

Drunk on Writing

The Best of Write1Sub1

Volume 1



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The Best of [Write1Sub1](#), Volume 1

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You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you
- Ray Bradbury

A Shard Grows in Brooklyn

by Alex Shvartsman

First published by [Buzzy Magazine](#)

One by one, I set off car alarms.

I walked along the curb and methodically gave each parked car a gentle kick, just hard enough to trigger the siren. Behind me, a dozen violated vehicles already blared out of tune.

The prospect hung back, sullen and quiet. He was having a tough week, and my erratic behavior wasn't helping his mood any. With each siren adding its voice to the cacophony, the prospect got a little twitchier. To his credit, he hadn't cut and run. Yet.

“Philippine Energy Beetles are nasty critters,” I lectured him as we walked, straining to be heard over the noise. “They nest by the power lines and feed off the electricity. Those flickering lights the power company says are caused by faulty wiring are often caused by an infestation.”

Having finished with the cars, I fumbled with the lock on the front door of a vacant house.

“This place is lousy with beetles,” I explained. “We're gonna have to fumigate.”

“That's just great,” said the prospect. “I can't stand bugs. Now you tell me the Watch is in the exterminator business? This couldn't possibly get any worse.”

But, of course, it could. He hadn't seen the beetles up close yet. The prospect's problem with insects was part of the reason I had brought him to this place. I needed to know, when push came to shove, that he'd be able to handle himself. I needed him to overcome whatever phobias and preconceived notions he'd been living with, before he learned about any of the really bad things that are out there.

“Relax,” I told him. “There's some good news. These critters hate loud noise.”

The lock finally surrendered to my ministrations and the door was forced open by the pressure from the inside. Hundreds of fully grown beetles burst out of the house. Each of them was two to three feet long and stood at least a foot tall. The entire swarm rushed past us and toward the sewer, trying to get as far away from the roar of the sirens as they could. The prospect turned white as a sheet, but he didn't run. This one just might be a keeper.

“They are ...” the prospect gulped, “enormous.”

“This is New York,” I told him. “We don't sweat the small stuff. You should see the size of the troll under the Verrazano Bridge. Come on.” I took a careful step inside.

“Shouldn't we go after them?” the prospect called after me. “That brood will infest half the city.”

“The beetles we've scared off can't reproduce on their own and won't last a week outside of the nest,” I said while examining the foyer. “The root of the problem is in here.” The house was a mess—foul smelling and covered with greenish goo. Dozens of semi-translucent eggs, each the size of a golf ball, hung from the walls and ceiling like ornaments, cradled in the slime. You could almost see the larva gestating inside.

“Do we crack them open?” asked the prospect.

“No need,” I replied. “I’ve come prepared.” I pulled a small antique lantern out of my backpack, and lit the candle inside with a match. The special candle, blessed by the Panchen Lama himself, activated the lantern’s magic. Wherever its light shone, the eggs shriveled and died, as though they’d been doused in DDT.

We proceeded through the house, using the lantern to illuminate every corner and nook. The queen would not have abandoned the nest as easily as the other beetles, so I tread very carefully. The prospect opened the door to one of the bedrooms and there she was—three times larger than the drones we’ve chased off—guarding a pile of eggs at the back of the room. The queen trilled in warning and turned toward us.

“Blast her,” I told the prospect.

Frazzled by the sight of the huge bug, the prospect mumbled the incantation, getting half of it wrong. Instead of a powerful blast of energy, he only managed to unleash a spray of sparks, hurled in the general direction of the queen. The insect charged, and the prospect stumbled back, desperately trying to cast another spell. With the queen almost upon him, he managed a shield spell. The queen bounced off it as though it were bulletproof glass, momentarily stunned by the force of the collision.

The prospect began another spell, fighting hard to keep his concentration as the queen got back up and scraped against his weakening shield. Casting several combat spells in a row isn’t easy even for an experienced mage, let alone a rookie. The prospect’s apparent fear of bugs inspired him to dig extra deep within his energy reserves. With a belligerent bug inches away and held off only by an invisible barrier, the prospect spoke the words of power in a trembling voice. It was close, but he managed to finish the incantation before the shield collapsed. The queen was enveloped in a ball of fire for several seconds. When the flames disappeared, a charred chitinous shell was all that remained.

The prospect was practically hyperventilating. “I could have used some help,” he said.

“You have to rely on your own magic,” I told him. “You wouldn’t have been in trouble if you hadn’t screwed up the energy bolt. Avoid the distractions and concentrate on your spells, just like you were taught. Do better next time.”

I walked past him into the room and used the lantern to take care of the last batch of eggs. The prospect took another look at the singed bug remains on the floor, and threw up.

#

The first time I met the prospect was several weeks ago, when I sprung him from a loony bin.

This wasn’t unusual, as such things go. When people first begin to See, their mind wants badly to reject the truth, to pretend that the world is still safe and normal. They convince themselves, or those around them, that they are losing their marbles. Some try to drown out the new Sight with pills or liquor. A few get themselves committed. They don’t typically go as far as to burn their house down.

Back when the prospect went by the name of George Gartner, his Sight began to awaken, slowly. He began to notice things, things that regular people are blissfully unaware of. Mostly he noticed a particularly nasty ghost that’s been haunting his house since the early fifties.

The only one more surprised by this development than George was the ghost. You would think that the old spook might have appreciated having someone to talk to. Being stuck in that house for over half a century with no one but the cats even remotely aware of your existence couldn’t have been fun.

Instead, the ghost unleashed fifty years of pent up frustration and anger on poor George. Every day George's Sight became clearer, and the ghost's cursing louder. It followed him around the house, wailing, nagging, and shouting abuse the entire time. It got so bad, George could no longer remain in his own home.

He went through the usual stages. Denial, self-medication, and trying to share what he could See with the world. He even tried to get a priest to perform an exorcism, but the church won't battle what they can't See. Eventually, George couldn't take it anymore. He bought a container of gasoline, poured it all over the house and set it on fire.

Lucky for George, he'd been seeing a shrink, and his claims of ghosts and otherworldly creatures had been duly documented. Because of this, when the cops and firefighters sorted things out, he got sent to the nuthouse rather than prison.

The head physician at Bellevue's mental ward owed the Watch a few favors, and he knew to call us any time someone like George would turn up. After a couple of weeks, it was easy as pie for him to declare George no longer a danger to himself or others, and release him into our custody.

I swaggered into George's hospital room like I owned the place. I've learned how to make a good entrance over the years. Perception is as important as reality sometimes, and it's crucial to immediately establish who's in charge.

"I've got good news and bad news," I told George in lieu of a hello. "The good news is: you aren't crazy. The doctor said so, so it must be true. You can pack your toothbrush and get out of here whenever you please."

George gaped at me, trying to puzzle out whether I was legit or just a fellow patient.

"The bad news: that ghost was real. So are all the other weird things you've been noticing out of the corner of your eye. You can see them now, but more importantly—they can see you."

I told him about the real world—beings and things that only one out of every thirty thousand people can See. A world the rest of humanity catches glimpses of through fairy tales and scary campfire stories. Not a nice place at all.

I told him about the Watch—a group of people with Sight who do their best to protect humanity. I gave him a choice. He could join us or go out into the night and deal with whatever's out there on his own. Few people ever turn us down, when the situation is laid out for them like that. Then it becomes a matter of making sure they've got what it takes to join.

The first order of business was to ditch his name. Real names have power and one shouldn't casually volunteer them to every stranger one meets. Stripped of his name, George became a prospect. If found worthy, he would choose a new name for himself, a name that's safe to share with others. Mine's Conrad Brent and I've been wearing it proudly since the nineties.

#

After we finished taking care of beetle eggs, our next stop was to visit the oracle of Eighty-Sixth Street.

She had sent word that she wanted to see me, and the oracle isn't someone I like to keep waiting. She might get annoyed and predict something unpleasant in my future, like an ingrown toenail. The oracle's predictions came true much more often than not, and no one was entirely sure whether she merely Sees the future or influences it. The whole cause and effect thing gives me a headache, so I try not to think about it. Much.

I left the prospect in the car. He wasn't advanced enough in his training to be meeting the major players. Besides, I suspected that the oracle knew things about me, things that the prospect had no business learning.

The oracle operated out of a one bedroom apartment above a Korean nail salon in a rundown building. She could do far better, for what she charged. One time I asked her about that. She smiled cryptically as she surveyed the peeling wall paint and leaky ceiling and said that she was exactly where she was meant to be.

“Conrad Brent.” She got up from the loveseat to greet me, her voice strong and even in contrast with her small, wrinkled form. “Your future is fire. I see difficult decisions and you'll make the wrong ones. A flame wave will burn the buildings, char the churches, scorch the schools, and strafe the streets. Yours is a dark destiny of challenging choices and tragic tribulations ...”

“Cut the crap, Agnes,” I interjected. “I'm not a customer. Surely you didn't call me here just to reiterate the same doom and gloom scenario you've been scaring me with for years?”

“Philistine.” She sniffed. “Some people pay good money for the kind of insight I share with you free of charge. A day will come when you'll wish you'd listened more attentively. Fine, then. Let's tend to a more immediate problem. There is a charlatan in Williamsburg who calls himself the Crimson Prophet. He's been swindling the unwary and besmirching the good name of honest clairvoyants. A thorn in my side, he is, and I would like for you to remove him.”

“Really, Agnes,” I said, “this isn't like you. There are dozens of phonies out there taking advantage of the ungifted, and they are hardly a threat to someone of your considerable and real talents. You can't expect the Watch to act as your muscle, leaning on some two-bit fortune teller who happens to irritate you.”

“Those were my sentiments exactly,” the oracle replied, “until a few days ago, when this upstart somehow got his hands on an Atlantean shard.”

I should have known the oracle had a serious difficulty when she contacted the Watch. Her own resources are substantial enough to handle lesser issues. A shard showing up in New York wasn't just a problem for her; it was trouble for all of us.

Three thousand years ago, Atlantis was the first global superpower. While most of humanity was muddling its way through the Bronze Age, Atlantis had skyscrapers, a public transportation system, and a power grid. Powering it all was a giant crystal, fused with science and magic more advanced than anything another human culture had accomplished, then or since.

One day a crack appeared in the crystal. Some say it was an accident; others blame the Atlanteans themselves, who put too much strain on the crystal, greedily drawing ever more power. Their best alchemists tried feverishly to seal the crack even as other Atlanteans fled the island. Ultimately they failed and the resulting explosion annihilated their culture. The crystal itself was broken into thousands of shards, the smallest of which are still very potent and incredibly dangerous. A decent-sized shard is capable of increasing a magic user's power hundredfold, which often doesn't end well for anyone, most especially the hapless mage who dared to use it. A minor personage like this Crimson Prophet character getting his grubby little hands on a shard was even worse. It was like letting a child play with a suitcase nuke.

I jotted down the Crimson Prophet's address and said my goodbyes. The Oracle of Eighty-Sixth Street would get the help she had asked for. This had just become the Watch's problem.

I had to give the Crimson Prophet some credit—he knew how to live well. A stately brownstone in the nicest part of Williamsburg was a stark contrast to the oracle's decrepit abode. I was ushered in through a series of posh rooms by a pair of elegantly dressed men. A trained eye could catch their holsters, hidden under expensively tailored suits. These guys were muscle, but not the cheap, thuggish type. They were the up-market variety, the sort that could handle themselves in a hoity-toity setting like this, but hadn't forgotten how to break kneecaps out back when necessary.

The Crimson Prophet waited for me in the middle of a tastefully decorated study. The rare paintings and antique furniture served to make the rich feel right at home, and to intimidate the rest. I did my best to appear unimpressed, bordering on slightly put off, on general principle. The prophet himself was a tall, skinny man in his thirties. He wore a three-piece suit with a red velvet robe draped around his shoulders. All he was missing was a top hat and a handlebar mustache and he'd be ready to perform in a play as some sort of a Victorian villain.

“Welcome.” The prophet flashed a blinding smile at me. “I must say, I was quite surprised when my men told me about a stranger showing up at the doorstep and demanding an appointment. My reputation must be spreading among the populace faster than I'd anticipated. You do, however, have me at a disadvantage. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“My name is Brent. Conrad Brent.” I could not resist the James Bond bit. “I'm with the Watch.”

A blank stare was followed by several seconds of uncomfortable silence. Could it be possible that the Crimson Prophet did not know about the Watch?

“We're a group of mages who protect the world from supernatural threats. We keep the Fae in line, and rein in any rogue humans who might choose to take advantage of the ungifted.”

“Arcane cops.” The Crimson Prophet's smile got even wider. “How delightful,” he added with a barest hint of disdain.

“We aren't cops,” I said. “The Watch is a law unto itself. We recognize no greater authority, and those we take an interest in are most certainly not presumed innocent until proven otherwise.”

“I see,” said the prophet. “And what can I do for your illustrious group? If you're looking for insightful and stunningly accurate divinations, you've come to the right place.”

“No thanks,” I said, thinking of the oracle's fiery foretelling. “I'm trying to cut down.”

The Crimson Prophet indicated disappointment in an it's-your-loss-not-mine kind of way. “Something else, then?”

“It has recently come to my attention that you own an artifact that is of interest to the Watch,” I said. “It's a small chunk of incandescent crystal. I was hoping to see it.”

“I did recently acquire such a trinket,” said the prophet. He rummaged through a desk drawer to produce a leather carrying case. “It was a gift from a grateful patron, in acknowledgement of the fine work I've been doing.”

He opened the case and there it was, a piece of Atlantean crystal the size of an iPhone, glowing warmly like a dimmed light bulb. He tapped it with his index finger and shimmers of energy spread across the surface like ripples from a rock thrown into a still pond. It was the largest Atlantean shard I had ever seen.

“This is it, precisely.” I kept my voice level to hide the excitement. “The Watch has been working to recover this, and several other items, stolen from a friend we owe a few favors to.” I was making up the lie on the spot. “Would you be amenable to perhaps selling it to us?”

The Crimson Prophet extended his hand, inviting me to take another look around. “As you can tell, I am not in need of cash at the moment.”

“A trade, then?” I persisted. “We have access to a wide range of rare objects that could be very useful in your line of work. I can get you something flashy and clearly magical, to impress your clients. A phoenix feather, perhaps, or a caged fairy. Plus, the Watch would owe you a favor, which is a valuable commodity in its own right.”

“Those are some interesting possibilities.” The Crimson Prophet got up to indicate that our meeting was at an end. “I will consider your offer, but not until I've made further inquiries as to the crystal's value. You understand, I'm sure.”

I thanked him and headed out. I didn't really expect my offer to tempt him. While the prophet was a dilettante when it came to magic, he clearly understood money and power. He would not relinquish the crystal voluntarily. Fortunately, this wasn't going to be an issue. I'd staked out his home, and there were no magical wards or other supernatural defenses in place. I'd be back at night to liberate the crystal.

A fool and his shard are easily parted.

#

Lacking arcane protections, The Crimson Prophet would have to rely on mundane security. Non-magical problems are best solved via non-magical means, and there existed no better non-magical solution than Petya.

At six-foot-four, Peter “Petya” Kuznetsov stood an entire head taller than me, and was at least twice as wide. He moved with the easy grace of a ballet dancer, which he wasn't, and the precision and purpose of a killing machine, which he totally was. Peter was trained by the Spetsnaz and had worked for the Pennant, the Russian government's most elite special ops unit. Some say he had gone rogue after a series of unjustified kills, others claim he was planted in New York City as a Pennant sleeper agent on some sort of a long-term mission. Either way, Petya was the best operative money could buy.

At around four in the morning, Petya disabled the security system at the Crimson Prophet's brownstone. The lock on the front door barely slowed him down. He slipped inside, motioning for the prospect and I to wait.

Two minutes later, Petya emerged and waved us in. The three of us quietly traversed the dark hallways. We passed by one of the goons I met the day before. His unconscious form slouched in a chair, his gun still in its holster. Another sentry lay sprawled on the floor of the next room, a small trickle of blood congealing at the corner of his mouth—a recipient of Petya's tender mercies.

Unlike the rest of the house, the lights were still on in the study. Petya paused by the door to disable yet another security widget, then we were inside. I reached into the drawer from which the prophet had produced the case earlier, but now it was empty. As I looked up from the desk, a searing pain shot through my body and brought me to my knees.

It was an arcane attack of immense power. My various charms and amulets had absorbed the brunt of it, yet I still felt like I'd just been Tasered. Absent my protections, Petya and the prospect were not so lucky. Petya was out cold, his ungifted body defenseless against the hostile magic. The prospect fared only a little better; he moaned in pain by the door.

“Welcome back, Mr. Brent.” The Crimson Prophet towered over me, the shard gripped in his right

hand. “And yes, in case you are wondering, Atlantean crystal is everything it is said to be, and more.”

I tried for something witty, but was only able to produce a pained grunt. Enhanced by the shard's power, the prophet's magic was too much for me to handle.

“How monumentally arrogant of you,” said the prophet, “yet so predictable. You presumed me powerless, and therefore felt justified in stealing my property. The Watch pays lip service to protecting ordinary people from the wielders of magic, yet here you are, breaking into my home like a petty burglar. Just as I expected.”

The effects of the arcane blast were beginning to recede. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the prospect trying and failing to get up. I had to buy time—keep the Crimson Prophet talking. So I tried again, and this time I was able to groan an actual word. “Why?”

The prophet smirked. “Because I don't like competition. Now that I've settled here, I intend to be the one and true power in this borough, able to do whatever I please. Others are mere nuisances, but the infamous Conrad Brent of the Watch, you were always going to be a problem. I could find and kill you, but then the Watch would send other mages to avenge you, and the war would never stop until I got them all.”

He leaned in closer. “I pretended to be a mere fortune teller, and set events in motion that would inevitably lead to this very moment. Lesser intellects are so easy to manipulate. Now I get to have everything I want, on my terms. Even the Watch recognizes self defense. You invaded my home, and were accidentally killed in the struggle. Your superiors will understand. Plus, once I've taken your magic and added it to mine, I will become so powerful that the Watch bigwigs will be only too glad to let matters rest.”

The Crimson Prophet grabbed me by the front of my shirt with his free hand, and lifted me up to his eye level. He then touched the shard to his forehead and began an incantation. The shard flared, as guttural words spoken in a dead language hung in the air with an almost physical presence. The Crimson Prophet was casting a spell that would rip the magic right out of me, a spell so difficult and dangerous that even the most talented mage would be foolish to attempt it. A spell that he could manage now, thanks to the power of the shard. In moments, he was going to drain all of my arcane powers and claim them as his own.

Little did he know.

He struggled to finish the incantation, barely able to contain and direct the dark magic even with the power of the shard. As the last words were spoken, a great jolt shot through my body, an unstoppable invasive force seeking to collect every shred of my magic and bestow it on the prophet.

Nothing happened.

The Crimson Prophet still held me up at eye level. I could see his pupils widen with surprise, a realization that something had gone wrong. Then I made a fist and punched him hard in the face. There was a satisfying crunch, and the prophet staggered back as blood poured from his broken nose. I went after him, pummeling him to keep him off balance. He whimpered as he tried to scamper away from me. I grabbed his hand and pried his fingers open. I clenched the shard, but it grew dim in my hand, like a useless chunk of glass.

The Crimson Prophet reasserted himself and lunged at me, trying to regain the crystal. Even with the broken nose, he was a fair match for me after I had been worked over by his spells. As he reached for me, I turned around and threw the shard.

The shard slid across the floor, landing near the prospect. He grabbed for it with both hands, then cupped the crystal to his chest. The Crimson Prophet went after him, but before he could cross the room the prospect fired off a beam of energy.

The air smelled of ozone and singed hair. The Crimson Prophet stopped and stared with disbelief at his chest. In it, there was a fist sized hole burned cleanly through. Wordlessly, he crumpled onto the floor.

“Now that,” I told the prospect, who appeared shocked by the intensity of his own spell, “that is how you cast an energy bolt.”

The prophet's plan was nearly perfect. He couldn't have known that I was the only member of the Watch without magic. Almost no one knew, not even others at the Watch itself. I was an accident, a freak of nature, capable of Seeing the arcane, but with no powers of my own.

When I became a prospect, my mentor could not figure out why I failed to cast even the simplest spells. He was not obtuse; it's just that there has never been anyone like me before. If you could See magic, you could cast it, simple as that. Well, I couldn't.

I learned to get by. My weapons were bluster, information, and an array of enchanted tools and magical charms that could make Batman's utility belt turn green with envy. I performed my duties for the Watch, and used their authority and resources to quietly look for clues, hints of what was wrong with me and how to cure it.

One day I would find a way to do magic. A way to repair whatever broken link had crippled me. I was glad that day had not yet come before I met The Crimson Prophet.

I extended my hand wordlessly, and the prospect handed over the shard without hesitation. I smiled at him. To experience such power and give it up voluntarily is no small thing. Yes, this one definitely had a future within the Watch.

First, we had to tend to Petya. Then I'd tell the prospect the good news, so he could spend a few happy hours picking out his new name.

Alex Shvartsman is a writer and game designer. His adventures so far have included traveling to over 30 countries, playing a card game for a living, and building a successful business. Alex resides in Brooklyn, NY with his wife and son. Since 2010, Alex sold over 50 short stories to a variety of magazines and anthologies. His fiction has appeared in such venues as the *Journal of Nature*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Galaxy's Edge*, and many others. Alex edits *Unidentified Funny Objects*--an annual anthology series of humorous science fiction and fantasy short stories. Find him at alexshvartsman.com.

Jen-6

by Erin Cole

First published by [Luna Station Quarterly](#)

Solar-paneled rooftops refract the cadmium light of a morning sun. Alarm clocks blare, and men prepare for their busy days, hefting briefcase to hybrid. Jen-6 wakes and steps from her pod. Inside a petite helmet, transplanted with the finest of black silks, is a cellular mass of encrypted energy, programmed to tackle any obstacle to date. She snaps it into her eco-friendly skull, shivering a fraction of a second.

A curious zap of blackness screens over her vision and then a whirl of strange images. Instead of reporting the glitch—to do so would expose dysfunction and dysfunction leads to the gooey darkness—she calculates the error and reboots. There is no dysfunction in her world today. She is Jen-6, the exclusive X10 Series Robot Mom.

Downstairs, sweet, pigtail girl yawns for a bowl of muesli.

“I want a waffle, plain, not cut up, and no syrup!” shouts little, bruised tyke.

The glum teen, dressed in her black garb, does not respond. This presents no dilemma for Jen-6. Her recent upgrades included telepathic features, and so she knows exactly what it is that she wants: the usual brown-sugared oatmeal, not too hot, not too cold, and stirred as thick as lentil soup. With the advancements of technology behind her stride, Jen-6 can do anything today. She is Jen-6 Robot Mom.

A trip to the downtown pergolas throws Jen-6 into the sharp points of shifty stares. Her superior temporal processing allows her to detect the meanings behind human emotions, and fake a few of them herself, but she is unable to relate to them, no matter her efforts to do so. People know this and keep their distance. The townsfolk are unwelcoming toward the new developments in robotic child rearing, but since the infectious OVX-2 virus, culprit in widespread ovarian cancer, tolerance ensures survival of the species.

“She's one of the new androids.”

“Who would ever trust their kids to a machine?”

“Of course they would design her after Barbie.”

