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Tor/Forge Author Voices

Volume Three



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How to Find Your Passion

By Beth Bernobich

Which do you believe in, fate or free will?

My answer is both.

No, that's not cheating. You don't make choices in a bubble, separate from self or consequence. You make them from preference, beliefs, from the exigency of the moment, weighted by lingering shadows of your past.

Wait, that sounds as though we have no freedom to choose, that an outside (or inside) force predestines our future. So fate wins?

No, and no. We humans are more than set of binary answers, pre-programmed by culture and the past. We are creatures who can learn, who can change. Our own real-world history proves that. The operative word being *can*. No guarantee there, alas. But there is a particle of hope.

So what if—my favorite question—what if we *were* gifted with multiple lives? How would choice, and consequence, and our past, affect us? It's not a new question. In Hinduism and many other religions, life doesn't end with death. You die, you are reborn, and the choices you make in one life determine the next. You are free to spend eternity struggling with the same questions over and over, or you can rise toward enlightenment. Fate and free will rolled into one package.

Which is a hell of a lot more interesting to me than a single shot at Paradise.

So when I sat down to write the first book in the *Passion Play* universe, I gave my characters many lives. Each of them remembers what came before through dreams, some of them more vivid than others, and because the soul carries the imprint of that person, each is drawn to the same kinds of situations over and over. Ilse Zhalina has spent all her lives avoiding confrontation, choosing instead to run. Lord Raul Kosenmark has always taken the oblique path, the hidden role throughout history. Time and again, other characters also gave the decision to others in power. At first these choices are small ones, but the weight of each affects the rest. At the point where *Passion Play* begins, they are mountains.

These books are about how the mountains can fall down. And what comes next.

Passion Play

By Beth Bernobich

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[Beth Bernobich](#) comes from a family of story tellers, artists, and engineers. She juggles her time between working with computer software, writing, family, and karate. Her short stories have appeared in publications such as *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *Postscripts*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Sex in the System*. She lives with her husband and son in Bethany, Connecticut. *Passion Play* is her first novel.

Chapter One

In the game of word links, a large vocabulary was not always an advantage. Words indeed were necessary—the game consisted entirely of words given back and forth, and each response had to connect to the previous one. The good players possessed a quick mind and the ability to recognize patterns. Those who could see the unexpected connections, however, inevitably won.

A simple game with endless strategies and unexpected side-effects.

Therez Zhalina watched Klara's face intently, waiting for her friend to turn the miniature sand glass and start the next round of their game. It was a late summer's afternoon. The two girls sat in a seldom-used parlor, on the third floor of Maester Zhalina's house. The maids had opened the windows, letting in the warm salt breeze from the harbor, less than a mile away, and a hint of pine tang from the hills and mountains that circled the city to the north.

Klara held the sand glass lightly between her fingers, tilting it one way, then another. She appeared bored, but the look did not deceive Therez. She knew Klara's style. Her friend would start with something innocuous, like *chair* or *book*. Then, at the crucial moment, she would throw out a word guaranteed to fluster her opponent.

I shall have to use her own strategy upon her first.

"Lir," Klara said, and flipped the glass over.

"Toc," Therez answered at once.

"Stars."

“Eye socket.”

Klara choked. “Therez! That is *not* fair. You deliberately chose a horrible image.”

Though she wanted to laugh at Klara’s expression, Therez did not let her attention lapse. “No more horrible than yours, the last round,” she said. “Besides, the link is perfect: *And Toc plucked out his eyes to make the sun and moon for his sister-goddess, Lir*. Come, the round is not over. A word. Give me a word, Klara.”

“I’m thinking. I’m thinking. What about— Ah, love-of-the-ocean, the sands have run out. Are you certain this wretched device runs true?”

“The glass came with a guild certificate from the artisan.”

“Damp,” Klara said grumpily. “Just like everything else in Melnek.”

“If the sands were damp, they would run slower not faster.” Therez poured a fresh cup of chilled water and stirred in a few spoonfuls of crushed mint. “Here,” she said, handing it to her friend. “You sound like a marsh-frog—a very thirsty one.”

“Oh, thank you.” Klara drank down the water. “How delightful to know that my voice is like slithery bog-creature’s. Do you think the young men will appreciate me more, or less, for that virtue?”

Therez smothered another laugh. “Oh, much more. Think what money you could save them on entertainment. No more fees to musicians when you are about.”

“Hah. There speaks a true merchant girl.”

“No more a merchant girl than you,” Therez said. “Here. We’ll play one more round. Unless you’re tired of losing.”

“Make it a double round,” her friend said. “And promise me you’ll turn the glass without delay.”

“Agreed.” Therez reversed the timer. “Duenne.”

“Empire.”

“War.”

“Treaty.”

They each rapped out answers as quickly as the other spoke, the words connecting through all the facets of life in a trade city on the border between Veraene and Károví.

Guild. Taxes. Caravan. Freight. Scales. Fish.

“Lev Bartov.”

“Klara! He’s not a fish.”

“He looks like one. Come, give me a word or make a challenge.”

“Very well. No challenge. My word is *shipping*.”

“Port.”

“Melnek.”

“Home.”

“Hurt. No, wait. I meant to say winter.”

The sands ran out in the silence that followed. Unwilling to meet her friend’s gaze, Therez turned the sand glass over in her hands. Its graceful wooden frame, carved from rare blackwood, made a swirling pattern against the luminescent sand, and the artisan had painted fine gold lines along its edges, reminding her of sunlight reflecting off running water.

“When do you go?” Klara said at last.

“Next summer.

“That late? I thought it was...”

“Next spring? It was. My father changed his mind.”

And he might again, Therez thought. After a long tedious lecture about expenses, Petr Zhalina had agreed that Therez’s brother, Ehren, would resume his studies at Duenne’s University. After longer discussions and several invitations, he gave permission for Therez to spend a year with their cousin’s family, who also lived in the capitol. But so many *ifs* and *maybes* lay between now and next summer. Their grandmother’s illness. Their father’s uncertain health and the state of his business...

“Do you want to play another round?” she said.

Her voice was not as steady as she would have liked, and Klara’s eyes narrowed, making them appear like quick, narrow brushstrokes against her dark complexion. But her friend only said, “No. Thank you. May I have another cup of water?”

A welcome deflection, Therez thought, as she poured chilled water for them both into porcelain cups. Her father paid extra to have ice blocks transported from the nearby mountains, and stored in his cellars. Her brother said the ice reminded their father of the far north, and Duszranjo, where he’d once lived. Therez didn’t know if that were true. She only knew her father’s whims on what he spent and what he saved made little sense to her.

“He must have been so very hungry,” she murmured, half to herself. “Starving, for more than one life.”

“What was that?” Klara said.

Therez roused herself. “Oh nothing. I was just thinking of....past lives.”

“Ah, those.” Klara’s black eyes glinted with curiosity. “I must have been a marsh-frog, at least once. Though marsh-frogs seldom care to become humans. What about you?”

Therez shrugged and pretended to study her water cup. But she could sense Klara’s attention. Her friend might pretend indifference, but she was watching Therez closely. “Oh, a scholar,” she said lightly. “I remember ink stains on my fingers. I had a lover, too. Another scholar. I remember us wandering through a library filled with books about everything in the world. About history and poetry, about Lir and Toc. About....” About magic and Lir’s jewels, gifts from the goddess to Erythandran’s priests in ancient times, she thought to herself. She had been a scholar more than once, but she didn’t want to tell Klara that part.

Klara, however, was smiling thoughtfully. “Scholar,” she said softly. “That I can believe. Do you remember how it ended, your time with your lover?”

Which one? Therez thought. The answer was the same for both. *In the darkness, running from a man I’d known years and lives before.* But who her lover was, or who the other man was, she still did not know.

She turned her head away. “It ended badly. That’s all I know. What about you?”

“Ah, mine.” Klara smiled pensively. “Mine are little more than vague dreams—shadows in the night, as the poets call them. But this I do remember—how in all of them how I always had friends. It gives me joy to think that.”

Some of the ache in Therez’s chest eased. “And so it should.”

A brisk knock startled them both. Klara arched her eyebrows. “It cannot be your father,” she whispered. “He never knocks.”

“Klara, do not make a joke, please—”

She broke off as the door opened to a liveried boy. “Mistress Therez,” he said. “Your mother would see you at once in her parlor.”

Klara immediately stood and shook out the folds of her loose summer gown. “A summons, I see. Then I shall not detain you a single moment.” She leaned close and whispered, “We shall continue our talk tomorrow, my scholarly friend.”

I should not have told her anything, Therez thought, as she escorted her friend down the stairs. That was the danger of the word linking game. Admit one secret and the rest come spilling out. It had nearly happened when her mother had first mentioned the cousin’s invitation. She wanted to cheer or laugh, both of them inappropriate reactions. Both guaranteed to convince her father she ought to stay home. Oh, not that she had any true plans. Just hopes and wishes that a twelve-month at Veraene’s capital city would let chance show itself. That she might meet a poet or scholar—anyone who was not a merchant’s son.

Or even a merchant’s son. As long as he is not like my father, I shall not care.

She parted from Klara at the next landing, and turned into the family’s private wing. All the house was quiet, except when Petr Zhalina held meetings or dinners for his colleagues, but the silence here was deeper, and the air lay heavy, thick with the scent of crushed herbs. Therez drew a deep breath, wishing for a cleansing northern wind, then hurried onward to her mother’s rooms.

She found her mother surrounded by a handful of servants who were laying out pens and ink bottles, parchment, drying dust, and packets of sealing wax. A tray with cups and two carafes occupied the center of the table.

Isolde Zhalina turned at her daughter's entrance. "There you are, Therez. I'm sorry to have interrupted your visit, but we have much to do. Your father has decided to hold a dinner party next week, and you're to help with the arrangements. I'm sending out the invitations today."

"Next week?" Therez asked. "Why the hurry? Papa said nothing before."

Her mother glanced briefly toward the servants. "Why ever the hurry? Therez, don't ask such questions."

So there were business matters afoot. Therez obediently seated herself at the table and poured herself a cup of tea. She waited until her mother had dismissed the servants before she spoke again.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Can you tell me now?"

"Business," her mother said, taking her own seat with a heavy sigh. "Your father decided to start contract negotiations early this year. He's anxious. So is Ehren."

Late summer brought the annual contract negotiations when merchants settled with the caravan companies and shipping guilds for next year's transportation. Other guilds often set their contracts as well—the silk guilds who provided raw silks, or woven fabrics, or finished goods; the miners' guilds who specialized in marble and granite and gemstones; the sundry smaller guilds and artisans who commissioned merchants to sell their wares. The season's negotiations made for tense conversations at dinner. Still, that did not explain the urgency in her mother's voice

"Your father is fretting about losing influence," her mother continued. "The City Council didn't invite him to the debate on caravan tolls, and even though they apologized, saying they thought him too ill to attend, I cannot believe the oversight was

entirely accidental. Then there are the rumors about higher taxes, talk about closing the border...”

“We heard those rumors last year.”

“Yes, but the rumors are louder this year. Much louder. I didn’t pay attention at first, but Ehren says he heard the same reports in Duenne. The king is anxious, and because he’s anxious, he wants more taxes, more fees, and stricter controls between all Moraúvín’s cities and Károví. And if the king *does* close the borders, we shall have to depend on smugglers or forgo our trade across the border. Your father would dislike that, especially after he’s invested so much time and money in opening those routes.”

She poured herself a cup of black tea from the other carafe and stirred a spoonful of honey. The pale sunlight, filtered through the room’s smoky glass, was not kind to her delicate features. Therez could plainly see faint lines crisscrossing her face, and silvery strands glinted from her neatly dressed hair, like frost upon the mountains. Her mother’s troubled look was not new, not since her father’s illness last spring, but this volubility about taxes and trade was a marked change.

“That’s not all, is it?” Therez said softly.

Her mother glanced toward the door. “No,” she said in a low voice. “I don’t know what you’ve heard, but Maester Galt has taken charge of the shipping guild, and he’s proposing changes to the fee structure. Talk says he’s already given the best terms to Maester Friedeck and his son. Your father thinks...” Another beat of hesitation. “We do not know if Ehren can return to the University, or if you can make your visit.”

Therez's chest squeezed tight in sudden distress. It took her a moment before she knew she had her voice under control. "Ah, I see. I had had no idea how difficult the year had been."

Her mother shrugged. "We are not in danger of poverty. But you know your father."

"Yes. I do." Therez fell silent. Her tea stood cooling, hardly touched, but she no longer had any desire for its delicate flavor. She had always told herself that her plans might be overturned, but she had not realized how much she had depended on them. Her thoughts flicked back to her word game with Klara. Melnek. Home. Hurt. The sequence was not far off from the truth. If only she could live a year—or even two—away from home, perhaps she could determine if hurt was a necessary part of life.

"May I see the guest list?" she asked.

Her mother handed her a sheet. Therez read through the list of names, written in her father's plain square handwriting. Galt, the head of the shipping guild, of course, and various other guild masters. Maester GerdBartos, the current head of the City Council, whose eldest daughter was contracted to marry Galt. A dozen of the most influential merchants and liaisons to the city council, Klara's father among them. The list covered an entire page.

"Papa's invited half of Melnek," she commented.

"Yes. We must extend ourselves more than usual." Her mother called up a brief unconvincing smile. "Though it won't be all work. We shall have music and special dishes and afterwards dancing. You are to pick the musicians yourself."

She took back the list of guests and went through Petr Zhalina's orders for the dinner, which were more exacting than usual—not only whom to invite, but also how many courses to serve, how much to spend on musicians and decorations, how long the dancing would last. It was unnecessary for Therez's mother to emphasize that Petr Zhalina wished to make a good impression. The length and detail of these instructions were evidence enough.

Therez absorbed all these implications for a moment. One dinner could not ruin their business, but clearly any future success would build upon its outcome. Every guild head invited. Every leading merchant—

Then it struck her. "I didn't see Maester Friedeck's name on the list. You might want to add him. Or no? What's wrong?"

The habitual crease between her mother's eyes deepened. "No. When your father heard the news about Maester Galt and Maester Friedeck, they...quarreled."

Therez bit her lip. Suggestions were a delicate matter, even with her mother. "Could you convince Papa to change his mind and invite him? Maester Friedeck, I mean."

Her mother dipped her pen in the inkwell, still frowning. "Why?"

"Because if the rumors are true, Papa will want Maester Friedeck as an ally, not a rival. He could use this evening to win his good will, if not his support. And if the rumors are false, and we snub him, then Papa would needlessly antagonize an important man. You did say this dinner was the key to next year's success."

Isolde Zhalina studied her daughter a moment. “Yes,” she said slowly. “I can see why Maester Friedeck should come. But let us have Ehren make the suggestion. That will do better.”

She nodded firmly. That too was out of character, Therez thought. A sign that all was not well in this household.

It never was.

Be quiet. It can be.

Still arguing with herself, Therez wrote down the name of a prominent musician. She immediately drew a line through the name, unhappy with her choice. Her pen hovered over the paper. When was the last time her mother had laughed or smiled without care? How had she looked, nearly five-and-twenty years ago, when Petr Zhalina courted her? Had he promised his love and all his heart? Had she, like Lir, laughed with delight? Or was theirs a marriage of gold and politics, even from the beginning?

The scratching of her mother’s pen ceased. She was staring at the guest list and frowning harder than before.

“A problem?” Therez asked.

“No. But I always find it hard to pick the right words. Especially for certain guests.”

Ah, so the list was not the complete list. Somehow this did not surprise Therez. “Who else is coming?” she asked.

Her mother wrote a line, paused. Her glance flicked up and back down to the parchment before her. “Baron Mann, if he accepts,” she said at last. “A few others.”

Therez exhaled softly. Baron Josef Mann had recently come from a season at Duenne's Court. Her father must have special plans indeed.

"Paschke," she said. "We must engage Launus Paschke for the evening. With him and his company, we won't need any other musicians."

"Paschke would indeed make a favorable impression," her mother murmured. "I only hope—"

She broke off and frowned again. Therez reminded herself that a failure meant more than disappointment for herself and Ehren. Failure also meant a lecture from Petr Zhalina to his wife, delivered in a soft monotone that would wash all emotion from her mother's face. And he would not drop the matter after one or two days—or even a week, Therez thought. That anyone could endure. But her father would bring up the subject weeks and years later—small pointed reminders of his wife's failings. Strange how a whisper could wound so deep.

It would come out right, Therez told herself. They would dazzle their guests, her father would secure his contracts, and she would see her own plans to fruition. But every detail must be perfect.

By late-afternoon, Therez had planned the wines and most of the decorations. She had written to various artists for advice with the finer details; she had also sent a letter to Launus Paschke, asking to meet and discuss hiring his company. In turn her mother had completed the invitations and given them over to Petr Zhalina's senior runner for delivery.

“We are done for today,” her mother told her. “Go and visit your grandmother. I know you want to.”

Therez did not wait for her mother to repeat the suggestion. She ran to her rooms to store away her notes, then hurried down the corridor to the lavish suite where her grandmother lived alone. Naděžda Zhalina called these rooms her empire, and there she had once ruled with vigor. But in the last year, age and illness had overtaken her—the empire had shrunk to her bedchamber, invaded by nurses and maids and companions. Therez came into the richly ornamented sitting room that formed the outer defenses of that kingdom.

A maid sat there, mending stockings.

“Is she awake, Mina?”

Mina shook her head. “Sleeping, Mistress. Very lightly.”

The sleep of very old people. “What about her appetite? Did she eat today?”

“Three bites, Mistress.”

Therez glanced through the half-open door. The rooms beyond were dark, but a faint light edged the bedroom door. “I’ll just look in, then. I won’t wake her.”

She glided through a second, smaller sitting room, which was given over to dozens of porcelain figures, through the dressing room, to her grandmother’s bedroom door, which she eased open.

Bowls filled with fresh památka cuttings were set about on tables, the pale white blooms like candle flames in the semi-darkness. Her grandmother had carried away a handful of seeds from her old home in faraway Duszranjo, in Károví, decades before. After they arrived in Melnek, and her son purchased this house, she had planted beds of

them in their formal gardens, over his protests. Now that she was ill, she had the flowers brought to her. Off in one corner stood a thick crude figure of an gnarled bent woman. Lir, as the crone. She had another name in Károví, in the old days, but the goddess was still the same.

Another maid, Lisl, sat in one corner, knitting by the light of a shaded lamp. Therez signaled for her to remain still and tiptoed to her grandmother's side.

Her grandmother lay with her head turned toward the window, snoring softly. She looked old, Therez thought. Old and frail. Her ruddy-brown skin was mottled, and her once-black hair lay scattered thinly over the pillow. Underneath the loose pouches of skin, you could just make out traces of the strong old woman from six months before.

Therez's grandmother stirred. "Therez," she whispered. "Hello, my sweet. Come closer."

Therez touched the old woman's cheek. "Are you well?"

"Dobrud'n. Good and not good, as they say." Thirty years in Veraene had not erased her strong accent. "I was hoping you would visit." She tried to sit up. Her face crumpled and she sank into her pillow again with a muttered curse. "I hate it," she whispered angrily. "I hate sickness and—ah, you didn't come to hear my complaints."

"I came to visit. If you'd rather complain, then I'll listen." Therez gathered her grandmother's hands in hers and gently kissed them. She could feel how light and fragile the bones had become. The surgeons had warned them to expect her grandmother's death within the next few months.

Already her grandmother had closed her eyes again, and her breathing turned soft and raspy, a sound like that of paper sliding over paper. Lisl's knitting needles resumed

their regular clicking. Therez gently withdrew her hands, thinking to let her grandmother sleep, when the old woman's eyes fluttered open. "Tell me about the dinner party," she whispered.

Therez suppressed a start of surprise. Of course her grandmother had heard. Probably from Lisl and Mina. "If you already know, Grandmama, what can I tell you?"

Her grandmother laughed softly. "Impertinent child. Tell me what these silly girls don't know. What has your father planned?"

"He's planned everything," Therez said dryly, which provoked another laugh from her grandmother. "But he's left a few choices to me and my mother. We shall have Paschke for our music, if he has no other obligation, and I've written to Mistress Sobek, the theater artist, for advice on the decorations. I can tell you already that there will be flowers and sweet candles, dancing, and three courses of the finest dishes Mama could decide upon."

"And the guests? Who are they?"

"Friends. Neighbors. He's invited nearly all the chief merchants and anyone with a voice in the city council." She hesitated. "He's even invited Baron Mann, if you can believe it."

"Friends," her grandmother said. "Those are not friends. Those are allies, rivals, partners. Sometimes I think your father—Well, never mind what I think. It should be an interesting evening. I wish

I could watch. Pity. And with you the chief of everything. So big since last year. Soon you will find a husband."

Not until Duenne, Therez thought, but she only smiled. "I'd rather wait another year, Grandmama. Sixteen or seventeen is old enough."

A brief spasm passed over her grandmother's face. "I was seventeen," she whispered. "Saw your grandfather in his shop in the marketplace. He was young then, quieter, but that day he was laughing. Such a bright smile. Oh, I fell in love so quick, it hurt."

Therez stroked her hands, not liking the quaver in her grandmother's voice. "Maybe we should postpone the dinner party. It's not right. Not with you so...tired."

"Bah. Don't be foolish. I'll see more dinner parties. I dream of them sometimes. Strong dreams, too, and all of them in the same palace. And always in winter, far to the north. About scrubbing, if you can believe it. Floors and walls. Tin plates. Silver plates. Once a platter of gold that I polished until it gleamed like the sun. I did well, they said, for someone so young. I almost told them I knew the work from lives and lives before, but I didn't. I knew they wouldn't like it...."

Therez's skin prickled at her grandmother's words. Strong dreams were always life dreams, the scattered memories of previous lives. Even those who dreamed faintly would find their life dreams more vivid as death approached. "Don't talk like that," she said fiercely.

Her grandmother made a tch-tch sound. "Ne. Not to worry, sweet. I only meant that I dreamed sometimes." Another pause while she recovered her breath. "Therez, why is your father holding this dinner party?"

Therez blinked, startled by the question. "Business, my mother said. The autumn contracts." She didn't want to mention the part about Ehren's studies, or her own trip to

Duennie. That would only provoke another argument between her grandmother and her father.

But her grandmother was already muttering. “Business. Always business. Money. Contracts. Deals and trade. Sometimes I think your father forgets the famine was thirty years go. Not yesterday.”

“It could happen again tomorrow,” said a voice from the doorway. “Or have your forgotten how easily wealth turns into poverty?”

Petr Zhalina stood in the doorway, a tall narrow shadow against the gloom. Only a white band showed where his shirt emerged from his dark gray vest and coat. With a wave of his hand, he dismissed Lisl, who vanished into the outer rooms.

Naděžda Zhalina opened her eyes; her expression turned wary. “Dobrud’n, my son.”

“Good afternoon, my mother.”

Her mouth twitched. “Such a diligent son. Have you come to wish me farewell?”

Petr Zhalina lifted his chin. His lips thinned even more, if that were possible, and the angles in his cheeks grew more pronounced. “I came to see about your health. Therez, please leave us.”

Therez turned toward the door, but stopped when her grandmother lifted a hand. “Come again this evening, sweet.”

“She comes if her duties allow,” said her father. “Therez. Go.”

Therez hurried out the door. She heard a low murmur from her father and a brusque reply from her grandmother. She paused, wondering what the new argument was about, but both voices quickly sank into whispers.

A shiver passed through her—a reminder of death and the coming winter—and she fled to the brightly lit halls below.

On Writing The Sword-Edged Blonde: The Bar Where Everybody Knows Your Name

By Alex Bledsoe

A man walks into a bar.

If this happens in a science fiction or fantasy novel, the author has his job cut out for him. Not only does he have to describe the bar physically, but also its patrons. They might include aliens, ogres, trolls or elves, all of which can have any number of permutations. Then the drinks have to be laid out, and the money system enumerated. When all that's done, the author *might* have enough imagination left to finally describe the man who walked in.

I'm unusual as a fantasy or science fiction reader, in that the details of made-up societies, worlds and cultures hold far less interest for me than the people (I include non-humans in that term) who inhabit them. I remember listening in wonder to another well-regarded fantasy author describe the elaborate monetary system he'd designed, and for which so far he'd had no use. It's something I could never do.

When I wrote *The Sword-Edged Blonde*, I wanted to pare it down to the things I, as a reader, cared most about: namely, the people. Anything that distracted from them, and from the reader's emotional commitment to them, I either left out or minimized. For example, many fantasy characters have names that, if not literally unpronounceable, at least challenge the tongue; I named my hero Eddie LaCrosse. Eddie's office is, in fact,

above a bar, one that is no different in feel and atmosphere from any you might walk into today. Eddie uses swords that, like modern guns, have make and model names, and the people speak in rhythms, patterns and tones that don't try to sound "otherworldly."

There's no time spent digressing into societal details that don't apply to the immediate situation; this is not to belittle authors who do that sort of thing well, it's just something I neither crave as a reader or excel at as a writer.

I did invent one term. Eddie is essentially a private investigator functioning in an Iron Age world. In *our* world, PI's are known by various, vaguely derogatory terms: shamus, dick, peeper, etc. I decided that Eddie's reality needed a similar term, and came up with "sword jockey." To me it rings with the same thinly-veiled contempt as "gumshoe" or "snooper."

The Sword-Edged Blonde (and its upcoming sequel, *Burn Me Deadly*) have been called high-fantasy stories written as if they were Forties pulp detective novels. That's exactly my intent, but it's not just an ironic stylistic choice; rather, it's a sincere attempt to let readers connect with the characters by letting as few things as possible get in the way.

So the man (or woman) who walks into a bar in Eddie's world could, hopefully, be you. And you'd be right at home there.

The Sword-Edged Blonde

By Alex Bledsoe

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[Alex Bledsoe](#) grew up in West Tennessee, but now lives in Wisconsin.

ONE

Spring came down hard that year. And I do mean hard, like the fist of some drunken pike poker with too much fury and not enough ale, whose wife just left him for some wandering minstrel and whose commanding officer absconded with his pay. The thunderstorms alone would be talked about for years, and the floods that followed erased whole towns along the Gusay River.

Nature, as always, had the last word.

I worked in a small town in Muscodia back then, out of an office above a dockside tavern. Located on the Gusay midway between the capital city of Sevlow and the border town Pema, Neceda was a place you stopped when you weren't in a hurry, for a drink, dinner or quick companionship. Only about three hundred people lived there, but at any one time the transients tended to double that population. The money that flowed into town didn't stay there, though, so Neceda always looked rundown and disreputable. It was a good place for someone like me, a private sword jockey with a talent for discretion, to quietly ply his trade. Clients liked coming to a small town where they could pass unrecognized. Some days were lucrative, most were not, but it all evened out at the end.

The flood and its aftermath had essentially shut Neceda down, and that had created a crisis of conscience among the population. Suddenly a bunch of bottom-feeding strangers had to act like an actual community, and it was amusing to watch people interact who normally wouldn't: whores and moon priestesses did laundry

together, blacksmiths and cardsharps repaired buildings, soldiers and beggars rounded up stray animals and children. I helped sandbag the tavern below, and we'd gotten off pretty light; except for the smell, there wasn't much damage, which said more about the place than the flood. The river was now mostly back within its banks, and soon would subside enough for normal transportation to resume. Then Neceda would be back to its old rapacious self.

My "office" consisted of two rooms in the attic over the kitchen, one always open with a bench against the wall in case anyone decided they needed to wait. I kept the inner office locked, but there was really no reason for it; it merely gave an illusion of confidentiality, which on most days was enough.

That illusion was definitely enough for the wellworn emissary from King Felix of Balaton now seated across from me explaining his master's needs. I wasn't surprised that the king himself hadn't come, but at first it amused me that he'd trusted this tired old man with something of, shall we say, such surpassing delicacy.

Still, as he related the situation, I understood why he'd been chosen. The very thought of describing the way Princess Lila had gone off to be a girl- toy for a bunch of randy border raiders left him too embarrassed to even meet my eyes. Any other man might've been too tempted to make bad jokes, but not this one. He'd been trusted with a job, and he was going to carry it out as

best he could.

"So as you can see, Mr. LaCrosse, the princess could not possibly have had any intention of, ahem, joining these young men, so she must have been taken against her

will. A noble daughter of the house of Balaton would never simply take up with vermin of this sort.” He took a long pull on the drink I’d poured from my office bottle.

Behind my desk, I kept my face neutral and said nothing. Nervous people hate silence, so I knew eventually he’d start talking again. In the meantime, I studied him: about sixty, thin and frail- looking, but with traces of a much larger, stronger man left in the set of his jaw and the way he sat up sharply each time he caught himself slumping. A soldier once, maybe even a high- ranking officer, now reduced to an errand boy. I took pity on him and broke the silence. “So what did the guys in the pointy hats have to say about it?” I asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The king’s wizards.” I’d only known two or three kings who didn’t rely on wizards for decisions. Some couldn’t put on their royal slippers without checking the stars’ alignment, and rumor claimed that our own King Archibald, the ruler of Muscodia, had one who read the pattern of mucus in his handkerchief each time he sneezed. I’d heard that King Felix kept three wizards

and a moon priestess on retainer for emergencies, and the disappearance of the princess certainly qualified.

“They’re supposed to see the future. Didn’t they see it coming?”

“They claim,” he said without looking at me, “that the future is murky at this time, and beyond their power to envision.”

“Convenient.”

“Yes. Their failure is one reason I’ve been sent to hire you.” He shifted nervously in his chair. “We’ve had no demands for ransom, nor any threats if royal policy isn’t

changed, so I don't believe it was a politically motivated crime. Still, King Felix doesn't wish word to get out that his family is so, uhm . . . easily swayed, whether by force or, uh, conversion. You can

understand that, can't you?"

"Would be kind of hard to hold your head up around all the other kings," I agreed. If he caught my sarcasm, he didn't mention it.

He finally raised his eyes to mine and said, "Then I hope I— I mean, *we*— can trust your discretion on this."

"The royal 'we'?" I asked, and this time the irony stuck.

"This is a serious matter, Mr. LaCrosse." His voice grew stronger now that he wasn't talking about the exploits of sex- crazed fifteen- year- old princesses. "I was told that you understood these things, and could be trusted."

"Yeah?" I leaned back and laced my fingers together over my stomach, which seemed larger than the last time I'd done so. "Who by?"

"Commander Bernard Teller of the Civil Security Force of Boscobel."

I smiled. "So Bernie made commander, huh?" Bernie was no- nonsense, tough as nails and way too honest to ever get promoted so high. If he had, then things in Boscobel had changed for the better. "Well, did he also tell you I get twenty- five gold pieces a day, plus expenses?"

He produced a small pouch that jingled distinctively. "I have been instructed to give you 200 gold pieces now, with another 200 upon successful completion of the job."

I leaned over and took the pouch, which was too heavy not to be genuine. "Let's be clear on exactly what constitutes 'successful completion.' "

“The return of the princess to her father.”

“Intact?” I pressed. We both knew what I meant.

“In any condition. He just wants her back before anyone finds out about this.”

I opened the pouch and took out fifty of the small gold coins, then pushed the bag back across my desk to him. “I don’t need the whole amount now, just enough for a couple of days’ travel to the border to look for these guys you say she ran off with. Pay me the balance when she’s back in her own canopied bed.”

He looked at me oddly for a moment, but didn’t argue. As he stood, I asked suddenly, “So tell me—why’d she leave?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Princess Lila. There must’ve been a reason. Spoiled rich girls don’t usually go to that much trouble to get away from home.”

“As I told you—”

“You told me she ran off to get laid by some rough boys. In my experience, rich girls don’t have much trouble with that, and they don’t throw away their meal tickets just for a night of slap- and- tickle. So why’d she leave?”

“The princess is . . . headstrong. As was her late mother.” He seemed to feel that this was enough explanation.

“Do you have a picture? I’d hate to show up with the wrong girl.”

The old man produced a small engraved image of a dark- haired, dark-eyed beauty. She wore a low- cut court gown that revealed her assets quite nicely; her liabilities were less obvious. She had a pronounced, sharp nose that gave her an earthy air at odds with her finery. “Kids these days,” I said, and pocketed the picture.

After the old man had gone, I swung my chair around and looked out the window toward the river.

The odor of drying mud and dead fish filled the air. It would take several normal rains to get all the crap off the streets, and in the meantime the thought of a little time away from home, even if it meant tangling with border raiders, seemed like a good idea.

I studied the girl's picture. This missing princess could be one of two types. The first kind, protected and sheltered from the harsh realities of the world, retained their childhood innocence throughout their lives, and were unconditionally honest, kind and loving no matter what the world threw at them. I'd known at least one princess like that.

The other kind, much more common, grew up spoiled, selfish and arrogant. Where I needed to look for this one depended on which type she was. I knew King Felix's elderly messenger hadn't told me everything; clients like him never do. But I suspected the pieces of the truth were there in the information he'd given, and I'd have the whole trip downriver to put them together. It was another reason I didn't take all his money; I'd agreed to find the girl, and I would, but I wasn't ready to promise what would happen after that.

I opened the sword cabinet and took out my old Fireblade Warrior three- footer, the one with the narrow dagger hidden in the hilt. I had bigger swords, but this one wouldn't attract attention and, since I'd filed the distinctive Fireblade monogram off the blade, it looked a lot more fragile and decrepit than it actually was. I slipped it into the shoulder scabbard and strapped it across my back, outside my jacket.

I grabbed the basics for a short overnight trip and threw them into a saddlebag. I put five pieces of gold in my pocket and the remainder in the hollow heel of my right boot. Then I locked up the inner office and went downstairs.

Angelina looked up from washing the mugs. It was just after lunch, so there were only a couple of men drinking, and neither of them seemed to require much of her attention. Angelina was not young, although she was beautiful in a way that only grew stronger the more time you spent with her. She could've done much better for herself than owning this ratty tavern where she endured the occasional gropes and rudeness in return for respectable tips. I knew she was hiding out from something, but it was none of my business. We all have secrets.

Callie, her teenage waitress, stood at the end of the bar carefully arranging a small ring of pebbles around a tiny metal cup. When she finished that, she cautiously measured powder into it. She kept referring to a scrap of vellum covered in red lettering beside it. Her lips moved as she read.

"What are you doing?" I asked. Callie was a beautiful girl, but I'd seen elder ly glowworms that were brighter.

"A spell for no more rain," she said as she worked. "I'm tired of cleaning the mud out from between my toes every night."

"A spell?" I repeated. "So are you studying to be a moon priestess now, Callie?"

"No, but I got this from one. It only cost me three pieces of gold, too."

"Bought spells aren't worth the blood they're written in," Angelina said disdainfully.

Callie looked up, annoyed. “Yeah, well, I bought it to stop the rain, and it hasn’t rained since.”

“So a teenage barmaid can now control the weather,” Angelina snorted. “What will they think of next?”

“Everyone knows you’re bitter, Angie, but it gets tired after a while,” Callie snapped. “*I’m* trying to make a difference in the world, not just bitch about it.”

Angelina wasn’t impressed. “Make a difference at the corner booth, why don’t you? Those plates won’t collect themselves. Oh, unless you bought a spell for that, too. Maybe I’m paying you too much, if you can throw money around like that.”

Callie’s eyes filled with tears. “Angie, you’re just mean,” she said. She gathered her little spell and stomped off into the kitchen.

I looked at Angelina. “That *was* mean.”

For an instant regret flashed in her eyes, then they hardened over. “I don’t need waitresses who still believe in magic. Their religion should be tips and serving customers.”

“You don’t believe in magic?”

She snorted. “And you do?”

“I believe in possibility.”

“Name one magical thing you’ve ever seen.”

“Why, you in the firelight, Angel.”

She barked a laugh at me, then turned back to washing.

“So, are you going out of town?” she asked.

“Yeah. Should be back day after tomorrow at the latest.”

“Have something to do with that old rattletrap who came down a little while ago?”

“Where you from, Angel?”

She grinned and winked over her shoulder. “Right.

No questions, no lies. Well, watch yourself. You’re ugly enough without more scars.”

“And you be nicer to Callie. A lot of people come in here just to watch her bend over and pick things up.”

Why Escape?

By Col Buchanan

Escapism is bad for you. It's unhealthy and immature and leads to a lack of bathing.

I'm fairly certain you've come across this particular sentiment before, maybe not the bathing part, but the rest of it. Hell, maybe even the bathing part too. People who hold this viewpoint tend to look poorly upon the imagined realms of fantasy and SF—and even more so in regards to their fans. Yes—because we'd rather poke a stick at the human condition from the vantage of Mars or Westeros than from the kitchen sink, because we like to cast our imaginations as far as we can, because we like to go *wow* along the way, we're all somehow squandering our precious time on this Earth.

My response to this is usually to acknowledge the most obvious point first—that it's a lot of fun losing yourself for a while in a fantasy setting. Yet escapism, for me, means a great deal more than this. In truth, we don't always find ourselves in circumstances of our own making. And trying to escape from bad circumstances, whether inwardly or outwardly, is a perfectly human reaction.

I'm speaking of course from personal experience here.

I grew up during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Dyslexic. Fairly lonely. One of those quiet kids who looks out at the world with something bordering on disbelief. My school years were an incarceration that I couldn't wait to be free from. Home life was the same. Circumstances I could either physically run away from or find some way to bear.

Thankfully I found fantasy and science fiction at an early age. Or they found me, as it sometimes seems with these things. And they were a serious gift back then—these stories that allowed me to escape into a different world than my own. While brothers took to drinking alcohol on the streets, I locked myself in my room and read of imagined places, and when that wasn't enough, invented and wrote of them too. I was like Sebastian in *The Neverending Story*. Same hair too.

Since then, this passion for escapism has been a constant theme throughout my life. And it really has been a life-saver. No matter how bad life may have been at times, the load has always been lightened by these temporary escapes of the mind. The result has been *Farlander*—my grown-up take on the fantasy adventure stories that thrilled me so much as a youth. For several years now I've been living part-time in the Heart of the World, the setting for the book, and having great fun sending my protagonists head-long through this fantasy landscape.

The fun, however—it has to be said—has been tempered by my real-life experiences of growing up under those earlier conditions that I mentioned. The escapism of youth was a necessity for many reasons, and they've shaped *Farlander* as much as its fantasy nature has. My empathy is strong for those who live under conditions they want to, but cannot, escape from. So I write always with an eye cast towards those circumstances in this world, our common world—which is why the Heart of the World is in many ways an echo of our real world, our history and our future. This is also why I'm interested in the dynamics of power and liberty; of oppressive ideologies; of what it is to live a free life, what constraints always face us. And it's why I write about the destitute,

the exiled, the enslaved, and the soon-to-be enslaved, as much as I write about the Beggar Kings, the Caliphs, and the monstrously wealthy.

From my own standing, there's no better way of exploring the issues of liberty than through the release of escapism—a medium that was, for me, a means of breaking out of a cage not of my own making. And in truth that has remained the underlying reason for my love for fantasy and SF to this day. The celebration of freedom they both entail.

In the much more elegant words of JRR Tolkien:

“Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape? ... If we value the freedom of mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can!”

Farlander

By Col Buchanan

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[Col Buchanan](#) lives in Lancaster, England. *Farlander* is his debut novel, and the first novel in the Heart of the World series.

CHAPTER ONE

The Shield

Bahn had climbed the Mount of Truth many times in his life. It was a green, broad-shouldered hill with gentle slopes, not overly high; yet that morning, hiking up the path that wound its way towards the flattened summit, it seemed steeper than it ever had before. He could not fathom why.

‘Bahn,’ said Marlee by his side, her hand in his tugging him to a stop.

He turned to find his wife was gazing back along the path, her other palm shielding her eyes from the sun. Juno, their ten-year-old son, struggled some way behind. He was small for his age, and the picnic basket he carried too bulky for his short arms. Still, he had insisted on carrying it on his own.

Bahn wiped sweat from his brow. In the moment his hand drew clear, and cool air kissed his forehead, he thought: I do not wish him to see this today. And he knew then that it was not the hill itself that was steeper that morning. It was his own resistance to it.

An apple toppled from the basket, red and shiny as lip paint, and began to roll down the foot-polished stones of the path. Both parents watched as the boy stopped its progress with his boot, then bent to pick it up.

‘Need a hand?’ Bahn called back to his son, and tried not to dwell on the money it had cost him for that single apple, or the rest of their precious picnic.

The boy replied with an angry glare. Dropping the apple back into the basket, he hefted the load before continuing.

Thunder rumbled in the far distance, though there were no clouds in the sky. Bahn looked away from his son, tried to exhale the worry that seemed always to curdle in his stomach these days. He forced a smile on to his face, in a trick he had learned during his years of fighting in the Red Guard. If he stretched his lips just so, his burdens would seem to grow a touch lighter.

‘It’s good to see you smile,’ said Marlee, her own brown eyes creasing at the edges. On her back, in a canvas sling, their infant daughter hung open-mouthed and asleep.

‘It’s good to have a day away from the walls, though I’d rather we spent it anywhere but here.’

‘If he’s old enough to ask, he’s old enough to see it. We can’t shelter him from the truth forever, Bahn.’

‘No, but we can try.’

She frowned at that, but squeezed his hand harder.

Below them, the city of Bar-Khos roared like a distant river. Gulls soared and dipped above the nearby harbour, wheeling in their hundreds like a snowstorm in the far mountains. He watched them, a hand across his forehead to shade his eyes, as they took turns to speed low and fast across the mirror-flat water, their reflections flying upside-down between the hulls of ships. Sunlight speared back from the surface, the dazzles painting it in burning gold. The rest of the city lay beneath a glamour of heat, the figures of people small and indistinct as they made their way through streets cast into deep shadow. Bells rang from above the domes of the White Temple, horns sounded from the Stadium of Arms. In air hazy with dust, mirrors flashed from the baskets of merchants’

hot-air balloons tethered to slender towers. Beyond them all, beyond the northern walls, an airship rose from the pylons of the skyport, and began heading east on its hazardous run to Zanzahar.

It seemed strange to Bahn, even now, that life could carry on seemingly as normal while the city teetered on the brink.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Juno panted, as he caught up with them.

Bahn’s smile was now a genuine one. ‘Nothing,’ he replied to the boy.

*

On days like this one, a crisping hot Foolsday at the high point of summer, it was common for people to climb their way out of the baking streets of Bar-Khos to seek refuge on the top of the Mount of Truth. There a park rose in terraces around its flattened summit, and a breeze blew constantly fresh from the sea. The path levelled off as it reached the park itself. Young Juno, feeling more confident now with his load, took this opportunity to increase his pace, overtaking his parents before dodging past others who were strolling more sedately. Together, they skirted a narrow green where, amongst a group of children playing with a kite, a fight was breaking out over who should fly it next. Beyond them, on a bench overshadowed by a withered jupe tree, an old beggar monk sat with his bottle of wine while talking incessantly to his dog. The dog seemed not to be listening.

Again, a peal of thunder rolled through the air, sounding more distinct now they were closer to the city’s southern walls. Juno glanced back towards his parents. ‘Hurry up,’ he urged, unable to contain his excitement.

‘We should have brought his kite along for later,’ said Marlee, as behind them the children ceased their squabbling long enough to send their box of paper and featherwood sailing into the wind.

Bahn nodded, but said nothing. His attention was fixed on a building that stood on the summit of the hill and occupied the very centre of the park. Surrounded by hedgerows, its tall walls were dotted with hundreds of white-framed windows, reflecting either sky or blankness depending on where he looked. Bahn himself reported to that building almost daily, in his capacity as aide to General Creed. Even without choosing to, he found his gaze running across the flank of the Ministry of War, to where he knew the general’s office was located. He sought sign of the old man perhaps watching from one of the windows.

‘Bahn,’ chided his wife, as she tugged him onwards.

At last they came to the southern fringe of the park. Juno moved ahead, weaving his way between the crowds of people sitting amongst the long grasses, but slowing with every step as he took in the vista appearing below. Finally he stopped completely. After a moment, the basket tumbled from his hands.

Bahn went over to join him and began to gather up the spilled contents of the basket. All the while, he watched his son closely, much as he had once watched him take his first tentative, risky steps as a young child. The boy had always been banned from visiting the hill on his own, but in the last year he had begun to ask and then to plead to be brought here, fired up on the stories told by his friends. He had wanted to see for himself why the hill was named the Mount of Truth.

Now, from this moment on, he would always know.

On this southernmost edge of the tallest hill of the city, the sea could be seen to run both east and west along the coastline – and directly ahead, the long, half-laq-wide corridor of land known as the Lansway, reaching out like a road towards the continent lying beyond, which today was a mere suggestion of contours and cloud barely visible in the distance.

Across the waist of this isthmus, in sheer grey stone, rose the great southern walls of Bar-Khos known as the Shield.

Those walls – which had protected the city from land invasion for over three centuries, and therefore the island of Khos, breadbasket of the Mercian Isles – towered some ninety feet in height, and taller still where turrets rose from the battlements. They were old enough to have given the city its name of Bar-Khos – ‘the Shield of Khos’. There were six bands of wall in all, or at least there had been until the Mannians had arrived with their flags waving and their declarations of conquest. Now just four stood blocking the Lansway, and two of those were of recent construction. In the original outermost one still standing, no gates or gateways remained: all such entrances had been sealed up with stone and mortar.

The Mount of Truth offered the highest vantage point in the city. It was from here, and here alone, that the ordinary citizen could witness what confronted the walls on the other side. The boy, doing so now, blinked as his gaze roved out from the Shield towards the Mannian besiegers arrayed like a white flood across the plain of the isthmus; the full might of the Imperial Fourth Army.

His young face grew pale, his eyes widening with every new detail they absorbed.

The Lansway was entirely covered by a city of bright tents, neatly arranged in rows and quarters by the streets of wooden buildings dividing them. The tent city faced the Shield from beyond countless lines of earthworks – ramparts of dirt raised up across a plain of dusty yellow – and meandering ditches choked with black water. Behind the closest sequence of these earthworks, like creatures basking in the heat of the sun, squatted the siege engines and cannon, belching smoke and constant noise as they fired at the city in a slow, unending regularity that had lasted – beyond everyone’s expectation – for the last ten years.

‘You were born on the very first day they assaulted the walls,’ Marlee said from behind them, in a voice seemingly calm, as she unwrapped a loaf of honeyed keesh from their basket. ‘I went into labour early, and you came out no bigger than a farl. It was due to the shock of losing my father, I think, for that was the morning he fell.’

The boy gave no impression of hearing her; what lay before him had seized his full attention. Yet, in the past, Juno had asked more than once to be told about the day he was born – only to be given the barest facts possible. Bahn and his wife each had their separate reasons for not wishing to recall it.

Give him time, Bahn thought, sitting himself on the grass to study the vista with his own more experienced eyes. Memories were stirring, unbidden, in the wake of his wife’s words.

Bahn had been just twenty-three when the war had begun. He could still recall exactly where he had been when news had first arrived of refugees flooding towards the city from the continent. He had been seated in the taproom of the Throttled Monk, still thirsty after his fourth black ale, and drunk already. His mood had been foul that

afternoon: he'd had altogether enough of his job as a shipping clerk at the city skyport, putting up with a foreman who was a stumpy-legged little dictator of the worst kind, and all for a wage that barely saw him and Marlee through to the end of each week.

