

SONGS OF THE SUN AND MOON

✦ TALES OF THE CHANGING BREEDS ○



Edited by
Jess Hartley

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Dedication

By Editor, Jess Hartley

Just under 20 years ago, the Fera first appeared as cousins and complements to Gaia's lupine heroes in the Werewolf Player's Guide. It took nearly a decade for them to receive their own source book, but in that time, Fera fandom grew in breadth and depth with a fervor and ferocity that no one could have anticipated.

When word was released that the Changing Breeds might be receiving their own 20th Anniversary Edition, the response was amazing. In the summer of 2013, more than 1400 of the Changing Breeds' most faithful supporters came together to make that possibility a certainty. Together, they not only successfully funded the Kickstarter for the Changing Breeds 20th Anniversary Deluxe Edition, they helped formed a community that would help shape the project into its final incarnation.

Through thousands of comments and conversational threads, Changing Breed fans helped the project creators refine what was truly iconic in the last two decades of World of Darkness material involving the shapeshifting races. They spoke about tantalizing topics that had been under-explored, and pointed out weak spots that could be strengthened with the knowledge of 20 years of perspective. From across the globe, they offered first-hand insight into cultures the original creators didn't have direct access to, and helped provide both passionate hearts and discerning eyes to make the Deluxe Edition better than it ever could have been without their aid.

This anthology is one of the direct products of that Kickstarter community's support. Without their contributions of time, attention, effort, and funding, these stories of the Fera — Gaia's Own — would have never been penned.

And so, it is to them that we dedicate this collection.

It is in their honor that these Songs of Sun and Moon are sung.

Fear and Loathing in Malfeas

By Jason Andrew

Some may never live, but the crazy never die...

— Hunter S. Thompson, Doctor of Journalism

We were lost somewhere in the Desert of Atrocity, nearly halfway to Malfeas, when the Wurm-taint began to take hold. There was no shade for the wicked or weary, no hint of relief for those foolish enough to attempt to transverse this Umbra wasteland, where we measured every step in suffering and regret.

Somehow, I remained just conscious enough to keep my tiny rat claws burrowed into Ghunbari's thick, black mane. I let her superior Crocas form ferry both of us across the wasteland, away from the pack of Banes that had taken a chunk out of both of our hides.

Ever see a spotted hyena the size of a grizzly bear and twice as mean? Imagine how ugly and nasty the Bane had to be in order to take a bite out of that. They swarmed over us, appearing as a plague of skeletal cats screeching with bile and hate. It didn't take a genius to see why the bastards took the form of grizzled Simba prides. We survived the ambush due to equal parts of luck and Ghunbari's gumption.

My thick blood has never been suited to arid climates. I was born to a world of air conditioning, venturing outside only to luxuriate in the shade near a swimming pool, sipping mai tais out of a half-coconut shell complete with a little frilly umbrella. Sharp-Sorrows sent me on this run because I was a specialist: a thief by trade and inclination.

Ghunbari was wild-eyed and full of grit, the type of hero born to suffer this spiritual land and earn the glory of the ages. The Simba prides damn near hunted most of her Tanzanian tribe to extinction after Black Tooth's purge. Sad to say, the rest of us Fera didn't dare say boo about it until an Ajaba whelp convinced us to unite and become the Ahadi.

Our pace slowed through the desert. Ghunbari's leaps grew sluggish. Something about this realm cut both of us straight to the bone. The bite marks on her hind leg weren't healing properly. If we didn't stop and dress our wounds soon, Ghunbari would hit the proverbial runner's wall, and then we'd die in the sun long before the Banes could catch us.

I climbed higher up her shoulders, trying to gain altitude to look ahead. I was hoping to find some sort of oasis in the desert: someplace we could catch a breather. On the horizon, maybe half a mile away, I spotted a creepy rock formation that looked a bit like a grinning skull. It was likely a trap designed to box us in on all sides, but it had shade and just enough shadow to maybe hide from our enemies for a spell.

I leaned close to Ghunbari's ears. "Head for the skull!" Her eyes glowed red. She was caught in the fox frenzy, a rare thing for her. I cuffed her on the back of the head and tried again. "Ghunbari! Your wounds aren't healing. I can smell the poison from here. If I don't clean your wounds, you'll die out here! And then I'll be stuck alone."

"We can't stop here, Manny! This is Bane country!"

"This whole desert is Bane country! They're born here. Trust me. Get us to that shade!"

The words must have sunk in somehow, because the massive hyena changed course, slowing as we reached the cliff. We crept into the shadow of the rocks, sniffing the air for danger.

I scouted ahead, pleasantly surprised to find a safe little nest out of the way, just big enough for the two of us to rest and plan our next move. I shifted back to Homid and gestured for Ghunbari to join me. Tight spaces didn't bother me much. I'm a tiny guy for being Samoan, despite the slight gut.

Ghunbari sniffed the crevice and then shook her massive head. There's no way she'd fit in her massive Crocas form. I shook my head insistently and pointed to her bleeding leg. "I need to clean your wounds. We don't have time for nonsense."

"What if they find us and attack us while we're weak?"

I pointed to my long rodentesque nose, noticeable even in Homid form. "Rats can smell danger. You ever hear of a rat *not* escaping a sinking ship? We have a nose for shit that'll get us killed."

Just this once, logic and reason won the argument. Ghunbari shifted into her Homid form: a young, athletic woman with hopeful eyes, ready to fight anything for a tomorrow that would never come. Fur receded, replaced by clothing and tribal tattoos. She rubbed her hands over her shaved head to wipe away the sweat and winced from the pain. Her right leg had two jagged wounds from the encounter with the Banes. "I can't feel it, but I know it's bad, Manny."

"That's the point of the poison, to keep you running until you exhaust yourself, and then it paralyzes you. And then drive you crazier than a shit-house rat." I offered her a friendly hand, helping her inside the makeshift warren. "Rest a bit and I'll have you fixed up in no time."

As soon as she accepted the gesture, I used the gift granted to me by the Rat Mother to cloak both of us in shadows. Few can see me if I'm trying to be sneaky, but Ghunbari's nature prevented her from taking full advantage of the opportunity. It wouldn't hide us from the big bads out in that desert, but it'd keep the riff raff knocking on someone else's door for the duration.

I dug deep into the pockets of my khakis. Thanks to the blessing of the Rat Mother, it felt like rummaging through a cluttered trunk in the family attic. You never know what Ratkin might have on them at any time, especially if we're prepared. You know what they say about pack rats and never throwing anything away, right?

It took but a moment to find the flask and cast a blessing on the water. It should've been good, but you never can tell, and purified water is almost better than a doctor when dealing with shifters. "Take a drink. Slowly. Too much too soon might shock the system."

Ghunbari sullenly took the flask. "I know how to survive in the desert, Manny."

"Kid, sometimes you have to say the obvious to avoid the pain of silence." The wound was already blistering yellow puss and stunk of the Wyrms. If the poison got to her heart, she'd turn and never leave this desert. "I won't lie. This is gonna hurt like hell. But you're brave."

The Maasai know more about bravery than I ever will. They live in Gaia's heart, where the Wyld is strong and the weak fade away without even a whimper. Ghunbari merely nodded and steeled herself. "Do what you must. We have to capture the package before they manage to bring it to Malfeas."

I took the flask back and sprinkled the water over the wound. It sizzled over the Wyrms-taint like acid. It must have hurt like the devil, but Ghunbari only grunted and stifled her cries. Pain is different here. It's not just physical. Every sensation is tied to a memory of something that was lost forever.

I placed my fingers on opposite sides of the wound and pushed it together like I was trying to pop a particularly nasty zit. The venom had infected the wound, negating her body's natural healing process. The trick was that if I didn't take her mind off of the pain, she might just snap and rip me a new one. "Why did you accept this mission from Sharp-Sorrows? Why bother helping the Silver Fangs?"

"Kisasi showed all of the Ajaba the truth." Every word she muttered was a willful defiance against screaming out. "Our purpose was to slay the weak so that the strong would thrive. In our pride, we failed to see that strength comes from unity of purpose. The Ahadi is the promise to return to what all of us once were. We need to ally with the wolves and everyone else against the Wyrms. The only way to do that is to show them that we are worthy allies in the war."

I kept at my work, cleaning the wound and pushing out the venom. The blessing of Rat Mother helped some, but we were too close to Malfeas for helpful spirits to reach us. "And wolves have no place in the desert."

Ghunbari scoffed. "The Silver Fangs fear this land as we do. Why did you agree to this task? You are not a warrior, Manny Sideways. I have fought the Assassins when our purposes were crossed. The Ratkin typically don't agree to help outsiders to their nests."

"I'm a thief. There ain't much for me to do at home. Have to go out to find the jobs if I want my fair share of infamy. Besides, I'm Homid-born. My kin don't take kindly to humans these days, even those of us born from them. I have to make my way where I can."

"We can't stay here long, Manny. If the caravan makes it to Malfeas, we'll never capture the package."

It's hard for the young to fully comprehend the Umbra, even when they've stepped into it and can't get the muck out from their toes. "This isn't a place of distance measured in steps from point A to point B. Travel is measured in endurance. The caravan has to endure and suffer just like we do. The Wyrms doesn't show kindness to its own. They're out there same as we are, suffering the weight of the deeds done."

"You think we can catch them?" Ghunbari asked.

She was a strong warrior, but still young enough to hope for a better world and to half-expect victory. I didn't want to dampen her spirits. We needed that for the next part of the mission. "You've already carried us across the first threshold. If we had been able to resist getting pulled into that fight, we'd be almost on them. As it is, they can't be that far ahead of us."

"You're the expert. What's next then?"

I had hoped to avoid discussing that topic until she was in a more rational state of mind, but sometimes there's no escaping taking your medicine for the pain. "Trials always come in threes. No idea why, but that seems to be the law of the universe on some crazy fundamental level. We've survived the easy part: atrocities that our kind and kin have suffered."

"The easy part, huh?"

"Next, we must endure the atrocities we've visited on others, metaphorically or otherwise."

Ghunbari shrugged her shoulders. "That don't seem so bad, compared to what bit me."

"I suppose that depends a whole lot on the how the weak feels about being culled so that the strong can survive." I squeezed the wound just a bit more to emphasize my point. "They might feel just a bit resentful about that."

She winced, but the wound started bleeding true, pure red instead of black bile. "Then there's a lot to account for. If that's the second trial, then what's the third?"

"All of the horrible things inside of us that we've never vented upon the world, but kept inside but for the grace of Gaia and luck."

Ghunbari looked out past the crevice to the open desert. "And what of those who we chase? How do those monsters survive these tests?"

"Hollow men must have hollow souls to survive Malfeas."

"Meaning?"

"They don't overcome this place. The Atrocity Realm transforms them. Makes them into what the Wyrms need them to be."

"And what's that?"

"Compliant. Willing to believe and do anything to get the job done as long as their suffering is eased just a little. This is why the wolves couldn't take this job. This is why it had to be you and me. We're survivors. We can take everything this place has to dish out and more. We're willing to go bonkers to get the job done, if we believe it's worth it."

By the time that the wounds had healed well enough for fast travel, the trail had grown cold. Ghunbari returned to her spotted Crocas form and sniffed fervently at the ground. If we were tracking anything on land, anything that bled, I knew that would have gotten the job done. But I could tell from her grunting pants that the Banes had covered their tracks too well.

When the ship is sinking, you can either get to swimming or you can rearrange the deck chairs. "I was hoping not to have to use this, but desperate times and all that nonsense..."

I dug once again through the contents of my deep pockets until I found the fetish of last resort. Us rats call it the Lucky Bone. A rat has to make his own way through the world. The Rat Mother blessed this trick upon us, but it carried the risk of incurring debt to her.

Once I had it in my greedy, pudgy hand, I immediately shifted to Roden form. The old finger bone dangled from a leather strap with an edge sharpened like a prison shiv; all the better to cut through the bullshit to find the true path. "Mistress of the Secret Ways, Rat Mother, help this tired old tunnel rat find the bastards before they get away!"

The bone twitched and shook, possessed of a power separate from gravity and my own influence. The tip pointed parallel to the suspected course of the caravan.

"We're going to risk the mission based on an old bone?"

"You have a better idea, Little Rain Cloud?" I cocked my head, ears twitching, and grinned a rat-bastard smile. If she was surprised that I knew the meaning of her name, she didn't show it. "Sometimes you have to jump over the edge to really know what's on the other side."

"That's how you get lost forever."

"Who ever said we were going to be saved?"

The frightening Crocas growled in approval and then crouched down to my level. Ghunbari tilted her head to allow me to climb aboard and saddle into an uncomfortable spot between her furry shoulders. I rolled my hand in the air like a square-jawed white hat from a third-rate spaghetti western. "Let's get those bastards!"

To her credit, Ghunbari didn't bite my head off. She started at a gallop that any Kentucky Derby winner would be hard pressed to maintain.

The edge of the desert shimmered from the heat. Clouds of black dust swirled and condensed into ominous, growling spectral faces. In the storm, I saw my brothers and sisters from Navigator Island with glowering scarlet eyes, ready to rectify the mistakes they made with humanity. Their intent was clear. None would survive this pestilence.

The Umbra ghosts spoiled for a fight, side by side with packs of gibbering Ajaba ripe and ready to cull the weak. Humans were the first to fall in the storm-battle, weak and defenseless before my ghost-kin's onslaught. Other shifters later fell to their fangs and claws: the Gurahl for failing to remember Gaia's name; the Simba and Khan for their crimes of becoming as tepid and blind as the wolves; and then the mighty Garou Nation, tribe by tribe, fell to their teeth and claws.

The rage and hate felt inexhaustible; it would only take a moment's surrender to their hunger to allow them to become real. Only the dim memory

of our prey and the promise of the package urged us forward through the slaughter. I had long ago surrendered my need for revenge for old wrongs, but Ghunbari was a Dawn Ajaba born of rage and spite. Revenge was bred in her bones. Somehow, despite this, she resisted the urge to strike back and to prove her worth. Her entire breed had been nearly wiped from the face of the world. Wasn't that a sign Gaia's disapproval? I had heard that said many a time to excuse all manner of atrocities.

She kept running straight and true through the massacre. Human and cats and bears and wolves and hyenas fought and bled, sanctifying the ground with crimson. Our pace slowed as Ghunbari absorbed the context of the massacre.

"This isn't real," I said trying to encourage her. "Keep running."

"It could be. This is what my people have done. What yours have done. None of us are innocent. We've all failed."

"And Gaia willing, we'll have the chance to fail in the future. That's why we're fighting. That's what you said. To prove that the Ahadi isn't just a fake promise from a deluded girl."

"There's just so much."

"If it were easy, we wouldn't need Kisasi... or you."

Somehow, we kept going, trudging towards the edge of the universe, towards Malfeas. Then, as the cloud dissipated, she picked up speed, keeping steady on the course.

The heat started to fade as color condensed into shades of gray and darker hues. Our line of sight started to shimmer as time dilated. "We're getting close to the border of Malfeas."

Do you know why the hyena laughed? I do. It was because she caught the scent of her prey.

We caught the caravan of Banes in a field of ashes and bone. I leapt off Ghunbari and drew my own dagger. She charged into the fray, biting and clawing at the Banes. When they surrounded her, she shifted into her hulking Hy-aenid form a goddess of death made manifest, twice the size of a bear and ten times as strong. She laughed and it sounded like a mighty bell made of shattered glass and broken dreams of desperation.

They fought desperately so close to their home, trying to get deeper into Malfeas to lose us. Every dark urge bubbled in our heads and the bloodlust took hold. Ghunbari fought with gleaming silver teeth and a black-bladed khukuri. The Banes screamed and howled and died.

Murmurs sounded in the distance. This was not a place we wanted to stay long. The last Bane tried to escape into the mist. He had a silver chain

around his neck that bound him to a shining metal briefcase. Ghunbari easily separated the Bane from both his head and the burden of the package.

Ghunbari lifted the case, but didn't open it. "Whatever is in here has great power, or the Banes wouldn't have wanted it."

"Fair to say that's likely."

"Why should we give it to the Silver Fangs?" Ghunbari asked.

"You know the answer to that."

She sniffed the case. "I could help the Ahadi by giving them this power."

I shook my head. "Power doesn't mean that they will have the wisdom needed to make peace. Kisasi is trying to show us all a better way."

"You believe in the Ahadi?"

"I've already been to the edge. I know what it's like when you jump over. I thought I'd try something new and do the right thing for a change."

"This is the third test, isn't it?"

"All of the horrible things you might ever do with the best intentions."

She passed the briefcase over to me. "You keep it. I'll deliver you as promised."

Hideous beasts and amorphous monsters never before imagined appeared at the edges of the ash mist, howling to their brethren, summoning the courage to rally a counter attack. "This ain't over yet, kid. Our friends are about to have reinforcements. I don't have the gumption to play out Custer's Last Stand."

"Fear and hate make a poor meal. I'd rather dine on hope. Let's see if we can make that happen."

Ghunbari turned away from the call of Malfeas. Gaia broke the mold when she blessed her spirit. It was going to be a race to make it back to the real world, but I had the feeling that we'd make it.

The Way of Endings

By Bill Bridges

The path narrowed and became unsteady. Tom sidled slowly around the bend in the ledge. As his foot searched for purchase, it slipped on loose gravel and hung over cold, empty air. He lunged back against the cave wall, dropping his flashlight as he scrambled to find a grip. It clattered against the opposite wall, careening downward into the dark, its spotlight spinning in all directions. He gasped as the circling light slid across Maggie Two-Woman's face. Her eyes reflected twin moons back at him, moons then eclipsed as the light's roving beam plummeted away.

Cat's eyes, Tom thought, as he froze on the thin ledge in the now pitch-black cave. *A trick of the light.*

"Are you all right, Dr. Bedford? Give me a minute to switch on my light."

He heard her fishing into her pocket. She snapped on a battery-powered headlamp and sharp LED light swept across the cramped cave walls. Tom breathed a sigh of relief.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Thanks for that," he said. "Damn thing just slipped away from me."

"Well, it's not far now. Only a few more twists."

He nodded, although he knew she couldn't see the gesture, for she had already turned to follow the ledge. The light, now strapped to her forehead, bobbed as she shimmied onward. He took a breath and carefully followed.

After what seemed like hours but must have been only ten minutes, she stepped off the ledge and onto the cavern floor. She turned back and held

out her hand for him. He took it, nodding appreciatively as he stepped down and felt the firmness of the ground.

"Thank god. Terra firma," he said.

"It's level ground from here on in," she said. She stepped away, into the widening cave. Tom followed.

"This is ridiculously off the beaten path, Maggie. Are you sure we're not lost?"

He couldn't see her smile from behind, but he could hear it in her voice. "We're practically standing on the find right now."

The find. The old Indian site he came all the way out here — into this dangerous and unmapped cave complex along Cave Ridge in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness of Puget Sound — to see with his own eyes.

Maggie Two-Woman was a Coast Salish tribe-member who had acted as a guide in the past for various archaeological digs up and down the Pacific Northwest coast. She was renowned for finding places that had been overlooked by professional archaeologists. Some of these, Tom suspected, were long-held secrets of the Indian tribes that she had somehow convinced the elders to let her reveal. There was definitely something more to her than a simple guide for hire. She had been slowly steering the course of Northwest Indian studies with her unique finds.

She had shown up two days ago in Tom's office at the university and teased that she knew the location of a "big find." A "career-making" find. She refused to give him details and swore him to secrecy, telling him if he told anybody about it she'd deny it and swear he was making it all up.