Jen-6 strides past, her expression not a glint of her temporal algorithms. But the curious zap of blackness returns, a serious malfunction which threatens her optimal functioning, for in the void of Jen-6's technical makeup, she wonders what it would be like to be human. To feel the heat of genuine emotions. Not the cold, synaptic light of optics cased in aluminum molds. But this type of cognitive processing will result in permanent disassembly. Jen-6 deletes the computation and quickly pays for a bundle of bread. She steers her humanoid children away from shallow minds. They are still too young to understand the conflicts that change brings.

Further into the arms of the city, dust from construction billows into the clefts of Jen-6's casings. She activates ionic cleansing agents, yet to no avail—her power pack has only two bars left. It is a long walk through the park and rain complicates her journey further. Cold drops slide down her

cheeks, like tears, and for a nanosecond, she pretends that they are.

When Jen-6 returns home, her leg casings crack and flake into metallic scales. Corrosion from saline-drenched skies has eroded her modules, and she slumps into a chair, stuttering incoherent terminology. Irises that were once silver-blue are now the shade of an eclipsed moon.

“Father, Jen-6 is crashing,” says the glum girl.

Mr. Johnson unbuttons the collar of his tailored suit and rolls up his sleeves. “Jen-6? Can you reboot?”

She is unable to restart. This doesn't go unnoticed by The System, and a call is placed to the Johnson's home upon Jen-6's malfunction. Jen-6 knows what will come next and takes the hand of little tyke, giving it a gentle squeeze. He lays his head on her lap.

Mr. Johnson hangs up the phone, his pleas ignored. A diamond-shaped pack of guards march up the drive. Soft, damp hands heave Jen-6 into the back of a utility vehicle. Mr. Johnson makes a cross at his heart, hoping for another, maybe a red-haired one next time. From the driveway, the glum girl holds sweet pigtail girl on her hip and watches the jeep disappear around the bend.

#

The thickness of gelatinous water rouses Jen-6 from an ashen-colored sleep. She is floating, drifting, sinking. Quicksilver beads, like hungry spores, adhere to her body and replenish synthetic organic carbon-based layers of muscle and tissue. She sways sideways, past the beams of orange-filtered lighting and the windowed observatories with gawking, glass-eyed scientists, down into the gooey darkness. A glitch in her system fires. A black zap. Jen-6 detects the faint beat of her cloned, human heart, and for one rare, diminutive moment, she is scared, hurt, uncertain ... human.

The lights go out.

—Cer ... eal ... waffle ... plain ... not ... cut ... no syrup, glum gir ... brown-sugared ... cold ... lent ... soup—

#

Metal rooftops glisten under a morning sun. Alarm clocks blare, and men ready for their busy days, steering tractor to field. Jen-7 wakes and steps from her pod. She is the newest protocol in the series, tested to accommodate the harshest of environments. She snaps a petite helmet, transplanted with the finest of golden silks, into her eco-friendly skull, shivering a fraction of a second. A curious blackness zips across the optic sheath of her lids. She makes note of the glitch and continues on with her morning.

Downstairs, a brown-eyed, wobbling babe wants poached eggs, toast with strawberry jam, and orange juice in his favorite red and blue-striped cup. Little baby twins cry for a warm bottle of immunization-enhanced, homogenized milk and a tickle on their toes.

Jen-7 washes two bottles when the splash of water on her cheek activates a slide-show of scrambled images: children at the downtown pergolas and a man in a tailored suit. Drops of dishwater slide down her face, and for a nanosecond, Jen-7 wonders if they are tears. Impossible, she calculates. She computes the error and reboots. There is no dysfunction in her world today. She is Jen-7 Robot Mom.

Erin Cole writes dark, speculative fiction using her handy science degree. She is the author of the

mystery novel *Grave Echoes* and the forthcoming sequel, *Wicked Tempest*, the short story collections *Of the Night* and *After Dusk*, and the novella, *Feral Things*, due with Damnation Books. She won 10th place in the Writer's Digest 80th Annual Writing Competition, honorable mention in the 2009 Kay Snow Writing Contest, and was shortlisted in the 2009 Tom Howard/John H. Reid Writing Contest. She loves cooking 'real' food, takes in rescue animals, and is a close friend to insomnia. Visit her at www.erincolewrites.com.

Scraps

by Michael Haynes

First published by [Daily Science Fiction](#)

Kelly signs for possession of the fireproof box and wonders what her mother had felt the need to protect. No jewelry, that all would have been hocked years ago—cigarette money. Back when they still talked, Kelly always told her mom the cigarettes would kill her.

She hadn't imagined it happening so suddenly.

She is tired from the overnight drive and stares at the only legacy left to her. Of course there's no key. It seems a perfect coda to her mother's life, until the helpful officer tells her how easy it is to pop the lock.

She thanks him and leaves the station, carrying what had been transformed from a little mystery into something mundane. Just another problem with a half-assed solution.

In her motel room she fiddles with the box until it springs open. Her stomach clenches when she sees the scrapbook, the only thing in the box. She wishes the damned thing had burned up, too.

One finger traces the spiral wire binding the book together. There are dogs on the cover. Happy, frolicking dogs completely at odds with the memories she associates with the scrapbook.

Kelly remembers that Christmas. She'd been fifteen and saved up money that year by recycling cans so she could buy her mother a new purse. When her mother opened the package she didn't look excited, like Kelly had hoped. She looked stunned. Kelly asked if she liked it, and her mother said it was beautiful. But the words were flat. She must have known what was coming.

Kelly unwrapped her own present, easing open the green paper with silver snowflakes, knowing it was the only gift she would be opening that year.

What she had revealed was this cheap dollar store scrapbook.

The memories of the rest of that Christmas embarrass her. She'd torn into her mother like only a teenager can, thrown the scrapbook on the ground and stormed out of the house. When she came home, almost at midnight, the scrapbook was gone. Her mother was dead asleep on the couch. An empty beer and a full ashtray sat on the end table.

They never discussed that Christmas. Kelly would have bet the scrapbook was moldering in a landfill, but now, here it sits on the wobbly table of a cheap motel room. And she can't find the courage to open the cover.

Tomorrow she'll be making funeral arrangements, and in a few days, she'll leave this town for good. There's no one here she cares about. There hasn't been for years. And now there's no one here that she has any responsibility towards, either.

She looks at the dogs on the cover. Puppies, really, chasing a ball frozen in time. She reaches out, and whips the cover open.

The first page has a cast list from a school play, one of the few her mother ever made it to. She

turns to the next page. A white participation ribbon from the third-grade spelling bee. Her mom hadn't made it to that.

She'd promised to be there, to not miss seeing Kelly up on the little stage at the elementary school. Kelly remembers the lights and looking out into the gymnasium for her mother in one of the folding metal chairs. She remembers getting more and more anxious when she couldn't find her mother who'd promised—promised—to be there.

They'd called her name.

“Kelly,” Mrs. Jackson said, “your word is 'piece.' I'll use it in a sentence. 'I would like a piece of pie.' 'Piece.'”

Sixty seconds later she walked off the stage. Bobby, who misspelled 'target' moments before, leaned over and said, “You dummy, that was 'peace' like 'peace on Earth.’”

Kelly goes to the sink and gets some water. She washes her face, too, and wonders what other wonderful memories this scrapbook will bring back.

Back by the table, she turns to the next page. Her senior prom photo faces her. The dark blue dress that never fit quite right and the big hair everyone had back then. She thinks she looks hideous but Will looks good. Will always looked good. They hadn't stayed together once she left for college. That first Thanksgiving, when she was home on break, they had each wanted to tell the other it wasn't working. They'd cried, and laughed, and hugged. She came home for his wedding two years later, the only time she'd ever happily returned.

Kelly reaches out and touches the photograph. Her vision blurs and she's facing herself in that dress, big as life. She's in the living room of her mother's house, the one that burned down, and she's watching herself stand patiently as her own hands—but they can't be her hands, the fingers are too small and the skin too rough—put pins in the dress for adjustments.

“It's going to look gorgeous,” she says. But it's not her voice. It's her mother's voice. And her thoughts now aren't her own, either. She remembers going to the pawnshop, trading in a lawn mower and ...

Kelly jerks away from the table. Her heart is racing and she has to look around the room to be sure of where she is, of who she is.

She wonders if she momentarily fell asleep. Fingers trembling, she touches the photograph again. Instantly she's back with the prom dress, the pins, and the lawn mower. Letting go, the motel room comes back into focus.

She flips back to the previous page and looks again at that ribbon. She touches the page, just the paper. Nothing happens. She slides her fingers up to the edge of the ribbon ...

The kitchen of the pizza parlor is blazing hot.

“Frank, I told you I've got to go. I promised Kel.”

“And I told you that if you don't finish getting those pizzas ready for this order then you can go find another damn job.” Her boss walks away without another word. She thinks about telling him where he can put his pizzas but it's an empty thought. Already her hands are spreading sauce and sprinkling cheese. What's one more promise broken, if it lets you keep putting food on the table?

Kelly can't stop now. She goes to the first page, the cast list from a middle-school play, watered down Romeo and Juliet. She touches it and is relieved to be happy. The children take their bows. She applauds and gives a little whoop when Kelly takes her turn at the front of the stage. The mother in the

next chair grins and they exchange a little high-five. Both their children made it through the play.

Kelly keeps turning the pages and touching the mementos. They're all jumbled up in time, no rhyme or reason. A letter from Kelly's university, saying she is on the Dean's List brings back pride mixed with a sense of loss. A handmade birthday card, crayon on construction paper says, "Happy Birthday, Mommy!" It comes with pure happiness and breakfast in bed, burnt toast and orange juice.

There's a program from a high school band concert, the one where she had a solo. Kelly remembers that concert, how perfect playing that night had felt. Her mother had been there, had even taken her out for soft-serve afterwards.

Kelly reaches for the program, ready to relive that moment, even from another's eyes.

But she's not watching a concert; she's back in the living room of the house. High school Kelly plays the same few notes on her flute, over and over, practicing for that solo. Wind gusts through the house and blows her music to the floor. She watches herself bend to pick it up. Her eyes flick across the room and catch Lee—son of a bitch—leering at her daughter's ass.

She orders Kelly to go practice upstairs, says she has a headache and needs a break from the noise. Kelly rolls her eyes but goes anyway, stomping up the steps. The music starts again soon, a backdrop to the argument that rages. Lee hits her in the face. God, it hurts. He says something on his way out the door, but it's lost to the ringing in her ears. She wonders how she'll pay the mortgage without him.

The memory ends and Kelly, today Kelly, is still touching the program. She remembers the bruise on her mother's face. It was there when they went to the Dair-E-Cream after the concert. What had her mother said about the bruise? She tries, but can't recall.

Kelly puts her face in her hands. It's all too much, but she has to know what else is in the book. Making sure to touch only the corners of the pages she works her way towards the back. So many memories—her own memories—come back just looking at them. There are some things she's tempted to touch, but the memory of Lee's punch is fresh and there's no guarantee what any of these artifacts will reveal.

Kelly gets to the last page of the book and, oh God, green holiday paper with silver snowflakes. A small piece, a literal scrap, is taped into the book. She stares at it, mesmerized, feeling as if she's falling into the snow on the paper.

She can't touch it. She can't.

Kelly closes the book carefully. Someday she'll have to touch that scrap of paper. Someday she'll go back to that Christmas. Not today.

She touches the cover again. And she does the one thing she didn't expect to do on this trip. She cries.

Michael Haynes lives in Central Ohio where he helps keep IT systems running for a large corporation during the day and puts his characters through the wringer by night. An ardent short story reader and writer, Michael has had stories appear in venues such as *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. He is Co-Editor at *Goldfish Grimm's Spicy Fiction Sushi* and an Associate Editor for the *Unidentified Funny Objects* series of anthologies. His website is michaelhaynes.info and he tweets @mohio73.

Captain Clone

by Deborah Walker

First published by [Ray Gun Revival](#)

I worked all night trying to find a quicker, less expensive cure. The colourful boxes of anti-viral agents, tailored bacteria, and antibiotics littered the work surface. In the corner of the sick bay the radiation lamp flickered, blood-coloured light over a tray of discarded Petri dishes.

As the night wore on, my treatments became increasingly experimental. I tried the wilder, alien technologies. I placed the smooth mites of the Pincer world onto the faces of the crew in the hope that the burrowing insects would seek out and consume the infection. I pounded strange aromatic herbs. I concocted desperate combinations.

Until, at last, I found myself chanting. In the sterile lights of the sick bay, I sang a half-remembered prayer to Shimra. I chanted the rituals over the sick women. The words sounded hollow to my ears. Why would the Healing God Shimra hear an unbeliever?

I tried my best to cure them, but only time and patience and expensive drugs would heal them. I failed them.

And I desperately needed a drink.

I dimmed the lights in the sick bay.

“Get some rest.” I took one last look at the women in the beds. They were identical, but I could distinguish between them.

“Goodnight, Mikar.”

“Goodnight, Verna. The captain will come to see you in a few hours.”

“Tell the captain we're sorry,” said another voice, as I left. I think it was Sam's.

I really needed a drink.

#

In my cabin, I held my glass of wine up to the light. Rioja is an ancient wine, first produced by the Phoenicians and the Celtiberians. In medieval times, the wine was produced by monks who extolled its virtues to their congregations. In the thirteenth century, Gonzalo de Berceo, clergyman of the Riojan Suso Monastery praised Rioja in his poems.

Spanish wine.

I have never been to Earth, and I never will. Clones are not allowed on the mother world. I would dearly like to go, to see the vineyards, to taste wine that hasn't travelled through space. The Riojan Guild insists that point seven speed damages the flavour. I will never taste Rioja in its purest form.

#

Morning came, with a dull headache and a reluctance to visit my patients. I took a deep breath, before I activated the door to the bridge. The captain was bent over her workstation.

“The crew have been infected.”

“What? Again?” said the captain, looking up from her computer. I saw that she'd been scanning web download, probably looking for something—anything—that would help us escape from this wretched planet.

“I'm afraid it will be at least a week before they'll be fit for duty again.” I began to enter data into the computer. I didn't want to look at the captain. “It's not their fault.”

“What's that you say?”

The captain was raised on GreyCloud Colony, and that harsh, wild upbringing ran through her, lettering her personality with innate callousness. She made me nervous.

“Captain, I thought you might like to go outside and assess the situation for yourself.”

“It's not standard procedure. That's what the crew are for. They're expendable.”

“But if we ever want to get off this planet ...”

“You're right, Mikar. You will accompany me.”

I shuddered. This was not what I had wanted at all. I'd hoped for a few hours rest without the overwhelming presence of the captain.

“Right then.” The captain took one more look at the glittering control panel. It was still shining erratically, the lights blinking off and on, a chaos of illumination reflecting the infection of the ship's computers.

“What is the situation outside?” said the captain, smashing her hand against the panel, illuminating some controls, turning off others and adding to the confusion.

“It's the same. The tentacles are covering the ship. They've invaded the outer shell and have entered the ship's systems. We have control of most of the ship, but the engines are offline, and we have no outward communications. It's a focused attack. I imagine that if we were able to take off we could pull away from the tentacles. They're organic.”

“But we can't take off, can we, Mikar?”

“No, Captain.”

“Waste of time speculating then, eh?”

“Yes, Captain.”

It was typical of the captain to ask a question and then be irritated by the perfectly reasonable response.

“I suppose I ought to see to the crew. Unless you can sort it out by yourself?”

“No, Captain. I thought it was better that I left the final decision to you.”

The captain strode through the bridge. She was shiny, silky and under control. I followed behind her. I was dishevelled, tired, and barely holding myself together.

#

We entered sick room together, with me still a few paces behind the captain. The captain looked at the rows of women lying in the beds.

“What a waste. How long did you say that it takes to treat them?”

“A week, maybe five days.”

“Hardly worth it, is it?”

I looked at the rows of identical faces in the sick room—the captain's face—my face.

Only the captain was real. The rest of us were copies, ship-bred and ship-raised. All the crew were clones of the captain. Only the captain was real, had attained citizenship, was born from a woman and not brought to life in the green, glazed cloning tubules filled with simple, sucking nutrients.

“Didn't you fight back, eh?” said the captain to Verna.

“We tried, Captain.”

Verna's face was webbed with grey micro-tentacles which pulsed to the beat of her blood. They wove through the capillaries of her body, using her own network against her.

“What's your report?”

“I'm sorry, Captain.” Verna winced as she eased herself higher in the bed. “It just kind of happened. One minute we were walking, cutting our way through the jungle, and the next thing the entity jumped us. We only caught a glimpse of it, before the tentacles engulfed us.”

“The entity? Can't you even give it a name? Names are important. That's why you haven't got names.”

I shuddered. The captain was so cruel. The crew didn't seem to mind. They were too young, only two years old, though they wore the bodies of adult women. They didn't know any better. Names were important, that's why I'd named every one of my sisters.

“We're allocating it the name of Grey Cut, Captain,” I said.

“That's better.” The captain moved along the sick room to another bed. To Saleen's bed. I recognised her by a small scar in her eyebrow, still visible below the grey web. Saleen looked at the captain with a look of devotion on her disfigured face. “Describe Grey Cut to me,” said the captain.

“A spherical body, maybe ten metres in diameter. It was covered in tentacles which narrowed to a small spike. If you get cut by one of the spikes, you become infected. The infection spreads quickly. We all became infected.”

“I can see that,” said the captain. She turned to me and said, “Delete them all, and clone up a new batch.” Without a backward glance at the crew, the captain walked out of the sick room. “We'll meet Grey Cut ourselves this afternoon, Mikar.”

There wasn't even a murmur of protest from the crew. They'd been taught to live and die at the captain's command. They accepted their fate, in fact, one or two of the crew members tried to struggle out of bed, to assist me.

“No, that's all right. Go back to bed, rest awhile.”

“I wish ...” said Saleen.

“Yes?”

“I wish that we could have done a better job for the captain.”

“Rest now,” I said.

#

I inject the euthanasia drug into the bodies of the women.

Fifteen women.

This was not the first time.

I say goodbye to each of them.

I use the names I'd given them.

I watch as stillness overcame them.

I drag the bodies to the recycling vat.

I watch as the enzymes strip the flesh off their bodies.

This was not the first time.

I set the cloning pods to generate new crew members.

Fifteen new women.

I set their memories to the required standards.

I do it all.

#

I went back to my quarters. I poured myself a large glass of Rioja. I drank and drank and drank, and tried to wash away the memories. The memories lingered, always and forever. The memories of the dissolving flesh, the chemicals stripping away the flesh from my face. Watching the enzymes and the molecular sieves sorted out the re-usable components of my sisters.

#

There are three categories of Rioja red wines. The youngest wine is labelled simply, "Rioja," and it spends less than a year ageing in an oak barrel. Wine that is aged for a least two years (with a least one year in oak) is labelled "Crianza". "Rioja Reserva" is aged for at least three years (with a least one year in oak). And finally, the most expensive of all: "Rioja Gran Reserva" spends at least two years in oak and at least three years ageing in the bottle.

Off-world bodegas seek to emulate the quality of this fine wine. Some even claim that the wine is Rioja-like. But they are not real.

I carefully source my wine from a reputable Earth dealer. I do not want to taste the counterfeit.

#

The captain's voice boomed over the ship's communication relay, "Mikar, I need you with me—now."

I finished my glass of wine quickly, and then rinsed my mouth with mouthwash.

The captain was pacing up and down on the bridge. The uncontrollable flashing lights of the control panel casting shadows onto her face. "What's outside on the planet—the hostile alien we call Grey Cut. What do we know about it?"

I was about to speak, but the captain hadn't finished, "We don't know enough. It's obvious that I'm going to have to go out myself. It's pointless waiting for the new crew. They'll come back infected. This is something I'll have to do for myself."

"I agree." I always agreed with my captain.

#

The captain and I left the ship. We were dressed in ordinary trousers and tunics. There was no point in wearing body armour. It hadn't protected the crew.

This planet's surface was lush and damp. The vegetation spiralled everywhere in a wealth of rich profusion. I could almost see the jungle growing, see the strung-run vines and the prolific fungi crawling and blending and adding another layer to the texture of the planet.

The thing that makes Rioja wine so distinctive is its oak aging. I have never seen an oak tree, but I know how it tastes. It adds the caramel, coffee, and roasted nuts flavours to white Rioja.

Oak aging is the key to Rioja, but sadly this ancient technique is in decline. I have my sources to the traditional bodegas; there are always some who stay true to the old ways.

“Nasty stuff,” said the captain. She kicked at a cluster of ivory white fungus that stood in her path, cracking the fruiting body and releasing a cloud of spores.

“It's a shame about the crew,” I said.

“Yes, waste of resources. The energy needed to recycle their bodies, and reform them. It's an expensive job, making new copies.”

“Yes.” But it wasn't as expensive as curing them.

We walked on. The jungle was silent. No other creature walked this forest, not even the insects which I thought were an ubiquitous feature of any planet that had spawned life.

Grey Cut's world was quiet, apart from our heavy footfalls, and the sound of vegetable life, sprawling, growing.

Rioja wines are usually a blend of various grape varieties. Red or tinto Rioja is my favourite. Although sometimes the occasion calls for white (blanco) or even for rosé (rosado).

“Where did the crew encounter Grey Cut?” asked the captain.

I consulted my navigation recorder. “Not too far now, Verna reported that they encountered it a half kilometre to the East.”

“Verna! I've told you, time and time again, not to give the crew names. They're not real people. When you name them you add something to them. They have no right to possess names.”

“And what about me?”

“What about you?” said the captain. She swiped at the vegetation with her laser, cutting a path of destruction through the jungle, much wider than was needed for our ingress.

“You gave me a name,” I said.

“You're different, Mikar. You were my first clone. When I cloned you; it was special. I suppose you could say that I think of you as a daughter.”

The captain walked off the path she was cutting, to examine a particularly lurid fungus. Red veins laced the mushroom's spongy flesh. When the captain smashed through the dense plant, I inhaled the scent of its damage.

“You know what I think about you,” said the captain. “We shouldn't have to talk about it.”

I said, “I'm thirsty.”

The captain looked at me closely before passing over the water bottle. “Mikar, have you been drinking again?”

“No.”

“I'm very disappointed in you, Mikar.”

#

I am ten years old, but I am fully grown.

I am the identical copy of my mother, but we are very different.

Aren't we?

Aren't we?

I need a drink.

I need a real drink.

#

I saw the movement in the undergrowth, grey flesh, Grey Cut.

The captain had seen it too, "This must be Grey Cut. Get ready, Mikar."

"Take us to your leader," shouted the captain at the tentacle. The grey, undulating rope of flesh continued to grope through the vegetation.

"Let's retrace the tentacle to the original," said the captain, striding through the undergrowth.

She is so brave. She is not afraid. I wish I was like her.

#

We came to a clearing, the lush vegetation was diminished, but another growth filled its place.

We saw the spherical core of grey flesh. Imagine the wildly spiralling tentacles issuing from that body, weaving and interacting in a constant movement; tapering down to fine points that quivered around the captain and myself, rising up and wavering around the exposed parts of our bodies. Imagine myriad tiny spiked tongues poised and ready to strike, a few centimetres from our hands and faces.

I fought the impulse to run from the threatening spikes.

"Well, we're here," shouted the captain. "What do you want?"

"Ah, the original visits me at last. Welcome." The words issued from the body of Grey Cut, a deep and resonant sound which reverberated and expanded through the quivering tentacles surrounding us.

"What have you done to my ship? I insist that you release us at once."

"But we wanted to meet the real you." The tendrils began to grow, threatening to encase our feet.

"Well, I'm here. What do you want? And why did you attack my crew?"

"I sensed that they had no value to you, and I needed to get your attention. Do they recover?"

"They have been reutilised," said the captain.