The news, when it broke, was delivered by a fat skins merchant just returned from the south, the man's portly face a bright scarlet, as though he had run all the way home just to say what he revealed next. Pathia had fallen, he declared to them all breathlessly. Pathia, their immediate neighbour to the south, was the traditional enemy of Khos – the very reason the Shield had been built in the first place. Around the taproom his words fell upon a sudden silence. As they now listened, shock and wonder grew in equal measure. King Ottomek V, despised thirty-first monarch of the royal line of Sanse, had been foolish enough to be captured alive. The Mannians had dragged him screaming, twisting and turning through the streets of conquered Bairat behind a galloping white horse, until the skin had been flayed almost entirely from his body – along with his ears, his nose, his genitals. Near death, the king had then been cast down a well, where he had somehow clung on to life for an entire night, while the Mannians laughed down the shaft at his cries for mercy. At dawn, they had filled the well with rocks.

Even amongst the most hardened men in the taproom, such a fate drew muttered oaths and shakes of the head. Bahn grew fearful: this was bad news for them all. For the full length of his life, and more, the Mannians had been conquering nation after nation around the inland sea of the Midèr̄es. Never before, though, had they been so close as this to Khos. Around him, the debate rose in volume: shouts, arguments, thin attempts at

humour. Bahn pushed his way outside. He hastened for home, back to his wife of barely a year. There he rushed up the stairs to their small damp room above the public bathhouse, and blurted all of it out in one desperate, drunken tirade. She tried to soothe him with soft words, then she made him some chee, her hands remaining miraculously steady. For a time – Bahn’s mind needing a release from itself – they made love on the creaking bed, a slowly passionate affair, her gaze fixed constantly on his.

Together, later that night, they stood on the flat roof of the building, and listened with the rest of the inhabitants of Bar-Khos to the cries of the refugees pleading to be let in, thousands of them huddled beyond the walls. From other rooftops, people shouted for the gates to be opened; others demanded, in hot anger, for them to let the Pathians rot. Marlee had prayed quietly for the poor souls, he remembered, whispering under her breath to Eres, the great World Mother, her painted lips moving blackly under a strange light cast by the twin moons hanging over the south. Oh mercy, Sweet Eres, let them in, let them have sanctuary.

It was General Creed himself who had ordered the gates to be opened the next morning. The refugees flooded in bearing stories of slaughter, of whole communities put to the torch for their defiance against the invaders.

Even confronted with such alarming accounts, most in Bar-Khos considered themselves beyond harm. The great Shield would protect them. Besides, the Mannians would be busy enough with the newly conquered south.

Bahn and Marlee carried on with their lives as best they could. She was expecting again, and therefore taking it easy, cautious of risking another miscarriage. She drank infusions of herbs the midwife gave her and would sit for hours watching the busy street

below, a hand splayed protectively over her belly. Sometimes her father would visit, still clad in his reeking armour, a giant of a man, his face hard, without flex, squinting at her with eyes dimmed by age. His daughter was precious to him, and he and Bahn would fuss over her until she finally snapped and lost her temper. Even that did not dissuade them for long.

Four months later, news came of an advancing imperial army. The mood in the city remained much the same. There were six walls after all, tall and thick enough to protect them. All the same, another call went out from the city council asking for volunteers to fill the ranks of the Red Guard, which had thinned considerably during the previous decades of peace. Bahn was hardly cut out to be a soldier, but he was a romantic at heart and, with a wife and child and a home to protect, in his own way he was stirred to action. He quit his job without fuss, simply not turning up one morning – a warm thrill in his belly on thinking of the foreman having a tantrum at his absence. That same day Bahn signed up to defend his city. At the central barracks, they handed him an old sword with a chipped blade, a red cloak of damp-smelling wool, a round shield, a cuirass, a pair of greaves and a helm all much too large for him . . . and a single silver coin. He was then told to report every morning to the Stadium of Arms for training.

Bahn had barely learned the names of the other recruits in his company, all still as green and untrained as he was, when the Mannian herald arrived on horseback to demand the city's surrender. Their terms were simple enough. Open the gates and most would be spared; but fight and all would be slain or enslaved. It was impossible, the herald announced to the high wall looming before him, to resist the manifest destiny of Holy Mann.

A trigger-happy marksman on the ramparts shot the herald off his mount. A cry rose up from the battlements: first blood.

The city held its breath, waiting for what was to come next.

At first their numbers seemed impossible. For five days the Imperial Fourth Army assembled across the width of the Lansway, tens of thousands stamping into position in an ordered procession, then spreading out to erect their colony of tents, earthworks, guns in numbers never seen before, mammoth siege towers – all before the collective gaze of the defenders.

Their barrage finally began with a single screeching whistle. Cannon shots pounded into the wall; one arched high and landed in a shattering explosion among the reserves of men behind. The defenders on the parapet hunkered down and waited.

On the morning of the first ground assault, Bahn was standing with some other raw recruits behind the main gates of wall one, the heavy shield hanging from his arm, a sword in his trembling hand. He had not slept. All night the Mannian missiles had crashed down around them, and horns like wild banshees had sounded from the imperial lines, fraying his nerves to tatters. Now in the early dawn he could think of only one thing: his wife Marlee at home with her unborn child, worried sick over both her husband and her father.

The Mannians came like a wave cresting over cliffs. With ladders and siege towers they attacked the ramparts in a single crashing line; Bahn, from below, watched in awe as white-armoured men launched themselves over the battlements at the Red Guard defenders, their battle cries like nothing he had ever heard before, shrill ululations that seemed barely plausible from human

throats. He had already heard how the enemy ingested narcotics before battle, primarily to dispel their fears; and indeed they fought in a frenzy, without any regard for their own lives. Their ferocity stunned the Khosian defenders. The lines buckled, almost broke.

It was butchery, murderous and simple. Men slipped and pitched headlong from the heights. Blood flowed from the parapet gutters like the run-offs of a crimson rain so that soldiers had to run from underneath them with shields held over their heads. His father-inlaw was up there somewhere, in amongst the grunts and hollers of collision. Bahn did not see him fall.

In truth, Bahn failed to use his sword even once that day. He did not even come face to face with the enemy.

He stood shoulder to shoulder with the other men of his company, most of them strangers to him still, every face that he saw a stark white, drained of spirit. The din of the battle robbed him of breath; he felt a sickness take hold of his body, like a dizzying sense of freefall. Bahn held his sword in front of him like a stick. It may as well have been a stick, for all he knew how to use it.

Someone's bowels had loosened nearby. The ensuing stench hardly inspired courage in the other men; it inspired only an urge to run, to be away from there. The recruits trembled like colts wanting to bolt from a stable fire.

Bahn did not know what it was that breached the gates in the end. One instant they were there before them, massive and stout, seemingly impregnable. Rall the baker was jabbering by his side, something about his helm and shield being his own, how he had bought them from the bazaar, a jumble of words that Bahn could barely hear. The next instant, Bahn was sprawled on his

back, gasping for air, his mind stunned to numbness, a high-pitched ringing in his ears as he tried to remember who he was, what he was supposed to be doing here, why he was staring at a milky blue sky obscured with rolling clouds of dust.

As he lifted his head, grit pattered down all around him. Old Rall the baker was shouting in his face, eyes and mouth open wider than they had any normal right to be. The man was holding up the stump of his arm, the hand still dangling from a narrow length of tendon. Blood jetted in an arc that caught the slanting sunlight, becoming almost pretty in that moment. Pain descended on Bahn then. It stung the torn flesh of his cheeks, and at once he could feel the explosion of breath from Rall's screaming against his face, though he still could not hear him. He looked over to the gates, between the legs of men still on their feet, and found himself staring over a carpet of raw meat, of gristle, with hideous movement in amongst it. The gates were gone. In their place stood an unfurling curtain of dark smoke, parting here and there where white figures slipped through, howling as they came.

Somehow, he staggered to his feet as survivors from his company ran forward to fill the breach. That seemed like madness to Bahn: farmers and stall-keepers in ill-fitting armour rushing straight at killers intent on hacking them down. His eyes burned with what he saw: the impetus, the nerve of those men, when all about them their comrades lay exposed to the sky, or stumbled about, unhinged from their senses, jostling to get away. It roused something within Bahn. He thought of the sword in his hand, and of running to help those fellows, too few of them trying to stop the tide. But, no, he no longer held his sword. He looked about for it, frantic, and saw old Rall again, on his knees, screaming up at him.

What does he want of me? Bahn had thought wildly. Does he expect me to fix his hand?

At the gates themselves, the defenders were being cut down like wheat. They were inexperienced recruits. And the Mannians were not. Somewhere behind Bahn, a sergeant yelled for the men to stand firm, spittle flying from his mouth as he shoved at their backs and tried to form them into a line. No one was listening to him, and those around Bahn were pushing against him, cursing, crying out, wanting only to flee.

He knew it was hopeless then; besides, he couldn't find his sword. There were other blades lying amongst the debris, but not one with the right number on the hilt – and it was vital to him, for some reason just then, to find the right one. Perhaps if he had done so he would have died that day. Instead, in those scattered moments he spent searching in vain, the urge to fight drained out of him. Instead, he wanted more than anything else to see Marlee again. To see their child when it was born. To live.

Bahn grabbed old Rall and hauled him clumsily over his shoulder. His knees buckled; but fear loaned him extra strength. With the rest of the panicking men, he allowed himself to be jostled back towards the gates of wall two, faces glancing back over shoulders, over Bahn's shoulders, no talk or shouting from them now, simply wordless panting. Even Rall stopped yelling and began thanking him, would not stop thanking him. His words emerged jerkily to the bounce of Bahn's footfalls.

It was a full rout, as hundreds of men raced back across the killing ground, casting their weapons and shields aside as they went. The distance was several throws to reach the safety of wall two. The old baker grew heavier on his back, so that Bahn's stride inevitably slackened and he fell behind the main mass of escapees. Rall shouted for him

to move faster, warning that the enemy were close behind. Bahn hardly needed telling. He could hear the Mannians baying in hot pursuit.

They were the last to get through, just before the gates were slammed shut and sealed. Less fortunate men remained trapped on the other side. They pounded for the gates to be opened. They shouted of how they had wives and children at home. They cursed and pleaded. The gates stayed closed.

Bahn lay in a heap and listened to the shouting on the other side, more grateful than anything else in his whole life that it was not him still out there.

He had closed his eyes, overwhelmed. For a long time, lying facedown in the dirt, he had wept.

Now a gust of wind swept across the Mount of Truth, warm and humid. Bahn exhaled a breath of stale air and returned his attention to the hill and the summer's sunlight, and his son staring down at the walls.

'Drink?' asked Marlee, as she handed her husband a jug of cider, her motions slow and careful so as not to wake the child on her back. Bahn's mouth was parched. He took a drink, held a mouthful of the sweet liquid before swallowing. He then followed his son's gaze.

Even now, as he and the boy silently watched, an occasional missile struck or rebounded off the still intact outermost rampart facing the imperial army. A giant glacis of earth fronted the entire wall now, deflecting or absorbing such shots – one of the inspired innovations that had allowed them to draw out the Mannian siege for this long. Still, this rampart was sagging in places, and the battlements behind it gaped like toothless mouths where sections of stone and crenellations had fallen. Along these ragged

defences, an almost imperceptible line of red-cloaked soldiers huddled behind the surviving cover; amongst them, crews operated squat ballistae and cannon, constantly firing back at the Mannian lines.

Behind the other three inner walls, more heavily garrisoned in comparison, cranes and labourers could be seen erecting yet another one. So far, four walls had fallen to the never-ending barrage of the enemy – at a staggering material expense to the Mannians. In response, the defenders had succeeded in building two new ones to replace them, but they could not hope to erect ramparts indefinitely. The latest construction lay close to the straight channel of the canal which cut across the Lansway to connect the two bays. Not far beyond this canal, the Lansway ended at the Mount of Truth, and beyond that sprawled the city itself. It was clear they were running out of room.

Bahn's son was peering down at the wall currently under fire.

Along its battlements, between the cannon, ballistae, and the occasional long-rifle firing in reply, men laboured with cranes as they raised great scoops of earth and rock. Some kept dropping out of sight as they were lowered on ropes over the far side, while others merely tipped the contents of the cranes' scoops over the outer rim. Even as they watched, a group of men pulling on ropes collapsed amidst a cloud of flying debris.

Juno gasped.

'Look there,' said Bahn, quickly drawing his son's attention away from the sight, and instead pointed out various structures dotted around the prospective killing grounds between the walls. They looked like towers, though they were open on all sides and not very tall. 'Mine shafts,' he explained. 'The Specials are fighting every hour down there, trying to stop the walls from being undermined.'

At last Juno looked down at his seated father.

‘It’s different, from what I was expecting,’ he said. ‘You fight there every day?’

‘Some days. Though there are few battles any more. Just this.’

His words appeared to impress the boy. Bahn swallowed, turning away from what he recognized as pride in his son’s eyes. Juno already knew that his grandfather had died defending the city. Even now he wore the old man’s short-sword about his waist; and, when they returned home, he would no doubt insist that his father give him further lessons in its use. The boy talked often of how he would follow in his father’s footsteps when he was old enough, but Bahn did not wish to encourage such ambitions. Better his son ran off to be a wandering monk, better even to sign up on a leaky merchanter, than stay here and fight to the inevitable end.

Juno seemed to read his mood. Softly, he asked, ‘How long can we hold them off?’

Bahn blinked, surprised. That was the question of a soldier, not a boy.

‘Papa?’

Bahn almost lied to his son then, even though he knew it would be an insult to the boy’s growing maturity. But Marlee was sitting just behind them, his wife who had been raised to face the truth no matter how unpalatable it might be. He could sense her ears listening keenly in the silence that awaited his reply.

‘We don’t know,’ he admitted, as he shut his eyes momentarily against another gust of wind. Bahn tasted salt on his lips, like the remnants of dried blood.

When he reopened them, it was to see Juno staring again at the walls, and the Mannian host that confronted them. He appeared to be studying the countless banners

that were visible: to one side, the Khosian shield or the Mercian whorl on a sea-green background, dozens of them fluttering along the ramparts; on the other side the imperial red hand of Mann, with the tip of the little finger missing, emblazoned on a field of pure white – hundreds of them staked out across the isthmus. Intent on this scrutiny the boy's skin clung thin and tight to his face.

‘There is always hope,’ said Marlee reassuringly to her troubled son.

Juno looked to his father once more.

‘Yes,’ agreed Bahn. ‘There is always hope.’

But even as he said these words, he could not meet his son's eyes.

How Dyslexia, Linguistics, & Medical Science Inspired

Spellwright

By Blake Charlton

At the age of twelve, I still couldn't read fluently. This despite years of special ed., endless parental tutoring, and one disastrous campaign to establish Scrabble™ as the family pastime. (*Blake, honey, I didn't think it was possible but you've finished game with a negative score.*) And yet, eighteen years later, I am a medical student about to publish a novel. What catalyzed such a transformation?

Answer: fantasy literature.

When I was young, my parents read to me most nights. I found it enjoyable, but nothing special. Then we started Robert Jordan's *The Eye of the World*. A quick fact: Mom and Dad are both psychiatrists. (*Yes. The answer to whatever question you're wondering right now is 'yes.' Trust me.*) So, no surprise, they noticed how much Jordan ensorcelled me and began reading less each night. Often they stopped just when Rand and company most desperately needed to escape the Wheel of Time's seemingly inexorable squishing power. I was driven wildly, floridly insane with frustration and focused my every desire onto reading faster. I began sneaking Jordan into special ed. study hall, then Ursula LeGuin and Terry Brooks, Tad Williams and Robin Hobb, and so on and so on until suddenly I was a bookworm, then a overly earnest geek, then a too rabid pre-med.

At that point, I didn't want overcome my disability so much as crush it into a million tiny and anthropomorphically cringing pieces. (*If you were the guy sitting behind me in Cellular Biology: Sorry, man. My bad.*) In biochemistry, I was struck by how much nucleotides and polypeptides are like written languages. In a sense, they consist of letters and words that might be translated or transcribed. They might be rendered useless or harmful by a misspelling—a mutation. Then, while sitting in a dull English class, every disparate syllable of my life interlocked to form the long, lovely sentences of a daydream.

What if written language were more like molecular language? What if you could peel a paragraph off the page and make it physically read? Could you pick your teeth with a sentence fragment? Thrust a sharply worded invective at an enemy's throat? How would physical language shape culture, technology, history?

As my daydream grew I escaped my cold, pre-med self and remembered the wonder that only good speculative literature imparts. Tolkien created Middle-earth for his languages; could I imagine a world built *by*—not *around*—its languages? More importantly, could I find a character whose story was intertwined with this world? Instantly, my disability provided the answer.

Welcome to the world of *Spellwright*, where luminescent magical languages come off the page and shape themselves into powerful spells. Authors can cast information across thousands of miles or write creatures made purely of text. Into this world is born Nicodemus Weal, a wizardly apprentice who can produce vast amounts of magical language. However, Nico was born with a disability so severe that any text he touches misspells in erratic, sometimes dangerous ways. When a powerful wizard is murdered with a misspell, Nicodemus quickly becomes the primary suspect of the crime. *Hunted by*

both investigators and a hidden killer, Nicodemus must race to discover the truth about the murder, the nature of magic, and himself.

I was so passionate about this story that after college I delayed applying to medical school to write while moonlighting as an English teacher, a medical writer, and a JV football coach. During this time I struggled with my own conception of disability and came to see that some disabilities never vanish, that they must be overcome. Armed with this realization, I matriculated into medical school and completed *Spellwright*. More importantly, I stopped pursuing a career in medicine and literature just to ‘disprove’ my disability and started writing and studying in hopes of healing and inspiring others as I was inspired and healed by fantasy literature.

Spellwright

By Blake Charlton

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[Blake Charlton](#) is currently a medical student at Stanford University. An active, engaging presence online, he lives in the San Francisco Bay area.

Prologue

The grammarian was choking to death on her own words.

And they were long sharp words, written in a magical language and crushed into a small, spiny ball. Her legs faltered. She fell onto her knees.

Cold autumn wind surged across the tower bridge.

The creature standing beside her covered his face with a voluminous white hood. “Censored already?” he rasped. “Disappointing.”

The grammarian fought for breath. Her head felt as light as silk; her vision burned with gaudy color. The familiar world became foreign.

She was kneeling on a stone bridge, seven hundred feet above Starhaven’s walls. Behind her, the academy’s towers stretched into the cold evening sky like a copse of giant trees. At various heights, ribbon- thin bridges spanned the airy gaps between neighboring spires. Before her loomed the dark Pinnacle Mountains.

Dimly, she realized that her confused flight had brought her to the Spindle Bridge.

Her heart began to kick. From here the Spindle Bridge arched a lofty half- mile away from Starhaven to terminate in a mountain’s sheer rock face. It led not to a path or a cave, but to blank stone. It was a bridge to nowhere, offering no chance of rescue or escape.

She tried to scream, but gagged on the words caught in her throat.

To the west, above the coastal plain, the setting sun was staining the sky a molten shade of incarnadine.

The creature robed in white sniffed with disgust. “Pitiful what passes for imaginative prose in this age.” He lifted a pale arm. Two golden sentences glowed within his wrist.

“You are Magistra Nora Finn, Dean of the Drum Tower,” he said. “Do not deny it again, and do not refuse my offer again.” He flicked the glowing sentences into Nora’s chest.

She could do nothing but choke.

“What’s this?” he asked with cold amusement. “Seems my attack stopped that curse in your mouth.” He paused before laughing, low and breathy. “I could make you eat your words.”

Pain ripped down her throat. She tried to gasp.

The creature cocked his head to one side. “But perhaps you’ve changed your mind?”

With five small cracks, the sentences in her throat deconstructed and spilled into her mouth. She fell onto her hands and spat out the silver words. They shattered on the cobblestones. Cold air flooded into her greedy lungs.

“And do not renew your fight,” the creature warned. “I can censor your every spell with this text.”

She looked up and saw that the figure was now holding the golden sentence that ran into her chest. “Which of your students is the one I seek?”

She shook her head.

The creature laughed. “You took our master’s coin, played the spy for him.”

Again, she shook her head.

“Do you need more than gold?” He stepped closer. “I now possess the emerald and so Language Prime. I could tell you the Creator’s first words. You’d find them . . . amusing.”

“No payment could buy me for you,” Nora said between breaths. “It was different with master; he was a man.”

The creature cackled. “Is that what you think? That he was human?”

The monster’s arm whipped back, snapping the golden sentence taut.

The force of the action yanked Nora forward onto her face. Again pain flared down her throat. “No, you stupid sow,” he snarled. “Your former master was not human!”

Something pulled up on Nora’s hair, forcing her to look at her tormentor. A breeze was making his hood ruffle and snap. “Which cacographer do I seek?” he asked.

She clenched her fists. “What do you want with him?”

There was a pause. Only the wind dared make noise. Then the creature spoke. “Him?”

Involuntarily, Nora sucked in a breath. “No,” she said, fighting to make her voice calm. “No, I said ‘with them.’”

The cloaked figure remained silent.

“I said,” Nora insisted, “ ‘What do you want with them?’ Not him. With them.”

Another pause. “A grammarian does not fault on her pronouns. Let us speak of ‘him.’”

“You misheard; I—” The creature disengaged the spell that was holding her head up. She collapsed. “It was different in the dreams,” she murmured into the cobblestones.

The creature growled. “Different because I sent you those dreams.

Your students will receive the same: visions of a sunset seen from a tower bridge, dreams of a mountain vista. Eventually they will become curious and investigate.”

Nora let out a tremulous breath. The prophecy had come to pass. How could she have been so blind? What grotesque forces had she been serving?

“Perhaps you think Starhaven’s metaspells will protect your students,” the creature said. “They won’t. They might keep me from spellwriting within your walls, but I can lure the whelps into the woods or onto these bridges. It won’t be hard to do now that the convocation has begun. If I must, I’ll snuff out your students one by one. You could prevent all these deaths by speaking one name.”

She did not move.

“Tell me his name,” the white figure hissed, “and I will let you die quickly.”

Nora glanced at the railing. An idea bled across her mind like an ink stain. It might work if she moved quickly enough.

“No answer?” The creature stepped away. “Then yours will be a slow death.”

Nora felt a tug on the magical sentence running through her chest.

“I’ve just infected you with a canker spell. It forces a portion of a spellwright’s body to forge misspelled runes. As we speak, the first canker is forming in your lungs. Soon it will spread into your muscles, compelling you to forge dangerous amounts of text. An hour will see your body convulsing, your arteries bleeding, your stomach ruptured.”

Nora pressed her palms against the cold cobblestones.

“But the strongest of your cacographers will survive such an infection,” the creature sneered. “That’s how I’ll find him. He’ll survive the cankers; the others will die screaming. I’ll spare you this torture if you tell me—”

But Nora did not wait to hear the rest. Soundlessly she pushed herself up and leaped over the railing. For a moment, she feared a swarm of silvery paragraphs would wrap about her ankles and hoist her back up to the bridge.

But the force of her fall snapped the golden sentence running through her chest . . . and she was free.

She closed her eyes and discovered that her fear of death had become strange and distant, more like a memory than an emotion.

The prophecy had come to pass. The knowledge would perish with her, but that was the price she had to pay: her death would keep a small, flickering hope alive.

Still falling, she opened her eyes. In the east, the crimson sky shone above the mountain’s dark silhouette. The setting sun had shot the peaks full of red- gold light and, by contrast, stained the alpine forests below a deep, hungry black.

Nicodemus waited for the library to empty before he suggested committing a crime punishable by expulsion.

“If I edit you, we can both be asleep in an hour,” he said to his text in what he hoped was a casual tone.

At twenty- five, Nicodemus Weal was young for a spellwright, old for an apprentice. He stood an inch over six feet and never slouched. His long hair shone jet black, his complexion dark olive— two colors that made his green eyes seem greener.

The text to whom he was speaking was a common library gargoyle. She was a construct, an animated being composed of magical language. And as Starhaven constructs went, she was a very plain spell.

More advanced gargoyles were animalistic mishmashes: the head of a snake on the body of a pig, limbs profuse with talons and tentacles or fangs and feathers. That sort of thing.

But the gargoyle squatting on the table before Nicodemus took the shape of only one animal: an adult snow monkey. Her slender stone torso and limbs were covered with stylized carvings representing fur. Her bare face presented heavy cheeks and weary eyes.

Her author had given her only one augmentation: a short tail from which protruded three hooked paragraphs of silvery prose. As Nicodemus watched the spell, she picked up three books and, using their clasps, hung them on her tail paragraphs.

“You edit me? Not likely,” she retorted and then slowly climbed onto a bookshelf. “Besides, I was written so that I can’t fall asleep until daylight.”

“But you have better things to do than reshelve books all night,” Nicodemus countered, smoothing out his black apprentice’s robes.

“I might,” the spell admitted, now climbing laterally along the shelf.

Nicodemus cradled a large codex in his left arm. “And you’ve let apprentices edit you before.”

“Rarely,” she grunted, climbing up two shelves. “And certainly never a cacographer.” She pulled a book from her tail and slipped it onto the shelf.

“Magic calls to magic”

By Alex Dellamonica

The above line, from my story “Nevada,” formed one of the first rules I set out for the universe where *Indigo Springs* takes place. I had decided I was going to write about my grandparents’ home in Yerington, Nevada, an ordinary ranch house centered in a fenced-in patch of desert just outside town. The place has always been special to me. We moved a lot when I was young, but Yerington was always there. Going to Nevada meant being spoiled by my grandmother, of course, but their home also had a lot of physical objects that I was fond of—a cookie tin full of sun-melted crayons, my mother’s old stuffed bunny, Grandma’s polished rocks, and the possibility of finding a painstakingly hand-chipped arrowhead under every tumbleweed. I made all these childhood treasures explicitly magical when I turned them into the chantments that do so much good and harm in *Indigo Springs* and its sequel, *Blue Magic*.

Indigo Springs picks up on the groundwork laid in “Nevada” and the chantment stories that followed. As I wrote these first stories, something that was immediately obvious was that if such objects of power were real, there would be people whose primary desire would be to own or control them. This conclusion led me to create the century-old chantment thief in “Nevada,” the corrupt music teacher in “The Riverboy”. . . and when it came to writing *Indigo Springs*, it gave rise to the beautiful, fickle, and manipulative Sahara Knax.

I also had to figure out who was making the mystical objects. Sahara's opposite number is her best friend, Astrid Lethewood. Astrid not only owns a number of chantments but in time discovers she has the ability to make new ones. She is less interested in having or wielding power—she's responsible for the magic, and it's a terrible load. She wants to do the right thing but is afraid of having her life consumed in the process. Having inherited the magic and being overwhelmed by it, she is vulnerable to this charming friend who's offering to take care of everything. In her weakest moments, Astrid is that little piece of all of us who hopes someone *else* will combat climate change, speak out against poverty or oppression—who gives in to those moments of weakness when we don't want to look beyond our day to day concerns and try to own the world a little.

Indigo Springs is a love triangle and the third person in the mix is Jacks Glade, who tries to mediate between Sahara and Astrid. Jacks is an active, take-charge guy—he rescues people from burning buildings, tells people the truth instead of guessing what they want to hear. . . . and he's madly in love with Astrid. It's these three people who come to be caretakers of the mystical well.

The thing about magic in *Indigo Springs* is that it is an immensely powerful force—one capable of creating amazingly beautiful things and doing great good, but only when wielded with good intentions. In a sense, the magic has an agenda of its own.

Indigo Springs

By **A.M. Dellamonica**

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[A.M. Dellamonica](#) has had stories published in various fantasy and science fiction magazines and anthologies. She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, where she is at work on *Blue Magic*, the sequel to *Indigo Springs*.

Chapter 1

“You’re going to fall in love today.” It is the first thing Astrid Lethewood says to me. A heartbeat later Patience joins us in the foyer and I nearly believe her.

I’ve seen Patience—on TV, on security feeds—but nothing has prepared me for meeting a demi-goddess. My brain seizes up, my hands get damp, and my mouth dries. I smell popcorn, hear the distant music of a carousel. A tingle of arousal threatens to embarrass me, but that, at least, I am ready for. My jacket, folded over one arm, hangs discreetly over my groin.

Today Patience is curly haired and black, with breasts—I can’t help looking—as firm and curvaceous as if they had been sculpted by Rodin. Her lips are full, her teeth straight, and her brown eyes are luminous and warm. Her skin has the seal-fat sleekness of youth, but she does not look young.

Soon she will look utterly different, if just as devastating.

“Who are you?” she asks, voice full of music.

“My name is Will Forest. I’m—”

“Another of Roche’s inquisitors? When’ll he give up?”

“Don’t be naïve,” I say.

She pops a candy into her mouth, crunching defiantly. “I got nothing to say to you.”

I pull in a breath. The carousel music tinkles on, and my spirits ride along, taking my inner child to the circus. “I’m here to talk to Astrid.”

“Great—another therapist type who thinks he can get through to her.” She puts a protective hand out to Astrid, who is hiding in her shadow. Proximate invisibility, the doctors call it, as if naming the behavior gives them a measure of control. The everyday world of telecommunications and two-hour commutes is crumbling, so they crouch in the surveillance center, labeling Astrid’s every twitch.

Even now she is shrinking against the wall. “Is this when the guards start shooting?”

I glance at the well-armed young women in the corridor. They frown back, probably annoyed that I’m blocking the threshold of the apartment entrance.

Astrid sobs into a clenched fist, and Patience strokes her hair, glaring at me. “Just leave us alone!”

“I’m not here to upset you, but I’m not going away either.” To emphasize the point, I step inside and shut the white door. Steel bolts clunk into place behind it: a vault door sealing us inside. This prison is two hundred feet belowground and surrounded by bedrock. To get here, I have been X-rayed, frisked, fingerprinted, and DNA tested. My identity has been confirmed and reconfirmed so completely that I am almost beginning to doubt it.

“As I said, my name is Will Forest.” I take care to speak to them both. “I’m here to interview Astrid about—”

“Please, Doc, go away.” Patience locks her bewitching eyes on me. “She can’t help you.”

I want to give in, like the others before me, but I hold her gaze, fighting the spell with thoughts of my missing kids. “I’m not a doctor, Patience, and I’m not leaving.”

Astrid stops crying with a hiccup. “Didn’t I show him around the place?”

“Show him the door, sweetie.”

“Why don’t you let her decide?” Opening my suitcase, I bring out a battered, plastic-wrapped paintbrush.

Astrid’s breathe catches. She looks at me closely, searching my face. “I’m supposed to believe you’d let me have it back?”

“Cooperation is a two-way street. I don’t expect something for nothing, Astrid.”

She licks her lips. “I need paper. Cards. Playing cards.”

“I’ve brought them.”

“Astrid, you’re not ready,” Patience says.

“How long do you expect us to give her?”

“She’s in shock.”

“Astrid?” I say.

“It was okay, Patience.” She slides to her knees, face raised, eyes locked on the paintbrush.

“Fine.” Throwing up her hands, Patience wafts away.

Astrid begins to hyperventilate. “When are we?”

“You said something about showing me around.”

“I said that?” Her tone is dubious. “Is that today?”

“Do you know how long you’ve been here?”

“We were locked up for about twelve weeks....” Her eyelids flutter; she seems to be counting. “Eight in jail, four here. That’s twelve.”

“That’s right. You were moved here a month ago.”

“The comfy prison.” She shudders.

The apartment is part of an underground military base: a VIP housing unit that got converted to a jail cell when this crisis arose. It comes with false windows, frosted glass alight with phony full spectrum sunshine.

“You razed your gardens,” Astrid says. “Bird blood, right? If you put tulip bulbs in the front, daffodils—”

“I’m not much for the outdoors these days,” I say.

“The woods aren’t as deep as they seem.” She breaks off, eyes wandering. “Have we . . . Sahara—”

“It’s all right,” I say, because I’ve watched hundreds of hours of surveillance footage on this pair, and that is what Patience tells her.

Astrid curls away, then bangs her head against the drywall. “Roche sent you down here to screw me over.”

“It’s not like that.” I grasp her shoulders. “You help me, I’ll help you.”

“Help . . .” She jerks her head again, but I’m holding her away from the wall.

“Let me help you, Astrid.”

She flinches, then seems to calm down. “Want to see the rest of the place?”

“Sure.”

She listlessly tours me through the apartment. Every counter, shelf, and tabletop is cluttered with baubles and jewelry, offerings from Patience’s admiring public. The air smells of paint, and the furniture is inexpensive particleboard, two decades out of date. One piece stands out: an oak cabinet that dominates the living room wall.

“My grandfather is gonna make that,” Astrid explains.

“I thought he was an accountant.”

“He took up woodworking after he retired. Terrible at it—made Ma a rocking chair that almost killed her. Tips too far, falls, hits her head.”

“Ouch.” Evelyn Lethewood has mentioned the incident too; it happened when she was a teenager.

Astrid leans a damp cheek against the varnished wood. “Colonel Roach takes this out of Ma’s garage for me.”

“I asked him to.”

“You?”

“Yes.” She’s mentioned the cabinet in her ramblings, even searching for it in the spot it now occupies.

“You’re a regular Santa Claus, aren’t you?”

“I meant it as a show of good faith.”

“It’s all happening.” Her hand drifts out, settling on my briefcase. “It’s finally Will day, isn’t it?”

“It’s the sixth of September.”

She starts to weep, tugging her hair. “Will day, Jackson day, fire, quake day, cutthroats, boomsday. Blood on the paintings, painted spatters across the walls . . .”

Patience peers through a doorway, arching her brows in challenge. “Making out okay, Santa?”

“I’m fine.” I rap my knuckles on Astrid’s cabinet, drawing her attention. “Only things my granddad ever made were model airplanes and bad wine.”

She sniffs. “Think you can trade with me? I’ll bare my soul for treats, like a dog?”

“I thought you’d like to have something familiar around, that’s all.”

“Thinking of my welfare.” Her eyes narrow. “I know about you.”

“Do you?”

“You’re divorcing, I know that.”

“Am I supposed to believe you’re psychic? Patience could have gone through my office.”

“Right, Patience. I’m small potatoes, right? The side issue. The material witness.”

“The accomplice?”

Her mouth tightens. “You have two kids and a pit bull, which is funny because you don’t like dogs.”

The words bring up gooseflesh on my neck. “My son Carson wanted a puppy. I’m a soft touch.”

She scoffs. “You’re here to break me open.”

“Astrid, all I want is to talk.”

“Gull dropping mussels onto rocks, that’s you. Cracking shells, getting the meat. Break everything open.”

“Astrid, I know you’ve been through a traumatic—”

“I’m not insane.”

“Then you’ve no excuse for not cooperating.” I will coax the truth from this raving, damaged woman. I need to learn how Patience became a shape-changing beauty, how she defies locks and assassins by turning to mist and drifting through walls and bullets, rocks and people.

I'm here to and out how Astrid, a landscape gardener who never finished high school, came to possess a collection of objects we can only label as mystical, despite our science and rationality.

Most important, I'm supposed to learn how Astrid's childhood friend, Sahara Knax, took those mystical items and used them to create an eco-terrorist cult with half a million devoted followers. I need to discover Sahara's weaknesses, anything that will tell my panicked government how to fight as her numbers grow, as she unleashes monsters into the seas and forests, as she forces us to napalm U.S. territory to destroy the infestations. Her actions grow more dangerous daily, and our attempts to locate her have failed. Astrid may be our only hope.

"The grumbles are so loud," Astrid says, "I can't remember when things happen. So much compressed magic..."

"You want to make things right, don't you?"

She clutches my arm. "You had an accident last month. A contaminated blue jay attacked your car."

I rasp my tongue over my lips, remembering the eagle-sized bird pecking holes in my windshield.

"That's when you killed off your yard."

Caroline had vanished with our kids just days earlier. I'd shot the bird, then pulled up the garden and, in a rage, burned it. Instead of telling Astrid this, I say: "Lots of people are sterilizing their gardens."

With a defeated sigh, she leads me to the kitchen, where Patience is sorting tea bags. "Santa Claus drinks coffee," Astrid says.

“We don’t have coffee.”

“It’s okay, tea’s fine.”

Patience holds up a bag of Darjeeling. “You don’t look military.”

“Are you asking what I do for a living?”

“Yeah,” Astrid says. “This is the part where you tell us.”

“You don’t already know?”

“Patience asked, not me.”

“I’m no psychic,” Patience says, crunching another candy as she dangles the tea bag. The swing of her wrist is hypnotic; I nod to show Darjeeling is fine.

“I’m a crisis negotiator for the Portland city police,” I say.

“Hostage haggler. Same as Roach.” Astrid’s voice is flat with dislike. I remember anew she has been charged with kidnapping and murder.

“Civilian rather than military, but essentially yes, the same as Colonel Roche. We went to school together.”

Patience runs hot tap water into a stoneware teapot to warm it. “So you’re a cop and a shrink?”

“If you like.”

Dreamily, Astrid says: “He was at the sewer outflow before they firebombed it. He got some of Sahara’s converts to come out.”

“Does that make you uncomfortable, Astrid?”

She eyes me like a stalking cat, ready to pounce. “You don’t make me uncomfortable, Santa.”

“I’d prefer it if you’d call me Will.”

“Would I, won’t I, will I?” Another predatory glance. “Okay... Will it is.”

The kettle shrieks and Patience puts a tray together. Sugar, cream, three cups.

“You sure about this, sweetie?”

“Yeah. It’s Will day, Patience.”

“If you say so. Want to set up by the couch?”

“I think that’s what we do.” Astrid pushes at her curls, flashing the mangled cartilage of her right ear. “It’s hard . . . so much going on. Tuna and bullets and gates of brambles—”

“Let’s try, all right?” With that, Patience leads us back the way we came. As she passes me, she whispers a threat: “Don’t you mess her up worse than she already is.”

The living room’s lack of a TV gives it a Victorian aura. Photographs cover the walls—snapshots of Astrid’s parents and missing stepbrother. Four couches sit facing one another in a box.

Roche tried to keep the personal touches out of the suite, but Patience kept telling the media that she and Astrid were being kept in a barren subterranean hole. Her fans raised a hue and cry. Finally Roche allowed the bric-a-brac and Patience resumed her public campaign against Sahara. Without her broadcasts, the Alchemite cult would be even larger.

Astrid slumps on a grass-green chaise. I sit on a matching love seat and pull out my digital recorder.

She scowls. “Apartment’s bugged.”

“It can go out of sight if you like.”

”Doesn’t matter. The cards?”

“Will these do?” I hand over a bulging manila envelope stuffed with greeting cards, playing cards, and a Tarot.

“Perfect. Are you really going to give me my chantment?”

“Of course.” I pass her the paintbrush.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” she murmurs, rolling it between her fingers. I imagine how Roche and the others upstairs in Security must be tensing up. But her gratitude and relief seem sincere.

“Astrid?”

She holds the brush to her cheek, eyes glistening. “You took a chance, bringing it here.”

My gut clenches. Roche hadn’t wanted to hand over the paintbrush. It’s magical, he’d said. What if she uses it to change you into a frog, like the Clumber boy?

I’d brushed the objection aside, producing the transcripts of Astrid’s ramblings. “Can’t think,” she’d said hundreds of times. “Need the brush, Jackson day, fortune cards.”

“Will day” too appears repeatedly. Maybe it’s arrogance, but I knew she’d been saying my name.

Turn you to a frog, like the Clumber boy. It doesn’t seem so funny now.

“Are you going to show me what it does?” I ask.

“Yes.” Astrid pulls her hair up, knotting the curls atop her head. She pins them into place with the paintbrush handle. Her hands drop to the table . . . and as they do, they change. The fingers become longer and wider, while the nails take on the flat, fibrous texture of paintbrush bristles.

She says, “Relax. Nothing terrible happens today.”

“Is that so?” I turn her hand palm-up, running my finger over the bristles of her thumbnail.

She draws back, aloof as a cat, and digs out a ten of hearts. “The cards help me keep track of things . . . things to come?”

“I’d like to talk about the past six months.”

Ghosts of dimples dent her cheeks. “Past, future . . . it’s all the same.”

“Tell me about the magic—when and why things started to change.”

“That’s two different questions.” Patience tosses a couple of high-calorie protein bars onto the tray. Then she serves the tea. “What exactly do you want to know?”

How to change it back. “Let’s start with Sahara.”

“That’s two questions too.” Astrid cups her palms above the surface of the ten of hearts. The red ink fades, leaving it blank. Then a bead of brown paint wells from the stiff paper, like a minuscule drop of blood coaxed from a pinpricked finger. It streaks across the card, outlining a dilapidated car. Astrid watches it raptly. Me, I burn my mouth, slurping too-hot tea in a sip that becomes a gasp.

“Not what you expected?” Patience laughs.

“On the fifteenth of April, Mark Clumber told Sahara he’d been cheating on her,” Astrid says, eyes locked on the card as if she’s reading text. “He confessed, then took off for a few hours—to give her space. Sahara packed her bags the second he was gone. She took his car and cat, half their money, and drove west. She was eighty miles out of Boston before Mark slunk back, looking for forgiveness.”

“She just left?”

“When someone hurts Sahara, she cuts them out of her heart forever. Ask Mark.”

“Mark’s beyond speech,” Patience says sharply. The Clumber boy is in one of the compound’s other apartments, suffering from severe alchemical contamination.

“Beyond speech,” Astrid murmurs. “Sahara would be pleased.”

I can believe it. Sahara routinely attacks Alchemites who leave her cult, not to mention police who oppose her and reporters who question her claim to be a goddess.

On the playing card, brown paint colors in the outline of the car. Wispy strokes of black sketch a cat on its rear dashboard. Brush-strokes from an invisible brush; the hairs on my arms stand up.

“So Sahara isn’t particularly forgiving?”

Astrid doesn’t contradict me. “She called from Billings and asked if she could stay at my house.”

She means the home she inherited from her father, I know, on Mascer Lane in Indigo Springs, at the epicenter of the alchemical spill. “And you said yes?”

“I said she could stay forever if she wanted.”

“What did she say?”

On the card, dots of green brighten the cat’s eyes. “She said I’d have to make life pretty goddamned interesting if I was going to keep her around.”

On Collaboration

By Ian C. Esslemont

In a recent interview I commented that Steven Erikson and I have often been approached by people expressing surprise, even disbelief, at our long-standing collaboration in a co-created world (The Malazan Empire). These comments always come as a surprise to us because in retrospect the process seemed an entirely natural one. It simply unfolded organically—we worked the world out together, bouncing ideas off each other and laughing an awful lot in the process.

In many ways writing is actually a profoundly lonely and isolating undertaking. For me it was a privilege and a pleasure to have someone to share the material with. And I benefited enormously. I hope Steve did so, too. And I'm sure the product, the stories themselves, benefited as well. The give and take, the topping of ideas and undermining of each other's characters' goals, all added an extra layer of complexity and—dare I say realism—to so many threads. So many times one of us picked up what the other had added only to turn it completely inside out, or reverse it entirely, all to the surprise and enjoyment of both. I remember one particular immortal exchange between us (one that has yet to see print) wherein I explained that the paranoid Kellanved, then owner of a bar named Smiley's, was spying and listening in on his employees by drilling holes in the floor of his office over the bar. Later, Steve had Dancer come upstairs, see Kellanved

with his ear pressed to a hole and his bum in the air, and promptly kick him across the room. We threw that scene at each other across a table in Victoria, B.C.

After those early years the material lay fallow for quite a while. Yet the dream of writing never went entirely away for either of us. In the end it was Steve's stubborn determination (and extraordinary talent!) that dragged it through to its eventual realization. Then, even though time had intervened, it was the natural thing to simply pick up the material once again knowing full well what had to be done. And since then, for me, it has all been a matter of attempting to do justice to what we begun. All I hope to do is give fullest depth and emotional truth to what we created.

Stonewielder

By Ian C. Esslemont

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Ian C. Esslemont grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has studied archaeology and creative writing, has traveled extensively in South East Asia, and lived in Thailand and Japan for several years. He now lives in Alaska with his wife and children and is currently working on another novel set in the world of Malaz, a world he co-created with his friend Steven Erikson.

Prologue

The Elder Age

Height of the Jacaruku Crusades

The Many Isles

Uli knew it for a bad omen the moment he saw it. he'd been readying his nets for the pre-dawn fishing when the unnatural green and blue aura bruised the sky. It appeared out of the lightening east and swelled, becoming more bloated with every passing moment. The bay was choppy as if as agitated as he, and he'd been reluctant to push his shallow boat out into the waves. But his family had to eat, and cramped stomachs belch no end of complaints.

Through the first of the morning's casts he kept his face averted from the thing where it hung in the discoloured sky, blazing like the baleful eye of some god. The catch that morning was poor: either his distraction, or the fish fleeing the apparition. In either case he decided to abandon the effort as cursed, threw his net to the bottom of the craft, and began paddling for shore. The blue-green eye now dazzled brighter than the sun; he shaded his gaze from the points of alien light glimmering on the waves. He paddled faster.

A strange noise brought his frantic, gasping efforts to a halt. A great roaring it was, like a landslide. He glared about, searching for its source. The alien eye now seemed to fill half the sky. No remnant of the sun's warm yellow glow touched the waters, the

treed shore, or the dark humps of the distant islands. Then, with unnatural speed, the surface of the bay stilled as if cowed. Uli held his breath and ducked side to side in his tiny craft.

The eye broke apart. Shards calved trailing blue flames, arcing. A roaring such as he had never before endured drove him to clap his hands to his head and scream his pain. A great massive descending piece like an ember thrown from a god's fire drove smashing down far to the east. A white incandescent blaze blinded Uli's vision. It seemed as if something had struck the big island.

Just as his vision returned, another glow flashed from behind. It threw his shadow ahead like a black streamer across the bay. Turning, he gaped to see a great scattering of shards descending to the west while others cascaded on far above. He rubbed his pained eyes – could it be the end of the world? Perhaps it was another of the moons falling, as he'd heard told of in legends. He remembered his paddle; Helta and the little 'uns would be terrified. He returned to churning water with a desperate fury, almost weeping his dread.

The hide boat ground on to mudflats far sooner than usual. Mystified, he eased a foot over the side. Shallows where none had ever stretched before. And the shore still a good long hike away. It was as if the water were disappearing. He peered up and winced; in the east a massive dark cloud of billowing grey and black was clawing its way up into the sky. It had already swallowed the sun. Untold bounty lay about him: boatloads of fish gasping and mouthing the air, flapping their death-throes.

Yet not one bird. The birds – where had they gone?

The light took on an eerie, darkly greenish cast. Uli slowly edged round, turning his head out to sea, and all hope fell from him. Something was swelling on the waters: a wall of dirty green. Floods such as the old stories tell of. Mountains of water come to inundate the land as all the tales foretell. It seemed to rear directly overhead, so lofty was it. Foam webbed its curved leading face, dirty white capped its peak. He could only gape upwards at its remorseless, fatal advance.

Run, little 'uns, run! The water comes to reclaim the land!

Approx. 400 years bw (Before the Wall)

The Empty Isles

Temal pushed himself upright from the chilling surf and crouched, sword ready. He gazed uncomprehendingly around the surface of the darkening waters, wiping the cold spray from his face. Where have they gone? One moment he's fighting for his life and the next the sea-demons disappear like the mist that preceded them. Weak coughing sounded from his flank. He slogged among the rocks to lift a soaked comrade: Arel, a distant cousin. Though almost faint with exhaustion, Temal dragged the man to shore. Survivors of his war band ran down to the surf to pull both to the reviving warmth of a great bonfire of driftwood.