"Why me?" he had asked. "Why not bring this to Professor Chittick? He's more qualified."

"Yeah, but you know more folklore. I read your paper on Rabbit tales. You've got a good understanding of that trickster."

"But most of those are East Coast stories. How would they apply to a Northwest Coast site?"

"You'll see," she'd grinned. He couldn't help but think of a cat that had just swallowed a canary.

Maggie stopped in front of him and pointed to her right. "Hey, it still works." His flashlight had rolled against the far wall and was now casting light against the damp rock.

"Give me a second," he said, walking over to wall. As he bent down for his flashlight, he noticed carvings on the rock wall. He caught his breath. *Petroglyphs here?* He was unaware of any Coast Salish petroglyphs this far inland, and none in caves. All the ones he knew about were on boulders in the open air.

"Yeah, I told you it was a big find," Maggie said, from right behind him. He'd been so absorbed in the rock art he hadn't heard her approach. "These aren't the ones I want you to look at, though. Those are over here."

She tugged his arm in the direction from which she'd come. He reluctantly stood up, shining his flashlight over more strange figures.

"I don't recognize these," he said. "They aren't animals. Spirit helpers, maybe? Like those in Nanaimo?"

"Probably. Come on, I want to get in there."

"Get in where? Another cave?"

"Uh... sort of." Maggie was standing in front of a wall with a slight inward depression. It was carved from ceiling to floor. "Just look at this, okay?"

Tom came up to the wall and ran his fingers over the carvings. "Good god, Maggie. I've never seen anything like this. It's almost like a... a totem pole carved into the rock."

"That's what I thought, too. Can you decipher it?"

"What? Me? I don't know. I have no idea who put it here or how old it is. It's certainly a hoax. I mean, cave petroglyphs? This can't be real."

"Trust me, it's real. See that face on the bottom? That's a lynx. You can tell by the ears and whiskers."

Tom stared at the strange figure closest to the floor. "I think you're right. It's as good a guess as any."

"And the figure in the middle?"

"Well, that's obvious — a rabbit. Look at those ears and that grin. But... this unfortunately proves it can't be genuine. I've never seen a rabbit carving like this. I've seen a similar one outside of a longhouse, but not as a cave carving. It's certainly not a Coast Salish tribe artifact."

"No, not a Salish tribe," Maggie agreed. "A different tribe entirely. What about the one on top?"

"A bear? It could be. I've seen bear carvings similar to that before."

"So, what do you think it means? The rabbit, I mean. What's its relation to lynxes and bears?"

"For Coast Salish? I haven't a clue, Maggie."

"Forget the damn Coast Salish! You wrote a whole paper on Rabbit tales. Surely there's something there about rabbits and lynxes? I can't figure it out, and that makes no sense at all! Stupid goddamn Rabbit!"

"Whoah, Maggie, calm down. Where's this impatience coming from? There's no rush here. From what I can tell, this thing is in no danger of ero-

sion anytime soon. If it's genuine — a big *if* — we can study it for as long as we want. Once we bring in a team of students to help out. We'll need some floodlights, of course."

"I don't care about that!" Maggie said, waving her arms as she started to pace. "I *need* to solve this puzzle now! Don't you get it? There is no way I shouldn't have solved it by now! But oh, no — *he* had to go and put rabbit magic here. He knew it would foil me. Great goddamn security system."

Tom stared at Maggie, jaw agape. "*What* are you talking about?"

Maggie stopped gesticulating and smiled. "Just ignore me. It's just, uh, *kusiut* talk. Pretend you didn't hear it."

Tom nodded slowly. The *kusiut* were once a Bella Coola secret society whose members claimed to possess magic powers. Some of the known petroglyph sites were meant to be secret and shown only to initiates of that society. Maggie seemed to be implying that this was such a place. Maybe that explained why she was so sure it was authentic. If there was still an active *kusiut* society — which was hard to believe — then maybe she was a member.

"So... rabbits," he said, turning from Maggie to the carving. "Let me think. There's a story from the Nez Perce about how Coyote tricked Lynx into killing Bear's cubs. Bear chases Coyote down in a rage but is outwitted by him. The story ends with Coyote enjoying bear meat over a fire."

"I know that one. It doesn't involve Rabbit, though."

"Uh, okay." He wracked his brain. "There's a rather elaborate Micmac story about how some wolves pay Lynx to hunt down Rabbit, but Rabbit constantly outwits Lynx until the end, when Glooskap has to intervene to save him."

"Yeah, yeah," Maggie waved her hands impatiently. "Everybody knows that one. Of course, the wolves never get the proper blame for that, do they? They never do. Any more? There's got to be a clue somewhere that I missed."

Tom shrugged. "There's a Cree legend about how some lynx children killed Achaanwaapush, the Cannibal Rabbit."

Maggie's eyes widened, and she paused in her tracks. "Cannibal Rabbit? I don't know that one. What happens in it?"

"Well, the lynx parents leave their village to hunt, and the lynx children are left all alone. Achaanwaapush comes by and sticks his head into their teepee and asks them to scratch his back. He intends to kill and eat them afterward. They agree and rub his back with their paws, but they don't use their claws. He gets impatient and demands they use their claws, because his back really itches by now, and so he gets what he asked for. They tear

him from stem to stern and cook him over the fire, feeding him to their parents when they return.”

Maggie began laughing. “Oh, fuck. It’s so obvious! That Rabbit thought he had me! All I need are some claws!”

She thrust her hands toward the carving. Tom stifled a yell, his hand involuntarily covering his mouth. He stumbled back, staring aghast as Maggie’s hands slowly *changed*, growing into a pair of thick-furred paws, her former-fingers flexing ten sharp claws.

She raised her paws up and brought them slashing down against the carving of the rabbit face. To Tom’s complete shock, they actually drove furrows into the stone, tearing gashes in the carved rabbit’s face.

And then, the wall opened up.

Like a door loose on its hinges, the rock face simply pivoted inward, revealing a new cave.

“Gotcha,” Maggie said, her paws once again normal human hands. She bent slightly to enter the doorway, stopping halfway through to turn back and look at Tom. “Well, are you coming? There might be more Rabbit wards inside, and I’ll need your expertise again.”

Tom stood watching her slip into the deeper darkness of the inner cave, her headlamp’s illumination already out of sight. He opened and closed his mouth three times in succession, trying to say something, but his brain just couldn’t form a coherent thought. Finally, he lifted his flashlight and bent over, waddling after Maggie into the cave.

She was standing in a circular room, moving her head slowly from left to right, eyes on the ceiling. Her headlamp revealed more figures, although these appeared to be paintings rather than carvings.

“Maggie,” Tom said, staring up at the petroglyphs. “What are you?”

“What?” she laughed nervously. “What does that mean? I’m me, good ol’ Maggie Two-Woman. Hey, do you think that’s another rabbit there?” She pointed at a figure with large ears and a devilish grin. It looked like it was throwing a trail of bark chips ahead of it.

“Yes, clearly Rabbit. You didn’t answer my question.”

Maggie sighed. “I’m Qualmi. We’re not like you.”

Tom wrinkled his brow. “Snoqualmie? I thought you were Bella Coola. And what does that ‘we’re not like you’ crap mean?”

Maggie turned and looked him in the eye. He blinked at the brightness of her headlamp. “I don’t mean it like that, Tom. I know you’re one of the good ones. They raised you right that way, your kind did.” She shrugged

her shoulders and sat down on the empty cave floor. "And I don't mean Snoqualmie. They're human. I mean Qualmi. Lynx People."

Tom sat down next to her, shaking his head. "I've never heard of that tribe. Or is it your *kusiut*? The secret society?"

She smiled. "Heh. No. I was fibbing about that, trying to throw you off my trail. I knew I'd have to tell you soon anyway. I got carried away out there with the claws."

"Yeah, and that's what I mean. Your... claws. I thought I was imagining it, but no, it happened. How did you do that?"

She shrugged again. "It's what we do. When I said Lynx People, I meant it. We're both human and lynx, and neither. I'm a werecat, Tom."

Tom laughed. "Sure. No, really, how did you do it?"

Maggie stood up. "Help me out of this next jam and I'll tell you. You see, I was in a real pickle there. I couldn't figure out how to open the outer door. I knew it was a puzzle — my kind like puzzles — but I couldn't solve it. For some reason, rabbit spirits confound my gift for seeing patterns. I needed your memory, that story about the Cannibal Rabbit."

Tom stood up and wiped the dirt from his pants. "Okay, I'll play along. I assume this is some sort of weird initiation ceremony your 'tribe' is putting me through for some reason. But I'm game. So, what's next?"

Maggie pointed at the rabbit painting. "I need to open the inner door, and that painting is the clue. I think it's from that other story you mentioned, where Lynx chases down Rabbit through many guises."

Tom nodded. "The one where Rabbit uses his *m'téoulin* powers to escape over and over."

"Right. I remember something about Rabbit throwing those bark chips in the air and leaping on them, one by one, so he didn't leave any tracks."

"But Lynx circles Rabbit's empty lodge, in an ever-widening arc, until he catches the scent."

Maggie threw her arms around Tom. "I could kiss you!" She jumped away from him and ran to the center of the room. "Circles! That's it. The Gauntlet is too thick here, old strong magic. But circles, like in the old story... we just have to keep going until I get the scent!"

"Okay," Tom said, throwing up his hands. "If that's how the game goes. So what do I do while you're going around in circles?"

Maggie looked at him, a mischievous grin stretching from cheek to cheek. "You're walking right behind me, holding my hand. Tight. *Do not slip out of my grip*. I might not be able to get you back."

Tom shrugged and walked up behind Maggie, taking her hand. "Look, there's a payoff for this, right? Am I going to get inducted into this *kusiut* of yours?"

Maggie smiled, shaking her head. "Not exactly. But I promise: by the end of this, you'll know exactly who you are."

Tom smiled, only rolling his eyes a little. "Enigmatic. Nice. Okay, let's do this."

"One more thing. A favor. Where we're going... well, I've got a plan. But it might backfire. If I seem, like, really confused, as in totally drugged-out kind of confused, I need you to say something to me. Okay?"

"Okay. I guess."

"Just say the words, okay?"

Tom sighed. "I'm humoring you so far, aren't I? What words?"

"What's up, doc."

"You're kidding. I thought you were allergic to rabbits."

"Rabbit *magic*, yeah." Maggie shrugged. "I'm hoping some reverse psychology will work here. Let's go."

She began walking in a widening spiral, sniffing the air with every step. Tom's flashlight was pointed down at the floor, and Maggie's lamp faced away from him, but for a moment the shadows seemed to paint whiskers on her cheeks.

"Aha!" Maggie cried. "Hold on tight. I got it. The scent. It's rabbit, all right. We're stepping over now."

Tom felt the floor drop out from under him, his stomach lurching with the sudden shift. Then, he felt gravity again and realized his feet had never left the ground.

But the cave had changed. The walls now glowed as if a fire burned somewhere deep inside them. The paintings were gone, replaced by blank rock. He felt a heavy, muggy heat all around him, and heard a deep, rumbling, rhythmic grumbling, like a furnace being turned on and off.

He let go of Maggie and stretched out his hand. He felt... hair. He looked over to see a large bear-skin rug stretched out across the wall. As he looked to either side to see the breadth of the pelt, he felt his stomach lurch again and an uncontrollable moan escaped his throat.

Maggie grabbed his jacket and tugged him backwards a step. "Just keep still. He's still sleeping."

Tom shuddered, stepping backwards again, away from the giant, huge, enormous, unbelievably titanic grizzly bear curled up on the cave floor next to him, slowly snoring.

All too aware of the danger of any volume whatsoever, and still staring at the bear, he whispered. "Good god, Maggie, what the hell is this? That... that thing is *fucking* extinct!"

"No, it's very much not extinct. But yes, it is about the size of a prehistoric cave bear. And believe me, that's not even his Bjornen form."

Tom's legs gave out and he crashed to the floor. The sound reverberated through the cave but the bear didn't stir. It just kept snoring — slow, deep, bass rumbles.

"Just stay right there, Tom. That's as good a spot as any. You do not want to move right now." She tip-toed up to the bear and bent her ear to its nostrils.

"What are you doing?" Tom said. "Get away from it!"

"Sorry, no can do. I came here to rouse him. To make him remember. I stole a bear song just for this purpose. Now, you sit still while I do my job."

Tom once again opened and closed his mouth over and over, unable to produce any words. He finally stopped and just stared, watching as Maggie crept carefully around behind the massive bulk of the sleeping bear. She appeared again next to his huge head and fished something out of her pocket. It looked to Tom like a red berry. She crushed it between her forefinger and thumb, the juice smearing across her palm. Then she leaned forward, cupping her mouth over the bear's ear, and began to sing.

"When you hear the hunters coming down the creek, then upstream, upstream you must go. Upstream, upstream you must go."

The bear's ear flickered. Maggie smiled and kept singing.

"But if you hear them coming up the creek, children, then — downstream, downstream you must go. Downstream, downstream you must go."

Tom smiled. He knew the song. It was a Cherokee legend, a mother bear's song to her cubs.

He froze. A single eye had opened. The bear's nostrils widened, taking in the air. Maggie leaped back, but when she landed she was no longer Maggie. She was a lynx, crouching silently on four paws.

The bear moved, shifting its weight. Tom felt the ground tremble. The bear sat up, smacking its lips and blinking its eyes. Maggie slipped nimbly behind it again, staying out of sight.

The bear sniffed and growled, a grumbling like the engines of a C140 cargo plane. It didn't look happy.

"Now, now, old man," Maggie said. Tom couldn't believe words were coming out of the mouth of a lynx, although they were raspy and oddly pitched. "You've been sleeping too long."

“WHO WOKE ME?!” The bear roared and stood up, his head grazing the ceiling. Tom froze, an atavistic terror welling up from his lizard brain, commanding his every muscle to lock in place.

“It is I, daughter, come home,” Maggie said.

“I HAVE NO DAUGHTER! Who are you! I can’t smell you — wait! Wolf-changer! I smell my enemy, the Garou!”

“Oh, no, old man. That is not I. You smell the man I brought with me.”

The bear looked straight at Tom, who withered where he stood, his muscles now rubber. The sheer terror of that gaze almost emptied his bowels. He shut his eyes, hoping like a child that the monster would go away.

When he opened them, the monster was gone and in its place stood a mountain man. *Grizzly Adams on steroids*, Tom thought. *A naked Grizzly Adams on steroids. I have gone insane.*

The mountain man stared at Tom and then whipped his head around. The lynx — Maggie — leaped like lightning to remain behind him and unseen.

“I am not *your* daughter, old man,” she said. “*You* are in *my* home. My *father’s* den.”

The mountain man relaxed, his shoulders slumping. “Ah, you are Thunder Jack’s daughter, then. Come to reclaim his den realm.”

The lynx stumbled, as if she’d taken a blow to the temple. In that scant moment, the mountain man wheeled around and grabbed her four-legged form in a two-armed hug.

“Ha! I know you Qualmi! Can’t stand the sound of your own parent’s name!” He squeezed and Maggie cried out in pain. “Thunder Jack was your father! Thunder Jack!”

The lynx’s blue cat eyes grew foggy and she began to drool.

Tom started to stand, to move toward her, but one look at the mountain man and he knew he could never break that grip. Maggie looked drugged.

“Wait — Maggie!” Tom yelled. “What’s up, doc!”

Maggie’s eyes shot open. She melted into her human shape and slipped from the bear-shifter’s arms. She took one bounding leap and soared over Tom to the other side of the cave.

“Ha, ha! Tom, I was right!” she cried. “If Rabbit magic normally makes me confused, then when I’m already confused, Rabbit magic makes me smart!” She stuck her tongue out at the mountain man. “My father bound that Rabbit spirit into his den realm to keep me out while you were in here. This place wasn’t meant for you.”

"Your father invited me in. And I'm *not* ready to leave yet," the mountain man said, scowling.

"You've slept for decades. Your long Bhernoct is over."

"It's over when I say it's over!" the man yelled. He stomped toward Maggie, and Tom scrambled out of the way, cowering against the cave wall. The man ignored him, heading for Maggie.

Maggie stepped to her left and disappeared. She was there one moment and gone the next.

The mountain man — *the bear-thing*, Tom thought — stopped and sniffed around. "Where are you? Stupid Qualmi tricks!"

"What color is the mind in winter, great bear?" Maggie's voice echoed around the cave.

"Nonsense!" the man yelled.

"Blue. What is the sound of parting mist?"

"What?! That makes no sense! Mist doesn't make a sound!"

"The answer is 'aha'!"

The mountain man staggered, trying to keep its balance. He looked confused, unsure where he was. "Wait—! Where—? I... I just... want to sleep!"

"Then tell me what is the shape of regret?"

He collapsed, weeping. "It is the sight of my cub, dying from her wounds." A great sob — a bear's moan — escaped the man's maw. "Leave me alone, cat. Let me die in my sleep."

Maggie appeared again, and Tom saw that she had been there all along, camouflaged with the rock. "*Remember*, oh Gurahl. Remember the Way of Endings. It is not your time yet. Gaia calls you to return."

The man sat up, sniffing, his eyes draining tears. "She was everything to me. I could not defeat Mangi. I could not bring her back. What does it all matter when the Garou can come and take her away from me?"

"They must be made to remember. *You* must *make* them remember, Eldridge Bonecrusher."

"My name," the bear man said, staring wistfully into the distance. "I'd almost forgotten it. It was so long ago. How will I find them? They are many; we are few."

Maggie looked at Tom, and he thought he saw regret in her eyes. "I brought you their scent. Their Kin. You can track them down by capturing *his* scent." She pointed at Tom.

The bear man — Bonecrusher — looked at Tom, his brow furrowing. Tom pressed against the wall, desperately hoping it would swing open like the totem door had.

“Maggie... what are you talking about?” Tom said. “Why are you *doing* this?”

Bonecrusher walked over to Tom, changing as he came, growing larger and larger, resuming his bear form. He stopped with his snout inches away from Tom and took a deep breath.

“Yes,” Bonecrusher said, in his now deep-bass rumble of a voice. “The wolf-changers. I know them now.”

“It won’t be the same ones,” Maggie said. “But they are related. Tom is descended from their tribe.”

Bonecrusher nodded. “Then I will begin my remembering with him.” He drew back an enormous paw, large enough to wrap around Tom’s head as if it were a baseball. A paw bristling with knife-sized claws. Tom whimpered and began to shake uncontrollably.

“No,” Maggie said, quietly and solemnly. “You have taken my father’s hospitality. You owe me. Do not kill him.”

Bonecrusher held his paw steady, hovering over Tom. Tom closed his eyes and tried to mutter a prayer, but his quivering body couldn’t produce a coherent sound.

“Your father was my friend,” Bonecrusher said. “When he died, I came to protect his den from despoilers.”

“You came to hide. To sleep away your sorrow in the only place you knew no one could wake you. But I figured it out. I read the patterns in the past. I pieced together my father’s clues. I solved his tricks and found my way in.”

Bonecrusher still held his massive paw in check, although Tom had melted into a prostrate puddle on the floor. “Yes. Your kind is pesky that way. But you woke me. You knew it would rouse my revenge. I must start somewhere.”

“I risked everything by letting you know I was his daughter, by *speaking* of him.” It seemed now to Tom that Maggie had been exerting great will all this time to maintain her composure. He saw sweat beading on her brow.

Bonecrusher smiled, his lips curling back to reveal his juggernaut teeth, through which escaped a coughing rumble that echoed throughout the cave. He dropped his paw. “You lynxes. Why does your past get so deeply under your skin, I wonder?”

