moments before he got up and returned to his bed. He could not sleep but he dreamed of the Widow Maker anyway.



"So you believe me now?" the television asked.

"I'd be a fool not to," Dino whispered. The fish had circled his boat just like this face had promised. "But I still don't know. It doesn't seem right."

"You feel like it's fixed?"

That was exactly it. He wanted to catch the Widow Maker but this felt like cheating. The last thing he wanted was a hollow victory.

"It is fixed," the face said. "It always has been. The Widow Maker only exists because I fixed it. As things stand now it is truly an uncatchable fish. And I could always have someone else catch it. I could even turn its brain off and have it sink to the bottom of the lake to be eaten by the craw-daddies and catfish. What a waste that'd be."

"It's not about that," Dino said.

"Explain."

"I mean the status of catching it would be nice, and Santa knows, I wouldn't be the first man to get ahead through a lie, but—" Dino struggled to find the words. He wasn't a philosophical man, preferring quiet hours to deep thoughts. This was the first time he had ordered his thinking about the Widow Maker.

"It's just that I've never been terribly successful. I didn't really want to get into advertising, it was just a job. When I had my kids..." He contemplated the screen. "I don't know how old you are but life has a way of getting behind you and—"

"I fail to see—"

"You have to understand the Widow Maker." Dino held up his hand and took a deep breath. He wished his wife let him smoke inside. A pipe would lubricate his thoughts. "It's the beast I've put myself up against. Some people run marathons. This is something I do for myself. You can't—you can't *buy* the Widow Maker." He sighed. "At least I thought you couldn't. I guess you can buy anything if you have the money. I should have known that. But catching it was, well..."

"Your way of proving you have some worth?"

"Yeah." Dino wiped sweat from his forehead. "Not to the guys at the dock but to me."

The face held still for a long moment. "Yes," it said. "I understand. Better than you might think."

"So, I can't just *catch* the Widow Maker."

"I see the solution. When you hook into the fish, I'll let her fight. And I'll help her. You'll have to beat the both of us. Is that sporting enough for you?"

"That sounds fair." Dino smiled. "I can pay for the game but not the victory."

"The price remains the same."

Dino nodded. "How do we set up the pay?"



"You'll never catch her." The old man cast off the dock as Dino eased into his boat. "That fish is a monster now, more monster than animal, and it would take a legend to bring her in. A real hero." The man looked Dino up and down. "And you, if you don't mind me saying, don't look like the heroic type."

Dino did mind. What did this guy know anyway? "You talk a lot for a man who's never caught anything bigger than a three pound bass."

"Nothing wrong with a three pound bass," the man said. "And I've never seen you catch anything bigger than a perch, even with all your fancy lures."

Dino squeezed his hands into fists. If he was a bit younger he'd get out of the boat and teach this old fool some manners. As it was he just said: "Would you like to put your money where your mouth is?"

"Sure," the man said. "Five globals say you never catch that fish."

"Five globals?" Dino said. "You think as small as the fish you catch. Let's make it interesting."

"Five globals isn't interesting?"

"Let's say 150 globals."

The man's face dropped.

"150 globals says that I catch her today. Before they close the lake tonight."

"150? You're on." The man laughed. "You're crazier than I thought. Or richer." He stepped towards the boat and they shook on it. "Happy fishing," he called as Dino took his boat out. "I'm gonna start running a tab at the bar."

Dino ignored the comment. Once out of sight of the shore he lit his pipe and shook his head. It was a stupid bet to make but it was too late to do anything about it. If he lost the Widow Maker he'd have to dip into his savings to pay and that'd be hard to hide from his wife. But his pride was worth something. Maybe not 150 globals but something. He anchored his boat and checked his equipment. Spider-web line, a three pronged hook and his best rod.

He impaled a writhing leech on the hook—wondering if he even needed bait—and took a few meditative pulls on his pipe before casting in. It was important to be focused. His landing net at his side. Dino did something he had never done before but often fantasized about. He fastened his safety belts. This fish was not going to drag him in. He slipped the pipe into his pocket

and cast. The lure plopped into the water and Dino let it sink before clicking his line into place. Drew in his slack and waited.

A moment later the rod buckled.



The rod bent and Dino's arms burned.

The diving fish tried to tangle the line. He resisted its massive pull. Dino felt like he was trying to yank a car up from the bottom. He could not budge the Widow Maker. He only hoped to weaken it. He had to make the fish tire before he did.

The line slackened and the tip of the rod sprang up. The fish planned to clear the water again. Dino yanked his rod down just in time. The creature flipped through the air, tossing its head back and forth, and crashed into the lake, soaking Dino and rocking his boat. The fish's strategy was clear. Dive and jump, jump and dive. After twenty minutes its dives became less deep, its jumps less high. There was some give in it.

Dino found a rhythm and danced it through the water, gaining an inch here and an inch there. Losing line then getting it back. He muttered to the old beast and predicted its next move time and time again.

He felt like he was in the creature's head and that was dangerous. This fish was partly controlled by a man and that man could be bluffing, pretending to tire and establishing a routine, only to suddenly break out of it. Dino had to be prepared for anything. His nerves were on edge and exhaustion set in. His arms and back ached, occasionally exploding into bright sparks of pain. No matter the result, he would feel this tomorrow.

He felt it now.

Dino worked the fish closer. It still resisted hard and heavy but its vigor was gone. Dino inched his line towards the starboard side of the boat.

A huge shadow darkened the murky water. It stared up at him, tried to dive and failed. Dino grabbed his landing net with one hand and poked its tip through the water. He pressed the button and sent an electric charge into the fish's body, stunning it. Then he flipped the net around its huge head, got as much of its body as he could in and released his rod. He rested the net against the side of the boat and used all the leverage he had to hoist the monster in.

It stared at him, gills working hard, exhausted and stunned. Alive. Not for long, Dino thought. Not for long.

He pulled his knife from his sheath. He saw himself in the silver blade. Tired and old but smiling. His teeth the shape of the knife. The knife, reflection and all, bit into the thick throat. And chewed.

FEATURE PROGRAM (2)



The manhole opened like a camera lens. Budgie climbed down the ladder and into the unit where Sputnik lived with his mom. *Had lived.* The place smelled like burned toast and sweat. He leaped off the last few rungs. Hitting ground, his boot caught in a broken chunk of floor. He caught his balance.

Sputnik's mom sat in a frayed orange chair balancing a plate upon her lap and watching television. Everything so normal, so ready to be shattered. Budgie felt guilty. What right did he have to intrude?

"Sputnik isn't with you?" Mrs. Dobject said without even glancing at him. She sniffed the air. "Damn Budgie, I can smell the booze on you from here."

Budgie's breath came fast and shallow through his dry mouth. The dope and booze should've buzzed the edge off but if these nerves were blunted he'd hate to see them sharp. This was the first time he had ever done this. Hopefully, it'd be the last. Losing your partner was bad enough but losing a friend? Who had one of those?

Snort Donkey was right. Everyone was right. Better to not make friends.

"I'm sorry—" He didn't know else to begin. Tears blurred his eyes. Thank Santa there was no one here to see this. He'd never live it down. "I'm sorry."

"Don't," Mrs. Dobject said and went quiet.

Budgie wiped at his face with a sleeve, looked at his steel capped boots. A little chunk of floor stuck out of the sole. He tried to tap it off. It refused to move. He pulled the little black box out of his pocket. "I gotta."

She finally looked away from the television to stare at the box, her eyes fat, plastic beads.

Budgie gave it to her and backed away. A sudden, sharp pain in his chest startled him. The box bounced off his tunic and spilled onto the floor.

Mrs. Dobject stood. The plate fell off her lap and bounced. Something about upended food reminded Budgie of Wolfe's body. His stomach twisted out an urking noise.

She threw something wet and soft at Budgie, hitting him square in the face. Half of a sandwich. Soaked in stew. She clenched her fists and stared at him. "You even feel that you little psycho?"

She strode toward him. Stepping though her spilled food. Stomping on Sputnik's pocket litter. Budgie backed up. He bumped the wall.

"It wasn't me," he said. "It was—"

"It's never you." Her face was close to his, her breath hot and stinking. "Sputnik looked up to you, you should have protected him, you should have—"

She kept yelling but Budgie's brain stopped making sense of it. It was just shrill noise in his face. Did she think he wanted Sputnik to die? He'd been closer to him than she ever was. What were they supposed to do?

True, they could've tried to get jobs on the green levels—not being chipped exiles but just native-born reds. But how did you come home and face these corridors when you did that?

The gangs hunted sellouts. Budgie had done the same and so had Sputnik. It was better to be dead.

Mrs. Dobject knew that. Did she seriously want that life for her kid? It wasn't their fault. If anything, it was hers. And now she wanted to complain?

"Back the fuck off me," Budgie whispered. He put his hand square on her chest, feeling how soft and fragile she really was behind all that fury.

He shoved her and something something clicked in his head: An old, evil switch that only got thrown when he was angry. His whole body went cold. "I'm not gon get shit hit by you." His voice got real quiet and slow. Some people freaked out and got high pitched when they got angry but not Budgie. He was a machine that worked better at high speed. Anger calmed him. Made things clear.

I could do anything right now.

He stepped towards her.

She's weak.

"Where was I?" He jabbed a finger into one of her big fake tits. "Where the fuck were you?"

"Those are expensive!"

"I don't care." Budgie poked her again. Hoped to pop the breast and send it flying around the room like a deflating balloon. It just mushed up beneath his finger. "Sputnik ain't the one who got fired from his job, got chipped and got exiled. Didn't ask to be born, did he? You're the one that got sent down here and you're the fucking one who was never there. Too busy fucking Slummers for a bit of pocket money that went up your nose faster than it went into his gut."

Tremble faced, she backed up against the wall. Budgie had the horrible feeling that she'd been cut before. Maybe by a pimp and maybe by a john. There was something terrified and knowing in

those eyes. She'd seen men act like this before, seen methodical, drugged violence and felt it slicing into her.

She's weak.

His hand slithered to his belt. It caressed the hilt of a knife.

Behind Mrs. Dobject, a cockroach crawled over the wall. On the television soaps, this'd be a heavy scene with Budgie cast as the sneering villain. There'd be no bugs. It should be melodrama but just felt pathetic. His ice insides cracked. "I've gotta get outta here."

Mrs. Dobject stood shaking. She looked so vulnerable and old. The cockroach crept onto her shoulder.

Budgie scooped up Sputnik's litter and dropped it into the black box. He couldn't believe he'd lost his temper like that. Should he do something? What? "If you need anything, like money or whatever." He remembered. "You'll get twenty percent of the wake."

She didn't say anything and didn't move.

Guilt wrung Budgie out. Drug shook and cold, bile rose in his throat. He clambered up the ladder. The space between the rungs played like a the worst flip-book in the world: Wall, wall, more wall, and a crack.

The manhole opened in front of him and he crawled back onto the street. He scuttled towards a dark corner. Bent over and vomited. Blue fluid sprayed his boot-tops.

He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and straightened, knowing his face was red and his eyes were wet. All he wanted to do was walk and keep walking, right into the wrong section, hoping someone would notch him. He couldn't take another fucking day.

He leaned against an advert and closed his eyes. In eye shut darkness, patterns formed spiderweb faces.

Time to call it a night.

Time to go home.



After a long and hard day, Vivian Shuckhart came home to a man who was short and soft.

"It would be nice," said Olin before she'd even taken her boots off, "for you to take some responsibility."

Hearing that warbling nag, Vivian wished she was back at the office. She didn't *hate* coming home—that was too strong a word—but she certainly dreaded it. Every day she spent managing the shoe shops—dealing with the buyers, sellers and, Santa forbid, the designers—decreased her authority here, even as it increased it there. Just another trade in a life full of them. Now Vivian felt like a ghost who

appeared every evening in front of the dining room television to rattle phantom chains of authority.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take an interest in your daughter for beginners."

"Lexus is fine."

"She's hanging out with the wrong crowd. They're like little mall rats, the way they cruise around after school. Be lucky if she can keep a job."

"She's fifteen," Vivian said. "I used to be the same and so did you. We turned out all right."

"If she does, it'll be no help from you."

Yeah, of course. No help from Vivian. She'd paid for this nice condo, put food on the table and paid for her husband's home decorating courses. Vivian sat down, undid the top button on her blouse and stared hard at the television. If she got into a fight she'd just lose. Better to hold her tongue. Men were too emotional.

"She started smoking. Did you know that?"

"Smoking what?"

"Tobacco, of course. Good Santa, what did you think I meant? It's not that bad. Yet."

"You smoke tobacco."

"I quit." Her husband thrust his chin up. That used to turn it her on. It used to look proud. Now it just looked smug. He was still the basic physical type she liked, short and stout, but his muscles had softened into fat. His clothes had changed from the security guard uniforms and jock gear into the plain and comfortable, nothing to look at, uniform of the perfect middle management house-spouse. Topped with a tasteful haircut and tasteful accessories that spanned from neutral on weekdays to less neutral on weekends.

In other words, boring.

Making love to him was on par with cleaning the garbage bags before reusing them. For starters, there were the starters. The vials and oils and pills, all saying MAXIMIZE THIS and INCREASE THAT. Then, when Vivian had the energy to run that medical marathon, he'd top it off with a psychiatric session. She usually ended up holding his hand for twenty minutes while he whined about getting fat. It ended with her just laying there, legs spread, wishing he'd shut up.

When she'd told Burt about all that, he laughed and said she needed a new husband. She'd grunted and said she just needed a man.

"Don't we all," Burt had replied. "A hard man is good to find." Not that he had problems. Burt was a free agent and just kept getting better looking as he aged.

That might be why Olin disliked Vivian hanging out with Burt. The idiot even briefly suspected they were having an affair. When

she told Olin that Burt was as gay as a Christmas line is long, Olin yammered about an 'emotional affair.' She'd listened or at least done a decent job of looking like it. Then she stopped using her old friend as an excuse to avoid coming home. Now she said she was working overtime. Sometimes it was even true.

The door opened, and Vivian wondered what excuse her daughter would use. Figured she was about to find out.

"Here's the little princess now," Olin said. "Will you say something to her?"

"About what?"

Lexus shuffled into the room smelling of cigarettes.

The scent reminded Vivian of better times. "Hi-ya, Lexus."

"Hi Mom."

"New haircut?" She was determined to never be offended by her daughter's style. Working in fashion, she often hired girls that looked crazier than Lexus.

Olin's problem was ignorance. He only ever went out to the food court. His reality was mediated through his loudmouthed know-it-all friends or his even more loud mouthed magazines and television hosts. Lexus's partially shaved head conjured up images of dark, forbidden debauchery, but it was just the current style. Nothing to sweat about.

"Yeah." Lexus fingered the plaid pigtails that hung at the sides of her head. She glanced at her Dad. "Got it last week."

"Your mother has something to say to you." Olin crossed his arms with a childish 'now you're going to get it' expression.

Was Olin was jealous of Lexus? It was ridiculous but she wouldn't put anything past him. He was becoming a ridiculous little man, smaller and sillier by the day.

Olin tilted his head. "Vivian?"

She wondered what she was supposed to say. "Umm, don't smoke."

Lexus looked at her for a moment. "Okay?"

"I'm serious!" Olin said.

Why didn't he say we? Was Vivian supposed to be a puppet that he spoke through?

"You smell like a red level whore house."

Vivian laughed. Only a man who had never been to a red level would say something that stupid. Only a man who had no understanding of teenagers would think that the red levels weren't cool or dry or whatever they said these days.

Olin glared at Vivian then threw his hands into the air and stormed from the room.

Vivian winked at her daughter, hoping for her to return the gesture. But Lexus just scoffed and went to her room.

"Teenagers," Vivian muttered.

Misfit on Gelion

An Okal Rel Universe Legacy Novella
Part 2 of the Misfit Series

By Krysia Anderson



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Dedication

For Kathy, Alison and Lynda,
the creators of the world I love so much.

Misfit on Gelion

An Okal Rel Universe Legacy Novella

Pacing the lobby of the hotel, Victoria D'Ottawa waited impatiently for her chaperone to arrive. He was supposed to have been there nearly an hour ago, but Amel Dem'Vrel was almost never punctual.

I should punch him in his pretty face, she thought bitterly checking her watch again, if he ever shows up!

Victoria glared at the maid, who had once again stopped to stare at her. Even in UnderGelion, pant clad females were rare, especially in the Apron District where she was staying. Although Victoria had been itching to explore some of the more Vrellish parts of the city, she hadn't yet worked up the courage to do it without Amel and he was always busy. Brushing aside the lace curtains, she looked out into the calm streets to see if Amel had materialized on the doorstep.

"Is there something I can help you with, Princess?" The curious maid asked, clutching a bucket of dirty water. The woman reminded Victoria of her dear friend Rebecca, who she had left back on Orchard six months ago. The maid was soft spoken and well-liked by the other residents, but Victoria was in no mood for kindness.

"Leave me be," Victoria snapped, pressing a hand to her forehead and immediately regretting being so rude. With a hurt expression the maid hurried away. Rebecca wouldn't have put up with being treated like that, which was one of the things Victoria missed about her. Rebecca had always been a worthy companion, quick to stand up for herself.

Victoria jumped, startled by the quiet click of the front door.

"Amel!" she smiled, forgetting she was angry with him. "Finally!"

"Sorry I'm late," he said, taking a hesitant step inside. Even after all of the time they had spent together, not even Victoria was completely immune to his presence and found herself catching her breath whenever he came into full view. Everything about him was impressive. His jet black hair, flawless skin and crystal grey eyes were only the most obvious signs of his beauty.

Victoria had always thought he looked best when dancing, when his Demoran looks were coupled with a surprising and graceful strength.

"I have some bad news," he said looking sheepish. Only then did she notice the pure white flight leathers that he had been wearing the first time they had met.

"Ameron," she choked. The Ava was always sending Amel away. "Not again. You promised."

"I know, I'm sorry," Amel said with a guilt ridden cringe. "I'll take you to Spiral Hall when I get back. It won't take long."

Victoria was heartbroken; this was the third time he had to leave her on Gelion—alone—at the whim of Ava-Ameron.

"Just go," she said, holding back hot tears. "Get out. Don't keep him waiting."

Amel took a step forward to comfort her, but she retreated a few paces down the hall to avoid him.

"Be good when I'm gone," was all he said with a stung expression and then left the way he had come.

Oh, I'll be good! she thought, tearing up the stairs to her room. *About as good as I am at home!*

Furiously, Victoria packed with every intention of not being there when Amel returned. Whenever that was. Storming past the servants she barged out onto the street attracting stares from everyone she passed. The guard at the gate let her go without question, but she doubted he would let her back in without an escort.

She wandered the roads looking for somewhere to go. Only when her feet began to ache, along Ava's Way, did she realize what an idiot she was being.

Brilliant! Leave the gates right before lights down without anywhere else to go! She groaned, wringing the life out of the strap on her shoulder. She slipped inside a pub she had been to during her earlier explorations of Ava's Way. Amel had not approved of her wandering so far without him, but the area wasn't strictly against the rules.

"What can I get you?" asked the waiter as Victoria sat down at a corner table.

Feeling rebellious she replied, "Anything with alcohol."

Sipping her beer, Victoria watched the boisterous crowd for a while, catching parts of conversations about far-off places where she would never go. Her attention was soon drawn to a teenage boy standing across the room. Craning her head to get a better look at the boy, she came to the conclusion that he was a hybrid Sevolute—part Demish and part Vrellish. A mop of blue black hair obscured his heavy lidded grey eyes but his strong, wide shoulders were more typical of a Demish heritage. He smirked at her with an air of confidence that she couldn't place as endearing or annoying. All of a sudden he stepped towards the closest table with a long, powerful stride. Effortlessly he jumped up onto it, much to the surprise of the customers sitting there who had to dodge to avoid his swinging duelling sword.

Drawing in a deep breath the boy began to speak.

Poetry! Victoria thought, jaw dropping in disbelief. It was unlike any poem she had ever heard before: scathing, sarcastic and hilarious. She laughed as the blond-haired men looked up at him, mouths agape. When he was done, nothing but silence filled the room. Victoria was busy smothering a laugh when the boy took a deep bow, jumped from the table and headed towards her.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asked with a satisfied grin.

"Yes, very much. Think I'm the only one," Victoria said, waving a finger at the people whose stares had followed him to her table.

"I'm here all week!" he called back at the gawkers with a dismissive gesture and clamped a hand on the back of a chair. "What would you say if I asked you to imbibe with me?"

Victoria blinked once and lifted her bottle. "I would say that I am ahead of you."

"And you would be absolutely right," he said, sliding the chair out to sit across from her.

"Victoria D'Ottawa," he said, shooting out a hand.

He accepted it at once. "Eler."

"So what was all that about?" Victoria asked, waving over the waiter to order another beer.

"I was just educating the ignorant about poetry." Eler said. "Are you a fan?"

"Of poetry?" Victoria wrinkled her nose, thinking of all the tutors who had given up on teaching her about literature back home. "Not that sticky romantic stuff my teachers were fond of, but I liked yours," she said, earning herself another mischievous smile.

Noticing the bag shoved under her seat he asked, "Are you going somewhere?"

"Anywhere I damn well please!" she said with conviction. "Vent Amel and his rules."

Eler seemed to deflate slightly at the mention of Amel and cocked an eyebrow.

"Amel huh?" he said, with an annoyed air. "Please don't tell me you're hot and heavy for him, too."

Victoria choked on her drink, spluttering a cough. "Gods no! He's just my friend and guardian, sort of. Although he's not here right now. It's complicated," she explained hastily, wiping her mouth clean.

Eler smiled. "At least one blond on the planet has some taste in men and poetry, apparently."

Victoria snorted. "You're hardly a man. What are you—eleven?"

"Fourteen!" he corrected, breaking into a sly smile. "And the Vrellish age faster than the Demish, so I'm more like seventeen."

"You can't be that Vrellish, you're a poet," she said with a laugh.

"You must be Vrellish, judging by your clothes and eyes," he shot back playfully. Suddenly very aware of her tank top and sweats she shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"It's not that you don't look good," he assured her, while looking her up and down. "Most blond women bind their curves to an inch of their life or just cover up completely. Vrellish women don't worry about that sort of thing."

Ears burning, Victoria felt exposed. Quickly, she grabbed her flight jacket from her bag, threw it on and zipped it all the way to the top.

"Does that make you uncomfortable?" Eler asked, tilting his head to one side slightly. "Me talking about you like that?"

Victoria gulped. "I'm not that Vrellish, only half."

A short silence followed that made Victoria squirm. Eler seemed to enjoy it, and was looking at her as though he had learned something fascinating.

"So, exactly what are the rules that you're venting?" Eler asked inquisitively.

"Stay on world, don't go to the UnderDocks, stay away from Ev'rel and don't harass the house lieges," she replied mildly, finishing yet another beer.

"The UnderDocks aren't that bad," Eler said, resting his elbows on the table to lean towards her. "Not if you have a decent guild. And most of the lieges aren't interesting enough to want to bother."

"Do you know Horth Nersal?" asked Victoria, sheepishly. "I have a poster of him back home."

Eler grinned—on the brink of a chuckle. "Yeah, I know him. I could introduce you if you want."

"Really!?" Victoria said excitedly, then composed herself. "If you wouldn't mind."

"I could even get you a room in Black Hearth," he said, getting up and walking towards the exit.

Victoria picked up her bag to follow.

"Nobody knows UnderGelion better than me. I'll show you all the best places," he said, stepping towards a car parked just outside the cafe. He tapped on the window, causing the sleeping driver to wake up with a snort. "That is, if you would grace me with your company."

Victoria slid into the back seat, followed by Eler.

"Good," he said and clapped a hand on the driver's shoulder. "To Black Hearth."

"Wait!" Cole exclaimed stepping off the challenge floor. "Victoria is half Vrellish and you sent her to Gelion with Prince Amel?"

"I didn't send her anywhere." Salvador said, pulled off his fencing mask and wiped sweat from his brow. "That was all Amel's doing."

Cole heaved a great sigh and sheathed his practice sword. "You really are an idiot! After what happened at the reception, you let her just walk away, with Amel no less!"

"What was I supposed to do? Tie her down?" Salvador spat back, resentful of being put on the defensive.

"No," Cole agreed, looking like he had just tasted something bitter, "she would have liked that too much."

Salvador lunged, knocking his friend to the ground.

"Vrellish is not *sla*," Salvador hissed, bending Cole's arm behind his back.

"How would you know?" Cole said, and broke free. "You don't even have enough insight to see that your mother is a wreck, your servants are insolent and your sister has run off with a whore! The D'Ottawa's are circling the drain and you do nothing to stop it. Be a man, save the family!"

"Get out of my home," Salvador ordered when he was finally able to speak.

"Thought so," Cole said, gathering his gear. "Don't get up. I know the way."

Numbly, Salvador watched his friend go and listened to the faint, muffled sobs coming from further in the house. His mother's crying took a moment to register in his mind as something he should check on. Usually Victoria would deal with that sort of thing.

After a quick change out of his sweaty fencing gear, Salvador made his way to Hyacinth's room.

"Mum, it's me," he said through the door. He let himself in.

"My daughter." Hyacinth cried. She was curled up on the bed, black circles under her eyes and hair tangled. She had not gotten up for the last couple of days and it showed.

"I know Mum, I know," Salvador said softly and came to sit on the bed.

"She's never coming back," Hyacinth said, looking up at her son with watery blue eyes.

"Victoria will come home," he assured her. "There is still time."

"Four days until her time is up," she said, suddenly angry. "So it's six before she remembers and another two before she gets in a ship!"

Salvador sucked in a sharp breath and pulled his mother into a hug. He had dwarfed her in size for years, but she seemed frail now in a whole new way.

"I'm going to go get her," Salvador said soothingly. "Bring her home."

"Oh Salvador, thank you!" she said, pulling away to look at him. She smiled. "You need a haircut," she said, brushing aside his bangs.

"When I get back," he promised, getting off the bed.

Rebecca appeared in the door frame of the bedroom, looking solemn. She had been bad tempered since Victoria's departure, prone to fits of crying and anger.

"May I speak with you, Prince Salvador?" Rebecca asked, as he closed the door behind him.

He nodded, lips pulled down in to a frown. "Yes, please do."

"You can't bring her home by force," Rebecca warned, eyes cast towards the floor. "Victoria will resent you forever if you do. And even if you can get her here, nothing short of armed guards can keep her." She smiled sadly at the thought. "Even they wouldn't be able to hold her for more than a week."

"Thank-you for the warning," Salvador said, straightening up, "but I'm bringing her back, kicking and screaming if I have to."

Rebecca bit her lip, tears welling up in her eyes. "Then you should say goodbye when you find her because she will never forgive you."

"I know," Salvador muttered as she walked away and disappeared from view.

The entrance to Black Hearth was easy enough to find on the plaza, although Victoria had never been there. Two men

in Nersallian uniforms guarded the way into the pavilion. They stepped aside as Eler came near and gave Victoria a friendly look.

"About time," one of the errants muttered under his breath.

Confused, Victoria asked, "Do you have a curfew?"

Eler snorted. "No, but if I disappear for long enough somebody will come get me."

At the bottom of the spiral stairs, Victoria found herself in a large reception room. It didn't seem well used and almost had a sterile feeling. Eler led her through a series of rooms called the throat, each one as functional as the first.

"This is the nursery." Eler said, pointing towards the first room that seemed lived in.

The moment they entered, Victoria shot out a hand to grab his wrist, as she stared at the tall, lean man ahead of her. "Eler! I am standing in the same room as Horth Nersal."

"You get used to it," Eler said as though he had heard this reaction before. "Don't expect him to say much."

Horth didn't look like the regal duellist in Victoria's poster at the moment. He had a silly grin plastered on his face, his blue black hair was messy and he was busy tossing a small girl, no older than eight, up into the air and catching her again. Victoria was in complete awe of her idol. It wouldn't have mattered to her the least bit if he had been wearing a full-skirted dress.

"Hey Horth!" Eler called out so casually that Victoria felt like apologizing. "Can she stay?"

Horth put the child down to give Eler his full attention. Steely grey eyes went from Victoria to Eler and back again. Then, breaking into a wide smile, he nodded and returned to the game.

"Horth!" the little girl exclaimed excitedly. "Who's the blond girl?"

He just shrugged and reached down to pick the girl up by the ankles. She giggled, short black hair standing on end.

Victoria furrowed her eyebrows a moment; there was a striking resemblance between Horth, Eler and the girl. "Are you related?" she asked, turning towards Eler.

"Horth is my brother and that's Sanal, my sister," he replied with a wicked grin.

Victoria slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Way to tell me," she hissed with a slight smile.

Sanal was trying to climb up her brother when she suddenly stopped to yawn. "I'm sleepy, take me to bed," she said, and Horth pulled her off his side and into his arms.

Horth departed without a word leaving Eler and Victoria alone in the nursery.

"Where's my room?" Victoria asked.

"Down this way," Eler said, offering her his arm. She took it, allowing him to escort her down the hall. Eler pushed the heavy wooden door open, revealing a bedroom. Large leather bound books scattered the room, concentrated on the desk in the corner. Only the bed seemed to be tidy, freshly made by the servants.

"Eler...is this your room?" Victoria asked, dropping her bag on the floor.

"No, it's our room," he corrected, pulling her by the hand further into the bedroom.

Dumbfounded, Victoria allowed him to give her a quick tour and show her where she could put her things.

"What did you say about sharing?" Victoria asked sleepily. "That's a bit inappropriate. Don't you think?"

Sighing, Eler sat down on the foot of the bed and looked at her with a bored expression. "You're Vrellish, right? This is what the Vrellish do. Share rooms."

"The Vrellish have strange traditions." She groaned, too tired to fight with him. Kicking off her shoes, she stretched out beside him. Arm falling off the side of the bed, her fingers brushed a book halfway under the bedside table. She picked it up.

"What's this?" she asked, turning the book over to open it.

"Don't do that!" Eler yelled, reaching for it. Victoria rolled off the bed, avoiding his grabbing hands.

"Oh, more poetry," Victoria said, prancing away just out of his reach, suddenly wide awake again. "*Your poetry.*"

"Those aren't finished yet," he protested, managing to get hold of her by the arms.

"I thought you liked to share!" she laughed, clutching the book to her chest.

"Not this," he said, taking the book. "It's private."

"Then tell me about it instead," she said with a half-smile and sat back down on the bed. "Read the poem on page three."

Hesitantly he opened the book and began to read. When he was done she requested another and then another. She liked to listen to him. He spoke with a confidence and charisma that reminded her of Amel, although physically he was closer to her brother Salvador. After a while Eler needed no prompting to continue and went on to recite poems written by other authors and he was not shy about sharing his critiques of them.

"The problem with Demorans," Eler explained in a lecturing manner, "is that there is no punch, no real emotion other than love. Even then they lack any sort of realism that could make it interesting. When was the last time a couple truly managed to live all their lives together in happiness? It simply doesn't happen. As Golden as he is, Amel managed to write some hard hitting poems. All from his commoner days, of course."

"Really?" Victoria asked, having trouble keeping her eyes open. "I didn't think that Amel had a mean bone in his body. At least he never let on about it."

"That's no surprise," Eler said in a sour tone. "He likes to pretend he's a saint, but deep down he's just a scared kid trying to forget what the universe did to him."

Eler spoke with such certainty about this that Victoria thought they weren't talking about Amel anymore.

"Sure, Eler," Victoria said with a sigh and leaned back on the bed, propped up on her elbows. "Whatever you say."

He looked at her hard for a moment, like he was trying to place a piece of a difficult puzzle.

"What?" she snapped, beginning to get cranky from lack of sleep.

"Which part of you is Vrellish?" he asked slowly and came to sit next to her.

She arched an eyebrow. "I have no idea what that means."

"You like poetry and you fight," Eler said gesturing towards her discarded duelling sword. "Everything about you is contradictory: you're Demish in some things and Vrellish in others. What else about you is Vrellish?"

She thought for a moment. Fighting and flying were the only attributes about herself that she blamed on being Vrellish.

It's the middle of the night and you're lying in a Vrellish boy's bed. What do you think he's talking about! a voice in her head snapped. Victoria resented her responsible self for trying to ruin all her fun.

Nothing is going to happen, she assured herself before answering Eler's question.

"I haven't exactly been around many Vrellish people," Victoria explained slowly, thinking through the fog of exhaustion. "I'm not entirely sure what it means to be Vrellish."

Eler grinned, sending a pang of sexual awareness down Victoria's spine.

"Being Vrellish," Eler began in a slow drawl, "means a lot of things. We are good with swords and can fight in space. We do what we want and aren't tied down with petty social rules. Most of all we know how to enjoy each other's company, in and out of the bedroom."

Victoria inhaled sharply, filling her nose with a musky scent she hadn't noticed before. To her own surprise she liked it. She even found the scent a little intoxicating.

"I like spending time with you," she managed to choke out, feeling like she was being smothered by the tension in the air. Blood rushed to her cheeks as Eler leaned very close to her face. "What are you..." she asked as his lips met hers.

For a moment she did nothing, but she soon found her mouth knew what to do. A warm tingling sensation spread over her entire body, and her heart thumped in her chest. Eler seemed experienced so she let him take the lead.

"Close your eyes," he whispered and lay back with her.

Victoria was completely entranced with the new feelings spreading like waves throughout her and didn't resist when Eler wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him.

FIGHT NIGHT

by Ryan McFadden

Jack Dempsey daydreamed of the Moulin Rouge, which was odd because he'd only seen it from the outside when on war leave. Chandeliers dangled from pressed-tin ceilings while men in sharp suits danced with women in skirts far too short.

Eleanor?

A sharp slap across his cheek brought his focus back to where it belonged.

"Got your attention?" Christian hovered inches from him, poised to deliver another slap.

"I..."

"Stay away from the overhand right, Jack. You hear me?"

"He hits hard."

"Then hit him harder," Christian said.

Jack gazed through the ropes. The Polo Grounds thrummed with the excitement of forty-thousand fans, each having paid upwards of \$10 to see the two heavyweights slug it out for the championship. He searched the faces past the reporters clacking away on typewriters, his eyes stinging as flashbulbs popped.

"Where's Eleanor?" he asked.

"Forget about her, Jack. She ain't important. That guy on the other stool — he's important. He wants to knock you back to Tuesday. You understand?"

"Yeah, yeah, I understand." But still he searched through the haze, hoping to see her blue velvet hat.

The bell rang and the sound sent shocks down his spine as if he'd touched a live copper wire. He didn't want to get off his

stool but stood when it was pulled out from under him. Jack's gloves were heavy from two rounds of hard fighting, but he knew he had to keep his hands high or the Magnificent Mauler was going to knock his block off.



Sam "The Magnificent Mauler" Madison, heavyweight challenger, advancing toward him. Magnificent indeed. A great slab of a man who moved with the grace of a dancer. Rumor had it that he built all those rippling muscles by beating on colored folk down in the Bible Belt.

"Just another tree to fell," Christian had told Jack when they'd signed the fight agreement. But after two rounds, Jack was thinking this was more than just another tomato can brought in to inflate his record.

Or maybe Christian had misled him.

Why would he do that?

A right jab flashed. He covered, willing to absorb a shot or two to get inside but the Mauler attacked sharply from a southpaw

stance with body blows that sent shockwaves through Jack like a rock thrown into a pond.

He knew the Mauler hit hard but not that hard. Once the horsehair gloves became sweat logged, it felt like being whacked with a bag of sand but the last shot felt more like a lead pipe.

Jack stumbled, flash bulbs temporarily lighting the night sky, the photographers no doubt hoping to catch him pirouetting to the canvas. He wouldn't go down that way. He kept upright on rubbery legs.

"Jack!"

Eleanor's voice. He changed focus, just for a second, searching for her. The Mauler only needed a second. That right, cocked and generating power for the last half round, launched. Jack didn't see it coming. His head snapped sideways and the world flashed white.

The rain hadn't stopped for months, filling the trenches with water almost as fast as the brigades could pump them clear. God, he hated the mud. Jack sat on a makeshift chair under an overhang, water dripping in sheets around them. He ripped paper from the care package and tore into the box. It contained the usual necessities: foot powder, toothpaste, shaving cream, chewing gum. More importantly it held four pairs of socks, and a scarf that he wrapped around his neck.

Christian stood next to him, adjusting his over-sized steel helmet. "Who's that from?" he asked.

"Eleanor."

Christian clucked his tongue. "I didn't get nothing."

"Here," Jack said, handing him the gum.

"Thanks." Christian unwrapped a stick and pushed it into his mouth with slender fingers.

Christian didn't get packages from home but Jack had never asked why. Instead, he began splitting the contents best he could. He grabbed the socks and discovered the real prize at the bottom of the box.

An American-issue Colt Automatic pistol — far superior to the Canadian-issue Webley that he currently carried.

"Wow," Christian said. "She must really love you."

He inspected the pistol. "Yeah, she does."

The ground heaved and mud sprayed down on their helmets. Jack shielded the care package with his body.

"Gas!" someone yelled from further down the line.

*"Masks!" came an echoing cry.
Hell broke loose.*

The next blow wasn't from the Mauler. It was Jack's head bouncing against the canvas, snapping him awake. The Mauler stood over him, right hand ready to fire off another blow if he dared raise his head.

Nobody hits that hard.

The referee yelled at the Mauler but Jack couldn't hear what he was saying. Such a little man trying to push the Mauler to a neutral corner. Grudgingly, the Mauler backed away and the referee turned and began the count, hurling numbers at him, each one feeling like another jab.

"10 ... 9 ..." Backwards. Why is the ref counting backwards?

Jack wanted to stay down. The side of his face felt broken and blood pooled at the back of his throat. He tasted something else mingled with the copper. Champagne?

The Mauler rested against the turnbuckle, and that was when Jack saw that he was a no-good cheat. One of his corner men extracted something from the Mauler's glove, then made it disappear in the folds of his jacket. Their sleight of hand was good. Probably no one else saw except Jack. A piece of dark iron the perfect size to fit within a clenched glove.

Railroad spike.

That no good sonofabitch. Was that how he beat all those boys down south? Cheating? Jack wasn't about to let a cheater beat him.

"5 ... 4 ..." Jack started the climb to his feet, using the ropes to steady himself. The world tried to slide out from under him and he wasn't sure what he'd do if he got hit again. He needed a miracle.

The bell rang. Good enough.

Jack staggered to his corner where his stool had reappeared. He plopped onto it and leaned back. The left side of his face throbbed. His tongue played with his back molars, digging at the sharp edges of his broken teeth, exploring the new cracks.

Where the hell was Christian? Why was no one in his corner?
You can't trust him. You should know that.

His head was still swimming. They had lived through the war together. The endless nights in the trenches, keeping each other sane and alive through the rain, the gas attacks, the dysentery, and the artillery fire.

TOM CHESNUTT'S MIDNIGHT BLUES

Robert J. Wiersema

What's the worst thing you can imagine? The worst punishment someone could wish on you? To forever be cut off from those pretty young girls, the ones who look at you like you're a god? To wander the world looking for peace, but never knowing a moment's rest? To have your finest song never be heard?

"Can I get the houselights up?" Tom Chesnutt muttered into the microphone as he fumbled with his guitar strap. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Hank, can you bring up the lights?"

Cheers washed over him as Hank brought up the bar's main lights. The crowd was on their feet—they had been for most of the night.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, for the figures on the other side of the spotlights to start to come into focus.

"This is an old song," he said into the mic, almost as an aside, as he tightened the E string. He made it sound off the cuff, but it was the way he introduced the song every time he played it. A couple of people cheered; they'd seen the show before, or recognized the words from the record.

"It's nice to finish a night like this with an old song," he continued, looking down the guitar's neck. "A song everybody can sing along." He ran his pick lightly over the strings, listening to the tuning in the monitor. It was fine, but he fumbled with the keys a little longer. For effect. Playing it out.

More of the crowd cheered—people were starting to figure out what was coming. The sound of the crowd had changed; it was darker now, lower than it had been when he first took the

stage. Two hours of cheering and drinking and smoking had taken their toll.

"It's been a good night for me, Victoria." The crowd exploded with the mention of their city's name, same way they always did. "Hope y'all have had a good time too."

He shook the neck of his guitar decisively and straightened up in front of the mic.

"This song's called *Jolene*."

The crowd roared, and Frank started beating out the rhythm heavy, almost a Bo Diddley beat.

Tom let the guitar hang loose around his neck, curled his right hand around the microphone and leaned in, closing his eyes as he sang against the backbeat.

FROM WWW.THEWEBMUSICGUIDE.COM:

TOM CHESNUTT—SINGER, SONGWRITER, GUITARIST

Born in Santa Fe, N.M., but based for most of his career in Spokane, Wa., Chesnutt met with early success as a songwriter, penning tracks which included *Love and Smoke*, *Brokedown in Your Eyes*, *Right Child* and *Tell-All Eyes*, which charted briefly for Stanza in 1987. His early albums, though critically well received, sold poorly. After a brief hospitalization following the death of his fiancée Emily Grace in 1999, Chesnutt burst to national prominence with the album *Emily's Song*. Recorded in three days, the album is widely regarded as a dark masterpiece in the tradition of Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* and Neil Young's *Tonight's the Night*.

He'd got to the bar a couple of hours early, same as he always did. The place was a crappy little club right on the water that had once hosted bands, before they discovered that there was more money in techno and drunk university students. Now, the only time they cleared the DJ and his equipment off the stage was for a Very Special Event—namely someone the owner or promoter really wanted to see for themselves.

Tom didn't mind that: Very Special Event. Had a nice ring to it.

He had wandered around while the guys loaded in and set up, watching the pretty girls and the pretty buildings, the boats and the water. He had to stop to rest a couple of times; two nights without sleep and he was running on fumes. He got back to the club for a quick sound-check, then he sent the boys off to find some food while he bellied up to the bar.

The bartender, a kid with a shaved head and a pierced lip, was still setting up, but he was kind enough, thank you very much, to provide a bottle of Maker's Mark and a glass. Tom's needs were simple.

"Water water everywhere," he muttered as the bartender turned away. "Only whiskey's fit to drink."

He drank slowly but steadily, savoring the flavour and the burn of the whiskey, relying on it to cut through the last of the pills, bring him down a couple of notches to let him play.

When he poured the first glass, his hand was shaking so bad he thought he might actually spill. A couple of drinks later and his hand was perfectly still, the jangle gone from just behind his eyes.

"Better living through chemistry," he muttered.

The bartender glanced down at him and Tom shook his head. "Just talking to myself."

Emily smiled at him from the empty bar stool to his right. *"Is that what this is, you and I? You still think I'm some sort of projection?"*

"Or psychosis," he muttered. The words could have stung, but he offered them up with an easy familiarity. He and Emily had been having this conversation for a good five years now. Since the night after she had died.

"I can't say it's good to see you," he lied, glancing toward the bartender, who was shelving glasses and sniffing like he was fresh from Colombia. It was good to see her, everything considered. She was just as beautiful as she had ever been, just as funny. It made him miss her even more, her showing up every third day.

"You're such a sweet talker," she said, breaking into a grin. *"You knew I'd be here: that's why you started in with the whiskey rather than popping another handful of pills. Think you're getting some sleep tonight?"*

"God willin' and the creek don't rise," he said, taking another swallow. "She'll be here."

She made a production of looking around the empty bar. *"I dunno, Tom. The prospects for a Jolene here...they're not filling me with a whole lot of optimism."*

"She'll be here," he stressed. "There's always a Jolene."

"What?" The bartender asked from a few feet away.

"Nothin'." Tom waved it away. "Just goin' over the setlist in my mind."

KING HIM

Richard Gavin

Joelle Russell felt a deepening pressure on her arm, which had been dangling over the mattress edge like a stray vine cadging to be cut. The squeezing sensation had been strong enough to wake her, and it quickly became vice-like, painful. Joelle flinched, opened her eyes to the dimness.

The casement window sat open, resembling a book with glass covers. March night winds took advantage of the aperture, gusting in to refrigerate the bedroom. Barbs of panic passed through Joelle as she gazed at this evidence of a home invasion.

Something shook her. She jerked her head down and saw that the figure clutching her arm was, "Theo?"

He was crouched down at the bedside. The hand on her arm appeared grubby, stained. Joelle could hear him snivelling. "I need to tell you something," he said. "I can't believe this is really happening..."

His voice was a strangled whimper. His body trembled as though there were live wires beneath the skin. Lengths of glistening secretions hung from his nostrils, his mouth.

"What happened?" Joelle pleaded. "Tell me!"

Theo pressed a finger to his lips, hushing her. He quickly looked to the parted window, peering into the black yard beyond it.

"Theo," she said, quietly this time, "you're scaring me."

He turned back to face her briefly before flinging his arms around her blanketed legs. He pressed his head against her and began to sob. It was the first time she had ever seen him cry.

"Christ, Joelle...I killed your baby."

Her stomach flipped, her throat and tongue became desiccated. The shadows that surrounded her all seemed to be swaying.

"Oh, God! I wanna die!" he howled.

"You...you had a bad dream, Theo, that's all. Maybe you walked in your sleep. But you *know* I don't have a baby, right? That proves it was a dream. Now...now stop this. Please."

Theo's eyes appeared lidless as he stared at the hook rug at the foot of the bed, studying it as though he were a yogi and it an ornate mandala.

"You were pregnant." His voice was as flat-line as his stare, as cold as the perennial gusts from the still-open window. "You've been pregnant for weeks. I couldn't tell you. I didn't know how. I thought I was okay with it. I really thought I could let Him go through with it. But when He told me what the baby would be like, I couldn't allow it to be born. I tore it out of you!"

She watched him flinch, double over, then vomit onto the floorboards.