"What happened?" he stammered through chattering teeth.

“They withdrew,” answered Temal’s older sword-brother, Jhenhelf. His tone conveyed his bewildered disbelief. “Yet why? They had us.”

Temal did not dispute the evaluation; he was too tired, and he knew it to be true. He had less than twenty hale men in his band and too many of those inexperienced youths.

“They will return with the dawn to finish us,” Jhenhelf continued from across the fire. Temal held his old comrade’s gaze through the leaping flames and again said nothing. At their feet Arel coughed, then vomited up the seawater he’d swallowed.

“What of Redden?” one of the new recruits asked. “We could send for aid.”

Faces lifted all round the fire, pale with chill and fear.

“They could be with us by dawn . . .”

“Redden is just as hard-pressed as us,” Temal cut in strongly. “He must defend his own shore.” He glanced from one strained face to another. “Redden cannot spare the men.”

“Then—” began one of the youths.

“Then we wait and rest!” Jhenhelf barked. “Arel, Will, Otten – keep watch. The rest of you, get some sleep.”

Grateful for the support of his old friend, Temal eased himself to the ground. He thrust his sandalled feet out to the fire and tried to ignore the agonizing sting of salt licking his many cuts and gashes. He felt the heat work upon him and hunched forward, hand across his lap at the grip of his sheathed sword, and through slit eyes he watched the mist climb from his drying leathers.

He had no idea why the damned sea-demon Riders attacked. Despite them, it was an attractive land. The peninsulas and islands were rich and cultivable. It was ready to be wholly settled but for a few ignorant native tribals. His father and his grandfather before him had fought to keep their tenuous foothold. As leader of his extended clan he had to think of the future: enough futile wandering! They would hang on to these islands and all the lands beyond. Dark Avallithal with its haunted woods had not suited, nor the savage coast of Dhal-Horn, nor the brooding Isles of Malassa. Here flew their standard. Here his forebears burned their boats. He would not allow these Riders to force them out; they had nowhere to go.

Temal jerked awake, knocking aside Jhenhelf's touch. It was almost dawn. "An attack?" He struggled up on legs numb and stiff.

His lieutenant's face held an unfamiliar expression. "No." He lifted his chin to their rear, to where the grass-topped cliffs of the shore rose; to the meadows and forests and farmland beyond, all of which would soon be dead and withered should the sea-demons be allowed to work their witchery unmolested.

Everyone, Temal noted, stared inland, not out to sea where they should be keeping watch for the first pearl-like gleams of the Riders' approach. "What is it?"

Jhenhelf did not answer, and it occurred to Temal that the strange expression on his friend's coarse, battle-hardened face might be awed wonder. He squinted up to the top of the cliffs' ragged silhouette. A figure stood there, tall beneath dark clouds in the red-

gold of the coming dawn's light. The proportions of what he was seeing struck Temal as strange: whoever that was, he or she must be a giant to rear so high from so far away . . .

"I'll go," he said, his gaze fixed. "You keep guard."

"Take Will and Otten."

"If I must."

Dawn was in full flush when they reached the crest, and when they did Will and Otten fell silent, staring. Though the shore breeze was strong, a repulsive stench as of rotting flesh struck Temal. He clenched his lips and stomach against the reek and forced himself onward alone.

The figure was gigantic, out of all proportion, twice the height of the Jaghut or other Elders he'd heard talk of, such as the Toblakai or Tarthinoe, and vaguely female with its long greasy tresses hanging down to its waist, its thrusting bosom, and the dark tangle of hair at its crotch. Yet its flesh was repulsive: a pale dead fish, mottled, pocked by rotting open sores. The feter almost made Temal faint. At the thing's side rested a large block of black stone resembling a chest or an altar.

Temal glanced out to sea, to the clear unmarred surface gleaming in the morning light, where no hint of wave-borne sea-demons remained. He glanced back to the figure. Dark Taker! Could this be she? The local goddess some settlements invoked to protect them? That many claimed offered sanctuary from the Riders?

The broad bloodless lips stretched in a knowing smile, as if the being had read his thoughts. Yet the eyes remained empty of all expression, lifeless, dull, like the staring milky orbs of the dead. Temal felt transformed. She has come! She has delivered them

from certain annihilation at the lances of the sea-demons! Not knowing what to say he knelt on one knee, offering wordless obeisance. Behind him Will and Otten knelt as well.

The figure took a great sucking breath. “Outlander,” it boomed, “you have come to settle the land. I welcome you and offer my protection.” The Goddess gestured with a gnarled and twisted hand to the block at her feet. “Take this most precious sarcophagus. Within rests flesh of my flesh. Carry it along the coast. Trace a path. Mark it and build there a great wall. A barrier. Defend it that behind it you may rest protected from those enemies from the sea who seek to ravage this land. Do you accept this my gift to you and all your people?”

Distantly, Temal felt cold tears trace lines down his face. Hardly trusting himself to speak, he gasped: “We accept.”

The Goddess spread her ponderous arms wide. “So be it. What is done is done. This is our covenant. Let none undo it. I leave you to your great labour.”

Temal bowed again. The Goddess lumbered south in prodigious strides that shook the ground beneath Temal’s knees. She was gone in moments. He did not know how long he remained bowed but in time Will and Otten came to stand with him. The sun bore down hot on his back. Sighing, he straightened, dizzy.

What had he done? What could he have done? No choice. They were losing. Each year they were fewer while the enemy seemed just as strong, if not stronger. But her mere approach had driven them back.

Will found his voice first. “Was it a Jaghut? Or her? The Goddess?”

“It was her. She has offered her protection.”

“Well, she’s gone now – they’ll be back,” Otten said, ever sceptical.

Temal gestured to the basalt coffin. “No. She’s still here.”

“What is it?” Otten asked, reaching for it.

“No!” Temal pushed them back. “Get Jhenhelf. And Redden.”

“But you said they were to keep guard.”

“Never mind what I said. Listen to me now. Get them both. Tell them to bring wood and rope.”

“But what of the demons?”

“They won’t be back. At least, not near us.” He extended a palm to the black glittering block. Heat radiated from it as from a stone pulled from a fire. Flesh of her flesh. Good Goddess! Gracious Lady! May we never fail you or your trust.

Korelri year 4156 sw (Since the Wall)

Year 11 of the Malazan Occupation

Kingdom of Rool

Island of Fist

Karien’el, a lieutenant of the City Watch, led Bakune under the wharf to where the young woman’s body lay tangled in seaweed at the base of the jumbled rocks of the breakwater.

The lieutenant, ever conscious of rank, reached up to aid the man across the slippery rocks though he himself carried more years than Bakune, newly installed Assessor of Banith.

With Bakune's arrival at the chilly wave-pounded shore the men of the Watch straightened. A number quickly cinched tight helmets, adjusted leather jerkins and the hang of their truncheons and their badge of honour: swords – albeit shortwords – which they alone among the subject peoples of Fist were allowed to carry by the Malazan overlords. Also conscious of rank, in his own way, Bakune answered the salutes informally, hoping to set them all at ease. It still did not feel right to him that these men, many veterans of the wars of invasion, should salute him. Uncomfortable, and hugging his robes to himself for warmth, he raised a brow to the Watch lieutenant. “The body?”

“Here, Assessor.” The lieutenant led him down to the very edge of lazy swells and blackened, seaweed-skirted boulders large as wine tubs. An old man waited there, sun and wind-darkened, kneeling on scrawny haunches, tattered sandals on filthy feet, in a ragged tunic with a ragged beard to match

“And this one?” Bakune asked Karien’el.

Brought us to the body.”

The old man knelt motionless, his face flat, carefully watchful. The body lay at his feet. Bakune crouched. Newly cast up; the smell did not yet overpower the surrounding shore stink. Naked. Crabs had gnawed extremities of hands and feet; had also taken away most of the face (or deliberate disfigurement?). Very young, slim, no doubt once attractive. A prostitute? Odd marks at the neck – strangulation. Faded henna tattoos – a common vanity.

Without looking up Bakune asked: “Who was she to you?”

“No one,” the old man croaked in thickly accented Roolian.

“Then why the Watch?”

“Is one anonymous dead girl not worth your attention?”

Bakune slowly raised his head to the fellow: dark features, kinky greying hair. The black eyes in return studied him with open, what others might term impertinent, intent. He lowered his head, picked up a stick to shift the girl’s arm. “You are a tribesman. Of the Drenn?”

“You know your tribes. That is unusual for you invaders.”

Bakune peered up once again, his eyes narrowed. “Invaders? The Malazans are the invaders.”

A smile empty of any humour pulled at the edge of the old man’s lips. “There are invaders and then there are invaders.”

Straightening, Bakune dropped the stick and regarded the old man directly. As a trained Assessor he knew when he himself was being . . . examined. He crossed his arms. “What is your name?”

Again the patient smile. “In your language? Gheven.”

“Very well, Gheven. What is your – assessment – here?”

“I’m just an itinerant tribal, vaunted sir. What should my opinion matter?”

“It matters to me.”

The lips hardened into a straight tight line; the eyes almost disappeared into their nests of wrinkles. “Does it? Really?”

For some odd reason Bakune felt himself almost faltering. “Well, yes. Of course. I am the Assessor. It is my duty.”

A shrug and the hardened lines eased back into the distant, flat watchfulness. “It’s more and more common now,” he began, “but it goes far back. You all blame the

Malazan troops, of course. These Malazans, they've been here for what, ten years now? They walk your streets, billet themselves in your houses and inns. Visit your taverns. Hire your prostitutes. Your women take up with them. Often these girls are killed for such mixing. Usually by their own fathers or brothers for smearing what they call their 'honour'—"

"That's a damned lie, tribal scum! It's the Malazans!"

Bakune almost jumped – he'd forgotten the Watch lieutenant. He raised a placating hand to the man who stood seething, knuckles white on the grip of his shortsword. "You said usually . . . ?"

The man's lined face had knotted in uncompromising distaste; his gnarled hands remained loose at his sides. He seemed unaware of, or indifferent to, how close he was to being struck down. Luckily for him Bakune shared his disgust, and, generally, his assessment as well. Gheven nodded his craggy head up and down, and the tightened lips unscrewed. "Yes. Usually. But not this time. Much of the flesh is gone but note the design high on the right shoulder."

Bakune knelt, and, dispensing with the niceties of any stick, used his own hands to shift the body. The henna swirls were old and further faded by the bleaching of the seawater, but among the unremarkable geometric abstracts one particular symbol caught his eye . . . a broken circle. A sign of one of the new foreign cults outlawed by their native Korel and Fistian church of their Saviour, their Lady of Deliverance. He tried to recall which one among the bewildering numbers of all those foreign faiths, then he remembered: a minor one, the cult of the 'Fallen God'.

“What of it? You are not suggesting that just because of one such tattoo the Guardians of Our Lady—”

“I am suggesting worse. Note the bruises at the throat. The cuts at the wrists. It has been a long time, has it not, Assessor, since the one who you claim protects you from the sea-demons, the Riders, has demanded her payment, yes?”

“Drenn filth!” Karien’el grasped the man by the neck. Iron scraped wood as his sword swung free of its scabbard.

“Lieutenant!” The man froze, panting his fury. “You forget yourself. Release him. I am assessing here.”

Slowly, reluctantly, the officer peeled his fingers free and slammed home the blade, pushing the man backwards. “Same old lies. Always defaming Our Lady despite her protection. She protects even you, you know. You tribals. From the sea-demons. You should stay in your mountains and woods and consider yourselves blessed.”

Gheven said nothing, but in the old man’s taut, almost rigid, mien Bakune saw a fierce unbowed pride. The dark eyes shifted their challenge to him. “And what is your judgement here . . . Assessor?”

Bakune retreated from the shoreline where stronger waves now cast up cold spray that chilled his face. He pulled a handkerchief from a sleeve to dab away the briny water. “Your, ah, suspicions are noted, Gheven. But I am sorry. Strong accusations require equally strong evidence and that I do not see here. Barring any further material facts the murder remains as you originally suggested – a murder or a distasteful honour killing. That is my assessment.”

“We are finished here?” Karien’el asked. His slitted eyes remained unwavering on the old tribesman.

“Yes. And Lieutenant, no harm is to come to this man. He did his duty in calling our attention to an ugly crime. I will hold you personally responsible.”

The officer’s sour scowl twisted even tighter but he bowed his accord. “Yes, Assessor.”

Climbing back up on to the breakwater walk Bakune adjusted his robes and clenched his chilled fingers to bring life back to them. Of course he’d seen the marks encircling the neck, but some things one must not admit aloud – at least not so early in one’s career. He regarded the lieutenant who had followed, one boot on the stone ledge, ever dutiful. “Report to me directly the discovery of any more such bodies. Or rumoured disappearances of youths, male or female. There may be a monster among us, Karien.”

A salute of fingertips to the knurled brow of his iron helmet. “Aye, Assessor.”

The officer descended the slope, his boots scraping over the boulders, cloak snapping in the wind. Bakune hugged himself for warmth. The coast, Lady, how he hated it: the chill wind that smelled of the Riders, the clawing waters, the cold damp that mildewed all it touched. Yet a positive review here could lead to promotion and that posting in Paliss he hoped for . . . yet another good reason for discretion.

He looked for the tribesman down among the wet boulders but the man was gone. Good. He didn’t want a beating on his conscience. What an accusation! Why jump to such an assessment? True, long ago the ancient ways sanctioned such acts in the name of the greater good – but all that had been swept aside by the ascendancy of Our Saviour, the Blessed Lady. And in their histories it is plain that that man’s ancestors practised it,

not ours! Thus the long antipathy between us and these swamp- and wasteland-skulking tribals with their bastardized blood.

Perhaps in truth a killing by an enraged father or brother, but without sufficient evidence who can assess? In lieu of evidence the locals will decide that this one, like all those prior, was plainly the work of their bloody-handed murderous occupiers, the Malazans.

From between tall boulders Gheven watched the two walk away. The Watch officer, Karien'el, lingered, searching for him. That did not trouble him; he intended to be moving on in any case. In the eyes of the Roolian occupiers of this land they called Fist he was officially itinerant, after all. And why not, since he was on pilgrimage – an itinerary of sacred paths to walk and sites to visit, and in walking and visiting thus reinscribing and reaffirming? A remarkable confluence of diametric attitudes aligning.

He turned to go. With each step the dreamscape of his ancient ancestral land unfolded itself around him. For the land was their Warren and they its practitioners. Something all these foreign invaders, mortal and immortal, seemed incapable of apprehending. And he too was finished here. The seeds had been sown; time would tell how strong or deep the roots may take.

If this new Assessor was true to his calling then Gheven pitied him. Truth tellers were never welcome; most especially one's own. Better to be a storyteller – they at least have grasped the essential truth that everyone prefers lies.

Korelri year 4176 sw

Year 31 of the Malazan Occupation

Kingdom of Rool

Island of Fist

The occupant of the small lateen-rigged launch manoeuvred it through the crowded Banith harbour to tie up between an oared merchant galley out of Theft, and a rotting Jourilan cargo scow. He threw his only baggage, a cloth roll cinched tight by rope, on to the dock, then climbed up on to the mildewed blackwood slats. He straightened his squat broad form, hands at the small of his back, and stretched, grimacing.

An excise officer taking inventory on the galley pointed his baton of office. “You there! You can’t tie up here! This is a commercial dock. Take that toy to the public wharf.”

“Take what?” the man asked blandly.

The dock master opened his mouth to respond, then shut it. He’d thought the fellow odd by his darkly tanned shaven head, but power clearly remained in the meaty thick neck, rounded shoulders, and gnarled, big-knuckled hands. More alarmingly, faded remnants of blue tattoos swirled across his brow, cheeks, and chin, demarking a fiercely snarling boar’s head. “The boat – move the boat.

“‘Tain’t mine.”

“Yes it is! I saw you tie it up just now!”

“You there,” the fellow called to an old man in rags on his hands and knees scouring the dock with a pumice stone. “How about a small launch? Battered but seaworthy.”

The elder stared then laughed a wet cackle, shaking his head. “Haven’t the coin.”

The newcomer threw a copper coin to the dock. “Now you do.”

The excise officer’s gaze flicked suspiciously between the two. “Wait a moment . . .”

The old man took up the coin, cocked an amused eye at the excise officer and tossed it back. The newcomer snatched it from the air. “Talk to this man,” he told the officer, turning his back.

“Hey! You can’t just—”

“I’ll be moving my boat right away, sir!” the old man cackled, revealing a dark pit empty of teeth. “Wouldn’t think of tying up here, sir!”

Walking away, the newcomer allowed his mouth to widen in a broad frog-like grin beneath his splayed, squashed nose.

He passed Banith’s harbour guardhouse, where his gaze lingered on the Malazan soldiers lounging in the shade of the porch. He took in the opened leather jerkin of one, loosened to accommodate a bulging stomach; the other dozing, chair tipped back, helmet forward over his eyes.

The newcomer’s smile faded. Ahead, the front street of Banith ran roughly east–west. The town climbed shallow coastal hills, its roofs dominated by the tall jutting spires of the Holy Cloister and the many gables of the Hospice nearby. Beyond these, rich cultivated rolling plains, land once forested, stretched into the mist-shrouded distance.

The man turned right. Walking slowly, he studied the shop fronts and stalls. He passed a knot of street toughs and noted the much darker or fairer hues of mixed Malazan blood among them, so different from the uniformly swart Fistian heritage.

“Cast us a coin, beggar priest,” one bold youth called, the eldest.

“All I own is yours,” the fellow answered in his gravelly voice.

That brought many up short. Glances shot between the puzzled youths until the older tough snorted his disbelief. “Then hand it all over.”

The squat fellow was examining an empty shop front. “Easily done – since I own nothing. This building occupied?”

“Debtors’ prison,” answered a girl, barefoot, in tattered canvas pants and dirty tunic, boasting the frizzy hair of mixed Korel and foreign parentage. “Withholding taxes from the Malazan overlords.”

The man raised his thick arms to it. “Then I consecrate it to my God.”

“Which of all your damned foreign gods is that?”

The man turned. A smile pulled up his uneven lips and distorted the faded boar’s head tattoo. His voice strengthened. “Why, since you ask . . . Let me tell you about my God. His domain is the downtrodden and dispossessed. The poor and the sick. To him social standing, riches and prestige are meaningless empty veils. His first message is that we are all weak. We all are flawed. We all are mortal. And that we must learn to accept this.”

“Accept? Accept what?”

“Our failings. For we are all of us imperfect.”

“What is the name of this sick and perverted god?”

The priest held out his hands open and empty. “It is that which resides within us – each god is but one face of it.”

“Each god? All? Even Our Lady who shields us from evil?”

“Yes. Even she.”

Many of the gang flinched then, wincing, and they moved off as they sensed a more profound and disquieting sacrilege flowing beneath the usual irreverence of foreigners.

“And his second message?” a girl asked. She had stepped closer, but her eyes remained watchful on the street, and a sneer seemed fixed at her bloodless lips.

“Anyone may achieve deliverance and grace. It is open to all. It cannot be kept from anyone like common coin.”

She pointed to her thin chest. “Even us? The divines of the Sainted Lady turn us away from their thresholds – even the Hospice. They spit at us as half-bloods. And the old Dark Collector demands payment for all souls regardless.”

The man’s dark eyes glittered his amusement. “What I speak of cannot be bought by any earthly coin. Or compelled by any earthly power.”

Perplexed, the girl allowed her friends to pull her on. But she glanced back, thoughtful, her sharp brows crimped.

Smiling to himself again, the newcomer took hold of the door’s latch and pushed with a firm steady force until wood cracked, snapping, and the door opened. He slept that night on the threshold under his thin quilted blanket.

He spent the next morning sitting in the open doorway, nodding to all who passed. Those who did not spurn his greeting skittered from him like wary colts. Shortly after dawn a Malazan patrol of six soldiers made its slow deliberate round. He watched while coins passed from shopkeepers into the hands of the patrol sergeant; how the soldiers, male and female, helped themselves to whatever they wanted from the stalls, eating bread, fruit, and skewered meat cooked over coals as they swaggered along.

Eventually they came to him and he sighed, lowering his gaze. He'd heard it was bad here in Fist – which was why he'd come – but he'd no idea it was this bad.

The patrol sergeant stopped short, his thick, dark brows knitting. “What in the name of Togg’s tits is a Theftian priest of Fener doing here?”

The newcomer stood. “Priest, yes. But no longer of Fener.”

“Kicked out? Buggery maybe?”

“No – you get promoted for that.”

The men and women of the patrol laughed. The sergeant scowled, his unshaven jowls folding in fat. He tucked his hands into his belt; his gaze edged slyly to his patrol. “Looks like we got an itinerant. You have any coin, old beggar?”

“I do.” The priest reached into a fold of his tattered shirt and tossed a copper sliver to the cobbled road.

“A worthless Stygg half-penny?” The sergeant’s fleshy mouth curled.

“You’re right that it’s worthless. All coins are worthless. It’s just that some are worth less than others.”

The sergeant snorted. “A Hood-damned mystic too.” He pulled a wooden truncheon from his belt. “We don’t tolerate layabouts in this town. Get a move on or I’ll give you payment of another kind.”

The priest’s wide hands twitched loosely at his sides; his frog-like mouth stretched in a straight smile. “Lucky for you I no longer have any use for that coin either.”

The sergeant swung. The truncheon slapped into the priest’s raised open hand. The sergeant grunted, straining. His tanned face darkened with effort. Yanking, the priest came away with the truncheon, which he then cracked across his knee, snapping it. He threw the shards to the road. The men and women of the patrol eased back a step, hands going to swords.

The sergeant raised a hand: Hold. He gave the priest a nod in acknowledgement of the demonstration. “You’re new, so I’ll give you this one. But from now on this is how it’s gonna work – you want to stay, you pay. Simple as that. Otherwise, it’s the gaol for you. And here’s a tip . . . stay in there long enough and we sell your arse to the Korelri. They’re always lookin’ for warm bodies for the wall and they don’t much care where they come from.” He eased his head from side to side, cracking vertebrae, and offered a savage smile. “So, you’re a priest. We got priests too. Guess I’ll send them around. You can talk philosophy. Till then – sleep tight.”

The sergeant signalled for the patrol to move on. They left, grinning. One of the female soldiers blew a kiss.

The priest sat back down to watch them as they went, collecting yet more extortion money. The street youths, he noted, were nowhere in evidence. Damn bad. Worse than he'd imagined. It's a good thing the old commander isn't here to see this. Otherwise it would be the garrison itself in the gaol.

He picked up the two shards of the truncheon, hefted them. Still, mustn't be too harsh. Occupation and subjugation of a population – intended or not – is an ugly thing. Brutalizing. Brings out the worst in both actors. Look at what he'd heard of Seven Cities. And this is looking no better.

Well, he has his God. The priest's wide mouth split side to side. Ah yes, his God. And a browbeaten and oppressed population from which to recruit. Fertile ground. He edged his head sideways, calculating. Yes . . . it just might work . . .

First year of the rule of Emperor Mallick Rel 'The Merciful'

(Year 1167 Burn's Sleep)

City of Delanss, Falar Subcontinent

Sitting across from his hulking grey-haired friend, Kyle squeezed his tumbler of wine and tried to keep his worry from his face. The long, stone-hued hair that had given his friend his old nickname, Greymane, now hung more silver than pewter. And though he attacked his rice and Falaran hot peppered fish sauce with his usual gusto and appetite, Kyle could

see that his strained finances must be taking their toll: new lines furrowed his mouth, dark circles shaded his eyes, and Kyle swore the man was losing weight.

They sat on a terrace overlooking an enclosed courtyard of raked sand where racks of weapons boasted swords of all makes plus daggers, pole-weapons and staves, as well as padded hauberks, helmets and shields. Everything, Kyle reflected, one might need for a fighting academy.

Except pupils.

So far, Kyle didn't think Greymane, who now insisted on his original given name, Orjin, had attracted more than thirty paying bodies to his new school. Kyle didn't count himself; he'd tried paying for all the lessons and sparring he'd been privileged to have from the man, but Orjin wouldn't accept a penny. The three cousins who'd come along with him and Greymane had also tried to help, but after their version of 'training' broke bones and bloodied noses Orjin asked them to quit. Bored with hanging around, Stalker, Coots and Badlands had said their goodbyes and shipped out on a vessel heading west. Kyle's guardian spirit, or haunt, seemed to have also drifted off: Stoop, the ghost of a dead Crimson Guardsman, one of the Avowed, those who swore a binding vow to oppose the Malazan Empire so long as it should endure. And that vow, which granted them so much, extended life and strength, also bound them in death, chaining them to the world. But over the months he too had faded away, returning, perhaps, to his dead brethren. Kyle had thought he saw a kind of disappointment in the haunt's eyes when it appeared that last time to say farewell.

So over the months he'd spent his time talking up Orjin's school at every chance. He suspected, though, that his friend wasn't interested in what the regular burghers and

farmers of the markets, inns and taverns thought of his new academy – he had his eyes on a far more elevated, and moneyed, tier of the local Delanss society.

Small chance there. Delanss, capital city of the second most populous island of the Falaran subcontinent and archipelago, boasted prestigious long-established schools: Grieg's Academy, the School of the Curved Blade, the Black Falcon School. Academies that rivalled the famous officers' school of Strike Island. And privately, Kyle did not believe his friend would ever manage to push his way into such a closed, tightly knit market in what seemed such a closed, tightly knit society. As far as he could see, this region's capitulation to its Malazan invaders seemed to have amounted to no more than changing the colour of the flags atop the harbour fortress.

Greymane – Orjin – tore a piece of greasy flatbread and used it to sop up the last of his sauce; he looked as though he was about to speak, but chewed moodily instead. Kyle sipped his white rice wine, thought about asking whether any classes were scheduled for the day, decided he'd better not.

It seemed to him that all this must be especially galling since his friend had to hide his past. A past that would have officer hopefuls battering down his doors should they know of it. Unfortunately, word of his past career as an Imperial Malazan military general, a Fist, and subsequent outlaw from that same Empire, would have him a hunted man on this subcontinent as well.

A sound from below turned Kyle's attention to the practice floor. A man had entered. He was dressed in the rounded cloth hat, thick robes and bright jewellery of just that social stratum Orjin was so keen to attract; the fellow gazed bemusedly about the

empty school. Following Kyle's gaze, Orjin peered down, then shot upright from his chair, sending it crashing backwards. "Yes, sir!" he boomed. "May I be of service?"

The man jumped at the bellow trained to penetrate the crash of battle, squinted up, uncertain. "You are the master of this establishment?" he asked in Talian, the unofficial second tongue of the archipelago.

"Yes, sir! A moment, sir!" Orjin wiped his mouth, disentangled himself from his fallen chair and headed for the stairs. Crossing the practice floor, he bowed. "How may I help you, sir?"

Kyle finished his wine and followed. He stopped at the base of the stairs, leaned against the banister of unfinished wood. The fellow wore the full fashion of the local aristocracy: multiple rings at his fingers, thick silver chains round his neck over fur-trimmed robes with fur cuffs. His hat consisted of wrapped dark burgundy cloth set with semi-precious stones. His goatee was finely trimmed, and while looking Orjin up and down he stroked it, showing off the large gems in his rings. "What are your credentials?"

Orjin bowed again. He looked what Kyle hoped was properly severe and professional in his tanned leathers. "I served in the Malazan Fourth Army, sir, and attained the rank of captain before injury at the Battle of the Plains."

The man's brows rose. "Truly? Then you were there when the Empress fell?"

"Yes, sir. Though I did not witness it."

"Few did, I understand. What, then, is your impression of this new Emperor, Mallick Rel?"

Orjin glanced back to Kyle, cleared his throat. "Well, sir, I'm not a politician. But I was glad that he did not prosecute the officers who had rebelled against the Empress."

The man's calculating gaze seemed to say, *Because you were among them?* "He's Falari, you know."

"No, sir. I did not know that."

"Yes. And I will tell you this – there were many of us here who were not in the least bit surprised at the news of his, ah, advancement."

"Is that so, sir." The man shrugged uneasily beneath his layered furred robes.

"Anyway . . . Your rates?"

"A half-silver per hour for individual instruction."

The man's mouth drew down. "That is much more than I was expecting."

"Ah, but . . ." The big man motioned to Kyle. "I can also offer instruction from my compatriot here, who was of the famed mercenary company, the Crimson Guard."

The nobleman eyed Kyle thinly. "And now employs those skills breaking arms."

Orjin actually winced. "Yes, well. You can always withdraw should you not judge the instruction beneficial."

"It is not for myself. It is for my son."

"I see. His age?"

"Still a boy, really . . . but rowdy. Undisciplined." He tilted his head as he stroked his goatee. "But you look as if you might be able to handle him." He nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. Thank you. Until then." He bowed.

Orjin answered the bow. "I look forward to it."

The man left. Kyle ambled across the floor to Orjin's side. "Think we'll see him again?"

"Could be."

“He didn’t even ask to see your papers.”

“Perhaps he knows how easily all that bullshit can be forged.”

“Maybe.” Kyle eyed his friend sidelong. “A half-silver per hour? Pretty steep. I couldn’t afford you.”

The man smiled wolfishly and his glacial blue eyes glittered with humour. For a moment he had the appearance of his old self. “He looked as if he could spare it.”

Kyle laughed. “Aye. Tomorrow, then.”

“Yes – sword and shield work.”

Backing away, Kyle waved the suggestion aside. “Gods, no. There’s no skill in that.”

“No skill! There’s ignorance speaking. Do you in, that ignorance might one day.”

“Not before I knife it.”

“*Knife?* Useless against anyone in a shred of armour.”

Kyle paused. “I’ll—” A knock sounded just as he was reaching for the doors. Frowning, he opened one of the wide leaves. Three men, plainly dressed, bearing expensive Falaran-style longswords and daggers, the blades straight and slim. Three more! Must be Greymane’s – Orjin’s – banner day. He nodded to one. “Morning.”

This one, a young swell in a broad-brimmed green felt hat, looked him up and down and made no effort to disguise his lack of approval. “You are this new weapon-master?”

“No.” Kyle motioned up the tunnel. “He’s it.” He stood aside. The three men entered, leaving the door ajar. The indifferent condescension of that act – as if the three

were used to others opening and shutting doors for them – moved Kyle to stroll along behind them, curious.

He stopped in the mouth of the tunnel that led to the court. The three had met Orjin at a weapon rack. “You are this new weapon-master, Orjin Samarr?” their spokesman asked in a tone that was almost accusatory.

Orjin turned, blinking mildly. His eyes glinted bright like sapphires in the shade. “Aye? May I help you? You would like a lesson, perhaps?”

The three exchanged glances, their mouths twisting up, amused. “Yes,” the fellow in the green hat began, backing off and setting a gloved hand on his sword. “You can help us settle a wager my friends and I have made . . .” The other two stepped aside to Orjin’s right and left. Kyle pushed himself from the wall, edged closer to a weapon rack. “. . . as to whether any foreigner could possibly provide fighting instruction in any way approximating that quality with which Delanss has been so blessed.”

Orjin nodded his understanding. He drew a bound stave from the weapon rack, sighted down its length. “I see. Well, normally I charge a half-silver for lessons. But perhaps the three of you would like to go in together on a group rate—”

They drew, snarling. Orjin sprang upon the one on his right, the stave smacking the man’s right hand, and he yelped, tucking it under an arm. Orjin spun to face the other two. Kyle drew a wooden baton from the weapon rack, tossed it end over end while he watched.

Using a two-handed grip, Orjin parried, the stave blurring, knocking the slim double-edged blades aside. The fellow in the felt hat furiously threw it aside and drew his parrying dagger. The clack of the stave against the blades echoed in the court. Kyle listened for the telltale catch of iron biting wood, but so far Orjin had managed to avoid that particular danger. The man's face was reddening and Kyle stopped tossing the baton.

Too early; far too early for any exertion to be showing. "*They're* using knives," he observed conversationally.

Orjin shot him a glare, his cheeks puffing. The three danced around him while he shifted slowly, knees bent, stave cocked. "Now, normally," he began, "none of you would have occasion to meet an opponent using a two-handed weapon . . ." One lunged in, and Orjin's stave smacked his face, sending him tottering aside. Orjin returned his guard on the remaining two. "Normally, it is too slow and awkward to move from side to side across the body. A nimble opponent should—" The same one charged, slashing. Orjin's stave parried, dipped, and came up into the fellow's groin. The man fell like a string-cut puppet. Kyle winced in empathetic pain.

Sweat now sheathing his face, Orjin faced their spokesman, who smiled, acknowledging the lesson, and immediately attacked. Parrying, Orjin dipped his head, shouting his encouragement. "Yes, yes! That's right – draw the point aside, prepare the gauche for the hidden thrust!"

A warning shout from Kyle died in his throat as the hand-slapped fellow re-entered the fray to grip Orjin from behind. Kyle was amazed by the foolhardiness of the move; the bhederin-like Orjin was half again as broad as any man he'd ever met.

Shrugging, Orjin wrenched an arm around to get the man in a headlock and threw him over his shoulder stomach up like a sack of grain. Stave in one hand, he faced the spokesman. “Now you have the advantage – a one-handed opponent!”

The spokesman did not hesitate. His booted feet shushed and thumped the sand as he dodged, feinting, circling the ponderously shifting Orjin. Kyle kicked himself from the wall. *Shit! He’s really gonna try it!* The longsword scraped up the shaft of the stave, holding it aside, and he stepped in the gauche, thrusting, but Orjin spun, the blade sawing shallowly across his side as the legs and boots of the man across his shoulder smashed into his assistant, sending him flying aside. Orjin tossed the man on to his sprawled fellow and stood panting. He touched his side gingerly and flinched. “The lesson is . . .” he drew a heavy breath, “that you all should’ve attacked at once, regardless.”

Kyle watched the big man’s chest rising and falling. Out of breath already? Not good. No, not good at all. He replaced the baton.

As the spokesman struggled to rise Orjin put a booted foot to his backside and sent him tumbling to the tunnel. “I’d charge you. But I suspect you’re all incapable of learning anything.”

Gathering up their fallen weapons, they backed off to the exit. Kyle bowed as they passed. “Honoured sirs!” They merely glared and mouthed curses. Kyle ambled out to Orjin, who was cleaning up. “Winded already . . .”

The man shot him a glare. “Been a while.” He found a rag, wiped his jowls.

“A little dust-up like that shouldn’t—”

“Drop it.”

Kyle's brows rose. *Short-tempered too*. "So I'll be by tomorrow afternoon then for that sword and shield work. What do you say? Full armour too?"

Orjin made a face. "Very funny. Now get out of here. I have to get cleaned up."

Kyle saluted and backed away.

But he'd been serious.

In a shaded narrow alleyway a few streets down, the young tough, his green felt hat in one hand, dabbed a silk handkerchief to his bleeding nose and mouth and faced the richly dressed Delanss noble in his furred robes and thick silver chains. With a ringed hand the noble edged the young man's head aside to examine one cheek, tsked beneath his breath. "So he did manage to handle you . . ."

"Father!"

"So, what do you think? Is he the one?"

"He must be. He lifted Donas like a child."

"Very well. I'll send word. Until then, hire men to keep an eye on the school."

The young man bowed.

"And no retribution! No crossbows in the night, or knives in the market. They want him alive."

The young man rolled his eyes. "Yes, father."

The noble stroked his grey-shot goatee, studied the young man. “I must say I am impressed by the man’s control. He put you down without breaking any bones at all. He showed great restraint in the face of almost intolerable insult.”

“Father!”

First year of the rule of Emperor Mallick Rel ‘The Merciful’

(Year 1167 Burn’s Sleep)

Stratem Subcontinent

At dawn, Kuhn Eshen, called Kuhn ‘The Nose’, master of *Rich Tidings*, a Katakan freetrader, dropped anchor offshore from the town of Thickton and spent an anxious morning waiting to see whether the stories of the lands of Stratem being open once more to the outside world were true.

As the hours passed the usual small boats made their way out, offering fresh fruit, bread, fish and pigs. Boys and girls swam the cold waters, offering to lead the crew to boarding houses or brothels, or to act as general guides about town. All good signs of a growing openness to trade. By noon the larger open launches were oaring out, bearing merchant agents. These men and women Kuhn greeted. He offered a taste of the Styggian liqueur he’d brought, and showed bolts of Jass broadcloth. They listened with barely concealed eagerness to his talk of Korel; news only a few weeks old rather than the two

or three months it usually took for any word to reach this stretch of the isolated Sea of Chimes.

One woman among them, however, mystified Kuhn and he kept a wary eye on her. She stood leaning self-contained against the side. Dressed in dark leathers, with a sword belted at her side, her long auburn hair pulled back and fixed with a bright green tortoiseshell clip, she almost looked to be a military officer of some sort. She took no interest in his wares; instead she watched his crew as they in turn eyed the thickly treed shore. Some few garbled stories had reached Korel lands concerning events on their southern neighbour. Word of a band of hireswords carving out a private kingdom. But all that had been long ago. Still, he wondered: could she be one of *them*?

After expressing an interest in board feet of the local hardwoods, in tanned hides, and furs, Kuhn spent a time doling out news of Korel lands. The crowded circle of locals hung on every scrap – true or not. He was talking of the Stormwall when his audience went silent and all eyes edged aside, glancing past him. He turned.

The woman in dark leathers had come up behind him. She was watching him expectantly, her sharp chin raised. “I’m sorry . . . ?” he stammered.

“I said what was that . . . what you were just talking of.”

“Just the latest news from the Stormwall, honoured lady. And you are . . . ?”

“I represent the governor of this province – Haven Province, of Stratem.”

“Truly? A governor?” Kuhn looked to a nearby agent who was nodding seriously, his thick neck bulging. *Intriguing. This news could be worth much in certain ports of Korel.* “And this governor – does he have a name?” Closer now, he saw that she wore a

single piece of jewellery high on the left of her chest – what looked like a dragon or snake wrought in silver.

The woman's thin lips edged sideways in an almost cruel knowing smile. "You first."

Ah. Going to be that way, is it? Kuhn shrugged, and rested his forearms on the ship's gunwale. "Certainly, m'lady. My news is always free. It's half the reason we traders are welcome wherever we go. I was just speaking of the Stormwall. The ranks of the Chosen have thinned, you know. But this last season a new champion has arisen on the wall. The Korelri are full of his exploits. They call him Bars – odd name, that."

The woman's reaction made Kuhn flinch. She fairly paled; a hand rose as if to shake him by the throat but to his relief merely clutched air. "*Bars*," she hissed aloud in an almost awed whisper. She threw herself over the side, slipping down the rope ladder by her hands alone. Landing jarringly in a launch, she immediately ordered it away. She even lent a hand at an oar herself and it was all the rest of the burly crew could do to keep up. All this Kuhn watched bemusedly, scratching his scalp. "Who in the name of the Blessed Lady was that?"

"That was Janeth, warder of the town."

"Warder? What does that mean? Is she your ruler?"

A shake of the head. "No, gentle sir. We have a council. She enforces the laws. Her men guard the coast. Arrest thieves and killers – not that we've had a killin' here in some time." The agent warmed to his subject, crossed his arms on the gunwale. "Last season raiders from your neighbour Mare came through. They show up from time to time. She and her men drove them off."

Kuhn eyed the retreating launch. Drove off Mare raiders? Her and how many men? So, law enforcement and protection. Agent of this self-styled governor. A king by any other name? News indeed for the Korelan Council of the Chosen concerning their once sleepy southern neighbour. “And this provincial governor. He has a name?”

An easy shrug beneath bunched hides. “I heard him called “Blues” once. We just call him the Lord Governor. He’s living in an old fort called Haven. Hasn’t been around lately. Not that I’d know him to see him.”

Enough for now. Smiling easily, Kuhn slapped the agent on the arm. “Well, thank you. See you this evening?”

“Oh, yes. Esta’s house. She runs a clean place. Best ever. You’ll see.”

Best ever? My friend, I very much doubt that this muddy backwater could offer any attractions rivalling those of infamous Danig of Theft, or legendary Ebon of Stygg.

Behind the Boiler

By Alexander Jablov

My favorite writing space in my life was a tiny room in my apartment, above the porch, just big enough for a desk and a couple of bookshelves. It was cold in the winter and hot in the summer, but it had great light and felt completely separate from the world.

Of course, at that time, I had a life kind of like that office, clean and neat and organized. I'd saved enough money to take some time off and make it as a writer.

I won't say I failed (five novels and one short story collection), but I can't claim to have made it big either. I got married, had children, went back to work...and went through a dry spell in my writing. It was a choice I made freely, because usually life just shows up and saying "But I'm writing!" to that knock on the door can be a mistake.

Plus, a family is a really convenient excuse for not getting writing done, though they seldom enjoy being told that.

But as the kids have gotten older and more easily neglected, I've had some time. I took the old desk left over from that nice well-lit office (really a door on two filing cabinets) and set it up behind the boiler in my basement. I separated myself from the washer/dryer and the play area with bookshelves, and taped geological maps of the Southwest on the walls. I set up a Writer user on my computer that has all non-writing programs blocked and has no internet access.

I didn't quit my day job, and, in fact, worked hard to succeed at it. But, early in the mornings before going to work, and during any spare weekend time, I started writing *Brain Thief*.

Now, more than ten years later, *Brain Thief* is finally being published.

Here is what I have learned from this experience:

It's the production on your worst day that determines your overall production, not your production on your best day. A succession of days with nothing written can eat any number of days with many words written, like the seven lean years devouring the seven fat years in the story of Joseph.

I write less than I used to, but can't delude myself into thinking I would write twice or three times as much if I had all day to do it. I spend 23 hours looking forward to that one hour in the morning, and do my best to make it count.

No one wants to listen to you whine about how your desk is behind the boiler in your basement, because if that's as romantic as your struggle gets, you can just get back in line.

People at your day job may find it interesting that you also write, but they won't cut you any slack because of it (even if your desk is behind...etc.) They actually only care about the work you do for them. So you should do it as well and as honestly as you can.

Take a look around yourself at your day job. *This* is what most people do all day. Many of them are devoted to their work. All human passions eventually surface in the workplace. Shouldn't something in your writing reflect all that? Just don't try to caricature your ex-boss as a world-ransoming supervillain. Unless that was your

organization's actual line of work and her actual job title, in which case you don't need advice from me.

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Brain Thief

By Alexander Jablov

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[Alexander Jablov](#) lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Chapter One

For Bernal, the message in the cowboy boot finally confirmed that something was wrong.

Muriel liked to make her communications to her single employee works of art. The one standing on the windowsill at the end of the hall was an elaborately decorated cowboy boot, complete with spur. In it were three foil- wrapped chocolates, bittersweet, and a 3 × 5 index card on which was written, in Muriel's slanted handwriting, "Bernal. What I learned today changes everything.

Head over to Ungaro's lab if you crave an explanation." Of course he craved an explanation. Muriel was supposed to be at the opening of an exhibit of Renaissance silver at the Cheriton Art Gallery that night, not hanging around the lab of her pet AI researcher.

Impromptu visits to Muriel- funded research programs were what Bernal got paid for. He'd just gotten back from one, a road trip to South Dakota to deal with some bad feelings about the mammoth project, with a few side visits on the way. Bernal rubbed his eyes. It had been a long day's drive from the campground at Seneca Lake, and he'd been looking forward to a hot shower and quick sleep in a back bedroom, with business left for the next day.

But something had seemed off as soon as he had made it into the house, a quality of deliberate silence. He'd run up the curving staircase to the sconce- lit hallway upstairs and said hello to the tailor's dummy in the military dress jacket that guarded the low bureau with the turned wood bowl on it. A glance into Muriel's bedroom had increased his unease.

Clothing lay piled against a radiator. An old wooden soft- drink box, smelling of damp cellar, had been dumped out, and the toys that had once been stored in it, things like stuffed tigers with green eyes and long- obsolete video games, lay scattered across the dark red Oriental carpet at the foot of the bed. A doll's head had rolled under a highboy. It stared demurely at Bernal from beneath long lashes, one eye half closed.

Found objects, like a wooden shoe form, the numerals 61/2 bold black on its side, and a row of glass eyeballs of various colors, rested on top of door moldings, safe above the mess. Her bedside lamp was an Art Deco Atlas nobly holding up a frosted glass circle with a 40- watt bulb behind it. What looked like the contents of her jewelry box had been poured over his patinaed bronze feet.

The yellow silk-upholstered daybed was piled with shoe boxes.

Dozens of them. He knew that Muriel loved shoes, but this was ridiculous. The entire top layer was new purchases from some store called DEEP. A receipt showed that they had been purchased just that afternoon, and the figure made Bernal's male eyes bug out.

He'd worked for Muriel for two years now, and he knew how to judge her mood from the disorder in her private space. This was worse than he'd ever seen it. Something was definitely up with her.

A suit bag, unzipped and empty, lay on the bed.

He'd made fun of her for that bag. It usually contained what he called her ninja outfit: fitted black microfiber and Kevlar, which she always insisted would come in handy some day if she had to commit a crime. Muriel was somewhere beyond sixty but fit enough to carry the suit off. Accessorized by some usually over- the- top diamonds,

the thing actually looked like a real outfit. He understood that she sometimes wore it to the gym. But not to a gallery opening.

Hanging by the mirror was the gown she'd been prepared to wear, a bronze knee-length. If she'd decided to switch outfits, she'd done it recently.

When he saw the cowboy boot on the windowsill, he figured he'd have his answer. But all he got were more questions. He ran his fingers through his hair as he reread the card, wondering what she was up to.

A door slam downstairs made Bernal jump. Just as he was turning from the window to head down there, a flicker of motion outside caught his eye. He pressed his forehead against the glass and peered through the tree branches to the ground.

A figure in a pink nightgown ran across the lawn, heading toward the garage.

He recognized Muriel.

Everyday Magic: Lady Lazarus and the Book of Raziel

By Michele Lang

Lady Lazarus is both a historical fantasy and a magical history of my family. My mother's childhood in Communist Hungary was filled with séances, mediums, and prophetic dreams, and everyday magic was part of the cultural fabric.

Even in America, the technological, I find magic all over the place — it comes up out of the ground, like oil in the Caucasus. And that magic invades my writing. I mean to write straight up stories, but the magic hides in plain sight, and before I know it characters are working spells, flying by night, dreaming of demons.

Let me give you an example of something magical from the everyday world that infused *Lady Lazarus*. The protagonist, Magda Lazarus, is a witch who hunts for a book called the Book of Raziel, written by her angel Raziel to console humankind after the expulsion from the Garden.

The thing of it is, the book exists—I've held it in my hands. The Book of Raziel is an amulet, a benevolent Jewish magic that you can find in Brooklyn, in Jerusalem, even in Budapest. The book protects the bearer in childbirth, during surgery, and from fire, and I first learned about this book when grateful patients gave it to my husband to protect him, too. My husband is a surgeon, and he has found the Book of Raziel taped over his Hasidic patients' hearts.

According to legend (not my imagination), the angel gave the book to Adam, and it contains angelology, magical astrological formulations, incantations, and amulets. Other legends say that after a period in which the book was lost, the angel Raphael rescued it from the deep and gave it to Noah after the Flood.

It is forbidden to read the Book of Raziel—but fortunately, for reckless people like me who have tried it, the Book is written in the Angelic tongue and has never been properly deciphered, so it is impossible to read and understand the version of the Book that exists. The first bound and printed edition appeared in 1701 in Amsterdam, and reportedly the pages were scrambled on purpose before publication to further render the book unreadable.