Maggie shrugged. Tom thought her trembling lips suppressed a grin. “Never ask a riddler to solve her own riddles.”

The bear shifted back into his man form. He held out a hand to Tom. "You live. You stink of my daughter's murderers, but you belong to this cat. I would not deign to take a cat's toys from her."

Tom let loose a long-held breath, and looked uneasily at Maggie, before taking the man's hand. The bear man hauled him up to his feet, and slapped him on the back, laughing. "A Garou Kin. With a Qualmi! Why not?"

Bonecrusher shook his head and walked to the center of the room. "I'm going to look for those Garou. Make them remember what their kind did to my daughter. To *me*. They won't know what hit them."

Maggie nodded. "I'd appreciate it if, you know, you kept the existence of this place secret. You understand."

Bonecrusher laughed. "I'm not coming back. My final battlefield lies elsewhere. Thank you, cat, for ending my long winter."

He shimmered away, his form dissolving into the air.

Maggie clapped her hands together. "Yes! It's mine!" She ran over to hug Tom.

He shied away from her.

"What?" she said. "Oh, come on, you were never in any real danger. Well, maybe a little. Okay, a lot. But I had a plan, remember? And it worked! Thanks to your help. I owe you one."

Tom scowled. "What the hell was that about 'wolf-changers' and me being 'kin'? And that French word you both kept using?"

"Ah, yeah. Garou. It's what your kind call themselves. I mean, your full-blooded kind. You? You're only kin. You didn't breed true."

"True to *what*?" Tom said, throwing his hands up.

Maggie patted him on the shoulder. "You're not a werewolf. Your cousins are, but you're not. Relax; you've been spared a fate worse than death by a simple accident of genetics. Or lack of a proper spirit fetch. I'm not really sure how the whole thing works."

Tom leaned his back against the cave wall and slid down it. "You... you have no idea how utterly fucked up all this sounds."

Maggie stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the cave. "Doc, fucked up is my *business*. And you've just become a partner in this little enterprise I call the Grand Riddle." She beamed as she looked around at the cold, empty cave. "It's a fixer upper, but it's all about location, location, location."

Tom looked up at Maggie and saw once more the saucer-like gleam of her pupils. *Cat's eyes. A trick of the light.*

A goddamn trick.

The Sins of Sharks

By Matthew McFarland

My grandfather had all kinds of stories about the sea and the creatures that lived in it, but you had to get him drunk to hear about how the Serpent of Eden was actually a shark.

Grandpa had a thing about sharks. He'd been in the Navy for 30 years, and while he'd never risen very high in the ranks, by the time he finally retired he knew more about sailing, the ocean, naval combat, and marine biology than most people ever could. Sure, higher education was never his thing, but Grandpa was a lot smarter than most people (including my dad) ever gave him credit for.

"If he was so damn smart," Dad used to say, "he'd have gotten off the boat, gone to college, and gotten a job that didn't take away from his family for a year at a time." Dad may have been a little resentful about all the missed birthdays, and Christmases, and baseball games and so on.

For what it's worth, Dad went too far the other way, and by the time I turned 18 I couldn't get the hell away fast enough. I went out and stayed with my Grandma for a few weeks right after high school; Grandpa was still in the service then, and he came home on leave right after I got there. We stayed up one night drinking Japanese beer and talking about life and plans and how I had to get away from my parents' house. Grandpa told me I could stay as long as I wanted, that he'd give me a little money to get started if I needed it, but just one thing — don't join the Navy.

"Wait, why?" It hadn't been a burning desire, but I'd sure considered it. And I was honestly surprised that he was so dead-set against me following in his footsteps.

“They’ll put you on a boat,” said Grandpa, like he was letting me in a secret. “Boat’s on the water.”

“Yeah, and...?”

He stared off the porch for a second, gazing off into the grainy twilight. Then he finished off his beer and shook his head. “Well, there are sharks out there.”

• • •

Grandpa had talked about sharks before, of course. He told my sister and me stories about the Navy, and when we were kids, we didn’t understand the stories about how stupid and bureaucratic military life was, and we weren’t ready for the story about the crossed-eye hooker in Singapore. So he stuck mainly to stories about marine life. Grandpa had seen whales and dolphins, and sea snakes, and sea birds, and all kinds of other things, but his favorite — and ours — were the sharks. Those stories were constant, no matter how sophisticated the other stories got, he always had one about a shark, even if it was just that he’d seen an especially big one eat a seal off the coast of Gansbaai. Sometimes he had pictures, and my sister would shudder, when she was little. When she was a teenager, she’d just roll her eyes.

But we didn’t live near the ocean, so sharks were fairy-tale creatures for us. We went to aquariums and saw the sharks in big tanks, but they didn’t seem like the ones Grandpa talked about. They were only a few feet long, and they just swam around like the other fish. They didn’t have the fearsome teeth or the dead, black eyes.

Grandpa’s sharks had will, purpose, and above all, hunger. The sharks in his stories were always eating something. Seals, fish, and one time, a sailor. Grandpa told me that story when he was a little tipsy one evening. I was probably about 13, and he said that he and a friend had been on leave in Florida. They’d both been swimming near twilight, and suddenly his friend just went under.

“Something grabbed him and yanked him down,” Grandpa said. “Something strong. I didn’t know what was going on, but then he popped back up and screamed, and I saw the thing’s mouth, clamped around his middle. His arm was...”

Grandpa trailed off, then. He sat there for a full minute, and I didn’t say a word, because I was terrified. I finally leaned forward and put my hand on his knee, and he started, and then got up, tussled my hair, and left the room. I had nightmares for a week, nightmares about floating in the water, surrounded by darkness and hearing my sister scream.

Grandpa never finished that story, and I never asked. But there were other shark stories. He saw sharks jump fully out of the water to snatch birds in flight. He saw them chase down tuna and throw seals across the waves like skipping stones. He said one evening that he’d heard a shark scream, said it

surfaced one night and let out a shriek that left the men on his ship clutching their ears, but my mother cleared her throat and looked uncomfortable and my father told him to hush. Before I went to bed that night, though, I caught up with Grandpa in the hallway and asked him why the shark had screamed.

“Guilt, I guess,” he said. “Guilt for its sins.”

• • •

Grandpa had a funny relationship with sin. He wasn’t really a religious man — I never saw him go to church, and he sure never preached the Gospels to me or my sister. But he was devout, and he had his own faith, cobbled together over years as sailor, influenced by Shinto and Christianity and long, cold nights on the ocean. I never actually asked him if other fish could sin, or if it was just sharks, but we got to talking about it one night, and he told me what he thought.

I was about 20 at this point. Grandpa had retired from the Navy, and his stories about sharks were starting to blur together. He stopped in the middle of a lot of the stories, and he forgot the endings sometimes, but that night, as we worked our way through the beer in the fridge, he seemed to grow more lucid. The stories came clearer, and I worked up the courage to ask him about the time in Florida when his friend had died.

I don’t know why I asked that — I was pretty drunk, too, I think. But Grandpa looked over at me, and then turned his head and looked out the window. “That was a sin,” he said.

I thought he meant *he* had sinned by letting his friend die, so I said, “there wasn’t nothing you could’ve done.”

He turned back to me and gave me a confused look, and then said, “No, I meant the shark. That was the shark’s sin.”

“How do you mean?”

Grandpa cracked open another beer, but then stared at it like maybe it was a bad idea. “Well, sharks are older than people. I don’t mean they live longer, I mean they’ve been *around* longer. Sharks were around before damn near everything. Before *trees*, did you know that?”

“No,” I said, but I was thinking *how would you know that, old man?*

“Well, it’s true.” He took a sip with a resigned look on his face. He was committed to being drunk, now. “Sharks have been around so long, they *have* to have some sense of the Divine. They *have* to know some faith, and they *have* to know sin. To be able to sin you have to know that you can sin. Sharks know sin.”

“But...they’re fish.”

He ignored me. “So what’s a sin to a shark? Not murder of a seal or a fish or even another shark; that’d be stupid. But murder of a person?”

“Why would a shark care about a person?”

“Book of Genesis, boy. God told Adam that he would rule over the beasts of the land and the fish of the sea. Now, maybe that doesn’t mean anything when a jellyfish kills a person, because a jellyfish ain’t a fish anyway, but a shark is, so when a shark commits murder, that’s a sin.”

I stared at him. I didn’t really believe this. I didn’t believe that *he* believed this. But then he turned back to me and I saw his eyes. He looked haunted, even scared, and he was holding his beer tightly enough that the can was folding in on itself.

“Look,” he continued, “I don’t want to scare you, but sharks were here before dinosaurs. You know how many *millions* of years that is? Before we were anything? And how pissed off must they have been when Adam shows up, some little weirdo who’s never even *seen* the ocean, and God says *he’s* in charge? I figure maybe God was thinking ahead to the flood, right, because then the sharks could actually see Adam and interact with him. Or else...maybe there was shark there. In the Garden.”

I haven’t exactly led a life of hedonism, but I’ve had friends who were happy to pop whatever pills were handed to them, and that attitude does rub off. I’d been on my share of bad trips, and that night, watching Grandpa tell me with a totally straight face that he believed that sharks figured into the Book of Genesis pretty heavily, it was like slowly descending into hallucinations. I had the same feeling of nibbling inevitability, the knowledge that not only did this suck, but it was going to suck for the next several hours and all I could do was hope to see something interesting. I didn’t want Grandpa to really believe this, because if he did, it would mean he was losing his mind. I didn’t want that for him. So I let him keep going, hoping he’d come to a point that wasn’t so insane.

“A shark in the Garden? Like, the Garden of Eden?”

“Sure,” he said. “Bible says ‘serpent,’ but you know it’s been all translated and re-translated and all. And the Bible uses the word ‘serpent’ to talk about sea-monsters, later. So God does say that stuff about the serpent crawling on its belly and eating dust, but we know snakes don’t eat dust, they eat rats and so forth.”

“So you think it’s a shark?”

“The serpent, whatever it really was, knew what’s what. It was there before Adam. Sharks were there. So why not? If they can scream, and if they can fly, and if they can grow arms when they want—”

And then Grandpa stopped talking, and started making this noise. He was still trying to talk, but he wasn’t getting words out. He was sobbing, trying desperately to make sense. He dropped his beer on the floor and buried his face in his hands. I got up and tried to comfort him, but I was pretty

drunk, too, and I couldn't do much but hold his shoulders while he shook. I couldn't understand much of what he was saying. I heard him repeat a word, and it didn't make any sense at all at the time.

That word was "Wigwam."

• • •

My sister died four weeks to the day after Grandpa told me about the sharks in the Garden of Eden. She was 19. She died in a boating accident off the coast of North Carolina. Her boat capsized and sank, and her body was never found.

Grandpa couldn't attend her funeral. He became completely hysterical when he heard what had happened. He did the same thing he'd done that night, broke down in sobs, trying to talk, but unable to make anything coherent. When we picked him up to go the funeral, he was so drunk he couldn't walk. We had our neighbor sit with him, and when we got back, Grandpa was asleep. My neighbor pulled me aside — he could see my parents were in no state to deal with anything — and asked, "What's 'wigwam'?"

I felt my heart skip a beat. I almost asked if Grandpa had been drinking, but I caught myself. "I don't know," I said. "It's a thing Indians live in, isn't it?"

"Well, I don't know," he said, "but your grandfather kept talking about it. He kept saying that this was because of 'wigwam', but he wouldn't tell me what he meant."

I thought about that, but I didn't know, either. He'd never told me, and I didn't see how it was important. I'd just come from burying a box that we pretended had my baby sister in it. "He's just drunk," I said, and my neighbor shrugged, and left.

I couldn't sleep that night. Mom had taken a pill, and she nodded off in the living room. Dad could sleep any time, no matter what was going on. That left me and my grandfather. I went outside to sit on the step and cry, and he was already there, tears on his cheeks, staring out into the yard.

"It's my fault," he said.

"What?"

He didn't say anything, and I didn't feel like pressing. We just sat there and stared into the dark. It felt like he wanted to say something, but I was too wiped out to care. Finally, he looked over at me and said, "John, do you trust me?"

Not really, I thought, because you think there were sharks in the Garden of Eden, but then I felt bad about that. "Of course, Grandpa."

"Then listen. I can't really tell you why, but I want you to promise me. Stay off the ocean."

I wrinkled up my brow. I thought this was just Grandpa finding a weird way to cope with Hannah's death, but the expression on his face... "Look, Grandpa—"

"No, I'm serious, John." He sat up straight. "You promise me, you stay away from the ocean and the goddamn sharks. I can't protect you. I'm too old. But I'll be damned if I lose anyone else like this, so you stay away from the ocean. You hear me?" He moved closer and put his hand on my knee. He was squeezing it, and he was pretty strong for an old guy. "*Promise me, John.*"

"OK, I promise." I pushed his hand away and got up. I went inside, stole one of mom's pills, and slept until noon the next day.

I said it. I made the promise. But I didn't really mean it.

• • •

I went to the Bahamas a year and a half later. Mom was still in therapy. Dad was still sleeping too much. Grandpa had moved in with them, and I guess he made them make the same promise, but they never went anywhere anyway. Four of my friends all kicked in and bought me the plane ticket, and we flew down there and drank, ate conch fritters and tossed Frisbees on the beach.

I thought about the promise I made to Grandpa. I thought about it a lot. I decided on the first night that I'd stay off of boats. I loved Grandpa, and I made a promise, and that meant a lot to me. The next day, though, I met Marie, and that was pretty much that.

Marie was not the prettiest girl I'd seen — in the Bahamas, there was no shortage of fantastic bodies in bikinis. Marie had a lithe, muscular build, but she was blocky and her hands were too big. She approached me the second morning we were there, while I was standing on the beach looking out at the water.

"Hello." Her voice was weird. She had obviously said it to me, but she didn't seem to really want to communicate.

"Hi," I said back. I looked her over. She was dressed in a one-piece, but it didn't really fit her. It had a hole in it, on the side, too.

"I would like you to come parasailing today."

I stared at her for a few seconds, and then it hit me — she worked for one of the parasailing rental places. "No, thanks," I said. "Got plans today."

"No," she said, "you should come parasailing today." And then she touched my hand, and everything got strange.

She looked at my eyes, and I wanted her. I'd never been turned on that much, or maybe just not in that way. It was different than anything I'd felt

before, with any woman. I wasn't especially attracted to her, but I felt a *need* for her. I put my hands on her shoulders and started to move to kiss her, but she pulled back, like she didn't understand what I was doing. But then she put her hands on my hips, and slipped her fingers under the elastic of my swim trunks, and I swear, if my friends hadn't come walking about crowing about the place they found that sold breakfast burritos (in the Bahamas? Weird, but true), we'd have fucked right there on the sand.

She backed off, and my friends asked who she was. She said, "I'm Marie, and John Bergen is going to come parasailing later." My friends all laughed because she sounded so weird, and then they all decided parasailing sounded awesome, and Marie pointed to a kiosk near the beach and we signed up.

It did not occur to me until I saw Marie again that I had no idea how she knew my name, much less my full name. By the time that occurred to me, it didn't matter much. I was already screwed.

• • •

"Remember your promise."

"Huh?" I was preoccupied. I knew I *had* a passport, but I couldn't remember where it was. My grandfather was standing in my bedroom doorway.

"You're going to the Bahamas, right?"

"Yeah, Grandpa."

"Well, you just remember your promise."

I turned to face him. "Grandpa, I don't know if I can go to the Bahamas and not swim in the ocean."

He stepped forward and grabbed my shoulders. "John, some of the sharks are good and devout, and some of them are sinners. We have dominion over all the fish of the sea, but some of them just don't *listen*, and—"

I stepped back. "Jesus, Grandpa, calm down. Sharks don't sin. OK? They're just fish. It'll be fine. I'm not gonna go swimming with sharks."

"But you *are*, John. That's what I'm saying. If you go in the ocean at all, you're swimming with sharks, and the Bahamas, well, that's where I saw the one with arms." His hands were shaking. It was happening more often. Mom had mentioned the word "Parkinson's," but we hadn't had any tests done.

"Grandpa, look, I don't want to disrespect you, but I don't know what the hell you're talking about and I need to find my passport."

His hands fell to his sides. "Wigwam," he said. "Operation Wigwam. God damn it."

I cocked my head. "What are you talking about?"

"Passport's on the island in the kitchen, John," he said. And then he walked down the hall, into his room, and closed the door. That was the last time I saw him until the hallucinations set in.

• • •

I figure we'd been without water for about 18 hours. I'd had a bottle in my pocket and there was a cooler in the boat, but we'd gone through that pretty quickly. Our captain was something of a guzzler.

I had been up in the parasail, looking down at the boat. My friend were there looking up, or out at the water, and then up ahead I saw the shark. It was heading straight for the boat, and it must have been some trick of the sun, but it looked *bigger* than the goddamn boat. I screamed down at them, but they couldn't hear.

Sitting on the edge of the boat with nothing but gleaming water around, I guess the shark must have gone under and bumped the boat. I felt the *thud* and I jerked up a bit, but I was already flying. I started to lose altitude, and the handlers started reeling me in, and the boat turned. I realized that someone had gone overboard. He was my friend. I think his name was Ben.

I landed and they pulled me in, quick, talking about sharks. I saw red in the water and I think I threw up, which in retrospect was a really stupid thing to do. You lose water that way.

The handlers tried to start the motor back up, but it wouldn't turn. I sat on the bench and looked at the red in the water, and I saw pieces of Ben float to the surface. I had three other friends on the boat, and I'm not sure of their names, either. But one said, "You broke your promise."

That can't be right.

No, he said, "We have to get out of here!" Another said, "Start the fucking engine!" The handlers were talking to each other, but I couldn't understand them. Something hit the boat, and then something crawled up out of the sea onto the deck.

Next thing I knew, the railing was covered in blood. The captain was cowering in the corner, and one of my friends was leaning over the side screaming "Mark!" Everyone else was gone.

It seems weird that the hallucinations started before the water ran out, before we got hungry or sunburnt. It seems weird that the radio and the boat's engine stopped. But I felt like I couldn't think about that too long. I'm not sure why; it just didn't seem important. I kept trying to remember where all the blood came from.

I'm not sure how long it was until my friend jumped into the water, but I know it happened at night. I was asleep, but I woke up when the captain

cried out. It wasn't a scream, really, just a loud yelp, like he'd been surprised by something. I opened my eyes, and he looked over at me, but he didn't make a sound. And my friend was missing.

I called out for him, but I just heard splashing. We were drifting — we'd been drifting ever since the boat stopped, but I had no idea which direction — and I could see him bobbing in the water. I yelled to him, and he yelled back. "You broke your promise!"

No, that's not it. He said, "Help me!"

But then he disappeared into the water, like he was yanked down. And I thought, *but Grandpa never told me the end of that story.*

I didn't see him come back up.

• • •

"What's Wigwam?"

"Huh?" The captain was naked. I didn't care anymore, I was just glad he'd stopped crying about how much his clothes itched. "What's Wigwam?"

"That's what I asked you."

"How do I know?"

"I don't know." I looked around again, for the millionth time, but I still didn't know which way was land. "Just making conversation."

"I don't know." He stood up. "I don't know. What's Wigwam?" He started walking closer to me.

"I don't know, man. I was just—"

"What's Wigwam? How the fuck should I know that?" He dug into the pile of his clothes and pulled out a knife. I stood up, put my hands out, but I had nothing, no way to defend myself, and I was so hot I could feel my skin crackle.