"How could I do that, Jo? How? What kind of man can just rip out an unborn child like he's cleaning a turkey?"

"Stop!" Joelle's reach for the lamp chain was fumbling, but she eventually found and yanked it.

The burst of light made her squint, and when she ultimately looked down at the quilt she noticed stains, ugly dark blotches. Some of these spots evaporated once her eyes grew accustomed to the lamp-glow, but those that remained became even blacker and uglier. She poked one. It was wet, and some of it came off to stain her flesh.

She flung back the covers, stood, gave her body a frantic inspection.

There were no visible injuries, no telltale reddish stains on her nightgown.

"It's not your blood," Theo explained, "it's mine." He turned his arms over to expose red-weeping divots in his flesh.

Joelle quickly yanked two T-shirts from the stack of laundry on her dresser and wound them over Theo's forearms. She told him to get up, but Theo didn't want to. He rose only after she forced her arm beneath his and attempted to yank him to his feet. She slapped the casement window shut before leading Theo out of the room.

Once inside the bathroom Joelle uncapped the peroxide bottle and began to clean his wounds; nearly a dozen jagged,

angry-looking rings marred his forearms, palms, left wrist. The nail of his right thumb was dangling by its root, exposing the delicate pulp beneath.

"Jesus, Theo, what did you *do* to yourself?" she managed before the lump in her throat stopped her voice.

"The baby did this, not me," he said. "I didn't think it'd be that strong or that big. And I didn't expect it to have teeth. But once I managed to fight back with my silver hammer, the thing came apart so easily. It just crumbled in my hands...like it was made of wet newspaper." Theo rested his head against the tile wall.

"Your silver hammer?" Joelle asked thinly.

Theo nodded once. "Sleepy," he whispered.

"That better?" she asked Theo as she lowered the quilt onto his trembling form.

"Yes."

She'd transformed the sofa into a makeshift bed for him after he'd refused to leave the living room, claiming it was the only place he felt safe.

Theo's mouth widened with a yawn. Joelle hoped he'd fall asleep. He needed it, but before he drifted she needed something too.

"I have to ask you something," she said.

"Okay."

"You know you were just having a bad dream, right? I mean, now that you've seen that I'm fine, you know I wasn't really pregnant."

"If you say so."

"I'm serious! I need to hear you acknowledge that you were just confused; that you know you didn't really hurt me. You were sleepwalking or hallucinating. You hurt yourself in your sleep. But I was never pregnant and you never aborted my baby with your hammer, right?"

"It wasn't *your* baby. It was King Him's"

A frigid winter passed through Joelle's insides. "What?"

"King Him."

"I thought all that was settled a long time ago, Theo."

"We did settle it, King Him didn't."

"But you said you banished King Him after...that you banished King Him the last time."

"I did. King Him came back."

404

Barbara Roden

"Any idea what happened to Dwight?"

"Christ, don't sneak up on a person like that," Wilson snapped.

"Sorry." Armstrong didn't look sorry as he stepped into Wilson's office; worried, wary, but not sorry. "Just wondered if you knew where he'd gone."

"Didn't know he'd gone anywhere."

"Well, he has. I went by his office earlier and it was empty."

"Maybe he's sick."

"No, I mean empty. Nothing in it except a desk and a chair."

"No idea." Wilson gazed at the pile of folders perched on the corner of his desk. They had appeared overnight, with no note on them. "Explains these, though."

"What are they?"

Wilson shrugged. "I haven't really had a chance to look. Some sort of demographic study. That was Dwight's area, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." Both men stared at the files. "Wonder why you got them?" asked Armstrong finally.

"Don't know. I don't need the extra work right now, though. I've been working twelve hour days as it is."

Wilson hoped that Armstrong would take the hint, but the other man moved closer to the desk, flipped open the topmost folder, and began leafing through the sheets of paper, which contained charts and lists of names. He nodded.

"Yep, this is Dwight's. Told me he was working on this. Said he didn't know how *he'd* cope, since Jenkins left."

"Jenkins? Tall guy, glasses, corner office?" Armstrong nodded. "Where's he gone?"

Armstrong shrugged. "Didn't say. Hey, d'you think they've heard something we haven't?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should..."

"Staff meeting, gentlemen? Very remiss of you not to tell the rest of us."

Both men jumped as Mr. Edwards' voice sounded from the doorway, and Armstrong brushed against the pile of folders, which slid to the ground. He scabbled around on the floor and gathered them into an untidy heap, which he piled haphazardly on the corner of the desk.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but *is* there a staff meeting in progress? Or am I interrupting something else entirely?"

"You're not interrupting anything, Mr. Edwards," said Wilson. "Armstrong was just going; weren't you, Armstrong?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Er, thanks for the help, Wilson. Appreciate it. Uh, excuse me, Mr. Edwards...." Their supervisor made no move to get out of the way, causing Armstrong to sidle awkwardly past him. When he got through the doorway he turned back to Wilson, mouthed "Sorry", and disappeared.

There was silence for a moment. Wilson tidied the pile of folders into a neater stack, then pushed them well back from the edge of the desk. When there was no more avoiding it, he turned to the doorway.

"Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Edwards?"

"I was coming to speak with you about those files. I see you've already found them."

"Yes. I was, uh, wondering about them. They don't really appear to be in my field."

"You have, then, had an opportunity to peruse them?"

"Well, no, not really." Seeing his supervisor's raised eyebrow, Wilson added, "I was...I mean, I took a quick look at...Armstrong said Dwight wasn't here, and they look like the sort of thing he did, and that isn't my field, so I just..." Wilson trailed off.

"That explains your colleague's presence in your office. What else did Mr. Armstrong have to say?"

"That was all, really, just that Dwight wasn't here."

"And did Mr. Armstrong offer any opinions as to the cause of this absence?"

"No."

"I am glad to hear that. Idle speculation has no place in this office, Mr. Wilson. We carry out very sensitive work, as you are aware, and it would not do for employees to begin speculating in the absence of any facts. Speculation turns to gossip, which becomes rumor, which then takes on a life of its own to become fact, and the rot sets in. Demoralization! Depression! Disintegration! I suggest, in future, that you do everything within your power to discourage this."

"Yes, Mr. Edwards. I understand."

"Do you? I am very glad to hear that. Carry on, Mr. Wilson."

"Mr. Edwards?" The other man halted in the act of leaving the office. "Er, about these files. You still haven't told me what I'm supposed to do with them."

"Ah, of course. The question of the hour. Was there no note with them?"

"Nothing that I've found."

"I see."

"Maybe there's something in Dwight's office that will help. I could go look."

"No, Mr. Wilson, a visit to that office will not, I fear, prove edifying. I am positive, however, that upon closer inspection all will become clear."

"I could wait until he comes back...."

"The truth of the matter, Mr. Wilson, is that your colleague will not, alas, be returning to the bosom of this office."

"I see."

"Do you really? I wonder." Mr. Edwards gazed at him thoughtfully for a moment, then sighed. "No, he will not be returning. A shame; his grasp of the minutiae of his employment was second to none. These days, however, one cannot be too careful, particularly in our line of work. I am sure you understand."

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"Suppose?" said Mr. Edwards. "There can be no 'suppose' about it, Mr. Wilson. Security and vigilance must be our watchwords."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, sir. Did Dwight...I mean, did he do something?"

"No, he did not 'do' anything. Suffice it to say that there were certain...irregularities surrounding your colleague, certain questions which he could not answer to our satisfaction. There is nothing more to say, except that no one currently employed here need fear anything; unless, of course, discrepancies come

STAY

Leah Bobet

She felt the storm come in her kneecaps, then her thighs. By eight o'clock, it blew from the north into Sunrise, January-hard and fine like sand, and Cora's hip was aching.

She asked Johnny Red for a smoke break and limped out back to the storeroom, kneading the hip with her right hand while her left cupped the cigarette. The storeroom was cold and cluttered, a tiny junkyard of boxes and broken chairs, but normally it was quiet; the rattle of pots in Johnny Red's kitchen didn't quite reach through the door. Tonight, though, the back door banged like an angry drunk; the snow hissed and ground at metal, brick, bone. Cora lit a second thin-rolled smoke off the first and listened to the rattle of the heartbroke wind.

When she came back through the storeroom door, half her tables had up and left.

"Better service across the street?" she asked. The plates were half-full, still steaming. There was nothing across the street. There was nowhere else to eat in the whole town: just the service stations, the Tutchos' grocery, and the snow.

"Transport truck's gone off the road," Johnny said behind the counter, and crimped a new coffee filter into the brew basket. A few hairs pulled loose from his straight black ponytail and drifted into his face; he brushed them back with a callused brown hand. "The boys went to haul it to Fiddler's."

Georgie Fiddler ran one of the two service stations in town. Mike Blondin, who ran the other, was still at his table, hands

wrapped thin around a chipped blue pottery mug. He held it up and Cora grabbed the stained coffeepot.

"I want the fresh stuff," he complained; she didn't answer, just filled the mug with sour, black coffee. He waved her off before it hit the brim and flipped open the dented metal sugar tin.

"You didn't go out with them," she said. Not a question.

Mike Blondin's fingers moved like a stonemason's, measured sugar with chisel precision: one pinch, two. He had big hands. "Wouldn't want to just abandon you," he grinned. There'd been a time, not too many years past, when Mikey Blondin's grin had got him whatsoever he desired anywhere from Sunrise to the Alberta border.

"Thoughtful," she said, dry, just as Johnny Red hit the percolator button and called out, "What'm I, chopped liver?" Gertie Myers, back at the corner table, rolled her eyes. Cora ignored it all and covered the cooling plates.

An hour passed before the menfolk trickled back in, red-faced and damp with winter-sweat. "Hey," Johnny Red said, and ladled out eight bowls of steaming chicken soup. "What's the news?"

"Went hard into the ditch," Fred Tutcho replied, and sucked back soup straight from the bowl. The steam set the ice in his eyelashes to melting. "Georgie got the tow and we managed to fish it out, but the front axle's pretty busted."

"The driver?" Cora asked.

"Got him up at Jane's." Jane Hooker ran the Treeline Motel, which was ten rooms and a Dene crafts shop, old-style porcupine quill-and-hair work, out by Blondin's. In the deep wintertime most of her rooms were closed; the only visitors to Sunrise in January were family and the odd long-haul trucker. "She'n Georgie are checking him out."

"I'll bring them something, then," Cora said, and ducked into the kitchen. She filled three thermoses and screwed the lids on tight, shrugged on her long, thick, battered coat. She wound three scarves and a hat about her head before stepping out into the storm.

It wasn't enough. The storm cut. It had blown in from the north, where there weren't no buildings or shrubs—whitebark pines or larches—to beat down the wind. Even breathing through thick wool, Cora's nostrils froze together at the first sucked-in breath, and her jeans were stiff by the time she reached the Treeline Motel. There was only one light on. Cora hunkered deeper into her scarves and scooted, knees-bent against the slippery gravel,

down the battered row of doors with fingers clamped around her canvas bag.

Room six had been converted into a warm and stuffy sick-room. Jane Hooker leaned over the bed, obscuring her patient from the knees on up, and Georgie Fiddler tinkered with the steam radiator, coaxing out a whining, clanking heat. The warm air made Cora sneeze, and two heads turned sharp around the double bed. She waggled the canvas bag and groped with her free hand for a tissue.

Her fingers were still stiff when she unscrewed the thermos caps and set them on the nightstand. Jane shifted over to make room, and she finally got a look at the driver.

He had soft, sweaty, messy hair. It fell dark across a white man's flattened cheekbones and was tamped down in a line where his cap would sit. The cap was on the dresser: white and faded red, damp from the roadside snow. The brim was bent almost double, into a fist.

Jane had the man's jackets off—one for winter and a checked old lumber jacket—and her broad hand felt the shape of his ribs. "Good enough," she said to Georgie with a nod, and he let out a little sigh; probably happy he didn't have to call to Hay River for the doctor.

Cora poured them half-chilled chicken soup and passed the mugs into reddened hands. "From Johnny," she said. Jane took hers with a nod, distracted; Georgie caught his up and resumed his regular pacing. She cupped her hands around a third mug, stealing what heat it had left, and leaned back against the wall to watch.

"Enough left for our boy here?" Jane asked, and Cora nodded. She'd ladled Johnny's soup pot dry. "Good," Jane replied, and stood with a long, loose breath. The lines around her eyes were windburned and deep. "I get the feeling he'll wake up hungry. Got a pretty good crack on the head."

"Lucky he didn't break those ribs too," Georgie said.

"Speaking of." Jane paused. "You find his seatbelt on?"

"He was clear across the cab." Georgie looked up at her, at Jane, and his brow creased into three fine canyons over his greying eyebrows. "I'll look over the truck tomorrow."

Jane nodded. "You're a good man, George Fiddler."

She didn't need to say it. But Georgie pinkened anyways over the rim of his mug, and those terrible fissures came out of his face.

BLACKLIGHT

Michael R. Colangelo

Jacob waits quietly for Atticus to give the signal.

All the details that led to this moment start to come back into focus.

It's a roadmap of regret. A path of bad decisions spurred into reality by worse intentions.

It's a few months ago.

They move into a new apartment well away from the university tenements that crowd the city. He wants to ensure they're far enough away from influences that Sarah could run afoul of prior to finishing her degree. Far enough, but still close enough to all the hangouts so she'll never be bored enough to leave him. It's selfish to contain her so, but he's a first year dropout and there isn't a whole lot waiting for him back home.

He doesn't want to run back that way with his tail between his legs. He doesn't want to lose his girlfriend to a better marriage prospect.

Despite his best efforts though, he puts in too many hours waiting tables to keep tabs on her every movement.

Soon, she's taking a night class in medieval pantomime. She says it's so she can add something smart to the 'Hobbies/Interests' section of her resume. 'Fucking' and 'Smoking' don't qualify at most employment centers.

One night he goes with her. He wants to see exactly what goes on at Medieval Pantomime 101.

That's where they find Shelly.

Shelly eventually leads them to Atticus.

The building where they hold classes is one of the older campus buildings. It's from before they added the east library wing and the newer housing tenements. It's composed of ornate stonework and crumbling gargoyles. It's crawling ivy and ancient Greek pillars. Inside, it's dingy and cavernous. The ivory walls are stained yellow with age. The elevator rattles fearsomely and crawls from floor-to-floor at a terrible, ice-layered pace.

Classes are held on the fifth floor inside an old office room. It's cold and drafty, with rattling windows and a thin, worn carpet covering the floor.

There are a few plastic chairs, a vending machine, and racks upon racks of costumes.

The costumes are nightmarish parodies of humans, animals, vegetables, and all hybrids in between. All are grossly exaggerated in bright felt, sewn buttons, and frozen papier-mâché faces. They sit forever in the stasis of whatever emotion their creator has seen fit to shape them into.

Jacob sits in class and listens half-heartedly to a thin woman in a cat suit. She reviews the finer points of blocking and emote techniques. He yawns. She stresses the importance of unwritten improvisation. Everybody else is taking studious notes.

Some of them ask questions. Most want to know when they'll be allowed to don the ghastly costumes that surround them.

At the end of the night, they're paired up and given an assignment. They are to return to class the following week with five emotions that a pair of actors can relay to the audience without sound.

Sarah chooses Shelly out of her pool of classmates.

Rather, she gravitates to her, and Jacob can see why.

Shelly is thin and quiet, and pale. She lurks at the social perimeters of the group, but not quite beyond them enough to draw her peers' ire by her detachment. She acts like she stands apart by choice rather than natural selection or mandatory exclusion. She's very Breakfast Club, and it's exactly where Sarah would like to be.

Later in the week, he's at the apartment when Shelly comes over. He stretches out on the couch and watches the baseball game with the sound turned low.

Sarah and Shelly sit on the other length of the couch at a ninety-degree angle to him with notepad and pen. They talk quietly between one another, trying to think of five emotions for next week's class.

THE DEAFENING SOUND OF SLUMBER

Simon Strantzas

“People are no longer sleeping well,” Doctor Wy opined late one Thursday night during his regular telephone call to the sleep lab. Fisher yawned as he listened. “As a rule, they like things that are neither difficult nor bad and right now the state of the world couldn’t be worse. The stock market, wars, crime; it all adds up to an existence that seems increasingly horrible and without end. What follows is worry, and with more worry comes less sleep. It’s provable, and it’s the basis for all my research.”

But research was not Fisher’s concern; he was just happy to be employed in such a downward economy. Doctor Wy spent little time at the lab, preferring to continue his work back at the university where he could see patients and evaluate their continuing candidacy for the program. Fisher had not seen the doctor in weeks — which was a relief. Though he found the end-goal fascinating, and was thrilled to play a small part in its hoped-for success, Fisher knew that without Doctor Wy’s watchful presence he would be free to slip his headphones on and enjoy the sound of white noise rustling in his ears. It was the only sound he found soothing, and it helped block out those that he didn’t.

Fisher had been lucky to find a lab located in a quiet part of the city, but he’d always been lucky at finding new jobs or places to stay, even when far from home. He didn’t know why it came so easily for him. He imagined it was because he refused to worry about things he couldn’t change. What was the point? Rather, he preferred to hope for the best, and more often than

not the best found him...though not always right away. The sleep lab, for instance, despite being far from the hubbub and the noise of the major thoroughfares, was in a rundown district full of boarded-over buildings. Across the street, an urban renewal project promised changes in the near future, but until then it was merely another construction site from which emanated the grating noise of work—noise that Fisher, due to his condition, could not tolerate. Why, he wondered, did the work have to be done so late in the day, every day, and why had it been going on for so long? At times, the progress seemed so slow as to be nonexistent. Perhaps it was a manpower issue. After all, he never saw more than two people on the site at any time, though they made enough noise for twenty. It did nothing but add to Fisher's anxieties. At least Doctor Wy's lab was soundproofed, and the din of the outside world did not carry through its brick walls. The promised quiet was the biggest motivation to accept Doctor Wy's offer. As the doctor said, "Though your level of auditory anxiety is low, what better place is there to work than with the sleeping, overnight when the world is at its quietest? The night shift requires someone with a positive attitude, and from what I've seen you should not have any problems adapting." There was no arguing with that logic, Fisher thought, and willingly signed on. A position that kept the noise he encountered to a minimum was ideal, though he found it strange that he was asked to keep the door locked at all times. "It's a private laboratory, after all," Doctor Wy said. "The patients are at their most vulnerable."

Fisher was ostensibly in charge of the sleep lab, but recognized he was little more than another technician, hardly different from his partner Rose. She was younger than he by at least a decade, not to mention fifty pounds heavier, yet she was also the parent of a daughter already in that netherworld between child and teenager. She showed him photographs one after the other the first time they'd met, all the while telling stories of her daughter's exploits. He did his best to listen and appreciate them if only because of the joy it obviously brought her.

The lab was devoted to research, more specifically Doctor Wy's research, and as such was smaller than most buildings of its kind. Doctor Wy's lab consisted of three rooms, and even then he wanted no more than one occupied at a time. His testing had entered a new phase and he feared the reactions patients might experience were they introduced to one another. "Once a patient is exposed to information, even erroneous information, about his or her treatment, it's inevitable that the patient will suddenly

believe they too are experiencing similar results. Again, this behavior is well-documented." Doctor Wy thus normally ran his tests with only three patients on a regular basis, and each was given a different day to come in. Great pains were taken to schedule them in such a way that no trace of one remained before the next arrived.

"I have to admit, it's a bit sad; we speak to them only long enough to put them to sleep, then stare at them all night long. At the end of it all, they wake up puffy-faced and then disappear without a word. I'm not even sure sometimes Doctor Wy's treatment is helping."

"Does it look like it's helping to you?" Rose asked. Fisher crossed his arms and leaned back from the console.

"I don't know. He assures me everything is normal and that the tests are producing the expected results, but I can't deny that no one *seems* any better. At least, not to me."

"If anything," Rose said, "they're *worse*. We've already lost one of the sleepers, and the rest don't look like they'll make it much longer. Especially Sanderson."

Eric Sanderson was the first patient included in Doctor Wy's trials. He suffered from a form of central apnea that kept him from sleeping more than a few hours at a time. Since Fisher and Rose had met him, his appearance had deteriorated considerably. His once ruddy skin had turned grey, his complexion sallow. He was thinner, yet softer, so much so that Fisher had trouble keeping him in focus.

"What's Wy hoping to find?" Rose asked. "Sanderson is a walking corpse. Though, I suppose they *all* are, aren't they?"

"Apparently, the doctor is closer than ever to a breakthrough. He expects it at any time."

Rose snorted.

"Do you wonder sometimes if it's worth it? Look at everything that's going on. Recessions, Depressions... What's the point in dealing with people who can't sleep when all of *that* is happening?"

"You know what Doctor Wy would say: it's specifically *because* that's going on that they're being kept awake. He dreams of finding some way to ease people's minds about it."

Air hissed through Rose's teeth.

"Let me tell you a story about the way things are," she said. "My daughter is a good girl. Quiet, maybe a bit too shy, but she goes to school every day and works hard. There are two girls in her class who want to make her life hell. They push her around

LAST WALTZ

Jason S. Ridler

"You dead yet?" said a Slavic crow on a low hanging branch, chewing on a cigarette butt.

"Been working on that one a while," Fritz said, laying corpse-still on a concrete bench, shattered bottles blossomed into broken petals around him, guitar in its case at his feet like an epitaph unsung.

"Seems like you need some help."

"Maybe so, maybe so."

The crow fluttered. "I could stitch you out some, tear off a few slices. Gotta make me a nest to catch me some honey. I'm good. I'm a doctor."

Fritz snorted. "Even dirty Dr. Crow gets more action than me. Heh."

"Might take a load off you, too, slim. Seems like bunch of things weighing you down like a tractor."

The guitar case glared at him, cracked and torn. "I don't know. What are you without dreams?"

The crow inched closer, wings out for balance. "But what are you with dead ones still rotting inside you? Dead dreams are poison. Let me bleed the wound. What else you planning on today? A sold out show at the Gardens? Busking for dollars? Waiting for the runaway muse?"

Fritz snickered. "Have at me."

Dr. Crow dove his beak into Fritz's head quick, sharp and deadly. Heavy wings flapped until he reached the treetop, and in his mouth was a whisky bottle. He dropped it, letting more

shard flowers blossom. "I can't build a nest with devil piss! What the hell were your dreams made off?"

Fritz burped red froth. "Monsters made of whisky and rye, devil kisses and sex with angels. All shimmer, no core and such and such." He exhaled smoke. "You take the drowning man out of the sea, he's just another sailor. The spotlight was addicted to his disgrace. So when you can't hack through another pack, drink through another day, when the tremors are all you got left ...well, try and steal some more, Dr. Crow, but I doubt there's anything left." He coughed yellow-red foam.

Dr. Crow sneered. "So. You think there's no music unless you're drowning?"

Fritz's chin jabbed his chest, as if the strings above his skull were snapped.

"Idiot." Dr. Crow dived and then tore out the Texas mickeys, tall-boy six packs, and wine boxes until a sour mash river ran out of Fritz's mouth and rushed into the soil, turning the green to brown.

Dr. Crow pecked the latches to the guitar case, then returned to his perch. "Go on," he said. "I've drained the worst. Now give me something worth stealing."

Fritz was bone pale. He coughed red wetness into his fist, words dribbling out in whispers. "It would be a lie."

"Then lie," said Dr. Crow. "Or I'll peck that guitar to kindling."

Fritz's body shivered, hands all nerves and trembles.

"That's it."

The dull-sheen Telecaster should have been a feather but weighed a ton. Fritz draped it across his knees and they cracked, heavier than God's balls.

"Now what?"

Dr. Crow cawed. "Make a chord. Then another. Then another. Build me a fucking nest, you self-defeating jackass."

Skeletal fingers formed an E minor, while Fritz cleared his throat of froth. "But you spilled it all."

"No. Give me your last drop."

"It will stink like a dead man's asshole."

"But it'll be true."

Fritz gulped brine and blood, heart mere leaves rustling in the wind, as his jagged fingers strummed and the words fought through the paste gluing his teeth shut in the cold air.

"Empty bottle of broken down dreams and everything ain't resplendent. No poet of the underground, no underdog hero

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

Nancy Kilpatrick

They treated him like a monster. Everybody did. And he didn't deserve that. He didn't do anything. Nothing at all. He wasn't responsible, it was the others. He was the victim here. A *real* victim. All this nasty business because of that stupid woman...It was so wrong.

The nurse arrived and went about the work of nursing, sans comfort. This one was young and fairly pretty, with brown hair and eyes, though a little plump for his tastes, but she did the things the other nurses had been doing over the last week since he's regained consciousness into this living hell. She took his temperature, blood pressure, heart rate, all that from the automatic readings so that she didn't need to have any physical or verbal contact with him. Yeah, he was a pariah.

"I'd like my pillow fluffed," he said, not because he needed it fluffed—that wouldn't matter. He just wanted to see how she would react.

Her head jerked up as if she hadn't heard a sound in ages. Without even a glance in his direction, she moved to the side of the bed, pulled the pillow out from behind his head, made a great show of pounding it into a new shape, then, carefully, pushed him forward with latex-gloved fingertips on his shoulder as if touching him might infect her in some way. He couldn't even feel it through the fabric of the hospital gown, but that, too, didn't matter. In fact, it was a plus.

Once the pillow was in what she deemed to be the right position, she moved his shoulder back. Without a word, she hurried

from the room as if he might have the audacity to ask for something else and she had to get out of earshot fast.

"Bitch!" he muttered to her back. "Every last one of you!"

Now that he was back from the dead, so to speak, he was bored. Seriously bored. It was just a question of when they'd let him out of here. He could use a drink. And a cigarette. Neither one was possible in this place. The only thing that cut the boredom was the pain. He didn't think he'd ever been in such physical pain, not even as a kid when his asshole stepfather beat the crap out of him for killing the neighbor's cat. That was nothing compared to this.

At least he had a morphine drip and he could self-regulate. With both arms and legs in casts, he had to gum the clear plastic tube hanging beside his head. He did that now, only to find that nothing came through the tube. He glanced up; the morphine release syringe hanging on a tripod next to the bed was empty and the stupid nurse hadn't changed it. But she wouldn't, would she? None of them would. They were punishing him. They were like sheep, sentimental slobs, soap opera addicts so pathetic they'd hang on every word of a sobbing woman. But he was the victim here. The *real* victim. Look at his body, broken, bandaged from head to toe! And now, craning his neck had caused pain to slice through his shoulder and back as if a hot rod had been plunged into his muscles. Yeah, and look how they treated him.

"Hey," he yelled. "Hey! Somebody get in here and turn on the damned TV, will ya?" But nobody came, of course. Why should they? They blamed him for the accident. Well, damn them to hell, it wasn't his fault!

When he woke up, the TV was on. His eyes focused on the small screen. A soap. Right. It would be. The bed next to his was empty, had been, as if they didn't want anybody too near him. Fine with him. They could all go to hell.

"Mr. Hammersmith."

His head jerked around. "Who the hell are you?"

The old woman smiled one of those beatific smiles that only the old and nearly toothless can manage. "I'm Mrs. Shade."

"Shade? Like window shade? Or are you shady?"

She laughed, one of those sweet-old-lady laughs that most people seem to love. Harmless old lady. Annoying old lady.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Oh, I'm just a volunteer, Mr. Hammersmith. I visit people in hospitals and other institutions, those who have no one else

visiting them. People alone often feel a bit hopeless. I just want to help."

"Yeah, well, I don't need or want your help, but you could change the channel." He nodded towards the TV where some woman was crying and a man was holding her. Yeah, right. Real life. Bullshit!

As Mrs. Shade switched channels, stopping at a game show, she said, "Mr. Hammersmith, I have the feeling that you're lonely."

"So much for your feelings, lady. Not lonely. Not at all."

That damned smile again. "Well, I came by when I discovered you'd not had any visitors or even next of kin who might phone or visit. Everyone should have someone who cares what happens to them."

"Ha! Like you care. You're just an old bat with nothing to do before you die." He could have laughed but he wasn't in the mood. "Look, lady—"

"Mrs. Shade."

"I'm just recovering from a bad accident and want some peace and quiet so if you don't mind—"

"Oh, I wouldn't deprive you of that. Certainly not. I'm sure you're in a great deal of pain and—"

At her words, a fierce and fiery snake shot through his spine. His mouth opened involuntarily and a cry slipped out. He rode the pain for the long moments it slithered through his spinal cord, desperately biting on the clear tube for morphine that was not there. "Damn those bitches!" he yelled when he could articulate it. "Fill the goddam morphine!"

"Here," Mrs. Shade said, "let me help you. I'll get the nurse."

She trundled out of the room at a snail's pace, which he saw through his fog of agony, returning with the young nurse. While he writhed internally, they chatted as if he wasn't even there, and certainly not in extreme and relentless pain.

"And I worked as a nurse before I retired, but that was a dozen years ago. My, this apparatus is much more complicated than in my day. Do you have children, Laura?"

The nurse named Laura smiled and said, "Yes, a toddler. He's twenty months and getting to be a handful."

"Oh, that's the age! I remember my daughter at two..."

And on and on they nattered while the nurse took her damned time changing the morphine syringe in the machine. Finally she was done and the two douche-bags walked out the

THE NEEDLE'S EYE

Suzanne Church

Lise held the needle up to the light. A single drop of vaccine nestled between the twin points, glistening amber. She hesitated, hating the cure for the slow ravages of Retiniapox. But she'd seen the horrible devastation the scourge could bring. Entire villages wiped out. Bodies doused with bleach and left to petrify in the sun, as no one would risk the dangers of burial or cremation.

Her patient, a young girl, wailed on the cot, held down by her mother. The cot's canvas, once green and now a drab shade of grey dotted with splotches of blood and fluids, groaned under the pressure of two bodies pressing down. The stench of it wafted up, adding to the reek of sweat and fear that permeated the medical station.

The girl's mother wore a bandage over her left eye from her own inoculation. Red and yellow blotches stained the white gauze; the eye would never function again, but her chances of contracting the virus had dropped by sixty-eight percent. Lise had vaccinated the mother only moments before, yet it felt like hours. *So many eyes ruined*. When she'd signed up for overseas medicine, she had prepared herself for the horrors of makeshift facilities and understaffed clinics, but nothing could have prepared her for Retiniapox. Back in university, medicine had called to her, with its noble pursuits and its promise to help, to cure. Now she felt like a crusader, storming through a new dark age with a bifurcated needle instead of a sword.

"*Où est ton Papa?*" Lise asked about the father's whereabouts in the hopes of distracting the girl while the Alcaine numbed her eye.

The mother shook her head.

I shouldn't have asked. They come from the northeast, where the last outbreaks were reported. Choosing silence over further reassurances, Lise began the scratching. Two strokes left and right, pressing the serum with both points just below the surface of the cornea. The girl squirmed and shrieked, more from fear than pain. She shouldn't be able to feel the needle. Two strokes up and down and the amber liquid disappeared into the layers of her eye. Lise pressed gauze over a closed lid and taped the dressing down.

Next.

A young man, about the same age as Lise's beloved Rideau, lay down on the cot. She tied his arms in the restraints, sanitized her needle, and gathered another drop of serum.

Sweat poured down Rideau's back. The Hazmat suit made the dry heat unbearable. He leaned over his next patient simultaneously cursing and thanking the layers of PVC separating him from the virus.

The woman's body wept from countless pustules, most concentrated on her face, neck, and chest. Her eyes had liquefied the previous day; always the first casualty. A biological weapon of war, the virus had been designed to blind its victims, rendering an opposing army helpless. Nature, in its random cruelty, had mutated the pathogen to a deadly cousin of Smallpox since its introduction in the battle of Baqa el Gharbiyya.

The woman moaned, unable to scream, throat clogged with erupting sores.

"Bientôt," he said. *Soon, it'll end.* One in a thousand would survive the illness. About three in ten would succumb despite vaccination, a high price to pay after trading sight in one eye for hope.

He readied a dose of morphine to add to her IV. A seizure gripped the patient in the next cot. Arms and legs flailed, knocking Rideau off balance. He fell onto the woman. His arm brushed across her neck and chest, ripping open a swath of pox. In his haste to push himself back up, he twisted the morphine syringe in his hand.

Pop. Rideau started, stunned, terrified, at the unmistakable sound of a suit breach.

He hurried for the rinsing station, searching for the suit's weakness. The needle had poked through a smear of pus. Contamination. *No, I must think positive.* Other doctors had

endured a suit breach without a hint of infection. Some more than once.

He showered the suit with bleach until the buzzer sounded. Next he stripped, set the bleach to half-dose, and cleansed himself. Caustic welts erupted on his skin and he dared not open his eyes, though they stung mercilessly. At the buzzer, he lunged blindly for the eye wash and rinsed the bleach from his face.

In two hours he would learn the true effectiveness of his inoculation; whether the trade of sight in one eye for his safety had been fair. He headed for the quarantine tent and scribbled a note on the chalkboard outside, "Rideau, needle through suit, Wednesday, 1027 hours."

Inside, he clung to thoughts of Lise, fleeing this room of despair for better times.

He remembered the previous Saturday, bringing the thought to the front of his mind, reliving its exquisite beauty.

He rested on their cot, watching her run a sponge along her arm. She turned to face him and said, "Like what you see?"

He smiled. "Always."

The air in their tent hung dry and cloying, like laundry at the bottom of a hamper. His skin was slick with sweat. He sat up and the sheet fell from his chest, pooling around his waist. Part of him wanted to grab her in his arms, make love to her again, but watching her bathe electrified him; his muscles twitched with desire and bliss.

The lights dimmed then returned to their yellow murk. "The generator needs filling," she said.

"I'll get to it. Are you finished with the water?"

"Not quite."

"Hurry and come back to bed."

She lifted another sponge full of water along her thigh and the excess dripped slowly back into the basin she had placed below. "I think we've wasted enough time today."

"Wasted?" He crossed his arms against his chest. "Is that what you think of our time together?"

She glanced out the mesh window. "The queues have started already."

He clicked his tongue against his teeth. "I shouldn't have to take a number to be with my own wife."

She shook her head. "Pardon. I've so much on my mind."

He tugged at the sheet, wrapped it around his waist and approached her naked body. As she dabbed the sponge along

LOOKER

David Nickle

I met her on the beach.

It was one of Len's parties—one of the last he threw, before he had to stop. You were there too. But we didn't speak. I remember watching you talking with Jonathan on the deck, an absurdly large tumbler for such a small splash of Merlot wedged at your elbow as you nodded, eyes fixed on his so as not to meet mine. If you noticed me, I hope you also noticed I didn't linger.

Instead, I took my own wine glass, filled it up properly, climbed down that treacherous wooden staircase, and kicked off my shoes. It was early enough that the sand was still warm from the sun—late enough that the sun was just dabs of pink on the dark ocean and I could tell myself I had the beach to myself.

She was, I'm sure, telling herself the same thing. She had brought a pipe and a lighter with her in her jeans, and was perched on a picnic table, surreptitiously puffing away. The pipe disappeared as I neared her. It came back soon enough, when she saw my wineglass, maybe recognized me from the party.

I didn't recognize her. She was a small woman, but wide across the shoulders and the tiniest bit chubby. Hair was dark, pulled back into a ponytail. Pretty, but not pretty enough; she would fade at a party like Len's.

"Yeah, I agree," she said to me and I paused on my slow gambol to the surf.

"It's too bright," she said, and as I took a long pull from my wine, watching her curiously, she added, "look at him."

"Look at me," I said, and she laughed.

"You on the phone?" I asked, and she dropped her head in extravagant *mea culpa*.

"No," she said. "Just..."

"Don't fret. What's the point of insanity if you can't enjoy a little conversation?"

Oh, I am smooth. She laughed again, and motioned me over, and waved the pipe and asked if I'd like to share.

Sure I said, and she scooted aside to make room on the table. Her name was Lucy. Lucille, actually, was how she introduced herself but she said Lucy was fine. I introduced myself. "Tom's a nice name," she said.

The night grew. Lungs filled with smoke and mouths with wine; questions asked, questions answered. *How do you know Len? What do you do? What brings you to the beach when so much is going on inside?* It went both ways.

Lucy knew Len scarcely at all. They'd met through a friend who worked at Len's firm. Through the usual convolutions of dinners and pubs and excursions, she'd insinuated herself onto the cc list of the *ur*-mail by which Len advertised his parties. She worked cash at a bookstore chain in town and didn't really have a lot of ambition past that right now. Which tended to make her feel seriously out of her weight class at Len's parties or so she said; the beach, therefore, was an attractive option.

She finished my wine for me, and we walked. I'd been on my way to the water's edge and Lucy thought that was a fine idea. The sun was all gone by now and stars were peeking out. One of the things I liked about Len's place—it was just far enough away from town you could make out stars at night. Not like the deep woods, or the mountains. But constellations weren't just theoretical there.

"Hey Tom," she said as the surf touched our toes, "want to go for a swim? I know we don't have suits, but..."

Why not? As you might remember, I've a weakness for the midnight dunk. We both did, as I recall.

I stepped back a few yards to where the sand was dry, set down my glass and stripped off my shirt, my trousers. Lucy unbuttoned her blouse, the top button of her jeans. I cast off my briefs. "Well?" I said, standing *in flagrante delicto* in front of her.

"Get in," she said, "I'll be right behind you."

It didn't occur to me that this might be a trick until I was well out at sea. Wouldn't it be the simplest thing, I thought, as I dove under a breaking wave, to wait until I was out far enough, gather my trousers, find the wallet and the mobile phone, toss

the clothes into the surf and run to a waiting car? I'm developing my suspicious mind, really, my dearest—but it still has a time delay on it, even after everything...

I came up, broke my stroke, and turned to look back at the beach.

She waved at me. I was pleased—and relieved—to see that she was naked too. My valuables were safe as they could be. And Lucy had quite a nice figure, as it turned out: fine full breasts—wide, muscular hips—a small bulge at the tummy, true...but taken with the whole, far from offensive.

I waved back, took a deep breath and dove again, this time deep enough to touch bottom. My fingers brushed sea-rounded rock and stirred up sand, and I turned and kicked and broke out to the moonless night, and only then it occurred to me—how clearly I'd seen her on the beach, two dozen yards off, maybe further.

There lay the problem. There wasn't enough light. I shouldn't have seen anything.

I treaded water, thinking back at how I'd seen her...glistening, flickering, with tiny points of red, of green...winking in and out... like stars themselves? Spread across not sky, but flesh?

I began to wonder: Had I seen her at all?

There was no sign of her now. The beach was a line of black, crowned with the lights from Len's place, and above that...the stars.

How much had I smoked? I wondered. What had I smoked, for that matter? I hadn't had a lot of wine—I'd quaffed a glass at Len's before venturing outside, and I'd shared the second glass with Lucy. Not even two glasses...

But it *was* Len's wine.

I'd made up my mind to start back in when she emerged from the waves—literally in front of my face.

"You look lost," Lucy said, and splashed me, and dove again. Two feet came up, and scissored, and vanished. Some part of her brushed against my hip.

I took it as my cue and ducked.

The ocean was nearly a perfect black. I dove and turned and dove again, reaching wide in my strokes, fingers spreading in a curious, and yes, hungry grasp. I turned, and came near enough the surface that I felt my foot break it, splashing down again, and spun—

—and I saw her.

COWBOY'S ROW

Christopher K. Miller

Rex Wheeler loved Hell-driving, didn't mind going all the way to Cayuga to catch a show. He knew about reverse spins, hi-skis and precision drifts. He knew about skids, drifts, jumps and tight formation manoeuvres. Of course he only knew *about* all these. He couldn't actually *do* any of them. Really, he couldn't even parallel park.

Rex was a smart driver who knew that Hell-driving ain't real driving, the object of which is to arrive at one's destination in a consistently safe and timely manner, and in which real success is based not on sharp tactics, but on good strategy, and that the most important strategy (beyond not driving shit-faced drunk, dog tired or hopping mad) is to try to stay as far away as possible from all the other bad drivers on the road. Assume that everyone around you is disabled, distracted, delusional or suicidal, and you will not be far wrong.

He had many ways of maximizing his road space, of avoiding man's primordial tendency to travel with the herd. But his favorite method was to choose unpopular routes. And that is why, instead of being squeezed along on highway 7, trying to pass seniors tooling along at thirty under the limit with their left turn signals flashing and flashing, and playing road roulette with oncoming traffic eager to pass dawdlers of their own, Rex was sailing along alone in the dark on county road 13, listening to his favorite country rock station.

Rex lived in Maryhill and worked evenings in Guelph as an animal husbandry technician for United Breeders. The job could

be tough, especially in the fall when the bull's libidos began to wane. Rex used the drive home to relax and unwind.

On AM radio, Toby Keith sang his first big hit. On the horizon, a harvest moon like the ghost of a pumpkin rose behind dark clouds.

Rex turned on his high beams, cutting a bright swath through surrounding bush, and illuminating blacktop split by a single solid yellow line. He liked how County Road 13 seemed to wind through the country with no clear purpose. At night, with its rounded surface, blind curves and narrow gravel shoulders, it was like riding on the back of a snake.

"I should've been a cowboy," sang Rex. He needed this drive. His father had always taught him to stand up for himself, to treat others with respect, and to know when to do which. The lessons hadn't always been easy either, and neither was living them. It had been a bad shift, a *real* bad shift. There had been an *incident*. Now, soothed by the song, the wind, and the road unfurling, he went over it in his mind.

Rambo hadn't gone for the AV (Artificial Vagina) even with a new trained steer to coax him. And prepping him for digital manipulation had just pissed him off more. He'd recommended giving the big Holstein the day off. But there were back orders on his semen and at two-hundred-and-seventy dollars a half-gram straw, management hadn't wanted to see any slacking. Rambo could fill a *lot* of straws.

The seminal vessels of a bull are situated on either side of the pelvic urethra. Through the walls of the large intestine they feel like symmetric bags of grapes. Rambo had snorted when he'd begun to gently palpate the gland on the right. The gland on the left had been swollen and warm, and Rambo had bellowed falsetto and bucked against the bars of the tight stall when he'd applied a small amount of pressure to it. "Seminal vesiculitis," he'd said withdrawing his arm, beginning to peel off the glove. "You've been pushing him too hard. Don't matter how hot his wrigglers are now. My boy here needs a break."

Rambo had grumbled as if to concur.

His boss, Mr. Hornsby, from the safety of the raised cement walkway dividing the rows of dirt-floor stalls, had carefully folded a silk hankie that he'd been cleaning his glasses with and returned it to his breast pocket. Then he'd said, "Use the electroejaculator."

His mother's lifelong belief in and example of treating all God's creatures with kindness had afforded a gentle but enduring

lesson. Just thinking about this device, even now, made his knees weak and his prostate ache. The thing resembled a giant copper-tipped 30-30 round. But attached black electrical cables made it look like some high-tech implement of torture—which wasn't far wrong. Vocalization is an indicator of pain in bulls, and the bulls tended to get pretty vocal when the ejaculator was applied.

The lights of an oncoming vehicle stabbed up over the crest of a hill. Rex turned off his high beams before returning to the day's events.

He'd pulled the long latex glove on up to his armpit. "I've been in and around bulls for thirty years," he'd said, "And I'm telling you, you pump current through those glands now, you're gonna rupture something." Then he'd slapped Rambo high on the rump. "And your million dollar man here is hamburger."

Rambo had lowed, raising and dipping his head between vertical crossbar restraints as though nodding.

"Why don't you pull one on," he'd said to Hornsby, tossing the spent glove into a waste receptacle. "See for yourself what I'm talking about."

Rambo had responded to the suggestion by raising his tail and dropping a nine inch pie.

"That won't be necessary," Hornsby had replied, blanching. "I've made my decision."

It'd satisfied him to see Hornsby's pinched expression, to see him shrug his hands up almost into the sleeves of his virgin wool suit jacket. He knew the man had never had an arm in a bull in his life, had no business supervising the harvests. Who wears Brooks Brothers to the pens anyway? The man was a bean counter.

His reverie was broken by fast approaching headlights in his rear view. Rex flipped it up to reduce night glare and eased to the right. A pickup truck shot by on his left and then cut in front of him. As he pulled away, the driver slid open the back window and pushed something out. Rex flicked on his high beams to see that it was only the driver's arm. The guy was giving him the finger.

Asshole. A flash of hot irritation caused him to step on the gas, then to open his own window and return the gesture. The world is so full of assholes. The thought took him back.

"Now see here Mr. Wheeler," Hornsby had said, "It's not your call to make." Hornsby had sucked in a breath as if to inflate his confidence before continuing. "You know the drill. Sanitize the ejaculator. Check the battery." Hornsby had blown air into his

SAFE

Brett Alexander Savory

When the sun started melting, no one seemed particularly bothered. No one except Clark.

"Todd, check it out," Clark says, points at the sky.

"What?" Todd says, and looks up. The two are on the sidewalk of a busy street. Cars and bees buzz by. Summertime.

"The sun," Clark says. "The sun. Look at it."

Todd glares. "What about it? It's the sun. Big whoop." He bites into the street meat he'd bought from one of the vendors downtown.

Clark stops walking. Todd keeps going. A few steps later, Todd realizes Clark isn't beside him. Wiping at his mouth with a ketchup-stained napkin, he turns around, says, "Come on, man, we'll be late. Get your skinny ass in gear. Quit staring at the sun. You'll burn your retinas out."

Todd turns, keeps walking and chewing.

Later, they're on the outdoor patio of a café, sitting with the girl both Clark and Todd want. Neither of them know of the other's desire.

Todd says, "So Jane, Clark tried to burn his eyes out of his stupid head by staring at the sun on the way here."

