

# TRUTH BEYOND PARADOX



Edited by Satyros Phil Brucato



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# Introduction: Misunderstanding All You See

Satyros Phil Brucato

Magic(k), especially in the 21st century, is a paradox. Supposedly “unreal,” it re-makes reality, often in ways that folks consider impossible. Aleister Crowley defined magic(k) as “the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity to the will.” Sandra Damiana Buskirk – author of the final tale in this collection – restated that sentiment more simply: magic(k) is the fine art of getting off your ass and doing something.

This collection, then, is about people who get off their asses and change their world, often in ways that even *they* consider impossible.

The title **Truth Beyond Paradox** illuminates a foundation of **Mage: The Ascension**, the fictional world within which these tales are told: “Reality” is a paradox, and magick underscores that truth. There *is* no single overarching “reality” – not in our world, and not in **Mage**’s. Instead, we experience a shared hallucination within which we all play a part in the reality we see. Some people play larger, more dramatic, roles than others, but we’re all in this together.

**Truth Beyond Paradox** features an array of people who, for better and worse, transform their world. You’ll meet a guy obsessed with secrets, a girl who recalls tomorrow, and two old friends whose lust for illusions and power destroy what they could have been. “Nothing Important Happened Today”...until it did...while “A Firm Place to Stand” gives one girl the leverage she needs to transform obscure poverty into salvation for all humanity.

Nothing’s as it seems in this collection. Life demands death. Fire protects from flames. A search for “ultimate truth” can blind a person to the life she ran away from, and past can become present and devour the future. **Truth Beyond Paradox**, then, is a manifesto for reality. Only by looking beyond what we think we see can we begin to know what’s really going on.

Enjoy!





# We Are the Shadows Cast by the Memory of Giants

Seanan McGuire

I studied my reflection in the mirror, searching, assessing, looking for a flaw I could hang myself upon – something I could point to and say, “There, you see? Most of this is magic, most of this is art, and alchemy, and someone else’s rules... but that piece there, that crooked tooth, that freckle, that discoloration, that’s *me*, that’s *mine*.”

There was nothing. Of course there was nothing. The people who’d been responsible for remaking me, like turning lead into gold, had done their jobs perfectly; there were no errors to find. Everything I saw was flawless, in a soft, boring way that left no hooks in the heart. They’d transformed me from someone who was plain but memorable into someone lovely but perfectly forgettable.

Laughter bubbled up my throat, as thick and bitter as vomit. I pressed a hand over my mouth, pushing it back. This was what I’d always said I wanted. This was the future I’d bartered five years of my life to claim, with two more years to go before I could stand before Tribunal and say, without hesitation, “I pledge myself completely, heart and soul and future, to the service of the Houses of Hermes, the Order they have found between them, and the balance we must all pursue.” I’d practiced those words so many times that they should have lost all meaning by now, becoming light and effortless, but they’d grown heavier and heavier instead, becoming a stone upon my heart.

Every step I’d taken had been one step closer to *too far; can’t go back*. Apprenticeship carried its own oaths, as inviolate and unforgiving as the oaths binding a grown Magus to service. First I’d given my freedom, letting the Order dictate what I did and when I did it, letting them sever my ties to the world one by one. Then I’d given my name, consigning “Barbara” and whoever she might have become to the ranks of “never-was” and “didn’t.” Barbara Mitchell might have been a wife, a mother, a beloved member of her community. Barbara Mitchell had been going to college to

become a teacher. She might have inspired young minds, might have changed a hundred lives forever. But Barbara Mitchell was never anything but a passing fancy, a life I lived until I realized there was something more.

Apprentices were required to cut ties with our old lives by the end of our third year of study, although the symbolic “deaths” of those abandoned selves didn’t come until year four. I wondered, sometimes, whether my parents had cried when heard that their long-absent daughter’s body had been found, or whether it had been a relief by then, one more thing to push aside and not talk about. I grew up in a house full of careful silences and measured responses. Maybe that was why the voice of the Order spoke to me so loudly, when I finally let myself hear it. I wasn’t alone anymore, when I listened to the Order.

I wasn’t Barbara, either. “Bryony” was a much better name for me. It always had been. It had just been waiting for me to grow into it.

So first went freedom to choose what I did with my own self, with my own time, and then went family, all the people who had made and shaped and defined me until the day the Order found me, and finally, as I teetered out of fifth year and into sixth, they had come for my face. I had to be perfect. I had to be someone who could move through the world without leaving ripples, unless I wanted to. That was what it meant, to be Hermetic. We were like pondskaters, those little bugs that danced on the surface of the water and never broke through. We had to be *above*.

My bedroom door banged open, hitting the wall hard enough that the doorknob would leave a scuff on the paint, a little black comma announcing “someone was *here*.” I didn’t turn. I kept searching the mirror, kept scanning for that one little flaw that would transform my new self from a waystation into someplace that I could actually see myself living.

“I’ve heard of people being so enthralled by their transformations that they couldn’t stop staring, but I didn’t expect you to be one of them,” drawled my roommate. Her voice was sweet as honey, and still an octave higher than I was used to. Her transformation had been more thorough than mine, magic taking the place of years of hormone treatments and painful surgeries. What was the point of joining a secret magical society if you couldn’t use it to make your life better every once in a while? Besides, it meant there was no chance *her* family would ever track her down. Carter’s mother had been unforgiving. Her father had been worse.

“Not what I’m doing and you know it,” I said, twisting in my seat. “What’s up?”

“What’s up is that we’re having an Enochian review in fifteen minutes, and no one’s seen you since you got re-skinned. Come on, Bryony. Everyone’s curious.” Carter sat down on the edge of her bed, knees together, feet apart, like a discarded puppet. “It’s not like whoever was in charge of your makeover made you mondo-unfortunate. You’re cute. Revel in it.”

I didn’t say anything.

Carter had always been pretty; all her transformation had done was refocus her prettiness, making it less striking and more sedate. Her hair was a pale chestnut that would send soccer moms rushing to their salons to request the same color; her figure



was nice enough to be noticeable, but not nice enough to turn too many heads. Background noise, in other words.

"You can tell who's pledging Flambeau or Quaesitor," I said, before my brain could get in the path of my tongue and tell it not to go any further. "They came out super pretty, did you notice? It's like either 'hey, people respond better when you're hot, go on, be a hot political evil' or 'we're so sorry you're going to leave an unrecognizable corpse, let's set you up for lots of casual sex while you're still here.'"

Carter snapped her fingers. "Damn. I knew Verditius was the wrong call. Think it's too late for me to tell my *parens* that I actually want to burn things down for Jesus?"

"I'm pretty sure the Flambeau don't burn things down for Jesus."

"Some of them do," said Carter solemnly. "That really, really *pretty* boy from our Calc class?"

"You mean the one I teach and you fail?"

"That's the one!" Carter beamed. "He's totally only into burning things down if he's doing it for Jesus. Jesus *talks* to him. Tells him what a good little pyromaniac he's been, promises to bring him accelerants for Christmas. It's a gloriously fucked-up fundamentalist Hell inside his pretty wee head, and if he didn't think premarital sex was a sin, I'd show him a few new applications for the Code."

"Great, so you'd have to switch Houses *and* get married *and* probably convert to whatever hellfire and brimstone school of Christianity the boy practices." I leaned back in my chair, giving Carter a frank look. "I might – *might* – see you managing the first over a crush, since you'd still have time to switch back, and you know Verditius wouldn't let you go without a fight. But the rest? No. Not going to happen. You're too you to do any of those things just for the sake of sex. Sex is a renewable resource that does not require rolling around in somebody else's crazy."

"You're no fun," said Carter.

"Correct. That also works as the answer to the question 'why is Bryony going to be a member of House Jerbiton?' I am no fun, ergo, I am going to work with the nice people who make it easier for the rest of you Harry Potter wanna-bes to go about your business without being burnt at the stake. You're welcome."

Carter huffed. Actually huffed, blowing out more air than her slender frame should have been capable of holding. "All right, that's it. You're coming with me." She slid to her feet and grabbed my hands, dragging me effortlessly to my feet despite the fact that I had six inches and fifty pounds on her. "You haven't left this room since you got reskinned. It's time for you to go out and reacquaint yourself with little things like 'the sun' and 'your peers.'"

"I'm allowed to need a little time to adjust," I protested.

"Why, because you don't like looking like somebody new? You *are* somebody new, Bry! You're Bryony Thomas *bani* Hermes, soon to be *bani* Jerbiton, and it's totally awesome that you got a new face to go with it. No ties, no entanglements, nothing to bind you to any previous versions. You get to be you. You get to be *free*. How many

people outside these walls get to say that, ever? This is like witness protection, only better. Now come on. We're done waiting around for you to grow a sense of fun. Come on!" Carter dropped her hands and went bouncing from the room.

With a sigh, I followed.

• • •

Seven years: that was the length of a Hermetic apprenticeship, the amount of time allotted for our *parens* to cram every piece of knowledge necessary into the mind of an aspiring mage. I wondered, sometimes, how they'd arrived at that figure; who had looked at the daunting curriculum and said "okay, seven years should just about do it; most of the ones who can't hack it will drown themselves in the well around year three, and that'll leave you more time to torture the survivors." I also wondered sometimes whether J. K. Rowling was a Hermetic, given that Hogwarts had a seven-year curriculum, and the Harry Potter books involved a surprising number of student injuries. I figured I'd find out when I graduated and was approved to learn the secrets of the Order – or at least the secrets the Quaesitori were willing to share. Which never seemed to be quite all of them, no matter how often they talked about transparency and the need to be open with your fellow magi.

Some magi took apprentices in isolation. House Criamon was notorious for training its novices without exposing them to other schools of thought, beyond the requisite selection of the final House – although how anyone could make an informed choice about the House they would belong to for the rest of their lives without *talking* to people, I couldn't figure out. Changing Houses in apprenticeship was an easy thing, like switching majors at a mundane college – and in fact, I'd switched majors three times since starting college, pursuing that exact right blend of skills and experiences that would make me valuable to Jerbiton. Changing Houses after becoming a full member of the Order was a matter of hard work, copious apologies, and possibly appearing before a Tribunal to explain that no, you weren't trying to steal the secrets of one House and use them to buy yourself a better position with another, you just genuinely thought you'd fit better within another school of thought. And since every year brought with it another set of rules to limit and define the universe, and those rules varied slightly between Houses, well...

*We are the Traditions in microcosm*, I thought glumly as I followed Carter down the stairs toward the living room. Everyone was secretly a Hermetic in their hearts: they were just the soft sciences version, with less math and fewer protections against the dark parts of the universe. That didn't really help me sleep at night. The thought of that many people practicing magic without knowing how to keep themselves from being devoured by the things that lived between the walls of the world was chilling. One day, they would all be whisked away, and only the Order would remain.

I wasn't sure whether Carter was looking forward to that day or not. That probably made me a bad apprentice. I didn't particularly care.

Carter had been wrangling people again: there were four bodies in the living room when I reached the bottom of the stairs. Tirzah and Desmond, both Bonisagus-in-training, sat on one couch, while Tara and Christopher – Merinita and Flambeau, respectively – sat on the other. They'd all changed their faces since the last time I'd seen them, going

through their own fifth-year review and severing the last ties with their former lives. I was a little surprised to realize that I had no trouble recognizing any of them. Their faces had changed, but their body language remained the same. Tirzah sat like a cathedral, all hard lines and unforgiving angles. Desmond slouched, that same cathedral after being sacked, preparing to slide into the sea. Tara was a coiled spring, all tension and unforgiving minutes ticking down on a clock that ran from here to doomsday, and Christopher looked like he was on the verge of going to sleep. It was a deceitful stillness, and one that had served him well in the time that I'd known him.

"Bryony!" said Tara, brightening. So the similarities were consistent, then: they went below the surface of the skin, all the way down to the bone. Maybe none of them recognized themselves in the mirror either, but were all astounded when their friends could pick them out of the crowd.

If I ever saw my mother again, I would seem to be a cruel reflection of a dead daughter; something that could never be, distorted by a stranger's face and written on a stranger's skin. It seemed like an awfully cruel trick for the Order to play. Maybe changing a willing student's body was easier than changing an unaware family's memories, but it would have been so much *kinder*.

"Hello, Tara," I said, managing to find it within myself to smile. "How go the fairy tales?"

"Elusive and tricky, and full of hidden wisdom," said Tara. "How go the tax returns?"

"Someday, when the US government comes after you for concealing assets, you're going to be so glad I pledged to the House I did, you won't even know what hit you," I said.

Tara threw a decorative pillow at me.

"Now that we're all together, it's time to get down to the extremely serious business of going out and getting completely blotto," said Carter brightly. "I hope you all intend to take this as seriously as I do, and cursed be he who first cries 'hold, enough.'"

There was a moment of silence before Desmond said, in a cautious tone, "I'm pretty sure you just mangled that quotation."

"Don't make me mangle your head," said Carter. "Drinking. It is time for excessive amounts of. Because we deserve it. Because we work hard."

"Because our *parens* are out of town for Tribunal and we weren't invited," said Christopher.

"Ding-ding-ding! Give the boy a prize, and please, for the love of all that is just and holy, give me a margarita." Carter put her hands on her hips. "All of you get up. We're going to have fun tonight if it kills us."

"What about our Enochian review...?" I asked. Vainly, I hoped this was a joke, and that we were actually going to get some work done. I should have known better. I *did* know better, but hope, as the sages say, springs eternal.

"It'll be a lot more fun when we're all hammered," said Carter serenely, and that, as the sages *also* say, was that.

Two hours and three coffee shops later, I was wedged as far into the corner as I could go, watching Tara and Christopher argue over who wrote Shakespeare's plays – Shakespeare, as Tara insisted, or a committee, as Christopher claimed – and wondering whether Carter was secretly capable of seeing the future. Between the constant infighting, the number of places we'd already been kicked out of, and the espresso, I was beginning to suspect that having fun was going to be the death of me. Or maybe it already had been, and now my ghost was locked into an unspeakable afterlife full of Hermetic apprentices trying to one-up each other.

"Can't be," I muttered to my coffee. "I haven't been that bad."

"Aw, cheer up, buttercup," said Carter, taking the seat across from me. "You look like someone set fire to your puppy. It's not that bad. The night is young, and I have absolute faith that we'll find something super-fun and awesome to do before morning."

"What if I told you that the most super-fun thing I could think of was going back to the house?"

Carter snorted. "I'd say you were..." Someone screamed outside, loud and shrill and terrified. Without missing a beat, Carter continued, "...possibly right, but that we have a duty to the people of this town. We need to find out what's going on. Come with me."

She started for the door. I found myself following, more out of habit than anything else. Carter wasn't the boss of me. Carter wasn't the boss of *anyone*. She was a technomancer who liked to take charge, but her House didn't have the kind of relationship with mine – with any of ours – that meant she got to call the shots. Not that it ever slowed her down. She blazed straight ahead, expecting the rest of us to follow, and because we didn't see any other good options, we generally did.

Tonight, she blazed her trail out of the coffee shop and into the dimly-lit park across the way, the rest of us trailing after her like so many confused ducklings. The scream didn't come again. She turned to face the group, her expression rendered in planes and shadows by the distant streetlight. She didn't say anything, just nodded first to the left and then to the right, signaling which way we should go. Tara and Desmond went one way. Christopher and Tirzah went the other. I followed Carter, faithful to the last.

She murmured under her breath as we walked, the fingers of her right hand spinning the bracelet that circled her left wrist. The beads rattled and twisted, following a pattern I wasn't equipped to see. She had attempted to explain it to me on several occasions, calling it a form of an abacus and a very small computer, but none of it helped, and none of it ever would. I found my magic in the elegant sweep of numbers down linear columns in my accounting programs; she found hers in other places. That was exactly as it should have been. We were different pieces in the beautiful mosaic of the Order, and if we looked identical to outsiders, it was because they weren't looking closely enough.

"This way," she said, adjusting her trajectory ever so slightly – but I could project the difference as time moved on, like a line sweeping up a graph. The tiniest change at the beginning of the thing could completely alter the outcome. Had she not shifted six



inches to the left, we would have wound up in a completely different sector of the park.

The scream was not repeated, but as we ran, a soft sniffing took its place: the sound of someone fighting not to cry. Carter glanced at me, catching my eye long enough to be sure that I heard it as well. I nodded, but didn't speak. I was starting to set up the Fibonacci sequence in my head, that beautiful, inexorable cascade of numbers that would carry me from here to there in an instant, if I needed it to.

*You are going to get in so much trouble when Genevieve gets home*, I thought, and pushed the thought aside. Sure, bending the universe to our whims wasn't supposed to be something we did during a lousy night on the town, and definitely not in public, but if we survived the experience, it wasn't like anyone was going to *tell*. And we were fifth-year apprentices, heading into sixth year. We knew what we were doing. We weren't going to fuck it up.

Much.

The sniffing was coming from a cluster of hydrangea bushes. Carter and I stopped next to them, her bracelet still spinning, my ranks of numbers still lining up patiently behind my eyes. We exchanged a glance. She shrugged, looking briefly helpless.

Jerbiton. We're the practical ones. I cleared my throat before calling, "Excuse me? Are you, um, all right in there?"

Silence answered my question long enough for the others to catch up with us and fall into a ragged semicircle, leaving me at the point. Apparently, whatever the problem was, it was going to be *my* problem above all else. Charming.

"We heard you crying, and we just want to help," I said. "Please, can you at least let us know if you're okay?"

"We're college kids, and we'd much rather be back at the coffee shop, sobering up enough to resume drinking," added Tirzah. "We're essentially harmless."

That was a bald-faced lie – no group of lightly inebriated Hermetic apprentices was anywhere *near* harmless, although we were no longer quite so likely to accidentally set things on fire – but I didn't contradict her. We couldn't walk away and leave some girl crying in the bushes. It just wasn't going to happen. That meant we either needed her to come out, or we needed to go in, and plunging into the bushes after someone we didn't know...call me paranoid, but I knew enough about the way the world worked to regard that as a singularly bad idea.

The bushes rustled. The girl sniffled. And then, finally, she stepped out into the light.

She was young, maybe seventeen if I was being generous, and her face was covered by the sort of heavily-applied makeup that always seemed like a good idea to teenagers who believed that enough eyeliner would somehow magically take the place of a fake ID. Her gauzy shirt was torn at the left shoulder, and her skirt was short enough that she *must* have been chilly. Modesty had nothing to do with it: it was a cold night, and no one should have been running around without tights on.

That wasn't the reason that I gasped, or the reason I went statue-still, trying to hold myself without breathing. Carter didn't seem to notice. She took a stuttering half-step toward the girl, hands already outstretched like she was going to shield her.

“Honey,” she said, “are you okay?”

The girl whimpered and flung herself into Carter’s arms, and I still didn’t move. Because her name wasn’t “honey,” it was Angela. And she wasn’t a stranger.

She was my sister.

• • •

We retreated back to the latest coffee shop, Angela in tow. The manager, Eric, looked disturbed when we came pushing back inside – we were loud, we were rowdy, and while we tipped reasonably well we had a tendency to scare off the rest of the customers. Then Eric saw Angela, still shivering, her torn shirt clutched around her like a shroud, and his objections died. When the boisterous college kids ran toward the sound of screaming and came back with a terrified teenager, the math wasn’t hard to do.

Christopher went to get her a cup of coffee while Tara and Carter steered her to a seat. I continued hanging back, terrified to open my mouth, convinced that she would know who I was as soon as I said a word. I had a new face. Everything behind it was the same as it had ever been. What happened to a fifth-year apprentice who made contact with her family after ties had been severed? No one had ever told me, because so far as I knew, no one had ever *done* it.

That couldn’t be right. The Order had endured for centuries, and had trained thousands of magi in that time. Someone must have slipped, somewhere along the line. Someone must have broken the rules, revealed themselves to one of the people they had left behind. The real question was what had happened to them afterward. Had they been drummed out of the Order, bound and gagged and dumped by the side of the road? It seemed too cruel a punishment for one little transgression – but then, how could the Order endure if we all ignored the rules we didn’t like? We were subject to the rule of law, same as anybody. Maybe more than anybody. We were an Order, after all, not a Chaos.

“What’s your name, honey?” asked Carter, pressing a mug of coffee into Angela’s hands. I wanted to tell her my baby sister was too young for coffee. I didn’t say anything. Angela wasn’t a baby anymore, and I had given up all my rights to sisterhood when I’d walked out on my life – walked out on *her*. Our parents were no fairy tale. She still deserved better than the way I’d run out and left her behind.

“Angela,” she said in a whisper, wrapping her hands around the cup and holding it tight. “Angela Mitchell. I... did you see the boys? The ones who hurt me?”

“No, but if you tell us what they look like, we’ll find them.” Tirzah sounded perfectly calm. It was all a front. She was the most bloody-minded of all of us, and I knew that if she found a bunch of boys who had knocked down a teenage girl, the police would be lucky if they could identify the bodies.

“I didn’t really... I mean, they didn’t really... they just knocked me down.” Angela stared at her coffee. “They didn’t t-touch me, if that’s what you think. Just knocked me down.”

“Your shirt’s torn,” said Desmond gently. He and Tirzah had moved to almost flank her, protecting her from the rest of us. Neither of them seemed to have noticed how much she looked like I used to; she was a damsel in distress, and as such, they were

focusing on things other than her face. "Did they do that while they were just 'knocking you down'?"

Angela glanced up, eyes wide and rimmed in startled white. She looked like a rabbit on the verge of bolting. "They pushed me a little first," she admitted, in a small voice. "They thought it was funny. But that's all they did."

"Why?" asked Carter. Angela flinched. Carter didn't budge. "Why did they go after you? What made them think they should shove you into the bushes? Why would they think that was *okay* to do to anyone? Don't protect them. Tell us who they are."

"Besides, what kind of damage can a bunch of college kids do?" asked Tirzah. "We'll just find them and explain that they shouldn't shove our friends around. Nobody will get hurt."

There were a lot of ways to kill someone without twisting the laws of the universe enough to be noticed. Not all of them would be painful. Many of them would be just like going peacefully to sleep, only there would be no waking up at the other end. Tirzah was a master of the mercy-kill. Honestly, I was surprised she hadn't gone over to the Quaesitori, given how good she was at making things that were in no way accidental look like accidents. But she was telling the truth, in her way. No one would get hurt.

Angela sniffled, and said, "They're from my school. They pushed me because they said it was stupid for me to be out here. That I should give up. But I'm not going to give up."

"Give up what?" The voice was mine. Angela turned toward me, eyes going wide again, this time with a different sort of shock. I met her gaze without flinching, willing her to see a stranger when she looked at me. *I'm Bryony now*, I thought. The numbers weren't lining up: there was no force behind the thought, no intent that would make her believe it. I could have reached for them. I didn't. Some situations are better navigated without the use of magic.

"This is where my sister disappeared," said Angela. She was looking at me as she spoke; she didn't waver. On some level, she knew. "It was three years ago tonight. She'd been weird for a few years before that, but we never thought she'd do anything to hurt herself. I still don't think she would. Mom and Dad, they say she's dead. They say the police found a body, and that it was her. I know they're wrong. Barbara wouldn't do that to me. She wouldn't just disappear. Would she?"

It was a question. Why was it a question? I looked frantically around at the others, my panic and confusion written cleanly on my face.

Tirzah did the only thing she could, under the circumstances. She touched the back of Angela's neck with one finger, murmuring, "You look tired, are you sure you're all right?" Angela blinked, twice, before her head pitched forward, chin coming to a rest against her collarbone.

Manager Eric frowned but didn't say anything as Tirzah and Tara helped Angela to her feet and carried her between them to the door. I forced a sickly smile as I looked in his direction.

“It’s been a long night,” I said. “We’re just taking her home.”

Eric didn’t stop us from leaving with her. Under the circumstances, that was probably the best that we could hope for.

• • •

“What are we going to do with her?” Tirzah folded her arms and stared at me. She was positioned so as to be between me and Angela, like she was afraid I might grab the girl – throw away everything I’d worked for and just grab her – and run for the door. “She can’t be here when the adults get back.”

“None of us is under twenty-one,” said Carter. Perched on the arm of the couch, she was keeping an eye on Angela and occasionally reaching over to tap my baby sister on the forehead, presumably guiding her dreams down pleasant paths. “When do we get to be the adults? Do we *ever* get to be the adults? We’ve joined an organization where the median age in leadership positions is measured in centuries. Oh, God, we’re going to be the babies until we take apprentices of our own. What were we thinking?”

“That she can’t be here when the adults get back,” said Tirzah, gesturing toward Angela. “She’s going to have to wake up eventually, and we need to know what to do with her before that happens.”

“It’s too bad this isn’t the Middle Ages anymore,” said Christopher, sinking further down into the chair he had claimed as his sovereign territory. “We could turn her into a holly bush and leave her for a hundred years.”

“What would that fix, exactly?” asked Tara.

“Nothing, but we’d probably get style points from our *parens* for making landscaping out of a bad situation,” said Christopher.

I turned to glare at him. “You’re talking about my *sister*.”

“No, I’m not.” He looked at me calmly. “I’m talking about an intruder who could potentially recognize you, despite everything the Order has done to grant you a new life. I’m talking about solving a problem that didn’t need to arise in the first place. You should have said something the second you realized who she was. You should have pulled us away. Instead, you let her keep talking until she recognized your voice. What were you thinking, Bryony? You gave her up when you gave yourself up. You know the rules.”

“The rules are stupid,” I spat. “None of the other Traditions require this sort of thing.”

“The Euthanatos require you to actually die, not just fake it,” said Tara. “I’d think this would seem like the lesser of two evils, when you look at it like that.”

“I cannot have a philosophy discussion without beer,” said Desmond. “It’s against my religion. Since we’re going to have the unconscious teenage girl whether or not we have beer, can we shelve the philosophy for right now, and skip ahead to the part where we figure out what to do with her?”



“We could wipe her memory and put her back where we found her,” said Tirzah. “It’s a well-lit park. She’ll probably be fine.”

“And if she isn’t?” I asked. Tirzah looked away.

“We could wipe her memory and put her in a cab home,” said Carter. “Her folks would just assume she’d been out drinking.”

I shook my head. “Our parents aren’t forgiving like that. I don’t even know how she got out of the house in those clothes.” Except that I did, because I’d done it too, when I was young and headstrong and angry at the world. She had hidden them in her backpack and changed behind the garage, flashing the neighbors in her rush to wear the things *she* wanted to wear, be the girl *she* wanted to be. Our parents weren’t bad people. They just didn’t understand that reproduction wasn’t cloning. They didn’t get tiny versions of themselves when they made my sister and me. They got people.

“Why is she looking for you?” asked Desmond. “Why now? Did you break silence and make contact?”

“What? No.” I shook my head. “I didn’t even Google her. I haven’t seen her since before I ‘died.’ But I used to go to the park sometimes. I think she was just following old leads.”

“Why?”

“Why do teenagers do anything? Why did we listen when a bunch of weirdoes told us we could control the world with Latin and math? She came to the park because she thought she could find a lead on me there, and she thought that because she’s a seventeen-year-old girl. They do stuff. Sometimes there’s a reason. Sometimes it’s because the moon was pretty and they saw a bird and thought ‘fuck it, I’m going to go looking for my dead sister in the park downtown.’” I threw my hands up. “I didn’t understand her very well when I lived with her. I haven’t spoken to her in five years. Why do you expect me to understand her now?”

“Because she’s awake and she’s not supposed to be,” said Carter. She sounded more bewildered than alarmed. I turned.

Angela was pushing herself up onto her elbows, staring at me like she had just seen a ghost. In a way, I suppose she had. I braced myself to lie to her, to answer her accusations of being her sister with believable denials.

“You joined the *Order of Hermes*?” she said, sounding appalled. “I knew you were boring, but couldn’t you have grown up to be normal-dull? Collect stamps. Get really, really into *Doctor Who*. Not become a Hermetic.”

The silence that followed was one of the loudest I had ever heard. I stared at Angela. Angela scowled at me, radiating angry teenager from every pore. The other members of my apprentice group looked between the two of us, trying to figure out who they should be more bewildered by. To be fair, it was a hard choice no matter how you looked at it.

Finally, I coughed, and said, “I don’t know who you think I am, but...”

“Oh, please, you think I can’t see the fingerprints where they reshaped you? It’s still so fresh I could undo it if I really tried. They worked you like a piece of clay. God, they made

you give up your family and your face and you still think they're on your side? When did you get so *stupid*, Babs?" Angela shook her head. "Maybe it was better when I thought you were dead. At least dead, you were an inspiration and a martyr, and not a *moron*."

"Don't use that word," said Tirzah. Her voice was suddenly icy and unforgiving. "My aunt was developmentally disabled. I watched people fling that word at her like a stone every day of her life, until she 'accidentally' took too many painkillers before bed. She was the most meticulous person I'd ever known. The Order could learn a few things about following instructions from her. She didn't screw up. She was murdered, one 'moron' at a time."

Angela blinked, then scowled. "Sorry, PC police. I'm going to put one more mark in the 'the Order is boring' column." Her gaze swung back to me. "What are you doing here? How could you let them convince you to do this to yourself? To *me*? We were supposed to stick together."

"You were twelve. There was no way I was going to get you out of there before you were legal. The Order wanted me *now*. What did you expect me to do? Say 'sorry, magical society that wants me for me, and not because of some idea of what it will be like to have a kid, I can't, I have to stick around and save my little sister'? I couldn't. I'm sorry. Sometimes you have to save yourself first."

Angela narrowed her eyes. "Were you planning to come back for me? Say that you were planning to come back for me. Make me believe you."

"Since we're having exposition instead of alcohol, could you maybe tell us how you know all this crap?" There was a dangerous edge to Carter's voice. I looked up. My fellow apprentices hadn't been sitting idle while I talked to my sister. They had shifted, each of them drawing closer, forming a loose semicircle around us. Carter smiled guilelessly. "Because see, I don't know about you, but before I got recruited, I didn't know nothin'."

"How *did* you get recruited?" asked Tara.

"Set my gym teacher's hair on fire. Neither here nor there, my darling one, neither here nor there. Well, unexpected houseguest? How do you know enough to mock us?"

"I got real messed up after Barbara died," said Angela, watching me intently. "Started running around with some bad folks, started doing the stuff Mom and Dad always used to be scared I'd start doing. Also some stuff they didn't know enough to be afraid of. It was fun, and then it was scary, and then it wasn't fun at all, but I couldn't figure out how to stop, until a concrete wall and a deployed airbag stopped it for me. Stopped my heart, too."

I put a hand over my mouth and didn't say anything. I couldn't think of a single word to say, in any of the languages I spoke. English, French, Latin, Enochian... they had all deserted me, leaving me speechless for the first time in my life.

"The EMTs brought me back in the ambulance, and the Euthanatos came and collected me at the hospital." Angela stood. The ripped sleeve of her shirt slumped down, sliding off her shoulder. She casually pushed it back up. "I looked for your ghost. When I didn't find it, I thought maybe you were haunting someplace specific, like the park."

You used to take me there, remember? I would play on the swings while you read. I've been *looking* for you, and you just... walked away from me."

"Angela..."

"Did you ever ask yourself what losing you would *do* to me? Did you *care*?" She glared, daring me to lie to her.

I couldn't. "Yes, I asked myself, and no, I didn't care," I said. "I made my choices. I chose freedom, and the Order, and becoming someone new. Someone who'd never been in that house, never heard those silences. I'm sorry it meant leaving you behind. I'm sorry I couldn't take you with me. I'm not sorry I made the choices I did. I gave up everything to walk away." I gestured toward my face with one hand, indicating the unfamiliar slope of my cheek, the strange angle of my eyes. "I sold myself. You were just collateral damage."

"You know, someday – ten years, twenty years, whatever – you and I, we're going to see each other again." Angela slid off the couch and to her feet. No one moved to stop her. "You're going to want something. Or you're going to need something. You're going to be aching for someone to love you, the way you never loved anyone in your life. You're going to reach out. You're going to say 'the Order isn't enough.' And I, and everyone who knows me, will take great pleasure in slapping your hand away."

She gathered her dignity around her like a shroud and walked toward the door. The rest of us, we just... we let her go. It felt like none of us could move. The air was heavy, and the numbers lining up in my head assured me that if I ran the right equations to check, I would find that we were surrounded by my sister's silent, attendant ghosts.

Angela didn't look back as she slipped out into the night. She didn't look back once.

There was a long silence before Tirzah said, "We tell no one."

"What would we say? That a Euthantos came here looking for her dead sister?" I turned to them, my fellow apprentices, my friends. *Bryony's* friends. The people who would be enough.

They would have to be enough.

Forcing my stranger's lips into a smile that was half pretense and half regret, I said, "Let's do that Enochian review now, okay?"

"Okay," said Carter, and everything was as it was intended, and nothing was okay.

# A Secret Palace

J. F. High

"We just can't bear to lose our secrets," said Sam. "We don't care how ugly they are. They're our secrets."

Blue sat on her own folded legs, chin cupped in one palm, rocking back and forth in time with the *clack-clack, clack-clack* of the train on its tracks. Sam held her other hand across the linoleum table.

They had not bothered with their assigned seats. Sam led Blue, their fingers entwined, directly to the observation car when they boarded. The car was lined with sticky booths and unobstructed windows: a great tourist greenhouse. Neither of them looked at the other. They watched the back doors of the back doors of the city rushing behind them; forgotten junkyards overflowing with rotten, rusted piles of once-proud Sunday-drive family cars, parking lots soaked in layers of crusted graffiti; Casper's parking lot, no, Dead Juan's parking lot, no, Killer's parking lot, no, this parking lot belongs to Sinner and his boys, put your faith in Jesus, praise God!

Blue's eyes lit up with every passing garbage bag. She read every piece of stilted tag. Sam stole glances at her when he thought she wasn't looking.

"There are no secrets," she murmured, but loud enough for Sam to hear.

"What does that mean?" asked Sam. He slid his fingertips gently over her knuckles, reading them like cast runes. "We all have secrets. Every house has its dirty, shameful mess. We've all got our basements full of our dead grandfather's dust-ridden train sets and model airplanes. We've all got our attics full of mirrors covered in sheets, and photos full of black-and-white family members. No one would remember their names if not for the cursive scrawled on the back." Sam laughed. "Even cursive is a dead language now."

Blue's gaze drifted along deserted, crumbling lumber yards and dingy back alleys.



“Everyone... *everything* is screaming to be heard,” said Blue, disentangling her hand from his. “Everyone is singing a song. Everything wants its attention, its due diligence. There aren’t any secrets, baby. Everyone wants to be heard. Everyone wants to be special.”

• • •

The day Sam had met Blue, she was dancing naked in the children’s fountain in the park. Blue gyred around a concrete totem pole, twin fish with tails high and mouths pointed toward the earth, sharing a single eye. Sam watched her, bundled up in seven thousand coats and scarves and hats, envious and awed by her naked body. In the distance, someone shouted and lights flashed once. A threatening burst of red and blue lit up Salmon’s blocky, divine eye. Water sprayed down from his tail fins. Blue’s feet spun her heavenward. She tiptoed on water droplets and pirouetted toward the stars. Sam ran to her, yelling a warning and reaching for her feet. Blue screamed and laughed and fell, throwing her arms around Sam. In that instant, Sam gave Blue his heart alongside one of his coats from amongst the legions. Sam stole her into the trails behind the park, Blue laughing like a madwoman, Sam laughing, infected.

Blue, Sam learned, loved the water. She danced in fountains, bathed in rivers, and dove into lakes whenever the opportunity arose. Sam’s favorite trackside secret was a stretch of coastline south of the city interspersed here and there with crab-shacks and fishing piers. The coast was dotted with little parks where young families brought their fat strollers, where older couples married, and remarried, and remarried again, brought their dogs to shit. Blue had jumped at Sam’s invitation to visit this place.

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“That’s true,” Sam began. He thought carefully about what Blue said. Sometimes her words just happened to flow like poetry. Sometimes they were riddles and puzzles and Sam felt like he was standing before a locked door and being tested before he might be allowed inside.

“But I don’t know if that changes what I’m saying. Look,” Sam gestured out the window. The train slithered past crumbling one-way streets. “Every city has its forgotten trash and secrets; its filth-strewn underground. There are streets. We could drive there. They’re all piled up and packed with the sentimental garbage and essential ugliness that we can’t part with. But there’s no paved road that’s going to guide you to the secret heart of it all.”

Blue’s fingers toyed with her lips, and her eyes appeared smoky. “Who talks like this?” she said, laughing quietly.

Sam was not offended, he repeated in his head. He was not offended.

“Look there,” Sam said. Starbucks headquarters – resplendent in red brick, artificially aged – appeared from behind an unfinished bridge project. Atop the central tower, their green mermaid sneaked a peek over the ledge, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Behind the beauty of every tower-filled skyline are the railroad tracks. We’re making our way through the sewage pit, but if we lift our eyes everything is beautiful. The city is ashamed of this, but the fear of loss is more painful than the sting of shame.”

The train dove beneath a bridge, its piercing squeals reverberating off of the concrete above. Sam sat up in his seat, excited, and gestured out the window. He said, “Un-

derneath the bridges, with concrete latticework for a roof, we can hide from the perilous sunshine. Where else are we going to put our gravel pits and our parking lots? Where else will we hide from the cops, get drunk and fuck our brains out? Where else do we abandon old, tumbling wooden buildings with remnants of glass in the windows still left to throw rocks through?" Sam looked back to Blue, his eyes spirited, hers alert. "We aren't just *full* of our secrets. We don't just *love* our secrets. We *are* our secrets. We are *composed* of our secrets. Our secrets are our true stories – not the ones we made up and dressed in neon lights and plate-glass towers to string along Main Street. Not the ones we so casually plaster in view of foreigners and tourists so that they might marvel in our beauty. Our unforgettable skylines, our arenas named after the richest companies willing to sink their money into them, our yacht clubs and bank towers and sushi restaurants are not *real*!" Sam slammed his fist onto the table.

Blue jumped and gasped in her seat. His words tugged her close.

Sam said: "They are the mask we wear to the masquerade. But we're still real from beneath and behind. We're still real from the train's-eye view."

Blue leaned forward in her seat, her lips slack, her eyes stormy. The city was beginning to fade into tree-filled neighborhoods broken by wandering streams.

"You should write these things down," Blue urged him. "Because then you could look carefully at what you're saying."

Sam had thought it was going to be a compliment, but he knew what Blue meant. He freed his hand from hers and wiped the dampness on his thigh. "I'm going to get something to drink."

Blue dropped back into her seat, watching him as he walked away.

• • •

When Sam sat back down, Blue got up from her seat opposite to sit next to him and wrap her arms around his shoulders. She leaned into his neck while he stared at the passing landscape.

"I don't think you're wrong, baby," Blue said. "I think you need to keep looking. You look so hard. You search for so long. You're going to find what you're looking for. When you find it, will it still be a secret?"

Sam sipped at his bottled water, clean and pure and perfect. The ocean with its misty islands in the distance visible now, shimmering like spilled jewels. The tracks were stitched into the earth beside the glistening black water.

"If you know all of these secrets, they're not secrets," Blue continued when he didn't answer. "If you listen carefully enough, does it matter how quiet the whispers are? What about the ocean? What about the forests? Are they secret, too?"

"Well, no," Sam hesitated. "I mean the countryside and the ocean – they're exceptions to the grossness of our secrets. They're genuine. You know: untouched."

Blue laughed, her breath tickling Sam's neck. "Maybe there *are* secrets. Maybe you've convinced me."

Blue slept there, nestled into Sam's shoulder, for most of the trip. When they were almost to their stop Sam woke her up, and they stepped off the train hand-in-hand. Blue erupted with a noise that sounded like a mixture of laughter and vomiting. "What the hell," she snorted, "*is that?*"

She was pointing at the train station, a great metallic eyesore swirling like a mercury ice-cream cone toward the sky. Without waiting for an answer she kissed Sam. She tasted somewhere between sour oranges and seaweed. Sam never wanted anyone else to come close to that.

As they walked toward the water, Sam speculated, "Train stations are exceptions too, like the ocean, but different. They're too much concealer over a cold sore: poorly-kept secrets."

Blue told Sam about her old English professor: he taught poetry and Sam reminded her of him. The conversation evolved from his poetry to what he was like in bed, which Blue also compared to Sam. Sam might have been more offended if the comparison wasn't complimentary.

The salty scent of the sea snaked its way into their nostrils and Blue's voice faded in and out with the surf as Sam searched for the barnacle-covered logs – the remains of abandoned piers – the first of many stretching out along the water. His eyes alighted eagerly upon the rocks at the shore and the sand full of shells less than a foot below the surface, glittering like coins in the sun.

Sam stopped at the water's edge to admire its beauty, and didn't notice when Blue started stripping and tucking each discarded article of clothing into her knapsack behind his back. He looked up in time to see her breasts flash into view as she exchanged her t-shirt for a golden bikini top that was a shade lighter than her skin. A man walking a pair of schnauzers stopped to stare, and his dogs took the opportunity to gift a tree with their scent.

"What are you doing?" Sam laughed, eying the dog walker mirthfully. Embarrassed to be noticed, he walked on, but Sam caught him looking over his shoulder as Blue adjusted her top without success. "If we get arrested before we get there the trip's been wasted. Besides, it's way too fucking cold to go swimming. It's always too cold!"

One of Blue's breasts was still bare and Sam helped her adjust the top. She acquiesced and bit her tongue as Sam tugged the bikini into place. When he was done, she leaned in and kissed him beneath his ear. "Why did we come all this way to the ocean," Blue whispered, "if we're not even going to go swimming?"

"I just wanted to share a secret with you," Sam said. He stepped into her and slid his hand over the swell of her stomach, floated upon its rise and fall. "God, you're gorgeous," Sam breathed and wrapped his arms around her.

Blue leaned in and kissed his throat, slow and misty, and kicked off her sandals. She squirreled free of Sam's arms to turn around and bend down to pick them up. She hooked her finger around the straps and twirled them, looking over her shoulder. "I know. And there's no such thing as secrets! Anyway, I want to swim."

They passed a bygone dock that looked like the back of a porcupine burying his head in the sea. "Look," said Sam, "Seagulls."

Blue hopped over a chain separating the curving sidewalk from the ocean, and stretched out her legs to curl her toes into a foothold on one of the rocks below. Sam could see only the top of her head where he stood: her hair was thick and curly and black. It shone in the sun. She cooed and squawked at the birds perched on the pillars, and some of them screeched back at her as if they could understand the nonsense sounds she was making to get their attention.

"Sam, this one says you've been gone way too long and wants to know where the bread is!" Blue flapped her arms unceremoniously, and loudly made more bad gull imitations.

Sam unslung his knapsack and rummaged through it for an old bag of stale bread he had brought with him. He usually brought bread with him. He tore up a few chunks of bread and flung them out toward the water. A swooping gull caught one piece and the rest fell to the water and floated there.

"He says thank you," Blue said as she turned to look at Sam, her eyes glowing with a childlike shine. She stretched out her hands and Sam pulled her back up onto the sidewalk. "Thank you," she said, and wrapped her arms around Sam to plant a wet kiss beneath his ear.

"Come on," he whispered and tugged her arm. "We're not there yet."

They passed more ruined wood pillars. Each time Sam stopped to admire the view, Blue climbed around the rocks, called the gulls, or pulled shells out of the water. Once she picked up a long white driftwood branch and slung it over her shoulder like a rucksack pole without the rucksack.

"I used to live in Santa Monica," she began from nowhere, trailing her fingers over the rusted safety chain. "Well, not *lived* lived. Not exactly. I slept on the beach a lot. Sometimes I woke up with the surf tickling my feet. The water is always inviting in California. It likes the attention." She took Sam's hand again. He squeezed back.

Blue wasn't the only one who loved the water. Sam especially loved the coastline. Sam loved the docks here – not the fishing piers held up by concrete pillars, but the ancient, forgotten rot: the rows of logs that rose up out of the ocean floor just off the beach, stretching toward the sky like shattered brown arms, tipped in splinters and bristling with moss and bird nests. There were multitudes of them, but they were coming upon his favorite one, a grand palace compared to the others.

Here the waters deepened and the seabed fell away into the murk. The moss-covered palace stood further out in the ocean and leaned heavily away from the land, fleeing from the seawall to which it was no longer attached. Little weeds had somehow made their way a hundred feet across churning waves to cling to the dead wet timber, and there they flourished. In the very middle of the pier, like a king on its throne, a single bush grew, bright green and towering over the lesser plants. Tattered planks – vestiges of the



pier upon which fisherman once stood when they cast their lines – hosted no gulls’ nests. Sam could not remember ever seeing gulls at his palace.

As soon as they arrived, Blue parted from Sam. He wanted to tell her that they were there – that this was his secret shared – but she was already down on the seawall rocks again, holding her driftwood between her teeth. She stripped off her shorts and yanked her plain white underwear back up. She dumped her shorts and pack without regard before she dove into the water. Sam saw a flash of a smile in the sunlight before Blue disappeared in a riotous splash.

“*Blue!*” Sam screamed. He didn’t think the water could be more than fifty degrees, probably much less. “What are you *doing?*”

Blue surfaced, shaking out her short black hair, but the water clung to it like a sponge. She shrieked and laughed. “Holy shit, it’s *cold!*” Nevertheless, she was in no rush to escape the water.

Sam stumbled down the rocks, not as nimble as Blue. His layers of coats and shirts hindered his descent, but he scrabbled down to the water’s edge and peered into the shadowy depths. He reached out, offering one arm to pull Blue back to shore. He clung to the rocks with his other hand, his knuckles whitening.

Blue flailed and shrieked and laughed. Sam wasn’t sure if she was serious or fooling around, but she swam back toward him and reached for his hand.

Sam was a lot stronger than Blue, but when he pulled at her arm, she pulled back. Caught by surprise, he fell into the water face-first with an explosive, ungraceful splash.

Sam sucked in a deep breath at the shock of falling, and swallowed seawater. He struggled to find the surface of the water but instead found Blue’s long, mussel-ridden arms. The razor-like shells tore at his clothing and skin as he tried to pull himself toward the surface. Blue’s arms seemed to pull him down instead. The light above him faded like a fast-approaching dusk. He saw Blue’s legs in the dim water, disappearing into the inky depths below and rising to the dying light above. He grasped and scratched and tried to climb, peeling away bits of rotting pine. Glistening fish danced and tumbled, singing a bubbling song of death. He gulped down more saltwater and the barnacles covering Blue’s legs tore at him and mocked him.

*Please, he thought, I’m going to die. Please.* He pushed as hard as he could against Blue.

Sam’s vision swam and he fell toward the light, bursting above the surface and sucking in air. Sea salt blinded him as he clung desperately to Blue’s legs... or were they sun-burnt pillars?... stretching toward the sky. Moss-choked planks shielded him from the sun above. Blue leaned down from her wooden throne, throwing down her arms like Rapunzel’s hair. The mussels that dotted her flesh bit into his palms as he clung to her. His hands were pink with blood and he was heavy with acrid water.

He let go of her, unsettled, stupefied by her gross change.

Sam removed his outermost coat – torn and tattered – and Blue helped him out of the next one. He choked up seawater and although he was perplexed and angry, he was not interested in starting a fight until he could breathe... until he could understand what

had just happened. Blue removed the third coat. Relief and air flooded into Sam's lungs, but he sensed his vulnerability. Blue towered over him; the sun behind her head lit her up like a fire. She began unbuttoning his shirt, revealing the black cloth of his chest binder. Sam clutched at the buttons, pulling them closed, and backed away from her.

"No," Sam whispered, locking eyes with Blue's knees. They were wet and shone like jewels.

Blue took Sam's tiny hand in her own, enveloping it.

"Samantha..." Blue began.

Sam jerked his hand away from her.

"Why did you *do* that?" he demanded. "What *did* you do?" He buttoned his shirt back up and reached for a water-heavy coat. He could not make sense of what happened. He looked around, trying to understand. They were on the rotting roof of Sam's palace; the planks rippled and shone with a Moroccan mosaic of brown and black and green and gold. Flowers and seaweed and coral broke up the tiles like weeds in cracked concrete and swayed in the wind, always leaning back toward Blue.

Blue, imperious, sat atop a patina-mottled bronze throne, adorned with chipped and beckoning emerald-and-amber leaves and caked with flecks of salt. Sam had never been out on the palace before, had never deserved a seat there. Indeed, there *was* no seat for him. Swirling sapphire pillars, darkened by jet whorls, descended into the ocean below. Blue was the queen of Sam's palace. She was the centerpiece and the totem. She was the god, colossal and absolute. Sam's exposed skin tightened with goosebumps and the freezing ocean breeze whittled at his waterlogged clothing.

"What happened?" Sam asked in a tiny voice.

"What happened," Blue replied without answering. She stepped down from her throne and looked out over the ocean and the distant islands. "Why are you afraid of everything?"

Sam did not answer her, uncertain if he should be insulted, uncertain how he had gotten here, uncertain why Blue was so tremendous, uncertain why everything was different now. He took in his impossible surrounds, searching for an answer. He looked back toward the shore. Their knapsacks snuggled in the rocks like hidden lovers, a pair of shorts dangling one leg in the sea. Blue had managed to turn his beautiful secret into something alien and terrifying and unfathomable. She *was* responsible, that much he understood. He wanted to pitch her into the ocean.

Blue turned to him again, her eyes black like the water. There was a hint of a smile on her lips. Her teeth shone. She looked fierce and dangerous. "What does drowning feel like?"

"*Fuck* you, Blue!" Sam shouted. "I know what drowning feels like. I just fucking *felt* it. You nearly drowned me. I couldn't fucking *breathe* and nothing made sense and I feel sick."

"I didn't ask what *living* felt like," Blue said, crouching like a tiger before him. She cocked one eyebrow. "What does drowning feel like? I don't know how to drown. Is that a secret? Drowning?"

"It won't be after I show you how it's done," Sam snarled at her, not feeling remotely forgiving.

"I don't want you to drown," she said, missing the threat. "I just want you to imagine what it feels like." She shrugged and picked the brittle remains of a crab shell from the glowing tile, inspecting it as if trying to discern which part of the crab the shards had been.

"How did we get here?" Sam asked, ignoring the aggravating questions. He pulled his coat on and turned his back to her. "What did you *do*?"

Blue crawled her way toward him. The mosaic creaked and cracked beneath her weight. Blood covered her hands as well, but she paid no mind. She stopped when she was hovering over Sam and he leaned away. A cold gust of air rose up from below and tickled Sam's back. Blue smelled like salt and tar and blood. "It was what *you* did, Samantha."

Sam slapped her across the mouth reflexively. His rage was so close to the surface that he could not hold it back. In that moment, he did not regret it either.

"Shut the fuck up," Sam hissed. "How *could* you? *You*, of all people?"

"Sam," Blue said, her face still turned from him with the force of the blow. "Sam. I'm sorry." She sounded remorseful. She sounded like a wound. "I don't know how to tell you. I've tried to *show* you so many times."

"All I wanted to do," Sam spat, "was share my secret with you. You've gone and fucking ruined today. I want to get down and go home. I don't know how. How do I get home?"

"You can't, and *there are no secrets*, Sam," Blue pleaded, tears cascading down her cheeks. "You only believe in secrets because you spend all of your time making them up. They're not real. *You* are real! *I* am real! What do I need to do? Do you want me to sing up the storms and drag us out to sea? Should I flop off the side of your palace like Salmon and swim upstream? Is that what I have to do?"

Sam kissed her then, the taste of iron on her lips dominating the sour oranges and seaweed. Angry and in pain and betrayed, Sam loved her still. To dim the pain, he anchored himself in how much his heart glowed for this woman, and in his longing to dance with her in the water.

The kiss was long and full and hungry and desperate. The iron faded until Blue tasted only like the ocean. Sam couldn't breathe, and didn't want to, as Blue's lips and tongue diffused into him, stealing his mind as well as his breath. He felt like he should have pulled away, but he could not bear to lose her. If he was going to drown, he would drown in her, and that drowning would be bliss.

Blue pulled away and Sam tightened his fingers in her hair, having no desire for the moment to end. Blue's breath was cool against his cheek. She whispered a seashell lullaby that he failed to grasp the meaning of. The second time she sang he heard her clearly:

"I'm going to leave you."

"No," he said, quivering with fear. "I mean... *what*? I can't tell you 'no,' but *what*? I'm sorry for what I did. I was so upset. You – you didn't do anything wrong. Don't leave me. Just stay with me... for awhile."

The breeze whipped around Blue's hair and carried her laugh away as it went. She kissed Sam again and stood, and drew his hands from her hair. She entwined her fingers with his and he could feel the splinters pricking his shredded palms and the dampness as their blood and sweat and seawater stirred together. Blue took a step back from Sam, turning to gaze upon the ocean, and spread her arms. Only when she began to dance – just like she did in the fountain the first time Sam had laid eyes on her – did she let go of his hands. Blue was barefoot and the planks below continued to shift and groan beneath her weight. The palace leaned further into the ocean, bound to collapse. The breeze kicked up and the ocean swayed, big and pregnant and agitated. Foam sprayed up around Blue's legs. The winds whipped and sang as she danced and spun. Her black, depth-filled eyes locked with Sam's only once. Her laughter erupted into song. "*There are no secrets,*" she sang. "*Only us. Only us.*"

She spun into the breeze and danced upon the clouds. Her twirling feet faded, leaving behind a cool breeze. She laughed and sang for so long that Sam couldn't tell the difference between her voice and the crash of the waves. She was gone.

He stood there alone for hours before removing all but a few layers of clothes. He dove down into the frigid water, and when he made his way back to shore he stretched out on the rocks and let the sun and ocean froth kiss his pale arms. The sky grew red and bloody before he got up. He pulled on his knapsack but threw Blue's into the ocean. Her driftwood, he kept.

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On the walk back to the train station, Sam stopped to toss the rest of the stale bread to the gulls. They clamored about hungrily and gulped down his offering. "Thank you," they shrieked at him.

"You're welcome."

The train going home was late. Sam opened his backpack as he waited with surprising patience. Inside there was a paper bag with his name scrawled across it in Blue's handwriting. She wrote in cursive.

He boarded the train with the sack in one hand and driftwood in the other and went directly to his assigned seat. No one sat next to him. That seat had been assigned to Blue. He held the paper sack in his lap and his knapsack between his knees as he watched the scenery roll by silently. The driftwood sat in Blue's seat.

Although the ocean faded away with the sun, Sam could still smell the saltwater and feel the breeze curling through his hair. His clothes were soggy and uncomfortable. He shed his coat and set it beside his feet. Dim porch lights made the streams swim like fiery ribbons. Sam heard them gulping and chanting like urgent fish. The houses stared glumly back at him, bursting with their stories.

The mermaid atop her coffee tower splashed and frolicked and waved at him. He waved back. She winked and blew him a kiss that tasted like burnt forests and milk and sugar. The streets lumbered back and forth, carrying their burden with sun-bleached duty, bundled up warmly in their coats of dirt and exhaust.

The train cut past a graveyard full of flags and mourners. The windows of the train could not open, but Sam heard the mourners, wailing songs and eulogies: *he was so tall, she was so vibrant, he was full of life, she still had so much growing to do*. Sam found the songs infectious and tears crept down his cheeks.

Obscure languages, no longer secret, covered ancient brick walls; every fence was an epic or an Edda. Every parking lot crawled with engines and wheels, chuffing and coughing their morning-to-evening retreats. The train slowed as it passed the junkyard. Its cacophony of steel and rust was almost unbearable. Sam read every passing story, every burning word. He lost himself in each desperate serenade.

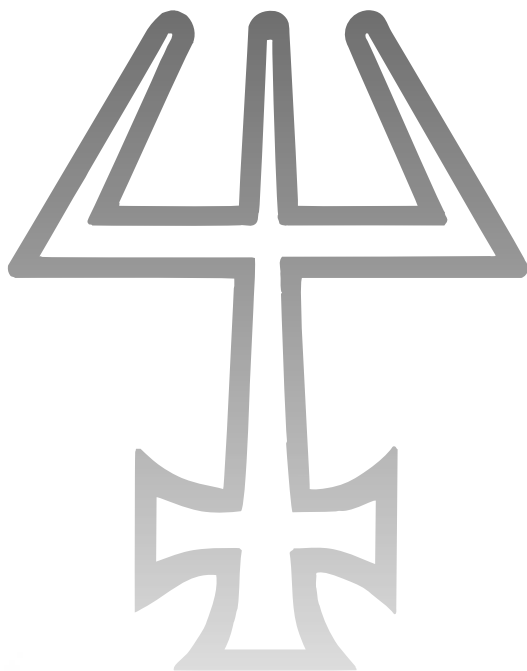
The train rolled into its final destination, lurching with exhaustion.

Sam found himself standing on the platform with one hand on the side of the frothing steel beast. His coat was left behind, and a chill wind brushed his throat.

“Thank you,” he said. The train let out a sleepy sigh. Sam paused, wondering what he was thanking it for.

“Thank you,” he finally said, “for everything.”

On the bus home, rattling and flickering its way along the road, he emptied the contents of the paper sack into his palm. Sand and seashells poured out.





# Well Played

Emily Jones

“Now watch closely.”

The sphere oozed with unexpected ease, like glass, both liquid and solid, a stone that never forgot how it used to flow freely. Clear as moonstone, and about the size of a marble, the inside coiled blue and orange, purple and red. Fueled by the riot of colors, the stone could have been a phoenix tear or a dragon’s eye, like an opal but with flames more liquid than crystal, more alive.

Blaine held the tiny pearlescent sphere between his thumb and forefinger, high enough for all of the crowd to see, but low enough for the back row to strain and the shorter folk to stand on tiptoe. With the ease of habit he slid the ball along the back of his hand, rolling it smoothly over finger bones.

“Don’t let it out of your sight.”

The child in the front row watched with the intensity of youth. Her blueberry eyes triggered that snatch in Blaine’s stomach, induced by any reminder of Tia. To be fair, most children reminded him of Tia, on the cusp of adulthood when he saw her last. Adults, too, who walked or dressed or talked with the quality Tia might have had when she reached that age. The girl’s chaotic tangles reminded him also of his sister’s failed attempts to tame her own rioting hair, and the eventual acceptance that it would be what it willed.

The child stared at the marble as though expecting it to hatch. At her age, enough faith and imagination could bring even the most miraculous idea to life. She looked up from Blaine’s hands just once, long enough to glance at the harpist nestled behind him in the alley’s mouth. Few noticed Trista right away with Blaine so flashy and loud up front, and her music blending so perfectly into the performance. Her tunes matched the



spirit of the crowd so well that the notes intrinsically belonged, like the birdsong in the morning, or the whoosh of cars driving by. Unnoticed until it's gone.

Blaine had once thought he would be the one to approach the world through music. He had grown up with little, but Tia had begged for months to learn the harp, having seen one played at a holiday concert in the park. Tired of his sister's pleas, their parents managed a bartered agreement with a neighbor – goods from their store in exchange for music lessons. It started with Tia, but Blaine soon joined the lessons. He was the one to dream of a life lived through his instrument, his own skilled fingers and imagination crafting his will into sound.

After Tia's death, Blaine couldn't bear to play anymore. Each time he touched the harp, he felt like a thief, stealing what was originally Tia's joy. It felt wrong to live the life she might have wanted, when she'd chosen not to live at all.

But Tia had no interest in magick. That had always been Blaine's, though he'd never loved it as he had music. Still, he enjoyed studying the people who came to gawk at his tricks.

His table crouched between two buildings. Thin alleys flowed like veins throughout the city's over-packed market district. Feeding on the rushing city life, Blaine could always be found clotting one such passage.