He lunged, but he tripped. He fell, and I heard the splash.

I looked. I shouldn't have looked, but I did.

The shark had to be at last 18 feet long. It rose up from under the water as soon as he hit, and it grabbed his legs and twisted. I heard his knee pop, and saw white bone fragments from his shin. He screamed, but he was so hoarse he couldn't make much noise. He stabbed downward and hit the shark right above the eye, and that's when I looked away.

The screams stopped. I looked over again, and the water was clean and calm. I sat there, wondering if maybe I should just jump in.

And then the shark crawled up onto the boat.

Oh, the shark didn't look like a shark anymore. Now it looked like Marie. But it still had a cut over one eye where the captain stabbed it. "Hello, John Bergen," it said.

"Marie?"

It didn't answer. It just walked forward.

"What's Wigwam?" I said.

I don't know why I said that, but Marie — the shark — stopped. "Wigwam?"

"My Grandpa said that I should stay off the oceans, and that it was because of Wigwam. But I don't know what that means, and he wouldn't tell me."

The shark crouched down. It looked confused. "You should stay away... because of Wigwam?"

"Because of sin." I was trying so hard to remember, but all I could come up with were words. "Because sharks were here first, and then there was sin—"

"What is sin?" The look on her face was strange. She looked like she was...considering. It's a weird look for a shark, even if the shark is a naked woman.

"Um. Sin is a crime against...God. I guess." That didn't sound right. "A crime...the serpent sinned. Sort of."

She looked frustrated.

"People sin. They...kill, and they steal. And then God judges them."

"Judgment." That word she seemed to understand.

"Right."

"You stay away from Sea, to avoid judgment?"

I had the distinct feeling there was a right answer here, and I didn't know it. I decided to go with the truth, or at least as much of it as I could manage. "I promised to avoid the ocean because my grandfather asked me to. I think he asked me to because of Wigwam, but I don't know what Wigwam is."

"Wigwam." She bared her teeth, and they looked much too triangular. "Turna'a."

That's all I remember.

• • •

The helicopter spotted the boat a couple of hours later. They picked me up, took me to a hospital, questioned me, and eventually sent me home. When I got home, I wound up right back in the hospital with a viral infection, and my parents brought my Grandpa to see me.

The whole time, we looked at each other, just waiting for my parents to leave. But of course they didn't — Grandpa was officially diagnosed with dementia, now, and they were worried he'd unhook my IVs or something. Finally Mom went to the cafeteria and Dad fell asleep, and I could talk to Grandpa.

"OK, now tell me what the hell Wigwam is."

His eyes got a little wide. "You saw the sharks, didn't you?"

"Damn it, Grandpa, tell me. The shark just about killed me, and turned into a woman to do it. Tell me."

"I think it was 1955," he said. "We were on a ship about five hundred miles from California, and we set off a bomb."

I blinked. Suddenly I had that "bad trip is beginning" feeling again. "What bomb?"

"Operation Wigwam. It was a nuclear test. Whole bunch of ships. Ours was there to watch for marine life coming up to the surface."

"Why?"

"Shit, John, I don't know. I was just a sailor. They did all kinds of stupid tests then. They didn't know what the bombs really did."

I raised my bed. Dad stirred, but stayed asleep. "So what happened?"

Grandpa leaned toward me. "Sharks. Had to be dozens. They all just floated to the surface, burnt and in pieces, and some of them thrashing around like they were poisoned."

I thought about the pieces of my friend in the water. I thought about sin and judgment.

"Then what?"

"Nothing. I mean, we took some samples and left and that was it. It wasn't anything earth-shaking, it was a nuclear test. I know that's weird, but that's how it was."

I felt sick. "I think it *was* something earth-shaking, Grandpa."

We sat there for a minute, not looking at each other, trying to figure it all out. The door to my room opened, and I thought it would be the doctor or my mom. It was Marie. The "bad trip" feeling got worse. I think I just said "no" a bunch of times, at first, but Marie gave me a look, and then looked at my Dad, sleeping in the chair, and I bit my knuckle to shut myself up.

"Zachary Bergen, US Navy," she said to my grandfather.

"Yes." Grandpa looked tired.

"You were there at Wigwam."

Grandpa nodded.

"We have followed you and searched for you for many years."

“Why?” I blurted. Marie gave me a glare. “How do you even know him?”

Marie turned her gaze back to Grandpa. “His face was one we saw, there in the burning waters of Turna’a. His face was passed on in the Sendings of the dying to the few survivors, and we remembered. We survived. We always do.”

I fingered the call button, but what was a nurse going to do? There was a shark in my room. She was wearing scrubs, and the pants were torn. I saw blood on her sleeve, too. I wondered where she’d gotten the clothes.

“Zachary Bergen, US Navy, you have sinned.”

Grandpa looked up.

“John Bergen explained it to me,” she continued. “I think it makes sense. You have transgressed against Sea. You have sinned. We will take you to Sea and you can face judgment.”

“No,” whispered Grandpa.

“Or we can take John Bergen and he can face judgment in your place.”

I started to say, “Fine, fuck you then, let’s go,” but Grandpa stood up.

“OK, then,” he said. “But then, you leave him alone.”

“He has not sinned,” said the shark. “He has not sinned against Sea. You did, but we were blinded to you, even as you stayed so close to us, floating in your metal shells on Sea. And so we were forced to wait until your offspring’s offspring went to us.”

“Hannah,” I whispered. The shark didn’t react. I don’t think she knew the name.

“But we see you, now, Zachary Bergen, US Navy.”

“You had to come here to see him,” I muttered. “Here to land.”

“Unsea,” she said. She sounded disgusted. “We had to follow you to Unsea. We are not sure why we were blind to you when you were near us. But our Darkwaters intend to find out.”

I didn’t know what a “Darkwater” was. I felt like my pain meds were kicking in, but I didn’t remember having taken any.

“I’ll go,” said Grandpa. His voice sounded like it was getting distant. “I’ll face judgment.” He took my hand and squeezed it. “To sin, you have to *know* sin.”

“Now you know,” said the shark.

“Yes,” said my grandfather. He didn’t even look scared anymore. “And now we see each other.”

The shark opened the door for him. They walked out together, and then closed the door.

Threads of Steel and Glass

By Andrew Peregrine

When I dream, Grandmother Spider comes to me and tells me faerie stories. I find myself sitting at her feet listening to the click-click-clack of her knitting needles as she whispers to me of wolves, and princesses, and deep dark forests. Occasionally I am foolish enough to interrupt and her aged face growls a little to remind me of my manners. But she always reaches out and strokes my hair to show she loves me, though the click-click-clack never misses a beat.

She tells me many tales, but my favorite is one about a princess who had eight eyes. They were a gift from her mother, but something about them frightened her. So she decided to open them one at a time. When she opened the first eye, she wept because she had come out of the darkness and suddenly knew the light. When the princess opened her second eye, she wept once more, glad that with two eyes she was just like everyone else.

Comforting though my Grandmother is, we cannot sleep forever. However, I do like to take my time waking up, let the world come into focus slowly so I might notice each detail. While the city around me is vast, it takes little time for my immediate surroundings to come into focus. Like every flat in central London, it is not much bigger than a shoebox. While I have plenty of bookshelves, they are all overfull, and the clothes in my wardrobe are sandwiched between boxes of books. More volumes, non-fiction for the most part, pile up around the walls.

As I've grown older, my emotions have become more distant. I wonder if this is why I surround myself with books. While my consumption of fiction has dwindled, I hoard those that have touched my life in the past;

each novel a memory of what I once felt as I read it. It is strange to me that I still have this emotional connection to such objects when *Flowers for Algernon* itself no longer makes me cry.

Upon rising, I note that I have more than an hour before I have to meet Bethany for coffee, so I go up to the roof of my building. I close my eyes, and reach out into my city. Spirits are everywhere, even in the concrete and ancient brick of this place. I can feel them, dashing to and fro, a great web that I sit in the center of. I can feel it all from here, each strand of steel and glass, and the vibrations of prey entering my web as well. You can feel the subtle changes in power too, if you pay attention. There are dark and strange things walking the streets here under layers of masks. It feels like they are coming out to play soon.

When the princess opened her third eye, she wept once more because she realized she wasn't like everyone else.

Bethany is simple to find, dressed in black Chanel, pearls, and a wide brimmed hat. Her outfit, on anyone else, would seem overdressed for a coffee shop, but she doesn't look out of place. She always appears as if she is on her way somewhere more important, but has managed to fit you into her schedule out of the goodness of her heart. Having coffee with her is like having coffee with Holly Golightly, although I suspect Audrey Hepburn was less of a bitch.

"Darling Jane," Bethany says, brushing my cheek with a false kiss, "It's been too long." We both know it hasn't been nearly long enough, but there is no reason for us not to be polite. Grandmother finds her children fighting distasteful, after all.

Bethany looks me up and down, taking in my plain skirt, turtleneck jumper, raincoat, and cheap jewelry. "You always look so..." She gropes for a compliment. "...professional."

"What brings you to my city, sister? Just shopping again?" I could do without this little permission dance every time one of us visits the other. But, with Bethany, it's important to underline that this city is mine. It's not my fault that London is so much more interesting than Birmingham.

"Not entirely, dear Jane. I also have news. My sources tell me an Elder is coming here for some sort of clan meeting. I believe he arrives tonight. One suspects the vampires might be up to something."

It must be Winters, Richard has spoken about him before, and Bethany is right, the vampires are always up to something.

When the princess opened her fourth eye she wept in wonder, for suddenly she saw twice as much as anyone else.

Richard takes me to dinner that evening, as he often does. We've been seeing each other for about six months. He has never told me exactly what he does for a living but I have my suspicions. Whatever it is, he can always afford the most expensive places, restaurants I could never afford on a librarian's pay. Neither of us eats much though. He never has much appetite and I only need blood for sustenance. While I can still eat "normal" food, it no longer holds the appeal for me that I can distantly remember it once having. The transition was difficult at first, but it is far more convenient and practical once you are used to it.

In lieu of food, we have become wine connoisseurs. In fact, what food we do order is often only there to compliment the wine. Richard enjoys showing off, ordering different types and vintages, and I indulge him so I don't have to do much talking. However, every now and again he will suggest a vintage that is just vile. He'll call forth some obscure Pinot Noir or Shiraz gleaming like liquid ruby in the glass, and offer it up, excitement clear in his eyes. The color will seduce, the bouquet entrance — but one sip will turn my stomach violently. It was embarrassing at first, dashing for the loo, but I've got a little more used to it now and can usually at least keep the first sip down, no matter how awful. After that, a feigned sip or two, a little sleight of hand, and he never need know that his newly discovered vintage has found a home in a nearby potted plant.

Afterwards, we go back to his place. To say Richard's apartment is larger than mine is an understatement; you could fit my whole flat in his bedroom alone. I could never live here though — it's a soulless place. If it wasn't part of such an old building, it would be just another expensive city flat. It does at least look out over the river, and being on the eighth floor there is a good view of the city. After we've spent a satisfactory time in the bedroom, I like to look out at the view, to watch over my city. Richard knows me well enough to leave me alone for a while after we've been together like that. I need some space to feel myself again after being so close.

After he's let me have myself for a while, Richard slides up behind me and hands me a glass of wine. I taste it carefully, only a drop passing my lips, but it is one of my old favorites, a deep Nebbiolo. He puts his arms around my waist and nuzzles my neck a little.

"I can't talk you into staying over?" he asks, knowing the answer. I turn so I can look at him, but don't break the embrace.

"I've got to get home," I remind him, although I don't offer a reason. I just need to be back in my space, and Richard knows me well enough not to suggest he stays at my place.

I refuse Richard's offer of a cab as I enjoy walking home, especially at night. I like to listen to the rhythm of the place as I walk. Unfortunately, I must have overstretched my senses this time, because I don't notice the werewolf until he's standing in front of me. Even in human form, he still stands out a mile. He's wearing black jeans and a matching long leather coat, black boots, and no shirt. I don't know the tribes that well, but he doesn't look like a tramp or a suit so I'm guessing not Glass Walker or Bone Gnawer, which is a shame since they are usually happy to negotiate. The overuse of black in his wardrobe and angry superior growl makes me bet on Shadow Lord. Regardless, when he takes an aggressive step towards me, he proves he must be new in town.

"Wyrmlover," he snarls. I barely have time to think how lucky I am to get one of the conversational ones before he slams me into a wall. The blow knocks the wind out of me completely. Something inside me cracks as I hit the wall, and my raincoat tears as I slide down it. I'm just catching my breath when he grabs my collar in his huge hands and lifts me off my feet. He's half shifted into his wolfman form, making his face a mass of fur, fangs, and rage. Muscles bulge beneath his coat, almost tearing the leather, and he's grown at least a foot taller.

"What do you think you are doing?" I ask, when I can catch my breath. He obviously wants to frighten me, so he doesn't really know who he's dealing with.

"This is your first and only warning, spider-whore. Your relationship with a vampire is beneath even a lesser breed like you. You shame us all. End it, or we will end you."

I'm not sure if I'm more annoyed that they've been following me, or that they would dare presume to know about my personal life. He takes my silence for acceptance and promptly dumps me in a puddle. I recover my glasses, and note the muddy stains on my skirt and coat. Something akin to anger begins to brew inside me. Considering the matter at an end, the Shadow Lord turns and walks away. That's his next mistake.

Werewolves are basically animals, and if you don't put them in their place, they will take it as license to interfere whenever they feel like it. This one in particular seems to need a lesson in manners. I draw on the blood I drank earlier today and feel my wounds shift and close, strength rippling into my muscles. I let the spider come out to play, my form shifting a little as my eyes widen and my mouth fills with fangs. In one leap, I jump onto his back, hitting him like a freight train, although that's only enough to take his balance. I wrap my mouth around his neck and tear into his throat, venom flooding into his system from my bite. As he begins to topple, I stab

my shoe heel through the back on his knee, and he screams and goes down. My pumps have silver heels, just for this sort of occasion. I don't usually go for designer labels, but I'm happy to pay extra for quality when it counts.

The poison in my bite paralyzes him, and I know that every muscle in his body feels like it's on fire. His powerful heart only circulates the poison quicker and the silver skewering his leg inhibits his ability to heal. I keep my weight on him to pin him down, and whisper in his ear.

"That was rude," I remind him. "My affairs are my own. I appreciate the advice, but if you ever try that again, I will end you."

I don't wait for an answer. All I'd get is bravado and he's welcome to the last word, now that I've made my point. But I don't want to risk him trying something once I let him up, so I let the spider take me. My body falls apart and I dissolve into a mass of scurrying arachnids. My mind is set adrift like wind on the swarm and we scatter. I sense him retching and shouting as he tries feebly to swat at the horde.

Richard isn't expecting to see me again so soon, and he takes a step back as he opens the door. I look a state, I imagine. I'm holding either side of the doorframe and almost snarling. My raincoat is torn and stained, my skirt twisted and my tights a mess. My hair is an unruly disaster and even my glasses are a little skewed.

"Are you a vampire?" I ask, too clearly to be as insane as I surely look.

"Am I a what?"

"A bloodsucker, a kindred, one of the damned, a child of the night, Lost Boy, stake dodger, cursed immortal, shadow walker, Nosferatu, walking dead, revenant, sparkly Edward Cullen knock-off! Do I have to underline the fact I am not in the mood for bullshit?"

"I am," he says with a sigh, realizing any excuse is pointless, "but I don't sparkle."

"A vampire boyfriend," I groan, "What a fucking cliché."

"Do you want to come in?"

"Only if you have alcohol."

He does, so I do.

He makes a few phone calls and when I come out of the shower, there are three very expensive designer dresses on the bed for me to choose from. None of them is quite my style but they are all beautiful. I pick the plainest. After I dress, Richard is waiting for me on the sofa with a glass of wine.

"Who told you?"

I shrugged. "A werewolf who should have known better."

"Do many of them know?"

"I'm not exactly in their social circle, but a few at least."

Richard is silent for a while after that, as if he is recalculating a plan. We sit there taking it all in. I bring the glass to my lips. The bouquet is apricot and oak, with an underlying metallic tang that I feel on my tongue before a drop touches my lips. I force myself to try to drink, but it's another of Richard's pet vintages, and too foul to drink. While Richard looks out the window, lost in his own thoughts, I tip my glass into the silk hosta beside the sofa.

"You're more than just a librarian then?" he says.

"Asked the vampire."

"Seriously, what are you?"

"In need of another drink."

"Fine, be mysterious," he says opening another more agreeable bottle. "It's a librarian I need anyway."

"Excuse me?"

"Look, this isn't how I wanted to bring it up, but I need your help with something."

"Ah..."

"I know, I'm sorry, it's just that... it's important."

"Go on," I say, cautiously.

"There is a book, an old journal kept by a rival clan. It is the clan's founder began it centuries ago. They only bring it out for special occasions, and one of those occasions has brought its keeper here to London. I can't get near it. They have wards and magical protections in place to stop other vampires getting close."

"I'm sorry, what? Magical vampires?"

"Not true mages, but they have a form of blood magic. I've never understood it myself but it's powerful. One of their elders is arriving tonight for a big clan meeting. You remember I mentioned a man called 'Winters'?"

I nod.

"He's the one bringing the book."

"This is why you need a librarian?"

"The book contains most of the secrets of their clan; it only comes out of the vault it's stored in for this sort of occasion. Its ancient, but my sources tell me they keep it with several forgeries. I need an expert who can recognize the right one."

I tell Richard I think I can help him.

Having opened half of her eyes, the princess decided to go out and see something of the world. But even though she was of royal blood, she was shunned everywhere she went. The peasants looked at her in fear, as if she was a creature of nightmare. The wolves of the forest told her she was unnatural, and not worthy to be a part of their games. Alone and outcast she wept once more, not out of sadness but out of anger. How dare they spurn her, a princess, just for being different! So she opened her fifth eye, because if she was to be different she decided she should be as different as possible.

It is no small surprise to me that these sorcerer vampires own the only building in London that looks like Barad-Dûr, the Shard. They have an office on the 25th floor, but Winters is in a penthouse on the 62nd. I've arrived with a pass for the function on the 58th, courtesy of Richard's contacts. I'm dressed a little better than usual as I approach the lobby. The suit Richard bought for me probably cost more than my best jewelry — even Bethany would be impressed. The only problem is that sunrise is still a few hours away, and night is never the best time to be stealing from a vampire. Luckily, the Tremere love a good ceremony, so they are at their clan clubhouse preparing for their meeting tomorrow night. Richard has also orchestrated a distraction to put them on high alert, but in the wrong place. If I came here during the day, Winters would be sleeping here and security would be even tighter.

Waving my pass is enough to get me past the entrance security, and my suit gets me across the lobby unchallenged. Unfortunately, a large and well-dressed man stops me as I approach the lifts. I present my pass to him but he gestures to another lift, one that presumably only goes as far as the 58th floor. It seems the vampires aren't as stupid as I'd hoped. However, I have more than a suit to act as a disguise. Meeting the guard's gaze, I shift a little and let my fangs slide into place. I hiss at him and he steps aside with an almost Pavlovian response. They train their people a little too well.

I take a deep breath before the lift opens onto the 62nd floor, but there is no one there. As I walk down the corridor towards the apartment door, however, the air seems to get thicker and thicker. I'm breathing heavily by the time I reach the door, and my eyes are watering, but I make it. This must be their magic, a ward against vampires, werewolves even, but not spiders. Even so, I'm gasping for breath. The door is solid, but not airtight. Muttering a prayer to Grandmother, I shift to my swarm form, flowing like oil under the door and into the apartment. Another warding tingles under my thousands of feet as I cross the threshold. Were I anything else I suspect it may have vaporized me.