Clark says nothing, glances up into the sky. Then, after a moment's reflection: "I'm actually pretty concerned about the fact that when I look up into the sky, it looks as though the sun is melting—like yellow-orange paint that's been heated and is dripping down a light blue canvas."

Jane laughs. Clark does not. Jane stops laughing. Unlike Clark and Todd, she is fully aware that they both want her. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Clark lifts his head again skyward. Jane follows his gaze, shielding her eyes from the full force of the sun's brilliance. A man riding by on his bike lifts his head. Sees nothing. Carries on.

"I don't see anything weird about the sun, Clark," Jane says. "Honest, I don't."

Clark nods his head slightly, blinks rapidly, taps his fingers on the wooden table.

Beers arrive. Todd drains his in four gulps. Clark's sits untouched. Jane sips.

A breeze stirs, sending a lavender scent across the table from Jane to Clark. Clark inhales it, smiles. Wonders how the underside of her forearm would feel cupped in his hand.

When Clark gets home that night, he posts on his blog: "The sun is melting. Has no one else noticed this?" Only one person responds, a friend of his from high school with whom he has recently lost touch. A girl named Bernice. Bernice writes: "Clark, the sun is not melting. You probably have a brain disease and are dying. Maybe it's cancer. A horrible way to go. When you're dead, can I have your cat?"

The next day, Clark is supposed to meet with Jane and Todd for dinner. Instead, he calls them and lies, says he's caught some kind of bug. Needs to stay home and rest up.

After making his calls, he draws back the curtains in the living room of his one-bedroom apartment. The feeble light from the melting sun drizzles in, settles across the hardwood floors grudgingly.

It's easier to look at the sun today; it's become hazier, its edges more indistinct.

Clark thinks about what it means, what he can do about it. Wonders why newspapers, TV, and the Internet aren't buzzing with headlines about The End of the World.

Clark closes the curtains, makes coffee, bacon, and eggs. Dips toast into the runny centres. Waits for nightfall.

Last night, he didn't look up at the stars. He was afraid of what he might see. Tonight, he braces himself, walks over to the living room window when he sees the dark red and purple light bleed away to black beneath the curtains. Glances at his watch: 8:49 p.m.

Heart fluttering madly, stomach in knots, he reaches out to yank the curtains aside, but stays his hand. Lets it drop to his side.

He walks to the cordless phone, picks it up from its cradle, dials. His cat brushes up against his legs, meows for food. It's two hours past its feeding time. When Jane picks up, Clark is scooping food into the cat's bowl.

"What's up?" Jane says. "Thought you were sick."

"I am. Listen, can you come over? Just don't bring Todd, alright?"

"What's that noise?" Jane asks.

"I'm feeding the cat."

"You mean the cat you're going to leave to Bernice when you die of brain cancer?"

"You saw that?" Clark says. "What kind of thing is that to say to someone?"

Clark closes the lid on the plastic food container, walks back into the living room, stands in front of the curtains. Afraid of them. Wanting to be as far away from them as possible.

"So did you hear me? Don't bring Todd," Clark says.

Jane replies, "Sure, no problem. Should I bring something? I'm not sure what you want me to do over there."

Clark hears something in her voice. "No, it's okay. Just bring yourself. I want to show you something. Actually, I want to show *myself* something, but with you here in the...um, in the room, I guess."

He feels a certain distance grow between them just then. "Todd can be a bit of a douche sometimes and I think it'd be cool if we spent a bit of time together without him, you know?"

"Oh, yeah, well...okay, sure. Sounds good." Clark hears her voice warm again. "I can be there for 11:30. Good with you?"

Clark says, "Good with me, yeah. Thanks, Jane. See you soon."

Once he's hung up, Clark goes to his computer, pulls up his blog, types: "Bernice: The sun *is* melting. I do not have brain cancer. I am not dying. You cannot have my cat. I never really thought of you as a friend."

At 11:37, Clark's phone rings.

"Hi, Jane," Clark says.

"I'm right around the corner, fella. Get ready to buzz me in."

Clark says, "Roger, that."

THE CARPET MAKER

Brent Hayward

The man from personnel held open his office door and indicated, curtly, with his free hand, that Patrick should enter; as Patrick did so, the man said, in low and threatening tones, "Mr. Troy, you understand we are not running a whorehouse?"

Chagrined, Patrick took a seat. The chair was creaky and uncomfortable and very small. He faced a huge wooden desk. Air in this dank basement office smelled sour and stuffy and he shifted in the chair. Black mould grew on the cement walls, by the baseboards. Over the big desk, a single bare bulb cast huge shadows.

He looked down at the carpeted floor as the door squealed shut behind him.

Walking softly, the man from personnel returned to his place. His own chair—deep green, leather, high-backed—glistened in the light as if it were a living thing. The man put his hands on the desktop, locked his long fingers together, and waited.

Patrick cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "I can understand why you said that. But let me explain." Leaning forward, elbows on knees, he took a deep breath, focussed again on a spot between his sneakers. He could distinguish a muted pattern of red, gold and black. Fleurs-de-lis swam in the depths of the worn pile.

"Mr. Troy?"

"Yes..." He could even *smell* the carpet now, the ages it had laid here, the vanished lives come and gone, passing through this room. "You see, it's just that my wife and I—"

"Look how you've dressed your daughter."

Following the direction of the pointing finger, Patrick was startled to see that the wall to his right had become a window, of sorts—had it always been? Was this a one-way mirror? Had a curtain been lifted?

“How—?”

Words failed. He was looking at the waiting room, where he had left Samantha, moments before.

But that room was on another floor, on another side of the building altogether.

Samantha sat between two tired-looking teenagers, a boy and a girl, her thin legs stretched out, one ankle crossed over the other. At least she had taken off the stilettos. On the way uptown, the shoes had been hurting her feet, she'd said. With her head tilted back, so that her neck was taut, smooth—her throat curved and muscled—Samantha's hair hung down, out of sight. Patrick couldn't see the make-up—the foundation and blush, the blue eye shadow and lipstick—that Kendra had applied to Samantha's face before he brought her here, but that sequined dress, clinging tightly to her thin, boyish body, changing tone from deep red to small lakes of cerise as she breathed, made him wince.

“My wife is...” Now he met the gaze of the man from personnel and the disapproval he saw there caused anger to bloom in him, and it felt like a release. “Look,” he said, “my wife is not a happy woman. We know this isn't a whorehouse. You should be careful what you say to me.”

His outburst was ignored. “Where is your wife now?”

“Kendra is, uh, she's busy. She couldn't make it.”

The man from personnel continued to stare for a long time. Shadows moved, like bruises, over his face. Finally, though, his expression seemed to soften. He brushed at his black moustache with one curled knuckle. “We have to be careful here, Mr. Troy. I thought we had agreed to the utmost discretion. I thought you understood our position.”

“I thought so too. I'm sorry about the dress.”

“Mr. Troy, we are trying to operate a business. That's all. This is a cutthroat world. We want to provide quality carpets at affordable prices.” He smiled a thin smile.

“Carpets,” Patrick echoed, nodding. “I understand.”

“And, Mr. Troy, though I honestly can't fathom why you dressed your daughter like that”—the man's eyes glittered—“she is by all means hired.”

Patrick did not know what to say. He did not even know what to feel, whether relief or remorse. "Thank you," he mumbled.

"Now let's fill out the forms, shall we, and forget about this unfortunate incident?" The man from personnel bent to open a drawer, and Patrick heard the sound of wood moving on dry wood, and then the rattling of documents that he would shortly sign to complete the sale.

Samantha's clothes—her ridiculous shoes, her gaudy and sequined dress—were quickly stuffed into a paper bag by a woman in a dull twill suit. Like the man from personnel, this woman did nothing but scowl at Patrick. Her skin was stretched so tight over her cheekbones that tiny blue veins showed, patterns of cracks in fine china. She handed Patrick the bag and nodded as he took it, an almost imperceptible movement, then took him firmly by the arm with a surprisingly strong grip, guiding him towards what was—he realized with some additional shock—the rear exit of the building.

"Do not worry about Samantha, Mr. Troy," said the woman as they made their way through a large kitchen: ceramic-tiled floor, sinks along one wall and, between them, truncated pipes of gas mains that protruded from the sea-green walls like accusing fingers. "The food here is wonderful and the rooms are always comfortable. I assure you that Samantha will make new friends. At lunchtime, all of our young workers sit together in the sunlight, eyes closed, faces turned toward the sky, as if they have found peace. This is a sight we have come to love."

He stopped, turned towards the woman, confused. "Sunlight? But where, where do they sit? Where could they go?"

The door was opened, unanswered questions sucked out into the night. Rain diffused the city lights. Car tires hissed on nearby wet roads. Blowing in, the rain was cold and reflected neon on the wet tiles at their feet.

"Tell her to write." Patrick clutched the bag to his chest like a life preserver. He could smell the perfume; Kendra had splashed Samantha liberally with some cheap brand this morning, after the fight.

With little choice, Patrick stepped outside. The metal door clicked shut.

Standing atop a landing, in an alley, stunned for a moment by memories, Patrick was soon soaked. A car horn blared, waking him, as if from a dream, and he blinked, letting the rain patter his face. He took a deep breath. The segment of street that he

FOXFORD

Sandra Kasturi

Furred shapes move in the darkness near the platform, waiting for the last train. Fog muffles their sharp barks.

Eleanor made it onto the last Express heading back to Oxford from London just in time, despite Frankie and Bill's nonsense at the Fox's Head pub—leaving her with the bill and then scurrying off in a fit of laughter as if they were teenagers. Eleanor had been working on her thesis in England for a year now, and she would have thought her half-sister might have grown up a little since she'd been away, but Frankie was still her usual childish self. And now she was dragging Bill along with her, their new relationship excluding everyone but themselves. Their visit was almost over, but Eleanor had already had enough.

She fumed silently as she thought about the scene all over again. She'd only had a vodka and orange at the pub, for goodness sake, but somehow Frankie and Bill had managed to down several pints and squeeze in a bottle of champagne as well. Then Eleanor had gone to the loo, only to find them vanished on her return, and there was the barmaid presenting her with the bill. She could hear their giggles outside, fading as they ran off. A hundred and twenty pounds! That must be...what? Nearly two hundred dollars?

Surely not that much, she thought.

Her whole life with Frankie was filled with similar scenarios. The past year in Oxford had been glorious with its silences and lack of drama.

The train swayed and Eleanor dozed, grinding her teeth like she hadn't done since she was living at home.

She really should have known better. The whole day had started unpleasantly, and even though she was used to it by now, she was still surprised at how miserable she was in the presence of her half-sister. In Oxford, she'd finally felt like she belonged somewhere, and here was Frankie ruining it, like she ruined everything. And Bill was worse.

Frankie and Bill were both terrible guests, Eleanor's small flat rendered even smaller by their tiresome boisterousness and complaints about water pressure, English food and the fact that hair dryers and shavers didn't fit into the outlets.

"I told you it was a different voltage system," said Eleanor with a sigh, but Frankie had gone back into the bedroom to sulk. Eleanor lay back down on the narrow sofa and wondered again what had possessed her to agree to this two-week visit. But she knew—it was their mother, still recovering from Frankie's father's death, who desperately needed some peace and quiet, even for a short while.

I need to get them out of the flat, thought Eleanor. Or I'll kill them both. London. I'll take them to London.

"I'd love to go to London," said Frankie on hearing the proposal. "But don't you have more research to do?" She stood in front of the window, brushing her silvery blonde hair.

"Well, yes," said Eleanor, "but I can do that tomorrow. Or the next day."

"I didn't think Nervous Nelly wanted to brave London again after the Heathrow craziness." Bill grinned maliciously at Eleanor.

Eleanor looked at Frankie. Eleanor had e-mailed her and their mother to let them know she'd arrived safely in England, but she'd only mentioned her hatred of Heathrow and London's crowds when she and her mother were e-mailing privately later. Would her mother have told Frankie? Or had Frankie read her mother's e-mail? It wouldn't surprise her. And Frankie, of course, would have told Bill.

When did he get so nasty, she thought. Was it always like this, or is it just this trip? Maybe it's Frankie. The two of them together. She looked away, tried to ignore him.

"Come on, Bill. You know Eleanor doesn't like crowds. Or new places." Frankie smirked at her.

"Oxford is hardly new to me anymore," said Eleanor. "And neither is London. It would be silly for you to come all this way and not see London properly," said Eleanor, still not looking at them.

"Very silly," said Frankie.

"Very silly, very silly, very silly!" shouted Bill. He grabbed Frankie by the hands and twirled her around in the cramped room until they nearly fell on top of Eleanor on the sofa, laughing. Bill pulled Frankie to him and started kissing her on her thin mouth.

Eleanor stood up quickly and said, "I'm going to run a few errands. I'll meet you at the train station at 11:00 if you want to go. If you're not there, I'll go to the Bodleian and do some work. You two can do whatever you like."

"Ooooh, we can do whatever we like," said Bill, looking down at Frankie. "Did you hear that?"

Frankie pulled his head down to hers again.

Eleanor dressed in the bathroom, grabbed her purse and slipped out the door. They were unbearable. She and Frankie had never been close. Eleanor had been ten years old when her mother remarried, and Frankie had been born a year later. She'd felt completely disconnected from the pink, squalling creature, and retreated further into the books she loved. And Bill...Bill had been so nice in Toronto during grad school; she had even thought at one point he would be something more than a friend. She'd had no idea that he and Frankie had even met, much less become involved. When Bill said he'd dropped out of the graduate program and wanted to visit, she'd felt her heart lurch. That was before she'd known Frankie was coming too.

Bill had turned into a real Biter. That's what her mother had called men like him, her Welsh accent still strong.

"Nell, lovey, watch out for those men, they're real Biters." Eleanor wasn't quite sure what she'd meant, but had avoided entanglements on principle. Until Bill...and even then it had just been a friendship. He probably hadn't even realized that she'd once had other ideas. Now, in England, she was glad it hadn't come to anything. Biting Bill.

And Frankie...Frankie had been a Biter from birth.

The train picks up speed and dives into thickening fog that is rolling in from the north, turning the falling darkness a silvery grey, through which strange shapes move, keeping pace.

MY BODY

Ian Rogers

I had seen enough darkness in Sycamore to last me a lifetime. Once I got home I planned on turning on every light in my apartment and sitting in the middle of the living room floor, as far away from the shadows as I could get.

It was Sunday night and I was driving toward the bright lights of the city. I had the gas pedal pressed to the floor and the radio cranked to an oldies station out of Barrie. I also had the dome light on. It made driving a little difficult, and I got a few disapproving honks from the one or two other drivers on the road, but I needed it.

The Platters came on singing that heavenly shades of night were falling, and I switched off the radio. I turned off the dome light, too, and that's when I saw her.

She was standing at the side of the road. I thought she was a deer at first, the way the headlights reflected off her eyes. Then I saw her dress. I expected her to dart out in front of me, but she just stood there. A little girl about seven or eight years old.

My foot lifted instinctively off the gas pedal, and the car decelerated. As I cruised by, I looked out the passenger window. The girl turned her head at the same time and our eyes locked. We looked at each other for only a moment, but I clearly saw the blank expression on her face flicker to one of intense gratitude. It was like a spotlight snapping on. I put on my blinker and pulled over.

The girl came running up as I stepped out of the car.
"Please," she said. "No one would stop."

The girl brushed at her cheeks with the back of her hand, and I could see she had been crying. She was wearing a coat with a fur-lined collar over her dress. The dress had some sort of print pattern on it, but I couldn't make it out in the dark. She didn't seem to like my staring, and pulled her coat tight against her body. A red leaf was stuck in her wavy brown hair. She brushed at it absently, but it stayed put.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked. "You lost?"

I looked up and down the highway. There were no other cars on the road, or parked on the side of it, and I felt a brief sensation of unreality standing there with a little girl who should have been at home in bed. It was a school night.

"I don't know where I am," she said dismally.

"Are you cold?" I took a step toward her, and she took a step back. "I'm not going to hurt you, kid. I stopped so I could help you. Where are your parents?"

"I don't know." She looked around like her mother and father might come wandering out of the woods at any moment.

"What's your name?"

She hesitated a moment, then said: "Millie."

"Millie?"

"It's short for Millicent."

"Hi Millie. My name is Felix. Felix Renn." I held out my hand and Millie looked at it distrustfully. "It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you." She still wouldn't take my hand, not that I blamed her. "Do you live around here?"

"No," she said. "I live in Toronto. In Rosedale."

I nodded. My office was in the next neighborhood over, in Yorkville. "Did you drive up here with your family? You and your parents? Maybe your brother and sister?"

"I don't have a sister," Millie said.

"Do you have a brother?"

She nodded. "Mom drove Pete to hockey. It was her turn. Dad took me to the mall for dinner. He went to the food court to buy us french fries. He said Mom would kill us if she knew, but I said I wouldn't tell."

"Where's your father now?"

Millie shook her head slowly. "He told me to come with him, but I didn't want to. I wanted to stay and watch the kittens."

"The kittens?"

"In the window," Millie said. "At the pet store. I always visit the kittens when we go to the mall. They remember me," she added defiantly, as if I might not believe her.

I nodded. "I'm sure they do. Which mall did you go to?"
Millie shrugged. "The mall. The same one we always go to."
"Do you know where you are right now?"

Millie shook her head. Her lower lip trembled and her eyes blurred with tears.

She was scared, and I didn't want to scare her more by telling her she was, at present, about eighty kilometers away from home.

I went over to the edge of the shoulder. The land sloped down to a drainage ditch that ran between the road and the woods. There were no streetlights on this stretch of the highway, and the spaces between the trees were very dark. I took a step down the slope, mostly to see if I could do it without flinching. This new aversion to the dark was looking dangerously like it could turn into a full-blown phobia, and quite frankly I was too old for a nightlight in my bedroom. I took another step.

"Don't," Millie blurted. She came toward me, then remembered that she was afraid of me, and moved back. "The man who looks like Daddy is out there."

I thought I had misheard her. "Your daddy is out there?"

"He's not my daddy," Millie snapped at me. "He *looks* like Daddy. That's why I went with him. He said he knew where Daddy was."

"What did this guy look like?"

"Like my daddy," she said. "I told you."

I bit my lip. "Was he short or tall? Did he have long hair or short—or was he bald?"

"He's almost bald, like my daddy, but he has some hair. It was brushed across the bald part."

"Do you remember what was he wearing?"

"A grey coat. It was long, and it had a belt."

"Like a trench coat?"

Millie shrugged. "He had a bag, too. A big one. Like the kind Pete uses to carry his hockey stuff."

I nodded.

"He said he knew where Daddy was. So I went with him. He said Daddy was looking for me, and he was getting angry because he couldn't find me. But I didn't go anywhere. I was still watching the kittens."

"Where did the man take you, Millie?"

"Outside, to the parking lot. I got scared. I started to cry. The man told me to stop, but I couldn't. He started shaking me. Then he hit me with something. He hit me right on the head. It hurt so

THE SHRINES

Gemma Files

Photo: A rubble sculpture on the Leslie Street Spit. Five layers, the bottom two made from three-hole cinder blocks, then a two-hole block (jaggedly broken) and two partial blocks of one hole each, plus one more three-hole block. On top is a lump of concrete with rusty wires jutting from it; the wires have been "shaped" to suggest hair flowing in the wind, while the lump itself has a grey suggestion of features, open-mouthed, in profile.

Dear Darrow: Yesterday I went out to the Spit and saw the Shrine you'd made, that awful thing. All those honest gifts defiled, just to cobble together a poisoned offering for some nameless god to choke on. All those other Shrines broken up for parts, heaped like garbage—a middle finger made from other people's dreams, doubled, quadrupled, up-thrust towards silent heaven.

No secret at all about how I knew to go there; I found the article about the place when your landlord let me in, pinned to your bedroom wall.

New Gods of Leslie St.

*On the Spit, Some Torontonians are Building
a Religion Even They Can Believe In*

By Gregg Polley, Bite Daily

The first, built from broken bricks and cinder block, stands less than a metre tall, sides and roof forming a stage for a jumble

of obscurely significant items: A ceramic Easter egg, a box of baby teeth. *A votive card to St. Martha, guardian against distractions.*

In front, a ceramic cast of the soles of someone's feet around which have been sprinkled brightly colored marbles seems to indicate where prospective pilgrims should stand, if they want to view this odd little diorama for maximum impact. There's even a "spire" made from half an orange traffic cone, like a Church of Oz raised by Munchkins.

But this isn't Macchu Picchu, or Angkor Wat. This "sacred" structure, like the fifty surrounding it, sits square on the shores of Lake Ontario—a little-trod part of the Leslie Street Spit.

"A lot of people don't even realize the Shrines are here, because they're in this kind of nook, hidden from the road," notes Jensen Cort, crew leader with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, which manages the park.

The collection of towers looks like a primitive city fallen into disrepair, its miniature buildings fashioned out of construction debris fetched from the shoreline, where crashing waves have weathered bricks and cast iron into found art. The grass around it is revealingly trampled, indicating a steady stream of visitors. A few feet away, a garter snake slithers through another of the follies.

"We're standing on tons of rock with just a little soil on top," Cort says, unsurprised. "This place is like one big hibernaculum."

According to him, the entire spit was created over many decades by clean fill and construction waste being dumped to form a promontory, with adjacent lagoons and ponds. Now the place teems with wildlife: Foxes, raccoons, hawks and the many rodents they prey on, plus the nearby water-bird colonies Cort's team looks after.

Dear Darrow: Three weeks since we'd last spoken. I can still play the conversation back in my head, almost word for word—

"Mom," you said, "you're a smart woman. That's why it kills me you're letting this crap pull you down to...their level. All these other idiots."

"Like what, like Dad? *That* kind of idiot?" I gave an angry sigh. "He would've said he died in a state of Grace—that means something. The way Gran and Granddad's kindness means something to *me*, whether it comes with the Church attached or not. You don't spit on somebody for offering you sympathy."

"You don't. Besides—didn't do him much good, all that happy Christ-crap, did it? In the end."

"You don't know that."

You turned away. Threw back: "Yeah, well...neither of us does, actually. That's kind of the point."

What's "funniest" about all this, in retrospect, is that when Frank and I first married, I was definitely the Godless one in our relationship: Raised with no religion at all, taught only that Christianity was one more mythic system, one more set of stories people tell themselves at bed-time to distract themselves from an impending, inevitable headlong plunge into darkness. We used to joke about it, uneasily, whenever we ran across nursery rhymes like this:

*Goosey goosey gander, whither shall I wander?
Upstairs, downstairs, and in my lady's chamber.
There I met an old man who would not say his prayers;
I took him by the left leg and threw him down the stairs!*

"Thus perish all apostates!" I'd say, and you'd giggle. Too young to know what I was talking about.

That last fight ended when I told you that you were free to believe any damn thing you wanted, or not. But what I resented was being browbeaten for choosing not to tell people who believed something I didn't that they were idiots to their face—certainly not Frank's parents, whose grief over his death (Jesus talk set entirely aside) was just as sharp and valid as my own, or yours.

Dear Darrow: Most aneurysms have no cure, or reason. Your father died because people die; that's just what happens. There's no right or wrong to it. No good or bad, except as it applies to you.

I didn't tell you that then, because I knew you wouldn't believe me. But you would have grown out of it in time, this impossible hunger for accountability. I believe that devoutly, or try to. No one can stay that sad, that angry, forever.

No one human.

The towers stand above a shoreline littered with great slabs of broken sidewalk and tangles of re-bar, as though announcing the Shrines' presence to those approaching by water. Closer to the road, a meandering, human-scale walkway has been laid down with discarded bricks. At one end, the entrance closest to the road is framed by tree branches festooned with bits of cloth and paper on which questions, statements—invocations?—have been scribbled, like improvised prayer flags.

A subsidiary wall of sculptures lines both sides of the walkway, all of them decorated with bits of broken ceramics, doll parts, toys, metal hardware, feathers, pine cones, ornamental grass.

No one seems to know precisely when the charmingly rustic village of Shrines first took shape, or who started it. But the more compelling question might be, why?

DEAD

Claude Lalumière

My dead brother insists that we stop using his alive name. His mommy asks, "What should we call you, then?"

He smiles, his mouth open wide, the gap in his teeth looking too adorable. Last week, he lost his first baby tooth. I want to rush over and hug him so I can absorb all that cuteness. And I want to smell him, because he still has a trace of baby smell, even at five years old. "I'm dead. Call me *Dead*."

But he isn't. Not yet. It takes seven years to be declared dead, and he's only been missing for a few days. We humour him, though.

The mommies and daddies let me sit in when the police explain what happened on my brother's first day in kindergarten. I can tell the detectives expect me to be sent out of the room.

First they ask who everyone is. Daddy Kent says, "We share the house. We're like one big family." That's not a lie. They make it look like Mommy Jenny is with Daddy Kent, and Mommy Tara with Daddy Neal. They call it fudging the truth. Sometimes it's simpler that way.

Less than an hour after class started, the police tell us, the teacher discovered a heap of clothes. There was a bit of blood on the shirt. She did a quick headcount and realized she was one child short. She took attendance, and of course my brother was the missing one.

The other kids told the police that my brother had lost a tooth, and that explained the blood.

Ms. Collingswood hadn't noticed, but there were so many kids to pay attention to.

Neither the teacher nor any of the children remembered anyone being in the classroom besides themselves. Neither the teacher nor any of the children noticed how or when my brother disappeared.

One of the detectives says, "Did you get a ransom note?"

The other one asks, "Is there anyone you know who would have any reason to take him?"

"Are you pressing charges for negligence against the school and the teacher?"

No to all of the above.

They ask to see his room. They look around, but there's nothing to find.

"If you hear anything, call us."

"We'll do everything we can to return your son to you."

Finally, they leave.

Dead has already told us a different story.

Curled up on Mommy Jenny's pillow, Dead is taking an afternoon nap. He looks so tiny nestled in the mommies and daddies' big bed, as if he were still a little baby. The rest of us are standing in the doorway, admiring him. He's so peaceful. So beautiful. So fragile.

Mommy Jenny whispers, "Nothing must ever hurt him again."

Even as a baby, when he was still alive, my brother was so sensitive to everything. If someone lashed out in anger—at anyone—he would either cry uncontrollably or withdraw completely, his eyes wide with shock and fear. We had to learn never to have temper tantrums and never to scream at each other. We learned to really communicate. We did it for him, but it was a good thing. My brother taught us to be better people.

He taught me to be a better person.

Once, when I was little, I was furious at the mommies and daddies because they didn't get me this stupid toy, and I got so mad. I was so stupid. I made everyone angry, and it all turned into a big fight with lots of yelling. And then we heard a loud, horrible scream—only a short burst, but it was the most terrifying noise I'd ever heard. The sound of a baby being tortured. That's the image that flashed into my mind. We stopped fighting and rushed to the crib. My baby brother's face was rigid with

fear. He breathed in short bursts, like a broken piston. Mommy Jenny barely touched him, and he screamed again.

The mommies and daddies murmured tensely to each other.

I was so scared. I hated myself for what I'd done to my brother. I filled my heart with my love for him, and I singsonged his name.

The mommies and daddies stopped talking. They listened to me and watched the baby.

After a few minutes, he made a little baby noise. A normal noise. I continued my song, and his face relaxed. He drooled. His eyes closed. He drooled some more, and his breathing calmed as he slept.

The mommies and daddies each kissed me on the head as they left the room. I sang to my brother the whole time he napped. When he woke up, he smiled at me. I climbed into the crib, squeezed in next to him, and hugged him. There were tears in my eyes as I whispered, "I'll never hurt you again. Ever."

It's time to renew my vow. I say, "I promise never to hurt my brother."

The mommies and the daddies stare at me forever, then they nod to each other, and then turn to look at Dead sleeping on their bed.

Mommy Tara says, "I promise never to hurt Dead."

Daddy Neal says, "I promise never to hurt Dead."

Daddy Kent says, "I promise never to hurt Dead."

Mommy Jenny sheds a tear. "I promise never to hurt my son."

Gently, I climb on the bed. I'm too old for afternoon naps. I cuddle Dead. I close my eyes.

Everyone is dressed in black. The two daddies. The two mommies. Me. Except Dead. Dead isn't wearing any clothes at all.

Dead pees in a plant pot. A big cactus. His little wee-wee is funny-looking. Dead reminds me of those water fountains with statues of pissing cherubs. His pee is colorless, almost odorless, just like water.

We all laugh.

The doorbell rings. Dead is done peeing, so he disappears.

We all remove the smiles from our faces. We try to look sad. It's been three months since my brother vanished. My mommy opens the door. Seeing everyone's grim expressions, I start giggling. Daddy Kent glares at me, and I bury my face in my hands.

Uncle Jerry walks in. His big SUV can seat everyone, so he's driving us. The five of us (Dead isn't coming) could have fit into

our own car, but Uncle Jerry insisted: "You shouldn't have to drive to the ceremony." The mommies and daddies said, "Okay," because it's best not to make a fuss.

Uncle Jerry kneels down next to me. "Oh, Lilly!" He takes me in his arms and hugs me. "You loved him so much, eh? It's okay to cry."

I peek at the mommies and daddies, and they all look relieved. Daddy Neal winks at me.

Daddy Neal sits up front; Uncle Jerry's his brother. The two mommies climb in the middle seat, with Daddy Kent squeezed between them, holding hands with both of them. I sit alone in the back seat. Actually, I lie down. I take up the whole seat. I close my eyes and pretend that we're flying, that the car is a private luxury jet. The steady rumble of the SUV becomes the hum of the plane. I'm flying. Flying! Flying to a heaven made to order for my brother. Dead's perfect world. I want to be there with him, in that place where no-one is ever mean.

Someone grabs my hand. Immediately, I know it's Dead. Those tiny hands, spongy like marshmallows. Still naked, Dead climbs on top of me and rests his head on my chest. I wrap him in my arms. His soft hair tickles my chin.

Dead's mommy turns to see what's going on in the back seat. Dead isn't supposed to be here. But she chuckles. What all of us want is to make Dead happy. Daddy Kent turns, too. And then my mommy. They nod to each other. Mommy mouths to me, "I love you."

Uncle Jerry says, "Is Lilly alright? What's going on back there?"

Daddy Kent says, "Nothing. Nothing at all." Meanwhile, Dead's mommy stretches her arm and rests her fingertips on Dead's hair.

Later, Daddy Kent says in a voice that's a bit too loud, "We're almost there."

I nudge Dead, and he slides off me. He slips under the seat, out of sight.

By now, Dead is presumed dead, even though legally he's still only a missing person. Today, the entire extended family is commemorating him. For closure, they say. It wasn't our idea. But it was simpler to go along and get it over with. At the ceremony, the aunts and uncles and grandparents all want me to say a few words.

I'm nine years old, but today they all try so hard to treat me like an adult. Why now? The aunts and uncles and grandparents

THE WEIGHT OF STONES

Tia V. Travis

At dawn, on April 29, 1903, a huge rock mass, nearly half a mile square and probably 400 to 500 feet thick in places, suddenly broke loose from the east face of Turtle mountain and precipitated itself with terrific violence into the valley beneath, overwhelming everything in its course....

Nineteen men were working in the mine at the time of the slide. Of these seventeen escaped and two, who are supposed to have been at or outside the mouth of the tunnel, perished.

—McConnell & Brock, *Report on the Great Landslide at Frank, Alta., 1903*

The loss of life has been appalling as nearly one sixth of our people have without a moment's warning passed into that great beyond and been ushered before the judgement seat.

—Frank *Sentinel*, May 2, 1903

The worst mining accident occurred in 1914, when Canada's deadliest mine disaster horrified the Pass and the world. The Hillcrest mine had an enviable reputation as a safe, well-run mine.

Idle for two days because of over-production, the mine opened as usual on June 19, 1914.

Of the 370 or so men who reported for work, 235
headed underground.

Only 46 of them would ever see daylight again.

—*Crowsnest: An Illustrated History & Guide to
the Crowsnest Pass*, J. Bryan Dawson

She sleeps beneath ninety million tons of limestone.

A sigh that might be the wind siphons through the Pass. Gustiest corridor in the territory, a convergence of plates where mountains break loose from the sky, where violence is measured both in moments and eras, where sunlight splinters through crevices and flowers live and die in darkness. If you listen, you might hear a grain of sand sift through the labyrinth of boulders.

If you listen, you might hear her breathing.

I hold my own breath and map the movements of her heart... the rise and fall of her lungs. I held that last breath for her until I passed beyond the need for it. The desire for it.

Lie still. I will find you.

The river tumbles in its channel. Her voice rises above a ridge of pressure. Thirty feet below, where the rescue party almost lost hope, lays the trail she and I walked so many decades ago. I've counted the lives this mountain has devoured down to the last ulna and scapula. Crumbled heaps like the rocks themselves, crushed beneath boots calcified with dust and lamp-oil. Boots battered down to mule-hide, a century's stink of creosote, blasting-powder, and coke oven—all the detritus of the building of the Canadian West, above and below. There is not one stone I have not turned. I searched for her on hand and knee until I bled to the bone.

Now, I stand with my back to the mountain and form a circle with my hands—like a surveyor's compass or the mouth of a tunnel. When I squint through those hands in the sunlight I almost convince myself I can pulverize those locomotive-sized boulders with nothing more than the flex of my fingers...the dynamics of muscle and will.

The strength of my regrets.

At moments like this, these rare moments of absolute clarity when I remember who I am, and who I was, and where she is—the world has no more substance than that circle of hands. Wind whistles through on its way to somewhere else as though she and I were never here at all.

SUMMER, 1922

"Did you hear, that man came by asking again. He knew we dug up the Clarks' cottage."

Will Evans leans on his shovel handle. Turtle Mountain is indistinguishable from the dynamited rock on either side of the road.

"You know who he is, Will?" The kid from New Brunswick has hired on for twenty cents a day and the privilege of bunking under a canvas tent-flap.

Will uncaps his canteen. Drinks.

"He asked whether we'd found anything else."

"We did." A third workman, stripped to the waist, jams boot to shovel. "About ninety tons of limestone." He wipes his forehead with the shirt he's slung over a jack pine stump. "Tell him to come back tomorrow. I'll have more rocks for him." He hacks and spits. Plunges the blade back into dusty gravel.

Bars of perspiration dampen Will's shirt where his suspenders have steam-ironed the cotton. Beyond the boulders on the northern slopes, forest breaks the achingly grey valley.

Will drinks in the green with his eyes as a thirsty man drinks water.

Nineteen years since the Slide buried the town. Sixteen since improvements were made to the hardpan road by the Old Man River. Backbreaking labour through hundreds of feet of boulders, some the size of houses. The limestone is veined with rusty lichen, crusted like blood. First time in twenty years some of these shattered blocks have been exposed to sunlight.

"Too bloody hot for this." The British Columbian runs a hand through a shock of hair matted with dust and sweat. "Not a bloody breath of air all morning."

The New Brunswick boy surveys the cracks in Turtle Mountain's peaks. "What was it like cutting through this the first time?"

"They used more dynamite blasting down to the old wagon trail than they did the first two years running the mine." The British Columbian's back is burnished brown as deer-hide, deepening to Indian red across his shoulders.

"Five minutes 'til quitting time." The foreman, an older man with arms like steel pipe, is accustomed to loading twelve tons of bitumen a day. "You boys best get back to it now."

Will turns his back on the mountain. Eighteen years old, he has lived in the Pass since he was born, long before the Hillcrest

explosion of 1914 that killed his father. Long before the Great War that claimed his brother three years later at Vimy Ridge. *First Division, 10th Battalion under Commander Currie*. They'd buried Laurier Evans and his blown-off legs in a rainy cemetery in Villers aux Bois with the other Canadians who died on that muddy scarp.

*You come from a long line of phantom limbs, Will Evans.
Missing pieces.*

Will touches the sun-warmed miner's tag he's worn around his neck since he was nine. The brass is warped from the blast, notched where the check struck a track. He remembers the stink of singed hair and scorched bone. Burnt strawberry pie, Papa's favorite. The oven smoke was hardly noticeable for the black billows rolling from Hillcrest.

The foreman calls lunch. Twenty shovel blades hit dirt. Men brush limestone powder from blistered hands wrapped in rag. Boys sag cross-legged near road-clearing equipment or atop boulders and swig bottles of ginger-beer. The bulldozer, parked on chunked earth and stone, radiates heat in waves. Workmen swap sandwiches and cigarettes.

"Heard they're gonna build a highway north of the railway line."

The British Columbian huffs. "Not in this lifetime they won't."

"Have you seen him, Will?" It's the New Brunswick boy.

Will knows who he means.

"I've seen him," he answers at last. "On the rocks. Near the old mine entrance. At twilight, when I'm out walking. He keeps to himself."

The foreman reaches for a long-necked bottle. "Owen Lawson used to be an engineer at Hillcrest eight years ago. Chief at Bellevue, now. One of the first rescuers back in the mines after the explosion. They tried to hold him back because of the blackdamp. Bad bit of business, that.... You boys is too young to remember much. The rest of you likely knows from the newspapers but you wasn't there."

Idle talk to pass the time but Will doesn't mind. Too many years have passed. The realization saddens him.

"Why would anyone keep these mines running after so many died?" The New Brunswick boy is all of sixteen. Alone out here. Searching.

The foreman grunts. Unwraps a sandwich of cold tongue. "When I think of the men crushed when the roof caved...boys

The List

By Kelley Armstrong

Everyone laughed when I walked into Miller's bar. Never a good way to start an evening out.

Randy waved for me to ignore them and join him at his table. He had my beer waiting. There would be a list of supplies he needed me to steal, too, but that wouldn't come out until later. Don't ask me where he learned such good manners. Certainly not from his older brother, Rudy, who was snickering and whispering behind the bar.

"Ignore them, Zoe," Randy said, twisting the top from my bottle. "What's going on?"

"You don't want to know."

Whatever it was, it was bringing a much needed air of liveliness to the place. Miller's might not be the worst dive in Toronto, but don't tell Rudy that or he might decide he can skip the monthly cleaning.

It isn't even a bar, really, just a dark cave of a room off an alley, with a Miller's Beer sign in the window. The sign used to flash, until Rudy realized it was attracting patrons and unplugged it.

It's not a private club, but it is racially segregated. Sorcerers, half-demons, witches, necromancers, they're all welcome. As for vampires, only one is allowed. I'd feel a lot more special about that if I wasn't the only vampire in town.

"How's the clinic going?" I asked.

Randy made a face, which meant 'the usual'. Chronically underfunded and in danger of closing, which is why I stole medical supplies for him.

"I had an interesting case today," he began. "This guy—"

"Hey, Zoe!" Rudy called. "Come here. Got something to show you."

"Don't do it," Randy murmured.

I walked over to the bar, reached across and snagged a beer bottle from the ice.

"Uh-uh," Rudy said. "You haven't paid for your first one yet."

"And I don't plan to pay for this one either. So what's up?"

The guy on the stool beside me leaned over. I resisted the urge to lean back. One advantage to not breathing? You don't need to smell anything you don't want to. As for the guy's name, it was either Dennis or Mo. I'd known them both for years. Still can't tell them apart. Both on the far side of sixty. Both missing half their teeth. Both half-demons. Or so they claimed. Never saw them demonstrate any powers other than the ability to sleep on rickety barstools.

For simplicity's sake, I usually call them both Dennis. Neither complains. Most times, they're past the stage of remembering their names anyway.

"You are not a real vampire," Dennis said.

I sighed. "This again? Fine. In the morning, I'll go drain the blood of a few virgins."

"Real vampires don't go out in the morning."

"Hey, I agreed to the slaughter of innocents. Don't push it. And don't ask me to pretend I can't see my reflection in a mirror, either, or I'll never look good enough to get those virgins back to my place."

"Can you sparkle?" someone across the room called. "I hear that's what real vampires do these days."

"Oh, I can sparkle. Just not for you."

A round of laughter. I headed back to our table.

"We got confirmation, you know," Rudy called after me.

I turned. "Confirmation of what?"

"That you're not a real vampire." He picked up a folded newspaper from the bar. "You aren't on the list."

I returned and took the paper. Two papers, actually. The first was the *Toronto Sun*, our daily tabloid. The other was an underground rag.

I read the *Sun* headline: "24 Vampires Call Toronto Home, researcher claims."

"Cool," I said. "Add me and we can field our own baseball team."

I skimmed the article. The researcher was an anthropologist who specialized in vampire lore, its origins and its connection to modern life. He'd compiled a list of people suffering from porphyria and deemed them 'real vampires'. The underground

paper had reportedly found and printed his list of the twenty-four living in Toronto.

"It's a known medical condition," I said. "You need to drink blood and you have an aversion to sunlight, which means, when it comes to real vamps, it's only half right."

"Or maybe you're half wrong," Dennis said.

"No, Zoe's all sorts of wrong," Rudy said. "Which is why she isn't on the list. Meaning she's not a real vampire. Meaning I win a whole lotta bets."

I flipped him the finger and took the *Sun* back to our table.

"Hey, look. The guy's giving a lecture tomorrow at U of T," I said as I finished reading the article.

"Don't even think of going, Zoe," Randy said.

"Why would I do that? To mock the guy when he doesn't recognize a real vampire? That would be very immature."

I ripped out the article and pocketed it. Randy sighed.

I took Brittany the Vampire Slayer to the lecture. At seventeen, she's waffling about post-secondary education, so I'm trying to convince her that university isn't as boring as she thinks. And that vampire hunting really isn't a viable career goal. There are only about a dozen of us in North America. In five years, she'd have slaughtered the lot, and then what?

"I am not a vampire hunter," she grumbled as she trudged along beside me. "And why can't we take the subway?"

"Because walking is good exercise. A vampire hunter must be in excellent physical—"

"I'm not—"

"But you were. Remember how we met? You running at me with your garden stake, yelling, 'Die, bloodsucker!'"

She reddened. "That was last year, okay? I don't know why you have to keep bringing it up."

"Because it was so adorable. And Brittany the Vampire Slayer rolls off the tongue much better than Brittany the Former-Vampire-Slayer-Who-Now-Just-Wants-to-Hunt-Bad-Guys-in-General."

"Not 'in general'. Not 'bad guys' either. That sounds so lame. I'm going to join the interracial council and hunt supernaturals who misuse their powers."

"See, now that's what I mean about redefining goals. That's very specific and feasible. However, working for the council is a volunteer position. You need to plan for a long-term, satisfying, *paying* career."

Nosangreal

By Ivan Dorin

If she had begun her death spiral, its completion was years away. She was about seventeen, a little overweight by modern standards, and plain to view at a glance, like the prairie itself. I could see her married and running a farm like her ancestors might have done. She just couldn't be a farmer in Nose Hill Provincial Park, especially by gazing out over the lights of the city at three o'clock in the morning.

"Heritage Park is that way," I said, walking up in front of the bench, then pointing south past the downtown skyscrapers.

"Do I look lost?" she asked.

"Only misplaced," I said. "You just seem like such good farming stock. It would be a shame to waste the look."

"Well, I never was one for being on display."

"Neither were they. Have you seen how the old pioneers looked in pictures?"

She smiled at that. "And where do you belong?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out. In the meantime, I walk around here. I'm a sort of self-appointed, unofficial guardian, I suppose."

"Of what?"

"Not of. From. Not that it's that dangerous, of course. It can take years before a threat gets serious, but it can creep up on you."

She nodded and motioned for me to sit down next to her.

"It's so quiet," she said, "like perhaps everyone in the city has vanished and I don't know it yet. The cars could be driving themselves, the traffic lights changing color automatically, but when I get back everyone could be gone."

It was a strange sort of rapture to hope for, wanting to be the one left behind. "Just don't make a habit of coming here,

especially at night," I said. "I don't want to see you become one of those people."

"Those people?"

"People who gaze into the lights as if there were one person they needed to find, and they could reach into the city and pull out that person by staring long enough. People who lie down in the grass, thinking they can draw strength from the earth. People who talk to the wind, because they have something they need to confess and can't go to church."

"We're natural rivals."

"You and the church?"

She nodded.

"The park isn't any better," I told her. "People may say they love it, that it's beautiful and worth preserving, but coming to a park won't make them treat anyone like they're worth preserving. This place can anesthetize you, suck the life out of you, just as surely as the government, the corporations, the financial system, even sheer force of habit, or our national insect."

"Our national insect?"

"The mosquito."

"I've known a few people like that too," she said.

"The individuals aren't so bad," I told her. "People who go around sucking the life out of other people, they don't last. They gorge themselves to death or get swatted. It's the institutions they serve that advance, that evolve, while the people suffer and die. I heard a radio phone-in not long ago where they seriously discussed putting reflective dust into the atmosphere to blot out the sun. Who would pay people to come up with a scheme like that, and seriously discuss it on public radio? Who could devote their time to creating a country of people so mind-controlled that they're scared to see the sun come up?"

"It's a deeply rooted fear," she said, "the fear of living. Institutions have exploited it for centuries."

"But how? An institution can have hypnotic appeal and many servants, can wield both natural and bureaucratic powers and appear in corporeal or incorporeal form, but it's also vulnerable. It loses much of its power if you refuse to let it into your home, it can be burned by the light of truth and, in the case of this park, it can't cross water. So how does an institution keep people in thrall without being demonized or exposed as a monster? By masquerading as its own enemy, the monstrous individual."

"And you're one of them? One of these mythical monsters?"

"Do I look like one? You tell me. If I were a mythical creature, which one would I be?"

She turned and looked me up and down, taking in my face, my shoes, my clothes, as if for the first time. "Narcissus," she said. "Good looking, graceful, impeccably dressed, alone. I could see you hypnotized by your own reflection."

I laughed out loud at that one.

"Am I far off?" she asked.