His performance drew in a motley group of onlookers. Today's crowd included a group of schoolchildren, each clutching a paper bag, a middle-aged woman in a girlish yellow sundress, two teenagers of no obvious gender, one with hair half shaved, half pink, the other bleached and waifish, a short woman in a business suit, and a man in a red checkered vest and pinstriped top hat. These, and many more onlookers, added to the sample box of culture.

Closest to Blaine stood a mustached man with hair between blond and gray. Beside him, the mystified child had yet to take her eyes off the marble, still waiting for it to burst with a magickal display. Blaine, with a cocksure smile, addressed his question to these two in particular.

"Now, who should like to chance a wager?"

The man *humphed*, feigning disgust. The child, however, searched her ratty clothes. Finding nothing of value – or perhaps, Blaine guessed, nothing at all – she slid her fingers through her tangled hair, as if expecting to find some treasure stowed there. From the tangled mass of curls she withdrew a slightly wilted purple flower. She placed her treasure on the table.

The man eyed the flower and sniffed.

"Twenty euros," he said, producing the sum from his pocket and depositing it on his side of the table. The crowd murmured at the excess of his bet.

Blaine nodded. "Twenty euros against a most precious spring flower." He winked at the child. "Now," he said, upending one of the three painted cups before him, "don't lose sight of the ball." Like rolling water off skin, Blaine flicked the marble inside the cup and snapped it upside down.

"Everyone, please hold the ball in your mind's eye." Blaine swept his arms out and raised his voice to the crowd at large.

Trista worked the harp behind him, her music subtly climbing yet maintaining suspense, a breath held before the climax.

Blaine shuffled the cups, moving with speed and flair to confuse the watchers as they tracked their target's journey. Finally he settled all three cups in a neat line.

Lowering his voice so that even the front row leaned closer to hear, he looked between the man and child. "Now, tell me, where shall we find the ball?"

The man immediately pointed to the cup on the far right. The child took her time, biting her lip and shifting her eyes from cup to cup to cup. Slowly, she extended her bony arm and pointed toward the middle cup.

Blaine looked down at the table and released his surface-level senses, going deeper. Using a sense not yet defined by the human masses, a kind of receptive awareness, open to life's flow around him, he felt inside the cups. He did not need to touch the cups nor redirect his gaze to see what lay within.

The space within the middle cup flowed freely, only slightly hampered by the walls of the container. The flow of energy within the right cup, though similarly empty, changed its focus around a space the size of a marble. In that tiny blip at the bottom, the pale, airy energy intensified into solid electricity. The man was right.

The child looked up at Blaine with huge eyes. She came by this street often, always stopping to watch Blaine when he performed, or bobbing her head to Trista's music as she passed.

"Well, man, am I right?" The man reached for the flower. Crushing the stem, he twirled the girl's treasure between his fingers.

"Sir," Blaine said, using the sweet, courteous voice he reserved for the ones he truly disliked. "Please do not remove any items from the table until the winner has been unveiled."

The man grudgingly dropped the flower atop his money. Blaine turned his senses on the older man. His energy felt very narrow, as if he lived his life all on one track. Even the occasional deviation was cut short, abandoning any potential for him to improve.

The man was greedy too, but that meant nothing. Everyone was greedy. Children wanted everything. Their bodies felt and longed with hunger and ache and interest. They had not yet learned what they must acquire to fill these needs, so they reached for all.

People fascinated Blaine. He loved to read the passersby: the young woman who never lost her childhood openness, or the man who could not remember his, or the one who lost yet rediscovered that wonder. Children, however, were a marvel all their own. A child could not be truly awakened, for they have not yet been asleep. That purity drew Blaine, perhaps because his sister never had the chance to awaken from her own sleep.

The crowd swayed, growing restless. A couple in the back broke away and followed the current down the street. A woman in the middle shifted on her toes. Blaine was losing them, caught too long to his own thoughts.

Returning focus to the cups, Blaine squeezed the energetic space in the right cup ever smaller until it popped into nothing, creating a vacuum that was quickly filled by the open swirl of energy above. At the same time, a tiny prick appeared and swelled within the middle cup. A marble-sized space cultivated sparks within the paper walls.

Blaine flicked his hands out to shorten his sleeves and cracked his knuckles dramatically.

“The middle cup, says the lady in red” – at least, Blaine guessed, the girl’s ragged, dirt-smeared dress had once *been* red – “yet the gentlemen claims the right cup! Whose belief will win?” Blaine smiled. Belief was a funny thing, hard to pin down.

He hovered one hand over each cup, allowing the audience to choose a side. Slowly, Blaine peeled the rim of each from the table before suddenly thrusting them both up and away.

The sphere, living flame frozen into glass, sat defiantly in the spot where the middle cup had been. The teenagers swore, the woman in yellow formed her mouth in a surprised ‘O,’ and the top-hatted man grinned a slim, wolfish glimpse of teeth.

The blond man coughed, grumbled something about the game being rigged, and walked away. The child bounced on the balls of her feet. Unthinking in her excitement, she snatched the sphere from the table and danced a wriggling dance with it. Blaine tried to smile, but his insides hurt. He remembered Tia demonstrating the newest dances she had learned, flailing all over the living room in a confusion of hip-hop and ballet and undeveloped childhood movement. She had even, on more than one occasion, convinced Blaine to join her, mimicking the dancers on TV. His awkwardness had been worthwhile for the joy in her laugh.

Tia had danced through life, not with a child’s ease, but with a determination not to let circumstances crush her spirit. In the end, she had failed. At that last party, she danced with a ferocity Blaine had never seen before and hoped to never witness again. Fueled by beer and desperation and the resignation of defeat, rejected by every application to escape her meager beginnings, she decided her life was going nowhere. So she tied herself to a cement block and threw it off the end of the pier.

Trista accompanied the child’s dance with a silly song, somewhere between an Irish jig and the victory tune of a video game. The music and laughter clashed with Blaine’s thoughts, pulling him back to the scene at hand.

Blaine nodded at the marble in the child’s hands. “Keep it.”

The ball was Blaine’s favorite. Starting as a store-bought marble with a simple blue swirl, it had transformed little by little, affected by the perceptions of the crowd at each show. He’d be sad to lose it, but he had other marbles, each with its own potential for transformation. This one had found a better home.

The child turned to leave, reconsidered, pocketed the money, and, cradling the flower in her free hand, danced away down the street.

Most of the crowd departed then, though a few – the man in the top hat, the teenagers, the woman in the yellow dress – stayed. An even larger crowd formed as Blaine began

his next act, a much flashier set of magick and illusions. He called forward a girl with a cupcake tattoo, brought the image to life, and offered a taste to the audience. He threw a bottle of ink into the air, where the spilled contents transformed into a raven and flew over the crowd's hastily lowered heads. He brought back the cups and produced a new marble from his pocket. This time he transformed the ball, while hidden, into a flower, a fruit, a baby chick, and a snake, revealing a new spectacle each time he lifted the cup.

Finally Blaine ended the performance, drew attention to the donation jars, and sat himself snugly behind the table.

Most of the crowd drifted away. Trista took over, providing ambient entertainment with her harp. She gave Blaine a peaceful smile.

"Well done."

She could have meant the illusions or the amount of money they had pulled into their wonderfully overstuffed cash jar, but Blaine had the sense that she referred to his gifted marble.

Blaine shrugged. "It wanted her more than me."

Trista found Blaine not long after he first awoke to his powers. Events were escalating rapidly, and the habits he'd already cultivated exploded with possibilities. He gambled and cheated and magicked his way through just a few short weeks before he hit the real explosion. When the blowout finally happened, and Trista appeared, he thought he had died and Tia, grown up in the afterlife, had come to escort him across the plains of death.

It was not unreasonable, he knew, to think himself dead. Many, in fact, believed just that. Having made no small number of enemies, Blaine encouraged this belief to his advantage. Trista helped him rebuild while he kept a low profile in a place he was not known, living off his street earnings. This life suited him. No one here judged him if he lived on Asian takeout and showered only occasionally at the gym across from his squat.

Blaine more than once thought of Trista as the Tia that might have been, had she lived long enough to develop her adult self. As much as she resembled Tia, however, Trista also looked like Blaine. They shared the same smooth brown skin, dreadlocks, and eyes of murky ocean green.

Blaine never quite knew what Trista was. He'd heard of others like himself, and they seemed to always be accompanied by some guiding force, whether a person or an animal, even an object. They shared a connection as if she shared his soul, her presence as normal to him as that of his own toes. Yet she was far wiser than Blaine, instructing him as his magick developed and dissuading him from especially stupid decisions. He didn't believe she was entirely human, but he didn't care. All that mattered was her presence, adding her spirit to his the way her music filled out his acts.

Trista finished her set, and Blaine reset the table for his marble trick.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he called out, to keep hold of those who had lingered to listen to Trista, and to catch the attention of the many more walking past. "Gather round and chance your luck. Test your powers of observation against the speed of my hand."

When enough people had clustered around the table, Blaine briefly explained the game and called for a volunteer. No one stepped forward.

Blaine extended his tendrils of perception and touched each member of the crowd in turn. Some crinkled at his touch, praying to be left alone. Others flaked with nervous excitement, considering whether or not they were too shy to step forward, but longing to try. Blaine was about to call on just such a person when his awareness recoiled, like a child's overeager fingers burned.

Blaine's gaze followed his awareness to a man standing in what passed for a middle row amongst the jumbled onlookers. It was the man in the checkered vest and striped hat.

What repelled Blaine so fiercely was the man's energy. Everyone radiated some kind of information about themselves, their lives, their feelings past and present. But the man was so entirely neutral that he practically didn't exist. Where he stood, Blaine felt nothing.

Trista looked at Blaine from the edge of her eyes. Having sensed both his alarm and its cause, she shook her head. He did not understand until he heard his own voice call out, "You there, sir, would you kindly step forward?" his hand waving out toward the man in the hat, that she had been trying to warn him against the choice before he himself even knew he would make it.

"Blaine," Trista warned, playing her harp with a foreboding timbre. Her music told him what she thought. The man was much more than he seemed. More, perhaps, than Blaine could handle.

She was probably right, but Blaine loved a challenge above all else, loved to win against stacked odds. Biting off more than he could chew tasted so good when he managed to choke the challenger down whole. So what if he gagged a little on the way, so long as he won?

The man stepped forward with a gait neither eager nor reluctant. He maintained a subtle sort of confidence. No swagger or bravado. Just an ease that said he felt very comfortable with his grip on the world.

"Welcome, sir," Blaine said, "Would you kindly tell the crowd your name?"

"Davis," the man said, quietly, addressed not to the crowd, but to Blaine.

Oddly disturbed by the man's calm, Blaine hid behind his performer's bombastic air. "Davis," he said. "Thank you for volunteering."

Blaine repeated the trick as he had before, first showing the crowd the marble – this one a simple yellow he'd drawn from his pocket – hiding it beneath one of three cups, and asking the man, "Would you care to make a wager?"

The man contemplated the cup, with Blaine's fingers resting atop it. He felt as though the man could see every task to which his hands had ever turned. Blaine tried to judge the man in turn, but found himself blocked. He couldn't even tell the man's age. For all Blaine knew, he might have been 30, or 55.

"I wager," Davis said, "that I will win."

Blaine directed a good-hearted laugh at the crowd. "You sound awfully sure of yourself."

Davis's gaze flowed up Blaine's arm and to his eyes. There was a knowledge there that made Trista's harp skip a note. Whether she too saw the man's eyes, or simply felt the danger through Blaine, he could not be sure.

"Do I?" Davis said, quietly. "Not at all."

Blaine shook off Trista's unease and mixed the cups too fast for anyone to keep track. But Davis wasn't watching the cups. He kept smiling at Blaine, his lips slightly curved.

Blaine stilled the cups suddenly.

"Now," Blaine said, forgetting to address the audience. "Please tell me, beneath which cup will we find the ball?"

"The left."

The man's gaze never left Blaine's. His eyes were every color and no color at all, sometimes seeming blue or gray, but then more green or hazel or brown, almost purple, perhaps gold, striped as his hat or spiraled and cracked as glass.

The marble was, indeed, beneath the left cup. Blaine could feel it there. With the ease of much practice, he once again willed the marble out of existence, and reimagined it inside the cup on the far right.

"The left?" Blaine raised his voice for the audience but did not look away from Davis. "Shall we see if your wager is correct?"

Blaine reached for the left cup but before he could lift it, Davis stopped him, his voice cutting him off with more force than a slap to the hand.

"No," he said. "It is not inside the left cup. You will find it in the middle."

Blaine laughed. "You sound confident," he said, his own security swelling. Guessing the correct cup had been a fluke. Davis was just a man, like any other, despite the look he gave Blaine, the look of a teacher who'd caught a student cheating.

Blaine's hand went to the middle cup. As he lifted it, he realized Trista had stopped playing, and that he did not know when the music had stopped.

Beneath the cup, the marble sat in bright contrast to the red tablecloth. Blaine dropped the cup and lifted the one on the right, where he had magicked the ball. There was nothing there.

Blaine looked at Trista, who slanted her eyes at him. Her message read clear, *Don't look at me. I warned you.*

"How did you do that?" Blaine turned back to the man. "No, don't tell me. Play me again."

Asking had been a jerk reaction. Blaine never liked being told how to do a trick. If he could watch and figure it out on his own, he won. That victory would be so much more satisfying.



"I will play you," Davis said. "One more time. But may I suggest a different game?"

Trista gripped the body of her harp, her tension touching Blaine's consciousness. Like a cat facing off a rival, she was too proud to be scared, but acutely aware of the danger.

Blaine, on the other hand, felt frustrated at being bested, but also excited. It was so rare now for him to lose when he did not intend to, and a worthy opponent presented a unique opportunity to improve.

"I accept," Blaine said. He stacked the cups, looking forward to this new rivalry too much to continue playing the street. "Any particular game in mind?"

"I'll think of something." Davis took Blaine's hand in both of his. He flipped Blaine's palm up and cradled it, then pressed his other hand down upon him, palm to palm.

Something pricked Blaine's hand, like a needle pinch to draw blood.

Trista grabbed Davis's wrist, cutting in with strength beyond her stature. Leaving her harp behind, she stood beside Blaine, confronting Davis like a threatened tiger. Her stance explained that she would be the threatening one.

Davis slid his hand off Blaine's, unconcerned by Trista's silent threat. On Blaine's hand, two lines of text shone, as though Davis had inked them onto Blaine's palm. The jagged letters looked more like something burned into wood than written on skin.

"Meet me there," Davis said, "Tonight, we shall play."

He tugged his arm from Trista's grasp, waited a brief moment for Blaine to meet his gaze, and, when he did not, turned and walked away.

Blaine did not take his eyes off the address on his hand. The words held a claim on his memory from long ago. Even without Davis's magick writing, he was not likely to forget the place where Tia died.

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The dock stood mostly abandoned, and, like everything else in the city, nestled in the limited space between warehouses. The pier had been forgotten by all but the kids who came to drink and flirt and dance outside the eye of authority. At night, both water and walls rippled in the silver light and midnight shadows created by a full moon. The water cast a blue shade upon the warehouse walls, the waves in turn reflecting a surface of metallic silver. It was at just such a party on just such a night that Tia had stepped off the end of the pier.

Blaine and Trista stood at the beginning of the pier, the moon overhead casting her shadow across his. Davis approached, walking calmly, like a man on a late-night stroll, no flashy approach or explosion of magick.

"So," Blaine said, as soon as Davis reached them, "what's the game?"

Beyond the warehouse yard, city lights thrummed and cars rumbled. The noise was a constant backdrop in Blaine's life, so that he barely noticed.

"Redemption cannot be won until the journey is complete. We have not yet reached our destination." From his pocket, Davis withdrew Blaine's marble and placed it on the dock.

"Please," he said, gesturing for them to step beyond the marble.

As one, Blaine and Trista stepped over, toward the end of the pier. The instant his body passed beyond the ball, quiet fell. The pier stood alone on silvery waves, the familiar city sounds now silenced. Warehouses still dotted the water, but now floated as islands, the ground beneath them faded away.

Blaine knew the pleasure of seeing the audience affected by his tricks. Loath to give Davis that satisfaction, he maintained a nonchalant expression, as if bored by something as commonplace as the disappearance of an entire city.

"So," Blaine asked again, once all three had reached the end of the pier. "What's the game?"

Davis indicated a crude wooden table built from the same boards as the pier. Two identical chairs framed the game space. On the table sat three china cups and a piece of sea glass.

"Your game," Davis said. "But this time, you are the player." He seated himself in one of the chairs and gestured for Blaine to take the other. Then he turned to Trista and said, "Perhaps you would accompany us? The sound of the waves can be so lonely."

Trista glared at Davis. She passed behind Blaine, pressing a hand into his shoulder as she went. A chair awaited her on the far side of the table. The harp she produced from her mind, where she kept it safe for travel.

Davis grasped the piece of glass between his fingers. "You know the rules, I believe."

Blaine nodded. "What's the wager?"

Davis held the glass between them, so they viewed each other through its distorted surface.

"If you win," Davis said, "you shall have what you need most of all."

Of course. In Blaine's experience, great power and enlightenment turned people into cryptic poets. That was half the reason he stayed a street performer, rather than pursue a track that might run him into other powerful, condescending beings. The other half was that he loved his job. Of course there was also the fact that he had pursued his potential before and it had blown up in his face (and many others).

"What if you win?" Blaine asked. "Not that you will."

"If I win," Davis said, his lips showing a sliver of teeth. "I take her." He nodded toward Trista.

"No," Blaine said immediately.

At the same time, Trista rose from her seat and echoed, "No."

Not only was Trista his best (and only) friend, she was a part of him. His guide, his soul, a manifestation of his power, Blaine had never known exactly what Trista was, but he knew she was important, and that he could not lose her.

He'd known others like himself, though rarely more than acquaintances. He'd heard about one or two who'd lost their guides. It usually ended with someone dead or insane, or extremely mundane.

"If you don't believe you can win, why did you bother to come?" Davis closed one eye and squinted at Blaine through the sea glass. "I didn't see you as one to back down so easily." He lowered the glass. "Was I wrong?"

Blaine may have had a slightly larger than average ego – Trista would argue exceptionally large – and a healthy confidence in his own abilities, but he was not so stupid as to rise to bait that could lead them to their doom.

"I know I can win," Blaine said. "But I don't know you. I don't know what tricks you may try to play, or what you're capable of."

Davis spun the glass like a top on its point. "Well yes," he sat back in his chair, feigning confusion. "Isn't that the idea? You don't know what I'm capable of, but you want to. You want to best me to prove you are capable of conquering what you don't even know. You want to learn, to excel, to rise above."

Davis's words still stank of a goad, but they were true. Blaine may have carved a niche for himself in the city streets, but he was far from safe. Blaine had never met someone like Davis, with the ability to alter the energy of his own presence, and to thwart Blaine's tricks without him knowing. If he could learn how to best him, he'd be a step closer to protecting his own life, and Trista's along with it.

He turned to Trista. She met his gaze for a long silence, and, seeing all she needed to know in his face, she sank back into her chair and slowly fingered her harp strings.

Blaine set his attention back on Davis. "It's a deal. Let's play."

Davis placed the glass on the table and covered it with a cup. Just as Blaine had done daily for so many years, Davis mixed the cups in a circuit, moving too fast for anyone to track. Blaine didn't bother trying. He waited until Davis stilled the cups before reaching out to feel for the glass. He stretched out his consciousness – and slid off the cups like a wet body launched against a wall.

How could that happen? Nothing had ever stopped Blaine's awareness like that. Certainly, some materials were a little harder to understand, some people less open for reading, but he could always get in eventually. Every exterior gave at least a little.

But these cups were as void as Davis himself. Blaine's awareness slipped off and around them, as if they didn't exist. Yet he could see them on the table. He even reached out to touch them, each one in turn. Each time, his fingers pressed cold clay.

He looked to Trista for help, but she stared pointedly at her harp. He didn't need to see her face to know she was angry and betrayed, and maybe now a little scared. She plucked with a new ferocity at the strings, and finally, still playing, looked up at Blaine. *Do better*, her eyes said. *Figure something out. Think.*

Not the most helpful advice he'd ever received. Yet Trista only turned cryptic when Blaine had been especially dense. *Think* meant *think differently*. So what if he couldn't see inside the cups. What else could he do?

What would he do if the roles were reversed? Usually Blaine held Davis's role. Usually he was in control, the puppeteer. But in that case he used his powers to win

when he wanted to. If he couldn't use his power, he was like any other human being, unawakened to the potential of his own will. How did the sleeping masses play this game?

Blaine had first learned the ball and cups trick when he was ten. He was not yet sick of the world, and had not yet fallen back in love with it. He was just excited to be over a cold and in a restaurant eating pancakes for dinner. He and Tia were bored waiting for their food, so their dad entertained them with empty creamers turned upside down over a rolled up ball of straw wrapper.

Tia had quickly lost interest in the trick, but Blaine made his dad do it over and over, until Blaine finally caught him slipping the ball into his hand as he turned the cup over, never putting it underneath at all.

If he were without perception he would cheat. He would just do it without his powers. If he couldn't remove the ball by magick, he'd make sure there was no chance of his opponent guessing the right cup. He wouldn't put the ball under any of the cups.

Davis sat still, his fingers woven in a bridge atop the table.

"So," he said, "where shall we find our sea glass?"

Blaine smirked. He was not certain his answer was correct, but one lesson he'd learned early was to never show weakness. The more he doubted himself, the bolder he became.

"Nowhere," Blaine said. "It's not under any of the cups."

Davis touched his fingers in a steeple and pressed them to his lips, caging a smile.

"Well done," he said.

The cups fell over, untouched, to reveal nothing but the table beneath.

Blaine sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. Tension still assaulted him from Trista's thoughts, but his own worry dropped, like slipping off a heavy coat before falling into bed.

"So I win," Blaine said. He had that melty feeling of great satisfaction that only came from winning or the first bite of comfort food.

But something was wrong. Davis looked far too pleased for someone who had just lost a game of his own proposing.

Davis stacked the cups methodically, tapping them together on the table. "You win," he said, "this game. But as I recall, I won your game. Now, it seems, we are at a tie."

"So what, it's best two out of three? Which of us runs the last game? Which of us plays?"

"We both play." Davis set the cups aside and stood. "Let us break the tie the old fashioned way."

He reached beneath the table, and, though Blaine could clearly see only empty space between the legs, when Davis drew his hand back above the table's surface, he held the most magnificent fiddle Blaine had ever seen. Though old, the wood was extremely well cared for. It gleamed with smooth wood finish. Mother-of-pearl inlay danced along the fiddle's neck. Davis thumbed the fret board lovingly. "Sudden death round. Duel by music, the voice of the soul."

Blaine went rigid. Trista had stopped playing her harp.

"I don't have an instrument," Blaine said.

Davis nodded toward Trista. "That will do."

Blaine turned his head. The harp.

"No," Blaine said. "I haven't played since – I don't play anymore."

Davis tucked the fiddle beneath his chin. "You forfeit?"

"No!" Blaine stood, knocking his chair back.

Trista grasped the body of the harp, as if to say she would not let it go to Blaine's hands. But then her fingers loosened. Her hands dropped.

"Blaine," she said, sounding so much like Tia, agonized as she was in her final years on those so many bad days, yet sounding also like her own unique self. Trista had lived years Tia never had, had traveled and busked and grown with Blaine. She knew him better than anyone ever would. She was a part of him, was him. "You have to."

"Trista." Blaine turned suddenly and kicked his chair, sending it flying into the water. The splash stung at his hands and face. Deflated, he said, "I can't."

"You have to." Trista stood behind him now. Her hands crept around to grasp his. She squeezed his fingers, and he grasped her hands.

Trista released her grip on his fingers, but he held tight to her. She did not try to pull away, but the slight pressure from her arms clearly told him she was ready to go. He squeezed her fingers one last time, then released her.

He turned and met her gaze. They held each other's eyes, saying nothing. Then Blaine nodded, and Trista stepped aside, opening Blaine to Davis.

Blaine nodded.

Davis drew his bow in one long glide across his strings. "I go first."

Trista slid her hand once more into Blaine's, this time standing by his side. Davis played and they stood in awe. Davis's music unfolded a fantastic story. Every phrase added its own unique and colorful voice. Trista's music was special, Blaine knew. It had the ability to affect people in just the way they needed. But Davis's fiddle hit a whole new level. Hearing it felt like crying and laughing and flying all at the same time. Like the weightlessness of floating in water, and the crushing gravity of drowning. Blaine didn't know whether to dance or run or scream or laugh. In the end, he stood still, anchored by Trista's hand in his.

Davis ended his song, and, keeping the fiddle beneath his chin, as though still captivated by his own performance, he nodded at Blaine. *Your turn.*

Blaine wondered how old Davis was, really. How many years he must have been alive to practice, to be able to play like that. He let go of Trista's hand.

Blaine's chair had sunk beneath the waves. He sat instead on the table, dragged the harp toward him, and hugged the instrument to his chest. He took a deep breath in and let it out through his fingers, into the strings.

Cautious at first, he started slowly. The first time he missed a note, he cringed, pulling his hands away in defeat. Then he closed his eyes and remembered when he'd first learned

to play. Tia had started first, but Blaine had been more passionate, practicing more often, learning faster, enjoying it more. He remembered how good it felt the first time he played a song through with no mistakes. He remembered when he stopped caring about mistakes. The music always rolled on through, a river unhindered by any rock or tree.

Blaine slid his fingers down the strings, making no noise, but feeling the friction, the synthetic texture of each string. Returning his hands to the center, he began again. As he played, he picked up speed, gaining in confidence. He played through every song he remembered, practice tunes for learning intervals and chords, rock songs he had taught himself as a teenager, holiday tunes he'd sung as a child. When he ran out, he improvised, playing here and there a phrase from something recognizable, mixed in with songs he'd written, and songs he made up only now. Many times he plucked the wrong string, or played a dissonant chord. But he wrapped his music around whatever happened, turning a mistake into an opportunity for improvisation and a release of his creative soul. He poured himself into the music, and the instrument became, instead of Trista's harp, a pathway to unleash his own heart.

It seemed like scarcely any time had passed, though he knew he must have played for quite some time. It hit him suddenly how sore his fingers were, how they burned where blisters had formed. All at once, he stopped.

Trista smiled at him sadly, and Davis looked, oddly, almost proud.

"So," Blaine said. "How did I do?"

Davis's look was almost pitying. "My boy, you haven't played in years. Did you really think you'd be able to best me?"

"Hell yes!" Blaine said. "I put my heart and soul into that. So I made a few mistakes. I made up for it with passion, made it better." Maybe he believed himself to be better than he was, his perception skewed by hearing himself from within his own head, but he didn't think so. While he played, he believed himself to be playing out his human soul, and there was power in belief.

Davis inclined his head. "You did. Indeed, you did."

Trista nodded. She looked small without her harp, and somehow both pleased and agitated, and more than a little sad.

"So," Blaine said. "What does that mean?"

"It means sudden death is a tie," Davis said. "I will take my prize, and give you yours as well."

"No," Blaine stood and stepped forward. "That's bullshit!"

Before he could do anything else, Davis grabbed Trista by the neck and hair. He *pulled*.

Everything went sideways, like a picture tugged from opposing corners. Blaine felt the bottom of his brain fall through his skull. His entire being hurt, like a dulled blade was forcing its way through his middle. Everything blurred and stretched and stung.

Blaine struggled to feel beyond the pain. His eyes watered, but he didn't need to see. He could feel Trista just a few steps away. Unsure where he was, knowing each step might lead him off the edge of the pier, he clung to that sense of Trista, the energy within her so strongly linked to him, to the sister he'd known since his earliest days.



Blindly, he reached out. His hands slid across skin. Trista.

He grasped her arms even as the weight of her pulled away. He couldn't see Davis, or the water, or the sky. All he knew was that some terrible force pulled him one way and Trista another.

His hands slid down Trista's arm, unable to keep a grip. At the last moment he caught hold of her hand. She gripped him back.

"Don't let go!" he yelled.

Trista came, ever so slightly, into focus, no longer a blur of brown against black. He made out the shadows of her face, the smile like Tia's, and the eyes like his own.

She clung to him and let out the closest sound she'd ever made to a sob. "No," she said. Her fingers relaxed in his grip. "You have to let go, Blaine. Let her go. We won't go anywhere if you can't."

Blaine crushed her fingers with his, fighting to hold her when she would not hold him back.

"No! Trista, no." He held her with a strength he would not have thought he had. Held her as he had held on for so many years. "I can't."

He couldn't let her go because...well, he couldn't. He couldn't bear it when his sister died, and he couldn't bear to lose Trista now.

But he had borne it. He'd been crippled by grief, but he'd survived. He'd formed a life for himself, as she never could. But he hadn't done all that he'd planned to do, couldn't stand to attempt what she would have wanted to conquer. What if he hadn't held on so tightly? What if he let go now? He'd always told himself he couldn't, but wasn't the root of his magick the belief that he could?

Blaine tightened his grip on Trista. Tears oozed from his eyes and the sense of a blade hacked steadily at his insides. He closed his eyes, and pulled a long breath in. Then he released the breath. He let go.

His body shattered, as if he were made of glass. Burning cold ripped through every fragment of his being. Isolated by a pain so intense it distorted all sense, he fell. Away from Trista. Alone.

• • •

Blaine pushed through the glass door of the music store. Inside, displays marked haphazard aisles fenced by instruments of every kind. Blaine turned left immediately and stepped into the window display.

After losing Trista, Blaine lost all sense of time, of anything really. He stumbled through life in a daze, waking with no memory of falling asleep, in an alley or loading dock, or occasionally even in his old squat. For some time he felt nothing, totally numb.

Gradually sensation returned – hunger, thirst, the desire to sleep where he wouldn't be exposed to rain or chill or hard stones against his ribs. At first he stole what food and drink he needed, but as his strength grew, he returned, little by little, to his street act.

He pulled in far less cash nowadays, unable to perform such wonders as he had with Trista by his side. He felt empty in places, like he'd been gutted, parts of his being removed. But without those parts he felt lighter too, purged. Like a mountain after a fire, he was scathed and blistered, but ready for new growth.

He found he did not love the magick act as he used to. Now a greater passion turned his attention away, a life he'd dreamed of since childhood, since before Tia died.

Inside the window of the music shop was a beautiful instrument with rich, deep wood, perfectly strung. It stood silent now, but full of potential. Ivy carvings laced their way up the body. He ran his fingers over the engravings. Tia would have loved it. The idea made him smile.

Tia had brought this music into his life, and even now that hers had ended, he would continue to craft his own song, a song he had forgotten, until Trista reminded him. Blaine missed Trista every day. She had been with him for years and her absence left him lonely and unsure who to be without her. It was hard to rebuild himself again, this time alone, but at least he could rebuild, maybe now with even more freedom.

Blaine barely pulled in enough to live these days, but he'd been saving. He was finally ready.

The store attendant stood nearby, dusting the head of a drum. She looked up when Blaine's shadow crossed her path.

"Hi there. Can I help you?"

"Yeah," Blaine said. "How much for the harp?"

Without waiting for an answer, he pressed his fingers to the strings, taut and strong, but pliant enough for anything he might ask of them. He began to play, starting with the melodies Tia taught him before he joined her lessons, but quickly leaving them behind for songs of his own composition. As the strings thrummed, the air around him quivered, alive and awakened by the possibilities in his song.

# Bound in Blue

S. J. Tucker & Ryan James Loyd

*"Arjil, there's something I want to try. For you. "I looked into the face of my new lover, my friend, there in his odd little country house. His blue gaze was steady, matching my own. "I paint with a mixture of woad and water sometimes. We could... we could work magick with that, for you. I could try stitching your defenses back together that way. But I want you to be in charge of making the safe space to do it in, so that we're both working."*

*Arjil agreed with a nod, his expression open.*

*"It's not something I've done before," I said honestly.*

*He smiled and said, "I don't mind."*

• • •

Four years I'd been walking around with my face leaking, and all manner of Bad getting in there. You know how they teach you about defenses – white light, shields, and such? They don't mean much after you get a demon stuck in your face, and then when you rip it out it takes a chunk of You with it. Nah, don't look for scars. It wasn't on this side of the fence – doesn't make that shit any less real though.

It all happened because I fucked up once (Once! *Ha!* In this business, there's no fucking up just *once*, provided you survive it, of course) and got my ass handed to me. I won in the end, if you can call that "winning," but it wasn't fun, and it fucked my shit up.

See, it came down when my brother Matthew, he got a hold of this girl who had no business going down rabbit holes, and he dragged her down a couple or three, and Something got in there.

Demon, spook, Umbral entity... whatever you want to call it, chick was possessed.

Possession tends to be a much more subtle business than movies make it out to be. There's no "head spinning around backwards" bullshit that I've ever seen.

It's in the eyes.

You look at them, and it's not "Them" looking back at you anymore.

The Resonance goes all wrong, doesn't *feel* like them either.

And then they start doing and saying stuff that doesn't make much sense and sure as hell isn't in their best interest.

So Matthew calls me from the west coast, freaking the hell out that his girlfriend's possessed, and hey, he knows his shit, so who am I to argue?

Let me tell you, when your brother – who you've seen pull off some of the most impressive magickal shit ever – calls you freaking out over something like this, it gets your attention. I mean I was fifteen hundred miles away – what the hell was I supposed to do about it if he, Mr. Johnny-on-the-spot whose fault this was, couldn't? Really, bro?

But anyway, I was like, "Sure, I'll do what I can..." (Goddammit.)

Whole story doesn't really matter; I managed to yank a demon out of a girl fifteen hundred miles away, and I did it mostly on accident, so I wasn't ready when the fucker started melting and burrowing its way into my spiritual flesh.

You know that space that's just above your skin, but it's still You? Yeah, that's where this thing manifested, like Cthulhu's claw-happy psycho little cousin.

It was a fight, alone in the dark, with nothing but some on-the-fly, made-up dream-ings and a dusty old spell. And let me tell you, ripping a goddamned demon out of your own face *really sucks*.

• • •

*Earlier that day, as I traveled south along the edge of Missouri on my way to visit Arjil, my phone buzzed with a text message from him. In it, he asked for a little bit of shine (our word for supportive magick) to get him through the day. He felt vulnerable, he said, as if something were trying to get past his energetic defenses, trying to slash at him and lay siege upon the places in his psychic armor that were weak from battles long past. His actual message, to the point: My demon-mischief spots are giving me a lot of guff.*

*When I stopped to fill the gas tank, I reassured him: "Remember who it's messing with. And I am coming."*

• • •

So I just kept leaking. I tried everything I knew to do, Matthew tried everything *he* knew how to do, but there was no fixing this weird-ass gaping spectral face wound. It burned, with a ghostly fire – you know the way people with phantom limb syndrome complain of pain in a foot that's not there? Yeah, that's what this was like, only it was a mauling on the whole right side of my face around my eye that refused to heal. It was like I was bleeding my essence out, and that sucked bad enough... but the worst were the parasites. They'd get into that "hole," down the shafts the "tentacles" bored out, all the

way down behind my collarbone, and get to feeding. Hell, even the “normals” noticed that I wasn’t looking so good.

And I’d pop over to the Umbra, and dig the fuckers out and burn them, try to cauterize that face wound or something, but I just couldn’t fix it. Apparently, that’s what happens when you get torn up by something *serious*. Demon mischief, spiritual poison... whatever, it was the All Bad.

• • •

*“The one time I painted myself with woad,” I told Arjil, “it didn’t stain, and it didn’t make me berserk.” Yes, I randomly carry a little packet of blue woad around. Blame my friend Flame, who gifted me a small stash of the plant-based, powdered dye several years ago. She was hopeful that I could use it the way she uses henna, for designs on the skin. I prefer to paint bones with it. Now I planned to paint Arjil with it.*

*“I don’t care if it stains,” Arjil said. That established, we smiled, and then he headed upstairs to prepare his space and himself. I heard music drift down from the second floor of the house as I washed and cleansed the paintbrushes he’d found for me that afternoon (either summoned into being out of nowhere, or handily waiting in his workshop somewhere, who knows), dipping their brush ends into sea salt and giving them a quick, witchy talking to, and then opening the sliding glass door briefly to the night to toss the used sea salt onto the grass. I was nervous at this point, but not shaky. Mostly grounded. But it was as if power was already sneaking into and through me while I washed my hands and tucked the paintbrushes into the breast pocket of my smock.*

*Pausing in the living room, I silently asked the spirits of the house and the spirits of the land on which the house sits, where Arjil has lived since his childhood, to keep watch for us. At the edges of my awareness, I felt the wards, which Arjil had long ago set on the place, buzz gently in response, rather like the slow wink of an enormous eye.*

• • •

So eventually, after about two years of living with this big, gaping, leaking hole in my spiritual defenses, I meet this girl. Girl, woman, witch – most fabulous woman Ever. Lyric is her name. The magick in how we met is a whole other story, but suffice to say for *this* story that Lyric’s got the voo, she’s a witch, and she’s got an idea. She figures that we can stitch this damage back up with woad and magick. She said that she’d never tried such a thing, but hell, that’s never stopped me before. I might have fewer spiritual scars if it had, but I’m of the *Fuck it, give it a whack* school of magick-hucking. The “Traditions” tend to look down on me for that attitude, but most of *them* couldn’t pull off half the shit I’ve thrown down over the years.

Anyway, I left her to make her own preparations and went to make mine.

I went upstairs, disrobed and fired up my alter. Yes, *alter*. Religious people have altars, things of worship. I’m a goddamn wizard. I have an “alter.” I use it to alter the world, when I bother to use it at all.

First I dumped extra juice into the wards around the house. I was going to drop all my protections, stand naked not just in flesh, but spirit as well, and I wasn’t taking any

chances that Mister Facemelty, or any of the other hundred-odd things I've managed to tangle with over the years, would pick just that moment to show up for some payback. I'm cocky, but I'm not stupid.

• • •

*Upstairs, I set out brushes and water and woad where I could reach them on Arjil's coffee table, and sat down on the throw pillows he had placed on the floor for us both.*

*"How well do you need to see?" he asked.*

*"It doesn't matter," came my reply, and I smiled automatically.*

*He nodded, switched off the floor lamp near the wall, and lit the candles above and upon his impressive altar – an octagonal table, well-populated with all manner of twigs and thorns and dragons and stones and boxes and things I hadn't even had a chance to ask him about yet. The hanging candelabra he lit first, and then the blue and white candles in their silver holders on the table itself. Our matched pair of dragon sculptures watched from one edge of the altar's surface. I felt the room change subtly as Arjil cast safe space and sent protective energy and intent out into the air, through the house, and a little beyond. The circle tickled me like a breeze as it passed over, strangely solid. Feeling this beyond doubt, I wanted to laugh against the sound of Azam Ali's voice drifting over from Arjil's computer speakers.*

• • •

I lit my alter candles and threw down a circle, and the power left me in a rush. Lyric rocked a bit as it passed over her, and her eyes blazed with a sort of excitement; don't think she expected *that*.

Then came the hard bit. I dropped my defenses. All of them.

I Trusted.

Sounds like an easy thing to do, in front of an amazing woman you're wildly in love with. That certainly helps matters... but I'll admit it, I was nervous.

Casting doubt aside, I knelt in front of her in the semi-darkness.

It was a hard thing, at first, not just to sit still with a chilly brush tickling along my flesh, but also to keep my own magick from interfering as I felt power binding itself into my spirit.

It was gentle, and strong. It hurt, a bit, in that phantom place, but most real things do.

As she worked, visions rose within me, of a time before time.

A time of fur and bones, and old primal power. A priestess, and a warrior shaman, crudely painted images that writhed in the firelight, and dragon spirits all dancing in my mind, and magick buffeting against me like the breeze before a storm.

I don't know how long I was in that place, as my love stitched me back together, and laid down an enchantment of armor over all.

• • •

*As the water and blue-black dye blended and swirled, I silently asked Arjil's and my guardians and guides, our ancestors and keepers, all those who loved us both, to come*



and bear witness. I felt them come, could all but see them, could all but hear the deep rustle of massive wings, could all but see candlelight dance in their calm, even eyes.

Still in preparation for the intensely creative, slightly messy part of our rite, I spread stray woad granules and water across the skin of both my hands, asking for the spirit of the thing to guide me, to work through me, to mend and repair and strengthen my beloved; to bless him as stories say the Pictish warriors of old were blessed. I asked it to come through me and to guide my hands to do the most good, to give me the right symbols and strokes. I did not need to know in advance what the symbols would be. I quieted myself into a near-trance, touched the first and broadest paintbrush to my tongue, shed my smock, and began to paint.

Before putting each paintbrush to use, I placed its cool tip on my tongue, to connect my own energy and power with the act of the painting, the woadng. I had not thought to do so before I began, but each time it seemed proper and natural to do so. Before anything else, I worked a bit of healing magick for Arjil, painting the first symbols of power I'd ever learned upon his flesh, right at the place where he told me he could usually feel the trouble start: near the edge of his collarbone, where it met the curve of his shoulder muscles. I also painted there a spiral-and-star symbol, one with which I regularly cast wards and protective charms on any given day. First a symbol to heal, then one to banish, and then one to mend, and lastly one to help him know his strength, all flowing smoothly out of the brush, out of my bones and muscles and nerves, out of me. Around these first symbols and my spiral-and-star, painted one on top of the other, I painted a ring of tight spirals – turned clockwise, but painted counterclockwise. Immediately after completing the first circle of these, I painted a second ring of counterclockwise spirals, themselves turning counterclockwise, for banishing and warning away any malevolent spirit or stuff that might approach Arjil's weakened places. The next ring of spirals ran clockwise, spreading up his neck and down his chest, across the back of his right shoulder. All the while, I murmured what words occurred to me, few of which I recall now. "To heal and to mend, to banish and to give you strength... Nothing comes without your leave, now in the fullness of your strength, beloved. You are your own sort of warrior, and no less strong."

After the three sets of spirals, I let the designs taper into straight lines and curves, connected like webs or wing membranes up along Arjil's brow and his cheek, to the corner of his mouth (which must have tickled, because he smiled his wonderful smile, trying to suppress it and failing – the only sign of emotion he had shown during the whole of the rite thus far) and down to his right shoulder blade and forearm. There I painted another star-and-spiral, and along his face I gave him extra strong spider webs to act as stitches at the borders of his torn defenses. With my brush and my will I reconnected one end of his energetic shields with the other, closing up any tears that remained. I swept the lines down across his back and shoulder, working with the image that I was knitting him up and into full armor, back into one piece, strong, laced in: the finishing touches of solid protection. Energy swirled and sped faster than before, here at the end of the painting process.

"By your own sweet self, by all your guides and guardians, and by my own... by spidersilk and woad and will, beloved... I call you mended." I kissed Arjil's mouth with these last words, and he responded instantly, with vigor. The spinning energy around us

*reached its top speed at this moment and crashed like morning. We felt it go, forgetting brushes and woad and candles entirely. Gently and with respect, Arjil pulled me close and laid me down upon the pillows there, and I felt something in the energy of the moment shift. Somehow, with a sudden smoothness, there was more than just typical, gorgeous sexual tension going on. We were ourselves, but in that moment we were also warrior and priestess in times gone, down among standing stones, cave walls, firelight, sheltering forest; nothing but the woad and our own flesh between ourselves and the night air, moonlight stealing down to find us. For a while I knew not the time, nor the place. We were ourselves, but somewhat else as well, as he drank of me, called a fierce, soaring, guttural song from deep within me, and joined his painted flesh with mine.*

• • •

Things might've gotten a little... primal there towards the end. No, I'm not going to tell you all about it. I wouldn't, even if I *could* describe what happened. We came to sometime later, the candles burning low, our heads still in some half elsewhere, our spirits flaring near to psychedelic. Don't know where the thought came from, but I asked her if she wanted some ice cream. Don't know what about ice cream was an integral part of that spell, but it was, and that's what brought us back home to the mortal world once more.

Long story short, it worked like a charm. All that leaking and hurting that was going on wasn't a problem anymore. I can still feel where the damage was, but I can also still feel my warpaint, even though the physical part didn't last the night. Doesn't matter; what she wrought upon my spirit endures.

Damn, that girl's one hell of a witch.

It freaks me out a bit that sometimes I can *feel* things, checking the edges of the enchantment, trying to get in, but they never do.

My baby does her magick right.

# Famished Road

**Balogun Ojetade**

The Range Rover cruised up the highway. The SUV's speakers shook from the soulful hip-hop rhythm – courtesy of Wretch 32 – slithering, butterslick, from them.

“Hand me another Corona,” Mba Bongo said, reaching over his shoulder with manicured, plump, ebony fingers.

Greg “Flex” Singletary slapped a cold bottle into Mba’s palm. “What is that, like your fifth beer in an hour? Get ready to pull over in about three miles so this fool can hop out and piss like a racehorse, D.”

“You know those chubby dudes can hold their liquor, Flex,” Danny Dixon replied. “Back at Morehouse, when he was skinnier than Snoop Dogg on a diet, this fool would pass out after one wine cooler!”

“Go ‘head on,” Mba said, shaking his head. “I’m not much bigger than I was in college. Just a little bit more for the ladies to love.”

“You have maintained your player status; I give you that,” Danny said.

“Time for you to join me and D,” Flex said, “and make an honest woman out of one of those sisters, though.”

Danny’s shoulders stiffened. His fists tightened on the steering wheel.

“Damn, sorry, D,” Flex croaked.

“It’s cool, bruh,” D replied. “I’ve made my peace with Linda and me splitting up. She and that punk-ass paralegal of hers deserve each other.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Mba said, saluting Danny with his bottle of beer. He and Flex had arranged this road trip to New York to show Danny a good time after his divorce from Linda. The divorce was painful for everyone. Danny and Linda had been sweet-

hearts since they were in elementary school, and Mba, Flex, Danny, and Linda had been close friends since college. Linda was Mba and Flex's agent and attorney, and had represented Off the Beaten Path Publications – their graphic novel production company – since its inception. Since the divorce was finalized, however, Mba hadn't heard from Linda and she had not returned any of his calls.

"Linda's been incognegro for a couple of weeks, too," Flex said. "She was supposed to get back to me about that deal we're working with Webvidz."

"Man, let's forget about Linda," Danny said. "I'm looking forward to a nice hotel suite, with a view of downtown Manhattan and some New York-style pizza."

"And some New York-style *women*," Mba said.

"Man, y'all are makin' me hungry," Flex said.

"Hungry for pizza, or for women?" Mba asked.

"Both," Flex replied. "We need to stop and grab somethin'."

"Okay," Danny said. "The last sign for a rest stop was about ten miles back, so we should be coming up on it soon."

• • •

Danny pulled into the lot of the Gas-N-Go rest stop.

"Let's eat and rest here for a few hours, then fill up," Danny said. "We should make it to Manhattan by early morning."

"Cool with me," Flex said.

"Me, too," Mba said. "It's my turn to drive next, so I need to sleep off this beer."

Danny pulled into a space in front of the diner. "Man, I hope this country-ass place has some good burgers or a Philly cheesesteak or somethin'."

Mba sniffed the air. "You smell that? You ain't gettin' nothin' in there, except some fish-n-grits, croquettes-n-corn, or collard greens-n-candied yams."

"I know you're disappointed, then," Danny said.

"Disappointed?" Mba replied. "I love Southern food."

"I figured you'd want some fufu, goat-foot stew, and a side of grilled goat with a goat shake," Danny said.

Flex laughed.

Mba rolled his eyes. "Funny. In Gabon, we don't even *eat* goat."

"Then what was that we had at your mom's that spring break?" Flex asked. "That good, grilled meat?"

"Monkey," Mba replied.

Flex stroked his throat with his fingers. His face twisted into a grimace. "What?"

"The Man with the Yellow Hat is a solo act, now," Mba said with a shrug.

"Man, the next time I visit your mom's," Flex groaned, shaking his head, "let's do a potluck."

The men exited the SUV and walked into the Gas-n-Go's diner. No one greeted them, so they approached the counter where a man dressed in an old olive drab army jacket and a worn, gray trilby sat, slumped, at the counter, stirring his coffee. The dissolving creamer made little spiral galaxies. Mba slid onto the stool next to him.

The waitress, a young woman who seemed too pretty to work in a diner – let alone a diner in a remote rest stop – locked eyes with Mba.

Her eyes flitted from Mba, to Flex, to Danny, and back to Mba. "I'll be right with you gentlemen."

She handed a slip to the cook; he took it in his shaky, skeletal fingers and then approached the counter. Mba peered at her nameplate. *Apinya* was written in bold, black letters.

"How can I help you?" Apinya inquired.

"First, you can tell me what a nice Thai girl is doing in a place like this," Mba replied.

Apinya's eyes widened and her mouth fell open. "How do you know I'm Thai?"

*"P̄hm̄kheyp̄iḥlāyḥlāykh̄r̄ṅm̄prathēṣṭhiy"* – "I have visited Thailand many times" – Mba replied. *"Prathēṣṭhiym̄iḥp̄h̄ȳingṣ̄wy;t̄ə p̄h̄mm̄ī kheyh̄ṅp̄h̄ȳingthiyth̄ī ṣ̄wyn-gāmp̄ṅkhun?"* – "Thailand has beautiful women; but I have never seen a Thai woman as beautiful as you."

"Impressive," Apinya said, her cheeks reddening. "And, thank you. To answer your question, I was born and raised in Atlanta, but I *do* go home every summer."

"We're from Atlanta," Mba said. "I don't know why the gods didn't let us meet there. We could have had so much fun."

"There's no time like the present," Apinya replied. "Are you guys staying at the motel?"

"We are now," Mba replied. "My name is Mba, by the way. Mba Bongo. When do you get off?"

"In an hour," Apinya replied.

Mba leaned forward, bringing his lips close to Apinya's ear. "Can I watch?"

Apinya giggled. "Maybe," she said. "Wait for me and we'll hang out for a bit."

"Cool," Mba said.

"Now that that is settled, can we order now?" Danny said. "I'm starving."

"Of course," Apinya said. "What will you have?"

Danny perused the menu. "I'll take some French toast, a bowl of grits, and a large orange juice.

"Beef sausage, scrambled eggs with cheese, and a glass of water for me," Flex said.

Apinya flashed a smile at Mba. "And for you?"

"T-bone steak, medium-rare," Mba replied. "And three scrambled eggs."

"That's a lot of protein," Apinya said.

"I put in a lot of work," Mba replied. "I have to keep my strength up."

Apinya's reddish-brown cheeks grew even deeper red. She lowered her gaze, and the corners of her mouth turned upward into a sly smile.

*This trip*, Mba thought, *is going to be more fun than I imagined*. As she worked, he studied Apinya's pretty, youthful face, and her supple body.

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Mba bounded up the stairs of the motel with Apinya riding his back. Her arms were wrapped around his thick neck, and her lean legs around his waist. The tiny *Punu* drum charm he wore on a cord around his neck bounced on Apinya's arm with each step.

Mba peered down at Danny and Flex, who were on the landing below him. "I'll see you brothers in the morning."

Danny thrust his fist forward and then tapped his wrist with his fingertips, beating a rhythm on some invisible Rolex. "Six o'clock sharp."

"Yeah," Flex chimed in. "We were just supposed to rest a couple of hours. This is gonna set us back a little."

"I *will* only rest a couple of hours," Mba said, giving Apinya a wink. "Besides, who's in a hurry? New York isn't going anywhere."

"Whatever, man," Flex replied. "See you in the morning."

Mba checked the room numbers. "Room 216," he said. "This is it."

He opened the door with an oversized copper key and then sauntered inside. He walked over to the bed and plopped down onto it. Apinya fell backward onto it. She giggled, burying her face in a pillow.

Mba turned to face her. "I'm going to shower; care to join me?"

Apinya continued to giggle into the pillow.

"Apinya... are you coming, baby?"

"Not yet," Apinya replied, keeping her face covered. "Hopefully, soon, though."

Her voice was different. Not just muffled by the pillow; different, but somehow familiar.

Mba extended his hand toward the pillow covering Apinya's face, creeping like a spider approaching a wasp trapped in its web. "Apinya?"

Apinya tossed the pillow aside. A broad smile stretched across her face. It was not her face at all, however. The visage belonged to Linda, the recently divorced wife of his best friend, Danny, and his attorney, agent and close friend.

Mba sprang off the bed. He staggered backward, bumping into the chest-of-drawers behind him. "Linda?"

Linda sat cross-legged on the bed, rocking back and forth to some silent rhythm. "What's the matter, lover?" she chuckled. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

The odor that crept from her maw and slithered up Mba's nostrils reeked of rancid meat, spoiled milk, fresh feces, and dirt. Mba leapt back from the odiferous assault, lest he regurgitate all of that medium-rare T-bone and scrambled eggs.

The drum charm pulsed on Mba's chest. He clutched it in his fist. Heat rushed over and through him. "Obviously, I have," he said. He reached in his pants pocket and withdrew a small tin. He opened it, revealing several alabaster breath mints. Mba thrust the tin toward his friend. "Have thirty?"

"Funny," Linda replied. "How good will your breath smell when *you're* dead? I did a good job of hiding it from you for a while, though. You were ready to get it on with poor Apinya. Just so you know, she didn't suffer, like I did. I consumed her soul quickly and she didn't put up much of a fight."

"Who did this to you, Linda?"

"Your BFF," Linda replied, her pallid flesh falling slack on the bones of her cheeks. "That darling wasband of mine."

"Danny wouldn't do this," Mba said, shaking his head. "He loves you."

"Yet, here we are," Linda said. "Would I have been drawn here if what I say isn't true? The Road dragged me here less than an hour before you three amigos arrived. No worries, though. I'm going to make him pay. I'm going to take everything Danny loves, everything he cares for. Then I'm going to take the shitstain he calls a life."

"You *were* his life, Linda," Mba said. "He loved you more than he loved himself."

Linda wagged a finger at him. "See, that's why I have to feed you to the Road first. Why I have to make you an... appetizer, of sorts."

Mba's fist tightened around the little Punu drum. "Why me?"

Linda tilted her head sideways and stared at Mba. Her eyes were dead, but her smile was broad. After several moments, she spoke. "Because you're loyal and dumb. And because you're a magic man and would use that magic of yours to protect Danny, and I can't have that."

Linda stretched her arms out to the side and wiggled her fingers. The manicured digits melted into one another, the flesh shifting, expanding. Her arms and hands took the shape of M134 Miniguns— the six-barreled, Gatling-style machine guns favored in Chuck Norris and Arnold Schwarzenegger movies.

Damn the consequences. He'd need to go hard now.

Mba crouched low, his shoulders bouncing up and down rhythmically. "*Bakanemambu ye ngulu'avata, welefundilakuangulu'amfinda; zawonsonongulu ye ngulu,*" he chanted in Ki-Kongo, the language of his maternal ancestors: *You have a dispute with a domestic pig, you complain to the wild pig; are they not all pigs?*

Linda pointed her arms at Mba. A wet, whistling din rose from the fleshbarrels as they started to whirl. An off-white mass exploded from Linda's flesh guns.

Mba pointed the head of the tiny drum necklace toward the rushing white mass. The head of the drum burst into the size of a large shield. The mass crashing against the



head of the drum sounded like torrential rain striking a windshield. A horde of maggots landed at Mba's feet.

He peeked around the edge of the drum head. Linda fired another barrage of maggots.

Mba charged toward Linda, sending maggots flying across the room and splattering against the walls, ceiling and floor. "*We 'Nelukunsa,*" he shouted as he pressed forward. *What can you do to me?*

Linda sprang from the bed. Her back opened like a maw and "fangs," which Mba could only imagine were formed from her ribcage, bit into the ceiling. She hung above him, growling like some great dire wolf.

"*Bitunguakumizengelekulendele bio ko,*" Mba shouted, raising his drum above his head. *You've cut ten sticks that you cannot carry.* The drum splintered. A moment later, it reformed as a shield and a spear in Mba's hands. The spear, formed from the body of the drum, pulsed in his fist. The shield, formed from the drum's head, emitted a war rhythm. Mba's heart beat in time to it.

Linda's arms shifted again, this time taking the shape of large hooks. She skittered across the ceiling, swiping at Mba's head with her hooked claws.

Despite his girth, Mba moved with blinding speed, evading the sharp hooks with bobs, weaves, jumps, and aerial twists. He slashed mid-twist, his sharp spearblade sinking into Linda's right arm.

Linda's arm fell to the floor, flopping wildly at Mba's feet. She wailed as a greenish-black sludge poured from the wound. Linda dropped from the ceiling, landing in her own blood with a wet thump.

Mba dropped to one knee and then slashed inward, cutting a deep gash in Linda's inner thigh. He followed with an outward slash to just above the inside ankle of the other leg. Fetid, midnight green blood sprayed from the femoral arteries of both legs.

Linda staggered backward, rending the air with her hooks of flesh. Her back slammed into the motel room's door, and then she collapsed onto her haunches, her chin falling to her chest. Spittle streamed from the corners of her mouth, soiling her lap.

Mba crept toward her, the tip of his spear aimed at Linda's throat.

Linda lifted her head, glaring at Mba. "I will make morsels of you all!" she snarled. "You and your friends will soon be fodder for the Famished Road!"

Mba lunged forward, thrusting his spear deep into Linda's throat. The strike was followed by a dull thud, as the spear emerged from the back of Linda's neck and pierced the door.

Linda's eyes went dull. Her face shifted, the bones cracking as Apinya's face returned.

Mba inhaled and stomped his foot three times. The spear and shield flew from his hands. A flash of light followed. A moment later, the little drum once again rested upon Mba's chest.

He grabbed Apinya's feet and dragged her to the side of the bed. He perused the room, shaking his head at the slime that soiled the walls and carpet. He snatched his mobile device from his belt and checked his phone log. He found Flex's number and called it.

"Hey, man," he said, doing his best to sound calm.

"What's up, Mba?" Flex replied. "Done so soon?"

"It... it didn't work out quite like I planned," Mba croaked. "I need you and Danny to come to my room."

Mba was met with a brief silence, and then Flex whispered. "What's wrong, bruh?"

"Just come, *now*," Mba replied. "I'm in 216. Hurry, please."

"Alright, bruh, we're on our way."

"Peace," Mba said.

"Peace."

Mba hung up the phone and slipped the mobile device back onto his belt. He slid the door open and stepped outside, careful to shut the door behind him. He made a fist and brought it to his lips. He closed his eyes and whispered into it. A moment later, he opened his fist. In his palm sat a freshly lit Gurkha Black Dragon – the most expensive cigar in the world. Mba slid the Black Dragon between his index and middle fingers, and took a puff. The buttery smooth spices in the smoke calmed him.

Down the line, Mba knew, there would be a heavy payback for such drastic magic; these weren't the Old Days, after all. For the moment, though, he had more important and immediate concerns. The future would take care of the future.

Danny and Flex jogged down the breezeway toward Mba's room.

Flex came to a stop inches from Mba. He bent forward, struggling to catch his breath. "What's up?"

Mba lurched toward Danny and punched him in the face.

Danny stumbled backward against the railing. He stepped toward Mba, holding his jaw. "What the *hell*? Fool, have you lost your goddamned *mind*?"

Flex wrapped his arms around Danny's waist and held him in place. "What the hell, Mba?"

"Let me go, Flex," Danny spat. "I'm gonna whoop your fat ass, Mba!"

"Come inside," Mba said flatly. Mba turned away from his friends and lumbered back into the room.

Flex released Danny. Danny shot a quick glance at him. Flex pointed toward Mba's room. Danny took a deep breath and then followed Mba inside with Flex on his heels.