I coalesce in the spacious living room to get my bearings. My Crawlerling form is good for getting into places but it is hard to get much of a sense of your surroundings with so many eyes all looking in different

directions. Unfortunately, in this case, none of them was looking in the *right* one. When I have hauled myself together, I notice far too late that there is a gun pointed at my head.

“Don’t move,” the gun’s owner orders from my left. I slowly turn my head and meet the gaze of a professional. He is dressed in a neat suit, and holds the gun precisely, but not close enough that I can grab it. He doesn’t appear to be a vampire, but they have ways to improve both the physicality and loyalty of their servants, so I’d be foolish to allow myself to underestimate him. Without taking his eyes off me, he reaches for a radio clipped onto his belt. “Adam, get up here, I have an intruder.” The fact he must have seen me form from a pile of spiders doesn’t seem to faze him in the least. I’m definitely in trouble. I very slowly put my hands on my head and kneel down as his pistol suggests. I’m good, if not deadly, when I have the drop on someone. But in a stand up fight against an armed opponent? A frontal assault isn’t my best bet.

The princess wandered alone in the forest for what seemed an age. She did not want to return to the castle where her family might mock her as the wolves had done. Neither did she want to find another village where she might be met with scorn and horror. But, as she curled up on a mossy bank, she heard a sorrowful whisper in her ear.

“Dear sister, why will you not play with us?” it asked.

“Play with you? Who are you?”

“You need only look for us and you will see.”

So the princess opened her sixth eye, and with it saw a world she’d been blind to before. She gazed in wonder at this new layer painted across everything she thought she knew. In front of her danced an array of spirits from the trees and flowers around her, all wearing the most bizarre shapes and forms. They reached out and welcomed her and they played together until the sun set. All the time the princess wept for joy from each of her six open eyes, because she understood she would never be truly alone ever again.

Unlike vampires, we shapeshifters are never truly alone. Most are creatures of the wilderness and the countryside, so the spirits they call upon aren’t found in town. But my sisters and I are daughters of the Weaver, and our allies built the cities. So, as I kneel on the carpet, I open my mind to the realm beyond mortal sight, and feel the pattern close around me. The chittering of a million web-workers, spirits still weaving the reality of the very building itself, echo around me. “Sisters,” I whisper to them, “I need you.”

My captor is about to tell me to be quiet when the walls start moving.

He can't see the spirit world, can't visually perceive the horde of ethereal spiders besetting him from beyond the Web. But that doesn't mean he can't feel it. A primal part of him senses the attack, and realizes something is terribly wrong. Then he sees the walls and floor ripple as my sister weavers start tearing his spirit apart. It's the distraction I've been waiting for. I shift into my war form. The gunman's eyes widen in horror as legs sprout from my side and my face vanishes under huge mandibles and eight lidless eyes. Powerful claws grab and bring him to me, and I soundlessly tear him apart.

I'm a quick and tidy eater, so when his friend, Adam, comes into the room from the downstairs level, there is nothing to see. He quickly draws his gun and moves into the room with the silent grace of a true professional. He checks the corners and moves across to the hall where he steals a glance down the corridor. It's only then, after finding everything else empty, that he thinks to look up. And that is when I descend on him before he has a chance to scream. I do love a room with a high ceiling.

I shift back into human form and make my way down the corridor until I find what must be the right door. It's solid steel, probably inches thick with an airtight seal. A code and combination lock both nestle next to a metal wheel large enough to steer a ship. I'm not good at safe cracking, but I have friends. I reach out to the sister-weavers once more and mutter the charm that asks them to help me open it. The door shifts as I watch, its pattern reweaving into a new configuration, and a quiet click tells me it is time to turn the wheel and open the door.

Inside I find a small library, and it is beautiful. All the books here are old, first editions of works history has forgotten. The one I'm looking for appears to sit open on a lectern in the center of the room. The leather of its cover has been recently replaced, and it is bound in solid silver. But as I turn a page, the parchment doesn't feel right beneath my fingertips. I look closer, and while the Latin on each page is exquisite, the writing style is too modern. The real one is nearby though. I just know it.

I run my hand along the shelves, glancing at the titles and occasionally gasping as I brush past one I know. There are works here I thought lost to the world, had mourned like late friends, even though most people would have never heard of them.

When I reach the end of the second shelf, I feel the air thicken again. The fools have been too careful, and warded the book with the same protections, but this time far more powerful ones. I push towards the heart of the foul air and I feel the book before I see it. I'm breathing heavily and

the air burns my lungs as I get close. When I reach out I feel the skin of my hand crisp. For some reason an image of Richard slips into my mind, along with the metallic taste from the wine. I shake my head to clear it and push forward, crying out a little as my hand touches the book. As I take it from the shelf, I feel its protections dissipate, but the pain in my hand doesn't. I can still move my fingers, and the skin is burned rather than blackened, but it will take more than blood to heal. There will be time for that later, for now I have the book; its age is tangible. I only need to smell the years on its pages to know I have found what I was looking for.

I slip out of the vault, taking the book and its shallow copy with me in a suitcase. Leaving the building is simple. I stroll quickly through the lobby trailing the case behind me. My voice is raised into my silent mobile phone insisting they hold the departure gate open as my flight is extremely important. No one chooses to get in my way.

The day was finally coming to an end for the princess, so she sat down to watch the sunset. She understood that while there were those who would find her strange there were also those who would love her for what she was. She opened her seventh eye and let the fading sunlight flood over her. She let go of her fears and concerns and accepted who she was. Her tears fell once more as she washed away her old self and became what she was meant to be.

I arrive at Richard's place again a little before sunrise. When he opens the door, I'm standing there proudly with the book in my hand. He takes it from me and opens the silver clasp to flick through it. His grin widens as he turns each page. He doesn't even mention the scars on my hand.

"By Caine," he says. "This is everything. We can take their clan apart."

He moves to the sofa where I join him, but he remains buried in the book. His Latin must be better than I expected.

"Well, I'm glad that's out of the way." I say.

Richard finally turns to me, but his eyes have grown cold. "Oh no, we've only just begun."

"What do you mean?"

"We are going to do so much together, you and I," he whispers as he strokes my hair. "You're mine now. Each of those wines you didn't like had my blood in them. When you had such a reaction to it the first time I thought this wouldn't work, but I recalculated the dosage and you seem to have got used to it. I knew it had worked when you agreed to get the book back for me. No one breaks into a secure Tremere stronghold just to help out their boyfriend."

The blood bond. One more trick in the vampire's web. To drink from them three times, even just a sip, turns your heart to them with a love more powerful than anyone can ever know. It is a bond that turns queens into slaves. I pull away but he smiles at me.

"Show me what you really are now, Jane. I want to know what else you are capable of."

I stand and take off my jacket and my glasses. I untie my hair and let it fall. "I am Ananasi," I murmur, eyes lowered, as if baring my soul.

Then I let the blood surge through me again and I tear into his neck like lightning. The poison and surprise make him too slow to stop me. Shifting my arm from human to arachnid, I use it like a spear and drive it through his heart, pinning him to the sofa.

"But how?" he splutters through the blood running out of his mouth.

"When I heard you were looking for a librarian I simply let you find me. I must say, you took your time about it."

His heart almost destroyed and his blood pooling on the floor, he seems weakened enough to release. I let my arm become human again and take one of his raincoats to hide the blood on my clothes. He seems puzzled when I arrange the book neatly on the table, rubbing some of the blood away from the silver binding with a cloth. His clan will blame the Tremere for this. And they, in turn, will blame him for the theft of their secrets.

Richard realizes what I'm doing as he lies there impotently. "But you'll start a war; the clans will slaughter each other."

"Yes, but you vampires conduct your wars so quietly, it will hardly impact the rest of my city. Besides, I've been looking for a way to cull a few of you from my territory for quite some time. I'll be looking after the real book from now on. I think it best kept by a librarian. You've been very useful in getting hold of it and the secrets it keeps are priceless. Thank you."

"Please," he begs, "please don't kill me."

"But, why not, my dear?" I ask leaning in close enough to brush my lips across his cold, dead forehead. "You aren't any use to me any more."

"But, but, you're mine!" he tries to shout. "The blood bond!"

"The blood bond is based on love," I whisper to him, "and there is none of that left in the spider."

When the princess opened her eighth eye, she did not weep, for she had cried all her tears away. She did not lament their passing, for she needed them no longer. She was whole, and herself, and saw the world through eight beautiful eyes. She understood her gift and found joy as winter settled over her heart.



Walking a Tightrope

By Aaron Rosenberg

“Absolutely not — I won’t allow it!”

Midori Saputo banged her fist upon her desk. Despite her petite frame, the polished wood surface shuddered beneath the blow, a spider web of cracks racing outward from the point of impact. She glared across the marred furniture at the equally slight woman sitting there, black eyes narrowing. “Do you hear me?”

“It would be difficult not to,” her guest replied, stretching as she ran an idle hand through her silky red mane. “You are speaking rather loudly.” Kumiko Hadoki smiled to take the sting out of her comment, and lounged back in her chair as if they were best friends having a casual conversation, instead of ruler and subject in the midst of a formal, if private, audience.

Of course, there were elements of truth in both of those scenarios.

“Kumi,” Midori groaned, rubbing a hand across her face. “Don’t do this to me! You know I can’t sanction something like that!”

“Who’s asking you to? I was simply relaying a news item I thought you might find interesting.”

Midori glared again. “Don’t lie to me,” she demanded, banging on the desk again, though with less force this time. “You know I can see right through you.”

“I certainly hope not,” Kumi shot back. “That would mean I’d wasted all that time picking out my outfit.” She smoothed a hand down her raw silk blazer.

As she’d hoped, her little joke made her friend laugh despite herself.

"I didn't come here to beg permission for anything," Kumi continued, before the laughter had fully ended. "I only wanted to tell you that I might be gone for a few days, and why."

"You'll get yourself killed," Midori warned. "And there won't be a thing I can do to help you."

"I know." Kumi stood, straightening her skirt before looking up. "But thank you for wanting to."

"Of course." Her best friend rose as well, visibly biting back a sigh as she came around the desk to hug Kumi. "Be careful," she urged. "And call me as soon as you're back."

"I will," Kumi promised, returning the embrace for a second before pulling away. She grinned. "Don't worry, it'll all be fine."

Midori's frown didn't fade as she watched her friend exit. Then again, as the Regent there was always something to worry about.

And, more often than not, her best friend was right in the thick of it.

• • •

"How did it go?" Tatsin asked, sidling up alongside as Kumi left the building. His spiky-short hair was just long and fine enough to flutter as he matched his pace to hers. Neither of them cast a single footfall.

"No worse than expected," Kumi replied, without bothering to glance at the man beside her. "But I had to tell her."

"If you say so." Tatsin didn't sound too convinced. Then again, Kumi wasn't sure she'd convinced herself completely, either. It had made sense to her originally; even if she couldn't get Midori's help or blessing, her friend was the Regent of their Court and so should be approached before anyone from the Court took any severe action. She was at least nominally a member of the Court, though that was largely because of her friendship with Midori.

And "severe" was exactly what she was contemplating right now.

"Where to?" Tatsin inquired, head tilted slightly to one side as he studied her profile. She shifted to face him, and he grinned. He was a handsome devil, of course, and knew it. But that wasn't going to avail him anything with her. Even so, she smiled a little, amused as always by his clownish antics — and reassured because she knew the iron that backed his playful façade.

No matter what happened, he had her back.

"Where to?" she parroted to him. Then she tapped him on the nose. "Why, to Hell, my dear companion. Straight to the everlasting fires of Hell."

It took them under an hour to get there.

"It's certainly an . . . impressive facility," Kumi told her host as he held the door for her, leading her back from the front reception area. Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror, she stifled a laugh. She'd colored her hair, turning the giveaway red into an inky black, and with her small frame, delicate features, and new dark waterfall of hair she looked almost exactly like Midori! That was something she hadn't expected, and it amused her greatly — as it would her friend, once she told her.

The surprise was good in another way, too. Kumi's enjoyment of the private joke helped her keep her face from showing the revulsion it might have otherwise.

The Otanaga Power Plant was a massive complex, a big, blocky, ugly stain upon the landscape, all jutting tubes and towers and warehouses, with gantries and ladders running every which way. It looked as if a cubist spider had started trying to spin a strange geometric web but had been forced to give up and try again time and again. Even though it was only early afternoon, the power plant was lit up against the mild autumn sky, a cloud of noxious yellow-green pluming incandescently about it. The smells were almost overpowering, burning metal and foul gas and other stench so strong Kumi had to clench her jaw to keep from retching. It was like the Centipede had set foot into the world in person, tainting it by his mere touch.

And then there were the people.

Mr. Fumira, her guide, was clearly human. His aura was filmed with taint from his job here but not otherwise affected. Some of the others she'd seen so far were the same. But there were a few, including the security guards who prowled the place, who were definitely something more. The guard who had stopped her at the front gate to check her credentials, for example, had been a hulking brute. His face was too long and narrow, his eyes too small and beady, his hair too bristly and sparse, his skin too leathery and gray. Bakemono, without a doubt, but the fact that he wore it so openly was unsettling. As was the way he'd grinned at her, showing all of his needle-like yellowed teeth. Could he have known that she was hengeyokai? Possibly, though unlikely. Whether he knew or not, it was obvious he'd noticed her discomfort at his presence, and that had pleased him. Kumi had dealt with many bakemono over the years, but normally they were shifty, cowardly creatures who skulked about in the shadows. This one was stomping about in broad daylight, and he was not alone.

That only confirmed her worst fears about this place, and cemented her determination to do something about it.

"Thank you," Mr. Fumira replied, beaming at her vague compliment as he showed her down a narrow hallway to a cramped office. "Please, have a

seat.” He gestured toward the two stiff-looking wooden chairs squeezed in before the battered desk. He slid behind the desk to sink into a cheap office chair that barely had room to turn toward the computer taking up the desk’s far side. “We’re always happy to have the media visit us.”

That was the story Kumi had used to gain entry. She was here posing as a reporter for a major news blog, *Japan Today*. Except that it wasn’t a pose — she really did work for the blog. Actually, she had created it a few years back, knowing it might come in handy someday. Nowadays she left most of the day-to-day operations to her staff, but she still called upon her credentials when she needed to gain access somewhere.

Somewhere like here.

“Well, we’re all very interested to know more about your organization and your facilities,” Kumi admitted, giving him her best smile. “You’ve only been online for a month now, and already you’ve produced enough power to keep Tokyo running for a full season. That’s very impressive.” They’d also polluted the entire region to such a degree it would take a year or more to cleanse it again, both in this world and the Mirror Lands beyond. That was equally staggering, and not in a good way.

“Just you wait,” her host told her, leaning forward and rubbing his hands together. “We’re only getting started! We have to ramp up our production slowly, to make sure everything’s within safety parameters, but once we’re up to full power we’ll be able to produce enough energy to fuel the entire nation!”

Which was, of course, exactly what Kumi was afraid of.

Unfortunately, it was also something the regular world was counting on. Which was why the Beast Courts had decided to turn a blind eye to this atrocity. They didn’t want to upset their human counterparts, even though this plant was polluting the landscape and poisoning everyone and everything around it. That was why Midori had warned her to leave it alone.

But Kumi couldn’t. “I command you to destroy that which harms Gaia” was the very first of the Laws of Heaven. She could no more ignore that than she could her own nature.

She had to tread carefully, however. Both because she and Tatsin could expect no support and because this might well be one of the most dangerous places she had ever visited.

“So,” she said, smiling brightly. “Any chance of a full tour?”

• • •

“. . . and this is the drywell, where we keep the reactor,” Mr. Fumira explained some twenty minutes later, stopping midway across the gantry and gesturing down. Kumi stepped over to the railing and gazed at the sight below.

"It's not exactly what I expected," she admitted. She had pictured an enclosed chamber like a bathysphere, with fissionable material glowing inside and rods projecting outward like a porcupine. Instead the entire main chamber here was one large open room, its floor dotted by alternating circular grates and strange cylindrical projections that jutted up like small, squat black fire hydrants. At the room's far end were a row of devices Kumi hesitated to call vehicles though they had metal wheels fitted into long tracks grooved into the floor and ladders leading up to small control panels up on top. Jumpsuited workmen scurried here and there, checking the tops of the cylinders and also gauges and monitors against one wall.

"The actual reactor is below ground," her host told her, "so all you're seeing here are the vents and the tops of the control rods. It's safer that way, for us and for the reactor itself — the dirt and rock keeps it better insulated and protected, and helps keep the water around it cooled so there's less risk of a meltdown."

It also lets radiation leak out into the soil if the chambers haven't been coated in thick enough concrete, Kumi thought but didn't say out loud.

"Is there much risk?" she asked instead, assuming an innocent expression.

Her guide ate it up. "Oh, no," he assured her. "We're very safe here. This entire tour you'll only pick up maybe ten millirem of gamma rays. That's about the same as a standard chest x-ray."

Kumi tried not to shudder at the thought of that, either.

"And we have many safety features in place to prevent anything from going wrong," he continued, not noticing her reaction.

"What happens if the fuel rods overheat?" Kumi asked next. She'd done her homework — she knew the fuel rods were what contained the uranium that ran the whole process. The control rods were there to keep the reaction at safe temperatures and to shut the reactor down if necessary. "What if the control rods don't deploy correctly?"

Mr. Fumira leaned in a little and winked at her. Kumi did her best simpering schoolgirl impression in response.

"Not to worry," he told her conspiratorially. "We've prepared against that. If the control rods are rendered inoperative, we have a failsafe in place that will fill the entire reaction chamber with boron. It'll render the uranium inert and bind any and all radiation in there, creating a single dense block of material. Nothing in, nothing out." He smiled, reminding her of a used car salesman — which, in a way, is what he was. "So you see, even if it cost us the entire plant, we would make sure no harm came to anyone else."

Except for the harm you're already causing, Kumi couldn't help adding in her head as she followed him the rest of the way across the gantry and to

the control room. Even as she walked, however, a plan was starting to form. It would be risky, of course, but far better than leaving this monstrosity to continue belching its poisons out into the world.

• • •

The tour continued, including a stop at the Used Fuel Well. There had been a deep natural fissure here when they'd first started construction, Mr. Fumira explained proudly, as if he had somehow created that crevice himself. They had simply widened the gap and then coated it in concrete to form the perfect receptacle for their spent fuel rods. After a rod had outlived its usefulness, it went into the Well, which was filled with water to keep the rods cool and safe.

"How long do they stay there?" Kumi asked, trying not to shiver as she peered over the railing at the deep, dark hole below and imagined the hundreds of deadly tubes lying in wait there.

"At least six months," he answered, "and then we'll move them to our Dry Well, which is similar but has even thicker concrete and no water. There they'll remain indefinitely."

"And what about the water?" she inquired next, following him farther down the hall. "What happens to that, especially the water that's used in the reactor itself?"

"Oh, we filter it very carefully afterward," Mr. Fumira assured her, waving a hand as if this were assumed. "We remove all radiation and any particles in general, before returning it to the river. It's purer when we're done with it than it was when we started!" He gestured at a certificate on the wall. "As you see, we've been fully inspected and certified — passed every test with flying colors!"

But how much of that was due to bribes and threats, Kumi wondered, instead of actual procedures and safeguards? That was what had attracted her attention to this plant in the first place; she'd seen a news report that claimed the plant had cut corners and then bribed officials to look the other way.