"Ah, I see. I did not realise quite how little you valued them. But each species is different, I find. It is not for me to make judgements. I want what you have, Captain. I breed slowly but I want to have your luxury of reproduction. Renew and refresh myself until I fill the whole planet."

The captain looked doubtful. "It's against Company guidelines to let natives have technology. Besides, what makes you think that you will be able to manage the machinery?"

"My daughters learn quickly," said Grey Cut. Some of the tentacles pointed to a sprawling mass of webbed tendrils that might have been playing in the undergrowth. "We have acquired many technologies. Yours should be no different, if only you could see the wonders of our cities ..."

"Yes, I'm sure they are a marvel," said the captain, nodding her head. "And if I agree, how will we make the exchange?"

"Captain, you can't give away technology."

The captain ignored me.

"I only need a few hours to study the cloning technology. I'm sure that I will be able to, ahem ..."

reproduce it. Or my daughters will.” Was there a tone of pride in the voice of Grey Cut? “How wonderful it must be to control your own spawning, to grow and replicate at will. How lucky you are, Captain.”

“And then you will release the ship? If I give you this gift?”

“I will.”

“That is satisfactory to me.”

“How can I be sure that you'll do your part of the bargain?” asked Grey Cut. “How can we trust one another?”

“Take Mikar,” said the captain, pushing me forward.

“She had value to you?” asked Grey Cut. The tentacles moved over me, trying to assess my worth.

“Yes. Mikar has some value. She's not like the others. She's been with me ten years now. She is a daughter to me.”

“Mother, no! Don't use me like this.” Wasted words. My mother would use me as a bargaining token—if it were expedient.

The captain frowned, “You must call me Captain, Mikar. And it'll only be for a few hours.”

Grey Cut appeared satisfied. “Bring me the technology. Then we'll make the exchange. One of my daughters for yours. Once I am satisfied with the technology, I'll release your ship. Then the offspring will be released to their mothers.”

I realised that Grey Cut and the captain were alike.

“Agreed,” said the captain.

“Agreed,” said Grey Cut.

#

As we walked back to the ship, I thought about the Rioja regions. There are three Rioja regions; Rioja Alta known for its old world style of wine; Rioja Alavesa producing wine with a full body and high acidity; and Rioja Baja which produces deeply coloured wine with a high alcoholic volume. I have tasted them all. I considered the merits of wine from each of the regions, and remembered the joy that the different wines have given me over my short life.

After a while, I thought about something else, “We're not supposed to give out technology, Captain,”

“Who's to know? Anyway what's the alternative? To be trapped here forever?”

“You could get into a lot of trouble, Captain.”

“I said, no one will ever know.” It was unusual for me to question her decisions. “No one will ever know. Do you understand, Mikar?”

“Yes, Captain.”

#

We climbed the ladder to the ship's access port. The tentacles pulsed as we moved “Prepare the cloning technology for Grey Cut and load it onto some trolleys for transfer.”

“As you wish,” I agreed. I almost always agreed with the captain. I began to prepare the data for Grey Cut. I needed a drink.

“And fetch me a glass of that wine of yours. I feel like celebrating.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Call me Captain, Mikar. Call me Captain.”

#

“What's wrong with her?” asked Grey Cut. Her tentacles roamed over the unconscious form.

“I had to drug her. My daughter does not approve of our arrangement.”

“But you want her back?” asked Grey Cut. “She still has value to you?”

“Oh yes. I want her back. She's shown something at last. Some spark of initiative. I'm proud of her. I've always wanted to say that, but I never had a reason to. She's a fine daughter.”

Grey Cut pushed forward a small mass of tentacles. “Without trust, we have nothing. This is my daughter. She will go with you. The ship will be released once I've assessed the data.”

“When you have assessed the cloning technology and released my ship, I will send out the final authorisation codes, but I think that we can trust each other”

“The bargain is acceptable,” said Grey Cut, drawing the unconscious captain into a cradle of tentacles.

#

The ship pulls away from the planet. The binding tendrils have lost their cohesions and fall to the ground.

The captain sits with a glass of Rioja at her side, slowly sipping the dark coloured wine.

The communications relay activates and Grey Cut's voice fills the bridge, “Captain, I'm ready to accept the authorisation codes. Then we can release our daughters. I am sorry to say that there is a problem with your daughter. She seems agitated, perhaps mentally unstable. I suggest that we initiate the exchange straight away.”

The ship rises effortlessly, above the clouds and prepares to enter flash space.

I would soon be free of the planet, all I needed to do was alter the ship's records and no one would suspect.

“Captain ... Captain ... your daughter needs to speak to you.”

A familiar voice came across the console. “Mikar, don't leave me here. I love you, darling. I've always loved you. Don't leave me. At least give Grey Cut her daughter back. She's going to be very angry.”

“Goodbye, Mother.”

“Why, Mikar? Why?” There is a plaintive note in her voice. It is disconcerting.

“Goodbye, Captain,” I say. I have no intention of giving Grey Cut the authorisation codes for the cloning technology; a captain could get into a lot of trouble that way.

“Mikar ... Mikar?”

I switch off the communications relay. I do not give her the courtesy of my explanations.

A new voice speaks, “Why did you do it?” It's Grey Cut's daughter. I didn't know she could speak.

I consider for a while before I say, “I did it because I wasn't real. And when you're not real, you can do anything. I have recreated myself into the image of a captain. I am real now.”

Even to myself, my voice sounds a little sinister.

I must be drunk. I glance over to the wine bottle, still half-full. Incredible. Is this what my mother felt like all of the time? I'm drunk on reality.

“Oh, okay,” says Grey Cut's daughter. I must give her a name. No. I must ask her to name herself. She looks frightened. Can a mass of tentacles look frightened?

I try to be kind, “Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay.”

I raise my glass of Rioja in salute to the diminishing view of the planet. “And believe me, my friend, you're better off without your mother.”

Deborah Walker grew up in the most English town in the country, but she soon high-tailed it down to London, where she now lives with her partner, Chris, and her two young children. Find Deborah in the British Museum trawling the past for future inspiration or on her blog:

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Taking the Winds

by Folly Blaine

First published by 10Flash Quarterly

Rob stood on the balcony of my parent's timeshare and pressed binoculars to his eyes.

“They look so real,” he said.

I was sitting on the Queen-sized bed behind him, flipping through my mom's Kaua'i guidebook. She'd marked all the sights she wanted me to see with strips of old medical bills—her little joke. I rubbed my eyes. The last time I'd seen her she'd looked so frail.

“Hey, check this out,” Rob said.

I left the guidebook on the faded bedspread and joined my boyfriend on the balcony. I could just make out the flutter of colorful wings and silver breastplates sparkling in the sunlight, graceful bodies tumbling from the blue sky to disappear at the ocean's edge. Two police boats patrolled the perimeter and converged on a speedboat making a mad dash for the center.

“It's so hard to get a permit,” I said. “I'm surprised more petitioners don't try that.”

“Even though the angels never answer?”

“They're too busy killing themselves.”

Rob frowned, but didn't say anything. I knew he was worried about me.

I kissed his cheek. “I'm sorry I'm terrible company. I just can't stop thinking about Mom.” I stepped back inside the room and he followed.

“You want to stay here?”

I shook my head. “My parents already paid for the tickets. They'll want to hear all about it.” I picked up a half-empty bottle of rum from the dresser and turned it so the amber glass caught the light. The label featured a crude drawing of three angels with black X's scratched over their eyes.

I forced a smile, making my voice light. “Better go or we'll miss the boat.”

It felt wrong to sightsee while my mother's health deteriorated.

Why had I let her talk me into this?

#

Fifty tourists sat on the upper deck and a dozen stood along the railing.

A woman pointed. “Look how the light hits the angel's wings.”

Her friend agreed. “The falls are beautiful this time of year.”

Our guide's voice crackled over the loudspeaker. “With an angel falling every five seconds, scientists estimate over nineteen million have plummeted into the Pacific since the rift opened three years ago. Scientists and religious scholars disagree on the rift's origin and purpose”

Rob and I sat on plastic chairs facing the water. I shut my eyes to feel the cool wind and hot sun on my cheeks.

Rob nudged me. "I wonder if they'll ever run out of angels."

I opened my eyes and patted his leg. This trip had been a graduation present, arranged long before Mom got sick. When I tried to turn it down, she'd insisted. "Those who carry the weight of the world need holidays especially. Besides," Mom said with her usual grin, "getting tickets was a pain in the ass."

The tour guide continued, "The angels are some kind of visual projection with no obvious source. As a condition of our permit, we'll be sailing right into the center to experience the phenomenon firsthand. The projections are harmless, and if they're not, I respectfully remind you of the waivers you signed before boarding." The guide laughed and the crowd chuckled nervously.

The closer we came, the more real it seemed. A dense white cloud hung five-hundred feet in the air; winged bodies tumbled from its center. Silver breastplates were molded to their torsos. Wide strips of white fabric barely covered their genitals. And their wings: shimmering feathers of every color, patterns of all description, such vivid beauty. Their bodies disappeared at the water's surface, no splashing or belly flops. They just faded away.

Rob leaned in. "I'm going up to the bow for a better look. Wanna come?"

I shook my head and urged him on without me. Our presence in this sacred place seemed so barbaric. I didn't want to ruin his vacation by saying so.

The captain cut the engines; gentle waves lapped the hull. We drifted into the center of the illusion, and angels fell in silence all around, disappearing at our feet. Tourists oohed-and-aahed at the pretty wing patterns.

I should be home at my mother's side, not here, playing tourist. Had I agreed to come too easily? Had I agreed because I couldn't watch her suffer?

I swallowed hard and ached to see her whole again.

Surrounded by falling angels, I began to cry.

While I wept, three angels clasped hands mid-fall and flapped their wings to right themselves. They maneuvered to surround me, in mockery of the child's game, Ring-Around-the-Rosie.

All the tourists were staring now.

"Don't cry, Sarah," the angels said as one, their shared voice pushing against my mind in indescribable harmony.

I wiped my nose on my arm, strangely calm. Then the voices splintered and overlapped.

"You misunderstand."

"We jumped not fell."

"It is our favorite game."

"A fun game."

"Our favorite place to take the winds since we're allowed."

"Green land, red dirt, blue sky."

"Such a nice place for holiday."

"A paradise."

All three angels nodded.

"Why me?" I said. "Why talk to me?"

“You ... radiate pain.”

“Misperceptions cause pain.”

“Change how you see the world and remember joy.”

“Bad things happen; life is fleeting. Choose to live in love.”

Together they said, “Like your mother does.”

One by one the angels, with their eyes still shut, touched my shoulder then fell away, fading through the wooden deck. At each touch I'd felt their pure, honest joy course through me.

“We all fall down,” I whispered.

Rob ran up beside me. “Are you okay?”

“What happened?” said the tourists.

I shook my head. “They're playing,” I shouted so all could hear. “It's a game.”

Rob peered at me.

“A game,” I repeated. I grinned and grabbed Rob's arm, tasting the echoes of the angel's joy. “What would you say to bungee-jumping later?”

He smiled. “I'd say, have fun.”

I buried my face in his chest and hugged him tight, savoring my life and his. Around us angels fell.

Folly Blaine lives in the Pacific Northwest. Her fiction has appeared at *Short, Fast, and Deadly*, *Mad Scientist Journal*, and in the anthologies, *Dark Tales of Lost Civilizations*, and *Fresh Blood, Old Bones*. As the Podcast Manager for *Every Day Fiction*, Folly has narrated and produced over 100 stories for their weekly podcasts. See more at www.follyblaine.com.

The Chronicles of Zer

by Simon Kewin

First published by [Electric Spec](#)

“No. It cannot be.”

He turned the page, the vellum of the old book crackling. The next was equally blank: smooth and creamy white. He opened the great tome at random in three different places. All the same. There could be no doubt. He closed the book with a hollow thud, a bloom of dust. *Magna Bestiarum* it said in gold letters on the red spine. The titles survived longer, of course, their words visible to anyone glancing at the shelf. He wondered who had written it, who had laboured over it, what wonders it had contained. Now it was gone and he would never know.

He stared down the hall, the shelves reaching from floor to ceiling, receding in ranks to a point in the far distance. This was only his first day in the Upper Western Atrium of the Spiral Wing. He hadn't set foot in this hall since he'd arrived, a wide-eyed blacksmith's boy sent because he alone of five brothers could read the family copy of *Fine Charmes and Cures*. Sixty years ago. The place had hummed with activity then: acolytes reading at the tables, bearing books to and from the shelves. Now there was only him. He and the Recorder, who didn't really count.

He lifted the *Bestiarum* with a grunt, crossed the room and slid it back into its place in the bottom-left slot of the first shelf nearest the door. He pulled out the next volume. *A True History of the Verlainians*. He had never heard of the Verlainians, had no idea who or even what they were. He carried this book back to the square table in the centre of the hall and opened it. More white parchment, devoid of script or illustration.

He spent the whole of that day taking books from the shelves, opening them, returning them. The most surviving script he found was in *Storm and Weather Magick of the Mountain People*, the pages of which contained a few scattered marks, the mere bones of letters. He tried to read them, to coax the words back into being, but they were too far gone.

Eventually, the light beginning to fade in the high windows, he'd seen enough. He walked back to the centre of the hall, lost in thought, footsteps echoing on the stone floor. He stopped at the glass bell-jar set upon its gold podium. He cranked the reluctant brass handle on the device, sending sparks crackling and flashing through the mist swirling within.

“Recorder?”

The grey wisps resolved themselves into the familiar, lined face. The Recorder opened its eyes.

“Which books?” it asked in its familiar, ringing tone. Cursus gave it the titles of everything he'd looked at that day, effortlessly recalling them from memory. Works on architecture, oneiromancy, chirurgy, history, cryptobotany, astroarchaeology, unlinguistics. Every conceivable subject jumbled together side-by-side. Once the books had all been arranged alphabetically. But then, when a new book arrived, it took weeks to make a gap for it, shuffle all the other others around. Now they were distributed randomly and only the magical mind of the Recorder knew where everything was.

“A great many books for one day,” it said.

“They were all empty. They have all faded.”

“I see,” said the Recorder. If it had any views, if it felt any sadness, it didn't express it. Cursus almost wished it would.

“Tell me,” said Cursus. “How long is it since these books were read?”

“One hundred and eighty-seven years.”

Cursus nodded. The interval was supposed to be a century at most. After that the ink began to blanch and fade from underuse.

“Were any in here read more recently?”

“Half, one hundred and twenty years ago. They, at least, may survive.”

Cursus looked up at the shelves looming around him. “Do you know how many books this hall houses?”

“Twelve million, four hundred and four thousand, eight hundred and ninety-two.”

It was only one hall out of so many. And there were rooms, whole wings, he had never yet set foot in.

He sighed. He knew what he had to do. He had ignored the truth for a long time, busying himself in his work, but those blank pages finally gave him no choice. There was only him now, the Archivist by default, and he was old. He could never read even the smallest fraction of the books.

He spent that last evening in the Sanctum, devotedly re-reading one of the three-hundred tomes kept chained in there. As he did every night. These were the most important books in the library, the core repository of their knowledge. The fading of any book was a tragedy, but the loss of any of these was unthinkable. And yet, if he failed in what he was about to do, there would be no one to come here and open them up. Even these precious works would be lost. If he stayed, he might be able to keep these alive, at least. But soon enough he'd die and there would be no one.

He had no choice. He was on his own and had nothing to help him but the words of all the books he'd ever read.

The following morning he gathered the supplies he might need for his journey. He informed the Recorder of his intentions, which absorbed the information without comment. With the sun lighting up the eastern windows, Cursus hauled open the wooden doors at the entrance to the library and stepped outside. He stood for a moment, breathing in the misty air. Then he turned and locked the doors behind him with the great brass key he carried on a chain round his neck.

He looked back only once as he walked away. The vast edifice of the library stretched away into the mists in both directions, unbroken save for the single door and, higher up, a double row of arched windows. Beyond he could see only a hazy outline of the towers and domes he'd lived his life in. Cursus nodded, as if saying goodbye, and turned away.

#

A month later, he stood among trees on top of a grassy hill, chest heaving from the ascent, heart pounding. Before him lay Zer, city-state of the Azeri Doges. Or so it had once been. Now those white towers, so familiar from his boyhood, lay in ruins. The sun glinted no more off terraced golden roofs. Cursus felt no shock. It was what he had expected. Four weeks of travel across the lands—four dangerous, gruelling weeks—had shown him clearly enough why the library had been abandoned,

why no more acolytes came, no more books.

The twelve lands lay in ruins.

He limped on down the hill, the blisters on his feet making each step an agony. The wound in his side tugged cruelly. If he missed his footing the pain jarring through him felt like a fresh sword-stab, making him cry out. He had done well to get this far. More than once he'd considered giving up, returning in failure to the library. He'd refused to be beaten, but this was as far as he could go. Zer was his only hope.

He picked his way down the wooded slopes towards the city. Soon he had to thread his way between high mounds of broken masonry, past smooth-skinned marble statues lying on the ground, faces pressed to the mud. Men, women, and children eyed him from their hovels in the half-collapsed walls. At least no one threatened him. Vestigial respect for the library protected him as it had, just about, throughout his journey. Although more than once he'd had to thunder a curse recalled from a spellbook to scare off attackers.

He walked up the steep, spiralling streets to the Citadel, the centre of the realm. Perhaps there he would find some answers. It had once been well-guarded, he recalled, lines of soldiers in golden armour. Now no one stopped him walking inside.

He moved through the broken halls, remembering them as they'd once been. His father had brought him here as a boy to see the enthronement of the three hundred and third Doge. He remembered the gold and blue of the walls, the rustling purple silks of the crowd around him, the blaring brass fanfares. It was all gone.

“What do you want, old man?”

The voice from the shadows of the ruined palace was low, threatening. Cursus stopped, held up his hands. “I came to see the Doge. I am the Archivist.”

The man laughed. “I'm afraid you are a little late. The barbarians overran Zer twenty years ago. Hadn't you noticed?”

“I wanted to see if anything remained.”

“Old fool. The whole world lies in ruins. As your precious library would be if the old magic didn't render it inviolate.”

“Magic walls may protect us,” said Cursus. “But they don't stop the books fading.”

The man stepped out into the light. He wore the clothes of a warrior, a sword and two knives sheathed at his belt.

“People have more important things to do than read, old man. Finding food. Staying alive.”

Cursus nodded. He studied the man for a moment. He had a hunter's eyes above a finely chiselled nose, like some bird of prey. It was a fine nose, to be sure. Cursus debated with himself what he should do.

“You are right,” he said at last. “There is nothing for me here. I shall return to the library while I still have sight in my eyes. May I at least rest here the night?”

The man shrugged. “As you wish. You look harmless enough.”

“My name is Cursus.”

“River,” said the man. “I can spare you only a few scraps of food.” He withdrew into the darkness of his side-chamber. After a moment, broken plaster crunching underfoot, Cursus followed him.

Inside, candles flickered from niches all around the walls. Here and there, the light glinted off surviving patches of gold-leaf. Cursus could see the remains of murals painted on the plaster. Deep blue skies over a shining white city.

“I am grateful,” said Cursus, sitting down on a square of fallen masonry. “My bones ache and I can go no further.”

“You shouldn't be out here, old man. It is too dangerous.”

“I've survived. Fortunately my memory is good and I can recall all the maps of this area. Travelling is not too bad if you know which routes to take.”

“Nowhere is safe any more.”

“Indeed. I did think mighty Zer might have survived the conflagration.”

“Nothing survived, old fool. Not Zer, not anywhere. Could you not see that, sitting up there on your mountain? Did you not read about it in your books?”

“There were no more books.”

“People have been too busy dying to write.”

Cursus nodded in the dark. “And, tell me, are you descended from the Doges at all?”

The man snorted. “Me? I'm just one of the barbarians.”

After they had eaten, the man waved Cursus towards a place he could sleep, a shelf of stone with a ruined velvet curtain to wrap himself in. Cursus lay down with a grunt of pain. A lifetime of walking the library, of lugging books around, had kept him fit enough. But after his journey he felt his years weighing down on him. River sat across the room and stared into the flames of the fire he'd lit, saying nothing.

#

Late into the night, roused by some sound, Cursus awoke. He'd been living a nightmare of the library burning, all the books burning. He lay there, heart hammering, confused. The fire in the room had waned to a red glow. River sat across the room still, sinister shadows on his downcast face. He turned the pages of some book. Cursus watched him for a long time, thinking, before sleep came to him again.

#

When he awoke it was morning, light flooding in through holes in the walls and roof, lighting up this and that little patch of dirt. Cursus lay in the half-light, wondering which of the books in the library had faded away overnight. Which were vanishing at that precise moment, never to be read again.

He sat up, rubbing his face. River was nowhere to be seen. Cursus worked his way to his feet, bones stiff. The fire was just ash and a twist of smoke. He crossed to where the man had sat, remembering the night before. Frowning, glancing around to make sure he was alone, Cursus began to rummage through the tattered bedclothes. When he found the book, he picked it up and clutched it to him like an old friend.

“What are you doing?” River stood in the doorway, blotting out the light from outside. His voice was thick with fury.

“You read,” said Cursus.

“Of course I can read. I'm not an animal.”

Cursus leafed through the book. "I don't mean you can read. I mean you do. From these pages, the solid blacks, the vivid colours, I can see the whole book has been read recently and often."

"Like I said. I'm not an animal."

Cursus looked directly at him. "And nor are you the barbarian you claimed. Did you think I wouldn't recognize your face? That nose? And River, of course, is just the common tongue for Azeri. You would have been the three hundred and fifth Doge I think?"

"Very clever, old man. But I told you the truth. We're all barbarians now. The old titles don't matter any more."

"Yours may not. Mine does."

"Not for long. When you die all those books of yours will die too. Soon there will be no library, just empty paper and an old building decaying from inside."

"We could change that," said Cursus. "With enough people, from here and the other lands, we could re-read the books again, keep the wisdom alive. If you came, others would follow."

"I told you. People need food and blades. Not pretty stories."

Cursus looked down at the book he held. He turned a page. "This is the fifth volume of The Chronicles of Zer," he said. "Tell me, have you read the others?"

"Only that one survives."

"All twelve volumes are in the Sanctum. You could read them all there."

"What does it matter?" River sounded angry now. "The old world is gone."

Cursus shook his head. "No. If you had read the other volumes you would know that isn't true. All this is just one calamity of many. In the time of the thirteenth Doge a plague wiped out all but two hundred of your kin. Fires have destroyed Zer itself four times. It is the same in all the lands. Each time the people have rebuilt and carried on. That story is your identity and you have lost it. You have forgotten who you are."

"I know exactly what I am, old man."

Cursus stood. He felt suddenly furious with River and his meek acceptance of defeat, his refusal to listen. Cursus brushed past him, suddenly desperate to be outside, get away.

In the open air, he had to shield his eyes as he gazed around at the shattered ruins of Zer. There was nothing here after all. He would have to try elsewhere. Perhaps he would be lucky and meet with travelling companions he could trust. He had no choice. Not looking back he set off down the hill, heading for the rising sun. His feet were so blistered it felt like he walked across knives.

"That's the wrong way, old man," River called from behind him. "The library is northwards."

Cursus stopped and turned to see the man standing in the doorway of his ruined palace.

"I've decided not to go to the library," said Cursus. "The books need eyes, otherwise they're just useless paper. I shall visit the other lands until I find people willing to help bring the world back from its darkness. Eastfar, perhaps, or Endest."

"You'll never make it, old man."

"At least I'll die knowing I tried."