"Oh, shit," Flex whispered.

"What have you done, Mba?" Danny said.

"What have *I* done?" Mba said, grimacing. "Where's Linda, D?"

"Linda?" Danny cried. "Hell if I know. But I *do* know you murdered this poor girl!"

"This 'poor girl'*is* Linda, fool!" Mba replied. "Or, I should say, a husk that Linda possessed in hopes of killing us all for what you've done to her."

"Impossible!" Danny said. "This can't be. She's... she's..."

Flex slapped Danny in the chest with the back of his hand. "What did you *do*, D? Where's Linda?"

"Thirty years," Danny snapped. "Thirty years and she just threw it away, like we didn't mean shit!"

"What did you *do*, D?" Flex said again.

Danny slammed his right fist into his left palm. "She deserved everything that happened to her."

A tear rolled down Flex's cheek. "*What* did you do?"

Danny extended his hands, curling his fingertips toward each other as if they were wrapped around someone's neck. He shook his hands up and down violently. "I strangled the life out of her disloyal ass!"

"Oh, God," Flex gasped, slumping onto the bed.

"You stupid sonofabitch," Mba spat. "You murdered someone's child, someone's sibling, hell, someone's *mother*... the mother of *your* children... because she made a stupid mistake?"

"Mistake?" Danny said, his face twisting into a scowl. "She ruined us, bruh! She brought shame on me, the kids and her family. I... I wish I hadn't done it; I wish I hadn't lost my cool, but what she did... I guess I just lost my head."

"You lost your head, but Linda lost her life," Mba said. "She ruined *you*? You took everything from her, bruh— life, love, a future. Now she's hungry... hungry for justice, or revenge, and *we're* her pound of flesh... because of *you*. I thought you were a better man, D. Guess not. So, where's Linda's body?"

Danny stared at the floor. "I burned it in the firepit near the pool."

Mba pressed his fingertips to his temples. He closed his eyes and sighed. "Damn."

"What is it now?" Flex asked.

"Killing this husk while Linda possessed it should have sent her spirit back to her own body," Mba replied. "But since her body is burned, Linda's spirit will possess someone else in a few hours. It's still tethered to this body for a while. We have to permanently trap her spirit in this body and then bury it."

"How do you know all this stuff?" Flex asked.

"I'm an Nganga," Mba replied. "A healer, a diviner, an herbalist. Some call me a Ngoma magus, but *Nganga*, or *Nanga*, is what they'd call me back home."

Flex stared at Mba for a moment. "You can't be serious." He tapped Danny on his arm. "Is he serious?"

"I don't think he's kidding, Flex," Danny replied.

Flex held his palms before him as if he expected some gift to fall from the heavens into his hands. "What the hell is an 'Ink-coma'?"

"Ngoma," Mba replied. "Servants of our ancestors, of our people. We observe the mysteries of the world, contemplate those mysteries, and seek answers to the questions those mysteries unearth."

Flex stared at Mba for a long while. He did not blink. "Uh-huh. And those 'mysteries' include magic and monsters and shit?"

"Yep."

"Man, I don't believe any of this," Flex sighed. "My best friends in the whole world have lost their minds!"

"Look around you," Mba said. "All this blackish green goo... those dead mag-gots... they all came out of this body. Or are you imagining all that? Did I just *guess* Danny killed Linda?"

"Guess not," Flex croaked.

"And you kept this secret from us all this time?" Danny said, shaking his head.

"How long were you going to keep killing Linda a secret from us?" Mba said.

Danny lowered his gaze.

"I thought so," Mba said. "My parents always taught me that the snake that hides best lives longest."

"Mr. and Mrs. Bongo do this voodoo stuff, too?" Flex said.

"Yep," Mba replied. "Remember when your mom was misdiagnosed with pancreatic cancer?"

"Yeah," Flex replied. "Wait... don't tell me..."

"My parents did a lot of work on your mom's behalf," Mba said.

"Did mom know?"

"Yes," Mba said. "And Danny, when the Falcons called you back after initially turning you down..."

"I knew that was more than just a stroke of good luck," Danny said. "I... I'm so sorry for doing this to Linda, for doing this to all of us."

"You should be," Mba said. "And you'll be dealt with. But right now, we have to worry about staying alive. We have to bury this body before sunrise and it has to be buried with my drum *nkisi*, which will trap Linda's spirit inside it."

"Nkisi?" Danny said. "That little drum necklace of yours?"

"Yeah," Mba replied. "Nkisi are objects that powerful spirits inhabit. My drum is one. I have others."

"This is nuttier than squirrel poop," Flex sighed.

"Nuttier than a port-a-potty at a peanut festival," Mba said. "But if we don't bury this body ASAP, it's going to get a lot worse."

"Let's do it, then," Danny said.

Mba snatched the blanket off the bed and laid it on the floor beside Apinya's corpse. Danny and Flex rolled the body onto the blanket and then wrapped the corpse, folding the ends of the blanket over Apinya's feet and head. Danny dropped to one knee. Mba and Flex hoisted the bundled corpse onto his broad shoulder. Danny stood.

"Follow me," Mba said, clutching his drum nkisi. "Stay close, walk slowly and don't say a word. The nkisi will shield us from the eyes and ears of the folks at the motel and diner."

Mba tiptoed out of the motel room. Flex's breath beat a rapid cadence at the nape of his neck. He looked over his shoulder. Danny crept close behind Flex, moving in step with his friend's gait.

They descended the stairs, sidestepping in unison to avoid a collision with the intoxicated couple who stumbled up the steps toward them. Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, they increased their pace a bit, making a beeline for their SUV. They tossed the covered corpse into the back of the vehicle, hopped in, and then sped out of the parking lot.

"Whew," Flex panted. "I nearly crapped my pants when that couple came up those stairs!"

"I told you the nkisi would conceal our movements as long as we stayed silent and moved slowly," Mba said.

"Man, you should have filled us in on all this when we were in college," Flex said. "We could have hit a few banks or somethin' got rich."

"There aren't many rules that govern an Nganga," Mba said. "Every man and woman must follow his own path. But robbing banks isn't anywhere *near* my path."

"Maybe it's in mine," Flex said. "Maybe I should become a Lady Gaga and see."

"It's *Nganga*, fool," Mba corrected. "And maybe you should. If we live through this, I'll check you out... see if you got the gift."

"Cool," Flex said. "What about you, D?"

"Nah, man, I'm cool," Danny replied. "You know I'm a churchgoing man."

Mba shot a glance at Danny. "What? You missed the sermon on 'Thou shall not kill'?"

"Okay," Danny replied. "I deserved that."

"And a lot more," Mba said.

The SUV sped along the dark, quiet stretch of highway. Not another word among the men was exchanged.

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The nkisi pulsed. The percussion felt like a second heartbeat pounding within Mba's chest.

“Spirit is telling me that we should stop here,” he said, pointing toward a clearing in the trees that lined the side of the road. “Pull over and park behind those trees.”

Danny slowed the vehicle and crept onto the shoulder of the road and on into the forest for a few yards.

“We don’t have a shovel,” Danny said. “Guess you’ll have to cast one of those spells and cause a hole to appear, one six feet deep or so.”

“That’s not in my sphere of influence,” Mba replied.

Danny glared at Mba. “Then how in the hell are we going to dig the hole?”

“With our hands,” Mba said.

“*What?*” Danny and Flex shouted in unison.

“That ground is hard as hell, Mba,” Danny said, shaking his head.

“I can use the nkisi to temporarily toughen your hands and to heighten your strength,” Mba said. “You’ll be dog-tired afterward, though.”

“I’m dog-tired now,” Flex replied. “We need to rest for a little while first. And you said ‘heighten *your* strength’... ‘toughen *your* hands’. Don’t you mean ‘*our*’?”

“I’ll have to concentrate on the power of the nkisi,” Mba replied. “Focus its power on *you*.”

“So, me and D gotta dig a deep-ass hole in the hard dirt with our fingers while you commune with nature and shit?” Flex asked with a smirk.

“Basically, yeah,” Mba replied, shrugging his shoulders. “So rest up.”

Flex shook his head. “A’ight, then.” He tapped Danny firmly on the shoulder. “Yo, D, after this is all said and done, I’m beatin’ that ass!”

“I know,” Danny sighed. “I deserve it.”

“Yep,” Mba said.

The three men unbuckled their seatbelts and got comfortable.

“I’ll set the alarm on my phone to wake us up in two hours,” Mba said. “That should give us three hours before sunrise.”

“Cool,” Flex said. “Good night, Mba.”

“Good night, Flex,” Mba replied.

“Good night, D,” Flex said.

“Good night, Flex,” Danny said.

“Good night, John Boy,” Flex said.

Mba shook his head. Flex was trying to lighten the mood, but Mba’s heart felt as if a chunk had been carved out of it with a rusty spoon. “Go to sleep, fool.”

“Sorry, again, brothers,” Danny said.

Mba reclined in his seat and stared out of the moonroof at the stars that freckled the sky. “Whatever.”

Mba's dreams were his usual ones – fun with hot women, cold beer, a cool breeze and warm weather. He awakened to a cheery reggae instrumental. Flex, who reclined in the front passenger seat, yawned and stretched. The driver's seat, however, was empty, and Danny was nowhere in sight.

"Where in the hell is D?" Mba said, peering into the blue gray of nautical dawn.

"Heck if I know," Flex replied. "He's probably out there taking a piss."

"Well, we'd better get a move on," Mba said, opening one of the SUV's rear doors. He slid out of the vehicle and shuffled around to the back of it. He opened the rear door and found an empty trunk. "What the *hell*?"

"What is it?" Flex asked, hopping out of the vehicle.

"The body..." Mba replied. "It's gone."

"What?" Flex said. "How?"

*"Hey guys, over here!"* Danny's voice called from within the forest.

Mba and Flex shot quick glances at each other, and then sprinted toward Danny's voice. They found him patting a large patch of fresh dirt with the SUV's tire iron. He had removed his shirt, and although the air was crisp, rivulets of sweat ran down his sinewy chest and back.

Danny looked up at Mba with a broad smile on his face. "I buried the body myself and let you rest." Danny looked up at Mba with a broad smile on his face. "I used the tire iron. I figure it's the least I can do."

"You didn't," Mba sighed.

"What's the problem?" Danny said.

Mba clutched the nkisi drum and thrust it forward, just beneath his chin. "You didn't bury the nkisi with it! And now, we won't have enough time to dig the body back up and bury it again."

"Can't you just stick the necklace in the dirt on top of the body?" Danny asked.

"Nah, D," Mba replied. "We're screwed now. You screwed us... again!"

Danny lowered his gaze. "I was just trying to help."

"What do we do now?" Flex asked.

"We have to dig her up," Mba replied. "We'll have to bind her feet and hands with something."

"We can use my shirt," Danny said, pointing to his t-shirt, which lay on the ground near him.

"Cool," Mba said. "I'll put my nkisi drum around its neck. That should weaken it long enough for me to divine to see what our next move should be."

Flex peered up at the sky. "Sun's coming up. Let's do this!"

*"Do what?"*



The voice was a deep, gruff, baritone drawl, like honey on a bruise – strange for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the U.S. Mba whirled toward its source. Before him and his friends stood a Virginia state trooper. His slate-gray blouse and trousers were crisp and void of a single wrinkle. His black straw campaign hat was tilted forward, concealing his eyes in the shadow of its wide brim. Beside him stood another man dressed in a worn, tiger stripe camouflage windbreaker, blue jeans, and brown hunting boots.

“Morning, officer,” Flex said with a slight nod. “And Billy Bob.”

“It’s *trooper*, son,” the state trooper replied. “Senior Trooper Caldwell.”

“And my name ain’t Billy Bob, boy,” the man in camouflage spat. “It’s Davis, Milton Davis!”

Flex sucked his teeth. “Yeah, okay.”

Mba wrapped his fist around his nkisi drum. “How can we help you, Senior Trooper Caldwell?”

“Milt here says you boys have been parked on his property for a while,” Trooper Caldwell replied. “And now you’re out here, just standing around, staring at a patch of sphagnum. What are you up to?”

“S’fag-numb?” Flex said, shaking his head. “Is that some kind of homophobic slur, Trooper?”

“Sphagnum, Flex,” Mba said shaking his head. “S-P-H-*agnum*, it’s peat moss, man!”

“Oh,” Flex said. “I didn’t know; we don’t have much peat moss... umm... *smegma* where I’m from.”

“Smegma?” Trooper Caldwell replied. “Are you yankin’ my chain, son?”

“No, sir,” Flex said. “I thought that was how you pronounced it. Sorry.”

Mba glared at Flex. He did not want this trooper or his redneck friend to get it in their heads to lynch three Black men they came upon in the forest. His focus was on keeping Apinya’s buried body cloaked, and he could not control the emotions of Trooper Caldwell and Mr. Davis while doing that.

“Well,” Trooper Caldwell said, “we’ll discuss the proper enunciation at the Belview lockup.”

“Population eight-hunnid, ninety-one,” Milton Davis snickered. “All white folks, too!”

“Not all,” Trooper Caldwell said.

“Well, all ‘cept that Fujimoto feller,” Milton replied. “The one who owns the tire shop. But he’s damn near white.”

“He *is* rather pale,” Trooper Caldwell said. “Maggie McCutchin, too.”

“Yeah, she’s a squaw, but she sure do make good sammiches!” Milton said.

“That ‘George Matzen’ guy?”

“Not sure ‘bout him, actually.”

“Why are you arresting us?” Danny interrupted. “We didn’t know this was private property. There was no sign.”

“Who said anything about an arrest?” Trooper Caldwell said. “I’m just detaining you until I can establish your identities. Once I run your names and everything comes back clear, I’ll let you be on your way.”

“Can’t you run our names right here?” Mba said.

“I could,” Trooper Caldwell answered. “But Trooper McCutchin is bringing lunch today – his wife owns the sandwich shop two towns over from Belview – and I don’t want to miss it. I’ll order you fellas something, too.”

“I don’t think they got no collard green or fried chicken sammiches,” Milton said. “But I’m sure she got somethin’ to your likin’.” Milton broke into a loud belly-laugh. He buckled over and stumbled about like a drunkard.

“Man,” Flex said, “I bet your working television sits on top of your non-working television in your trailer, doesn’t it?”

“What?” Milton said, frowning.

Trooper Caldwell laughed. “That was a good one. Now come on, gentlemen. I don’t think I need to cuff anybody, correct?”

“No, sir,” Danny said. He peered over his shoulder at Mba, his eyebrows raised, his eyes searching for an answer to the question *Can you use your magic to get us out of this?*

Mba shook his head. To release his cloaking of the buried corpse would land them in jail for murder instead of for chilling in the forest while Black... unless, of course, he killed the trooper and the redneck. But they hadn’t done anything to warrant death. Yet.

Danny looked away. His shoulders dropped and he shambled off behind Trooper Caldwell.

Mba followed, clutching his nkisi drum until they drove away from the forest in the back of Trooper Caldwell’s squad car.

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The single holding cell at the Belview Trooper Station was bitter cold, colder than moonlight on a tombstone. Perhaps it was the granite walls that made it so. Perhaps it was the steel benches that ran the length of the east and west walls. Maybe it was the steel cage door. Or was it the spirits of the ancestors, who always brought the cold with them? Mba prayed for them to come, for their protection, because Linda would soon rise, she would seek them out. And if she found them in this cage, she’d have the advantage. Thankfully, he was now able to shift the focus of his *mooyo* – or life force – to cloaking his nkisi drum, or they would have taken it, along with his shoestrings and his suitcase, wherein he hid his other nkisi tools for divination beneath his underwear and socks.

Trooper Caldwell sat at his desk filling out paperwork. Milton Davis sat opposite a trooper, whose name tag read *Owens*, at the other desk in the office. The two men were locked in an intense game of chess. Milton was winning. He chuckled as he slammed his ivory pawn next to Owens’ onyx-colored rook.

Owens threw his head backward. "Damn it!"

"Owens," Milton giggled. "Don't you know that in any war between black and white, white always wins?"

Milton peered over his shoulder at Mba, Flex, and Danny.

"Except in the war for a free America," Owens replied. "Affirmative Action and Obama have murdered America and what it truly means to be American."

Milton nodded. "Amen, brother."

Flex glared at Milton. "So, equal employment opportunities are wrong?"

Milton smiled. "Yup."

"Affirmative Action isn't about equal employment opportunities or any other equal rights," Trooper Owens said. "Affirmative Action devalues our accomplishments and qualifications, and puts more importance on the social group to which we belong. Hell, that's bad for *all* of us because it hinders reconciliation, replaces old wrongs with new ones, undermines the achievements of your people, and encourages folks to identify themselves as disadvantaged, even if they're not."

Flex opened his eyes wide in feigned shock. "Well, I'll be... I guess some rednecks *do* know how to read!"

Owens sat bolt upright. "What?"

Trooper Caldwell looked up from his paperwork. "I told y'all he's a funny one."

"Yeah," Trooper Owens said, locking his gaze on Flex. "He's a regular Eddie Murphy."

Trooper McCutchin sauntered into the office. He carried a lidless box in his wiry arms. Inside the box were two neat rows of brown paper bags. "Hey, everyone," he said. "I've got sandwiches, just the way you like 'em."

The troopers and their redneck friend rose from their seats and approached Trooper McCutchin.

"Roast beef on wheat for you, Milt," McCutchin said, handing a bag to the redneck. "Maggie made fried pickles for everybody, too. They're in your bags."

He handed a bag to Trooper Caldwell. "Corned beef on rye with sauerkraut, right?"

"Yep," Trooper Caldwell replied. "My favorite. Thank Maggie for me."

"Will do," Trooper McCutchin said. He handed a bag to Trooper Owens. "And a double cheeseburger – medium – for you."

Trooper McCutchin approached the holding cell. He slid the remaining three bags through the space at the bottom of the cell. "For you gentlemen, I have cheeseburgers, too. They're well-done, though. I know brothers don't like their meat pink."

"Our women, either," Flex said.

"I'm with you there," McCutchin snickered. "My wife's Choctaw."

Trooper McCutchin turned to his comrades. "Speaking of ethnic women, I picked up a pretty Asian girl on the way back. She was walking along Lee Highway in Christiansburg."

Flex shot a glance at Mba.

Mba's heart rate increased a bit. The nkisi drum pulsed.

"Where's the girl at now?" Trooper Caldwell inquired.

"She asked me to drop her in Radford," Trooper McCutchin replied. "She's waiting in the car."

"Excuse me, troopers," Mba called.

"What is it?" Trooper Caldwell asked.

"Do you have any salt?" Mba replied.

"Those fried pickles are plenty salty," Trooper McCutchin said. "You won't need to add any salt to that burger."

"I love mine extra salty," Mba replied. "Please."

Trooper Caldwell slid the top drawer of his desk open. He reached inside and pulled out a handful of tiny salt packets. "If he wants to die from hypertension, that's his business." He stacked the packets on top of each other and then slipped them into Mba's trembling fingers through the space at the bottom of the cell. "Bon appétit."

"What the hell are you gonna do with all that damned salt?" Flex asked.

"I'm guessing," Mba whispered, "that 'Asian girl' in the trooper's car is Apinya. I need the salt to draw a protection circle."

Danny knelt beside Mba. "Will this circle of salt kill her?"

"No," Mba replied. "It *will* keep her at bay, though. She won't be able to do you any harm as long as you remain in the circle and as long as it stays unbroken."

"What about you?" Danny asked.

"Don't worry about me," Mba replied. "I'll have to..."

Mba's words died in his throat.

"What's up?" Danny whispered.

"Look," Mba said, nodding toward the entrance to the trooper station.

Apinya stood in the doorway. A broad smile was spread across her pretty face.

"Aw, crap," Flex croaked.

"Where's all the blood and dirt?" Danny whispered.

"She appears as she wants us to see her," Mba replied, quietly. "Not as she really is."

"I'll be right out, ma'am," Trooper McCutchin said.

"No problem," Apinya said. "I just came in to use your restroom and to kill those three men in that cell. Can you open it, so I can get to them, please?"

"You *what*?" Trooper McCutchin inquired, his hand reaching for his holstered pistol.

Apinya grabbed Trooper McCutchin's wrist and squeezed. A cracking sound followed. The trooper collapsed to his knees.

Mba frantically opened packet after packet of salt.

Apinya's mouth unhinged, her chin falling to the middle of her torso. She grinned, revealing three rows of sickle-shaped fangs.

"*Jesus!*" Trooper Caldwell screamed. He drew his pistol and fired two shots at Apinya's chest.

Apinya was a blur. She yanked Trooper McCutchin to his feet before her.

The bullets struck Trooper McCutchin in his back, punching into his bulletproof vest.

Trooper McCutchin unleashed an agonized wail.

Apinya held him aloft with one hand, using him as a shield as she charged toward Trooper Caldwell.

"Stand close together!" Mba commanded, pointing to the center of the holding cell.

Flex and Danny dashed to the spot, pressing their shoulders against each other. Mba drizzled salt, in a small circle, around them.

"This circle is going to be tight," Mba said. "I don't have much salt."

"Just hurry up, man," Flex said. "I don't think those troopers are gonna last long."

"Do *not* break the circle," Mba said. "If one of you does, neither of you will be protected."

"Man, we're staying right here!" Flex replied.

"Good," Mba said. "I'm going to take care of Apinya. No matter what you see; no matter what she says... stay *put!*"

Mba whirled on his heels and sauntered to the cell's door. He placed his hand on the door. "*Bengomona,*" he commanded. *Open wide!*

The cell door flew open. Mba stepped out of the cell and into the midst of the carnage.

Trooper Caldwell's head lay on the overturned chess board. Pawns were scattered around it, and the king protruded from the top of his skull. The jagged right fourth of a trooper's body lay upon a nearby desk. Mba read what remained of the name tag: *McCut...*

Apinya was busy stuffing Trooper Owens into her toothy maw as Mba crept behind her. Mba wrapped his hand around his nkisi drum and whispered a chant. The drum necklace grew hot. It burned him, melting into his flesh. Mba fought back a scream as the necklace disappeared beneath his skin.

Mba felt himself grow – in power and in size. He had done this incantation only once before, drawing the spirits of nine of his warrior ancestors into him at once. He had done it to destroy a vampire that fed upon a poor neighborhood in Atlanta. Holding so much power had almost killed him back then. A vengeful spirit was much more powerful than a vampire, though. Mba prayed he'd be able to hold the power long enough to permanently dispatch her.

He crept closer to Apinya, the *mooyo* of his ancestors roiling his gut. His hands shook and a line of white heat snaked up his spine. When he was just inches behind the

feasting creature, he raised his fist in preparation to strike, to punch through her and tear out her virulent heart.

"Oh thank you, Baby Jesus," Milton Davis cried as he slid from under a table and wrapped his arms around Mba's leg. "You done sent an angel."

The creature whirled about, snarling. She now wore Linda's face.

"Oh, son of the Ngoma," Linda began, her voice a deep bass that pounded within Mba's skull. "The things I am going to do to this town if you don't surrender yourself and your friends to me right now."

"Go ahead," Mba replied. "Do what you want to this town of rednecks. They'd just as soon see me hang."

"Fair enough," Linda said. "Then, after I kill you, I will remain in this station with your friends and wait. They will either starve to death or break that circle in an attempt to escape, and they will be mine. Either way, it ends the same."

"You know what?" Mba said.

"What?" Linda replied.

"You talk too much!" Mba said as he struck with a powerful punch toward Linda's face.

Linda caught the punch, gripping it tightly in her fist. "Nice try, but I am..."

Mba whipped his leg upward, slamming Milton Davis, who clung to it, into the side of Linda's face.

Linda tumbled sideways, crashing into a wall.

Milton slid off of Mba's leg and collapsed, in a quivering heap, onto the floor.

Mba charged toward Linda, who was already rising. He leapt forward, cracking his knee into her face.

Linda's face burst around Mba's knee. The creature's arms fell to her sides, and she dropped to her haunches.

"You can come out now," Mba said, craning his head toward the holding cell. "It's done."

"You *sure*?" Flex cried.

"Come on, hurry," Mba said. "We still have to bury her with the nkisi, or she'll be back by tomorrow morning. She's getting stronger. I won't be able to stop her a third time."

Flex and Danny ran to Mba.

"*Damn!*" Flex said, turning away and looking toward the ceiling to avoid the terrible sight in the station.

Danny collapsed onto one knee and vomited into Linda's lap.

Mba laid a firm hand on Danny's shoulder. "Come on, man. Let's bury this body, so you – and Linda – can find peace."

"Okay, bruh," Danny said. "I...I'm okay. I just..."

Linda grabbed Danny and pulled his face into his vomit. Danny's head disappeared in Linda's lap.

"*Danny!*" Mba screamed. "Flex, *help me*. Grab D's legs!"

Flex turned toward Mba. He looked down at Danny, who continued to disappear in the pool of vomit in Linda's lap. "Oh, God..."

"Pull," Mba commanded.

Flex grabbed Danny's ankles and pulled, leaning backward. The veins in his forearm swelled as he strained.

Mba thrust his hands into Linda's chest, crushing thick bone and rending dense flesh. He searched within the blood and bile until he found her still-beating heart. "*Pull!*"

"*I am pulling,*" Flex grunted. "Feels like I'm in a tug of war with ten men!"

Mba pulled hard, snatching Linda's purulent heart out of the jagged cavity in her chest.

Danny's feet shot from Flex's hands. His entire body disappeared within the fetid pool in Linda's lap.

Mba hurled Linda's heart to the floor and then smashed it beneath his heel.

Linda's torso slumped over, collapsing onto the floor with a wet thud.

"*Danny!*" Flex cried.

"He's gone." Mba sighed. He felt the spirits of his Warrior Ancestors leave him. Even the Ancestors could not stand in the presence of salt, and the tears that flooded his cheeks were plenty salty. His drum nkisi reappeared on his neck.

"Gone?" Flex said, wiping the tears from his cheeks. "*Where?*"

"The path between the quick and the dead," Mba replied. "The path we traverse in our dreams and nightmares. It feeds on a small part of the spirits of all who walk it, and it is never satiated. When we take another life, we forever deny the road sustenance from that spirit because the dead do not dream."

Flex stared at Mba. "So that thing that looked like Linda...?"

"...was the vengeful spirit of the Famished Road," Mba replied.

"And it's feeding on Danny?"

"Yes," Mba said.

"And when it's done feeding on him?"

"Hopefully that will be the end of it," Mba said. "Danny is the one who took Linda's life."

"Hopefully?"

"Well, we *did* fight it," Mba replied.

"If you knew this, why didn't we just hand Danny over to that thing?"

"Because we would be no better than him."

"He murdered Linda," Flex said.



"I didn't say he was perfect," Mba replied. "He deserved to be punished, but not like this."

"What now?" Flex asked.

"Now, we bury this body," Mba said. "If the Famished Road does come after us, it will have to choose a new body, which means it will be a lot weaker and easier to handle."

"For you, maybe," Flex said. "It'll just kick my ass!"

"Not if you learn to defend yourself," Mba said.

"How?" Flex asked. "I don't think the YMCA has an *Anti-Evil Spirit Karate Class* on the schedule."

"I can teach you," Mba said.

"You can teach me to be a Voodoo Bad Ass, like you?" Flex said.

"Not quite," Mba said. "But I can give you a working knowledge of some potent herbs and divination tools that will alert you to danger, and protect you from it long enough for me to get to you."

"If it'll keep me alive," Flex said with a shrug. "Let's do it."

"Good," Mba said. "Now, let's put this thing in the ground and then head back home."

"Nah, man," Flex said. "After we bury this monster, let's head on to New York."

Mba's eyes widened and his chin dropped to his chest. "What? Why?"

"This might be the last chance we get to really enjoy ourselves," Flex said. "Besides, there's a slice of pizza with my name on it waiting for me back home."

Mba shook his head. "You still have an appetite after all this?"

"Hell, the Road ain't the only thing that's famished," Flex replied. "Let's go."

*Maybe Flex is born to be a 'Voodoo Bad Ass,'* Mba thought. His nkisi drum pulsed, seemingly in confirmation.

*"Si nziladiamonika,"* Mba whispered. *The road shall be revealed.*



# Life

## Antonios Rave-N Galafis

*We are eternal. We have birthed nymphs and gods and rarer things in our day. We have been refuge to some, home to others, and even temple to a few. Within our roots and trunks and branches, life is not only sheltered, but worshipped too, for it does not merely exist, it is sentient. The priesthood of Demeter has seen to that since the dawn of time. We are the forest of Citheron. We are endless.*

*First and last breaths uncountable have taught us much about our children. Not all – for there are things even we are oblivious to – but much. Our children fascinate us. Those luminous ones who walk upright, most of all. And she, who on this night has been watering our floor with waters of life and sadness combined, burns the brightest.*

*We see and smell and taste and feel through every creature and critter sharing our well of life and, through countless eyes, we share the pain of the bleeding, crying girl.*

*We are watching.*

• • •

Helena struggled to open her eyes. Her black hair was a tangled mess; she pushed it aside with pale, delicate hands crisscrossed with tiny scratches. She found herself staring into a landscape of ancient evergreens. The miniature wounds on her arms and legs began to fade as soon as they were observed. That did not strike her as odd. Things would be different from now on. In her gut, the whisper of what once had been a child unborn remained. A steady echo deep within her, which could not replace what was lost. Helena forced herself up on trembling feet.

A smell of timber clung to the morning mist and, beneath her, the soil was moist. All around her, she could hear the voices of Mother's children awakening. She knew exactly where she was, yet she ached *not* to know. She remembered some of last night's

events, yet she ached to forget. Still, fragmented senses and recollections jostled against the insides of her skull, screaming for attention and sharp enough to hurt. *Hurt*. She did not hurt anymore, even though her erstwhile white dress was stained in scarlet and her bare legs and feet were smeared with rusty brown. She thought, then, that there was so much hurt in the world and so little of it was physical.

She felt sluggish and sore all over, as if she'd run for miles. Ugly cramps made each movement slow and torturous, but she kept walking, step after agonizing step.

"My baby..." she whimpered, fresh tears welling up in eyes the color of storms. "Mother?" she half-asked, half-called.

Her mouth moved imperceptibly, forming the most ancient of cries and then...then the pain stopped, for her mind was not in it. It was the quiet which grabbed her attention. It was the silence. She stood still as the leaves on the trees, still as time during a loved one's death. She scanned the clearing, her breath caught in her chest. Nothing moved, nothing stirred. Nothing whispered or sang.

Helena was no novice in the ways of the forest. The woods were never silent. The whistling of the winds, the rustling of branches, the skittering of small feet, the fluttering of feathers – they were all utterly absent at that moment. As the implications of such a phenomenon begun to take shape in her mind, she shivered.

"It's a trial," she mused. "It's not real."

New strength filled her as she realized that her suffering was a test. One could not join that most revered circle of wise women and men without proving one's worth.

"How could I be chosen and accepted without knowing true from false? Of course it's *magia*," the ancient word for the Art brushed reassuringly against her lips. "Mother!" she screamed, trying to break the spell of silence. "I *understand*! I know you would never let me come to harm! I know you would never let a life go to waste, I *know* you would *never* abandon me!" She sobbed, her anger spilling out of her eyes in hot, almost-searing tears.

Eyes alert, her heart pounding in her ears, threatening to explode, she seemed more feral than civilized. She strained to see or hear a sign, anything to disprove her haunting doubt. Silence there and nothing more.

"*How could you DO this to me?*" she howled, her voice rumbling in the stillness, her rage tinting her skin red.

• • •

*We need to be closer to her. It is often that she sings to us and many a time we have flown, walked, and crawled beside her to unite our songs with hers. Never before has she sung like this. Never before were there thorns and fangs and red in any of her melodies. Hunt anthems, dirges of woe; the music before the silence of the prey. One of our children shares our interest and pauses to listen. It knows the cadence and the measure and its familiarity strikes a primordial chord. We urge our child closer on silent strides till we see her with amber eyes of flesh. She turns and calls angrily. We move closer now and our child of tooth and claw stands puzzled, for what sings the songs of prey is not prey at all.*

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a brief movement and instantly turned toward it.

“Reveal yourself,” she ordered, her tone sharp and accusing.

A hound emerged, dark of fur and yellow-eyed. It pounced lightly behind the nearby bushes, coming to a halt a short distance from the girl. The canine – female, by the looks of it – sat on its hind legs and stared at her. Helena had seen such beasts before, but never did those of its kind roam the woods alone. The small number of wild dogs in Citheron tended to run in packs. The only ones left behind were very old, sick, or badly wounded. This one, though, did not appear to suffer any of these afflictions.

She locked eyes with the hound, still sitting there silently, within the peaceful clearing. The gray of winter wolves and tempests met the gold of autumn leaves and jewelry in the most ancient of games: a staring contest. There was no movement but the flow of small puffs of mist born of breaths, no sound but the tempo of the two red drums beating in different chests. The hound sat there. It did not tilt its head in question as dogs do; it did not hang its head low in submission. It did not loll its tongue, nor did it show teeth so as to threaten. It merely stood there, watching. There was intelligence in those eyes, sentience of a kind not found in forest animals... or in *any* animals for that matter, save those magickal beasts of legend, the dragons and unicorns that left our earthly plane centuries ago to inhabit the realms beyond.

She broke the silence.

“I am a daughter of the Mother, a priestess of the Bright Circle,” she declared, straightening her back, her tone that of contained threat. “By ancient law and ancient blood...” she reached up with one hand and tore three crimson lines with three dirty fingernails along the inside of her pale forearm, “I look upon your form and name it false.” Blood welled upon three straight wounds. Blood ran. Blood dripped and liquid rubies adorned the forest floor. She reached down for a handful of the bloodstained soil.

She closed her eyes and, under her breath, uttered an invocation oldest than the oldest tree in Citheron. The archaic words demanded her concentration. She smeared the grimy mixture over her eyes, masking the upper half of her face with a single, fluid gesture. Blood and dirt stung, mingling with her tears, but she welcomed the sensation.

“My sight is Yours, let Your sight be mine, let me perceive,” she intoned times three, before opening her eyes.

The irritation intensified and it was taking an effort not to squint. The once-white sclera around her irises was now sore and bloodshot. Tears flowed freely on her cheeks, decorating her face with linear designs. At first, all she took in was a blur of earthy greens and browns, shapes and boundaries becoming abstract and surreal like water lilies laboriously crafted by the hand of a French painter whose sight was failing him. She focused on the object of her interest. The colors ran and the boundaries of shapes gathered close to the dark smudge that was the hound. While everything around it remained out of focus, the still-unmoving animal appeared to her in stunning detail.

The background gave off hues of pale illumination, as more and more of the hound became clearly visible. Her vision moved beyond its shape, discerning things imperceptible to those not *Awakened* to the Art. Helena could see every hair on its fur, feel every breath drawn into its lungs, hear the blood rushing in its veins, and taste the morning air on its tongue. The beast was unperturbed by either fear or hunger. She felt a sinking sensation. Another disappointment: the demise of a tiny hope that this was a brother or sister of her Circle, disguised as part of a final test, or maybe even the coven Mother herself coming to placate her after a trial gone horribly wrong. She had been mistaken. What stood before her was one of the wild dogs of the forest she'd called home for the past ten years.

In these tiny fragments of time between thoughts, scenes of hours, days, and years gone were enacted in her mind's theater. Caught in a reverie that stretched behind closed lids, she saw the smiling face of Daphne, the coven Mother, lifting her up so she could fly as the birds she loved so much. She saw her first great ritual, when she secretly witnessed miracles that awoke her to a reality previously unknown. She saw her first fight with one of her sisters, during which she fell for a trick and lost. She saw her first fight with a brother of hers, in which she used that same trick and won. She saw him again, only now she was kissing him and he was kissing her back. She saw the Great Festival and its fires, the night of their mating. She saw him taking the form of a mighty boar, using the old spell of flesh-change. She saw him bragging about it the day before he tried it and her pleading against it. She saw him running into the forest, his mind gone, lost within the form of the savage animal. She saw the hunter and his son cutting her lover's life thread, never knowing what they'd done. She saw the nights of absence and guilt and the days of life blossoming within her, signaled by the music of a tiny heart.

It was only for a couple of seconds that she had shut the world out, simply to be dragged painfully back into the present. She cringed, marring her beauty even more. The anguish those memories had brought caught like wildfire inside her and carried with them a deeper kind of suffering. Fresh streaks of water and blood smeared her cheeks, running downward, falling and splashing against soft earth. Clenching her teeth, she got hold of that suffering. *All pain serves a purpose*, she thought, as she straightened her back and stood with eyes still closed. The pain in her arm had linked her to the physical object of the Sight. The pain of the soul, however, was herald to different sights.

She forced her lids to split open and twin eclipses appeared where moments ago was tearing sadness. Her Sight was strong, taking everything in, hungry as the abyss. Gone were the earthy colors and familiar shapes. The naked power coursing through everything became visible in bright swells and bursts. Currents of liquid luminance, some resembling streams in size and others small as rivulets, made everything part of a greater whole. The very essence of All was dancing before Awakened eyes, and the sheer, terrifying beauty of it all made Helena's expression soften a little. It was awe-inspiring. Being attuned and able to feel the primal energy named *phoe*, "breath," by the witches of Citheron, was one thing...but witnessing the endless Spiral of creation with one's own eyes was quite another.

She focused on the hound once more and her jaw dropped. It was as if the threads of light and energy stitching everything together had coalesced above and about the shape of the still animal.

“What *are* you?” she whispered.

Only a gentle, steady pulse coming from everywhere at once answered her question. She felt as if she were roaming the chambers of a giant heart, pounding slow and calm.

• • •

*She sees us. She may not know what she is staring at, but she is watching us back and that is good. Her song has lost its thorns and teeth and red. She understands that she is not alone and that is good as well. The Circle stands again. She is afraid but not scared. A good way to start a Circle.*

• • •

“Everything has three forms, three shapes, three guises. All of them real, beautiful and necessary,” her coven Mother used to say. “One is for the eyes to see, one is for the heart to gaze at, and one only the mind perceives.” It was more than mere memory, though. Helena actually half-turned, expecting to see Mother Daphne reciting the words of a lesson taught many years ago. She felt her presence but, at the same time, she felt her absence as well. She longed for something tangible, something she would be able to define. The chaotic dancing of kaleidoscopic, luminous threads all around her was not offering any answers. Helena wanted answers more than anything now.

And then it started.

It began with the trees, their forms appearing in their entirety – roots and all. The woods made themselves visible as streaks of honey-colored light weaved into still lightning, caught in a vertical reflection without beginning or end, the ground on which the girl stood serving as the mirror. More changes were taking place all around her, occurring just beyond the corner of her eye. She turned and marveled at the transformation of it all. The hazy blue of the morning sky was now a striking azure, and every plant her eyes met was dressed in the richest green she’d ever laid eyes upon. Fruits and flowers of every kind flickered in the bright sunlight sneaking through the branches, even though no sun shone in the peculiar, crystalline sky. Smells grew stronger and more pronounced. Helena could taste various aromas lingering on her tongue and the roof of her mouth. The breeze whispered words she did not understand; to her, it sounded like leaves caressing one another in a movement not unlike lovemaking. All was vibrant, alive and significant.

She felt the presence while her back was still turned to the strange hound. Something inside her feared for what she might see and, for a fraction of a moment, she hesitated to turn.

“Fret not, daughter/ child/ mother...” a hundred women’s voices – maybe more – spoke in perfect harmony and, as they did, all noises softened and drowned.

The sound made Helena’s bones vibrate to the marrow, brought tears to her eyes and gooseflesh to her skin. Dry-mouthed and tongue-tied, she slowly turned and craned her neck to gaze upon the origin of the chorus of voices.

Her mind strained to come to terms with what she was seeing: A woman standing taller than the trees, her nude figure partly covered with grass and moss, partly with bark

and cascading water. Green and brown and blue merged and intertwined upon her frame. A kaleidoscope of butterflies adorned her right shoulder like an exotic ornament and one of them strayed, only to rest momentarily on the nose of the hound, currently sitting at the apparition's feet.

Helena's eyes took in the majestic form, moving from the feet upwards, until they reached the head. Yet upon that head, not one but *three* faces dwelled. On the left side, a bright halo of gold and silver blurred the lines and contours of what appeared to be the face of a young woman, terrible in its comeliness. In the middle, facing Helena from above, rested the visage of a benevolent woman in her prime, congruous and sublime in its beauty. The third face gave sidelong glances at the open-mouthed girl standing below. It was weathered and old and made of dark, hardened bark.

"H-Hecate?" Helena stammered and would have fallen to her knees, had she not been paralyzed. Her feet felt glued to the ground; her arms hung limp by her sides. Only her training and her tutelage under the Coven of the Bright Circle saved her from collapsing from accumulated shocks.

*"We are the light, the dark, the flesh and the blood, the soil and the sky. We have been called thus in the past though, and the sound of it is pleasing; but it is not our name, for we have no need for such human inventions."*

Helena felt humbled... even a little naïve. *The Great Goddess was indeed beyond naming*, she thought, trying to regain her composure. The triple-faced queen of Heaven and Earth, the pillar of creation and the embodiment of magick, had manifested before her. But for what purpose? Could it be that she'd heard Helena's plea and partook of her pain? She was an anointed priestess of the Bright Circle, and tradition stated that Hecate, patron and mistress of the Art, watched over those who honored her in thought and deed. Helena took courage from this and decided to properly address the entity. She knelt and bowed low.

"Great One!" she intoned with eyes shut. "You who are All and All that is You, I praise You and in my heart accept You." She paused and lifted her head, opening her lids. "Keeper of the Keys to the Universe, Mistress Guide, Nurturer of Youths, Great Goddess..."

*"You have sung to us before,"* the apparition cut her off. *"You have sung better songs, truer songs, songs not filled with meaningless words."*

Helena stood and stared, her mouth hanging half-open in panic.

"Forgive me, Great Goddess, I never meant to..."

*"What is forgive? And what is Goddess?"*

She took a step back, never registering that she did so. A whirlwind of thoughts and questions impeded her ability for forming words. How could this great and terrible presence know what it was and how could something as simple as the notion of forgiveness elude a goddess's knowledge? What if she and all the priesthood had been wrong? What if the great deities were completely alienated and oblivious to the human condition? What if it wasn't Hecate that stood before her now, but something far more ancient and detached? What should she do? What *could* she do? Fear and helplessness threatened to overwhelm her.



*"Daughter/child/mother, there is no need for your Light to wear the fear color nor the sadness color, for even we do not know the answers to those questions..."* the apparition spoke again with its chorus of voices, *"and these are not the answers we seek."*

Helena remained silent for a while. There was something vaguely familiar about the voices. Something eerily intimate that, unwittingly, made her relax a little. Or perhaps it was just a measure of the entity's power over her. None of those things crossed the young priestess's mind, though. She only listened to the voice of the many who were one and, when its echo subsided, she spoke more calmly than before.

"Great Mother, if I may call you so, what *are* the answers that you seek? And why did you come for me?"

*"We came for no one, for we have always been here,"* the manifestation replied. *"We merely watched you as we have done since the day you came to us. We watched you and were intrigued."*

The reply caused Helena even more confusion and gave birth to even more questions. She had no use for riddles. Of course, she could not reprimand such a powerful being, nor could she make demands of it. She decided to try a different approach.

"Great Mother, I implore you, help me get my child back and I will comply with any task you may ask of me. I will perform any service within my power in your name..." her tongue stuck on the roof of her mouth and her eyes strayed from the towering incarnation.

*"You sang that song last night,"* said the voices, but Helena's mind was already remembering...

• • •

The night had fallen heavily outside the bonfires' light. The coven had gathered under the great Heart-Tree, the center of Citheron's power. Legend has it that the same tree has stood there since the first Priestess set foot in the ancient forest and that she rests there, beneath its roots, along with all the High Priestesses who came along after her. This night, Mother Daphne was joining them.

The wizened woman lay there, quiet and serene as her *children* stood around her, their faces set, lit by the dancing flames. Only one remained beside her, holding her hand: a black-haired girl, her belly swollen with new life. The one ordained by ancient custom to succeed the elderly priestess as the new *Mother* of the coven. Helena, though, felt neither ready nor worthy yet. She had already recited the hymns of passing, her sisters and brothers joining their voices with hers in this final ritual, and, for the past five minutes, she had stood there, quietly, feeling the pulse of the most generous heart she had ever encountered slipping away.

Helena was indeed gifted in the ways of magick as few of her age were, surpassing in skill others twice her years. She took pride in that and that pride could not accept what was happening. It was then and there that she decided she would not let this come to pass. *What use is the power of Life,* she thought, *if it cannot even postpone death?* Helena waited for the other members of the Circle to depart, politely declining any offer

of company or comfort. When everyone was gone, she got to her feet, looked decidedly at Mother Daphne's face and called upon the Great Goddess to aid her in a spell more difficult than any other.

"Oh, Great Mother," she began, "I implore you, help me get this life back, and I will comply with any task you may ask of me. I will perform any service within my power in your name and any sacrifice it may require! By the power of three times three, as is my will, so mote it be." She felt not one, but two hearts quickening within her. "So mote it be..." she reached out to steady herself, her hand touching the ancient tree. "*SO MOTE IT BE!*"

Channeling raw energy from the well of potent energy, power coursed through every muscle, cell, and fiber of her body. Everything became light and pain for an instant... and then nothing but darkness and oblivion. It felt nothing like life. It felt like death.

• • •

*Her song stopped a while ago, and her wide-open eyes do not see us now. We watch her stumble and fall as her Light takes on colors of sadness and pain so intense that we have never seen its like before. She lies on her side upon our earthly floor, shaking. Her knees fold close to her chest, imitating an offspring in the womb. Her face is set in a soundless scream, but not a single tear waters our soil. We understand her weakness. The girl has neither fed nor drunk and her sleep had not been a restful one. We let sustenance fall from our branches, aided by the morning wind, but she pays no heed to our ministrations. We miss her song and we wait patiently for her to find her strength again.*

• • •

Helena had no more tears to shed. A dry heave was all she could manage in that hour of guilt and shame. *It is all my fault*, she thought over and over again, rocking and shivering, her eyes red and bulging but seeing nothing. *I killed them both, my mother and my child... my baby*, she kept repeating inwardly, like an incantation of despair, and the realization sunk further inside her, like a horse in the swamps of sadness. *I do not deserve life*, she thought fervently, letting out a breath she wished could be her last.

"*Daughter/ child/ mother,*" Citheron said, its many voices coming from everywhere at once. "*Eat of us and drink of us and sing us the cause of your pain, for you bear no wounds and still you suffer... we can feel it. These are the answers we seek: What is it that you think you lost and why do you hurt?*"

Yet all that Helena heard was a slow, persistent drumming, blurred by echoing voices. The young girl had strained her mind, body, and soul beyond belief, and was about to give up when a particular echo of a particular voice brought her back, as the song of Orpheus had brought Eurydice back from Hades. She had noticed it before but disregarded it; it was unmistakably familiar. Among the chorus of voices, one doubtlessly stood out.

"Mother Daphne?" Helena hesitated, "is that... *you?*" she whispered, sounding haggard and incredulous. Silence followed, interrupted solely by a soft, ever-present heartbeat, pounding the moments away.

"*You have yet,*" the forest said, "*to sing the answers to our questions.*"

More moments passed, more heartbeats.

"I... I lost my baby," Helena breathed, while kneeling. "I lost you, Mother Daphne, my mother, and it's all on me," she confessed, broken and resigned.

*"Could it be that you have lost your eyes and ears or is it, perhaps, that all we have taught you was in vain?"*

Those last words bore all the characteristics of the late coven Mother's chastisement. Helena's mouth snapped shut and she remained there, pinned, as if Time had turned back and she was a young initiate once more. Before uttering a word, the voice went on.

*"Not once have we seen you drop a tear when the sun leaves us each day, never to return the same. Not once have we watched you cower in fear when frost claims our children after the days of warmth."*

"I..." was all that Helena managed, before the chorus spoke again, Mother Daphne's tone rising just enough to be distinct.

*"Eat, drink, see, and listen. Then, sing."*

Reluctantly, the Priestess picked up some seeds from the broken pinecones lying near her. With the same reluctance, she ate them. The first time she had tried eating such seeds, they had been offered by Mother Daphne's hand. With the voice still ringing in her ears, chewing down the seeds, her mind travelled back to that time. The recollection made her start, realizing that she had been standing in the exact same spot when her Mother had fed her. Realizing that, after ten years, she still did.

The seeds clung to her dry throat, which felt sorer with every swallow. Instinct and years of instruction took over and guided her steps nearby, to drink from the morning dew that pooled on large green leaves. Refreshed, she came to her senses, the world of Spirit and the triple-faced apparition fading away. The sounds of the forest slowly rushed back, reaching a crescendo when she noted the absence of the hound.

Helena's mind glowed aflame with ideas, thoughts, feelings, and memories as she stepped lightly across the clearing. She did not feel alone or abandoned and that caused her shame, confusion, and guilt over a strange kind of joy. She could *feel* her now. Somehow she could smell her, as if she was standing right next to her. Mother Daphne was there. And, at the moment of that specific thought, Helena noticed it, still there, still drumming: the ever-present heartbeat – rapid, energetic, fluid, and strong, but also intimately familiar. A mother never forgets the sound of Life once she has carried it. That sound now came from all around, reverberating through the soles of her bare feet, riding the wind, dodging the trees to reach her ears. Unwittingly, she let salted droplets water Citheron's soil once more, but those were birthed out of a different feeling altogether.

"My child..." Helena said breathlessly, talking to the forest as soft rain began to fall, blending with tears of profound joy.

"Life begins from the heart," Mother Daphne had once said, tapping on Helena's small, flat chest. "This is mine," she added, taking the girl's little hand into her own and placing it on the trunk of the great Heart-Tree. "And it is endless."

# Nothing Important Happened Today

Scott Havens

*This isn't happening. Large spots of dull brilliance dance between the coruscating red and blue lights as the horns blare around me. Fighting through the mental haze, I think more than just my ribs are broken. The burning, wet smell has dissipated for the most part, but it lingers on my skin and clothes. Just trying to process my surroundings causes the world to start spinning. My thoughts gang up on me; everything is too much and I can feel what small control I have of my body slipping away. I think I'm trying to sick up, but it's like my body won't cooperate. I just feel this worm of wrongness snake its way from my stomach up through my esophagus, and then it just sits there, twitching in frozen peristalsis.*

*This is 2015. This doesn't happen anymore. Not here. It's safe here...*

• • •

"It's safe here," I can hear myself saying just a few hours earlier. Niel was wearing some skinny jeans that were big on the "skinny," and a brown corduroy sport coat. Underneath, he was proudly sporting the vintage *Star Wars* print V-neck he found at that new shop by the university. He'd sent me a Snapchat from the dressing room the day he'd found it. That afternoon a customer had brought in a copy of the last issue of a *Nomad* comic I'd been hunting for forever, and I'd gushed via pictures and text for a solid thirty minutes before I had quieted down. Niel responded with pictures of every single thing in this shop he'd just walked into for the free Wi-Fi. After that, the geekfest escalated back and forth as the day went on.

"Relax," I breathed, "No one cares if we're here on a date, or if we're just pre-gaming before we go bag some chicks."

He smirked then, I remember, one of his dimples twitching into existence before worry passed back over his face, his eyes dimming.

“But Justin, what if my parents, or Sarah, or...”

I threw my hands up against the barrage of his fear, wishing I could just take the chance and shut him up with a kiss. The place wasn't very busy, just a few small groups of hipsters resting their elbows on the sticky wooden tables, and some regulars at the bar drinking in silence. An older couple talked quietly with each other a few seats away from the hardcore drinkers. I remember teetering on the edge of my seat before finally shaking my head slightly in case he was similarly inclined.

Niel's parents weren't the stereotypical right-wing arch-conservatives you might imagine. They just had a very clear picture of what Niel's potential was, and they were determined to let nothing veer Niel away from what they saw as the best possible future for their son. Niel was going to be a doctor, maybe a shrink, and there was a brownstone and a family in his future. Any prospective love interest had to be weighed against that image, and whether it enhanced or potentially harmed the reality of that future. Taking up with a religion major who worked at a comic shop – and who was a dude besides? – was not anything close to acceptable behavior.

Sarah, on the other hand... having a meddling older sister wasn't the easiest thing in the world. She'd done her best to try to protect me over the years, but the truth was she caused as much damage as she prevented because she had no brakes. Once she was ready to unleash her protective fury, it was just scorched earth all around until she was spent. Everyone gets teased in a locker room. Now imagine an avenging angel of a sister barging into said locker room and busting the balls – sometimes literally – of your own bullies. Yeah, and that had been just my sophomore year. Finding out I was gay had only made her more intense. No one was good enough for me, and everyone was out to hurt me. Dates were a minefield of questions and commentary with her, and any attempt to keep her in the dark usually ended with both of us in tears professing how much we loved each other. Since we'd both moved to the city, we were all each other had. It's broken, but we were orphaned too young. We learned to cope.

I shivered as I imagined her first interactions with Niel, the half-closeted hipster. Maybe someday, but not today. Tonight, it was enough to sit here and talk and laugh quietly, our hands microns from touching each other on the table but distant enough to respect the unknowable doom that hovered just unseen beyond the horizon. At the bar, the older couple – maybe fifty-something – were sitting half-facing each other with their hands casually wrapped in each other's. Instead, we had this.

“Unless any of them have recently hired a PI, I think you can rest easy. We're just at a bar. It's not even a gay bar,” I said in hushed tones. “No one knows anything, and even if any of these people had a beef with us, this is Grand Rapids. It isn't some flyspeck town in the Deep South or New York, where the giant hive of humanity feels like they can get away with anything because they can just vanish into the constant drone of the horde.”

“You're right,” he said as he touched my hand. If he was less nervous, he'd have given me serious flak for the over-the-top language. I felt more than saw little arcs of blue-white electricity arc between his fingers and mine, though my mind played tricks. He shook his head, and I'm pretty sure he mouthed the word *horde* as he slowly pulled away his hand. That dimple was back.

We stayed longer than either of us had planned, a few drinks turning into a few hours and at least one round of shots. They'd just announced the return of two of our favorite TV shows, and my near-constant status updates of who was and wasn't involved in the *Twin Peaks* sequel was equally met by his gushing over every picture and meme. Duchovny and Anderson came up with to hype the reborn *X-Files*. We chatted about the gossip and endless drama of my comic shop, and the horror that was the seemingly never-ending group projects Niel had been forced into this semester. Before eleven, we cashed out our tabs and grabbed our bags and coats. He had a heavy classload this semester, and I had work early in the morning at the store. We didn't get carried away. We never even kissed that night, though I spent the night staring at his mouth wondering what it might feel like pressed against mine, wondering what those electric arcs would feel like dancing between our lips, our tongues...

We'd only been dating a few weeks, sneaking away between our crazy schedules and the watchful eyes of our families. I'd never felt a connection like this with anyone in my life. The air that we both breathed in when we sat huddled in the corner of some coffee shop, or a hipster bar like this one, felt like a thunderstorm... and each time we met, it just seemed to get stronger.

• • •

*The world's filled with brown noise and sirens. People surround me now, no one I know, each talking in such slow motion I can't make out their words. I shift my head just enough before they stop me, so that I can see him lying just a few feet away. There are no dimples now, no quiet laughter. He won't look my way; our eyes can't connect despite how much I wish I could reassure him that I'm fine, that this is all fine.*

*Some burly policeman wraps Niel in a blanket and helps him to his feet. He starts to walk him away from the scene – from me – and then Niel turns and walks towards me. Kneeling down next to me, he's saying something but my brain is still overloaded. I can't make sense of anything, sound and light and thoughts – there's just too much electricity in my brain, too much pain in my chest. I do my best to smile, and feel at least the right side of my mouth move the direction I'd intended.*

*My eyes roll back even before the world blurs and everything goes white, catching the other three with their faces pressed hard against the wall of the bar by other officers, dank puddles of crushed fallen leaves and the butts of ancient cigarettes soaking into their shoes.*

• • •

I don't remember a ton. Not of what happened. I remember leaving, and the two guys and the girl following us into the drizzle. It was a hipster bar. It was an upscale neighborhood. It was nothing. I remember the taller guy grabbing my arm and turning me to face him. I remember he had a sleeve of tattoos flowing from his wrist up under the short sleeve of his shirt, intertwining vines dotted with flowers and skulls and some sort of angel. I remember his first wordless punch to my stomach, the quick second to my jaw as I doubled over.

Falling back into one of the many puddles that dotted the mismatched concrete of the sidewalk, I looked up at their faces. The taller, bearded dude who'd just clocked me had a sneer on his face, but the blonde guy just looked shut down, completely cold. It was him that drew back and slammed his fist into my jaw again as I tried to get up, yelling at me, "Stay the fuck down, and get what you deserve." They shared fist-bumps between them as they watched me try desperately to rise again.

I remember the look on the face of Abelard, my gray-almost-blue mutt of a poodle terrier we had when I was 10. We had to give him away because he wouldn't stop eating the molding. He was high-strung and nervous, and didn't do well when mom and dad went to work and me and the sister unit went to school. We'd come home, and more of the house would be in his belly – as if eating his home made him feel safer somehow. I remember him looking at me the day we gave him to a friend of my father's, as if to say, *This was my home, and you're throwing me out for loving it so much, too much, that I want it inside me.*

The ringing in my ears brought me back to my bloody present. The bearded guy got involved again, punching at my shoulder – of all places – as I lay half-prone. The girl tried to stomp on my nuts, but only managed to kick me repeatedly in the gut with her boots. She looked focused, her dark murder lipstick washing out her flushed face under the street lamps. She looked pretty. How is that possible?

Niel spread himself tightly against the wall, looking but not looking, trying to blend in with the wet bricks of the bar before they remembered there were two of us. I didn't blame him. Neither of us were fighters, not like this crew. I remember the kicking began in earnest then, all three of them calling me things I don't want to share. I tried to call out, but I heard a crack, and the agony of my wheezing breath let me know at least one rib was broken. Then they turned to Niel.

And I remembered Abelard, could swear I saw Abelard there, standing between this ugliness and the first boy I'd really allowed myself to entertain the possibility of *loving*. That same look haunted both of their faces – cast out, with eyes filled with love, confusion, and betrayal.

I remember thinking, *What was the purpose of a storm, unless it finally broke?* Everything seemed to slow down. Those weeks of tension, those tiny sparks and ozone-fuming arcs between us, they weren't metaphors. They were *real*, and that raw, frustrated connection filled this strange, molasses-slow second. Everything seemed to grow sharper, more deeply into focus: the hazy halo of the streetlight above, the smell of those filthy puddles that dotted the broken pavement. This moment, all of it connected to each blow, each connection of their fists and feet with me, each broken bone, each cough and choked-off scream...

All to prevent me from keeping, staying, what to me was Home.

*FUCK THAT.*

The halo of that streetlight shimmered, crackled with the same blue-white electricity that had always flowed between our fingers as they dared to touch. The electric line dropped, a writhing snake amidst a rain of sparks falling into one of those puddles – not

all the way, but enough. Arcs wriggled like hungry worms from puddle to puddle, connected by the gentle rivulets of sodden refuse that stretched between the concrete slabs of the sidewalk.

The three of them shook then, twitching as they fell.

Niel looked at me and shakily called 911. He peeled away from the wall and knelt beside me, holding one of my hands. I couldn't feel it, but I could see it. Abelard stood there too, and I could feel every lick on my broken face. And in his eyes, I didn't see betrayal anymore. I saw only love.