Not surprisingly, none of the people who had made those claims were now available for comment. The few she'd managed to reach had been clearly terrified. And for good reason — the others had all died in the past few weeks, in a spate of "accidents" and "unfortunate incidents."

Someone at the power plant was covering their tracks.

Too bad for them that Kumi had a very good nose. She wasn't going to be put off so easily.

• • •

"And our final stop," Mr. Fumira announced a short while later. They had left the reactor areas, thankfully, and were now back in the offices near the front of the plant. But the hallway they now traversed was far wider and grander than the one to Mr. Fumira's cramped little space, with a fine carpet over polished wooden planks, and lovely, deep-grained paneling. It resembled an elegant club more than an office, and the door he now reached for only heightened that sensation. Its thick panels were embossed with images of nature, and its heavy brass handle carved to resemble a cluster of grapes, complete with burnished leaves. The door opened soundlessly to reveal a handsome, expansive office beyond, with more paneling and polished wood. An expensive rug was flanked by a deep leather couch and matching armchairs to one side, a full sidebar to another. A massive carved desk squatted directly in the center, below the wide picture windows.

All of which perfectly accentuated the tall, broad-shouldered man standing in the room's center, waiting for them.

"Our director, Mr. Sumimoto," Mr. Fumira introduced the man, giving his superior a deep bow and receiving a cursory nod in response. "Sir, this is Kira Hanote, the reporter from *Japan Today*."

"A pleasure, Ms. Hanote." The director stepped forward and offered her his hand, a small, smug smile upon his wide lips. His expensive gray suit fit him perfectly, showing off his powerful build but helping to mask the brutishness Kumi saw in his deep-set eyes.

"Lovely to meet you, Mr. Sumimoto," she replied, letting him dwarf her own hand in his grip. She tried not to shudder as he turned her hand palm down and raised the back to brush her knuckles with his lips. There was something utterly repugnant about this man, a wave of not only power but also of casual cruelty — and something more — emanating from him. It left her almost feeling faint, but she steeled herself and smiled back at him.

"I trust Mr. Fumira has been taking good care of you?" the director asked. He straightened, but did not release his hold on her hand as he peered down at her. His eyes glowed in the shadows of his heavy brow.

"Absolutely," she answered. "You can expect a comprehensive account of my trip here, thanks to him." Which was true — she'd write it up tonight or tomorrow. "I forbid you to break your word" was another Law.

"Excellent. Perhaps that will help put people more at ease with our continued presence." It seemed to Kumi that he was speaking about something more than just the power plant, then. "I know many are worried, but we are only here to further our great nation's progress." Yes, his smirk said he was definitely talking about other matters — and Kumi had a sinking feeling she

knew exactly what he meant. That moment with the eyes hadn't just been a bizarre trick of the light. He was bakemono!

"We all wish the best for our nation, and the world," she told him, gently but firmly pulling her hand free of his and raising her chin so she could meet his gaze more easily. "There are merely different paths to that objective."

"Of course."

She thought she detected puzzlement in his eyes then, and stifled a smile of her own. He had sent out feelers and she had responded, but so subtly he wasn't entirely sure she had. And he couldn't place her origin, which was exactly as she'd planned. That had been the main reason for shifting her coloring.

"Well, I need to be getting back," she continued brightly. "This piece won't write itself. Thank you again for your time, and for the highly informative tour." As she turned and led the way back toward the door, and the exit beyond, she glanced once over her shoulder, to where Mr. Sumimoto was still staring after her. "I'll see you again soon," she promised.

• • •

The small teahouse was on the outskirts of the city, not far from the plant itself, but far enough that Kumi had been able to ditch the man following her back. She wasn't sure if that was standard procedure for them, given all the bad press they'd gotten lately, or if she'd warranted special attention after her meeting with Sumimoto, but she'd been followed all the way from the factory. After, she'd returned her rented car, restored her normal appearance, and made her way here. She was confident that, even if someone who'd seen her on the tour today did stumble in to the teahouse, they wouldn't recognize her.

"So?" Tatsin asked after she'd slid into the booth. "How bad is it?"

"Bad," she admitted, taking the tea he poured for her from the steaming pot between them. "Bakemono all over the place — including the director. Tons of heavily armed guards. Barbed wire fence all around. Thick concrete walls. Security stations throughout." She grinned at him over the lip of her cup.

Tatsin sighed. "Then why are you smiling?"

"Because." She paused to take a sip, making her partner wait for her response. When she sensed he was just about to explode, she continued.

"I know how we can shut the whole thing down."

• • •

"This is never going to work," Tatsin muttered as they approached the van. "We should just do it my way."

"What, leap over the gates, dodge the guards, and break through the doors?" Kumi crooked an eyebrow at him. "*That* sounds more plausible to you?"

He shrugged.

Kumi did her best to ignore his pouting — she knew it was just because he didn't like the subterfuge. There were times she almost wondered if he was really Kitsune. But of course she knew he was. It's just that he was Eji, a warrior Kitsune, which made him more direct than most. That wasn't going to work this time, though.

"Trust me," she urged, batting her eyelashes at him. "Have I ever steered you wrong?"

He laughed, his bad mood forgotten, and they were both smiling as they slowed to a stop by the parked vehicle.

• • •

"Who're you?" The guy blocking the open rear door was short, stout, and balding, but Kumi thought his eyes were warm. That was promising.

"Subs," she answered, handing him the kami she'd crafted that afternoon. It had only one word on it — CLEARANCE — but she'd infused it with the Ju-Fu of the Silver Sigil. The fox-magic made the paper medallion appear as legitimate security badges to the human eye.

At least it was supposed to.

Kumi held her breath as the cleaning supervisor frowned down at the ornately folded paper, only exhaling after he grunted, then nodded for them to enter the cleaning company van.

"We're late because of you." He slammed the door shut and then climbed forward to the front passenger seat. "Coveralls're on the hooks — grab ones that fit."

"Got it," Kumi replied, and selected the smallest uniform available. Grinning at Tatsin, she pulled the dingy blue-gray jumpsuit on over her clothes. Everything was going according to plan.

• • •

As expected, they breezed past security. Nobody ever really looked at janitors and the entire clean-up crew was waved through together. They were even given badges, generic ones that had the janitorial company's name and logo without any individual information. Armed with those and a mop and bucket, they'd basically have freedom of the entire plant.

The foreman stationed Tatsin in the hall by Mr. Fumira's office and Kumi in the employee break room, warning each of them to get floors and walls spic and span before he returned to give them their next assignments. The minute he'd turned his back they'd fled, meeting up again just outside the Radioactive Control Area that included the reactor chamber, the wells — and the control room.

"No way they're letting janitors in there," Tatsin pointed out, indicating the scanners by the heavy doors. He peeked through the small inset window. "And I see a guard inside."

"Relax," Kumi assured him. "We'll just wait." She called upon the Silver Lady to bless her with a Moon Dance, and smiled as she and Tatsin both shimmered like the Moon herself before fading from view. Sure enough a few minutes later a plant employee approached the door. He wasn't wearing any sort of gear and had a coffee mug in one hand. Kumi pushed away from the wall and stepped up close to him without a sound. She couldn't hear or see Tatsin but she knew from long experience that he would be right beside her. The worker used his key card to open the door, and Kumi ducked through on his heels. She could only hope her partner had done the same.

It was clear the First Goddess was watching over them, because once inside the restricted area the employee turned and headed straight for the control room. There he had to swipe his key card again before wrestling the door open without spilling his coffee. Kumi was almost tempted to give him a hand, but restrained herself. She did bump the door with her hip as she entered however — it was closing a lot faster than the outer door, and she wanted to make sure Tatsin had enough time to squeeze through behind her.

The tour earlier hadn't gone in this room — it was too sensitive, Mr. Fumira had said apologetically — but they'd peeked in through the window, so Kumi already knew the general layout. Now she headed straight for the back wall, and the panel marked "Failsafe." Neither the coffee-drinking employee nor his partner noticed anything as Kumi flipped up the plastic case covering the one big red switch marked "Boron Cascade" and slammed her right palm against it.

Instantly sirens began to sound and lights began to flash. "What's that?" the partner yelled, lurching to his feet. "What's happening?"

"Oh, hells!" His coffee-drinking colleague leapt up as well, splashing coffee everywhere, but he barely seemed to notice as he caught sight of the panel and its button. His eyes went wide. "It's the boron cascade! It's activated!"

"We have to override it!" The partner spun back to his console, then suddenly tripped and slammed chin-first against it. There was a loud crack and he slid to the ground, unconscious.

“Jiri!” The coffee-drinker rushed to his friend’s side, then there was a muffled thud — he jerked upright before collapsing as well. Tatsin appeared above him, billy club in hand.

“They’ll be all right,” he confirmed after studying the two downed workers. “I couldn’t risk them undoing that.”

Kumi nodded. This mission was important enough that even killing these two innocent men wouldn’t have stopped them, but she was glad they didn’t have to. “We need to go,” she told Tatsin. “Before someone comes looking for us.”

Together they stepped back out into the hall, but before they could make it back out of the restricted area they heard a shout from down below. Peering over the railing, Kumi saw a large, powerful figure standing there amid the control rods.

“Shifter!” Mr. Sumimoto bellowed. “I know you’re here! Come out and face me!” He looked even bigger than he had that morning, his skin darker and mottled. His eyes glowed a sickly green, and a pair of vicious tusks jutted up past his upper lip, almost to his nose. Apparently he didn’t feel the need to disguise his appearance any longer.

Kumi let the Moon Dance fade, and leaned forward. “I told you I’d see you again,” she reminded the bakemono, who glowered up at her. “Pity about the plant.”

He started to snarl something in reply, but was cut off as a bolt of lightning flashed past Kumi and struck the creature full in the chest, slamming him backward. A second bolt followed, and a third. Mr. Sumimoto twitched once before falling still, his torso a smoking ruin, his eyes glazed and unseeing.

“I think that’s enough,” she told her partner, glancing over her shoulder at him. “He won’t be troubling us any further.”

“Good thing,” Tatsin replied. “I doubt I could conjure another one.”

Together they retraced their steps back to the general-use areas. The janitorial foreman was waiting for them near the employee break room.

“We need to leave, right now!” he shouted as soon as he spotted them. “There’s an emergency evacuation in place!” He turned to go, but spared a glance over his shoulder at the still-dirty break room. “And once we’re out of here, expect to be fired!”

“That’s fine,” Kumi replied, sailing past him. “Once we’re out of here, we quit.”

The guards were so harried they barely glanced at the departing van. Kumi, hunkered down in back, could just make out the power plant’s outline through

the rear windows as they drove away. The complex was no longer glowing, and the noxious cloud had already begun to thin. Soon, she thought to herself, reaching over to rest a hand on Tatsin's shoulder. Soon, First Goddess, you can begin the healing process anew.

• • •

"It's terrible what happened," Midori commented over brunch the next day. "The Otanaga Power Plant had a malfunction, did you hear? Their failsafe activated and flooded the reactor chamber with boron, transforming the entire thing into a big block of inert material."

Kumi shrugged and took a sip of tea. "I won't lie and say I'm sorry to hear that," she admitted. "That place was an eyesore, and an affront to the First Goddess. I'm glad to hear it's gone."

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about what happened, would you?" her friend asked, head cocked to one side as she studied Kumi closely.

"Would you really want to know if I did?" Kumi countered.

Midori sighed. "What am I to do with you?" she asked.

"Do with me? Nothing." Kumi selected a cookie from the tray between them and nibbled at it delicately. "Why should you? I know you'd agreed to look the other way due to the humans' wanting that plant, but now it's gone anyway and you had nothing to do with it. They'll find some other power source — wind or water, perhaps, or sunlight, all much healthier for everyone — *and* the Beast Courts can honestly say they weren't involved, *and* the bakemono lose their foothold here, *and* the First Goddess recovers from being poisoned." She smiled. "Everyone goes home happy. Well, everyone we care about, anyway."

Her friend laughed and shook her head. "You always walk the line, don't you?" she said, her tone half accusing and half admiring. "Always just skirting the edge between behaving and outright disobedience."

"Of course, dear," Kumi agreed placidly, taking another little bite of cookie. "We Kitsune are famous for that. It's the tails, don't you know — they help us balance out on the tightrope." She smiled, making Midori laugh again, and then turned the conversation to other topics as they enjoyed their tea and the prospect of a slightly cleaner, slightly safer world.

Secretkeeper

By Ree Soesbee

The magistrates sounded their trumpeting alarm throughout the night. Terrified rumors spread through the city. Surrounded by bloody battlefields, the armies engaged in fearful slaughter. Victory was certain for the Boeotians — until Alexander, and his courageous band, broke through the body of the enemy. “For the loyalty you bear the king and for the love you bear your shieldman, defend! Defend! We must defend — to the death!”

My beloved’s beard was dark against his suntanned skin, eyes as light as honey. Shoulder to shoulder we held the line, my blade and his shield, together. We shared a smile.

At Chaeronea, the men of Athens stood in twos... but died as one.

“Hank?”

I blink. The sheen of light across the broken glass museum case was mesmerizing, but with effort, I draw myself out of the internal drift. For a moment, I’d been lost in the *mnesis*, the memories of my ancestors, thoughts wandering long-past ages of the world. “Right here,” I say, willing my voice to seem more focused than my mind.

“C’mon, Hank. Talk to me. See anything we can use to catch this guy?”

I straighten, tucking in the shirttail of my still-new-feeling police uniform. I know that my partner’s question is as much a test as it is collaboration; I am new to the force. Lucas Dawnish stands a head taller than me, broad-shouldered with narrow hazel eyes and a long, thin nose, greying hair pulled into a ponytail. The man is an epitome of old-school police work.

Hell, it took Dawnish three years to figure out how to say ‘forensics,’ much less use them. The rest of the squad teases him about his speech impediment; everything the man says is accented by asshole.

I give the room my full attention. The floor beneath my feet is covered in glass. Bright sparks and slivers of glass reflect from the dark green carpet, crunching softly beneath our hard-soled shoes. The burglary had been thuggish and straightforward: upper window smashed, spreading glass across the northern half of the room. Clear footprints, wet and far apart on the carpet, as though the intruder had leapt from step to step.

The museum is small — a lifetime of keepsakes, not a massive public institution. Only a few rooms, each centered on one facet of the collection. History, literature. Archaeology. The intruder ignored most of the cases — all but one. The front of this display was broken in strange lines and fragments, the wood of the casing scored in parallel lines, as if a hatchet had been taken to the glass. No, not a hatchet. Claws. *Garou claws*.

The case had been looted, its contents strewn about. “I think the intrusion was a case of opportunity, not a planned robbery,” I say carefully. It’s a lie, but a plausible one. What had those damnable wolves wanted? Why were they here? The paper caption labelling the wreckage of the case gave me no clue. “Ten stones from a fallen wall. *Homo floresiensis*, Indonesia.”

“Remnants of a minor civilization during the Paleolithic age,” a helpful voice offers. “Unusual, in that these pieces may represent an initial attempt at patterning. Perhaps a first excursion into written language.” I look up to discover a lean young man watching me from the far side of the room. Pale green eyes beneath a shag of sandy hair. I look back and find myself wishing I could touch him. We share a smile.

“This stuff should be in a real museum,” Dawnish grunts. “What the hell use is a private collection, anyway?”

The young man gives my partner a level gaze. “Ms. Wakefield’s private collection is one of the best in the United States. Her security measures are strict. The collection is safer here than it would be in a museum. She’s very... particular.”

“I bet she is.” Dawnish grins without humor, teeth too big in the narrow corners of his mouth. His eyes tarnish the young man from head to toe with a withering glance.

The young man catches the innuendo, and flushes angrily. “I curate the collection. My relationship with Ms. Wakefield is purely business, I assure you.”

“Good-lookin’ lady, and you’re all business?” Dawnish’s eyebrows shoot up in a look of disgust. “Oh. One of *those*, are you?”

Sensing the friction, I step in between. "I'm Officer Machak, Raleigh PD. My partner, Officer Dawnish. We've been assigned to investigate the break-in." I try a smile. "You can call me Hank."

"Amos Roland," He shakes my hand firmly. Strong for a skinny guy. "I was the first person here after the alarms went off. I was coming in early to study our new acquisitions," He nods at the broken case. "Those stones just arrived from the archaeological team. We hadn't even written a press release, yet. The intruder was in the room when I arrived. I unlocked the front door, and..." His voice falters. "Look, I know how this is going to sound, but I swear, it was some kind of bear."

I hear Dawnish's low snickering, and try to remain sober-faced while hoping Roland hadn't heard.

"Anyway, I must have surprised the thing, because it freaked out and ran. I jumped out of the way, and it went straight through the door and out into the yard. That's when I saw the broken case."

"A *bear* broke into the collection?" Dawnish can't contain his skepticism. "What the shit kind of story is that? I don't see any blood on the glass, or fur, or claw marks in the rug. Are you on drugs? Do I need to take you down to the station and get a piss-test?"

Roland bristles. "That's entirely uncalled-for, officer!"

"Somebody making up a story like that is usually hiding something. Maybe you're involved in this theft? You little pansy. Is that the best you can come up with?"

"Dawnish!" I scowl. He shuts up, but not without a laugh. I turn back to the curator. "Mr. Roland, you were frightened and surprised. Maybe the thief was wearing a fur coat? You said you were coming in early — perhaps you didn't sleep well?" More likely, I think, you saw a Garou in Crinos. I shut my mouth and feign sympathy.

"I wasn't hallucinating, and I wasn't confused." The curator insists in frustration. "It was an animal. An animal as big as a man, running on two legs."

"Bullshit," Dawnish snorts. "He's on drugs." With a shrug, he walks away to do another circuit of the room.

I try to keep on-subject. "What did the intruder steal, Mr. Roland?"

"Nothing." He sighs, shaking his head. "Nothing I've noticed, at least. The stones in the case are still there. I must have interrupted the robbery before the intruder had a chance to look over the room. These fragments aren't particularly valuable. Rare, yes, but not saleable. We were very fortunate."

"Maybe the bear was looking for a rock. To sharpen his claws." Dawnish mocks from the other side of the room.

“Please, believe me.” Surprisingly, Amos takes my hand. His voice lowers, “I’m not on drugs, and I wasn’t hallucinating. I don’t know what that creature was, but I have no reason to lie.”

Amos’s hand is warm, his green eyes wide. Surprised by the intensity of the curator’s grip, I manage, “You probably just thought you saw — I mean, clearly you were mistaken...” If I confirm his story, or even act as if I believe it, I’m risking Gaia’s silence; betraying Her secrets. The humans can never know — even if it means protecting one of those fur-covered bastards. “I need you to come to the station and make an official report for the record. There’ll be some follow up questions...” I swallow my hypocrisy and say, “and, perhaps, a lie-detector test. Just to clear your name.” His smile fades, and his hand drops away from mine.

Amos’s betrayed stare lingers in my memory long after he walks away.

The sun shone brightly above the church steeple as the man spoke. His words were couched in love, but filled with revulsion. God’s glory, and the condemnation of his fellow man. His name was Thomas Aquinas. “These things are contrary to the natural order... copulation without procreation!” The crowd cheered, ready to follow the course of the Archbishop’s words. Love. Pleasure. Joy. These things were deemed ‘unnatural.’ Against nature herself.

That was a moment upon which the world turned. The season changed, and man turned against man for no reason other than hypocrisy. Culture shifted, and those who loved the same were somehow christened as ‘against God.’ We were cast out of the sacred eye.

Fools. As if anything born of Gaia could fall far from Her grasp.