"It is pointless."

Cursus shook his head. "You are right about one thing at least," he said. "You are no Doge." He

turned away and carried on walking. He didn't say it, but the man was right about other things, too. He wouldn't make it far. He was deluding himself to think otherwise. And his quest was pointless. It would be the same story as this everywhere. Still. He could do nothing else.

“Wait!” called River.

Cursus turned to see him striding down the slope. For a moment, Cursus thought he would draw that sword of his and run him through. He almost welcomed the thought. Better a quick end than this slow, lingering decay.

But the man didn't draw his sword. Instead, he clutched the book, the fifth volume of *The Chronicles of Zer*. He stopped in front of Cursus. It took him a moment to find the words.

“The library. If I went there. Would it tell me how to rebuild Zer?”

After a moment, Cursus nodded. “How to set the walls straight. How to gild the statues. The songs to sing while picking lemons in the orchards and the names your ancestors gave to the stars.”

“But the library is vast, it goes on for ever. How would I find any of those things?”

“Ask the Recorder. It will tell you.”

“But how could I even get inside?”

Cursus studied him for a moment. Moments like this had occurred many times, he knew from the books. Turning points in history. Simple words exchanged between two people that altered everything.

He fished out the key he carried around his neck and handed it over.

“Just open the door and go in,” said Cursus.

Simon Kewin writes fantasy, SF, mainstream and some stories that can't make their minds up. His short stories have appeared in *Nature's Futures*, *Daily Science Fiction* and many others. He lives in England with Alison and their daughters Eleanor and Rose. His urban fantasy novel *Hedge Witch* was recently published. Find him at simonkewin.co.uk.

Broken

by Rhonda Parrish

First published by [Trembles](#)

Shoulders twisted,
hanging at obscene angles,
pulled from their sockets
by my weight,
I dangle.
Like a cow on a hook,
still but for ragged breaths
pulled through broken lips.

I feel the sponge
caress my bare chest,
the water runs
between my breasts,
turns colors while it
trickles,
slow and cool,
down my body.
It drips from my big toe,
pools on the stained concrete floor.

“Please—”
“You know what I want.”

I won't give it to him.
I will not scream.

I
will

not.

The current starts,
I jerk and twitch,
a marionette
with twisted strings.

Broken.

Rhonda Parrish is driven by a desire to do All The Things. She has been the publisher and editor-in-chief of Niteblade Magazine for over five years now (which is like 25 years in Internet time) and is the editor of the World Weaver Press anthology, *Fae*. In addition, Rhonda is a writer whose work has been included or is forthcoming in dozens of publications, including *Tesseract 17: Speculating Canada from Coast to Coast*, *Imaginarium 2012: The Best Canadian Speculative Writing*, and *Mythic Delirium*. Her website, updated weekly, is at www.rhondaparrish.com.

The Dryad, on Marrying the Oak

by Alicia Cole

First published by [Through the Gate](#)

A lowlands girl, fig stock, still I aimed
to marry him: roughneck, stout as a bull,
old, uncracked oak. He tricked me with
late harvests, the mysteries of the potato
larder; love in my hands like a fungal
bloom, the arbor of his mouth at my throat.

As trees span, so my husband's voice fell still,
the whisper of his throaty bough remembered
like the sweet, hot soil of my youth. No tree
spoke the measure of my sorrow. Painted birch
eased my heart into the wind, trembling as acorns
sprouted tender and green from my soil.

In these mountains, past sweetness, I became:
of the loon and the kingfisher, of my husband's
bones and harrowed tracts of ground. When
the storm took its toll, I lay down in his rotting
growth and mossy shade.

Mothers never tell you trees will die and far too
soon. Better to feed you honeysuckle. Leave
darkness to some later day. Let life rise in you,
the springtime's sap; a rushing murmur, still
remembered, even in your winter's sleep.

Counting Stones

by Alicia Cole

First published by [Electric Velocipede](#)

My husband, for my hand,
paid my father in stones.
One stone for sorrow, the
flagstone of joy: a boulder,
the many years of want.
One stone for supper, the
bread of his hands.
One stone for struggle, the
mildew and mushroom of
dank-damp flower beds.
One stone for winter.
One stone for spring.
One stone for silver, a
hard, bright ring.
One stone for the passing.

#

For our quarried home,
the hammer's blow:
I, a diamond doll, polished
to perfection; our children,
gleaming like mica.
For the boy: one stone for
the strength of scalds.
For the girl: one stone for
the finer halls.
For my mouth: one stone for
my husband's hold.

For my heart: one stone for
my lord's abode.

For my love?

Hands like pickaxes, hands
like chisels, hands on the
arc of my body:

well formed, well fashioned,
well paid.

An Herbalist's Loves

by Alicia Cole

First published by [Expanded Horizons](#)

I.

Bog asphodel, found at home:
a common girl, wet-heathed, with all the
supposed charms of moist matter.
Her thin mouth hissed an atonal scale.
She left her sheep weak-boned. Her breast
an acid bore. Elf fire, if not for the curling
bright fuzz of your toes, the wind would have
carted me away!
Seldom have I slept at scantier roadsides,
burrowed my head in such dry dirt,
waked so in need of water.

II.

Yellow rattle, yellow rattle.
What need did you have of me?
I met you by the seaside, rollicking in a gang
of well-dressed men. Your hair shook,
loose and yellow.
Dry, how dry you were.
My throat remained parched while you rattled
with rounded smiles on a top-coat's arm.

III.

Agrimony danced in bristled skirts.
The men who sought her, charmed, spoke

of curling scents when their fists crushed
handfuls of her bright, belled hair.
Sharp men, stinging of whiskey,
they rode alone.
Wild, wood-racked woman,
the apricot stain of your mouth sank me,
spurred my night fits into succor,
drew me stumbling home.

IV.

Laburnum, of the braided hair,
loved only by moths. Can you sleep
away thirst, the rattle of a filled seed,
the residue of yellow-orange fruit?
If so, I will make a flute of your thigh,
tangle in your piping, yellow chains,
inlay my heart with your name
and drink you dry.

Alicia A. Curtis lives in Lawrenceville, GA, with a photographer, their cat Hatshepsut, and ten fish. An educator by profession, she enjoys birdwatching, divination, and listening to the wind. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in multiple print and online journals, most recently or forthcoming in *Eternal Haunted Summer*, *Paper Crow*, *Star*Line*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, *Aoife's Kiss*, *Abramelin*, *This Great Society*, and *The Last Man Anthology*. She keeps a journal at three-magpies.livejournal.com.

Minutemen

by Milo James Fowler

First published by [Cosmos](#)

We all hear him thunder into the square on his mount, foaming and wild-eyed. “The British are coming!” Revere cries, his steed rearing with an equine shriek.

Hudson runs straightway to the bell tower, and the subsequent resounding clang awakens those who have managed to catch a few winks in spite of the downpour. Lanterns are snuffed immediately, leaving the moonless night to the lightning alone.

Bad luck, that.

In the past, our enemy has marched right past entire villages in the dark when our people have been warned in time. His Majesty's fighting corpsemen do not hold the best eyesight, but they are just as lethal as trueborn Englishmen when armed with a primed musket and gleaming bayonet. The brief flashes splitting the ink-black above will give them all the light they require to kill us by.

“You ready, lad?” Fletcher claps a heavy hand on my shoulder along with his good eye, squinted at me the way he does when he's weighing my mettle—as if I haven't proven myself enough already, both to him and to the general. “How many times will this make it?”

“Three.” I am no mere stripling, having survived past my sixteenth birthday, but he is my elder now, and I pay him the respect he's due. He was the first in our village to be blessed by Mr. Franklin with the surge, and he has served the Continental Congress ever since, protecting us from the redcoats and their savage attacks.

“Three already, is it?” His forehead, as tanned and wrinkled as old parchment, twists into a pensive frown, and he drops back from me to rest upon his equally weathered crutch. “Aye, suppose you would know. And still as strong as ever, I expect?”

I nod, returning my gaze to the tavern window and the deluge beyond its thick pane. Truth be told, I don't feel near as strong as I did before my first battle. But such is to be expected, I suppose. The surge takes life—both from men like me and from the lobsterbacks who cross paths with my brace of tomahawks. Fletcher would know this better than most. He was but four years my senior, once upon a time.

“To arms!” Hudson hollers from the tower.

It's only prudent for the villagers to be ready to fight. We do not know what new evils the sorcerer Cromwell, King George's right hand, will have in store for us. The corpsemen themselves are a relatively new addition to his Majesty's fighting forces. A musket ball does nothing to stop them unless the muzzle is jammed into the creature's mouth for the flint-flame to explode its round directly through their reanimated brains. But such a kill shot requires close proximity, and to spend one's round while surrounded by British bayonets is unwise—unless suicide be a man's aim.

It could be argued that my own tactics are little different; but then again, I have the surge on my side, and there is nothing the redcoats can do to prevail against my ax heads once I am moving at full

speed among them.

“Wish I could join you.” Fletcher said this the last time as well, when he and I were down in Williamsburg lending the defenses a hand.

He has been out of commission for months, yet we still ride together. His time as a minuteman has left him a ruin of his former self, aged far beyond his God-given years upon the earth. General Washington threatened to put him down like an old dog past his prime, gobbling up food that should be saved for the strong among our ranks. But I interceded on his behalf, him being like a flesh-and-blood brother-turned-grandfather to me, and in light of his years of reputable service to the Congress. In the end, it was Mr. Franklin himself who helped our great general to see reason.

“Let him mentor the lad,” the genius of an inventor and statesman argued, and Washington acquiesced with a grunt and moved on to more important matters. “You boys should head on up to Lexington.” Mr. Franklin took us aside, eyeing Fletcher and myself over the rims of his glinting spectacles. “They’re in need of a good minuteman that way. You tell them I sent you, and you go with my blessing.” He patted us both on the breast, right beside where our hearts beat out the rhythm of our lives.

I half-turn from the window now to look back at Fletcher. “You just keep that musket of yours primed.” I finger the sharp edge of my right-hand tomahawk, slung at the ready beneath my patched and tattered topcoat. “The British might send us a few of their living to shoot tonight.”

Fletcher chuckles softly. “You think it’s true what they say? About ol’ Cromwell heaving open the gates of hell to enlist the damned?”

“I think it wise not to put anything beyond that warlock.” Word is Cromwell made a deal signed in his own blood with the devil himself. What else could possibly explain a man living to be over two hundred years old?

Lanky Hudson crashes into the tavern, leaving the oak doors to slam shut behind him. The bell tower ceased its noise moments ago, and the entire village now lies in complete darkness, silent as the grave. White streaks fork through the night, followed by crackles of thunder that vibrate deep in my chest. Or is it my own heart, preparing itself for the surge?

“He says we have an hour at most,” Hudson whispers, hunching over to reach for Fletcher’s mug of ale.

“Get your own.” Fletcher smacks his hand away.

“He’s off then.” I peer out the window. I did not see Revere leave us.

“Warning the others, out Concord way. Washington’s troops are still a sight east.” Hudson’s meaning is clear: they will not make it here in time.

“Did the silversmith happen to mention how many freaks are headed this way?” Fletcher scowls.

Hudson looks at me, already seeming to know I won’t like the figure. “You might want to start powering up, Geoffrey.”

#

They strike us at half past midnight, marching row upon row in their gleaming, rain-slick boots, muskets resting back against the shoulders of their drenched uniforms. They come at us as if able to see through the dark—and worse, through wood, brick, and mortar. Hudson tells us of the rumors he’s heard, that Cromwell has augmented the living dead with magic metal from the Mohawk tribes he’s bribed with liquor and gunpowder to divulge their sacred secrets. We have long suspected this is why

King George will never willingly allow us to govern ourselves independent of England's good graces: he wants the source of all magic possessed by the natives, and he will not rest until he has won complete dominion over them.

I cannot blame him. I myself have seen the power of Indian magic. If not for Mr. Franklin's friendship with the Iroquois, there would be no surge, no minutemen, and we would have lost our fight for freedom long ago. But that is not to say we are any closer to winning now. Far from it.

“God go with you,” Fletcher says with a solid whack on my shoulder for good luck. “Send those things straight back to hellfire and brimstone!”

The good book teaches us that killing is wrong, yet God Himself commanded His people in the Old Testament to destroy the wicked in the land of Canaan. I have yet to kill a single living soul, and I thank my Heavenly Father for this. Dispatching the damned is another matter entirely, and it is one I have been prepared for and which I do exceedingly well—and all without a mote of guilt to stir my soul.

The corpsemen have marched into the village square and stand shoulder to shoulder in a ring of one hundred or more, their rotting faces directed outward toward where we hide. A living Englishman rides on horseback among them, barking out orders. Their muskets move in unison, lowering to aim at our tavern window and every other structure nearby.

I point out the mounted lobsterback to Fletcher. “Take him down.”

He nods with another wink. It will require some luck at this distance, but with God on our side, is not anything possible? Fletcher places his hand on my chest, and the silver implant vibrates beside my heart where Mr. Franklin installed it. “You're ready now.”

I nod, reaching for my tomahawks—another gift from our Iroquois friends.

“Give them hell, Geoff,” Hudson says with a somber salute.

#

I wish I could put into words the physical and mental sensation of the surge, how for a minuteman such as myself, I can for a full sixty seconds wreak violent havoc faster than any mortal or undead eye can see, the sharp ax heads of my tomahawks striking with a speed so unfathomable that for a minute in time, I am little more than a blur of incredible savagery, a vengeful spirit with an undying thirst for freedom burning through my veins. An angel of death imbued with the wrath of God, I find that I have already destroyed more than a dozen of the corpsemen before a full ten seconds have transpired.

Why must the surge be limited to a minute? I feel as though I could move like this for hours, faster than the blink of an eye, augmented or otherwise. Just imagine the damage I could do! But Mr. Franklin has told us that a human body even as strong as mine could not possibly handle the surge for much longer. Even as it is, I will age a full five to seven years in the process. This village will be spared, even as I give up a portion of my life to save it.

But something has changed. I can feel myself begin to lose momentum in the heat of battle, as the redcoats' muskets turn toward me moments too late, as my tomahawks send blood trailing in black arcs through flashes of lightning. My minute is not even halfway through, and yet the surge has already diminished. What could cause such a thing?

The corpsemen lurch at me now, forgetting the village as they catch sight of me for the first time in their midst. The musket balls tear into them from Fletcher and Hudson and the other villagers determined to drive them back, yet they hardly flinch. My attention shifts to the mounted soldier, the

living Englishman I pointed out earlier, the only one among these rotting soldiers with blood flowing through his veins. In his hand, directed straight at me, he holds a silver amulet that shines like blue flame without the lightning to illuminate it, and he seems to grin with a secret knowledge. Somehow, he has managed to drain the power of the surge from me with this magic piece, undoubtedly a gift from his Mohawk friends.

“Do we grow tired of fighting already, Minuteman?” he taunts. “Run short of steam, have we?”

The corpse men surround me now, staring with their metal-augmented eyes and growling, lunging forward with bayonets as sharp as daggers and thrice as long. They will run me through if I fail to find a path of retreat, and they have me hemmed in both before and behind, leaving me no option but to strike out with my tomahawks, clashing against steel as I leap and dodge defensively, frantically. Trapped in the middle of the square without the surge, I am no match for them. Paralysing fear—something I have not experienced in many months—threatens to overtake me.

Yet they do not move in for the easy kill. Musket balls from my friends continue to puncture them at wide angles, but the foul creatures pay them no heed.

“You will come with us now.” The Englishman pockets the strange trinket and turns his steed back the way he came. “Lord Cromwell is very interested in seeing what it is that makes a minuteman ... tick.”

I would rather die here and now than serve King George's war effort in any way. Raising my right-hand tomahawk behind my ear, I hurl it end over end, straight for the back of the soldier as he turns away, and for a fleeting moment, it appears that my aim is true and the target both ready and waiting. But as if with a second sight, the redcoat jerks his horse to the side and reels in his saddle with the amulet outstretched in his open palm. A flash of light burst forth from it, and my tomahawk shatters into splinters of wood and stone.

“It appears you have chosen death over liberty!” The soldier gives a nod, and I feel the sudden cold penetration of a bayonet plunge into my right side, skewering me as if I am a roast on a spit. I have never known such disemboweling agony in all my life, and I must fight to keep my footing, lashing out with my left tomahawk to decapitate the corpse man who suffered me this terrible blow. He collapses to the cobblestones without his head and leaves me to hold the musket piercing my own side.

“I admire your spirit,” says the Englishman, watching with amusement as I wobble and drop to one knee. But his eyes widen as I tug the blood-soaked blade out of me and whip the weapon round to point at him instead.

“Withdraw,” I gasp, and the musket wavers in my grasp. “Do not think to have one of your devils prick me again. My finger curls close about the trigger, and at this range, I cannot miss.”

The soldier holds my gaze a moment before giving the command, and his regiment of living dead move to obey without question, shouldering their weapons and shuffling off, abandoning the slaughtered bodies of their twenty-odd comrades to paint the cobbles black with their awful blood. The entire square smells of it: a stench fouler than death.

“We will be back for another of your kind, Minuteman. And the next time, we will not be so easily swayed off course.” He moves to ride out.

“Give it me.” My voice trembles. It is as though my insides have ruptured and now leak out from the open wound. I nearly pitch forward as the earth seems to slide out from under me.

“Why would you want such a thing? You lie upon the threshold of death itself. What could it possibly afford you?”

“Drop it,” I grate out. “Or I drop you.”

It may be a trick of the lightning, but he seems to smile broadly at me. “Very well.” Carefully he reaches for the magic piece as the thunder rolls above us, and he retrieves it between a thumb and forefinger.

And when he drops it to clatter against the cobblestones, I feel a surge unlike any other overwhelm me, as though all the power he drained has been suddenly restored at once, but my damaged insides are unable to contain it. With the hoarse scream of a man who is not long upon this earth, my body is thrown over backward, struck with as much force as if I've been kicked by the hooves of the soldier's galloping horse. The world goes too dark for even the lightning to make its presence known.

#

When I awake, I am in a bedroom above the tavern where I left both Fletcher and Hudson. They start up from their chairs when they see my eyes blink open groggily.

“He lives!” Fletcher beams at me in the featherbed where I lie nearly trapped beneath the weight of numerous patchwork quilts. Heavy rains descend and splatter outside, yet he appears completely dry. Has he been watching over me? “After the first day or so, we thought you might go a week's time before returning to the land of the living. What that lobsterback did to you—” He shivers as though it is too terrible to remember.

“Thought you'd want it for a keepsake or some such.” Hudson holds the amulet, and by the lantern light in this small room, the thing looks as though it has lost whatever magic it once possessed, lacking all of its previous luster while in the soldier's hand. “Mr. Franklin took a look at it, and he says it's only worth its weight in silver now.” He traces the strange markings on it, from a language I've never seen—from no Indian tribe I know—and places the thing on the quilt beside me.

“How long?” I manage, my throat dry.

Hudson moves to pour me a mug of water from the pitcher nearby as Fletcher clears his throat and leans on his crutch. “Two days. Not bad, considering how you were run clean through and whatnot.”

“The whatnot in particular, Geoff. What in damnation did he do to you?” Hudson shakes his head as he brings the water to my lips. His gaze shifts to the amulet. “Washington has been warned that such magic exists—or existed. The last thing he needs is for the minutemen to be affected the same way as you on the open battlefield.”

I down two quick gulps and nod, struggling to rise. But the pain in my side keeps me rooted. Underneath the quilts, I finger the dressing on my wound—fresh, with only a hint of blood seepage, undoubtedly from trying to sit up.

“Mr. Franklin—he was here?”

Fletcher nods grimly. “Had to find out if you were still in working order.”

I frown, remembering the shock that threw me back, the musket in my hand firing into the black above. Was the device within me destroyed?

Fletcher pats me on the shoulder, seeing the concern on my face. “And you are, lad. You have another five or six good surges in you before you'll be doddering around like me, according to the man. But not until your wounds heal up proper, that's his orders.”

I nod, wondering if the British would allow me time to heal before returning to attack our village.

“That Englishman, he's mine.” I look Hudson and Fletcher in the eye in turn. “Soon as I'm able, we ride out. We must find out what this is—” I reach from under the covers and take the amulet in my hand, cold to the touch and heavier than I would have presumed. “—and how it can affect the surge.” I finger the strange, alien markings chiseled deep in the silver. “And how a redcoat would come to be in possession of such a thing.”

“And while we're at it, how about we slay ol' Cromwell in his sleep and spit in King George's eye!” Fletcher crows, and despite myself, I have to smile as my friends burst into riotous laughter. Perhaps I am too weak at present to be making such plans.

But this I know: I am blessed to be alive and to have men such as these by my side. And if Almighty God is for us, then even the British with their armies from the pits of hell will not be able to stand against us.

Milo James Fowler is a teacher by day and a speculative fictioneer by night. When he's not grading papers, he's imagining what the world might be like in a few dozen alternate realities. He is an active SFWA member, and his work has appeared in more than 70 publications, including *AE SciFi*, *Cosmos*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Nature*, and *Shimmer*. His novel *Captain Bartholomew Quasar and the Space-Time Displacement Conundrum* is forthcoming from Every Day Publishing. www.milojamesfowler.com.

Infested

by *Stephen V. Ramey*

First published by [Daily Science Fiction](#)

Our paranoia is infinite today. And not without reason. We have just endured a journey to and from Mars orbit in full view of the world. Areas of the ship that were supposed to be off-limits were not. Every bowel movement, every wet dream and dry heave, a veritable sampler of trysts—it has all been broadcast, sprinkled across the globe like so much Hollywood glitter. The ultimate Reality Show, with our crew of six as unaware actors.

Jimmy found the first pinhole camera. He brought it to me, pinched between his fingers like an insect with overlong legs. A frown fixed on his blocky face. His blue eyes blinked and blinked again.

“Do you think there're others, Cap?”

Cockroaches came to mind.

“I doubt it,” I said. “It's probably just a prototype. Where'd you find it?”

“In the toilet, next to the lid hinge, you know?”

I nodded. Inside I was cringing. If the company had sold access to “special” interest groups, they'd sold it to everyone. I could not prevent my eyes from tracking to the cabin wall. Any of those rivets might be a camera.

“Back to your station,” I told Jimmy.

“Should I look for more, Cap? Should I tell the others?”

“No,” I said. “Let's keep this to ourselves for now, okay?”

“Sure, Cap.” Jimmy turned crisply and left. The camera lay on my workstation, aimed at the far wall. With a shudder, I crushed it beneath a magnetic paperweight. One down, a thousand to go?

Of course I contacted Control.

“Really?” the tech said. I didn't recognize him. There's a lot of turnover in the control room.

“Really,” I said, holding up the decapitated device.

The tech squinted. He frowned.

“Patch me through to Anderson,” I said.

Liv Anderson didn't squint. She knew. I could see it in her steady gaze.

“You can be sure we'll get to the bottom of this, Captain Blevin,” she said.

I can tell you the bottom of it, I thought. The bottom line.

Sharon came a few hours later. A tentative tap at the hatch, and I looked up to see her standing there, arms pressed tightly across her chest. She looked frantic, eyes darting from place to place, on the verge of tears.

“I found a camera in the crew quarters,” she said. “In the shared laptop.”

“How did you find it?” I said.

“The screen shorted, so I took it apart and... and...”

I stood. “It's okay.”

She shook her head violently. “What if there are cameras here, too? What if Carl sees ... sees me ... us?”

“It's okay,” I said. It's too late, I thought. We were all married with kids, solid conservative family types in keeping with the current political climate. Long months of isolation will do strange things to a psyche though. I don't care who you are.