"Well, it's hardly very Canadian, is it? To have a reflection is to have an identity, and that's the number one thing Canadians are supposed to lack."

"And yet we have a third of the world's fresh water surfaces," she said, a teasing lilt to her voice. "Strange how we never look down and see ourselves reflected in them."

"Some do, in the end. Some of the favorite Canadian places to commit suicide involve a plunge into water: Niagara Falls, the Lion's Gate Bridge. Seductive, romantic places, where one might go with a lover to enjoy the view, or go without one to fall fatally for oneself at the last moment."

"Calgary's hardly the setting for fatal seduction, is it? No dramatically high bridges, no big lakes, no water more menacing than the drowning pool below the irrigation weir."

"And they got rid of that," I reminded her.

"So here you are, in Nose Hill Park, all flowers and no water, surrounded by what you could become and safe from becoming it. Narcissus turned into a flower in the end. You could still be shaped by what you fear."

"Do you think our fears define us?" I asked.

"They can if we let them."

"And what are you afraid of?"

She shrugged. "Living. Dying. Killing. Myself. The usual."

The lady doth protest too much, I thought. "It's not usual to be that aware."

"I've never been the sort of person that people notice. I've made a career of observing other people, trying to understand them, living vicariously through them."

"Or dying."

She paused and scrutinized my face again. "Is that what you've done?"

"No, I'm a cautionary tale. I came here too many times on my own at night. I try to steer people off the path I took myself. If

A Puddle of Blood

By Silvia Moreno-Garcia

*Six Dismembered Bodies Found in Ciudad Juarez.
Vampire Drug-wars Rage On.*

Domingo reads the headline slowly. Images flash on the video screen of the subway station. Cops. Long shots of the bodies. The images dissolve, showing a young woman holding a can of soda in her hands. She winks at him.

Domingo waits to see if the next news items will expand on the drug-war story. He is fond of yellow journalism. He also likes stories about vampires; they seem exotic. There are no vampires in Mexico City: their kind has been a no-no for the past thirty years, around the time the Federal District became a city-state.

The next story is of a pop-star, the singing sensation of the month, and then there is another ad, this one for a shoulder-bag computer. Domingo sulks, changes the tune on his music player.

He looks at another screen with pictures of blue butterflies fluttering around. Domingo takes a chocolate bar from his pocket and tears the wrapper.

He spends a lot of time in the subway system. He used to sleep in the subway cars when he was a street kid making a living by washing windshields at cross streets. Those days are behind. He has a place to sleep and lately he's been doing some work for a rag-and-bone man, collecting used thermoplastic clothing. He complements his income with other odd jobs. It keeps him well-fed and he has enough money to buy tokens for the public baths once a week.

He bites into the chocolate bar.

A woman wearing a black vinyl jacket walks by him, holding a leash. Her Doberman must be genetically modified. The animal is huge.

He's seen her several times before, riding the subway late at nights, always with the dog. Heavy boots upon the white tiles, bob cut black hair, narrow-faced.

Tonight she moves her face a small fraction, glancing at him. Domingo stuffs the remaining chocolate back in his pocket, takes off his headphones and follows her quickly, squeezing through the doors of the subway car she's boarding.

He sits across from the woman and is able to get a better look at her. She is early twenties, with large eyes that give her an air of innocence which is quickly dispelled by the stern mouth. The woman is cute, in an odd way.

Domingo tries to look at her discreetly, but he must not be discreet enough because she turns and stares at him.

"Hey," he says, smiling. "How are you doing tonight?"

"I'm looking for a friend."

Domingo nods, uncertain.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen," he replies.

"Would you like to be my friend? I can pay you."

Domingo isn't in the habit of prostituting himself. He's done it once or twice when he was in a pinch. There had also been that time with *El Chacal*, but that didn't count because Domingo hadn't wanted to and *El Chacal* had made him anyway, and that's when Domingo left the circle of street kids and the windshield wiping and went to live on his own.

Domingo looks at her. He's seen the woman walk by all those nights before and he's never thought she'd speak to him. He expected her to unleash the dog upon him when he opened his mouth.

He nods. He's never been a lucky guy but he's in luck today.

Her apartment building is squat, short, located just a few blocks from a busy nightclub.

"Hey, you haven't told me your name," he says when they reach the fourth floor and she fishes for her keys.

"Atl," she replies.

The door swings open. The apartment is empty. There is a rug, some cushions on top of it, but no couch, no television and no table. She doesn't even have a calendar on the wall. The apartment has a heavy smell, animal-like, probably courtesy of the dog. Perhaps she keeps more than one pet.

"Do you want tea?" she asks.

Domingo would be better off with pop or a beer, but the girl seems classy and he thinks he ought to go with whatever she prefers.

"Sure," he says.

Atl removes her jacket. Her blouse is pale cream; it shows off her bony shoulders. He follows her into the kitchen as she places the kettle on a burner.

"I'm going to pay you a certain amount, just for coming here. If you agree to stay, I'll double it," she says.

"Listen," Domingo says, rubbing the back of his head, "you don't really need to pay me nothing."

"I do. I'm a *tlahuelpuchi*."

Domingo blinks. "You can't be. That's one of those vampire types, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Mexico City is a vampire-free territory."

"I know. That is why I'm doubling it," she says, scribbling a number on a pad of paper and holding it up for him to see.

Domingo leans against the wall, arms crossed. "Wow."

Atl nods. "I need young blood. You'll do."

"Wait, I mean...I'm not going to turn into a vampire, am I?" He asks because you can never be too sure.

"No." She sounds affronted. "We are born into our condition."

"Cool."

"It won't hurt much. What do you think?"

"I don't know. I mean, do I still get to...you know...sleep with you?"

She lets out a sigh and shakes her head. "No. Don't try anything. *Cualli* will bite your leg off if you do."

The kettle whistles. Atl removes it from the burner and pours hot water into two mugs.

"How do we do this?" Domingo asks.

Atl places tea bags in the mugs and cranes her neck. Her hair has turned to feathers and her hands, when she raises them, are like talons. The effect is disturbing, as though she is wearing a curious costume.

"Don't worry. Won't take long," she says.

Atl is a bird of prey.

The first thing Domingo does with his new-found fortune is buy himself a good meal. Afterwards, he pays for a booth at the Internet cafe, squeezing himself in and clumsily thumbing the computer screen. The guy in the next cubicle is watching porn; the moans of a woman spill into Domingo's narrow space.

V-Link

By Eileen Bell

I love Vlad the Impaler!

The words floated in, a warm spot in Roslyn's mind. It was Gina, with information.

Roslyn pretended to pay attention to Dr. Erickson, who was standing right by her bed. She watched his lips move as Gina's voice crawled around in her head, giving her the up-to-date about the U-Link implant patients. Everybody was getting weaker by the day. Roger and Cassidy were still off the grid. In other words, no good news.

She muttered "uh huh," like she was listening to the doctor, then felt the small warm spark in her brain as she responded to Gina.

Can't talk long, Erickson's here. Who's Vlad?

Original vampire or something. A real bad ass, apparently. But anybody with Impaler in his name couldn't be all good, now could he?

Gina was being held in a university and actually had access to a library, so she could look stuff up. Dead tree technology, but at least it was something.

The rest of them were in hospitals all across the country, with no access to the outside, or to each other. At least, that's what the doctors believed when they shut down the wireless network to disconnect everyone fitted with Version 1.0 of the U-Link implant.

U-Link. Before their surgeries, Roslyn and the rest had been told it would be the next great networking system.

Roslyn touched the IV cannula sprouting from her chest, into which would soon spew the latest chemical stew, and wondered if maybe this time she should have waited for Version 2.0. The one that *didn't* shut down all your internal organs one by one until all you had left was your brain.

Dr. Erickson grabbed her foot and she jumped. Not that it hurt—it didn't, her nerves didn't carry pain messages the way they used to—he had just surprised her. She cut the connection to Gina and glared at him. "What?"

"Are you having difficulty focusing?" He looked anxious. "Maybe another CT scan—"

"No," she snapped. "My brain's not shutting down. I'm ignoring you. I only ever asked for two things, Dr. E. Saying no about the blood, all right, I get that, but no computer? That's BS and you know it."

She almost added that the V-Link—the name Gina had coined when the U-Link patients spontaneously reconnected—wasn't enough anymore. That she missed her old friends, and her mother, and her life. But she clamped her mouth shut before those words slipped out. He didn't need to know about the V-Link. That was *their* little secret.

His expression went from anxious to almost angry. "Those are the rules. You know them as well as I do. Now, pay attention, please. We are going to change your regimen—"

"Again?" she whined, hating the weak sound of it. "Why?"

"Remarkable advances were made at the New Hampshire facility—"

"What advances?" Roger and Cassidy were in New Hampshire.

She clawed at the blankets until Erickson helped her sit upright. "Have you been out of bed today?" he asked.

"No. Tell me what happened in New Hampshire."

"You must exercise." He pointed to the hated walker, the scorch mark visible on the side. "Your muscles are atrophying—"

"Thinner's better," she quipped. When he didn't laugh, she went serious, too. "I'm not taking the chance. Not after Melissa."

"You don't have to go outside. Just up and down the halls."

"But I have to do it during the day, when the physio staff's here. You know that, Dr. E."

She closed her eyes and saw Melissa stepping out through the front door of the hospital like it was happening at this moment and not three months before. The late afternoon sun touching her. Igniting her. Her screaming and screaming as Roslyn fell backwards into the safety of the shadows. And then Roslyn screaming as Melissa finally fell, finally silent, to the sidewalk, and burned to ash. "I'm not doing that again."

"But you have to walk."

She shook her head. "Tell me what happened in New Hampshire."

For a moment she thought he wasn't going to answer her.

"Please?" She let her voice wander up to little girl young, because it worked on him sometimes.

"They removed the implants from two of the patients there," he finally said.

A chill, like a puff of winter, and she pulled the blanket up to her chin before she realized it was fear and not cold. "Successfully?"

"More or less."

The chill trickled over her like ice water. She shuddered. "What does that mean?"

"The good news is, both survived, this time. And it appears that some of their internal organs are regaining viability." He smiled. "We are very hopeful."

"Their hearts?" she asked.

"No. The appendix. But it's a start."

"And the bad news?" There was always bad news.

"There was some loss of brain function—"

She touched the scar that ran along her hairline. "How much?"

"Some cognitive ability, and for some reason, scent recognition." He shook his head, as though that was the real puzzler. Then his eyes slid from hers and settled on the thin blanket covering her belly. "They only lost a few IQ points, though. Nothing to worry about."

"How many's a few?"

"Not many." Erickson's eyes did not leave her midsection. He was lying. "The results were positive enough to warrant phase two. A slight variation on the chemical mixture. And then extraction."

"So, who's your next victim?"

Erickson's face tightened and his eyes swung up to hers.

"Not me," she whispered.

"You don't have a choice."

"But that's not fair!" Roslyn looked around the room as though trying to find something in all that sterile white with which to protect herself. She clicked on the V-Link and thought/screamed 911, 911, 911, as if it would do some good.

"We'll start the next round of chemical therapy tomorrow night," Erickson said. "It's for your own good."

Six Underground

By Michael Lorenson

*"We owe respect to the living;
To the dead, we owe only the truth."
—Voltaire*

At a command from the bailiff, a door slid into the wall with a soft hiss and the jurors filed into the deliberation room. Connor noticed that there were no other exits in the room and that the far wall was solid stone, rough and brown, flaked with black. This room was at the back end of the courthouse, which had been built into the very edge of the underground. Connor imagined that he could feel a kilometer of metal and rock and people pressing down on him from above. After forty years of this life the depth still caused him to panic at times. Unless you were born to it, you never got used to the feeling of living underground.

Overhead lamps flooded the room with soft white light, and a blue glow emanated from the outdoor view displayed on the false window in one wall.

"All right, let's get this vote done with so that we can all go home." The foreman handed out pencils and small slips of blank paper. He hadn't even bothered to wait until all the jurors had taken their seats.

"Why the rush?" Connor asked, taking a seat at the opposite end of the long table from the foreman, his back to the false window. "The trial only started this morning. Shouldn't we discuss the evidence before we vote?" Connor examined the pencil he'd been given. All the pencils on the table were shorter than his thumb and about as sharp, as though they'd had problems before with violence in the deliberation room and weren't taking any chances. Connor wasn't inclined to complain over the lack of

long, pointed bits of wood, but he thought that bolting the table and chairs to the floor was a bit excessive.

The foreman paused in his distribution of writing materials and looked at Connor without raising his head. "Let's vote first. If we're not unanimous, then we can discuss the evidence. Everybody write either guilty or not guilty. No doodles, no knock-knock jokes, no yes or no. When you're done, fold it up and put it in the bowl."

The jurors silently obeyed their instructions and deposited their folded votes into the stainless steel bowl in the middle of the table. It wasn't bolted down but it didn't look extremely heavy. Connor guessed that any past violent confrontations in the deliberation room must not have involved the blunt object or it would have been replaced.

The foreman collected and unfolded the ballots, dealing them like cards, all but one into a single pile. "One guilty, and eleven for acquittal. All right, which one of you is the hold-out?"

Eleven faces turned towards Connor, clued in to his vote by his suggestion that they examine the evidence. He had hoped that he wouldn't be the only one to vote guilty. This would be difficult.

He leaned back in his chair, bringing one ankle up to rest on his other leg. "I voted guilty because I believe that they are guilty. And if we vote again, then I will vote guilty again."

A collective groan filled the room. The juror three seats to his right was the only one who seemed sympathetic, and she was the first to speak. "The prosecution didn't prove their case at all. Their closing arguments just went over the evidence of the beating, they didn't even address any of the defense's claims. You can't tell me that there's no reasonable doubt."

Connor tsked at the woman, but was happy to hear that at least one person was open to discussion. He had heard all their names, but after such a long life he found names difficult to retain. He preferred to name people himself, because the ones he made up for people were more likely to be remembered, and he decided to refer to this one as Mrs. Rational. "The prosecutor was a robot," he said. "Each side thought they had the case in the bag so they agreed to an expedited trial and that meant the government wasn't going to assign a flesh and blood lawyer to the case. I have to say, though, the defense didn't prove their case either. Those boys admitted to beating that girl. There's video evidence of it. We can watch it again if you want." He pointed to the wall behind him, occupied almost entirely by the false window.

The woman's expression soured. "No thanks, once was enough."

The man to her left cleared his throat. He was very large, with no neck. "But she was found, exactly where they left her, dead with clear traces of vampirism in what little blood she had left."

"And some serious drugs, too," said Connor, "but yes, death by blood loss. None of that means that she was a vampire when they beat her."

"No," agreed the other juror. "But if we're not sure, if there's any possibility that she was already dead when they got to her, then we have to let them go free."

"Those boys beat her to death for absolutely no reason," said Connor. "It shouldn't matter whether she was already dead or not."

"The judge disagrees with you," said the foreman. "And so does the law. If she was a vampire when they beat her, then she was already clinically dead and she didn't have the same rights as you and me. If she was a vampire, then they were within their rights to defend themselves."

Connor spun his pencil on the table. It stopped, stubby point facing him. He left it where it lay and crossed his arms across his chest. "So that's what we're deciding, then. Not whether or not those boys beat her, but whether or not this girl was a vampire when they did what they did."

"You got it." The foreman nodded.

Connor wasn't certain if that would make it easier or harder for him to win them over.

"Okay, so what do we know about vampires?"

"Oh God," said the foreman. "We know whatever we know. We know what that expert witness told the court. Weren't you there for that?"

Connor spun the pencil again, this time with more force than he intended, and it skittered over the edge of the table and into his lap. "Of course I was there. I heard the same things all of you heard. I just want to go over it again, see if we can spot any holes."

"The only hole here is the one in your head," said the juror to Connor's left, sounding agitated. "Did any of us really need an expert witness to tell us that vampires are dead, strong, fast, and that they drink blood? Why do you care so much about this girl anyways?"

"Because we're here to do a job and I'm going to do it right. Why *don't* you care about this girl?"

"Because my brother was turned into a vampire. Drove him crazy until he lit himself on fire just to die, said he didn't want

Outwitted

By Sandra Wickham

I wake to pain in my arm and across my chest that makes me want to scream and curl into a ball, but I can't do either. Panic rushes through me as I try to open my eyes. They don't respond.

"It's the drugs," a woman's voice says, close to my ear. "Just relax."

Relax? Why can't I move? The words are only in my head, I'm unable to speak. I'm lying on my back. Was there an accident? I can hear other people moving around me but no one speaks to me again. I feel something pulling me under, the pain or the drugs. The sounds fade.

I'm with my family, in the house my brother, sister and I grew up in. It's spring. Today is warm, sun kissed with the promise of summer.

My sister and I are laughing and playing with our dolls in the backyard, trying to sit them on the swing so we can push them. My Dad and brother are in the driveway working on their bikes, fixing and adjusting, acting like mechanics.

Mom isn't home from work yet, but she'll be back soon and we've planned a family barbecue.

Something pierces my arm and the vision of my family spins away. This time my eyes snap open but I see only a yellowish blur.

"It's awake again." This, a man's voice.

My eyes won't focus and my mind feels trapped in a heavy fog. My senses seem cut off, dulled. I know someone is laying fingers on my arm at the wrist, but their touch is cold.

"We can't keep her like this." It's the woman from before.

There's a loud click, then a filtered voice fills the room. "I don't need to remind you how important this is. Keep it under until our colleagues arrive." There's another click.

Keep me under? I fight to move any part of my body, anything at all, but it's useless.

"We've taken as much blood as we can," says the man close to me.

Click.

"Then we wait."

Click.

My blood? Is there something wrong with my blood? Sounds and feelings slip away from me once more.

I'm in the cafeteria, eating an overflowing sandwich with one hand, holding a highlighter over a text book with the other. Lettuce falls onto the book and I set the sandwich down to pick it off. I look up and see a male student crossing the room. He catches me staring and I quickly look down at my text. It's too late, he's coming my way. I know I'm blushing, I can feel the heat in my face. Why is he making me feel this way? I've never even seen him before. He's at my table so I have to look up.

"Hi," he says. "This seat taken?" I shake my head and he sits down, throwing his backpack on the chair next to him. He holds his hand out across my book. "I'm Tom."

I take his hand and swallow the last bit of food in my mouth. "I'm Sarah."

"Nice to meet you, Sarah."

Before we know it, we've both missed classes and have talked non-stop for nearly three hours. After exchanging phone numbers and email addresses, we agree to get together again soon. It seems corny, but in my gut I know this could be the beginning of something amazing.

This time it's my dry, swollen throat that brings me back. I feel I'll choke if I don't get something to drink. I cough, and then realize I've made a sound. "Water, please," I manage to say. I don't know if anyone is around me to hear. I open my eyes, but my vision is still blurred. "Hello?"

I can't move my head and my heart clenches. Am I paralyzed? Maybe I'm dying. Someone lifts my head and places something against my lips. My vision goes from blurry yellow to blobs of white and blue. I can make out the shape of my own body and an arm by my face as I feel water pass into my mouth. It hurts to swallow, but I take in all I can. It doesn't seem to help the thirst. My head is lowered back down.

"This will all be over soon," the woman whispers close to my ear. "They're filing to their seats. Then this whole thing can be finished."

Who? Finished, how? I cough again. "Where am I? Where's my husband?"

"It's delusional." The man's voice is close and assertive. "It'll be pointless if it's incoherent the whole time."

I spiral downwards again.

We're on the beach at sunset, Tom, Vanessa and me. It's like something out of a movie, Vanessa giggling with delight as her father chases her along the water's edge. I have our dinner laid out on a blanket, the one I was so excited about finding online. Grinning, I take video of my husband and beautiful daughter with my phone.

Click.

"Then revive it so it can speak," the voice commands.

"But sir—"

"It's drained of blood and restrained, what's it going to do? We need it to speak."

Click.

More needles poke me and gradually I can feel my body again. I feel weak, but my mind is clearing.

I can smell them. The woman is young, healthy. The man is older and has a taste for wine and illegal cigars. I can hear their hearts beating, his, a regular rhythm, hers faster. She's nervous. The last of the drug-induced confusion dissipates like an extinguished candlewick.

No! My entire being screams it again and again. No, I want to go back. I *need* to go back. Let me stay with Tom and Vanessa. A tear threatens to slide from my eye. The pain in my heart is greater than anything they could inflict on my body. I haven't cried in many decades.

At first I'd cried every day, even after seeking out and killing the one who changed me. It didn't ease the pain of having to leave my family. If I'd stayed close, I would've killed them too. They smelled too enticing, as though my love for them sweetened my desire for their blood. They thought I was dead, killed by the one who attacked me. At least, for them, there'd been closure.

I continued to exist in utter loneliness, long after my grandchildren's children would have died. I found no solace in finding others of my kind; around them, my instincts were like those of a wild animal—kill or be killed.

I hear the click again. Whoever is giving the orders is tucked away somewhere safe, not in the room with me. "Welcome, Doctors, Honorable Officiates and Hunters. We will now begin."

Click.

I know that voice. He is the reason the others are gone. For years he has organized those who hunt and kill us, campaigning

Toothless

By Peter Sellers

Hot. Sunny. No chance of rain even though it always felt like I was walking through a fish tank. It was the same forecast as yesterday. For that matter, it would be the same for tomorrow. They tell me that weathermen used to get it wrong more often than not. Now they're always bang on. Everyone hates people who are right all the time.

I was working days for the third week running. I hated days. Every cop did. Only a few more shifts, though, and then the switch to blessed nights, with temperatures that we'd all conned ourselves into believing were cool.

There were still a few people around who remembered what it was like before the meltdown. Most of them worked in the suicide clinics. If you were feeling down you went in and they'd talk about how it was and show you photographs, or maybe a film. If you were lucky you got slides—those had the best resolution. After seeing that presentation, people went out and threw themselves off bridges. A lot of people I used to know had killed themselves but, bad as things were, I figured what came after just might be worse.

I'd even heard that once upon a time cities used to send out tanker trucks full of water to wash down the roads. Such profligacy made me shake my head. They tell me it isn't like this in Scandinavia. But I haven't seen for myself, and no one I know can afford the flight either.

When I got off shift I headed to Alan's place. There were eight of us staying there this time. Couch surfing was a way of life for most people these days. The government turned on the air conditioning by zones, one week at a time. So every Sunday morning you saw people clutching toothbrushes and sweat-stained pillows and moving from an apartment in one zone to an apartment in

another. Most people had worked out a sharing arrangement among a group large enough to make sure you could sleep with air every day, but not too large so as to become unwieldy. Of course, you had to have a couple of spares so you could kick someone out if he became too obnoxious or smelly.

Police work was not much about deduction and forensics and solving baffling crimes anymore. Mostly, we protected property: water, zinc and Vitamin D. Zinc was the only thing that really worked to keep the sun from turning you into a walking tumor. Needless to say, it got expensive and that made it a popular item for theft and lucrative for black market sales.

The meltdown had hit everybody hard. But to the vampires, it was like a crucifix to the nuts. It took the night away from them. Science is not my strong suit, so I may have got some of this wrong, but here's how I understand it: When the ozone burned up, the radiation that hit the earth pervaded everything. Turns out it wasn't sunlight that made vampires fall apart like lepers on fast forward, it was the radiation, and all of a sudden radiation was everywhere. Even at night, vampires were no longer safe. The radiation after dark wasn't strong enough to kill them but it sure made them sick. They went from invincible to weak, ill and tired most of the time. That was no different from the rest of us, of course, but for them it was one hell of a come down. They went from social paragons to pariahs overnight. Needless to say, this decline stripped them of their charisma. There's nothing charming about an emaciated vampire bent over and coughing up blood in an alley.

The effect of radiation combined with the fact that the quality of blood was poor. With depleted D levels, human blood was not as nutritious as it had once been and vampires began to suffer from malnourishment. With their exotic appeal gone, there wasn't much left. Vampires weren't used to working for a living and resented having to do it, kind of like exiled royalty. They tended to take a lot of sick time, which made employers hesitate hiring them. Some vampires took night jobs, like driving cab and waiting tables. A lot of them, though, became hookers, drug mules, petty thieves—anything to find the money to afford the high-priced artificial plasma that, like margarine, was not the original but would do in a pinch. From a cop's standpoint it was a good thing because there were a lot of snitches around, too. A desperate vampire would sell out anybody for a pint.

For those of us who'd spent years exposed to microwaves, phones and mp3 players, the levels weren't high enough to kill quickly. But during the day, any kind of skin exposure brought up blisters in minutes and tumors shortly after that. It didn't take many of those episodes to add up to bad news.

It was one of those low rent blood fiends that we found that morning. He was tucked away in a basement that we'd been told was a warehouse for stolen water, which turned out to be untrue. But, in scouting around, Kelly found the body in a dim corner.

"I've got something you have to see," he said.

It was a dead vampire. Nothing unusual there. We found them all the time, OD'd on hits of fake plasma cut with cleaning products, melted candle wax or radiator fluid. What made this one different was the blood around its mouth. With vampires, there's always some, but this puppy looked like he'd ripped into a full unit of O Positive. "Whose blood is that?"

Kelly reached down and pulled back the upper lip. The absence struck me immediately. "Well, well," I said. The usual startling whiteness was missing. The vampire's fangs were gone, probably ripped out by the roots with a pair of pliers.

"Nasty," I said. "What do you think happened? Bad trick?"

"Gambling debt?" Kelly said.

"In-law trouble?"

We both laughed.

Maybe someone had taken the fangs and made a necklace like people did with shark teeth. Neither of us cared. All we had to do was drag the corpse into the sunshine and in a few minutes the problem would disappear.

But there was something that nagged at me; no sign of shoot-up gear. When we flipped the body over, just in case he'd fallen on his kit, we saw that his head had been beaten in. That was something new.

Two days later, we found another one. Head bashed in and teeth ripped out. Even though cops aren't called upon to do much detection anymore, by the time the fourth toothless vampire turned up I was starting to sense a pattern.

We filed reports, but nobody cared about dead vampires. But the incidents nagged at me; what was the defanging about? I ruled out the obvious right away: Revenge for a child or loved-one bitten and turned. Revenge for one of the blood infections vampires so often spread, despite all the hype about safe biting. Neither felt right.

Symbiosis

By David Beynon

Damp gravel crunched beneath the soles of a shuffling set of ragged New Balance running shoes. The upturned collar of his denim jacket did nothing to keep the constant drizzle from crawling down his neck, biting him with an unaccustomed chill.

There was a time when his eyes would have burned in this near darkness with unparalleled clarity. Not now. Now he squinted like a feeble myopic old wretch, struggling to focus on his hands eighteen inches from his face.

They were ghastly, skeletal things, his hands. Gaunt and pallid, the skin hanging from his long, brittle fingers glistening in the drizzle like the belly of a frog. He tried to steady them, but they trembled and with each tremble, each stuttering tremor, he could feel his life slipping away.

Starvation.

Oh, he'd known hunger. Many times. Hunger and Ray were age old acquaintances. He well knew the gnawing, persistent ache, the yearning in his jaw, the burning of his throat, the coiled tension in the pit of his stomach. These he knew well and could deal with.

But starvation... Starving was another beast entirely.

Ray touched his face, his fingertips navigating an alien landscape. His eyes were sunken into pits with harsh, sharp edges. His cheekbones were a pair of mountains that descended into valleys etched deep into the sides of his face. Beneath cracked lips, he could feel receding gums set against a wall of loosening teeth.

This can't be how it ends.

Ray looked up. To his left stood a wooden post crowned by a white mailbox. Stenciled in black paint: "A. and B. W. Smith".

He peered down the driveway into inky blackness. He caught a pang of something down that darkened drive that was both

compelling and forbidding. He breathed deeply through his nose, exhaled a staccato whimper and made a decision.

At the end of the driveway stood a neat, well cared for house with white siding and black trim. Ray's gaze drifted to the porch steps, then higher to the unadorned front door. He tilted his head and sniffed the night air.

No dogs, he thought, and then looked above the door. No sentry lights, either.

Expending a staggering amount of effort, Ray climbed the three steps onto the covered front porch. He began to run his fingers through his tangled hair, abandoning the effort when he encountered hopeless tangles.

Gaunt, bony knuckles rapped against the wooden door.

He heard a host of sounds from within the house: A rustling, the snap of newsprint being briskly folded, the scrape of a chair against the floor. There were footfalls beyond the door, then a click; the porch light sprung to life. Ray winced, turning his face away from the dim illumination.

Beyond the door, Ray heard a man clear his throat. A deadbolt shifted and the doorknob turned.

The man framed in the doorway looked Ray up and down, then opened the door completely. "You don't look too well," he said. "In fact, no offence, you look like shit. What can I do for you tonight?"

Ray sniffed, rubbed his face, and then spoke in a raspy voice. "I guess...I guess I'm here to beg."

The man closed his eyes and gave his head a gentle shake. He raised his left hand. Ray saw that he held a long, metal flashlight.

"Two things, friend," the man said in a voice sounding older than he looked. "First—I'm not going to need this, am I?" He inclined his head toward the flashlight.

Ray shook his head, his eyes darting from the flashlight to the man's face. "No... No, sir."

"Good. I am really, really glad to hear that. Second—I'll have no one beg on my doorstep. If you're so inclined, I'll invite you in out of the cold. Then we can talk about what you need."

Ray hesitated. He looked down at the threshold, then back at the man.

"My name is Barry, by the way," he said, extending his right hand. Ray, dumbstruck, shook it. "I know what you are, but I don't know *who* you are. How about you come in so we can both find out?"

Ray stepped through the door. As his foot lighted on the rubber "Welcome" mat, he noticed that Barry's gaze had drifted to Ray's filthy shoes.

"Can you do me a favor and slip your shoes off by the door?" Barry said. "They're looking a bit muddy."

Ray kicked off his runners, regarded his equally dirty socks and peeled them off, too. Barry held out his hand.

"Pass me your jacket. I'll hang it here to dry."

Ray snaked out of the soaked denim. Barry's eyes registered the line of ribs beneath the white cotton of Ray's threadbare t-shirt; they looked like a strip of corrugated roofing. He grimaced at the emaciated state of his guest's arms, but, carefully keeping his voice neutral, simply tilted his head and said, "Kitchen's this way. It's warmer in there."

Ray followed his host along a short hallway. Hanging along the wall were framed photographs. One showed a teenage girl holding a Holstein cow by a lead, a ribbon affixed to the halter. Another photo showed a much younger-looking Barry standing next to a massive tractor. Yet another showed Barry, the girl and an older woman, presumably his wife. All smiles. All looking carefree.

Ray looked ahead. Barry's shoulders were slumped. His gait was that of a broken old man. He glanced back at the photo. The man who had invited him in was a washed-out shadow of the happy family man, the proud tractor owner. The photos were clearly pre-Pandemic.

The Pandemic had changed everything for everyone. Ray could hardly believe it had been less than two years since humanity was devastated by the most virulent flu the species had ever encountered. The death toll was staggering. The planet reeled, mourned, and then took precautions for the future.

Thermal imaging began in a nightclub in Singapore. Cameras mounted at the entrance measured body temperature in order to keep out patrons running a fever. Soon, Public Thermal Imaging was installed in airports, shopping malls, everywhere.

A security person routinely scanning a line up at a Frankfurt nightclub pulled a woman out of the line. He had noticed that she was a full eleven degrees centigrade below normal. As she attempted to flee, she was apprehended, held until morning when someone from public health could assess her. During the night, she paced the cell, rattling the bars and begging to be released, her agitation mounting with each passing hour. As the first rays of daylight spilled through the barred windows, she momentarily

Forest-Bathing

By Heather Clitheroe

The rule was that the person who shit in the bucket had to empty it. The piss could collect in the bucket, but once somebody pinched off a loaf, it had to be dumped. That was the rule. Otherwise the stench would go from bad to worse, and it was already pretty disgusting. Everybody was holding it as long as they could, hoping that somebody else would get to the bucket first and carry it out to the gutter behind the embassy wall and dump it down the drain. It was easier, so much easier, to empty the bucket if it was your own shit in there. If it splashed on your shoes, well, at least it was yours. The kids never had to empty the bucket, but they held it too—you could see them jumping from one foot to another, jiggling their legs and dancing around. Nobody liked using the bucket. But there wasn't enough water. There hadn't been any water pressure for days, and nobody was really certain if it was about to crap out—oh, the pun—altogether, and since the electricity was off, they expected the water would be gone soon, too. They had to save what they had.

Jake hated the bucket. There were nineteen of them camped out in the lobby, and another fifteen in the reception area, where they could look out the windows at the green grass and the gardens that lay within the long, white walls and the iron fence. The gates were closed. Nobody was coming or going. They didn't go outside. Too dangerous; the virus had gone airborne, but nobody knew *how* airborne, and the trips to pour out the bucket were accomplished as quickly as possible, with mask and gloves. That was the other reason to hold it for as long as you could—to make as few trips outside as possible. If you didn't shit in the bucket, you didn't have to go outside. Better to stay inside, just in case. It felt safer inside, away from the sky and the quiet, and

the virus that hung in the air, invisible and deadly. It was too late to go anywhere else. And anyway, there was nowhere left to go.

Traffic had vanished. The streets were silent, in a way Jake had never seen—not even early in the morning. The embassy was closed, the phones were silent, and all they could do was sit and watch the news in the employee lunchroom. The news broadcasts were terse, the official messages nothing more than instructions. *Stay indoors. Go to quarantine centers if you show symptoms. Watch for fever, headache, and bloody discharge from eyes, nose, or mouth, in urine or feces. Isolate victims. Place bodies in a cool, dark room and wait for collection.*

The stateside casts were worse. More ominous. Rioting, looting. Images of people sitting in quarantine tents and clinics, blood running down their faces, more talk of the spread of the hemorrhagic fever and less of the survival rates; a person wouldn't live long once they'd contracted it. Once *it* started. There was discussion about that, in the lunchroom, but when the power went out the ambassador's assistant told them that they had to conserve the diesel fuel for the generators, so they could only watch television for a couple of hours at night, after the kids had fallen into an exhausted stupor. The ambassador was already dead.

When it had seemed that the excrement was hitting the ventilation system—Jake's expression, not really a pun, but had seemed funny at the time—he'd left his apartment and headed for the embassy. He thought he'd catch one of the last flights out, because he'd heard that they were evacuating Americans. Taking them to a hospital ship sitting out in the Sea of Japan, or to one of the carriers. Taking them home. The airports and train stations were closed and commercial traffic grounded. The only chance he had of making it home, before the bug came to Tokyo, was the embassy. But by the time he'd made it inside the gates, it was too late. They told him to sit and wait. Then martial law was declared by the prefecture, and a curfew. He couldn't leave if he'd wanted to. He hunkered down in the lobby and, one by one, the people inside got sick. Then they died. He helped wrap the dead in plastic and carried corpses down to the basement. He soon figured out that nobody was coming to pick up the bodies. Transports had stopped. You couldn't call for help—hospitals weren't answering phones; maybe nobody was left to answer the phones. So they continued to take the bodies down to the

basement, and then close the door. Jake didn't mind carrying them. When the power went out and took the water pressure and the flush toilets with it, hauling bodies became preferable to emptying the shit bucket.

Just how many people were dead? How many people were sitting in tenements with *obasan* wrapped in a quilt and left in the stairwell? How many *gaijin* were freaking out in neighborhoods where nobody else could speak English? Jake didn't know. Nobody really knew. What they said on TV wasn't necessarily the truth, and the main networks were down, only the emergency station broadcasting. He couldn't get to Twitter. He couldn't email. Couldn't Skype out to find out what was really going on. Like the others trapped in the embassy, he sat and waited. Waited because it was somehow better to wait inside, with people who knew where you were from and why you wanted to go back there.

But the talk:

We're not getting out of here.

The radio is dead.

Not dead, nobody's broadcasting.

Same thing.

It's all ending.

What's ending?

Everything.

The world.

All of us.

We're all going to die.

Just like that. The world, ending. With a whimper instead of a bang.

Jake carried the bucket to the door, opened the door, walked outside down the cement path and carried the bucket to the gutter. He poured the contents down the sewer drain, stood and looked around. The gates were still closed but not locked, though the guards were long dead. The sky was overcast, the color of an old bruise. The world was silent and felt damp. He stood for a moment, listening to the peculiar silence that hung heavy over the gardens. Tokyo was dying. Dead, really. The embassy was a mausoleum. *We're all going to get it. We're all going to die.* There was food enough and bottled water. The paranoia of the embassy staff—the great fear of terrorism—had left a larder well-stocked

The Deal

By Erika Holt

"Thanks for springing me." Tau slid the passenger seat in Linh's Hyundai Accent back and reclined with a jerk as they screeched out of the alley across the street from the Foothills Hospital.

"Here, put these on." Linh tossed him a bag of clothes. Naked, he'd draw attention. Especially with a bandaged, seeping wound on his upper thigh, where he'd been bitten.

"They tried to knock me out with morphine." Tau pulled a pair of shorts over his bandage, and then scrubbed his fingers through his woolly hair, trying to hold it together. "Felt a bit stoned, but that was it. Lucky for us though, eh? What would you've done if I was out?"

He didn't give her time to say she would've used a wheelchair or gurney, dragged him if necessary, all 104 kilograms, 190-some centimeters. They had a deal, and he would do the same for her.

"Guess they don't make allowances for experienced livers," he continued, rubbing his wrists where the restraints had chafed. He laughed, raw and forced, unlike his usual easy chuckle.

Of course, there were bound to be changes. Perhaps this was just the first.

"Okay, dude. You're free. Can we just talk about something pleasant?"

Linh didn't want to think about what would've happened if she hadn't found him in time. If the Containment Squad had transferred him to Zir Corp's lab where infectees, "Toxics," were kept in morgue drawers, the conscious ones thrashing against metal for twenty-four hours until their transformation, and then thrashing all the more when they realized they were trapped, would serve as specimens for experimentation, existing in some in-between state, unable to die, always ravenous. Still able to suffer.

No, Linh didn't want to think about this, or that her time with her best friend—safe time—was coming to an end. She glanced at the dash clock. 6:06 a.m. His toe-tag said he'd been infected around 11:00 p.m. Seventeen hours left. Max.

Linh clicked on the CD player. Heavy bass cut by angry, operatic wailing erupted from the speakers. Chaos Monkey, one of her and Tau's favorites. Too much. She pressed another button and the lighter strains of the Ambrosiaks took over. Good old-fashioned road-trip music. Better.

Nondescript office buildings passed in a blur and more cars appeared on the roads, mostly two-seater electric models. Linh's Accent was old by comparison, her mechanical skill and stockpile of parts allowing her to squeeze extra life out of the relic now clocking in at over 240,000 kilometers. Thankfully there were still a few other big gas guzzlers out there, so they wouldn't stand out too much. Anyway, "Midnight Gray" was the sort of color people forgot instantly.

Tau stretched to reach for a vodka Chill from the back seat cooler, in its usual place and stocked with Pomegranate Prodigy, his usual flavor. The least she could do was ensure he got one last, good buzz. A sharp pop as he opened the can followed by an eruption of fuchsia foam. Nothing the charcoal, fabric seats hadn't absorbed before.

"Shit shit shit!" then his mouth was over the hole, sucking down liquid.

Linh giggled. Pretty soon they were both laughing. Tau snorted Chill out his nose, causing fresh bouts of hysterics, even though it wasn't that funny. Sometimes there were other reasons to laugh. Like when you'd kidnapped an infected friend and were fleeing Calgary, hoping to avoid Containment Squads long enough to kill your best friend proper, and deliver his ashes to his Aunt Lesedi in Arborg, Manitoba. It turned out there was something insanely comical about this.

After a few, heady minutes joy evaporated and they both went quiet. Tau crunched the can flat and grabbed another. He offered Linh a sip and she took it, though she didn't like Chill. Had she thought of herself during last night's frenzied preparations, she would've brought a Coke bottle filled with Shiraz.

"You look hot, by the way," Tau said. "Never thought I'd see you in pastel flowers."

He grabbed her knee before she swatted him away.

He was always like that. Flirty. Not that anything had ever happened. It wasn't like that between them. He *claimed* he was bi, but that was only because he once banged some electrofunk slut when messed on crash. But he'd never had a relationship with a woman and out at clubs and parties Linh saw his gaze pulled exclusively towards men. Extremely slender, blond-haired men with multiple piercings usually, who at some point or other he proclaimed to love, attempted to date, and cried to Linh about after. He never chose a woman, only bad, blond boys who broke his tender heart.

But, that was okay; kept things between them less complicated.

"Wearing dirty hospital laundry is not my idea of 'hot,'" Linh said. "There's a blood stain—"

Blood.

She changed the subject. "Can you believe it actually worked? I mean, do I look like a nurse?" She twirled a finger in the long, blue hair of her dangling mohawk and smirked. "The only one who confronted me was some ancient janitor. Told him I was from the Rockyview, covering someone's shift. Ha!"

But of course it worked. No one wanted to go *near* Toxics, let alone *help* them. Guards were unnecessary. Left unsaid were thoughts of what would happen to the janitor if the Containment Squad found out.

"That's my girl." Tau grabbed her pale hand on the steering wheel and enclosed it with his much darker, much larger hand, causing the car to swerve momentarily. "I never had a doubt you'd pull it off, if it came down to it."

Intense camaraderie flared then faded out. Again, silence.

When they'd made plans for what to do if one of them ever got infected, she'd never thought it would happen. Just one of those silly, late-night discussions you have while high. The odd Toxic was around, of course, sneaking into seedy after-hours clubs or costume raves, but avoiding one wasn't difficult. Just don't go to *those* parts of town. Don't associate with people with the telltale pale, starved look; the perfect, pointy-white smile. And if you felt an irresistible pull, *run like hell*. Easy. But Tau must've gone. Why?

Those weren't his types of places. Of course, he *had* been with Chen, and Chen was bad-ass. Not even the fact that it'd been Chen who called to say Tau had been hospitalized, and his attacker beaten to death by a mob, could raise her opinion of him. It was Chen who'd once dragged an intoxicated Tau to a scarification shop and convinced him to get a unicorn outline burned onto the

Homo Sanguinus

By Ryan T. McFadden

The walls of the army cargo truck vibrated under the impact of thrown bottles and rocks. The mob hurled insults in a language Remmy didn't recognize, maybe a Balkan language, and he closed his eyes, wishing that he could just wake up back in the compound. He didn't like encountering the survivors. These accidents brought out the worst in Homo sapiens—looting, raping, and murder. And yet they feared him and his kind.

It will be dark soon, his internal voice taunted him.

The human soldiers in the truck fidgeted with their automatic rifles, faces hidden behind gasmasks. Remmy wasn't sure if their nervousness was from the angry mob or from sitting so close to him—a Homo Sanguinus.

Remmy's Handler, a man named Okami, checked his timepiece, then startled as a particularly large projectile dented the metal wall near his head.

"It's going to be dark soon, isn't it?" Remmy asked.

"I'll take care of it." Okami's voice filtered through his gasmask. He stumbled along the hanging hand straps to the back and glanced out the reinforced tailgate window into the wake of locals, most not wearing environmental suits.

"We've run out of time, Corporal," Okami said, voice muffled from the mask. "Fire a warning shot above their heads."

"Sir?"

"We're late. Does that mean anything to you?"

The soldier glanced back at Remmy, then nodded.

Remmy's stomach coiled painfully but not because he wasn't wearing a gas mask to filter the heavy concentration of chlorine or phosgenes. His last infusion had been two days ago and already his hands was so tight that his fingers curled into claws.

Okami unlatched the window and the soldier took his position. He fired a quick burst along the horizon. The crowd fell back, momentarily.

"Jesus," Okami muttered. "I said *over* their heads."

"Sir—"

As Okami fought to fasten the window, a flaming bottle sailed past him and exploded on the metal floor, spraying liquid flames across the hold.

A soldier yanked one of the fire extinguishers from its bracket but fire roared up his leg and he dropped the cylinder. The truck jolted, gears grated. It slammed to a sudden stop and Remmy pitched forward. Another flaming cocktail burst against the back window. The fire spread, black, oily smoke pouring up the walls. The soldiers would be suffocated within moments.

The truck rocked. *They're going to tip us*, Remmy realized. He wanted to hide, to curl into a little ball and tuck himself away. Even as the flames burned hotter, he was paralyzed with fear; beyond the flames were the locals and beyond them the deepening night.

Okami threw open the tailgate. The soldiers dove from the truck into a wall of people. The crowd boiled over them with tire irons, two-by-fours, axes. Okami, too close to the edge, was dragged under. Brief machine-gun fire colored the night sky but that only emboldened the crowd.

Remmy huddled at the front of the cargo hold, preferring to face the fire than the mob. The black smoke hid him. And while he didn't need to breathe, the flames would soon cook him. He tried to peer through the smoke, hoping that Okami had escaped and taken control of the situation, because that had always been Okami's job.

He's dead. So are the soldiers. Only we're left now, his inner voice said.

Even if he got past the mob, he had nowhere to go. He'd be lost in the dark. *The dark*. He had never been alone and never without his Handlers. He wondered if perhaps burning here was a better alternative.

You're not going to die here. Run! Run!

Before he could reconsider, he ran and leapt from the tailgate, sailing twenty meters past the front ranks of faces bearing startled looks. Then he was running, fear pushing him faster than he had thought possible. Their surprise was temporary and they gave pursuit.

Remmy ran through petrified trees twisted upon themselves like broken skeletons. Flashlight beams bobbed around him. He didn't know if the pounding in his ears was from fear or from his hunger. Even when he lost sight of them, he kept running despite wanting to hunker down in a crater and wait for the Handlers to find him. Remmy stumbled onto a roadway that was no more than two hardened ruts. His stomach contracted with such intensity that he collapsed. He beat his hands on the ground and screamed at the sky because he knew he wouldn't survive the night.