I think magic, an emanation of the One that made us, is a way to strengthen people's native power to transcend the evils and dangers they confront in the world. It's lying around like a weapon, like gold, like radium. It's up to us to figure out how to use it.

My family survived the war through a combination of courage, luck, and sheer determination. I'd like to believe that a dash of magic, the intercession of angels, gave them the strength to save themselves, too. Because what is survival in the fire, but a miracle of the first magnitude?

Lady Lazarus

By Michele Lang

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[Michele Lang](#), like her protagonist, is the daughter of Hungarian Jewish parents. Neither a witch nor able to defy death like the Lazarus, she was inspired, nonetheless, by the selfless heroism of her family in WWII. She lives on Long Island.

Prologue

July 1945

Paris

I damned my soul in the summer of 1939. I did it for the noblest reasons, the best ones—to save the people I loved; to make a terrible wrong turn right. But still I am tormented by the thought that my sins overwhelmed my intentions and turned my noble sacrifices to dust even as I made them. Only time will tell if my desperate measures, in the end, were justified.

In my mind, that final summer is saturated with golden sunlight. My beloved home—gilded Budapest, the Paris on the Danube—glittered brilliantly in the sun, even blighted as it was by the stain of fascism. The cafés still buzzed with energy, the city still throbbed at night. My Budapest still lived.

And I felt at home there like no other place I have lived before or since. To me, a girl of only twenty, Budapest was the culmination of a life's dream of freedom. My family, originally from the northern mountain town of Tokaj, was drawn to Budapest's brilliant light at the end of the nineteenth century, and my father, a wine trader, eventually made his fortune.

Not even the depredations of Béla Kun's Bolshevik regime in 1919, followed by the genial fascist toad, that hypocrite Regent Horthy, not even an army of their small-

minded followers could destroy the restless creativity of the city. I knew it was dangerous to be a Jew. But I had one secret advantage, and I clung to it for dear life.

I was a Lazarus. And the eldest daughter of an eldest daughter.

The city teemed with magical folk, living alongside the pure mortals. Vampires, dryads, dwarves; other, hidden, immortal beings— and the adepts, the sorcerers, necromancers, and witches. As for me, I am a Lazarus witch. My power is passed from mother to daughter, and has been so conveyed since time out of mind.

My mother, bless her vanished soul, tried her best to teach me the Lazarus creed and how to use the power I inherited, and the dangers such a power brings, but I was born rebellious.

And when she died suddenly, my training was still unfinished. I preferred to haunt the cafés, debate Communism and literary theory with half- starved poets living on weak tea and rumballs, indulge in mad affairs of the mind and heart that in the end led absolutely nowhere. In short, I was a young fool, but a happy one.

The trouble crept up on all of us, a shadow that lengthened over everything we knew. Horthy's regime was dreadful, but after the disaster of Béla Kun, we all believed we could survive the regent. So we, the Jews, kept our heads down and worked.

And we, the witches, kept to our creed, respected the destructive potential of our powers and invoked them rarely. We told ourselves useful lies, that the trouble would soon pass. And a fragile balance held.

Such a state, balanced on lies, could not sustain itself for long. Despite this, when the end came, none of us were ready.

And now I hold my breath, my pen hovers over the paper before I write. How can I explain to you, a stranger, what has happened to me? At this pause in my earthly trials, I do not know which is better: to press forward and leave the past to die, or to commit my strange tale to paper.

Well do I know the power of words. In many instances, I am the only witness, the only one still living who knows of the great- hearted sacrifices of those who are now gone, the only one who can now remember. So: I write this story not to glorify the living, but to honor the dead.

The summer of '39 is seared into my mind, and lives on forever unchanged in my memory. Hitler had not yet invaded Poland, war had not yet exploded the world I had known into irredeemable shards. I was still a girl, the future still lay before me, indefinable, infinite with possibility.

I was still kissing- close to the people I loved most in the entire world. And simple love matters more than magic, treasure, or even the promise of eternal life. It is for love that I now set this strange tale into words.

Remember this as you read on, for though my story has its triumphs, in the end it has always come back to two fundamental questions:

Who do you love?

Do you seek the darkness or the light?

Chapter One

June 13, 1939: 2:30 a.m.

CAFÉ ISTANBUL

Budapest, Hungary

The world I had known ended on a steamy Tuesday night in Budapest. It was so late that only the poets and vampires still remained at the café, and my employer and I sat at our usual table as the stranger from the east told his dreadful tale. I was surrounded by Art Nouveau stained glass and by giant brass hookahs imported from the Orient, but all I could see and taste was blood.

“You say that the Americans . . .” Bathory’s voice trailed off, and for once he seemed completely at a loss. I watched him light an unfiltered cigarette with his absurd jewel- encrusted Zippo lighter; it was a clear sign that we were all in trouble, for Bathory only smoked in times of deepest strain.

I took refuge from the stranger’s words in our familiar surroundings. The Café Istanbul wrapped me in beloved, Levantine luxury. Inside the Ring Road, in the center of Budapest, the café catered to vampires, musicians, and wine merchants, an unlikely but nonetheless harmonious combination. It made for fruitful and prosperous encounters.

The man’s voice shuddered in the mirrored, high- ceilinged room; fear rose from him in a stink. He stood before us in supplication, his hat in his hands, and the very chandeliers trembled as he spoke.

His words came in German, but haltingly, as if he had to translate the words in his head from another language before he formed them aloud. “Yes, the Americans. They have uncovered a weapon. A doomsday weapon. Whoever can claim it first will have the upper hand in the war that is to come. My people must have this weapon, or Stalin will kill us all. You must help us.”

The stranger sounded like a madman. Bathory and I had entertained any number of desperate callers at our permanent table on the mezzanine of the café, and we heard many a tale of woe in that terrible year, 1939, but nothing yet as grim as this. As I replaced my demitasse, the delicate porcelain chattered a little too loudly against the saucer.

A glance at my beloved employer didn’t help to calm my nerves. The count’s piercing gaze pinned me to my seat. He expected me to do what I had always done for him: draw the truth out of this supplicant, as I had from every other mortal that sought his favors. My job was to lull them into doing my master’s bidding, encourage them to do business with Bathory so that he could line his pockets and keep me in rumballs and off the streets. I was still innocent enough to believe the truth protected both the supplicants and me.

But the truth I now sensed in this strange, foreign man was volatile, unstable. If I brought his truth into the light, all of us could die in the explosion.

In 1939, I made my living as a servant of one who preyed on human fear in its many permutations. And though more frightful creatures existed in Budapest, Bathory was nightmare enough for most of our mortal visitors. As I now considered this man from the east, the stranger’s fear tasted of bitterness.

It was cloying and metallic on my tongue.

The man's fears did not originate with the sight of my employer, that much I could readily sense. Bathory scared me more than anything else in Budapest. But this stranger knew things that made Bathory seem tame.

I took another slow sip of Turkish coffee. As the warm liquid burned a pathway along the inside of my throat, I sent my witch's caress into the stranger's mind, and coaxed him into mastering his fear so he would stay.

The man sank into a cane- backed chair. He held his hat in his hands and balanced it on one knee. His whispers rose into the stuffy air above our heads like smoke, vanished into the early morning mist swirling outside on the terrace.

"Please help me," the stranger said in German. His diction was formal, his expression anguished.

Bathory leaned forward, his narrow, pale face reflecting the Istanbul's electric light like a trapped moon. "But of course. I am here to help. For a price." He caressed the bone china plate at the table's center. "May I offer you some refreshment? A rumball?"

The man cleared his throat, trembled. "No, thank you. No rumballs." He dragged his gaze away from my employer, and Bathory let him go. With wide eyes, the stranger stared at the gaunt young composer sleeping alone at the corner booth, his artist's plate of cold cuts all but untouched on the table next to him.

I riffled through the stranger's mind as gently as I could, leaving him to the café's pretty distractions as I worked. Flickering images, like an old silent movie— a pumping oil well, a black stallion trotting along a cobblestone street— moved through my mind and floated away.

“I didn’t catch your name, sir,” I said, my voice as silky and gentle as I could make it.

“Ziyad. Ziyad Juhuri.”

“And you come from Stalin’s land.”

“Yes. At great danger to my people, I come.”

He did not want to reveal his story; he wanted our help without too much exposure. But this Ziyad’s secret was too dangerous to us to allow him to hide his origins. How could we know his mission would not endanger us?

“And how can my master assist you, sir?”

“Sir . . .” He addressed Bathory, not me. “I— I know what you are.”

Bathory’s spidery fingers crept along the cravat knotted at his bony throat. As he considered the stranger’s words, Bathory’s lips parted in a wide smile, revealing the rows of long, needlelike teeth. The man paled and clutched the edge of the table. I hummed under my breath, tightening the cord of the stranger’s fear like a golden leash around his neck. He gasped in surprise, but I held fast. His heart surged like an engine, and then steadied as a thick despair spread through his veins.

Despair was an improvement. Ziyad straightened his tie, and I felt him relax, as he accepted the knowledge he spoke with a vampire, and that such encounters usually end badly for the human supplicant.

Now he and Count Bathory could do business. Bathory’s face grew serene. “Yes, I am a Drinker, my friend.” He let his statement linger like the smoke in the air between us as he took a long, languorous sip of his milky coffee. “But what will that do for you?”

The man watched in fascination as Bathory's long fingers dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a linen napkin. "I need help, from you and your . . . kind."

"All of us are in grave danger in these wretched days. In fact, those like my little assistant Magda who thrive in trouble are in a small minority." Bathory favored me with a fond little smile.

And how I treasured the old vampire's sincere approbation.

Bathory had lived long, dapper in his antique silks and velvets, and many human assistants had served him faithfully and lived out their mortal days untouched by his fangs. He had once told me that I was his favorite protégée, and it pleased me mightily to believe him.

The stranger rallied his courage. "I am here to make arrangements to procure this superweapon immediately. My sources have revealed that an American has it."

This earned a raised eyebrow from Bathory. "Your sources? Call upon the American ambassador. You describe a matter for diplomacy, not for private profit, yes?"

The stranger shook his head. "No, my lord. Your guild stretches around the world, Count Bathory, you are the only ambassador I need. I must move through, shall I say . . ."

"Unorthodox channels."

"Yes. And I would pay in prayer rugs or ready cash, pay a premium to succeed."

Bathory made a dismissive wave of the hand, though I caught the acquisitive sparkle in his narrow eyes. "My dear Magda here, the daughter of a brilliant businessman, can help you should you wish to engage in trade, sir. But that is no special favor."

The man's face clouded over, and he stroked his drooping mustache and scowled. "I do not come for fortune, or for trade."

I caressed the man's mind as he spoke, and I looked for his true desire. I saw blood, blood, children and women slaughtered in a mountainous place. Their deaths called to me as well as to him, and they demanded revenge. The stranger did not lie. He needed to reach the Americans, find the hidden magic, and kill his enemies before they killed him.

I tasted the metal of blood in my mouth, and I shuddered as I chewed on a lump of sugar to dull the bitterness of it. "Ah, I understand. You are only a messenger," I muttered, only realizing I had spoken aloud when the man turned and of his own volition met my gaze.

"We are all messengers," he said, and for the first time, the stranger smiled.

I took a deep breath and allowed myself the luxury of doing what I had learned never to do: speak honestly. "You may not live to see your message delivered."

His lips trembled with emotion as he played with the brim of his hat. "That is no matter. What matters is only that the message is received. Ah, you are a holy messenger to me, indeed, miss."

"Do not fear . . . we will help you, sir. We will."

Bathory interrupted our interchange with a low hiss, and I saw that I had exhausted his patience. He spoke in Hungarian, to hide the import of his rebuke from our supplicant. "You are my messenger, Magdalena Lazarus," he said, baring his fangs to make his point. "But you are only my messenger. Remember your place!"

I had learned to tolerate his periodic rages, understanding them for the symptoms of panic they were. Bathory, now landless nobility, desperately missed his portion of earth, swallowed up by Romania and the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Without the comfort of his native soil, my poor count could not cope with the massive dislocations of history.

As for me, such chaos was my native state. That is why he relied on me, and why, no matter how much I angered him with my naïveté and rebelliousness, he kept me in his service. But we both knew I did not belong to him, no matter how much we both wished it were so. “I do not know my place, dear count. And that is why you love me.”

With an effort, Count Bathory recovered himself, reverting to speaking German for the benefit of our visitor. “Magdalena Lazarus. You are stuffed like a goose with romantic notions and sentimental paradox. When you know what you are willing to die for, you will know what to live for. It is that simple.”

Bathory’s thin shoulders knotted together and he slouched, staring sullenly into the middle distance. “And unless you figure that out, Magda, your nonsense will get us all killed someday.”

My face burned like fire. Given the fact that Bathory hovered in the undead shadows of a vampire’s existence, his comment shouldn’t have cut as deeply as it did. But what can I say? Twenty was young to carry the burdens I bore, but Bathory had no way of knowing my age or my burdens— I worked too hard to hide the secrets of my life from him.

I cleared my throat, smoothed my periwinkle silk skirt against the tops of my thighs. “Well, I haven’t failed you yet, have I?”

I looked him full in the eye, and defied the hooded menace of his ancient gaze. He pursed his lips, studied me coolly as if I were a brood mare or a blood slave. "This man, unwillingly or not, brings war to our doorstep, make no mistake," he said. "Ready or not, I am afraid you will soon receive an education on how to die."

"So be it," I said. Part of me wanted to die: after all, to die and return was my heritage as a Lazarus witch. I wanted to choose the time and place of my death, too, but who gets to decree one's end like that? Even the most illustrious citizens of Budapest had to accept the mystery of death.

The man surprised us both by interrupting. "Forgive me for entangling you in my affairs. In the end, they will be yours, too, alas."

"It is too late already, dear sir," Bathory said. "We are here caught between Hitler and Stalin, a precarious passage indeed."

I inclined my head in deference to our visitor and dared a smile. "You bring us adventure as well as danger, Mr. Ziyad Juhuri. And that is good business for us, and good life experience for me."

I expected Bathory to jump on me again for opening my big mouth, but instead he looked past me. His eyebrows shot up, and he half stood and bowed to a shadow in the corner behind me, near the archway that led to the staircase. I blinked hard, shocked. Who could arrest Bathory's attention so and bring him to his feet?

A distracted smile played along his thin, curved lips. "My. Oh, my. Is that your sister in the archway, Magda? Why, she is lovely. No wonder you have kept her hidden away from me."

My heart pounded, and the knowledge that Bathory could hear the syncopated rhythm of my distress made it even harder to disguise. I stood up so fast I knocked my chair over, for at this time of night my sister was in mortal danger at the Café Istanbul.

But when I turned and saw the figure framed in the archway near Bathory's customary table, I realized matters were even worse than if my sister had come. No, it wasn't my sister. At least my sister Gisele was also a witch and had her own magic to protect her.

I licked my suddenly dry lips and forced myself to speak the truth. "Ah, no. That is my best friend, Count Bathory, from my girlhood days in Tokaj. Her name is Eva Farkas, and she is a silly and reckless girl, without even a drop of magic in her."

A girl with a talent for waltzing into danger with a smile dimpling her rounded cheeks and sparkling in her powder blue eyes. If I got her out of this alive, I was going to kill her.

Ziyad sighed. "Such beautiful girls, wandering alone by night. Both of you hurt the eyes to see."

Bathory laughed, the sound a dry, husky rustle of dead leaves. "Budapest is full of beautiful girls, sir. But beware, my friend . . . they are dangerous. Every last one."

Fantasy: Keeping It Real

By Edward Lazellari

The characters in *Awakenings* live in our world, the one where Obama is president, Bloomberg's the mayor, and no one can figure out the physics behind Donald Trump's hair. My New York could be the setting for a Jonathan Franzen story, or a place where Carrie Bradshaw parties with her girlfriends. And it's this universe that's invaded by the "fantasy" elements. That mainstream/fantasy mix is the vibe I aimed for in writing *Awakenings*.

Take Callum the cop in the novel... I could have faked all the police actions in the book, but wanted the interactions between the cops to be authentic. I spoke with a friend in the NYPD to determine what the likely course of actions would be in certain scenarios. I got the correct signal codes for jobs, and more importantly, how the NYPD would communicate under those circumstances. There are also ramifications to the actions that occur, and I wanted the cause and effect to seem logical. A police officer should be able to read those scenes, and even with the fantastic elements introduced, not be pulled out of the story because it lacks credibility.

The irony is writers of fantasy expend tremendous effort to make the worlds in their story as "real" as possible, whether it's about a boy living under the stairs, a girl who leaves the farm to save her dog from a crone, or a hobbit that wonders what's beyond the Shire. We love these stories and come back to them because, except for Charlie Sheen, most of us fantasize about being something else (or somewhere else)

instead of trudging through our daily existence for little pay and no accolades. We all want to be powerful heroes, great lovers, or sports gods. There has to be something recognizable in the universes these stories take place in. Fantasy stories tap into a primal part of ourselves that improve our regular lives. It's why people crowded around the poet Homer three thousand years ago to hear him recite tales of gods and heroes. We fantasy readers get it, and I've seldom met a fantasy fan I didn't like.

Awakenings

By Edward Lazellari

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Prologue: The Bad Guys

Colby Dretch cleaned out the empties from his office wet bar. Only half a bottle of vodka and a bottle of peach schnapps remained.

He threw the clinking bag, along with a valise full of his laundry, into the bathroom and hoped the new clients had good bladders. Once he had folded the bed and threw the pillows into the closet, the place looked almost ready for business.

It would be a no- frills meeting.

Carla would be bringing the new clients in any minute. Colby put on a fresh shirt and tie. He tied his knot using the reflection in his office window and surveyed the bustling masses on Third Avenue. An image of dressing up a pig popped into his head; he had to chuckle. While it might hide his varicose veins, no shirt and tie could detract from his dark puff y eyes, thinning hair, gaunt cheeks, pasty pallor, and hawkish nose. He looked like Ichabod Crane on that ill- fated night, and he was only fifty two.

But it was all part of the game.

Carla led an odd crew of three men into the room. One man had to crouch to get through the door frame. He looked almost deformed— his jaw was thick as an anvil, his fedora was too small for his head, and cigarette smoke wafting from his lips caused a two days ago cloud that partly obscured his face. His stylish suit barely contained him, and dandruff lay on his jacket collar and breast. The other two looked like fashion models. Same height and build, they both wore their hair slicked back in ponytails and could have passed for twins, except for their coloring. One was light skinned and blond, the other swarthy and dark. Carla rolled her eyes as if to say, Who let these guys out of the

sideshow? She tossed him a wink and sashayed out of the room. Colby smiled; she would have made a great gangster's moll.

A cold chill went through the detective. He checked the radiator dial to his right and saw it was already in the on position.

Fine time for the heater to go on the fritz, he thought. He rubbed his hands for warmth before offering one to the blond man Carla had pegged as the ringleader.

"Hi. I'm Colby Dretch. Take a chair, please."

"Dorn," the blond man said, waiting a moment before accepting the detective's hand and taking the seat on the other side of the desk. He failed to introduce his silent colleagues.

Colby noticed a trace of an accent, but couldn't place it. Dorn exuded confidence, like someone raised in an exclusive Northeastern boarding school; the kind with crested jackets and ties, where teachers lived in fear of their students. He took his seat behind the desk. The others in the room chose to remain standing.

Colby lit a cigarette and offered one to Dorn. Dorn politely declined.

"What does someone with your kind of money want with a broken-down detective like me?" Colby asked. "Did Pinkerton g under?"

Dorn studied the autographed celebrity photos around the room; Colby knew they looked impressive, even through the dust. Dorn picked up a framed photo of the detective and his boy. "Your son?" he asked.

In happier days, Colby thought. He was unimpressed with Dorn's forward style. "His name's Tory." He waited for Dorn to put the photo down before continuing. "I

should tell you, I'm suspended from practicing for the time being. A small disagreement with the district attorney's office."

"Your abilities are still intact?" Dorn inquired.

"Yeah. As long as we keep things on the down low, keep it strictly cash, it shouldn't be a problem." Carla was right. These guys were oddballs. Anyone with common sense would have walked out already.

Dorn pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to Colby. It was a long list of names with short descriptions of age and race, some of them various versions of the same name spelled different ways: Cal MacDonnell/McDonnell, Callum MacDonnell/McDonnell . . . et cetera.

"Could you locate the people on this list?" Dorn asked.

"Assuming how accurate the names are . . . probably in two days."

Dorn looked to his swarthy colleague, who offered an ambiguous, yet approving, shrug. The giant just kept blowing smoke.

"Are you boasting?" Dorn asked.

"I can cross-reference multiple government databases."

"We tried other agencies with similar resources," Dorn said.

"I've got access to deep systems that are normally off limits to private firms. The fringe benefits of twenty years in the NYPD."

Colby also had a network of strategically placed bribed informants.

He wondered why he tried to impress clients that, as far as they knew, needed him more than he needed them. Old habits die hard, he thought.

Colby waved the paper with the names in front of Dorn. "Is this it? The job?"

“Large agencies have too many eyes and ears, Mr. Dretch. I value discretion. I also want someone desperate. Are you . . . desperate, Mr. Dretch?”

“Hardly,” Colby lied. He started rubbing his hands again to keep them warm, and regretted that it looked like an act of weakness. He turned up the thermostat in the heater behind his chair.

“Don’t be off ended,” Dorn said. “I insist that people who work for me make my interests their only priority. There’s a refreshing lack of activity at this firm due to your dubious practices.”

Dorn’s smile was shark white. He pulled out a recent copy of the New York Post and scanned an article. “ ‘Colby Dretch . . . under government indictment for nine counts of embezzlement and blackmail of his rich, deeply troubled, and well- connected clientele . . . infidelities, pedophilia, domestic abuse,’ et cetera.

And, you never reported your ‘moonlighting’ income to the government.

Why, they have you on tax evasion alone.” Dorn moved to the second half of the article on a different page. “Eight civil suits, resulting in your property and finances being placed in escrow.

Suspended operating license, at least until the verdict, after which it will be fully revoked. A bit redundant,” Dorn said turning his attention back to Colby. “Not really much use in prison. The vultures are circling.”

“Innocent until proven guilty,” Colby said, calmly. He was losing patience with this lot, but he wouldn’t let them see him break.

Dorn’s cohorts made a poor attempt to suppress chuckling.

“Mr. Dretch, you’re not just a thief— you’re an accessory after the fact in your clients’ illicit affairs. You’d be lucky to get out in thirty years.”

“I think you ought to leave,” the detective said in a steady voice.

Dorn reclined in his chair and smiled as warmly as his features would allow.

“Colby, you misunderstand. I’m interested in doing business with you because you’re guilty. Putting the screws to anyone naïve enough to trust you with their deepest secrets is an admirable trait. That’s a sign of intelligence where I come from.”

Colby had never before been complimented for being a complete bastard. His crimes were many— far more than the indictments that had been handed down already. Friendless and penniless, his passport revoked by the courts, the future looked bleak, and now he was taking crap from some rich boy with an agenda.

Colby tossed the list of names on the desk in front of Dorn.

“Many agencies can find these people for you,” he said. “You don’t need me.”

“That’s not why I’m here, detective. The real job is for a name not on this list— a young man. His name could be anything by now; even one of these,” Dorn added, picking up the list.

“Not interested,” Colby said.

“You cannot find him?”

“I can find anyone. But as you just pointed out, I have many problems.”

“Name your price.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It really is.”

“Fine. A million dollars as a retainer, ten thousand a day plus expenses, twenty-five thousand for each name on the list that I locate, and another million when I find the boy with no name.”

The two men stared each other down; Colby waited for Dorn to leave.

“Done,” Dorn said. Colby almost did a double take straight out of the movies.

“What?”

“I agree to your terms.”

Colby shifted in his chair to find a more comfortable position.

It was his worst tell when playing high-stakes poker and had lost him a lot of money through the years. What cards does Dorn hold?

“Those fees are unreasonable,” Colby said, cautiously.

“Are you that good?”

“Yeah, I’m that good, but . . .”

“Others have failed. I need results.”

With two million dollars cash, Colby could buy his way off the continent without a passport. He could start life over in a country without an extradition treaty. He could even set up a trust fund for Tory, try to make up for being a lousy father. He had just been handed a way out of the mess that was his life.

“You can wire these funds internationally?” Colby asked.

“Even to Antarctica,” Dorn said, smiling.

“Tell me more about the kid.”

“I have never seen the child. His last known location was Dutchess County, New York, thirteen years ago. He bears a red birthmark above his left scapula. Symian will provide a detailed file.”

“Symian?”

“Our colleague. He is taking care of business with your woman.”

Colby grinned. “Ms. Hernandez is engaged to be married to a Marine. He’s back from Afghanistan next week.”

“Symian is adept at winning women’s hearts,” said the swarthy twin in the corner, with an amused expression.

“This boy,” Colby started, getting back to the job that would save his life, “are you his biological father?”

“Relative,” Dorn said.

“You’re a relative, but you’ve never seen him, you’re not sure of his name, and you believe he was somewhere in Dutchess County about thirteen years ago.”

“You’re on top of the situation already.”

A heavily swathed man Colby assumed was Symian walked in from the reception area and gave Dorn a nod. “Just them,” he said, in a raspy whisper. He wore gloves, his hat was too big and his raincoat collar and a scarf hid much of his face. Colby noticed that under the brim’s shadow, where the whites of the man’s eyes should be, they were egg- yolk yellow.

“The file,” Dorn ordered.

Symian placed a portable flash drive on the desk.

“Is this kid in witness protection?” Colby asked. “Those FBI guys are hard to crack.”

“Why would they be involved?” Dorn asked.

“Well, I assume . . . the mother took off with the kid because she didn’t want him raised in a ‘connected’ family.”

Dorn laughed. “A compliment, Mr. Dretch. Alas, I do not bear the honor of belonging to that distinguished group.”

Colby was amused. After years on the job, he knew a thug when he saw one. If Dorn hired him for his scruples as he claimed, then he’d also know working for organized crime posed no problem.

“I guess that’s not important, as long as your money is good,” Colby said.

“Shall we secure his commitment, my lord?” Symian asked.

“And your loyalty, Colby, how do we ensure that?” Dorn’s tone changed, making the previous conversation until now seem almost jovial. “Are we to trust you with our secrets?” Dorn’s voice exuded a deep severity.

For the first time, the detective wondered if he was in over his head. He wished he’d replaced the clip in the Beretta sitting in his bottom drawer.

Colby took a deep breath and convinced himself he had the upper hand. After all, if other detectives had failed before him, and they went out of their way to hire an indicted, unlicensed detective, he must be exactly what they need.

“Look, Mr. Dorn— I’m smart enough to know who not to screw with. I promise, the retainer will assure my loyalty.”

Dorn gave a nod to Symian. The bundled- up man pulled a small velvet sack out of his coat pocket.

“I disagree,” Dorn said. “Where I come from, fealty is a matter of life and death. Since your oaths mean little, you have to give us something very important to you. Something you could never live without.”

That’s a new twist. Colby had never been asked to put up collateral for a job. “I thought you read the Post article. I put up most of my money for bail. Th e government took my passport and froze my assets until the investigation is complete. I sleep on that fold- out couch over there. I got nothing to give you.” Colby glanced at the photo of Tory, and immediately regretted it. “My boy’s a quadriplegic. I won’t lift a damn finger if you bring him into this.”

“I do not want your son,” Dorn said. “Some creatures throw their young to the wolves if it means one more day for themselves. I have something more dear to you in mind. Hesz.”

The large man scurried behind the detective in a flash, faster than Colby thought possible for someone so big, and locked him in a full nelson.

“What the hell are you doing?” the detective shouted. “Carla! Call the cops!” The detective struggled, but Hesz’s grip was like refrigerated steel. It was only when Hesz was breathing right on top of him that Colby finally realized the mist coming out of his mouth wasn’t cigarette smoke . . . it was frost. As was the “dandruff” on the man’s suit.

“Call the cops!” Colby shouted again.

Symian walked up to him. He glanced at Dorn and said, “Bet you a purse of Krakens it bursts. He doesn’t look too healthy.”

Dorn gave Symian a fierce look and said, “If he dies, I’ll braid your liver into a rope and hang you with it.”

Symian’s grin revealed canine teeth. He turned back to Colby and put two small pills into the detective’s mouth and said, “Swallow these.”

Colby spat them out. “Fuck you! Carla!” A frightening thought occurred to Colby. Carla might be dead.

“It’s just nitroglycerine,” Symian said. “Trust me.”

Symian gripped the detective’s face, pried his mouth open, slipped two fresh pills under the detective’s tongue, and Hesz clamped the detective’s jaw shut with a massive hand.

When Symian was sure the pills had dissolved, he ripped Colby’s shirt open and drew a circle in the center of his chest with a foul- smelling, thick, cloudy liquid that he seemed to be scraping off his own forearm. Using a Sharpie marker he drew five symbols around the circle and then spread more of the goop over the symbols. Then he placed the fingers of his right hand on the circle under each symbol. He uttered an undecipherable word.

Pushing forward, Symian’s hand sunk into Colby’s chest up to his wrist. Colby’s eyes almost came out of their sockets. He anticipated the agony of such a violation, but as the seconds passed, he realized it was a numb sensation, like pins and needles.

At the door, a shocked, hysterical Carla crawled in, sobbing.

Her torn blouse revealed symbols drawn around a red welt on her chest. “Give it back!” she cried at Symian. “Oh, Colby, make him give it back!”

Colby never screamed louder in his life. He could feel the gray man's hand clamping his heart, but was too gripped with terror to realize there was little blood coming forth. Symian's hand pulled the organ free of its attachments. Within moments, Symian held Colby's still-beating heart in front of his face. He put it in the velvet bag, thumping like a trapped rat, and pulled the drawstring shut.

Worlds Colliding? That's Nothing

By Edward M. Lerner

My first exposure to a Really Big Idea was an ancient and tattered—nay, disintegrating—copy of *When Worlds Collide*, by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer, encountered in my school library. Merely the title blew my mind. I remember coming to a halt, thinking: Worlds can *do* that?

Ah, the power of science fiction.

Years later, I came across another Really Big Idea: a ribbon-like structure a million miles wide and looped into a circle 600 million miles around. A star like our sun shines at the center of the circle. The loop spins at 770 miles per second to provide Earth-like gravity on its sun-facing side. Walls at the loop's two edges—walls towering a thousand miles high—retain an atmosphere above the surface. And *what* a surface: its area equals that of about three million Earths. That's some ribbon! Now populate the surface with trillions of alien inhabitants. And consider the power wielded by whoever *built* such an artifact

I'm referring, of course, to Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, forty years old this month, and the centerpiece of the wildly popular Known Space future history.

The artifact is, in fact, *so* huge that Larry took his readers on a detour—let us expand our minds in stages—before arriving on the actual Ringworld. That stretch-your-mind stopover was the Fleet of Worlds, a cluster of worlds zipping through space at near-

light speeds—a large and fascinating artifact in its own right. Only (grumble, grumble), we hardly saw the Fleet. We met but one of its trillion alien inhabitants.

In the fullness of time (not to be confused with *The Wheel of Time*) I became an SF author myself. I convinced Larry that the Fleet of Worlds must have its own story—from which arose our first collaboration, *Fleet of Worlds*. (A Really Big Idea makes for a Really Good Title.)

We never set out to write a series, but *Fleet*, like *Ringworld*, generated its own following and led (for lack of new Really Big Objects to serve as additional titles) to *Juggler of Worlds* and *Destroyer of Worlds*. Each time, the Puppeteers of the Fleet of Worlds face a new existential threat. Each story highlights different alien species (*Fleet*: the Puppeteers of the Fleet and a lost human colony. *Juggler*: the liquid-helium-based Outsiders. *Destroyer*: the xenophobic Pak.) As with any series, there's something to be gained by reading every installment, but each book stands alone.

And with each story, we came closer in (future) time to the events of *Ringworld*

Readers met Louis Wu, the hero of *Ringworld*, on his two-hundredth birthday, recruited by the Puppeteer named Nessus for an expedition into the unknown. Nessus offers only the most general of reasons why he wants, specifically, Louis on his team. Even after four books of the Ringworld series, we know little about Louis's life before Nessus appeared.

Betrayer of Worlds finally reveals why Nessus selected Louis. Because the Ringworld was not Louis Wu's first epic adventure ...

Which is to say, *Betrayer of Worlds* is Louis Wu's long-awaited back story. The novel is much more, of course. The Fleet of Worlds faces yet another existential danger, this time at the hands—well, tentacles—of the scary-smart Gw'oth. There's interstellar warfare, and Puppeteer political machinations to put Machiavelli to shame, and fiendish new technologies. For those who have read *Ringworld* or any of its sequels—there will be plenty of “Aha!” moments about this or that mystery.

And if you haven't read *Ringworld*? First: no problem. *Betrayer of Worlds* takes place seventy years prior. Second: why not? *Ringworld* is a classic. It's a great story. And did I mention that this month is its fortieth anniversary? Either way, consider heading over to Tor.com where this month a group of fans begins a series of “*Ringworld* Reread” articles to observe the occasion.

Betrayer of Worlds

By Larry Niven and Edward M. Lerner

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[Larry Niven](#) is the award-winning author of the Ringworld series, along with many other science fiction masterpieces, and fantasy novels including the Magic Goes Away series. *Beowulf's Children*, co-authored with Jerry Pournelle and Steven Barnes, was a *New York Times* bestseller. He has received the Nebula Award, five Hugos, four Locus Awards, two Ditmars, the Prometheus, and the Robert A. Heinlein Award, among other honors. He lives in Chatsworth, California.

[Edward M. Lerner](#) has degrees in physics and computer science, a background that kept him mostly out of trouble until he began writing science fiction full-time. His books include *Probe*, *Moonstruck*, and the collection *Creative Destruction*, and he has collaborated with Larry Niven on the other books in the Fleet of Worlds series. He lives in Virginia with his wife, Ruth.

Chapter One

The jungle was eerily quiet.

Hugging the uneven ground behind a thin screen of greenery, Nathan Graynor peered over the precipice to where a dirt road followed the narrow, undulating floor of a steep-walled canyon. The suns, one yellow and one orange, were high overhead. Anyone glancing up from the road toward either ridge would only see glare.

The perfect time and place for an ambush.

The day was cool and a breeze blew steadily. Still, sweat trickled down Nathan's face. Nerves, he told himself, knowing that was at best a half truth.

With the barrel of his laser rifle, he nudged aside a frond for a clearer look. (The fern was green, clearly terrestrial. Across the rugged gorge where the second group of rebels hid, the red-gold vegetation was as plainly native.)

Ruts and potholes scarred the primitive road: no obstacle for antigrav vehicles, but scarcely navigable for anything with wheels.

He wasn't afraid, not exactly. Fear would have required truly believing that this was happening, that he was here.

Life had been that way, surreal, since the missile punched through Clementine. The emergency restraints in the pilot's couch had saved him.

Everyone else aboard died when the ship broke apart. Resistance fighters reached the wreckage first. Deep in shock, unquestioningly, he had gone with them.

He took small, measured sips from his canteen. He took deep, cleansing breaths. When neither calmed him, he looked skyward for serenity, at the birds and their native equivalents soaring effortlessly in the thermals that rose from the plain. That didn't work, either.

In the Resistance camp he had drawn plenty of sideways glances. The rebels didn't fully trust him— yet here he was. Maybe they had chosen not to leave him behind unguarded. Maybe, finally, they felt comfortable with him. Or maybe they wanted to see if he would bolt into the jungle given the chance. (Would they have let him go? He didn't think so.)

One way or another, his presence here was a test.

A faint droning drifted Nathan's way, and hints of metallic clanking.

Over the plain below, in the far distance where jungle still hid the road, a cloud of brown dust now hovered.

Their target approached.

The aristos controlled space around Wunderland more completely every day. Nathan— and even more so, his former crew— had learned that the hard way. Snoopersats might intercept even the briefest radio whisper.

And so from Nathan's left, where Logan, the leader of this guerrilla band, lay hidden, the most basic of signals: a soft avian trill.

Get ready.

Nathan whistled an acknowledgment as best he could, not knowing what he tried to imitate. More "birdsong" to his right and from across the gorge. The guerrillas wore camouflage over their improvised armor; even with their whistles to guide him, he

spotted no one. Seven answers in all, including Nathan's own. The crossfire would be deadly.

Reviewing what had passed for training— mostly “If it reflects, don't shoot it” and “If you see them, assume they see you”— Nathan raised the laser rifle to his shoulder. (There had been a lesson, too, on improvising explosive devices from household chemicals. Making bombs scared the hell out of him, and he tried his best to leave that knowledge theoretical. Seeing his hands shake, others had built the explosives now hidden in the ravine far below.) Through the scope he followed the barely- a-path across the rocky plain below. Not- quite trees swayed where the road entered the lower jungle.

The first vehicles emerged: tractors, cargo floaters, flatbed trucks. Civilian vehicles, all. People jammed the truck beds, balanced precariously on the sideboards, plodded alongside on foot. Another few minutes would bring the caravan into the canyon. Into the trap. Birds circled high overhead, indistinct against the suns' glare. Their presence, perhaps, signified nothing.

In his mind's eye they were vultures.

Cranking up the magnification Nathan saw more women and children than men. Everyone kept glancing fearfully over their shoulders. He saw a few dogs and even a sway- backed horse. Here and there people clutched hunting rifles, but that didn't make them the enemy. Who would venture into this wilderness unarmed?

He zoomed closer still, examined weary faces. Half the adults looked old.

Boosterspice was plentiful, if pricey; to look old meant you were poor. Most men's chins were stubbled, but of asymmetric, pointy- on- one- side/close cropped- on- the- other beards, Nathan saw not a one. Only Wunderland's aristos sported those

ridiculous, high-maintenance affectations as symbols of indolence and leisure. This couldn't be the rumored garrison resupply convoy. Nathan waited for the call to stand down. Instead, from his left, a brief chittering.

On my signal.

Madness! These were civilian refugees. Poor farmers by the look of them and of their vehicles. Why the tanj ambush them? Nathan cleared his throat.

"Quiet!" Logan hissed.

For the first time since getting stranded, Nathan wondered if one side was any better than another.

Be honest, he chided himself. The second time. The first time was when two guerrillas marched a third, her face bruised, the cloth badge of the Resistance ripped from her blouse, out of camp into the jungle. Only the men, their expressions grim, had returned.

Nathan had chosen to believe they had sent her away. These people had pulled him from the wreck, whisked him away before Internal Security arrived.

He owed the guerrillas everything, from the shirt on his back to his very life.

Now he wondered if he could live with the debt.

As the hum of engines swelled, Nathan's mind churned. Join in the slaughter? Never. Stand by, doing nothing, and watch? How was that better?

There had to be another way. A warning shot to scare off the civilians?

No. The laser beam between plain and cliff top would point back at him.

That woman vanished into the woods outside camp . . . Nathan had a pretty good idea how the Resistance treated sympathizers. Or—

Probably no one was looking up. Nathan raised his rifle and fired. With a squawk a bird stopped its circling. Gravity here was scarcely half that to which Nathan was accustomed, and the bird, cut almost in two, fell in slow motion.

Splat went the carcass, just ahead of the caravan.

The people on foot turned and ran, zigzagging, back toward the trees.

Engines raced. Vehicles jerked into reverse or turned off the road to circle back.

Maybe he had saved a few—

Crash! A tractor and a truck collided, blocking the way into the jungle.

“Now!” shouted Logan.

From both canyon rims guerrillas opened fire. Laser beams, silent, scythed down three men before anyone below noticed. Then: screams. Curses. More bodies crumpling. Chaos.

It was a massacre, sickening—

Sudden motion behind the slaughter. Sleek and sharklike, three antigrav gunships burst from the jungle, their charge spookily silent. Laser cannon blazed bloodred. As the gunships neared, their railguns let loose. The guerrillas launched their only two surface-to-air missiles. One hit.

Trailing smoke, its engine stuttering, a gunship arced down, down, down. . . . It smashed—boom!—into a cliff face, and the ground shook.

Across the gorge two men more brave than sane (“If you see them, assume they see you!”) kept firing. The remaining gunships spewed their own missiles.

No one could have survived those blasts.

“Fall back!” Logan shouted.

At least Nathan, his ears ringing, decided that was the order. He was already slithering backward, away from the precipice and deeper into the jungle, as quickly as he could.

He had done what he could for the refugees. The thought offered no comfort.

The caravan was doubly bait. The militia had used civilians to entice the Resistance. The guerrillas, just as callous, had attacked the refugees to lure an aristo patrol into reach.

Blam! Blam- blam!

More missiles. The ground slammed Nathan, flung him high into the air.

He came down stunned. Through the underbrush, backlit by explosions, he glimpsed a profile. It loomed over him, well over two meters tall. What with the low gravity, most Wunderlanders were gigantic.

One of the guerrillas. Cody something. Was he here to help Nathan or kill him?

“Come on,” Cody growled. Maybe he hadn’t seen Nathan warn the refugees.
“Time to go.”

As Nathan struggled to his feet, another blast bounced him off a tree trunk. His left arm and some ribs snapped. And something molten had splattered his camo. It ate through the cloth, through his body armor.

The bellow of railguns swallowed his scream.

Cody sprayed first-aid foam over the hole in Nathan’s vest and his side went numb. The Wunderlander helped Nathan to his feet and together they staggered into the jungle.

A YELLOW OVAL GLEAMED on the sloping roof. Not a sun, Nathan gradually decided. The glow of a lamp, reflected on . . . what? How long had he been staring at the glow and why were his thoughts so fuzzy?

He looked around. He was flat on his back on one narrow cot among many. All the cots were filled, most by people wearing bloody bandages. He remembered the jungle being eerily quiet. Now that dubious honor belonged to this . . . ?

First- aid ward, he decided. In a futzy cave. Geological time later, he figured it out: body heat. Snoopersats would zero in on any camp this size in the wild.

He didn't remember getting here. Cody had carried Nathan out, then.

Had anyone else among the guerrillas made it? Nathan sat up, the better to check the other beds. He noticed his cast before trying to put any weight on that arm.

But he had forgotten about the ribs and the burn. He gasped. The one person standing— a medic?— was tweaking the flow rate on a drip bag. She turned her head.

“Be with you in a minute, soldier.”

Drip bag. Cast. Bloody tanj bandages! Blurry though his mind was, it hit Nathan: this was medieval. He should be asleep, oblivious, within a computerized cocoon dedicated to healing him. But did the guerrillas even have autodocs? He couldn't recall seeing any.

He had felt fine until he sat up. Now all he felt was the throbbing in his side. Pain was so . . . archaic. Finagle, he couldn't remember when autodocs came into general use. Well before his time, and he was 130. He didn't know how to deal with pain. No one did anymore. His head spun and his breathing raced—

“Careful.” The medic, her sweat- dark hair gathered in an untidy bun, caught Nathan as he toppled. She helped him lie back down, then squirted something into his IV. “Here’s a little something for the pain.”

“Wait,” he said, a moment too late. Maybe that tardiness was no accident.

The first wave of relief kicked in and it felt familiarly wonderful.

“How much of this stuff have I . . . ?”

He drifted off before finishing the question.

ACROSS THE WORLDS of Human Space, people disdained the Wunderlander aristos. Running a blockade to deliver medical supplies to freedom fighters was noble. Running a blockade to sell medical supplies? That dimmed the luster, but it was still in a good cause.

Wasn’t it?

Things were less black and white viewed up close. Wunderland’s civil war, like all civil wars, was nasty. It sundered families. It offered no quarter and expected none. It recognized no civilians, no innocents, no neutral parties.

Benefit of the doubt was a scarce commodity—

A nonexistent commodity once you’d bled DNA all over a wrecked blockade runner.

Through a drug fog Nathan struggled to make sense of things. He had not set out to be a smuggler, any more than he had set out to be a master chef, a mechanic, a pilot, or any of the other things he had been. No career, no hobby, no marriage could last for a century. He had had honest, if mercenary, intentions buying a share of the med shipment. Joining Clementine’s crew thereafter was simply prudent, just protecting his investment.

He had deluded himself, of course.

A respite from the dull routine yet another career had become? Of course.

A way to get beyond Paula Cherenkov dumping him? Running the blockade was that, too.

Sinking back into hazy oblivion, Nathan confronted a harder truth. He ran—still—from far older demons.

Got a Job in Magicland?

By L.E. Modesitt, Jr.

While I always wanted to be a writer, I didn't start out writing either science fiction or fantasy. In fact, my first published works were poems, and my primary collegiate fields of study were politics and economics. For the record, writing was third. But when I left the Navy, after a tour as a pilot and after the realization that the life expectancy of wartime search and rescue pilots was less than optimal for a man with a wife and children, I returned to the boringly practical and became an industrial economist, followed by other fields required by economic necessity, until I ended up in Washington, D.C., still dealing in economics and politics. By then I was writing science fiction on the side, and my first published story was about, naturally enough, a junior economist in Washington, D.C., followed by more stories and then novels, all with characters who had what I'd call "real jobs" and no desire to be heroes.

Several years later, after attending my first SF convention ever, I came to the realization that very few SF writers dealt with economic structure in their stories and that, at that time, almost no fantasy writers did. So when I began to write *The Magic of Recluce*, I made a deliberate decision to continue the approach I'd used in my science fiction, and I centered all of Lerris's problems on his need to fit into his society economically. That is, Lerris needed a job! Yes, he's exiled from Recluce, but he still needs to make his way, to pay for what he eats and where he lodges, and even to pay for

that mountain pony he needs. And, as is the case with most successful people, the key to his eventual understanding of life and success in it comes from his mastery not just of magic but of the skills and understanding required in learning how to do a meaningful job well and professionally.

More than twenty years ago, when I wrote *The Magic of Recluce*, my “economic” approach to fantasy was anything but common, but readers liked it well enough that the book has been continuously in print, and they’ve bought fifteen other Recluce books over the years. I’d like to think it’s at least partly because I required Lerris, and all the characters who followed, to have a real job in magicland.

The Magic of Recluce

By L.E. Modesitt, Jr.

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[L. E. Modesitt, Jr.](#), is the bestselling author of the fantasy series *The Saga of Recluce*, *Corean Chronicles*, and the *Imager Portfolio*. His science fiction includes *Adiamante*, the *Ecolitan* novels, the *Forever Hero Trilogy*, and *Archform: Beauty*. Besides a writer, Modesitt has been a U.S. Navy pilot, a director of research for a political campaign, legislative assistant and staff director for a U.S. Congressman, Director of Legislation and Congressional Relations for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, a consultant on environmental, regulatory, and communications issues, and a college lecturer. He lives in Cedar City, Utah.

Chapter One

GROWING UP, I always wondered why everything in Wander-naught seemed so dull. Not that I minded the perfectly baked bread routinely produced by my father or by Aunt Elisabet, and I certainly enjoyed the intricately carved toys and other gifts that Uncle Sardit miraculously presented on my birthday or on the High Holidays.

Perfection, especially for a youngster learning about it from cheerfully sober adults, has a price. Mine was boredom, scarcely novel for a young man in the middle of his second decade. But boredom leads to trouble, even when things are designed to be as perfect as possible. Of course, the perfection and striving for perfection that marked the island, though some would term Recluce a smallish continent, had a reason. A good reason, but one hardly acceptable to a restless young man.

“Perfection, Lerris,” my father repeated time after time, “is the price we pay for the good life. Perfection keeps destruction away and provides a safe harbor for the good.”