“That guy back at the private collection,” Dawnish shouts over the noise in the station locker room. “I think he was a queer. Didja notice? Didn’t like the ladies. Hell, he was trying to hold hands with you, Hank.” Dawnish laughs out loud, and several of the other officers join in with his cat-calls. “Damn gays! They creep me out! Tab A into slot B, dammit! That shit’s not natural. It ain’t right!” There’s another round of laughter, and someone in the shower room makes a joke about hanging on to his soap.

“Whatchoo think, Hank?” Dawlish sniggers as we towel off. “Think that Amos fella was some kind of fart-knocker?” He leans against the metal locker frame. “You know? A friggin’ homosexual?”

“The term ‘homosexual’ was invented in the nineteenth century, Luke. It’s not a real word.” I tug up my boot and tie the laces around my ankle.

“‘Homo’ is Greek, and ‘sexual’ is Latin. Some guy in Germany made it up for a psychology paper. Seems kind of stupid to repeat it.”

“Get a sense of humor, Hank.” Luke pauses and eyes me. “C’mon. That guy was as queer as a three dollar bill. You gay or something?”

“Gay? No, I’m not gay. It’s just — what do I care, y’know?” I fake a laugh and wave him away. “None of my business.”

Luke doesn’t notice my stilted smile, or the flush that creeps along the back of my neck. He goes back to the other cops, their jokes still falling well below the waist.

I stride out of the locker room, and there’s a sick feeling in my stomach. *No, I’m not gay, Luke.* I push the words away, but they stick like hot embers in my chest. I’d lied twice today, to protect myself. Twice, I’d compromised my integrity and hidden from the truth. No matter how I tried to justify my actions, it feels like eating ash.

I am Mokolé. I am Gaia’s memory, blessed and cursed with the ancient thoughts of dragons; with the primal knowledge of dinosaurs, with the strength of both Sun and Moon. I am a shifter. A shaman. And yes, I feel a passionate love toward those of my own sex. None of these things turn Gaia’s eye from me. None of these things make me feel as false or dirty as the lies I tell to conceal them.

“Fuck you, Luke,” I snarl under my breath, yanking my pickup door closed.

Across the parking lot, I see a man in jeans and a tweed jacket, sandy hair falling loosely about his ears. There’s a dejected slump to the figure as he walks toward the taxi stand. Recognizing the man’s profile, I roll down my window and call out. “Amos?”

His head snaps up.

“Don’t worry about a cab. C’mon. I’ll give you a ride home.”

Amos walks to the side of my Ram 1500 and places his hand on the door. “I don’t know, officer. I prefer to take the bus.” The wound of my betrayal bleeds into his voice.

“I... think I owe you, Mr. Roland. We didn’t treat you very well, back at the collection. My partner and I, I mean, we were...” the sentence collapses as I try to justify. Clearing my throat, I end simply, “The least I can do is give you a ride.”

Amos watches me for a moment, his green eyes thoughtful. At last, he says, “You’re sure it’s no trouble?” Unspoken words hang on the end of his sentence.

A pair of off-duty policemen snicker as they pass by. A few other officers call out across the parking lot, their muffled commentary setting my teeth on edge.

"I'm sure. Hop in."

Amos nods and climbs into the truck's passenger seat, closing the door sharply. The Ram's eco-diesel engine revs loudly as we drive out of the parking lot, but not enough to cover the jeering. The color in Amos's cheeks tells me he hears them, too.

We pull out of the parking lot. "How did you start working for Ms. Wakefield?"

Amos shrugs, dawdling with the hem of his jacket. After a moment, he answers. "My degree is in social anthropology, from the University of Manchester. I met Ms. Wakefield at a seminar, and we spent time talking about pack structure in early civilizations. I guess she liked what I said, because she hired me when I graduated a few months later."

"Manchester? You don't sound British."

"Rhodes scholarship. I'm from Charleston."

I feel tension in the air. My thoughts are churning, distracted, trying to find a way to excuse my earlier behavior. Nothing comes to mind. The jokes in the locker room still echo in my ears. "Look, Amos. I need to tell you... I want to apologize. For not believing you about the... intruder."

"The 'bear'?" His voice is bitter.

"Whatever you saw, I know that it scared you. We should have treated you with more respect. I should have. I regret that."

Amos's hand flutters through his hair like a cat settling its tail. "Thank you." Silence, and then he gives me a quiet smile. "It was one hell of a morning." The road spins past, dotted with strip malls and gas stations, the occasional bank or fast food joint standing out from the rest. Garish yellow and red signs punctuate the bland concrete landscape. "Have you traveled much, Officer Machak?"

"Hank. I'm off-duty, so please, no formality." We share a smile. "I've been to Australia. South America. I always wanted to travel to Afghanistan — Kandahar, but that's a dangerous area."

"I've been there." His voice holds the ring of passion, lighting his calm. "It's a magnificent city. The mausoleum of Baba Wali, the mosques, the ruins of Zorr Shaar — Old Kandahar — incredible. I went to a Persian poetry reading. It was amazing." His voice holds the ring of passion, lightning-quick beneath his calm demeanor. The spark stirs me. Somewhere within the *mnesis*, a deep memory rises to the fore.

*Dance, when you're broken open.
Dance, if you've torn the bandage off.
Dance in the middle of the fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance, when you're perfectly free.*

I'd spoken aloud. Amos stares at me, the curve of his mouth agape. "Rūmī's poetry? You've read it?" His eyes widen. I curse internally. In that brief flicker of memory, that whispered moment, Amos saw part of my inner truth. Heard it in my tone of voice. Before I can respond, he boldly slides his hand over my own, curling our fingers together beneath my palm.

We pause, my hand in his, as I turn into the narrow driveway. His house is a cottage, set away from the street, shaded by green willows. Gravel crunches beneath the truck tires as we slow at the door. "I was going to do some research... but I can put that off for a while." Amos's face is calm, hopeful. Our fingers tighten.

Despite the fear, the instinct calling me to hide, I pull him in for a kiss.

We stay the better part of the afternoon, and I relish the joy of sharing myself with another, with Amos. His touch is kind, but not always gentle. The roughness in his hands and hips echoes my own need. Lizards are cold-blooded creatures, but we make love like every other animal on Gaia's earth — with the heat of abandon. For a brief period of time, I feel free.

Late in the evening, I put on my jeans and walk into the kitchen. I pull a bottle of light beer from the fridge and twist the cap off in my hand when Amos calls my name.

"In here," I answer.

Lying on the kitchen table with his laptop and a pile of mismatched, scrambled-looking pages are several fragments of dark grey stone, shallow etchings covering their smooth sides. I pick one up and run my fingers over the marks, marveling at their age. Primitive, but beautiful. I wonder what the *mnesis* would make of these.

Amos places his head on my shoulder, wraps his arms about my waist. "Those are more of the Indonesian stones. I checked them out from the back archives last night to do research. Fascinating, really, if you have any interest in anthropology. Otherwise, they're just rocks."

I smile. "These marks... it's some kind of proto-language?"

"They appear to describe great lizard-like beasts fighting other mythic animals. Some kind of apocalyptic tale, written down for the next genera-

tion. You know, Indonesia has a great deal of history with snakes and lizards of all kinds. This particular culture revered them greatly. I was hoping the marks could give us an early look at that fascination and how it developed.”

My blood runs cold. “Lizard-beasts?” I try to sound casual. The drifting sound of a car reverberates in the living room, engine purring in a driveway somewhere down the road. Cicadas click in the front yard. The wind on my bare skin feels over-cold.

“Massive ones. Possibly dinosaurs, but the fragments are far more recent, dating many centuries after the Cretaceous extinction event. My current theory is that these people found fossils or dinosaur bones, and their first forays into language were attempts to explain those items.” He sighs, and his breath is warm against my shoulder. “The glyphs describe something called the “Age of Sleep.”

“The... Age of Sleep?” I am barely breathing.

“It’s a simplistic term, I know, but it’s my best translation.” He lets go of me and picks up one of the stones. It’s as big as my fist, chipped and broken along one edge. He wipes away the dust with his thumb, holding the fragment up to the light. “If you look here, you can see one of the lizard creatures.”

Ancient lines, carved with skill, depict the clear figure of a Mokolé. These aren’t mere pictographs — these primitive humans had been trying to write in the Dragon’s Tongue! Whoever broke into the collection wasn’t interested in monetary profit. They were searching for knowledge.

The Age of Sleep, which befalls Mokolé after each Wonderwork — each Apocalypse in turn, when the world begins its cycle again. The creator, the creation; the ebb and the flow. What else did these pieces of stone contain, and how dangerous would they be, in the wrong hands? The memory within me drew images of fire and flame, of burnings and false trials. Of prejudice and hatred.

“Amos,” I say cautiously, “Have these pieces been here, at your house, since yesterday?”

“Why, yes,” he answers. Hearing the tone in my voice, he steps away and meets my gaze. “I brought them home two days ago, when we first received the exhibit. We put the rest of the collection, the lesser stones, on display.” He must see the fear in my eyes, because his voice falls to a hush. “Hank, what’s wrong?”

“You may have surprised the thief at the museum, but that’s not why he left empty-handed. What he wanted wasn’t there.” Even as I speak, there is a crash, and the front door of the cottage shatters with massive force. “Amos! Get down!” I grab him, hurling us both beneath the kitchen table as fragments of wood shot through the front room, followed by the sound of claws on the hardwood floor. The Garou hadn’t found what he was looking for at the collection — so he came here, to finish the job.

Through the kitchen door, I see a heavy, furred creature approach, sniffing the air as it paces forward with arrogantly confident strides. Its body is bestial, but the fur softer and finer than that of an animal. The creature’s movements are far more controlled and intelligent. A mane of hair flows regally down over broad shoulders. There is a grace to the animal’s movement that was at odds with its massive size. This is no lumbering wolf. This is a Bastet; the Eyes of Gaia. A were-cat.

“I hear you, simpering little human mouse,” the Bastet growls proudly. “Care to play hide-and-seek?” It flexes brutal, razor-sharp claws and strides toward the kitchen. With one swat of its hand, it overturns the couch, claws tearing six inch swaths in the hardened oak frame, just like the case in the museum. It gazes back and forth in the front room, debating which way to begin its search — and, perhaps, catching the scent of something it does not yet recognize.

Me.

“Amos!” I turn, but he’s staring at it, jaw agape, half in Delirium and half in shock. I shove him toward the other hallway and the back door. “Run! Get out.”

“Your gun!”

“In the bedroom. Just go!” I shove him again, and he starts running. His movement catches the werecat’s attention. I rise from my crouch, squaring my shoulders toward the kitchen doorway and the creature beyond. Its yellow eyes widen. It hadn’t expected to find two men here — and it would be expecting the next few moments even less.

“Leave now, and nobody has to get hurt!” I call, and stand my ground.

I feel the tug of memory at the edge of my vision; a flash of ancient days and long-worn fears. Not now! Not now! I need to keep myself together. No time for memory — there’s no time to sink into the past, not when the future is in jeopardy!

As I fight to control myself, the Bastet’s eyes widen, and the mane of fur ripples over its shoulders.

“Hank?”

How the fuck does this thing know me by name?

The shifter’s eyes flick from me to Amos’s retreating form, and then back again. Its pupils dilate, its claws widen in shock and revulsion. When it speaks again, loathing fills its voice.

“You’ve been keeping secrets from me, Hank. I knew I’d find the pictogram stones here, and I hoped I’d find the little faggot, too, but it appears Gaia has blessed my labors. Now I can wipe two of your filthy kind off Her green earth and still get the job done.”

The tone, the mocking sneer, the voice — it all snaps into place. “*Dawn-ish?*” Now that I’ve pieced it together, I can see the resemblance. The same arrogant lope, the same sarcasm-laced voice. No, not sarcasm. Pride. I feel a cold prickle across my shoulders, down my ribcage. The precursor to a shift.

“Buggers. Fucking queers. You’re an abomination on the face of Gaia! Man to woman, boy to girl — you are anathema, opposed to the very exercise which creates life!” The monster roars and hurled himself toward me. “You are an aberration, no better than a metis, and I will cleanse the world of your kind!”

In anger, I let the change consume me. The cold protection of plate, the searing burn of skin stretching and hardening into scale beneath. My eyes widen, my sight sharpens, my nose and mouth push out into jaws full of teeth. My spine lengthens into a tail, descending in a massive coil until it seems the kitchen can no longer hold me. With a roar, I plant my fists upon the ground as my arms lengthen. The impact shakes the whole house. The Bastet stumbles, shocked, and slams into an arm that’s nearly the size of his torso.

“My kind, Dawnish?” I hiss, the plates atop my spine stiffening with anger. “Oh, you mean ‘gay’? I thought you meant ‘dragon.’”

Now, I can let go. I must, for the mnesis has taken me, and I am servant to its will. Memories flood through my veins — my own, and others. A thousand years of changing tides and damning social constructs. Of hiding and of abuse. A thousand years of being the “other,” the outcast, the lost. Of being alone.

I don’t realize how angry I am until my enemy’s claws sink into my cheek. Suddenly, I am overtaken by rage. His words, his hatred. The laughter of the other officers in the locker room. The fact that I’ve had to hide a portion of myself from the world, bury it deep within my spirit. I fight to protect myself, to defend my mate. But I also fight for the past — for the memory of those

who could not fight for themselves. For Matthew Shepherd, and others brutalized for their sexual choices. For the humiliated lovers in Texas, guilty of nothing more than making love in the privacy of their own bedroom. For Edie Windsor, deprived of her rights as a wife and widow. For all those who have been beaten and humiliated, cast aside and mocked.

I am Mokolé, the memory of Gaia — and I remember them all.

The Bastet strikes, clawing at my shoulder. I bite down on the proffered arm; blood pours into my throat. I lock my jaw like a crocodile, daring Dawnish to pull back his fist and lose the entire limb. With his other hand he claws for my eye, but the thick ridge of my forehead blocks his attack. I return the gesture, slicing his stomach with the crescent of my foreclaws, and my tail lashes to wrap around his neck.

Dawnish slashes at me and feebly roars, but the fight has left him. Choked breathless, he falls limp in my grasp. I unlock my jaw and raise my head to trumpet victory, blood dripping from my teeth and jaws. As I do so, I see Amos — handsome Amos — standing in the bedroom doorway, his back arched in fear, my gun clenched in his hand. He points the barrel at me.

I draw myself free of the *mnesis*, dragging my memories together, sorting through the fog of ages to find that which is intimately *me*. I raise my hands, feeling the claws sink into flesh. The armor that surrounds me falls away, evaporating with the change, leaving me naked and breathless. The night wind on my skin reminds me how defenseless I am without my scales. Without my secrets.

“What are you?” Amos asks, fighting the Delirium. He is so brave, so very brave. Not just in this moment. He is brave because he does what I cannot do. He lives at peace with himself. He lives the way he loves. Openly.

“A shapeshifter. A dragon.”

“And... him?” The gun flicks down to indicate Dawlish’s unconscious body.

“A different kind of shapeshifter, from a different part of the world. He wanted the stone fragments because they tell my people’s secrets. His kind collects secrets — like the existence of my kind — and uses them against others.”

Tears are bright in his eyes, on his cheeks. “Did you know that Dawnish was the one who attacked the museum? Is that why you’re here? To fight him?” He’s screaming now. Angry.

The cold evening wind reminds me of my nakedness. "I came because I wanted you."

My answer surprises Amos. He lowers the gun, glaring, but the edges of that glare are softening. He's still confused, but I don't think he's going to forget. He's fighting too hard to understand.

"How do you live like this?" he asks. "Hiding everything that you are. You're into guys, you're a... shapeshifter...? Are you honest about anything, Hank?" His words cut like the Bastet's claws. "How can anyone love you? How can you love yourself, carrying that kind of lie?"

I hear him, but the fear in me goes deep. I remember the anger within the *mnesis* and the release of finally acting on it, and I am forced to admit that it wasn't all someone else's memory. Some of that anger was my own.

"How can I do anything else?" I ask. "Since the dawn of time, we've been forced to hide ourselves from Man. We've been hunted. Slaughtered. I've always felt the same about my sexuality." I gesture toward Dawlish's body. "I'm not wrong."

Amos shakes his head. "You're not right, either! They're both secrets, and secrets will kill you. Keeping them inside, denying who you are; that's dying, too."

The parallel surprises me. I've been too wrapped up in memories to consider my own situation, but he was right. I hide my sexuality the same way I hide my Mokolé heritage. Still, what could I do? Hiding was all I knew.

Amos places the gun on the table and steps toward me. Shaking, hands on my shoulders, "You fought for me. I'll fight for you, as will thousands of others across the world. Together, we're strong. We're changing things."

"For queer folks, maybe. But for shapeshifters? If I changed form at a gay pride rally, do you seriously think people would hold my hand and sing 'kumbayah'?"

"There's a fetish for everyone." His tone has fire, but I can tell he agrees. "There are two kinds of secrets, Hank. The kind you keep to protect yourself and others, and the kind you tell — for the same reason. Only you can decide which is which."

Dogs are barking somewhere down the road. A moment later, I hear sirens. Amos looks down at Dawlish. The Bastet has reverted to his human state, his mane gone, his skin shifted to pink, fleshy normality.

"Is he dead?" Amos's voice is quieter now.

I shake my head 'no.'

He murmurs, "Good." I expect a lesson on ethics and morality, on kill-

ing as a last resort, but Amos surprises me again. “We’ll tell the cops that the bigot broke in and tried to scare us, and let him live down the fact that he got his ass kicked by queers.” Amos’s lips twist into a savage smile. Heat spreads through me. I want to drag him back to the bedroom.

The sirens are closer and I see flashing blue lights at the far end of the road. Amos looks up at me and pushes sandy hair out of his eyes. “You’d better go, if you don’t want them to know you were here.”

The urge to run grows strong, but I stifle it. He’s right. I am a dragon. My duty is to protect Gaia’s creatures, to remember the past and to build the future, whatever that may be.

“No. I’ll stay,” I tell him. “Um... I might put some pants on, but yeah. I’m staying.” I offer him a shy grin.

Amos takes my hand, and returns the smile. “I’m glad.”

We wait together until the sirens arrive.

Uncountable years of memory. Infinite aeons of Gaia’s presence. Each Wonderwork, each renewal, and the Age of Sleep between. Times change, and events shift and change, weaving the circular ribbon of history. I can feel within me a thousand years of bigotry, of hatred, or unreasoning discrimination. My descendants will feel those things when they look back into the mnesis. They will know the pain of hatred and ostracizion.

I hope they will see this night, as well.

A Nuwisha Walks Into A Bar

By Eddy Webb

Zurie saw the Nuwisha walk into the bar, and she immediately ordered another drink. A smile lit the coyote's lean face under his inevitable stubble, and he oozed over to take the bar stool next to her.

"Hey, Zeebee!" he said cheerfully.

"Fuck off, Chance." The Corax took a long drink, not looking his direction.

"You're looking good," he said, ignoring the brush-off.

She snorted. She glanced at the mirror behind the bar and saw hair that hadn't been washed hair in days, and red streaks grown out with long black roots. Her eyes were sunken, making her pale skin look sickly. Mirrors don't lie. That's why she tried to stop looking in them.

"I'm pretty sure I told you to fuck off, Chance," she said, staring at the rack of bottles behind the bar instead of looking at him.

"I know, I was there. But I know you didn't really mean it, so I forgave you and stayed. What are you drinking?"