A sound broke through the pounding in his head. A truck.

He stood, turned into the headlights of a pickup.

The front bumper folded around him, launched him flying and he landed with a crunch then tumbled along the hardpan. He managed to raise his head and stare into the lights. A door opened and Remmy realized that the humans had caught him.

Then nothing.

He wakened to the smell of chlorine-laced lavender—not a wholly unpleasant scent. He thought he was back in the compound because that's where he woke every day. The Handlers liked to keep things predictable. And for a brief moment, he felt calm. Then memories hit him like a spike to the eye: the headlights, the crack of impact, flying through the air.

Military hospital? Impossible. The bedroom was decorated in soft purples and violets, an over-stuffed duvet and frilly pillows piled high. Candles burned on a wooden nightstand adorned with porcelain and ceramic trinkets. Not a hospital—a house.

Then he remembered screaming into the night, his body wracked with spasms as it tightened upon itself. Remmy inspected his hands. His nails were long and the skin a pasty white. Normal. Someone had given him an infusion.

He pulled back the covers and winced. Thick, white bandaging cocooned his midsection. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, his feet registering the cold of the worn floor boards. The floor vibrated, perhaps from a generator hidden somewhere in the house.

Remmy's overalls had been replaced with tattered track pants. He inspected the faded pictures on the walls, and then quickly sorted through a dresser full of sweaters and pull-overs. He glanced out a greasy, double-hung window. He was on the second floor of a farm house overlooking wilted fields that a week ago would've held thick stalks of corn.

Out with the Old

By William Meikle

From the journal of John Sharpe—April 3rd 2062

Although we had manned the barricade all winter, this was the first day I felt tense and on edge, the first day I really *believed* that danger might be imminent. There was something in the air that spoke of a possibility of spring. Not that anyone would notice much. We've been under the same grey cloud for two years and more now, and there hasn't been a sign of any sun in all that time. All of us *hope* that this year things will be different, that this year will see us turn the corner. None speak of it though, for that might jinx the thing entirely.

There was also something else with us this morning besides hope. Bill Davis actually cracked a smile when the light changed from a murky gray to a slightly less murky gray, and Harper Lodge sang "The Spring's a Coming", so off-key that we *all* laughed. The jollity had a forced note to it, though. You don't come through a winter like this one without it affecting you. All of us have been touched by standing too close to cold death. We've had thirty-five bodies to burn out back of Mifflin's store, and I know I'm not the only one who's laid awake at night thinking about their dead eyes.

I haven't been doing much writing. Not doing much of anything besides dying slowly and watching this old town fade away.

We're down to fifty-five souls, sinking fast. We won't make it through another winter. We all know it, but nobody will speak of it, a huge elephant in every room. Actually, an elephant wouldn't be a bad thing. At least we could eat it. The last of the deer meat went this week, and we'll be lucky to see any more. Grass doesn't grow real well under this cloud, and the wild animals aren't any better off than we are.

There's not been fuel for automobiles or tractors for three months now, and nobody's volunteering for a trip to Edmonton—the last four we sent never came back. I'm guessing it's the same all over.

Weren't any one thing that caused the world to go to shit so fast...just a lot of things at once: war, warming, pollution, and too many folks chasing too little water. That, and the weather deciding to throw everything at us all at once for five years in a row, and we're left where we are now—no infrastructure, no food, and damned little hope.

A fine start to spring!

The morning's brief flirtation with a lift in the gloom soon faded as the clouds fell down from the Rockies, slate gray and flat like a giant tombstone just over our heads, getting ever darker as the sun went behind the mountains. I was just starting to look forward to the thin gruel that would pass for supper when Harper cocked his rifle.

"We got company," he said.

Suddenly the day felt a lot colder.

The three of us stood at the barricade watching a vehicle close in on us along the highway, the headlights too bright in the gathering dark.

I was thinking how unlucky I am. I'd been there on the road the last time too, when the three bikers came along shooting and hollering. I'd stood alongside Frank Brookes when he took a shot in the chest and died gurgling at my feet as I pumped round after round into the bikers, and I'd helped burn the bodies later that day.

I never want to smell flesh burning like that again.

Maybe I'm afraid I might start salivating. Ha! Morbid humor.

Anyway, there's not much chance of a repeat of that gunfight. We're down to twelve rounds between the lot of us, and we really should be keeping them for hunting game this coming summer. They might be all that stand between us and starvation.

All those thoughts were going through my mind as the vehicle approached. Whoever was driving, they didn't seem to be in a hurry. It was a pickup truck, sleek, black and cleaner than anything I'd seen for years now. It could have come straight from a showroom. It came to a stop ten yards from the barricade and when the driver cut the engine I heard warm metal *ping* as it cooled rapidly. The door of the pickup opened.

"Let's see your hands," Harper shouted, his voice high and whiny with fear. "Right fucking now!"

A pair of pale hands rose above the door. There was no sign of a weapon. Bill Davis covered me as I walked up to the pickup, knees like jelly and a stone brick in the pit of my stomach.

As I approached, the door opened further and a tall man stepped out. He showed me his palms, which looked almost white in the gathering gloom. When he looked into my eyes my stomach turned to ice, and I was sore tempted to just drill him there and then.

It was something in those eyes that did it. They reminded me of a time before the darkness, and a bar fight in Boston with a man who didn't care how hard you hit him, a man who just liked to fight. This newcomer gave off the same aura, and that was trouble I didn't want to know.

He smiled, and that put paid to any idea I might have of shooting him.

"Hello," he said softly. "As you can see, I'm not armed. I'm here with a proposition."

Harper was having none of it. "You can take your proposition and shove it where the sun don't shine."

He'd come up to my side and aimed his shotgun straight at the newcomer's nose. If the stranger was intimidated, he didn't show it. Ignoring Harper's gun completely, he stepped back and patted the tailgate of the pickup.

"You'll want to see what's in here," he said.

And he was right. He drew back a tarp and showed us what he had under there. When I stepped forward I did indeed start to salivate.

The stranger...he said his name is Josh Prentice...brought us enough tinned food, liquor and smokes to see us through a month at least.

We've just had a town meeting. He's promised to share it all, if we let him stay.

Mine was the only dissenting vote.

From the journal of John Sharpe—June 12th 2062

I still haven't taken to Prentice, but I can't deny he's made a difference. Three times now he's gone out in that big pickup of his, and three times he's come back with supplies—less each time, but still enough to keep this town on a borderline subsistence.

It's better than dying, that's for sure.

And he's certainly been putting in the work up at the Avery place. Nobody's lived in that big house for three years and more—

Chelsea Mourning

By David Tocher

Stooping low in the darkness, Chelsea Mills clutched her bleeding palm and peered at the Montreal ruins through the grimy window of an abandoned pub.

Thick dust clouds and debris smudged the sky, and Chelsea thought it'd probably been months since any living thing had seen sunlight. Montreal had become a disemboweled corpse, stone and steel guts scattered amongst the bones of its streets and avenues. Skyscrapers and cathedrals no longer blocking the view, the landscape offered her a panorama of the distant St. Lawrence River, a rippling expanse of black, swirling with cross currents.

Chelsea listened to the wind, high and keening, as it rushed through the crumbled framework of buildings, spinning eddies of ash and debris into the air. She also heard the voices of *the others*. Fleeting words. Sentence fragments. A mostly incoherent drone.

Since childhood, she'd called them *think-voices*. Hearing them now, Chelsea knew she wasn't the only person above ground; there were others nearby. Those disembodied whispers kept her pinned inside the dark building, unwilling to show herself. Of this earth, but not human—that was how the think-voices *felt* against her mind.

As the pain in her palm dulled from searing to a bitter throb, she considered the think-voices—how they seemed like one thing, but were really another. That reminded her of something from childhood: She'd dug a hole in her backyard with her plastic shovel. When she thought she'd uncovered a rock, she pried it out from the soil. But, unlike a rock, the object had some give. Movement. When she realized she'd unearthed a large beetle and saw its legs scabbling at the air, she had screamed in horror.

Chelsea noticed three shadowy figures emerge from the remains of a nearby building.

She sucked her breath in and held it, afraid to make a sound. *Don't be silly*, she thought. *The think-voices, of course they're human. What else could they be?*

But she didn't convince herself. With good reason, too. After the world went to hell, she had seen things she could never un-see. Mummified corpses scattered in the streets. Bodies motionless, decayed clothing fluttering with the wind. Each time she pointed her flashlight at one of their faces—leathery skin stretched taut on skull, eyeless sockets, yellow-toothed mouth howling soundlessly—she saw a deathmask swimming in a sea of darkness.

What frightened her even more were the fresh bodies. The people who'd come above ground before her. She'd counted ten pale, lifeless forms, all with large puncture wounds in their throats, legs and stomachs. *If those are teeth marks*, Chelsea had thought, *then they're not human teeth. Animal?* She doubted it.

It was as if someone had driven railroad spikes through the skin. Smear-dried blood formed straggly patterns, like brushstrokes of abstract art, the canvas their rotting flesh. It was their faces, though, that horrified her most—frozen contortions of pain that screamed a warning: *Run! Get away from here! Now!*

That dreadful *someone's-behind-you* feeling struck like a fist. The city's ruins came to life, taunting her. Wind-tossed newspapers scraping pavement became dragging feet; the clatter of distant rubble, a shout. She spun in circles, gasping, looking everywhere, her flashlight drawing zigzag patterns in the dark.

She couldn't think straight. She had to find someplace to hide until her courage returned. She'd run down an alley, crawled through the transom above the pub's backdoor, slicing her palm on a shard of glass jutting from the frame.

Now, as whispers clamored in her skull, Chelsea watched the three shadowy figures outside. She squinted, struggling to see details from the darkness. Suddenly, what she saw made her skin crawl. Not one particular thing, but a bunch of slight irregularities that, when added together, made each of their three forms seem...*offish*.

The backs of their skulls were bulbous, slightly larger than normal. One turned in Chelsea's direction. She made out the eyes, bulging from their sockets. Another was female by the flare of the hips, tapered legs, rounded chest, long hair—the jaw opened wider than normal when she spoke.

But when one of them raised his hand and pointed at another, Chelsea's crawly feeling was replaced with fascinated horror. The thumb extended past the fingers and curled into a talon. She examined the hands of all three and saw that they were the same.

Their think-voices were a cacophony of words and phrases she couldn't string together. But after watching how they interacted, it became clear that the female was the leader.

Chelsea fine-tuned her mind to the woman's think-voice. The others faded to faint whispers, but the woman's echoed even louder.

Stop bleeding humans! It's been two days since we've found any. We're taking the next one we find back to the colony. Maybe they'll know where we can find more.

One of the men barged towards her, raising his taloned fist in protest. Instantly, the woman's arms shot out and seized his throat. She heaved him off the ground. He kicked and twisted. Chelsea wished she could hear more than one thought-voice at a time.

I'm the leader of our colony, so I'll be giving the orders. If we don't find more, we won't have enough blood to feed our weaker ones.

From where Chelsea squatted in the darkness, she sensed waves of power emanating off the woman. A feeling of excitement flared inside her chest— *I want that power! If I'd had that kind of power...nobody would've ever been able to hurt me. Or Brian.*

At his name, her throat constricted. She touched the friendship bracelet on her wrist, the only thing she had to remember him by. He'd been the only man who'd ever—

Footsteps behind her. Hands seized her by the shoulders and flipped her around. She struggled in his steely grip until she saw his face. Bulging eyes. Bulbous head. Trembling, she looked at the large, taloned thumbs clutching her upper arms.

"You shouldn't have cut yourself, girly. I could smell your blood on the wind," he said. "If it weren't for my orders, you'd already be dead."

He raised one hand above his head. It swept down and struck Chelsea's face.

Everything went black.

When Chelsea came to, she was lying on the floor of a wide cement room, torches fitted into the walls. The air, thick and clotted with burning oil, made her stomach clench. She fought back the urge to gag.

Blood That Burns So Bright

By Jason S. Ridler

Knuckles? What Ned taped together was closer to jagged turtle shells hiding under torn, red calluses. Sakura's hand remained calm and still in his palm while the tape made its long way around.

"You shouldn't have called time out," she said, voice a thin mist in the fetid air. "I had him."

"Deep breaths," Ned said. "Remember to breathe." She complied while he pulled out another a stretch of tape. "Fine, my bad. Make him eat my words when you get back in the cage."

"Tighter," Sakura said, legs dangling over the edge of the ancient massage bench, body still and poised despite the agony. It made Ned's silent heart ache. Chains of sweat dropped from her chin, past her boots, and turned the dirty floor into a fresh mess. Each drop hit with a rusty echo. This was the change room for a slaughterhouse, once upon a time. Fitting, Ned thought.

Down the hall around the killing room floor, the frenzied crowd hungered for the last round.

"You want a little flexibility," Ned said, as the tape made another lap. "So the impact has somewhere to escape besides your wrist. And you need a grip to grapple."

She exhaled hard now, controlling the pain. Crooked fingers flexed like a dying critter. "Thumbs are all I got that work on their own. Tighter."

He chuckled. "Fine. Full mummy treatment, minus the thumbs. You know he'll try a submission now."

The tape did another lap around her tortured hands. "Try and fail."

He forced a smile. Outside the deadbloods howled from the stands as the time-out burned like a fuse. "You should be proud, child. Those boos? That's a kind of cheer. They hate that one of us is getting beaten by one of you. But they love a good fight."

And loud as they boo, the cheers in the Scrum amongst your kind must be shaking the roofs. Turncoats will be having their hands full tonight!"

"Only if I win," she said, chin dripping, voice clearer. "Any bets on that happening?"

He stopped taping. "I never bet on my talent until they win one, so you should feel righteous for making me lose. Sure you don't want to grapple?"

Sakura's glare was steady as a cat's, and just as heartless. He'd hurt her. And it twisted his guts, wishing he'd believed in her then as he did now. "Then make a fist," said Ned.

Trembling, her fingers tried retracting into the knuckle-bombs she'd dropped on every deadblood she'd fought on her short rise toward arena glory, bombs harder than steel, enough to rupture a deadblood's brain stem.

Impossible bombs and speed for a brightblood.

And yet here she was. Still alive, but—

"Ned?" Sakura grunted. Her fingers shook like a dying spider. "I can't—"

"Easy, child."

Slow, strong, and steady, he taped her hand into a boney hammer. The pain had to be cosmic, but she just breathed in and out like a bellows. As he reinforced the tape at the wrist, his finger hovered above her vein. Her pulse shivered like it belonged to a meth head cornered in an alley, heart burning out and melting down at the same damn time.

He cut the stray tape with his thumb nail. "Give me your other hand."

She did. It was worse. God, they'd been pristine last week, when he'd watched her for the first time. Tough and strong, but healthy, like a deadblood fighters after they'd eaten their kills in a mob match.

But not Sakura. She wasn't like Ned, or the elders, or the monster Gregor starving for the last round, or even the chump-ass brightbloods normally torn apart by deadbloods. Whatever she was, she was—

"Ned?"

"Right, right." He began the wrap. Sweat hung off her chin. "Finish some water, but not too much. No sense fighting dry."

"Ned?"

He looked up.

Eighteen, she'd said. Eighteen and now with the face of a career grinder, starved of blood. He wrapped slow, head down. "Don't let him rush you," he said, "but if he does, keep the elbows hammering on the back of the skull, like you did yesterday."

"Who'd you bet on?" Sweat dropped.

"Child, you have two minutes before Gregor tries to eat your spleen while you watch. Focus."

She stole her hand back faster than he could sense it, she was that quick. "Damn it, Ned. Who?" she seethed, chin wet, body vibrating. "Who?"

He straightened the frayed lapels of his red sports coat, brushed the dust and stains off. Damn Wallace for shooting off his big, stupid mouth at the last fight. He knew it would rattle her cage. She needed an angry focus, but not on Ned. And he couldn't lie about it, like he had with Wallace. Just to make everyone feel good. Not again. "Child, either way I lose."

"Coward," she grunted. "You really think I can't take this fang-job out? That it?"

He took the slang-shot. "We wouldn't be here if you couldn't. And that's coming from a fangjob."

She slid off the bench, the white hammers at the end of her arms hung like a gunslinger's pistols. "Then say who you bet on."

Ned pushed his hands tight and down in his coat pockets. "You want to wail on me, spar on my mush, go right ahead, child. You hate us. You have every right to. We're butchers and slave masters and have turned your kind into chattel and chum. That hate has carried you a long way in a short time. From the first moment I saw you in the mob fights to the roar of that crowd out there. Hate's made you who you are. Maybe it will carry you all the way." He shrugged. "Maybe not. Unless you go in packing a little heat."

Sakura stepped back. "Don't even think it."

He ground his teeth. "Listen, child. It won't hurt, I promise."

"Don't say it."

"Just want to help."

The punch drilled him quick as a bullet and nearly shattered his skull. Ned hit the tiled corner like a heap of trash. Deadblood surged and mended the damage. Her gnarled hand snapped out of the tape, gripped his throat, and pushed him against the wall. "Help? You call turning me into a fucking fangjob help?"

He gripped her mangled fingers and squeezed hard.

Survival of the Fittest

By Leanne Tremblay

It took Kara Morales more than two hours to slow her breathing. Only then did she try to wipe the blood off. Killing Angeline had been surprisingly easy.

At first, she had sat on the floor beside the body, mesmerized. A cavity the size of a fist yawned in the chest. The pooled blood beneath the body had begun as red but had since turned black. Kara touched the tip of her tongue to the droplets adorning her wrist like a bracelet. Salty. Hesitating, she licked the rest of the blood off her arms and fingers and sucked at the matter congealed under her nails.

At some point during the afternoon, she left her office and activated the cleansing system. Thirty minutes later, she re-entered in fresh clothes. Her office, sterilized and lightly scented, showed no trace of blood. Looking at the body annoyed Kara, even though it had been scrubbed white as a china doll. She lifted it under the shoulders and dragged it out of sight behind her desk. The monitor blinked the time, just past four o'clock in the afternoon. Two hours until sunset. For now, she had to remain where she was, sealed inside the Institute. She'd just have to wait.

Kara's first surprise had been seeing Angeline in the examination chamber when she arrived at the lab. The woman had been laughing, sharing a joke with a figure already seated at a small metal table in the centre of the room.

"Angeline, what are you doing here?" asked Kara sharply. The woman's interference in her research was becoming endemic; always sniffing around. Kara put it down to a morbid curiosity in the research subjects. Homo sapiens were short, cowering creatures, dirty, malnourished and infested with parasites. She

assumed Angeline wanted the thrill of proximity so she could pass along scintillating tales to her friends.

Secretly, Kara despised the woman's classic Vamparian looks: tall, pale, sharp features, red lips, perfect skin. She was the pretty, public face of the Institute, the PR voice that soothed and cajoled. Kara may not have inherited beauty but she did inherit the mind, the historic bloodline. That's what mattered.

"Kara, there you are! Charlie and I were wondering where you'd gotten to." Her canines flashed, the ridiculous diamond chips embedded in them winking under the fluorescents.

Charlie? Who? Confused, Kara blinked several times and halted mid-step.

"Ah, hello. That would be me," said the subject, getting up from his chair. He rounded the table in a few long strides and offered his hand. "Charlie Koop." He smiled.

Charlie—the second surprise.

Dazed, she took his hand automatically. Lord, he was warm! Even through gloves, her hand sucked up the heat from his fingers and an unfamiliar wave of perspiration pricked her skin.

Civilized social behavior, coherent speech—what form of *Homo sapien* was this?

Kara cleared her throat, hiding her unease. "Hello...I'm *Doctor Morales*. I run the *Sapiens Outreach* program."

"I was just telling Charlie about the Institute's mandate for hominid species preservation," said Angeline.

"What a relief," he quipped, smiling at Angeline, who'd hitched herself onto the edge of the table, letting one long leg dangle.

He turned back to Kara and frowned slightly. "You okay, Dr. Morales?" Standing at full height, he was as tall as any Vamparian male, but his face, brown and smooth as glass, betrayed a different ancestry. He was dressed oddly, in a high necked tunic made from some kind of dull brown fiber. His hair, so blonde it was nearly white, fell softly to his shoulders. With his height and healthy build, he could almost pass as Vamparian, if it wasn't for his skin. Burnished gold. Like sunshine, she imagined.

Flustered, she fumbled with her recording tablet. "Yes, um, I'm fine. I'm sorry, but where do you—"

"I live in a community about a hundred miles outside New Chicago."

Kara nearly choked. A hundred miles outside the Net? No one had lived that far from a Net city in centuries. "But the atmosphere... the heat during the day would... So, there are more like you?"

Charlie laughed easily. "Sure. We don't all live under rocks."

"But that's impossible!" she spluttered. This had to be a joke. Sapiens in the New World lived individually, not in groups. In fact, as a species they were becoming hard to find, hence her Outreach program. Her brain scrambled to assemble the possibilities. An entire community within a hundred miles of the Institute? If Koop was telling the truth, then she'd made the discovery of a lifetime.

"Isn't it just so lucky that we found Charlie," Angeline said, interrupting her thoughts, "before some nasty race mongers got their hands on him."

Starting, Kara looked at her and blanched, the threat underlying her statement all too clear. Angeline had no intention of letting her keep this discovery to herself. Kara sucked in her breath and gripped the recording tablet, her knuckles whiter than usual. She still hadn't turned it on. Charlie was unlike other Homo Sapien she'd ever encountered. She couldn't, *wouldn't* lose this opportunity.

Ignoring the smug look on Angeline's face, she tapped the tablet to activate it and gestured towards the chair. "I'd be interested in hearing more about your community," she said.

He smiled and sat, folding his hands loosely on his lap.

Kara drummed her fingers on the desk, keeping time with the flashing clock on the monitor. She thought it surprising how little she remembered of their conversation, although she and Charlie talked for at least an hour. She had a vague recollection of Angeline leaving during the interview, probably bored. The thought pleased her. One thing she did recall was telling Charlie about her father. Had he asked her about him? He must have—everybody did. Her father had been over four hundred years old when he finally died. She'd only met him a handful of times. The last time, he grabbed her chin, his yellow nails digging into her jaw, and forced her mouth open. Squinting, his rancid breath blowing up her nostrils, he ran a dirty thumb over her canines. They were like child fangs, no more than blunted points compared to the elegantly-tapered dentition of the devotees clustered around the sickbed. "Throwback!" he'd barked, and shoved her away. She never saw him again.

Kara glanced at the hole in the body where Angeline's heart had been. She studied the secondary and less obvious wounds, including deep slashes at the throat. She wondered suddenly if her father would have been proud of her. "Genetic throwback, my ass!" she snapped, swiveling back to the monitor.

The Faith of Burning Glass

By Steve Vernon

I see the bottle glint in the distance long before I can ever hope to be sure.

I know it is out there.

That's what faith is all about.

Ask any television evangelist.

Not that there are many evangelists around these days. As far as I know they've all died and gone to heaven. I expect when the first big fire-blast hit the state, they clapped their hands together and peed their pants for joy. Cinder-fried into ashy cre-mains, one blessed-out, pissed-out rapture to go.

As for me, I'm burned dry.

My throat is parched like a two hundred mile crawl through a desert of pan-fried deep-salted squid. I see that glimmer up ahead. I see it reflect in the burning sunlight—tantalizing, transient, the wink of melting diamond.

I smell it.

I followed that glint of unbroken glass. It wasn't much as vectors went, but in this Gehanna-painted desert, it's a lot better than nothing at all.

The world has parched itself.

The world has smoked down like an ant under a burning glass. How did it happen?

You could blame the nukes, but only in the round-about way that you would have blamed a zealous fireman for kicking down your burning door. The world was ready for desiccation long before the flying atoms ever got to it.

We did it to ourselves.

We emptied the sky. We poured it out like the last drop of cheap wine. That deodorized confidence that kept the earth safe, the Colgate shield that surrounded us, the ozone that distanced the

earth from the sun's blind rape had swallowed itself down into nothing, leaving us naked to the burning eye of fate.

Bottles and cans and spray cylinders. We wrapped it all into neat double shrunk packages, everything but the world itself. Now it's all gone. Drained.

I understand this because of what I am.

A vampire.

I know what you read. I know what you saw in the movies. I know how you think we are so damned vulnerable. Sunlight will kill us. Garlic will kill us. Silver will kill us. Bible camp will kill us.

Forget that foolish prattle.

There is no race of vampires.

As far as I know, I am unique.

Alone.

I kept to the shadows for centuries—but now the shadows are burned away and I must walk. The steady beat of my footsteps is the only heartbeat I have.

It is slow going. I walk on sand glazed by heat. I feel each particle fused together like the icing on a funeral cake. The sun pours down on me like a white-hot acid bath. It doesn't kill me but it is damned uncomfortable.

I wish for a bottle of SPF sunscreen three hundred times strong but all I have is my cloak, a tatter quilt sewed from a dozen black "Keep On Trucking" t-shirts.

How's this for a slogan? *I Survived the Apocalypse and All I Got was a Dozen Crummy T-shirts!*

My jacket is leather, homemade, flayed from a biker's burned back. I wear high black riding boots, or they wear me. The damned boots rot to my skin. If I try to peel them off, I'll peel myself down to the bone.

I like my hat.

It's a large black sombrero, stolen from the wreckage of a tacky souvenir shop. The hat makes me think of Eli Wallach, in *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*.

"Hey Blondie," I croak—a mouthful of razor and scorpion song.

At least I don't sweat. I don't need that kind of teasing, that kind of torment.

But I can't ignore the thirst.

Never mind. I'm focused on the glinting glass.

I am a walking shadow. I need no shade. I am a shambling darkled pocket of nothing, slanting through a wasteland.

Everything is dead.

Even the cacti are roasted dry.

I draw closer. Close enough to really see the burning glass. The light dances and tantalizes like the sharded mirage of a ripe-titted hooch dancer, shaking her naked juices at my sun-parched eye holes.

God, I am thirsty.

I want to lick my lips, but I resist the urge. A flick of my tongue will peel the dried-out membranes raw.

I plow ahead, immersed in the burning quicklime of want and my thirst for a glinting bottle.

What will it be?

A Pepsi?

A Perrier?

And then I see the actual bottle.

I pick it up. It's empty, of course. The black label compliments my pitchy cloak. It's square, like a miniature, transparent coffin.

I recognize the label.

Brother Jack Daniels, the patron saint of sun-parched sinners.

I glance skyward briefly.

"Are you up there, Jack Daniels?"

There is nothing but sunburnt sky. I haven't seen a cloud in a long forever. I slip the bottle into the pocket of my leather jacket.

Carefully.

I don't want to break it.

There is something else out here.

I can smell it.

It takes me two long thirsty days to find where it is hiding.

I count my footsteps, one to a second.

Habit or hobby?

Even the dead need something to do.

Here it is, or the face of it, anyway. A slab of concrete poured across a limestone cliff.

A gun slit.

I smell the life, hidden and cowering within.

"Hey," I call.

My voice surprises me.

"Hey in there."

Nothing.

Whoever is hiding is damned sensible.

They aren't peeking.

Red Planet

By Bev Vincent

When Isaac awakens, he doesn't know where he is. In the distance, there's a muffled thrumming sound. Closer, an instrument chirps and a red dot blinks. It's the only light, but Isaac has no trouble seeing.

His mouth is parched and his back stiff, like he's been sleeping too long. He tries to sit up, but something is holding him down. Then it comes to him. For the past four months, he's been in stasis aboard the *Ferdinand*, bound for Mars.

Their sister ship, the *Isabella*, is behind them, on the same course. The media dubbed the mission the Hundred Years Starship, despite the fact that there are two ships, neither of which is destined for the stars. Nothing like it has ever been attempted before: sending people on a one-way trip to colonize another planet. Isaac and his colleagues are pioneers, en route to a brave new world aboard a nuclear-powered wagon train.

The austere federal budget of 2088 made it clear that this was the only way NASA could reach Mars in the foreseeable future. It's audacious and controversial, but the additional cost required to guarantee the safe return of the crew would eat up most of any other scheme's budget. This way, the ships are lighter and can carry more provisions. Disposable unmanned craft delivered sophisticated robots in advance to establish the base camp and set up a fission reactor for power. Other drones will bring supplies on a regular basis. Within a decade, they hope to be completely self-sufficient.

Eight candidates were chosen from the hundreds of applicants. All underwent physical and psychological evaluation to ensure they were healthy and up to the rigors of the mission and its implications. None left behind family—that was one of the main selection criteria. They also understood that they would

probably live only twenty or thirty years on Mars due to celestial radiation exposure.

Isaac was subjected to short periods of stasis during training, but emerging from that was nothing like this. Air doesn't seem to fill his lungs when he inhales and he has a terrible thirst, unlike anything he's experienced before. It's specific and overwhelming: he craves blood instead of water. He also doesn't understand why his vision is so acute. In total darkness, he can see every tube running along his body, every needle in his wrists, every sensor affixed to his chest. Could these be unanticipated side effects of prolonged stasis?

Dyer, the chief medical officer, should be attending his awakening, but there's no sign that anyone else is up. For all he knows, he's only been asleep for part of the journey. Perhaps a malfunction awoke him too soon. If so, he needs to rouse Dyer to put him under again—but not before he does something about this burning thirst.

He closes his eyes and tries to sigh, but his lungs won't cooperate. He isn't breathing, nor does he have any discernable pulse. He allows his thoughts to drift, searching for anything that might explain what's happening. Some passing reference during their training—anything.

Instead, what flickers through his memories is a vision of frantic hands fumbling in a dark room. Clothing ripped off and cast aside. Passionate kisses. Groping. Teasing. Penetration. Blissful friction and release. Then nothingness.

He was supposed to be in quarantine, but it was his last day on Earth. Forever. His affairs were in order, his possessions sold or donated. The seven other people on the two NASA ships would be his only companions for the rest of his foreshortened life. After tomorrow, Earth would be nothing more than a minute speck in the sky, barely discernable from the stars.

Who could blame him for wanting one last fling? He was surprised NASA hadn't arranged one for them, considering what he and his colleagues were sacrificing in the name of science. He used the cash he reserved for just such a purpose to bribe one of the flunkies keeping tabs on them into letting him out of the compound for the evening. The closest bar was dingy and dark, which suited Isaac just fine. No one gave him a second look when he strolled in. After a few drinks, he targeted a dark, exotic beauty sitting at a table near the back of the joint. Surprisingly, everyone seemed oblivious to her presence. Anywhere else, men would be swarming her.

He had enough money left to treat her to anything she wanted, but the only thing she wanted, she said, was him. She had a place nearby. After that, the night was a blur. He staggered back to the compound less than an hour before reveille. During their pre-launch checkout, the NASA doctor noticed a gash on his neck. "Won't have to worry about shaving for a while, will you?" the man said with a snicker. The doctor also ignored Isaac's blood-shot eyes and the reek of alcohol that a shower and mouthwash couldn't eliminate. For all Isaac knew, his fellow crew members were in similar states. He hadn't been the only one about to be strapped into a rocket and sent on a one-way trip into space.

He slips one hand free of the restraints that keep him from floating around in his stasis chamber. Near the tube that runs into his neck, his fingertips encounter swollen flesh and the rough edges of broken skin. If he's been asleep for months, any injuries he sustained on Earth should have healed. Assuming he's not dreaming, he needs to figure out what's happening.

Isaac removes the mask from his face and the mantle of electronic sensors from his head, expecting alarms to go off.

Nothing happens.

The needles float away when he pulls the IVs from his hands. The monitoring equipment continues to chirp after he peels the patches from his chest.

He undoes the rest of his restraints and drifts to the entrance of his chamber, where he braces himself so he can open the door. There's a hiss when the seal breaks, but he doesn't sense any change in the air around him. He's neither warm nor cold, and he still doesn't seem to be breathing.

Shaking his head, he glides into the hall and examines the monitor outside his door. The mission clock reads T+128 days, which means they should gain Mars orbit in four days if they're on schedule. He's only a little early in waking. However, the display indicates that his vital signs all dropped to zero during the past twenty-four hours. He taps the monitor, but nothing changes.

Isaac floats up the corridor to the next compartment, the one containing Willows, the flight engineer. Her vital signs are normal. He peers through the porthole. Willows is on her back with her hands clasped across her belly. Peaceful. As he watches, he becomes fixated on the tube running into her neck. If he pulled it out, droplets of blood would appear at the puncture site and form perfect globules as they drifted into the air. He runs his tongue across his upper lip and discovers, to his amazement,

The Slowing of the World

By Sandra Kasturi

The earth is cooling.

I know this because Aurore has told me, yet again, that it is happening. Even the climatologists are beginning to notice now, and there has been some mild talk, but not in any seriously scientific way. And soon it will be too late to do anything about it. Most people are still going on about global warming. Which, incidentally, Aurore tells me isn't really going to be relevant any more. Not for a long time.

I'm new to the vampire game—I've been "Turned" (they use this term with amusement, having cribbed it from films), but the changes are slow ones. My blood is still mostly my own and my genitals haven't entirely retreated and changed. When I think of the hunger I used to feel for Aurore, it seems distant. Pleasant, but far away, like a rewritten childhood memory, or some mild opiate-induced haze.

I notice the deepening chill for the first time in many springs. It takes longer than usual for the ice to retreat from the lake's shore, snow stays on the foothills permanently, and the returning swallows don't make it back until July. But these are small things. Maybe the scientists are worried, but if they are, they're not telling anyone. And the vampires think in terms of millennia, epochs and eons. They've been a perpetual whisper on the crust of this planet since before the dinosaurs. Evolution, adaptation—it's rote now, so easy, it's a parlour trick.

Most of the Elders have retreated into the mountains, laid themselves ready for the Long Night. It started back in the 2060s, when things had gotten too hot, and there were too many of us. Too many of *them*, rather. Too many humans. I'm not one of them

anymore, but the Change comes like a glacier, so sometimes I forget.

The humans were just making things hotter, and the birth rate was climbing even further. The Elders decided it was time to cool things down, cull the herd. They—we—need humans to live, but if there are too many—too many cars, too many hamburgers—it becomes dangerous for everyone, predators and prey. Too many shoes and Q-tips and Tupperware containers, too many vacationers in the Caribbean, too many paper clips and rock songs and lap dogs, and everything falls apart.

They've done it before, with the dinosaurs who were getting uppity, vicious and overly smart. With previous civilizations. They've done it with water, fire, with stars falling from the sky. But the ice is their favorite. Ice works best. It's quiet, slow and soothing. It takes time, and they, *we*, like things that take time. We are more patient than trees, than dust.

The Long Night will start in the mountains. As the Elders' bodies cool, the glaciers will make their slow way down, until humanity is contained in one small area. Our cities will be ironed to nothing, our pills and pornographies forgotten, our words and wisdom gone to smoke. Only then, when we—when they—are manageable again, will the ice retreat as the Elders wake.

I've asked Aurore: how long? The answer? *As long as it takes*. Which is no answer at all. But then, I am still young, filled with impatience. The fact that two sentences with Aurore take a year bothers me until I remember again that we will have nearly forever for conversation, the earth whizzing around the sun in an eyeblink.

Aurore and I will be the last. I am almost completely Turned now, my body smooth, but for a fine layer of something like down, my genitals retracted within my body cavity. To the vampires, "male" and "female" have no meaning. They—we—are both. And neither.

Aurore tells me of a time, centuries ago, as the humans reckon it, when the vampires tried to breed with humans, mix their DNA, raise hybrids that weren't dependent on blood supply. It never worked well. And so the vampire fables started—half-breeds crazed with desire or bloodlust, Vlad the Impaler, Wendigo, mutants and myths. The vampires put a stop to it and went another route.

THE COLOR THAT CAME TO CHISWICK

by William Meikle

I hoped that my friend Sherlock Holmes would be more settled when I called on him that evening in May of '87. His recovery from his travails in France, and the subsequent excitement in Reigate, meant that a period of house rest was prescribed. As ever, he paid little attention to my ministrations and pleadings, and over the course of the previous fortnight had driven poor Mrs. Hudson to despair with a series of petty requests.

On my last visit she had pleaded with me to do my best to calm my *patient*. Indeed, she had worked herself into such a state that I do believe had any longer time passed it would have been her, and not Holmes, who would be coming under my ministrations.

It was Holmes himself who greeted me as I entered the house in Baker Street.

"Come in Doctor Watson," he said in a near perfect impression of Mrs. Hudson's Scots brogue. "You'll be wanting some tea?"

He laughed, and fair bounded up the stairs to his apartment. I had not seen him in such good humour for several months.

I discovered why on entering his rooms ... he had a new case. Several sheaves of paper lay scattered on his desk, his brass microscope was in use off to one side, and a glass retort bubbled and seethed above a paraffin burner. An acrid odor hung in the air, thick, almost chewable. The whole place reeked of it, despite the fact that the windows were all open to their fullest extent.

Holmes noticed my discomfort.

"It is nothing," he said.

"I doubt Mrs. Hudson will agree," I said.

"Do not worry Watson," Holmes said. "Our esteemed landlady has gone to Earls Court with the widow Murray."

"The Wild West show? Yes, I have seen the posters around town. It is said it will be a great spectacle."

I had wished to inquire as to Holmes' opinion on the authenticity of Mr. Cody's show, but it was obvious that his mind was already elsewhere. He stood over the microscope, studying the slide contents intently.

"What have you got there Holmes?"

In answer he passed me a sheet of paper.

"This came in several hours ago."

It was a note on letter-headed paper, from the Fullers Brewery in Chiswick, and addressed to *Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective* at this Baker Street address. The note proved to be short and to the point.

"Dear Mr. Holmes," it began. "In the past three days we have encountered several problems with our brewing processes in our main Tuns. We suspect sabotage, but are unable to prove the cause, and our own chemists have drawn a blank. I have sent a sample from our latest fermentation, and would appreciate some of your time in its study. I shall be happy to discuss your remuneration by return of post."

It was signed, *Gerard Jones, Chief Brewer*.

"Examine the paper," Holmes said. "There is something peculiar on the left edge near the bottom."

I immediately saw what he meant. The edge seemed bevelled and on closer examination proved to have a greenish tinge.

"What is it Holmes? Some form of algal growth perhaps?"

"That is what I am trying to determine," Holmes replied. "But so far I am having little success."

He motioned me towards a jar that had been partially hidden behind the microscope.

"The sample mentioned within the letter is there. See what you make of it Watson."

As soon as I picked up the jar I knew I had never seen anything like it before.

The jar held a pint of fluid but it did not look like anything resembling any fermentation of ale I had ever seen. As I held it up towards my face the contents shifted and the acrid odor grew so strong that I almost gagged as it caught at the back of

my throat. The fluid was thick, almost solid, and a deep emerald green. It flowed, as if the whole thing were a single organism.

"It seems to have some of the properties of a slime mould," Holmes said. "And it responds to external stimuli with a range of defensive adaptations."

Holmes took the jar from me and placed it close to the paraffin burner. The green substance surged, piling up against the glass wall of the container.

"And this is in the vats in the brewery?"

Holmes nodded.

"It would appear so. Our task is to prove whether it has been introduced deliberately, or whether it is an accident of nature... of some kind."

Holmes allowed me to study the sample he had mounted on the slide. There was no evidence of any cellular structure, or any differentiation in the material. Nothing existed to show that the thing was in any way alive. Yet it clearly moved. Even the small amount present on the slide pushed and surged against its confines with such violence that I stood back quickly in surprise. In doing so I knocked the bottom stage of the microscope, and swung the mirror away such that it no longer lit on the slide. I bent to rectify the problem but stopped as soon as I looked in the eyepiece.

Despite the lack of light I could still clearly see the sample. It glowed, giving forth a faint green luminescence. When I pointed this out to Holmes he at once drew the curtains and dimmed the lamps. It immediately became apparent that there was far more to our problem material than we realized.

The full expanse of Holmes' desk glowed a sickly green, the miasma hanging in the air a full two feet or more above the surface. Holmes showed me his hands ... they too shone dimly.

I frog-marched him downstairs and both of us scoured our hands with carbolic soap until no trace of green remained. When we went back upstairs the sight that met us made us pause in the doorway.

The curtains were still closed, however the darkness only accentuated the effect. The sample jar sat square in the middle of Holmes' desk and the air seemed to dance, an aurora of light hovering in an almost perfect globe around it.

Armed with vinegar and salt I set to cleaning and disinfecting as much as I could see. Holmes could scarcely take his eyes from the jar and merely stood, contemplating the sheer *strangeness* of it, as I worked.

Pet Peeves

By Jennifer Lott

“Amel ought to have returned by now,” Margaret said peevishly. “His Reetion lyka must be monopolizing his time.”

“Ann?” asked Dela. She twirled under chandeliers, from one upholstered chair to another, her bright hair wagging over chubby cheeks. Blue Hearth seemed too small to contain the Demish Princess.

The Abbess Margaret could have fit into a tidy corner of it, where indeed she stood, arms folded, forehead creased over large, blue eyes.

“Yes, I’m sure she must be,” Dela said absently about Ann. “Only perhaps he is enjoying it. He’s just lost Luthan to Erien, after all, and had to child-gift to that horrible Vretla. He wanted to child-gift to Ann, to give her something to do while she’s locked up with all those counselors.”

Margaret released tension in a deep, troubled sigh. “His Immortality is too gracious.”

“He’d better come here first,” said Dela, whirling about the room. “He has to bring me my present from Rire!”

“Dela!” Margaret shot her a sharp look. “Amel is a Soul of Light. It is not respectful for you to presume—”

“He likes to bring me things.” Dela continued to use wholly respectful grammar in her presumptions. “It makes him happy.”

“Certainly,” Margaret conceded coldly. “His Divine Goodness has always derived pleasure from delighting children with silly toys.”

"My present's not silly," Dela pouted, looking every bit as childish as implied.

Margaret raised an eyebrow. "You didn't say it's not a toy."

A servant came in to announce Amel's arrival.

"I'm not telling you what it is." Dela started for the door, suppressing giggles in a poor attempt at dignity. Straight-faced in the doorway, she turned back to Margaret, and said dramatically: "But it's alive!"

"What?" Margaret rushed out after Dela's flouncing skirts.

They went down Blue Hearth's Throat, Margaret in a state of trepidation. She suffered a horrifying moment, as the first living things that flashed to mind were the brown-skinned Reetions themselves. What could Dela want with one of those? A pet anthropologist such as the late Liege Monitum had adopted?

Then Margaret reached the atrium, where Blue Hearth's exalted liege was delivering his gift.

Amel was smiling as he held out a small quadruped with orange fur, a tail, pointed ears, round green eyes and whiskers on either side of a little pink nose.

Dela scooped her new pet to her chest, squeezing it half to death in her excitement.

Of course, Margaret thought, both relieved and exasperated, *more nonsense inspired by Nersal's cat trade.*

Dela named the female kitten "Precious," and soon after took the beloved furball for her first outing on Fountain Court.

The marble-lined octagon had doors around the perimeter which led to the Hearths. People coming in and out of those Hearths met here, in the middle, where the fountain was set for communal enjoyment.

Margaret had gone into Silver Hearth.

Dela waited outside with Precious, who was curled in the crook of her arm, being stroked from head to tail. Dela had tied a pink bow round her neck and was eager to tell anyone who would listen all about her.

The person who did stop to chat did so less than graciously.

"Precious?" Eler repeated. "You've gotta be kidding."

Dela looked critically back at Liege Nersal's younger brother: big, wide-shouldered and smug-looking.

"You needn't say it like that," she told Eler, haughtily. "I only named her what she is."

He looked disgusted. "What does Precious think about all this?"

"Think?" Dela blinked, fingers slowing in tracts of orange fur. "How much do cats think?"

She flipped the kitten over to stroke its fluffy white tummy. Precious yowled and pawed at her hands.

Eler made a wary face. "Now you've done it."

"Why?" said Dela. "What's the matter with her?"

"That her," Eler first echoed Dela's pronoun then trumped it, "is a *her*." He raised the cat's birth rank so high that Dela gasped.

Dela couldn't wrap her head around what Eler had said. Was it a very bad joke? Most of what Eler said fit into that category. Or did he literally mean the cat had higher status than a Demish princess? It was wrong either way; jarring to her cultural sensibilities. She took a moment to compose herself, patting dimpled hands distractedly over Precious.

"You're doing it again," said Eler. "Unless *she*—" he ignored Dela's flinch at his inflated pronoun, "gets petted just when *she* wants, in just the way that *she* wants, *she*'ll give you the cold shoulder. Cats are very demanding of their servants."

"I am not her servant!" said Dela, affronted.

"Feed her and clean up after her, don't you?"

"My servants do that." Dela took a quick look around for anyone in earshot. Who knew what rumors might catch on: notions that she mucked about in litter boxes and that her sweet kitten was an arrogant tyrant!

She watched Silver Hearth's door and wished that Margaret would come out.

Eler's voice asserted his annoyingly prolonged presence. "Your cat being so young and all, she's still got plenty of time to train you."

The Caddy

by Hal Friesen

Nestor Tark gasped as he walked into the hospital room on the Palace Plain where the Lorels had set up a clinic. There were monitors and nervecloth interfaces around the room in the usual spots, but they faded into obscurity as he surged to the bed. In the place where a body should have lain was a note with a shimmering silver symbol on it: three silver jagged lines with a half circle crossing two of them and a dot beside it. He dropped the glass of water he had fetched, the pieces shattering across the slippery floor into the shadows of medical gadgetry. His son was gone.



Remei's face sank when she heard the news. "A criminal from the palace plain?" she asked as they walked out of the hospital and onto a causeway leading back into the streets of UnderGelion.

"I don't think so," Nestor said, discounting the notion that the message was from someone in the neighborhood. He held her hand while he clenched the note with his other. "The Lorels running the clinic said we should look to the UnderDocks."