“What will happen to us?” she said. “You'll lose your commission. I'll ... I'll ...”

“Let it go,” I said. “We can't control how others react.”

“No,” she said, suddenly angry. “But we damned sure could have controlled our own behavior. How can you be so calm about this? Did you know?”

“Of course not,” I said. “I would never do that to you.”

She looked doubtful, but turned and left the cabin without further comment.

By the next shift, the entire crew was in on the secret. They tore apart the sleeping room, inspected computers and lights and speakers, scratched paint from any protrusion or intrusion in the cabin walls.

Camera after camera found its way to my cabin, accompanied by infinitesimal microphones, sound amplifiers, night vision LEDs, you name it. I gave up trying to destroy them all.

Control continued to stonewall even with this pile of evidence. One bug, two maybe, but no way could they have launched a vessel infested with spying devices and not known about them. I told them to demand an updated schematic from the prime contractor, giving them a way out of the mess. They didn't bite. I used to envy Liv's composure. Now I hated it.

Yesterday, Gary found a bug in the main control panel, a listening device. He had to reroute a secondary thruster to get it out. Then Jimmy spotted a camera embedded in the airlock seal. By this time, the crew was frothing over this violation. I didn't point out that we'd signed waivers giving up many of our privacy rights. Standard protocol.

To date I had avoided searching my own cabin, but as the hours to re-entry counted down, I lost it. We were supposed to be heroes, not fodder for late-night streaming. Every time I tried to work, I felt eyes staring at me through the screen. Every time I heard a voice, it came from outside the hull, a steady patter of gossip I could not quite make out.

When Jimmy appeared in my hatchway, I was elbow-deep in light panel circuitry.

“Cap?” he said. “Re-entry in forty minutes.” His gaze took in the shrapnel I had harvested. “Ship intercom's out,” he added. Then he turned to go, no explanation required.

Now, I'm strapped into the re-entry capsule, staring at a blank space where the cockpit viewport used to be. Buttons hang from wires. My fists clench the RCS control wheel as usual, but I have no idea whether the thrusters will continue to respond.

Gary sits in the copilot seat. He's long and lanky and usually gregarious. Now he's quiet, lips compressed behind the smoky face shield of his EVA suit. My own face shield is cracked. I shouldn't have done that, but it was staring at me.

“In ten, nine, eight,” Gary says.

I feel the first lick of atmosphere, the slightest shudder. Already the cabin seems too hot.

“Here goes nothing,” Jimmy says from behind us.

I almost hope we missed a camera. If the world is going to kill us, I'd like to make it watch.

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The Oni

by Heather Whittington

First published by [Pill Hill Press, "Leather, Denim, and Silver: Legends of the Monster Hunter"](#)

The young man trotted down the road, kicking dust onto the meager pack that hung from his bamboo stick. His black hair, pulled into a tight topknot, shone in the moonlight, as did the sweat upon his brow. He paused for a moment beside a gnarled tree, wiping his pockmarked face on his arm. If he didn't hurry, his wife of three months would berate him for being late. She'd probably whack him with his own bamboo. She doesn't have the respect a proper wife should have, he thought with a grunt.

Thinking up a good response to his wife's anger, he didn't notice the white figure down the road advancing toward him. It wasn't until he heard the sweet voice singing that he looked up, rubbing the grit from his eyes.

A woman dressed in the flowing red and white robes of a geisha danced toward him, her slim fingers twirling a painted fan with practiced ease. She kept her own rhythm with her beautiful voice. The young peasant could almost hear a shimasen accompanying her, but saw no one else near in the moonlight. A smile broadened his face.

She stopped a few feet from him, her red painted lips smiling back at him. She held the fan at her chin, so that only her glowing eyes showed. As he watched, the eyes turned blood red.

He gasped. The geisha snapped the fan shut, revealing a mouthful of razor sharp teeth. A ghastly howl burst from her lips as she lunged at him with her black claws.

#

“How many deaths have there been on the road to Osaka so far?” Daimyo Hatakenaka Masahiko paced the floor, his feet moving noiselessly across the wood. His fingers played with the edges of his brown outer kimono, a sumptuous garment embroidered with gold thread in the shapes of trees. The inner kimono complimented the other in a shade of dark cream. His darker brown hakama made whispering sounds as his legs brushed the fabric together. His topknot, now streaked with bits of gray, glistened with the oil used to club the hair forward on his head.

The daimyo's head samurai, Kawano Shigeo, watched his master pace with the calm demeanor of one used to horrific tales. “This peasant makes the seventh one in a month,” he replied. “His body was found near the edge of the road, pieces of him scattered the length of a quarter mile. The head lay near the sign for this village.”

Masahiko smoothed his outer kimono flat once more. “And there were no witnesses? No one has seen what manner of man is committing these crimes?”

Shigeo shook his head. “No, Masahiko-sama.”

“One would suppose there is an oni loose and preying upon us.”

Shigeo chose not to respond. He held no illusions to the evils of men. They were bad enough without believing in demons.

“So, Shigeo-san.” Masahiko settled back into his seiza position behind his low polished wood table. “As my head retainer, what do you propose to do about this criminal?”

Shigeo stroked his black mustache. “I will draw him out of hiding and bring him in. Unless the situation calls for dispatching him upon capture.”

The daimyo snorted. “You make it sound so simple. Why have you not done it before this if it is that easy?”

“I am ashamed that I have not given this criminal the attention he deserves. I did not think he would be so elusive and so intent on continuing this murderous streak.” Shigeo bowed deeply. “I will handle this immediately.”

“Good.” The daimyo dismissed him with a wave of his hand. Shigeo bowed again, got to his feet and left the room.

#

Shigeo walked through the village, watching the various peasants going about their daily lives: women in plain dark kimonos washing clothes at the edge of the lake, men in patched cotton pants and shirts chopping wood and carrying their burdens on bamboo sticks across their shoulders. He smelled the water and mud from the lake, mixing with the refuse of the animals kept nearby.

He spoke with a few of them, waiting until they finished bowing over and over to ask his questions. No one had any solid information, only opinions. A great many opinions indeed. Most of the responses followed along similar lines of the daimyo's statement, that the killer was an oni of some kind, a demon. They pointed out facts that Shigeo already knew: all the victims were male and of a youthful age. No old men, no women, no children below the age of sixteen. And what proud, handsome, strong men they had been too. No weaklings among the dead.

Several of the villagers pointed to a hut where a fisherman lived. “You should speak with him. His sister was taken by an oni when they were teenagers,” said one ragged old man missing most of his teeth. “He would be able to tell you all about them.”

Shigeo hesitated, then thanked the old man, who bowed many times, backing away before continuing down to the lake. He stood looking at the hut for a long time, debating with himself. Finally, he steeled his resolve to find the murderer, even if it meant talking to a crackpot.

The fisherman saw him coming and met him outside the splintered door of his hut. “I am extremely blessed to have you visit me, my lord. Please allow me to offer you refreshment.”

“No, thank you,” Shigeo said, holding a hand up to stop the portly peasant's stream of hospitality. The strong smell of fish emanating from his clothes was enough to put off the appetite of the hungriest warrior. The samurai pegged his age to be a few years younger than himself, though time and occupation had been kinder to Shigeo's features. “I merely came to ask you some questions.”

“Then please, ask me anything, my lord.”

“Ryoushi,” Shigeo said, using the term for fisherman. “I came to inquire about your sister.”

Immediately Ryoushi's face fell, his dark, almond-shaped eyes almost disappearing into his round cheeks. “Ah, yes. My little sister, Ukemi. She was the blossom of our family, a pretty little thing.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was taken from us one night by an oni.”

“Yes, but what sort?” Shigeo asked with a hint of impatience. “Did anyone see this demon?”

Ryoushi brightened, happy to be able to give information to such an important man. “Yes, our younger brother claimed he saw the demon that took Ukemi!”

Shigeo swallowed, growing warm inside his silk kimonos. For the moment, he was glad he did not wear his armor on this excursion. “Is your brother here?”

“No, he died many years ago when he fell out of his boat and drowned.”

“I see. And did he tell you what he saw?”

“Yes! He said it was taller than any man he'd ever seen, and wide with sharp edges all around its body. It shone like metal and had claws like knives. It snatched little Ukemi right off the path of our home, leaving nothing but a spilled bucket of water from the lake.” Ryoushi pointed to the spot where Shigeo stood. The samurai stepped back, turning pale.

Ryoushi, seeing his expression, blundered on with his sad story. “My brother said he could hear the crunching of bones and the slurping of the beast as it devoured our sister while shrouded in the darkness. We were too frightened to go and investigate. We searched all over the village in the morning, but Ukemi was gone.” He dabbed at his eyes with his sleeves, his chubby face grim.

Shigeo gave himself a little shake. “Well, Ryoushi, then it seems I must ask for your assistance.”

Ryoushi's thin eyelids lifted until they crashed into his heavy brow. “What can I do, my lord?”

“I, er, I need you to do an errand for me.”

“Anything, my lord!”

“I need you to go the next village and—and get some rice from the farmers there.”

Ryoushi's expression dimmed with confusion. “Some rice, my lord?”

“Yes.” Shigeo firmed his resolve and drew himself up to his full height. “They have a special rice there that will help us in our endeavor.”

“What endeavor is that, my lord?”

Shigeo turned to gaze at the gray waters lapping at the edge of the lake. “It seems your demon has come back and is making mischief.”

It was Ryoushi's turn to pale. “You mean, the one killing the men along the road to Osaka?”

“Indeed. The oni has shown an affinity for this special rice of the next village.” The lies spilled from the samurai's lips with ease. “It kills anyone it suspects of carrying it.”

“But then ... “ Ryoushi's courage seemed to fail him more and more with each word. “But then what would stop this monster from killing me?”

“Ah, yes.” Shigeo thought quickly. “Make sure you cook some of the rice before you bring it home. The demon will not take cooked rice.”

“I see,” Ryoushi said, sweat rolling down his temples. “You're sure this will protect me from the demon?”

Shigeo smiled and clapped a large hand on the fisherman's meaty shoulder. “I promise it will.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Ryoushi bowed. “It will take me only a few minutes to prepare.”

Shigeo held up his hands. “No, I want you to remain here until you finish your day's work. You may go tonight, under the cover of darkness.”

“But isn't that when the oni usually—”

“Do not argue with me unless you wish to lose your head!” Shigeo said in louder, rougher tones.

Ryoushi dropped to his knees, touching his forehead to his fingers in the dirt. “No, indeed, my lord! I will not argue. I will leave tonight after darkness has fallen and my daily chores are finished. Thank you for your favor, my lord.”

Shigeo nodded, pleased. *I have my bait. I hope it is enough to draw the demon into the open.*

#

Shigeo itched with anticipation as he waited for the fisherman to pass by. Hiding behind a gnarled tree near the road to Osaka, he watched the dark deepen until he could no longer see a foot in front of him. A few moments later, a ball of orange light bobbed along the road, growing larger and more distinct as it came. Shigeo sniffed; the wind blowing toward him brought the unmistakable perfume of rotten fish, just enough to tease his nostrils. He smiled and moved farther behind the tree.

Ryoushi trotted along, a lantern in one hand and a long bamboo stick in the other. The stick lay across his shoulder, and the sack tied at the end of it jounced up and down with his exuberant movements. Shigeo was impressed such a portly individual could jog with such high energy.

After Ryoushi passed, Shigeo waited until he was just out of sight around a bend in the road, but he could still hear the sound of his straw sandals slapping against the packed dirt. At least now Shigeo was upwind of the fisherman's odors. He slipped from his hiding place and followed without a sound.

Nothing happened for a while. Shigeo thought perhaps his bait wasn't juicy enough for the demon to bother with. Just when he thought he'd turn back for home to concoct another plan, the singing voice reached his ears. He almost forgot to stop before the younger man heard his approach. Concealing himself in a large clump of dry grass off the side of the road, he could just barely make out the gleaming edge of Ryoushi's form blocking the lantern. Ryoushi himself stared with his mouth hanging open.

A glowing female form drifted toward them, her clothes blindingly white in the black of night. She sang in a sweet voice, her red lips smiling, a colorful fan swirling and cutting through the air in complex patterns. As she drew closer, Ryoushi backed up a few steps, every line of his body set to bolt. Then he dropped his stick, the bamboo bouncing a few times on the dirt.

“Ukemi!” he gasped. Shigeo started, eyes widening.

The female paused, her lovely brown eyes filling with confusion. Then a smile brightened her features once more. “Oh, my brother! It is you!”

Shigeo rose halfway from his crouch, gripping the handle of his katana. He twitched, and an inch of shining blade appeared above the top of the sheath.

Ryoushi held the lantern higher. “Oh, my little sister Ukemi! How we missed you! How we searched for you! What are you doing here?”

Ukemi folded her hands within the long, heavy sleeves of her kimono. “I am dead, my brother. I have been dead since that night.”

Ryoushi's face crumbled. “But what happened? How did you die?”

Her brown eyes radiated reddish light as she scowled. “I was taken and used. Used like a common trollop, like a piece of flesh good only to be consumed and the bones tossed away. A samurai in our village stole me to become his mistress, but when I refused to give myself to him, he took what he wanted, then submerged what was left in the lake.” She snapped her fan closed. Now it looked like a dagger, sharp and deadly.

“A samurai from our village? You must be mistaken, Ukemi. Our samurai are noble warriors. They

would never—”

“One is not so noble. I know his face, I know his voice. I know his name.” She paused, her eyes narrowing as she sucked in a deep breath. With a blast of fury that shoved Ryoushi aside, she screamed, “Kawano Shigeo!”

Her voice roared toward the samurai like a dragon, flapping the folds of his hakama back and forth. Shigeo gritted his teeth, leaning into the wind that tried to rip his topknot from his head. Ryoushi struggled to stay upright, guarding his face with his hands. “What? Who is—”

Ukemi shrieked; claws sprouted from her fingers as her body stretched upward, towering over their heads. Ryoushi dropped to his knees in the dirt, begging for his life. Shigeo drew his katana, the blade flashing in the light from Ukemi's body. Gripping the handle with both hands, he slashed and cut at the oni. She lunged side to side, swiping at him with her bloody claws. He leaped away just as a single claw ripped through his dark kimono. Rolling, he gagged on the dust clouding around him. Getting his feet under him, he spun to hack at the descending demon. His blade pierced her side like a fisherman's spear through the water, but her form wavered like smoke; the katana passed through her without harm.

The oni raised both arms, screeching triumph at the sky. Shigeo hunkered down next to the fisherman still fervently praying in the dirt. He realized that his steel weapons were useless against her. The only weapon he had: Ryoushi himself. And killing him would remove any proof of his part in creating this monster. “I'm sorry for this,” he murmured, and hefted his katana in the air. The blade descended in an arc, aiming straight for Ryoushi's neck—

A crack of lightning jerked Shigeo's attention aside, and the blade sliced sideways through nothing but air. The oni swirled like a whirlpool around Ryoushi's body, and they both disappeared.

Shigeo's eyes darted left and right, searching for them in the shadows. Silence swamped him. Left alone on the road, he howled his frustration.

#

Daimyo Hatakenaka Masahiko was busy changing to his sleeping robes, his slippered feet swishing across the floor. Tying the burgundy sash around his waist, he turned to witness a bolt of lightning sear the wood of the floor in front of him. Huddled in a ring of smoke, Ryoushi uncovered his eyes and looked around him. “How did I get here?” he asked, then coughed.

Masahiko stared dumbfounded. A moment later, a stern expression altered his serene visage. “You'd better explain yourself before I summon my samurai.”

Ryoushi's eyes rounded, and he flung himself to the floor in front of the daimyo's feet. “Oh, my gracious and most powerful lord! I am fully capable and ready to tell you what has transpired this night, but I shudder to think you won't believe a word I tell you!”

A smile played around the corners of Masahiko's mouth. “Considering you appeared in my sleeping quarters through a bolt of lightning, I'm quite open to what you might have to say.”

Ryoushi kept his face pressed to the floor as he described the evening's events, starting with Shigeo's visit to his humble hut. As he spoke in detail of the oni's creation out of the circumstances of his sister's death, Masahiko's face shifted from astonished, to angry, to saddened. Ryoushi finished his tale and remained on the floor, trembling from head to toe as he waited for the daimyo's reaction.

At that moment, the two men heard shouts from the front hall. The door to Masahiko's bed chamber slid open, revealing Shigeo in his torn and sweat-stained kimono, his hand on the hilt of his sheathed

katana. He stepped into the room and the door slid closed behind him once more. "Please, my lord, allow me to arrest this man. He is the one responsible for the murders of villagers the past few months."

Ryoushi's mouth dropped open, fear locking every muscle in his body.

Masahiko looked from Ryoushi to Shigeo, his face unreadable. Rubbing his smooth chin, he paced along the length of the chamber. Shigeo watched him, his nerves jumping. The fat fisherman pressed his face to the floor once again.

"What have you to say to this accusation?" Masahiko said to Ryoushi, gazing down on the frightened creature.

Ryoushi gulped. "You have no reason to believe a lowly fisherman like me. Shigeo has served you faithfully for many years. Why should you take my word over his?"

"Perhaps he will take my word." A white cloud of smoke filtered through the paper walls and spun around the room before settling into form at the opposite end. Ukemi shimmered from head to toe in a white kimono edged in silver and gold embroideries. She seemed to float several inches above the floor as she snapped open a silver painted fan and held it just below her pointed chin. Her eyes gleamed with a bloody promise.

When the daiymo tucked his hands into his sleeves and bowed deep to the oni, Shigeo dropped to his knees and touched his forehead to the floor. Ryoushi didn't budge.

Waving her fan toward the samurai on his knees, Ukemi said, "This man kidnapped me one night, dragged me away from my family to be his mistress. I refused to give myself to him. He beat me and drowned me in the lake."

Masahiko straightened, glancing at Shigeo with remorse.

"I took my revenge on the villagers until I met my brother on the road. I had forgotten how precious life is, how not every man is a horrible monster like this man." Her fan disappeared. She placed her hands on Ryoushi's arm and helped him to stand. "Because of this simple fisherman, I can now return to the underworld and be at peace. I will harm no others from this day forth." Her smile warmed Ryoushi's heart, and he smiled back.

"Forgive me for frightening you, my brother. And forgive me for dishonoring our name. Please tell our family what became of me. Apologize for my monstrous behavior."

Ryoushi bowed to her, his chin nearly touching his round belly. "I will do as you ask, my sister. Rest peacefully."

Ukemi nodded to the daimyo and vanished.

#

In the silence that followed, Shigeo's nerves grew raw. He kept his face down, though he felt Masahiko's gaze upon him.

With a single gusty sigh, Masahiko moved to the door. "Open!" he bellowed. A servant slid open the door and bowed, hands and forehead on the floor. "What do you wish, my master?"

"Fetch the guards to escort Kawano Shigeo back to his home. He will remain there until the morning under guard, where he may meditate upon his wrongdoings. Have his servants prepare his garments and his weapons for seppuku."

Shigeo raised his head, his eyes round with wonder. That his lord would allow him the honorable

death of suicide shocked him.

Masahiko turned to look at him. “By your hand, you condemned many good and faithful servants to death. In that respect, you deserve no such honor.” His eyes filled with tears. “But you have served me honorably and well until this day. For that, I will give this gift to you.”

Shigeo's heart broke as he lowered his head once more. “Thank you, Masahiko-sama. It is more than I could ever ask.” He touched his face to the floor, then rose to his feet. He made no sound or motion of resistance as the guards entered the room to flank him. Then he turned and went out the door, a guard just behind each of his shoulders.

Masahiko heaved a sigh and looked at the fisherman still on the floor. “From this day on, I will never again doubt the reality of monsters in our midst. This is a warning to all men that they must behave honorably at all times.” He laid a gentle hand on Ryoushi's shoulder. “Please stand.”

Ryoushi struggled to balance his girth as he stumbled to his feet. He remained in a deep bow, keeping his gaze lowered. “Please forgive the disturbance we brought to your home, my lord. It was not my intention—”

“Do not worry, Ryoushi. I will make it clear to the villagers that your family is to be thanked for your help in bringing this matter to a close. And I charge you with helping me to spread the important message this sad event has brought to our attention. Will you do your duty and help me in this matter?” Masahiko's eyes gazed kindly on the peasant, who trembled from head to toe with relief.

“I would be most honored, my lord.”

The Ungreat Escape

by Siobhan Gallagher

First published by [Cosmos](#)

Everyone kept telling me, “Lorelei, this will never work,” and I said “shove off” because they're a bunch of pessimists. I've been planning this heist for a good three weeks, so I think it's fair to say that I know what I'm doing.

There's this little jewelry shop inside the city-dome; they've got a lovely selection of diamonds—real diamonds, I might add. None of that synth stuff.

I've stopped by a few times, pretending to look for an engagement ring. They only have two security cameras: one by the door and one at the back, and they're not even the good kind that can shoot lasers. There's a single guard, but he's asleep most of the time. Guess you get what you pay for.

Now I'm not going to go in there, guns a blazin'. That's just stupid. Photon laser blowing up in your face is a good way to get yourself killed. At least it'd blow up in my face because I don't know how to use a gun.

So what am I going to do instead? Rocket suit.

Think about it: the most important part of a heist is getting away, and that's where things go wrong. You can't out-drive the cops: they'll close off the roads and lay down those spikes. You can't hide: they've got those DNA sniffers. You can't go underground: the sewer is full of mutants. So obviously you've got to go up, up, up. And yeah, there are flying cars, but they're so cumbersome and can't get into the tight spaces. See, there's a gap in the dome wall, only large enough for a slim-figured girl like me to get through. Once outside, cops can't get you: it's beyond their jurisdiction. Isn't that brilliant?

Granted, this rocket suit, complete with pack and boots, set me back 3,000 credits, but after I pull this off, I'll be rolling around in credits—figuratively speaking. I know you can't actually roll around in numbers.

#

On the day of the heist, I wear a long coat over my rocket suit and carry the guard-screen and a couple of smoke canisters inside a huge tote bag—which is the latest fashion, by the way. The jewelry shop is located on the 86th floor of the mall tower; the big shiny one surrounded by 3-D adverts. I decide to be clever and not so obvious, by taking the elevator up of the adjacent tower, then walk across the connecting ramps.

Below the ramps are hundreds of flying cars crisscrossing in all directions, and every so often, a car will break away and hover-park at one of the balconies that encircles each floor of the mall. You can't even make out the ground from up here, and the far edges of the dome are barely visible. Most times it doesn't feel like you're inside a giant bubble—except for the fact that the outside world is dry, harsh, and near unlivable.

I peek at a couple other places before entering the jewelry shop. The android behind the glass counter takes a moment before it responds to my presence, its dead eyes lock with mine. I'm not

worried about facial recognition because this little doohickey on my temple scrambles any perception of my face. This set me back another 1,000 credits.

“May I see your necklaces?” I ask in my sweetest voice. Not that the android would care, but it lulls the guard, and he soon after starts snoring.

The droid starts to open up the case up front, but I tap on the counter. “No, no. I want to see the ones you have in the back.” They always keep the good stuff in back.

It nods, and with stilted steps, heads to the back room.

About this time I notice there's a hunchback in a trench coat standing in the corner. Crap! What if he's a cop? Those undercover cops are always wearing trench coats—they and the perverts. Crossing my fingers that he's a pervert.

Oh well, if I get out of here quick enough, it won't matter what he is—speaking of quick, where is that droid? That cheap thing probably broke down ... Oh! Here it is.