“But why? And how?” Those were always my questions. Finally, shortly after I finished the minimum formal schooling, in my case at fifteen, my mother entered the discussion.

“Lerris, there are two fundamental forces in life, and in nature. Creation and destruction. Creation is order. We attempt to maintain it—”

“You sound just like Magister Kerwin . . . ‘Order is all that keeps chaos at bay . . . because evil and chaos are so closely linked, one should avoid all but the most necessary

acts of destruction . . . ' I know perfection is important. I know it. I know it! And I *know* it! But why does it have to be so flaming *boring*”

She shrugged. “Order is not boring. You are bored with order.” She looked at my father. “Since you are bored with us, and since you are not quite ready for the possibility of undertaking the dangergeld, how would you like to spend a year or so learning about woodworking with your Uncle Sardit?”

“Donara?” asked my father, obviously questioning my mother’s volunteering of his sister’s husband. “Sardit and I have talked it over, Gunnar. He’s willing to take on the challenge.”

“Challenge?” I blurted. “What challenge? I can learn anything . . .”

“For about the first three weeks,” my father commented.

“It’s not as though you will ever be a master woodworker, Lerris,” added mother. “But the general skills and discipline will come in useful when you undertake your dangergeld.” “Me? Why would I ever go tramping off through the wild lands?”

“You will.”

“Most assuredly.”

But the only thing that was assured then was that I would have the chance to learn how to craft some of the screens, tables, chairs, and cabinets that Uncle Sardit produced. Every once in a while, I knew, someone traveled from Candar or even from one of the trading cities of Austra to purchase one of his screens or inlaid tables.

Until I had a better idea of what I really wanted to do in life, woodworking was better than helping my father keep all the stonework spodess or mixing clays or tending the kiln fire for mother. Although the same traders who visited Sardit also visited my

mother's shop, I did not have the touch for pottery. Besides, pots and vases bored me. So did the intricacies of glazes and finishes.

So, within days I had left the neat and rambling timbered and stone house where I had grown up, where I had looked out through the blue-tinted casement window in my bedroom on the herb garden for the last time. Then, I had walked nearly empty-handed the half-day to my uncle's where I was installed in the apprentice's quarters over the carpentry. Uncle Sardit's other apprentice, Koldar, had almost completed his term and was building his own house, with the help of an apprentice stonemason, a woman named Corso. She was bigger than either of us, but she smiled a lot, and she and Koldar made a good pair. He was living in the unfinished house alone, but probably not for long. That meant that until another apprentice came along I had the privacy and the responsibility of the shop in evenings.

Still, it had been a small shock to realize that I would not be living in the guest room at Uncle Sardit's, but in the much smaller and sparsely-furnished apprentice's space. The only furniture was the bed, an old woven rug, and a single hanging lamp. The plain red-oak walls scarcely showed even hairline cracks where the boards joined. The polished floors, also red oak, displayed the same care and crafting.

"That's what you're here for, Lerris. When you learn how, you can make your own tables, benches, chairs, in the evenings. Have to fell your own wood and make arrangements with Halprin at the sawmill for the rough stock to replace what's been seasoned unless you want to try to cut and rough-cure the logs yourself. Don't recommend that."

Sardit as a craft-master was a bit different than as an uncle.

I was going to learn about carpentry, and tools, and how to make screens and cabinets and tables, right? Not exactly. To begin with, it was just like the pottery shop, but worse. I'd heard about clays and consistencies and glazes and firing temperatures for years. I hadn't realized that woodworking was similar—not until Uncle Sardit reminded me forcefully.

“How are you going to use tools properly, boy, if you don't know anything about the woods you're working with?”

With that, he sat me down with his old apprentice notes on woods. Each day, either after work or before we opened the shop in the morning, I had to show him my own hand-copied notes on at least two kinds of trees, the recommended uses, curing times, and general observations on the best uses of the wood. Not only that, but each card went into a file box, the one thing he had let me make, with some advice from him, and I was expected to update the cards if I learned something of value in a day's work on a wood.

“What did you write down on the black oak? Here, let me see.” He scratched his head. “You spent all day helping me smooth that piece, and the wood told you nothing?”

Once in a while, I saw Koldar grinning sympathetically from whatever project he was handling. But we didn't talk much because Uncle Sardit kept me busy, and because Koldar mostly worked alone, just checking with Uncle Sardit from time to time.

After a while, Uncle Sardit even nodded once or twice when reviewing my cards. But the frowns and questions were always more frequent. And as soon as I thought I understood something well enough to avoid his questions, he would task me with learning some other obscure discipline of woodworking. If it weren't the trees, it was

their bark. If it weren't their bark, it was the recommended cutting times and sawmill techniques. If it weren't one type of wood, it was what types you could match in inlays, what differences in grain widths meant. Some of it made sense, but a lot seemed designed to make woodworking as complicated as possible.

"Complicated? Of course it's complicated. Perfection is always complicated. Do you want your work to last? Or do you want it to fall apart at the first touch of chaos?"

"But we don't even have any white magicians in Recluce."

"We don't? Are you sure about that?"

There wasn't much I could say to that. Practicing magicians, at least the white ones who used chaos, were strongly discouraged by the masters. And what the masters discouraged generally stayed discouraged, although there seemed to be only a few masters for all the towns in Recluce.

I guess my old teacher, Magister Kerwin, actually was a master, although we didn't usually think of magisters as masters. They were both part of the same order. Magisters were those who actually taught.

So . . . I kept studying woods, trees, and tools, and after nearly a year began to make a few simple items. "Breadboards?"

"Someone has to make them. And they should be made right. You can do it well enough to keep chaos at bay, and you can select from any of my designs or try one of your own. If you do your own, let's go over it together before you begin cutting."

I did one of my own—simple, but with an octagonal shape. "Simple, but nice, Lerris. You may actually have a future as a wood crafter."

From breadboards, I went to other simple items—outdoor benches for a café, a set of plain bookcases for the school. Nothing with carving, although I had begun to do carving for my own furniture, and Uncle Sardit had even admitted that the wooden armchair I had built for my quarters would not have been out of place in most homes.

“Most homes. Not quite clean enough, and a few rough spots with the spoke-joining angles, but, on the whole, a credible effort.”

That was about the most I ever got in praise from Uncle Sardit. But I was still bored, even as I continued to learn.

Imposter Syndrome

By J.A. Pitts

It's freaky, this concept that I'm a Tor novelist. I remember my first science fiction book I ever read: *Runaway Robot*, by Lester del Rey. We got it at one of those book fairs the schools had every year. I read and reread that book until it fell apart. I knew then that someday I'd write novels and thrill some future kid, maybe inspire her to write her own stories. And I understood it took work. Authors were a rare breed, full of wit and sly wisdom. That was the thing for me.

So I wrote, practiced and submitted my words and stories to anyone who would sit still long enough to read them. I started racking up rejections of all flavors, including some wonderful comments that I hold dear to my success. Then, lightning struck. I got that call from my lovely (soon to be) editor at Tor.

Suddenly, I was on the other side of the wall from most of my friends. There were some folks I knew who'd crossed over ahead of me: Jay Lake, Ken Scholes, and Brenda Cooper, just to name a few. But I didn't realize how much it would all change for me. We call it Imposter Syndrome, when we discuss it at all; that feeling that we somehow cheated, that we don't belong here. It's like walking into a cocktail party with all the cool kids, and everyone nods at you, greets you like a member of the sekrit club. The problem is, I'm not sure how I got here.

Of course I know how, I wrote a good book, sent it to a good editor who was looking for a book like the one I wrote, and in a house that was interested in marketing the product I produced. It's not rocket science, but it doesn't take away the fact I feel like I jumped ahead of the line, cut in front of others, and generally skated my way into the best party ever.

That's the trick of imposter syndrome. It muddles the brain; tries to convince us that we don't deserve our hard-earned success. There are always more worthy people, better books, cooler kids. The only way to beat it, in my experience, is to keep writing. Make the next thing better than the last one.

Meanwhile I'll continue to be amazed at the turns my life has taken, and remember the secret I learned from my friend Jay Lake—I earned this, and I should be grateful. Only leaves one more thing for me to do...that's right, Snoopy dance!

Black Blade Blues

By J.A. Pitts

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Chapter One

The warrior king stood atop the hill, the light of a new dawn cresting behind him. His pompadour, tall and proud as a cockscomb, blocked the sun, casting his face in shadow. Tiny shafts of light sprayed from the crystals adorning his glowing white armor. The ebony blade he held above his head drank in the light, casting a halo around his upraised hands.'

"I declare this land free from oppression," he called.

His voice rang. "I claim this, my birthright: this sword, made from the shattered horn of Memphisto, and handed down to me from my father, and from his father before him. With this I cast the goblins from this land."

He swung the sword to drag it across the rocky crag and shower sparks down upon the goblin horde at his feet.

Instead, I watched the sword strike the ferrocrete stage and snap. Fully one-third of the blade ricocheted toward the goblins, who scattered, squealing.

Actors are so stupid—it was not supposed to actually hit the stage. That's what special effects are for.

"Cut!" Carl called. Carl was the director.

JJ flung the sword to the ground, sending the goblins into full retreat. "Stupid, useless props!"

The overhead lights came up, and the soundstage appeared, shattering the image of a vengeful King of Rock and Roll and his mighty sword of doom.

I love my job.

“Everybody take fifteen,” Carl said into his megaphone.

“Sarah, do not kill the actors.”

Several of the stagehands chuckled and cast sideways glances my way. I counted to ten. Honest I did. At least seven, I’m almost positive.

Seventeen extras in horrid rubber goblin suits began to waddle out to the lot, lighting cigarettes, their large costume heads under their arms.

I stormed over to JJ. “You idiot! You aren’t supposed to actually hit the stage.”

“Damn thing’s too freaking heavy,” he whined. “Can’t we use a lighter prop? Maybe one that doesn’t break?”

I knelt down, looking at the pieces. For a moment, I wanted to pummel JJ with the flat of the blade. I’d only likely bruise him. Likely.

Behind me, Carl sighed. “Do we have another black sword?”

“No,” I said. Here goes a second career down the toilet.

“Well, it’s too damn heavy,” JJ grouched. “Maybe you can make one out of Styrofoam or something.”

I just stared at the back of his sweaty, over styled head as he sauntered toward the gaggle of women waiting along the back of the soundstage.

With a sigh, I picked the sword up firmly by the handle.

The broken blade lay forlornly on the rocks. It was a bad break, snapping midway to the tip. Be a bitch to repair this one. Reforging a sword was tricky business.

I do the blacksmithing thing for a living, so I had some idea what I was talking about. Being prop manager here was my night gig.

Not like I'd planned this life. I took welding in high school, and loved working with metal. I went to college to get away from my family— well, mainly my father—but didn't find any satisfaction in it. Da was convinced I'd come home after college and fit the mold he wanted.

The blacksmithing school I went to saved my life, frankly. My father wanted me to get married and squeeze out half a dozen puppies, be a good homemaker, adore my husband, go to church. . . . I'd rather gouge my eyes out.

My farrier school gave me a reference to Julie Hendrickson, the blacksmith master I work for. She's supercool, but the pay doesn't cover all my bills. Student loans really add up.

I found the movie gig by accident. Carl hassled me at a local science fiction convention. He thought it was cool I was a blacksmith. We chatted— ended up he made movies, needed someone who was creative at making things, and here I am.

My two careers meshed together pretty well. Julie had no problem letting me use the forge after hours as long as I covered the expenses and cleaned up when I was done. To night's wages would cover fixing the black blade, and maybe help me afford to make a few more for the upcoming conventions.

Cons were a good place to sell weapons. Everyone who showed up wanted to be a hero, or be rescued by one.

I was only too obliged to support the fantasy. Whatever made people happy, ya know? Of course, I'd be on my own for this effort. Julie was a farrier, and a good teacher, but her weapon skills sucked.

Which was a shame, actually. You could make a decent amount of scratch if you had made good weapons or armor. There was always someone willing to buy a cheap sword, but the real money was in the collectors and the cosplay folks. They liked the real thing. Costume players— cosplay. Anyway. They wanted to look the coolest, have the best accessories. I did my level best to fill that niche. Most shows had crappy knockoff weapons made in Pakistan, so I had a market.

But this sword, my black beauty, she was a special blade, not some beater we used in the Society or used to play dress- up. The Society for Creative Anachronism folks would never risk their precious weapons like this. Reenactors were crazy authentic, and treated their gear better than their spouses in some cases. The group I ran with—Black Briar— they were on the normal end of loony. Still, they thought I was nuts to risk a blade of this quality on a movie shoot.

Maybe they were right. I never should've risked the black sword here with ham-fisted JJ.

I carried the broken blade into the props cage and gently placed the pieces into the crushed velvet nest I'd hand- built for it. Who knew the case was better constructed than the blade?

"We won't need that sword again for a few days,"

Carl said, walking up behind me. "Why don't you take tomorrow off, see if you can repair it?"

Closing the case, I snapped the latches and hefted it up by the handle. "I'll do what I can," I said, smiling at him. "Plus, there's an antique auction in Seattle tomorrow.

I'm hoping to get over and see if they have anything interesting."

Carl laughed. "You're quite the weapons nerd, Beauhall."

I stuck my chin up, tilting my head to the side. "You making fun of me, boss?"

He stepped back, hands in front of him, palms out, laughing. "God, no. I would never tease a blacksmith.

I mean, with arms like yours . . ." He trailed off. "And any woman who collects swords, no chance." He gave me his best Boy Scout grin. "Too many sharp pointy things to be concerned about."

I smiled. He was cute, in a baby- faced sort of way.

Not a bad director, either. More Ed Wood than Woody Allen, but his films didn't make me want to hurl. "All right, boss. I'll see you on Wednesday then?"

"You'll be bringing me a new ebony blade?"

"We're still doing wide- angle shots?"

"Yes, close- up shots aren't until next weekend."

"Okay, I'll have something you can use."

He grinned, but said nothing further.

I gave him a moment. "So, I'm not fired?"

"Not today."

"Great," I said. "We'll see how Tuesday goes."

Jennifer, the DP, came over shaking her head, complaining about the lighting. She was one of those high maintenance photography directors who was worth every minute of time she sucked out of Carl. She'd have him tied up forever. The hangdog look on his face as I snuck away almost made me feel sorry for him.

Thing about Carl's films: most of the shoots happened after hours because nearly everyone had a day job, just to make ends meet. To night's was no exception.

I had arrived here in Everett's industrial area, north of Seattle, around six forty after a hard day at the smithy.

A quick shower at home, some decent clothes that didn't smell like smoke, and a drive- thru meal in me— I was good to go.

Carl worked a deal with the city to keep costs low so we shot from seven until midnight on good nights. Tonight was not a good night.

Ganymede

By Cherie Priest

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The air pirate Andan Cly is going straight. Well, straighter. Although he's happy to run alcohol and guns wherever the money's good, he doesn't think the world needs more sap, or its increasingly ugly side-effects. But going straight is easier said than done: whether he likes it or not, the captain's first legal gig will be paid for by sap money, because the Seattle Underground is in dire need of supplies.

New Orleans is not Cly's first pick for a shopping run. He loved the Big Easy once, back when he also loved a beautiful octoroon prostitute named Josephine Early—but that was a decade ago, and he hasn't looked back since. He's still on Jo's mind, though, or so he learns when he gets a telegram about a peculiar piloting job. She says she needs him, and no one else will do. It's a chance to complete two lucrative jobs at once, one he can't refuse. He sends his old paramour a note and heads for New Orleans, with no idea of what he's in for—or what she wants him to fly.

But he won't be flying. Not exactly. Hidden at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain lurks an astonishing war machine, an immense submersible called the *Ganymede*. This prototype could end the war, if only anyone had the faintest idea of how to operate it....if only they could sneak it past the Southern forces at the mouth of the Mississippi River....if only it hadn't killed most of the men who'd ever set foot inside it.

Now the only question is whether there's enough reward in the world to justify the risk to Cly and his crew.

This excerpt introduces the book via its opening chapters, the first from the perspective of Josephine Early, and the second via Andan Cly.

1 [Josephine Early]

"Croggon Hainey sends his regards, but he isn't up for hire," Josephine Early declared grimly as she crumpled the telegram in her fist. She flicked the wad of paper into the tiny, round waste bin beside her desk and took a deep breath that came out in a hard sigh. "So we'll have to find another pilot, goddammit."

"Ma'am, the airyard's full of pilots," her assistant, Marilyn Quantrill, responded.

She leaned back in her seat and tapped her fingers on the chair's armrest. "Not pilots like *him*."

"Hainey...he's a colored fellow, isn't he? One of the Macon Madmen?"

"Yes, and he's the best flyer I know. But I can't blame him for turning us down. It's asking a lot, for him to come so far south while he's still wanted—and we don't have the money to pay him what he's worth, much less compensate him for the extra danger."

Marilyn nodded, disappointed but understanding. "It didn't hurt to ask."

"No. And if it were me, I wouldn't take the job either." Josephine ceased her tapping and shifted her weight, further wedging her voluminous blue dress into the narrow confines of the worn mahogany chair's rigid arms. "But I sure was hoping he'd say yes. He's perfect for the job, and perfect doesn't come along every day. We won't

find anyone half so perfect hanging about the airyard, I can tell you that much. We need a man with excellent flying skills *and* absolutely no loyalty to the Republic or the Confederacy. And that, my dear, will be the trouble.”

“Is there anyone else we could ask, anyone farther afield?”

“No one springs to mind,” Josephine murmured.

Marylin pressed on. “It might not matter anyway. It could be Rucker Little is right, and a pilot won’t have any better luck than a seaman.”

“It’d be hard for anyone, anywhere, to fail so spectacularly as that last batch of sailors.”

“Not *all* of them drowned.”

“Four out of five isn’t anything to crow about.”

“I suppose not, ma’am.” Marylin lowered her eyes and fiddled with her gloves. She didn’t often wear gloves, given the heat and damp of the delta, but the elbow-length silk pair with tiny pearl buttons had been a gift from a customer, and he’d requested specifically that she wear them tonight. Her hair was done up in a twisted set of plaits and set with an ostrich feather. The yellow dress she wore cost only half what the gloves did, but they complimented one another all the same.

Josephine vowed, “I’ll find someone else, and I’ll show Mr. Mumler that I’m right. They’re going about that machine all wrong, I just know it. All I need is a pilot to prove it.”

“But you have to admit,” the younger woman carefully ventured, “it sounds strange, wanting an airman for a...for whatever it is, there in the lake.”

“Sometimes a strangely shaped problem requires a strangely shaped solution, dear. So here’s what we’ll do for now: Tomorrow afternoon, you take one of the other girls—Hazel or Ruthie, maybe—and you go down to the airyard and keep your eyes open.”

“Open for what?”

“Anyone who isn’t Southern or Texian. Look for foreigners who stand out from the usual crowd—ignore the English and the islanders, we don’t want them. We want people who don’t care about the war, and who aren’t taking sides. Tradesmen, merchants, or pirates.”

“I don’t know about pirates, ma’am. They scare me, I don’t mind saying.”

Josephine said, “Hainey’s a pirate, and I’d trust him enough to employ him. Pirates come in different sorts like everybody else, and I’ll settle for one if I have to. But don’t worry. I wouldn’t ask you to go down to the bay or barter with the Lafittes. If our situation turns out to call for a pirate, I’ll go get one myself.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Let’s consider Barataria a last resort. We aren’t up to needing last resorts. Not yet. The craft is barely in working order, and Chester says it’ll be a few days before it’s dried out enough to try again. When it works, and when we have someone who can consistently operate it without drowning everyone inside it, then we’ll move it. We have to get it to the Gulf, and we’ll have to do it right the first time. We won’t get a second chance.”

“No ma’am, I don’t expect we will,” Marilyn agreed. Then she changed the subject. “Begging your pardon, ma’am—but do you have the time?”

“The time? Oh, yes.” Josephine reached into her front left pocket and retrieved a watch. It was an engineer’s design with a glass cut-out in the cover, allowing her to see the hour at a glance. “It’s ten ‘til eight. Don’t worry, your meeting with Mr. Spring has not been compromised—though, knowing him, he’s already waiting downstairs.”

“I think he rather likes me, ma’am.”

“I expect he does. And with that in mind, be careful, Marylin.”

“I’m always careful.”

“You know what I mean.”

She rose from her seat and asked, “Is there anything else?”

“No, darling.”

Therefore, with a quick check of her hair in the mirror by the door, Marylin Quantrill exited the office on the fourth floor of the building known officially as the Garden Court Boarding House for Ladies, and unofficially as “Miss Early’s Place,” home of “Miss Early’s Girlies.”

Josephine did not particularly care for the unofficial designation, but there wasn’t much to be done about it now. A name with a rhyme sticks harder than sun-dried tar.

But quietly, bitterly, Josephine saw no logical reason why a woman in her forties should be referred to with the same address as a toddler, purely because she’d never married. Furthermore, she employed no “girlies.” She took great pains to see to it that her ladies were precisely that: ladies, well-informed and well-educated. Her ladies could read and write French as well as English, and some of them spoke Spanish, too; they took instruction on manners, sewing, and cooking. They were young women, yes, but they

were not frivolous children, and she hoped that they would have skills to support them upon leaving the Garden Court Boarding House.

All of the Garden Court ladies were free women of color.

It was Josephine's experience that men liked nothing better than variety, and that no two men shared precisely the same tastes. With this in mind, she'd recruited fourteen women in a spectrum of skin tones, ranging from two very dark Caribbean natives to several lighter mixes like Marilyn, who could have nearly passed for white. Josephine herself counted an eighth of her own ancestry from Africa, courtesy of a great-grandmother who'd come to New Orleans aboard a ship called the *Adelaide*. At thirteen she'd been bought to serve as a maid, and at fourteen she'd birthed her first child.

And so forth, and so on.

Josephine was tall and lean, with skin like tea stirred with milk. Her forehead was high and her lips were full; and although she looked her age, she wore all forty-two years with grace. It was true that in her maturity she'd slipped from "beautiful" to merely "pretty," but she anticipated another ten years before sliding down to the dreaded "handsome."

She looked again at the watch, and at the waste bin holding the unfortunate telegram, and she wondered what on earth she was going to do now. Major Alcock was expecting a report, and Admiral Partridge had made clear that it wasn't safe to bring the airship carrier *Valiant* too close to the delta for very long. Texas wouldn't tolerate it—they'd chase the big ship back out to sea like a flock of crows harrying an eagle.

She had until the end of May. No longer.

This left not quite four weeks to figure out a number of things which had gone years without having been figured out thus far.

“*Ganymede*,” she said under her breath, “I *will* find someone to fly you.”

All she needed was a pilot willing to risk his life in a machine that had killed seventeen men to date; brave the Mississippi River as it went past Forts Jackson and St. Philip and all the attending Rebels and Texians therein; and kindly guide it out into the Gulf of Mexico past half a dozen Confederate warships—all the while knowing the thing could explode, suffocate everyone inside, or sink to the ocean bottom at any moment.

Was it really so much to ask?

The Union thought she was out of her mind, and though they wanted the scuttled craft, they couldn’t see paying yet another seventeen men to die for it. Therefore, any further salvage efforts must come out of Josephine’s own pocket. But her pockets weren’t as deep as the Major seemed to think, and the cost of hiring a high-level mercenary for such a mission was well outside her reach.

Even if she knew another pilot half so good as Croggon Hainey, and without any allegiance to the occupying Republicans or the Confederates, a month might not be enough time to fetch him, prepare him, and test him.

She squeezed her watch and popped it open. The gears inside flipped, swayed, and spun.

On second thought...

She’d told Marilyn she didn’t know any other pilots. The lie had slipped off her tongue as if it’d been greased, or as if she’d only forgotten it wasn’t true, but there *was* someone else.

But it wasn't worth thinking about. After all, it'd been years since last she'd seen him—since she'd even thought about him. Had he gone back west? Had he married, and raised a family? Would he come if she summoned him? For all she knew, he wasn't even alive anymore. Not every man—even a man like Andan Cly—survives a pirate's career.

"He's probably dead," Josephine told herself. "Long gone, I'm sure."

She wasn't sure.

She looked back at the waste bin, and she realized that with one more telegram, she could likely find out.

Croggon Hainey frequented the Northwest corners, didn't he? And Cly had come from a wretched, wet backwater of a port called...what was it again? Oh yes: *Seattle*—out in the Washington Territory, as far away from New Orleans as a man could get while staying on colonial turf.

"No coincidence, that," she said to the empty room, realizing she flattered herself to think so. Well, so what? Then she flattered herself. She wasn't the first.

Downstairs, something fell heavily, or something large was thrown and landed with a muffled thunk.

Josephine's ears perked, and she briefly forgot about the waste bin, the telegram, and potential news of long-ago lovers from distant hinterlands. She listened hard, hoping to hear nothing more without daring to assume it.

The Garden Court Boarding House was different from many bordellos, but not so different that there were never problems: drunk men, or cruel men who wanted more than they were willing to buy. Josephine did her best to screen out the worst, and she prided herself on both the quality of her ladies and the relative peace of her establishment; even

so, it was never far from her mind how quickly things could turn, and how little it would take for the French Quarter to remember that she was only a colored woman, and not necessarily entitled to own things, much less protect them, preserve them, and use them for subterfuge.

It was a line she walked every night, between legitimate businesswoman performing a service for the community of soldiers, sailors, merchants, and planters...and the grandchild of slaves, who could become a slave herself again simply by crossing the wrong state lines.

Louisiana wasn't safe, not for her or any of her ladies. Maybe not for anybody.

But this was Josephine's house, and she guarded it with all the ferocity and cunning of a mother fox. So when she heard the noise downstairs she listened hard, *willing* innocent silence to follow, but suspecting the worst and preparing herself accordingly.

In the top left drawer of her battered, antique, second-hand desk, she kept a .44 caliber Schofield—a Smith and Wesson revolver she'd nicknamed "Little Russia." It was loaded, like always. She retrieved it and pushed the desk drawer shut again.

It was easy to hide the weapon behind her skirts. People don't expect a left-handed woman, and no one expects to be assaulted by anyone in a fancy gown—which was one more good reason to wear them all the time, as far as Josephine was concerned.

Out past the paneled office door she swept, and down the red carpeted runner to the end of the hall, where a set of stairs curved down to all three lower levels, flanked by a banister that was polished weekly and gleamed under the skimming touch of

Josephine's hand. The commotion was located on the second floor, or so her ears told her as she drew up nearer.

This was a good thing, insofar as any commotion was ever good. It could be taking place down in the lobby, and no one wants that kind of thing in one's lobby. It's bad for business, and bad for covering up trouble, should it be required. At street level people could squint and peek past the gossamer curtains, trying to focus on the slivers of light inside and the women who lived within.

At street level, there could be witnesses.

Josephine was getting ahead of herself, and she knew it. She always got ahead of herself, but that's how she'd stayed alive and in charge this long, so she couldn't imagine slowing down anytime soon. Instead she held the Schofield with a cool, loose grip. She felt the gun's weight as a strange, foreign thing against her silk overskirts, where she buried it out of sight. As she'd learned one evening in her misspent youth at the notorious pirate call of Barataria, she need not brandish a gun to fire it. It'd shoot just fine through a petticoat, and knock a hole in a man all the same. It would ruin the skirts, to be certain, but these were trade-offs a woman could make in the name of survival.

Down on the second-floor landing she stepped off the stairs so swiftly she seemed to be moving on wings or wheels. She brought herself up short just in time to keep from running into Fenn Calais, a Texian.

A big man in his youth, Mr. Calais was now a soft man, with cheeks blushed pink from years of alcohol and a round, friendly face which had become well known to ladies of the Garden Court. Delphine Hoobler was under one of his arms, and Caroline Younger was hooked beneath the other.

“Evening, ma’am!” he said cheerfully. He was always cheerful. Suspiciously so, if you wanted Josephine’s opinion on the matter, but Fenn was so well-liked that no one ever did.

With her usual polite formality, she replied, “Good evening to you, Mr. Calais. I see you’re being properly cared for this evening. Is there anything I can get you, or anything further you require?”

Caroline flashed Josephine a serious look and a sharpened eyebrow. This was combined with a quick toss of her head and a laugh. “We’ll keep an eye on him, Miss Josephine,” she said lightly, but the urgent, somber gleam in her eyes didn’t soften.

Josephine understood. She nodded. “Very well, then.” She smiled and stepped aside, letting the three of them pass. When they were gone, she turned her attention to the far end of the corridor. Caroline and Delphine had been luring Fenn Calais away from something.

From someone.

She could guess, even before she saw the window that hadn’t been fully shut, and the swamp-mud scuff of a large man’s shoe across the carpet runner.

With a glance over her shoulder to make sure the Texian was out of hearing range, she hissed, “Deaderick? That’d damned well *better* be you.”

“It’s me,” he whispered back. He leaned out from the stairwell. “That Fenn fellow was passed out on the settee with a drink in his hand. I thought I could sneak past without waking him up, but he sleeps lighter than he looks.”

She exhaled, relieved. She wedged Little Russia into her skirt pocket. “Delphine and Carrie took care of him.”

“Yeah, I saw.” He looked back and forth down the hall. Seeing no one but his sister, he relaxed enough to leave his hiding place.

Deaderick Early was a tall man, and lean like his sister, though darker in complexion. They had only a mother in common, and Deaderick was several shades away from Josephine’s pale skin. His hair was thick and dense, and black as ink. He let it grow into long locks that dangled below his ears.

“You’re lucky it was only Fenn. He’s easily distracted and probably too drunk to recognize you.”

“Still, I didn’t mean to take the chance.”

She sighed and rubbed at her forehead, then leaned back against the wall and eyed him tiredly. “What are you doing here, Rick? You know I don’t like it when you come to town. I worry about you.”

“You don’t worry about me living camped in a swamp?”

“In the swamp you’re armed, and with your men. Here you’re alone, and you’re visible. Anyone could see you, point you out, and have you taken away.” She blinked back the dampness backing her eyes. “With every chance you take, the odds stack higher against you.”

“That may be, but we need soap, salt, and coffee. For that matter, a little rum would make me a popular man, and we could stand to have a better doctor’s kit,” he added, looking down at an ugly swath of inflamed skin on his arm—caused, no doubt by the stinging things that buzzed out in the bayou. “But also, I came to bring you *this*.”

From the back pocket of his pants he produced an envelope that had been sealed and folded in half. “It might help your pilot, if you ever find one.”

“What is it?”

“Schematics from a footlocker at the Pontchartrain base. It’s got Hunley’s writing on it. I think it’s a sketch for the steering mechanism, and part of the propulsion system. Or that’s what Chester and Honeyfolk said, and I’m prepared to take their word for it.”

“Neither one of them needs it?” She slipped the envelope down into her cleavage, past her underwear’s stays. The paper showed only the faintest seam through to the outside of her bodice.

“They’ve already taken that section apart and put it all back together. It doesn’t hold any secrets for an engineer, but a pilot who wants to know what he’s getting himself into...this might come in handy. Or it might not, if you have to trick someone into taking the job.”

A loud cough of laughter came from upstairs, and the *whump* of heavy footsteps. The siblings looked up to the ceiling, as if it could tell them anything; but Josephine said, “Fenn again. Probably heading to the water closet. Listen, we should go outside. Out back it’s quiet, and even if someone sees you, it’ll be too dark for anyone to recognize you.”

“Fine, if that’s what you want.” He pushed the back stairway door open and held it for her, letting her lead the way.

Down they went, her soft, quiet house slippers making no noise at all, and his dirty leather boots trailing a muffled drumbeat in her wake. At the bottom, she unlocked the back door and pushed it. It moaned on its hinges, scraping trash and mud with its bottom edge.

It opened, letting them both outside into the night.

The alley itself was dark and wet, smelling of vomit, urine, and horse manure. Overhead the moon hung low and very white, but they barely noticed it over the grumbling music, swearing sailors, drunken planters, and the late-night calls of newspaper boys trawling for pennies before closing up shop. The gaslamps on Rue des Ursulines gave the whole night a ghostly wash, leaving the shadows sharp and black between the lacy Old World buildings of the Vieux Carré, and leaving Josephine and Deaderick as close to alone as they could expect to find themselves.

Josephine swatted at her brother's vest pocket, the place where he always kept tobacco and papers. He took the hint, retrieved his pouch, and began to roll two cigarettes between his fingers. "It's a good thing that dumb bastard let himself be dragged away so easy."

"Like I said, you were lucky. Some of the younger men lounge around armed, and after a few drinks they're quick to draw. Fenn's not dumb, but he's harmless. Even if he'd seen you—even if he'd recognized you—we might've been able to buy him off."

"You'd trust some old Texian?"

"That one?" Josephine took the cigarette he offered, and waited for him to light it. She gently sucked it to life, and the smell of tobacco wafted up her nose, down her throat. It took the edge off the mulchy odor of the alley. "Maybe. I don't think he'd make any trouble for us. He'd die of sorrow if we told him he wasn't welcome anymore."

Deaderick lit his own cigarette and stepped onto a higher corner of the curb, dodging a rivulet of running gutter water. "You making friends with Republicans now? Next thing I hear, you'll be cozying up to the Rebs."

“You shut your mouth,” she whispered hard. “All I’m telling you is that Fenn spends more time at the Court than he does at his own home, assuming he has one. He’s sweet on Delphine and Ruthie in particular, and he won’t go talking if he thinks we’ll keep him from coming back.”

“If you say so.” He sighed and asked quietly, “Any chance you heard from that pilot friend of yours? The man from Georgia—could you talk him into it?”

“He can’t make it, so now I’ve got to find someone else. I’m working on it, all right? I’ve already talked to Marilyn, and tomorrow she’ll take Ruthie over to the airyard to look around.”

“There’s nothing but Republicans and Rebs down at the airyard. You’d have better luck in Baratavia. Not that I’m suggesting it.”

She snorted, and a puff of smoke coiled out of her nostril. “Don’t think I haven’t considered it. But I want to check the straight docks first, all the same. Times are hard all over. We might find foreigners—or maybe westerners—desperate enough to take the job.”

“How much money you offering?”

“Not enough. But between me and the girls, we might be able to negotiate. There’s always wiggle room. I’ve talked it over with those who can be trusted, and they’re game as me to pool our resources.”

“I don’t want to hear about that,” Deaderick said stiffly.

“I suppose you don’t, but that doesn’t change anything. If we can get this done between us, it’ll all be worth it. Every bit of it, even the unpleasant parts. We’re all

making sacrifices, Rick. Don't act like it's a walk in the park for you and the boys, because I know it *isn't*."

Life was hard outside the city, in the swamps where the guerillas lurked, and poached, and picked off Confederates and Texians whenever they could. It was written all over her brother's flesh, in the insect bites and scrapes of thorns. The story was told in the rips that had been patched and re-patched on his homespun pants, and in the linen shirt with its round wood buttons—none of which matched.

But she was proud of him, desperately so. And she was made all the prouder just by looking at him and knowing that they were all struggling, certainly—but her little brother, fully ten years her junior, was in charge of a thirty-man company, and quietly paid by the Union besides. He drew a real salary in Federal silver, every three months like clockwork. Out of sight, at the edge of civilization, he was fighting for them all—for her, for the colored girls at the Garden Court, and for the Union, which would be whole again, one of these days.

And just like her, he was fighting for New Orleans, which deserved better than to have Texas squat upon it with its guns, soldiers, and Confederate allegiance.

Deaderick gazed at his sister over the tiny red coal of his smoldering cigarette. "It can't go on like this much longer. These...these..."—he gestured at the alley's entrance, where a large Texian machine was gargling, grumbling, and rolling, its lone star insignia visible as it shuddered past, and was gone—"vermin. I want them out of my city."

"Most of them want out just as bad."

"Well then, that's one thing we got in common. But I don't know why you have to run around defending them."

“Who’s defending them? All I said on behalf of Fenn Calais is that he’s an old whoremonger with no place left to hang his hat. I have a business to run, that’s all—and I don’t get to pick my customers. Besides, the better the brown boys like us, the safer I stay,” she insisted, using the Quarter’s favorite ironic slang for the soldiers who, despite their dun-colored uniforms, were as white as sugar down to the last man. “I can’t have their officers sniffing around, looking too close. Not while I’m courting the Admiral, and not while you’re running the bayou. As long as we keep them quiet and happy, they leave us alone.”

“Except for the ones you treat to room and board,” he sniffed. “You let that old fat one get too close. You call him harmless, but maybe he thinks like you do. Maybe he watches you send telegrams, or pass messages to me or Chester. Maybe he sees a scrap of paper in the trash, or overhears us talking some night. Then you’ll sure as hell find out how far you can trust your resident Texian, won’t you?”

It was something she’d privately wondered about sometimes, upon catching a glimpse of Fenn Calais’s familiar form sauntering through the halls with Delphine, Ruthie, or a new girl hanging on his arm...or drinking himself into a charmingly dignified stupor in one of the tower lounges. Occasionally it occurred to her that he could well be a spy, sent to watch her and the ladies. Spies were a fact of life in New Orleans, after all—spies of every breed, background, quality, and style. The Republic of Texas had a few, though as an occupying force they were all of them spies by default; the Confederacy kept a number on hand, to keep an eye on the Texians who were keeping an eye on things; and even the Union managed to plant a few here and there, keeping an eye on everyone else.

As Josephine would well know. She was on their payroll too.

She dropped the last of her cigarette before it could burn her fingers, and she crushed its ashes underfoot on street stones that were slippery with humidity and the afternoon's rain. Her house slippers weren't made for outdoor excursions of even the briefest sort, and they'd never be the same again—she could sense it. Between her toes she felt the creeping damp of street water and regurgitated bourbon, runny horse droppings strung together with wads of brittle grass, and the warm, unholy squish of God-knew-what, which smelled like grave dirt and death.

"I don't like it out here," she said by way of changing the subject. "And I don't like you being here. Go home, Rick. Go back to the bayou, where you're safe."

"It's been good to see you, too."

"Just ... stay away from the river, will you?"

"I always do."

"Promise me, please?"

Down by the river and roaming the Quarter's darker corners, monstrous things waited, and were hungry. Or so the stories went.

"I promise. Even though I'm not afraid of a few dusters."

"I know you're not, but I am. I've seen them."

"So have I," he declared flippantly, which meant he was lying. He'd only heard about them.

"They aren't dusters," she muttered.

"Sure they are. Addicts gone feral, like cats. And you worry too much."

She almost accused him of lying, but decided against starting that particular fight. If anything, it was good that he was ignorant of the dead—or that’s what she told herself. She’d be thrilled if he went his whole life without ever seeing one, even though it meant that he wrote them off as bedtime stories, designed to frighten naughty children.

He’d last lived in the quarter ten years ago, before he’d headed off to fight. Back then, there hadn’t been so many of them.

Deaderick didn’t want to argue any more than Josephine did. “I’ll stay away from the river, if it’ll make you happy. And maybe I’ll head out to Barataria myself, one of these days soon. We hit them up for discreet mechanics and supply fliers every now and again. While I’m there, I’ll see if I can’t spot any potential pilots for you.”

“All right, but if you find anyone, be careful what you tell him. It’s dangerous work we’re asking for, but anybody we have to trick too badly won’t do us any good, when push comes to shove. That’s why I’m sending another few telegrams tonight. I’ve got somebody else in mind.”

“You do?”

“I know of a man who might be good for the task. If I can find him. And if he’s still alive. And if he can be persuaded to come within fifty feet of me.”

Deaderick grinned at her. “Sounds promising.”

“It’s *not* promising, but it’s better than nothing. We have to get that thing out of the lake. We have to get it out to sea, to the Federal Navy. Once they get a crack at it, it’s just a matter of time. *Ganymede* could change everything.”

“I know,” her brother said, putting his arms around her. “And it *will*.”

In the distance, a cheer went up and so did a small flare—a little rocket of a thing that cast a pink-white trail of burning fire into the sky. A second cheer followed it, and the clapping of a crowd.

“Goddamn Texians,” Josephine said wearily, the words garbled against his shoulder.

“What are they doing?”

“Tearing up the cathedral square, gambling on livestock and shooting off fireworks. It isn’t right.”

Deaderick nodded, but noted, “You haven’t been to church in half a lifetime.”

“Still,” she said, “that doesn’t make it right, what they’re doing over there.”

A faintly burning chemical stink joined the city’s odors, trapped in the humid fog of Gulf water and river water that crept through the Quarter like a warm, wet bath. Gunpowder and animals, men and women, alcohols sweet and sour—bourbons brought from Kentucky, whiskeys imported from Tennessee, rums shipped in from the islands south of Florida, and grain distillations made in a neighbor’s cast-iron tub. The night smelled of gun oil and saddles, and the jasmine colognes of the night ladies, or the violets and azaleas that hung from balconies in baskets; of berry liqueur and the verdant, herbal tang of absinthe delivered from crystal decanters, and the dried chilies hanging in the stalls of the French market, and powdered sugar and chicory.

Josephine leaned her head on Deaderick’s shoulder as she hugged him good-bye. She breathed, “We’re drowning like this, you know,” and she saw him off with tears swallowed hard in the back of her throat.

2 [Andan Cly]

Andan Cly folded the telegram shut and said, "I'll be damned." He slipped it into his shirt pocket, then changed his mind and set it instead on the bar—as if he were reluctant to touch it, but didn't want to let it out of his sight.

"What for?" Angeline drew her feet up onto the stool's bottommost rung and looked at him expectantly. She was dressed in her usual preferred attire, a man's shirt and pants cut down to size. A slouch-rim hat sat atop her head, crowning the two long, gray braids that hung down her back in the Duwamish style.

The pilot and sometimes-pirate cleared his throat and signaled the bartender for a glass of something stronger than what was already in front of him. "It's...it's a message. From someone I used to know, a long time ago."

"Must be a woman."

"I didn't say it was a woman."

"If it wasn't, you wouldn't be hemming and hawing like a schoolboy."

"Hush, you," he told her, not for a moment expecting her to do so.

Lucy O'Gunning slipped a shot in front of him and then put a bottle of whiskey beside it. "One for you too, Princess?"

"Since you're offering."

Lucy poured another drink, using her one mechanical arm as deftly as any bartender ever used two of the usual kind. "And what have we got here?" She reached to pick up the cheap slip of transcription paper, but Cly snatched it back, crumpling it in his hand.

“It’s a note from a woman,” Angeline informed her. “He won’t admit it, but that’s what it is. Telegram came up from Tacoma. Freddy Miller brought it in his sack with the last batch of mail; I just brought it along, ‘cause I was passing through anyhow.”

“A woman?” Lucy gave Andan Cly a suspicious squint. “You airmen, all the same. A girl in every port.”

“It ain’t like that,” he insisted. “I haven’t seen this woman in...I don’t know. Eight or ten years. She’s a few thousand miles away, and she didn’t dash off a note because she missed me.” Under his breath he added, “I can promise you *that*.”

“Ooh.” Lucy leaned forward, planting her matronly bosom on the countertop and propping her chin in her clockwork palm. “Sounds juicy.”

“What does she want?” Angeline asked bluntly, unconcerned by the blush that climbed the fair-skinned fellow’s neck. Cly’s hair was cut close to his scalp, and it was light enough to plainly show the pink when embarrassment made it all the way to the top of his considerable frame.

“She wants to hire me.”

“For what kind of job?” Lucy asked.

“She wants me to come to New Orleans. There’s a craft she wants me to fly, but I don’t know anything more than that. The telegram is thin on details.”

Angeline harrumphed. “Sounds like a trumped-up excuse to bring you out for a visit.”

“She’s not that kind.”

“You don’t sound so sure if it,” Lucy said. She waited for him to down his shot. When he did, she poured him another before he had a chance to ask for it.

“I’m plenty sure of it, and now you’re just trying to liquor me up so I’ll tell you more.”

“You complaining?”

“No. Keep ‘em coming.” He cleared his throat again, and said, “There’s got to be a catch. New Orleans is a huge place—big port, big airyard. She could get a perfectly good pilot by setting foot outside her front door and hollering for one.” Unfolding the paper, he reread a few lines and said, “All I know is, it’s got something to do with this thing, the *Ganymede*.”

The bartender asked, “What’s a Ganymede?”

“A dirigible, I assume. She needs someone to take it from Pontchartrain to the Gulf, and she’s willing to pay...but it’s only a few miles, from the lake to the coast. Why she’d want me to come all the way out there to move it for her, I just don’t know.”

“Ask her,” suggested Angeline.

“Not sure it’s worth the trouble.”

Ever the practical one, Lucy asked, “Is it enough money to make the trip worthwhile? That’s a long way to go, to fly a ship a few feet.”

“Almost, but not quite. She’s offering low, asking it like a favor for old time’s sake.”

Angeline smiled. “Old times must’ve been good.”

Lucy straightened up and grabbed a towel. She pretended that the bar needed a good wipe-down, and hinted, “I never been to New Orleans.”

“Me either, but I done heard about it,” the older woman said, her smile still firmly in place—and now with a playful gleam twinkling in her eyes. “I hear it’s a city for music and dancing, and drinking too. I hear it’s all Frenched up.”

Cly swallowed his beverage but put a hand over the glass when Lucy used her bar rag to nudge the bottle his way. “New Orleans is one hell of a city, or it was last time I saw it. Even though Texas had been sitting on it for years.”

Angeline’s smile contorted into a puzzled frown. “What’s Texas got to do with it?”

He picked up his glass and fiddled with it, tipping it this way and that between his fingers. “Early in the war—back in 1862—the Union went after the city. They thought if they could control the port and the river, they could get a good choke hold on the Confederate supply line. So they took the place. Trouble was, they couldn’t keep it.”

“Texas took it away from them?” Angeline guessed.

“Yeah. The Rebs couldn’t pry the Federal troops out on their own, not for trying; but the Texians didn’t like having the Union presence so close by, so they agreed to lend a hand. They freed up the city in ‘64, I think. But once they’d booted out the Union, they had a problem: The Rebels didn’t have enough people on hand to keep the city secure, and the Union wanted back inside it real bad. That’s the biggest port this side of the world, you understand? So Texas could either hold down the fort, or it could withdraw and risk an enemy stronghold right outside its eastern border.”

“So Texas stayed,” Angeline inferred.

“Texas stayed. And nobody likes it much.”

Lucy nudged the bottle Cly's way again, and this time he picked it up and poured another round for himself and the princess.

"Texas did some rebuilding, and they set up shops of their own to take advantage of all the trade and travel—trying to make the best of it. Nobody knew how long the war would last, though. Nobody knew it'd straggle on twenty years. Even back when I was there, in '71 and '72, the locals were fed up with the occupation. It must be worse now, worse by all these extra years."

Andan Cly ran his fingers around the lip of the still-full shot glass, thinking about the French Quarter, and about a woman named Josephine. Neither of his companions interrupted, but both leaned expectantly toward him, waiting for more.

"New Orleans," he said slowly. "It's not like other places, in the South or anywhere else. I mean, all over the South you've got a whole lot of colored people—not surprising, since they went to so much trouble to import 'em; but in New Orleans there's a goodly number of *free* negroes, and mixed folks too. They own property there, and have businesses, and get married and make families and run households just like the southern white people do in other places. The whole state is organized different, and that city is especially different, that's all I'm saying." He scratched his head, trying to find a good way to explain the place, and not coming up with anything that sounded right.

"What do you mean, it's organized different?" asked Lucy.