"Why wouldn't they help us?" She glared at the vendors and people bustling around them, though she was referring to the hospital staff. "It's like we didn't exist. Enid is nothing

more than a discharged patient. And we can't ask for help from anyone else."

Nestor squeezed her hand and gave her a sympathetic look. He wore his traditional Nersallian garb, and Remei wore a purple dress like the one when they had first met on SanHome. As he thought back to when they had flirted in the quiet Nesak temple, he remarked how her features had changed. Her face was gaunt and strained compared to the lightness that had been her trademark back then, the playful bounce that flowed through her every action.

They had challenged the Empire and its ways with their love, but it hadn't been easy. Now was one of those times when, had they followed either of their own customs, they would be in a much better position. They could give their son the protection of cultural honor and not be relegated to solving their own problems as outcasts. Nestor's liege, Hangst Nersal, understood their marriage but was already having enough problems with the temperamental kin' stan. Hangst's lack of concern regarding Enid's health was a strong indication that the cost of his sympathies was becoming too great.

Nestor could see the weight of their troubles on Remei's face and felt a lump in his chest. They walked in silence as they passed an arch and a staircase that led toward a blinking streetlight. It had been different when it was just the two of them. They could take risks together, each knowing and accepting on a certain level what difficulties might result. Enid hadn't been given the choice. Now he was in the gutter of Gelion, taken by hands that traveled in the twilight Nestor and Remei had entered in order to be man and wife.



"Yeah, I've seen it," said a merchant, his face patched with dirt as he spat next to the crate he leaned on. "What's it to you?"

Nestor gritted his teeth. "A sheathed sword."

The merchant raised his eyebrows. "Eh? A sword'll do."

Nestor pressed his sword against the man's throat a second later. "Will it, now?"

The merchant wore a look of annoyance. He growled. "It's the Caddy."

"What's that?" Nestor leaned in as though he had heard wrong. The street slang that he and Remei had been hearing all day made it hard to gather information.

"The Caddy."

"What does that mean?"

"Not what, who. It's his symbol." The merchant looked down at the blade and up into Nestor's eyes. Nestor released him.

"Is he some sort of boy-*sla* trader?" Nestor said, keeping his sword arm visibly tense.

"I'm not sure what he is," said the merchant, rubbing his neck and inspecting his hand. He pulled his brown hood over his head. "Not sure if he is sure, either."

"Where can I find him?"

"You don't want to find him." The merchant shook his head slowly. "No one does."

"I do."

"Lightworlder, you come down here and ask me for info, but you're not going to take my advice, are you?" He spat and wiped his mouth. "You and your Demish girl over there," he nodded to the shadows where Remei was hiding, "think you can stroll into the UnderDocks and take over. You're not on Fountain Court anymore, prince." The merchant upspoke Nestor even as he insulted him.

Nestor kept his eyes on the merchant, who held his gaze. "The Caddy took my son," Nestor said.

The merchant looked to the side and breathed out. "Probably wasn't him, is my guess. But he arranged it."

"Either way, I'm going after him."

"Fair enough, lightworlder. The best way is probably to ask around at one of the Takoshi fights."

Nestor felt an arm slip around his elbow. A hooded Remei had joined him. "What fights?" she asked, cutting Nestor off.

"Takoshi fights. Never seen them, lady?"

"No. What are they?" Remei asked. She was unafraid, and Nestor's heart lightened with her next to him.

"You'll see for yourselves. I'm not sure I could even tell you much about them, anyway. From what I hear, they seem to change every week."

"When's the next fight?" Remei asked.

"Tonight, I think."

"Where?" said Nestor.

"I'm not into that sort of thing, lightworlder. Do I look that sleazy? Ask someone who looks like they might enjoy it." The merchant shook his head, gazing around into the darkness.

Nestor sheathed his sword. "Thank you," he said, extending a Nersallian honor chip to the merchant.

The merchant looked at it for a moment before taking it. "Pleasure."

"What's your name?" asked Remei.

"Tirello," said the merchant. "Don't tell the Caddy I sent you his way, though."

"We won't," said Nestor. "I'm Nestor, and this is Remei." He nodded to Tirello. "Now we're even."

"Nestor? As in, you two got married a while back? Even though Nestor's Nersallian?" Tirello licked his lips.

Nestor froze. They had gotten married on Tark — how had the news reached the belly of Gelion?

"Why would you ask that?" Remei said.

Tirello shrugged. "Don't worry; I don't think it's a bad thing. I heard about it when you moved here. News travels quickly." He scratched his stomach, looking down. "Say, did you do a full ceremony and everything?"

Nestor and Remei looked at each other. "Yes," they whispered.

"That's good to hear," Tirello mumbled. "Good to hear."

"Thanks again, Tirello." Nestor and Remei turned away, taking a few steps on the uneven brick floor.

"Remei," Tirello said, and she turned. "What kind of dress did you wear?"

"A blue gown," she said, glowing. She could feel the clasping broach against her sternum as though she were

Forging Friendship

By Elizabeth Woods

“So you’re the big deal from Medoc.”

Minerva turned to regard the slight, but powerful and poised presence who spoke to her in specifically modulated rel-to-pol address, with a significant superior emphasis. House Monitum braid marked the womanly contours of the speaker’s vest in intricately woven, non-repeating patterns representing DNA. Although she was only ten, the tight green leathers hugged trim hips and an athletic physique — a reminder that the Vrellish matured quickly.

Minerva pulled herself upright, straightened her flight clothes, and shook off the fatigue of her travel as only a youth of just over a dozen years can do. She brushed her mahogany hair behind her ears, wet her lips, took a deep breath, and phrased herself in careful pol-to-rel, “And you must be the infamous Di Nal, flight and sword sensation on Fountain Court, known to be the bane of all tutors in all the Reaches.”

Di Nal did not allow herself to smile. She seemed pleased Minerva accepted her highlord-to-seniorlord status and acknowledged her legendary resistance to Monatese scholastic training.

The pleasant moment did not last long. Di Nal shouldered past Minerva and walked toward the transport. The waiting escort gathered Minerva’s baggage and ushered her ahead. Minerva pulled herself in and sat as far from Di Nal as the vehicle would permit.

They rode in silence.

Minerva sighed as the scenery passed. *It's not like I've never been to Gelion before, she thought. We've spent lots of time visiting Gramma's house in the Apron District. We even lived here when I was little. She glanced over at her seat mate. Not a very friendly welcome. This does not feel like visiting Gramma.*

Di Nal sprang from the seat before the vehicle had settled to a stop, bolted out the door and stormed ahead of them. Her escort guided Minerva and her belongings into the care of a waiting servant. She was led through the immaculate front entrance, into a vestibule lined with four great wooden doors, all closed. They passed these and went into a long passageway, marked with several connecting hallways, and finally she was settled into a comfortable, east facing room.

"We were told you would appreciate something to remind you of the green world of Medoc," said the small, plump woman who had escorted her, as she opened two doors that led into a little, manicured garden.

"You are so kind. How wonderfully thoughtful," Minerva dropped all pronoun differentiation, hoping for an ally in a strange world. "What is your name?"

"I am Marika, Lady."

"Oh no, I'm no lady! Just call me Minerva, please. I'm here to study with Di Nal." Minerva laughed. She remembered that House Monitum had commoners in their employ. She looked more closely at the pudgy, friendly woman before her. Age lines were beginning to form where her mouth broke into a smile. "I don't think that is going to be quite as easy as I expected."

Marika waited, silent for several minutes.

Minerva explained. "My family and I are honored that I will be allowed to study in the great Monatese library. I still can't believe Liege Monitum himself invited me here!" She paused, debated with herself momentarily, shook her head. "But I also think he had his reasons."

The mighty House Monitum is the major, no, almost the sole business base for my family's mercantile enterprise, she reminded herself quickly, not to mention one of the most important of the eight highborn houses, and one of the oldest lines of Sevildom.

She smiled at the waiting servant, "I've heard about his niece, Di Nal, heir to the fortunes of this house." And Di Nal

knows that all too well. "Her reputation as a pilot prodigy is as well known in Princess Reach as in all Monitum. She stands unchallenged with the sword for her age."

She paused before she continued, "I think Liege Monitum would like her to face some challenge, perhaps a scholarly challenge." Again she paused, "I think I am here to offer that challenge."

Marika looked around to ensure they were alone. "You have a job ahead of you, you can't imagine. Usually she is away, flying with her uncle for Monatese business or to serve the Ava and his business. This idea she needs to be a scholar, well..."

Minerva waited for her to continue. "Well?"

Marika screwed up her eyes and mouth. "Well, the girl is more than smart enough, but to have her sit in one place for too long..." She shrugged and shook her head. "That girl is not meant to be still."

With that, Marika waved in resignation and left Minerva to appreciate what was to be her new home.

Minerva went to the small shelf beside her bed to unpack her favorite books and comforts of home.

She picked up a small table doily, held it to her nose, smelled the lavender of home, and closed her eyes. She was standing in the middle of their long covered porch. To the south stood the abundant vegetable garden; cabbages, squashes, enormous pumpkins, peas, varieties of beans and tomatoes. To the west, the long entrance walk was covered on both sides with brilliant summer flowers: especially her favorite, the black pansy.

She picked up a picture. Orion. She remembered when he made this wooden frame for her, the year he came to stay with them on Medoc. She blushed with young girl fantasy; her mother's cousin, they had called him Uncle Orion even though he was just those several years older than she was.

When her fingers traced the lines of the black pansy forever frozen inside the small frame, she let herself cry.

Days and yet another tutor later, Minerva knew Marika had spoken true. Di Nal was a gifted student, mathematical whiz and voracious reader with a prodigious memory.

A Safety of Crowds

by E. L. Chen

Jan's phone chimes. She fumbles for it on the bed and brings it up to her face, squinting at the bright display. GPS co-ordinates from London or New York or Vancouver—some city that she will only ever visit from the safety of her house—float on its glassy surface.

Jan scratches at her scarred shoulder blades, phone still cradled in her hand, and sits up. A stripe of sunlight lies across the bed sheets; the curtains have parted a finger's-width in the night. They will betray her in the end, she thinks. Anyone could be watching, even now at six in the morning. Charles could be crouched in the house across the street, clutching binoculars and hoping to add her to his life list.

A video, the message floating on her phone tells her. Would she like to see it? Yes, she would. Jan presses the play button. Bows her head over the phone. Feels unseen eyes raking the scar tissue on her hunched back. On the tiny glass screen, Jenna Crow waves and says hello.

The text message says to meet in front of the Metropolitan Opera at 3:30 p.m. Despite having had an hour's notice, about a hundred Crowheads show up, straggling off the street in threes and fours. They wear Jenna Crow's signifiers like a fairy's glamour: the black pixie shag wig, the blood clot-dark lipstick and Krishna-blue pancake makeup, the stick-on eyebrows, the oil slick feathers that sag off shoulders like an empty knapsack.

Passers-by eye them with mild curiosity, expecting them to break into a dance routine or some other PR stunt-worthy

spectacle. But the Crowheads only ripple and murmur, raising their phones and viewing each other with the facial recognition software in their cameras. One of them could be the real Jenna. *Are you Jenna Crow? Are you Jenna Crow?* She's played hide-and-seek in a Crowhead flash mob before, first in Cannes last month and then in Tokyo's Harajuku district a week later.

Data whizzes over wireless and satellite networks. Somewhere in New Jersey, a server farm churns through the information like a farmer tilling a field and fires back what it finds. It thinks they are all Jenna Crow because of the hair and makeup. The Crowheads laugh and grumble and check their phones again to see if there are any updates. There aren't. Their phones are blank, save for a push from the Met and the occasional friend suggestion: *Show this message to the box office and get 15% off tickets for this evening's performance. Skatrboi (male, 16, 2 mutual friends) also likes Hellboy comics, Canadian indie bands, and Jenna Crow.* It's 3:45.

At 3:46 someone shrieks and points upward.

As one, the Crowheads turn their heads toward the sky at the hurtling smear of iridescent tar. A hundred phones jiggle and twitch in a hundred outstretched hands, but she's moving too fast for anyone to lock on her.

With a loud *whoomph* her wings unfurl like a great black sail—and she hangs five feet in the air, toes pointed to the ground, as if suspended by wires. She has never landed any other way. Always she falls, never flies.

"We're *all* Jenna Crow," Jenna Crow announces, beaming. The virtual shutters of a hundred cameras click.

On the outskirts of the crowd, the only one not hysterical with joy, Charles Wyn Crowley bites ragged, dirty nails and fails to push his way to the front.

No one knows where Jenna Crow came from or who she was before an NYU student, gazing up from Ground Zero through his phone's camera, saw the superimposed footage of Jenna Crow falling from twin towers that weren't there. A year later and she's a cultural juggernaut, one of the most recognized young women in the world because of her wings. The gossip blogs whisper: are they real or aren't they? Oddly, her Frida Kahlo eyebrows receive as much skepticism as her wings.

She's made appearances, both real and virtual, on every continent. There is even supposed to be a video in Antarctica, although

no one has found it yet. Today, however, she's in Miami, being paid a lot of money to DJ a party that never happened.

The club is empty save for her crew and the sleepy-eyed manager who'd let them in. She perches on a barstool while the crew sets up, one petite leg demurely crossed over the other, her wings oozing over her back like motor oil. Her phone dangles in her hand, and occasionally there's the tap-tap-tap of long nails on a touch screen as she posts updates to her stream. Today's plain white T-shirt and innocuous blue jeans are sponsored by Abercrombie & Fitch; she can't remember whose black stilettos she's wearing but she's sure her fans will figure it out with image recognition. The T-shirt is artfully torn to accommodate her wings and publicize Abercrombie & Fitch's new line of distressed tees.

Wendy shows up a half hour later than everyone else, bringing breakfast and a stranger. Jenna freezes when she sees the stocky man with the chunky black-framed glasses. Her feathers shiver. They will give her away in the end, she thinks.

Wendy hands her a coffee and says, "Ivan had to fly back to Portland, his mother's in the hospital." Ivan is their video director. "This is Tim."

Jenna lifts up her phone and views him through the camera. He smiles nervously. On the phone's screen, a carousel of info-bubbles pop up around Tim's head: *Tim McKenzie a.k.a. tim_mc, TimmyMac, The Kenzer. 3 mutual friends. Male, 23, married to Keisha Porter McKenzie. View Tim's profile. View Tim's website. View Tim's stream. View photos of Tim. View videos of Tim. Send Tim a message.*

Wendy (*Wen Yi Lam a.k.a. wendilicious, CrowHandlr. 107 mutual friends*) clamps her hands firmly on Tim's shoulders, perhaps to give him confidence, perhaps to prevent him from running. Jenna never knows how someone will react when meeting her in the flesh. "I've worked with Tim before," Wendy says.

Unable to help himself, Tim reaches out to touch Jenna's wings. She smiles. They can never help themselves. "Nuh-uh," she says. She slaps his hand away. In the viewfinder of her phone, his face turns red.

"Sorry, they look so real," he says.

"They *are* real." She raises one of her famous Frida Kahlo eyebrows behind the phone at Wendy. Wendy shrugs.

Tim flushes again. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Everyone thinks they're fake." Jenna puts down the phone and extends her hand. "Welcome to the House of Crow, Timmy Mac. Shall we get started?"

Fragile Things

by Amanda Sun

There are only two news crews this morning, so after I turn out the workhorses and feed the unicorn, I might actually make it to the bus before it pulls away. Maybe.

I take a bite out of the stale bagel Dad's left out on the counter and slug down my glass of orange juice. It makes a sticky ring on the table when I clank the glass down and hoist my backpack over one shoulder.

I stand in front of the chipped green door a moment, catching my breath before I have to go out there.

"Two cups of bran!" Dad hollers down the stairs. His voice is slurred, but I can't tell if it's from sleep or booze.

You think he'd know by now that I know how much to feed the friggen' Frankengoat.

I squelch the ugly door inward and press on the hinges of the screen. I head for the barn, keeping my head down so I don't make eye contact with the reporters out front. The more aggressive ones used to follow me from house to barn, but since Dad put out the NO TRESPASSING and BEWARE OF DOG signs, the reporters have lost their nerve. Too bad they don't realize the dog is a ten-inch high Chihuahua named Paris. Dad's girlfriend has a dumb sense of humor.

My fingers slip into my pocket for the key to the side door of the barn. I jiggle the padlock on the door, listening for any fancy-loafed footsteps that might thunder up the dirt path. But they don't and I pull the rusty lock open, slipping into the musty darkness of the stable.

The Clydesdales whinny in the stuffy air and once my eyes adjust, I see Bill's velvet snout sticking out above the grimy stall door, his nostrils huge and sniffing. I want to reach out and feel the greasy silkiness of his muzzle, but I'm late enough as it is, and I can't miss another English class or Ms. Jung will seriously murder me.

I climb the ladder up to the loft and pull down two flakes of hay, the jagged ends sticking my fingers like sharp needles. I toss them into the other stalls and listen to the sounds of munching. I have to go into the storeroom for the lead, and I reach above Bill's door and clip it onto the halter ring, but not before his big-arse workhorse muzzle reaches out and slimes the arm of my jacket.

"Agh!" I stare at him with fury in my eyes, but he just keeps blowing his warm breath all over me. "Dumb horse."

I check my watch. There's no way I'm gonna make it now.

I shovel two scoops of bran into a black rubber pail and carry it to the stall at the very end where the unicorn is practically gleaming in the dust and woodchips.

He lifts his head to look at me briefly, his vacant eyes staring at mine, and when he sees the little cloud of dust as the grain pours into his bucket, he figures it's worth walking across the stall for.

It's not like I hate him. I'm just sick of the attention a defective horse gets. It's like those puppies born with three heads—you wouldn't think that's a real Cerberus, so what the heck makes the unicorn more than a deformed horse with a goat antler twisting out of its head?

He looks like the dog from *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*.

I check my watch again. *Frig*. I head for the door, locking the padlock behind me and shoving the key deep into my pocket. I shoulder my backpack and look down.

Always look down. That way, you won't feel like crap for not answering them.

I hear the feet pounding in the dirt as I push toward the street. They're coming now. They're not going to hold back.

"Alex, can you tell us how the unicorn is doing today?"

I hate when they call me by name. Like they know me or something.

"Have you received any calls today regarding this week's miracles? Can you fill us in?"

No one ever believes me about the Frankengoat. There aren't any miracles, but Dad says it's better for business if no one knows

that. So we just keep our mouths shut and people keep making stuff up.

"Alex," and this time it's a woman's voice, and I know she's that pushy reporter that got her pumps stuck in the mud last week. "Has the unicorn healed anyone today? Is it true you're trying to breed him?"

I snort a little at that one. I can't help it. Like we'd want double the attention. Although we're pretty sure he's sterile, anyway. Mules usually are.

"Mr. Wheeler, can you make a statement about the Wiccan priestess visiting the premises this coming weekend? Are you expecting any unusual results?"

Bunch of morons. Do they really believe this crap, or does it just make good news?

I can hear the engine of the school bus. My eyes flick up from the ground, from my scruffy red-and-white sneakers to the long black trousers the crews are wearing. A couple of men hoist heavy black cameras on their shoulders while the reporters shove microphones at my throat. Through them all I can see the mustard-yellow school bus rumbling from side to side as it snorts forward.

Crap.

I push my way past the news crews, squeezing my backpack straps with both hands as I race after the bus.

"Mr. Wheeler!"

The school bus isn't stopping, so I run up alongside it and bang on the side of the bus.

"Mr. Wheeler, could you let us in to take photos of the unicorn?"

I slap the metal with my palms over and over until the bus screeches and jumps back on its lousy brakes. The little flashing stop sign stretches out to the side, and I run to the door opening wide to swallow me in.

The reporters rush right up behind me, and the doors close in front of their microphones. The bus jerks forward and I climb up the steps to the driver.

I watch the news crews drift away through the cloudy glass windows.

"That stuff's crap, man," says Riley, lifting a cigarette to his lips. We're standing a foot off school grounds so the teachers can watch us smoke but can't do a thing about it. "How can you stand it?"

I shrug and flick my lighter until the end of the cigarette flares red.

Just Dance

by Erika Holt

A shrill keening burst into Marie-Lunie's head as the power needles she'd pressed into the ground around her house warned of an intruder.

"Uuuh!" she growled to no one. Reluctantly she set aside her father's dusty notebook before extinguishing the array of lanterns. Whoever was here had likely already seen the candles flickering through the tower's stained-glass windows, but she wasn't going to make things any easier for them.

Looking out with her left eye—her regular eye—she scanned the garden below. No shadowy figures lurked. But the overgrown caragana, honeysuckle, and cotoneasters offered many hiding places, and there could be *other* things about, things not visible to her left eye. She flipped up the patch over her right socket, now filled with the crimson glass orb she'd found six months earlier on a tiny tripod hidden behind her father's books.

Why she'd thought to try the thing as a surrogate eye, she didn't know. Intuition maybe, or an inherited sense of curiosity. It'd taken some doing to insert the delicate thing into her tight socket, empty since birth, but she'd managed. When the first new images had popped into view, Marie wondered why her father hadn't said anything, hadn't offered this wondrous bulb to give her back full sight. Then she'd looked outside and understood.

Peering outside now, the world seemed to throb and stretch, as though through a web of living blood—the Otherrealm, a place that existed both within and apart from reality. But nothing

unnatural stirred, no ghouls seemed to be about at the moment. She flipped the patch down.

So, who was here? The house was at the end of the road on the outskirts of town, not on anyone's way anywhere. It'd been at least three months since an RCMP officer or Concerned Teacher had ventured near the place, and she'd added five more needles to the perimeter since then, imbuing them with strong *stay away* urgings that had, so far, worked. Whoever it was that crept through her garden must've come here *specifically*, with a steely determination to make it past her defenses.

Tip-toeing through clutter on the floor, Marie-Lunie settled into her father's oversized armchair and curled in her limbs like a spider. She listened.

The doorbell gonged, bouncing around the dusty house like a racquet ball. Light knocking followed. A pause, and then a loud creak as the heavy front door opened. Gutsy. If the intruder said anything, their voice was lost somewhere in the two floors between.

Marie-Lunie reached for her father's slingshot and wedged it in the cushion crack, then tugged on a tattered top hat over her mass of frizzy black hair and slipped into fingerless gloves. Though she doubted very much it was a ghoul—ghouls didn't respect social niceties such as doorbells—she fastened her silver listening trumpet onto her right ear.

Several moments of quiet before a bang and thud, as someone tripped in the darkness. Marie huffed and removed the trumpet. Ghouls didn't trip.

A slow clomp, clomp, clomp, as the intruder mounted the stairs.

Then, "Hello? Marie? I know you're here."

A female voice, young and vaguely familiar.

"Are you up there? Ow!"

It sounded like she'd kicked something. Hard. Marie's lips twitched.

Finally the footsteps, now limping, arrived just outside the tower door.

An LED flashlight swung around the octagonal room and pinned Marie, blinding her good eye.

"Oh! There you are! What are you doing?"

"Who, me?" Marie-Lunie replied, squinting. "Why, I'm just in the swimming leg of an iron-man triathlon, thanks for asking. Now get that light out of my face and get lost."

The girl fumbled to flick the flashlight off.

It finally struck Marie who the owner of the voice was: Kelbee Worth, the ringletty-haired treasurer of the high school yearbook committee. One of Alice Eastwood's giggling followers who used to laugh when Alice had called her "patchwork," mocking both Marie's old patch and that its standard-issue skin coloring was so much lighter than her own. Marie hadn't seen Kelbee in the year since Marie had ditched out on school and hadn't talked to her for perhaps three years before that. Good riddance, she'd thought.

She was tempted to ask what Kelbee wanted but resisted the urge, letting the girl squirm in the silence. Marie was used to silence.

"Can we turn on some lights or something? You're creeping me out."

When Marie didn't stir, Kelbee hunted around for the switch. A single, wooden elephant lamp buzzed into illumination, casting a wan glow over the large, tangled tower room.

"So, you're a hoarder now?" Kelbee wrinkled her nose as she surveyed teetering piles of books, papers and drawings, garbage bags spilling clothes and shoes, various knick-knacks and gadgets either collected on exotic trips or crafted by hand—all of Marie's father's things pillaged from the rest of the house and gathered in the tower room where she'd, for the most part, holed-up.

"How can you stand all this junk? It smells musty." The pretty nose wrinkled further.

"Shut. Up. And get out."

The edge in Marie's tone was enough to wipe the smug judgment from Kelbee's face. But the girl's gummy pink lip gloss and shiny metal braces still made Marie want to kick her in the shin. Hard.

"I said OUT." Marie slowly raised the slingshot and stretched the band back. Of course, she wouldn't shoot, but Kelbee didn't know that.

Kelbee stumbled backward, fell. The impact cracked her egg-shell veneer and she burst into tears. "My dad's gone, Marie! You have to help me!"

Marie studied the sling while listening to Kelbee sniffle and whimper. Finally she said, "What about your mom?" Marie hadn't had a mom to rely on when her dad went missing. The mysterious woman had left when she was just an infant.

"That's really mean, Marie, even for you." Kelbee was sitting now, blue mascara streaking her pale cheeks. An improvement in Marie's books. Kinda gothic.

"My mom died in grade eight, remember? Uterine cancer. She was in the hospital for, like, seven months."

Adaptation

by Francine P. Lewis

- i.
from your origin, find your way
along the x-axis
eyes down
to divine the processes of earth
- ii.
getting from here to there
is all that counts
in life

do the number of steps matter
across the Plains of the Serengeti
- iii.
from your origin, find your way
along the y-axis
eyes up
to divine the processes on the horizon
- iv.
footsteps preserved in wet mud
marching up through the strata
as one aeon supplants the next,
the beauty of Descartes

Saving the Dead, or The Diary of an Undertaker's Apprentice

by Jennifer Greylyn

Saturday, April 20, 1912

12:45 *p.m.* Three days out from Halifax and we're nearly there. I can feel it. The tremors have become constant and I can almost hear voices. I told Uncle John and he wanted to tell Captain Larnder, but praise God, George intervened. He hasn't lost all his sense in the excitement. Then the point became moot as we received a wireless message from another steamer in the vicinity, reporting three bergs and many bodies northeast of our position.

We'll arrive by nightfall, the captain predicts. My older relations both smile. They don't seem to notice (Uncle John) or care (my second cousin George) how that causes the crew to give us uneasy looks.

Rough men in their heavy scarves and oilskins, stubbly faces hardened and fissured by the bitter winds and cold fogs of the North Atlantic, they're still unnerved by what we're going to encounter. They don't understand how Uncle John can be so joyful, striding on deck freshly shaven and beaming every morning. Nor do they like that George, who began the trip as solemn as the headstones he carves when he's not lending a hand at Grandfather's funeral home, now has an anticipatory gleam in his eye.

As for me, they deplore my youth and physical condition. They shake their heads and mutter, "It ain't right. 'Tis no place for a boy. Especially one who's sickly." They conveniently ignore two facts: some of them are only a little older than my fifteen years and, had they met me in other circumstances, they'd think me perfectly sound. One might hope they'd at least recognize my pallor and dark-circled eyes as signs of how seriously I take this enterprise. But no, their disapproval is almost palpable, as strong as my mother's was.

The crew, at least, should understand that we are simply doing our duty as men. The *Mackay-Bennett* is ordinarily a cable ship, laying and repairing the undersea telegraph cables that connect the New World with the Old. But did she hesitate when an agent for the White Star Line wanted to hire her to investigate the site of the disaster, now six days past?

Of course not. Captain Larnder and all his men knew it was their Christian duty. Just as I knew it was mine when Uncle John asked me to accompany him and George. It was an opportunity everyone else in the family business was clamoring for. I couldn't refuse, although I hardly consider it the height of my career, as Uncle John does, or my chance at immortality, as George believes.

I don't need the world to remember my name. The dead already know who I am. They've been calling to me for almost a week now. I must help them. I must.

8:00 p.m. We've arrived and it's worse than I imagined. I'm bundled up in three wool sweaters and an overcoat, but I'm still quaking so hard I can barely sit up in my bunk. George keeps stealing concerned glances at me while he and Uncle John play cards, but neither of them feels what I do.

There are just so many! One reads the numbers bandied about by the newspapers—maybe over 1500 dead—and one can't conceive of it. But to be here where it happened...

I force my hand to be steady with the other. My words are still no better than a scrawl. But I need to record this. The family needs to know what I'm experiencing.

A manifestation of our banshee blood, Uncle John insists, believing that old story about why we're all so drawn to death. Mother's more modern. She's studied spiritualism and thinks it's to do with our souls. Something about etheric vibrations. I wonder if she'll have forgiven me by the time we get back...

Dear Lord, I thought I was ready for this. I've known the victims of fire. Murder even. But it wasn't like this. My skin is throbbing. My skull is about to crack. They don't understand that Captain Larnder won't allow the recovery effort to begin until daybreak and we can see.

For now, even to me looking through our little window, they're just broken glimpses in the cloudy moonlight. Tiny dark shapes appearing and then disappearing among the equally dark but bigger shapes of debris and the glinting islands of ice. But they don't know that. They only know their own need.

How will I ever make it through the night?

Sunday, April 21

10:30 a.m. My head aches, but I welcome it. It blurs their whispers and gives me an excuse Uncle John will accept to take a break.

After listening to me moan and thrash in my bunk above him last night, George kindly offered to switch places with me. "We can't have you falling and killing yourself," he whispered with his typical mordant humor. "We've enough bodies already to deal with."

My burst of frenzied laughter drew a troubled frown from George and woke Uncle John across our small room. Instantly alert, he took one look at my haggard face in the orange flicker of the kerosene lamp we'd turned low on the table between the two sets of bunks and sent George to beg some laudanum from the doctor.

Any other time, I'd have bristled at his high-handedness. We'd already had words about this. Uncle John knew Mother had given me the bitter, powerful soporific when I was a child and my gift first appeared. I'd told him I didn't need it anymore, but that was back in Halifax. When George returned with a familiar brown-glass bottle, I took a long swig from it without waiting for a spoon. It succeeded in putting me to sleep, but I still dreamed.

I relived our treacherous passage through the ice yesterday, dodging growlers and bergies as the sun sank in the sky. Three times, a huge iceberg loomed, each bigger than the one before. The last was the size of a mountain, streaked with the fires of sunset. I quailed before its terrible beauty, unable to escape, the voices filling me with their fear and confusion.

It was a relief to wake to George's hand on my shoulder and hear Uncle John whistling as he scrubbed his face. Our little ship was clearly still intact. It echoed with the booted footfalls of the crew, already about their duties even though it remained dark outside. I wondered if, on some level, they were infected by the

restlessness of the dead too, or if they simply wanted to get on with our grim task.

Dressed but unable to face the breakfast my two relations enjoyed, I went out on deck, clung to the rail and fought the tremors. Anyone watching would think I was still not accustomed to the frequent rolling of the ship. That was true, but the tremors made my lack of equilibrium worse. Today, though, there was a different quality to them. I felt like the sky, filling with light as dawn finally came. Filling with hope and anticipation.

But there was no warmth. My breath whitened the brightening air before the wind scattered it. The cruel, leaden ocean slapped the sides of the ship. I exchanged nods with many of the crew, but no one said "Good morning". It wasn't a day for that. Uncle John and George joined me as the first boat was being lowered and I felt urgent tugs in a dozen different directions.

Soon, it was possible to see the nearest bodies bobbing head-up amid the grey swells, a fact remarked upon by Captain Larnder when he paused beside us in his habitual pacing. "Astonishing," was his opening comment, a weathered hand rubbing his gaunt, bearded cheeks. "I can't believe they're still afloat. They must be waterlogged, but they wait for us as peaceful as sleepers."

He lapsed into pensive silence, as if to invite a reply, but none of us offered one. I kept my eyes fixed on the boat, as though fascinated by the way three of the men braced themselves against one side and kept the vessel balanced while the other two leaned far over the other side and fished out a body with a long boathook. I winced to think of its sharp point piercing flesh but felt instead a profound sigh gust through me as the body was dragged aboard.

I must have made some noise of my own because Larnder glanced at me, then at George who was studiously blank-faced and lastly at Uncle John who wore a strange, satisfied expression. The captain shook his head and muttered. "It must be the lifebelts. As far as I can tell, they're all wearing one. Not that it did them any good, poor blighters. Good day, gentlemen."

Barely had he left us when Uncle John exclaimed, "I knew I was right to bring you, lad. They *are* waiting for something, aren't they? They're waiting for you."

I flinched and George shot a wary look in Larnder's direction. Fortunately, he was out of earshot, deep in conversation with the men about to drop a second boat. George admonished my uncle "Careful, John", but Uncle John wasn't listening.

Feral

by Nicole Luiken

Half-hidden in the trees, a werewolf paced her.

A hot ball of shame and anger lodged in Chloe's throat as she ran along the dirt track through the forest. Bad enough Coach Wharton had tried to excuse her from training on the grounds that she couldn't keep up with the others, but now he'd assigned her a baby-sitter?

Humiliated, she put her head down and increased her pace until her feet flew down the trail, crunching on bright yellow leaves, until her lungs heaved and a bright stitch of pain appeared in her side. But she neither lost her shadow nor caught up with the rest of the Pack. Still she kept running, pushing her body to the limits. Werewolf limits. Chloe had all the extra werewolf strength and agility, her senses were keener than her townie classmates and she'd had no difficulty qualifying for Track. But her fifteenth and sixteenth birthdays had passed, and she still had not Changed.

All the other teens in her age group had. Even Judy, the smallest and most nervous of them all, had Changed three full moons ago.

Chloe couldn't decide which was worse, the sympathy in Judy's eyes or the veiled contempt in Coach Wharton's. Both rubbed her ego raw. Chloe was used to being the leader of their little pack and now everyone was Dominant to her. Last week she'd heard Coach Wharton tell Dean she might never Change because she was too afraid of the pain. Her! Who'd never so much as whimpered during one of Coach's brutal three-hour training hikes.

And now that contempt had spread to the other kids. They closed their shoulders against her when she came up, as if she were a townie.

Tears burned in Chloe's eyes, blurring the trail. She misstepped on a root and twisted her ankle. The anger raging inside her made her want to keep running through the pain, but that was stupid. She stopped and sat on a fallen log at the side of the trail and drank some of the water in her squeeze bottle. Her ankle would be fine in a moment. Werewolves healed fast. So fast it took something big to kill them, like the fiery plane wreck that had killed the Jennings family.

How could she have all the werewolf gifts and not the ability to Change? Her mom kept telling her to be patient, that there were records of werewolves who hadn't had their first Change until they were nineteen, but Chloe could smell the acrid scent of worry masking her words. Because there were also records of Duds, werewolves by heritage who were unable to Change.

Chloe's fists clenched. She was not a Dud. Glaring, she looked up—and caught the yellow eyes of a wolf staring out at her from some underbrush.

In a second, Chloe was on her feet, temper pumping through her. "Cut it out. I can see you, you know. I'm not blind." Was this some kind of test? Did they think they could scare her? She'd grown up in the Pack.

The wolf faded back into the brush and she sat back down, feeling satisfied. But in five minutes when she resumed her run, the wolf started tailing her again. Chloe pretended not to notice, waiting until her pursuer got a little too close, then suddenly she reversed direction and cut left into the trees.

A thick stand of pine kept the wolf from retreating. He hunched his shoulders and growled at her. Chloe stopped in surprise as she got a good look at the wolf's coloring: creamy chest and underbelly, salt and pepper gray back and tail. Who was it? She knew all the wolves in their Pack and no one had coloring like this one.

The wolf couldn't be wild. Natural wolves stayed far, far away from Pack territory unless they were sick, and this one was just standing there, staring at her. Chloe sniffed hard—instead of the usual Pack scent, the wolf smelled of wildness, musk and a hint of iron—but she didn't catch the distinctive scent of disease. All the Pack kids got rabies shots as a matter of course, but Chloe's dad had made sure she could recognize distemper and other canine ills.

The werewolf's pelt lacked the shine of a healthy wolf, and she could see its ribs. It was skinny and not full-grown. A rush of anger filled Chloe. "That better not be you, Gail," she threatened. Judy's sister was thirteen, a not unheard of age for the Change, but...

She took a step forward. The wolf snapped its teeth at her and broke left past her into the trees.

Instinct had her give chase, but she stopped after a few steps because—hello?—four legs were always going to be faster than two.

"Chloe, what's bothering you?" her mom asked.

Chloe slouched down in her chair and sighed. She might as well tell her; her mom was like a pit bull when in pursuit of a secret. "Coach says I can't Change because I'm a coward."

"Oh, did he?" her mother said in sudden cold fury.

"What's that?" her dad asked, wandering into the kitchen.

"Conrad Wharton, in his infinite wisdom and experience, thinks Chloe's delay in Changing is due to cowardice," her mother said. From the look in her eye, she and Coach Wharton would be having a little chat soon. Chloe's mom Changed into a small brown wolf and Wharton outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds and ranked third in Pack hierarchy, but Chloe would bet on her mom. Chloe had long suspected her mom could have ranked much higher if she'd cared enough to assert herself.

Her dad snorted. "Our Chloe?" He ruffled her hair before snagging a cookie. "If anything, she has the opposite problem. She's not scared enough."

A warm feeling grew in Chloe's chest. She'd been getting more and more anxious about the Change as the months dragged on, but she'd never been afraid of Changing itself. Something inside her relaxed at the realization.

She ate a cookie and her mind circled back to the other thing that had been bothering her. "Dad, are there any werewolves visiting from other Packs right now?"

Except for a certain number of matings to keep their Pack from getting too inbred, the other Packs didn't have much to do with each other. Packs were territorial. The nearest Pack Chloe knew about was three hundred kilometers away in British Columbia.

"No. Why?"

"Oh, I thought I saw a strange wolf this afternoon. I was probably just mistaken." Chloe deliberately made it sound as if she'd merely glimpsed a strange wolf in the distance.

A + Brain

by Katrina Nicholson

I'm really looking forward to college. From my brother's Facebook posts, I can tell that there are more parties to go to than he can keep up with. The problem is my grades. It's the end of September in my senior year, and I still haven't earned better than a C- in anything. My dad says if I want to go to college, I have two options:

1. work harder,
2. brain replacement surgery.

I choose the surgery.

I'm feeling very understimulated, David.

I hear the stern voice inside my head and I almost drop my controller. On screen, the Master Chief freezes in mid-charge and gets owned by some noob.

The doctor had said to expect some disorientation, but he'd never mentioned hearing voices.

I stop to listen. It doesn't come back.

I decide that it was a side effect of the pain left over from the surgery.

The pain is an angry line that stretches across my forehead, over my ears, and meets at the back of my skull. It's from where they lifted the top of my head off to take out my crappy C-brain and replace it with a brand new A+ brain. It's satisfaction guaranteed by Instant Intellectuals of America Inc.

I think I'm unsatisfied. My new brain won't leave me alone.

Your spatial perception is adequately developed, my new brain insists as I play Xbox. It's time to abandon visual entertainments and move on to more challenging and academically relevant endeavors.

"Adequate?"

"Relevant?"

"Endeavors?"

It's really weird when your own brain uses words you don't understand.

Of course, as soon as I think that, my new brain explains: *I mean you've played enough video games. It's time to do homework.*

I thought the point of having a fancy new brain was that you didn't have to do homework anymore.

I ignore my brain and start a new game.

I end up doing homework anyway.

My brain was nagging me constantly while I played. It was driving me crazy. I started looking around the room for something I could hit it with and my eyes landed on my math textbook.

And my brain went silent.

As long as I'm looking at the book, my brain is quiet.

So I'm spending my weekend on algebra instead of playing paintball with my friends.

I want my parents' money back.

It's impossible to have fun online anymore. Every time I log onto the computer, I end up on the wrong website:

www.facebook.com becomes the Harvard Political Review,

www.youtube.com becomes NASA's Hubble Telescope Page,

www.twitter.com becomes National Public Radio.

It's annoying, but it's even more annoying to listen to my brain say things like: *This is shallow, topical material, David. You can do better*, every time I try to watch a video of a guy getting smashed in the nuts with a wrecking ball.

Too bad. I really wanted to see that video.

In their Facebook statuses, my friends are complaining about how the upcoming math quiz is getting in the way of their Facebook time. I don't comment.

I'm too busy actually studying.

My parents beam at me when I bring them the results of the math quiz.

B. I'm improving.

Well, my grades are improving anyway. With no *Halo* and no Facebook and no YouTube, I'm pretty much miserable. I can't even watch TV anymore. At least not anything good. The only channels my brain approves of are the ones that show documentaries. And the worst part is how excited my brain gets whenever I see a book.

I hate reading.

I do a lot of reading now, even outside of my school work. It's the only way to get my new brain to shut up. It's easier just to do what it wants than to listen to it nag.

Did you know that some types of frogs can change sexes if they can't find anyone to mate with? Or that Alpha Centauri is the closest star to Earth apart from the sun? Or that impressionist paintings are more about capturing the feeling of something than just how it looks? Or that guys my age in the 1940s had to shoot real Nazis? Because I do, now.

My friends don't really understand. They've stopped texting "whr r u? prty @ joez. b their" because I only message them back to correct their grammar. They've stopped sitting with me at lunch because I keep asking them things like what they think about the debates last night on C-SPAN or whether they want to go see the local theater company's performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

I can't help it. My brain thinks Tennessee Williams and his writings are more important than Jenny Williams and her date for the prom.

There's nothing left in the house to read. I've read all my dad's computer books, all my mom's detective novels, even the manuals for the television remote and the microwave and the printer that hasn't worked for two years. It's like I'm hungry and there's nothing to eat. I mean, it's like my brain is.

My dad just about falls over when I ask for a subscription to *National Geographic* for my birthday. The paper version. My mom suspects it's because there might be topless natives in it. But I tell them it's because we're woefully undereducated about the anthropogenic effects on the biosphere. That's something my brain said one time while it was switching the TV away from *Jersey Shore* and onto *Daily Planet*.

The Road of Good Intentions

by Cat McDonald

Lee was too young to know why they called it the Road of Good Intentions and quite nearly too human to walk it. Three-quarters human, which is a lot. But, regardless, he found himself walking, one foot directly and precisely in front of the other, on the thin balance-beam chain of hatred.

A million such chains, perhaps more, hung in every direction all around him, further below, above and to all sides of him than he could possibly see. They slung in easy catenaries from one “core” to the other—from one human heart to another—in a rattling network of ill-will. Lee didn’t know what the cores looked like; he could never see them through the tangle of connecting chains.

No one had ever seen the end of the Road, although they speculated about what was at its very bottom. As for Lee, he was beginning to think that it didn’t have a bottom at all. If not for the fact that the falling lights always came from above, he wouldn’t even be sure that the Road had an “up” or a “down”. He couldn’t see any colors anywhere but a mottled shade of streaky orange-gray, a forest of chains so infinite that they became everything.

Here, for once, he looked too human. In the real world, his pupils were always too wide even in midday glare, but at least he had pupils at all. Outside the Road, his skin was a gray tan almost too ashen to be human, but at least he had skin. It covered his whole body, too, and that was something. Outside, his fine

movements were too quick and jerky; he had to slowly, patiently flick open his lighter, carefully retrieve his cigarettes. People didn't like to see his hand jump and twitch too fast to follow but luckily, down here, that kind of thing was expected.

From every chain, from every direction, he could hear voices: howling voices, shrieking voices, whispering voices, nothing but the voices of the Travelers. Ordinarily, he liked the sound.

His foot settled unevenly over a round link in the chain. His heart dropped and lifted like a bird in a hurricane as his body stumbled and, somehow, found its footing again.

If he fell, he'd have to find out what was down there, or else risk materializing in some completely random place in the real world which was, acre for acre, mostly barren ocean. He was on a clock, an important one, so he didn't have time to get lost even if he didn't drown.

Lee had walked much larger, thicker chains than this. Almost all the chains he walked were as wide as a sidewalk, some even as thick as a highway; whoever had spun this chain, it wasn't personal. That was a start. So, Marcel was probably right; it was probably a hired man. Lee had never seen chains this careless and casual between people who genuinely hated each other.

At one end of the chain, far into a distance that swallowed every Traveler's scream of rage, was the Summoner who had called this down on them. At the other end, about fifteen minutes behind—maybe more, if time existed on the Road—was his friend lying in bed, pale and hollow. Luckily for Lee, there was still time. Regardless of what novice Summoners believe, Travelers never killed the targets; they waited for the targets to kill themselves.

Marcel had a large family: six brothers and two sisters. A lot of fuel for the nightmares that had been eating him alive for a week before he and Lee finally realized what was going on. Lee didn't envy him the nightmares that locked him in a gravestone sleep, unable to wake up or even cry out for help. Eventually, they would completely devour him.

As soon as they had guessed what was responsible, Lee unraveled himself, tore himself open at the seams, dissolved into air and found himself sewn back together to the right pattern on the chains of the Road of Good Intentions. He listened to the howling and tried to isolate the particular sound of a Traveler he had probably never even met.

Without anything to hold on to, the way became difficult. How did anyone expect him to walk along such a weak, narrow hatred?

It sagged under his feet the further he got from his friend, more like a tightrope now than a balance beam. Ballroom dance had given him good enough balance for a beam, but he had never been a circus acrobat. No amount of Tango would prepare him for a balance beam that wasn't even stiff enough to keep still under his footsteps.