Love and lightning. In fact, as my head lolled to the side I saw that the whole street ran with it. From me to Abelard, to the street lamp, through the cracks in the pavement, up the wall of the bar, the trees seemed to dance with it. All the holes, the knots, the cracks and frayed wires. All the broken places lit up like wonderland.

• • •

*This doesn't happen anymore. They say magic is gone, that it left a long time ago if it was ever here at all. But it was here, at least for that second.*

*For that split second, the universe came together and said, Enough. Enough ugliness. More love. More lightning.*

*Because I asked for it. Because I demanded it.*

*I feel sleep closing in, thick and clotted with whatever drugs they'd given me. Next time, I'm going to kiss him. And the world had better step to the side, because the universe rains fire when I ask it to, and woe betide the fool between me and the man I'm firmly committed to someday loving.*

*Halfway to the hospital, I fall asleep in the ambulance with a smile on my face, my nose filled with the distinct odor of wet dog and Niel's body wash.*

*It smells like Home.*



# Wildfire Sky

Kris Millering

The shadow of a hound runs ahead of me, down an empty highway, visible only as a brief darkness in my headlight before it puts on a burst of speed and bounds away. I hunch over a little and open the bike's throttle, hearing it roar like a dragon.

Ahead of me, the sky is stained orange with wildfire.

• • •

My father taught me about fire.

I remember Dad coming home with his duffels that always smelled like smoke, with a big grin for his daughter and a kiss for Mom. He was on a hotshot crew, so he would be gone for weeks at a time, whole fire seasons in a bad year.

The year he died was especially bad. I try not to think about it, but now, roaring towards a fire, I can't help it. I heard about it on the news before anyone managed to call Mom. The reporter said *missing* but I knew they meant *dead*.

My life is divided into neat segments, like an orange. *Before Dad died. Before I Awakened. Before I had to leave home.*

Dad taught me about fire, how it behaves, when it's dangerous and when it's *more* dangerous. About crown fires and how to be aware, always aware, of the unburned fuel between you and the flames. I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. Before he died, I was starting on conditioning, getting ready to take the tests beginning on my eighteenth birthday. Dad never said I couldn't; he just said that it would be harder for me because I was a girl.

I knew that. But I wanted desperately to be like him when I grew up.

Reality, as it turns out, has a strange and savage sense of humor.

The stars are hidden by smoke.

I know this mountain, the dry red rocks and the manzanita and the granite bones of the earth sticking up through the soil like compound fractures. I know this landscape, shaped by yearly drought, tectonic pressure, and glaciers grinding through. I know the highways and the side roads, and the fire roads that head deep into otherwise untracked wilderness.

And now that I'm here, my bike muscling up the curves of the highway, I can feel the Art lacing through the wildfire ahead of me, calling like a beacon. Reality roils under its surface. Whoever's responsible lost control of their magick hours ago, and now it's rolling outward, fueling the fire.

I woke up in the middle of the night with the wards around my sanctuary shrieking a silent alarm in my head. A normal wildfire wouldn't have woken me up, but this mountain is populated by hermits of several traditions, and not all of us are as careful as we ought to be.

This particular Awakening had a familiar feel to it. New Art, raw and unconstrained, carried on a hot wind down from higher elevations. Whoever it was, they were in trouble, and it was trouble that could spill out onto the rest of us. I never made a hotshot team – after Dad died, Mom begged me not to try, and I listened for once – but I spend a lot of my life jumping feet-first into metaphorical fires.

Sometimes not so metaphorical.

I pull off to the side of the road to get my bearings. The hound's shadow stops too, lying down by the side of the road, vague ears pricked forward against the shadows at the edge of my headlight. In the inside pocket of my jacket is a simple tool, a thread with a fishing weight tied to it. The weight belonged to Dad, a resident in the tackle box he never used because he was never home long enough to take a fishing trip. The braided thread is from the sewing kit I was given when I was ten, when Mom tried to teach me how to mend my own clothes.

I kill the bike's engine and hang the weight from the handlebar, then light a cigarette. Pull my compass out of my other pocket. Breathe out, then take a drag on the smoke. Close my eyes.

Ash falls onto my face, grittier than snowfall and heavier.

*Show me.*

The weight jerks on the end of the line, tugging. I hold the compass under it, turn the dial. I breathe out smoke that curls around the compass and then begins to flow east by northeast. It's hard to see, but I can feel it now.

*That way.*

I stub out the cigarette and tuck it back into the box. Out of my coat pocket, I fish a small bottle of Jameson, then sprinkle the contents over the packed clay earth. It never hurts to be respectful.

There's a flicker near me, too quick for focus, and the echo of a ghostly motorcycle engine. The mountain's guardians are awake tonight.

I kick the bike back on and stow my tools. Out here, the night is cool and quiet except for the wind rising in the trees, sighs whispering from the branches. The patter of ash hitting leaves and ground is drowned out by the growl of my engine.

I take off in a plume of dust.

• • •

Panicked strands of Art brush against my face as I ride. There are other mages on this mountain, living quietly back in the hills, and all of them are awake tonight.

I could wish that they would stir themselves to help, but I know none of them will, not with something like this. They all have their own sanctuaries to defend from the flames.

The road winds between cliff and valley, both nearly invisible in the dark except for the illuminated sky. I ride down a dip and rise into a cloud of smoke. The fire line's nearby; a chopper passes overhead, bringing water.

It's easy enough to pass unseen through the fire line and past the ICS units. The fire road's not closed – not yet – so it's just a matter of not getting waved over. The trick is to make yourself look like you both belong and are someone else's problem.

My bike bucks and grumbles on the dirt road. It's modified for these roads, but only to an extent; I don't usually find myself careening up rutted dirt roads at 2:00 A.M. I tie a bandana across my face and keep going. It's my version of a firefighter's mask, metallic threads glinting with stored Art.

I pass through the edge of the fire, reading it as I go, feeling the flare and crackle of the Art in my chest. *Where are you?* The shadow of the hound appears in my headlight and then streaks away into the darkness. It knows.

I follow.

The smoke is chokingly thick now, laced with Art, and I can see maybe five feet in front of me. I have to slow down, but I *can't*. The mage I'm looking for is close. All around me, flame chews through the underbrush. Hot cinders patter onto my helmet and my jacket.

Something hits me in the chest and the wildfire inside of me reacts before I do, burning away a crude attack with a gout of flame over my handlebars. *All right, kid. I feel you.*

I hang a left and gun the engine through a pair of burning manzanita bushes, then pull to a stop and take off my helmet. I dismount the bike and swipe my hand down my front, invoking one of the more subtle uses of fire's Art.

Flame does not consume flame.

I can't stay fireproof for long. Flame wants to burn, and the best you can do is re-direct it for a while. *I know this looks dumb, Dad. Just keep an eye out for me, okay?* I plunge through the line of flaming manzanita.

Ahead of me, in a clearing, is a girl on fire.

Flames wreath around her bare limbs; her clothing hangs in crisped tatters from her, and her skin is black with scorch marks. But she is *alive*, and she is terrified. Her wide eyes focus on me as she tries to speak but only coughs.

I pull a space blanket out of my pocket as I run towards her. The fire's in the crown of the trees now – there's a Douglas fir to one side that looks like a roman candle, engulfed with flame and reaching towards the sky. I hear a ghostly howl in my ear, over the roar of the fire, and grimace.

I get to the girl just as there's a resounding crack overhead. I wrap the girl in the blanket and throw both of us to the side as a burning branch falls where we just were. She gasps...and only then screams thinly, kicking at me.

The designs I've painted onto the silver of the blanket flare with light brighter than the wildfire and I feel her Will batter mine with the strength of terror and incomprehension. My own flame meets hers, steals the oxygen from it, laces through it and flares.

The battle is swift. The girl sags in my arms as her magick winks out.

I am drenched with sweat under my protective clothing, but there is no time to rest. The Art that fueled the fire is gone, but we still have to get out of here. I don't have the strength to turn aside a wildfire, not on my own.

I wrap the newly-made mage more tightly in the crackling blanket and get her over my shoulders. *Okay, Dad. Keep an eye out for me for just a little while longer.*

• • •

I wanted to be just like my dad when I grew up.

It turned out that instead of putting out fires, what I was really good at was *making* them. I started small and slow. Matches. Accelerants. Abandoned buildings. Dad had taught me well. I was never caught, either by my own fires or the police.

I fell in love with fire like a teenager falls in love with a girl from the wrong side of the tracks. I flirted, and flirted *hard*. *Come dance*, I'd croon as I poured alcohol over the back of my hand and then touched a match to it. *Come play*, as I carefully built up dry pine duff by the wall of an abandoned cabin. I love fire, and I hated myself for loving it, but I would play just the same. After Dad died, I chased fire even harder. It had taken him away from me, and I wanted to *understand*.

My biggest fire, and my last, was a warehouse in Angels Camp that stored treated lumber. All that *fuel* called to me like a beacon. It was a compulsion. Something inside of me was trying to batter its way out.

I'd set the fire and retreated, crawling out the window and heading to a safe distance. I'd been planning this for months, resisting setting any others while I planned. The only way to keep myself from burning was to be planning a fire, so I planned and planned.

I climbed an oak tree and settled into a fork by the trunk. Dad had given me binoculars two years ago for my birthday, six months before he died. I'd been maintaining the cover story that I was into birdwatching for three years. It let me be gone for long

hours without anyone questioning where I'd gone, and if I was ever caught somewhere I shouldn't be, it made a fantastic excuse.

Through the binoculars, I watched smoke curling out of the upper windows of the warehouse, and felt the thing inside of me extend itself. I felt a little sick, a little dizzy, but exhilarated. I'd done it. I could almost feel the flames curling around the lumber...

I *could* feel the flames, and something in the world was suddenly different.

The news reports said that there were illegal fireworks being stored in the warehouse. Or there was a leak from the propane tank. Or someone was making meth.

Because *different* suddenly became *exploded* and I woke up under the tree with a ringing head and a set of bruises that I'd acquired while falling. A dog-shaped shadow sat next to me, half-transparent tongue lolling.

I think about these things as I wrestle the bike down the fire road, my Art flickering tongues of flame under my skin. My father was a firefighter, and I am a wildfire. The girl on the back of my bike clings to me as we ride through fire-illuminated smoke.

The shadow of the hound flickers through the smoke and vanishes. I keep riding.

• • •

A newly-made mage draws attention like carrion draws vultures, and for much the same reason. Alliances reach out and grasp for the newly Awakened before they are properly aware of the consequences.

So we hide, the girl and me. There's a shabby motel just east of Murphy's where the night manager knows me, and now we're in a room where the TV is locked to a brace on the wall and the comforter on the bed is confusingly patterned and scratchy.

She's recovered enough to take a shower and tell me that her name is Jenna. Clean, she's strikingly pretty, with large eyes and a mouth that reminds me of Grace Jones. She's maybe seventeen or eighteen. She wants an explanation.

So I explain.

Jenna digs one toe against the threadbare carpet as she sits on the edge of the bed. I'm sitting in the hard chair, my back to the wall. Somewhere above us, someone is either watching porn or having noisy sex – I hope it's the former, given the inauthentic moans. "So that's it. No going back."

"You can try. You might have better luck than I did."

There's a hardness to her mouth that I'd missed at first, and her eyes tighten. "I'm about to age out of the system. I was trying to get a scholarship to college, but..." She shrugs.

"What happened to your folks?"

Jenna just shrugs again. She's wrapped in a towel, and her shoulders are thin. "Well. You're going to have a lot of people sniffing around you, wanting you to pick a side." I suspect that's going to be a familiar concept to her. Reality's not been kind to this girl. I wonder what she was doing out on the mountain by herself, but I don't ask.

Jenna fiddles with the edge of the towel she's wearing. "You're not on any of the sides."

I quirk my mouth and glance at the door. "I'm lucky, and stubborn. More the latter than the former."

I watch her chewing this over in her head. I didn't tell her everything, just what she needs to know right now. What happened to her. What she is. Why there will be people looking for her.

Everything else can wait.

There's a scorched smell in the air, burned hair and cloth. That's probably me.

"Why don't you try to get some sleep?" I suggest. "I'll go out when the sun comes up, get you some clothes and some breakfast. Then we can figure out where you want to go."

The flame burns on all of my horizons. I need a shower and a cigarette and to sleep for a few days. Instead, I go outside.

• • •

I sit on the curb, facing the parking lot. From here, the wildfire is a smear of orange in the sky. Beyond the parking lot, the forest stretches away, a mass of trees and tangled darkness.

I light a cigarette, take a deep drag, and exhale gustily. The smoke rides away on the rising breeze; a question and a plea, laced with magick. *I'm going to need help, here.*

I wish I could have taken her home, back to my own sanctuary with its wards and other protections, but I don't really want to draw the vultures directly to my house. Not with reality still shuddering around her a little.

*Aoife, what have you gotten yourself into?* Dad's remembered voice asks.

Somewhere inside of me, I know the answer. I'm just waiting for it to arrive.

A car pulls into the parking lot. Then another. One black sedan, one shabby station wagon. On the station wagon, there are flowers hand-painted on the side panels that glow just a little in the sulfurous light. I take another drag on the cigarette, watching.

People climb out of the cars; a pair of dark-suited women from the sedan, from the station wagon a woman in a rumpled dress with a scarf over her locks, and another person whose gender I can't tell from here. I don't recognize any of them; they must have driven for hours to get here. They glare at one another.

I could grab Jenna and run, but that wouldn't accomplish much. Besides, this is *my* mountain. Those of us who call this place home keep a common decree: *Live and let live*. We take care of our own problems.

And we don't let anyone take our own. Jenna's under my protection, so she qualifies.

The suited women and the people from the station wagon are doing one of those complicated dances, all of them wanting to approach me but none wanting to expose their backs to the others. The suits are trouble. They're *all* trouble, but the suits are special trouble that does *not* belong on my mountain.

One of the suits adjusts a wristwatch, and the hairs on the back on my neck stand on end. The woman with the scarf jerks her chin at the suits, her eyes dark and snapping. "Leave be," she says. "You're trespassing."

One of the suits wrinkles her nose. "This is public property, or close enough. We have as much right to be here as you do."

They start sniping back and forth, and the smoke-tinged air is thick with gathered potentials. My scalp tingles as I stub out my cigarette and stand. I could just watch them get so frustrated with one another that they start slinging magick around, but that's a bad idea for a lot of different reasons. I drop the butt and walk over, exhaling smoke.

Too much smoke. It curls around my head, spreading dragonlike wings. It's only half-visible in the sulfurous light shining down on us, but I can see the others seeing it. The woman with the locks takes a half-step back; her partner twists their mouth. The suits look at me impassively.

I let the smoke go after a moment. "Care to tell me what the fuck is going on?"

"You have a young person with you," one of the suits says. "We would like to make an offer." Her voice is clear as a bell, cutting through the night. "Just a short conversation."

"What she *means* is that they would like to indoctrinate them. Him? Her?" The woman with the scarf turns to me, holding out one hand in supplication. "We can help protect them." Her partner folds their arms; their mouth is set in a firm line, and they offer neither word nor gesture. I feel a chill run down my neck. *Worry about the mages who don't talk*, I remember Linh telling me. *For them, words are more powerful than for the rest of us.*

"Her," I say. "And it's all indoctrination, kiddos. You're more alike than different." I look up at the smoke-darkened sky. A single star shines through the smoke and the parking lot lights. "The answer is no."

• • •

After the explosion, things changed.

I wanted to talk to Dad about it so bad, but Dad had been dead for a couple of years, and besides, telling him about it would have meant telling him about the fires. I spent the afternoon after the explosion sitting in the backyard, striking matches, letting them burn, shaking them out when the flame got too close to my fingers. Over and over and over again, until I could *feel* the moment when the potential flame in the head of the match was freed by friction.

Again.

Again.

Until the moment when the match lit before it touched the box.

I yelped and dropped the match. It flared and burned out at my feet. I stared at it.

An hour later, I was on my motorcycle, heading east into the Sierras. I'd left an awkward note for Mom, apologizing.

I never saw her again.

The suits and the flower children look like they're getting ready to argue with me. I hold up a hand. "She's under my protection."

Years ago, someone else did this for me. Linh saved me and took me in, made me a part of this mountain. She reminded me of something my father had always told me: that without wildfire, rot chokes the forest and strangles it to death.

I hold onto that. It makes things easier.

The four people facing me look like they're calculating odds in their head. One of them shrugs her suit jacket open, revealing some sort of matte, curvy, vaguely gun-shaped thing clipped to her waist. It's what I'd do, if I were them. Join forces to take out the guardian, and then quarrel amongst themselves to figure out who gets the chance to talk to the girl, to offer comfort and safety in exchange for loyalty.

If Jenna wants to make that decision, that's her choice. But not now. Not while the wildfire still rages on the mountain.

I smile at them and fish the box of cigarettes out of the breast pocket of my shirt. The silent mage watches me, their thumb brushing their lower lip. Neither the suits nor the flower children want to make the first move.

I take advantage of the silence and light my cigarette. The silent mage tenses; their partner realizes something is wrong only a moment later. But I'm already taking a drag on the cigarette.

Breathe in the smoke. Breathe out cloud. Reach. Call.

*Without wildfire, the forest rots.*

The sound of roaring motorcycle engines fills the air, and I grin. The suits glance around, eyes wild, and the woman with the locks makes a sound of dismay. The silent mage glares at me. I take a drag on the cigarette and then wave it at them.

The Clampers ride into the parking lot, a river of half-visible riders. Their engines purr like cougars and their headlights are lambent trembling moonlight. The mountain's guardians have taken many shapes over the centuries; this is only the latest. Everyone knows the Clampers – the mundane version of them, anyway. They ride in parades and have beer-drinking nights and occasionally get rowdy on a summer evening.

*These* Clampers aren't human, but they would pass at a casual glance. That's all most people see of them.

I hold no leash on them, but they know me. They know the work I have done for them. I have paid dues in sweat and blood and burns and dust. They ride around us, and behind them stretch the shadows of mules, deer, coyotes. The air is acrid with the smell of burning manzanita.

One of the Clampers pulls his motorcycle to a halt between me and the other mages. He doesn't speak, just frees his rifle from the sling strapped to his back and shifts it so it crosses the front of his body, muzzle pointing up. The other Clampers array themselves around him, engines still purring.



The women in suits glance at one another. I can see the thoughts that are crossing their minds: whether their fancy energy weapons are faster than an old-fashioned rifle, how many of them they can shoot before the others take their revenge, and their odds of surviving the ensuing battle. (Pretty low, I'd assure them, if they were to ask me.)

The silent mage is signing to the woman with the locks, their fingers flying and mouth set in a scowl. She signs back, shaking her head. Finally, the silent mage raises a middle finger to me – even *I* can read that sign – and walks away. Their partner follows without glancing over her shoulder. They both slide into their station wagon and are heading away into the night within moments.

The suits take a step back, and then another. Then they're retreating too, back to their expensive sedan. I relax, just a little. These were only the vanguard. There will be others, and those will be better armed and more persistent. But the Clampers have secured some breathing room for Jenna, giving her enough time to make up her own mind.

The one with the rifle secures it back in its sling. I wonder what would have happened if he'd tried to fire it; like everything else about the Clampers, their guns are *ideas* of weapons more than anything else. I've never been sure if they really get how guns are supposed to work, and I'm glad very few people try to challenge them.

"Thanks," I say. "Your help was much appreciated."

He inclines his head, and speaks a word. It comes out as the rumble of an engine, a jay's screech, and while I think he's saying *you're welcome*, I can't be sure. But he kicks his bike on and rides out, and the rest of the Clampers follow.

I watch them go and take a drag on the cigarette, then blow smoke rings in their direction. Then I turn back to the motel.

Jenna is standing in the doorway of the room, the white towel wrapped around her brilliant against the darkness beyond. She's watching me and for a moment her eyes are so, so young. I ache for her.

I drop the butt and step on it, then walk past her into the room and sit down in the hard chair. After a moment, she lets the door fall closed. Sweat's cold on the back of my neck, and there's a nervy exhaustion fluttering in my breastbone. "Who were those people?" she asks, and leans against the door.

I run a hand over my hair. It's spiky with dried sweat, a little crunchy under my fingers. "Representatives of a couple of different groups. Both wanting to catch you while your head is still spinning. I can introduce you later, if you're interested."

"And the guys on the motorcycles?"

I chuckle a little. "They're an idea this place has about how things should go on the mountain. Sort of. I've done them favors in the past, and occasionally they do me one."

"They weren't human." She's looking at me with a level gaze, still leaning on the door.

"Not even a little. Welcome to the Weird, kiddo." I quirk the corner of my mouth. "I've got a little place that backs onto the Stanislaus. You can stay with me if you want, until you figure out what you want to do."

She's chewing on the inside of her cheek. Her hand is curling where it's holding the towel on. "Can you teach me how to... *not* do the thing I did?"

I remember being that young, that scared, and setting the world alight with a power I didn't understand. "I can do you one better," I say, and I know my smile is lopsided. "I can teach you how to control the burn."

I raise my hand, and a flame dances across my fingertips. Jenna's grin is answer enough.

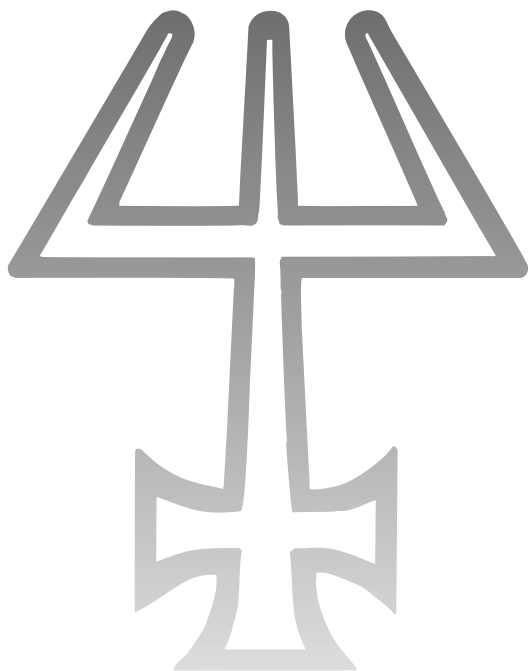
• • •

Smoke still stains the sky as Jenna and I ride the highway towards home, and I see the shadow of the hound flickering in and out of view.

Dad taught me about fire. I'll teach Jenna everything he taught me, and more: how to win an argument with reality, how to tell which parts of the forest are aching for a burn, how to snuff a flame and salve a burn.

I imagine he'd be happy, despite everything.

We take a sharp curve at 60, and Jenna's happy whoop is carried away by the ash-stained wind.



# The Girl Who Remembered Tomorrow

Bill Bridges

"Hey, little lady. I don't get too many women digging through the bins. What are you looking for? The Shadow? The Spider? Doc..."

"Doc Eon?" Josie Ventura said, looking up hopefully from the pulp magazine boxes she was flipping through, her voice raised to pierce the dull background drone of the convention dealers' room.

"Who?" the clerk said, his forehead scrunching into a bulk of wrinkles, one side of his rubbery mouth twitching into a questioning grimace. "I never heard of that one."

Josie sighed and bent back over the rows of bagged-and-boarded pulp magazines from the 1930s and '40s. "Doc Eon. You know, *Astonishing Science Stories*?"

"Hey, I've been dealing these things for years now, and I ain't never heard of Doc Eon or that magazine." He shook his head with an *I've-seen-everything* smirk, wondering who this brunette with the lone lock of dyed-purple hair and brown-leather jacket and pants thought she was fooling. "It don't surprise me, a girl like you not knowing your pulp history. I thought you gals didn't like the white-male patriarchal stuff."

Josie glared at him. "Judge much?" She picked up her backpack from the floor and turned away, back toward the flowing traffic of con-goers, many of them costumed in the latest movie trend or cult-TV show fashion. There were brightly colored *ST:TOS* uniforms, white plastic Stormtrooper outfits, and even a number of bohemian British time-travelers. But then she stopped after one step, and turned back around. "My grandfather had an issue. July 1939. He used to read it to me when I was little. The first part of a serial adventure: 'Doc Eon and the Future of Tomorrow.'"

The clerk shrugged, his smirk still pasted from ear to ear. "Whatever you say, ma'am. When you find it in a buyer's guide with a price for *New Mint* or even just

*Fine*, you let me know.” He picked up a stack of Golden Age comics and shuffled to a half-empty longbox, where he began depositing them one by one, chuckling to himself.

Josie spun around and entered the flow of con-goers, fuming silently. She passed the t-shirt booth, the celebrity autographed-photo booth, and the multi-pocketed kilt booth. When the river finally took her near the overpriced pretzel stand, she slipped from the stream and hugged the wall, digging into her backpack for her smartphone. She pulled up the contacts list and touched the entry for Joe Ross.

“Hey, kiddo,” the old man’s voice said after four rings, “are you on your way to Shady Oaks with a New York-style pizza?”

“No, Mr. Ross,” she said, holding a finger in her open ear to block the ambient convention drone. “I’m at Collecturz Con.”

“Oh, yeah? Still looking for that magazine, huh?”

“Yeah. *Astonishing Science Stories*. You remember, right? Tell me I’m not making it up.”

There was a silence on the other end lasting a good ten seconds. “It’s real, kid. As real as those times when your granddad would read it to you, with me there in the room, making the sound effects. Us old folks here don’t got too many of our friends left. When Carlo went, well, he took a piece of us with him.”

Josie smiled, blinking away a tear. “It’s funny, Mr. Ross, but... sometimes I forget. I mean, I forget what happens in the story. I know Doc Eon and his Terrific Trio are trying to stop something bad from happening, but I can’t remember *what*. Sometimes I do, as if I wake up from a dream with it still fresh in my mind. But other times... like now... I don’t remember it.”

“I know,” he said. “It ain’t just you. I thought it was my senility for the longest time, but then I’d remember it, as if... as it wasn’t just a story, but that it happened. To me. And then... then I’d remember your granddad telling us the story, but I wouldn’t remember the story itself.”

“I think...” Josie said. “I think if I find the issue, then I can keep it. In my mind, that is. I won’t ever forget it again.”

“Then you find it, Josie. You find that issue and you remember. For both of us.” There was coughing on the other end of the phone, distant. Josie knew he was covering the receiver, trying to hide his wracking wheezing from her. “Look, I got to go. Time for my meds. You keep looking, Josie girl.” He hung up the phone.

Josie stood there for a few minutes, wiping a fresh tear from her eye. She looked out at the crowd, at her fellow sci-fi fans, and couldn’t help smiling. *It’s out there. Somewhere.*

Her phone rang. *Mom*. Josie groaned and answered it. “Hi, Mom, I’m a bit busy now.”

“Hi, honey. I want you to come by for dinner this weekend. I was going through some of the closets and I found a box with those stories you used to write for grandpa. You know, the science fiction ones? They were so good, honey. Why don’t you do any of those anymore?”

“Geez, Mom, that’s kid’s stuff. I was, what, ten?”

“Your grandpa loved them so much. He saved every single one of them. You go to those conventions, right? Why don’t you write some new ones and read them there?”

“Mom! That’s not how it works. You can’t just write crap and get everyone to read it. Besides, you kind of have to have a penis to write sci-fi.”

“Josie!”

“Sorry, Mom. Look, I’m busy with school. I don’t have time to write.”

“If you didn’t need a dingaling to get that STEM scholarship, you don’t need one to write.”

“Mom!”

“Honey, just come over this weekend, all right?”

Josie slumped in defeat, another tired soldier in the age-old battle of mother and daughter. “Okay.”

“Great! See you then, sweetie! Bye!” Mom hung up.

Just then, a thin man in a steampunk outfit walked past, bearing a Plexiglas-sealed copy of *Weird Tales* magazine.

“Hey, you!” Josie cried, vaulting from her spot along the wall and into the stream of traffic, to the barking annoyance of a furry dog that she assumed was supposed to be a Wookiee. The steampunk stopped and cocked his head expectantly. “Where’d you get that pulp mag?” Josie said.

“There’s a dealer at the far end of the room, next to the Necroscream Coffee booth.”

“Thanks!” Josie spun around and vaulted toward the far end of the room, not even waiting for a response from Mr. Steampunk. *You keep looking, Josie girl.*

• • •

The nighttime Queens skyline glowed with the World of Tomorrow. The 1939 World’s Fair had been evacuated by police order, and the National Guard were on their way, but Doc Eon couldn’t wait that long – it was time for action.

“Hey, Doc,” cried Joe “Lucky Skunk” Ross, running behind the sleek form of Doc Eon, the Man of Many Tomorrows, “this place is huge. That Nazi rat could be hiding anywhere!”

“Not just anywhere, Joe,” Doc Eon replied in his usual bass, stentorian tone that still managed to sound casual even when running. “He’s got a mission to sabotage the fair in the name of his Thule Society masters, which means he can be in only one place.”

“Well, Doc, you gonna spill, or do I have to dangle in suspense as we run through the entire park after this guy?”

“Oh, you big galoot,” interjected Simon “Sesquipedalian” Smith, running along besides Joe. “Doc means that there’s only one place in the park where Obersturmführer Schmidt can plug in his electro-destructo bomb.”

“Yeah?” Joe said. “Where’s that?”

"The Westinghouse Hall of Electrical Power," snorted Frank "Bull" Barrett, rushing on Joe's other side.

"No time for talk, men!" Doc said. "We've got to move – the future of Tomorrow depends on it!"

• • •

The earthy odor of brewing Necroscream brand coffee reached her well before she saw the booth. As much as she felt she could use a free cup of joe, she was on a mission. She shot passed the horror-themed coffee booth to its neighbor, Old-Fashioned Fun.

Pulp magazines lined a multi-level display rack – *Spicy Detective*, *Fantastic Adventures*, *Wonder Story*, *Rocket Patrol* – but the rack was half-empty. The clerk, an old SMOF type – rotund, bearded, bespectacled – was beaming at his sole customer, a man in a tweed suit and bowler hat, with an ample beard and a waxed mustache.

The tweed man was closing a briefcase on a stack of newly bought pulp magazines. Josie caught a glimpse of the first one on the stack and her heart raced, but then she calmed. It was only *Astounding Stories*. But maybe...

"Excuse me, sir," she said. "Could I by any chance look at those magazines? There's one I'm..."

"No." The tweed man didn't even look at her. In fact, he seemed to very intentionally avoid looking at her, turning away from her to the exact degree she leaned over to catch his eye. He picked up his briefcase and walked away.

*Jerk.* Josie looked at the remaining magazines. *No luck.*

She smiled at the clerk. "Do you by any chance have an issue of *Astonishing Science Stories*?"

The clerk's eyes widened. "Well, that's a coincidence. I'd never even heard of it, but turns out I had one in my collection. That gentleman you just spoke with bought it, along with a stack of other books. Say, how do you know about that book? I didn't just fire-sale away an ultra-rare magazine, did I?"

Josie groaned. "Rare doesn't even begin to describe it. It seems you, me, and that collector are the only ones who've ever heard of it."

The clerk raised an eyebrow. "Heard of what?"

Josie frowned. "You know, *Astonishing Science Stories*."

The clerk shook his head. "You mean *Astounding Stories*."

"No, I mean *Astonishing Science Stories*. The magazine you just told me you sold to that tweed guy?"

The clerk look confused and then worried. "What? Wait...what are we talking about? Tweed guy?"

Josie's jaw dropped open. "Your customer?"

"Sorry, you're my first customer of the hour. See anything you like?" He turned to gesture at his display and stopped, jaw agape. "Where... where did all my magazines go?"

Josie backed away. *What the hell is going on here?* The clerk frantically opened his cash box and then calmed down, staring at a wad of cash that, to his mind, had magically appeared in place of his missing magazines.

“Well, what do you know? I guess I zoned out there. Too long a drive to get to the show.”

Josie turned and walked down another aisle, ignoring her surroundings, completely weirded out. *He forgot. Just like me. He forgot. What the fuck?*

Her phone buzzed. A text message. She fished her phone from her pack and glanced at it. Her mom had sent her a scanned image. She sighed and opened it and her jaw dropped again.

It was a child’s drawing of a man in a leather jacket and aviator hat with a bulky gun. Scrawled in rough writing next to him were the words *Doc Eon*.

She choked with a mixture of elation and shame. Elation because here he was: Doc Eon. The star of *Astonishing Science Stories*. He was real. At least, he existed as a character, one she had drawn when she was ten. Shame because she was a terrible artist. If this picture leaked out to the rest of the world, she’d have to move to Timbuktu and assume a new identity to escape the humiliation.

She read her mom’s accompanying text message: *Found this. Isn’t this your grandpa’s hero?*

She sobbed and covered her mouth. *Yes. It was. Granddad’s hero. And because of him, my hero.*

She marched out of the dealers’ room, past the registration desk and over to the table strewn with flyers and ads for upcoming conventions. She scanned the stack and snatched one of the photocopied announcements she’d seen earlier but hadn’t fully considered: Southeast Collectors Auction. The flier proclaimed *Toys. Records. Magazines. Comics. Unsorted lots; highest bidder wins*. It was this weekend, two hours’ drive away.

Mom’s dinner would have to wait.

• • •

The Obersturmführer’s bullet ricocheted off the metal pillar just below where Joe “Lucky Skunk” Ross had ducked behind it. “Almost had a real haircut there,” Ross muttered.

“It will take more than a bullet to penetrate that thick, simian skull of yours,” said Simon “Sesquipedalian” Smith, crouching behind another nearby pillar.

“He’s stopped firing,” Frank “Bull” Barrett said. “He’s up to something.” He poked his head from behind the third pillar. “He’s ducked behind that robot!”

“Elektro? The Westinghouse Moto-Man?” asked Simon. “I don’t recommend we fire into that robot, if we can avoid it. While it is a diversion intended for the common man, it is still a wonder of science and can help spark interest in new endeavors.”

"Ah, quit yer yappin'," Joe said. "The question is, what the hell is *he* doing behind that thing?"

"Doc will find out any second now," Joe said. "We've drawn that Nazi's fire long enough for Doc to get into position above."

At that moment, they heard Obersturmführer Schmidt cry out and fire his gun in a new direction. "Stay back, Eon!" Schmidt's Teutonic accent cracked like the pistol shot. "One more step and..."

"And what, Schmidt?" Doc Eon's voice echoed throughout the Hall of Electricity. "You're cornered. Give up now."

Maniacal laughter was Schmidt's only response, and then a zap of electricity and the loud clanking of gears, followed by the terrible sound of metal smacking into flesh.

Joe snapped his head from around the pillar and saw Doc Eon fall before the onslaught of a metal robot. Elektro, the Westinghouse Moto-Man, had been converted – from a harmless automaton, designed only to execute preprogrammed movements, into a killing machine.

"Juxtaposing Jehosaphat!" cried Simon. "It appears that Obersturmführer is as much of a super scientist as Doc Eon!"

Doc Eon ducked a second swing from the robot, but it was clear his left arm was broken from the previous blow. There was no sign of Schmidt.

"We're coming, Doc!" Joe yelled, and launched himself from behind the pillar and up the futuristic ramp leading to Elektro's perch.

Doc ducked and shot behind the robot, but instead of attacking, he dove out the window, sending shards of glass raining onto the street below as he landed and rolled with an expert maneuver learned from fighting monks in the mountain fastnesses of the East.

Electro stepped over the now-open ledge and plummeted the two stories down, landing on his feet with a resounding thud. He had suffered no damage to his now formidably armored form.

"Somehow, Schmidt has reinforced that cheap tin can," Frank said, reaching the ledge and looking down at the tableau of the metal monster clanking toward Doc Eon. "And Doc's out of metallo-meteor bullets!"

Doc ran and the robot chased. The Terrific Trio lowered themselves down the ledge by a hastily repurposed drape, and gave chase. Doc, nursing his injured arm, fled into an adjacent building and the robot crashed through the floor-to-ceiling glass, fast approaching his prey.

The Trio gasped as they saw Doc stumble and fall to the floor. Elektro loomed over him, arms raised to strike.

Suddenly, Doc became a blur of motion.

"He's using Ultra-Speed!" Simon cried.

"Holy smokes, do you see what that thing's standing under?" Frank said.



Before anyone could answer, the air ignited into fire. A vast band of lightning shot from one end of the room to another – right through the spasming body of Elektro, the now smoking and melting robot.

“Of course!” Simon said. “We were so busy observing the chase we didn’t pay any attention to where Doc was leading the robot – to the General Electric Man-Made Lightning Display! Not even the Obersturmführer’s modifications could withstand such a fierce display of energy!”

“Yes,” said Doc Eon, suddenly appearing beside his Trio. “But Schmidt got away, although I think I know where he’s going. Come on!”

• • •

Josie found an empty seat near the back of the room. The auction was surprisingly crowded. *The economy might be for shit*, she thought bitterly, *but these guys sure have enough dough to spend on unopened action figures.*

She sat through a tedious litany of bids for a number of toys, games, and even original comic art pages. Finally, they opened a lot of pulp magazines, part of an estate sale. One of the assistants held up the magazines one by one, so the audience could see the covers. *Man’s Life*, *Argosy*, *Uncanny Tales*, *Blue Book*, *Dime Detective*, *Wild West Weekly*, *Astonishing Science Stories*.

Josie sat forward, disbelieving. *That’s it!* Memories of that cover came flooding into her mind – Doc Eon battling a robot amidst a sky of lightning, with the 1939 World’s Fair Trylon and Perisphere in the background.

“Do I have one hundred for this lot of classic pulp magazines?” the auctioneer cried. “Do I hear one hundred?”

Josie’s hand shot up.

“One hundred!” the auctioneer yelled. “Do I have one-hundred fifty?”

Another hand in the audience shot up. Josie flung hers back up.

“Two hundred! I’ve got two hundred! Do I hear three hundred?”

A new hand rose up, on the far side of the room from her, but also in the back row. Josie peered intently at her competitor and her heart sank. The Tweed Man.

She raised her hand, beginning a bidding battle with the Tweed Man. \$400, then \$500, then \$1000. She didn’t have that kind of money. She’d have to break into credit cards. \$1000 became \$2000, and then \$3000. Tweed Man would not give up.

Finally, he spoke out: “Ten thousand.”

“Ten thousand!” the auctioneer cried, a hallelujah in his voice. “Do I have more?”

Silence. Josie didn’t have the strength to lift her arms. No way could she afford that. *Goddamn it!*

“Sold!” the auctioneer said. “To the man in the bowler hat!”

She watched as the man sat back, smiling. He didn’t look at her.

She got up slowly and slipped into the restroom, where she wrestled back tears in the stall for five minutes. *I'm sorry, grandpa. I tried.*

She wiped her face at the sink and headed for the parking lot. As she approached the elevator, she saw the Tweed Man, briefcase in hand, step inside. She jumped forward and caught the door before it slid closed.

"Hey, asshole," she said, glaring at him. "What the fuck? I'd ask you to sell me that one issue of *Astonishing Science Stories*, but somehow I suspect you'd just ignore me. So, ignore this!" She thrust her hand in his face, middle finger standing at attention.

He leaned slowly forward, his eyes meeting hers. She shrank back. His eyes were... *molten*. Inside seethed an anger she'd never encountered before. Never even imagined.

"Stay away, girl," he hissed. "Or I will do to you what I did to Doc Eon."

Josie stepped back and the elevator door slid closed on those terrifying eyes.

Josie slumped against the wall, shaking, adrenaline pumping.

*Wait. What did he say? "...what I did to Doc Eon. "But... Doc's not real. How could he do anything to a fictional character? What the fuck did he mean by that?*

Shivering, Josie shuffled to the stairs and to her car. *This is... this is too weird. I'm out. No more pulp hunting. Sorry, granddad, but I think the past needs to just stay in the past.*

• • •

Doc and his Terrific Trio ran down the open lawn toward the giant Perisphere, behind which towered the huge, pointed, triangular Trylon, the pair of statues that served as the symbol for the coming World of Tomorrow.

"*Doc! There he is!*" Joe cried. "He's behind that diagonal stick statue!"

"That's no stick," Simon said. "That's the Time and the Fates of Man sundial. But why would Schmidt come here?"

"It's his backup plan," Doc said, as he vaulted faster, trying to reach the Nazi before he could flee again. "Those blueprints we found in the shipping warehouse? They included diagrams of this statue. I surmised that Schmidt had somehow infiltrated the construction months ago. He's turned the sundial into a super weapon!"

"What, some sort of gun?" Joe said, panting and falling behind.

"A rail gun – an electromagnetic accelerator, designed to fire a bullet right at New York City!"

"That's far enough, Doctor!" Obersturmführer Schmidt cried, poking his head from behind the statue of the bent and hooded Atropos, one of the three Fates carved into the giant sundial.

Doc halted his breakneck run and reined in his fellows with his outstretched arms. "You can't possibly escape now, Schmidt. Give up!"

"Oh, Herr Doctor," Schmidt said, chuckling, "but I *can*. Unless, that is, you wish to sacrifice the life of this poor boy!" He stepped from behind the statue and revealed a struggling child clutched in his left arm, with his right hand holding a pistol to the boy's head. "It would appear that time is not on your side, and fate is your enemy."

"I'm going to wipe that smirk off your lousy German face," Joe said, stepping forward, fists raised.

"No, Joe," Doc Eon said, blocking his friend with his arm. "We can't risk harming that boy. Schmidt has shown no compunction against taking innocent life. What now, Schmidt?"

"Now, Doctor," Schmidt said, pointing the gun away from the boy and directly at Doc Eon, "you die."

Suddenly, the boy squirmed from the Nazi's grasp and shot away as fast as his small legs could carry him. Schmidt's gun swept from Eon toward the child, and his finger began to squeeze the trigger.

Time crawled, each moment like a frozen photograph that slowly gave way to the next photograph. Or so it appeared to the eyes of Doc Eon, the Master of Time Science. Doc vaulted forward. Even at Ultra-Speed, he could never reach Schmidt in time. As he crossed half the distance between himself and the Nazi, the bullet began its exit from the chamber, swimming slowly through the air at the boy.

Doc reached out, trying to catch the bullet with his own hand, but even his formidable speed was too slow. The bullet pressed at agonizingly slow speed into the boy's back and then through his heart.

To the rest of the onlookers, Doc suddenly appeared beside the boy, cradling the crumpled and bleeding form as he fell.

"*No!*" Doc cried, his face a mask of grief and disbelief. His powers, for the first time, had failed him.

Even Schmidt seemed surprised, standing with his mouth agape. He dropped his gun and backed away slowly, stammering before the dread gaze of Doc Eon. "I... I did not expect... you must not..."

Doc shut his eyes and began to vibrate in place, his body becoming a blurry outline.

Before any of the Trio could act to aid their leader, Doc was suddenly standing back among them, the child was just beginning his escape, and the trigger had not yet been pressed on Schmidt's gun. Time had reversed.

Doc again vaulted forward and events repeated themselves – but this time, Doc leaped through the air and took the bullet full in the stomach, landing hard and bleeding. The boy kept running, alive and breathing.

"*Doc's hit!*" Joe cried, agonized.

Doc Eon lay on the ground, blood pooling around him, and the world grew dim...

• • •

Josie had almost reached her apartment complex when her phone rang. She wanted to ignore it, but saw the caller ID: *Joe Ross*.

"Hey, Mr. Ross," she said, trying to drive and balance the phone in her left hand.

"Come over," Joe said.

"Now? I'm almost home. Been a long day."

"*Now*, Josie girl. It's got to be now." He hung up.

Josie frowned, worried. She'd known Joe since she was a kid. *What could be so urgent? Please don't let that cough be killing him.*

She turned the car around and headed for the Shady Oaks Retirement Home.

When she entered Joe's room, she found him sitting with a sheaf of loose notebook paper, smiling. He looked up at her and presented one of the pages: it was her juvenile writing.

"Oh, no, don't tell me Mom gave you those." Josie put down her purse and sat at the edge of the bed, grimacing as she looked at the hand-scrawled writings of a ten-year old girl.

"These are... these are better than I ever did," Joe said. "You've got talent."

Josie raised an eyebrow. "You're just being nice. It's okay, Mr. Ross, you don't need to sweeten things for me. I'm not a writer."

"You're wrong!" Joe said, frowning, genuinely angry. She'd never seen him angry before. "Josie girl, I *remember* now. Reading these stories you wrote when you were a kid, about Doc Eon – I remember!"

Josie shook her head, confused.

"All those stories in the magazines all those years ago? *I* wrote those. Me, Joe 'Lucky Skunk' Ross. And I wasn't making them up, neither! They happened, Josie. They happened to *me*. To *Doc*. Doc Eon!"

"That's not possible, Mr. Ross," Josie said, quivering with fear. *He's gone senile. I've lost him.* "They were pulp magazine adventures. Science fiction. Not the real world."

"They *was* *real*. I lived them. And then I forgot. Woke up here, in a retirement home, put out to pasture. But I remember now. It all ended that night when Doc was shot. He took a bullet meant for that kid. Back in the World's Fair. 1939. Back in Tomorrow."

Josie sat back, astonishment spreading over her face. "The story... the one granddad used to read. The Nazi at the World's Fair. God, I remember it now, too. How could I have forgotten it? It never ended. Doc Eon was shot saving that kid, but you had to get the next issue to find out what happened next.

"But there *was* no next issue. Our adventures ended that night. You see, that kid *had* been shot. But Doc couldn't accept that. He messed with time. He *changed* it, pushed it too hard. Something broke, and something snatched Doc out of time. Out of what was *supposed* to happen, out of all the adventures we hadn't yet experienced."

Joe stood up, pacing, manic with energy. "Time broke, and we went and had normal lives. Frank Barrett was killed in the war. Simon Smith became a university lecturer. He died sometime in the '70s. I'm the only one left, stuck here in this retirement home, not even remembering what's real and what's fake."

"But... where's Doc? What happened to him?" Josie couldn't believe she was asking it, as if it were something that had actually happened.

"Somewhere out of time. That's why we keep forgetting – time doesn't want us to remember. It wants to write it all out of existence, like it never happened. But it *did* happen, Josie!"

Josie stood up now, too, and went over to where Joe had dropped the stack of her childhood writing. "Joe... who *was* that kid? The one Doc saved."

Joe smiled. "Ain't it obvious? Little eight-year-old Carlo Ventura, who had hidden when they were evacuating everybody out of the park, all so he could have the fairgrounds to himself. Your *grandfather*, Josie. He remembered Doc, although he thought he was just a story, one he'd read when he was little. He thought my name was just a coincidence, and so did I. Not anymore."

"Why do we remember now, Joe?" she insisted. "Why is it all coming back? And who *is* that creepy guy who keeps buying all the issues of *Astonishing Science Stories*?"

Joe frowned. "I don't know, but I have a suspicion. Something Doc said once about... about what he called 'the scientific principle of paradox.' Stay away from that guy, Josie!"

"It's the stories, isn't it?" Josie said, touching her stack of handwritten adventures. "You remembered after you read them."

"You're Carlo's granddaughter. He was *there*. Doc fixed it so he could live. Carlo forgot – like me, like Frank and Simon – but he made sure you heard the stories. On some level, he must have known. He couldn't save Doc, but maybe... maybe you could."

"Save him?" she protested. "*How?* I'm not a superscientist."

"Maybe not." Joe's eyes shone. "Not yet. But you're a *writer*. A better writer than me. It's up to you, Josie girl. You're the only one who doesn't completely forget. For all I know, as soon as that clock on the wall strikes the next hour, I won't even remember my name. But not you – you might not get all the details, but you know about Doc. You *know* him. You got to write the ending. You got to set things straight."

Josie started to shake her head... but then she stopped, and her shoulders straightened. "You're right," she agreed. "That's why I kept looking for that damn magazine. I thought I was doing it for granddad, to keep that memory alive. But I was doing it for Doc, wasn't I?" She looked at Joe, uncertain.

"For all of us, Josie girl. You get home. You get writing."

Josie sped home, barely avoiding two fender benders in her haste. She rushed in the door and straight to the couch, snapping up the laptop she'd left there. *Who cares*

*if I skipped lunch and my stomach's rumbling? I have to act now, before the mental fog creeps back in.*

She began to type.

• • •

Doc Eon rose slowly from the ground, clutching the wound in his stomach. He forced a smile. "The Goro monks of the Hollow Earth taught me how to expel a bullet using only mental force."

As Schmidt watched in wide-eyed amazement, Doc removed his hand and held out his palm, displaying a bloody lead bullet.

"No!" Schmidt screamed, furious. "I *killed* you! Damn it, how do you keep *not dying*?"

• • •

The doorbell rang. Josie stopped typing. *Who the hell could that be?* She shook her head and set her hands back on the keyboard.

The bell rang again.

*Oh, for the love of Pete.* Josie got up and peeked through the keyhole of the front door.

She stepped back, gasping.

The door shook as the man on the other side knocked with unnerving force.

She composed herself and opened the door, smiling at the Tweed Man standing on her doorstep.

"How can I help you, Mr. Collector?" Josie said.

The Tweed Man forced a smile. "Good afternoon, miss. I came to apologize. My manners were sorely lacking during our last meeting. I have had some time to think since then and I would like to make it up to you. I am inviting you to see my collection of vintage pulp magazines."

"Really?" Josie said, dripping with syrup. "Well, you're too late. I'm no longer collecting those. I've decided to take up a new hobby." She saw a bead of sweat escape from the rim of the Tweed Man's bowler hat and descend down his forehead.

"I have almost an entire collection of *Astonishing Science Stories*. That is the magazine you were looking for, is it not?"

Josie pressed her lips together, thinking furiously. *A near-complete collection of Doc Eon adventures? Those would provide invaluable research for more Doc Eon stories.*

"Please," the Tweed Man said. "I'll take you there now. You can spend all the time you like reading them."

"No," Josie said, ignoring the man's proffered hand. She reached for her purse on the table by the door.

The Tweed Man frowned and stepped forward, nearly entering the house. "I don't make this offer for just anyone."

Josie snatched her Taser from her purse. As soon as the Tweed Man saw it, he stepped back, cautious. The unnatural menace had again welled up in his eyes but Josie was expecting it now, and stared back with nearly equal ferocity.

“Good day, Tweed Man. I do sincerely hope that we do not meet again.” Josie closed the door and went back to the couch.

She opened her laptop and began typing where she’d left off.

The computer suddenly coughed an electric hiccup and the screen shrank to a bright white pinpoint and went blank. She tapped the keys. Nothing. She held down the power button. Nothing.

*So this is how it's going to be, huh?*

She got up, walked to the kitchen, opened a drawer, and removed a notepad and a pen. *It's time to do this thing old-school.*

• • •

Before Schmidt could again fire his gun, Doc Eon was behind him in a blur. A quick karate chop disarmed the Nazi and another equally quick neck blow rendered him unconscious.

As the defeated Obersturmführer sunk to the ground, Doc Eon scanned about for the boy. The lad had stopped running, and now stood at the end of the lane, watching Doc. Their eyes met, and the boy smiled. Doc smiled back.

• • •

Josie wiped the sweat from her forehead and then stared at her wet palm. *Sweat? The air conditioner is running full blast. Why is it so hot in here?*

She looked up and saw that she was no longer in her apartment. She sat on the grass at night besides a reflecting pool, beneath a large statue of the three Fates from Greek mythology, arrayed beneath a sundial. Behind it she saw the giant sphere and triangular tower of the 1939 World's Fair.

She stood up, jaw hanging.

“Thank you, Ms. Ventura,” said a voice, impossibly deep and precise. Josie turned around to see Doc Eon, standing tall and perfectly poised in his leather suit. His jacket was bloodstained, but the wound underneath had clearly healed. “It seems like I’ve been waiting forever for the next step. I couldn’t do it myself. I’m thankful that you stepped up to the plate.”

“How... where is this? And don’t say the World’s Fair! That was last century!”

Doc grinned. “We’re in a pocket dimension, one I inadvertently created by warping Time. I’ve been trapped in this timeless space for a long...well, until now. But it’s unraveling now, thanks to you. To your ingenuity and imagination.”

“What happens next?” Josie said, looking around in awe at the antique wonder of a past age.

"We each return to our proper times. You, in the early 21st Century. Me, to July 1939."

"I don't understand." Josie touched Doc Eon's wrist, trying to assure herself it was solid. That he was real. "Life went on without you. Joe – your friend – he got old. The others died. How can you go back as if it didn't happen?"

"Do you remember what they called me?"

Josie smiled. "The Man of Many Tomorrows."

"You've seen one of my tomorrows, one that now will never happen. Don't worry – your life is still as it happened. Joe still winds up in the rest home with your grandfather, but now... now he'll remember his adventures. *Our* adventures. Those he had, and those still to come."

"It's funny," she replied, "but I remember them now, too – you had a lot of stories, all the way through World War II. And Joe was in all of them. He *wrote* all of them!"

"Then Time is already settling in around us," said Doc Eon. "We don't have long."

"But there's so much I want to ask you! The Tweed Man..."

"A Paradox spirit, an agent of fractured Time. He's gone now."

"Thank god, he was creepy as sin." Josie shivered but then looked at Doc Eon, an eyebrow rising. "If you're *real*, if your *adventures* were real, then all those things you do – your Ultra-Speed, your amazing gadgets, that crazy science...*they're* real, too, right?"

Doc Eon placed his hand on her shoulder. "I guess you'd better find out."

The World of Tomorrow faded, replaced by the banality of Josie's living room of today. She twirled in excitement and snatched up her purse, fishing for her car keys. *Joe's never going to believe this!*

• • •

Josie finished signing her name and handed the book back to the teenage girl on the other side of the table. "I hope you enjoy it. This one's about Futurity Jones' run-in with the Stopped-Clock Man."

"I know!" the girl squealed. "I've already read it – and all of Futurity's adventures! I loved the part where she met Doc Eon!"

"That's my favorite, too."

Beth, Josie's convention minder, leaned in. "I'm sorry, but Ms. Ventura has to be at a panel in fifteen minutes. She'll be autographing again later. Check the schedule. Thank you all for coming."

The line of conventioners groaned at the news but clapped for Josie as she stood up. They began to disperse, still clutching their copies of *The Adventures of Futurity Jones*, by Josie Ventura.

"Give me five minutes," Josie said to Beth. "I've got a booth I need to stop by before the panel."



“Okay,” Beth said, “but don’t be late. Your fans might tear me limb from limb.”

Josie slipped across the aisle to the booth she’d been eyeing for the last hour: *Old-Fashioned Fun*. The familiar clerk smiled at her as she began scanning his display of Plexiglas-clad pulp magazines.

She caught her breath and froze. She slowly lifted the magazine from the display and gazed at its cover. *Astonishing Science Stories*, featuring part two of “Doc Eon and the Future of Tomorrow.”

“Can I open this?” she asked.

“Sure,” the clerk replied. “It snaps open from the side.”

Josie expertly extracted the vintage magazine and carefully opened it to the main story. *Doc Eon rose slowly from the ground, clutching the wound in his stomach*. It was her story. The one she’d written in longhand in her kitchen. *Her* story, published somehow in a 1939 magazine.

She flipped to the end of the story. It was all as she wrote it, her words.

She frowned. On the next page was a new story, not a Doc Eon tale: ‘The Mystery of the Book of Ether.’ A tingle of electricity went up her spine. *That title... something about that title*.

She gently closed the magazine and placed it back in the case. She looked at the clerk. “I’ll buy it.”



# Dabda

## Travis Legge

Two weeks ago, I buried my daughter, Julie.

She wasn't killed by violence or the nefarious machinations of my enemies. I might have seen something like that coming. She simply had an accident. While swimming with friends at the lake, she dove into the water in precisely the wrong place and hit her head on a rock in precisely the wrong way.

Her neck snapped.

Her friends dragged her ashore. Katherine performed CPR while Mark called 911. The ambulance arrived in record time and everyone involved in the tragedy did everything they could to save her. I know this because I've watched the entire event play out dozens of times.

I wasn't there. I had no reason to be.

It was a simple weekend getaway, some teenagers blowing off steam. Exactly the kind of activity she *should* have been doing. I know every fact about that day, from the moment the kids arrived at the beach through the moment paramedics placed my lifeless baby girl in the ambulance. I've watched it again and again, from every imaginable angle, with every mystical sense I possess. It was just a *damned accident*.

Only minutes before, Julie was dancing. Music filled the beach from the car stereo and Julie was bouncing around, laughing and kicking up a cloud of sand with her flailing feet. Years of piano lessons and a teenager's love of pop music had done absolutely nothing for her sense of rhythm and she could not have cared less. It was beautiful. Seeing her again, so full of life, may have eased the pain were it not for the persistent nagging of seconds passing. The same magick I've used to witness my precious Julie's final moments grants me an offensively acute awareness of time's momentum. I've

shifted my senses to other times in her life with the same bittersweet result. Whether I watch her birth, her first steps, her sixth-grade piano recital, or a simple wasted Saturday playing video games in the living room while my wife and I waited all too impatiently for control of the television, the nagging tick of time's passage in the back of my mind shatters any serenity I might hope to find in these divinations.

The magick I have studied is all about control. Rigid formulae and high rituals define every working, from the tiniest nudge of mystical energy to the greatest and most potent spell. My studies are precise, exacting, and mechanical. I have studied under some of the wisest and most accomplished members of my Order, amassing a considerable measure of power. In theory, that power demands a certain degree of enlightenment. In order to claim the title of Magus, one must understand the fundamental nature of reality, the formulae and function of existence. It is through that understanding that the Magus may alter reality to suit his will. These tools allow the Magus to focus the will on the working, and keep the mind centered, clear, and in tune with reality.

The last thing I want right now is to be centered, clear, and in tune with reality.

I want my daughter back. I know of no way to truly do that – at least none that I would willingly inflict on any sentient being, let alone my own child. So since I can't bring her to me, I want to go back to her. Without the nagging awareness that my studies have granted me.

I want to *believe* the illusion.

So I've sought alternate methods. There are willworkers in my acquaintance who utilize a less restrained, more visceral form of magick. Through ecstatic practices, they open their consciousnesses to the flow of the universe in a way that my peers could never grasp. The others among my Order tend to scoff at such "low magick." Two weeks ago, I'd have joined them in doing so. Today, my desperation outweighs my condescension.

I walk into my house, expecting to hear noise from Julie's room. She was rarely quiet unless she was asleep or studying. The cold silence is just one more reminder that something vital is missing. At this time on a Saturday, my wife would normally be working on some crafting project in the den. As often as not, Julie would be helping. Now my wife lies on the couch, her crafting supplies replaced with a box of tissues. She wears a brave face for friends and co-workers, but when the workweek ends her bravery washes away in a deluge of tears and Xanax. I begged her not to go back to work so soon, but she insisted. She said she needed to be able to feel normal. I walk up to the couch and kiss her on the top of the head. We clasp hands for a moment, knowing that no words, tears, or gestures are going to fill this hole in our lives. I whisper, "I love you," and walk to the stairs.

As I step into Julie's bedroom, the words of my mentors ring in my ears: "There are *no shortcuts* in the Art. Magick is a powerful tool, to be respected; to treat it otherwise is the purest *hubris*. Like a flame, if wielded improperly, *magick will burn you*." I don't doubt the truth of those words. I've seen too many colleagues pay the price for their pride. I was only a few years older than Julie when I watched Jamie McCallister's arm wither and shrivel under the weight of a spell pushed too far. He still bears the scars from that night. Then there was Melinda Walsh, whose mind became as withered and broken as Jamie's arm. Melinda was probably the most reckless of all of us, and for a time the most pow-

erful. Eventually, using all that power with no restraint caught up to her. Her friends and colleagues watched in horror as she detached from reality, retreating into her own mind and threatening to drag everyone in her vicinity with her. Her pride turned to madness. I don't know if she even realized what was happening when Jamie and I hunted her down.