"Oh, like they don't have counties and such. They have parishes, left over from when France was running the place, and their elections are different—the people who get into power are different. It's hard to explain. But as you could guess, the free colored people don't have much interest in being run by the Confederacy...or any of its allies,

either. Hell, being unhappy with Texas is the one thing the colored locals have in common with the Confederates. You'd think it'd give them something to bond over, but that's not how the world works."

Angeline's frown deepened. "Don't the Rebels want to keep the city open for their own country?"

"Sure, but Texas holding New Orleans—it's a permanent reminder how the Rebs couldn't hold it themselves. They talk like it's about honor, but it's not. It's just pride, same as anything else."

The princess shook her head. "Honor, I understand. Pride, I've got a handle on. But sometimes you white folks are crazy as a snake-loving rabbit."

"Aw, come on Angeline," Cly grinned.

Lucy laughed and said, "*Surely* you mean present company excepted."

"Nope!" She spun off the stool, swallowed her drink, and saluted them both with a tip of her hat. "Both of you are well included, I fear." As she dug around in her pockets, she added, "And I thank you for the history lesson, Captain, that was real enlightening. But I need to be on my way. I have a train to catch tonight, from Tacoma."

"Where are you going?" Andan asked. "Maybe I could give you a lift."

"Portland. But don't you worry about it, much as I appreciate the offer. I'm headed down there to see an old friend, and sometimes I don't mind a nice train ride. It's only half a day's trip, and he's meeting me at the station." She tossed some coins on the counter and winked. "I'll catch you two when I come back around."

"All right, Miss Angeline," Lucy said with a wave. "You have a safe trip."

When she had exited through Maynard's sealed, filtered front door, Lucy shook her head. "I swear to God, that woman.... I don't know how she comes and goes so free and easy, like it's nothing at all to get inside or out again."

Andan examined the telegram again, shielding it from Lucy's curious hovering. He scratched at his ear and revisited the letters again and again, in case a fourth or fifth reading might squeeze some extra meaning out of the few brief lines.

"Captain?" she asked, pretending she was offering another drink.

Without looking up, he said, "Hm? Oh, I'm sure Angeline has her methods."

"No doubt. But what about you? What about that telegram?"

"What about it?"

"You taking the job?"

He shrugged and finally looked up. "I could use the money, and there are lots of things I can pick up in New Orleans—things I can't get just anyplace. I could bring you back some absinthe, Lucy. You ever had any absinthe? You'd be the richest bartender in the Territory if I could fetch you a few barrels."

"Oh, you'd do it for *me*. And here I was thinking maybe you wanted to go strike a match on an old flame."

"You've got it all wrong."

"I bet I don't."

"It was complicated."

"I bet it *wasn't*."

Just then the front door opened, sliding stickily forward on its rubber-coated seals. Everyone in Maynard's—Lucy, Andan, and the three men playing cards at a round, green

table in the back corner—turned to see the newcomer. After he entered Cly shifted his weight on the stool, putting one foot down on the floor; and the men at the green table became engrossed in their game once more, their eyes darting back and forth over the cards.

“Yaozu,” Lucy both announced and greeted him.

The white-clad oriental man surveyed the underground saloon. His attention skimmed past the drunks and the gamblers, settled briefly on Andan Cly, and returned to Lucy. “Mrs. O’Gunning. I’d like to try some of that beer you brew. The local selection,” he clarified in precise, flawless English.

She blurted, “Are you sure? It’s...an acquired taste, or so I’m told.”

“Then allow me the opportunity to acquire it.”

“As you like.” She stepped away from Cly, grabbing a clean mug off the second plank shelf and toting it over to the tap. “But if you don’t care for it, I have some *huangjiu* on hand. Mrs. Wong gives me a bottle every now and again; I think she takes them away from her husband. A barkeep should have something on hand for all her customers, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but there’s no need to assume. Today I’d like to try this beer...about which I’ve heard so...*much*.”

Though the pub was more empty than full and there were many seats available, Yaozu chose the stool next to Andan Cly. He sat upon it with a graceful swish that let the tail of his jacket fall perfectly behind him. An ink-black braid snaked back and forth between his shoulder blades when he turned his head to examine the state of the fixtures,

the stock on the shelves, Lucy O’Gunning as she filled his mug, and his own reflection in the mirror behind the bar.

Then he regarded Andan Cly. Their eyes met in the glass.

Cly adjusted his position on the stool, a frequent occurrence, for it was about a size too small for him. “So...what are you doing here, Yaozu?” He aimed for a cautiously friendly tone and more or less hit it.

To what Cly considered the Chinaman’s credit, he did not stall the conversation with disclaimers or pleasantries. “I’d heard you were inside the walls—that your ship is docked at Fort Decatur. I thought I might find you here.”

Lucy arrived with the beer and placed it before Yaozu with a dubious look in her eyes. Seattle’s home-brewed beverage was distilled from blight-contaminated water; and though it was safe to drink, it was rarely anyone’s first choice. Or second. Occasionally, it came in third.

“Thank you, Mrs. O’Gunning,” he said. Without so much as a nervous sniff, he lifted the mug and began to drink. Two or three swallows into the draught, he paused and cocked his head to the right. “It certainly has a *distinctive* flavor.”

“You’re too kind,” she said, still not convinced she wasn’t being humored. “I’m glad it suits you, and I suppose I’ll leave you to it.” Taking up her rag once more, she ambled to the far side of the bar and started cleaning anything that looked like it might hold still for a wipe-down, whether it needed it or not.

When Lucy was gone, Yaozu set the beer aside. He said to Andan Cly, “I need a ship.”

“What are you moving? Big sap shipment going out?”

“On the contrary, I want to bring goods *into* the city.” He gave the beer a hard stare and a moment of philosophical inquiry. He took another drink before continuing. “I’ve been reorganizing Minnericht’s operations—a task which needed to be done *long* before his demise, might I add—and I’ve discovered that Seattle is running perilously low on the basic necessities. Between you and me, Captain, I’m not sure how much longer the city can remain habitable. Such as it is.”

Intrigued, Andan Cly nodded. “So what are we talking about?” he asked. “Pitch and the like, for seals? Masks? Pump equipment?”

“All that and more. We need canvas, lumber, charcoal for filters, coal for the furnaces, and that’s just the beginning.” He sighed. “Last week we ran out of coffee, and I thought the chemists would start an uprising.”

“It can be a lifesaver,” Cly acknowledged. “Sharpens the mind, and the hands, too.”

“That’s what they tell me.” Yaozu abandoned the beer glass, now more empty than full. “This will be an enormous undertaking, and I’m happy to finance it. Minnericht was an able tinkerer, but some of his works are not so stable or permanent as one might wish.”

The ensuing silence in the saloon was so thick you could spoon it into a bowl. Cly realized that everyone had been listening in, but he was still startled to feel the eyes of everyone present glued to himself and Yaozu.

In a normal speaking voice, intended to be overheard, his companion added, “For now, things are as safe as always, of course. But there’s room for improvement, don’t you think? Here,” he pulled out some coins, one of which appeared to be pure gold.

Placing these coins on the counter, he added, “Let us take a walk. We can discuss your fee.”

Andan Cly wasn’t sure how he felt about taking a stroll with Minnericht’s former right-hand man, but there was more to be said, and Yaozu was unwilling to say it in front of an audience. The captain couldn’t blame him, so he shot Lucy a two-fingered wave and followed the Chinaman out the sealed door, into the dark, mulch-smelling spots beneath the city.

Both men carried gas masks for convenience or emergency, but the masks were not required in the unfinished basement wonderland. There, forests of brick created a dank labyrinth that unfolded with bends, kinks, and curves under the streets as far as the Seattle wall extended, in every direction. It would have been an impenetrable place, blacker than any night without a moon, except that lanterns were hung on hooks at the spots where corners crossed, and at the mouths of the tunnel entrances.

Yaozu unhooked a lantern and turned the knob to raise its wick. He offered the lamp to Andan Cly, who lifted it above his head. Courtesy of his prodigious height, the whole Quarter was bathed in a yolk-yellow glow.

“This way, Captain. Toward the vaults. If we take the long way around, I can show you what I mean.”

The corridor was wide and flanked by the exposed, wet bricks that characterized so much of the underground’s topography. Its floor had been packed, but it was not paved in any way; the surface was soggy from the atmospheric moisture—seeping rains above, drizzling down long-dead tree roots and filtering past the houses and businesses of the polluted city.

The air captain and the oriental man walked side by side, their feet struggling slightly with the mucky path. And as they pushed onward, back farther and deeper away from the buried saloon called Maynard's, Yaozu explained.

"I am fond of this particular passage. It sees little travel, partly because"—he gave his dirty boots a rueful gaze—"no one ever installed flagstones or slats. And up ahead, one of the walls has crumbled across the path."

"Then why do you like it so much?" Cly asked, doing his best to keep the lantern steady. But with every step, shadows danced and kicked to the sway of the light, up and down the moss-covered walls, and along the black-mud footway.

"Because it very nearly connects our Chinatown to your vaults, and to the storage quarters back beneath Commercial Street."

Andan Cly said, "Huh. I can see why that would be useful. So you want to clean it out? Shore it up?"

"I do. However, two walls will need to come down in order to make the way passable by track and mining cart," he replied, referencing the handcarts and buckets by which some of the residents moved supplies and toted important items. "And above those walls, new sections of street-level buildings must be sealed against the blight."

"Gotcha."

"Also, if we expand and fix this passage, we could turn one of the offshoot basements into another pump room."

"Do we *need* another pump room? The air's plenty breathable down here."

"So far," Yaozu agreed. "But in the last few weeks the workers have been keeping longer hours, and more coal is being used to power the pumps. My engineers suggest that

it's a maintenance issue. Therefore, I wish to invest in maintenance procedures. I want to clean the pump tubes, all two- to three-hundred feet of them, one after another."

Cly made a low, worried whistle. "That sounds like a big job."

"Yes—a job that will require the pumps to be shut down for cleaning, one at a time. But before we can begin such a chore, supplementary pumps must be operational. Do you understand?"

"I do," he said thoughtfully. Then he stopped and said, "And this must be the brick pile."

Yaozu nodded. "You first? Since you're holding the light."

They scaled the bricks, and slid down the other side. Cly dusted off his pants and observed, "The kind of thing you're talking about...big renovations, big improvements...is going to take time. And money."

"Money we have, and time too—though less of the latter than the former."

The path split before them and Yaozu urged Andan Cly down the right fork.

"How much time?"

"Impossible to say. The tubes and pumps have held for years, and might hold for years to come. Or they might not."

"What about those engineers you mentioned?" Cly asked. "Can they give you a better idea?"

"They're trying, but they are new to the city and still learning the finer points of its workings. I have recruited them with *generous* paychecks. And I am trusting your confidence on this matter when I tell you," he paused, and looked up into the giant's face. "I'm burning through Minnericht's coffers at a rather alarming rate. He left a fortune, of

course. He hoarded it like a dragon, underneath King Street Station. But it is *costing* a fortune to keep this place livable.”

The captain asked, “Then why are you going to all this trouble? Does the sap really make that much money, to make it all worth this?”

A thin, slow smile spread across Yaozu’s face, and it was not entirely pleasant. “Oh *yes*. And the potential for more money still is *staggering*. The gas—this punishing, brutal substance that killed the city above us—it offers us the means to save it. With better processing and more efficient means of survival underground, these doornails”—he used the white men’s slang for the underground citizens—“could make more money than Californians have ever dug out of their rocks.”

“And you.”

“Me?”

“You stand to make a bundle too, don’t you?”

“Absolutely. But as I was sometimes forced to wonder, with regards to my former...employer, what does it profit a man to be wealthy, but to live in the midst of such...” He hunted for a word, and settled on one. “Instability? It was obscene to me, how much he could have done for this place—and how little interest he showed in doing so.”

“So why don’t you make your money and leave? With what’s left of Minnericht’s stash, you could live like a king outside these walls. Everybody knows it. Everybody wonders.”

“Everybody knows it?” Yaozu asked, his understated smile fixed in place. “I wonder what else everybody knows.” He gazed down the pathway, and once more struck

out for it. “But to answer your question, I stay here because I want to. I like this settlement where a man like me, or like you”—he gestured one long hand toward Cly’s chest—“can live undisturbed by others.”

“But *I* don’t live here.”

“You could if you wished; you’d fit right in. Perhaps,” he said, watching Cly duck to dodge a low-hanging support beam, “less so in the literal sense. I’ve often thought it must be strange to be a man of your size. Like Gulliver in Lilliput, at times.”

Cly was familiar with the tale, and Yaozu wasn’t the first to make that comparison. The captain shrugged as he ducked another beam. “I’ve been big my whole life. You get used to it. I’ve known a few dwarves—a couple of them pirates, and damn fine ones—and I’ve wondered the same thing about them. I expect it’s not so different, living in a world where nothing is the right size.”

Yaozu murmured, “I know what you mean.”

“There’s nothing strange about your size,” Cly observed.

“Not my *size*, no. But outside these walls, I could be treated as a monster, evicted from my home, my property seized and my family sent away. It happens all the time in Portland, you know. Strange persons such as ourselves, Captain Cly...we may be very different from one another, but we recognize a kinship all the same.”

In silence they traversed another few blocks, and all the while, Cly considered this. Finally he said, “I suppose that answers my question well enough.”

“Speaking of fitting in...you’ve spent a good deal more time in the underground than before these last few months.”

Cly flushed, and even the rattling lantern couldn't hide the creeping color. "I'm not... Well. Maybe a *little* more."

"You protest too much, Captain. And look, here we are at the cross-paths before the vaults."

It was true. Their conversation had brought them all the way to the edge of a set of living quarters, the entrance to which had once been a great bank vault with a reinforced door in a reinforced room.

Here, where people came and went more frequently, the labyrinth opened and the streets were packed cleaner, lined with planks or stepping stones held aloft from the perpetually moist floor. More lanterns hung, dimmed, from the end of every wall; and containers of fuel were stationed beneath them, left ready for any passers-through who might require them. Painted signs were affixed to walls or mounted to posts between the corners where mine-cart tracks split the right-of-way. These weathered rectangles held messages in handwritten black lettering and clearly marked arrows.

UNION STREET, THIS WAY; SENECA STREET, OVER HERE; COMMERCIAL AVENUE, TO YOUR RIGHT.

"So," Yaozu said, clapping his hands together. "My appeal for your services."

"Yeah, that," Cly said. "Sure, I'll make your supply run. I'll need some details, and a list, and a budget—"

"Absolutely. I'll draw up all of these things, and we'll discuss your rate."

"Oh that's easy. I ask—"

“Whatever it is, I’ll double it. I’ll need you back by the end of next month, and I’ll need my instructions followed to the letter. I’m fully prepared to pay for speed and quality service.”

“That’s good, that you’re giving me a few weeks. Because I’ve been thinking...”

“Yes?”

“About making a trip to New Orleans.”

“When?”

“Soon. Real soon.”

“That’s...quite a ways off, for a jaunt. May I ask why you’ve chosen such a destination?”

“An old friend wants me to run an easy job, down there on the Gulf. It wouldn’t interfere with anything you’re asking—not at all—and New Orleans has everything you’re looking for.”

“And then some, I’d bet.”

“You’d bet right,” Cly said. He was surprised to hear himself selling the idea, but he sold it anyway. “It’s huge, and with all those Texians on the premises, you can bet I’ll find plenty of good industrial-quality wares. They’ve got the best machine shops on the continent.”

“I’ve heard as much,” Yaozu said, considering the possibilities. “I wouldn’t have thought it’d be worth the trouble, to send you so far away. But if you’re already going...it might work out well for us both. Two of my engineers are Texians, or they *were*. They’ve been known to complain about things I can’t provide them—instruments and tools they wish they had, or equipment they can’t necessarily find on the West Coast.”

Cly said, "Ask them what they want. I'll get it for them. I'll kill two birds with one stone, Yaozu—yours and mine."

"And you'll collect two flight fees for a single trip."

"There's that, yes," the captain admitted, counting up the coins in his head. Between what Josephine was offering and Yaozu's bold statement that he'd double the usual asking price...there was enough money in the trip to make major plans.

Life-changing plans. Settling-down plans.

The Chinaman contemplated the pros and cons, staring alternately into space and into the captain's eyes. After a few moments of deliberation, he declared, "I like the sound of it! I'll speak with my engineers, and you and I shall confer again shortly."

With that, he made a short, dipping bow and excused himself down the far passage to the right. He disappeared on the other side of a sign that said KING STREET. Before long, even his shadow and footsteps were lost to the buried city.

Captain Cly stood in the moldering chamber, chewing over the conversation, replaying it in his head—trying to figure out how much to believe, and how much to accept regardless of whether it was true or not.

Yaozu had been an unknown quantity back in the bad old days, suspicious for the obvious fact that he kept so close to a capricious madman. Even his fellow Chinamen didn't trust him, for they had suffered too much at Minnericht's hands. And Angeline, last surviving royalty of Chief Seattle's reign, had made concerted efforts to kill him. Under the best of circumstances it would have been difficult for the primarily white, working-class doornails to warm up to the oriental man with the educated voice and a millionaire's manners. And now that he was running the empire which remained—

whether it was by default, ambition, or some other power mechanism yet undetermined—the enigma of his presence was both a blessing and a curse.

On the one hand, he managed an operation that pedaled poison to willing takers. On the other, he'd done an admirable job of holding the underground together while leaving the doornails in place. Therefore, complaining was kept to a superstitious minimum, as if Yaozu might change his mind or vanish, only to be replaced with someone worse if too much ill were spoken of him.

“Strange persons such as ourselves,” Cly recalled out loud.

He resolved to await the list with an open mind and an open pocket, and he approached the great vault door.

From the outside it looked like the portal of an enormous bank—which it had been, once upon a time. The spinning lock jutted like the spokes of a wheel, and though the combination to this lock had been long-since lost or forgotten, it had been rigged to open to a different key. Now, when a visitor wished to come inside, all he had to do was pull a lever hidden beneath the panel. Unless the door had been barricaded from within, it would open with a tug.

Cly lifted the panel, and pulled the lever with its rubber grip and rusting hinge. With a creak and a low moan, the heavy door swung out and Cly descended the uneven steps down into Briar's living quarters in a basement beneath a basement, two cool, secure stories deep underground.

The Alloy of Law

By Brandon Sanderson

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[Brandon Sanderson](#) is the bestselling author of books including *Warbreaker*, *Elantris*, *The Way of Kings*, and The Mistborn Trilogy—*Mistborn*, *The Well of Ascension* and *The Hero of Ages*. He has also written *Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarians*, a book for middle-grade readers, and is completing the final books in Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time® series—*The Gathering Storm*, *Towers of Midnight* and *A Memory of Light*—based on Jordan's notes and material. Sanderson teaches writing at Brigham Young University. He lives in Utah.

PROLOGUE

Wax crept along the ragged fence in a crouch, his boots scraping the dry ground. He held his Sterrion 36 up by his head, the long, silvery barrel dusted with red clay. The revolver was nothing fancy to look at, though the six-shot cylinder was machined with such care in the steel-alloy frame that there was no play in its movement. There was no gleam to the metal or exotic material on the grip. But it fit his hand like it was meant to be there.

The waist-high fence was flimsy, the wood grayed with time, held together with fraying lengths of rope. It smelled of age. Even the worms had given up on this wood long ago.

Wax peeked up over the knotted boards, scanning the empty town. Blue lines hovered in his vision, extending from his chest to point at nearby sources of metal, a result of his Allomancy. Burning steel did that; it let him see the location of sources of metal, then Push against them if he wanted. His weight against the weight of the item. If it was heavier, he was pushed back. If he was heavier, it was pushed forward.

In this case, however, he didn't Push. He just watched the lines to see if any of the metal was moving. None of it was. Nails holding together buildings, spent shell casings lying scattered in the dust, or horseshoes piled at the silent smithy—all were as motionless as the old hand pump planted in the ground to his right.

Wary, he too remained still. Steel continued to burn comfortably in his stomach, and so—as a precaution—he gently Pushed outward from himself in all directions. It was a trick he'd mastered a few years back; he didn't Push on any specific metal objects, but

created a kind of defensive bubble around himself. Any metal that came streaking in his direction would be thrown slightly off course.

It was far from foolproof; he could still get hit. But shots would go wild, not striking where they were aimed. It had saved his life on a couple of occasions. He wasn't even certain how he did it; Allomancy was often an instinctive thing for him. Somehow he even managed to exempt the metal he carried, and didn't Push his own gun from his hands.

That done, he continued along the fence—still watching the metal lines to make sure nobody was sneaking up on him. Feltrel had once been a prosperous town. That had been twenty years back. Then a clan of koloss had taken up residence nearby. Things hadn't gone well.

Today, the dead town seemed completely empty, though he knew it wasn't so. Wax had come here hunting a psychopath. And he wasn't the only one.

He grabbed the top of the fence and hopped over, feet grinding red clay. Crouching low, he ran in a squat over to the side of the old blacksmith's forge. His clothing was terribly dusty, but well tailored: a fine suit, a silver cravat at the neck, twinkling cuff links on the sleeves of his fine white shirt. He had cultivated a look that appeared out of place, as if he were planning to attend a fine ball back in Elendel rather than scrambling through a dead town in the Roughts hunting a murderer. Completing the ensemble, he wore a bowler hat on his head to keep off the sun.

A sound; someone stepped on a board across the street, making it creak. It was so faint, he almost missed it. Wax reacted immediately, flaring the steel that burned inside

his stomach. He Pushed on a group of nails in the wall beside him just as the crack of a gunshot split the air.

His sudden Push caused the wall to rattle, the old rusty nails straining in their places. His Push shoved him to the side, and he rolled across the ground. A blue line appeared for an eyeblink—the bullet, which hit the ground where he had been a moment before. As he came up from his roll, a second shot followed. This one came close, but bent just a hair out of the way as it neared him.

Deflected by his steel bubble, the bullet zipped past his ear. Another inch to the right, and he'd have gotten it in the forehead—steel bubble or no. Breathing calmly, he raised his Sterrion and sighted on the balcony of the old hotel across the street, where the shot had come from. The balcony was fronted by the hotel's sign, capable of hiding a gunman.

Wax fired, then Pushed on the bullet, slamming it forward with extra thrust to make it faster and more penetrating. He wasn't using typical lead or copper-jacketed lead bullets; he needed something stronger.

The large-caliber steel-jacketed bullet hit the balcony, and his extra power caused it to puncture the wood and hit the man behind. The blue line leading to the man's gun quivered as he fell. Wax stood up slowly, brushing the dust from his clothing. At that moment another shot cracked in the air.

He cursed, reflexively Pushing against the nails again, though his instincts told him he'd be too late. By the time he heard a shot, it was too late for Pushing to help.

This time he was thrown to the ground. That force had to go somewhere, and if the nails couldn't move, he had to. He grunted as he hit and raised his revolver, dust

sticking to the sweat on his hand. He searched frantically for the one who'd fired at him. They'd missed. Perhaps the steel bubble had—

A body rolled off the top of the blacksmith's shop and thumped down to the ground with a puff of red dust. Wax blinked, then raised his gun to chest level and moved over behind the fence again, crouching down for cover. He kept an eye on the blue Allomantic lines. They could warn him if someone got close, but only if the person was carrying or wearing metal.

The body that had fallen beside the building didn't have a single line pointing to it. However, another set of quivering lines pointed to something moving along the back of the forge. Wax leveled his gun, taking aim as a figure ducked around the side of the building and ran toward him.

The woman wore a white duster, reddened at the bottom. She kept her dark hair pulled back in a tail, and wore trousers and a wide belt, with thick boots on her feet. She had a squarish face. A strong face, with lips that often rose slightly at the right side in a half smile.

Wax heaved a sigh of relief and lowered his gun. "Lessie."

"You knock yourself to the ground again?" she asked as she reached the cover of the fence beside him. "You've got more dust on your face than Miles has scowls. Maybe it's time for you to retire, old man."

"Lessie, I'm *three months* older than you are."

"Those are a long three months." She peeked up over the fence. "Seen anyone else?"

“I dropped a man up on the balcony,” Wax said. “I couldn’t see if it was Bloody Tan or not.”

“It wasn’t,” she said. “He wouldn’t have tried to shoot you from so far away.”

Wax nodded. Tan liked things personal. Up close. The psychopath lamented when he had to use a gun, and he rarely shot someone without being able to see the fear in their eyes.

Lessie scanned the quiet town, then glanced at him, ready to move. Her eyes flickered downward for a moment. Toward his shirt pocket.

Wax followed her gaze. A letter was peeking out of his pocket, delivered earlier that day. It was from the grand city of Elendel, and was addressed to Lord Waxillium Ladrian. A name Wax hadn’t used in years. A name that felt wrong to him now.

He tucked the letter farther into his pocket. Lessie thought it implied more than it did. The city didn’t hold anything for him now, and House Ladrian would get along without him. He really should have burned that letter.

Wax nodded toward the fallen man beside the wall to distract her from the letter. “Your work?”

“He had a bow,” she said. “Stone arrowheads. Almost had you from above.”

“Thanks.”

She shrugged, eyes glittering in satisfaction. Those eyes now had lines at the sides of them, weathered by the Roughts’ harsh sunlight. There had been a time when she and Wax had kept a tally of who had saved the other most often. They’d both lost track years ago.

“Cover me,” Wax said softly.

“With what?” she asked. “Paint? Kisses? You’re already covered with dust.”

Wax raised an eyebrow at her.

“Sorry,” she said, grimacing. “I’ve been playing cards too much with Wayne lately.”

He snorted and ran in a crouch to the fallen corpse and rolled it over. The man had been a cruel-faced fellow with several days of stubble on his cheeks; the bullet wound bled out his right side. *I think I recognize him*, Wax thought to himself as he went through the man’s pockets and came out with a drop of red glass, colored like blood.

He hurried back to the fence.

“Well?” Lessie asked.

“Donal’s crew,” Wax said, holding up the drop of glass.

“Bastards,” Lessie said. “They couldn’t just leave us to it, could they?”

“You *did* shoot his son, Lessie.”

“And you shot his brother.”

“Mine was self-defense.”

“Mine was too,” she said. “That kid was *annoying*. Besides, he survived.”

“Missing a toe.”

“You don’t need ten,” she said. “I have a cousin with four. She does just fine.”

She raised her revolver, scanning the empty town. “Of course, she does look kind of ridiculous. Cover me.”

“With what?”

She just grinned and ducked out from behind the cover, scrambling across the ground toward the smithy.

Harmony, Wax thought with a smile, *I love that woman*.

He watched for more gunmen, but Lessie reached the building without any further shots being fired. Wax nodded to her, then dashed across the street toward the hotel. He ducked inside, checking the corners for foes. The taproom was empty, so he took cover beside the doorway, waving toward Lessie. She ran down to the next building on her side of the street and checked it out.

Donal's crew. Yes, Wax had shot his brother—the man had been robbing a railway car at the time. From what he understood, though, Donal hadn't ever cared for his brother. No, the only thing that riled Donal was losing money, which was probably why he was here. He'd put a price on Bloody Tan's head for stealing a shipment of his bendalloy. Donal probably hadn't expected Wax to come hunting Tan the same day he did, but his men had standing orders to shoot Wax or Lessie if seen.

Wax was half tempted to leave the dead town and let Donal and Tan have at it. The thought of it made his eye twitch, though. He'd promised to bring Tan in. That was that.

Lessie waved from the inside of her building, then pointed toward the back. She was going to go out in that direction and creep along behind the next set of buildings. Wax nodded, then made a curt gesture. He'd try to hook up with Wayne and Barl, who had gone to check the other side of the town.

Lessie vanished, and Wax picked his way through the old hotel toward a side door. He passed old, dirty nests made by both rats and men. The town picked up miscreants the way a dog picked up fleas. He even passed a place where it looked like

some wayfarer had made a small firepit on a sheet of metal with a ring of rocks. It was a wonder the fool hadn't burned the entire building to the ground.

Wax eased open the side door and stepped into an alleyway between the hotel and the store beside it. The gunshots earlier would have been heard, and someone might come looking. Best to stay out of sight.

Wax edged around the back of the store, stepping quietly across the red-clay ground. The hillside here was overgrown with weeds except for the entrance to an old cold cellar. Wax wound around it, then paused, eyeing the wood-framed pit.

Maybe . . .

He knelt beside the opening, peering down. There had been a ladder here once, but it had rotted away—the remnants were visible below in a pile of old splinters. The air smelled musty and wet . . . with a hint of smoke. Someone had been burning a torch down there.

Wax dropped a bullet into the hole, then leaped in, gun out. As he fell, he filled his iron metalmind, decreasing his weight. He was Twinborn—a Feruchemist as well as an Allomancer. His Allomantic power was Steelpushing, and his Feruchemical power, called Skimming, was the ability to grow heavier or lighter. It was a powerful combination of talents.

He Pushed against the round below him, slowing his fall so that he landed softly. He returned his weight to normal—or, well, normal for him. He often went about at three-quarters of his unadjusted weight, making himself lighter on his feet, quicker to react.

He crept through the darkness. It had been a long, difficult road, finding where Bloody Tan was hiding. In the end, the fact that Feltrel had suddenly emptied of other bandits, wanderers, and unfortunates had been a major clue. Wax stepped softly, working his way deeper into the cellar. The scent of smoke was stronger here, and though the light was fading, he made out a firepit beside the earthen wall. That and a ladder that could be moved into place at the entrance.

That gave him pause. It indicated that whoever was making their hideout in the cellar—it could be Tan, or it could be someone else entirely—was still down here. Unless there was another way out. Wax crept forward a little farther, squinting in the dark.

There was light ahead.

Wax cocked his gun softly, then drew a little vial out of his mistcoat and pulled the cork with his teeth. He downed the whiskey and steel in one shot, restoring his reserves. He flared his steel. Yes . . . there was metal ahead of him, down the tunnel. How long was this cellar? He had assumed it would be small, but the reinforcing wood timbers indicated something deeper, longer. More like a mine adit.

He crept forward, focused on those metal lines. Someone would have to aim a gun if they saw him, and the metal would quiver, giving him a chance to Push the weapon out of their hands. Nothing moved. He slid forward, smelling musty damp soil, fungus, potatoes left to bud. He approached a trembling light, but could hear nothing. The metal lines did not move.

Finally, he got close enough to make out a lamp hanging by a hook on a wooden beam near the wall. Something else hung at the center of the tunnel. A body? Hanged? Wax cursed softly and hurried forward, wary of a trap. It *was* a corpse, but it left him

baffled. At first glance, it seemed years old. The eyes were gone from the skull, the skin pulled back against the bone. It didn't stink, and wasn't bloated.

He thought he recognized it. Geormin, the coachman who brought mail into Weathering from the more distant villages around the area. That was his uniform, at least, and it seemed like his hair. He'd been one of Tan's first victims, the disappearance that sent Wax hunting. That had only been two months back.

He's been mummified, Wax thought. *Prepared and dried like leather*. He felt revolted—he'd gone drinking with Geormin on occasion, and though the man cheated at cards, he'd been an amiable enough fellow.

The hanging wasn't an ordinary one, either. Wires had been used to prop up Geormin's arms so they were out to the sides, his head cocked, his mouth pried open. Wax turned away from the gruesome sight, his eye twitching.

Careful, he told himself. *Don't let him anger you. Keep focused*. He would be back to cut Geormin down. Right now, he couldn't afford to make the noise. At least he knew he was on the right track. This was certainly Bloody Tan's lair.

There was another patch of light in the distance. How long was this tunnel? He approached the pool of light, and here found another corpse, this one hung on the wall sideways. Annarel, a visiting geologist who had vanished soon after Geormin. Poor woman. She'd been dried in the same manner, body spiked to the wall in a very specific pose, as if she were on her knees inspecting a pile of rocks.

Another pool of light drew him onward. Clearly this wasn't a cellar—it was probably some kind of smuggling tunnel left over from the days when Feltrel had been a booming town. Tan hadn't built this, not with those aged wooden supports.

Wax passed another six corpses, each lit by its own glowing lantern, each arranged in some kind of pose. One sat in a chair, another strung up as if flying, a few stuck to the wall. The later ones were more fresh, the last one recently killed. Wax didn't recognize the slender man, who hung with hand to his head in a salute.

Rust and Ruin, Wax thought. *This isn't Bloody Tan's lair . . . it's his gallery.*

Sickened, Wax made his way to the next pool of light. This one was different. Brighter. As he approached, he realized that he was seeing sunlight streaming down from a square cut in the ceiling. The tunnel led up to it, probably to a former trapdoor that had rotted or broken away. The ground sloped in a gradual slant up to the hole.

Wax crawled up the slope, then cautiously poked his head out. He'd come up in a building, though the roof was gone. The brick walls were mostly intact, and there were four altars in the front, just to Wax's left. An old chapel to the Survivor. It seemed empty.

Wax crawled out of the hole, his Sterrion at the side of his head, coat marred by dirt from below. The clean, dry air smelled good to him.

"Each life is a performance," a voice said, echoing in the ruined church.

Wax immediately ducked to the side, rolling up to an altar.

"But we are not the performers," the voice continued. "We are the puppets."

"Tan," Wax said. "Come out."

"I have seen God, lawkeeper," Tan whispered. Where was he? "I have seen Death himself, with the nails in his eyes. I have seen the Survivor, who is life."

Wax scanned the small chapel. It was cluttered with broken benches and fallen statues. He rounded the side of the altar, judging the sound to come from the back of the room.

“Other men wonder,” Tan’s voice said, “but I know. I know I’m a puppet. We all are. Did you like my show? I worked so hard to build it.”

Wax continued along the building’s right wall, his boots leaving a trail in the dust. He breathed shallowly, a line of sweat creeping down his right temple. His eye was twitching. He saw corpses on the walls in his mind’s eye.

“Many men never get a chance to create true art,” Tan said. “And the best performances are those which can never be reproduced. Months, years, spent preparing. Everything placed right. But at the end of the day, the rotting will begin. I couldn’t truly mummify them; I hadn’t the time or resources. I could only preserve them long enough to prepare for this one show. Tomorrow, it will be ruined. You were the only one to see it. Only you. I figure . . . we’re all just puppets . . . you see . . .”

The voice *was* coming from the back of the room, near some rubble that was blocking Wax’s view.

“Someone else moves us,” Tan said.

Wax ducked around the side of the rubble, raising his Sterrion.

Tan stood there, holding Lessie in front of him, her mouth gagged, her eyes wide. Wax froze in place, gun raised. Lessie was bleeding from her leg and her arm. She’d been shot, and her face was growing pale. She’d lost blood. That was how Tan had been able to overpower her.

Wax grew still. He didn’t feel anxiety. He couldn’t afford to; it might make him shake, and shaking might make him miss. He could see Tan’s face behind Lessie; the man held a garrote around her neck.

Tan was a slender, fine-fingered man. He'd been a mortician. Black hair, thinning, worn greased back. A nice suit that now shone with blood.

"Someone else moves us, lawman," Tan said softly.

Lessie met Wax's eyes. They both knew what to do in this situation. Last time, he'd been the one captured. People always tried to use them against one another. In Lessie's opinion, that wasn't a disadvantage. She'd have explained that if Tan *hadn't* known the two of them were a couple, he'd have killed her right off. Instead, he'd kidnapped her. That gave them a chance to get out.

Wax sighted down the barrel of his Sterrion. He drew in the trigger until he balanced the weight of the sear right on the edge of firing, and Lessie blinked. One. Two. Three.

Wax fired.

In the same instant, Tan yanked Lessie to the right.

The shot broke the air, echoing against clay bricks. Lessie's head jerked back as Wax's bullet took her just above the right eye. Blood sprayed against the clay wall beside her. She crumpled.

Wax stood, frozen, horrified. *No . . . that isn't the way . . . it can't . . .*

"The best performances," Tan said, smiling and looking down at Lessie's figure, "are those that can only be performed once."

Wax shot him in the head.

1

Five months later, Wax walked through the decorated rooms of a large, lively party, passing men in dark suits with tailcoats and women in colorful dresses with narrow waists and lots of folds through long pleated skirts. They called him “Lord Waxillium” or “Lord Ladrian” when they spoke to him.

He nodded to each, but avoided being drawn into conversation. He deliberately made his way to one of the back rooms of the party, where dazzling electric lights—the talk of the city—produced a steady, too-even light to ward off the evening’s gloom. Outside the windows, he could see mist tickling the glass.

Defying decorum, Wax pushed his way through the room’s enormous glass double doors and stepped out onto the mansion’s grand balcony. There, finally, he felt like he could breathe again.

He closed his eyes, taking the air in and out, feeling the faint wetness of the mists on the skin of his face. *Buildings are so . . . suffocating here in the city*, he thought. *Have I simply forgotten about that, or did I not notice it when I was younger?*

He opened his eyes, and rested his hands on the balcony railing to look out over Elendel. It was the grandest city in all the world, a metropolis designed by Harmony himself. The place of Wax’s youth. A place that hadn’t been his home for twenty years.

Though it had been five months since Lessie’s death, he could still hear the gunshot, see the blood sprayed on the bricks. He had left the Roughs, moved back to the city, answering the desperate summons to do his duty to his house at his uncle’s passing.

Five months and a world away, and he could still hear that gunshot. Crisp, clean, like the sky cracking.

Behind him, he could hear musical laughter coming from the warmth of the room. Cett Mansion was a grand place, full of expensive woods, soft carpets, and sparkling chandeliers. No one joined him on the balcony.

From this vantage, he had a perfect view of the lights down Demoux Promenade. A double row of bright electric lamps with a steady, blazing whiteness. They glowed like bubbles along the wide boulevard, which was flanked by the even wider canal, the still and quiet waters reflecting the light. An evening railway engine called a greeting as it chugged through the distant center of the city, hemming the mists with darker smoke.

Down Demoux Promenade, Wax had a good view of both the Ironspine Building and Tekiel Tower, one on either side of the canal. Both were unfinished, but their steelwork lattices already rose high into the sky. Mind-numbingly high.

The architects continued to release updated reports of how high they intended to go, each one trying to outdo the other. Rumors he'd heard at this very party, credible ones, claimed that both would eventually top out at over fifty stories. Nobody knew which would end up proving the taller, though friendly wagers were common.

Wax breathed in the mists. Out in the Roughs, Cett Mansion—which was three stories high—would have been as tall as a building got. Here, it felt dwarfed. The world had gone and changed on him during his years out of the city. It had grown up, inventing lights that needed no fire to glow and buildings that threatened to rise higher than the mists themselves. Looking down that wide street at the edge of the Fifth Octant, Wax suddenly felt very, very old.

“Lord Waxillium?” a voice asked from behind.

He turned to find an older woman, Lady Aving Cett, peeking out the door at him. Her gray hair was up in a bun and she wore rubies at her neck. “By Harmony, my good man. You’ll take a chill out here! Come, there are some people you will wish to meet.”

“I’ll be along presently, my lady,” Wax said. “I’m just getting a little air.”

Lady Cett frowned, but retreated. She didn’t know what to make of him; none of them did. Some saw him as a mysterious scion of the Ladrian family, associated with strange stories of the realms beyond the mountains. The rest assumed him to be an uncultured, rural buffoon. He figured he was probably both.

He’d been on show all night. He was *supposed* to be looking for a wife, and pretty much everyone knew it. House Ladrian was insolvent following his uncle’s imprudent management, and the easiest path to solvency was marriage. Unfortunately, his uncle had *also* managed to offend three-quarters of the city’s upper crust.

Wax leaned forward on the balcony, the Sterrion revolvers under his arms jabbing his sides. With their long barrels, they weren’t meant to be carried in underarm holsters. They had been awkward all night.

He should be getting back to the party to chat and try to repair House Ladrian’s reputation. But the thought of that crowded room, so hot, so close, sweltering, making it difficult to breathe. . . .

Giving himself no time to reconsider, he swung off over the side of the balcony and began falling three stories toward the ground. He burned steel, then dropped a spent bullet casing slightly behind himself and Pushed against it; his weight sent it speeding down to the earth faster than he fell. As always, thanks to his Feruchemy, he was lighter

than he should have been. He hardly knew anymore what it felt like to go around at his full weight.

When the casing hit the ground, he Pushed against it and sent himself horizontally in a leap over the garden wall. With one hand on its stone top, he vaulted out of the garden, then reduced his weight to a fraction of normal as he fell down the other side. He landed softly.

Ah, good, he thought, crouching down and peering through the mists. *The coachmen's yard*. The vehicles everyone had used to get there were arranged here in neat rows, the coachmen themselves chatting in a few cozy rooms that spilled orange light into the mists. No electric lights here; just good, warmth-giving hearths.

He walked among the carriages until he found his own, then opened the trunk strapped to the back.

Off came his gentleman's fine dinner coat. Instead he threw on his mistcoat, a long, enveloping garment like a duster with a thick collar and cuffed sleeves. He slipped a shotgun into its pocket on the inside, then buckled on his gun belt and moved the Sterrions into the holsters at his hips.

Ah, he thought. *Much better*. He really needed to stop carrying the Sterrions and get some more practical weapons for concealment. Unfortunately, he'd never found anything as good as Ranette's work. Hadn't she moved to the city, though? Perhaps he could look her up and talk her into making him something. Assuming she didn't shoot him on sight.

A few moments later, he was running through the city, the mistcoat light upon his back. He left it open at the front, revealing his black shirt and gentleman's trousers. The

ankle-length mistcoat had been divided into strips from just above the waist, the tassels streaming behind him with a faint rustle.

He dropped a bullet casing and launched himself high into the air, landing atop the building across the street from the mansion. He glanced back at it, the windows ablaze in the evening dark. What kind of rumors was he going to start, vanishing from the balcony like that?

Well, they already knew he was Twinborn—that was a matter of public record. His disappearance wasn't going to do much to help patch his family's reputation. For the moment, he didn't care. He'd spent almost every evening since his return to the city at one social function or another, and they hadn't had a misty night in weeks.

He needed the mists. This was who he was.

Wax dashed across the rooftop and leaped off, moving toward Demoux Promenade. Just before hitting the ground, he flipped a spent casing down and Pushed on it, slowing his descent. He landed in a patch of decorative shrubs that caught his coat tassels and made a rustling noise.

Damn. Nobody planted decorative shrubs out in the Roughs. He pulled himself free, wincing at the noise. A few weeks in the city, and he was already getting rusty?

He shook his head and Pushed himself into the air again, moving out over the wide boulevard and parallel canal. He angled his flight so he crested that and landed on one of the new electric lamps. There was one nice thing about a modern city like this; it had a *lot* of metal.

He smiled, then flared his steel and Pushed off the top of the streetlamp, sending himself in a wide arc through the air. Mist streamed past him, swirling as the wind rushed

against his face. It was thrilling. A man never truly felt free until he'd thrown off gravity's chains and sought the sky.

As he crested his arc, he Pushed against another streetlight, throwing himself farther forward. The long row of metal poles was like his own personal railway line. He bounded onward, his antics drawing attention from those in passing carriages, both horse-drawn and horseless.

He smiled. Coinshots like himself were relatively rare, but Elendel was a major city with an enormous population. He wouldn't be the first man these people had seen bounding by metal through the city. Coinshots often acted as high-speed couriers in Elendel.

The city's size still astonished him. Millions lived here, maybe as many as *five* million. Nobody had a sure count across all of its wards—they were called octants, and as one might expect, there were eight of them.

Millions; he couldn't picture that, though he'd grown up here. Before he'd left Weathering, he'd been starting to think it was getting too big, but there couldn't have been ten thousand people in the town.

He landed atop a lamp directly in front of the massive Ironspine Building. He craned his neck, looking up through the mists at the towering structure. The unfinished top was lost in the darkness. Could he climb something so high? He couldn't Pull on metals, only Push—he wasn't some mythological Mistborn from the old stories, like the Survivor or the Ascendant Warrior. One Allomantic power, one Feruchemical power, that was all a man could have. In fact, having just one was a rare privilege—being Twinborn like Wax was truly exceptional.

Wayne claimed to have memorized the names of all of the different possible combinations of Twinborn. Of course, Wayne also claimed to have once stolen a horse that belched in perfect musical notes, so one learned to take what he said with a pinch of copper. Wax honestly didn't pay attention to all of the definitions and names for Twinborn; he was called a Crasher, the mix of a Coinshot and a Skimmer. He rarely bothered to think of himself that way.

He began to fill his metalminds—the iron bracers he wore on his upper arms—draining himself of more weight, making himself even lighter. That weight would be stored away for future use. Then, ignoring the more cautious part of his mind, he flared his steel and *Pushed*.

He shot upward. The wind became a roar, and the lamp was a good anchor—lots of metal, firmly attached to the ground—capable of pushing him quite high. He'd angled slightly, and the building's stories became a blur in front of him. He landed about twenty stories up, just as his Push on the lamp was reaching its limit.

This portion of the building had been finished already, the exterior of a molded material that imitated worked stone. Ceramics, he'd heard. It was a common practice for tall buildings, where the lower levels would be actual stone, but the higher reaches would use something lighter.

He grabbed hold of an outcropping. He wasn't so light that the wind could push him away—not with his metalminds on his forearms and the weapons he wore. His lighter body did make it easier to hold himself in place.

Mist swirled beneath him. It seemed almost playful. He looked upward, deciding his next step. His steel revealed lines of blue to nearby sources of metal, many of which

were the structure's frame. Pushing on any of them would send him away from the building.

There, he thought, noting a decent-sized ledge about five feet up. He climbed up the side of the building, gloved fingers sure on the complexly ornamented surface. A Coinshot quickly learned not to fear heights. He hoisted himself up onto the ledge, then dropped a bullet casing, stopping it with his booted foot.

He looked upward, judging his trajectory. He drew a vial from his belt, then uncorked it and downed the liquid and steel shavings inside it. He hissed through his teeth as the whiskey burned his throat. Good stuff, from Stagin's still. *Damn, I'm going to miss that when my stock runs out*, he thought, tucking the vial away.

Most Allomancers didn't use whiskey in their metal vials. Most Allomancers were missing out on a perfect opportunity. He smiled as his internal steel reserves were restored; then he flared the metal and launched himself.

He flew up into the night sky. Unfortunately, the Ironspine was built in set-back tiers, the upper stories growing progressively narrower as you went higher. That meant that even though he Pushed himself directly up, he was soon soaring in open darkness, mists around him, the building's side a good ten feet away.

Wax reached into his coat and removed his short-barreled shotgun from the long, sleeve-like pocket inside. He turned—pointing it outward—braced it against his side, and fired.

He was light enough that the kick flung him toward the building. The boom of the blast echoed below, but he had spray shot in the shells, too small and light to hurt anyone when it fell dispersed from such a height.

He slammed into the wall of the tower five stories above where he'd been, and grabbed hold of a spikelike protrusion. The decoration up here really was marvelous. Who did they think would be looking at it? He shook his head. Architects were curious types. Not practical at all, like a good gunsmith. Wax climbed to another shelf and jumped upward again.

The next jump was enough to get him to the open steelwork lattice of the unfinished upper floors. He strolled across a girder, then shimmied up a vertical member—his reduced weight making it easy—and climbed atop the very tallest of the beams jutting from the top of the building.

The height was dizzying. Even with the mists obscuring the landscape, he could see the double row of lights illuminating the street below. Other lights glowed more softly across the town, like the floating candles of a seafarer's ocean burial. Only the absence of lights allowed him to pick out the various parks and the bay far to the west.