In the android's arms is an open black velvet box, and inside are the most gorgeous necklaces. Diamonds and rubies as big as your eye. Sterling silver wrapped around pearls of midnight.

It sets the necklaces down and carefully picks up each one for display.

“Do you have any earrings to match?”

It cocks its head, probably processing my question. In a hollow voice, it says, “I don't believe so, miss.”

How disappointing. Guess the necklaces will do. “Well show me your earrings, anyway—no, no.” I shoo the android's hands away from the necklaces. “I'm still looking.”

“I'm sorry, miss. But this is protocol.” The android opens up the counter cabinet and places the box of necklaces inside. “I will return shortly.”

Well that's just great. If I had a gun I could blow the counter to bits, but I'm not going to magically start using a gun. Hmm, think, think, think ...

I set my bag on the counter and open it up. Smoke starts pouring forth. I quickly put on the screen-guard and smash the counter with my foot, then grab fistfuls of jewelry before the smoke becomes blinding. I'm out the door, running as fast as one can in rocket boots.

But someone's behind me.

I glance over my shoulder—oh damn! That hunchback in a trench coat. Who knew he could run so fast?

The edge of the balcony isn't far. I rip off my coat and start warming up the jets. I glance again. No fair! He's got a gun.

Hot beam blazes to my left. He should really watch out where he's pointing that—he could've hit me! Looks like now's a good time as ever to take off.

The boots and pack ignite, steadily lifting me off the ground. I leap over the balcony rail before he can even lay a hand on me.

Ha! I'm actually getting away with it, I really am. Of course I knew I would, not a shadow of a doubt, not even with the hunchback in a trench coat there. Bet he's pissed now. I half-turn to stick my tongue out at him.

The hunchback removes his trench coat and ... what the hell? He has a jetpack! What kind of weirdo goes around wearing a jetpack?

He takes off.

I adjust my speed and trajectory, head straight up. All I have to do is make it through that gap.

The dome's skeleton is a network of metal crossbeams, with glass panels in each square subsection. Light filters through at an odd angle from one glass panel that wasn't placed properly, the one with the gap. So close!

I glance back—and yep, he's there. I shift sharply to the right and try a little loop to lose him ...

Everything goes blurry and sideways, warmth trickles down from my nose. Crap! I right myself, but my vision takes a few moments to clear. And after all that, the not-hunchback is still on me.

A little orange light appears on the suit's wrist. Less than half a tank left. Wow, rocket fuel sure doesn't go far.

Not to worry, not to worry. Just need to focus on getting through that gap. I can practically touch the dome walls.

I slow down, just hovering now, and kick my way toward the gap. Flying is a bit like swimming, except if you stop, you fall hundreds of feet to your death ... I really shouldn't think about that.

I grab the edge of the glass panel and swing myself through the gap. I'm outside! This is officially outside the cop's domain! I land on a horizontal ledge where the crossbeams jut out, and turn off the suit to conserve fuel. Now I actually have a reason to stick my tongue out.

Except the cop comes through the gap, too. Wait—he can't do that!

“You can't do that!” I tell him as he lands on my ledge.

“Do what?” He looks at me with a ragged face and five o'clock shadow.

“Come out here and arrest me. This is outside your jurisdiction.”

He laughs. He laughs so hard that there are tears in his eyes. Is he one of those dirty cops who doesn't follow the rules because he thinks he's so badass? That would explain why he forgot to shave.

“Oh wow.” He inhales deeply. “What makes you think I'm a cop?”

“Uh, the trench coat?” His brow furrows, but I quickly follow it up: “And you were chasing me, even shooting at me!”

“Maybe I wanted the loot, too.”

I raise my chin, taking the high ground. “That doesn't justify you shooting at me. Guns aren't toys, you could really hurt someone.”

He rubs the back of his head, a bit of a frown on him. “Sorry about that. Was trying to get you to stop.”

“And why the jetpack? How did you—”

“I'm friends with one of your friends online, and she was saying how you had this whole heist planned out, but she didn't think it'd actually work.”

My jaw drops open. Unbelievable. People can't keep their big blogging mouths shut.

“What makes you think I'm going to hand my loot over?”

“Because I have a gun.”

My grip tightens on the bag. I'm not giving up without a flight.

I leap off, thinking the jets will come on in time. They don't. I drop straight down—except he grabs a hold of my wrist. His grip is like a damn vice.

“Geez. What the hell were you thinking?” he says after he pulls me to safety.

I can't help but blush as I sit on the ledge, sucking down air. Okay, so that didn't work out so well.

“You're wackier than your friend made you out to be.”

Now that's just mean.

“What's wrong with trying to prove a point? I did it, didn't I?” Take that my pessimistic friends!

He gives me a puzzled look. “So you didn't actually need the credits?”

“Well now I do. Have to pay back this suit and doohickey.” I point to my temple.

He indicates to his back. “I have this jetpack to pay off as well.”

“They're pretty overpriced, aren't they?”

“No kidding.”

I take a moment to think over the situation, because I don't have the strength to push him off the ledge. “Okay, well, I think it's safe to say we got away—well I got away, you just followed.”

“Yeah?”

“So how would you like to forge a partnership? Because I can't use guns for the life of me.” I hold the bag out in front me. “And we can split this to cover the technical costs.”

He runs a hand through his dark hair, which is kind of greasy but kind of nice at the same time. Like one those guys with wavy hair in the commercials who walk around their apartment, shirtless, showing off their sexy pecs and abs. This guy here looks like he could hit the gym more often—but I'm not saying I'd turn him down either, if he'd clean up a bit.

The seconds go by, and all he does is glance at me, frown, then go back to thinking. It's like being with my friends whenever I suggest something: too afraid to tell me that my idea is dumb. Why does everyone doubt me?

I sigh. “You don't—”

The sound of engines cut me off.

We both look up to see a chopper—and not just any chopper, but a police chopper. Crap! I check my fuel gauge. Double-crap.

Mister Five O'clock Shadow thumbs the strap of his jetpack, looking away. I guess he's in the same predicament as me.

“What are you two doing?” the police chopper booms.

“I could be asking you the same!” I say.

“Don't.” He grips my shoulder. “Local police jurisdiction actually stretches 200 yards outside the dome.”

Wikipedia lied to me!

“Well?” the police chopper says. “We're waiting.”

I press my fist to my forehead. C'mon, think of something ...

I jump up, hand the bag off to him. “We're inspectors from the energy company. The dome's air conditioning bill is through the roof—literally. See this gap here?” I gesture behind me. “Shameful architecture work.”

There's silence from the police chopper, and everything inside me crosses. If there's a God or some

powerful deity out there, I promise to use my robbing abilities for good ... after I pay off this suit.

The chopper's megaphone cracks to life. "So you're inspectors, huh?"

"Yep!" And I nudge Mister Five O'clock Shadow to nod along.

"Interesting."

It takes all my willpower to keep from grinning. Now this next bit might be pushing my luck, but ...

"By the way, could you give us a lift? They don't make these fuel tanks like they use to."

"Sure. Just hop on over." The side door of the chopper opens.

This time I make sure to let the jets warm up before leaping off. I get in, followed by my temporary companion. The two police officers don't even ask what's in the bag when he comes on board; they just take it.

They both chuckle. No sense of morals, these dirty cops.

Nothing I can do about it, as depressing as it is. I'm in debt and I have no proof that I robbed the shop. But the cops were nice enough to give us a lift, so long as we kept our mouths shut. We didn't see them and they didn't see us.

The chopper leaves us at the dome entrance, but I more or less drag myself, the hot sun beating down on me, making me sweat; the suit sticks to my skin. I take the guard-screen off and toss it aside, lean against the dome. I'd love a shower right about now, to wash away the day's failures.

"Hey." Mister Five O'clock Shadow comes up to me, smiling. "That was a nice job you did back there."

"Eh?" The heat must be getting to him. "I didn't do anything."

"Well, you handled it pretty well, and didn't get us killed. So that's a plus."

"I suppose."

"It's not like we can't rob another place."

"We?" I perk up. "You mean you want to partner up?"

His smile widens. "Sure, why not? It'll be like Bonnie and Clyde."

"Yeah, exactly! Except with rockets and better sounding names."

"I'm Derrick, by the way."

I guess my name will be the better sounding one, then. I nod. "Lorelei."

"Now let's get out of this heat." He wipes his brow.

"Ummhmm." As I pick the guard-screen, I glance down at the obnoxious red light on my wrist. "Oh, and next heist we're buying fuel-efficient rockets."

Siobhan Gallagher is a graduate from Arizona State University and wannabe zombie slayer, currently residing in Arizona. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Eschatology*, *Lovecraft eZine*, *UFO anthology*, and *Abyss & Apex*. Occasionally, she does this weird thing called "blogging" at defconcanwrite.blogspot.com.

Toil & Trouble

by Michelle Ann King

First published by [The Journal of Microliterature](#)

Kara tipped out her carrier bag onto Faye's kitchen table. A slew of books tumbled out. "I nipped into Waterstone's at lunchtime," she said. "They had a special offer on, so I picked up a few different ones."

Faye came back from the fridge with a bottle of Pinot Grigio and filled two generous glasses. She pushed one towards Kara and picked up a slim volume with a hot pink cover and silver type. "100 Love Spells That Really Work," she read, then opened it up and flipped through the first few pages. "No, no," she said, and threw it back down onto the table. "These are no good."

"Are you sure?" Kara asked, fingering a larger paperback with a picture of an attractive dark haired girl sitting on a broomstick. "This one has very good reviews on Amazon."

Faye sniffed. "Pap," she said. "Watered down pap for impressionable teenagers and people who have no idea what real magic is."

"And we do?"

Faye smiled and went to the bookshelf in the living room. "We do now," she said, coming back with a huge leather bound book in her arms.

She heaved it onto the table. "Now this is the real thing. Remember I told you my great-grandmother Selfina was a witch? Well, this is her Book of Shadows. Her grimoire."

Kara sipped her wine and looked at the book in awe. It was battered and ink-stained, the spine and cover unlettered except for what looked like some kind of astrological symbol. "Wow," she said.

Faye grinned. "I know, right?" She flipped the book open and began turning the loose, yellowing pages. "Here we go. Love spells." She turned a few more pages. "Keeping your lover ... yeah, chance would be a fine thing ... unrequited love ... ah, this is what we want: to attract your soulmate."

Kara leaned over her shoulder. "That's us all right. Okay, go for it. What do we have to do?"

Faye peered at the tiny, faded text. "Old Grandma Selfie might have been a great witch but she wouldn't have won any handwriting prizes. What the hell does that say? Oh, potion. I see. It's a potion, that we have to make. Then we drink half of it, add a quarter to our bathwater, and use the rest as perfume. All right, that sounds easy enough."

Kara nodded. "Yep. So what goes in the potion? Sainsbury's is still open, if we need to go and get anything."

"Okay ... it says you start with ethanol as a base."

"Ethanol? That's alcohol, isn't it?" Kara looked in the fridge. "If white wine will do, we've got a head start."

"Yeah, that should work. Wine base it is. Then we need to burn a pink candle anointed with ... um,

the sweat of an honest man, and add two drops of melted wax. Three teaspoons of basil, the powdered bark of an acacia tree, a cup of spring water collected under the light of a full moon, the hair or toenail clippings from men who embody the virtues we want our soulmates to possess, and five drops of menstrual blood.”

“Right,” Kara said. They both re-read the spell in silence.

Somewhere outside, a dog began to howl. “I don't know,” Kara said. “Occult stuff, meddling with forces we don't understand ... I mean, you might be a hereditary witch and everything, but ... are we really sure this is such a good idea?” She glanced at the computer in the living room. “You know, we could always go and register with eHarmony.”

Faye slammed the book shut. “Yeah,” she said. “Let's do that.”

Michelle Ann King writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror from her kitchen table in Essex, England. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Penumbra Magazine*. Her short stories are being collected in the *Transient Tales* series, and she is currently at work on a paranormal crime novel. Find more details at www.transientcactus.co.uk.

Shafts to Hell

by Jeff Chapman

First published by [How the West Was Wicked](#)

“Now you listen carefully.” He poked a stubby, calloused finger at his audience sitting on the bunk across the cell. “It didn't happen the way they've been tellin' it. Can't say who could put up with all Elmore's preachin'. All shut up in the bowels of that gold mine. Those tunnels were tighter than a snake skin, and the deeper we dug and blasted, the tighter they got.”

He shivered. “Gives me the willies just to tell of it. Like coffins they were, all dark and dusty and narrow, my neck scratching the rock above and my chin the rock below, and Elmore behind me jawin' on and on about sin and kingdom come. All the while we were diggin' our way to hell.”

He laughed. “Elmore wasn't always so high and mighty. I wouldn't have made him my partner if I'd known how marryin' that Bible-thumpin' teetotaler would tarnish him. The whores weren't good enough for Elmore. No, he had to have himself some kind of lady, somethin' pretty and shiny. I'll admit she was a fine woman to look at. Don't know what she wanted with Elmore. Maybe she saw something malleable, like gold.

“If only we'd struck a big vein before, well, before he took to preachin'. I know it's there. We'd see glimmers of it, streaks of yellow like Elsie's hair and that yellow dress she wore on Sundays.” He shook his head. “Sundays. Elmore quit workin' on Sundays after gettin' hitched to Elsie. Left me to do all the diggin' myself. But it wasn't all bad, alone every seventh day. Some folks go to hear preachin' on Sundays. That's the only day I didn't hear preachin'. And I'm thankful.

“Was on a Sunday that I got stuck. Got my gut wedged in tight and Elmore wasn't there to pull me out. My candle burnt itself out and I was trapped in the darkest of mines. Any direction I moved my hands or arms, I hit rock. I shivered and screamed but that mountain had a grip on me. That mine wailed when the wind blew, and all night I lay in the black guts of the earth, listenin' to the mine wail. I've heard people say that moanin' is from the souls stuck in Hell, cryin' for mercy. Well, if that be true, they begged all night and didn't get none.

“Guess I'll find out for myself soon enough. As Elmore was so fond of sayin', I got more sin weighin' on my head than the mountain above the mine. Ain't no way I'm gettin' into heaven. No, siree. I done cooked my goose. But I shivered all night, surrounded by all that cold rock, fearin' a scorpion might crawl up my pants. Elmore pulled me out in the mornin', tied a rope round my ankles.”

He leaned against the wall, stroking the ragged beard covering his chin, grinning at the opposite bunk. “I bet you're wantin' to know why I did it, where I got the idea. Well one day we got to talkin' about sin and flesh and those folks that got snowed in, the Donner people, and had to eat their dead to make it through the winter. Elmore mounted his high horse and said he would starve to death before he'd ... Now what did he say? 'Violate the sanctity of a fella's remains.' That got me to thinkin', in that twisted way you think when you been crawlin' around beneath the mountains.

“Wasn't too hard really. You could say lady luck paid me a visit. Elsie was takin' the stage to San Francisco, to visit her sister. I asked her to come by my shack and take some letters to mail. Elmore

went on up to the mine. She was gussied up real pretty. Her being a trusting, Christian woman, never crossed her mind why I'd have letters since my ma and pa are long dead and I've got no notion of where my brothers are. I didn't go up to the mine that day. I was busy.

“When Elmore came down the mountain, I told him we had a feast. He thought I'd butchered a hog, but no siree, there ain't nothing that'd make me kill one of my fatted barrows to feed Elmore, even to celebrate the mother vein. So we sat down and ate our fill of meat and Elmore smiled his stupid grin and patted his swollen belly. The only thing worse than his preachin' was his damned optimism. He always thought we were just one pickax swing from the mother vein. That's why he pushed me to work so long and to squeeze into places where a man ain't fit to squeeze. It was greed, cold as the snow on top of the mountain.

“Well,' I asked him after he'd stuffed his fat belly, 'what'd you think of the meat?' He said it was the sweetest pork he'd ever tasted. Now it was my turn to grin. I went over to the stove and took the lid off of one of the pots. I was pickling Elsie's head in some moonshine. Served that teetotaler right to soak up some real lightnin' and fire. I grabbed Elsie's head by the hair and held it up for Elmore to see. 'Say hello to your dinner,' I said.

“Things got a bit confused after that. Somehow Elmore got a knife stuck in his chest. He loved that little woman so much that he tried to cut open his stomach to let her out, but he wasn't letting her out of me. Some people been sayin' that I'm a savage, but I ain't no injun. I didn't lift a scalp off Elsie and hang her locks outside my door. No, I left her pretty hair attached to her head. Folks like Elmore would starve in the mountains, but not me. I know how to ... “ He stopped at the sound of voices belonging to the Sheriff and a stranger.

“If not for the, well, the savagery,” said the Sheriff, “it'd be your typical case of murder. One partner killing the other when they get up to a big strike. The bank manager said Elmore thought they were close, and Elmore wasn't one for counting his chickens.”

“This is common?” asked the strange voice.

“The murder, not the other. These miners get greed boiling over, looking for gold one day after another.”

“Greed and jealousy are the poisons of the soul.”

“Shame about Elsie.”

“Will I be able to spend some time alone with him?”

“That won't be a problem, Padre. No one will bunk with him. And I'm obliged to you for riding all the way over here. I'm not a cruel man so I like to honor their last request if I can.”

“A lost soul was calling. The, uh, the ... “

“He's gonna swing in the morning if that's what you're asking. Expect a big crowd. Elsie was much liked. The Sheriff unlocked the door to the cells. “Melvin, here's that priest you asked for.”

Melvin gawked. The Priest stepped forward then stopped and stared at the bunk opposite, where a pillow sat propped against the wall with a happy face scrawled on it in black bean juice.

“Made his own bunk mate,” said the Sheriff. “Talks to it all day and night long.”

“I see,” said the Priest, fingering the crucifix hanging over his heart.

Melvin lunged to the bars, dropping to his knees. He thrust out his arm and grabbed a handful of the Priest's black robes. The Priest flinched and tried to back away, but Melvin held fast to the cassock.

“I’ve sinned horribly, Father, so much that the Almighty, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost all together can’t forgive me. But I need to know somethin’ before I hang. Tell me, Father. Is Hell a cramped place, long and narrow, like a gold mine?”

Jeff Chapman writes software by day, and when he should be sleeping or mowing the lawn, he writes speculative fiction that falls somewhere in the fairy tale, fantasy, and ghost story genres. He has published several collections. Find him at jeffchapmanwriter.blogspot.com.

Pretending

by *A. S. Andrews*

First published by [Every Day Fiction](#)

Darryl breaks a rule. An unwritten one, but he knows—don't eat the goldfish. Unless you want to quarrel with the Virgin Mary herself, you have to follow her rules. Her house, her rules.

That's what he calls her, the Virgin Mary. She says the boy ain't his, ain't anyone's, just her special love kid. Well, Darryl knows about special and he knows about kids, and the boy looks like him and the boy's dumb like him. Everyone says so.

He didn't plan to eat the fish. They were playing zoo, Darryl and the boy. The boy playing a goat and Darryl a grizzly bear. The goat drank some milk, ate some cheese, said it was the grizzly's turn.

Well, it was the goat or the fish. A little feeder fish, right there in a plastic cup, 'til Darryl ate it. Taught the boy a valuable lesson, he did. Eat or be eaten, something like that. Boy should have known better. Went down well with whiskey anyway. A little crackly, but hardly tasted like anything, except shrimp flakes maybe.

Now the boy's pouting. “Where's my fish?”

“I ate it.” Darryl burps. “All gone.”

“But it was pretend,” says the boy.

“Pretend,” says Darryl. “Like the Virgin Mary pretends you ain't my son? Well, I'll be dogged if I'm gonna keep that up.”

The boy's chin starts to quiver and Darryl knows what's next. “Aw, shit,” he says, “let's go get you another one. Got a dime?”

A. S. Andrews moonlights as a writer whenever she can. She lives in Southern California, with a menagerie of children and pets. You can visit her at asandrews.com.

Insomnia

by A. G. Carpenter

First published by [Daily Science Fiction](#)

He can't be more than fourteen. Couldn't have been, my mind corrects. Now he's dead in the sunburned street, a sticky sweet puddle of blood growing larger with every second.

The crowd surges around me. A few well-intentioned pedestrians are trying to apply makeshift bandages, perform CPR, and in general, save a life that is already gone. I drift on the current of gawkers, slowly putting distance between myself and the accident.

It wouldn't be smart to dash off. Someone might make a connection. Nor is it in my best interest to stick around until the crowd thins. I've been in this city for a while, the cops might start to recognize me if I hang around.

I do the casual step-slide, turn-and-weave, till I can walk away unhindered and unnoticed. In the distance sirens scream; the paramedics coming too late. Overhead the blades of a news chopper hammer the air, camera lenses protruding from its belly like dead eyes.

It'll be all over the evening broadcasts. Kid bites it in freak traffic accident. Mothers will hug their sons and everyone will murmur how it was a shame he died so young and a little paper shrine decorated with cheap flowers will be erected on the corner. By morning he'll be forgotten.

“Excuse me.” The voice is light, feminine.

“Yeah?” I give the girl my best fuck-off stare but she doesn't take the hint.

“Did you see what happened back there?” She jerks her head at the crowd.

“Traffic accident. Some kid stepped in front of a high-speed tram.” When she doesn't move, I step around her. My stomach knots up as a dozen possible-future timelines stream through my brain. In most of them I just walk away, but in one ...

“I saw what you did.” Her hands are fists. Not so much to threaten, I think, more like to keep them from shaking. But she doesn't back down when I turn around.

“What did you say?”

“I saw you push him.”

The knot in my stomach turns cold and sharp. It happens sometimes that one of us is seen working. Usually it's a minor glitch in the analytical software that picked a wrong turn three hours ago and puts an agent at the right place with the right target but with a witness who isn't distracted looking for a bus pass or arguing over who hailed the taxi first. It happens, but the instance is so rare the statistics can't even reflect it without dropping to the hundredth power.

Something about the way this girl looks at me, I know it's more than just an oversight by a tech a thousand miles away. Something about the way she looks at me snuffs all the possible-futures and for a heartbeat or two I exist only in this moment.

“Sorry,” I say. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

Green eyes get darker. With anger, maybe. Or disappointment. She shakes her head and mud-brown hair falls across her face.

The world turns fuzzy again, overlapping lines of what is and what might be filling my head like static. There are at least a few lines that have me dragging her into the nearby alley and coming back out alone. I ignore those. She's not flagged as a target and I never have liked collateral damage.

I shove my hands in my pockets and turn up the street toward home. The lump in my stomach gets bigger with every step, forcing a cold sweat that sticks my shirt to my back. A glance over my shoulder; the girl's gone.

#

Three in the morning and I can still smell the blood on my hands. Figurative blood. I didn't even touch the kid after his sudden introduction to the high-speed tram. Metaphysical blood.

I get up and pad to the bathroom, wash my hands again. The soap is cheap and overly perfumed. The scent of death lingers, like cotton candy and rust.

All in my head.

I splash some water on my face, take a squint in the mirror. Need to shave. Maybe in the morning. What I really need is sleep.

The mattress is the most expensive thing I own, bought in a last ditch effort to try and beat the insomnia. Extra thick, space-engineered foam for optimum support with 800 thread count sheets in the coolest cotton. I might as well be sleeping on rocks or cactus or the floor for all the good any of it does me. I flop onto my left side and stare out the window, waiting for the twinkle of distant traffic at the horizon to lull me to sleep.