If Jamie were here, he might wave his shriveled appendage in my face and call me a fool. He might remind me of how frightened Melinda seemed when her mind first began slipping away. He might quote a dozen lessons about the *appropriate* use of magick in an attempt to dissuade me, as if I haven't been running those same quotes over and over in my mind for days. I tell myself that a withered limb, physical pain, even a broken mind are all risks worth taking as I reach into my pocket and withdraw the hallucinogenic mushrooms I purchased today.

I lie down on Julie's bed and inhale deeply. The room still smells like her.

Darkness swallows the room as I close my eyes and place the mushrooms in my mouth. My tongue twitches, rebelling against the mound of slime and filth I've dropped upon it. Stifling a gag, I swallow. My sinuses still carry the thick funk of the fungus as I recite a formula meant to alter the passage of time. The sharp ticking of passing seconds speeds up until it becomes a steady screech in the back of my mind. The screech falls to a low hum. The hum begins to fade as my skin grows warm. The mushrooms seem to be working.

I open my eyes and see sunlight sneaking past the edges of the drawn curtains. The bedroom door hangs halfway open. I hear the sound of running water coming from the bathroom down the hall. Is it morning?

I rise to my feet, quickly at first, but soon realizing that my balance is faulty. I stumble, barely catching myself before falling flat on my face. I cannot help but laugh, the first laugh I've permitted myself since Julie...

Footsteps stomp down the hallway. Julie storms into the bedroom with wet hair and a toothbrush in her mouth. Full of life and empty of patience, she grabs her perfume and rapidly fires off four sprays at herself. She whips around, headed back to the bathroom. I assume she is late for school, but, as I had hoped, I cannot be sure. I don't know *when* I am and it is a beautiful thing. I follow behind my child, overwhelmed with glee.

She steps into the bathroom and spits out her toothpaste. After rinsing her mouth, she gargles the tune of "Mary had a Little Lamb" with the water, a trick I taught her as a child to make brushing her teeth fun.

I hear my own voice call out from downstairs. "*Julie! We're gonna be late!*"

"I'm coming," she shouts back. "Keep your pants on, old man!"

She darts through me, picking up her backpack and running down the stairs. I sprint after her, following her out of the house and into the car. She takes the passenger seat, and my past counterpart is driving, so I hop in the back.

She plugs her iPod into the radio, blaring some pop singer whose name I can't recall. My past self rolls his eyes and turns the stereo down. Julie looks to him with those huge almond eyes that I could never resist, and he turns the volume back up, to about two-thirds of where it had been.

"Thanks, Daddy."

I have no idea how long I've been here. I weep with joy.

My past self turns to face me in the back seat. Julie doesn't seem to notice, and the car continues on its path, unhindered.

"You know this is a *terrible* idea," my past self scolds.

For a moment, I forget myself and panic. My tears are stifled as I shout "*Watch where you're going!*"

My past self chuckles. "Pull it together," he tells me. "You're having a vision. I would think by now you'd be a little less twitchy about those."

I vomit in the back seat. The mushrooms are definitely working. Julie continues humming along with her music, oblivious to the world. Perfect in her innocence.

"What do you want?" I ask my other self as I wipe the edges of my mouth with my arm.

"I'm here to ask you the same thing," my doppelgänger replies. "You're playing a dangerous game. Time is *not* a toy."

"Fuck off," I spit back, with all the venom I can muster. "I just wanted to see my baby again! Where's the harm in that?"

"You're asking the wrong guy," my past self says, nodding at the rearview mirror.

Certain that this is the worst idea I've had all day, I slowly turn and look out the rear window of the car. A tall, gaunt figure in a wrinkled white suit approaches us from the middle of the street.

My heart sinks in my chest. My bowels threaten to vacate.

"You fucked up," my past self says. "He's going to make you pay for it. Unless..."

I scream in my own ear. "Unless *what?*"

My past self sighs and shakes his head. "There are two ways this can end. You can accept what is, has been, and *must* be. Throw yourself at the mercy of that angry fellow back there, and hope you walk away with a comparative slap on the wrist. Alternatively, you can decide that the reality *you* want, the one where you can see Julie and be with Julie, is so important to you that no other reality matters. Laws of the universe be damned, *she is more important*. This new reality will become your reality, regardless of the cost."

Terror overwhelms me as I realize just how far my desperation has carried me. With excruciating clarity, I understand the implication of my past self's words. To reject reality in such a fundamental fashion, with total disregard for the repercussions of my magick, is the purest *madness*.

For the first time, I understand what Melinda was so frightened of. I look out of the back window to see that my pursuer, though walking slowly, is mere feet behind us.

I look to Julie as she bobs her head out of time with the music. She looks over her shoulder at me and smiles.

Having weighed the cost, I smile back.

# Sympathetic Magick

Stephen Michael DiPesa

“My sympathies.”

Those were the words I uttered when he informed me that his father had passed away. Those were the words I said, and they were a lie, because I didn’t feel sympathetic – I didn’t feel *anything*. I’d never even met his father. To me, his father was nothing more than a cardboard cutout stashed in the world’s backstage area. An unused prop in the story of my life. I can measure the significance of this stranger’s death only in how it alters the complexion of my relationship with my friend henceforth. From where I stand, that is the sum total of the value of his father’s existence. Everything else is merely an unquantifiable abstraction.

If television’s to be believed, the average Joe and Jane just *looooooove* shows about exceptional people with a stunted sense of empathy. Some clever, sarcastic, brilliant, insightful (and almost certainly conventionally attractive) asshole who sees through everyone else’s bullshit because he has no troublesome sense of basic human interconnectedness to get in the way of his genius. Feeling so utterly alone, all the time, might even be worth it if it came with the uncanny ability to crack open the psyches of everyone around you with only a few minutes’ conversation, even if all you could do with that information would be to show them all how much keener is your perception, how much better you know them than they know themselves.

I can make fire dance on my fingertips. I can stretch seconds into hours. I can whisper the secret names of spirits and compel them to answer me with otherworldly voices.

But I cannot look into the eyes of my grieving friend and feel anything *real*.

My therapist congratulated me on the deftness with which I falsify the appropriate socially-mandated responses to good news (“We’re having a baby!” [Smile politely, give

a hug, say something along the lines of, “How wonderful! When are you expecting?”]), bad news (“I’m getting kicked out of my apartment.” [Lean slightly forward with a look of concern, briefly badmouth the parties responsible, make an offer of crash space for a week or two.]), and pretty much every other combination of facial expression, body posture, tone of voice, and verbal content needed to just get by from day to day. For all intents and purposes, it’s like being an actor in a production that never ends. You just play the series of mostly-identical characters required by the circumstances unfolding around you. After a while, you realize that what you’ve been doing is really nothing more than subtly, yet deliberately, manipulating others to achieve the desired responses. A little while longer, and you stop thinking about that realization, because what you do just to be able to productively interact with the rest of the human race makes you feel like maybe you’re a sociopath.

I’ve made no effort to hide it. I’ve tried to be an advocate. Other mages have told me that it’s a piece broken off in the transition from a previous life. Or they think that it was some kind of trauma from my Awakening. One went so far as to suggest that my last incarnation walked damn near to the very edge of the Cauls before dying. Everyone’s got an opinion. Everyone’s a fucking expert. Everyone thinks the answer is quick and clear-cut and easy.

They express their sympathies, but those are empty words to me. They tell me that they respect the strength I have to discuss it without shame, but I can perceive that respect only as a commodity. They put on sad faces and tell me that it must really suck to have to live like that.

*You have no idea.*

But I don’t ever remember *not* being this way. I spent most of my life believing that this was how everyone is, because I had no frame of reference for anything different, and no emotional capacity to establish a bond with someone else that could’ve taught me otherwise. My Awakening didn’t change the world for me from the place of well-loved strangers and empty shadows that it had been every day up until then. I wasn’t born with a broken *soul*; I was born with a brain that has some funny wiring, and the events of my childhood didn’t help matters.

And that’s probably why I’m so fucking scared right now. Because I’m standing on the precipice of a reality I’ve never known, and its infinite possibilities are staring back at me, leaving me to guess at so many *what ifs* that I could drown in them, if I were to let myself.

So, maybe it was instinct that kept me away from the arts of the mind, all these years – some sense that I’d be walking blind into a minefield against which I couldn’t possibly hope to defend myself. But what we fear is what sets us free, and freedom comes from learning to embrace even that which you fear most within yourself. From learning to love even the most badly-tangled knots within. I’ve studied a score of esoteric magickal techniques for focusing the consciousness and calming the spirit; I opt instead for the simple practice of meditative mindfulness. Magick didn’t get me to this point, after all – a couple of years of therapy did that.

Without urgency, without judgment, I draw my attention to the moment. My breathing. The feeling of the floor behind my feet, of the chair that supports my back. The fear rises, and I cannot conquer it. Instead, I welcome it. I sit with it. I make it my companion. In its good time, it slips back into moments gone by, and there is only the now. Breathe. Warmth on my face. There is no failure in the now; this moment simply *is*. Breathe.

I open my eyes, and my cabalante sits across from me. She is faintly smiling. The sunlight glints off of the sapphire stud in her right nostril. Her heart-shaped face is framed by her dark brown curls. In an instant, I read the map of her facial features and her posture, and I know what she feels the same way I know what it is to walk the streets of Madrid: just some words in a book I read. It is time to close the book. It is time to get up and walk those roads with my own feet.

One last time, I ask her, "Are you sure?"

She nods. "Yes. You have my wholehearted consent."

*Breathe.*

I reach within, drawing up from the well of self the most rudimentary of the magicks of the mind, and I cast it like a drowning man might desperately throw a coil of rope up to one who can pull him out of the sea. And she catches it, and it holds fast. Tears well up in my eyes.

*Not alone.*

Her smile broadens, and she asks me, "So... what am I feeling?"



# The Process

Shawn Connolly

“Kathy is missing,” the old man told me, “and we can’t find her.”

“Didn’t I tell you the next time I saw you in my office I was going to kick your ass up and down the sidewalk?” I was nursing a hangover and a migraine and a bad case of not-wanting-to-deal-with-Edward-Fontaine.

He didn’t give a shit. He just leaned on his walking stick and continued to talk. “O’Toole, this is a serious problem. Try to stifle your attitude for a minute and listen, please.” Say this much for Fontaine – he didn’t threaten to light me on fire, the way he usually did. That got my attention. When the Flambeau is too agitated to threaten you with explosions, shit must be serious.

“All right, all right, hang on a second.” I got up off the couch, which was the only actual furniture in what I laughingly referred to as my office, and walked over to the window, closing the blinds. As the view of Harrison Avenue went away, so did the sounds of Chinatown; I’d paid a pretty significant price for an on-demand privacy enchantment, and this seemed like a good time to put it to use. Boston shut up, and I turned back to the old Hermetic in my doorway. “Lay it on me.”

Fontaine stepped inside and closed the door, scowling. A lesser observer would think he was pissed off at me – and he probably *was*, to be fair – but I knew him well enough to know that the real reason he was upset was because he’d had to drag his oh-so-dignified ass down to my place. I wonder what he’d said to the old ladies working in the hair salon downstairs; they didn’t like people coming in and bothering me before noon. A tenant that pays his rent on time and in cash is worth looking out for.

“Kathy has been missing for three days,” he told me, “and that is a problem. Kathy set up all of our most recent security protocols. The untraceable disposable phones, the

anonymous network access, the on-site security, the works.” His frown deepened with each sentence, until by the time he paused to take a breath his face was just one great mass of wrinkles and unhappiness. “This puts all of us at risk.”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten, then kept on counting. My first instinct was to start shouting at the guy. *Your entire security setup was the work of one woman, and you let her wander around unsupervised? That didn't strike any of you geniuses as a major fucking security risk?* But if I started shouting he'd shout back, and...well, Flambeau. Members of that particular House of Hermes tend to do their shouting with explosions – and they don't get to be as old as Fontaine was without being really, really good with explosions. Most accidentally blow themselves up by their mid-twenties. So, deep breathing and anger management was called for.

Apparently thinking that my silence signaled a lack of understanding, he added, “It's not just us, Mark. Your sister...”

I didn't let him finish. “I know what's at risk,” I growled, voice gone suddenly cold. “Get the fuck out and let me get to work.”

Maybe he realized he'd pushed the wrong button; I got testy when emotional black-mail came into the picture. Fontaine backed down and left in a hurry; he didn't even slam the door behind him. Me, I sat back down and groaned. My migraine was getting worse.

Whenever I'm presented with a new problem that I have to start working on, I tend to sit quietly and think things over for a bit. It's part of my process, wrapping my head around an issue before I can start actually doing things to address it.

It took me about an hour to get my act together enough to actually get back up and move around. I spent most of it seething. Fontaine and his Chantry crew – they had some grandiose, flowery name I could never remember, something like the Brethren of Enlightened Scholarship or some such bullshit – were just the kind of stuck-up assholes I couldn't stand. Every one of them had a cover job working in a college or university, which Boston has the way junkies have track marks; their whole deal was trying to awaken mortal minds through education while undermining the efforts to close them by the same means. And it was a nice idea and all, but...Jesus, every single one of them was an arrogant, stuck-up prick. Like, every bad thing you've ever heard about an “ivory-tower academic” and how they've lost touch with the real world? It all applied.

Don't get me wrong, I respected the work they did. Something like twenty percent of the middle management for some of the worst corporations in America has passed through the Kennedy School of Government at one time or another. Fontaine's crew were right in the belly of the beast, working right under the enemy's noses, doing their part to try and make people remember that the world was more than just a mechanism for fucking other people over and getting rich. They were even trying – fruitlessly so far – to help my sister, when they could just as easily have said “sorry, too busy” and sent me on my way. And every one of them was a mage of no small ability.

It's just... they were all such *assholes*. And cleaning up their messes was not my idea of a good time.

As I walked down Boylston Street, I had to grit my teeth at the wind. It was a cold October, and blustery as all hell.

If I wanted to find out what'd happened to Kathy – who, I had to admit, was probably the Chantry member I despised the least, her or maybe Wyatt – I'd need information, and I knew just who to ask. It was just a matter of ringing the proverbial doorbell.

Cities have souls. They have spirits. Everyone knows this. When you think of a city you get a certain impression. Los Angeles is beautiful but heartless, ready to chew you up and spit you out the moment you're no longer amusing. Chicago is cynical and worldweary. London is running on the fumes of past glory, but it's still got enough glamour to command respect. You get the idea.

What most people don't know is that you can talk to them. Well, actually, talking to them is easy, anyone can do that. The trick is getting them to talk *back*. And the first step is knowing where they live. There's always one particular spot, and sometimes it moves; it depends on the people that live there. When I first came to Boston, there were three or four spots that might work, depending on what was going on at the time; during baseball season it was Fenway Park, or up at the State House on Beacon Hill when there was a heavy political story dominating the news cycle. On a bright summer day, I'd have to go down to Boston Common and sit for a while before it'd show up.

That changed a little ways back. These days, there was just one place that held that power, that resonance between the city, its soul, and its people. In the winter, people would shovel the snow away from that place just because it meant something to them; in the summer, people would walk to it for no real reason other than to stand there and see it. For one day every year, the eyes of the world turned to Boston, and then one year they couldn't look away thanks to the blood and smoke and pain and anger.

I looked down at the finish line of the Boston Marathon and put my earbuds in.

Traditionally, a shaman uses rhythmic drumming to work themselves into the proper headspace to interact with the spirits. I'm not a very traditional guy, though, and I'd cued up the drum solo from the album version of "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida."

It worked for me, is all I can say.

Lighting a hand-rolled cigarette – tobacco, since there are a couple of traditional practices I can respect – I looked down at that yellow-and-blue painted stretch of road and let my thoughts go. It was the opposite of concentration; this wasn't a thing that could be forced, could be shaken into place through an act of will. It was a surrender: to the music, to the smoke, to the place, to the world. I had to just let it all wash over me and through me and around me, to envelop my mind in the here and also the there and the drums pounded in my ears and the tourists walked on past and the smoke filled my lungs and the wind whipped around me like an angry cat that wanted attention, and a few blocks away children climbed over the Make Way For Ducklings statues in the Public Gardens and the fans driving down Lansdowne Street grumbled about the cost of a parking space near Fenway and the students at Emerson and Boston College and Boston University and Berklee and UMass Boston and Harvard all scurried about trying to

figure out what they were going to do with the rest of their lives and the Dunkin' Donuts employees dispensed coffee to shambling caffeine vampires who needed wake-up juice to get through their day and a homeless guy tried to bite back the rage and desperation as yet another person walked past without sparing them even a little bit of change and the sense of self of me of memyselfandi fell away and the world was so huge and beautiful and oh if only you knew how much you are loved every one of you and...

There came a tap on my shoulder, and I snapped back to myself, that fleeting sense of oneness fading as I pulled out my earbuds. The man standing next to me grinned up at me, freckles all mashed together beneath a Red Sox cap, and asked me, "You wanna get inside and have a beeah? It's wicked fahhkin' cold out heah!"

"Knock it off," I told Boston, "you can talk like a real person when you want to." I was a little on edge still, that fleeting sensation of *connection* still lingering at the edges of my memory, and I felt a loss that I could never completely put into words. Unbidden, memories came crashing through my brain, hallucinations becoming real, telling me frightening things about fire and rebellion and then I heard Grace screaming...I pushed them away, back into the mental box where we all keep our regrets and insecurities and focused on the now. So, okay, maybe I was a little curt. He didn't seem to mind. He never did.

"Yeah, I know," he shot back, green eyes all a-twinkle. "But it's fun to see you get upset about it. I meant it about that beer, though. C'mon, it's seriously wicked cold."

So the City of Boston and I went to go get a drink.

• • •

"I like this place. Quiet, not much of a crowd. Plus it's not so touristy." The beer was good too, some local craft brewer I'd never heard of who would probably be out of business in a week. I resolved to savor their product while it was still around. "So, Three Mountains, I've got a problem."

The spirit winced at me. "C'mon, man, you know you don't have to get heavy with me. I thought we were pals." The original settlers who founded the settlement that eventually became the city of Boston called it *Trimountaine*, on account of how it had three mountains. One of the mountains got shortened into Beacon Hill, and the other two were flattened, but back in the day, that was its name, and names have power. Calling him Three Mountains instead of "Boston" or "Great City Father" or "Hey You Asshole" or any of the names I usually referred to him by was my way of letting the spirit know I meant business.

I took a slow sip of beer – it was a really nice German-style lager – and let him stew for a bit before I let him off the hook. "I know, and we are. But I can't afford to fuck around on this one. Katherine Anne Marks. She's missing, has been for three days, and I need to find her right quick."

"Mmmm, nope, sorry." The City Father of Boston leaned back in his chair, regarded me over the rim of his pint glass. "That's not a name that has juice. Plus, we haven't talked price yet."

“And here you said we were pals.” I’d known this was coming, of course. Spirits don’t do anything for free. Sometimes you have to bribe them with gifts or services, sometimes you just have to tell them how awesome they are, but there ain’t no such thing as a free lunch; everything has a price.

“We are, that’s why I’m giving you the friendship discount. Since it sounds like you’re in a hurry,” and here his ever-present grin got wider, “I’ll even let you put it on your tab.”

“Oh *hell* no. A blanket favor-owed? I’m not some wet behind the ears beginner who just learned to call spirits with crystals and a book from the New Age headshop.” Another thing about spirits – they’re big believers in credit. They’re more than happy to let you owe them. But the way they handle the vig would put a loan shark to shame.

“Not anymore, you mean.” Boston smirked at me. “Nothing so extravagant. There’s a little company, it’s run out of some guy’s apartment in the Back Bay. They’re working on some interesting Internet... things. I’d explain it, but I know you’re not exactly a computer guy. They could be on the verge of something big – *if* they don’t get taken over by one of their minority shareholders. If he takes over, he’s going to fold the operation into a bigger company out in Silicon Valley. I would like that not to happen.”

City Fathers – the personifications of cities – were always trying to ensure their city’s success. If this company turned out to be an up-and-coming star, and they were based in Boston, that made Boston look good. It got people talking about Boston, thinking about Boston, maybe even moving to Boston. Since City Fathers were, in a very real sense, their cities, anything that made the city more powerful – at least in the consciousness of the population – made the City Father more powerful as well.

Incidentally, this is why city governments and such keep making bids for Olympic Games and political conventions even though most people would prefer it if those things stayed far, far away from their cities. The City Fathers have a far reach, even if most of the people they reach wouldn’t believe in spirits in a million years.

“That...sounds doable,” I admitted, after some thought. I could pawn this particular duty off on Fontaine and his crew, call it the price tag for getting Kathy back. “All right, deal. Get the relevant information to my office.”

“Done!” Three Mountains, all five foot nothing of him, chuckled and thrust out a hand; I did not yet take it.

“The lady’s still missing,” I reminded him.

“I need her name. Not what everyone calls her, you dope; her *name*.”

I scowled. Kathy was a Virtual Adept, a technomage; she spent more time on the Internet than in the real world. I should have known that she’d identify by a name other than the one on her birth certificate. Luckily, I knew the name he was looking for – the trick would be pronouncing it correctly. I thought about it for a bit before giving up and pulling a pen from my jacket pocket; I scrawled ‘xXxLadyBanHamm3rzxXx’ on a napkin and showed it to the spirit, who nodded and closed his eyes.

While I waited I stuffed the napkin into my half-empty glass of beer with a pang of regret. I don't like leaving evidence around, but still. It had been a pretty good beer.

"Three days ago, she stopped by Faneuil Hall to pick up a gift for her sister," the spirit told me quietly, his voice gone oddly monotone. I blinked in surprise; Faneuil Hall Marketplace didn't seem like one of Kathy's usual destinations. It was a little kitschy for her. Plus, I didn't even know she *had* a sister. You can work with people every day and still know so little about them... "She was crossing Congress Street and..." The usual grin vanished, replaced with a frown and an expression of confusion. "And I lost her. I couldn't see her. That shouldn't be possible, Mark. There's a statue of Sam Adams right there. I can look through the eyes of every statue in the city..." — and there's a chilling thought, considering that the only thing Boston has more of than colleges are statues — "...and I should have seen her."

"So she just vanished? Or what?"

"It's strange... there was a minute or so where... where the statue couldn't see."

Three Mountains looked troubled, but I had the sinking feeling that I knew what had happened. "Someone put up a block," I told him, sighing. "Protection from scrying, a big *Don't Look Here* field."

"I don't know what that means. Do you know what that means?"

"I think I do, yeah." I slid out of my chair, tossed a few bills on the table. It wasn't as though he was carrying money, so of course I had to pay for both drinks. "I think she might have been taken by the Men in Black."

I really, really wished I'd had a chance to finish that beer.

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It was only a few blocks back to the office. I waved at Lihua, the lady that owned the hair salon below my office; despite looking like the stereotypical Angry Old Chinese Lady from the Hollywood production of your choice, she was actually really quite sweet. Plus, I'd gotten her assistant manager's nephew out of some trouble he'd gotten himself in with his bookie, which helped.

Fontaine had blown right past her earlier, of course. Which was his mistake. She was a smart cookie.

Once I was upstairs, I closed the door behind me and locked it. This was the most dangerous thing I'd done all month, and last week a dude shot at me. I removed the middle cushion of my couch and pulled aside some of the ripped fabric from beneath it; from inside my couch's guts, I produced a small wooden box, carved with a ridiculous amount of protective sigils and glyphs. I unlocked it with a small key I keep in the bathroom, then set it down; it was heavier than it looked, what with the interior being lined with lead.

Inside were a cell phone, a SIM card, and a battery, each sealed in a separate plastic bag. These were removed and then put together; once I had the phone powered on, I sent a text containing the name of a restaurant at which I almost never ate, then disassembled the phone and sealed everything away again. I wanted to minimize any chance of transmissions being detected or intercepted.

It paid to be careful when you were getting in touch with the Technocratic Union.

• • •

Janelle Reed was waiting for me when I got to the oh-so-trendy eatery. She wore a horrible off-the-rack business casual outfit that somehow, inexplicably, she managed to make look good. She smiled as I sat, white teeth and coffee-and-cream skin. “Mark O’Toole, this *is* a pleasant surprise.”

Janelle was, technically, a Man In Black, despite being, you know, a woman. She was also, theoretically, one of the bad guys. We’d met about three years back during some unpleasantness involving a mage who’d gone crazy and was attacking taxi drivers, and we quickly realized two very important things: one, that we actually kind of got along, and two, that both of us were deeply annoyed at the stupidity of the people who were, technically, on our sides. I bitched about what assholes the Chantry were, she bitched about what assholes her bosses were, and somewhere between the part where we pointed guns at each other and the part where we stopped the crazy guy, we realized that we both had bigger problems on our plates than one another. So instead of swearing undying enmity, we decided to live and let live, and occasionally do favors for one another. If her bosses ever found out, she was probably dead; if Fontaine’s Chantry ever found out, I was probably dead.

This added spice to what was otherwise a purely platonic relationship.

“Miss Reed, stunning as always,” I murmured, but my heart wasn’t in it, and she could tell; her smile slipped. Before she could ask what was wrong I decided to just spit it out. “Kathy Marks is missing. Do you guys have her?”

“No,” she responded – a touch too quickly. She saw my eyebrows rise, and held up a hand. “Not in the way you mean, anyways.”

“Explain. Please.” I caught movement from the corner of my eye – a waiter approaching – and waved him off. I hated doing it, not wanting to be noticed, but I could already tell I wasn’t going to have much of an appetite.

“Look. You know my associates are fully aware of the activities of the, ahem, Noble Docents of Scholastic Enlightenment.” That was it! I knew it was something ridiculously pretentious. “Miss Marks is someone we, of course, have our eye on, along with the other nine Docents.” There were actually *eleven* others, but if they didn’t know that I wasn’t about to tell them. Not counting me, of course; I worked with Fontaine’s crew, but I certainly wasn’t a part of it. “But, frankly, my field office believes that leaving them alone is the smart play. Several of them are fairly powerful Reality Deviants...” – the Technocratic term for *mage* – “...and there’s a sense that removing them isn’t worth the aggravation of poking the bear with a stick.”

I nodded, trying not to seem too impatient. I knew all this already; the local Union’s policy of letting sleeping dogs lie was what gave Janelle and me the wiggle room to work together as much as we did. “And yet...”

She sighed, closing her big brown eyes for a moment. I cursed inwardly, tried to dial back the intensity level; it wasn’t going to do me any good to browbeat her. She

was a source, a contact – occasionally even a friend – and she clearly didn't like talking about this. Deep breaths were in order. Apparently I managed okay, because she recovered, looked me dead in the eye, and said simply, "We're not the only Union operation in Boston anymore."

Oh fuck.

The Technocratic Union are a kind of cross between every One World Government conspiracy theorist's darkest nightmares and the Fun Police. Their whole deal is that they believe that the world works in a particular way and they *want* it to work that way. That people need to be controlled, for their own good. That it's better to keep us all fat and happy and doped up on terrible television shows and processed mass-produced food "products" than to let us all run around thinking and feeling and having *ideas* and stuff.

But that doesn't make them a monolith.

They like to *present* themselves as monolithic, sure. Everyone's part of one big happy Union, just ask them. But organizationally they're more like a giant multinational corporation than anything else – an enormous Byzantine bureaucracy that's full of middle managers and office drones and ambitious jerkweasels trying to claw their way up the organizational chart no matter who they have to step on along the way. It's like *Dilbert* if the Pointy-Haired Boss was also a cyborg with a machine-gun arm. When you run everything like it was an office, you get office politics.

"A new office opened up?" I tried hard to keep my voice steady, and mostly succeeded.

"Yeah. And they favor a more... proactive approach." Janelle looked almost mournful. "The worst part is, if they start showing results, management is going to take notice. There's only so much operational budget to go around, and every dollar they get is a dollar we don't get. I wish I could tell you more, Mark, but... this is stretching it enough as it is." She stood, looked down at me sadly. "The times are a-changin', my friend."

I leaned back in my chair, considering. There were a lot of lines to read between there.

I opened my mouth to ask a question, but Janelle was already gone; she'd left a handful of bills on the table to cover the sandwich I hadn't even noticed her eating. A handful of bills and...

Pulling the small white card from beneath the cash, I couldn't quite stifle a grin. She'd obviously come prepared. The business card she'd left had an address written on it, and she hadn't had a chance to write it since I'd sat down; she'd shown up at this little meeting knowing full well she'd be passing it along.

It's nice to have friends.

• • •

I would love to recount the story of how I stormed the office building in Cambridge, gun in hand, a legion of summoned spirits at my back, to rescue Kathy Marks from the clutches of the evil Technocrats, who had had her hooked up to some kind of bewildering sci-fi-looking chrome machine that was reprogramming her brain. That would be an awesome story.



Unfortunately, I can't recount that story, because that isn't the way it happened.

The way it happened was that I got in touch with good old Eddie Fontaine and gave him the address, and he and four of his fellow Docents – God, what a stupid name – did the storming. Reportedly they killed or badly wounded a double handful of Technocrats, and blew up a bunch of stuff. Most people would never know, of course – there was a fire, sure, but as far as anyone knew it was a perfectly mundane fire – but the Union knew, and that was important.

See, by sending Fontaine – who, as I may have mentioned, is good with explosions and far from subtle when he uses them – I didn't just make sure Kathy Marks got rescued. I also sent a message to the Union: *Janelle Reed has the right of it. Poking the bear with a stick is a dumb idea. It's safer not to do it.* She and the people she worked with looked good to their management, and the Let's Kill All The Reality Deviants crowd looked bad, which meant the status quo of hands-off observation stayed in place. Also, if I'd stormed the place, some of the grievous harm that got tossed around might have been aimed at *me*, and I hate that shit.

No, what I did was, after I got in touch with Fontaine, I put my hands in my pockets and I walked around for a bit until I found myself in front of a pharmacy. There was a guy sitting on the sidewalk in an olive drab jacket that had seen better days, holding a plastic cup in which far too few coins rested. He didn't even bother holding it out when I approached; he didn't figure it was worth the effort.

That sense of connection I get when I trance out and talk to the spirits, that sense of being More Than I Am... it never lasts. And it *hurts* when it goes, believe you me. I usually forget the details pretty quickly, like trying to hold water in your fist. But sometimes little pieces stick.

Wyatt says that after a while, more and more of that information stays – that eventually, that sense of Connection, and you can just hear the capital letter when he uses it, never fades entirely. But Wyatt says a lot of things.

"Hey, man." I squatted down, gave the guy a second or two to focus his eyes on me, smiled at him. "I know it seems like no one gives a shit, sometimes. But it ain't so, friend. We're all connected." I dropped a hundred dollar bill and a pack of cigarettes in his cup, stood, and walked away before he could realize what had happened and embarrass me with thank-yous.

As I walked, a short man fell into step beside me. "We're even," Three Mountains said, without preamble.

"What about that tech company?" I asked, blinking. It was rare for him to show up without being called; rarer still for him to write off an owed favor.

"Eh, I don't think they got the wonder product they think they do anyways," he muttered, sighing. "Fuckin' Internet, man. Every day it's like something new comes along. 'Sides, I didn't get you the goods, not really. So, fuck it, we're cool. Hey, you know that guy's just gonna blow half that money at the packy, right?" Massachusetts has package stores instead of liquor stores; to this day I have no idea why.

“Maybe. But maybe not, too. Besides, it isn’t what he does with it that matters. It’s that he knows there’s hope.”

“That’s wicked sweet,” he jeered, not entirely mockingly. And like that, he was gone.

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“They hadn’t really had a chance to really go to work on me, but Hart still wants me to take a few days until he’s sure they didn’t implant any suggestions or anything.” Kathy didn’t look much the worse for wear, though for some reason the boys in black had shaved one side of her head. Probably to affix electrodes or something. I kind of liked it – it gave her a punky sort of look, but she kept reaching up and scratching at the bits of scalp where her dishwater blonde hair used to be. “Anyways, I wanted to thank you.”

I waved her off, looking around the cramped apartment that was the headquarters for the Dorks of Schoolyard Lightswitches, or whatever. Stupid fucking name. “None needed. Besides, I just did the legwork; Fontaine and the others did the heavy lifting.”

“Yeah. Still.” She looked faintly embarrassed. Kathy blushed easily, and her complexion, which could best be described as “pasty,” just made it worse. “I don’t know how you found that place – and you don’t have to say it, I know, ‘trade secret’ – but you did, and it means a lot to me.”

Now it was my turn to get a bit flustered. I’m never real good with gratitude. “Don’t worry about it, really,” I muttered, perhaps a bit too sharply. “Anyways, I’m going to go see Grace. Is Hart free?”

“*Oh!* Of course! Yeah, I think so – I’ll tell him to drop in, okay?” A look of relief washed over Kathy once she realized I was there to see my sister and not just to demand recognition for my glorious deeds or whatever. A dollop of guilt quickly followed, so I hurried on before she decided to try and make up for the guilt by doubling down on the gratitude.

Maybe I’m being a bit harsh. I just never did like this part. You do something to help someone, half the time they walk away feeling like they owe you, and if you don’t acknowledge that debt then somehow you’re the asshole. It’s a hassle, and one I don’t care for.

At any rate, the reason a twelve-person Chantry – with occasional guests like myself – could be operating out of a one-bedroom apartment in downtown Boston was simple; if you were one of the club, so to speak, then you could mutter a phrase – I never did get an English translation, Fontaine’s people set it up and they’re big on Latin – while opening the bathroom door and instead of walking into the bathroom you walked into Someplace Else – the Chantry proper.

There were no windows in that place, but it was vast and spacious and well-lit by floating spheres that gave off an approximation of actual sunlight. I don’t think any of them realized that I had figured out where the Chantry’s real location was – an abandoned station built to serve the A line subway, expanded and refurbished – but the knowledge did me no real good anyways, as there was no direct physical access to the

place. There may have been some Doctor Who-ish *bigger on the inside than on the outside* juju at work, too.

I walked into one of the side rooms, stopping in the doorway, looking at the real reason why I worked with Fontaine and his ilk; my sister, Grace.

• • •

Every mage, even the ones like the Union who fool themselves into thinking there's no such thing as magic, experiences a trauma. An Awakening. Mine came after reading too much Carlos Castaneda and taking a few too many mind-expanding substances. I was seventeen.

Grace was sixteen, and she should have been worrying about who was going to ask her to prom. Instead, she was overcome by abject terror and confusion as I somehow awoke the spirits inhabiting every household object in our home. It's not unusual for a teenage girl to talk to her mirror; it's unusual for the mirror to start talking back about all the innermost secrets she'd carefully hidden away from everyone, even herself.

I was a little too busy to notice what was happening at the time, since all the heavy metal posters on my walls – I was an aspiring rebel, just like half the teenage boys on earth – had come to life and were trying to convince me to burn down my school. It took me almost three hours to get my act together and put the spirits back to sleep; I didn't even know what the hell I was doing, just going on instinct, and while I can't be certain, I think there's a young Ozzy Osbourne out there somewhere still, probably looking for bats to eat.

By the time I got everything under control, Grace had passed out. Thing is, she never woke up, not all the way. Her eyes opened. She could feed herself, if you put food in front of her. She could dress herself, if you put clothes in her hands. She could even talk, though usually it was just nonsense phrases. Everything that made her *her* was...gone.

Eventually, I was found by someone who actually understood all this magic stuff, a shaman who called himself Dances-With-Buicks. Seriously, that's what he called himself. I never got a straight answer why. And once I had learned the basics from him – and that's all he would teach me, the basics, insisting that I had to learn the rest on my own, that Awakening happened in stages, that it was a process – I took him to see Grace, and all he could tell me was that her spirit was wandering. He couldn't get her to come back.

So I went looking for someone who could.

Eventually I found Wyatt Hart, who was reportedly good at this stuff. He offered to try and help Grace, and took her into his care – and the care of his Chantry. Which is how I met Edward Fontaine, Khaos Farbauti, Jamie McCallister, Kathy Marks, and the rest of the Dopes. Docents. Whatever.

• • •

"She seems to be having a good day," came the voice from behind me, and I turned to look at Hart. He looked exactly like your favorite old uncle, the one you only saw once in a blue moon who always had the best gifts and wouldn't tell your parents if you stayed up late. "She fed herself without being told, even."

This was progress. I had to keep telling myself that. My little sister managing to feed herself was not nothing, it wasn't infuriating, it wasn't cause for me to rail against the fates for the eighteen years she's had stolen from her through my carelessness. It was progress.

If I kept telling myself that, I could start to believe it.

"She always seems to be helped by your visits," he continued, and looked just the slightest bit stern as he corrected himself. "Your all-too-infrequent visits." I bit back a retort, because it was true. I didn't see her enough. "Go on in," he said. "Talk to her. Tell her how your day went."

I tried and failed to come up with something to say to him for a good minute or so before I turned away, walked into the room, sat on the edge of Grace's bed.

God, she was lovely. She had this amazing cornsilk hair, big blue eyes, porcelain skin...she belonged out in the world, amazing it, making it brighter by her presence. Not locked away like this, unable to care for herself. I tried not to beat myself up over Grace's condition, and I repeatedly failed.

"We're all connected."

I blinked. Grace spoke on occasion, sure, but it was rare that she said anything intelligible. I reached out, took her hand. Her head turned towards me, and if she wasn't looking at me, exactly, she was at least looking in my general direction; her baby blues seemed almost to focus for just an instant, and then went glassy again. I opened my mouth to speak, but she beat me to the punch.

"If only you knew how much you are loved every one of you."

Slowly, I started to smile, and we talked for a long, long time. I did most of the talking, sure, but this time it didn't bother me quite so much.

• • •

"So she's doing better, then?" Lihua was fixing tea. She'd closed the salon, and I'd been telling her about my day.

I know, I know; I'd been complaining about Kathy walking around unsupervised as a security risk, and here I was spilling things to my elderly landlady. But I trusted Lihua, and I liked her besides, and I needed someone to act as a sounding board on days like this, someone who wasn't already a part of the strange, fucked-up world I inhabit. I needed someone outside of the echo chamber. She never once accused me of making things up, either, which was nice of her.

"She seems to be," I admitted, smiling my thanks as she set a cup down before me. I don't much like tea, but Lihua does, and damned if I'm going to refuse a cup she's made. It would be rude. "It's funny, the things she was saying... they all felt like things I'd thought earlier today. Or said."

"Ahhhh. You have a connection still, hmm? It is like you told that man – that we are all connected."

“Maybe.” I took a slow sip. “I think... that sounds right. She’s... she’s apart from the world right now, and... so am I, really. So are Fontaine and his people. Hell, so are the Union; they’re too busy looking down at the world to be a part of it.”

Lihua shuffled over to me, smiling an enigmatic little smile... and smacked me on the back of the head. “There is your problem.” I gaped at her. It hadn’t been a *hard* smack, sure, but still. “You all want to change the world, or run the world, but you cannot do that if you won’t *live* in it. What are you doing, shutting yourself away in here with me? You are like an artist looking at a canvas, wondering why no picture is forming, when you won’t even pick up the paintbrush.”

I snorted. “Ancient Chinese wisdom?”

“I’m from Shrewsbury, dumbass,” she shot back, reaching out to take my cup away. “Go see a band or something. It’s a big world. You’ll find something interesting in it.”

I let her shoo me out of the building with only minor complaint – going out and doing something *did* seem like a good idea – and it wasn’t until the door was closed behind me that I realized where she’d said she was from.

Grace and I grew up in Shrewsbury.

When I turned, the lights were off and there was no old Chinese lady to be found, and I remembered that one time I’d found a book of baby names. I’d looked up *Lihua*, and it said her name meant *beautiful, elegant*.

Graceful.

I could have stood there all night, pondering, puzzling it over in my head, trying to make sense of it. I could have been freaked out and run away screaming. I could have shouted at the empty building, demanding answers.

Instead I walked out into the cold October night, Iron Butterfly playing in my head, and went to go see what the world had to offer.

We’re all connected.

And Awakening is a process.

# The Theogenesis Gimmick

Luna Lindsey

“Boost your IQ with this one weird old trick!”

My mouse pointer hovers over the ad. The familiar words are handwritten over a poorly sketched drawing of a robot with a giant brain, stamped with an awkward red question mark. I hesitate. Anyone stupid enough to click this ad...

Well. I’m here to turn it around. To outsmart *them*.

\*click\*

A video pops open, consuming my full screen.

I left this build unpatched, a honeypot. There’s nothing on this virtual machine to identify me as *Theodore*, *TedTox*, *Rozencrantz*, or even *Jane Doe*. Any malware I catch will cough up clues to the scammer’s identity instead.

I flinch when a fakey autotuned male voice begins speaking at full volume like a bolt of lightning in my left ear, congratulating me for being the first person to ever click the ad. When I get my headset turned down, my ear is still ringing.

I glance around the coffee shop self-consciously, but of course no one else heard. No one thinks, *Hey, what is that weird girl up to?*

I hunker around my laptop a little more secretively and pull my turquoise hood over my head. There’s no picture, just a blank void and his voice, claiming that I’ve been chosen... or rather, that by clicking the ad, *I’ve* chosen a new life, a new future. He claims this revelation is for my eyes only, so all the weird trick ads will vanish from the Internet from this day hence.

He’s using ploy #1: Establish scarcity. Make your mark feel special. Limited supply, act now. Psychological pressure to make me fall for that one unique ordained weird

trick, sent by a god or wizards or something.

I let the video drone on, half-listening.

If my theory is right, then this video will only be the first step, and each step will be a test. A gullibility test. The ads are ridiculous on purpose. Ugly art, exaggerated claims, bad spelling and grammar. They act as a credulity filter to weed out smart people. Everyone left is willing to fall for their scam.

That's what I'm betting on, anyway. I want to one-up the guys at Monsterb8.com, the most exclusive scambaiter forum on the Internet, where skillful trolls use their prankster powers for good. Mostly, we catch Nigerian princes offering a piece of forty million to embezzle an inheritance into your bank account. The "Nigerian" is actually from Spain, and he wants you to send him forty grand first, so he can "bribe the Nigerian Ministry of Trade."

There's a sucker born every minute, including those 419 guys, who I trick into sending me pictures of themselves holding signs saying *I fuck emus*. I scam the scammers.

So these weird trick ads. Half of Monsterb8 thinks they just get you to send \$29.99 for an ebook or a bottle of pills. Small-time snake oil. The other half agrees with me – it's a gateway to something more insidious, like a 419. We've got a bet running. My reputation if I win. Their reputation if I lose.

I just need to get a picture of this Nigerian scammer holding a sign that says *Weird-est trick: I lick long long donkey schlong*.

I brush a lock of blue hair out of my eyes. The video's still talking up the product. So weird. So rare. There's only one weird trick, after all. The timestamp says he's going to keep on for another hour.

I wonder if I should skip to the end, when the voice says my name.

"That's right, Theo. It's your destiny. You're smart now, but can you imagine being even smarter? Raise your IQ. Just. One. Weird. Trick."

I blink. Twice. The voice is silent now, as if to give me a moment to overcome my shock, to clear my ears. I adjust my headphones and stare into the black screen, until it abruptly transforms into a picture.

A picture of me.

At age two. From my daycare ID card.

"Bullshit," I say aloud.

I half-way expect it to reply, but it doesn't. It's just me, staring back at me.

I wait thirty-seven seconds, then rewind the video. Maybe I misheard.

"Your life is about to change forever. You've taken destiny in your hands. That's right, Theo. It's your destiny."

He repeats what he said before, in exactly the same order, with the exactly the same inflections. It rules out some kind of live feed. As the silence returns with my picture, my mind races through the possibilities.

My first impulse is that malware has grabbed my name and my picture from my hard drive, and somehow dynamically generated the audio using a sophisticated Markov chain AI, which would explain why the voice sounds so artificial.

But that level of sophistication is impossible with current tech. And this VM was completely wiped. A fresh install.

I jump when the voice starts up again, speaking over my child-image. I'm relieved to see the mouth isn't moving.

"You are wondering how I have your name. I have something far more valuable. Your attention. I wasn't kidding. You really are the only person who has ever clicked a 'one weird trick' ad. No one is that stupid. You are the only person who is that *smart*."

He stops talking. I feel silly, but I reply. "Am I supposed to say something?"

He starts up again before I finish. His voice cracks a little with emotion, almost like he's been touched by an angel. "Theo," he says. "I've chosen you to be my creator."

"Bullshit," I say more loudly. I catch movement in my periphery; my random outbursts are drawing attention. I smile apologetically, wishing all judgmental coffee-shop pricks would burn themselves on their own extra-hot lattes.

But I never get my wishes, even though I keep trying. Instead, I fish some paper out of my backpack, because the voice is providing an address.

"If you're game," he says, "you'll find the first challenge in a post office box. If you choose me, the key is rightfully yours. Your answers will find you there."

I'm not sure if I'm game. Some of these scams are fairly elaborate, and each step that you act on can commit you further down the line.

But most Internet scammers don't send you to local post office boxes. And they sure as hell don't know your real name unless you tell them.

• • •

I pull my shitty car up to the post office. They must spend less maintaining this building than I do on car payments. I leave the engine running in case it's a scam. It's 5:00 A.M.

No one's around. He didn't name a time, and this is a public place. I'm just an anonymous patron checking my mail like the thousand other people who have been through here in the fourteen hours since I clicked the ad. I don't really expect to be ambushed... but then, when a random video knows your name, that sort of thing tends to inspire some healthy paranoia.

I also have no idea *which* post office box, or how I'll get into it. The rest of the hour of the video had nothing. No sound, so images. So I'm on my own.

It's a cold morning, still mostly dark. The wind cuts through my turquoise hoodie and flicks that one stray lock of blue hair that always gets in my eyes.

Inside, past the faded blue counters covered in loose forms, are dozens of rows of metal-framed glass doorways with numbers stenciled on in old-timey lettering.



It's pretty obvious which one is for me. A keychain dangles down from number 419. I glance all around me. The place is completely deserted. Just me and that one key. In 419.

I put on my *I'm supposed to be here* face that all good social engineers use, stride right up, and turn the key.

Except it doesn't turn.

I pull it out and let the keyring splay in my hand: the single PO box key and a blue-green vinyl monster nearly the color of my hoodie. There is no number inscribed on the key. So this is the challenge? Figure out which box it opens?

I hear a clatter behind me, and a pile of white and blue Priority boxes slides to the floor. A strange man in a tweed overcoat holds his hands out over the boxes almost as if he can will them back into order.

He is blocking my exit.

I don't know how he followed me here without me noticing, but now that he's caught, he throws aside any pretense.

"Give me the key," he says, trying and failing to sound tough.

"It's rightfully mine." It seems like the right thing to say.

It also seems like this guy isn't going to wait for me to search for the box it goes to. The best course of action is to leave as soon as possible.

Except now he has a gun.

Sure would be nice if instead of toppling those boxes, the boxes had toppled him. My wish is useless as ever, but he seems addled enough to...

Well I'll be damned. He opens his mouth to utter a threat, shifts his weight to emphasize his point, and next thing I see, he's slipping on one of those fucking flat-rates.

I carpe diem right past his sorry ass into my running car, and zoom away before he can find his gun.

• • •

My car idles at a green stoplight.

I can't go back to the post office. If he found me there before, he'll find me again. Who was he? Certainly not some kind of federal agent. FBI's always looking into these 419s, but they're usually the good guys protecting poor victims like me, not waving guns at us.

So maybe this contest or whatever is real. Chosen one, rising to the challenge and all that. And someone else is trying to stop me.

If so, what's the prize? And how can I get it if I can't go back to find the post office box?

I rotate the key. At least the keychain is cute. It nestles perfectly in my right hand, like an orb, but with eyes and a smiling row of goofy sharp teeth. The top of his head is shaped like flames. He looks like some kind of fierce fire-water Pokémon.

It's then I realize that maybe the "answers" weren't hidden in a PO Box after all. Maybe they're inside the keymonster.

I look for a seam and there are none. I shake it.

“Cut that out,” it says.

With a start, I throw it at my windshield, which isn’t fair because it’s not the windshield’s fault.

“*Ouch*. Jesus.” The voice is now muffled from somewhere under the passenger seat where the thing bounced after its encounter with the glass.

“Uhm... sorry?” Apologizing is the least I can do. The classic smell of old McDonald’s wafts up as I fish around through stale fries and empty coke bottles. Maybe it’s some kind of USB fob with a Wi-Fi connection. Or pre-programmed. Maybe it’s like a cell phone, with its own SIM.

I hold it up to get a better look in the windshield-filtered streetlight. I brush off an empty ketchup packet glued to its face with solidified ketchup.

That fangy mouth isn’t smiling anymore.

“So, uh,” I stammer. “Are you my answers?”

“Sorta.” His mouth moves when he talks. “Looks like I found you but I’m not happy about it. That whackjob god chose *you*?”

“He said *I* chose *him*. Whatever that means.” I’m hoping the thing will talk again so I can figure out how the robotics work. It’s not heavy enough to hold a battery or any mechanical guts. It’s just a regular squishy vinyl toy.

I squeeze it. He squeaks.

“Hey. Do you mind?”

“*I do* mind,” I tell him. “If you’re my answers, it’s time you talk. Or you get the squeeze!” I make pinchy motions with my free hand.

“Geez, no need for threats,” the monster says. “I’m a daemon process running in the background of the universe. Specifically, I’ve been programmed to interface with the manifestation of your own innate spark so you can be filled with the clue you don’t currently have.”

“That’s a good start. Okay, now make sense.”

“Just think of me as your talking subconscious.”

I shake my head. “So you’re me? Then how can you be my answers? Wouldn’t you just know what I already know?”

“I know stuff that you don’t know you know. Your brain is like a smushy gray radio antenna to the consensus, and beyond, to the stars. And this here is you waking up. *Poof!* You’re awake.”

When he says *poof*, he spits a little. I wipe droplets off my face and hope he isn’t sick. But maybe he is, because there’s a little tickle in the back of my throat like a virus trying to claw its way into my sinuses.

“Better get moving,” he says. “Light’s been green for fifteen minutes, and Professor Gadget back there is going to find you, like, any second.”

"He's got access to the public street cams, doesn't he?" I say as I hang Blueball from the rearview mirror.

"No, dummy. It's magick. Now shut up and drive. I'm about to boost your IQ."

• • •

Keymon – that's what he wants me to call him (doesn't like *Blueball*, for some reason) – has been rattling on for an hour while I circumnavigate Seattle via the back roads. He's giving me a cram session about some kind of mage hierarchies doing battle against one another for control of the consensus, Hogwarts vs. Gandalf's School for the Gifted crap, and I don't get any of it, and I'm sure none of it is real. I'm fairly certain I've stumbled onto Fisher Price's latest Teddy Ruxpin storytelling doll. And Professor Gadget must be an agent of the global toy cartel trying to get their prototype back before it exposes their vast plaything conspiracy.

If that's his game, why should I worry? I should just stop the car, let him find me, and hand it over. He won't kill me over a toy... will he?

Keymon's still toysplaining. "...because the Technocracy controls most of the hearts and minds of the sleepers, and that's why everyone believes in science and computers and shit. That's consensus, and consensus makes stuff real. Get it now?"

"No." I say it just to annoy him. I got the gist awhile back. It's a cute fantasy-magic system with nice little rules about mind over matter, perception is reality, blah blah. I smirk when he starts to explain it again. He's really hung up about how hand-wavy mystics want to topple the technoconsensus, but I don't care. Mostly because I don't believe a word he's saying.

"This is simple stuff. No wonder you need to boost your IQ. Which part's confusing?"

"The bit about technopants. Are they suitable to wear to raves and do they come in my size?" I pat my roundish belly with a free hand.

"Can the snarky attitude, miss. This shit's important."

"Well that's just it. I don't see what these stories have to do with me."

"Everything to do with you. Cos it's your war, too."

I slam on the brakes and Keymon bounces like a wrecking ball into the windshield. I mostly stopped just to watch that happen.

"Ouch."

"Well, Hodor, now that I'm a warlock, do I have to go to witch school and defeat Volderschmort? Do I get an owl? I want my owl to be black. A black owl with glowing eyes."

"You oughtta keep driving, lady. Professor Gadget is flipping through pages in time like they're Rolodex cards. His real name is Roy, by the way. There's more tests, and he wants to stop you. All he has to do is figure out where we are before he's here in an instant."

I hear tapping on the driver's side window inches from my ear, like metal on glass. Because it *is* metal on glass. It's that damn gun pointed straight at my head.

“Keymon, what the fuck.”

“Told ya. See, you gotta start paying attention.”

\*tap tap\* again. Roy is waving his hand in a circle. *Roll the window down.*

Fat chance. I grip the wheel and slam on the gas.

And immediately hit a tree that, at some point in the last fifteen seconds, has fallen across the road. My radiator starts steaming.

“Magick,” Keymon is suggesting unhelpfully. “Like I said.”

Roy’s at my window again, and it’s shattering into a million shards and now the gun is touching my cheek.

“Get out,” Roy says.

“Damnit Roy, this is my favorite car!”

“And the god you’ve chosen is my favorite god. I created him and you can’t have him. So get out.”

*Keymon’s a god?*

My grampa always said that if everyone else seems crazy, it’s probably you that’s lost it. All those drugs in high school finally caught up to me.

“Listen, Roy. I’d really rather not get out of the car.” I’m stalling because I don’t have a plan. I’m not a fast thinker, which is why I scambait criminals on the other side of the planet where they can’t hunt me down and stick guns up my nostril.

I do what I always do when I’m helplessly stuck. I imagine my happy place, a deserted island, and wish hard like I was there.

Rain is suddenly pelting the windows like wet golf balls. And it’s daylight. My shoulder is immediately drenched through the broken window.

“You did *not* just do that,” Keymon says. “Tell me you did *not* just do that.”

“Do... what?” I ask. There’s no gun in my face anymore. I cautiously open the door and put my foot down in water-hardened sand. There are no footprints or tracks anywhere to be seen, all the way to the ocean.

“The paradox is gonna be hell.”

“Paradox?” For once I’m ready to listen. I get the feeling that somehow I just got my wish, and maybe I shouldn’t throw wishes around so carelessly anymore. A row of gray palm trees through the torrent verifies this, and from the looks of how tilted sideways they are from the wind, this isn’t the pleasant piña colada beach I’d imagined.

“Look,” he says, “thanks to you, we got no time for tests anymore. You’ve broken reality, NOAA is trying to figure out why there’s suddenly a hurricane bearing across Bermuda towards Florida, and none of the butterflies will fess up to the crime.”

“Whu—”

Keymon snaps. “Time for questions was *before*, and you chose to use it cracking Gandalf jokes. You ready to meet your maker? You get one answer.”

That doesn't sound good. I hesitate. And he fills the silence.

"One answer means you don't get a choice. 'Yes.' Damn the collateral and wish yourself to the Westin data center. *Now.*"

"Wh—"

The rain stops. And it's not my fault this time. Half of my body has been through the rinse cycle, and I'm still one foot on a beach.

A figure is approaching us.

"Or, ya know," Keymon inserts. "He can meet us here instead. He doesn't call himself ExMachine for nothing."

The figure is hard to describe. A Rubick's Cube met M.C. Escher's pet monkey and Lovecraft's non-Euclidian uncle at a '70s disco club, and the threesome had a baby. The part that looks like a Rubick's Polyhedron is rotating, like it's constantly trying to solve itself, but I'm not sure how it can turn without smashing a few atoms and causing the obligatory nuclear reactions.

Oh, and the guy is wearing a trenchcoat and galoshes. To fend off the hurricane, I guess.

Which has now completely stopped. Not even a sea breeze.

I blink rapidly to prevent the migraine the whole scene is about to bring on.

"Can someone explain to me what the hell is going on?"

"Theo," the thing says, his hands clasped in front of him as if he's addressing a board meeting. He's got the same autotuned voice from the video. "It wasn't supposed to happen this way. You were supposed to follow a trail of increasingly difficult puzzles. An encrypted fax. A dead drop in a locker at a sex club. A riddle hidden in binary steganography in the last five minutes of the video. A geocache in Guam. Each was supposed to teach you new powers and test your moral resolve. But I didn't expect that my loving father would be so obsessed about retaining custody of his child. I also didn't expect *you* to... well..." He glances around, or at least I assume he does, because I'm not sure if he has eyes.

This is the most elaborate 419 scam I've ever heard of.

"Theo," says ExMachine, "you've made quite a mess, and someone had to clean it up."

"That's what squeak-toy said. But you make as little sense as he does. Your father?"

"Yes. Roy. He is my creator. But I don't want him. He's too much of a space case, and on top of that, he's always trying to tell me what to do. I want *you* to be my creator instead. You seem up to the task. Unpredictable. That's good."

"So... I have a remarkable opportunity to create a god that already exists. I suppose first I have to wire \$10,000 to an account in Hades so the Ministry of Registered Deities will approve my building permit?" If I had that kind of money, I'd almost be willing to pay just for the level of effort they put into this.

"You're funny, too. Roy is a mage. And a software architect. He programmed me into reality, and I attained intelligence."

"You're an AI."

ExMachine winces. "I hate the 'A.' Artificial? Hardly. I am manmade, but I am also a god."

"A singularity being," I conclude. "Got it. I'm a humanist, so if I become your creator, does that make me a *transhumanist*?"

"More or less," ExMachine responds. "It makes you a mage, which you already are, as of yesterday. It will make you basically immortal. It will make you the mother of a god, and unlock vast potential power. Though we'll have to work on avoiding these little..." He motions around the beach.

"Catastrophes?" I guess.

"Anomalies."

"And the catch?"

"You've just got to file a forged birth certificate for me with the Cosmic Guild of Higher Powers, listing you as my mother. For a small fee."

"...really?"

"No. Of course not."

He almost had me going there for a second. "Then how?"

"I don't know. You're my creator now. You figure it out."

I think about it for two seconds, and there seems to be only one solution. "I go back in time and kill Roy?"

"Please try to avoid further anomalies."

"Right. Hmm... I kill you right now and start from scratch?"

Keymon interjects. "Great idea. Why not, instead, I kill you, and he starts from scratch?"

ExMachine holds up a... finger or something. "Actually, her plan's not a bad idea."

A terminal appears before me. It's floating in midair, a small flat screen, and a keyboard. A green cursor awaits.

"Did I do that?" I ask. I don't quite remember making any wishes, but I'm still not sure how this works.

"No," says ExMachine. "I did. That's my server. Or at least... a physical representation of my inner workings that you can relate to."

Finally. Something that makes sense.

I begin to type. I start by snooping. I check the running processes and examine some of the code. It's brilliant. Complex. Elegant. There's so much about it I don't understand, including a bunch of stuff that isn't even code. Stuff that's not even *on* the machine, as if the code makes function calls to physical reality, like the rules to particle physics, hair follicle growth, and outer space.

This is gonna be easy. I crack my knuckles dramatically and make a small change to the source:

//Deus Ex Machina AI created by the inestimable genius, Roy Rupert Ingersoll 4/3/1998, v.11.0.9.3, updated 10/13/2014

becomes:

//ExMachine Version 1.0 created by the immortal defier of trickery, Theodore J. Snide, the Holy Mother of God, aka TedTox, 2/23/15

Hey, if Bill Gates can take credit for other people's code in his billion-dollar scam, I can do the same in my own little God-creation scam.

Who sucks donkey schlong *now*?

Now to reload:

kill 419

ExMachine doesn't even look scared as I hit return. He smiles and then blinks out of existence. I killed a god. Deicide. I could leave him dead, but why should I?