Once, this city had felt like home. That was before he'd spent twenty years living out in the dust, where the law was sometimes a distant memory and people considered carriages a frivolity. What would Lessie have thought of one of these horseless contraptions, with the thin wheels meant for driving on a city's fine paved streets? Vehicles that ran on oil and grease, not hay and horseshoes?

He turned about on his perch. It was difficult to judge locations in the dark and the mists, but he did have the advantage of a youth spent in this section of the city. Things had changed, but not *that* much. He judged the direction, checked his steel reserves, then launched himself out into the darkness.

He shot outward in a grand arc above the city, flying for a good half a minute on the Push off those enormous girders. The skyscraper became a shadowed silhouette behind him, then vanished. Eventually, his impetus ran out, and he dropped back through the mists. He let himself fall, quiet. When the lights grew close—and he could see that nobody was below him—he pointed his shotgun at the ground and pulled the trigger.

The jolt punched him upward for a moment, slowing his descent. He Pushed off the birdshot in the ground to slow him further; he landed easily in a soft crouch. He noticed with dissatisfaction that he'd all but ruined some good paving stones with the shot.

Harmony! he thought. This place really was going to take some getting used to. *I'm like a horse blundering through a narrow marketplace*, he thought, hooking his shotgun back under his coat. *I need to learn more finesse*. Out in the Roughts, he'd been considered a refined gentleman. Here, if he didn't watch himself, he'd soon prove himself to be the uncultured brute that most of the nobility already assumed that he was. It—

Gunfire.

Wax responded immediately. He Pushed himself sideways off an iron gate, then ducked in a roll. He came up and reached for a Sterrion with his right hand, his left steadying the shotgun in its sleeve in his coat.

He peered into the night. Had his thoughtless shotgun blasts drawn the attention of the local constables? The guns fired again, and he frowned. *No. Those are too distant. Something's happening.*

This actually gave him a thrill. He leaped into the air and down the street, Pushing off that same gate to get height. He landed atop a building; this area was filled with three-

and four-story apartment structures that had narrow alleyways between. How could people live without any space around them? He'd have gone mad.

He crossed a few buildings—it was handy that the rooftops were flat—and then stopped to listen. His heart beat excitedly, and he realized he'd been hoping for something like this. It was why he'd been driven to leave the party, to seek out the skyscraper and climb it, to run through the mists. Back in Weathering, as the town grew larger, he'd often patrolled at night, watching for trouble.

He fingered his Sterrion as another shot was fired, closer this time. He judged his distance, then dropped a bullet casing and Pushed himself into the air. He'd restored his weight to three-quarters and left it there. You needed some weight on you to fight effectively.

The mists swirled and spun, teasing him. One could never tell which nights would bring out the mists; they didn't conform to normal weather patterns. A night could be humid and chill, and yet not a wisp of mists would appear. Another night could begin dry as brittle leaves, but the mists would consume it.

They were thin this night, and so visibility was still good. Another crack broke the silence. *There*, Wax thought. Steel burning with a comfortable warmth within him, he leaped over another street in a flurry of mistcoat tassels, spinning mist, and calling wind.

He landed softly, then raised his gun in front of him as he ran in a crouch across the roof. He reached the edge and looked down. Just below him, someone had taken refuge behind a pile of boxes near the mouth of an alley. In the dark, misty night, Wax couldn't make out many details, but the person was armed with a rifle resting on a box.

The barrel was pointed toward a group of people down the street who wore the distinctive domed hats of city constables.

Wax Pushed out lightly from himself in all directions, setting up his steel bubble. A latch on a trapdoor at his feet rattled as his Allomancy affected it. He peered down at the man firing upon the constables. It would be good to do something of actual value in this city, rather than just standing around chatting with the overdressed and the overprivileged.

He dropped a bullet casing, and his Allomancy pressed it down onto the rooftop beneath him. He Pushed more forcefully on it, launching himself up and through the swirling mists. He decreased his weight dramatically and pushed on a window latch as he fell, positioning himself so he landed right in the middle of the alleyway.

With his steel, he could see lines pointing toward four different figures in front of him. Even as he landed—the men muttering curses and spinning toward him—he raised his Sterrion and sighted on the first of the street thugs. The man had a patchy beard and eyes as dark as the night itself.

Wax heard a woman whimpering.

He froze, hand steady, but unable to move. The memories, so carefully dammed up in his head, crashed through and flooded his mind. Lessie, held with a gun to her head. A single shot. Blood on the red brick walls.

The street thug jerked his rifle toward Wax and fired. The steel bubble barely deflected it, and the bullet tugged through the fabric of Wax's coat, just missing his ribs.

He tried to fire, but that whimpering . . .

Oh, Harmony, he thought, appalled at himself. He pointed his gun downward and fired into the ground, then Pushed on the bullet and threw himself backward, up out of the alleyway.

Bullets pierced the mists all around him. Steel bubble or not, he should have fallen to one of them. It was pure luck that saved his life as he landed on another roof and rolled to a stop, prone, protected from the gunfire by a parapet wall.

Wax gasped for breath, hand on his revolver. *Idiot*, he thought to himself. *Fool*. He'd never frozen in combat before, even when he'd been green. *Never*. This, however, was the first time he'd tried to shoot someone since the disaster in the ruined church.

He wanted to duck away in shame, but he gritted his teeth and crawled forward to the edge of the roof. The men were still down there. He could see them better now, gathering and preparing to make a run for it. They probably wanted nothing to do with an Allomancer.

He aimed at the apparent leader. However, before Wax could fire, the man fell to gunfire from the constables. In moments, the alleyway swarmed with men in uniforms. Wax raised his Sterrion beside his head, breathing deeply.

I could have fired that time, he told himself. *It was just that one moment where I froze. It wouldn't have happened again*. He told himself this several times as the constables pulled the malefactors out of the alley one at a time.

There was no woman. The whimpering he'd heard had been a gang member who'd taken a bullet before Wax arrived. The man was still groaning in pain as they took him away.

The constables hadn't seen Wax. He turned and disappeared into the night.

A short time later, Wax arrived at Ladrian Mansion. His residence in the city, his ancestral home. He didn't feel like he belonged there, but he used it anyway.

The stately home lacked expansive grounds, though it did have four elegant stories, with balconies and a nice patio garden out back. Wax dropped a coin and bounded over the front fence, landing atop the gatehouse. *My carriage is back*, he noticed. Not surprising. They were getting used to him; he wasn't certain whether to be pleased by that or ashamed of it.

He Pushed off the gates—which rattled at the weight—and landed on a fourth story balcony. Coinshots had to learn precision, unlike their cousin Allomancers, Ironpullers—also known as Lurchers. Those would just pick a target and Pull themselves toward it, but they usually had to grind up the side of a building, making noise. Coinshots had to be delicate, careful, accurate.

The window was unlatched; he'd left it that way. He didn't fancy dealing with people at the moment; his abortive confrontation with the criminals had rattled him. He slipped into the darkened room, then padded across it and listened at the door. No sounds in the hallway. He opened the door silently, then moved out.

The hallway was dark, and he was no Tineye, capable of enhancing his senses. He felt his way with each step, being careful not to trip on the edge of a rug or bump into a pedestal.

His rooms were at the end of the hallway. He reached for the brass knob with gloved fingers. Excellent. He carefully pushed the door open, stepping into his bedroom. Now he just had to—

A door opened on the other side of his room, letting in bright yellow light. Wax froze in place, though his hand quickly reached into his coat for one of his Sterrions.

An aging man stood in the doorway, holding a large candelabrum. He wore a tidy black uniform and white gloves. He raised an eyebrow at Wax. “High Lord Ladrian,” he said, “I see that you’ve returned.”

“Um . . .” Wax said, sheepishly removing his hand from inside his coat.

“Your bath is drawn, my lord.”

“I didn’t ask for a bath.”

“Yes, but considering your night’s . . . entertainments, I thought it prudent to prepare one for you.” The butler sniffed. “Gunpowder?”

“Er, yes.”

“I trust my lord didn’t shoot anyone too important.”

No, Wax thought. No, I couldn’t.

Tillaume stood there, stiff, disapproving. He didn’t say the words he was undoubtedly thinking: that Wax’s disappearance from the party had caused a minor scandal, that it would be even *more* difficult to procure a proper bride now. He didn’t say that he was disappointed. He didn’t say these things because he was, after all, a proper lord’s servant.

Besides, he could say them all with a glance anyway.

“Shall I draft a letter of apology to Lady Cett, my lord? I believe she will expect it, considering that you sent one to Lord Stanton.”

“Yes, that would be well,” Wax said. He lowered his fingers to his belt, feeling the metal vials there, the revolver at each hip, the weight of the shotgun strapped inside his coat. *What am I doing? I’m acting like a fool.*

He suddenly felt exceedingly childish. Leaving a party to go patrolling through the city, looking for trouble? What was wrong with him?

He felt as if he’d been trying to recapture something. A part of the person he’d been before Lessie’s death. He had known, deep down, that he might have trouble shooting now and had wanted to prove otherwise.

He’d failed that test.

“My lord,” Tillaume said, stepping closer. “May I speak . . . boldly, for a moment?”

“You may.”

“The city has a large number of constables,” Tillaume said. “And they are quite capable in their jobs. Our house, however, has but one high lord. Thousands depend on you, sir.” Tillaume nodded his head in respect, then moved to begin lighting some candles in the bedroom.

The butler’s words were true. House Ladrian was one of the most powerful in the city, at least historically. In the city’s government, Wax represented the interests of all of the people his house employed. True, they’d also have a representative based on votes in their guild, but it was Wax they depended on most.

His house was nearly bankrupt—rich in potential, in holdings, and in workers, but poor in cash and connections because of his uncle’s foolishness. If Wax didn’t do

something to change that, it could mean jobs lost, poverty, and collapse as other houses pounced on his holdings and seized them for debts not paid.

Wax ran his thumbs along his Sterrions. *The constables handled those street toughs just fine*, he admitted to himself. *They didn't need me. This city doesn't need me, not like Weathering did.*

He was trying to cling to what he had been. He wasn't that person any longer. He couldn't be. But people did need him for something else.

"Tillaume," Wax said.

The butler looked back from the candleas. The mansion didn't have electric lights yet, though workmen were coming to install them soon. Something his uncle had paid for before dying, money Wax couldn't recover now.

"Yes, my lord?" Tillaume asked.

Wax hesitated, then slowly pulled his shotgun from its place inside his coat and set it into the trunk beside his bed, placing it beside a companion he'd left there earlier. He took off his mistcoat, wrapping the thick material over his arm. He held the coat reverently for a moment, then placed it in the trunk. His Sterrion revolvers followed. They weren't his only guns, but they represented his life in the Roughs.

He closed the lid of the trunk of his old life. "Take this, Tillaume," Wax said. "Put it somewhere."

"Yes, my lord," Tillaume said. "I shall have it ready for you, should you need it again."

“I won’t be needing it,” Wax said. He had given himself one last night with the mists. A thrilling climb up the tower, an evening spent with the darkness. He chose to focus on that—rather than his failure with the toughs—as his night’s accomplishment.

One final dance.

“Take it, Tillaume,” Wax said, turning away from the trunk. “Put it somewhere safe, but put it away. For good.”

“Yes, my lord,” the butler said softly. He sounded approving.

And that, Wax thought, is that. He then walked into the washroom. Wax the lawkeeper was gone.

It was time to be Lord Waxillium Ladrian, Sixteenth High Lord of House Ladrian, residing in the Fourth Octant of Elendel City.

My AI and Miss Brodie

By Pamela Sargent

Ship, the artificial intelligence that unites the three volumes of my Seed trilogy—*Earthseed*, *Farseed*, and the just-published *Seed Seeker*—is the mind inside the space-faring vessel sent out by a far-future Earth to seed other worlds with human life. In *Earthseed*, Ship is the only parent the young people growing up inside it have ever known. In *Farseed*, Ship is absent until the last chapter of the book, although still remembered by its children, who have settled the planet they call Home but are still caught in the conflict among them than began aboard Ship. In *Seed Seeker*, Ship returns to find out what has become of the descendants of its earthseed, who now recall it only as a legendary part of their distant past.

The obvious science-fictional antecedents of Ship include, to mention only one, Robert A. Heinlein's *Universe*. What isn't apparent is that the creation of Ship was also inspired by Muriel Spark's short novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, originally published in 1961. There were times when I imagined Ship speaking in tones similar to those of, say, HAL in *2001*, but maybe just as many when I would hear the voice of Maggie Smith, who won an Oscar for her portrayal of Jean Brodie in the 1969 movie based on the novel, or Vanessa Redgrave, who first played the role on the stage, reciting Ship's lines of dialogue.

A number of my novels and stories were influenced by sources that might seem eccentric. One early novel of mine, *Watchstar*, was fueled by the writings of both Arthur C. Clarke and Carlos Casteneda (one an sf writer rooted in rationality, the other a self-proclaimed shaman and occult thinker whose supposed anthropological studies were probably fiction). My Venus novels grew out of wanting to write a generational novel like Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, unlikely as that sounds; using a terraforming project as background provided the appropriate scope for a story of generations, and my fictional family, unlike the Buddenbrooks of Mann's novel, turned out not to be a family in decline. The characters led me to the story, while the science-fictional elements pushed it in a very different direction from what I had originally intended.

The same thing happened with Ship, who turned out to be not at all like Jean Brodie, the passionate and devoted schoolteacher who is betrayed by one of her students. But without Jean Brodie's (and Muriel Spark's) aid in imagining and shaping Ship, I might not have realized (not to give too much away to anyone who hasn't read my novels) that Ship has been misled by its own creators and is also in danger of being betrayed by them even as it inadvertently misleads the children it carries. *Farseed* went in another direction, given Ship's absence, while *Seed Seeker* depicts two very different and divided human settlements that fear what they think of as Ship's judgment, but the story had its roots in the mixture of idealism, devotion, and deception that Muriel Spark depicted so well.

Seed Seeker

By Pamela Sargent

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[Pamela Sargent](#) is the author of many highly praised novels, including *Earthseed*, chosen as a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association in 1983. She has won the Nebula Award, the Locus Award, and has been a finalist for the Hugo Award. She lives with writer George Zebrowski in upstate New York.

Chapter One

Bian's great-grandmother Nuy was the first to see the new pinprick of light in the sky.

Bian had followed Nuy downriver to the seashore only because her mother had insisted that she look after the old woman. "Don't let her out of your sight," Tasu told her. Bian did not argue with her mother, although Tasu knew as well as she did that Nuy often wandered down to the shore in search of solitude and was able, in spite of her advanced age, to look out for herself.

Bian found Nuy sitting on a hill overlooking the ocean, her basket empty of fish. The sun was nearly below the horizon in the west. Bian strolled along the shore, clutching her own small basket, kicking up sand while pretending to look for any fish that had washed up onto the beach.

"Go back to your mother," Nuy said at last. Bian halted and shifted her basket from one hand to the other. "Go on home, child. I don't need you here watching me."

It was no use telling Nuy that Tasu had only sent her here to fetch any fish that might have been washed ashore; Nuy could see through a lie as well as anyone. "I know you don't need me," Bian admitted, "but Tasu insisted."

"Tasu worries far too much about me."

"Not any more than the rest of us do."

"And then everybody wonders why I like to wander off by myself." Nuy waved a hand. "Lately it's because I can't bear to see all of your worried looks and sense

everybody's concern for me. It's enough to make me feel I'm being smothered by your worries."

Bian dropped her empty basket and sat down next to Nuy. The old woman's long white braid hung over her left shoulder and down the front of her sleeveless tunic; her slim bare legs and arms were almost as muscular as those of a young person. She was much older than other great-grandparents in their village, because the first of her seven children had not been born until she was in her forties, and her children had followed her example of living for a long time with their mates before having children of their own. Her age was most visible on her lined neck and around her eyes, where deep wrinkles were etched around drooping lids.

"You're one of the First," Bian murmured. "It's natural for us to be concerned about you."

"I'm the only one of the First who's still alive," Nuy said.

"That's what you meant to say."

Nuy was right, of course. She always knew what was lurking in the recesses of Bian's mind, sometimes even before Bian herself became aware of her own hidden thoughts.

Nuy had outlived all the first generation of Home's children, that first generation born of the people who had come down from the sky to settle this world. She had told the story of those sky people often. "All of us grew from the seeds sown here by Ship, that great vessel launched by our ancestors," Nuy would begin. "Some of those seeds were the people who came down from the sky, who flew down from Ship to live here on Home. Ship was the child of the people of Earth, and its purpose was to find other worlds like

Earth, worlds where its seeds could be sown and where they would grow and flower and preserve true humankind.”

At that point, Nuy was often interrupted by two or three of the youngest children, who wanted to know what and where Earth was, what “true humankind” meant, and whether the heavens were anything like the vast sea that stretched to the southern horizon. When she was much younger, Bian had imagined Ship as a very large boat sailing in from the sea and then up the river to disgorge its living cargo along the river’s banks, but she had soon learned that Ship could not have been anything like their boats. Ship, Nuy had explained, was more like one of Home’s two moons, an orb of rock, but with a hollowed out core and crannies where people could live, and with powerful engines that could carry it across the vast distances of space, and with a mind far more complex and all- encompassing than a human being’s.

“Other seeds from Earth were scattered over Home,” Nuy would continue, “and those seeds sprouted into the rabbits and horses and birds and cattle and sheep, the small and large cats, the dogs that befriend us and the wolves and bears that avoid us. None of those creatures existed on Home before our kind came here, and the greener grasses of the plain and many of the plants that feed us also sprang from the Earthseed sown here. If human beings were to survive, we could not live on Home as it was, or so Ship and its designers believed. Some of the life- forms of Earth would fill the niches that Home had left empty, and Home would in time become another Earth. That was their hope. But Home isn’t just another Earth. And we may all be a part of humankind, but strands of Home also took root in us and live within each of us.”

That was usually where Nuy ended her story whenever she told it to the young children. The rest of the story, a tale of the distrust, resentments, hatreds, and battles that had also made them what they were, could wait until they were older. Those battles had finally ended, and after that most of their people had left their original settlement to live along the banks of the river and near the sea. But a few had remained in the north, inside their domed dwellings, because they feared growing too close to Home and losing their true humanity. The battles among them might lie in the past, but distrust had remained.

“Will Ship ever come back?” Bian and some of the others had asked Nuy when they were older.

“I don’t know,” Nuy always replied. “Perhaps.”

The sky had grown dark green. Bian sat with Nuy, not speaking, until the sun set. Nuy intended to stay here at least until the first moon rose; Bian sensed that as soon as the old woman lifted her head to gaze at the sky.

“I saw a strange light in the sky last night,” Nuy said then. “Just before dawn, a light I’ve never seen before. It was only a tiny pinpoint of light, yet it didn’t flicker in the way that the stars do. I wonder if I’ll see it again tonight.”

Nuy was silent after that. Bian sat with her until the sun had set and the first of the stars appeared. Nuy glanced from right to left, grew still as she gazed east, then suddenly clutched Bian’s shoulder. “There it is.” Bian saw it now, a tiny beacon on the horizon. The unfamiliar speck of light shone steadily as it moved slowly across the sky. Nuy let out a sigh and Bian sensed a disturbance inside her great-grandmother. Nuy was afraid.

“You fear it,” Bian said before she could stop herself from speaking.

“I’m afraid of what it might mean.” Nuy’s grip on her shoulder tightened. “You remember the story of how we came to be and how we were brought to Home. Not the story that I told you when you were very small, but the rest of it, the part of the story you heard when you were older.”

“Of course.” Bian gently removed Nuy’s small bony hand from her shoulder.

“Most of the ones your age never did hear the end of that story,” Nuy continued. “Your grandmother heard it, and I think your father might have heard it all, but I may be the only one left in our village who remembers that Ship made a promise to our ancestors.”

Bian frowned. “What promise?”

“Ship’s promise to return.”

Bian turned toward Nuy, surprised. “But you never told us—”

“Ship promised to come back here,” Nuy said, “to see what we had made of ourselves. That was the true end of the story. But as the years passed, most of us came to believe that Ship would never return, that in carrying out its mission to seed other worlds, it might have forgotten about this one. Others worried instead that some misfortune had come to Ship, that it was unable to return, or even that it might have traveled so far across space that it could no longer find its way back to Home. What’s the point in telling young ones about Ship’s promise when it seemed likely that the promise would never be kept? I began to ask myself that after I’d been repeating the story for a while, so I started leaving that part out. When no one ever complained, I decided it was best to leave it that way. Maybe Ship would return, and maybe it wouldn’t, but it was better to get on with our lives and not think about that.”

“No one else ever told us the story except you.”

“Yes,” Nuy murmured, “I seem to have become the guardian of that tale in our village. I have grown to prefer the more uncertain ending I gave it.” She looked up at the sky.

“Maybe that new light is only a small planetary body that was roaming the heavens. Maybe Home has just captured it and made another satellite of it. That’s what I’m telling myself now. It can’t be Ship.”

“There’s no reason to think—”

“I don’t want it to be Ship.”

Bian waited for Nuy to explain what she meant by that, but her great-grandmother said nothing more.

Fan Fiction and *Fuzzy Nation*

By John Scalzi

Last year I announced on my Web site that I had written a novel called *Fuzzy Nation*, which was a “reboot” of the 1962 Hugo-nominated novel *Little Fuzzy*, by H. Beam Piper—which is to say that I took some of the characters and situations of the Piper novel and cast them into a new story which has similarities to, but it ultimately quite a bit different from, the original iteration of the story.

When I did that, I had people say to me, “OMG, you know what you just did? You just wrote fan fiction!”

And my response to that is: Yup, I pretty much did.

I don’t assume that anyone who downloads a science fiction publisher’s sampler doesn’t know what fan fiction is, but I also like to cover all bases, so, if you don’t know, “fan fiction” are stories, written in the universes of popular books, movies, television shows, etc, by the fans of those things, not the original creators (or their authorized collaborators). It’s what happens when someone loves something so much they can’t wait for the next official installment and instead write up their own in a grand game of “what if.”

Some creators get annoyed with people who write fan fiction in their universes but I tend to look at it as a positive thing, because it usually means those people really really really love the worlds you’ve created—love them so much, in fact, they’ve made

them an important part of their lives. As an artist, that's a high compliment; as a business person, it means you've got a committed audience. Both are good things.

I think to some degree most creators start off as fan fiction writers—when I was a kid I imagined myself whirling around with lightsabers and battling cylons (and sometimes battling cylons with lightsabers—crossing the streams!)—playing those games of “what if” and as a result building up our own imaginations to venture out into meet the characters and adventures we would create on our own.

When I sat down to write *Fuzzy Nation*, for various I had been a little burned out on the work and business of writing—what I really wanted to do was play “what if” again. And that's what I did, writing fan fiction in Piper's universe. When I was writing the novel, I wasn't planning to sell it or any such thing (all that came later); all I was doing was writing, and enjoying the act of writing, and having fun with a book I had loved by putting my own spin on the adventures within it.

It was fun. And my take on the Fuzzy tale, I think, reflects that: the fun I had in making it, and the fun I had exploring Piper's work again, as a fan and as a creator in my own right.

So, yes: I wrote fan fiction. And I'll you what: *Fuzzy Nation* is better because I did.

Fuzzy Nation

By John Scalzi

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[John Scalzi](#) is the author of several SF novels, including the bestselling “Old Man’s War” sequence, comprising *Old Man’s War*, *The Ghost Brigades*, and *The Last Colony*. He is a winner of the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and he won the Hugo Award for *Your Hate Mail Will Be Graded*, a collection of essays from his wildly popular blog The Whatever. He lives in Ohio with his wife and daughter.

Chapter One

Jack Holloway set the skimmer to HOVER, swiveled his seat around, and looked at Carl. He shook his head sadly.

“I can’t believe we have to go through this again,” Holloway said. “It’s not that I don’t value you as part of this team, Carl. I do. Really, I do. But I can’t help but think that in some way, I’m just not getting through to you. We’ve gone over this how many times now? A dozen? Two? And yet every time we come out here, it’s like you forget everything you’ve been taught. It’s really very discouraging. Tell me you get what I’m saying to you.”

Carl stared up at Holloway and barked. He was a dog.

“Fine,” Holloway said. “Then maybe *this* time it will stick.” He reached down into a storage bin and hoisted a mound of putty in one hand. “This is acoustical blasting putty. What do we do with it?”

Carl cocked his head.

“Come on, Carl,” Holloway said. “This is the first thing I taught you. We put it on the side of the cliff at strategic points,” Holloway said. “Just like I already did earlier today. You remember. You were there.” He pointed in the direction of Carl’s Cliff, a massive outcropping of rock, two hundred meters high, with geological striations peeking out of the vegetation covering most of the rock face. Carl followed Holloway’s finger with his eyes, more interested in the finger than in the cliff his master had named for him.

Holloway set down the putty and picked up another, smaller object. “And this is the remote-controlled blasting cap,” he said. “Which we attach to the acoustical blasting

putty, so we don't have to be near the acoustical blasting putty when we set it off.

Because that's *boom*. How do we feel about *boom*, Carl?"

Carl got a concerned look on his doggy face. *Boom* was a word he knew. Carl was not fond of *boom*.

"Right," Holloway said. He set down the blasting cap, making sure it was nowhere near the blasting putty, and that the cap receiver was inactive. He picked up a third object.

"And this is the remote detonator," Holloway said. "You remember *this*, right, Carl?"

Carl barked.

"What's that, Carl?" Holloway said. "*You* want to set off the acoustical blasting putty?"

Carl barked again.

"I don't know," Holloway said, doubtfully. "Technically it is a violation of Zarathustra Corporation safe labor practices to allow a nonsentient species member to set off high explosives."

Carl came up to Holloway and licked his face with a whine that said *please please oh please*.

"Oh, all right," Holloway said, fending off the dog. "But this is the *last* time. At least until you grasp *all* the fundamentals of the job. No more slacking off and leaving all the hard work to me. I'm paid to supervise. Are we clear?"

Carl barked once more and then backed off, tail wagging. He knew what was coming next.

Holloway glanced down at the detonator's image panel and checked, for the third time since he placed the charges earlier in the day, that the detonator was keyed specifically to the blasting caps placed into the charges. He pressed the panel to answer YES to each of the automated safety questions and waited while the detonator confirmed by geolocation that it was, in fact, safely outside the blast radius of any charges. This could be overridden, but it took some hacking, and anyway, Holloway preferred not to blow himself up whenever possible. And Carl was not so fond of *boom*.

CHARGES SET AND READY, read the detonator panel. PRESS PANEL TO DETONATE.

"Okay," Holloway said, and set the detonator on the skimmer floor between him and Carl. Carl looked up expectantly.

"Wait for it," Holloway said, and swiveled around in his chair to face the cliff. He could hear Carl's tail thumping excitedly against a crate.

"*Wait for it*," Holloway said again, and tried to spy the places on the cliff he had drilled into earlier in the day, using the skimmer as a platform while he inserted and secured the charges into the drill holes.

Carl gave a little whine.

"Fire!" Holloway said, and heard the dog scramble forward.

The cliff puffed out in four spots, spewing rock and dirt and hurling vegetation for meters. The cliff face darkened as the birds (which is to say, the local flying animal equivalent to birds) that had been nesting in the cliff face's vegetation took to the air, alarmed by the noise and sudden eruptions. A few seconds later, four closely spaced

cracks snapped the air in the skimmer's open cockpit, the sound of the explosions finally reaching Holloway and Carl—loud, but without the Carl-worrying *boom*.

Holloway glanced over to his right, where his information panel lay, sonic imaging program up and running. The sonic probes he'd placed on and around the cliff were spewing their raw feed into the program, which was collating and combining the data, turning it into a three-dimensional representation of the internal structure of the cliff.

"All right," he said, and swiveled around to look at Carl, who still had his paw on the detonator, tongue lolling out of his mouth

"Good boy!" Holloway said, and dug into the storage bin to pull out a zararaptor bone, still heavy with meat. He unwrapped it from its storage film and tossed it at Carl, who fell on it happily. That was the deal: Press the detonator, get a bone. It had taken Holloway more than a few tries to get Carl to press the detonator accurately, but it had been worth the effort. Carl had to come on the surveying trips anyway. Might as well have him be useful, or at least entertaining.

Now, it really *was* a violation of Zarathustra Corporation safe labor practices to let a dog blow things up. But Holloway and Carl worked alone, hundreds of kilometers from ZaraCorp's local headquarters on-planet and 178 light-years from its corporate headquarters on Earth. He wasn't technically a ZaraCorp employee anyway; he was a contractor, just like every other prospector/surveyor here on Zara XXIII. It was cheaper that way.

Holloway reached down and rubbed Carl's head affectionately. Carl, engrossed in the raptor bone, paid him not the slightest bit of mind.

An urgent beep came from Holloway's infopanel. He picked it up to see that the data feeds were suddenly spiking through their bandwidth.

A low rumble thrummed its way into the skimmer cockpit, getting louder the longer it lasted. Carl looked up from his bone and whined. This noise was perilously close to *boom*.

Holloway glanced up and saw a column of dust rising violently from the cliff wall, obscuring everything behind it.

"Oh, crap," he said to himself. He had a very bad, sinking feeling about this.

After a few minutes, the dust began to clear a bit, and his very bad, sinking feeling got worse. Through the indistinct haze, Holloway could see that a portion of the cliff wall had collapsed, the borders of the collapse roughly contiguous with where he had placed his explosive charges. Stark geological striations glared out from where vegetation had been before. Birds swooped into the area, looking for their nests, the remains of which were a couple hundred meters below them, the wreckage muddying and rerouting the river at the foot of the cliff.

"Oh, crap," Holloway said again, and reached for his binoculars.

ZaraCorp would be awfully pissed he'd just caused a cliff collapse. ZaraCorp had been working hard over the last few years to reverse the long-standing public image the company had as a rampant despoiler of nature—earned, to be sure, by actually despoiling nature on a number of planets it had operations on. The public was no longer buying the argument that uninhabited planets had higher ecological tolerances than inhabited ones, or that these ecosystems would quickly restore natural equilibriums once ZaraCorp had

moved on. As far as they were concerned, strip-mining was strip-mining, regardless of whether you were doing it in the mountains of Pennsylvania or the hills of Zara XXIII.

Confronted with overwhelming public opposition to his company's ecological practices (or lack thereof), Wheaton Aubrey VI, Chairman and CEO of Zarathustra Corporation, said "fine" and ordered ZaraCorp and all its subsidiaries to exercise practices consistent with ecological guidelines suggested by the Colonial Environmental Protection Agency. It was all the same to Aubrey. He was no friend to the various ecologies of the planets his company was on, but ZaraCorp's Exploration & Exploitation charter with the Colonial Administration specified that the company would receive tax credits when conforming to CEPA guidelines, so long as the incurred business costs were above a meager cost-of-development baseline formulated decades before anyone cared about the ecological despoilage of worlds they would never actually set foot on.

ZaraCorp's ostentatious new regime of ecological best practices, in other words, helped drive the company's tax indebtedness to something close to zero, a neat trick for an organization whose size and income were a nontrivial fraction of that of the Colonial Administration itself.

But it also meant that events that tarnished ZaraCorp's new eco-friendly PR campaign were looked at rather harshly. For example, collapsing an entire cliff wall. The whole point of using acoustic charges was to minimize the invasiveness of geologic exploration. Holloway didn't intend to make half the cliff fall away, but given ZaraCorp's reputation, the company would have a hard time getting anyone to believe that. Holloway had played fast and loose with regulations before and had mostly gotten

away with it, but this was just the sort of thing that *would*, in fact, get Holloway booted off the planet.

Unless.

“Come on, come *on*,” Holloway said, still peering through his binoculars. He was waiting for the haze to settle enough to make out details.

The communication circuit on Holloway’s infopanel fired up, showing the ID of Chad Bourne, Holloway’s ZaraCorp contractor rep. Holloway swore and slapped the AUDIO ONLY option.

“Hi, Chad,” he said, and put the binoculars back to his eyes.

“Jack, the geeks in the data room tell me there’s something really screwy with your feeds,” Bourne said. “They say everything was coming in clear and then it was like someone turned the feeds up to eleven.” Chad Bourne’s voice came in crystal clear and enveloping, thanks to the skimmer’s one true indulgence: a spectacular sound system. Holloway had it installed when he realized he’d be spending almost all his working life in the skim-mer. It was a wonder in many ways, but it didn’t make Bourne sound any less adenoidal.

“Huh,” Holloway said.

“They say it’s the sort of thing you see when there’s an earthquake. Or a maybe a rock slide,” Bourne said.

“Now that you mention it, I think I felt an earthquake,” Holloway said.

“Really,” Bourne said.

“Yes,” Holloway said. “Just before it happened, Carl was acting all strange. They say animals are always the first to know about these things.”

“So the fact that the data geeks just told me there was absolutely no seismic event of any magnitude in your part of the continent doesn’t bother you any,” Bourne said.

“Who are you going to believe,” Holloway said. “I’m here. They’re there.”

“They’re here with roughly twenty-five million credits’ worth of equipment,” Bourne said. “You’ve got an infopanel and a history of bad surveying practices.”

“*Alleged* bad surveying practices,” Holloway said.

“Jack, you let your dog blow shit up,” Bourne said.

“I do not,” Holloway said. The dust at the cliff wall had finally begun to clear. “That’s just a rumor.”

“We have an eyewitness,” Bourne said.

“She’s unreliable,” Holloway said.

“She’s a trusted employee,” Bourne said. “Unlike some people I could name.”

“She had a personal agenda,” Holloway said. “Trust me.”

“Well, that’s just the thing, isn’t it, Jack?” Bourne said. “You have to earn that trust. And right now, you’ve got not so much of it with me. But I’ll tell you what. I have a surveying satellite that’s coming up over the horizon in about six minutes. When it gets there, I’m going to have it look at that cliff wall you probably just blew up. If it looks like it’s supposed to, then the next time you get into Aubreytown, I’ll buy you a steak at Ruby’s and apologize. But if it looks like I know it’s going to look like, I’m going to revoke your contract and send some security agents to bring you in. And not the ones you go drinking with, Jack. The ones who *don’t* like you. I know, I’ll send Joe DeLise. He’ll be delighted to see you.”

“Good luck getting him off his barstool,” Holloway said.

“For you, I think he’d do it,” Bourne said. “What do you think about that?”

Holloway didn’t respond. He’d stopped listening several seconds earlier, because in his binoculars was a thin stratum of rock, sandwiched between two much larger striations. The stratum he was focused on was dark as coal.

And sparkled.

“Yes,” Holloway said.

“Yes, what?” Bourne said. “Jack, are you even listening to what I’m telling you?”

“Sorry, Chad, you’re breaking up,” Holloway said. “Interference. Sunspots.”

“Jesus, Jack, you’re not even *trying* anymore,” Bourne said. “Enjoy your next five minutes. I’ve already called up your contract on my infopanel. As soon as I get that satellite image, I’m pressing the delete button.” Bourne broke contact.

Holloway looked over at Carl and picked up the detonator panel. “Crate,” he said to the dog. Carl barked, picked up his bone, and headed for his crate, which would immobilize him in case of a skimmer crash. Holloway dropped the detonator into the storage bin, secured his infopanel, and strapped himself into his chair.

“Come on, Carl,” he said, and goosed the skimmer forward. “We’ve got five minutes to keep ourselves from getting kicked off the planet.”

Bioshock: Rapture

By John Shirley

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John Shirley is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *Black Butterflies* and many other novels. He is also a song-writer, singer, and a prominent screenwriter, having co-written the script for the “The Crow” and other films and TV shows. His new novel *Bioshock: Rapture* just came out July 19, 2011, and tells the prequel story to the award-winning first game in the Bioshock videogame franchise. Shirley lives in the San Francisco Bay area in California.

Chapter One

Park Avenue, New York City

1946

Almost a year later . . .

Bill McDonagh was riding an elevator up to the top of the Andrew Ryan Arms—but he felt like he was sinking under the sea. He was toting a box of pipe fittings in one hand, tool kit in the other. He'd been sent so hastily by the maintenance manager he didn't even have the bloody name of his customer. But his mind was on earlier doings in another building, a small office building in lower Manhattan. He'd taken the morning off from his plumbing business to interview for an assistant engineer job. The pay would start low, but the job would take him in a more ambitious direction. They had looked at him with only the faintest interest when he'd walked into the Feeben, Leiber, and Quiffe Engineering Firm. The two interviewers were a couple of snotty wankers—one of them was Feeben Junior. They seemed bored by the time they called him in, and their faint flicker of interest evaporated completely when he started talking about his background. He had done his best to speak in American phraseology, to suppress his accent. But he knew it slipped out. They were looking for some snappy young chap out of New York University, not a cockney blighter who'd worked his way through the East London School of Engineering and Mechanical Vocation.

Bill heard them say it, through the door, after they'd dismissed him: “Another limey grease monkey . . .”

All right then. So he was a grease monkey. Just a mechanic and, lately, a freelance plumbing contractor. *A dirty little job screwin' pipes for the nobs.* Heading up to some rich bloke's penthouse. There was no shame in it.

But there wasn't much money in it either, working on assignment for Chinowski's Maintenance. It'd be a long time before he could save up enough to start a big contracting outfit of his own. He had a couple of lads hired on, from time to time, but not the big contracting and engineering company he'd always envisioned. And Mary Louise had made it clear as polished glass she was not really interested in marrying a glorified plumber.

"I had enough of fellas that think they're the cat's meow because they can fix the terlet," she said.

A pretty girl from the Bronx was Mary Louise Fensen and raring to go. But not terribly bright, after all. Probably drive him barmy anyway.

The moment he'd got home the phone rang, Bud Chinowski, barking about getting his ass to an address in Manhattan, on Park Avenue. Their building maintenance was AWOL—probably drunk somewhere—and the Bigshot at the penthouse needed plumbers "fast as you can drag your lazy ass over there. We've got three bathrooms to finish installing. Get those witless wrench-jockeys of yours over there too."

He'd called Roy Phinn and Pablo Navarro to go on ahead of him. Then he'd changed out of the ill-fitting suit, into the gray, grease-stained coveralls. "Limey grease monkey . . ." he'd murmured, buttoning up.

And here he was, wishing he'd taken time for a cigarette before coming—he couldn't smoke in a posh flat like this without permission. He stepped glumly out of the

elevator, into an antechamber to the penthouse, his toolbox clanking at his side. The little wood-paneled room was scarcely bigger than the elevator. An artfully paneled mahogany door with a brass knob, embossed with an eagle, was its only feature—besides a small metal grid next to the door. He tried the knob. Locked. He shrugged, and knocked on the door. Waiting, he started to feel a little claustrophobic.

“‘Ello?” he called. “Plumbin’ contractor! From Chinowski’s! ‘Ello!” *Don’t drop your Hs, you bastard*, he told himself. “*Hel-lo!*”

A crackling sound, and a low, forceful voice emanated from the grid. “That the other plumber, is it?”

“Uh . . .” He bent and spoke briskly into the grid. “It is, sir!”

“No need to shout into the intercom!”

The door clicked within itself—and to Bill’s amazement it didn’t swing inward but slid into the wall up to the knob. He saw there was a metal runner in the floor and, at the edge of the door, a band of steel. It was wood on the outside, steel inside. Like this man was worried someone might try to fire a bullet through it.

No one was visible on the other side of the open doorway. He saw another hallway, carpeted, with some rather fine old paintings, one of which might be by a Dutch master, if he remembered anything from his trips to the British Museum. A Tiffany lamp stood on an inlaid table, glowing like a gem.

This toff’s got plenty of the ready, Bill thought.

He walked down the hall, into a large, plush sitting room: luxurious sofas, a big unlit fireplace, more choice paintings and fine lamps. A grand piano, its wood polished almost mirrorlike, stood in a corner. On an intricately carved table was an enormous

display of fresh flowers in an antique Chinese jade vase. He'd never seen flowers like them before. And the decorations on the tables . . .

He was staring at a lamp that appeared to be a gold sculpture of a satyr chasing an underdressed young woman when a voice spoke sharply to his right. "The other two are already at work in the back . . . The main bathroom's through here." Bill turned and saw a gent in the archway to the next room already turning away from him. The man wore a gray suit, his dark hair oiled back. Must be the butler. Bill could hear the other two lads, faintly, in the back of the place, arguing about fittings.

Bill went through the archway as the man in the suit answered a chiming gold and ivory telephone on a table in front of a big window displaying the heroic spires of Manhattan. Opposite the window was a mural, done in the sweeping modern-industrial style, of burly men building a tower that rose up out of the sea. Overseeing the workers in the mural was a slim dark-haired man with blueprints in his hand.

Bill looked for the WC, saw a hallway with a gleaming steel and white-tile bathroom at its end.

That's my destination, Bill thought bitterly. *The crapper. A fine crapper it might be, one of three. My destiny is to keep their WCs in working order.*

Then he caught himself. *No self-pity, now, Bill McDonagh. Play the cards you're dealt, the way your Da taught you.*

Bill started toward the door to the bathroom hall, but his attention was caught by the half-whispered urgency of the man's voice as he growled at the telephone.

“Eisley, you will not make excuses! If you cannot deal with these people I will find someone who has the courage! I’ll find someone brave enough to scare away this pack of hungry dogs! They will not find my campfire undefended!”

The voice’s stridency caught Bill’s attention—but something else about it stirred him too. He’d heard that distinctive voice before. Maybe in a newsreel?

Bill paused at the door to the hall and had a quick look at the man pressing the phone to his ear. It was the man in the mural—the one holding the blueprint: a straight-backed man, maybe early forties, medium height, two thin, crisply straight strokes of mustache matched by the dark strokes of his eyebrows, a prominent cleft chin. He even wore a suit nearly identical to the one in the painting. And that strong, intense face—it was a face Bill knew from the newspapers. He’d seen his name over the front door of this very edifice. It never occurred to him that Andrew Ryan might actually *live* here. The tycoon owned a significant chunk of America’s coal, its second biggest railroad, and Ryan Oil. He’d always pictured a man like that whiling the days away playing golf on a country estate.

“Taxes are theft, Eisley! What? No, no need—I fired her. I’ve got a new secretary starting today—I’m elevating someone in reception. Elaine something. No, I don’t want anyone from accounting, that’s the whole problem, people like that are too interested in my money, they have no discretion! Sometimes I wonder if there’s anyone I can trust. Well they’ll get not a penny out of me more than absolutely necessary, and if you can’t see to it I’ll find a lawyer who can!”

Ryan slammed the phone down—and Bill hurried on to the bathroom.

Bill found the toilet in place but not quite hooked up: an ordinary Standard toilet, no gold seat on it. Looked like it needed proper pipe fittings, mostly. Seemed a waste of time to send three men out for this, but these posh types liked everything done yesterday.

He was aware, as he worked, that Ryan was pacing back and forth in the room outside the hall to the bathroom, occasionally muttering to himself.

Bill was kneeling to one side of the toilet, using a spanner to tighten a pipe joint, when he became aware of a looming presence. He looked up to see Andrew Ryan standing near him.

“Didn’t intend to startle you.” Ryan flashed his teeth in the barest smile and went on

“Just curious how you’re getting along.”

Bill was surprised at this familiarity from a man so above him—and by the change in tone. Ryan had been blaring angrily into the phone but minutes before. Now he seemed calm, his eyes glittering with curiosity.

“Getting on with it, sir. Soon have it done.”

“Is that a brass fitting you’re putting in there? I think the other two were using tin.”

“Well, I’ll be sure they didn’t, sir,” said Bill, beginning not to care what impression he made.

“Don’t want to be bailing out your loo once a fortnight. Tin’s not reliable, like. If it’s the price you’re worried about, I’ll pick up the cost of the brass, so not to worry, squire . . .”

“And why would you do that?”

“Well, Mr. Ryan, no man bails water out of privies built by Bill McDonagh.”

Ryan looked at him with narrowed eyes, rubbing his chin. Bill shrugged and focused on the pipes, feeling strangely disconcerted. He could almost feel the heat from the intensity of Ryan’s personality. He could smell his cologne, pricey and subtle.

“There you are,” Bill said, tightening with the wrench one last time for good luck. “Right as the mail. These pipes, anyhow.”

“Do you mean the job’s done?”

“I’ll see how the lads are getting on, but I’d guess it’s very nearly done, sir.”

He expected Ryan to wander back to his own work, but the tycoon remained, watching as Bill started the water flow, checked it for integrity, and cleaned up his tools and leftover materials. He took the receipt book from his pocket, scribbled out the cost. There’d been no time for an estimate, so he had a free hand. He wished he were the sort to pad the bill, since he gave a percentage to Chinowski and Ryan was rich, but he wasn’t made that way.

“Really!” Ryan said, looking at the bill, eyebrows raised.

Bill just waited. Strange that Andrew Ryan—one of the richest, most powerful men in America—was personally involved in dealing with a plumber, scrutinizing a minor bill. But Ryan stood there, looking first at the bill, then at him.

“This is quite reasonable,” Ryan said at last. “You might have stretched your time, inflated the bill. People assume they can take advantage of wealthy men.”

Bill was mildly insulted. “I believe in being paid, sir, even being paid well—but only for the work I do.”

Again that flicker of a smile, there and gone. The keen, searching gaze. “I can see I’ve struck a nerve,” Ryan said, “because you’re a man like me! A man of pride and capability who knows who he is.”

A long, appraising look. Then Ryan turned on his heel and strode out.

Bill shrugged, gathered up the rest of his things, and returned to the mural room, expecting to see some Ryan underling awaiting him with a check. But it was Ryan, holding the check out to him.

“Thank you, sir.” Bill took it, tucked it into a pocket, nodded to the man—was he mad, staring at him like that?—and started hastily for the front door.

He’d just gotten to the sitting room when Ryan called to him from the archway. “Mind if I ask you a question?”

Bill paused. Hoping it didn’t turn out that Andrew Ryan was a poof. He’d had enough of upper-class poofs trying to pick him up.

“Where do you think a man’s rights should end?” Ryan asked.

“His *rights*, sir?” A philosophical question asked of a plumbing contractor? The old toff really was mad. McDonagh humored him. “Rights are rights. That’s like asking which fingers a man should do without. I need all ten, me.”

“I like that. Now—just suppose you lose one or two fingers? What would you do? You’d think yourself unable to work, and you’d have a right to a handout, as it were, eh?”

Bill hefted the toolbox as he considered. “No. I’d find something to do, with eight fingers. Or four. Make my own way. I’d like to be able to use my talents more—that’s right enough. But I don’t take handouts.”

“And what talents are those? Not that I discount a gift for plumbing. But—is that what you mean?”

“No sir. Not as such. I’m by way of being an engineer. In a simple way, mind. Could be I’ll start me own . . . my own . . . building operation. Not so young anymore, but still—I see things in my mind I’d like to build . . .” He broke off, embarrassed at being so personal with this man. But there was something about Ryan that made you want to open up and talk.

“You’re British. Not one of the . . . the gentry types, certainly.”

“Right as rain, sir.” Bill wondered if he’d get the brush-off now. There was a touch of defensiveness when he added, “Grew up ‘round Cheapside, like.”

Ryan chuckled dryly. “You’re touchy about your origins. I know the feeling. I too am an immigrant. I was very young when I came here from Russia. I have learned to control my speech—reinvented myself. A man must make of his life a ladder that he never ceases to climb—if you’re not rising, you are slipping down the rungs, my friend.

“But by ascending,” Ryan went on, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets and taking a pensive turn about the room, “one makes one’s own class, do you see? Eh? One classes oneself!”