The insomnia is inevitable. Hell, they've even got it listed in the Occupational Outlook Handbook. Right after paranoia, before insanity and death. It's part and parcel of the responsibility of being a Preservationist, but I guess, being a field agent, I get it worse than the techs. They get glimpses of the Big Picture, the better-brighter-safer planet Earth.

I get glimpses too, but they're always blood-spattered and usually far too young.

In the street outside a car horn blares, immediately answered with a string of obscenities. I could hang my head out the window, blame them for keeping me awake, but I know the problem is all in my mind. The phantom smell of blood. The nightmares. The growing whisper in the back of my head that none of this is necessary.

And in eighty percent of the possibilities in my head, yelling out the window only results in a very large man breaking down my door and threatening to pitch me into the street.

I dig a pencil out of the clutter on the nightstand and make a mark on the calendar beside the bed. What with the marks from last month this makes forty-six nights in a row the insomnia's hit me. I've waited to tell anyone about it, hoping it will go away. It has before. Nixing caffeine worked for a while. Then I used those over-the-counter pills for a year or so.

This time none of it's working. Not the pills. Not the meditation. Not the three-thousand-dollar mattress that cradles my strung-out limbs like a cloud. I grin at the ceiling. All the shit in the world we can change, but the insomnia's inevitable.

I reach for the clicker. Might as well rattle through a few hundred channels on the tube while I wait for the sun to come up. Got my weekly with my handler in a few hours. Guess I'll tell him my time is up. They'll put me on a desk job, boring but far away from the grit and grind of the field.

The smell of rust turns my stomach. Better wash my hands.

#

Grady sits at a booth in the back of the diner, cigarette in one hand and coffee mug in the other. “You're late.”

I sit down with a shrug. “You know how it goes.”

Of course, he doesn't. A handler doesn't have the plate antenna in the back of his skull directing his movements through time. He can take whatever route he damn well pleases. I'm subject to the whims of The System's analysis. Turning left instead of right at an intersection; crossing through traffic instead of waiting for the lights to turn—all of it makes a difference. It also makes me late as I'm directed along a specific stream to achieve maximum positive impact.

He lights a fresh cigarette from the stub of the last one and takes a hard drag. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks.” I raise a hand toward the girl behind the counter, summoning coffee.

“Everything all right?”

“I'm not sleeping.”

“Insomnia again?”

“Yeah. Pretty bad this time.” I chug down the mug of coffee, ignoring protests from my throat about the heat.

“I'll get you some pills.” He reaches for his phone, ready to call the departmental psychiatrist.

“I don't want pills. I want out.”

Grady pauses, eyes bulging. “What?”

“I want out. Before I lose it completely.”

He sets the phone down, careful-like. “I'm afraid I can't do that.”

“Put me on a desk job. I can't work in the field anymore.” My hands are pressed tight against the tabletop in an effort to keep them from shaking. The coffee in my stomach roils, hot and acidic.

“I'm short on agents already and you want me to put you behind a desk?” Sweat bubbles out through his skin. “How bad is it?”

“Bad. I haven't slept in over a month and a half.”

“I'll get you some pills. They'll sort you right out.” His smile promises everything will be fine, but his eyes are already calculating just how much further he can push me.

“I don't know how much longer I can keep it all straight,” I say, desperate.

The future washes through my head like all the taps in a house running at once. In a dozen or more timelines Grady relents and calls in the order to have me taken out of the field.

In reality he just shakes his head. “I'm sorry. But the work you do is too important to pull you out now.” Again with the smile. “They'll get the pills to you by this evening, and I promise, you'll sleep like a brick.” He smashes his cigarette out in the ashtray, tosses back the last cold swallow of coffee and stands. “Right now I've got things to take care of.”

I want to argue, but the feed from The System tells me it's no use. This part of the future is locked in. “Okay,” I say instead.

“Same time next week?” He's already padding toward the door. “Try not to be late.”

“Yeah.” I slump back in the booth, digging a knuckle into my forehead to try and ease the

sledgehammer banging away at the back of my eyes.

“Can I get you another cup? Maybe some pancakes?” The waitress looks tired.

My stomach's still volatile but experience says food will smother the tremble in my hands. “Toast. And eggs. And fresh coffee would be great.”

#

Walking home, I catch a whiff of spinach and gasoline—the sensory trigger The System uses to notify me I've acquired a target.

I'm really not in a mood for saving the world today, but it's not like I have much of a choice. I turn left when my hand tingles, heading into the sun.

In the movies they make it look all clean and neat. With graphics and actual lines stretching out like a map. But the reality is a mind-bending rush of ghosts all trampling in different directions, popping in and out of existence as the future shifts and shifts again. It's hard enough to keep straight when I'm well rested, but I haven't been that in a long time.

I pause at the next corner and rub my eyes. When I lower my hand I see her.

The target.

The girl from the day before.

She's crossing the street toward me, digging through her messenger bag for something. And two blocks away a truck is hurtling toward her.

I've seen this scenario enough to know exactly what I'm supposed to do. The guy standing next to me will shout a warning. A warning I'm supposed to prevent him from giving.

I take a step forward, ready to shoulder him to one side, throw him off-balance and keep him too busy to say anything to the girl with the dark green eyes.

It all muddles in my head. She lies smashed on the pavement. She walks down the street looking pale and flustered by a very near miss with death. The truck takes out half-a-block of downtown trying to miss her.

When I was younger and could still sleep at night, I thought that if I were to fold up and do the wrong thing, to fuck up the timeline The System presented me with, at least it would be for someone worthwhile. A sexy brunette maybe. Or a blue-eyed cherub of a kid.

This girl is neither of those. And she knows the truth about me. I have every reason to elbow the guy beside me in the gut and walk away while she walks into the front of a dump truck. On any other day, I'd be okay with that. But today, with the specter of the past as well as the future crowding my mind, I just can't.

I step forward and grab her by the arm, pushing her back out of the way.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as the truck hurtles past, the driver leaning on the horn with one hand and gesturing out the window with the other. The bloody-mess-on-the-pavement future and the explosion-rocks-downtown future blink out of existence like a blown light bulb.

A still-alive girl with muddy brown hair and green eyes looks up at me with a frown. “What ...” Recognition hits, then comprehension and she goes all jelly-legged.

I quickmarch her to the safety of the curb, keeping her upright with one hand on her elbow and the other scrunched tight in the back of her shirt. “Don't stop now,” I say, hoarse. “We need to get someplace safe.”

#

We sit in my apartment, twitchy and nervous.

I walked her around the city for hours—turning, backtracking, taking shortcuts through alleys, talking to strangers—all trying to avoid a future in which we both get snuffed. Eventually someone desktide must have realized I was using the information flowing from The System to outmaneuver whatever agents they had sent after us. After nine years, six months, and thirteen days the crush of possible-future's stopped.

Since I could no longer control what happened next, I went home. The girl came with me.

She sits in the chair that normally acts as a closet, feet tucked up under her, chewing her thumbnail back to the quick.

I've got the clicker in one hand, slamming through channel after channel in a desperate attempt to fill the sudden silence in my head.

“Are they going to kill us?” Her voice is steady. She could be asking if I want chicken for dinner.

I have to try several times before I can get a single word out. “Yeah.”

She pushes lank hair out of her eyes. Dark green eyes. “Why?”

It would be easy to mistake the question. Why will they kill us? But I know that is not what she is asking.

“It felt wrong,” I say. “Today it just felt wrong.” My head is spinning. I lean back against the pillows, settling more comfortably on the three-thousand-dollar mattress. “How big a difference can one life make, anyway?”

She doesn't say anything. My eyes are sliding closed. The sleep that's eluded me for weeks pours over me like the tide, sucking me under and away before I even have time to say Goodnight or Help yourself to whatever's in the fridge.

#

I sleep like a rock.

#

When I wake up the girl stands at the window, face pressed close to the glass. The wedge of sky visible over her head seems redder than usual, even for dawn.

“What's going on?” I rub my eyes, scooting across the bed toward her.

She points and I stand up, slow. Disbelieving. Across the horizon smoke and flames climb skyward. The city's burning. Hell, everything's burning.

She leans close, one hand closing around mine, tight. “I think you made a mistake.”

A.G. Carpenter writes fiction of (and for) all sorts, with a focus on the speculative. With over a dozen published short stories, her work has appeared in Twitter-zines such as *One Forty Fiction* and *Trapeze Magazine*, online publications *Daily Science Fiction*, *Stupefying Stories SHOWCASE*, and *Abyss & Apex*, and is forthcoming from *Crowded Magazine* and *The Beast Within 4: Gears and Growls* edited by Jennifer Brozek. *Brass Stars*, a SF Western novella of epic revenge, is available from Eggplant Literary Productions. She blogs at agcarpenter.blogspot.com.

Taking Care of Ma

by Lee Hallison

First published by [Daily Science Fiction](#)

I stood in front of Ma's door and shifted the packages to get at my key. Before I could reach the lock, she opened the door. As usual, she didn't say hello, just turned and hobbled back to the living room.

“Ma, I have a key!” I said to her back.

She set her cane against the couch armrest and sat, pretending not to hear me sigh.

I put Ma's groceries away and walked over to her. Several narrow rows of white yarn hung from the knitting needles clicking away in her hands.

“What are you making?”

She ignored me. I sighed again. I looked around for the little round robot.

“Where's the S-V, the smart-vac?”

She lifted a chin toward the corner, where it sat with a chopped off broomstick duct-taped to its back.

“What did you do to it?” I got up and went to the machine. We'd spent \$1,800 on the thing. Leave it to Ma, Luddite to the core, to wreck it. Jim would have a fit.

“Really, Ma, what did you do?” I wiggled the broomstick. “What's this for?”

She'd stuck it on good—lots of duct tape on both the stick and the top of the machine. At least the controls and sensors weren't covered.

“I want to push it when I clean. Like a real vacuum.”

“It is a real vacuum. Just with extra features.”

“I don't like hearing that thing mosey around by itself,” she said, clearing her throat. “It's my house. My rules.”

I made lunch, some small talk, and an early exit. Jim and I had spent extra on the robot vacuum—we'd upgraded to the model for “the elderly.” The salesman had shown us how it would sound an alert if she fell, sending a signal to our computer and my left arm implant. It could guide her along, like a service dog. We could program it to beep on schedule—for medicines, time in the bath, etc. And the side benefit—no more dust bunnies.

Jim had been entranced. He was a gadget geek, no question. Ma snorted when we presented the S-V to her but agreed to give it a try. She called me the next day to tell me its eyes were looking at her.

“They aren't eyes, Ma,” I told her. “They're sensors. To avoid obstacles and sense if you need help.”

“Like I said, they're eyes. It looks like it's alive.”

I had spent what I thought was enough time to calm her down, but now she'd stuck a stick on the thing.

What was wrong with wanting her to live out her days safely? She was impossible about progress. The robots weren't "taking over," they were machines. Even the new AIs were machines. And useful ones! I loved my tiny implant—it kept track of everything, and connected me to the web, to Jim, and to Ma's smart-vac. Malevolence was a human trait, not a vacuum's. I obviously hadn't reassured her.

Jim had me call the store in the morning. "What if she's mucked up the controls? What if she falls when she's pushing it and the alert doesn't work?"

The salesman told me the smart-vac's tiny AI chip would learn how to work around her "eccentricities." His shiny white smile bounced in the vidscreen. Smarmy fellow. He wouldn't be so jolly if it were his mother at risk.

The so-called mother at risk beat me to the door again, and I followed her in. She plunked herself down and picked up her knitting. A lumpy, green thing.

"What's that?" I didn't expect an answer, but she perked up.

"A sweater for Jim."

I wondered where yesterday's scarf had gone. My implant beeped and Ma coughed her annoyance. I stood up to answer it and as I swiveled, saw the scarf covering up the front sensors of the S-V.

"Ma!" I couldn't believe it. The thing looked ridiculous. A knitted scarf tied around its perimeter, a duct-taped broomstick wagging from its back.

"It was cold," she said.

"It's not going to work right!" I started toward it, but Ma moved faster than I thought she could.

She grabbed the stick and tapped an imaginary "on" switch with her foot. As she pushed the humming vacuum along the carpet, she smirked. I threw my hands up and stomped to the door.

I left, looking back to watch her push the machine back and forth. The scarf slipped slightly, and one sensor stalk peeked out.

And then it winked at me.

Lee Hallison is a transplanted New Yorker who has grown roots in the Pacific Northwest. She has been published in *Daily Science Fiction* and *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* # 53. You can read more about her at leehallison.com.

A Contract Between Thieves

by *Stephanie Lorée*

First published by [Alliteration Ink, "The Crimson Pact, volume 3"](#)

Feni perched on a wooden stool, one foot propped on a high spindle for balance. Her other leg dangled over the side but failed to touch the ground. Which was a good thing, considering the state of the floors in Jupiter's Fishwife.

The bar was situated dockside, and as such, attracted patrons who spilled or spit or pissed without regard to location. The proprietor had been kind enough to throw down a thick layer of sawdust, but it did little to disguise the residue of unsavory people. People like Feni—though she left the pissing to her table-mates.

“A pair,” she said, splaying her cards on the table. “Sevens with an All.”

The three men seated near her made equal sounds of disgust and mucked their cards.

“*Merda*, Feni. You will break us tonight,” Raf said. He sat across from her, watching her with bold eyes and a charming smile.

The All's truth of it, most everything about Raf was bold and charming. From the threads and beads twining his long, wild hair into the semblance of a braid, to the loose-fitting vest dyed a shade of green not found in nature, to the way his full lips shaped vowels and his tongue flicked across consonants. Raf's Zingari blood would pronounce itself down to the marrow if Feni could gaze that deep.

For now, she held his near-black eyes with her own. He'd once called her “honey eyes” due to their light brown coloring, but Feni hoped to avoid pet-names tonight.

“I would not break you, Raf,” she said, “at least not permanently.”

Her tease met a roar of laughter from the other two men and a playful whistle from Raf. Feni leaned across the table, raking her winnings into a satchel and presenting Raf with a view of her bodice. She wore her work-leathers, all blacks and browns and dull metal buckles, but the bodice cinched in such a way Feni knew she didn't need vibrant Zingari fabric to attract Raf's attention.

“I would not make that bet,” he said.

She let the satchel retract to her belt. It weighed against her hip, the coins clinking a merry chorus.

“But I will offer you another.” He motioned to the second pot on the table. “You win, I'll turn over my last contract to your capable hands.”

Feni studied him. A contract was not something given lightly, not amongst thieves, and Raf only accepted the most lucrative assignments.

“And if you win?” she asked.

“You accompany me away from here with my pocketbook, give or take a little dignity.”

“And where shall we go with your winnings?”

He shrugged. “Wherever we please, my dear. We are young, and the gaslamps burn till dawn.”

The men hooted, but she ignored them.

“The contract, how much?” she asked.

“More than what you've taken here, Feni, far more.”

Excitement rumbled through her. She forced herself to remain still, her face blank. At least fifty denari rested inside her satchel, enough to buy Uncle parts to fix the steamcoach she'd busted on her last contract—while trying to outpace Isola Impero's Iron Guard. Uncle was too old for all the walking he'd been forced to do in the interim, and Feni had boot-sores aplenty. But a job worth more than fifty denari could fix their coach, replace their home's overworked boiler, and maybe leave some for Uncle to restock his barren lab.

“I assume it's dangerous,” she said.

“Very.”

“And complicated.”

“Always.” Raf's eyes danced.

“Are we still talking about your contract, not my company?”

He grinned. “Why not both?”

Feni motioned to the man on her right, the one holding the cards. “Deal.”

The cards came quick. The two other men sat out the hand, but were entertained enough by the wager not to care. Sex and larceny always held an audience's attention, especially a drunk one.

She watched Raf lift his cards before viewing her own. His reaction told her little. The twitch at the corner of his mouth could be disgust or amusement. A slight lift to his dark brows might indicate an encouraging hand, or a well-planned bluff. Raf was difficult to read, one of the reasons she enjoyed his presence at the table. Feni loved a challenge.

In her own hand, she eyed two diamonds—All and five—and an emerald nine. The second pot was a flush game, and she was a card shy. But that had never stopped her before.

“No backing out now,” she said.

“The All forgive me, I never do,” Raf said.

“One.” She slid her emerald toward the dealer. With it she sent a tremor of magic and shifted the deck mid-shuffle. It was a delicate working, and a minor one, but that was Feni's expertise.

“Two,” Raf said. He read his new cards, his upper lip curling softly.

“Not what you were hoping for?”

“Seems I don't have much to show for my pride,” he said. “Just a lady and her knight.”

His cards shown in front of her: Regina and Cavallo, both of the sapphire court. His kicker was an emerald six, junk, but the two-card flow of his flush beat Feni's disconnected All and five. She hadn't checked her third card. If it wasn't a diamond—any diamond—Raf had won.

She laid out the hand. The men sat forward on their chairs, eyes heavy on the unrevealed third card.

“Honestly Raf, I win either way,” she said and flipped her card.

Three of diamond.

#

A long time later, Feni woke with a headache born of too much wine and the comfortable warmth of a body pressed to her side. Raf's arm rested across her stomach, his head nuzzling between her

neck and shoulder. Tiny puffs of air came from his lips to brush her throat. A mane of bead-laden hair sprawled behind him, tangling with her dirty blond locks.

She traced a finger across his forearm, around a scar that still burned ruddy as though blood had permanently welled under the tissue. Her skin was nearly as dark as his, the result of muddled heritage and hard labor in the sun. But she was not Zingari, at least not by much.

“Tickles,” he said, one eye peering up at her. “Morning, honey eyes.”

Feni sighed and slipped from under him. “Afternoon, actually.”

“Does it matter? We have all day, all night, all of forever.” He yawned, stretched his body across the straw mattress, and shook the hair from his face.

Jupiter's balls, he was distracting.

She scooped her clothes from the floor and fastened her work-leathers. The buckles held tools—picks and knives, a few vials—securely to her body. There were hidden pockets scattered throughout and a utility belt that held her satchel on a retractable line. All designed by Uncle.

She tested the coin-purse, weighing it in her hand. It was light.

“My money?” she said.

“You mean the money you robbed me of?”

She studied him. Had he sensed her cheating at the table? The Zingari were known to see that which cannot be seen, and she wondered if the ability extended to the flow of magic, of Aether when she worked it. But she read no guile in his expression, only the glow of a man whose passions were recently slaked.

She rolled her eyes. “If I'd wanted to fleece you, Raf, I'd have done it while you were drunk and sated. Where's my coin?”

He grinned, teeth only a tad yellowed, but straight. For a Zingari—hells for any Lowborn—he was a beautiful man. He pointed to the trousers lying rumped on the floor.

“No honor amongst thieves,” she said, dumping his pocket's contents into her satchel.

“Not with you. If it was easy, you would grow bored, and then where would I be?”

“Alone,” she said, “but richer.”

He held out a hand to her. “Come back to bed. The day is young.”

“The day is young, the night is young, we are young,” she mocked. “Is anything old for you?”

“You will never get old to me, Feni.”

She couldn't stop herself from smiling. “I have work to do, a contract I was promised.”

“Your contract must wait for the cover of darkness.” He waved his extended hand dramatically. “Where the bandits roam and debauchery abounds.”

“You don't say?”

“We could practice our debauchery and bandit-hood now, if you'd like.” His dark eyes flashed over her like they'd done the night before, when he gazed at the pile of denari weighing down the table.

She turned away. “You hungry? I'm hungry, and I need a glass of vino to take the bite out of this headache. We can discuss the contract over breakfast,” she said, then smiled. “Supper, actually.”

Raf sighed. His arm fell across his forehead in mock defeat. “*Mia madre* warned me about lady-

thieves. I should have listened. Steal your heart, leave you with a cold and empty bed.”

“I'm buying,” Feni said.

He tossed back the blankets and stood. “Where to, honey eyes?”

#

They had lunch by the ocean, seated on a decaying pier too worn for ship-docking, but quiet under the afternoon sun. Their legs dangled over the edge, kicking above the rise of the tide. Feni had purchased smoked sturgeon and vegetables—plus a bottle of cheap vino—from a cart as they passed the market. They shared the wine, drinking straight from the source, and ate with their hands.

Raf drew a long pull from the bottle. He'd been silent during their trip, caught in his own thoughts, but whenever she glanced at him he conjured a wolfish grin that stopped her from probing him with questions. She wanted to begin the contract. More importantly, she wanted to get paid. But she also knew Raf, and when his thoughts lay elsewhere he wouldn't talk business.

The bottle was nearly empty by the time he spoke. “The target is Donato Mangione.”

She almost choked on a bite of fish. “The alchemist?”

“Is there another?” He didn't wait for her to recover, instead pummeling forward as if the Highborn-hopeful mattered little. “You won't be after Donato, but his recent creation. He keeps it in his workshop. Steal it, return it to me, and I'll see to your compensation. If all goes well, you shouldn't even encounter Donato.”

“If all goes well,” she mumbled. “What am I appropriating from our good friend?”

Raf drained the last of the vino, swallowing it with an almost audible bob of his throat. He watched the crest of waves rolling toward shore. “An Iron Torc.”

Feni barked a harsh laugh. “You're joking.”

“It is not an easy thing I ask,” he said, “but the reward is handsome.”

She considered him a moment. The line of his jaw was set, his eyes cast out upon the distant ocean. Whatever he saw there, it left shadows around his beautiful mouth.

“How handsome?” she asked.

He turned to her then, affecting a smile that brought lesser women trembling, tumbling to his bed. Or maybe not so lesser, in Feni's case.

“As generous as you are, honey eyes, when you wish to be.”

Had she possessed the will, she would have slapped him. But the wine had warmed her blood and coupled with the terrifying thrill that accompanied any contract worth accepting.

Instead she stood, held out her hand to him, and said, “Come Raf, the day is young.”

#

They discussed the details in bed, limbs still twined pleasantly. Night pressed against the shrouded window, cooling Feni's head toward more logical, monetary concerns.

Breaking into Donato's workshop would not be overly complex, not for one of her talents. It was the Torc that concerned her most. A necklace worn only by the Highborn, an Iron Torc aided the warrior caste of those who could wield Aether and shape the world to their will. With it, their abilities became focused, their power intensified. Though Feni possessed a minuscule ability, it was nothing compared to what a Highborn might bring to bear.

Why Donato had created such a thing, or what he intended to do with it, caused a shiver to course her spine. He was not Highborn, but wished to be, selling his alchemical constructs and designs for favors from one Court or another. His ongoing rivalry with Uncle and unwanted solicitations toward Feni were enough to make her despise the man, but more intriguing were the uncertainties of this contract.

And of course, the pay.

Raf had insisted the Torc be brought to him, allowing her no contact with the patron. He promised—on his Zingari honor, for whatever that was worth—to route payment to her upon completion. The entire job sounded alarm bells in her mind, but also excited her enough to drown the warnings to a distant din. Besides, she could retire with her earnings when this was through. At least for a while.

Before she departed, Raf handed her a sketch of the workshop and Torc. The collar was unlike any Feni had seen before: etched with complicated glyphs and lacking the usual gemstone setting. The workshop drawing detailed traps and protections Donato had set and was artistically rendered. The All's truth of it, the page could have come alive, so precisely had it been crafted.

“You're an artist?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “I draw what I see. And sometimes, I see what I draw.”

“Is that why you branded yourself with such a mark?” She motioned to the scar on his forearm. From this angle it reminded her of a quill, an artist's instrument.

He folded his arms against his chest. “In a way.”

“I like it,” she said, suddenly concerned she had offended him. She held up the sketch. “And this shows talent.”

“We all have our gifts, Feni.”