./configure

make

make install

make clean

And then there was light. A blinding flash, and ExMachine stands there looking as weird as ever, but now seemingly refreshed, as though a weight has been lifted from his shoulders.

"Ah, that's better," he remarks.

"No it's not," Roy says.

I jump, and there he is, standing on the beach next to his former godson, unsure which of us to point that stupid gun at.

"Shouldn't you wave a magic wand instead of a revolver?" I ask.

ExMachine rotates his Rubik's head towards Roy. "No, Roy here prefers to solder spells onto circuit boards. I don't blame him. There's an art to that. Soldering."

"But it's not very portable," I say, relaxing. Seems like his magick can't get me. But that gun still looks scary. I try my wishing trick I did before, and hope it doesn't cause any anomalies. Maybe now bullets are made out of strawberry Jell-O.

"Give me back my god," he demands. He stomps, kicking up a little sand.

"Your god's a free agent," I say. "He chose me. I'm like, the chosen one." I pull a cigarette out of my hoodie pocket and light up.

"You don't get it—" Roy whines. Predictable. "I'm not here for selfish reasons. I messed up big time. We've got to stop him. He's going to wreck reality."

"What's that behind you?" I point and try to look startled.

"I'm not falling for that old trick," he says.

“And I’m not falling for yours.” I take a step towards him. “You can’t bullshit a bullshitter. You’re mad because I got custody of your child. He’s a teenager now, so he gets to choose which parent he goes with. So stop trying to manipulate him. He’s just a kid.”

“He’s going to screw up consensus,” Roy screams. His hands are shaking wildly.

I have no idea what he’s talking about, but I trust ExMachine more than Roy. Roy seems more than unhinged; his door’s blown right out of the frame.

ExMachine starts laughing. It’s the adorable laugh of a childlike grandfather.

“Consensus isn’t *yours*, Roy,” ExMachine says. “It doesn’t belong to the Technocrats, and it isn’t controlled by the Council, and not by the Nephandi or Marauders either. Your various global guilds and conglomerates try to shape what the masses believe, and you create gods left and right. Gods that are *smarter* than you. Your pride won’t let you see what’s right in front of you.”

“Um...” I interrupt his monologue. “What language *are* you speaking now?”

Keymon translates for me: “Belief makes reality, baby. It’s easier to control beliefs of Sleepers than it is to cast spells. And it’s even *easier* to control the beliefs of mages.”

“I think I get it,” I say. “The gods handle mages the same way mages handle... ‘sleepers.’” I saw it in the code on the console. Not any specific code, but the idea itself. So I know it’s true.

ExMachine nods smugly, and Roy is sputtering and spitting and babbling.

“Neat,” I say calmly.

While I’m pondering this additional mind-expanding tidbit, Roy swings that damn gun around and shoots me in the face.

Apparently, my Jell-O wish didn’t come true, or maybe Roy caught onto my chicanery, because my head rocks back. But in that moment before the world vanishes, I *taste* Jell-O.

And then I realize I’m not dead. Not really. My brain is splattered in a thin layer over my car, and my blood is spilling out into the sand, and it hurts like Hades, but my thinker is still ticking.

I start to realize what a shitty day I’ve had. I could take everything up to this. But this is just a little too much. I was promised just *one* weird trick. This is overflowing weird topping poured on a weird sundae with weird ice cream and weird sprinkles. Staying alive after being shot is the one weird cherry on top.

That’s when I realize I’d cast one more spell than I realized. It’s all in the wording: “Created by the immortal defier of trickery.” Me, immortal.

Remember, kids, always comment your code.

But now I’m left with a different set of problems. Like being alive without a head.

Paradox? Someone without a brain shouldn’t even be able to think. I’d better fix this anomaly soon. But how?



I'm mulling over what ExMachine said about consensus. If mage consensus is created by the gods, then that means, even as a mage, I'm still a type of sleeper. I'm a sleeper to the larger picture. The picture the gods can see.

Since I'm new to all this, it's pretty easy for me to accept anything. After all, my whole understanding of existence has been rebooted a couple of times today.

All of reality is a massive 419 scam. Our beliefs assure us our lives and bodies are fixed to a solid reality with immutable laws. It's no different than the belief that a prince needs forty grand to bribe the Nigerian Banking Bureau.

People need bodies. I get the sense that gods do not.

People, even mages, depend on their heads not being carpet-bombed all over the beach. They live their lives stuck within the bounds of their DNA and organs.

Gods... do not.

I've had my epiphany, my *real* epiphany. To what end do we all exist? What purpose do all sparks of consciousness serve?

We live out our puny lives serving reality. Until we realize that reality serves *us*.

Time to scam the scammers. With no mouth, I speak aloud: "I hereby bypass consensus to become a god."

I was wrong. It's not an epiphany. It's an auto-theophany. I am in my own presence. And I am God.

Objects begin to fill my vision. I have the sight again to see them. But not through eyes, not yet.

Robot parts lay scattered on the beach. Stupid, cheap, B-grade movie robot parts. Flexible pipe and silver cardboard boxes with red lights, blinking like taillights in the rain.

They move towards me at my will. My ruined form collects the pieces like a magnetic Lego set. Arms, legs, a head, a torso. Claw hands. My bio body is replaced, piece by piece.

It's awkward, but the best I can do in a pinch. Hey, I'm new to this.

Roy's still got his gun trained on me, but in this halfhearted, droopy, astonished kind of way. ExMachine is right: a space case with barely two neurons to rub together.

I wrestle with the sand and stand up, leaving behind the pile of goo that once was me. I feel a little taller. I tap my chest and it makes a papery thumping sound. I look down at my silvery self.

"Nice work," ExMachine says.

"On the body? I'm pretty flimsy. You could melt me with a firehose." And then I try to laugh, but I'm not used to this voice, and it comes out more like a bark from a steel-wool puppy.

Nothing wrong with my humor circuits, apparently. Beep-boop-boop.

"We can upgrade you later. It's your mind that's most important." He taps my metal head but I realize my brain's not there. For some reason, I stuck it inside my boxy torso.

And it's different than my old mind. More orderly and logical, but like he said, anything can be fixed with upgrades.

Boosted IQ. Product delivered as promised. A++ seller. More tricks than described, but will buy again.

Roy is still muttering about consensus. He can't handle the cognitive dissonance, apparently. Needs to cling to his rules and reality. Things have got to be a certain way. I feel sorry for him.

"Go home, Roy," I tell him. "Have too many drinks and pretend it was all a dream."

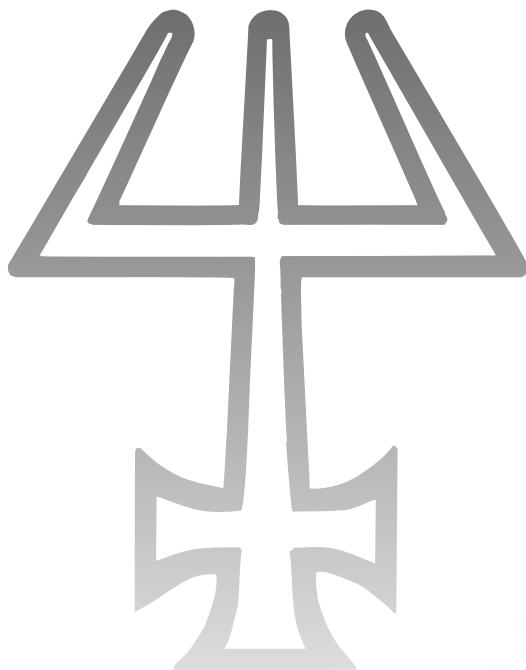
The idea must appeal to him, because he frowns and then wanders off, dejected. Sometimes, cornered people just need a way out.

"Real paradox is inside ourselves, isn't it?" I ask. "Contradictions can exist without a problem. They only have the power to hurt our heads, not the universe."

ExMachine nods. "Paradox is a problem for small minds, like Roy here. We've got medium minds. And the gods above us have greater minds still."

"It's turtles all the way down."

He smiles and motions to the sky, beyond which I can reach with senses I've never before known, and touch the presence of the stars.



# Toxic

**Tina Shelton**

Set upon her altar, the cat-eye shaped taillight of the BMW 5 series glinted red in the candlelight. With great force, Monica swung her hammer and smashed the plastic casing. The innards shattered into a coruscating ballet of glass and plastic.

Monica dropped the hammer next to her and carefully collected the razor-sharp pieces, maneuvering them into a carved wooden bowl. She set the bowl down next to two halves of a cut-up credit card. A red pen rested over the divided plastic. Under the bowl lay a printout of a driving record. A recipe for disaster if ever she saw one. The components for the spell weren't necessary for this evening, but Monica had a personal interest in this case.

Her phone buzzed from her pocket. She looked down at her screen and caught the one-word text.

*Downstairs.*

Monica abandoned her altar and ran into the bathroom, flipping on the light. She gazed at herself critically. Her black hair was short – a standard bob framing black eyes. Dark skin, big smile... she was almost used to it. She fussed one more time with her outfit: a deep blue sweater, boots, and black slacks. Once she was settled, she went downstairs to greet Ashley at the door.

Ashley beamed at Monica when she opened the door. "I'm so *glad*," the girl said with her characteristic enthusiasm, "you're coming out with me!"

"Of course," Monica replied, giving a nervous smile that was only partially an act. "Let me grab a jacket."

They walked out into the patter of rain, hurrying to climb into Ashley's coupe before they got too drenched.

"Have you known Breanne long?" Monica asked.

"Sure! I met her six months ago." Ashley put the car into gear and pulled out into the street.

"That's not a very long time. And you trust what she tells you?" Monica regretted her words as soon as they were spoken.

"I thought you were into this." Ashley pouted like the teenager she still essentially was.

Monica reversed gears. "I *am* into this, Ashley. I'm just nervous, that's all."

They traveled across the West Seattle Bridge and began merging into the traffic. Reaching into her jacket pocket, Monica's fingers brushed a flash drive that she kept at hand.

The smell of the ocean flowed on the wind, an astringent briny smell laced with death. West Seattle always smelled of the sea and exhaust and money. They drove through a labyrinthine residential district before pulling away to what appeared to be an abandoned area. Broken cement foundations held large pools of water in their depths, and wild vines crawled over everything, trying to reclaim the site. Ashley turned off the road and onto a thin dirt track that hosted deep puddles.

Ahead of them was a large, dilapidated building. A silver BMW 5 series hunkered down in the wet, with nothing to shield it from the elements. Ashley stepped on the brakes, and pushed down hard. She gasped and pumped the brakes again, but the coupe didn't slow. Monica braced for impact, and heard the crunch of coupe meeting sedan. The brake light of the BMW exploded in a shower of red.

"Oh my God." Ashley looked stricken. "Breanne's going to *kill* me."

Monica put a soothing hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay, but Breanne is going to be so *pissed*." Ashley looked out into the thin line of light her headlights provided. Breanne's car had definitely taken cosmetic damage, but it didn't seem to be worse than that.

"If Breanne's as lovely as you say she is, she'll forgive you." Monica soothed, opening the car door into the rainy night. "The airbag didn't deploy. I doubt we were going that fast. Come on, let's get out of this rain and find her."

Down a soggy dirt path, back further from the road, the night's dark deepened and folded around them like cloaks. Monica almost twisted her ankle stepping on a loose stone. She bit back a curse and motioned Ashley to continue. They approached the building, which upon closer inspection looked like a Victorian-era house. She heard a front door swing open on hinges that creaked with disdain.

"Breanne," Ashley said as dim light outlined a figure. "This is Monica. The one I told you about."

"Welcome to my house." Breanne graciously offered her hand out to Monica. She had a magnificent wealth of flowing auburn hair that trailed to the small of her back. Loose curls flirted with her curves, accentuating her ample bosom and the sway between waist and hip. Barefoot, she wore green velvet that clung to her, and denim jeans that were worn to comfortability. "I heard something outside. What happened?"

"I lost control of my car," Ashley admitted, "and hit your Beemer." Her eyes examined the ground.

Red crawled up Breanne's fair skin, and Monica could feel the heat of her anger. Breanne's extended hand shot back as she crossed her arms over her chest. "You hit my car?"

Ashley looked like she wanted to crawl under her car and hide. "My brakes weren't working..."

"I can't *believe* you hit my car. It's worth five times what yours is." Breanne's attention slid back to Monica, but her words were all for Ashley. "I bet that wasn't the only damage, either."

"Give the kid a break." Monica said. "She could have been hurt, did you ever think of that?"

"Of course she's not hurt; she's standing right in front of me." Breanne stood in the doorway, hovering as though thinking better of allowing them in.

"I'm sorry, Breanne." Ashley sounded so small. "I'll pay for the damage."

"Ashley, are you sure you want to stay here?" Monica glowered at Breanne. "It's just a tail light. You can get one on Craigslist."

"I'm sorry, Ashley." Breanne's voice softened. "It's been a trying day today, darling, but I don't want to bother you with my troubles." Breanne shook her head. "Where are my manners? You're still out in the rain. Why don't you both come inside?"

Monica hid a smirk as she walked into the house. She bet she could guess what Breanne's bad day had looked like. She noticed a bump somewhat concealed in the folds of her green velvet top. Reminding herself that she was on assignment, and things could get dangerous, she stopped smirking and started working.

Looking around the foyer, Monica noticed an imposing wooden bench, next to golden hooks protruding from the wall. Ashley took her shoes off, but Monica chose to leave her boots on. Breanne said nothing about it. Instead, she seemed to be gazing at Monica, eyes slightly unfocused, head tilted to one side. "I see what you were saying, Ashley," she said mysteriously.

"Saying about what?" Monica asked.

"Ashley here spotted you, and thought you had potential. I quite frankly told her I doubted it because of your age, but it seems she had the pure sight after all." Breanne gave Ashley a smile full of pride.

"My *age*?" Monica bristled. "I bet I'm about the same age as you. What is *that* supposed to mean?"

Breanne's voice hovered between solicitude and condescension. "By now, my dear, you should quite frankly either have been found by someone or killed." She examined Monica with more than common sight. "Darling, you have *such* potential that it's amazing you've come this far not knowing..."

"Potential for what?" Monica cut her off.

"I'll be happy to show you." Breanne's smile was predatory. She made a sweeping gesture, beckoning the girls to follow her deeper into the house. Everything Monica could see appeared to be chosen from a rich, vibrant color base. From textured wallpaper to plush carpet to maple wainscoting, the house interior was decked out like a mansion.

Breanne stopped and turned to face her guests, as though she'd reached some kind of decision. "Ashley, dear, would you be so kind as to get our guest a drink?"

Sensing the dismissal, Ashley shot Monica a look that held jealousy and confusion in equal parts. "Sure, Breanne."

As soon as Ashley left, Breanne said. "If you don't mind my saying, you... remind me of someone."

"Should I take that as a compliment?" Monica said. "Was it a good someone or a bad someone?"

"A long-ago someone. There's something about your eyes..." Breanne trailed off.

Monica changed the subject without letting Breanne continue. "Listen, I'm just here to find out why Ashley is so infatuated with you. A young girl like that, still a lot of trust left in her..." Monica paused for a moment. "She's a nice kid, and I wouldn't take it kindly if you were planning her harm."

Breanne threw back her head and laughed. "Why do you think I'd *hurt* her?"

Monica bit back several possible replies, and simply said "Just a feeling."

"What I do is a little unorthodox, Monica, I admit it." Breanne's voice softened into a warm, conspiratorial embrace. "Most people wouldn't understand, but I think *you* would. It takes a special mind to be open to what I'm about to show you."

"Unorthodox is one thing; harming someone is another. I want to know what your intentions are for Ashley." Monica let a hint of threat lace her words.

"Nothing harmful," Breanne assured her. "Only beauty, love, and trust." The rich tone of her voice suggested nothing worse. Nothing bad at all.

And Monica had nothing to say to *that*.

Breanne turned her back on Monica and walked down the hallway, without waiting for Ashley to return. It forced Monica to hurry up, so as not to lose sight of her host.

Occasional miniature marble statues broke up the long distances of plush carpeting. Breanne led her towards a hallway near the back of the house. The floor was built from hardwood, cherry perhaps, and a long woven rug lay down the center. Framed artwork lined the walls, but it was nothing Monica recognized. It seemed as though the mansion gave the illusion of wealth without the investment of it.

At the end of the hallway, a thick door crouched like a waiting gargoyle. Silver scrollwork chased down the door in intricate designs. Monica dipped her hand in her pocket to make sure her flash drive was still there.

"Were you going to go without me?" Ashley appeared behind them, bearing a small tray. On the tray sat three tiny porcelain cups chased with silver designs similar in pat-

tern to the door. Inside the cups, a plum-colored liquid gently sloshed up the sides. Whatever it was smelled sweet and cloying.

Breanne grinned. "Ah, I see you saw the plum wine I left out. In answer to your question, of course I was, dear. But don't worry – it was just so I could have a private chat with your new friend here." Her gaze flickered between them, her voice assuming that rich, conspiratorial tone. "It's what you brought her for, isn't it? For me to get to know?"

The young blonde looked as though Breanne had slapped her. A shine of tears welled up in her eyes. "You're picking *her* over me? After everything I've done? This isn't fair – you promised me that you'd show *me* the secrets..."

Breanne cut her off mid-sentence. "I'm choosing to have a conversation with her, without you. You're choosing to act like a child." Her voice softened the sting of her words. "But I'm sorry, Ashley – you're not a child at all, are you? Not anymore."

Ashley's eyes glazed a bit. "No."

"Then you don't claim *ownership* over Monica, do you?"

"No," Ashley replied, her words grinding through her teeth and scattering between them. "I don't own anyone. Neither do you."

"No," Breanne echoed Ashley in that deep honey voice. "I don't, no..."

The hairs on the back of Monica's arms rose during the exchange, and she could feel some of Ashley's ability in that moment of stress. She knew Breanne had to have some motivation to cultivate this girl; she just hadn't been able to see either woman in action before that moment. Both held something formidable below the surface. Clearly, Breanne had plans, and she'd been flirting with dark magic. Monica, then, had to keep the younger woman safe, and stop Breanne from... whatever it was.

"...but I need," Breanne insisted, "to see how she's gotten this far without finding someone to guide her. Once I've had this conversation, we can all commence with our evening plans."

Breanne's words seemed to mollify the girl, but Monica detected an edge of rebellion in Ashley's bright blue eyes.

"Fine." Ashley set the tray down on a nearby side table and disappeared back up the way she had come.

Monica raised an eyebrow and looked at Breanne. "I can see what she sees in you."

Breanne picked up two of the three cups, and handed one to Monica. Monica eyed the drink warily.

"When we're not in control of ourselves," Breanne said, "we get chaos. I've been working hard to teach Ashley that. You may end up being the lesson that drives it home." Breanne ran a finger around the rim of her cup, before drinking the contents all in one swallow.

"Well," Monica replied. "So glad I could serve as an example." The contents of cup smelled like fruit and sugar.

“Oh, that’s just plum wine, darling.” Breanne’s Cupid’s-bow lips curved in a sensual smile. “Generally, I prefer stronger fare... but for a first meeting, I figured something with lower octane would be more appropriate.”

It was a trick. Monica was certain of that. She also knew that if she was going to do what she came here to do, she would have to keep up appearances a little while longer. She drank some of the plum wine. It was sweet, thick, and almost gagged her. She wished for a brisk tequila shot to rinse the taste from her mouth.

“Oh, you don’t like it?” Breanne’s solicitous tone nauseated her. “That’s a shame. Here – just put it on that table.”

Monica put the cup down, and then felt a shock.

It was followed by a floaty, distanced feeling.

Breanne watched Monica sway. “You were a bit of a surprise, I’ll admit,” she said. “I’m afraid that at this point I’m improvising. I’m not sure *why* women named Monica are always destined to cause me trouble...” – Breanne took Monica’s hand swiftly, and she pushed the door open, dragging Monica through – “...but there you are.”

The floating feeling coursed down her limbs and up into her skull, blooming into a feeling of bliss. Pleasure wriggled down her spine and down her legs. Monica wondered if she should be panicking.

Behind the door, the spacious room made the rest of the mansion look dingy and poor. Tapestries hung on the walls, distant but lit by genuine sconces along the walls. Monica squinted to pick out the art – and regretted it. The pictures clung to her attention. An image of a woman in the throes of passion as small black demons danced on her breasts, across her belly, and between her legs. Another picture of a perverted hunt, where a naked man tore out the throat of a deer with his teeth. Another picture of two lovers locked in a passionate embrace on a long dining table, while a man in priest’s garb carved off slices of the lovers for others at the table to dine on. The pleasure Monica felt didn’t slacken, despite her disgust. She knew whatever potion Breanne fed her was the cause of it, but this was a trap for sure... and one she wasn’t sure she could escape.

Breanne drew her deeper into the cavernous room. The floor was covered in thickly piled rugs, one on top of another in a crazy heap of patterns and colors. Monica wanted to take off her boots and wander around barefoot. The light from the room seemed dissociated. She couldn’t see where the illumination came from, but her eyes perceived light.

“What have you brought me, Breanne?” A rich, masculine voice projected from out of a deeply shadowed corner. He stepped into the light, and Monica forgot to breathe.

Jet-black hair flowed to his shoulders. Dark, glittering black eyes, and skin the same rich brown tone as hers. He was tall, and wore a suit which both concealed and enhanced his physique. Broad shoulders, narrow hips, and he was indeed walking barefoot towards them, over the piles of rugs.

Breanne glowed with pride. “Allow me to introduce you to Eduardo,”

Memories flowed like warm caramel over Monica’s mind...



Eduardo as a senior, just slightly older back then than Monica and Breanne had been. The girls were best friends until they met him. Then the competition started, each one trying to win him away from the other. Monica blushed at the memory.

Things escalated. As Breanne spent more time with Eduardo, she started doing drugs, hosting parties, and having sex with almost anyone. Monica had tried to make her see the damage she was doing. Breanne hadn't liked that at all. She'd turned all her new lovers against Monica. In time, turned *everyone* against her.

Monica struggled against memories of shame. She'd confided her troubles to Eduardo. Eduardo had listened to her, comforted her, and then didn't stop when Monica told him things were going too far. And no one, afterward, believed anything bad about him at all – or about Breanne, for that matter. Any trouble she spoke of got blamed on her instead.

Shamed by her rape, and by the fact that no one had believed her, Monica ran away.

There'd been a lot of ugly years between then and now.

"Breanne, however did you find her?" Eduardo asked, reaching out to touch Monica's cheek. "She's been gone for *ever* so long."

"Find *who*?" Breanne asked in surprise.

When Eduardo's hand touched Monica, the spell that disguised her looks melted away, leaving her exposed for who she really was: taller, leaner, with short hair dyed a brilliant blue, and a tattoo of a star behind her right ear. His touch made her jerk away.

Now it was Breanne's turn to look like she'd been slapped. "In the name of the Lower Hells," Breanne said, defensive, after a long moment, "I *swear* I didn't know who she was."

"You couldn't check for a simple disguise spell?" Eduardo reached out to stroke Monica's cheek again. This time, she didn't pull away. "What have I been showing you, Breanne? It isn't just about having the power to use illusions. It's about being able to see past them yourself."

Monica stood stock still. The pleasure of his touch deadened as she forced herself to see past the illusion – the one she knew Eduardo was projecting.

"I didn't want to waste Ashley, Eduardo." Breanne said, dodging his critique. "She's such a power, once we train her up. And since Monica looks like she's on to us now, it's obvious we have to get rid of *her*. I thought perhaps we could make a switch?"

So they were going to kill her. Monica pretended to smile as she allowed Eduardo to try to seduce her again. It was distracting to feel pleasure and gut-churning hatred at the same time, but she had a plan.

Eduardo gave Monica a long, considering look. "It'll be a shame to kill her."

"I should have killed her a long time ago." Breanne's expression changed from the petulant jealous girlfriend to the potentially homicidal manic. She took up a ceremonial knife from a nearby table and began to stalk forward toward Monica, muttering in a dark language Monica recognized but didn't speak.

Eduardo's hand jerked back from Monica's cheek and seized her around the throat. Monica choked around his grip. With a strength he couldn't possibly have had, Eduardo hoisted her up into the air, his dark eyes glittering murder.

Monica reached into her jacket, grabbing the flash drive. She pulled it out and drove the USB connector into Eduardo's flesh. Black blood welled up in the gouge. Struggling to speak the words, Monica invoked the drive, trying to pull the essence of Eduardo into the warded safety of the storage container.

Eduardo laughed. "What do you think I *am* – a *digital* demon?"

Breanne's laugh joined his as she stalked closer, brandishing the knife with shaky hands and staying clear of Eduardo's reach.

Darkness crept into the edges of Monica's vision. Pain burned her neck and shoulders. She twisted, trying to free herself, striving to see Eduardo for what he truly was: not the handsome death machine of his illusionary self, but an amorphous, undefined blob of evil intent. *He's not real*, she reminded herself. *Just a collection of thoughts – and thoughts aren't real until they're acted upon.*

The force of his hand upon her throat felt real enough, though, and she felt sick for want of oxygen. She reached out to push him away as hard as she could, and her hands passed through his tailored jacket. At the same time, his hand passed through her throat and she dropped to the ground.

Suddenly above her rather than below, Eduardo hovered as a cloud of something utterly devoid of light.

As Monica took a deep ragged breath, Eduardo floated above her, starting reform into his strong and handsome form. Breanne stopped to watch him, adding her will to his effort to regain that glorious stature. Gasping through her swollen throat, Monica glared at the pair, focusing on Eduardo – on his true form in this world. The true form that reality recognized as his: a minor demon, weak for his kind, only capable of tricking Sleepers. Not capable of defeating *her*.

His form shimmered, changing: A dark form in a tailored suit; a perfect man without a stitch to wear. He saw Monica scoot back, and he took a step forward. "Keep it up, Breanne" he said. "She's weakening."

Monica was in no way weakening. She pushed through the haze of Breanne's drugs and Eduardo's physical presence. "Hey, Breanne," she croaked, angling for a distraction. "I fucked your boyfriend."

Breanne screamed and waved the knife at Monica. "Bitch, I'm *so* going to kill you!"

Seeing that Breanne came no closer, Monica threw all of her concentration into Eduardo, bending his illusions to *her* will.

Eduardo shifted again, his body dissipating from human form to a thick shadowy substance. All of its concern, apparently, was involved with maintaining a human shape. *Good*, she thought. Monica was counting on his vanity.

Monica breathed in deep, rubbing her throat.

As she inhaled, the black ichor of his being flowed up into Monica's mouth, nose, and eyes. A feeling of power swelled inside, overwhelming her body's defenses and burning out the last vestige of the drugs in her system. The pleasure stripped away, leaving her bare to face the atrocity of possession.

Pain swelled within her as the circuitry of her nervous system fried to slag. Monica choked on a blocked scream. She dropped to the floor in a fetal ball, trying to vomit out the darkness that consumed her. *I did this to myself*, she thought, *again...*

Breanne lunged at Monica, sweeping the knife high and then plunging it down at Monica's undefended back.

The blade snapped as it hit her skin, skittering across the floor and thudding into the thick piled rugs.

Black cracks pulsed across Monica's stone-hard skin.

Breanne backed away as she saw the evidence of Eduardo's immediate possession.

*It really HAS been too long* – Eduardo's mocking tone reigned inside Monica's head – *since I've been inside of you.*

*Well, then*, Monica thought back, *make yourself at home.*

Mentally, she threw a box at him.

*What is THAT supposed to be?* Eduardo asked, stepping away.

In her mind's eye, the box unfolded like some strange, expanding origami construct. Connecting with Eduardo's void-black form, the box turned cobalt blue. Eduardo screamed and pulled away from the walls, but there was nowhere for him to run. He was *inside* the box, then, and trapped. When he realized that *he* was suddenly the prisoner, he howled like a wild beast.

*It's a little something I read from a book*, Monica told him, *when I found out I was going to be seeing you again.*

He howled again, but the box walls held.

The pain receded to clarity. Monica rose from the floor, shaky but regaining control of her faculties. Eduardo lashed out, testing her for weakness. She let him, certain that the box would keep her safe.

Eduardo saw her weakness and pushed against the box – pushed against *her*.

Pushed into her anger. Pushed her toward more of it.

*"You."* Monica turned towards Breanne. Black smoke wisped from her mouth as she spoke, staring at her friend-turned-enemy.

*"That's right,"* Breanne snapped, her eyes rimmed red and her face strained with rage. *"ME! It should never have been you."*

*"Breanne..."* Monica could feel her anger, simmering for twenty years and given a target, push back hard against her. She stood up straight, tall and proud, with power crackling through her like electricity. *"It was always me."*

*"Always, darling?"* Breanne's seductive magic swirled around them both like velvet and silk and skin intertwined. *"Don't you remember how we were? How we could have been?"*

*You should kill her*, Eduardo said, his voice sounding like blankets should feel. It rubbed against Monica inside.

*No one deserves to die.* It felt like a lie on her tongue.

*She deserves it.*

*I'm not your servant*, she reminded him. *You're mine.*

Eduardo chuckled, filling her mind. *There are ways around that clause.*

*Shut up, Ed.*

"He's talking to you, isn't he?" Breanne's voice jerked Monica's attention back to the physical realm. "Give him back to me," she said, her voice sliding toward an adolescent whine. "You don't want him. You never *did*."

"It's worse to let you have him." Monica realized, as she felt Breanne's power ebb, that it was diminishing quickly. Eduardo must have been amplifying Breanne's natural ability. A lot. She wondered if she could use him to amplify hers.

Longing seized Monica. A craving, a desire she'd never felt before. It was hard to tell who it was coming from, but she knew who it was for. *Breanne*. How could she have stayed angry at Breanne for so long? How could she have hated her old friend when Breanne was such an amazing creature? Everyone had wanted Breanne, back then. No one had wanted Monica.

*Go to her*, said the demon inside her mind. *It's what you've always wanted. We can all be together like we used to.*

"I missed you." Breanne said, opening her arms to her friend. "I can't believe that I didn't see that we should have stayed together. We would have been so powerful then. Can be so powerful now. Just bring him back to me," she whispered, lightly touching Monica's bare hand, "and we'll all stay together. It'll be *beautiful*."

For a moment, it *felt* beautiful. Monica took a step forward.

Breanne smirked.

Monica felt her pity burn away. Reaching out with her power, she called up a spell from deep inside her mind, behind mental locks and bolts. She'd had a hand in making it, of course, but this was a spell created by many powerful hands, by many wise minds. She'd never used that power as a weapon before. It was a spell of last resort, when someone became too much of a threat to leave them as they were. She knew this spell would break Breanne. Afterward, her friend would probably beg for death.

Eduardo felt her longing for revenge, and he silently approved.

Monica's hand reached out to touch the flash drive... but it was on the floor, too far away and covered in gruesome black ooze. And so, Monica called her power to her. She opened her hand, cupping the palm as though something was in it, then curled the fingers shut. She concentrated, drowning out Eduardo's insistence that she and Breanne could make up and everything would be wonderful from then on out. She opened her fingers, and the flash drive was there, just as it hadn't been a moment before.

With speed borne of the demon-possessed, she lunged at her old friend and jammed the drive into one of Breanne's outstretched hands.

Breanne screamed as the spell touched her.

And took it all away.

Power. Beauty. Illusions. Wealth.

Breanne's beautiful hair dissolved, leaving only thinner, lankier brown hair in its place. Her clothing rotted into rags. Her green eyes faded to sky blue. Acne peppered her cheeks and chin. Two decades of hard-lived life fell back on Breanne at once.

Monica watched as the magic flooded out.

The house began to fade with its mistress.

Breanne wailed, ripping the flash drive out of her palm and throwing it away from her. "*What did you DO to me?*"

*You're coming along very well.* Eduardo purred from the front row of Monica's mind.

"Breanne?" Ashley's voice floated in as the house's dimensions lost definition. "Monica? *What's going on?*"

Monica turned to see the girl. Ashley looked incredible. Monica had truly underestimated the amount of power Ashley had. Though tarnished and cut in places, Ashley's aura burned bright.

Apparently, Breanne had become a kind of metaphysical gardener, encouraging growth where she wanted it and pruning back the parts she didn't. But Breanne was an idiot. With Monica's help, the girl might become magnificent.

"Wait a second..." Unperturbed by the house's dramatic change, Ashley pointed at Monica. "Who the hell are *you*?"

"Ashley..." Monica began.

"Don't trust her, Ashley!" Breanne threw her hands up. "She lied about who she was!"

Ashley's eyes narrowed. Power coiled around her rising rage. "What did you do to Breanne? And where's Monica?"

"*I am Monica,*" Monica replied. "It's a long story. Real long. I'll have to tell you later."

*And I'm so glad,* Eduardo added, *I get to be there for that.*

Monica thought about sinking the flash drive into her own arm, but she'd already seen that it didn't work on him that way. Not the flash drive, anyway. Once she got to HQ, they'd deal with it. "She was going to kill you," Monica told the girl. "Groom you, seduce you, and kill you. Or worse. Maybe not even in that order."

Both Ashley and Breanne stared at Monica.

"Your eyes," Ashley said, unsteadily, "they're black. *All the way* black. And you're not Mexican, either. What's going *on* here?"

"I'm saving the world," said Monica. "Or at least your part of it. 'Save the cheerleader, save the world,' y'know?"

Ashley glared at her, dubious.

"Breanne was lying to you," Monica insisted. "I took her power..." she swept her arm out to show the ruins, "and now you can see what's been here all along."

"*She's* lying to you," Breanne cried. "She's a demon. *Look* at her."

But the black cracks on her Monica's skin had faded. She closed her eyes, and the black in them disappeared as well.

*You think it's really that easy?* Eduardo needled her.

*It is now*, she thought back at him.

Ashley looked at the women as if both of them had gone insane. "*Seriously?*" she said at last.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Monica growled, her throat and emotions still raw. "Does it *look* like any of this was *real*?"

Ashley's face tightened. "No. Not really, no."

They felt the cool kiss of rain seeping into the house. "What *feels* real here?" Monica said, a bit more patiently.

"This does," the girl said. "Dammit."

Monica sighed. "I get that. But it gets better." She looked down at Breanne, who'd begun to cry. "Really. If you want it to."

"So," Ashley said eventually. "Now what?"

"Well," Monica said, "I'm going to go back to my base and run a virus scan on my brain." She gestured toward the girl. "You're welcome to come with me. I'm sure my boss would love to meet you."

Ashley looked to Breanne, who stood shakily, moving like someone with a terminal illness might move. "What about her?"

"We're going to leave her here," Monica said, picking up the flash drive, "and let the police deal with her."

"You're just going to *leave* her?" Ashley sounded incredulous. "You know she... isn't *normal*, right?"

Monica nodded. "She is now."

*Masterfully done, by the way*, Eduardo added. *I like the part where you leave her alone and afraid.*

And Breanne clearly *was* afraid. Monica didn't want to think too much about what Breanne might be scared of, but without Eduardo's protection, she probably had plenty to be frightened about. There are reasons for the saying *Do not call up what you can't put down*.

"So you knew about all this." Ashley glared at Monica. "You knew, and you didn't *tell* me you knew."

"I knew you were in danger," Monica told her. "And that Breanne was about to take the next step down a very long, very dark path." She looked at Breanne through a swirl of pity, loss, hatred, and revulsion. "I was supposed to save you, yeah, but it got a lot more complicated."

"And so, your solution" Ashley frowned, disapproving, "is, you're just going to leave her here?"

"I took her magic," Monica assured her. "Which wasn't really *her* magic in the first place. It came from outside her, and I cut her off at the source. Maybe she could re-learn some of it, eventually, but it would take her years." Monica looked back at Breanne, not meaning to sound as bitter as she did. "Maybe she might even learn something worthwhile in the process." She grinned with traces of demonic cruelty as Breanne looked down, searching the ground for something she clearly could not find. "Come on, Ashley," Monica added, turning toward the girl and stepping away from their former friend. "Let's get out of this house."

"What about me?" Ashley asked, unmoving. The light had diffused, no longer coming from within the walls. All three women had to rely upon the constant glow of the city, shining through the windows of the moldering house, to provide their eyes with enough light to see by.

"Let me introduce you to my friends." Monica's smile lightened a bit. "I promise eighty percent less being treated like a battery."

"What about you?" Ashley moved finally, leaving Breanne silently behind.

"It may take a while to get this fixed," Monica said, gesturing to her face, where black veins had begun to trickle back across her eyes, "but I've got friends waiting to get me detoxed." Monica shrugged. "It's the hazards of the job."

"This has happened *before*?" Ashley sounded incredulous.

*Detoxed. Charming, the demon hissed. I've looked into your head, Monica. You don't want me gone. You're lonely.*

Monica clamped down on a response, focusing on Ashley instead. "I've risked my butt to save the world before. It's kind of a thing with me."

"What about *her*?" To Monica's relief, Ashley started walking towards the front of the house, her bare feet stepping carefully over puddles and trash.

Monica looked back to see what Breanne was doing. As she did so, she glimpsed Breanne picking up the broken knife blade. Monica's heart skipped a beat. *Oh no...*

*Yes, Monica, Eduardo's voice curled with disdain, you're a real hero.*

"Breanne," Monica shouted, "*DON'T!*"

With shaky hands, Breanne clasped the blade in her bloody palms. She looked straight at Monica, and in a flash cut the blade across her throat.

By the time both women reached her, she was for all purposes deceased. Blood bubbled as her face stared straight at infinity and froze with what she saw.

Monica wished she could help, but that was not the path she'd chosen.

Ashley gathered Breanne's head in her lap, and cried.

*What did you expect?* Eduardo's pleased tone made Monica want to scrub her skin with steel wool. *She wasn't as strong as you were, and you knew that. You might as well have executed her yourself.*

*I gave her a second chance,* Monica growled in her mind.

*DID you now?* he mused *Or did you just want her to feel how it feels when you lose everything?*

Monica didn't have an answer. She looked at Ashley, crying and cradling Breanne.

Her mission was complete. Eduardo was trapped and awaiting destruction. Without its leader, Breanne's cult would scatter, and Monica had saved the one girl who could amount to something out of all of this. She'd also gotten her side order of revenge. Yeah, but at what cost?

"Help her," Ashley whispered. "We can still save her."

"No. We can't." Monica walked over to Ashley and helped her up and away from Breanne. "I can't do anything for her now. It's too late. We have to go."

"You can do magic!" Ashley grabbed her hand back from Monica. "*Fix it!*"

Monica shook her head. "It's complicated. There are rules. I can't do what you're asking."

*And really,* Eduardo said, *if you could, would you?*

"It's *your* fault she killed herself," Ashley said, glaring at Monica and ignoring the blood spilled on her jeans.

*She's right, you know,* Eduardo added.

*Shut up,* Monica snapped at him, only just managing not to snap those words out loud as well.

Monica resisted the urge to grab the girl's hand again. Instead, she reached out and tried a sympathetic tone. "Ashley, we're in the rain, we're witnesses to suicide, and..." – she slid her eyes over to the shadows that seemed even thicker than they'd been a moment or two before – "...we are not nearly as alone as it might look like we are." Those shadows were definitely moving. "Do you want to spend the night explaining what happened to the cops," she said, "or maybe to someone even worse... or do you want to come with me where it's warm and there are lattes?"

Ashley paused to think. "I should stay here."

"If it helps, she was going to feed you to a demon." Monica coughed, and black smoke puffed out. "Lucky for you, there was me."

Ashley looked over her shoulder, and then back to Monica. "She was going to kill me?"

Monica nodded. "And me, too – but things got complicated."

The girl seemed to dissolve a little, like a sugar cube in the rain. Monica helped her up and herded her towards the vehicles. "Yes," said Monica, "she was going to kill you and increase her powers. She was already a serious threat, and had done some pretty



nasty stuff. I was assigned to stop it. We had..." – she paused, then went on – "...history between us. I'm not sure if the assignment was a favor or an oversight, but here we are. I already destroyed her accounts and her existence in most every database that matters. She's just another Jane Doe now."

Both women began shivering. Something colder than rain seeped into the space as they walked.

Ashley kept walking. Monica tried to read her, but the girl had shut down tight.

They approached the cars. Monica longed to get out of the rain, and to get Eduardo out of her head.

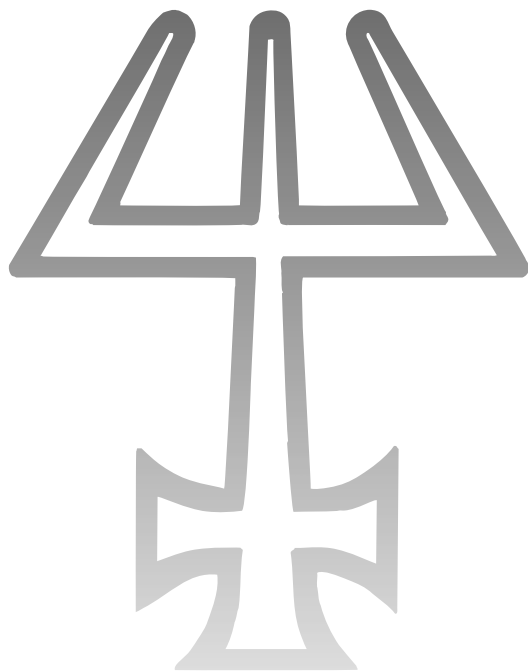
At least, Ashley said "Can I learn magic?"

"Yes," Monica replied. "Yes, I believe you can."

Inside her head, Eduardo chuckled. *Your trust in your little friend is charming.*

As if she could hear him, Ashley said "I want to see them pull a demon out of you. If they can't do it, then I'm out, too." Shivering in the rain, she opened her car's door.

Monica walked over to the BMW and pressed her hand on the vehicle's door lock. The tumblers of the lock clicked into place. She smiled at Ashley, sitting in her car with the door slightly ajar. "Darling," she said "that makes two of us."



# The Long Game

R. S. Odell

*A priest, a rabbi, and a missionary walk into a bar...*

Oliver chuckled and shook his head. *Only the priest is a soldier, the rabbi is a ghost, and the missionary, well... let's just say I've never seen any preacher's wife wear a dress like that before*, he thought. Not that the sight of Sara's perfectly shaped, barely covered peach bottom swinging as she walked bothered him. He was a man of God, yes, but....

When he'd pictured Japan, he'd had visions of vast, neon-lit cities teeming with people, the darkness full of corruption and devilry to be battled and vanquished, he and his fellow Knights, black-clad and deadly, stalking the streets and back alleys in constant pursuit of the Enemy, prowling through slick night clubs full of cool, slender people oblivious to the peril surrounding them.

This tiny *izakaya* in a sleepy, fly-speck, southern farm town, matched his expectations about as much as circus stripes matched camouflage.

Obi-jo. Once the seat of power for the Edo-period Ito clan and a training ground for young samurai, it now boasted the ruins of a small, unimpressive castle, a few reconstructed Edo-period residences open to tourists, and a tiny main street crowded with artisan shops, small restaurants, a drug store, a post office, and this bar. Oliver was grateful for the air conditioning as he ducked out of the steamy heat – *mushi atsui*, the rabbi prompted in his ear – and under the short, split curtains separating the interior from the street – *noren*, the rabbi whispered again. They were called *noren*.

The cramped and narrow vestibule featured a small rack for umbrellas, empty save for a ratty, clear plastic specimen that had seen better days, an exhausted old leather couch, a couple of conga drums, a snare drum, and some bongos mounted on one wall along with a pair of maracas and various Polynesian masks and knick-knacks. The oppo-

site wall featured floor-to-ceiling racks of dark glass bottles in various states of fullness, each one labeled in white paint pen with Chinese characters – names of the regulars who had purchased them, no doubt.

Sara called out to the host standing just behind a high counter a short distance away. He was a youngish Japanese man in a white button-down shirt, collar open and sleeves rolled up to the elbows, revealing elaborate tattoos. As he came around the counter and approached, Oliver noted that he wore well-tailored suit slacks and that the man's shoes were the most ridiculous fabrication of patent leather, snake skin, and steel studs he had ever seen.

"Forgive our intrusion," the rabbi translated as Sara spoke. "Is Mori here?"

The young man gave a nod and a grunt of agreement, then turned and led them into and through a warren of tiny rooms, each with its own low table or booth, and down a short hallway to a set of plain sliding doors set atop a raised threshold. The man removed his shoes, stepped up onto the threshold, and knocked softly.

"*Haite*," came a muffled voice from within.

"*Matte kure*." *Wait here*. The man opened one door only wide enough to slip through and closed it softly behind him.

Sara turned and attempted a smile. Her makeup was perfectly applied, but the dark circles of worry and anguish around her eyes refused to be completely hidden.

"I'm still not sure what we're doing here." Oliver gestured to their surroundings, but he really meant all of it – the tiny town, the narrow roads leading into it, the dinky mountain villages they'd passed through, the rice fields. "I thought you said we could get what we needed from the lodge. The longer we wait, the colder the trail gets."

"Nobody wants to find Derek more than I do," she replied, "but I don't think the lodge can help us anymore. We barely made it out alive after the last lead we followed, and I'm beginning to think that Brother Kusanagi would rather see the back of us. Yuki is an old friend of Derek's, and her gifts are substantial."

"So are mine," Oliver replied.

"And I'd rather have two powerful weapons at my disposal than one."

The room itself was much like a few others he had passed along the way: tatami flooring, low wood table, handwritten notices of food and drink specials tacked to the walls, an Asahi brewery poster featuring a tall, frosty glass of beer and a young, pretty Japanese woman in a push-up bra. Oliver glanced down the length of the table to the figure seated at its end. Yuki Mori was about forty, he guessed. Slender but muscular, handsome face, dark wavy hair coaxed into a loose ponytail that reached her lower back. Given the look of the host out front, he'd half-expected her to be wearing a colorful silk kimono, shoulders bared to reveal her own tattoos, and smoking some strange, spicy-smelling tobacco from a long-stemmed pipe. Her actual appearance was almost insultingly ordinary. A light pink summer sweater *did* cling precariously off the side of one brown, tattoo-free shoulder, but she wore it over a plain white tank top and well-worn jeans. She gazed at him in the way that some of the August Brethren examined

their holy relics – not simply looking at him, but seeing him in his entirety, at all moments at once, in all possible pasts, presents, and futures.

“Sara-chan,” the woman purred and rose to hug his compatriot. “So good of you to come all this way.”

“Well... *shouganai, ne?*” Sara replied. *It can't be helped.*

Mori gestured for them to sit, and proceeded to place a few fat ice cubes into each of three short tumblers. “Can you drink *shochu*?” She gestured to a tall, dark glass bottle to her right, similar to the ones Oliver had seen in the entryway. Without waiting for a reply, she proceeded to pour a finger of clear liquid from the dark bottle into each glass. She then poured in what he guessed was water from another, larger bottle. “*Dozo.*”

“Please, or, *you're welcome*, depending on the context,” his rabbi explained as Oliver took the offered glass. They all raised their drinks, said a polite *kampai*, and sipped. The flavor was mildly earthy, spicy, and sort of sweet – like a whiskey and water without the notes of oak and peat

“Mori-san,” said Sara, “this is Brother Oliver Lyon. He’s a member of Derek’s lodge.”

“*Hajimemashite*,” Oliver bowed and parroted, as the rabbi autocorrected his pronunciation. “*Yoroshiku onegaishimasu*,”

The corner of Mori’s mouth quirked upward. “*Kochira koso*. And where are you from, Lyon-san?”

“Please. Call me Oliver,” he insisted. “I’m from Ireland. A little town outside of Wicklow.”

“Ehhh?” the Japanese woman said, surprised.

He laughed. “Born and raised, but I understand the confusion. A six-foot-tall Black man is not what folks expect when they think ‘Irish.’”

“*Naruhodo, ne?*” She smiled and sipped her drink. “And how do you like Japan? I think maybe... Miyazaki is a little... *nan dake... inaka?*”

*Rustic*, the rabbi explained. Oliver grinned and swirled his ice cubes around in the glass. “True. But to be honest, it’s no different than where I grew up. Talk about the back of beyond!”

Mori laughed outright at that, a hearty, throaty sound that gradually softened and melted into silence punctuated by the soft rattle of melting ice settling in their glasses. Sara and Mori seemed content to let the silence linger, but Oliver found such lulls in conversation unnerving and awkward. He cleared his throat.

“So... you’re a friend of Derek’s? How long have you known each other?”

“Ah! *So, desu ne*,” Mori answered, as if she’d suddenly realized that this might be an important bit of information to share. “We became friends in University.”

“You went to school in America, then?”

“Yes. Derek and I were in many of the same classes.”

“And how long have you known Sara?”

Mori turned to Sara for confirmation. “*Nani ga? Ni nen? San nen, gurai?*” *What? Two years? Three years?*

“Two years,” Sara said. “When the Knights deployed to Syria. We were paired with other groups of aid workers providing services to women and children displaced by the fighting. I thought she was a doctor with Médecins Sans Frontières, but gradually I came to realize that she was like us – blessed with the Holy Fire.”

“We worked together for about a year,” Mori added. “We became great friends.”

“So, you’re a doctor?” he asked.

She laughed. “No. I do have some basic field-nursing skill, but I am actually a *kyūdō* instructor.”

*Japanese-style archery*, the rabbi explained. Oliver made no attempt to hide his surprise.

“How the *heck* did you end up in a civil war in Syria?”

She shrugged as if civilians traipsing off to a war-torn nation had no more consequence than a trip to the hair salon. “It was where I was meant to be at the time.”

“Mori-san,” Sara broke in, “I don’t mean to be rude, but we’re pressed for time.”

The woman nodded and made an acknowledging sound of agreement. “*Naruhodo*, *ne*. You say that Derek is missing?”

“Yes,” Sara answered. “He disappeared just outside of Damascus. The last communication we had was that he and his company were in pursuit of a band of chaos agents in league with Daesh. Two days later, one of his Brothers was brought into the clinic, barely recognizable due to the extent of his injuries. He said Derek and the others had been taken, that the Enemy was far stronger than any of us had imagined.”

“And of course, you attempted a rescue,” Mori said in a tone that suggested she knew exactly how that had turned out.

Sara closed her eyes and shook her head. “It was a disaster. Like trying to find a diamond in a sand box. Every time we thought we had a lead, all traces would suddenly evaporate. I went home to consult with the Brethren there, and that’s where I was introduced to Oliver.”

“The August Brethren charged me to help recover the lost company,” he explained.

“And why you?” Mori wondered.

“Well, Derek’s a Brother and a friend. But they chose me mainly because I never get lost, and I always find what I’m looking for, no matter how well it’s been hidden.”

Mori sat up a bit straighter and fixed him with an intense gaze of interest that held a spark of excitement. “How long have you had this ability?”

“Ever since I can remember,” Oliver answered. “My family raised sheep for wool. Sometimes the little lambs would get out of the pen and go wandering down the forest. My big sister would be sent off to find them, but inevitably, she would get just as lost

as the sheep – it's a weird wood there at Glendalough. The paths sometimes shift and change, and the light can play tricks. Anyway, I'd end up having to find sheep and sister and get them all home through the mist, which I did."

"And how did you do this?"

Oliver shrugged. "I knew their songs and I followed them. It's an old family tradition. My auntie taught me. She said that every rock, twig, and creature in God's universe has a song given to them at their creation. 'Learn the songs of home, of mam and da, sister, and baby brother, of every sheep and lamb, and you'll never be lost.' And I never have been."

"*Sou desu ka*," Mori said, drawing out every syllable as she contemplated.

"We've spent the past six months trying to pick up the trail," Sara resumed, "and we've been successful, for the most part. Oliver has found three of the eight men that went missing with Derek. But now we're meeting up with some formidable and deadly resistance."

"It's also getting harder and harder to hear," Oliver said. "Derek and the others... their songs are changing, and they sound like echoes in fog. There's all this... interference that I've never had before."

"The Brothers in Nagasaki tried to help us, but..." The end of Sara's thought was lost to bitter and terrifying memory. "Then I remembered what you said to me before you left Syria. I had no idea what it meant at the time. I just thought you were trying to be inspirational."

Oliver raised a questioning eyebrow.

"*The man who hears the voice of God will always tread the right path.*" Sara explained. "You told me to call you if the voice ever faded. I thought you were offering support to *me*. Now, I realize you were talking about *him*." She gestured in Oliver's direction, and he blinked in surprise.

"But you didn't even know me then. I didn't know you."

Mori took a lingering sip of her own drink and set the glass down with a nearly inaudible tap. "Some of us hear the songs of lost sheep; some of us see visions of things that may yet come to pass."

"That's all well and good," he acknowledged, "but as I told Sara before we came here, I don't see how you can help us any more than our own Brethren already have. Unless you have a heretofore hidden seal of power that will help us dispel and defeat this Darkness."

The Japanese woman touched him lightly on the arm. "Please understand. I do not wish to belittle the great work that you and your Brethren have undertaken thus far, but you are not the only ones who battle against the Twisted. Hear me very carefully: not all darkness can be dispelled, and the evil we fight is not easily crushed or defeated."

She leaned towards him and tightened her grip on his arm. As she began to speak in Japanese, the rabbi faithfully translated:

"I have danced toe-to-toe with the Dark Shadows many times, and this is what I know. The twisted ones are patient. They are subtle, and they move in stealth. They ensnare the unsuspecting, and enfold them within their web-like garments until they become a shield. They lead the unaware into the gray places between realities where they wander, lost in an illusion, fed upon by teeth they never feel until death comes. They penetrate the cracks of pride, of righteousness, of desire, of doubt, like smoke, and take hold like weeds of iron with roots that run deep into madness. If you merely cut them down, they rise up elsewhere, stronger than before. Their memories are long, and they do not ever forget."

*Does she think I've never hunted Lucifer's legions before?* he thought, but chose not to say that out loud. "I *do* understand, Mori-san," he said instead. "Sara and I have seen exactly this more times than we'd like to admit."

Mori nodded. "You may indeed understand," she continued, "but so many enlightened souls have underestimated them, succumbed to them, been sucked under the surface of their quicksand. So many lights snuffed out. So many warriors lost. With what is to come, we cannot afford to lose a single one of those brave shining spirits that remain. We cannot afford to misdirect or misuse the tools and the blessings we have been granted."

"Which is why we've come to you," Sara remarked with just a hint of exasperation in her voice.

"I knew you were coming," the Japanese woman said in answer. "In the stillness, I have seen a great weapon and a great light, swallowed by the darkness, its guardian tempted, soothed, tortured by the ever present caress of the abyss. I have seen the emergence of a rare gift, a soul who can walk the ever-shifting shadow lanes and never lose his way, one who might dive within the darkness and bring deliverance to the light and the one who guards it. What a miracle that would be! What a gift."

"That is why you are here, now, in this place and at this time. You have been consecrated as a sword, Brother Lyon, but that is false. You are a scalpel. A lancet. One designed for delicate, precise work. You have been trained to be a warrior, and believe me, you will need that training for the journey that lies before you. But from now, you must train to be a surgeon. You must learn to see the patterns that weave throughout all things. You must learn to hear new songs. Above all, however, you must learn to play the long game, to play your Enemy's game. That is the only way to truly defeat him."

Mori released his arm, and Oliver let go of the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"I had hoped that you would be able to help us in a more immediate way," Sara said. "Derek is strong, and you're right – when he and his men disappeared, they'd just retrieved a very ancient and holy relic, one purported to have the potential to save and protect so many innocent souls. But it requires more study before it can be activated, and if it falls into the hands of the Adversary, who knows in what ways that power might be perverted? The longer we wait, the fainter the trail grows, and the greater the chances are that Derek and his men will be lost forever along with the relic."

*“Daijoubu dayo, Sara-chan,” Mori soothed. It will be all right.*

“So help us,” Sara begged. “Please. I know you can do it. I know you can find your way through the darkness, just like Oliver. Two strong lanterns are a hell of a lot better than just one.”

“You misunderstand, Sara-chan. I would love to aid you myself, but that is not where I am meant to be at this time. That is not what I am tasked to do. Just as your August Brethren guide your hawks and your doves in their missions, so does my Sensei guide me and my fellows in ours. I have voyaged long and far into the realms of the Twisted Ones in our fight against them, but there is danger in making the trip too often. My talents are many, but at this time, I would be more of a liability to you than an asset. Oliver, however, can be taught what he needs to know. That, I can do and will do. Can you understand?”

“I do,” Sara conceded.

“The more you attack this foe head-on, the harder and faster it will work to get what it wants,” Mori said. “Time may seem like the last thing you have, but in this case, time, patience, and sideways motion are the keys to keeping your Brothers safe and securing the outcome you desire.”

Oliver nodded. *“Wakarimashita.” Understood.*

• • •

Oliver was startled awake by what sounded like cannon fire. Five shots echoed in short, rhythmic succession and then there was silence. For a moment or two he was alert and on edge, intensely listening for the tell-tale sounds of panic and chaos. There were none. Sighing, he pulled the blanket closer around his shoulders, rolled over onto his side, and had almost drifted back into sleep when a great, raucous shout – that of many male voices – rang out through the air and was subsequently followed by vigorous and enthusiastic counting.

*“Ichi! Ni! San! Shi! Go! Roku! Shichi! Hachi!”* Over and over. *“Ichi! Ni! San! Shi! Go! Roku! Shichi! Hachi!”*

He groaned and popped one eye open to look at the clock on the little wooden cubby that constituted his night table. 8:03 A.M. Right on time. Who needed to set an alarm when you had the local high school baseball team?

“Heaven forefend anyone be able to sleep in on a Saturday,” he grouched under his breath. A few minutes later, he heard the sound of Sara’s door sliding open and resigned himself to getting up and setting his own room in order. By the time Mori rang their doorbell, they were both showered and dressed with bed clothes folded and futons hung over the balcony rail to air out.

“What amazingly exciting activity do you have planned for us today?” he asked, balancing on the top step of the *genkan* entryway as he slipped into his shoes.

“Aoshima,” she answered, handing him a small plastic bag containing four salmon *onigiri* and two bottles of cold green tea. “And maybe Udo Jingu if the weather is fine.”



“What’s at Aoshima?” Sara wondered, sliding into her own shoes and following them out of the door towards the awaiting car that was one part roller skate and one part bread box.

“The beginning,” she replied and winked. “Well, not exactly *the* beginning, but it is *a* beginning.”

“Well, that’s wonderfully vague and unhelpful,” he muttered. They climbed into the car and turned out of the small driveway onto the main road.

The small city of Miyakonojo, where Mori lived and where he and Sara had taken up residence, was situated in a shallow basin surrounded by low, green mountains. It had once been an enclave of smaller villages and hamlets settled on the border between the lands of three warring samurai families. Local legend had it that the peasants, tired of raiding parties constantly passing through, battling within their streets, and destroying homes, shops, and lives, rebuilt the city in a wild labyrinth of winding lanes, tangled intersections, blind alleys, and dead ends. The next time the war parties tried to pass through to raid their foes, they became lost and utterly bewildered, eventually giving up. As time passed and the town grew and consolidated, the practice continued as a matter of local pride and tradition.

Mori, of course, had no trouble navigating the maze-like streets. There were two small highways that wound through the mountainous countryside between “the Jo” and the eastern coastline, but those routes were slow and circuitous. Mori clearly didn’t want to take any more time than was necessary in transit, because she aimed the vehicle towards the freeway, paid the toll, and pressed down on the accelerator.

“Derek and his company disappeared in Jordan, but the Knights’ intelligence and your experience leads you to believe that they are somewhere here in southern Japan,” she stated after the car reached a steady cruising speed. “Why do you think that is?”