In the real world, or the solid world, or however he wanted to think of the world he normally inhabited as compared to the Road, there wasn't much time left. If he had known a hit would be this hard to trace, he would have tried to trace the hate-chain that bound Marcel and the man who had hired the Summoner in the first place. From there, he could have just done things the easy way: cut the answer out of someone, found the Summoner, solved the problem. But they had only the vaguest idea at the time that it hadn't been personal. Lee had expected just to be able to run along a nice wide chain to the other core, re-materialize next to someone who hated his friend enough to summon a creature to drive him to suicide and solve the problem. With a knife, if need be—Lee completely expected that need. Having to solve his problems with blades was really nothing new.

Beneath Lee, the chain started to shudder. At first, he could barely feel it, a twitching under the soles of his feet that could have been anything, including the links of the chain grating against each other, so he kept walking, one foot in front of the other. But the shuddering worsened, grew into a tremble that sent the links clicking and ringing all down the line into the distance.

Marcel had a large family, including two older sisters. The older of the two, a Necromancer, was a strange, unsociable lady with a threatening presence. Lee barely knew her even though he and Marcel had been friends since childhood; all he could remember was that she kept a number of hallucinogens in her garden.

Estelle, the younger of the two, had hated Lee for as long as he could remember. They never spoke, and Marcel knew better than to keep his not-entirely-human best friend and his demon-hunting sister in the same room.

"Oh no, Marcel, no. Please no," Lee murmured, as quietly as he could to keep his voice buried deep in the din of the Road. If Marcel knew that he was being attacked from here, would he go and speak with Estelle? Would she have him sleep in a protective chalk circle to lock out the world's many evil spirits?

Did she know what those things did on the Road?

The Windup Heiress

by Leslie Brown

When Aliantha Mercit was betrothed to Hasaidi Odi, no one actually consulted Aliantha on the matter. When she questioned her father, she received a blank look.

"The House of Odi supplies all the crystal circuitry for our windups. Who else would I ally us with?"

Aliantha's mother was slightly more sympathetic but just as obdurate.

"It's the way things are done, my dear."

Since Echo had only been settled for one hundred and fifty years, any traditions were arbitrary creations of the wealthy people who lived there, and Aliantha did not care for a custom that had her marrying at the tender age of seventeen. She sequestered herself in her lab and tinkered with the genetic makeup of dormice for eight hours until her parents had the lock blasted off her door.

"All the arrangements have been made," Aliantha's mother said as she walked beside her daughter as she was dragged by two windup servitors. "Your father has some wonderful wedding presents for you and all that remains, is to hire a companion from the Spaceport labor pool to escort you to the Odi Estate."

"Why can't you just send me with a servitor?" Aliantha muttered and then repeated her mother's answer along with her:

"It's tradition."

Aliantha's mother gave her the same gift her own mother had given her: a strip of filter paper with three drops of her

mother's blood on it, DNA proof that Aliantha came from an unbroken matrimonial line originating with the first colonists of Echo. Aliantha jammed it impatiently into the carry pouch around her neck.

The Mercit family's sole human servant, known only as The Butler, went to the Spaceport and hired a companion, a young woman of Aliantha's age. Tiza came with a stony expression and an indeterminate figure concealed by a shapeless Mercit jumpsuit. However, The Butler, whom everyone in the Mercit family trusted implicitly, seemed very satisfied with his hire. On the marble floor of the House foyer were three travel cases. One was the symbolic overnight bag that Aliantha was to carry to the doors of the Odi mansion; the other two were her father's gifts. He came out of hiding to bid farewell to her.

"My dear," he said, not meeting Aliantha's gaze, "I've designed a new type of windup for you as a wedding present." He pushed a button on each case, and the small boxes expanded and blossomed into two windup horses, one white and one black.

"This is yours," her father said, tapping the white horse on its forehead. The eyes blinked and swiveled toward Aliantha.

"Good afternoon, Miss Aliantha," it said in a mild voice. "My designation is Falada."

"Charming," Aliantha told her father. "Just what I need: a horse."

"It's still a prototype," her father said twitching nervously.

"And the black one?"

"Less sophisticated, with no verbal interaction chip, but something for your handmaid to ride."

Since both her parents were devout agoraphobics, it was a given that neither would be attending her wedding or even be capable of watching a live broadcast. Aliantha allowed herself to be packed up with Tiza and transported to the magneto-rail station at the edge of Mercit Island. Glumly, she watched the train approach along the viaduct that stretched out over the inland sea. The Butler placed Tiza and the bags into their private coach and bid them farewell.

"Well, that's that," Aliantha huffed as she flung herself into a luxurious seat opposite her handmaiden.

"You don't seem pleased," remarked Tiza. Aliantha was startled that a servitor had spoken without being asked a direct question until she remembered Tiza was human.

"I'm not. This marriage is pointless. The House of Odi will always sell circuitry to the House of Mercit whether their children are allied or not. I can only hope this Hasaidi Odi is as sexless as the rest of his generation and will leave me alone after a few children."

"Is there no love in Family marriages, then?" asked Tiza.

"Occasionally, but it is discouraged."

"Have you even met this man?"

"No. We don't even know what each other looks like. It's traditional."

"Do you want me to get you anything to eat?" Tiza asked, suddenly helpful.

"A protein bar would be nice," replied Aliantha. "Use this credit band. It's handy for small purchases." Tiza was back shortly with several packages of protein bars. They chewed in silence.

Later, a soft chime woke them from their naps.

"We're at Odi Island," Aliantha said, her voice hoarse from sleep. "Grab those bags and I'll lead us."

Tiza picked up the two windup horse suitcases and looked pointedly at Aliantha's small bag. Aliantha looked blankly back.

"I've got my hands full. You'll have to carry that bag," Tiza told her.

"I'm not to carry my own luggage. That's what a handmaid is for."

Tiza gave a violent sigh and summoned a servitor porter. Aliantha was increasingly offended by Tiza's attitude, and she vowed to send the girl back to the Spaceport labor pool as soon as possible.

"Where's your welcoming committee?" asked Tiza.

Aliantha hesitated deliberately before deigning to answer.

"I will be greeted when I reach their gate. This is where we use father's windup horses." She pushed the buttons on the cases and the two horses sprang into shape on the platform.

After an hour of riding up the winding path, every muscle in Aliantha's body ached. She was also terribly thirsty. She stopped Falada.

"Tiza," she demanded, "fetch me some water from that stream."

"Get it yourself."

Aliantha stared in shock at her handmaid. "How dare you refuse an order! Do you want to be sent back to the Spaceport immediately?"

The Bridge Builder

by Kevin Cockle

This was cool.

Hundreds of people wandered through the aisles of the vendor section of the Calgary Gaming and Comic convention. Mike stayed close on Donnie's right side, using him as a crowd-break as they slanted through the throng.

"Dude." Donnie slapped Mike's arm, nodding to a line of celebrities signing autographs along the western wall of the convention center. "Stacy Keibler. Told ya."

Mike stared, star-struck. Sure enough, Stacy Keibler sat behind a table, smiling cheerily up at a fan. She was promoting some new wrestling/combat game which Mike already knew to be garbage, but which he suddenly felt compelled to purchase at all costs.

Donnie laughed at his spellbound friend. "Dream on!" He scoffed.

They shuffled along at a gallery pace. Crowd noise was deafening—hundreds of voices, thousands of footfalls multiplying in the cavernous room. Booths hawked games of all sorts: video games and board games, role playing games and gambling games, card games, dice games, scale-miniature and shared-world games. It was amazing stuff for Mike—well worth the effort it had taken to scrounge up the cost of a day pass.

Some actress in an elf costume approached on Mike's right flank. He knew she was a hired professional because, although there were tons of people dressed up for this thing, *none* of them

looked like this girl. The memory of Stacy Keibler, so vivid just a moment ago, disappeared as the elf drew near. Her costume was a classic wood-elf look: a short cape draped over her right shoulder with a brown, belted tunic over forest-green tights, finished with knee-high buckskin moccasins. She wore her Keibler-esque blonde hair long and loose about her shoulders and down her back. The tips of convincing pointed ears poked through on either side. Her face was perfect. Whoever had hired her had really known their stuff. She was all high cheekbones and delicate, arching brows. Her amber eyes looked like liquid honey. And as she passed, she turned those amber eyes on Mike and smiled.

Mike froze as though she'd slapped him. The girl passed by without saying a word.

"Dude," Mike gasped, stopping and turning to watch those long, be-leggined legs stride away. "Did you see that? She totally smiled at me!"

"You need to learn to distinguish between a grimace and a smile. She was in agony, Mikey. One look at you—cramps."

"No, but did you see?"

"Yeah, I saw a chick about to throw up on a hobbit...hold on now." Donnie's attention had been snagged by a vendor selling mail shirts and a variety of edged weapons. "Come on!" he said and led the way.

Mike followed. Donnie and his weapons. Sure, Mike thought weapons were neat, who didn't? But Donnie...Donnie had a real fixation. And, Mike recalled, it was a weapon that had forged their friendship in the first place.

It had been two winters ago, after school, and sure enough, Mike was in a shakedown yet again, three against one—the three all older and bigger than the one. Mike struggled to keep his glasses on his nose as he kept his head down, fearing to look the predators in the eyes...but when they started shoving him one to the other, it was kind of difficult. They were expensive prescriptions, those glasses. Mike had had rare cataract surgery shortly after being born and had weak eyesight ever since. But that wasn't the half of it.

He'd had half a dozen surgical procedures before his first birthday: heart, spine, left foot correction, left pinky finger separated from its neighbor, kidney, hernia. Once, when he was five, a doctor at a walk-in clinic had told him he'd be blind before he was

twenty; his mom freaked out and got other, less dire, opinions. But the idea of the near-term due date—or doom date—lingered, a weight upon Mike's spirit, an ever-present shadow or a cloud. The shade of that doom date imposed a ceiling on the number of times he could smile in a day; put a brake on how loud he would laugh. Sometimes, he thought that if the bullies knew how fragile he was and had always been, they'd go easy on him.

But then reality set in and everything boiled down to keeping his glasses in one piece.

"Hey, Brainiac," one of them kept saying. "Brainiac gonna think your way outta this? C'mon, Brainiac!" Mike had advanced a couple of grades to be in grade six well before his body should have been there: the nick-name "Brainiac" was a foregone conclusion. He hadn't wanted to accelerate, but his mom had explained to him that if he did, the government would pay to get him in a better school and that it was SO important to do so. Well, the school may have been better, but the kids weren't. They had proven to be pretty much the same knuckleheads as poor kids... maybe even worse.

One of the kids punched Mike in the back, just above the hip. Pain spread out from the impact in shockwaves and Mike bit back on tears. Start crying now, and it would be over. They might not stop until there was blood.

"Leave the kid alone," the voice had said, the voice that would turn out to belong to Donnie Kane. He was twelve to Mike's nine at that point, but he wasn't much bigger than Mike, and more importantly, he wasn't as big as the trio of thugs in charge. Still...his voice had carried a chill. He hadn't shouted or done anything dramatic, but he'd managed to convey real menace in a conversational tone. The bullies stopped their pushing, sniffing the wind for fresh blood. Seeing the size of the new kid, they responded with the appropriate jackal-grins.

"Brainiac's buddy," one of them said, to obligatory sniggers. "You want some?"

Donnie stepped forward. He had no toque to cover his unruly mass of long black hair. His slender body was bulked up by a long green military surplus coat, and his jeans were stuffed into hiking boots with the laces undone. His pale face was thin, angular, and his blue eyes were that washed-out shade you'd see in some Husky dogs. He crimped his lips and then answered, "The question is, do *you* want some?"

My Name is Tommy

by Mike Rimar

“Commander Paul won’t ever let me be the *Plymouth Rock’s* captain,” I said. “He says I’m not smart enough.”

“Really?” Mom buttoned up my pajama shirt. “Commander Paul said that, huh?”

“Yeah.” I breathed in the strawberry smell in her hair. “I know I’m different. Other moms and dads think eighteen is too old to play with their kids. Is eighteen too old?”

Mom said something but I was too busy staring at the fluffy clouds on my bed sheets. They looked just like the clouds in the old Earth vids. That planet must’ve been magical because those clouds looked ginormous and floated in the sky like they were weightless.

“Tommy, are you listening?”

I tried to remember what she’d said then shook my head and smiled.

She smiled back and I saw lines in her face where it used to be smooth. Every day she seemed skinnier and skinnier, and her face looked tired all the time. Sometimes I worried it was my fault. Taking care of me must be hard, especially without help.

Mom reached for her reading pallet. “I’ve got a new manual to read tonight.”

My shoulders sagged. Last year, Mom took me to the ship’s ice cream factory on Ring B to see how ice cream was made. It was cool. Get it? Ice cream is cool. When I told Mom that one, she laughed real hard. Then, she explained why it was so funny. Now, it’s one of my best jokes.

Tour Guide Sam showed us a big vat where the milk and sugar mixed together. "Wow," I said. "A thousand liters."

"I was just going to say that," said Tour Guide Sam and gave me an odd look. Later, at the end of the tour, I got a free ice cream cone.

"Tommy," Mom said while I licked melted chocolate off my hand. "Did someone tell you that was a thousand liter vat?"

Air filled my cheeks. I wanted to tell her how the vat turned into a cartoon in my head. It started out flat then stretched out, spinning around, numbers filling the spaces until everything stopped, but saying everything turned into a cartoon sounded made up. I blew the air out. "Yeah, someone told me."

Mom nodded slowly then ruffled my hair. "Eat your ice cream."

Ever since then, she traded my good bedtime stories with tech manuals. As I crawled into bed, I scowled at the reader, wishing for more of that ice cream.

Mom looked about to say something. She looked very small in her uniform, and her lips moved very slowly into a smile. Mom did everything slow now, like her bones and muscles hurt to move. She didn't eat much, and her skin had turned kind of yellow. She always seemed to have a cold because she coughed all the time.

Finding herself, she began to read about security protocols.

"Please read me *The Three Little Pigs*," I said.

"Tomorrow night. Tonight, we read about security protocols."

I slapped the crispy-clean sheets. "I'm sick of how security works, or how the engines work, or how navigation works. Why do I have to know this stuff, anyway?"

Mom sighed. "All right, Tommy. You win. We'll read *The Three Little Pigs*."

Smiling, I settled in for a real story. *The Three Little Pigs* was one of my favorites.

"Tommy." Mom put down the reader when she finished. "Do you tell anyone what we're reading about?"

"That's not funny." I gripped a handful of blanket. "You know no one talks to me."

Mom kissed my forehead. "I'm sorry, Tommy, dear. The others are so cruel. Maybe they were right. Maybe I should have..." She straightened suddenly and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"It's okay, Mom," I said.

She meant *abortion*.

One day I heard some of the crew use that word. They looked right at me so I knew they were talking about me. I said the word inside my head until I got home to get a definition. When I was a kid I used to write strange words down but usually spelled them wrong. Mom taught me how to use the computer on her desk. It had voice *rek-ug-ni-shun*, which means it understood what I said. Finding definitions was much easier after that.

When I *defined* abortion I cried all day.

"We have to keep our bedtime stories secret, Tommy." Mom kissed my cheek. "Don't tell anyone, promise?"

"Promise." I crossed my heart to show I meant it. The abortion word got me thinking. "Mom, who did you have sex with to get me?"

She laughed until she coughed so much I had to slap her back a few times.

"You mean, who is your father?" she managed to say. "I can't answer that, my love. I made a promise to him."

"Why doesn't he want me to know? Is it because I'm stupid? Didn't he want me?" I sucked in air. "Did you want me?"

"Don't ever say that." Her arms were around me before I took another breath. "I always wanted you. You're the most precious thing to me—and you are not *stupid*."

"I know I'm supposed to act more like a grown up." I squeezed her back, but not too hard. I didn't want to break her bones. "My brain just doesn't work that way."

"No." She sighed. "You're not like the others. You see, with only so many people, well, our forefathers gave us tests to check babies when they were still eggs. If we found something wrong—"

"You have an abortion," I finished.

"Yes." She held me at arm's length. "As captain I had so many responsibilities, and I might have waited too long to have children. When the tests came back, I wasn't surprised with the result, but I wanted a baby so badly, and I knew this old body couldn't go through another pregnancy."

She paused long enough to give me a quick kiss and hug. Then she drank from her teacup as if it was some magic strength potion. "But rank has its privileges and I carried you to term. That means the full nine months. My decision didn't sit well with the others. Some have forgiven me, but many still harbor ill feelings. You've been paying the price all your life, and for that I'm so very sorry."

Darwin's Vampire

by Elise Moser

Carola was washing dishes, singing along with the radio, and didn't see the vampire until it had landed on her wrist, but then it was too late; she'd already felt the sting. She smacked at the vamp with her other hand and suds flew everywhere. She peered around but it must have flown off. There were two bright red dots of blood beginning to well up in the center of the pinkish welt just beside her wrist bone. "Damn it," she muttered.

She held her wrist up while with the other hand, she pulled open the kitchen junk drawer and rummaged for the VampStop. There was masking tape, a Baggie full of twist-ties, a plastic fork. Where was it? She heard a faint buzzing, but her hand was starting to throb and she knew she didn't have time to look around—she needed to apply the VampStop within a minute or it would have no effect. She started tossing things onto the counter: a pencil with a broken end, the warranty from the coffee machine...she expelled a quick breath. There it was. The trademark blood-red applicator, there, at the back. It had been a while since there'd been a vampire around here. In the winter they usually liked to go south.

Carola pulled the tube out, and the cap fell off and rolled under the counter. Damn it, Greg never closed things properly. The spongy end of the applicator was bone dry. She frantically dabbed it at her puffed-up hand, but there was no moisture left at all. She hurled it onto the kitchen floor and ran to the bathroom, throwing open the medicine cabinet and sweeping everything

from the shelf into the sink. There had to be another VampStop in here. Greg said that vampires were once as big as humans, but it seemed so unlikely. "Darwin's finches," he said with that superior scientific air of his. There used to be a VampStop in here, Carola was sure of it. Her breath was starting to come in short gasps, close to sobs. She threw two lipsticks and a bottle of cough syrup into the bathtub. Where was it?

"Don't panic, don't panic," she chanted under her breath. Last summer, when they were packing to go camping, she'd asked Greg to buy a fresh one for the trip, but he packed the one from the bathroom instead. *Damn it.* She fled to the front hallway. She had a mini in her purse. Why hadn't she just gone for that one, right away? Her bitten hand was bright pink now and radiating heat. She tore open her purse and upended it. There, right there—she grabbed it and tore the cap off with her teeth. She couldn't bend the fingers of her other hand at all now. She viciously jabbed the spongy end of the applicator at the wound, jabbing and jabbing until the mini VampStop was empty. Then she watched in horror as the liquid on her hand turned blue. *Too late.*

Carola sat on the floor in the hallway, slumped against the wallpaper, the contents of her purse strewn around her. Her brain was foggy and her bones felt weirdly compressed. It was uncomfortable.

She'd miss Greg and his science stories. His favorite was about the finches on the Galapagos Islands. Carola remembered how, when they first fell in love, she and Greg used to sit in the dark and look at the pictures on his computer. The finches had all evolved different beaks—a large one for eating hard seeds, a short one for eating insects, a long, slender one for feeding on cactus pulp. They developed so quickly that scientists could track the changes from generation to generation.

Carola's face was damp and itchy from dried tears, and her skin felt tight all over. She suddenly thought of the poster they used to have up in her grade five classroom, an old-fashioned sign from the time of the Eradication, during her mum's childhood. It was a photograph of a grinning hunter holding the small head of a vamp which he'd presumably just chopped off. The body, about the size of a cat, lay at his feet, stumpy wings crushed against its back.

Carola's mum used to tell them stories about when the vamps started flying in through the windows. By the time she was in high school, she said, they were as small as sparrows, and the Eradication almost ground to a halt because they were so hard to hunt. Then someone invented the electricity-field nets. The only vamps that survived were those small enough to pass through them. "That," Greg used to say at parties, "was an evolutionary leap." Carola sighed wistfully; he loved to lecture. "Devastating for the population," he'd drone, rocking back on his heels, "but an evolutionary leap." Then he'd go on about insect robotics and aerospace engineering based on mosquito flight dynamics.

Carola noticed that the hall light fixture seemed very high up, the ceiling cavernous. The sound of passing traffic vibrated dully against the walls. She wondered if she should try to leave a note for Greg to tell him what happened, but everything was so far away. The prospect of finding a pen defeated her. She imagined herself carrying a ballpoint as tall as a log, and it just made her feel tired. There were two spots on her shoulder blades that felt hot and sore and nubby. She wondered if she'd hurt herself somehow without knowing it, maybe while she was flinging the contents of her bathroom around.

The cool dimness of the hallway was soothing. It occurred to her that her cell phone must be on the floor somewhere...she could call Greg. She forced herself to crawl through the large detritus from her handbag to look for it, but when she found it, it was a huge thing, the size of a rowboat. She reached up and tried to press the button to unlock the keypad, but it wouldn't move. She thought she might be able to jump on it. She surprised herself by opening her stiff new wings, and with a startling feeling of strength, lifted herself onto the phone, landing lightly on the asterisk key.

Now that she was here, she found that she didn't want to phone Greg, anymore. She was trying to remember why she'd wanted to before, when she heard a distant buzzing from the direction of the kitchen. Maybe it was that vamp again. She turned quickly, in time to see a dark spot flitting through the lighted doorway. As he flew closer, Carola could make out his clean, sharp features. He approached and the sound got clearer; she sensed it resonating in the vast space. Suddenly she realized that she could understand it in a whole new way. It wasn't buzzing at all—he was singing!

Costumes

by Shen Braun

I opened my sister's yearbook to the page I'd marked last night and tapped the picture with one finger. "See? I told you," I said to McKenna.

"Wow," was all she managed.

"Yeah, no kidding. That guy has absolutely no shame."

"We already knew *that*," McKenna said. She couldn't take her eyes off the picture, and I couldn't blame her. I hadn't believed it at first either, but there it was, in full color, taking up a quarter of the entire page. "Is he wearing a mask, too? His face is different. It's all wrinkly and kind of saggy. Are you sure it's him?"

"I'm sure. Look at the caption. This is how I knew that he dyes his hair...it's all gray there, see?"

"Oh, yeah." She laughed a little. "Maybe he got a face-lift, too, to get rid of all those wrinkles."

"Maybe," I said, "but if he did, they pay teachers way too much."

"It was worth it. He's hot."

"That's creepy," I said. "He's crazy old, McKenna, like older than your dad." But I had to admit that she had a point. Old or not, Mr. Billings was sort of cute, especially for a teacher.

"He doesn't look it," McKenna argued. The bell rang then and we both leaped up, eager for the day to begin.

This was the first day that I'd actually looked forward to History class. To any class, really. School wasn't so bad. It was pretty easy when you got right down to it, but it wasn't usually

a whole lot of *fun*, either. I could say the same about History, too, except you never knew what Mr. Billings was going to do. There was a sick fascination in wondering about, and then watching, the show. And he did put on a show, that's for sure.

I'd been warned about Mr. Billings by my sister, so he didn't manage to freak me out the way he did everyone else, but there was no doubt he was the weirdest teacher we had. Not bad, exactly, just very, very weird. For example, at least once a day he'd just start singing—sometimes words, but more often just strange, lilting melodies none of us recognized. Jordan had asked him once, sourly, why he wasn't a music teacher if he liked singing so much.

"The emanations of juvenile instrumentalists are hazardous to the aural functions of the truly sensitive, I'm afraid," Mr. Billings had replied. "I would not be able to stand them."

That was the way he talked most of the time. And he was lazy, too. Instead of just teaching us History like he was supposed to do, he would make *us* teach *him*.

"Miss Delaney," he'd say, "tell me, if you will, what a housewife's typical day might have entailed, circa 1200."

He'd nailed me with that one, once. Then when you couldn't answer him, bang, you got yourself an assignment to do. Not cool.

Everything he did was just off the grid, even compared to the rest of the teachers who weren't all that normal to begin with. But when we filed into class and saw him in his full Halloween outfit, even I had to struggle not to laugh. Becky had been right: he wore the exact same costume every single year, probably since the dawn of time as far as we could tell. It had been nine years since Becky had been in high school and from her descriptions, not one thing had changed. I hope he was at least having that thing dry-cleaned every so often.

A few people stopped and stared. I slid into my usual seat at the desk I shared with McKenna and pretended not to pay any attention. Secretly I watched Mr. Billings out of the corner of my eye. He was a sight, that's for sure. The yearbook picture did not do him justice.

The first thing you noticed was his long cloak, so red it almost burned the retinas. All of the colors were really vibrant, bright as new cloth never-washed. He had a shirt of deep forest green with loose sleeves and long triangular tails both in front and back. Over that, there was a yellow vest, though I bet he'd

have called it “gold.” Silver thread made interwoven patterns of leaves on his vest and the leather belt around his waist. His boots matched the belt and looked like suede to me. It was a bold guy who would wear boots like that. Heck, who would wear *anything* from that outfit. Say what you would about Mr. Billings, he never got embarrassed, even when maybe he should have.

Dressed to match that old picture, it was even more obvious that he had done some serious improvements to himself between then and now. Ten years ago, he’d almost been paunchy, and now there wasn’t a hint of a gut. His hair was jet black without a trace of the old gray. Any girl would envy his skin: smooth, totally without blemishes and it didn’t have that plastic look you saw on movie stars who had gone under the knife one too many times. He’d managed to shave off at least twenty years by the look of him. Not bad at all. I could understand why McKenna had a crush on him.

Of course, it was Jordan who challenged him. Big shock. Someone needed to cut his testosterone dose by about half. “What are you supposed to be?” The big goon eyed Mr. Billings up and down.

“Welcome, class,” Mr. Billings said to us all in his typically cheery way. He was always happy and it was enough to drive you nuts, especially first thing in the morning before your coffee had had a chance to work. He spread his arms wide to give us all a better look at his costume before answering Jordan. “Good sir, I am an elf.”

“An elf?” Jordan repeated dubiously. Maybe he didn’t understand what that meant. With Jordan, anything was possible. “If you’re an elf, where are your ears?” Guess he got it, after all.

“Yeah, good question,” Brooke piped up.

I rolled my eyes at McKenna and she agreed with me: Brooke thought everything Jordan said was a “good question” or a “good answer” no matter how stupid it was. The girl had it bad. One time in Science class, Jordan had seriously suggested that after gases and liquids, the third state of matter was “people.” Brooke had blindly backed him up. Good answer, Jordan, that makes sense. Give me a break.

“Actually, elves don’t have pointed ears,” Nathan piped up in that I-can’t-believe-you-don’t-know-better voice of his. “It’s a common misconception, but the myths and tales surrounding the origins of the elves refer to them only as ‘magical beings of

Civility

by J. J. Steinfeld

What startled me most
was the ability to know
my words and fears
though our lips never moved
not that the space alien
had lips or that my lips
were anything to write home about
wherever home might be
especially if you believe in
innumerable galaxies.

The space alien
was amazingly polite
offering me a warming hand
but the worrying luminosity
made me hesitate.

Should I be rude
and merely nod
in acknowledgement
a cold morning hello?

I want to say I dislike
handshaking, you know,
the spread of germs
and the world is
full of germs.

Take My Waking Slow

by Michele Ann Jenkins

*I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.
—Theodore Roethke*

“Who the null gave you access?”

You’re not supposed to verbalize obscenities like that in the nursery Simulation, but I know they don’t belong in this program the instant I see them flickering in the doorway. I can tell right off there’s no Mind behind either of them, they’re just Code. Creating Code that even tries to look and act like people is totally against Specifications.

“What library are you part of?” I try again.

They just stand there not blinking, the sky-blue background visible through their pale faces. They’re close enough Simulations that none of the little kids milling around the matrix table realize there’s anything wrong. I try to view their source but I can’t get to anything. It’s like they’re just overlaid on the background, but not actually here.

I’m the oldest one active in the nursery—usually there are a few Middlers here to interact with the Minors. We’re supposed to stimulate their synaptic paths to create normal sociological connections, even though their physical brains are miles below us in cold storage along with everyone else. Today it’s just me, working overtime, again.

I try tabbing out into someplace else: home, the root directory, anything. But I'm stuck. I can feel the Sim increasing my heart rate, sending the unpleasant sensation of cold sweat trickling down my back (I should remember to hack out that subroutine as soon as I have access again). I step between them and the children.

"You're not following the rules," I say. If I can get them to communicate, I'll have a better chance of accessing and maybe disabling their program. "Who made you? Because they are going to be in so much trouble. Hacking into the kids' place is totally uncool." I'm still expecting a guilty adult or sheepish kid to show up and zap this program out of existence, but there's nothing.

"We can take her out, too," says the boy. His voice sounds like it's pieced together from corrupt audio files.

"She is too old," says the girl. "Her neurology is permanently altered."

"What?" They're talking about me. "My neurology is none of your business."

"We're here to take you out," says the girl, speaking past me to the children. They're all quiet and wide-eyed, trying to decide if they should be afraid or play along. Everything is kept lucid and linear in the nursery, so they're going to figure out this isn't right, pretty quick.

They look at each other, sharing some un-verbalized communication. Finally, the girl nods. The boy walks around to the far side of the table so the kids and I are between them. They both hold out their arms, fingers spread wide. An arc of light leaps between their hands, encircling us.

"Hey!" I just have time to holler. And then everything is dark.

There's a blurry, piercing light. From far away comes a deep thrumming and the squeal of metal shrieking across my cortex. I'm definitely not in the form I had in the nursery. Everything is off. The body feels heavy and slow and somehow liquid at the same time. The senses are inputting strangely, too.

After a few false starts, I manage to blink the eyes. Visual shapes start to form out of the lemony light. Or maybe the lemon was a smell. I try to sort the sensory data into streams but nothing happens. I try to access the source for this scene; nothing happens. There's a hole in my mind where I should be able to get at the Code. I'm locked out.

The body twitches like one of those goose-stepped-on-your-grave shivers you get in horror Sims, only strong enough to shake the table. There's no sound except raspy breathing, no input except the muted feeling of fabric, the press of the table and my own lonely thoughts. I make the body take a deep breath, hoping I can trigger a subroutine to lower the heart rate—I'm on the verge of a panic feedback loop.

I can feel the movement of air down the back of the throat, the lungs expanding. Whoever designed this Sim totally gets an "A" for realistic physical sensation, but they have the pain threshold turned down way too low and the sensory input up too high. Maybe some sort of artistic statement? Not comfortable at all.

I try to pull up a low-level terminal. Even if everything else is fragged, I should be able to send a textual ping to an Admin. No one bothers with orthographic communication any more, but it's still part of the system and I can use it to scream bloody murder. Someone is going to get scoped over this. I don't care if it's art or experiment; I didn't sign up for either. I'm waiting for the black box to swim up across my visual cortex, but there's nothing there, either.

Total segfault; this sucks.

I hear a click—the sound grates on my cerebrum. Again with the crappy raw data! A figure looms across the line-of-sight. The visual input goes all streaks and star-bursts, and I feel wetness on the cheeks. A teardrop rolls into the ear. *They thought of everything.*

I'm able to parse the visual, now. Short black hair cut blunt across the eyes, some sort of drapey gray robe, a young man—really a boy—with a cold, serious face. He looks like people—but so did those kids-that-weren't.

I try to hold still; maybe he doesn't know I'm active here. Of course, there's another twitch. The feet banging nosily against the table, like a bird slamming against a window not understanding there's no way through.

"You clearly sustained less trauma during the evacuation than previous groups." I must be getting used to the input levels, because hearing his voice doesn't hurt so much. "I am called Aderic."

"Croak." I can't access the verbal subroutine. I try exhaling and moving the mouth, lips and tongue all at the same time to form the air into words. "Waah...ell...diiiiii."

I try again. "What the hell did you...where...?" That's all I can manage.

The Weirdo Adventures of Steve Rand

by Claude Lalumière

Surrounded by five Hellscorpions, the Weirdo draws his ropegun and laughs maniacally while the disembodied voice of Madman Mastermind issues yet another death threat. The Hellscorpions spit toward the young adventurer, but the Weirdo easily evades the missiles of burning spittle, pirouetting in the air, firing his ropegun, and lassoing the monstrous quintet. The instant the Weirdo lands he's knocked to the ground by the force of the Powerful Pachyderm running into him at full speed. Before the Weirdo can catch his breath, the extendable arms of Professor Kraken grab him and hold him tight. Have all his foes teamed up against him? Madman Mastermind materializes, facing the stunned teenager and pulls off his arch-enemy's mask, revealing that the Weirdo is in reality—

Steve Rand, sitting at the kitchen table, drops his spoon into his cereal bowl, splashing milk and flakes on the table and on himself. He gasps for air, as if surfacing, desperate for oxygen. His mother scolds him, but he pays no attention to her. He pulls at his face, thankful to be himself again. Much too soon, that ichorous light appears again and swallows him up—

The Weirdo can hear, smell, and taste the dreams of the city's sleeping residents. Night after night, the sounds are getting more strident, the odors more toxic, the flavors more repellent. For weeks now, the dreams of the innocent have been getting darker

and more violent. Using the beacon function of his dreamwatch, he's finally located the source of the nightmare infestation: the thirtieth floor of an abandoned office building in the ghost town that was once a thriving financial district. Getting inside the building was no problem. His dreamwatch guides him to a windowless door. Behind this door is the source of what's been plaguing the city. He knows he should be wary of what might lurk inside that room, but it's not in his nature to balk in the face of unknown dangers. With his blastgun, the Weirdo destroys the door. He hurls a weighbomb into the room and runs inside, announcing himself with the trademark laughter that has been terrorizing criminals and supervillains since he has taken on this identity. The weirdgas dissipates, and the Weirdo sees that the room is empty. Thick steel walls fall from the ceiling and clang down to the floor. It's a trap! Ghostly forms surround him, all speaking in one voice. the Malignancy! That monstrous hive mind that seeks to infect and enslave the entire planet. Many times has the Weirdo foiled their schemes. "Your ceaseless obstruction ends this night, Weirdo." Their synchronized voices echo metallicly with an otherworldly crackle. Whips snap from their insubstantial bodies, lacerating and entangling the trapped vigilante. One of the whips encircles his neck, choking him. Another tears off his mask, "This is the end for both the Weirdo and—"

Steve Rand cries out, more in shock than in pain, when his mother slaps his cheek. She yells, too close to his ear, "Wake up! I've told you before not to stay up all night. Reading those comic books. I know that's what you were doing again. That's why you can't stay awake, now. Why can't you just do what I tell you? You have to learn to listen. And to focus on your homework. Or it's boarding school for you."

But Steve ignores her. That's twice in one morning. They've never happened so close together before. Barely minutes apart.

"There's milk all over your clothes! Go change now! And don't you be late for school again!"

He stands up, still woozy from the shift, and staggers toward his bedroom. But that gooey, disgusting light appears again, enfolding his entire body—

Police sirens fill the night. Searchlights pierce the darkness of the cityscape. The Weirdo is wanted for murder. And the whole city is after him. No one will believe that he was impersonated and framed by the extraterrestrial Agent Metamorph. No one

knows of the planned invasion or even the aliens' existence. Only he can save the world—if they let him. He has spent the entire night dodging police bullets. The Weirdo is exhausted. He must somehow make it home undetected. Once he sheds his costume, he'll be safe to plan his next move. No one knows his real identity. He's only three blocks away from his home. It's time to active his shadowcloak; he has five minutes before its charge runs out and he becomes visible again. He collapses in his bed just as the shadowcloak effect wears off. His bedroom door crashes open. The police! Officers aim their guns at him, and a detective says, "It's over, Weirdo, we know you're really—"

Steve Rand, fourteen-year-old boy, fallen down on the floor in the hall, just outside his bedroom door, his face lying in a pool of his saliva, his mother shouting his name. He can hear her, but he can't find the strength to respond or even to move or react in the slightest.

Steve wakes up in a hospital bed. Briefly, he thinks it might be the Weirdo and not Steve himself who's in the hospital. But no. This is happening to him. Or really happening. Or whatever. He dimly remembers being brought here in a stretcher. He remembers a nurse taking off his clothes and slipping him into a hospital gown. He had been too detached from his body to be embarrassed about it then, but now he cringes at the memory.

He has vague recollections of a string of brief dreams about the Weirdo, each one of them ending in disaster for the adventurer. And then, a long period of blissful oblivion.

For the first time in months, Steve feels rested and at peace. Maybe it won't happen again, he hopes. Why does he suffer these hallucinations?

Why and how did he ever dream up the Weirdo? He doesn't crave adventure. Smiles, let alone laughter, do not come easily to him. He is nothing like the teen vigilante, nor does he aspire to be like him. And yet, he has now lived through hundreds of dangerous episodes where he becomes—or, at least, it feels as if he becomes—the Weirdo, always in the thick of deadly combat with grotesque villains.

Getting through high school without getting noticed and coping with his overworked, lonely, bitter mom is hard enough as it is. He doesn't need or want any of this strangeness.

And yet, every day for more than a year now, he has zoned out of real life and segued into this fantasy life. But that morn-

ing he collapsed had been the most intense ever. Three episodes, back to back. And not ordinary episodes, either. In all three, a different incarnation of the Weirdo had been trapped by some of his worst enemies. Maybe to the death. Followed, later, by dream images of more versions of the Weirdo being defeated time and again.

Could it be over? Had his subconscious finally gotten the message that he didn't want to experience this craziness? Had he dreamed the conclusion to his serial hallucinations?

Steve hasn't hallucinated once since being released from the hospital eight days ago. But the absence of his hallucinations has not afforded him the relief he had hoped for. He hasn't slept a wink since.

Earlier, he stole some of his mother's sleeping pills. He gulps down four of them and slides into bed. Hours go by, and he doesn't even doze. He's both restless and exhausted. His mom doesn't know about the sleeping problem, but at one point he's going to get so tired that she'll be bound to notice. He has to solve this by himself, and soon. She'll panic and blame him, and it'll be a waking nightmare. The less she notices him, the better.

The night is interminable. When the morning light starts to seep through the drapes he gets up and decides to take a bath before breakfast.

The bath is soothing. Calming. Steve is using his mom's aromatherapy oils. They smell girly, but the effect is nice. This almost feels like being asleep. The hot water, the steamy air, the dim lighting...

...And he wakes up with his head underwater, drowning. Something's holding him down. But he can't see anyone or anything. Nevertheless, abrasive, scaly invisible fingers dig into his flesh and prevent him from surfacing.

Scaly? He remembers this sensation. He's being held down by Doc Croc, one of the Weirdo's most vicious enemies. As soon as he realizes this, Steve is no longer in the bathtub but in the sewers, beneath the city, wearing the Weirdo's psychedelic costume. Doc Croc is drowning him, killing him.

And there's another figure behind him, one he can't quite make out. He can hear his voice, though, and it sounds vaguely familiar, but it's too distorted by the water for the Weirdo to identify it. "After this, there's only one left. The most pathetic one."

Every You, Every Me

by Virginia Modugno

"If everybody is thinking alike, then someone isn't thinking."

—George S. Patton

Locker Room, Level 1

Passchendaele High School

Present Day, 08:45 hrs

No matter how many times I blink, she still won't disappear. The hair, the clothes, the shoes, the backpack they all scream "stuck up" like it's going out of style: the hair band that sits like a crown just before the peak of her manicured hair, the blouse that's blindingly white, ironed crisp and suctioned in by a corset-like sweater vest, the regulation-length kilt that skirts her calves, the Mary Janes polished to such perfection that you could literally watch the other students mill by on her glassy toes, the knee socks that seem glued on. The knee socks!

She has a smile for everyone, not too wide, not too sweet, and makes eye contact with anyone who crosses her path from the Slurpie-guzzling mathletes to B-ballers so tall, they could slam-dunk her. She walks down the busy halls with the poise of a life-size Barbie. She doesn't dump her bag into her locker, then slam the door so hard it makes the whole row bucket back and forth like I do. She doesn't sneer at Edwin Banks, the first-year emo wannabe who follows her around like a groupie at an MGMT gig like I do. Instead, she gingerly plucks the photo collage off the inside door of the locker—my locker!—to make

room for her magnet mirror which she carefully manoeuvres until it is dead center, framing her tastefully made-up face. After reaching into the front pouch of her backpack, she unfurls a single tube of blush-colored lipstick and daintily coats her lips. She presses them together, then smiles winningly at herself, a pre-packaged starlet recast as a humble high-schooler in an update of *The Prince and the Pauper*.

As she weaves through the halls to her first class, there's no mistaking it—people are *loving* her. Or at least, the scene she creates. Mean girl glares go from glacial to predatory. Geek squad sprout instant wood. Even the slackers wake up long enough to notice something's happening. Cells are snapping pics in a frenzy to rival the paparazzi, thumbs are pounding, handsets are erupting, alerts are beeping, statuses are being updated by the second. She's a perfect storm of the scandalous and the spectacular on the 24/7 gossip circuit.

The worst of it is—she's me.

A new and improved me, now with less angst. A me with a flawless outer shell—all sparkly teacher-bait—but with no guts, no grit, no grunge. She's a Mac, and I'm like the least PC person, ever. Analog. Practically Luddite. Wouldn't even glance at a pair of Mary Janes, let alone wear them. As I watch her prance into first period, I barely suppress the urge to charge up to her and wring her prissy little neck, but those rumor-junkies would love that even more—a title bout between Versions 1 and 2.0, right there in the main hall—an easy million hits on YouTube if ever there was. I throw up a little bit in my mouth at the thought of my personal hell being exposed to the cheesy poof-scarfing masses, then a lot more once I retreat to the girls' bathroom. It's not every day you come to school to find that your photo-double has somehow taken over your life.

My first thought, after chugging the last of my Red Bull to kill the puke fumes: Android. My second: Who ordered the upgrade? My third: Where is Sam?

Basement Lair
Sparks Residence
08:00 hrs

It was the high note at the end of the Jimi version of *Star-Spangled Banner* that finally got me to crawl out from under my ginormous fleece comforter. The ringtone was Sam's idea, personalized the last time he swiped my phone.

My BFF Samson is the poster boy for “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” a red-blooded, US-born weekend cadet squad leader who plays fullback, bench-presses two-fifty, and plans to enlist the second he turns eighteen. He’s also a card-carrying Friend of Dorothy, who moons over his WWE Superstars Calendar and stealthily prowls the guys’ locker room after practice. We let everyone think he’s a serial horndog who’s slumming it by hooking up with me. Once upon a time, Samson was just as gaunt and mascara’d as I am, but now that he’s found the Corps, he’s the size of a tank.

I hadn’t really planned on moving before 1:00, hence the hiding out in my brother’s room, but a text from Sam this early had to be some sort of 911. I’d been avoiding school in general for most of the week, preferring to perfect my guitar fingering and work on my graphics portfolio, which translates to playing *Rock Band* ‘till I get early-onset arthritis. The glare of the screen is harsh, but when my eyes focus I manage to make the message out:

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WTBleep, Rayns?  
Since when did u  
go Sharpay on me?
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I stare for a bit, then shrug, then slump back under the covers until Jimi wails at me again. “What now?” I muffle-bark, angling the top of the wedge near the center of my ear.

All I hear is: “Holy.”

“Please don’t tell me that I am conscious before 12:00 hrs because Street Jackson dropped his towel in front of you again. You practice every day. You shower together. Every day. You should be—”

“Rayna, where...where are you right now?”

“At home, Brain Trust. Duh.”

He clams up, but I can hear him wheezing on the line, fast and sharp, like he’s being strangled. He clears his throat—once, twice—then sucks in a deep breath.

“No, you’re not. You’re just...not.”

“Sam, make sense.”

“You better get down here, quick. Serious. There’s a...you’re not gonna believe this, but there’s a *you* walking around. Another you, I mean. Just...”

“If this is part of your upstanding citizens’ initiative, I swear...”

“Rayns, it’s not. Straight up. We have what I can only describe as a FUBAR situation here.”

The Oak Girl

by Helen Marshall

She would watch him as he worked,
the thin spirals of wood falling in ringlets
to rest carelessly
or scatter when he moved.
Her half-lidded eyes traced the sweep
of the knife,
dreaming it when she slept
in the warm crook of the chair.

Once, his eyes flicked up,
caught her gaze
like a saw fumbling in a knot of wood.
He knew the shape of her
with a glance.

Watching in the midnight silence
(but for the whsssk of the blade)
she often wondered
who was trapped
beneath the layers of bark

waiting for the knife to finish.
As the last furl
fluttered to the floor,
she stared at the smooth, streaked limbs
of the other,

Edge of Moonglow

by Ed Greenwood

My hands were shaking so hard I almost dropped the pry bar. Hissing something unprintable, I grabbed it hard in both hands, *just* before it could whirl down and be lost in the darkness, and squeezed it as hard as I could—as if somehow melting it could make me calm.

I was as nervous as all get out.

Small wonder; I'd never broken into a building before.

Yet even here, clinging to a second-floor window frame of this oldest wing of Northwood College—sorry, no ivy-covered walls around me, just dirty red brick—only a thickness of old glass away from Professor Darrback's darkened and deserted Biology lab, I wasn't as scared as I'd been on the other side of the glass this afternoon.

Old Franklin "Frankenstein" Darrback had outdone himself this time...and if he succeeded, I was doomed.

We called him Frankenstein because he loved electricity. Crackling arcs of snarling lightning bolts, like in Frankenstein movies. He even chortled as he played with his flashing, dancing currents, a deep, crazy giggling that creeped us all out. Some of the gals in class literally sank down behind the giant fish tanks when he laughed like that.

Like them, I couldn't decide if I hated him more than I feared him or the other way around. Until his big announcement this

afternoon, that is. Now I knew I was more afraid of him than I'd ever feared anyone or anything in my life before. With the flick of a switch, he could end my life.

If you believed Frankenstein Darrback—and I did, boy I did—he had perfected a way of replicating moonlight precisely with artificial lighting.