She slammed her hand on the bar. The murmur of the barflies around her immediately died away as she turned to point a finger in the Nuwisha's face. Her voice was hard and low. "I did mean it. I meant it then, and I mean it now. I'm done with your games and I'm done with you."

The smile dropped off of Chance's face, and he looked suddenly hurt. "Come on, Zeebee. Trixter, Inc. isn't the same without you..."

"Running around stealing things from Wyrms creatures isn't something you can validate by calling it 'Trixter, Inc.'. It's pointless, and I'm sick of

people getting....” She stopped and immediately swung the seat around so he couldn’t see her face. “Just go away, Chance.”

Chance looked around the bar, but no one seemed interested in their discussion after Zurie’s initial outburst. “Listen, do you still have the, uh....”

She turned to slap her cellphone on the bar. “I may be drunk, but I’m not an idiot. I still have my Inane Conversation fetish, so no one else can understand me telling you to get the fuck out of my life.”

He nodded. “That’s good, that’s good. Because I wanted to say that I was... sorry. About what happened. Martin was a huge help, and....”

“He was my fiancé, Chance.”

He stopped to fiddle with a beer bottle that Zurie didn’t remember him paying for. “*Ex-fiancé*. He told me you had broken it off....”

She turned to look at him again, pain flashing in her eyes. “He was my *fiancé*, Chance. He was more than just someone to slap with a rite to continue the great and glorious line of Corax. And it was your plan that got him....” She stared at her reflection in the mirror behind the bar for a moment, before taking another drink from her glass. “Just go. Find yourself another hacker.”

Chance slid a photo next to Zurie’s glass. It was a headshot of a good-looking man around middle age. He had dark hair going a little gray at the temples, and wore sensible glasses. Chance thumped his finger onto the picture, becoming suddenly serious. “That’s Dr. William Krejci, a biologist. He works directly for Dr. Seraphina Sanderson, the regional head of Magadon GenDiv.”

Zurie picked up her phone and poked at the screen a few times before smacking it. “Is the firmware acting up again? It seems like you’re having problems understanding ‘*fuck off, Chance*’.”

He smiled and took another drink of his beer. “I bet you a drink that after one sentence, you’ll want to do one more job with me.”

She smirked, but there was no humor in it. “Fine. If you lose, you have to get the hell out of my life forever and never come back.”

“Deal.”

“Fine. What’s the sentence?”

Chance pointed at the picture again. “That’s the man who ordered the firebombing of Martin’s apartment, and he’s here in town.” He reached over and took a sip from her drink before spitting it out. “Rum and Coke? Can’t you drink something more expensive?”

• • •

Back at Zurie's apartment, Chance spent his usual ten minutes mocking her collection of Edgar Allen Poe paraphernalia as being "cliché" before he shoved a half-built laptop off of an easy chair and sat down. He explained that the Atlanta regional branch of the Magadon Genetics Division was highly secure, like most utterly evil corporations. Besides the mundane security of guards, locks, scanners, and cameras, there were also the supernatural measures: a First Team loaded up with Delirium-reducing drugs and Wyrms-tainted Weaver spirits making the Gauntlet thicker than normal.

Zurie took a sip from a fresh rum and Coke, watching the lights play off her platinum hoop bracelets. "Wait, go back a minute. What's the reason we're breaking into a secure Magadon facility?"

He furrowed his brow. "Didn't I say? Well, better to show you anyhow. Pull up the website about Martin's expedition in Africa."

More heartache. Zurie gulped half of her drink and grabbed her tablet, tapping furiously at the screen while Chance looked over her bust of Poe. He turned back around when she pulled the website up and snatched the tablet from her. He awkwardly manipulated it until a particular picture was up on the screen. "Here."

She took it back and looked at it. A hairless creature stared back at her, its pale skin wrinkled and bumpy. "What the...?"

"*Heterocephalus glaber*. Or, more accurately, *Heterocephalus glaber Thorssonius* or something. It's a new subspecies of naked mole rat that Martin discovered before his microwave exploded."

Zurie tossed the tablet onto the chair across from her. "The punching will start in five seconds if you don't get to the point."

He winced and hurried to continue. "But it isn't a subspecies, not exactly. It's actually a kind of..." He waved his hands in the air, searching for inspiration. "... naturally Wyrms-tainted animal, I guess. Normal mole rats are resistant to cancer and all sorts of terminal diseases, and they live forever. Well, forever in mole years. But this subspecies is different. There's something in their blood that activates certain genetic properties in others as well. And your ex-fiancé...."

"Fiancé."

"Whatever. He had the only known living specimen to date. In his apartment."

"A specimen that has to be dead now."

Chance dug around in his pockets and pulled out a badly-folded piece of paper. "Not according to the police report. No trace of mole rat was found."

She snatched the paper out of his hands and unfolded it, quickly scanning the report. One corpse found, burned beyond recognition. Presumed to be

Martin Thorsson. She crumpled it into a ball and threw it in Chance's direction. "So you think Magadon broke in, stole the rat, and burned down the apartment with Martin inside?"

Chance shrugs. "More or less. So clearly the rat's important. I say we bust in, go get it, and really yank the lion's tail."

Zurie looked at him for a long time. "And there's no trick here? No secret Chance plan lurking underneath the obvious plan?"

He looked at her with a serious face and dragged his finger over his chest in an X. "Cross my heart."

She sighed. "Whatever. Let me get a few things."

• • •

The first part was easy. Chance spent a lot of his spare time masquerading as a skinny Garou, so he whispered to some of his contacts that Magadon had been kidnapping Kinfolk and experimenting on them. Zurie was mildly surprised to find out that it was true, but didn't ask how he knew. She spent the time he was away getting as much information about the computer system as she could. When he returned after a few days, he reported that a local pack was getting ready to infiltrate the building. His plan was to slip in while security was busy dealing with the werewolves, grab the rat, destroy the data, and get out. He explained this all to Zurie while they moved through the Umbra to the facility as a raven and a coyote.

"How do you know the werewolves will attract the fomori's attention?" Human words always felt odd coming out of her beak in her raven form, but being able to talk to each other easily as animals was one of Chance's many tricks, and they both liked to chat.

He shrugged. "I left a note."

"You told Pentex that the werewolves are going to infiltrate their building?"

"When you say it like that, it sounds like a dick move."

"It is a dick move! They could die in there."

"Nah. I know these guys. They'll be fine. Come on — we're here."

The Umbra pulsed with random colors and smells as they looked at their target. The entire structure was woven from steel spider webs wrapped around dark crystals for windows. At various points all over the building there were cages made from the same crystal. Inside were creatures that looked like spiders with too many legs and no eyes. They chittered and paced in their cages as they exuded a thick, green, viscous fluid that covered the entire structure in a thin film. The whole thing was circled by fleeting Bane spirits, whispers of pain and turmoil flickering over the surface.

"Those are the spiders?" Zurie asked, watching the light of the moon play off the crystal.

"Yeah. They strengthen the local Gauntlet so that casual intruders can't use the Umbra to infiltrate their building."

"So we're in the Umbra because...?"

He turned to her and his tongue lolled out in a grin. "Because we're not casual intruders."

She flapped around in consternation. "You don't have a plan, do you?"

He sneezed once, twice, and suddenly Chance was in his human form again. "Of course I have a plan. I got us here, didn't I?" he said, as he started searching his pockets.

Zurie changed to human as well, adjusting her dedicated laptop bag after she did. "I was hoping for more about the 'once we got inside' plan, personally."

"Aha!" He pulled out an obsidian dagger with a flourish and held it in front of her. "Our ticket in."

"You're going to cut your way out of the Umbra. I'm sure they never thought of that." She glanced around. "Can we just do this before those Banes get curious?"

Chance muttered something, and Zurie felt a thrill of Gnosis as they slowly floated about halfway up the surface. Chance reached out to one of the cages, gently touching the bars as the spider skittered over, curious. Then he quickly stabbed the knife through his hand. Zurie flinched at the sudden violence, but the Nuwisha didn't even grimace. Instead, he smiled, whispering gently to the blind creature trapped within as his blood dripped onto its distended body. "That's it... drink up, my friend."

The horrible creature managed to back up enough to move an orifice in the way of the falling blood. After a few drops fell into what Zurie hoped was its mouth, Chance started to chant in a language she didn't recognize. The spider shivered, screaming quietly, and then the color of the ichor it was defecating changed from green to a deep purple. Chance pointed to the purple glaze, his palm still dripping. "There's the door."

"This is the most disgusting thing I've ever done with you," she grumbled, as she pushed through the ichor. She pretended not to notice Chance's muttered *"That's what she said."*

Within moments, they were on a polished tile floor, covered in purple slime, and their ears were splitting from the noise of the alarms.

"Oh," Chance said as he stood up, his hair sticking out at strange angles from the ichor. "The spider might have been trapped. Whoops."

Zurie crouched over her keyboard, hastily typing as commands whizzed by on her netbook screen. Chance peeked over the massive oak desk in the office they had broken into. "The lab we want is probably on a different floor."

"I know, Chance," she muttered. "Kind of busy trying to shut off the alarms."

He wiped some more slime from his hair. "I only bring it up because we're not really moving from this room."

"I know, Chance," she said through gritted teeth.

"And also..."

"What?" she snapped, before realizing that they were supposed to be hiding. She lowered her voice. "What the hell is your problem?"

He frowned. "I'm bored."

She clenched her fists for a moment, staring intensely at him as she debated simply killing him and leaving. After a second, she turned back to her netbook and hit a few more keystrokes. The piercing alarm suddenly cut out. Chance clapped his hands and stood up from behind the desk. "Excellent, now we..."

Zurie grabbed his shirt and pulled him back down behind the desk. "Listen to me, Chance. If you get me killed here, so help me I will make sure to haunt you for the rest of your natural life."

He tried to look sheepish and unruffled, and failed at both. "But everything's going according to plan!"

"You don't have a plan. You never have a plan. And you fucking lied to me."

"We should really be going..." He tried to stand back up, but Zurie pulled him down again.

"I'm talking about this," she said. With her other hand, she showed him the netbook screen. "This is a report where they acquired the rat before burning down Martin's apartment. You'll notice the part where it says *'Target Martin Thorsson found burned at the scene.'*? You told me he died in the fire."

"What? Let me see that." He took the netbook from her and started poking hard at the screen. After a moment he looked up. "I didn't know your last name was Betancourt. I always assumed the B stood for..."

"Hands over your head! Now!"

Both of them stopped at the sound of a new voice. Carefully they raised their hands and stood to look over at the rest of the office. Three security

guards in Magadon uniforms pointed pistols at the two of them. Zurie mentally sighed in relief — they didn't appear to be a First Team, just normal guards.

The Nuwisha smiled. "Evening, gentlemen. You don't happen to know where I could find a naked mole rat around here, would you?"

The guard in front spoke again. "Keep your hands in the air. Who are you?"

"Me? I'm just lost. One of the scientists from out of town here to look at the new mole rat you've got. I'd reach for my ID card, but I don't want to get, you know...." He jerked his chin towards the pistol. "Shot."

Zurie kept quiet and listened. As infuriating as Chance could be, he had talked his way out of situations like this before. She never quite knew how; maybe gifts from Coyote, or maybe just natural charisma. She started to call on her own gifts, judging the distance between her and one of the guards to see if she could throw one of her feathers that far.

The guard talking to Chance — he had "Murray" stenciled on his chest — lowered his pistol slightly, but still kept it pointed at Chance. "You can reach for your pocket. Slowly. Any sudden moves and I'll be forced to take action."

The Nuwisha smiled wider as he reached into his pocket and slowly pulled out his knife. Zurie winced, ready to change forms and attack, but Murray Guard didn't seem to react. "Here it is," Chance said slowly, showing him the knife. "I think you'll find all my credentials are in order."

Murray Guard started to reach out for the blade when one of the other guards in the back shook his head and shouted, "Look out! He's got a knife."

Zurie suddenly changed to Crinos and plucked a feather from her arm, throwing it at the guard who had shouted. It sank into his throat, and he gurgled before slumping over. She turned to the other one and threw again, as Chance leapt forward and grabbed Murray Guard by the arm before he could fire. The feather embedded itself in the second guard's chest, and by the time she turned back around, Murray Guard was standing in Chance's spot, grappling Chance who was trying to point a gun. Chance's eyes widened, and the guard snapped his neck with a quick twist before taking the gun from Chance's hand.

She looked at the guard, ready to strike, but he simply winked at her and holstered the pistol. "Thanks for the assist, Big Bird," he said in Chance's voice.

• • •

"Can I take these handcuffs off yet?" Zurie asked as they walked down yet another gray, sterile hallway.

Chance nudged her in the back with his pistol. "Hush, and act more captured."

They had been walking for ten minutes, with Zurie's hands behind her back in loose handcuffs. Once in a while they would run into other guards, and Chance would show his knife and mutter something about a prisoner, and they would be let through. He was even able to wave his knife by some of the card scanners and get access. This got them all the way to the basement level, when Zurie glanced over and happened to see Chance again.

"Your face is showing," she muttered as she slipped out of the handcuffs and slid her bracelets back on. "Looks like your disguise expired."

He shrugged and stuck the pistol into his jacket pocket. "At least Coyote didn't decide to let it fall when it would be the most hilarious. What lab is it in?"

"The computer records said it was in Lab 13, which is over near the north end. It should be just down this...."

They rounded a corner, and stopped. The hallway looked like a war had happened there. Large, bloody footprints went off in one direction, and multiple pools of blood were splashed on the floor.

"Ah, looks like my Garou friends have come and gone."

Zurie carefully walked around the puddles of blood. "Then we don't have much time before the real security comes down to start cleaning up."

They made their way to Lab 13. Like the previous labs, it was closed with a heavy metal door with no handles. Chance waved the knife by the card scanner, but it simply made a rude noise and flashed a red light. Chance grumbled for a moment, and then put his hand on it. There was a puff of smoke and the smell of burning plastic, but the light turned green and the door slid open.

"Subtle," Zurie remarked.

"We're almost done. Besides, this is more exciting, isn't it?"

Inside, the lab was little more than a large metal room, with a few tables and chairs for workstations. In the center of the room was a cage, containing what appeared to be a snub-nosed rat with no fur. A rat with strangely mottled and wrinkled skin, alternating between pink and a dark green. A rat that was probably as tall as Chance if it stood on its hind legs. A rat that was looking curiously at them.

"You didn't mention the size," Zurie noted.

"Or that it looks like a penis," Chance responded.

"Or that it was still alive," she added.

"I'm still focused on the penis thing," he said.

"You figure out how to get Mickey here outside. I'll work on wiping out the data."

She turned to the computers and looked over the files. She couldn't read scientist well, but the general gist was that something in the rat's blood caused some people to manifest their latent werecreature. A few doses and you have yourself a brand new Garou or whatever, pre-Wyrm-tainted and ready to go. The only experiment Magadon got to work so far was back in the lab with all the bloodstains.

Zurie spent a few minutes quickly deleting the files and overwriting them with pictures of Edgar Allen Poe, her signature when she and Chance were on jobs together. By the time she was done, she turned back to see him opening the cage. She started to ask if it was safe, but before she could get the words out, the rat hissed and jumped on Chance. The Nuwisha fell over, and the massive rat tried to bite his face. His knife skittered away from his hand in the struggle. Zurie started towards Chance, but he shook his head as he used all of his strength to keep the biting head away from him. "No! Get the knife! Cut a hole to the Umbra!"

She debated saving him anyway, but changed her mind and snatched up the knife from the ground. She slashed madly at the air, putting some of her own Gnosis into the fetish. After a few slashes, the air around her seemed to peel away, and she could see the nearby Umbra through a greenish haze. "Got it!" she yelled and reached down to grab Chance.

He ignored her hands, quickly turning to his half-man, half-coyote form. The large man-coyote picked up the rat and unceremoniously threw it through the gate. The green film burst, covering the rat, and several of the strange, sightless spider creatures chased after it. The spiders screamed with an ear-splitting screech that sounded eerily like the alarms when they first came in. Chance quickly shifted fully into a coyote while Zurie took her bird form, and they dove through the gate before it closed.

"See?" Chance said, as they attacked the spiders trying to wrap the rat in their viscous webbing. "A perfect plan."

• • •

"I am going to shower for a year when I get home," Zurie muttered as they left the Umbral realm that Chance stashed the mole rat into. It looked like it had a lot of grass and sun, and Chance assured her that Mickey would be happy there. She was too tired and too covered in slime to argue.

"There's one more stop we need to make," he said.

She sighed and flapped her wings again in another futile effort to get the ichor out of her feathers. "Will it take long?"

“Not long. We just need to stop in Tetepare.”

“In the South Pacific? That’s pretty random, even for you.”

“It’s not random. And I know a shortcut to get there.”

An hour later, they were standing (on human feet) on the beach of a tropical paradise. The sun was bright, but the heat was mitigated by a cool breeze. Fish flashed under the surface of the clear water, and birds chirped in the trees. Zurie briefly considered changing back to her raven form to hang out with the colorful parrots, or maybe just strip off her clothes and dive into the water, but Chance yanked her sleeve and took her deeper into the forest. “I stash things here that I can’t hide in the Umbra,” he explained as they made their way into the dense foliage.

He seemed to know exactly where to go, and every time she was sure the trees were impenetrable, he would slip between two of them and another path would open up. Eventually they made their way to a clearing, and a bed.

Zurie blinked. Sure enough, there was a bed sitting in the middle of a tropical forest. It had a gauzy net over it, like a thin tent. Lying on a bed was a familiar form.

Martin.

She fell to her knees and grabbed his face. It was warm under her hands. Tears splashed on his cheek, and she wasn’t able to get words past the lump in her throat.

Chance stood next to her, and carefully snapped a twig that was lying across Martin’s chest. “When I heard about the attack, I had him moved here before the Magadon team arrived. I left Krejci’s corpse behind — we had a bit of a disagreement — and I tricked the recovery team into thinking Martin was already dead.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “He’s been asleep for a long time, but he’ll wake up in a few days, now that I’ve broken the fetish keeping him that way.”

She swallowed, and managed to croak out a word. “Why?”

The Nuwisha knelt down and looked at her. “It was the safest way to keep him off of Pentex’s radar without driving him crazy in the Umb—”

Her hand shot out and grabbed his wrist, clenching it more tightly than her wiry form would suggest possible. “Why did you save him?” she said, her eyes not leaving Martin.

“Oh.” He put his hand over hers, tenderly. “Because I knew you broke it off because you didn’t want him to be hurt by this part of your life. You love him. And I knew it would make you happy.”

Zurie nodded, tears falling freely from her eyes. She put her head on his shoulder. “Thank you,” she said.

He chuckled. “I told you. My plans always work perfectly.”

She laughed, for the first time in what felt like years.

About the Authors

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SONGS OF THE SUN AND MOON

TALES OF THE CHANGING BREEDS

Songs of the Sun

Each dawn reveals new wonders to Gaia's shapeshifting children. Each time Helios rises above the horizon, they face a new day of uncovering secrets, unveiling duplicity, and standing strong for the good of Gaia and those she claims as Her own.

Songs of the Moon

Each dusk brings new dangers well. The Changing Breeds do not have the strength of numbers of the Garou Nation, and often must contend with the werewolves and their kin just as much as with Gaia's enemies, in order to perform their sacred duties. They must rely upon each other, on their wits and Gaia's sacred Gifts, if they are to have any hope of completing the tasks She sets before them.

Songs of Sun and Moon: Tales of the Changing Breeds is an anthology of seven short stories of cunning, intrigue, and guile in celebration of 20 years of Gaia's oft-forgotten Fera children.

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