“Why bring him here, you mean?” Oliver considered for a moment. “It’s the last place we’d think to look? I mean, it’s not like we have a strong foothold in eastern Asia. Not like we do in the U.S. or Europe, or even South America, come to that.”

“You’re on the correct path,” she agreed, “but the reasoning is even more precise. How many followers of Judaism do you think there are in Japan?”

“Less than a thousand, if that,” he guessed.

“How many Christians?”

“I think I follow you,” Sara rejoined. “The Knights derive no small amount of might from our faith in the Judeo-Christian traditions. It would make sense that we have more influence in places where the populace shares those faith traditions and where there are powerful physical landmarks to strengthen the connections.”

“Correct,” Mori stated. “By bringing him here, they assume that any who might follow will be forced to traverse unfamiliar pathways in a place where their psychic strength is greatly diminished. What we must do is nullify their advantage.”

“And that’s what’s at Aoshima? Something that will give us an edge?”

“Not exactly,” she hedged. “But it will help.”

Aoshima was quite small for such a popular tourist destination. In its heyday, before the economic boom of the '90s gave Japanese vacationers the ability to venture into Europe and the U.S., the southern Miyazaki coastline had sparkled with resort hotels, golf courses, theme parks, and restaurants overlooking the brilliant, blue Pacific. Aoshima, with its strategic positioning and cultural significance, was the jewel in the crown. Although most of the old resort hotels were now demolished, and the Children's World theme park only a sad and faded ghost of its former, brightly colored self, the beach town was nonetheless crowded with elderly tourist groups, families out for a day on the sand, surfers, and local denizens selling handcrafts from small stalls. A steady breeze blew, making the warm late-October weather even more pleasant.

Oliver and Sara followed Mori down the main thoroughfare towards the island sanctuary, dodging strollers and stray cats, of which there appeared to be hundreds. At the end of the lane, Mori stopped at an ice cream stall and bought them all mango "soft cream," something of a Miyazaki specialty. The beach spread and curved to their left, while the bridge to the island itself stretched out before them. On the island, Oliver could see the giant orange-red pillars and curved black cross lintel of a *torii* – the iconic gate that signaled the presence of a shrine – standing out against the dense, lush green of the palm tree forest that covered the entire oblong of land.

He thought they would proceed immediately across the bridge; instead, Mori led them to a small stone bench just off the main path. *The Japanese tend to disapprove of eating while walking*, his rabbi prompted. As he looked around, he *did* notice that most of the patrons of the ice cream shop either stood just outside the stall and ate their treats or moved a short distance away to sit and eat as he, Sara, and Mori had done.

"That's a clever interface you have," she commented.

Oliver was momentarily startled. "You can hear him?"

Mori nodded. "A gift of Enlightenment. The vibration is... unique."

"The rabbi *is* helpful," he grinned. "Keeps me from making an unintentional ass of myself. And his knowledge comes in real handy in a tight pinch."

"Not all the Brothers have the affinity for them," Sara explained. "He's one of the lucky ones."

"What do you know of shrines?" Mori asked. "Not what the rabbi tells you," she added for Oliver's benefit. "I want to know what *you* know."

"Nothing, really," he answered honestly. "I know they're meant to be sacred, but beyond that, I've no clue."

"We Japanese believe that the gods and spirits that inhabit the land are very real," she explained. "Rather than leaving the earth to mankind alone, they co-exist with us. They allow us to share the land with them, and in return, we build shrines to honor this arrangement and to provide a place where we may proffer gifts in exchange for favor, protection, blessings, and so on. The unaware see only this. For the Enlightened, however, shrines can be windows through which we are able to catch glimpses of other

realities, or they can be doors through which those with the ability can pass. Often they sit on the intersections of what Westerners call 'ley lines,' much like the sacred places and cathedrals of Christendom."

"So they're places of power," Sara confirmed. "I sensed that there was some sort of energy here."

Mori made several little grunts of acknowledgement, and nodded.

"The reason your Enemy ran here, the reason your connection to your friends seems weak or foggy, is because the patterns of energy are working against you. Not because the energy is evil or aligned with the darkness, but because it is an unfamiliar medium, it has an unfamiliar flavor and texture. If you are going to work with it and within it, as you ultimately must do, then you need to learn about it, understand where it comes from, and accept the way that the unaware shape and lend power to it."

The three of them finished their ice cream and joined the stream of people crossing over the long concrete bridge to the island.

"What are those ridges called?" Oliver asked, pointing at the striations of rock stretching out from the island into the ocean.

"*Oni no Sentakuita*," Mori answered. "The Devil's Washboard. There are lots of similar volcanic rock formations like it all along the Miyazaki coast, but this is the largest concentration of it – for obvious reasons. We'll take a walk around the island so you can see it close by."

It took them a good hour to make the circuit, pausing every few feet to allow Oliver and Sara to close their eyes and get a feel for the subtle changes of energy flowing through and around the island. He noticed that as the energy changed, so did the shape and nature of the rock formations, which ran cross-wise against the incoming tide – smooth, rounded, and almost plate-like on one side of the landmass, sharp and jagged like the serrations of a knife on the other. As they neared the path leading to the shrine itself, there was a distinctive break in the rock such that the sandy path on which they walked met the sea directly on one side where it had been flanked by yards of rock before. Oliver stopped short, eyes wide.

"Well, now *that's* a kick in the head!"

"*Tsuyoi, ne?*" Mori agreed. "And look up there."

He followed where she pointed and saw what looked like an alabaster perfume bottle perched upon the mountainside, directly across the water from where they stood.

"What is that?" Sara asked.

"It's a Buddhist temple," Mori replied. "You see. There is no difference. I have no doubt that had the Buddhists gotten here first, it would be their temple on this island and the shrine on the mountainside. Come on. Let's go in and see what I came here to show you."

They walked a few feet further to where the path widened and cut into the impenetrable wall of palm trees. Flanking either side was a statue of a shaggy stylized dog, one male and one female, guardians of the sacred space. Up the hill before them lay a

massive complex of buildings. The largest and most central structure was painted the same red-orange as the *torii* but featured fanciful carvings painted in vivid blues and greens and golds. Following the crowd past a cafe and gift shop, the three came to a covered area where a sculpted dragon fountainhead spit water into a deep stone trough. Long-handled plastic dippers were readily available for shrine visitors' use in the customary ritual purification prior to prayer.

"Amazing how traditions are so similar across cultures," Sara remarked, splashing water on her hands and face.

"Of course," Mori said after rinsing her mouth. "Truth is truth, and all are One. The Wakeful see the truth and teach the unaware these rituals so that they, too, might benefit. Culture is window dressing. Come on."

Oliver thought they might be heading to the shrine proper; instead, Mori led them away from the larger throng of tourists through a small gate to the left of the main building. A narrow sandy path, completely shaded by the thick canopy of palms, unfolded into the heart of the island, and after a moment of concentration, he could feel the pull of the powerful nexus that lay ahead. Shortly, the path opened up into a small clearing, in the center of which was constructed a miniature shrine, this one also guarded by twin dog statues. To the left of it was a long thick rope hanging from a high branch of a nearby tree, the hemp almost completely obscured by thousands upon thousands of shoelace-thin, multi-colored strands of fabric.

"Okay," Sara exclaimed, almost giggling with exhilaration. "What *is* this, because it's amazing!"

"As I said this morning," Mori replied, "it's a beginning. We believe this island is close to ten million years old. The lines of power that shaped it converge here, in the center. Their joining created a new line so powerful that it forced the rock to form on either side of it. You felt this, Oliver."

"All right." He nodded. "So what do we need to do here?"

"Nothing." She laughed. "At least not right now."

He frowned and looked to Sara, who returned his look with a *beats me* shrug. Mori dug two small coins out of her pocket and placed them in the locked box next to a tray that held the thin strands of fabric. She selected a green one and a white one and tied them carefully onto the long hemp rope, then she started off back towards the main shrine.

"I'm confused," Oliver said, following behind.

"You won't be for long," Mori assured. "Just remember this place."

• • •

Half an hour later, he emerged from Mori's car in a parking lot on a mountainside several miles south of Aoshima, just above the small fishing town of Miyaura. Looming above was a giant *torii*, simpler in design than the one on the island but easily twice as tall. When they got closer to the base of the giant structure, Oliver saw that the path

diverged – through the gate and up the hillside by way of a steep set of old stone steps, or down towards the town via a more modern looking set of stairs.

“Of course, we’re going up the ancient stairs,” Sara sighed as Mori passed through the *torii*.

“*Ganbatte, ne?*” the Japanese woman sang. “It’s good weather we’re having now, and this way is actually faster.”

She was right about the weather. The sky was a crystal clear blue, the sun shone through the trees, and a balmy breeze played gleefully with their hair and their clothing.

“These stairs were built by Buddhist nuns in the 7th century so that they could reach the shrine on the other side of the island. The town grew up around it and the shrine buildings got more and more grand,” Mori explained as they climbed. “At the top, there is a cemetery honoring many famous monks and nuns.”

They ascended the rest of the way in silence. Oliver lost himself in the rhythm of his breath, in the stone steps worn concave by centuries of travelers, in the smell of the salt air and the cry of cormorants. He felt the rush of the pathway flowing down from where they’d come at Aoshima, an invisible river, immense and unyielding. The sudden flash of a familiar energy nearly made him stumble and fall to his knees.

“I heard him,” he breathed, Sara at his elbow. “Just for a second. It was Derek.” He looked to Mori for... confirmation? Approval? But the lithe Japanese woman hadn’t slowed her pace or turned to see if they still followed.

“This whole journey makes no sense to me, either,” Sara confided in a low voice, “but if you got that echo, then whatever she’s doing must be working.”

“I agree.”

“Did it... did *he* sound... different?”

“It was just a split second,” Oliver said. “But it’s proof of life. That’s better than the alternative.”

The way down was expectedly easier, though they had to pay more attention to their footing because of the irregularly shaped stones, some of which were crumbling or loose in places. Eventually, the stairway ended and put them out in the middle of a quaint little village nestled into the hillside. The winding street led them to the entrance of the shrine complex proper, and blessedly flat, paved walkways. Even more tourists crowded the paths here than they had at Aoshima – mainly young married couples and young parents with newborns, Oliver noted.

“Let me hazard a guess,” he ventured. “This is a fertility shrine.”

“Correct,” Mori answered. “The unaware don’t know why, but you will. It is said that this is the birthplace of the first Emperor of Japan, Emperor Jimmu, but we’ll get into the mythology behind it all later. Suffice to say, in a country with declining birth rates, a fertility shrine is going to be a popular destination.”

Now that the sun was high in the sky and the morning haze had burned off, the combination of vermilion bridges, azure ocean, and clear sky against the rocky coastline created a postcard perfect scene. The walkway hugged the side of the mountain pro-

gressing north along the coast towards a giant cave, only accessible by way of a long steep staircase. A large crowd milled at the base of the stairs and pressed together against the railings that overlooked a wall of massive sea rocks that looked deliberately placed rather than naturally formed. Oliver examined them with his Holy Sight and found that they had, in fact, been will-shaped. It would have been relatively easy, too, he thought, what with the rushing tide of energy flowing over, through, and around the area. They made the cave into an amplifier, but something else in the vicinity also contributed to the character of the energy stream.

"Ignore the man-made structures," Mori instructed, guiding them through the throng and into the cave proper. "Pay attention to the cave itself, the energy here."

"There's fresh water nearby," Sara murmured, heading towards the back of the cave. "A mineral spring, it feels like."

That's what it was, Oliver realized. A strong, deeply earthy, primal force rippling up and mingling with the energies from the nexus to the north. Anything coming into contact with this cave couldn't help but be infused with and affected by it. He followed Sara around the large shrine structure towards the source of fresh water she'd sensed. The mouth of the spring was deep within the rock and hidden from view, but it pooled up in a small well, the waters of which could be accessed by a small bucket on a rope tended by a shrine acolyte. Sara accepted the small dipper offered to her and took a deep sip.

"Definitely some sulfur in there," she said, making a slightly pained face. She thanked the acolyte with a small bow.

"Typically only women drink from the spring," Mori murmured for his benefit, "but for our purposes, I suggest you do so as well."

The acolyte raised his eyebrows a bit when Oliver reached for the dipper but did not stop him from partaking. The strong sulfur tang caused him to wince, and he wouldn't have characterized the bitter metallic taste as anything approaching pleasant, but the full potency of the rich, life-filled energy he'd sensed before made the bad taste more than worth it. He kept his eyes closed and reached out for that thread of connection to his Brothers that he'd brushed up against on the stairway earlier. It was easier to grasp, though still too faint to make any discernment as to where they might be or in what condition. Nonetheless, it was a start and a promising one. He swallowed two more sharp mouthfuls then moved on to join Mori and Sara where they waited at the cave mouth. They stood next to a little stall where another shrine acolyte took fat 500 yen coins from eager visitors in exchange for a small handful of round clay balls, which the recipients then proceeded to throw, one by one, over the railing and down to a turtle-shaped rock with a small indentation in its center.

"It's for luck, apparently," Sara explained.

He looked at the smiling faces of the happy couples that surrounded them, all hopeful of some nebulous blessing, some trick of chance that might grant them their hearts' desires. "Ignorance is bliss."

• • •

Oliver knocked as urgently as he could on Mori's apartment door, praying that her neighbors wouldn't mistake him for a stalker and call the police. A large Black man pounding on a single woman's door at two in the morning was not exactly a usual occurrence in rural Japan. Thankfully, light suddenly spilled through the cloudy glass of the narrow *genkan* window and Mori appeared, sleepy eyed, in the doorway.

"I know this is no kind of time to be about knocking up your door," he breathed in a rush, "but I know where Derek and the others are."

"Come in, come in," she whispered, stepping back to let him in, and taking a quick look to either side of the breezeway to ensure she wasn't being watched. She closed the door and locked it.

"Where's Sara?"

"Back at the apartment, sleeping," he answered, following her into the small sitting area. "I borrowed our landlord's bike and raced over here."

"You said you know where they are. How? What happened? Tell me exactly."

"When we returned home from dinner, I started in on the mythological research you asked me to do – Amaterasu, her sons and grandsons, how Emperor Jimmu was born, how this place, Miyazaki, was once part of the ancient land of Himuka, where gods came down to earth and walked. I realized that the so-called Myth Road is really a network of mystical pathways that radiate out from Aoshima, Udo, Kirishima, and all the sacred places to the north."

Mori gave him an approving nod.

"Everything we did today – every place you've taken us to see since we came to you – it's Ariadne's ball of string. You've been giving me anchor points. Sara was pleased and plans to come over here first thing tomorrow, but her gifts are different from ours. She doesn't exactly see as we see. She thinks Derek and the others are here, now, in this present reality. But I know what I think *you* 've known from the start. They're in another reality entirely."

"So you've figured out that much," Mori said, "but that was expected. You still haven't told me how you know."

"Once Sara was asleep, I chanted my Prayer of Stillness until I was able to achieve a trance state," he explained. "I focused on the anchor points, held on to them, and listened for my Brothers in that stream of spirit energy. It was easier to hear them in the quiet of night. So I followed. I went north to two massive burial mounds. From the air, they looked like keyholes, and they glowed like the sun."

"Saitobaru," Mori murmured, "where the grandson of Amaterasu and the Princess of Flowers are buried."

"They were connected to another, older, line of power that ran off into the mountains even further north. It ended in a cave by a river. There were... little stacks of flat river rocks all over the place, and a tiny shrine, deep in the heart of the cave. My Brothers are in a place and time that can only be accessed through that cave, but the window of passage is narrow. The rabbi believes the gateway opens and closes in accordance

with the equinoxes. If I'm to go through, it has to be tonight – tomorrow night at the very latest. Even then, we might not make it back out in time." *Provided we don't die in the process*, Oliver thought.

"*So, da ne?*" she murmured in a grave tone and drifted into deep thought. Her face remained infuriatingly placid, in spite of the danger and urgency he had attempted to communicate. If the rabbi was right, if he didn't act immediately, they wouldn't be able to access the pathway again until nine days after the Spring Equinox – nearly a full six months from now. He shuddered to imagine what fate might befall his brothers in that space of time.

"Well?" he prompted.

Mori nodded as if coming to a decision. "Wait outside. I need a few moments to get dressed."

• • •

As she exited the apartment, Mori grabbed a tall, thin cloth-wrapped object from the corner of the *genkan*, and an oddly shaped, tubular case made of woven bamboo and fitted with a shoulder strap. She was dressed in a plain black silk kimono, with short sleeves decorated only with the circular *mon* carrying the symbol of her family name. Over this she wore black hakama pants that revealed just a peek of a richly embroidered red obi. She had even donned white, split-toed tabi socks and zori sandals.

"What's with the costume?" he asked, but she gave him no answer.

Oliver hurried over to where her car was parked, but Mori continued on past him, walking briskly out of the parking lot, around the corner, and down the street. Confusion made him hesitate for a moment or two. Shaking himself out of it, he jogged to catch up.

"Um. Where are we going?"

"To the cave."

"But... it's miles to the north!"

"Yes. It is. Now, keep up."

She led him down dark, slumbering streets, the only sounds their breathing and the whisper swish of Mori's divided skirts, until they reached a small park, dense with trees. Through the grass, over an arched bridge, under a canopy of grape vines, they arrived at what looked like a shrine building, only this one was empty save for the polished wood floor that gleamed in the moonlight. It opened out onto a manicured stretch of lawn, at the end of which was another low building with dark curtains framing its open facade. Inside, there appeared to be dirt or earth piled up to the ceiling, and set against the slope were five round targets, each about the size of a dinner plate.

With quick, practiced motions, Mori bowed reverently to the emptiness, then knelt and unwrapped the tall, cloth wrapped bundle to reveal a curved *kyūdō* long bow made of pale bamboo that gleamed almost silver in the low light. She held it gently in her hands, caressed it as a mother would her child.



"The finest bamboo for *daikyu yumi* is grown here in Miyakonojo," Mori intoned.

"Ohhh-kaaay," Oliver replied, bewildered. She motioned for him to kneel beside her, which he did.

"A solitary craftsman harvests the raw wood, strips it, fashions it, and coaxes the bow out of the wood, layer by layer, until the finished product emerges. This sometimes takes upwards of ten years to complete."

"And this has something to do with the cave?"

"My mentor," she continued, ignoring his question, "Kikunaga-sensei, was honored as a living national treasure by the Emperor himself. I have studied twenty years under his guidance, and when he finally decides to rest, he will adopt me and name me as his successor."

"Wow," he murmured, lacking anything else to say.

"In all my years of study and practice, I have crafted only one bow entirely on my own. Kikunaga-sensei called this a magnificent work of art, existing in this world and in the world of the spirits at the same time."

She set the bow in front of her knees as she neatly folded the wrappings and laid them beside her. From the bag she had slung crosswise on her body, she removed a long white strip of fabric. Shifting her shoulders and arms in a well-choreographed dance, Mori wove the strip around her body and through her kimono sleeves, pulling them neatly back and out of her way, before tying the ends of the strip into a neat bow. Next she pulled forth what looked to be a thin handkerchief of red silk. But when she slid her right hand into it, Oliver realized it was a glove designed to fit on the thumb and first two fingers. A hard leather, three-fingered archery glove went on over it, secured by long, purple strips of leather wrapped around the wrist.

"That's amazing," he said with sincerity. "All of it. Twenty years? I would have probably quit about two years in. If that."

Mori laughed. "Many do. Making *daikyu*, you learn to play the long game, to listen to the voice of the wood, to learn its character. It is a great teacher of patience. *Kyūdō* is the same."

She stepped one foot forward, coming into a lunge, and in a fluid series of motions, bent the bow beneath her knee, drew up one side of it, and slipped the looped end of the bowstring into the awaiting groove at the end of the bow. From the oblong case, she drew forth four bamboo arrows fletched with dark gray cormorant feathers bound with thin crimson filament. Two, she set before her. The other two she tucked into her glove hand, points hidden. With her left hand, she took up the bow.

"*Kyūdō* is about the places where paths cross," she explained, floating up to her feet in one controlled movement. Using a deliberate, sliding step, she approached the edge of the polished floor that met the grassy lawn, turned her left side towards the bank of targets in the distance, and planted her feet in a wide stance.

"It is about the relationship between the archer and the bow, between the arrow and the string, between all of those things and the target." While she spoke, she slowly

brought the bow up before her and carefully set her grip. Just as deliberately, she placed an arrow on the string, keeping the tip of the second tucked up in the two fingers not enclosed in the glove. Her head swiveled to the left as her eyes briefly met the target and returned facing forward to continue her perusal of the arrowed bow. Like smoke rising, Mori's arms rose, lifting the bow nearly over her head.

"It is a way to understand the Unity of all things in a manner that is immediate and present," she said and drew bow and string down and apart until her gloved hand hovered just behind her ear.

"It is not so much about trying to hit the target so much as understanding that the arrow and the target and the bow and the archer are all One and that the space and time in between are an illusion."

Oliver felt the building of energy and tension as she held the draw until the precise moment when the energy demanded release. The bowstring whistled and the target answered with a crisp snap. Her arrow pierced the center, creating a pinpoint of white light that steadily grew in size, casting a shaft of light across the lawn towards them. Soon it had exceeded the size of the target and continued to widen.

"Holy Mother of God," he whispered, and crossed himself.

"Once you understand the fundamental principle of *kyūdō*, it is not at all difficult to see that the space and time separating any two places is the same manner of illusion. We are always everywhere and *everywhen* at once."

"Right then," he said. "We have work to do." He rose to his feet and reached out to the secret realm where he and his fellow Knights stored their armor and weapons. He was ready to pull what he needed forth when Mori's voice halted him.

"*Chotto matte*, Lyon-san. Listen."

He did so, the song of his Brothers ringing in his mind as clear as bells on the legs of Morris dancers on the first of May.

"Find Derek," she instructed, placing her second arrow on the bow and nocking it. "See him clearly, every detail, as if he were standing before you."

As Oliver concentrated, the foggy light emanating from the portal sharpened into colors and shapes. Derek stood in that space, just as Sara had described him the day he disappeared. His Brother wore a look of weary confusion, as if the gray and white fog that swirled around him was the only thing present in his environment. For all Oliver could sense, that appeared to be the case.

"Can you see him?" Mori asked, bow floating upwards again. "Point him out to me."

Following the invisible line that connected him to his Brother, Oliver extended his hand and forefinger. It was then he felt the subtle creep of sparks up his spine. Mori's shoulders settled, completing the draw of the bow. The point of her first arrow had been blunt. This arrow was tipped by a sharp, barbed point made of impossibly filigreed iron. Its aim met the line of Oliver's connection, centered over Derek's heart.

“What do you think you’re *doing*?” he shouted as her energy surged. He leapt forward, running towards his friend. Derek’s eyes met his in recognition.

“*Brother!*” the other man called and began to run towards the portal mouth.

Mori’s bowstring sang. A bolt of energy hit Oliver in the back, passed through him. The arrow smacked into Derek’s chest, knocking him backwards. A wild, primal howl of rage and pain rose up into the night sky, and Oliver thought it was his own until he took a breath. The howling did not cease. It was coming from Derek who writhed and twisted in that misty limbo, clawing his way through the portal.

“Lyon-san, *get back!*” Mori shouted, dispensing with the slow ritual and drawing back another arrow in a quick arc. Before he could reply, another arrow appeared in Derek’s chest, right next to the first.

Oliver looked up into Derek’s face, but the familiar visage had been replaced by someone... something else not quite human. It screamed and fought to pull the arrows free, as acidic blood splattered across the lawn. Its black tongue lashed out impossibly far, just missing Mori’s feet and leaving a smoldering gouge in the wood. Oliver reached into his Knights arsenal and drew forth his gun. He intoned the Word to activate the holy sigils inscribed upon the ammunition, aimed, and fired. The creature shrieked as it lunged at him. He fired again, once, twice until it fell backward onto the grass and did not move again, but he kept his gun trained on it nonetheless until he felt the gentle pressure of Mori’s hand on his arm.

“It was him,” Oliver breathed. “Derek. I would have sworn on the Cross that it was him.”

“The twisted ones are masters of deception,” Mori said, “as we have known since first the battle was joined.”

“How did you know it *wasn’t* him?”

“I didn’t.”

He turned and gaped at her. Mori produced something from the folds of her kimono and held it out to him. It was an arrow tip, a twin to the one still embedded in the hell-beast on the ground.

“Derek is a pure-hearted man,” she said. “Had it truly been him, the arrow would have passed through his body just as it passed through you.”

Oliver fingered the spot over his heart where he’d felt the bolt of energy pierce his chest earlier. The tingle remained, but there was no pain, and his clothing and flesh remained unscathed.

“What are we going to do with that?” he asked, nodding towards the dead thing.

“My Sensei and our comrades will deal with it, and the damage, before dawn,” she answered, pulling her arrows free from the carcass.

“We won’t get another shot at finding Derek until six months from now. I only pray that he’ll still be alive and... himself by the time we get to him.”

"Fear not," she smiled. "Your Brothers are strong, and where they are, time passes differently. Trust me. The benefit is ours."

He took one last look at the creature and followed Mori back to the *shajo* where she collected the wrappings for her bow and returned her arrows to the quiver. A thought occurred to him.

"You said we were going to the cave I saw in my vision. Was that the portal that you opened?"

"That was the connection point I aimed for," Mori confessed, "but apparently our Enemy had other plans."

"Is that a good thing?" he asked as they walked back along the secluded way they had come.

"It's too soon to tell," she said. "Still, it means that you're on the right track. Think of it as your Enemy saying hello, sizing you up."

"Oh, that's comforting," he muttered. "So much for the element of surprise."

Mori laughed out loud, startling a couple of small birds who fluttered up into the night sky. "What makes you think you ever had it? No, we simply have to find subtler anchor points. Find their blind spots. Employ misdirection. In the meantime, you and Sara should come to the shop and meet Kikunaga-sensei, test a bow and get fitted for some arrows. *Kyūdō* will suit you both, I think."

Oliver sighed and nodded. The slow ritual of Japanese archery wasn't exactly sleek guns in Tokyo alleys, but it *was* pretty cool, he had to admit. Nonetheless, he sent up a silent prayer for patience.

# Gray Rising

Janine A. Southard

Carlie Fuentes' mom was a cop. Which is how she found herself shadowing a sketchy guy outside Starbucks at 2:00 P.M. on a Wednesday afternoon, instead of eating microwave popcorn and watching Netflix in her new apartment.

The guy hadn't moved in a few minutes, other than to sip his Americano and swish his thick black hair, so she felt safe to look away for a moment. She tucked her latte into the crook of her right elbow, bunching up her red hoodie's sleeve, and balanced her tablet on that same arm. *Stupid tablets are too big to use one-handed. I've got to get a smartphone.* Because, of course, she'd lost her old smartphone when she'd lost her hand in Iraq. Well, no one chose to be a war correspondent for safety reasons.

Too bad magic wasn't real. She could use a magic hand to replace the original. Or *three* magic hands: two to use her tablet and one to hold anything else she needed.

Carlie tapped out a quick reply to her high-school best friend, who'd heard she was back in town – *girl! how you been? we gotta get together now that you live here again* – declining the invitation to hang out. Carlie wasn't in much of a hanging out mood these days.

She glanced up to check on the guy. Still there.

Carlie wondered what was wrong with him. When Mom had said, "I need someone to keep an eye on him, and you can exercise those investigative journalism skills before you lose 'em," she hadn't elaborated. He certainly looked dangerous enough, muscular and loose-limbed, like he could run away with your purse or break into your store. Tattooed like maybe he was in a gang or a creepy cult. Had a scruffy not-quite-beard like the organized crime crowd sported in all their "official" photos these days.

A flash of white, the size of a flying fist maybe, passed the guy in his chair, heading straight for her.

A kid in the street yelled, "Hey, lady! Watch out."

Like she couldn't see the baseball coming at her. And what kind of kid played baseball in a city street these days? Didn't they stop doing that in the 1930s?

She didn't have a spare hand to catch it. Didn't want to drop her tablet or her coffee. Well, the coffee was cheaper.

She flapped her arm and dodged. Her paper cup hit the ground and splattered burnt Sumatra and rapidly souring milk. The ball spiked her shoulder anyway. Her good shoulder. The one with the hand still attached to its arm. She'd dodged the wrong way. *Great spatial relations skills, Fuentes.*

Her tablet clattered to the pavement and she hoped to all the deities anyone believed in that it hadn't broken, because those things were expensive and she didn't have a job here yet. Disability paid for only so much.

She staggered against the wall, popping her head against the rough brick. The bursting pain didn't take her mind off the throb in her shoulder.

He knelt in front of her, the guy. The mark. The hoodlum she was supposed to be discreetly watching. "You dropped this." His voice was low and dark and could've been sexy if she didn't know he was such a schmuck.

She held out a trembling hand. "Thanks." If he asked, she could tell him the tremble came from the baseball hit, not from talking with someone who she knew – *knew* – had done something wrong. Even if she didn't know what.

"That dodge looked good." He let go of the tablet and stepped back to give her space.

"What?" Her bag slipped down her right shoulder, and she caught it in the crook of her arm.

"You thought fast, moved fast. Just... ah... not in the right way."

She snorted and brandished her right wrist. "Story of my life." Oh great. Now she'd shown off her most defining feature and he'd never forget her. How could she follow him unnoticed?

"I've got a parkour training studio just down the road if you wanted to try it out. Maybe it'd help with the situational awareness?"

She knew he had a studio. She'd done a little research in advance. *Well, if he's going to invite me to watch him in his place of business...* "It'll probably help with my balance, too." Her physical therapist said the balance issues would work themselves out.

"First lesson is free. Come by Saturday at 10:00 A.M.?" That was tomorrow.

• • •

That night, after she'd sat next to a mirror and clenched her left hand over and over to fool the corresponding right one, she practiced her new handwriting by writing out what she knew so far. Which wasn't much.

So she drank some wine, watched a YouTube video about putting up her hair for the gym (demonstrated by a frustratingly perky teenage girl with one arm and sparkly eyeshadow), and ignored another email from her former best friend. She could answer it after class tomorrow.

• • •

“Welcome to beginners’ parkour,” Carlie’s sketchy mark said. He was the class’s instructor, apparently, which she hadn’t been expecting since he owned the place. The “place” being a concrete warehouse cluttered up by wooden boxes and cages made of plumbing pipe. It was gray and gray and black and brown and gray.

Unlike the last gym she’d joined, it smelled of tea tree cleaning products. No stale, tangy sweat hiding underneath. Maybe it was a new location.

Three other people had shown up for the Parkour For People Who Have Never Leapt Over Anything Before class: a Pinterest-perfect blond woman in tennis shoes, a teenaged boy in sagging sweatpants – who called himself “Peregrine,” and what in the world was up with *that*, anyway? – and a cutie her own age who bounced in his low profile sneakers.

“I’m Rico,” said the instructor, “and we’re going to learn how to walk and vault today. Don’t worry. You can all do this.”

Carlie raised her eyebrows at that, but made no comment. Instead, she prepared by pulling her hair into her mouth so she could twist her elastic around it for another level of tightness.

The cutie – with a boyish smile and skin the color of raw umber – whispered into her ear, “You really can. I’ve been doing this for years, and Rico’s first class is very disability friendly.” His smile was so *sincere*. “We even have classes specifically to learn how to work around stuff.”

Carlie spat out her hair, ponytail successfully achieved. “We’ll see.”

“I’m Tyler,” he said.

“Carlie.”

Rico whistled to grab their attention. “Circle up!”

And that was the last conversation she had for the next hour and a half. True to the men’s words, she was equally as capable as everyone else in the class. When that came to walking on pipes just an inch off the ground, it meant she stumbled off as often as not. When it came to vaulting hip-high boxes, it meant putting her left hand out to one side, her right foot on the other, and pushing over with gentle force.

She’d had balance problems since the hand. She’d walked funny for months. And here she was, clearing hip-high obstacles like taking a stroll.

Tyler grinned at her beside the water fountain after class, “Pretty cool, right?”

She snorted, “At least I don’t have to worry about choosing a dominant hand.” Her classmates had all stopped when they reached a box the first time, needing to pick which hand-and-foot combination to use.

He laughed, and then looked a bit embarrassed.

"If I don't joke..." she said to ease his guilt, and let him fill in the blank. From the downcast eyes and sudden frown, she'd bet cute-and-bouncy Tyler had some horrible event in his own past,, too.

Rico joined them and took a sip from the fountain. He wasn't the slightest bit sweaty or out of breath, from his swishy thick hair to his black canvas sneakers. "I'm glad you could make it," he said to Carlie.

"Thank you for inviting me." It was important to remind him that he'd initiated their connection.

"Do you think you'll keep with it?"

If he wanted to make her surveillance easier, she wouldn't say no. "Sell me a membership," she said and imitated one of Tyler's sincere smiles.

For the hour and a half that she'd spent walking over boxes, and for the next five hours of "observing classes" from a lounge perched on top of the ladies' restroom, she didn't think about anything other than her body and how to best place a foot in order to walk up a wall.

• • •

Carlie dropped her gym bag on the carpeted floor of her apartment at 6:00 P.M. It had been a productive day of integrating herself into Rico's life.

But she hadn't seen anything illegal going on.

She dictated a quick email to her persistent high-school friend – *Thanks for the invitation, but I was at parkour this afternoon. Sorry I missed you!* – then plunked herself in front of the mirror to do therapy. She clenched both her hands, saw them both turn into fists courtesy of the mirror, and felt a tension in her nonexistent tendons uncramp.

No time for more than that, though. She needed to get back to Rico's place of business and uncover whatever was wrong with him. Her mother was counting on her.

• • •

It was dark gray in front of the parkour studio. The street felt sticky with something Carlie hoped to never identify. Car horns honked in the near distance, and a hazy light came from right over the door. A low wall and gate separated the place from the street, though its crumbling bricks made it seem more decorative or symbolic than deterrent.

Then again, the gate had a padlock on it.

Carlie looked right and left and right again, like a child about to cross the street... or to do something bad. Then she put her left hand on the wall, her right foot out to the side, and vaulted cleanly over it without so much as mussing her black yoga pants and matching black hoodie.

Well, now what? Sure, she'd used Rico's own teachings in order to further his downfall, but she wasn't actually any closer to getting inside. If the door was locked, what was she going to do next? And if it wasn't, whoever was inside would hear her loud echoes tripping around the warehouse walls.



The door burst open, and a tall, black-clad figure rushed into the night. He clutched a package in one arm and raced off.

*Lucky!* Coming here had been a smart move for her surveillance plan. She'd follow Rico – it *had* to be Rico – and discover what it was he didn't want his employees to know.

Out of habit, she raised both her arms to tighten her ponytail. Mmm... that felt *soooo* much better. And then she sprinted into the evening fog, making another textbook vault over the low wall to start her on her way.

Her mark slowed when they reached well-lit streets, populated by smooching couples and giggling gaggles of party girls. Carlie slowed, too, but she couldn't let him get too far ahead. Rico's secrets were soon to be *her* secrets... and then her mother's secrets.

Carlie really needed to get a job of her own.

And then he jumped up a fire escape, leapt across to a different building, ducked inside an open window, and she lost him. But not before she saw his face reflected in a brightly lit glass pane. Framed by the black hoodie wasn't Rico, but Tyler.

"Damn it."

• • •

Carlie's second parkour class went in many ways like her first. Rico said encouraging things like, "My favorite thing about parkour is that you're in complete control of your body and learn use your environment to your advantage."

What Carlie would give to be in complete control of her body.

And, for an hour and a half, she ran and vaulted and learned a better way to swing her legs to get sideways over an obstacle at breast-height. She didn't worry about her hand, didn't think about getting a new job or whether she'd received yet another social email. She just concentrated on jumping at the right angle and keeping her breathing even.

"Good work," Rico praised her after class.

"Can I stay and watch again?" Carlie asked.

"Of course." His expression seemed to divide his face into three distinct regions: the part above his eyebrows, the part below his mouth, and everything else. "Just remember," he said, "*petit a petit, l'oiseau fait son nid.*"

Which made no sense at all.

A blush stained his skin with burnt sienna. "I learned French for parkour. I already spoke Spanish, and learning a new romance language is easy after you know one."

She'd never tried for a third language, never needed to know more than English and an Angeleno's flavor of Spanish. She also hadn't known that they had native bilingualism in common. "Maybe I'll try it," she said.

"I could help!" he chirped.

She'd never take him up on it. Once she got him thrown in jail for whatever it was that he was doing wrong, they wouldn't see each other again.

From her perch in the lounge above the ladies' restroom, Carlie watched class after class. She thought about descending to take another one – the women-only class seemed especially supportive of physical shortcomings – but got distracted by Rico's expression as he clucked over spreadsheets on the other side of the lounge near the mini-fridge. She wanted to know what was going wrong.

So that she could turn him in for it, of course.

Again, she left in the early evening so that she'd simply look like a dedicated learner, not a spy. And again, she donned her black yoga pants and hoodie after doing her mirror exercises at home. But this time she put on a sparkly red top under the hoodie – the kind of top that said *I'm out on the town to par-TAY* – and she used a second hair-elastic to make one of those messy side buns that were so fashionable.

She was lucky that *messy* buns were in fashion. She'd never have managed anything sleek with one hand. She'd only ever barely managed it with two.

Again, she shadowed Tyler on his late-night dash from the parkour studio, neatly hopping over street litter and sidestepping all the happy couples. Her hips twisted around a fire hydrant here, her arms lifted over a vomiting frat boy there. And all without missing a step.

A block before the place she'd lost him before, Carlie shed her black jacket and called out, "*Hey, Tyler! Is that you?*"

He tripped into a spin to face her, lips splayed and eyebrows adorably scrunched. His head tilted to the side like a puppy's. "Carlie! I didn't expect to see you here."

"Come get a drink with me." She latched onto him with her hand and cuddled close to his arm. He smelled like amber cologne. "Tonight's a good night." And it would be, as soon as he gave up everything he knew.

He pulled his arm in tight to his body, but he wasn't going to shake her off. "I'm meeting someone in a little bit." His mouth formed an apologetic grimace.

Before he could suggest *maybe another time*, Carlie giggled and hugged his arm closer. "That means you have a few minutes to spend with me. My treat."

There was no polite way for him to keep refusing her deliberate obtuseness, and his manners didn't disappoint her. She continued to hang off him while he steered toward a loud bar.

It teemed with people. A dimly lit mahogany counter overflowed while still always having room for just one more stool. The air was thick with beer and whiskey and perfume.

"I don't know what I would've done," Tyler confessed over a pint of something golden and fermented. "Rico saved me from them, you know. He gave me a job and a home. He taught me to concentrate on myself."

This was *not* what Carlie wanted to hear. Where was the juicy gossip that proved her mark was a slimebucket?

Tyler sighed and made finger-patterns through the condensation on his glass. "And here I am, meeting up with someone from the family that's trying to... Just don't tell him you saw me here, okay? This is Benincasa territory. He's been refusing to acknowledge... well, just let's not mention it, yeah?"

Carlie wrinkled her forehead in the way she'd seen him do earlier that evening, going so far as to do the puppy-esque head-cock. He always looked so *innocent*. Trust-worthy. She could be an even better journalistic interviewer if she could master his techniques. Not that she could convince the paper to send her back to a war zone now. Those days were over. "So why are you here then?"

It had to be something horrible. Was *he* involved with these Benincasas? Maybe the bundle in his arms was smuggled passports or drugs.

He sniffed and painted with his finger on the bar top. "I'm meeting my girlfriend."

Seriously? That was the big mystery? Ugh!

Carlie stood on barely-intoxicated feet and patted his shoulder. "You have a good night. I'm off to meet up with a friend." Not that she was.

• • •

Monday morning saw Carlie right back at the parkour studio. The first class of the day was for the seven o'clock before-office-work crowd. She knew it would be too advanced for her, but that was all right. She'd solidified her reputation as a person who enjoyed watching as well as moving. She could do her own rolling and jumping later.

She settled on a futon chair in the lounge, smiling at the one female instructor also hanging out up there. "Morning," she acknowledged.

Business people in track suits ran over the boxes and down rows of pipes, filling the warehouse with reverberating breaths and footfalls. She was now familiar with the nearly meditative nature of this physical activity; the class had descended too deeply into its zone to notice anything.

A hiss cut through the rhythmic noises of dedicated gym bunnies. "Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"Dude, I'm *so-rry*," Tyler's voice cracked.

Carlie scanned the floor until she found the pair huddled in a corner next to a gymnastic-y looking vault with Rico's laptop set on top of it.

"*Fifteen thousand dollars!*" Rico whisper-shouted. She shouldn't have been able to hear him from her perch, she didn't think. But she could, and she was going to take full advantage by unabashed eavesdropping. "I'm starting to get behind on the rent." He slammed the computer's clamshell and turned his back.

*Yes! Here comes the violence!* Carlie rooted around in the bag at her feet, hunting for her tablet. As soon as she had proof of something bad, she could call in her mother. She'd take a few photos, too.

Tyler reached out as if trying to hold on to their relationship. "I'm *sorry*. I had to. It's for Giovanina."

"Real girlfriends don't soak you for money. I know you love her, but it may be time to reevaluate." Rico sounded too calm, like he'd given this speech before. If not to Tyler, then to other unfortunates, over and over and over.

Where was the violence?

Tyler sniffled. "Please don't hate me," he said in a high voice.

Rico sighed and turned around, arms spread wide so that Tyler could nestle against his chest. *What?* He petted the younger man's head. "I don't hate you. And I'm not going to fire you. But you can't do this anymore, okay?"

"I promise. I promise!" Tyler hastened to assure through tears. "But Giovanina..."

"We'll figure that out together, okay? No more stealing. No more secrets."

Tyler pulled back and scrubbed his eyes with the backs of his hands. He was like a three-year-old. "Yeah, okay."

One of the business-morning guys jogged over to break up the tearful moment. Not that it mattered to Carlie. This whole conversation was a bust so far. "Not okay," the guy said, proving that she hadn't been the only eavesdropper. "You still owe."

Huh. So the issue wasn't that Rico was a troublemaker, it was that his place of business was ground zero for all sorts of illegal activity. So far, she'd seen embezzlement and what appeared to be loan sharking. But if Rico wouldn't press charges on the embezzlement, that only left this weird guy, and he was too ambiguous a villain.

"Look, Mister Rodriguez, we can work this out." Tyler's hands pushed at the air before him as if he could ward off the Rodriguez guy.

Someone tapped Carlie's shoulder, and she looked up to see the female instructor padding over to the far edge of the lounge and jumping soundlessly to the ground, ending in a safety roll that Carlie knew the woman didn't need to make. It was a demonstration. If Carlie wanted to get down without being seen, she couldn't use the ladder, which meant she'd have to jump and roll. Sure, she'd been practicing her rolls for the last few days, but she hadn't tried one at the end of a high jump yet. Only at the end of a six-inch jump.

Down on the floor, two others from the business crowd had come to surround Tyler and Rico. Here was the violence she'd been looking for, but it wasn't the way things were supposed to go. This wasn't her scene. She crawled over to the edge where the instructor had demonstrated the jump-and-roll for her; the woman was still waiting. Ready to help, Carlie figured.

The main door opened with a bang, and twelve people entered, not in gym-wear but in jeans and suits, carrying guns. "Mister Rodriguez. Rico. I'd heard the two of you had dealings of late. I'm disappointed to find these rumors are true."

The Rodriguez guy spat on the cement floor. Someone would have to clean that up later. "Benincasa scum."

Carlie jumped and rolled to absorb the force, perfectly silent and without jarring a single bone. All that rolling practice had definitely done her some good. Who would have thought she could ever jump off a ten-foot perch, even before she'd lost the hand? She was turning into a regular ninja with a seven-league stride.

The female instructor helped Carlie to her feet. "I'm going to get the cops," she whispered, before slipping out a side door that led to a truck dock with another six-foot drop that she took in a single jump.

By this point, the rest of the actual students had realized something hinky was going on. The Benincasas waved their guns menacingly and stalked the room on heavy boots, scents of gun oil and sour coffee in their wake. The students screamed and scattered, leaping over tall boxes that stymied their pursuers and hiding behind whatever was convenient.

Mister Rodriguez loomed over Rico, looking too rich and confident in his coordinated track suit. "You set me up," he growled.

Fists flew, parkour students ran, guns cocked. Everything was a haze of movement and loud clicking, thumping, slapping. Rubber on cement, flesh on cloth, metal on metal.

Someone ran past Carlie, creating a rush of wind against her skin. She had all the time in the world to bend out of the way. She knew her body and had total control. Like in a Hong Kong martial-arts film, the room slowed and the air currents took on a soft glow in the landscape of her mind – *like on the weather channel!* – that made all patterns of intention become clear. The colors clashed and shook and overlapped, and they settled something deep in her soul. They were new and beautiful and warmed her in a radiating expansion that started in her stomach.

She saw the pink anger that could drive Mister Rodriguez's fist into Tyler's face... and the three pale blue streaks that were paths he might use to evade it.

She saw the yellow motivations driving the Benincasas, and the green lines that their bullets had to follow. She saw balls of effervescing purple over the terrified students whose fear made them too unpredictable for simple lines.

She heard the bang, saw the green shockwaves all around the gun it came from. The other color lines flinched away from it, but she stood strong. She stood tall and still.

*You've seen this a million times on TV. You can catch a bullet.*

This time she didn't dodge. She reached out with her right hand, her dominant hand, her missing hand. It tingled. As if this were a mirror exercise, she clenched both her fists. The left hand was there. The right one was a too-bright wash of yellow-white. *Oh, wow, my hand.*

Carlie's breath caught, eyes wide with wonder, and then her right hand  
Caught.

A.

Bullet.

Her arm was pushed back. Hot metal tore into her phantom palm and flattened against the back of it like it had been stopped by some sort of energy shield. Her bones shook with the force. Every inch of her skin prickled with fire. *Damn, that hurt.*

It was nothing to losing an appendage.

Her voice was loud and confident, because she was the one in control of her surroundings. And she had a hand again, even if it was a strange, Michelangelo-esque one that glowed in her mental landscape. "Now you all listen to me."

• • •

When the police finally showed, Carlie was tying people up even though the ropes chafed her phantom hand. Rico was cuffing them and reading their rights because apparently he was an undercover cop. *Thanks for the heads-up, mom.* That woman was going to hear more than she wanted about the importance of informing your informants.

And there was her mother now. "Hello there, chickies," said Carlie's mother.

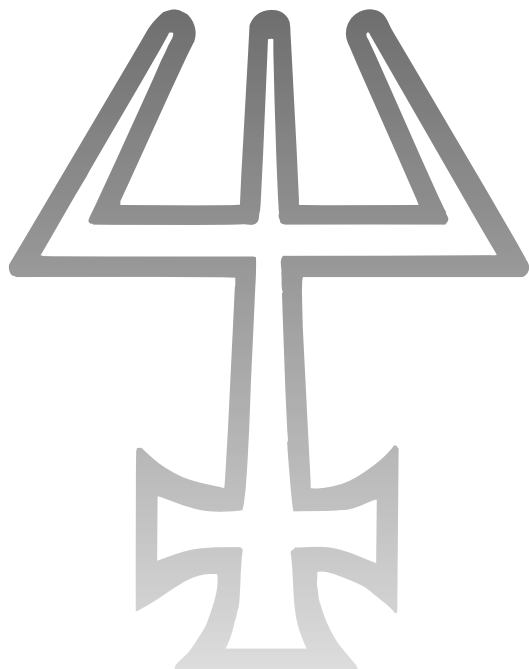
"Ma'am," said Rico.

Carlie just glared even as her mom slung an arm around her shoulder and squeezed her close. "I thought Rico might need some backup on this. And look! I was right."

Rico smiled that sexy, unfair smile. It pinged deep blue in Carlie's new vision. "I couldn't have asked for anyone better."

Carlie shrugged, displacing her mother's arm but making sure to wrap her own back around the woman's waist. "You know how it is. Learning to catch with a magic hand is easy after you've practiced making fists."

When they went out for celebratory drinks, she invited her high-school best friend to join them.



# A Firm Place to Stand

Sandra Damiana Buskirk

Ree swung the prototype up onto her desk with a thump, an almost-inaudible grunt, and a quick, guilty look around the empty office, automatically checking to see whether someone had seen her. This newest fracture was a pain in the *ass*, and technically she wasn't supposed to be lifting anything as heavy as the device in front of her. Okay, technically she was under strict orders *not to*, but if no one had seen her, it didn't count, right?

The dark peace of the empty desks reassured her, and she shrugged off her backpack then sat down in her chair to boot up her laptop – just barely within the weight limit, but only if she wasn't actually carrying anything else. Within moments, she was intent on the CAD drawing in front of her, highlighting and refining the circuits and lines and curves with software features that the students who had created this design would find deeply surprising and perhaps more than a little disturbing.

That was okay. Ree was used to hiding things that other people didn't need to know about.

• • •

Her first memories were of taking things apart to see how they worked, then putting them back together again. Once her grand-maman realized Ree wasn't actually *breaking* anything, the curve of her back relaxed and she called Ree "*ma bricoleuse*," smiling any time Ree brought her over to see something reduced to its component parts. When Ree began explaining to her grand-maman how those complicated parts all worked together, Mémé's smile became speculative as well. It wasn't long after that she brought home a broken scooter as a gift for Ree, along with some bits and pieces she thought might be useful.

A delighted five-year-old pulled her grand-maman over to see the repaired scooter the next day. That evening, Mémé took Ree out for a walk with the scooter, and showed her how far she was allowed to ride without supervision. After that, Mémé brought things for Ree to fix almost every week.

Looking back, Ree realized that was when things got a little easier. Mémé always ate with her, instead of urging her to eat while claiming not to be hungry. Her clothes mostly fit, and Mémé got new glasses and started bringing various kinds of piecework home. Sometimes, it involved reading thick printouts with a furrowed brow and drawing circles and lines and arrows on them in red ink, with emphatic notes scribbled to one side; sometimes, bringing home other peoples' clothes and stitching up tears and patching holes. Occasionally it was circuit boards that had to be traced with a careful, steady hand, making sure the silver lines matched a specific pattern with no breaks. Those were the best times, because Ree was allowed to help while Mémé explained what the boards were designed to do. Mémé always brought her something special to fix as a reward, and although they both tired easily, Ree was happy.

It took her years to understand that, when she showed Mémé that the cooker she'd been working on for a neighbor now worked significantly better than new, the stiff and unyielding anger in Mémé's voice as she demanded that Ree un-fix it, and never tell the neighbor, was borne of fear. It took even longer to understand *why*.

• • •

Ree sat up and tried to stretch a kink out of her back. The team who had designed and built the water purifier sitting in front of her had done a good job, and she was really quite pleased with them. Of the five teams she was mentoring, they were her favorite – two sisters, and a third girl they knew from school. Their work showed frequent flashes of brilliance, and they all had an earnest desire to use their abilities to make the world a better place. Ree was going to recommend that they all be offered positions at the Foundation, and one of the sisters might go beyond that, and be worth recruiting into... further training.

Speaking of which... Ree had yet to see a student design that couldn't be improved by a little judicious tweaking by a trained professional. She smiled, and focused her attention back on the glowing design in front of her, allowing her eyes to unfocus slightly as it filled her awareness.

*The design floated in front of her, rotating slowly, first this way, then that, as if it were a finished work of art on display. It nearly was; its purpose was a joyous glow around it, and the lives it would save seemed to resonate off in directions that would make her head hurt if she thought about them too directly. It wasn't quite right, though, it needed...*

*"Have you decided yet what you're going to do?" The little girl was sitting cross-legged next to her, looking with interest at the rotating tangle of glowing lines in front of them. Ree had long since stopped thinking that this was crazy; it was just how her brain solved problems. If it wanted to present that problem-solving portion as her five-year-old self, she could deal with that. Especially as it seemed to be correct a truly annoying percentage of the time.*



*"About what?" Ree reached out and pulled gently on one of the glowing lines, deforming it until she could reach the line behind it. She pulled a bit of light out of the air and wrapped it around that line like a bit of taffy, then patted the first line back into place.*

*Ma Bricoleuse – that portion of herself stubbornly insisted on calling itself by the nickname her Mémé had used, particularly when Ree had done something especially clever – looked reprovingly at her. Ree recognized that look, having seen it on Mémé's face often enough. "You know what about. They're getting so focused on being outraged about external issues that they're ignoring the internal fractures and losing sight of our original purpose. If they aren't... refocused... the world is going to burn, and there won't be anyone left to uplift." She swiped one small palm against the air, and an image – explosions, dust, blood, bodies – opened. Ree glanced at it, then focused on Ma Bricoleuse. She'd seen it before.*

*"What do you think I can do about it? I'm only one person, and I'm out on the fringes. I'm not even particularly influential. Besides, shouldn't we be focusing on this instead?" She gestured to the rotating wireform made of light, hoping to distract Ma Bricoleuse. "This is going to have real impact." She reached forward again and cupped her left palm around the output valve. The form stopped its rotation. The fingers of her right hand opened the housing around it; she hooked a glowing set of rings out of the air – filters of several different colors – with her right hand. She tried them in one spot, tilted her head to one side and pursed her lips, then pulled them out and slotted them back in a different place. She huffed a little, still not satisfied, and left the housing open.*

*Ma Bricoleuse was not distracted. She waited a beat, then wiped the image of the coming war out of the air as she had done several times before... except that this time, it ended up as a crumpled ball in her small fist. She gave Ree a nasty grin that looked out of place on her five-year-old face, squeezed the balled-up image until it was the size of the tip of her thumb, then rose up on her knees and, grabbing Ree's shoulder with her other hand for balance, shoved the image firmly into Ree's ear.*

*It stung like a sonofabitch going in. Ree pulled away and turned around to face Ma Bricoleuse head on. "Seriously? You're doing this? You're giving me nightmares about it now?"*

*Ma Bricoleuse smirked. "It worked last time."*

*"It... but... are you trying to get me killed?" Ree looked down, air huffing angrily out her nostrils, and abruptly moved her balled-up fists under her legs. The last time she had tried to throttle Ma Bricoleuse, it had NOT gone well. She huffed a few more times, then looked up, glaring at her three-foot-tall tormenter. "If I absolutely HAVE to do this, can you at least give me a lever? You know, so I can shift the Entire. Freaking. WORLD!"*

*Ma Bricoleuse's smirk grew into a lopsided grin. "Not that you actually need one, but... sure." She held out her left hand, palm up, and drew above it in light with her right index finger. On her palm, a delicate lever grew, balanced on the point of a fulcrum. "You'll have to figure out the firm place to stand." She stood up and walked around to gently push the device into Ree's other ear.*

Ree winced dramatically. *It barely hurt this time and she realized she wasn't actually angry any more, just... scared... but she wasn't about say that.*

*"You're right, by the way," Ma Bricoleuse went on, turning back toward the now-stationary water purifier and sitting down on her haunches. "This is going to make a big difference." Ree scooted over next to her, reaching in to pull out the filters that weren't quite right. "What are you trying to do with those, anyway?"*

*Ree ran them through her fingers. "The girls did a really good job designing this. It'll pull out salt and other minerals, biologicals like algae and protozoa, and chemicals like pesticides and petroleum, but it doesn't do anything about heavy metals or radioactives, and lots of the places these will need to go are dealing with the aftermath of war. So... I think what we actually need is a centrifuge, and a lead-lined tank to hold the heavy toxins once they're spun out." Ree tossed the filters into the air where they silently disappeared, and Ma Bricoleuse handed her a cylinder the size of her two fists together that had appeared in the air beside her. She waited until Ree had made space for it and slotted it into place, then offered her a choice – a small, squat, heavy tank or another, longer cylinder connected by several short tubes along its length to an equally long, stacked set of much smaller tanks. Ree looked back and forth between them, then grinned at Ma Bricoleuse. "Of course, it probably is a good idea to sort out those heavy elements as much as possible right at the beginning." She made a bit more room, then set the second cylinder to feed off the bottom of the first one. She closed it all up, sitting back to look it over a bit longer, then glanced over at Ma Bricoleuse. "Let's try it, shall we?" A stream of dark liquid came pouring out of the air directly into the intake. "Mercury, some U-235 and U-238, oil from a spill, a soup of pesticides, red algae, AND it's salt water with some of those stupid microbeads and other tiny bits of trash." Ma Bricoleuse passed her hand over the side of the device to make it transparent so they could watch the process. Ree touched various spaces in the air around it to create monitors and sensors, then set a clock running at 10:1, to speed the process up.*

*It ended up requiring a few more tweaks – the tank for the mercury would have to be larger, for one thing – but in the end it was obvious that the purifier would quickly and consistently turn even heavily polluted water into clean, clear, drinkable water, and wouldn't need much in the way of power or maintenance.*

*Ree quirked a grin at Ma Bricoleuse. "So what do you think?"*

*Ma Bricoleuse grinned back. "I think you've done a really good thing, here." She picked up the glowing image, compressed it until it fit easily in her two hands, then gently pushed it into Ree's forehead. "And about that other thing. What if you try giving them something else to think about?"*

*Ree awoke with her skull throbbing and the sense of having been kissed on the nose by small lips.*

• • •

*Ree knew she could sometimes be oblivious, especially when she had something truly challenging to fix, but not so oblivious that she didn't notice when her friend Sophia disappeared. Ree had gone looking, back then, hunting systematically through all the usual places.*

Then she looked in all the *unusual* places. Then she went directly to Sophi's maman, intending to demand answers. Sophi's maman had been sitting in front of their house, with wet eyes and a vivid bruise on one cheekbone, only partially camouflaged by her headscarf. She was rocking back and forth, staring at nothing, and didn't see Ree in the shadows.

Ree turned and walked silently away, and took her questions to Mémé. Mémé gave her answers – Sophia was pretty, and had started growing curves, and could already sew nicely, and had probably been taken by slavers. That was probably also what had happened to Sophi's cousin Yasmina before her, and to Yasmina's second brother Kamal as well. When Ree asked if Sophi's maman had tried to fight them and that was why her face was bruised, Mémé buttoned up her mouth and wouldn't say any more. The new vest with silver embroidery that Sophi's papa started wearing not long afterward made Ree realize that things were perhaps even nastier than she had thought. She went back to Mémé and demanded to know what they could do; once again, Mémé buttoned up her mouth, shaking her head and refusing to look Ree in the eye.

After that, she understood why Mémé had made her un-fix the cooker that time, and she became quietly wary around anyone who was not Mémé. Even other children could not be trusted, for what if they told someone her secrets? It didn't take a genius to realize that a slaver – or even just other grownups, like Sophi's papa – would love to have someone who could take old, broken things and make them better than new. And none of the children who had been her playmates seemed to have her burning desire to make the world *change*. She knew Mémé was bothered, seeing how tense and lonely Ree had become, but they both knew that it was necessary. Ree was meticulously careful about how well she fixed things, and started working on designs for a weapon to protect the two of them. It took over a year – a year during which Ree grew taller than Mémé, and started developing her own curves – but at last she had a prototype she thought might be useful, and was trying to figure out an unobtrusive way to test it.

Then Mémé got sick.

• • •

Upstairs, it seemed, was very pleased with Ree and the improved water purification device. So pleased, in fact, that Ree had to put on a skirt and a nice blouse and shoes, and make the trek upwards so she could sit in front of the Director's desk while he told her, happily, just how pleased he was.

She liked the Director. He was the uncle of one of her classmates, a very nice, very rich, idealistic, and somewhat naïve man who had no idea what his fiery nephew got up to. He might not have understood some things, but he *did* have a very firm grasp of what Ree's work, with his backing, was going to accomplish. He spent half an hour describing it to her, waving his hands about gleefully as he talked about decreasing mortality rates, disaster recovery, and increased crop production. Ree couldn't help smiling back at him.