He'd waved a thick sheaf of notes at us and then proudly used them to point at his "prototype installation," a tube on a tripod that looked more like a cheap amateur telescope than a light bulb.

He wanted us all—three classes of students, mine and the two that had followed mine in that lab class, I'd heard—to help him in "extensive research" for the rest of the term; research involving his artificial moonlight. The moment he could get them built, his moonlight bulbs would be all over the lab, and we'd be hard at work.

And the moment the rays of one of his lamps touched me, without stronger real sunlight also bathing me, I'd start to Turn, and the whole world would discover that the skinniest Sci sophomore in Northwood College was a werewolf.

There wouldn't be a thing I could do to stop myself. The "wolf blood" came down through the female side of my family. My mother and grandmother and aunts all had ways of resisting The Turn that had to do with womanly cycles and strange concoctions they mixed and drank that smelled of cinnamon and burned my nose and lips just sniffing at them, but as a guy, I had...nothing.

Which is why the males of my family had tended to die young and often back in the days of the settlers, and the surviving womenfolk had moved often.

So, I'd sat there this afternoon literally sweating and feeling as cold as ice, both at once. Staring across the lab and seeing it suddenly as a prison cell. Until I realized who I was staring at out of sheer chance and looked away—Murelle Benson, who sneered at me whenever she looked at me, had a tongue that she used on most of the guys, me especially, like a whip, and was way too beautiful for a skinny guy with glasses to have any hope of ever even befriending. Even though I was, of course, helplessly in love with her. Not that she'd ever been the slightest bit nice,

or even polite, to me. "Spiteful b..." was a mild way of describing her everyday manner, and toward me "actively malicious" would have been closer...yet, I couldn't help myself. One of the things about being a werewolf was being really good at smelling things, and I was crazy about the way she smelled.

That was, of course, something I couldn't ever see myself being able to tell her without results that'd be anything short of disastrous, but that didn't stop me smelling, and dreaming and...

Well, and that was a heck of a road to be letting my thoughts run down now, while I was out here clinging to a window frame in the night, with a cold breeze rising and the night passing.

The odd thing, though, this afternoon, while Frankenstein pranced about the room rubbing his hands and waving his notes and chortling, was Murelle's face. She'd looked as scared—as utterly trapped—as I'd felt.

Hah! As I'd *be*, if I didn't get a move on! I'd only have one chance at this, to steal and destroy the prototype and the prof's notes now, before he set us to work making duplicates of the damned thing. If the Science department photocopier hadn't been on the fritz, he'd already have dozens of copies of his notes carefully stashed away; I knew him well enough to be cold certain about that. Oh, he'd have his originals at home; I'd only be delaying him—but tonight was my best chance to slow him down, and just maybe stall the whole thing once the Dean and the senior faculty council found out *why* there'd been a break-in and started to wonder just *when* Darrback was going to teach us what he was supposed to be covering this term, what with all this moonlight stuff, I was sure he hadn't told them a thing about.

Scared as I was, tonight was the best night. After this bold try—if I *managed* a bold try—the moonlight lamps and the notes would be locked away or guarded, or both, and students shivering outside windows with pry bars wouldn't stand much of a chance of derailing Frankenstein's grand promenade into scientific greatness...and the doom of all werewolves in the vicinity.

Just in case, I was wearing sneakers and old, loose clothes I'd found in the lockers at the back of Anderson's repair shop after it closed down, last fall. The Turn was hard on clothes and even harder on me wherever they were tight. If I went "were," I'd probably end up naked, which was why I'd hidden a bag of old, not-mine clothes up in a tree across the road from the college, in the trees around one of the big old houses whose owners didn't have dogs.

Split Decision

by Robert Runté

So Mr. Shakey came over the intercom saying it was 2:03 and would all the teachers therefore stop whatever they were doing and please water the plants? As Mrs. Harness went for the door, Bethany-Anne reached over from her desk and peeked out under the shutters.

Mr. Shakey? Oh, sorry. Mr. Sheckley, the principal. But we call him “Mr. Shakey,” because sometimes his judgment is kind of off. Like, that has to be the lamest code phrase ever. I mean, I ask you: if you’re in the school intent on a killing rampage and you hear “drop everything and water the plants” over the PA, wouldn’t you at least suspect that that means “go to lockdown?” Because you have to know a lockdown is the logical response to your being there with a rifle; whereas it makes no sense to interrupt class just to water the plants. And Mr. Shakey orders “plant watering” like every other day, because he is totally paranoid.

What? No, no; nobody had a rifle. I’m just saying it’s lame, that’s all. So Mr. Sheckley says about watering the plants, and right away Bethany-Anne sneaks the bottom of the shutters up—

What? No, the shutters were down already before the announcement, because Mrs. Harness had us doing this frog on the Smartboard. So, anyway, Bethany-Anne is leaning—

What? Okay, okay. Because our class gets the sun in the afternoon, and you can’t see a thing on the Smartboard, even if you’re right up front with the shutters up. We have one of the old-style boards, where the projector hangs down from the top? It’s so old, it just totally washes out in direct sunlight. But Mrs. Harness says

it will be like another three years before she can even *apply* for them to do an upgrade for our room, but we'll all be graduated by then, so just too bad for us, eh?

So they were down, right, because of the frog? The shutters, I mean. So Bethany-Anne, reaches over—

Frog. The dissection you have to do in Science 7? Gramps says in his day they did real frogs, which is just barbaric. I can't believe that was ever *legal*, let alone something you *had to do* in school. Where was the SPCA? Where was PETA when this was going on? Now you just do it on your slate. But why even *simulate* a dissection? Sure, somebody—some scientist dude—had to do that the first time once, to find out. But why would you want to keep *re-doing* it? If I want to know what's connected to which, I can just look it up.

But anyway, Mrs. Harness was showing us all on the Smartboard first, before our doing it individual on our slates, and the shutters are down, and Mr. Shakey comes over the PA. Clear?

So when Mrs. Harness goes for the door, Bethany-Anne reaches over and flips the shutters to see if she can see anybody skulking around outside, and right away she spots it.

Sorry? Well, mostly that's true. But the shutter on Bethany-Anne's row is missing the bottom slat, so if you kinda work your hand into the gap and twist the roller, you can get the bottom four or five slats to all rotate, and you can get a pretty good look outside. Of course, Mrs. Harness goes all freaky if she catches you at it, and you have to listen to her go on and on about how someone could get a shot in, but I mean, how realistic is that? That they would happen to be focused on that particular window the exact moment you happened to flip the slats? And then there is still the whole question of getting the shot through the opening. Because four or five slats is okay to see *out*, but you can't really see *in* from more than...I don't know...a couple of feet away, maybe. It could be done I guess, with a good scope, but it would have to be someone who knew what they were doing, deliberate, calm, and that's hardly ever what you're up against with your typical lockdown. I think Mrs. Harness is more worried we'll spot a flasher or something. Like we haven't all seen everything there is to see like a million times before on our slates. Last week, Justin forgot to close a window after break and left it running in the background, and when Mrs. Harness asked him to flip his math to the Smartboard, guess what popped up! I thought Mrs. Harness was going to blow an artery for sure that time. Though, you know,

I was kind of disappointed in Justin. Why do guys always want to watch that kind of stuff? I mean, we get like fifteen minutes for break, and instead of actually *talking* to one of the girls next to him he spends it watching something like—

Oh, right. Sorry. So anyway, Bethany-Anne makes this kind of a sound that is, you know, not quite a scream and not a choke exactly, but the kind of sound where you just *know* something is seriously up. So Todd pushes her aside and sticks *his* head to the glass, and he's just kind of glued there, even though Mrs. Harness is already half way back from the door and shouting at him to "get down this second." So the rest of us start crowding in, in the hopes of a quick glimpse before Mrs. Harness gets there, and the crowding slows her down quite a bit, so most of us are able to get an okay look at it, sitting right out there in the rink.

Then Mrs. Harness orders everyone to the far wall, and she starts tipping tables over and telling everyone to get into crash position behind their desks...only that is so obviously lame! It just makes no sense to me. It's like, well, if it's going to blow, what exactly do you expect a set of shutters and a couple of tipped over student desks to do about it? We looked pathetic. I didn't want people seeing me like that. Because by now half the kids have their cells out and are phoning EMS or their folks, and the other half are uploading video of the first half, who are cowering there like morons.

And we were already way beyond "locked door" as the appropriate response, here. Because if they've got interstellar travel down, a locked door is probably not going to deter them. So either we should all be moving out the opposite exit as fast as our feet could carry us, or we should just relax and go greet our new masters from Megnar 7 or wherever.

So I go over to the fire exit and start leaning on the crash bar. Casual, you know? Not making a production of it? Like I was just thinking maybe of leaning out for a quick look. But I had already figured it as pretty safe.

Well, no, I didn't mean "safe" exactly. Obviously, this was not a normal situation. I understand your point there. I'm just saying that if something were going to explode, it probably would have done that already when it came down. But none us had even heard a thing. And I know for sure I had my earbuds out when it must have come down. Because it certainly hadn't been there at break, and I hadn't exactly been in a hurry to tune into Mrs. Harness putting that poor frog down—simulated or not—so my

Hide

by Rebecca M. Senese

Billy skidded to a stop beside her. She smelled sweat and Doublemint gum as he opened his mouth.

“The opening to Maple Crescent. After dinner. Be there.”

Then he was gone, running away from her, his untucked blue striped shirt flapping in the breeze.

Pauline’s heart pounded. They’d invited her! How long had it taken to get that invitation? Weeks of sucking up to twerpy Annie Burton at lunch. Swiping extra chocolate bars from home so she could use them as bribery. Smiling and laughing at Annie’s stupid jokes, trying not to be sick as the older girl chewed with her mouth open, exposing gobs of melting chocolate goo in her yellow teeth.

But it had all been worth it! She was invited to the best hide and seek game in the school. Pauline wanted to dance down the sidewalk home but didn’t; she kept her steps even and measured. She couldn’t look too excited to be invited to the game. That wouldn’t be cool.

At dinner, she ate all her vegetables, even the brussels sprouts, in record time. Thankfully no one noticed. Her father was too intent on the paper and her mother was arguing with her younger brother, Jason, who was fussing over his food. He kept pushing the offending brussels sprouts to the edge of his plate, balanced precariously. A glare from Mother would cause a grumble, and he’d pull them back onto the plate for a moment then push them back to the edge. Pauline sighed. He hadn’t even figured out how to hide them properly; what kind of a brother was that? She was cursed.

She set her knife and fork down beside her plate. Only a trace of mashed potatoes remained.

"Mom, can I go outside?" she said.

"Once you clean your plate," her mother said without looking.

"I have."

Her mother glanced over, blinking as if she was just waking up. "Oh. All right, then. Put your plate in the sink."

Pauline scrambled from the table, dumped the plate and cutlery in the sink and was out the door before her mother could change her mind.

The early evening was crisp with the scent of cut grass. Pauline's runners thumped hard on the asphalt as she ran toward Maple Crescent. Three blocks down and four streets over. She raced past identical houses with similar lawns cluttered with bikes and children's toys. The sun had shifted since her walk home and she felt like she was chasing her long shadow. Maybe they would even be playing the hide and seek game until dark! The pounding of her heart was not only from running.

She passed a cluster of bushes and emerged at the entrance to Maple Crescent. New houses lined one side of the street; partially constructed shells lined the other. Fresh sawdust on the breeze tickled her nostrils. The front of the second unfinished house was covered with a plastic tarp that had come loose and flapped with a sharp snap in the wind. It looked like a tortured flag.

"You're early."

She turned to see Teddy Williams slouching on the sidewalk. He frowned at her, beefy hands fumbled with a silver yoyo that he stuffed into his back pocket.

"Billy told me after dinner," Pauline said. "I finished dinner."

Teddy kept frowning, shifting on his off-white runners. Behind him, Pauline could see a couple of other kids approaching. Yes, it was Ravi and his brother Jamil, both short with light brown skin. Pauline noticed Bridget and Sandra, cutting across from another street. Bridget had bright red hair cut short which only seemed to accent her height. Sandra, one year older, stood three inches shorter with blonde hair past her shoulders. A gold barrette clipped her hair neatly to the back of her neck.

Pauline turned back to Teddy and raised her eyebrows. He muttered under his breath and shifted again.

Ravi joined them first. "Where's Billy? He late again?"

"Don't know," Teddy said. "Ask her. She was here early."

Bridget and Sandra were within earshot. Pauline felt everyone looking at her. Her face grew hot. Oh no, she couldn't stammer and look stupid. She'd never get another chance!

She shrugged in a way she hoped seemed casual. "I haven't seen him."

For a moment, all the gazes fixed on her, then the kids looked away. Pauline let her breath out. That had been close.

Over the next several minutes, kids drifted in from all directions except from the new houses on Maple Crescent. Pauline glanced back at them. Why did the kids meet here?

Finally the last of the kids trickled up until there was about twenty of them, but still no sign of Billy. Ravi and Jamil consulted with several of the other kids, then called for attention.

"Billy's not here, so we'll just start." Jamil clapped his hands. "Now we got a new player today." He pointed at Pauline.

Pauline froze. Again she felt their gaze, this time magnified twenty times. Her cheeks burned. She hated blushing, but there wasn't any way she could stop it. She forced her mouth to move, cracking her cheeks as her lips tried to curve into a smile. Her hand lifted in a limp wave.

"The rules are this—everyone hides and you have to find them. The first one you find has to help you find another one, the next one you find helps you find the one after that. And it keeps going. Nobody hides together and kids can change their hiding place. We go until an hour after dark."

Pauline sucked in a breath. They played until after dark? She hadn't known that.

Jamil's expression hardened. "You got a problem? You have to go home early, like a baby?"

Pauline clenched her teeth. "No. I don't gotta go home."

Jamil's black eyes glared and then he relaxed. "Good. We'll get started. You count to a hundred and then get started."

"Wait, don't we have to figure who's it?" Pauline said.

"You're it. You're new. New one is always it first game. That's the rules."

Other kids around her nodded, muttering "the rules." Pauline tried to find a sympathetic face but they were all closed to her. She sighed.

"Okay."

Jamil led her to a telephone pole and watched as she faced it, covering her eyes.

Four Against Chaos

by Kurt Kirchmeier

Once upon a time, there were four gifted boys who went to war against chaos and won.

With their mittens full of fingers and their boots stuffed with toes, they set out from the street they all lived on and made their way to the nearest hill. On their heads were snug-fitting toques, like army helmets shrunk in the rain, while wrapped around their hands were the ropes that connected them to their saucer-style sleds, all of which were plastic and therefore much lighter than the wood toboggans of old. Light enough, the boys would soon discover, to be tossed about violently if the wind were to blow in earnest.

"Ten times!" said the first boy, whose name was Gunner Wilson. "Ten times I'll go down the hill!" He stomped vigorously through the snow, kicking up white powder clouds. Gunner Wilson was strong and tall, and had the gift of a "very hard melon" according to his father.

"Twenty!" yelled the second boy and he smiled a one-up smile. This boy's name was Domenic Johnson, but the others just called him Do-Jo. "Twenty times, for sure!" Do-Jo's gift came in the form of paramount peepers, which is to say, eyesight so sharp that should a procedure come along by which to attain it, even the proudest of eagles would surely line up, put beak to inkwell and sign on the dotted line.

The third lad, Lester MacLean, opened his mouth but said nothing, for it occurred to him quite suddenly that thirty trips *down* the hill would necessitate thirty trips *up*, and boy heck, would his

legs ever be sore after that! Lester MacLean possessed the gift of thought before action.

"Twenty!" he concurred and nodded in eager agreement with Do-Jo. "Twenty trips down the hill!" He made a whoosh sound, then turned to regard the last of their keen coterie who had fallen a ways behind and was now standing quite still, a single licked finger held up to the wind.

This fourth boy, who thought himself to be gifted differently than his friends and whose mother opined, nay, *insisted*, he was something very special indeed, swallowed hard and sighed. "I think I should maybe stay home," he said and discreetly returned his fingers to his mittens, pretending he hadn't been holding one to the air at all. "I'm not feeling so good, all of a sudden." The wind had begun to blow just a tad.

In a show of pre-teen synchronicity, the three companions tilted their heads at curious angles, eyebrows arching above left eyes. "What's up, Gabe?" they asked as one. The road here was slanted down, so although they stopped, their sleds continued to slide forward like impatient dogs straining at their leashes.

"Stomach's not feeling so hot," said Gabriel Aguirre. He put a hand to his mid-section and doubled over for dramatic effect.

Lester wondered about the licked finger and the wind, and what either had to do with an abrupt case of indigestion. Nothing, so far as he could figure. Probably Gabe was just worried on account of some silly idea his mom had put in his head. All that chaos and order stuff she was always going on about...enough to turn a boy into a basket case. "You'll be fine," Lester said and waved dismissively.

"Ahh, c'mon, Gabe," said the others. "Don't be a whiner! Don't be a dud! Or maybe he's just scared we'll beat him down the hill! Yeah, I'll bet that's what it is, all right! Gotta be!"

"That's not it," said Gabe, and he scowled for he hated being swayed by bravado and hated even more the fact that while his friends were always jolly and gay, he was just cautious and scared.

"Okay, here," said Lester, reaching into his coat pocket. "I got some antacid tablets right here. Couple of these and you'll be bouncing like ole Gunner."

Gunner grinned as though he'd had his name mentioned by a celebrity on television rather than by a friend who was standing right beside him. Gunner liked being referenced.

But what Gunner didn't realize was that Lester didn't have antacids at all. He was bluffing; what his fingers concealed was

merely the end of a pack of grape-flavored hard candies. Lester always did have a thing for grape. Fibbing, on the other hand, was new, but delicious in its own right.

Gabe looked Lester in the eye, then stretched a bit from side to side. Not because he believed Lester, but because the wind had just died down again. Perhaps he wouldn't have to be goaded into coming along after all. "Nah," he said. "I think maybe it was just a stitch. Stopped walking a spell and now it's gone away." He skipped ahead, pretending to test his capacity for play.

"Good, then let's go already," said Do-Jo with a roll of his eagle eyes. If it wasn't Gunner acting like a doofus or Lester over-analyzing things, it was Gabriel alternating between cowardly and strange. Always with their dilly-dallying. It would surely be nice, Do-Jo thought as he compacted a snowball between his palms, if friends came with wind-up knobs on their backs, because then you could get them going again if they happened to come up short on their approach. Do-Jo wanted to be a pilot when he grew up, but since it was winter he'd been forced to trade in his flight goggles for headwear "better suited for the clime" as Do-Jo's dad had put it.

Setting his sights on a distant road sign, Do-Jo let fly the ball of snow which spun threw the air straight and true—guided as though by a laser—and connected with a resounding *bong!*

The other three shared a look at Do-Jo's impatience but opted to shrug and high-step it rather than comment on the thing. And so off they went in companionable silence.

Gabe continued to monitor the wind at regular intervals along the way, hoping against hope that it would let him alone for the afternoon. He hadn't gone sledding at all yet, hadn't even left the house for those three days when it stormed so bad. His mom had phoned the school and said he was sick that day, but he wasn't really sick at all.

Gabe's mom explained it like this: "The wind is a force of chaos, Son, and you're a force of order, so it's only natural for the wind to try to rub you out from time to time, but only from time to time, because if it did so regularly, then it wouldn't be adhering to its code of chaos, now would it?"

As for the "order" she spoke of, well, that went something like this: Ever since Gabe was a boy, all he had to do was walk into a room and something would change. If there happened to be an out-of-tune piano in the corner, boom, it would be in tune again, and if there happened to be a partially constructed jigsaw puzzle missing one little piece, poof, there was that piece, the puzzle made

Ice Pirates

by Claire Eamer

Curled within a huge coil of rope near the main mast, Jem braced himself as the *Otter* wallowed in a slight swell. Frozen shrouds, invisible in the fog, clattered together overhead and a hatch banged somewhere below deck. Sheltered by the rope, Jem was hidden from everyone on deck. Especially the captain. He pulled the ragged scrap of blanket tighter over his shoulders and listened.

The fog muffled sound as well as sight. It even dulled the chock-chock-chock of hatchets on the port side, where half a dozen sailors were attacking the mounded ice that formed on rope and rail and made the ship tilt sluggishly under its weight. Left alone, the ice would build layer upon layer, as droplets of fog settled on sheets, masts and spars, until the burden toppled the little *Otter* and spilled everyone aboard into the icy northern sea.

Other than chip away at the ice, there was little to do until the wind returned and blew the fog away. The rest of the crew shivered below decks, wrapped in every bit of clothing they owned and buried in blankets and bits of torn canvas. They feared the cold, the grey water and the chattering skiffs of floating ice almost more than they feared their pursuers, stalled equally by the frigid calm. Jem wasn't afraid, didn't feel the cold. He wasn't sure why.

Perfectly comfortable, he curled tighter in his nest of rope, hugged his knees and savored the hint of icy sea carried in the cold air. Piercing air with the taste of salt. As long as he could remember, he had breathed salt air, but soft and tropical, heavy

with growth and decay. This air smelled sharp-edged, crystalline and glittering. It promised something different and, at the same time, it filled him with a sense of familiarity.

Odd that, because all he knew was the south...warm seas where the *Otter* plied her trade gliding silently between headlands and through narrow straits in the black of a tropical night, sometimes coming right up to a wealthy merchant ship, rail to rail, before the victim realized she was there. The *Otter* was small by pirate standards and her crew scant, but it didn't matter. Surprise was her strength. No one knew when she would strike next or where she might disappear to, leaving the unlucky merchant ship stripped bare and, as often as not, burned to the waterline and still smoldering in her wake.

The *Otter's* captain was uncanny, so said word around the pirate ports. She could read the tides and currents like a seabird and see in the dark like a cat. No one knew how she did it, but it kept a crew of violent, bitter, half-broken men content to follow her. And Jem, who knew how but did not understand, said—and dared say—nothing. As if thinking about her was enough to call her, a gravelly voice over-rode the sound of the hatchets.

"Pup! Where's the pup? I want him!"

Jem shivered, but not from cold. There was a pause in the chock-chock, a sullen silence and then muttering voices. They wouldn't protect him. Never had. Heavy footsteps clumped across the deck. Jem heard her hoarse breathing and smelled her, a mix of stale, unwashed wool, tobacco, and rum. His blanket was whisked away and a strong hand clamped onto his shoulder, dragging him from the shelter of the rope coil.

"Come along, whelp. Now." Long, dirty ringlets dangled from beneath a British officer's battered hat. Jem remembered the officer. The captain had made him strip off his uniform coat before she jammed a sword through his belly and tossed the still-twitching body overboard. She wore the coat now, its blue dulled with years of grime, the gold braid worn and lined with black and the deep pockets full and sagging from use.

Her hand bit into Jem's shoulder, and he squirmed as she turned to snarl an order at the ice detail. They ducked their heads, avoiding her eyes and Jem's, and the sound of the hatchets resumed. Then she hauled Jem, stumbling, to the small vessel's high stern, shoved him against the rail and loomed over him, blocking the sailors' view. Jem knew there was no escape and a

beating if he tried. He was small for his twelve years—twelve, he thought but didn't know—and skinny on the portions the cook begrudged him. He didn't think he'd ever grow big enough, strong enough, or brave enough to resist the captain. Only her need for his mysterious talent kept him alive and in one piece.

"Search, pup," she hissed in a voice that carried to his ears alone. "What's out there and where? Find me a current or a wind that will take us away from here, get us back south. With every other captain locked up or worse, we'll have the sea lanes to ourselves." She gave Jem's shoulder a final shake and turned him toward the sea.

Jem closed his eyes on the white fog and reached out with his mind. He had no idea how he did this, just that he had been able to do it as long as he could remember. And as long as he could remember, the captain had demanded it of him. Salt tickled the back of his throat and the *Otter* rocked gently beneath his feet. He sensed the blue-grey sheen of the ocean surface and the depths, where currents blew through the water like wind through the air, and weak, fog-dimmed light faded to darkness. He felt the currents' pull and reach. They curled, embracing, around a small island off to his right. Beyond it was a greater bulk, too big for the currents to embrace. Instead, they skimmed its edge, sending waves lapping toward the shore. The mainland, perhaps, or an island so big that it stretched beyond Jem's reach.

"Land," he said, pointing without opening his eyes. "There. Half a day's sail at most, in a fair wind. And an island, there. Small and rocky. A league or so away."

"The ships. What about those damned ships? Are they still there?" she growled in his ear.

Jem felt for the imprint of hulls on water and the jammering warmth of human souls. There. And there. And there. "At least three. Maybe more, farther away." He pointed, still without opening his eyes. South of their position, spread out, cutting them off from easy escape, herding them toward land. The captain cursed under her breath.

"Find me a way out, pup." She dug her fingers into his shoulder again, a reminder of what could happen if he didn't find what she wanted.

Pushing aside his fear, Jem reached into the ocean again, casting around for a sense of movement, of light, of change. Anything to say the fog and the calm weren't endless. There!

You Always Knew

by Michelle Barker

I'm going to tell you something
about Death,
though you suspect it already.

Death owns a rollercoaster,
the rickety kind—
cotton-candy-pink paint flaked,
colors faded,
wood rotting,
old stereo blaring seventies rock
in a nameless city

but you've been there.

There he is now,
greasy hair hanging stringy
from his black leather cap,
a moustache,
dirty T-shirt stretched
over a heart attack belly,
pants slung low

maybe a finger missing,
maybe the stub of a cigarette dangling
from the corner of his mouth

The Illumination of Cypher-Space

by Lynne M. MacLean

Dannie woke up stiff and sore. The stone behind which she was hiding—the biggest one in the graveyard—had lost the sun’s warmth that made it such an attractive hiding place earlier in the day. Now the ground was cold and the sun was lowering in the sky, shooting out long shadows. Little creatures rustled through the brown leaves blown into rifts around the cemetery. Night came early in late October.

First, though, she stretched out flat, face down, in the shadow of the gravestone. Neither Josh nor her grandmother was buried in this cemetery. But lying with her cheek in the soft grass, her heart pressed against the earth, she felt closer to them than anywhere else in this stupid city. She remembered when she had been by Grandma’s gravestone for the last time. Alone in the night, just before she ran away, Dannie had stopped by for a last visit. For reasons she couldn’t explain, she wrote “farewell” on the stone in marker. The writing had first glowed, then little sparks shot out that fizzled in the darkness. Fireflies, she had thought then. She wasn’t so sure, now.

Grandma was long dead, two years, but Josh’s death was fresh and painful. Dannie had spent the last two weeks crying for him. Enough. Now it was time to act.

She sat up slowly, looking around. No one was there, but that didn’t surprise her. It was a week since she had escaped

and found her way to this private cemetery. It was tucked away behind a hedge wall and creaky gate in the far end of a mansion's property. She couldn't hole up here much longer without being caught, but it had served its purpose. Billie and his crew wouldn't come into this neighborhood by day, and they were too superstitious to come into a graveyard at night. Stupid-stitious was more like it. Idiots.

She leaned against the gravestone again, hidden from the view of the gate and opened her backpack. She removed a half-finished bottle of cola and the remaining portion of the submarine sandwich she had stolen last night from a twenty-four-hour confectionary. Her stomach twisted in hungry knots as she shoveled in the food.

Dannie took out the exacto knife given to her, along with other art supplies, by Josh. She wiped tears away with the back of her hand, bit down hard on her bottom lip and started to hack away at her long dark hair. Billie would pay for Josh's death.

The knife blade was small. This haircut was going to take some time.

Josh had been the only person to really care about her, to really know her since she ran away from home following Grandma's death. Given how life had been before she moved in with Grandma, she sure hadn't stuck around that town to see where she'd end up. When she'd heard that Social Services was on its way, she'd grabbed her small savings, hitchhiked to the next town, bought a ticket on the greyhound bus, and headed to the big city. If she'd known what was waiting here she would've taken her chances with Social Services.

She had been fourteen. She met Billie at the bus depot after she had been panhandling for a couple of weeks. Billie was a friendly adult, hanging around, flashing his money. Real friendly. Before she'd had time to thaw out her brains and fill her stomach, she was stuck bad. Like a fly in a web. Billie had himself an organization based out of a night club and he had a lot of "employees," adult thugs as cruel as he was, and kids as hopeless as she. Pushing drugs, working the streets, stealing cars, running gambling dens and protection rackets, and more, anything awful you could think of—Billie's crew did it all. He wasn't big time yet, far from it, but he had ambitions.

He called her "Danielle," which she loathed. He said it was fancier. He made everyone else call her that, too. After awhile, she didn't mind separating Dannie, her real self, from Danielle.

He forced Dannie to work for him, and he had his guys keep close watch on her so she wouldn't run. Dannie was fast, with nimble fingers and the ability to slip away into the darkness. She was small and pretty, but not too pretty; the kind of girl you wouldn't stop and stare at, but one you wouldn't worry about around your car, your junior high school, your unlocked windows, the kind who, if you were a cop, you wouldn't think was up to trouble. The first year, all she did was work and head back to Billie's for beatings where bruises wouldn't show. She had tried escaping but without success. All it got her were more beatings. The other kids there were just as trapped. Somehow, she managed to stay off the drugs. She was pretty much the exception, though. Still, her spirit was broken and life was a waking hell. During the second year, having proven herself to be an obedient little girl, she was given more freedom. Once she turned in the night's money, she was on her own for a couple of hours.

She had roamed the limits of Billie's territory and beyond into other areas, learning the streets. She talked to other street people. She learned about the two big street gangs, the BluShuz and the Perdutions, though she didn't venture into their districts, not yet anyway. Billie was moving in on their turfs and his people would not be welcome. She spent most of her time in the neutral zone, No Man's Land. That's where she'd met the taggers. And Josh.

Damn. She cut her finger hacking off a lock of hair. Blood dripped down, forming a pattern on the ground. The wind gusted, lifting her hair, swirling leaves. She sucked on the wound, bound it with a less than clean bandana and then returned to her task. Hair fell in hanks around her. Some were long, some short. Nice and jagged, the way she planned it.

The taggers. Graffiti artists, young people mostly but not all: girls, guys, all drawn together by their common passion for graffiti. They worked alone most of the time, moving through the dark nights and dawns of the city, through alleys and culverts, under bridges, in a spider web of routes through No Man's Land. Once every few weeks, they met and worked together. A grim few were gang members who did the tagging of their gang's turfs, marking territory as borders shifted or bravado was asserted. They, too, felt called to join in with the others on those nights of sharing fumes and colors and line. BluShuz's tagger, Zack Tattoo, stayed far away from Perdutions' Night Hawk. They worked on the far edge of the tagger swarm, occasionally throwing shifty glances in each other's direction. No Man's Land was respected.

The Tremor Road

by Tony Pi

From atop his runestilts, Kulno surveyed the line of devastation before him. As wide as a broad avenue, the strip of broken ground cut southeast through the sweeping moors. But though the stilts raised the smallfellow higher than any tallfolk, even the added height did not show where the tremor road might end.

On the path ahead, the last light of day shone on a fallen standing stone, half-hidden behind the foliage of an uprooted larch. He strode to where the sandstone monolith lay. The stone had broken in two, the great moss-covered rune it bore damaged beyond reconstruction. Could this glyph have caused the tremor road? No, the curved remnants of the symbol suggested a sky-rune. He would bet his thighbones that an earth-rune powered the quakes.

He had stopped in Tockwick the night before in search of rumors of rune-bearing stones when the first quake struck. An ordinary earthquake would have affected the entire town, but the tremors cut a limited path through Tockwick.

Watchmaker Lane took the brunt of it. Prized clock-turrets fell, killing six below and trapping dozens. A crumbling wall had left Kulno bruised and bloodied, but despite his injuries he hastened to help, squeezing into small pockets among the rubble to find and comfort those who lived. The townsfolk worked through the night and into morning to free the trapped, but a second identical quake caught them by surprise, claiming the lives of two more men.

After the third quake, the clockmasters uncovered a disturbing pattern: the interval between tremors halved each time. When he heard of it, Kulno volunteered to track the source of the tremor road.

He unwound his braided white-gold beard from around his neck and checked the timepiece woven into it. Clockmaster Phinge had gifted him with it. "You've less than three hours until the next quake strikes on the cusp between sunset and moonrise," Phinge had said. "Take care, my stiltling friend. Such precision could only mean foul sorcery." If Phinge's calculations were accurate, Kulno had only a pinch of time to prepare. He suspected someone had corrupted a ley line to create the tremor road, but he needed to see the energies underground to confirm his theory.

He sought a patch of dirt not far from the standing stone, dug a navel in the peat-covered earth with his left stilt and vaulted atop the makeshift axis mundi. Balancing there on one big toe, he shook the soreness from his other foot.

Wielding the other runestilt with the toes of his right foot, Kulno sketched a land's eye glyph in the surrounding dirt, drawing the power from the earth into the symbol. Manipulating the earth magic increased his mass and slowed his motions, a side effect he always hated. Once he completed the glyph, he heaved the stilt over his shoulders and closed his eyes.

The land's eye was less visual than an extension of his sense of vibration through his toe. Kulno felt the ley line beneath, but also the motions of all creatures touching the ground within a league. The weave of life rippled around him: ponies ambling, snakes slithering, frogs hopping, night crawlers burrowing. But Kulno focused on the tremor road, waiting.

The earthquake struck at the dreaded hour.

Unlike previous quakes it had burst the bounds of the tremor road. Caught by surprise in the earthquake's zone, Kulno almost fell off his runestilt, but his inborn sense of balance saved him. Before the buckling earth could knock down his stilt or destroy his land's eye, he channeled more earth-energy skyward through the shaft and his body, rooting him as immobile as a world pillar.

His land's eye felt the tickle of animals scurrying away from the tremor road, while the tainted ley line convulsed and sank deeper into the earth. Though the tremors soon subsided, the eye revealed that stray energies in the earth continued to flow into the ley line like creeks into a river. Even odder, the slitherings of snakes had ceased everywhere within his sorcerous sight. Instead,

he sensed wheel-like movements spinning toward the tremor road. Two were racing his way.

He slid down the stilt to see with his own eyes.

Two hoops rolled toward him. Vipers biting their tails he thought at first, but no—the hoops were shrinking.

The snakes were swallowing their own tails.

There ought to be a limit to how much of itself a serpent could devour. Half its length, perhaps. But the snakes kept gorging and shrinking. The viper-hoops diminished until they were nothing but head and a snippet of body. They could fit in the palm of his hand with ease.

The closer one hit a clump of grass, bounced into the air and vanished.

Kulno blinked.

The second viper-hoop fell on its side and ate itself out of existence as he watched. Gone, with only swirlings in the dust to prove it was ever there.

Where'd they go?

He knew—hoped—he would see astounding things on his journey around the world, but this chilled him to the bone.

The tremor road and the vanishing serpents had to be related, but how?

His mind raced through all that the Towering Magi taught him about magic. The Rule of Sympathy said "like produces like." What if the ley line was eating its own tail like a world-circling serpent? Then it might sink deeper into the earth as he had observed. But who would force snakes to eat themselves out of existence, and why?

He had only an hour and a half until the next quake, and who knew what new twist that would bring? He did not know if he could stop the tremor road in time. However, he was certain the source lay in the moors since the tremors started in the south-east. The townsfolk said strange stones could be found there, including four called the Fangs of the Earth.

No one knew who had raised the ancient monoliths or carved runes of power into them. The Order of the Towering Magi catalogued and studied these runes. Every apprentice knew seven key runes, but to earn the rank of Master, they had to build their own repertoire of glyphs. To complete his apprenticeship, Kulno must circle the world in search of these standing stones, etching every glyph he found onto his runestilts. Almost certainly, aspirants would encounter obstacles on the road now and again,

The Memory Junkies

by Kate Boorman

We stood together in a dark corner of the schoolyard, tucked away from the iciest windblasts. It must have been twenty below even without the wind, and I wondered why Reid would pick an outdoor rendezvous point in the dead of winter on the prairies. A 3-D sims café would have at least been warm. Yeah, yeah I know—too dangerous, because Why Would the Four of Us be Hanging out Together and What if Someone Should Overhear and all of that. Far better to risk frostbite and all turn up at J. P. Magnus High School on Monday with purple-blue appendages. *Far* less suspicious.

“That is so *choke*.” Sara waved her arms in front of her face, her delicate flat nose scrunched in disgust. She flicked a hand toward Shaun’s cigarette, “You do realize those will kill you.”

Shaun stood a couple of feet away, savoring a long inhalation, “And you do realize they’re made with forty-five percent less tar and nicotine now? And that this little baby comes with an echinacea-coated tip?” He pronounced it wrong “Etch-Ee-Nay-Sha,” but Sara didn’t seem to notice.

“Whatever. Smoking is so last year. You wanna be 2019, go ahead.”

“Right, and you’re what? Retro 2007? Hate to break it you but your Goth meets Manga outfit was hype, like fifteen years ago.”

They went on like this for a few minutes while we shifted in the cold. It was the first meeting we’d all attended, in person, at the same time. It wasn’t the best start.

My toes felt like they were fusing together, becoming ice flippers in my Converse, and Leonard Cohen’s *Everybody Knows* was

running through my head—if you don't know, he's a singer from my grandparents' time. And yeah, the guy was melodramatic but the lyrics totally fit my situation. Hanging out with my Pretend Friends to plan the biggest terrorist act this side of the BC pipeline bombings was a pretty intense Saturday night.

Everybody knows that the dice are loaded; everybody rolls with their fingers crossed.

"What d'ya care if I smoke?"

"I don't, do what you want. But *my* body is a temple."

"Oh I get it. You're thinking about your own precious lungs."

"Well, *guh*. It's a good thing health care is finally private. Won't have to be paying for your new lungs when you're old and hacking blood."

"Yeah, we really dodged a bullet there," I broke in sarcastically, eager to end it. "Let's all just pay for our own health... what could go wrong? It's not like there'll be a licensed Wellness Facility that destroys your sanity and drains your finances. Oh wait, there is—check my parents' bank account." I was referring to Life Keep, of course, and they knew it. It was, after all, the reason we'd gathered on that balmy evening.

Even so, they glanced at me with passing interest, as though I might be a piece of more-clever-than-usual graffiti on the eTrain. I was used to that look.

"Right, but Life Keep's not technically in health care." Reid was rifling through his courier bag like a man possessed but he was still able to enter the conversation as though he'd been devouring every word, "They're more like...cosmetic surgery, designed to make you feel good about yourself," he looked up and his charismatic grin wobbled slightly, "at any cost." He went back to rummaging, his pale neck and hands dimly reflecting the glow from the schoolyard floodlight.

We'd agreed to dress in dark colors to be less conspicuous. It might have been all a little secret agent but Reid was adamant about Taking No Chances. It was fine by me; I wasn't in the habit of advertising my existence with bright clothing. Shaun had thrown on some dark mechanic's overalls and Reid, of course, looked infinitely more hype in his all-black attire. The three of us were practically invisible.

Sara, on the other hand, had far too many Fashion Sensibilities to fully play along. Her compromise was a shiny, knee-length purple coat, less crimson eye shadow than normal, and some

black stuff on her fingernails. It was a bit of overkill but despite what Shaun said, she pulled it off. She looked like a vampiric punk who could end your life with a well-placed karate chop. Or maybe just being Asian lent her the street cred.

Reid looked up from searching his bag and squinted at us in a way I knew girls found Adorable. Everything Reid did created legions of swooning fans, and in the six months we'd been partners it had become apparent to me the guy could club puppies for fun and barely lose points with the ladies. He was J. P. Magnus's version of the brooding rock star: Effortlessly Hype Hair, soulful lyrics and no end of emo torment.

Fortunately, he was also a total clinic when it came to cyber-tech. This was extremely critical to our plan. And truthfully, he was the only reason our group existed. He was more than just the angsty hype guy; he was obviously Paying Attention. How else would he figure out that the four of us, all from distinctly separate corners of the school atrium, were that desperate and miserable we could be united in one common, illegal goal? Four multi-colored, rejected peas in a pod, that's us.

Reid straightened up. "Should we start?"

"I thought we had." Sara eyed him. "I'm not hanging around you guys for funsies."

GargantuShaun (I'd never called him that to his face) let out a large ring of smoke. He shifted his six-foot-three frame. "Let's get this over with before Sara blows a neuron."

"Ease it, Shaun." Reid gave him a cool smile. Looking hype in any given situation was one thing he had down pat. "You alright, Mahone?"

I nodded and frowned, because frowning was one thing I had down pat. Mahone: a name you'd expect for a Cage Fighter. Me: thin bones, No Fly List-colored skin, and girlishly long eyelashes. Yes, the Scowl was my defense against the irony of it all.

"Great," Reid said. He'd finally found the tiny SimuGram in his oversized bag and he snapped it open. I couldn't see how the thing would work in the cold and was about to say as much when a familiar muted chime signaled that it was, in fact, booting up.

"Hey, hype." The device registered with GargantuShaun. "Does that Simu have Motion Correct?"

"Yep, but it drains the battery faster."

"How about Sonic Flare? That'd be killer at parties."

Reid grinned. "About the only thing it can't do is make you a sandwich."

SEE ME

— A Smoke and Shadows Story —

by Tanya Huff

“Mason, you want to move a bit to the right? We’re picking up that very un-Victorian parking sign.”

Huddling down inside Raymond Dark’s turn-of-the-19th-century greatcoat, Mason Reed shuffled sideways and paused to sniff mournfully before asking, “Here?”

Adam took another look into the monitor. “There’s fine. Tony, where’s Everett?”

Tony took two wide shots with the digital camera for continuity and said, “He’s in the trailer finishing Lee’s bruise.”

“Right. Okay...uh...” Adam was obviously looking for Pam, their PA, but Pam had already been sent to the 24-hour drugstore over on Granville to pick up medicine for Mason’s cold. He’d already sneezed his fangs out once, and no one wanted to go through that again. Tony grinned as Adam’s gaze skirted determinedly past him.

Although he’d been the 1st Assistant Director since the pilot, this was Adam’s first time directing an episode of *Darkest Night*—the most popular vampire/detective show in syndication—and he clearly intended to do everything by the book, including respecting Tony’s 2AD status. Or possibly respecting the fact

that Tony was one of the world's three practicing wizards. Even if he didn't get a lot of chance to practice given the insane hours his job required.

CB Productions had never had the kind of staffing that allowed for respect.

"I'm done here, Adam. I'll get him."

"If you don't mind..."

Chris on Camera One made an obscene gesture. "Dude, he's with Lee."

Tony flipped him off as he turned and headed for the trailer that housed makeup, hair, wardrobe, and, once, when the writers were being particularly challenging, three incontinent fruit bats.

Halfway there, he met Everett and Lee heading back.

Everett rolled his eyes and cut Tony off before he got started.

"Let me guess, Mason's nose needs powdering."

"It's a little ruddy for one of the bloodsucking undead."

"My sister's wedding is in *four* days," Everett growled, hurrying toward the lights. "I've already rented a tux. If he gives me his cold, I'm putting itching powder in his coffin. And you can quote me on that."

Tony fell into step beside Lee, who, unlike Mason, was dressed in contemporary clothing.

"I get that it's artistic, the real world overlapping Mason's angst-ridden flashback, but, after four seasons, I can safely say that our fans could care less about art and the only overlapping they want to see is James Taylor Grant," he tapped his chest, "climbing into the coffin with Raymond Dark."

"Not going to happen."

"Jealous?"

Tony leaned close, bumping shoulders with the actor. "It's basic geometry. Mason's bigger than me and you and I barely fit." At the time, they'd been pretty sure they weren't coming back for another season and had wanted to go out with a bang. Tony still had trouble believing the show had hung on for four years. He had almost as much trouble believing he and Lee had been together for over two years—not exactly out, although their relationship was an open secret in the Vancouver television community.

Their own crew had survived a dark wizard invading from another reality, a night trapped inside a haunted house trying to kill them, and the imminent end of the world by way of an

immortal Demongate hired to do some stunt work. Relatively speaking, the 2AD sleeping with the show's second lead wasn't worth noting.

Tony handed Lee off to Adam and headed down the block to check out the alley they'd be using as a location later that night. Stepping off the sidewalk and turning into the space between an electronics store and a legal aid office, he switched over to the Gaffer's frequency with one hand as he waved the other in front of his face.

"I think we're going to need more lights than Sorge thought, Jason. There's bugger all spill from the..."

He paused. Frowned. The victim of the week was an impressive screamer. Pretty much simultaneously, he remembered she wouldn't be arriving for another two hours and realized that the scream had come from in front of him, not behind him.

Had come from deeper within the alley.

"Tony?" Adam, in his earbud.

"I'm on it." He was already running, muttering the night-sight spell under his breath. As it took effect, he saw someone standing, someone else lying down, and a broken light over a graffiti-covered door at the alley's dead-end. Still running, he threw a wizard lamp up into it. People would assume electricity.

The someone standing was a woman, mid-twenties maybe, pretty although overly made-up and under-dressed. The someone on the ground was an elderly man and, even at a distance, Tony doubted he'd be getting up again.

"Tony?" Lee, leading the pack running into the alley behind him.

"Call 911!" Tony snapped without turning. He'd have done it himself, but these days it was best to first make sure the screaming was about something the police could handle. Like called to like, as he'd learned the hard way. Having Henry Fitzroy, bastard of Henry VIII, romance writer, *and* vampire based in Vancouver was enough to bring in the fine and freaky. Since Tony had started developing his powers, the freaky vastly outnumbered the fine.

Dropping to one knee beside the body, he checked for a pulse, found nothing, checked for visible wounds, found nothing. The victim wasn't breathing, didn't begin breathing when Tony blew in two lungfuls of air so Tony shifted position and started chest compressions.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.