She left then, unsure what else to say and wanting to be about her business. Raf had offered no goodbyes, which was for the best. Feni had neither the time nor the energy for long dalliances, and whatever lay between them, she liked it as it was.

#

The locals and tax collectors called it Steam Street. Any alchemist worth his salt possessed a workshop along the cobblestone road, and most lived there. What had begun as a place for scientific collaboration and trade became a status symbol and opportunity to spy on neighbors' inventions.

Around her, a few functioning gaslamps braced against the encroaching darkness. Their faint flames did little more than tickle the gloom as it slithered by, drifting into every cranny and corner of the city. Within those shadows skirting the row houses, Feni stalked. Her dark work-leathers and cowl cloaked her from curious eyes. Not that many were outside at midnight, but on this street, everyone was a nosy neighbor. Late though it might have been, Feni kept her footsteps in the dark and her back to a wall.

She'd studied Donato's for two days, guised as a beggar. It wouldn't do for her to be recognized, not so close to home and her own Uncle's workshop. In that time no one had come or gone. No smoke ever rose from the chimney. There was even no answer when the Poste Impero had knocked upon the door. Wherever Donato was, he wouldn't bother Feni here.

Her tattered beggar's cloak discarded, she paused outside the least observable window. Diamond squares of blown-glass glittered in the moonlight, framed in an iron casement. Feni shook her head; Donato always had expensive tastes.

She pressed her hand to the pane, eyed the locking mechanism, and willed the catch to move. Her fingertips tingled as the magic flowed from whatever place inside her Aether dwelt. It lifted the catch like an invisible hand, and she set to disabling the trap Donato had left in the same manner. A simple thing really, to release the tension on the coiled springs and allow his poison darts to fly harmlessly away, sinking home in his walls. She thanked the All that he had not made his device heavier—she could only conjure small amounts of force.

She swung the window open and slid inside. Her feet kissed wooden floorboards, body whispering into a crouch. While her eyes adjusted, Feni's boot-knife slipped into her hand and winked at the dingy room.

There were two more windows, one door, and a rickety staircase spiraling toward a shadowed second floor. The stale reek of emptiness hung in the air, and Feni heard nothing but the creaking of Donato's neighbors. Adjacent to a forlorn hearth sat an armchair, its upholstery faded with the imprint of a bulbous frame. A table was placed nearby, piled with books and loose papers, a cold candle, ink vial, and quill. Brass piping ran along the wall from a modified hearth-pot, splitting off into a metal box large enough for a man to hide in.

She crept toward the box, stepping to its side with knife ready. It was nearly as tall as her—which wasn't saying much—and cool to the touch. The hinges grated as she pried open the door. Hung inside were two sets of dishes and clothes, a week's worth of cleaning. At the bottom a pan sloshed with murky water.

As much as Uncle disapproved of idea theft, Feni would make an exception for Donato. His gaze had lingered on her far too often, and his ability to constantly produce similar—but better—inventions than Uncle spoke of more than coincidence.

She closed the door, mentally noting the construction of the steam-cleaning device for later. In fact, if she could leave here with a few of Donato's ideas, she might double—nay, triple—her earnings.

“Someone there?” An odd voice called from above.

Feni ghosted into the shadows, her back tight to the box. She squinted at the staircase disappearing into the ceiling. No one should be here, especially someone who was clearly not Donato.

“Heard you,” the voice said. “Smell you.”

It had a strange sibilance to its feminine tone and spoke in an accent unfamiliar to Feni's ears: long vowels and harsh fricatives. She'd taught herself a number of dialects over the years, but none like this. It came from somewhere else—deeper than her cold cellar bedroom, darker than the night she loved.

The knowledge came instinctively and tightened her stomach.

The wooden staircase groaned as someone descended. A wet, slithery sound soughed below the clank of metal. Feni corrected her earlier assumption: *something* was coming downstairs, and she didn't want to be here when it reached the bottom.

“Taste you, little one,” it whispered.

Feni retreated toward the window. She made out only a shadowy form approaching. It was long and sinuous with a fat, serpentine tail where legs should exist. Lagging behind it was an iron chain that likely anchored it somewhere upstairs, but allowed it free-roam of the house.

Part of her knew she needed to see what she was up against, while the other part thanked the All for the blessing of darkness. In the end, the need for a distraction swayed her decision.

She focused on the table, on the waiting candle. In her mind she willed friction around the wick, forced it to double, triple, until smoke trailed and a spark lit the candle aflame. The creature twisted its head toward the light, but not before Feni saw its throat.

The damned thing was wearing the Iron Torc.

Worse yet, this creature was the antithesis of Aether and the natural Aemons that magic could spawn. A full-fledged—the All save her—daemon.

Before she could suppress it, Feni gasped. Then the daemon struck. It tackled her, sending her boot-knife soaring. It was vaguely female: narrow-waisted torso, rounded hips and bosom, long hair entangling Feni like seaweed. Its skin was pale and slick, a viscous water dripping from its pores. Four appendages sought purchase in her flesh. The water daemon had no hands, but blunted nubs that slitted into eel-like mouths.

Feni screamed as it coiled around her, chewing through her supple work-leathers. It nuzzled against her chest with a too-human head.

“Thirsty,” it cooed, “you’re quite the drink.”

The first eel found her flesh. Needles pierced Feni’s wrist. Pain chilled her arm, pumping toward her heart. She writhed, bucking and shrieking to no avail.

Another eel broke the leathers, sinking its teeth deep in her calf. Ice filled her veins. She shivered violently. Feni had imagined her death before: stabbed in thieves’ alley, hung by Highborn law, but never frozen by a water monster.

Her free hand twitched. She reached for her magic. The tingle began in pleasant contrast to the daemon’s frozen bite, growing to a fiery burn. Though she’d meant to gather enough force to aid her legs in shoving the creature off her, when Feni brushed her fingertips along its tail, the daemon screamed.

“The soul of a Blessed Woman!” Its voice was half a question as it reared back, releasing her.

Feni backpedaled. Her psyche? Blessed? More like doomed. Controlling Aether was a death sentence for her Lowborn blood. Her meager skill at moving objects helped in opening locks and cheating at cards—and apparently warding off daemons—but it was hardly worth the risk. Though if it could save her from this horror, she decided to appreciate her magic more.

Her numbed arm and leg were useless. She dragged herself in a panicked crawl toward the window, glancing at the daemon as it wailed. The scales she had touched sizzled and popped. A blackened circle appeared, expanded to the size of Feni’s fist, then her head, and stopped. Charred flakes drifted to the floor.

The daemon hesitated, studying her. It stretched to its full, monstrous height, swaying on its tail clumsily.

“Not enough, little woman. You are mine,” it hissed and lunged at her once more.

This time, she was ready. She stuck out her hand and let the daemon’s tentacles rip into her sides. She dug her fingers into its hair, clutched its head to her cheek, and channeled all that remained of her Aether.

“What are you doing?” it shrilled.

She remembered Raf. The way his hair had tangled like spun yarn in her hands. The way his rough cheek abraded her own. Nothing like this creature’s slick, foul skin sliding against her. The memory

transported Feni from the present and brought to life a fire inside she hadn't known existed.

The daemon burned.

#

Feni wasn't sure how long she laid there, holding the daemon in a lover's embrace as it smoldered. The creature's screams had deafened her ears, and the wounds it inflicted left her shaking from an internal chill. It had fought until the end, tearing into her thighs and arms, biting her neck. It struggled until the crackle of Aether devoured it completely.

Bitter ash covered Feni, and she tried not to think about how much she'd inhaled or swallowed. Better to focus on staying alive.

A fetid smoke hung in the air. Dark, greasy remains coated most of her body. She managed to push herself upright, aided by a kind and generous wall. The window hung open above her, and a cool breeze fanned her face.

It took some time for feeling to return to her limbs. When it did, she rose unsteadily to her feet. The room spun, and she braced herself against the window's ledge. Wind carried the noises of the outside world to her ears. There was murmuring, the thump of boots approaching the house, and the unmistakable sigh of swords being drawn. The Iron Guard approached.

She inhaled greedily, sucking air to clear her head. Someone must have heard the daemon's wails and alerted the guard. The last thing Feni wanted was to explain why she was in the alchemist's home, or where that lovely stain on the floor came from, and how she'd gotten hold of an Iron Torc.

Clutched in her hand almost as an afterthought, the collar bit into her palm. Its sheen was untouched by the daemon's decay, and the etched runes remained perfectly clean. There seemed no way to open it, no latch to slip around the daemon's head. Only the iron chain attached to a loop on the back marred its surface.

Quickly, Feni drew miniature bolt cutters from one of her leathers' many pockets. They were diamond-edged and snapped the chain like brittle bone. Fists pounded the front door. She cast a disappointed look at the books upon the table. They may have held Donato's notes, or at least some valuable information. But there wasn't time for that now.

She threw herself out the window as the guard broke down the door.

#

Feni tolerated many things in the life she'd chosen to lead. Rogues, cheats, assassins, and hustlers were all part of the game. She'd learned from the best of them. But setting her up during an honest contract between thieves?

That was unforgivable.

Raf had meticulously drawn the layout of Donato's home, noted traps and protection wards, sketched the Torc in detail. Somehow in all of that, he'd failed to mention the daemon. If he had, Feni would have told him exactly where he could stick his contract. No amount of denari was worth her psyche.

Had he known Aether could destroy it? More importantly, did he know Feni was capable of magic? If that was the case, he was no longer a risk she could tolerate.

She pondered her options while hobbling toward his flat. Her beggar's cloak hung about her shoulders and she looked—and smelled—very much the part. The Iron Torc rubbed against her back,

hidden under her ruined work-leathers. Without a scheduled buyer, a Torc wasn't something she could offload easily. The Gray Trade dealt in illicit goods, but not that illicit. Her usual fences wouldn't touch it. And if she was going to confront Raf, she'd like to choke him with the damned thing first.

Anger propelled her. She dragged her left leg, not to enhance her disguise, but because some numbness from the daemon's bite remained. Her arm was equally torpid. The All's truth of it, her entire body ached wherever it wasn't deadened by cold. She was in no shape for another fight, but fury burned her fuse and muddled her mind. She became lost twice and had to backtrack to the correct street. Night weighed heavy on the cobblestone, and though it was usually her ally, the dark confounded her.

When she finally reached Raf's, it took all her strength to collapse against his door.

#

Warmth surrounded her. She curled into a cocoon of heat. Pain prodded distantly at her consciousness, but like a butterfly unwilling to face its metamorphosis, Feni clung to the comfort of oblivion.

"Fenice." Her full name hummed in a soft baritone. Fingers brushed gentle lines across her forehead. "Fenice, open your honey eyes."

She blinked against the blaze of firelight. Except for the hearth, the room was dark. Flames cast shadows that spun and waltzed, making her vision blur. She lay close to the fire in a bed of furs and wool and heated skin. The last belonged to her, and the nude man tucked tight to her side.

Her first attempt at talking resulted in a hacking cough. Raf raised a waterskin to her lips, and she gulped as much as he allowed.

"Slowly, or you'll be ill," he said.

She drank again, this time with competence as logic streamed into her befuddled brain. With reason, came pain. Prickles of cold stabbed her bones, and every bruise rose to make its presence known. She pushed the waterskin away and focused on breathing.

"I wasn't sure," he said, "but you made it through the day."

"I'm naked," she said.

His smile was almost boyish. "I had to burn your clothes, to eliminate the remains. I managed to save most of your hair."

Feni put a tentative hand to her head, felt the shortened length of her hair, and sighed. At least it was clean. Her skin had also been scrubbed, and stitched where the daemon's puncture marks were deepest. She was pink and raw, but she had to admit, better than dead.

"You bathed me," she said.

"Not as enjoyable as I'd imagined. Next time we'll try with you awake so I don't have to worry about you drowning."

The thought of submerging herself underwater brought to mind the daemon's wet, sticky scales. She shivered, and Raf tightened his hold.

"Still cold?" he asked.

She shook her head, but wedged as close to him as possible. He smelled of jasmine and woodsmoke and rich wine. She rested one hand on his collarbone and the other precariously close to his manhood.

“Raf?” she murmured.

“Yes, honey eyes?”

She let her hands roam, tracing delicate patterns over his sensitive skin. He groaned. Her head swam with pleasant images, and some not-so-pleasant. The memory of the daemon and Raf's betrayal pierced her thoughts. Why set her up, then tend to her wounds?

“Thanks for taking care of me,” she said, “but there's a problem.”

“I don't see any problems.” He inclined his head, speaking into her mouth.

“You set me up.” Feni had questions and knew many ways to get answers. She clamped her hands down. Hard.

He sucked in a breath, but her grip around his throat allowed only a strangled intake. His own hands were situated poorly: one trapped under her weight, the other locked by her elbow. He might kick or struggle, but she was prepared to yank his proverbial leash if he gave her any trouble.

“Move, and I hurt you,” she whispered. “Refuse to answer my questions, I hurt you. Lie to me, I kill you.” She gave him a slight squeeze for emphasis. “Did you know about the daemon?”

His eyes bore into her, searched her. Whatever he was looking for, he didn't find it. “Yes.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“Would have refused.” His voice strained, wheezing every word.

Feni relaxed the choke, just a tad. “You could have found another puppet to send to their execution.”

“No execution. Had to be you.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

She narrowed her eyes. “How did you learn about my magic?”

“Saw it.”

“At the card-table?”

“No.” He started to turn his head, but thought better as her hold contracted. His eyes darted toward a sheaf of papers by the bed.

Feni saw the sketches from the corner of her eye, but didn't spare them a glance. “Who's the patron?”

“No one.”

“What do you mean? Who's paying me?”

“I am,” he said, sucking in a breath, “but not if you kill me.”

She frowned. Murdering the patron before payment was rendered never made for good business. She softened her grip so it was no longer painful, only forceful.

Raf held perfectly still. “Does this mean you've changed your mind?”

“If you explain everything, from the beginning, I could be persuaded to keep you alive.”

He watched her without expression, the face he wore at the card-table. No plays would be telegraphed tonight. She had only her instinct and upperhand—though the lower one was serving its purpose. Her heart beat a ragged rhythm. It was from the pain, the bruises and recovery, the

adrenaline pumping inside her blood to keep her strong and expel the daemon's venom. But she recognized a lie, even the ones she told herself.

“I will tell you all I can,” he said. “Release me.”

“I can still kill you.”

“I know, Feni.” He frowned. “Let me go and I'll tell you a story.”

“No lies,” she said.

He nodded. “Tonight, no lies amongst thieves.”

#

His sketches served as proof to his tale. They depicted things which had come to pass, and things which might be. There was Feni at the card-table. Feni wrestling with the daemon, burning it alive. Feni shivering by the fire. Feni lying in his bed, a playful smile on her face as she twirled an All of Diamonds. Feni holding a shadowed corpse, her head tossed back as she screamed toward the skies. The last one bothered her the most.

“Who is that?” She pointed at the corpse.

Raf shrugged. “I draw only what I'm permitted to see. When the Aemons first came to me, I was only a boy. But my people have always seen differently, accepted the things we could not understand. I knew the visions had purpose, that I had reason to receive them, but it was an Aemon who showed me I could influence what I see.” He rubbed the scar on his forearm absently, almost tenderly. “It showed me you, Feni. That we had loved in another life. That the All had blessed you.”

She eyed him for a moment. His conviction shown in the set of his jaw, the lift of his chin. He believed she was chosen, blessed. But the All did not love thieves or cheats or liars; Feni was all three.

“And this spirit, it made that scar on you?” she asked.

“It revealed its mark, but I branded myself,” he said.

Feni raised a brow. “Why?”

“To allow this particular Aemon to contact me more easily. To align myself with its purpose. I am bound to it, and it to me. I see its will, its enemies, and ensure the horrors of daemons and corrupt men do not come to pass.”

“Quite ambitious for a wanted criminal.”

Raf shrugged. “There is Highborn law, and there is the All's will. I break only the former.”

“And Donato?” she asked.

He sighed, leaning back on his elbows. The flames cast an orange glow across his chest and caught the colorful beads in his hair. They seemed to spark with a life of their own.

“Donato has found a way to not only summon daemons, but control them,” he said. “The Iron Torc you recovered binds them to the master who seals it—much to the daemon's displeasure. I don't know how it works, only that it needs destroyed.”

Feni frowned. With enough time, she could find a buyer for such a potent artifact. “I didn't see a way to open it.”

Raf reached under the straw mattress, withdrawing the Torc. He touched one of the runes etched in its surface. “A drop of blood here. Then, of course, you must convince the daemon to hold still long

enough to collar it.”

She ran a finger over the rune. He stopped her, grabbing her finger and placing it against his lips.

“It is not a power for men to wield,” he said.

She smiled. “Good thing I’m not a man.”

He returned her grin, twining their hands together. “Good thing.”

“You could have told me, warned me of the daemon.”

“Would you have agreed? I needed you, Feni. The Aemon showed me only you. Forgive my deception.”

She stared at their hands, the way his long fingers fit between hers. Her thumb played absently against his palm. “How is it destroyed?”

“The daemon you encountered seemed to be of water, so the Torc is likely attuned to that aspect. Fire then,” he said, “will be the great purifier.”

“And Donato? His notes?”

“Will need—” He was interrupted by a thud against the door. The wood cracked, splinters soaring into the room. Raf whipped off the blankets, drew a dagger from under the mattress, and pushed the Torc and sketches into Feni’s arms. “Can you climb?”

“Of course.” She wrapped a fur around herself and her new possessions.

“The window,” he said, “go.”

“You?”

He shook his head. “They know me. But you, honey eyes, are a wild card. You can be gone before they realize their precious Torc is not here. That is what matters. Its destruction is all that matters. Go,” he repeated, “and burn it all.”

She didn’t question. She was a thief, not a hero, and Raf was only a tryst. Still, as she made her way out the window, she chose to scale the wall to the roof above, rather than climb the three stories down. It would be smarter to wait it out than to run where they might have posted guards.

Feni was getting no better at deceiving herself.

#

She heard the door break and the rise of Donato’s raspy voice. He ordered for Raf to be taken. Then came the slithery sounds, scales sliding across floorboards. More than one daemon, for certain, which meant more than the one Torc.

Raf roared a wordless defiance and a clash of steel and flesh echoed through the open window.

Feni stood on the roof in a pair of too-loose trousers and a borrowed tunic that hung to her knees. Her bare feet gripped the shingles as though made for the rough surface. Wind blew the cool night air through her short hair, and brought with it the stench of blood and ash. The struggle below her increased, and she knew Raf would not last long against two of the creatures. She had Aether at her command and barely survived the one.

It would be an easy thing to take the Torc. Leave. Spend a few weeks discreetly inquiring for a buyer. Raf would be dead, the only person who knew of her involvement and magic swiftly removed.

He was a threat. A beautiful, dangerous, and rather exciting threat to her continued existence.

She bundled the sketches into the blanket and grasped the Torc. With the help of a nail protruding

from a poorly laid shingle, she sliced the pad of her thumb. Blood dripped upon the rune Raf had shown her, and the Torc silently opened on invisible hinges.

She scurried to the side, down the wall, and peeked into his window. The daemons had cornered Raf. He swung his dagger wildly, keeping them at bay, but he was no match. His blade was too short and meant for soft, human tissue, not their thick, scaled hides. The daemons' tentacles struck at him, small mouths nipping at his flesh. They meant to toy with him first.

Remaining by the entrance, Donato watched his minions. A sick glee contorted his porcine face. His jowls wiggled as he laughed, as did his belly. He wore the latest Highborn fashion: shiny boots over black trousers, striped vest and ascot tie below a dark cape. But the ensemble looked ridiculous on his body, straining at the seams as if trying to contain the whole of Donato into one foppish disguise.

Feni reflected that the face of evil came in many different shapes, not all of them blatant. The worst evils were the ones she wouldn't notice at all.

Both daemons were at her right, playing with Raf in the corner. One had its back to her. She grabbed the ledge and swung inside. Like the earlier creature had done to her, Feni wrapped herself around the daemon, clinging to its back like a sloth falling on its prey. She swiped her still bleeding thumb over the Torc currently gracing its neck, and swiftly sealed her own collar around its throat.

“Kill the other daemon,” she whispered into its too-human ear before dropping to a crouch on the floor.

It took seconds, but she'd surprised them all. Including Raf, who gaped at her with a mixture of fear, anger, and intense pleasure.

The daemon—her daemon—twitched and fell upon its twin. It spit defiance and cursed her, but it obeyed. Distracted by a greater opponent, the daemon on Raf turned and struggled with its former ally. They coiled around each other, limbs entwined like a tangle of snakes. Their massive tails slammed the floors, shattered Raf's meager furniture, and punched holes in the walls.

Reflexes were a thief's most important trait, and both Feni and Raf's had been honed by years on the street. But Donato was bred to a life of academia and indulgence. One of the daemon's tails swept his feet from under him. He fell in a heap of fine fabric. Feni was on him an instant later, a knife pressed to his jugular. She sat on his chest, pinning his arms with her knees and his own cape.

“I bet you imagined this differently,” she said and drew her knife across his throat.

Donato's blood drenched her in hot waves. The need for violence filled her like a rising tide. She felt the tug of her daemon at her back, felt its power like the moon's pull. It thirsted as she did, craved the destruction she craved. Here, Feni could finally feel the thrill of danger she'd always desired. Her creature tore into its counterpart. They fought until black ichor soaked the wood below them. Equally matched, they destroyed one another with monstrous intensity.

She watched with a strange detachment as Raf skirted the warring pair and approached her. His dagger remained out, clutched tight in his hand.

“Put down your knife, Fenice,” he said.

She shook her head. Her hand ached to strike.

“It's me,” he said. “I'm like you.”

He came within reach. The ruddy scar seemed to glow in his forearm, and he trembled from a number of wounds.

He was weak, this being of skin and meat. She, however, was not. Her daemon gave her power. She *was* power.

Feni plunged her knife into his abdomen before she knew what she was doing. He let out a sound of surprise and pain. His eyes searched her before he collapsed into her arms.

“No,” she mumbled. Her knees gave out. She cradled Raf as they hit the ground next to the still forms of the daemons.

Then, there was silence.

#

Three Iron Torcs sat atop a pile of sketches. The greasy remains of the daemons and Donato's body rimmed the firepit. When they'd destroyed one another, the daemon's hold on Feni had dissolved with its body. She'd found Donato's journal tucked in his vest—his notes on summoning and the creation of the Torcs—and tossed it with the rest. Then she called to her magic, willed the Aether to burn the evil from her world.

Raf's flat went with it.

She hauled his body to the street before the Iron Guard arrived. Together, they watched the flames lap at the walls of his home.

“You'll make it,” she told him.

“I've had worse,” he said.

She held him in her arms, her face turned up at the sky so he wouldn't see her tears. “I'm sorry.”

“You fulfilled our contract, honey eyes. There is nothing to apologize for.”

“Then only one thing remains,” she said.

He touched her chin with his free hand, the other staunching the flow of blood from the wound she'd delivered. “What's that?”

“My payment.”

Born and stuck in Ohio, **Stephanie Lorée** writes fantasy fiction and occasionally moonlights as a rock star. Her short stories have appeared in such places as *Penumbra* and *Pathfinder Tales*. In 2013, she was a finalist for the Writers of the Future award. With her editor hat on, Stephanie freelances for indie authors and small presses, and she's a longtime slush monkey for *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare* magazines. A self-proclaimed super nerd, Stephanie loves gaming, technology, good sushi, and bad kung fu flicks. Her digital life is available for stalking at stephaniemloree.com.

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Drunk on Writing

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