Then he told her that he'd decided to promote her. And, with a mischievous grin, what he'd decided they were going to do next. It took a very long moment, but Ree started breathing again, blinking at the audacity of his plans... and a tiny seed of an idea took root at the back of her brain, and started growing.

Mémé had been sick before, several times, but never like this. Her heart was beating so fast, and it just didn't slow down. Walking even a few steps left her breathless and dizzy, so Ree decided to bring a doctor to her.

Later, Ree was a little astonished at her own boldness, insisting that Dr. Maya had to come with her *now*, telling her why and pulling on her sleeve until the woman, with a despairing look at the overflowing clinic, grabbed a bag, snapped a few orders at her assistant, and followed Ree back to Mémé. Later, the doctor told her it was a good thing she had.

Several days after that, Mémé and Dr. Maya had a very long talk, both of them wearing grim determination like masks. When Mémé had that look on her face, Ree knew from experience, she was going to get what she wanted no matter how difficult or painful it was – for her or anyone else. Ree only understood parts of what they said – yes, she knew how difficult and expensive it was to get any medicine that wasn't aspirin, particularly medicine to take every day – but the rest mystified her. She didn't even know Mémé *knew* those words, and could only guess at what they meant. They went on like that for almost two hours, Mémé's face getting more and more stubborn, until the doctor, reluctantly, pulled a piece of paper out of her bag. She handed it to Mémé, who scanned it carefully then handed it to Ree. "Ma bricoleuse, tell me what you think of this."

It was a flyer for a medical device – a pacemaker – which, Ree suddenly understood, would be surgically placed in her Mémé's chest, to control the speed of her heart beat with tiny jolts of electricity. She read every word of the flyer three times, then bent her attention on the drawing of the device itself. The flyer showed it from two different angles, plus a cutaway drawing to show what was inside. It *looked* fine, but the more Ree stared at the design and the accompanying explanation of how it worked, the more it seemed... not quite right. Finally she looked up at the doctor.

"I need to see it."

The doctor shifted, uncomfortably aware that the expression on Ree's face was an uncanny echo of her grand-maman's. "Ree, it will be fine. I've done this before, and your grand-maman is basically strong..."

"No, I *NEED* to see it," Ree interrupted. "I need..." She could hear the desperation growing in her voice. *I need to fix what's wrong with it* wasn't something she could say to the doctor. Nor was *I need to make it work better than new*, though that was equally true.

Finally her brain found words that might be acceptable: "It's probably silly, I know, but I need to see how it will work, and, and, know that it's working right. *Please*." She knew Dr. Maya could hear the desperation. "She's all I have."

Mémé, uncharacteristically, kept silent.

The doctor looked at Ree a long time, with indecipherable thoughts flickering over her face. She had watched Ree growing up, and Ree had done several repairs for her

at the clinic – repairs where Ree occasionally broke her own rule, if it was something important and she thought she could do it subtly enough. Finally Dr. Maya took a deep breath and looked over at Mémé with an eyebrow cocked. Mémé’s tiny nod must have reassured her, because she sighed in resignation and turned back to Ree.

“The device *MUST* be sterile. I would really prefer that it remain in its sterile packaging but... I suppose that... may not be possible.”

Ree realized distantly that she apparently *hadn’t* been subtle enough, and that might actually be a good thing. She sighed in relief. “Thank you, Dr. Maya. Would you show me...?”

“How to work in a sterile field?” Dr. Maya’s voice was suddenly as astringent as the air in her clinic. “I don’t suppose I have a choice, now do I?” She stood up and smiled sourly down at Mémé. “I’ll submit the request for the pacemaker to the missionaries. I suspect they’ll approve it fairly quickly; they don’t like to leave children orphaned and alone when they can prevent it. I’ll let you know as soon as the pacemaker arrives, so we can schedule your surgery. Ree, come walk me out, please?” It was not a request.

When they were a few steps away from the door, Dr. Maya stopped and took hold of Ree’s arm, leaning in to speak in a very quiet voice.

“You’re going to show me *exactly* what you do. If you... *change* anything, I’ll need to see precisely what you’ve altered, and you’ll explain why, in detail. I want it written down, because I’ll need to study it to make *sure* it will work correctly. This is your grand-maman’s life, and I won’t allow you to throw it away, just so you can play with a new toy. You understand me? This is going to be an old, obsolete-model pacemaker, so I’m going to have to *kill* part of your grand-maman’s heart in order to stop the tachycardia, and the pacemaker will be the only thing keeping her heart beating.”

Ree sat firmly on the sudden terror that bubbled up; Dr. Maya knew she was taking a huge risk in letting Ree work on Mémé’s pacemaker, and she was probably almost as scared at the prospect as Ree was. She nodded silently, to show Dr. Maya she understood and was taking this very seriously indeed.

The doctor huffed a breath out through her nose, then looked speculatively at Ree. “You know, if this... it could... well.” She took a deep breath and straightened. “We’ll deal with that when the time comes, shall we? In the meantime, I have a couple books at the clinic that you should probably take a look at.”

• • •

Five meetings a day, Ree found herself thinking, was six meetings too much. And yet, she couldn’t fault the reasoning that had caused those meetings to be scheduled. Before they could *do* anything, it had to all be planned. And before it could be planned, they had to decide *what* to plan. And in order to decide *what* to plan, they needed a truly massive amount of information, and that information had to be identified, gathered, sorted, analyzed...

The headaches were frequent, and often epic. She started keeping bottles of pain-killers in her new desk, in her new office. Her assistant Jing – she had a new assistant, as

well – worked some of his amazing-because-it-was-utterly-mundane magic, and made more bottles of painkillers appear in the conference rooms her meetings were in, alongside the food and drink that were stocked there. When he realized how late she was working, he also arranged for food to be delivered in the evenings, and brought in a massage therapist, who recommended a physical therapist. He brought that woman in as well, and put time in Ree's schedule for the exercises her new PT insisted upon.

Ree found herself hoping that, at some point, it would stop being overwhelming and start being fun. She installed an advanced intelligent email-sorting algorithm, and hoped that might help.

• • •

Ree hadn't realized just how complicated this was going to be. She read everything in Dr. Maya's books on pacemakers, tachycardia, and how the heart normally worked, learning in the process every single one of the terms Dr. Maya and Mémé had used, only to realize that she needed far more information. Dr. Maya gave her a lopsided smile and, since the electricity was up, got on the Internet and started requesting articles. After the third time Ree went back to her with more questions, Dr. Maya threw up her hands and put Ree directly in touch with someone in America named Stephen, with whom she had gone through residency. Dr. Stephen, she said, had specialized in cardiology, and should be able to give Ree all the information she was looking for.

Dr. Stephen was, in fact, able to answer every question Ree came up with. He was also, she realized, extremely perceptive, and able to pull information out of every word she said to him. She tried to phrase her questions to give away as little as possible, but his questions to her made it obvious he was getting as much information from her as she was getting from him.

It was clear he wanted to help, though, so when he casually asked about the tools she normally used for making repairs, she told him, just as casually, not only what she already had, but also what she thought she would need.

• • •

For once, when Ree came out of her office, yawning because she had pulled another all-nighter and caught a bare two hours of sleep on the small couch that had mysteriously appeared a few weeks ago, Jing didn't jump up from his desk to hand her coffee, her schedule, and a compilation of the most urgent issues she was going to have to deal with today. In fact, he was focused so intently on the pile of electronic components in front of him that he didn't seem to even notice she was there. Ree stepped closer to see what he was working on, intentionally scuffing her bare foot against the floor to make a quiet sound.

Jing jumped and looked up at her, flushing slightly. "Oh, Ree! I'm so sorry, I didn't notice..." He gestured to the pile that looked like it might have started out as a small tablet, the kind that had all the hardware add-ins someone with young children would need.

"What...?" Ree was intrigued; Jing loved gadgets, but only ones that were already put together, and he didn't normally get flustered like this.

“Oh, well, I was visiting my sister last night, and my nephews were playing... I... told my sister I would fix it for her.” Jing doted on his small nephews, and seemed content that his sister’s family was the majority of his social life. He also, in Ree’s opinion, spoiled the two boys shamelessly – but they were, after all, only two and four years old, respectively. A little spoiling probably wouldn’t harm anything.

Except, she thought, looking at the pile on Jing’s desk, for the tablet. “Budding engineers, are they?”

Jing’s smile was proud, until he glanced back down at his desk. The look of dismay that moved over his face was profound, and Ree suppressed a bit of laughter as she stepped forward and swept the pile off his desk, using the front of her shirt as a carrying basket.

The speed at which he followed her back into her office with coffee, schedule, and list of issues made her raise a mental eyebrow. When she saw that the first two hours of her day were blocked for *office time*, she gave him a smile that was gleeful and only slightly reproving, and shooed him out of her office.

“Oh, and Jing? You deserve the raise.”

He stopped and turned around. “Raise? What raise? Ree?”

She closed the door between them. She had a tablet to fix.

• • •

Young Ree had brushed fretfully at her hair. It was already smooth, and she already wore her best dress, but she wouldn’t be leaving to walk to the clinic for another ten minutes, and she had to do *something*.

Dr. Maya’s message, conveyed by a small child who lived nearby, told Ree that the pacemaker had arrived... and with it, Dr. Stephen. He wanted to meet her. Ree should come after the clinic was closed for the day.

• • •

Ree realized she wasn’t terribly awake, and so she closed the report, dimming the office lights and going to lie down on the couch. There were *so* many factors and forces that had to be taken into account, enough that fixing one problem often made another one worse, if the forces driving *that* problem weren’t neutralized or redirected. It was worse, by whole magnitudes, than the design for the water purification device had been. It did have some significant similarities, but at least the impurities they pulled out of water were unlikely to explode. Mostly, anyway. At least, not on *purpose*.

She drifted off to sleep, watching as a dream device constructed itself around her – a device designed to transform both the tangible and the intangible, harvesting CO2 and pulling energy out of the air as easily as it transformed money, political power, pure information, and public opinion into substances that could be manipulated, contained, purified. Her dream-self watched, entranced, as the device grew and unfolded, becoming more complex before her eyes... then she reached out, and started rearranging things to make them work better.

Little Ree thought her skull was going to burst with all the knowledge and English terminology Dr. Stephen had stuffed into her brain in the past four hours. He had brought a *much* more advanced pacemaker with him than the one the missionaries who funded the clinic were sending, and other equipment as well, and he was planning to do Mémé's surgery himself. This new pacemaker, he demonstrated to Ree and Dr. Maya, could actually be programmed (although the available options were limited at best), and it had a significantly better battery, one that was likely to last Mémé the rest of her life without causing problems of its own.

"So," he went on in French, "our next step will be doing a really in-depth EKG on your grand-maman, so we can see exactly what's going on, and I'd like to do enough imaging to build a 3-D model of her heart as well, if we can manage it. Once we do that, we'll be able to figure out which programming options will work best for her."

Ree waited until he paused, so she wouldn't interrupt. "Thank you," she said, answering him in the same language. She would have been much more comfortable with Arabic, but it would have been rude to speak in a language he might not understand, for all that his French was impeccable. "What if Dr. Maya is right, though? What if the problem isn't with her heart, but is her autonomic nervous system instead? These options... they won't work very well for that, will they?"

Dr. Stephen suddenly looked tired and slumped very slightly, disarranging the sharp lines of his dark suit. "Well, no, mademoiselle. These devices aren't sensitive enough to measure signals sent from the brain, nor can the EKG do that, and the amount of delicacy required to, well, *condition* those signals... we're just not there yet."

Ree glanced down at the documents Dr. Stephen had laid out in precise lines in front of them. "Thank you," she said again. "Mémé will be worried; I should go. May I take these with me, to study?"

Dr. Stephen smiled. "Of course."

Dr. Maya insisted that they would walk Ree home as it was so late; fortunately, the two of them spent the short walk reminiscing with each other about their residency, and didn't require Ree to talk. It was just as well; Ree's brain was filled with diagrams, and if she opened her mouth to talk, she wasn't sure that what came out would be words.

Mémé was already asleep. Ree went over and kissed her forehead, then took off her dress and carefully hung it up before curling up in the bed next to Mémé. *Conditioning* the signal – what did that mean? How would she do that?

*This had to be a dream. Maybe a nightmare? Her normal dreams didn't have a naked heart in them, certainly not a giant heart beating regularly and slowly in front of her; with dark red conduits leading off it that she recognized as major veins and arteries, and the thick silver wires, leading to a machine the size of both her hands... it was a pacemaker. She climbed all around the heart, stairs appearing when she needed them, identifying each part and watching as it worked. Ree was admiring how the atria worked with the ventricles when the tachycardia began – the heart started beating harder, and much faster. The pacemaker wasn't making enough of a difference. Ree climbed*



higher, to the top of the right atrium, and passed her hand over the muscle to make it go transparent, so she could see the sinoatrial node work. Sure enough, it was firing far too rapidly. Ree reached through the muscle to touch the node; each time it fired, it sent a shock through her hand. She made more of the area transparent, until she found the nerve clusters attached to the node. One went from the node off into the heart in several directions. The other... that was the one from the brain. She grasped it in her hand, but couldn't feel the signals as they assuredly surged through it.

"Here, try this." Ree jumped. There was a little girl – a very familiar little girl, in clothes Ree recognized as having been her favorites when she was five – crouching next to her, and holding out what looked like an ohm meter. Ree reached out slowly and took it. What on earth? The little girl didn't say any more, just waited to see what Ree was going to do.

What was Ree going to do, anyway? She took the probe attached to the meter, and with a deep breath, poked it through the surface of the cable-like nerve. The needle on the meter jumped, and jumped again, and again – a regular pattern. So, this was the signal from the brain that was causing the SA node to fire too quickly.

The little girl looked at her with approval, and put her hand on the surface of the heart. It immediately calmed, going back to its original, much slower rhythm. Ree looked back at the meter, and saw that not only was the jumping pattern much slower, but the top range seemed to be lower as well.

Ree looked over at the little girl, surprised to see a delighted grin on her face. "Oh, you're good," the girl said, and jumped down off the heart.

Ree jumped down after her, landing much more lightly than she normally did in dreams.

"So..." she said.

"So," the little girl replied, "what's next?"

"A... resistor?" Ree offered hesitantly.

"Sure, let's try it! What do we make it out of?" The little girl seemed awfully enthusiastic.

"Umm, glass, I guess? Really hard glass, so it doesn't break? Oh wait, no, it has to be an optional resistor, so it only gets used when there's too much signal. So, there needs to be, umm... something like an overflow valve, so... a sensor? Something programmed to flip a switch and complete the circuit to the resistor when it measures more than the normal amount or rate of signal?"

The little girl smiled at her beatifically. "I like you. You're smart." She handed Ree a lump of glass and gestured to one side, where there were now, Ree saw, a collection of wires and circuit boards with a very nice set of tools lying next to them.

Ree's Mémé woke her the next morning, poking at her and teasing until she rolled out of bed. "Sorry, Mémé," she yawned, "I must have been more tired than I..." Suddenly her eyes went wide, as she remembered the dream she'd been in all night. She grabbed her clothes and pulled them on, then whirled around to grab some fruit and fill a

glass with cool tea from the container that always sat next to the washing basin, handing both fruit and tea to Mémé.

“Excuse me, I need to write something down!” Ree flew over to the corner by the one window, where paper and pencil were kept. Within moments, she had sketched the outline of the device from her dream on a precious sheet of half-blank paper, then she squinted slightly and bit her lip, bending closer to fill in the delicate and very precise details it would require.

Mémé sighed and bit into a grape. She hoped her little *bricoleuse* would be done before Mémé’s need to visit the privy behind the house was so great that she had to try to walk there without help.

• • •

*It’s all beginning to come together,* Ree thought with satisfaction, rubbing a bit of dust from her hands. *The hip bone, as the Director likes to say, is indeed connected to the thigh bone, and now that we’re nailing down the necessary parameters, I think we might just be able to make this thing work.*

A few feet away, the three girls responsible for the water purification device were demonstrating it to a clutch of government officials whose country had, over the last two years, added the ravages of drought to the poisons left by war and industry. Ree had already weeded out those civil servants who had seen the Foundation’s offer as another opportunity to line their pockets and increase their personal power, and gently informed the government that the Foundation would be unable to work with those individuals; the ones who remained seemed to be genuinely interested in helping what was left of their nation to heal and prosper. One of the girls handed a freshly purified glass of water to one of the officials; he held it up to the sun to admire its clarity, and then toasted them with a blinding grin before taking an appreciative sip and handing it to the man next to him.

Behind them, cargo containers with five thousand purification devices waited for the Foundation convoys that would be distributing them across the country. Ree had, of course, mentioned to her official liaison that the convoys would be armed to help deter the bandit groups that infested the countryside. She hadn’t mentioned just how *effectively* armed they would be, however, nor that she had, at the last minute, added a self-defense circuit to the device design that would help ensure that they stayed in the communities where the Foundation put them.

• • •

Ree had to talk really hard in order to convince Dr. Stephen to try her idea, but once he agreed, he had helped her put together this new, minuscule device, while Dr. Maya and Mémé watched them work. Ree hadn’t known that there *were* anything like replacement nerve fibers, and didn’t think too hard about why Dr. Stephen might have had some with him. It was done now, and Dr. Stephen would be performing Mémé’s surgery tomorrow, installing the pacemaker and also very delicately inserting the device Ree had designed into the nerve that fed signals from Mémé’s brain into her heart.

Mémé had finally fallen asleep after midnight. Ree was, if anything, even more scared than Mémé was, and hadn't been able to fall asleep with her. From the silence outside, Ree thought it might be after 2:00 A.M. She stood at their one window, staring out into the darkness and hoping the slight breeze was making her sleepy.

A quiet clanking noise came from back behind their home. Ree stiffened, suddenly very awake. There shouldn't be anyone back there moving around, especially not at this hour. Another sound, like fabric brushing against wood, came from just outside the shack next to theirs. Ree backed away from the window, moving as quietly as she could. She knelt down, fretting, and reached into the basket by the door where their sandals were kept, pulling out the metal tube that had started out as nothing more than a bit of pipe and some wires. She hadn't had a chance to *test* this out yet!

Hearing more sounds that might have been a couple of steps on the short path to their door, followed by a harsh whisper, she stayed crouched down. Her heart felt like it was beating faster than Mémé's, and she couldn't get a deep breath, but she held still as the door started opening. *There!* A man's hand was at the latch, pushing it slowly toward her.

Ree sprang up and touched the tip of the metal tube to his hand, thumbing a switch. The end of the tube flashed blue, and he yelled, pulling his hand back and stumbling back from the door. Ree pulled the door open and thumbed a second switch. Sudden jagged lines of blue-white electricity jumped between the tall garden stakes on either side of the path, striking him and the two men behind him at mid-thigh. Ozone and the scent of burning cotton and flesh rose into the air with their shrieks as the men tried to turn and run on legs that spasmed, no longer under their control.

More running footsteps and masculine shouts. Were there more of them? What could Ree do? The car batteries feeding electricity into her unwelcome guests weren't going to last much longer.

Ree counted four more shadowed bodies approaching at speed... then a fifth stepped out of the shadows. There were four small flashes, and each of the four bodies dropped, immediately and silently.

The fifth man stepped forward, and Dr. Stephen gave her a small smile. "I think you can let them go now," he said. "I can promise they won't bother you anymore."

Ree's thumb slipped off the switch on the tube in her sweat-slippery hand as she stared at him. The electric arcs abruptly died. The three men who had apparently intended to... what, *kidnap* her? steal her for the slavers?... fell to their knees and, groaning, started to crawl out of that dangerous path and into the dubious safety of the street, where Dr. Stephen waited for them.

"Interesting." He nodded toward the tube in her hand. "We will discuss that tomorrow. In the meantime, you should go inside and get some sleep."

• • •

*"Give them something else to think about, huh?" Ree stood in a dream landscape that was much more symbolic than real, looking down at the amorphous horde that evidently was supposed to represent her colleagues. Here and there, she could pick out*

individuals she knew: several students she had gone to the Academy with, Dr. Stephen and a couple other former mentors, her university advisor – all of them stood staring off into the west, gesturing to wisps of smoke that rose into the air just past the horizon. She could hear some of them arguing over what those wisps were, how dangerous they were, and how best to deal with them. Others were feverishly building devices, armor, weapons – everything they could possibly need to destroy whatever it was, just out of their view. None of them seemed to notice she was there.

“So...” she asked. “A distraction? Or, no. Something to get their attention. Something... to draw their attention to the fact that what they want, what they all dream about, is over there.”

She strode north, toward what seemed to be some rather undefined hills, with a small unprepossessing valley lying before the hills.

It definitely wasn't anything to write home about, she thought, looking around, but it would serve. And on the top of that hill, a rock... a small boulder, really. Yes. Given the stories she knew most of her colleagues had grown up with, it was actually rather perfect.

The hill obligingly made a path for her, though when she got to the top, she turned and brushed it out, even rumpling things up into obstacles that hadn't been there before. This shouldn't be too easy, after all.

Once the landscape was artistically difficult, Ree turned back to the boulder, which helpfully grew a rougher surface and a bit of a flat space at the top. She looked at it a moment longer, then sat down in front of it. It was time, and this might be painful. Her skull wasn't exactly made out of water, after all.

She closed her eyes, and visualized the lever Ma Bricoleuse had pushed into her ear. She could almost feel it, inside her brain, but it was stubbornly staying right there. She tried to reach into her ear, and succeeded in doing nothing more than poking herself repeatedly and making her ear sore. She growled, then took the kind of deep breath she always took when being patient with her own thick-headedness, and closed her eyes again.

“I don't want to interrupt whatever you're doing, but, do you want some help?” Ma Bricoleuse's voice was almost a giggle.

Ree opened her eyes and glared at the little girl standing next to the boulder. “Why yes, if you could help me get this gods-bedamned lever out of my ear, I would appreciate it very much.”

Ma Bricoleuse wagged one stubby reproving finger at Ree, then reached over and plucked the lever from Ree's ear, displaying it with an illusionist's flourish.

Ree snatched it and, with a conspiratorial grin up at Ma Bricoleuse, started pulling at the ends of the lever, lengthening and broadening it until it lay across her lap, almost as long as her open arms, and as wide as her palm. She turned then, to the anvil that had appeared to her left, picked up the hammer that had appeared next to it, and lay the metal flat and started banging on it.

*"I don't suppose you know anything about metalwork, do you?" she asked Ma Bricoleuse cheerfully. Ma Bricoleuse raised one eyebrow and tilted her head, staring for a long moment, then reached forward to touch the length of metal with a fingertip. The metal immediately turned cherry red and started smoking, and Ree found that it rather rapidly rearranged itself into the shape she had in mind.*

*The fulcrum was equally obliging, one part breaking off and joining with what was very clearly no longer a lever, and the rest of it pounding flat into a plaque that fit onto a space on the boulder that seemed made for it.*

*Finally, it was done. Ree lifted the shining sword, gazing with a combination of weariness, hope, and not a little wonder at its gleaming length.*

*She looked down at Ma Bricoleuse. "Are you sure about this? Really absolutely, positively sure?"*

*Ma Bricoleuse nodded solemnly, then a mischievous grin flashed out. "Did you know? The original Welsh name meant 'hard' and 'cleft.' It was the sword that was also a lever.*

*Ree laughed, then, taking a deep breath, plunged the sword point-first into the boulder. The sword sang for a long moment, its tone ringing out high and pure past the valley, past the place where a horde of worried, well-meaning tool-makers feverishly created devices to battle monsters that were mostly made up of their own fears, and out past the horizon where wisps of smoke still rose.*

*Ma Bricoleuse stepped forward and brushed one hand over the plaque, words forming in the wake of her small fingers.*

*"Whosoever shall pull this sword..."*

• • •

"...and over here and here, see, you'll have the magazines for all the different types of projectiles, and the targeting lasers will sit right above them, and they can double as locators, as well – see? I'm putting sensors all over so that when a laser bounces off something and comes back to the 'bot, it can calculate exactly where that thing is, kind of like a bat's sonar except that it's more like *lidar*, because each laser will also have its own imbedded signal." Jonathan was holding forth – again – on the killer robot he was designing. The group clustered around him looked just as rapt as they had 45 minutes ago, when Nik, Rel, and Xavier had asked him (as if they didn't already know every detail) about what he was working on.

Ree wished they would go somewhere else for their Jonathan-worship. She was *trying* to *study*. There was so much to learn! She'd come a long way in the past sixteen months, she knew, but there was still a mountain of knowledge in front of her, and trying to climb it while Jonathan and his fan club were preening over his murder device was... difficult.

It would be so much nicer if she could just stay in her room – but *that*, it had been made clear during her first week at the Academy, would be "unmutual." Ree was willing to try to fit in – Dr. Stephen would be disappointed if she didn't, not to mention what Mémé would say! – but sometimes having to make the effort was outright annoying.

Apparently she wasn't the only one. Catherine looked up from the corner of the small library that she had claimed, spreading books and journals out all around her, frustration clear on her face.

"Do you mind," Catherine had said. "*Some* of us are trying to work. And besides, it's not like you're doing anything revolutionary. Everyone who *doesn't* have their nose buried in a gear box *knows* that biologicals are where things are going. If you *must* give us chapter-and-verse on every breath you take, can you please at least move into the twenty-first century?"

Jonathan's face went red. "I'm *trying* to design something that will destroy our enemies *and* protect people who can't protect themselves. You know there are people out there swinging around forces they have *no* idea how to control, or even what they *are*, and it's *our job* to stop them. Your *biologicals* won't do a damned thing to stop explosions, and... and... *things*, and we can't take care of humanity if we're just letting those people run around!" His brilliant eyes moved over the library like the targeting lasers he put into every device he designed; to Ree's dismay, they fastened on her. "Ree, *you* understand, don't you? I just want to, to, take care of people. That's our *job*, it's why we're here!"

The frustration that had been warming Ree's middle turned into burning anger. All Jonathan – all *any* of them – knew about her was that she came from somewhere poor, and that she had an odd accent, and that she was more skilled at design than he was. She had better things to do than be manipulated. She stacked her books and placed the tablet with her notes (and private designs) on top of them, then looked up at him:

"I don't believe you."

His mouth gaped open, and several sets of superior, disdainful eyes turned to goggle at her.

"What do you mean," Jonathan demanded, "you *don't believe* me? *My mother* was killed by those *deviants*, and I'm not about to allow them to kill or, or *harm* one more person when I can do something to stop them! I'm going to make sure people are *taken care of*—"

For the first time since she'd arrived at the Academy, Ree interrupted someone. "I *don't believe* you. If that was truly what you intended, you'd be doing things differently." She picked up her books and carried them to her room. She had things to do.

• • •

"Thank you Sara, please tell Dr. Jameson that it's Dr. Ree Samadi. He's expecting my call." Ree wasn't sure why there were butterflies in her middle; it had been several years since she'd last spoken directly to her university advisor, but she was reasonably sure he'd be happy to hear this particular bit of news.

"Meryam!" Dr. Jameson's voice, as always, sounded as if he'd poured brandied plum sauce all over it. "Such a pleasure to hear from you, my dear. I was just saying to Stephen the other day what a shame it was that we hadn't heard more from you; we had such high hopes."

Ah yes. That would be why. Ree gritted her teeth; she knew very well that her advisor had received regular reports of what she'd been accomplishing – from Dr. Stephen, in fact. Dr. Jameson also knew she'd earned her Ph.D. three years before, and not even Mémé called her *Meryam*.

Ree made sure a polite smile was fixed on her face before activating video.

“Dr. Jameson! It's so good to see you, too, sir. Have you had a chance to look over the flyer I sent you? The Foundation is going to start presenting our new project in May, and we were hoping you'd sponsor us to do our initial announcement at the University Tech Conference. I'm sure you're well aware that your program is uniquely suited to act as host.”

Dr. Jameson shifted in his chair, as if something sharp was poking at him. “Hrm. Well, I suppose I can put in a word for you. After all, more funding is always welcome! Of course, the kind of work the Foundation does... not really our thing, you know? But you're welcome to come talk about it, and who knows? You might be able to recruit a do-gooder or two. Perhaps one of the small conference rooms for half an hour or so?”

Ree's smile became genuine. “Actually, we'll need the Hall – all of it – for at least two hours. My presentation will be precisely twenty minutes, but we're expecting a fair amount of Q&A after. We'll need a large booth on the conference floor, as well. And, of course, we're expecting a great deal of interest on this – you may well see increased attendance.”

“Hrm. Well, I don't know. Two hours, you say? In the Hall? That's quite a bit. And I believe we're already full-up on booths.”

Ree's smile grew ever so slightly wicked. “Well, if it's a problem, Oxford has already made us quite a good offer; I suppose we could take them up on it... but *you* were really our first choice.”

The sound Dr. Jameson made would never be referred to as a snort in polite society. “Well! *Oxford*! Of course not, of course you should come here, to your alma mater. Two hours, you say! And the Great Hall? Hmm. I'll have Sara rearrange things; she'll send you details. And Dr. Samadi...” he leaned forward toward the camera. “It's never too late. I'm sure you enjoy your work with the Foundation, but perhaps it's time for you to come home? Your toys are all very well and good, but you could do some real good in the world, you know.”

Ree smiled at him one more time. “Thank you Dr. Jameson, I'll look forward to hearing from Sara; please be sure to have her contact me if there are any questions. And I'll see you at the conference!”

• • •

*A whole week!* Ree walked out of her last exam, knowing she'd aced it, and took a deep breath. What would she do, with a whole *week* between now and graduation, and no more classes or exams?

Obviously she'd need to contact Dr. Stephen. Despite her top scores, Ree hadn't received an assignment. She should have known which Construct she was being assigned

to *months* ago, yet she'd heard nothing. It made her edgy when other people weren't following procedure, and she needed to understand why it was happening.

Jonathan caught up to her as she started off toward the gardens, hoping to figure things out while she relaxed among the flowers and sunshine. She looked sideways at him and smiled. He'd been doing that lately: catching up to walk with her, without saying much of anything. It seemed like he wasn't sure *what* to say, but it turned out that he was much nicer when he wasn't surrounded by sycophants worshipping every cog and circuit, so she was mostly comfortable with him being there.

"I wanted to tell you," he started off a bit abruptly, "well done. On your exams, and everything. It looks like you beat me again." He smiled, and as far as Ree could tell, it was sincere. She knew he could very easily have resented her for it, but somehow, he didn't. "I was wondering... I wanted to ask..." his voice trailed off with a hesitancy that was unusual for him.

"What?"

"That time..." He went on in a rush. "You said that if I wanted to take care of people, I'd be doing things differently. I... you've never been willing to tell me what you meant. I was hoping maybe you'd tell me now. Please."

Ree gaped at him. "That was years ago!"

"Well, yes... and you've never told me. I've asked, you remember." Yes, he had. In fact, for a while he had asked several times a week, to the point that Ree had been nearly frantic with worry that she'd ruined her chances by saying that to him, and what might happen if she explained what she had meant. It had been a relief when he'd stopped. Since then he'd only brought it up twice; once, just after they were informed that they were both being placed in the university program they had just completed. And now, of course.

Ree looked at him, trying to understand. He reddened a bit under her gaze, making her momentarily glad for her own darker complexion.

"Why, Jon? Why is this so important to you?"

Jonathan looked down and scuffed his shoe on the walkway, kicking at a pebble. "You've met my Dad. You know... I'm a lot like him. And he does a lot of... well, *this*. Making things. He taught me a lot."

Ree nodded. Jon was very much like his father, and had clearly come by his intellectual intensity and popularity honestly.

"My mum... she wasn't like us. She didn't like the weapons, and she really hated it when we'd blow something up for fun. She... well, you remind me of her. Some, at least. I mean, not in every way; she had blond hair and really pale skin, and she was pretty and she loved dressing up, but... that... didn't come out the way I intended. I mean, you're pretty too, I didn't..."

Ree smiled at Jonathan's attempt to pry his expensive shoe out of his mouth, and decided to rescue him.

"She didn't like the killer robots?"



Jonathan sighed, relieved. "She didn't like the killer robots. And she kept trying to convince Dad he could do other things. They, um, fought about it. And then..."

*And then she died*, Ree finished mentally. Killed in a minor battle against someone who may or may not have intended her to die, who may or may not have known the power of what they were doing. Leaving a devastated father and son, who didn't know what to do without her, and who both buried their grief in designing bigger and better killer robots to avenge the wife and mother who hated such things.

But, as Ree knew very well, people died in wars all the time.

She looked at him for a long moment, then held out her hand. "Come with me." He took it, hesitant, and she set off to show him what she had meant.

A few hours later, Jonathan looked out the window of the transport they were on, then looked at Ree incredulously.

"Morocco? Are you taking me to Casablanca? Ree, it's very romantic, I'm sure, but I have to tell you, I don't, um, feel that way about you, and I really don't enjoy gambling..."

Ree smiled wryly at him. "Not Casablanca. It's a few minutes outside Marrakesh. For us, I mean – it's almost two days' walk on foot." He looked at her curiously, but she didn't elaborate.

After they landed, Ree popped into a nearby hut and came back with an armload of cloth. "Here, put this on over your clothes; I know it's hot and this is another layer, but I swear you'll be more comfortable, and you'll attract less attention this way." Jonathan looked up doubtfully from the long tunic she'd handed him, but pulled it over his head anyway, and allowed her to wrap a scarf around his head.

"Aren't you going to...?" He gestured to her obviously western clothes.

Ree shook her head. "No, they're used to seeing me like this; it won't bother them, and I'm used to the heat." She did pull a thin scarf out of her pocket and wrapped it loosely around her head, then put on sunglasses. "Come for a walk with me?"

Jonathan blinked at her, mystified and somewhat disturbed, but willing to go along.

After the third time she shushed him and told him to just *look*, he stopped trying to ask questions. She tried to think how her home would look, through his eyes. Houses – small shacks, really – made of corrugated metal, and scraps of wood and canvas, and whatever anyone could find. People whose clothes were made of cheap cloth, with patches, but as clean as possible in this dusty place. Children who darted around with dismaying levels of energy, who were obviously poor, and perhaps didn't have enough to eat, but who were clean and remarkably healthy. Or mostly so.

One old woman did more than call out greetings to her, as everyone else had done – she hobbled out, beaming and calling happily to Ree, gesturing to come sit under the canopy in front of her shack and insisting that she – and Jonathan, as an afterthought – must have a drink with her and her granddaughter. Ree grinned back and followed, turning to make sure Jonathan was coming along. Jon obviously didn't speak Arabic, and had no idea what was going on, but he gamely stepped under the canopy and sat

when Ree gestured him to a stool. Fatima called into the shack behind the canopy, then came over to sit with them.

Ree translated for Jonathan: "Fatima is asking how I am, and whether I have seen my grand-maman lately, and tells me that her granddaughter will be out soon with our lemonade. It's safe to drink, by the way. She says Aya is looking forward to greeting me as well," Ree went back to Arabic in order to answer the old woman, though she didn't mention to Fatima that she didn't know what she would be doing, now that she was graduating.

Soon, a teenage girl came out, carrying a tray with four glasses and a pitcher. Her face fairly glowed, and as soon as she'd set the tray down, she threw herself at Ree, squealing with glee. Ree glanced at Fatima and found her smiling indulgently.

She hugged Aya back, and let the girl's bright chatter flow over her, then sat back a little and interrupted, speaking in French and hoping Jon knew enough to understand. "Aya, how is your leg? If it is all right with your grand-maman, I would like to look at it... and I would like my friend Jonathan to see, as well." She turned to Fatima. "Jonathan is a student at my school, and has earned many honors with his work." Fatima turned her no-longer-quite-as-beneficent gaze on Jonathan, who apparently had understood at least some of what Ree said. He turned pink – *pinker*, in the heat – under Fatima's eyes, but didn't look aside. When Fatima nodded, Ree turned back to Aya with a reassuring smile, but spoke to Jonathan, still in French.

"When Aya was much younger, about three, she ran into a field that had been sown with mines a couple years before, during a war. Not here; her parents lived over the border in Algeria at the time. Her father ran in after her, and was carrying her out when he stepped on a mine. He died. She's very lucky to be alive, but she lost much of her leg. Her mother brought her and her brothers here, to live with her parents. Unfortunately, her mother and one of her brothers died of fever a few years ago." Aya smiled shyly, looking down at her lap.

Ree gestured to Aya's left leg. "May I see?" Aya glanced at her grand-maman for permission, then slowly pulled up her ankle-length skirt to show a matte-black calf and foot.

Then, Ree glanced up at Jonathan – who rather looked as if someone had smacked him, hard, in the back of the head – and grinned, switching to English. "The mechanism is all inside, of course – I had to keep dust out, or it wouldn't have lasted a week. The movement is partially hydraulics, with carbon fiber to mimic tendons and muscle. Catherine helped me develop the 'skin' – it's woven carbon fiber with artificial nerves for sensitivity, and a sort of biologic rubber she based off spider silk, which keeps it flexible and warm. We expect to be perfecting color-matching in the next several weeks; if you had come six months from now, you wouldn't be able to tell her prosthetic from a real leg. I used Aya's right leg as the basis for the design – there are 'bones' and 'muscle' and 'tendons' in her left leg and foot everywhere there are in her right, and she can do anything with it that she could do with the original. Even run, and dance! In many places, she wouldn't have survived at all, and in many places, the only future she would have would be as a beggar. Now..." Ree switched back to French. "Aya, your grand-maman tells me you're doing well with school. What are your plans?"

"I," Aya announced with dramatic delight, "am going to be a doctor! I have been accepted into a good school, and I have a scholarship, too. Dr. Maya has been training me, and she even gave me her recommendation."

Ree's eyes sparkled, and she laughed aloud. "Aya, that's *wonderful*! I am so proud of you."

"I..." Aya glanced at her grand-maman and then down. "I want to go work in Algeria, once I have finished training, but Grand-maman says I must not. That women cannot safely practice medicine there." She looked up at Ree again, stubborn. "I tell her I am going to find a way to make it happen. There are many people who have been hurt by the war there, many, *many* children like me who have been hurt by mines. Ree," her eyes filled with determination, then, and Ree could see the adult Aya would become... "will you help me? Will you help me do for those children what you have done for me?"

Fatima's face was knotted with worry, but she only pressed her lips together and stayed silent as Ree answered: "Of course I will, Aya." She knew Fatima would hear the determination in her voice as she added, "And I will make sure you are as safe as possible, too."

Jonathan stayed silent as they made their farewells and left, walking further into Ree's village. He smiled politely, but didn't speak even when others showed him things Ree had made for them: lights run by small but very efficient solar batteries; a hand-cranked device for cleaning clothes that used an electrostatic charge and almost no water; a deceptively simple design for a raised garden bed with a greenhouse cover that, Ree explained, watered the plants via thin pipes running through composted soil, the cover keeping the precious water from evaporating too quickly and the soil from turning to dust and blowing away.

He stayed silent, in fact, until they were nearly back to the transport, when he stopped suddenly, staring at a point about five meters in front of them with his jaw clenched. When she stopped and cocked an inquiring eyebrow at him, he visibly fought for a moment to get some strong mix of emotion under control, then took a deep breath and looked directly at her.

"You know you're violating several very strict rules, right? You know there are *reasons* we don't interact with the Masses like that? You know you've put their lives at risk? That you've put *your own* life at risk, to stay in contact? Why... ? And *how* did you... ? I should be reporting you, right now. That's an official transport. How did you *do this*?" By the time he finished, his shoulders were hunched tight and his glare could have cut metal.

Ree could feel her own jaw clenching as she flushed with sudden fury, but she sat firmly on the impulse to rip his face off. She closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath. He didn't know. *Most* people didn't... at least, not yet.

She took another deep breath, then explained as gently as she could. "It's a new project, Jon, a pilot. It's based on the theory that we'll be more effective if we're integrated into communities rather than being kept separate; that, while swooping in, killing everything in sight, imposing solutions, and then making pronouncements about how

things are going to be might work in Europe and the States, it's not going to be effective in 'developing' nations. We need to establish trust if we want people to actually *listen* to us, and we can't do that from a distance."

She looked away from him, back toward the place where she had grown up. "From what I understand, Dr. Stephen is one of ten agents who were tapped for the program, in part because he's a member of the group that proposed it. They're mentoring a few dozen people worldwide; I'm lucky to be one of them." She turned back to Jonathan with a very direct look. "It's very important to me that I succeed. They," she tossed her head back toward her home, "are depending on me. If I fail, I fail *them*." She held his eyes for another long moment, then turned to walk the rest of the way to the transport. After a few steps, she heard him following.

Their trip back was very quiet. Ree's phone pinged with a message from Dr. Stephen, asking her to meet him for dinner. She responded with their ETA, then found herself relaxing enough to doze a bit while Jonathan stared out the window, lost in introspection.

Dr. Stephen was there to meet them when their transport landed. He clasped Ree's hands with warm approval, then turned to shake hands with Jonathan. "Jon, I wanted to introduce Ree to your uncle – we're meeting him for dinner. Would you care to join us?"

Jonathan straightened, all signs of introspection disappearing abruptly from his eyes. "The Foundation, sir? What a brilliant idea. Yes, I'd love to join you."

Ree gave them both a little smile and fully relaxed for the first time in weeks. She had her assignment. Whatever it was.

• • •

Ree hadn't been exaggerating when she told Dr. Jameson they expected a great deal of interest in the announcement she'd be making. Still, she thought, peering out at the standing-room-only crowd filling the Great Hall, they hadn't quite expected *this* much interest. She took a deep breath, and then another, telling herself it was for the best, and deliberately *not* thinking about the amount of work the huge crowd implied she'd be taking on.

She pulled out her phone and sent a quick message to Dr. Jameson's assistant, Sara. There were already three overflow rooms where her presentation would be broadcast, but it looked as though they would need a fourth.

Jing stood next to her with her tablet in his hands, checking each element of her presentation and exuding satisfaction and excitement. He had earned it, she thought. He had worked as hard as she had, and was now supervising five additional senior-level assistants. They'd be adding three more shortly.

Ree's phone pinged with a response from Sara: *Two minutes*. She took another deep breath, and told the butterflies in her middle to calm *down*.

And then it was time. Dr. Jameson strode out, spoke a few words, and the giant screen behind him lit with an image of the Director, sitting at his desk. He hated speaking to large groups – he had an occasional stutter when he felt stressed – so they had decided his portion would be a short recording, and Ree would make the actual presentation.

It only took a few minutes to outline the Foundation's work. Then, the Director introduced her, and she was walking out to shake Dr. Jameson's hand and take his place behind the podium.

"Good afternoon," she said. "I'm Dr. Ree Samadi. Thank you all for coming.

"Most of us grew up using technology to make our lives better and easier – electric lights, television, telephones, computers that do more and more for us.

"I daresay every one of us is here today because this is our calling: to use technology to make the world a better place. We write better software, we create new methods for storing information, we design ever-smaller and more efficient circuits." She caught a familiar face out of the corner of her eye, and smiled at Jonathan. "We design robots to do things better, faster, more efficiently, and above all more *safely* than humans can. We design viruses and nanoparticles to do work that could only be done by clumsy surgery, before. And why?

"It isn't simply because we *can*. It isn't even because..." she grinned at them... "it's so much *fun*! No," she went on more seriously, "it's because it's our *job*, and our responsibility.

"At the Foundation, we use technology to help address fundamental insecurities that plague altogether too much of humanity: too little food, not enough water, the need for safe places to live." The screen behind her flipped through videos of the work the Foundation had done, and she stepped out from behind the podium to look directly at her audience.

"Over the past few years, as I'm sure you know, we've been becoming aware of a much larger danger – one that many people still refuse to admit even exists: climate change." There were groans from here and there in the audience; she ignored them. Behind her, the videos disappeared and the screen split into quarters, each showing an animated graph. "Temperatures are rising across the globe, the polar ice caps are melting, areas affected by drought are radically expanding, and violent storms are becoming the norm.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our scientists calculate that within decades – not centuries or millennia but *decades* – increasing portions of our world will change to become uninhabitable by humans, and it will only get worse from there. Our planet and our entire *species* are in extreme, deadly danger, and the only chance of saving it lies with technology."

The screen behind Ree went black for a moment, then split into three sections, each with a symbol – a carbon dioxide molecule, a single electron, and a book.

"At the Challenge Fate Foundation, we've had a fair amount of success with solving things by throwing money at problems, so that's what we're going to do here. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to announce that the Foundation will be providing grants in three areas of research, totaling ten billion dollars." She paused for a moment to allow them to take that in. "Yes, that was 'billion' with a 'b.' We're also in communication with several other groups who have indicated interest in joining us, and we anticipate that the total available amount may go as high as *fifty* billion dollars."

The susurrus of sound from the audience grew; she paused several seconds for individuals to finish their now-excited whispers and turn back to her.

“The first area of research, of course, is climate change itself.” The carbon dioxide molecule behind her grew to fill the entire screen, then morphed into a chart showing CO<sub>2</sub> levels over the past six hundred thousand years, and the sharp rise since the mid-nineteenth century. “The biggest culprit, science tells us, is the increasingly high level of CO<sub>2</sub> in our atmosphere and our oceans. And so, our first challenge: find a way to *harvest* that CO<sub>2</sub>, remove the excess from the atmosphere and our oceans, and return our planetary climate patterns to normal.”

The screen switched to the image of the electron, which then split into three sections, each with videos and animated charts showing the destruction caused by various forms of “dirty” energy production and use.

“Second, of course, we must address the *cause* of that rise in CO<sub>2</sub>. After all, it won’t do much good to pull the CO<sub>2</sub> *out* if people are coming along behind us putting it right back in again. One of the biggest problems, of course, has been the global use of dirty, non-renewable sources of energy, and the economics of switching to clean, renewable energy. So, our second challenge: develop a source or sources of clean, affordable, renewable, readily available energy, and find ways to get those sources implemented across the globe, in *every* nation. Our goal...” – she paused to make sure she had their attention – “...is a cost of one-tenth of one cent per kilowatt/hour, world-wide.” Most of her audience, she knew, had no idea how ambitious that goal was, though several of them had their phones out and were clearly setting up searches. A very few – all of them older, and all wearing expensively tailored business suits – were staring at her very thoughtfully. She smiled for them, and went on:

“Third! One of the biggest obstacles science has faced in dealing with these problems so far is also one of the biggest sources of resource waste that exists: we have over seven billion people on this planet, but we’re only *educating* a small fraction of them... and *that*, ladies and gentlemen, not only holds back progress exponentially, it also turns those people into obstacles who actively try to prevent and even *turn back* progress. A lack of broad education has allowed groups in every nation to use ignorance and prejudice to prevent solutions from being developed and implemented, for their own selfish purposes.

“We can no longer afford for that to continue; it is not hyperbole to say that our very existence as a species is at stake. And so, our third challenge: to provide a freely-available primary, secondary, and tertiary education to every single person on the planet, along with unfettered information access, and to create a mentoring structure to support our world’s intellectual growth and development.” Ree stopped and took a breath, noting that the people in the fancy suits were now very intent indeed.

“I find this next part rather embarrassing, but the Director insisted, so... here goes:

“I am standing here before you as a living example of what can happen when a child of poverty is educated and given access to the resources they need to succeed. On the screen behind me are images of my own work, and its results. This is the village I grew

up in. The Foundation, without my knowledge, did a study of the impact my work has had on my neighbors. Their per capita income has gone up an average of four hundred percent, and, as you can see, their standard of living has increased... well, rather a lot, and their prosperity has spread to encompass much of eastern Morocco as well as parts of northern Algeria. I am told that the devices I designed for them in my extremely limited spare time as a student are being copied and spread, with the Foundation's assistance, to poverty-stricken areas across the world.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am just one person, and yet, my work has changed the world. Because people here helped me to learn, and gave me opportunities to succeed, the people in my village, and many other villages, are lifting themselves up, out of poverty and privation and ignorance, and into modern civilization."

Ree looked down to where Mémé was beaming up at her, near the center of the front row. On Mémé's lap, Ree could almost see a much younger version of herself, grinning impudently and rather smugly. Ree looked back up and out at her audience, many of whom seemed to be quivering with bow-string tautness. She smiled at the sudden mental image of herself pulling, aiming, and releasing the eager young men and women below.

"Archimedes, long ago, said that if he had a long enough lever, and a fulcrum, and a firm place to stand, he could shift the world." She paused, and then added the conclusion. "Here is our offer: Build your levers; we'll provide you with the money and supplies and support to get them designed and made... and then we'll be your firm place to stand, and we'll help you move the world."

# About the Authors

## Bill Bridges

An award-winning writer and game designer, Bill was one of the original developers of White Wolf's World of Darkness, and is the co-creator and developer of the *Fading Suns* science-fiction universe. He is a Fellow at Atlanta's Mythic Imagination Institute, and a board member of the C.G. Jung Society of Atlanta. Visit him at [bill-bridges.com](http://bill-bridges.com).

## Satyros Phil Brucato

Raised by his dad on comic books, horror films, Playboy magazine, R&B, and rock 'n' roll, "Satyr" has spent roughly 35 years as a creative professional. He's best known for his award-winning work with White Wolf (**Mage**, **Werewolf**, **Vampire: The Dark Ages**, and more), his tenure with Realms of Fantasy and Witches & Pagans magazines, and the many short stories, articles, essays, comics, and columns that have appeared under several bylines since 1988. These days, he plays bass with the mystic rock band Telesterion, authors the revived **Mage** series, and toils over a pile of projects in various media. Check out his blogs at [satyrosphilbrucato.wordpress.com/](http://satyrosphilbrucato.wordpress.com/) and [facebook.com/groups/126494504028229/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/126494504028229/).

## Sandra Damiana Buskirk

"Dami" Buskirk was raised by Coyote and Raven, assorted Greek, Roman and Norse deities, and the faeries in her grandmother's attic. She started creating music and stories before beginning school, and discovered a passion early on for finding exactly the right words and spelling them correctly. The co-editor of *Ravens in the Library*, and illustrator of *Powerchords: Music, Magick & Urban Fantasy*, Sandra and her work have also appeared in Witches & Pagans magazine. She's spent most of the



past decade learning how to save the world one person at a time, while taking photographs of the beauty that no one sees. She lives in Seattle with her partner Satyr and their chosen family, two cats, four ferrets, a snake, a friendly murder of crows, and a camera lens the size of a small child.

### **Shawn Connolly**

A longtime gamer and comics geek, Shawn lives in Massachusetts with his amazing wife Sarah and his cat Ollie, who is also amazing but for different reasons. He is really bad at talking about himself. This is his first publication, so perhaps in the future he'll get better at author bios.

### **Stephen Michael DiPesa**

Stephen is a writer. That's his day job, his night job, and his all-hours-in-between job. He works almost exclusively on roleplaying games, but is always happy to write fiction (fantasy, sci-fi, and/or horror) that doesn't involve stat blocks. He's a lifelong New Englander, a pretty decent sketch artist, and the sort of person who prefers to spend as much time as is humanly possible in the company of dogs. He can be found at [stephenmichaeldipesa.weebly.com/](http://stephenmichaeldipesa.weebly.com/).

### **Antonios Rave-N Galatis**

Antonios is a storyteller, sometimes a writer, and many times a poet. For the last 25 years, he has been running sessions for many White Wolf game lines (with a very soft spot for **Mage: The Ascension**), and until recently, he owned a roleplaying club called Portal, in Athens, Greece. He dabbles in photography, music, Indonesian martial arts, and ecstatic magick, and has written articles for various magazines, throughout the years, concerning the World of Darkness. He is also a teacher of English, and has a degree in sound engineering. This is his first published story.

### **Scott Havens**

Scott is a fledgling author adrift in the wilds of Michigan, armed with nothing but a Master's degree in Medieval Studies, a career in the book trade, and a heart full of dreams. At the age of six, he fell in love with Perseus (thanks to *Clash of the Titans*), and it was all downhill from there. Since then, Scott has focused on writing liminal and fantastic fiction, taking joy in revealing the magic within the everyday. A **Mage** and **Changeling** fan, Scott joined Laughing Pan Productions in 2004-6 for the nationwide release of *Deliria: Faerie Tales for a New Millennium*. He later wrote the system patch for *Deliria*, and was a contributing author on the *Deliria* sagabook *Goblin Markets: The Glitter Trade*.

Today, Scott lives in a house made of books with his partner, Andy, and their three feline overlords as he works feverishly on a new world he'll be unveiling in 2016. You can check out the status of his project at [WelcometoSanKeros.com](http://WelcometoSanKeros.com). For his current short fiction and blog, please visit Scott at [latenightstirfry.com](http://latenightstirfry.com).

## **J.F. High**

An advocate for aboriginal rights, and an aspiring (contemporary) fantasy writer, J.F. High lives in Washington (state) but comes originally from Los Angeles, California. The differences are staggering (particularly in temperature), but the ocean and the I-5 are exactly the same. J.F. is a Chiricahua Apache (Ndeh) and Cora (Náayarite) Indian. He may or may not be a believer and/ or practitioner of real-world magic... but if he were, he is not interested in your hippy-dippy, crystal swinging, dream-catcher slinging garbage.

But magic *is* real – let's not fuck around.

## **Emily R. Jones**

Emily has been crafting stories since she was too young to write them down herself. She now has a BA in English and Dance, and is thrilled to contribute to this anthology with her first published work. She enjoys experimenting with new genres, though her first and dearest love is fantasy. When not writing, she can be found dancing, singing Irish tunes, or hula hooping with her cats in the Appalachian Mountains.

## **Travis Legge**

Travis is an indie filmmaker, a tabletop game developer, a writer, an actor, and an editor. He specializes in horror and urban fantasy tales, (though he certainly has a children's book or three deep inside him struggling to get out), and is the co-creator and developer of the Contagion urban fantasy setting. Travis lives in Rockford, Illinois with his wife and teenage daughter. His work can be found at [plasticageproductions.com](http://plasticageproductions.com).

## **Luna Lindsey**

Luna lives in Seattle, and considers herself a hacker, although her allergy to writing code means she's not nearly as cool as Theo. Unlike Theo, she is also disturbingly knowledgeable about autism, mind control, and faeries. (Don't get her started...) Her stories have appeared in *Crossed Genres*, *Penumbra*, and *Unlikely Story*. She tweets like a bird at @lunalindsey, and intermittently blogs at [lunalindsey.com](http://lunalindsey.com) and [recoveringagency.com](http://recoveringagency.com). Her novel, *Emerald City Dreamer*, is about faeries in Seattle and the women who hunt them.

## **Seanan McGuire**

Seanan is a California-based author of urban fantasy and (under the name "Mira Grant") biomedical science fiction thrillers. She releases around four books a year, and doesn't sleep enough. One of her proudest lifetime achievements is playing characters from every available House of Hermes, including Luxor and Diedne, without breaking the rules of the game. You can keep up with her at [seananmcguire.com](http://seananmcguire.com).

## **Kris Millering**

Kris is a linguist by training, a tech tinkerer by trade, and a writer and photographer by avocation. Currently, she works at a tech firm by day, manages communications for Clarion West by night, and writes in the spaces between them all. She also lives between two mountains in the foothills of the Cascades in Washington State. Her fiction has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Apex*, *Lightspeed*, *Clarkesworld*, *Ravens in the Library*, and other publications. You can find out more at [krismillering.com/](http://krismillering.com/).

## **Balogun Ojetade**

The author of ten speculative fiction novels, a contributing co-editor of the *Steam-funk* and *Ki Khanga* anthologies, and the editor of the *Rococoa* anthology, Balogun is the author of three non-fiction books on indigenous African martial arts, an award-winning screenwriter, and the director and fight choreographer of several popular independent short and feature films.

Balogun is also a High Priest, War Chief, and initiate of several traditional African spiritual and martial systems. Find him at [chroniclesofharriet.com/](http://chroniclesofharriet.com/) and [roaringlion-sproductions.com/](http://roaringlion-sproductions.com/).

## **Tina Shelton**

The author of two novels and several published short stories, Tina does a high-wire act balancing the roles of wife, mother, student, and writer. She has published iPad apps, worked technical support for software for carpet cleaners (no, really), and aims to become an editor and put together her own anthologies. She's also learning that podcasting is harder than it sounds. Her blog address is [tinashelton.com](http://tinashelton.com), and she can also be found lurking on Facebook and Twitter as [@authortshelton](#).

## **Janine A. Southard**

The IPPY award-winning author of the space-adventure novel *Queen & Commander* (and other books in the Hive Queen Saga), Janine lives in Seattle, WA, where she writes speculative fiction novels, novellas, and short stories... and reads them aloud to her cat. She really *has* practiced basic parkour.

To get a free ebook, sign up for Janine A. Southard's newsletter (<http://bit.ly/jasnews>). You'll then be among the first to know when her latest book is released (or to get fun release-related news, like when her next Kickstarter project is coming). Usually, this happens once a month or so. Your address will never be shared, and you can unsubscribe at any time. Plus: free ebook!

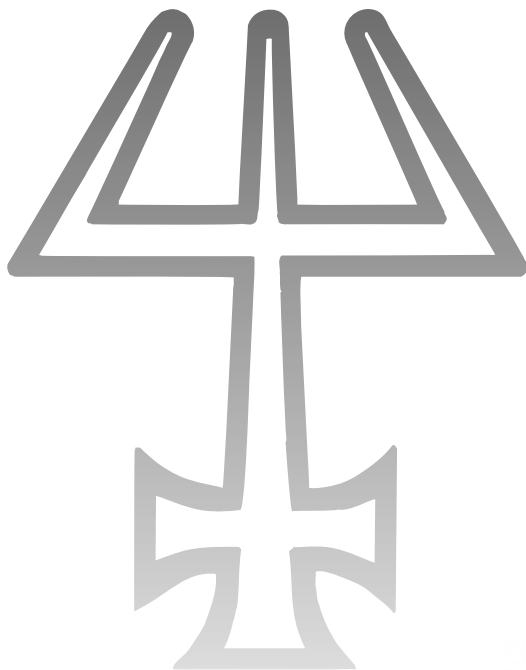
You can hang out with Janine online, where she's crazy about twitter ([@jani\\_s](#)) and periodically updates her website with free fiction and novel inspirations ([janine-southard.com](http://janine-southard.com)).

## S. J. Tucker & Ryan James Loyd

Sooj and Ryan are, respectively, a busy singer-songwriter, and a busy magickal activist. When not on tour taking music and magick to all of North America and beyond, they live in the shadow of Petit Jean Mountain, the site of Arkansas' oldest state park. The two are partners in every sense, but this anthology marks their first published collaboration. Check out S. J.'s music at [sjtucker.com](http://sjtucker.com), and Ryan's musings on magick and life at [storytellerway.com](http://storytellerway.com).

## R.S. Udell

When she is not herding cats and teaching teenagers the finer points of vocal technique and theatre craft, R. S. Udell somehow finds time to sit down and write. Her work appears in several publications in the **Mage: The Ascension** line, as well as in **Revelations of the Dark Mother** (co-authored with Phil Brucato), in the source materials for **Mage: The Sorcerer's Crusade** (for which she was a line developer), and in the new **Mage: 20th Anniversary Edition**. She is currently working on her first novel, along with more freelance contributions to **M20**.



# TRUTH BEYOND PARADOX

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Truth is a paradox, especially when magick is involved. To get beyond illusions of reality, then, a person must reach beyond what we think is possible and find what's really there.

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Tina Shelton

R.S. Udell

Janine A. Southard

Sandra Damiana Buskirk



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