Bill had been about to make his excuses and walk out—but that stopped him. Ryan had articulated something he fiercely believed.

“Couldn’t agree more, sir!” Bill blurted. “That’s why I’ve come to the USA. Anyone can rise up, here. Right to the top!”

Ryan grunted skeptically. “Yes, and no. There are some who don’t have the stuff. But it’s not the ‘class’ or race or creed that they were born into that decides it. It’s

something inside a man. And that's something you have. You're a true mugwump, a real individual. We'll talk again, you and I . . ."

Bill nodded good-bye, not believing for a second that they'd speak again. He figured a rich bloke took it into his mind to have a natter with "the little people," patronizing a chap to prove to themselves how fair and kindly they could be.

He headed to check on Pablo and Roy before he made his way to the lobby and went about his business. This had been an interesting encounter—it'd be a story to tell in the pub, though no one would likely believe him. *Andrew Ryan? Who else did you hobnob with—Howard Hughes? Yer ol' pal William Randolph Hearst?*



Bill McDonagh's head was only moderately sore the next morning, and he answered his flat's clangorous telephone readily enough, hoping for work. A good sweat always cleared his head.

"This Bill McDonagh?" said a gruff, unfamiliar voice.

"Right enough."

"My name's Sullivan. Head of Security for Andrew Ryan."

"Security? What's 'e say I've done, then? Look here, mate, I'm no crook—"

"No no, it's nothing like that—he just set me to find you Chinowski didn't want to give up the number. Claimed he lost it. Tried taking the job himself. I had to get it from our friends at the phone company."

"*What* job?"

“Why, if you want it, Andrew Ryan’s offering you a job as his new building engineer . . . Starting immediately.”

Russian Myth and Folklore

By Catherynne M. Valente

Fairy tales have always been about getting through the worst of everything, the darkest and the deepest and the bloodiest of events. They are about surviving, and what you look like when you emerge from the trial. The reason we keep telling fairy tales over and over, that we need to keep telling them, is that the trials change. So the stories change too, and the heroines and villains and magical objects, to keep them true. Fairy tales are the closets where the world keeps its skeletons.

Deathless is that kind of fairy tale.

In Russian fairy tales, the narrative flows a little differently. In those stories, you won't find a tale for Cinderella, one for Snow White, one for Rapunzel. Instead, a peculiar cast of characters recurs over and over, in nearly every story, performing different acts and suffering different sorrows, but remaining the same. Ivan the Fool. Yelena the Bright. Baba Yaga. Vasilisa the Brave. Koschei the Deathless.

Ivan is always the youngest of three sons. Baba Yaga sometimes helps and sometimes harms, but her house on chicken legs always makes a grand entrance. Koschei always hides his death in the eye of a needle, inside an egg, inside a chicken, inside a cat, inside a hound, inside a horse, and so on. Like a soap opera, these characters play out a hundred different dramas. Some of them are known in the West—for instance, Baba Yaga made the transition to popular mythology. Some, like Koschei, are almost

completely unknown—though I note with a little smile how infatuated our culture seems to be with a certain twilight archetype, the kind of man who steals young girls away, who drinks blood but can still come out in the daylight, deathless and dangerous but still oh so seduced by human women.

And then there's Marya Morevna, who appears just once, in one grand story, and no more. She is a warrior, the queen from beyond the sea, not just beautiful or clever like the princesses of the other tales, but a queen, with terrible power—power enough to keep Koschei the Deathless chained up in her basement for the always-unfortunate Ivan to find. The sly tale offers no explanation for the contents of Marya's cellar. She opens the story by killing a vast field of soldiers, and the reason for that is also left mysterious. She is a female Bluebeard, with a moral standing somewhere between Snow White and Snow White's stepmother.

Deathless is her book.

This is a story that lives in the gaps of the original—why does Marya Morevna kill, what does she want, how did the very devil come to be chained against her basement wall? Alongside these answers lies the long dark fairy tale of the Russian Revolution, World War II, and the siege of Leningrad. Magic and politics have been bedfellows for a long time, you see. Once, it was the only way to write about oppression without incurring official wrath. Stalin didn't do that terrible thing—Baba Yaga did. It's just a story, you know. Russia has a long tradition of tucking true stories of blood and pain into fairy tales, closing them away for safekeeping in the eye of a needle, in the center of an egg. Though I will not suffer for the tales I tell as some brave authors did, *Deathless* is part of that tradition, and I have tried to give it all the respect and love I have.

The trials change.

The tale stays the same.

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Deathless

By Catherynne M. Valente

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[Catherynne M. Valente](#)'s first major release, *The Orphan's Tales*, was released in the fall of 2006 when Cat was twenty-seven. Volume I, *In the Night Garden*, went on to win the James Tiptree Jr. Award and was nominated for the World Fantasy Award. The series as a whole won the Mythopoeic Award for adult literature in 2008. Her most recent novel, *Palimpsest*, has been nominated for the Hugo Award and is a Locust Award finalist. She currently lives on a small island off the coast of Maine with her partner, two dogs, and one cat.

Prologue: Don't Look Behind You

Woodsmoke hung heavy and golden on the shorn wheat, the earth bristling like an old, bald woman. The apple trees had long ago been stripped for kindling; the cherry roots long since dug up and boiled into meal. The sky sagged cold and wan, coughing spatters of phlegmatic sunlight onto the grey and empty farms. The birds had gone, arrows flung forth in invisible skirmishes, always south, always away. Yet three skinny, molting creatures clapped a withered pear branch in their claws, peering down with eyes like rosary beads: a gold-speckled plover, a sharp-billed shrike, and a bony, black-faced rook clutched the greenbark trunk. A wind picked up; it smelled of clover growing through the roof, rust, and old, dry marrow.

The boy stood sniffing, snot and tears dripping down his chin.

He tried to knuckle it away, rubbing his nose red and scratching his belly with the other scuffed-up hand. His hair was colorless, his age vague, though no fuzz showed on his face, no squareness set his jaw, and his ribs would have been narrow even if they had meat on them. His eyes drooped, too tired to squint in the autumnal light. The sun slashed through his pupils, stirring shadows there.

“Comrade Tkachuk!” A young woman’s voice cut through the brisk, ashy wind like scissors. “You have been accused of desertion, gross cowardice in the face of the enemy. Do you deny this?”

The boy stared at the pair of officers and their polished tribunal bench, dragged from a truck into this wasted field for the purpose of punishing him, as though the army

were a terrible stern mother, and he a child who had not come to dinner when called. His nose dribbled.

“On the eighteenth of June,” continued the staff sergeant, her pen scratching against her notepad like a bird in the dust, “did you report for service when Lieutenant-General Tereshenko opened his books to the village of Mikhaylovka so that all might know glory on earth through the gift of their bodies to the People?”

“N-no . . .” mumbled the boy, his voice thick and slurred, an illiterate voice, a field hand’s lazy vowels. The officer’s nose wrinkled in distaste.

“Why not?” she barked, the buttons on her olive uniform blinking like eyes in the sun.

“I . . . I’m . . . eleven, ma’am.” The sergeant frowned, but did not open her arms to him, did not gather him up or smooth his hair or feed him bread. He hurried on. “And I got this bad leg. Broke when I were six. I...I falled out a cherry tree. The man come with his big book, and I run and hidded with the pigs. Don’t want t’be in the army. Wouldn’t be no good soldier anyhow.”

The staff sergeant’s gaze sharpened itself on the boy’s fumbling speech. “The service of your body is not yours to give as you please. It belongs to the People, and you have stolen from us by means of your weakness. However, the People are not unkind. Just as you chose to hide among pigs rather than serve among lions, you may now choose your reprimand: execution by firing squad, which is no more than you deserve, or service in a penalty battalion.”

The boy stared, his eyes glassy and mute.

“That will be the front lines, son,” said the senior officer, her rough voice honey-full of infinite mercy. The rook ruffled her feathers; the shrike clacked her beak. The plover called, mournful and high. A wind kicked at the grasses, then, sudden and brief, neither warm nor sweet. The senior officer’s thick, dark hair was plaited around her head like a corona, her stare hard and tired. “You probably won’t survive. But you might. You’re small; we all were, once. You could be missed in the ranks. It has been known to happen.”

The staff sergeant looked bored. She made a note on her pad. “Comrade Tkachuk, what is it you want?”

The boy said nothing for a moment, his gaze moving between the two officers, seeking mercy like a boar snuffling for mushrooms in the loam. Finding nothing, he simply started to cry: thin, dry, starved tears cutting through the dirt on his face. His little chest heaved jerkily; his shoulders shook as though snow was already falling. He rubbed his nose furiously on a bare arm. Blood showed pinkish in the mucus.

“I want t’go *home*,” he sobbed.

The plover shrieked as though pierced with long thorns. The shrike hid her face. The rook could not bear witness—she opened her black wings to the air.

Major-General Marya Morevna sat impassively and watched the child weep. The staff sergeant tapped her pen impatiently.

“Go,” Morevna whispered. “Run. Don’t look behind you.” The boy looked at her dumbly. “*Run*, boy,” the major-general whispered. The boy ran. Flecks of dead earth flew up behind him. The wind caught them, and carried them away towards the sea.

PART 1: A Long, Thin House

And you will arrive under a soldier's black mantle

With the fearful greenish candle

And will not show your face to me.

But the riddle cannot torment me for long:

Whose hand is here, under that white glove

Who sent this wanderer, who comes in darkness?

—Anna Akhmatova

Chapter 1: Three Husbands Come to Gorokhovaya Street

In a city by the sea which was once called St. Petersburg, then Petrograd, then Leningrad, then, much later, St. Petersburg again, there stood a long, thin house on a long, thin street. By a long, thin window, a child in a pale blue dress and pale green slippers waited for a bird to marry her.

This would be cause for most girls to be very gently closed up in their rooms until they ceased to think such alarming things, but Marya Morevna had seen all three of her sisters' husbands from her window before they knocked at the great cherrywood door, and thus she was as certain of her own fate as she was certain of the color of the moon.

The first came when Marya was only six, and her sister Olga was tall as she was fair, her golden hair clapped back like a hay-roll in autumn. It was a silvery damp day, and long, thin clouds rolled up onto their roof like neat cigarettes. Marya watched from the upper floor as birds gathered in the oak trees, sniping and snapping at the first and smallest drops of rain, which all winged creatures know are the sweetest, like tiny grapes bursting on the tongue. She laughed to see the rooks skirmish over the rain, and as she did, the flock turned as one to look at her, their eyes like needle points. One of them, a fat black fellow, leaned perilously forward on his green branch and, without taking his gaze from Marya's window, fell hard—thump, bash!—onto the streetside. But the little bird bounced up, and when he righted himself, he was a handsome young man in a handsome black uniform, his buttons flashing like raindrops, his nose large and cruelly curved.

The young man knocked at the great cherrywood door, and Marya Morevna's mother blushed under his gaze.

"I have come for the girl in the window," he said with a clipped, sweet voice. "I am Lieutenant Gratch of the Tsar's Personal Guard. I have many wonderful houses full of seed, many wonderful fields full of grain, and I have more dresses than she could wear, even if she changed her gown at morning, evening, and midnight each day of her life."

"You must mean Olga," said Marya's mother, her hand fluttering to her throat. "She is the oldest and most beautiful of all my daughters."

And so Olga, who had indeed sat at the first-floor window, which faced the garden full of fallen apples and not the street, was brought to the door. She was filled like a wineskin with the rich sight of her handsome young man in his handsome black uniform, and kissed him very chastely on the cheeks. They walked together down

Gorokhovaya Street, and he bought for her a golden hat with long black feathers tucked into its brim.

When they returned in the evening, Lieutenant Gratch looked up into the violet sky and sighed. “This is not the girl in the window. But I will love her as though she was, for I see now that that one is not meant for me.”

And so Olga went gracefully to the estates of Lieutenant Gratch, and wrote prettily worded letters home to her sisters, in which her verbs built castles and her datives sprung up like well-tended roses.

The second husband came when Marya was nine, and her sister Tatiana was sly and ruddy as a fox, her sharp grey eyes clapping upon every fascinating thing. Marya Morevna sat at her window embroidering the hem of a christening dress for Olga’s second son. It was spring, and the morning rain had left their long, thin street slick and sparkling, jeweled with wet pink petals. Marya watched from the upper floor as once more the birds gathered in the great oak tree, sniping and snapping for the soaked and wrinkled cherry blossoms, which every winged creature knows are the most savory of all blossoms, like spice cakes melting on the tongue. She laughed to see the plovers scuffle over the flowers, and as she did, the flock turned as one to look at her, their eyes like knife-points. One of them, a little brown fellow, leaned perilously forward on his green branch and, without taking his gaze from Marya’s window, fell hard—thump, bash!—onto the streetside. But the little bird bounced up, and when he righted himself, he was a handsome young man in a handsome brown uniform with a long white sash, his buttons flashing like sunshine, his mouth round and kind.

The young man knocked at the great cherrywood door, and Marya Morevna's mother smiled under his gaze.

"I am Lieutenant Zuyok of the White Guard," he said, for the face of the world had changed. "I have come for the girl in the window. I have many wonderful houses full of fruits, many wonderful fields full of worms, and I have more jewels than she could wear, even if she changed her rings at morning, evening, and midnight each day of her life."

"You must mean Tatiana," said Marya's mother, pressing her hand to her breast. "She is the second oldest and second most beautiful of my daughters."

And so Tatiana, who had indeed sat at the first-floor window, which faced the garden full of apple blossoms and not the street, came to the door. She was filled like a silk balloon with the flaming sight of her handsome young man in his handsome brown uniform, and kissed him, not very chastely at all, on the mouth. They walked together through Gorokhovaya Street, and he bought for her a white hat with long chestnut-colored feathers tucked into its brim.

When they returned in the evening, Lieutenant Zuyok looked up into the turquoise sky and sighed. "This is not the girl in the window. But I will love her as though she was, for I see now that one is not meant for me."

And so Tatiana went happily to the estates of Lieutenant Zuyok, and wrote sophisticated letters home to her sisters, in which her verbs danced in square patterns and her datives were laid out like tables set for feasting.

The third husband came when Marya was twelve, and her sister Anna was slim and gentle as a fawn, her blush quicker than shadows passing. Marya Morevna sat at her

window embroidering the collar of a party dress for Tatiana's first daughter. It was winter, and the snow on Gorokhovaya Street piled high and mounded, like long frozen barrows. Marya watched from the upper floor as once again the birds gathered in the great oak tree, sniping and snapping for the last autumn nuts, stolen from squirrels and hidden in bark-cracks, which every winged creature knows are the most bitter of all nuts, like old sorrows sitting heavy on the tongue. She laughed to see the shrikes scuffle over the acorns, and as she did, the flock turned as one to look at her, their eyes like bayonet points. One of them, a stately grey fellow with a red stripe at his cheek, leaned perilously forward on his green branch and, without taking his gaze from Marya's window, fell hard—thump, bash!—onto the streetside. But the little bird bounced up, and when he righted himself, he was a handsome young man in a handsome grey uniform with a long red sash, his buttons flashing like streetlamps, his eyes narrow with a wicked cleverness.

The young man knocked at the great cherrywood door, and Marya Morevna's mother frowned under his gaze.

"I am Lieutenant Zhulan of the Red Army," he said, for the face of the world had begun to struggle with itself, unable to decide on its features. "I have come for the girl in the window. I have many wonderful houses which I share equally among my fellows, many wonderful rivers full of fish which are shared equally among all those with nets, and I have more virtuous books than she could read, even if she read a different one at morning, evening, and midnight each day of her life."

"You must mean Anna," said Marya's mother, her hand firmly at her hip. "She is the third oldest and third most beautiful of my daughters."

And so Anna, who had indeed sat at the first-floor window, which faced the garden full of bare branches and not the street, was brought to the door. She was filled like a pail of water with the sweet sight of her handsome young man in his handsome grey uniform, and with a terrible shyness allowed him to kiss only her hand. They walked together through the newly named Kommissarskaya Street, and he bought for her a plain grey cap with a red star on the brim.

When they returned in the evening, Lieutenant Zhulan looked up into the black sky and sighed. "This is not the girl in the window. But I will love her as though she was, for I see now that that one is not meant for me."

And so Anna went dutifully to the estates of Lieutenant Zhulan, and wrote properly worded letters home to her sisters, in which her verbs were distributed fairly among the nouns, and her datives asked for no more than they required.

Kitty's Big Trouble

By Carrie Vaughn

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Kitty Norville is back and in more trouble than ever. Her recent run-in with werewolves traumatized by the horrors of war has made her start wondering how long the US government might have been covertly using werewolves in combat. But her investigations lead her to a clue about enigmatic vampire Roman and the mysterious Long Game played by vampires through the millennia. That, plus a call for help from a powerful vampire ally in San Francisco, suddenly puts Kitty and her friends on the supernatural chessboard, pieces in dangerously active play. And Kitty Norville is never content to be a pawn... .

The Playlist

Norman Greenbaum, "Spirit in the Sky"

Social Distortion, "Making Believe"

Warren Zevon, "Lawyers, Guns and Money"

They Might Be Giants, "Wicked Little Critta"

P.K. 14, "The Other Side"

Blondie, "Atomic"

Vernian Process, "The Maple Leaf Rag"

Squirrel Nut Zippers, "Le Grippe"

PJ Harvey, "Down by the Water"

Carsick Cars, "You Can Listen, You Can Talk"

B-52's, "Mesopotamia"

Billy Preston, "Will It Go Round in Circles"

Lissie, "Little Lovin'"

Chapter 1

“I know,” I said into my phone. “This isn’t exactly standard—”

“It’s impossible,” said the poor, long-suffering office receptionist at the Calvary Cemetery in St. Louis. He was too polite to just hang up on me. “It’s absolutely impossible.”

“Maybe you can give the name and number of someone who might be able to authorize this kind of request? Is there any representative of the Sherman family on record?”

His responses were starting to sound desperate. “That information is confidential. In fact, I don’t think you’ll be able to get any further on this without some kind of a warrant or a court order.”

I was afraid of that. I’d been hoping there’d be a friendly way to accomplish this. That I could find a sympathetic historian who would back up my request or explain the situation to one of the descendants and get permission that way. Surely they would want to know the truth as much as I did. Also, I didn’t think I’d be able to convince a judge to issue said court order. The request was based on little more than rabid curiosity.

I soldiered on, as it were. “There has to be some kind of standard procedure for an exhumation. Can you tell me what that is?”

“Ms...Norville, is it?”

“Yes, Kitty Norville,” I said, thinking calm. I could wear him down with patience.

“Ms. Norville—can I ask why you want to have General Sherman’s body

exhumed?”

General William T. Sherman, hero of the Civil War on the Union side, war criminal on the Confederate side, considered one of the greatest soldiers and strategists in American history, and all-around icon. And yeah, I wanted to dig him up. It was a little hard to explain, and I hesitated, trying to figure out what to say. Last week I’d received a package from the Library of Congress containing a copy of an interview transcript from the 1930’s. It had been made as part of the Federal Writers’ Project, a New Deal program that employed journalists and other writers to record local histories around the country. Many valuable oral histories were collected and preserved as part of the program. The one I’d been sent was an interview with a Civil War veteran—one of the last to survive, no doubt. He’d been sixteen when he joined the Confederate army in the middle of the war and was close to ninety when he’d been interviewed, and he claimed that he’d witnessed General Sherman transform into a wolf during the Battle of Vicksburg. A librarian who was also a listener and fan of my radio show discovered it and sent it to me. I had always had my suspicions about Sherman—he looked so rough and tumble in his photos, with his unbuttoned collar, his unkempt beard, and a “screw you” expression. If any Civil War general had been a werewolf, it would be Sherman. But was my hunch and a single interview proof? No. Which was why I wanted to exhume the body, to test any remaining tissue for the presence of lycanthropy.

Maybe it was best to lay it out there. “I think General Sherman may have been a werewolf and I want to run tests on his remains to find out.”

Of course, a long pause followed. I kept waiting for the click of a phone hanging up, which would have been fine; I’d have just called one of the other numbers on my list.

I hadn't expected this to be easy.

"Seriously?" he said finally. The same way he might have said, You're eating bugs?

"Yeah. Seriously. So how about it? Don't you want to help me rewrite American history?"

"I'm sorry, could I get your name one more time?" he said. "Could you spell it for me? And tell me where you're calling from?"

I felt a restraining order coming on. So, in the end, I was the one who hung up. Oh well. You can't win them all.

#

At home that evening I sat on the sofa, library books lying open on the coffee table around me and my laptop screen showing a half dozen Web sites open. I was supposed to be researching Sherman. Instead, I was reading through the transcript for what must have been the twentieth time.

Tom Hanson had enlisted in the Confederate army at the age of sixteen. At several points during the interview he mentioned how young he'd been. How innocent, and how foolish. The interviewer kept having to prompt him to return to the focus of the story, his encounter with General Sherman under the light of the full moon.

One night while his squad was on patrol outside of Vicksburg, Hanson had gotten separated from the others and lost his way in the swampy forest some distance from where the Confederates were camped. Trying to find his way back, he'd stumbled across a pair of Union soldiers—an enlisted man arguing with an officer. Hanson swore the officer was General William Sherman himself. The enlisted soldier kept calling the other

man “General,” but with no name attached. Hanson couldn’t explain the argument because it hadn’t made any sense to him—the enlisted man was telling the general that he’d overstepped his bounds, and that he wanted to challenge him. Hanson had heard that Sherman was crazy—he could understand anyone on the Union side wanting him out of command. But that wasn’t up to an enlisted man, and they certainly wouldn’t have been discussing it in the middle of a swamp.

Hanson didn’t understand it, but he described what happened next. “The general, he took his clothes off. I couldn’t move or he’d of heard me, so I didn’t dare. I just sat there and watched. So there he was, naked in the moonlight. And then he changed. Like his body just melted, and I heard his bones snapping. I can’t say that I ever saw a wolf before, but that’s what he turned into—big, shaggy, with yellow eyes. That other soldier, well—he just ran. Didn’t do him any good. That big ol’ wolf chased him down.”

The door to the condo opened and closed—my husband Ben, lawyer and fellow werewolf—arriving home. He set his briefcase near the desk of his home office, a corner of the living room, and regarded me where I sat on the sofa, papers on my lap, my head bent in concentration.

“Still on that transcript?” he said, his smile amused.

I sighed. Ben had seen me reading it every night this week, searching for some insight. “It’s fascinating, isn’t it? What if it isn’t just a story? What if he’s right?” I pulled one of the books over, referring to a timeline of Sherman’s life. “Did you know early on in the war Sherman had a nervous breakdown? He was relieved of duty, and the newspapers and everyone said he was crazy, that he couldn’t take the pressure. But he recovered and when he came back he was this badass general. He and Grant started

kicking ass and eventually Sherman marched the Union Army through Georgia and won the war. What if that's when it happened? Somehow, he got attacked and infected around the Battle of Bull Run, it knocked him for a loop, he took time off to deal with it, and when he came back he was a super soldier. A werewolf general."

"I suppose it's possible," he said. "But if you're right, he kept it really well hidden."

"Lots of people keep it really well hidden," I said. "I'm betting it was easier to keep it hidden then than it is now."

He sat on the sofa beside me, which was too tempting an invitation. I leaned toward him, pulling his arm over my shoulder and snuggling against him. As I hoped, he hugged me close and bent his head to my hair, breathing in my scent as I took in his. Our wolf sides, claiming each other.

I said, "I just keep thinking—who else is out there? What secret histories slipped through the cracks because people kept it hidden or no one believed it? I'm not talking about Vlad Tepes being Dracula. What if Sherman really was a werewolf? Who else might have been werewolves? Maybe there was a reason Rasputin was so hard to kill, and Jack the Ripper was so bloodthirsty—"

He stopped me with a kiss, which was okay with me. I touched his cheeks and smiled.

"What would it change?" he said. "If Sherman really was a werewolf, would it really change anything?"

"We'd know the truth."

He looked skeptical. It was a fair question. Did this mean any more than

slapping labels on people? In Sherman's case, it meant a reinterpretation of his history—his nervous breakdown looked a whole lot different if he was a werewolf. But even that was speculation. He might have been infected with lycanthropy years before.

It wasn't just the labels. It meant history had a whole other layer to it, and that supernatural beings might have played an active role in guiding human events for centuries. I could almost get conspiracy minded about it.

"How can you even confirm something like this for sure? In a way that would hold up in court?" he added. Always legal-minded.

"I've been trying to find out how to get his body exhumed—"

He looked at me. "You haven't."

"Um, yeah. It's a lot harder than I thought it would be."

"Of course it is. You can't just go around digging up graves. Especially famous ones."

"Yeah," I said, wincing. "I know."

"You need to find a vampire who knew him," he said. "Get a corroborating eyewitness account from someone who wasn't a scared teenager confronting a guy like Sherman."

He probably meant it as a joke, but I turned thoughtful.

"You know," I said. "I could probably do that."

"Honey, if anyone can do it, you can."

Damn straight.

#

"Good evening, it's Friday night which means it's time once again for The

Midnight Hour, the show that isn't afraid of the dark or the creatures who live there. I'm your ever-eager host, Kitty Norville, and I hope you're ready for another illuminating evening of supernatural shenanigans."

Sitting at my table in the studio, in front of the microphone, headphones on, just a few lights glowing in the darkened space, I could imagine myself in the cockpit of an airplane or at the controls of a spaceship, commanding great power. Through the glass, I watched Matt, my sound engineer, at his board. Above the door, the on air sign glowed red. Epic.

"I've been thinking a lot lately about history and what to do with it. Vampires and werewolves and the like have only been public for a few years. Some of us are milking that publicity for all it's worth, I'm not ashamed to say. But we've been around for a lot longer than that. We must have been. What impact have vampires, werewolves, or magicians had on history? Were any historical figures—let's say General William Sherman, just as an example—supernatural creatures themselves? Those histories have been deeply buried, either because people didn't believe or because the stories were written off as folklore and fantasy. Let me tell you, when you start digging there are a lot of stories out there. What I'm looking for now isn't stories, but proof. That's where things get tricky, because traditionally, the supernatural doesn't leave a whole lot of proof lying around.

"That's my question for you tonight: what kind of proof should I be looking for, and what kind of proof would you need to be convinced that a beloved historical figure had a toe dipped in the supernatural world?"

Shows like this, where I threw open the line for calls right from the start in a

freeform brain storm, were often a crap shoot. I could get a lot of thoughtful discussion and gain some new insight. Or I'd end up yelling at people. NPR to Jerry Springer, my show ran the whole spectrum. Brace for impact...

"For my first call tonight I have Dave from Rochester. Hello, Dave."

"Hi, Kitty, thanks for taking my call, it's so great to get through." He sounded suitably enthusiastic—a good opener for the show.

"Thanks for being persistent. What have got for me?"

"Well. It seems to me you're just assuming that supernatural beings have been around for a long time. This stuff has only been making news for a few years now, and maybe that's because it hasn't been around that long. What if vampires and werewolves are actually the result of some government experiment that got loose and is totally out of control?"

"I can assure you that I'm not the result of some government experiment," I said flatly.

"Well no, not directly, but maybe it's some virus that escaped and spread, and that's where vampires and werewolves came from. That's why we don't have any historical evidence."

"On the other hand we have five thousand years of folklore suggesting that these beings have been around for a long time. What about that?"

"Planted. It's all a hoax."

I blinked at the microphone. That was bold, even for this show. "You're saying The Epic of Gilgamesh is a hoax? That the story of King Lycaon isn't really an ancient Greek myth?"

“That’s right. It’s all been made up in order to convince people that supernatural beings have been around for thousands of years when they’ve really only been around since World War II.”

“World War II?” I said. “Like some supernatural Manhattan Project?”

“Yes, exactly! In fact—”

Oh, yes, please say it, sink my show to this level in the first ten minutes. . . .

“—It was the Nazis,” Dave from Rochester said.

I clicked the line to a different call. “And that’s enough of that. Moving on now, next call please. Hello, you’re on the air.”

“Hi Kitty, I’m a big fan of the show,” said a female voice, cheerful and outgoing. Suze from L.A. “I just wanted to say, isn’t most of history based on eyewitness accounts? People reporting what they saw? We should have reports somewhere of people talking about this. But I’m not sure how you’d go about proving something that no one ever talks about.”

I was right on the edge of whipping out that FWP transcript and discussing Private Hanson—a report that had lain buried and forgotten because no one believed it. I wanted my proof before I brought it into the light.

Instead I said, “Or maybe people have been talking about it, writing about it, whatever, but those accounts were buried because no one believed them. Which leads me to a big question—how trustworthy are eyewitness testimonies? We depend on them for historical accounts, memoirs, battlefield reports, so of course this is going to be high on the list. But is one eyewitness’s story enough? How about two, for corroboration?”

“The more the better, I guess,” she said. “But you still have the problem of

separating truth from fiction.”

“Exactly. Part of the reason I’m always trying to get vampires on the show is I figure they’ve got to be some of the best eyewitnesses out there. They’ve been around for decades, for centuries. Not only have they seen a lot, they often seem to be in the front row, watching events play out. But I gotta tell you, they don’t seem particularly interested in sharing what they’ve learned. I think they really like keeping secrets from the rest of us. That’s why we haven’t had any vampire celebrity tell-all books yet. Oh, and if there are any vampires out there writing a celebrity tell-all book, please let me know. Thanks for your call, Suze.”

Matt flagged a call on the monitor—from a vampire. Ooh, was I really going to have my wish granted? I liked nothing better than to feature an exclusive news break. What were the odds?

“Hello, you’re on the air.”

“Kitty, if we keep secrets, perhaps it’s for your own good.” She was a woman with a faint accent, probably European, topped with a touch of finely-aged arrogance.

“So you’re a vampire,” I said. “May I ask how old you are?”

“You may, but I won’t answer.”

The usual response; it didn’t surprise me. “Oh well, I always have to try. Thank you for calling. My second question for you: Why do you get to decide what should be kept secret? Don’t you think everyone has a right to the truth? Even a dangerous truth?”

“Your attitude about the truth is a bit naïve, don’t you think? The truth isn’t an artifact you can put in a box and study.”

“But I don’t want to be lied to outright,” I said. “I especially don’t want to be told

I'm being lied to for my own good."

"Tell me this: what if you did find the definitive proof you were looking for—a DNA test for lycanthropy for example, or a photograph of someone shape-shifting, or proof that someone was killed with a stake or a silver bullet. What would change? Why would it matter? The events surrounding that person's life wouldn't change. Their identity wouldn't really change—just your knowledge of it."

Ben's question again. I kept saying I just wanted to be treated like a human being—that vampires and lycanthropes of any stripe should be allowed to live normal, law-abiding lives. Would exposing any supernatural secret identities damage that? Make them freaks instead of the historical figures they were?

"I guess I'm looking for a connection," I said. "I've been floundering, wondering where I fit in the world. Would having a role model be too much to ask for?"

"I thought being a role model was your job," she said, with that haughty amusement that only vampires could manage.

"Oh, heaven help us all," I replied. "But I have to say that yes, it is important. Being a werewolf is an important enough part of my identity that I've been basing a show on it and writing about it for the last five years. If I'm going to be an authority on the subject I really want to be an authority. And that means speculating like this."

"As long as you're aware that you may never find the answers you're looking for," the vampire said.

"Yeah, I'm used to that. Maybe the important thing is to keep asking the questions anyway."

And get other people asking them, too. Keep knocking on the door until someone

answered. Or until they hauled me away and locked me up.

#

After the show I invited Rick, Master of the local vampire Family, to meet me at New Moon, the bar and grill that Ben and I owned. I was careful not to say anything like, “Let’s go for a drink,” or “How about we grab a bite.” Not that Rick would have taken me literally, but I didn’t want to open myself up for the kind of teasing I’d get. Rick was a vampire, feeding on the blood of the living, although I was pretty sure he only drank from volunteers and just enough to stay functional. Still, you had to be careful about what kind of invitations you offered to vampires.

Rick was a friend, and I trusted him. That didn’t mean he told me everything.

He was handsome, with a hint of old-world aristocracy to his fine features and straight bearing. From what I could gather, he came by it honestly—he’d been the younger son of a Spanish noble family who traveled to the New World seeking his fortune in the first wave of immigration in the sixteenth century. I didn’t know if he ever considered his fortune found. He wore an expensive trenchcoat even in summer, a button-up silk shirt, and well-tailored trousers. Perfect, elegant. You couldn’t help but respect him.

“Hi,” I said, letting him through the glass front door. “I’m not even going to ask if I can get you anything to drink.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” he said, glancing around. “Business seems to be doing well.”

The place wasn’t crowded—not surprising at this late hour—but enough people sat here and there to create a friendly buzz.

“Lack of pretension,” I said, guiding him to a table in the back, where my beer

was waiting for me. We took seats across from each other. “I think that may be the secret.”

“I think you may be right,” he said. “Now, what’s the problem?”

“Everyone always assumes there’s a problem.”

“This is you we’re talking about,” he said, perfectly good-natured.

“I just wanted to have a nice, friendly chat,” I said. “How’s life—er, unlif—been treating you? What’s new in your neck of the woods?”

“Is that a pun?”

I had to think about it a minute, my brow furrowed. “Ah. Not intentionally.”

If Rick wasn’t laughing at me, he was at least chuckling, and I scowled.

“Nothing to report,” he said. Gaze narrowed, I studied him. “Kitty, I don’t ask about every detail of the workings of your werewolf pack, I’m not going to tell you every detail about my Family.”

“You can’t blame me—I’ve built a career out of gossip.”

“All the more reason for me to keep my mouth shut.”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. I blundered on. “I’d like to ask you about a story I’m tracking down. Did you know Sherman?”

“As in General William T.?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m afraid not, though I’m sure he was fascinating.”

I must have looked deflated.

“It’s not like I knew every public figure who lived for the last five hundred years,” he said.

“But you knew Coronado. And Doc Holliday. That’s a pretty amazing roster right there. Five hundred years is a lot longer than most of us get. Do you know anyone you might have known Sherman?”

“Any vampires, you mean?”

“Anyone who might be able to tell me if Sherman was a werewolf.”

He pursed his lips, considering, making him the first person who hadn’t looked at the claim with outright skepticism. “What’s your information?”

I told him about the interview with the Confederate soldier, and my own hunch, which couldn’t exactly be called information. You couldn’t tell a werewolf in human form just by looking. Unless maybe you were psychic, which was something to consider. Maybe I could call my friend Tina, a psychic with the TV show Paradox PI, and see if she could channel Sherman...

“That would be amazing if you could prove it,” he said. “We’d have a whole new perspective on his career.”

“But the only way I can really prove it is to test a tissue sample, assuming a testable sample still exists, or talk to someone trustworthy who might have known him.”

“And no one’s very excited about exhuming the general’s body, I’m guessing.”

“Exactly.”

“Alette’s the only one I can think of who would know. She has her fingers in everything, even going back to that period. If Sherman spent any time in D.C., she would know.”

“Sherman spent a ton of time in D.C. She’d have to know,” I said, excited.

Alette was the Master vampire of Washington, D.C., and had been in the 1860’s. She

was already on my list of people to call after talking to Rick. If she didn't know, I'd probably never find out.

"Something to consider," Rick continued. "Even if she does know, she might not tell you. You're not the only one who's been asking these sorts of questions since lycanthropy and vampirism went public. Alette could have leaked the information herself if she wanted people to know."

That vampire sense of superiority again. I shook my head. "She shouldn't be the one to get to decide what people know."

Rick made a calming gesture, forestalling the rest of my rant. "Consider this—if Alette knew Sherman, knew that he was a werewolf, but hasn't told anyone, it may be because Sherman didn't want anyone to know. The secret may be his, and Alette—or anyone else who has the information—may be keeping a promise with him."

Sherman was dead and gone, he shouldn't get a say in it. Historical public figures were fair game for all kinds of digging, as far as I was concerned. But a vampire's promise went on forever, didn't it? I had a thing about exposing people who didn't want to be exposed. My own lycanthropy had been made public against my will. Afterward, I took the publicity and ran with it as a survival mechanism, but I could understand why Sherman wouldn't want something like this public. It would overshadow his entire record and all that he'd accomplished. His autobiography—considered one of military history's great memoirs—would become next to meaningless because it doesn't say a word about it. Which meant that maybe he didn't want anyone to know. If Sherman's ghost appeared and asked me to drop the question, what would I do?

Thoughtful, I rested my chin on my hand and said to Rick, "How many promises

like that are you keeping?”

Smiling, he glanced away.

“Oh my God, you are,” I said, straightening. “You know. You’ve got something juicy on somebody famous. What is it? Who?”

“You’ve gone this long without knowing, why should I say anything now?”

“I just want to know,” I said. “It’s important to know that people like me have existed for thousands of years, living their lives, surviving. Roman’s been recruiting vampires and lycanthropes for his secret supervillain plans for two thousand years. I have to assume that vampires and lycanthropes have been opposing him as well, like us. To know who they were, to have some kind of history—who knows what it could tell us about his methods? You know Roman would have tried to recruit Sherman. I’d love to imagine that Sherman told him to shove it.”

Rick sat back. He seemed amused, thoughtful, studying me through a narrowed gaze. Like he was considering.

“What?” I said. I got the feeling I’d said something funny or strange.

“It’s a cliché, you know,” he said. “Eternal life being boring. Maybe for some of us it is, the ones who lock themselves away in mansions or castles, cut themselves off from the world and the people in it. For the rest of us, there’s always something new coming along, if we know where to look. We stay interested by having a stake in the game.”

“The Long Game?” I said. The Long Game, a conspiracy among vampires. The few people who knew about it spoke of it in whispers, in hints, if at all. Near as I could figure, it really was a game, but one that dealt in lives and power. And the one who dies

with the most toys wins.

Rick shrugged. “Not always. After all, Kitty—you’re one of the people who keeps life interesting.”

He gazed over the dining room and bar, waiting for me to respond. I’d already finished my beer or I would have taken a long drink. “I’m flattered, I think.”

“If you want my advice, you’re narrowing your focus too much,” Rick said. “Don’t just look for the secret vampires and lycanthropes. Look for people who might have hunted them. People like your friend Cormac.”

Now there was an idea. “You’re not going to give me any hints about where to start, are you?”

“Think about it for a minute. If I met Doc Holliday, who else do you think I might have known?”

Western history wasn’t my strong suit, but my knowledge was better than average. I remembered the stories of the Wild West and O.K. Corral, and a few choice Hollywood treatments of the same, and my eyes grew wide.

“Wyatt Earp?”

Rick just smiled.

Children of the Sky

By Vernor Vinge

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Vernor Vinge is the author of the Hugo Award–winning novels *A Fire Upon the Deep*, *A Deepness in the Sky*, and *Rainbows End*. An acknowledged authority on the technological Singularity, he was for many years a professor of mathematics and computer science at San Diego State University. He lives in San Diego, California.

CHAPTER 00

How do you get the attention of the richest businessperson in the world?

Vendacious had spent all his well-remembered life sucking up to royalty. He had never dreamed he would fall so low as to need a common merchant, but here he was with his only remaining servant, trying to find a street address in East Home's factory district.

This latest street was even narrower than the one they had left. Surely the world's richest would never come here!

The alley had heavy doors set on either side. At the moment, all were closed, but the place must be a crowded madness at shift change. There were posters every few feet, but these were not the advertisements they had seen elsewhere. These were demands and announcements: WASH ALL PAWS BEFORE WORK, NO ADVANCE WAGES, EMPLOYMENT APPLICATIONS AHEAD. This last sign pointed toward a wide pair of doors at the end of the alley. It was all marvelously pompous and silly. And yet . . . as he walked along, Vendacious took a long look at the crenellations above him. Surely that was plaster over wood. But if it was real stone, then this was a fortified castle hidden right in the middle of East Home commercialism.

Vendacious held back, waved at his servant to proceed. Chitiratifor advanced along the alley, singing praise for his dear master. He had not quite reached the wide doors when they swung open and a hugely numerous pack emerged. It was nine or ten and it spread across their way like a sentry line. Vendacious suppressed the urge to look up at the battlements for signs of archers.

The huge pack looked at them stupidly for a moment, then spoke in loud and officious chords. “Employment work you want? Can you read?”

Chitiratifor stopped singing introductory flourishes, and replied, “Of course we can read, but we’re not here for—”

The gatekeeper pack spoke right over Chitiratifor’s words: “No matter. I have application forms here.” Two of it trotted down the steps with scraps of paper held in their jaws. “I will explain it all to you and then you sign. Tycoon pay good. Give good housing. And one day off every tenday.”

Chitiratifor bristled. “See here, my good pack. We are not seeking employment. My lord”—he gestured respectfully at Vendacious—“has come to tell the Great Tycoon of new products and opportunities.”

“Paw prints to suffice if you cannot write—” The other interrupted its own speech as Chitiratifor’s words finally penetrated. “Not wanting to apply for work?” It looked at them for moment, took in Chitiratifor’s flashy outfit. “Yes, you are not dressed for this doorway. I should have noticed.” It thought for a second. “You are in wrong place. Business visitors must visit to the Business Center. You go back five blocks and then onto the Concourse of the Great Tycoon. Wait. I get you a map.” The creature didn’t move, but Vendacious realized the pack was even more numerous than he had thought, extending back out of sight into the building;

these Easterners tolerated the most grotesque perversions.

Chitiratifor shuffled back in Vendacious’s direction, and the nearest of him hissed, “That’s a two-mile walk just to get to the other side of this frigging building!”

Vendacious nodded and walked around his servant, confronting the gatekeeper directly. “We’ve come all the way from the West Coast to help Tycoon. We demand a courteous response, not petty delays!”

The nearest members of the gatekeeper stepped back timidly. Up close, Vendacious could hear that this was no military pack. Except at dinner parties, it probably never had killed a single living thing. In fact, the creature was so naive that it didn’t really recognize the deadly anger confronting it. After a moment, it reformed its line, and said “Nevertheless, sir, I must follow my orders. Business visitors use the business entrance.”

Chitiratifor was hissing murder; Vendacious waved him quiet. But Vendacious really didn’t want to walk around to the official entrance—and that wasn’t just a matter of convenience. He now realized that finding this entrance was a lucky accident. Woodcarver’s spies were unlikely this far from home, but the fewer people who could draw a connection between Tycoon and Vendacious, the better.

He backed off courteously, out of the gatekeeper’s space. This entrance would be fine if he could just talk to someone with a mind. “Perhaps your orders do not apply to me.”

The gatekeeper pondered the possibility for almost five seconds. “But I think they do apply,” it finally said.

“Well then, while we wait for the map, perhaps you could pass on an enquiry to someone who deals with difficult problems.” There were several lures Vendacious could dangle: “Tell your supervisor that his visitors bear news about the invasion from outer space.”

“The what from where?”

“We have eyewitness information about the *humans*—” that provoked more blank looks. “Damn it, fellow, this is about the mantis monsters!”

Mention of the mantis monsters did not produce the gatekeeper’s supervisor; the fivesome who came out to see them was far higher in the chain of command than that! “Remasritlfeer” asked a few sharp questions and then waved for them to follow him. In a matter of minutes, they were past the gatekeeper and walking down carpeted corridors. Looking around, Vendacious had to hide his smiles. The interior design was a perfection of bad taste and mismatched wealth, proof of the foolishness of the newly rich. Their guide was a very different matter. Remasritlfeer was mostly slender, but there were scars on his snouts and flanks, and you could see the lines of hard muscle beneath his fur. His eyes were mostly pale yellow and not especially friendly.

It was a long walk, but their guide had very little to say. Finally, the corridor ended at a member-wide door, more like the entrance to an animal den than the office of the world’s richest commoner.

Remasritlfeer opened the door and stuck a head in. “I have the outlanders, your eminence,” he said

A voice came from within: “That should be ‘my lord’. Today, I think ‘my lord’ sounds better.”

“Yes, my lord.” But the four of Remasritlfeer who were still in the corridor rolled their heads in exasperation.

“Well then, let’s not waste my time. Have them all come in. There’s plenty of room.”

As Vendacious filed through the narrow doorway, he was looking in all directions without appearing to be especially interested. Gas mantle lamps were ranked near the ceiling. Vendacious thought he saw parts of a bodyguard on perches above that. Yes, the room was large, but it was crowded with—what? not the bejeweled knicknacks of the hallway. Here there were gears and gadgets and large tilted easels covered with half-finished drawings. The walls were

bookcases rising so high that perches on ropes and pulleys were needed to reach the top shelves. One of Vendacious stood less than a yard from the nearest books. No great literature here. Most of the books were accounting ledgers. The ones further up looked like bound volumes of legal statutes.

The unseen speaker continued, “Come forward where I can see you all! Why in hell couldn’t you use the business visitor entrance? I didn’t build that throne room for nothing.” This last was querulous muttering.

Vendacious percolated through the jumble. Two of him came out from under a large drawing easel. The rest reached the central area a second later. He suffered a moment of confusion as Chitiratifor shuffled himself out of the way, and then he got his first glimpse of the Great Tycoon:

The pack was an ill-assorted eightsome. Vendacious had to count him twice, since the smaller members were moving around so much. At the core were four middle-aged adults. They had no noble or martial aspect whatsoever. Two of them wore the kind of green-tinted visors affected by accountants everywhere. The other two had been

turning the pages of a ledger. Pretty clearly he had been counting his money or cutting expenses, or what ever it was that businesscritters did.

Tycoon cast irritated looks at Vendacious and Chitiratifor. “You claim to know about the mantis monsters. This better be good. I know lots about the mantises, so I advise against lies.” He pointed a snout at Vendacious, waving him closer

Treat him like royalty. Vendacious belly- crawled two of himself closer to Tycoon. Now he had the attention of all Tycoon’s members. The four small ones, puppies under two years old, had stopped their pell-mell orbiting of the accountancy four. Two hung back with the four, while two came within a couple feet of Vendacious. These pups were integrated parts of Tycoon’s personality—just barely, and when they felt like it. Their mindsounds were unseemly loud. Vendacious had to force himself not to shrink back.

After a moment or two of impolite poking, Tycoon said, “So, how would you know about the mantis monsters?”

“I witnessed their starship *Oobii* descend from the sky.” Vendacious used the human name of their ship. The sounds were fl at and simple, alien. “I saw its lightning weapon bring down a great empire in a single afternoon.”

Tycoon was nodding. Most East Coast packs took this version of Woodcarver’s victory to be a fantasy. Evidently, Tycoon was not one of those. “You’re saying nothing new here, fellow—though few packs know the name of the flying ship.”

“I know far more than that, my lord. I speak the mantis language. I know their secrets and their plans.” And he had one of their *datasets* in his right third pannier, though he had no intention of revealing that advantage.

“Oh really?” Tycoon’s smile was sharp and incredulous, even unto his puppies.

“Who then are you?”

An honest answer to that question had to come sooner or later, fatal though it might be. “My lord, my name is Vendacious. I was—”

Tycoon’s heads jerked up. “Remasritlfeer!”

“My lord!” The deadly little fivesome was clustered around the only exit.

“Cancel my appointments. No more visitors today, of any sort. Have Saliminophon

take care of the shift change.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Tycoon’s older four set their ledger aside and all of him looked at Vendacious.”Be assured that this claim will be verified, sir. Discreetly but definitively verified.” But you could see Tycoon’s enthusiasm, the *will* to believe; for now, the puppies were in control. “You were Woodcarver’s spymaster, convicted of treason.”

Vendacious raised his heads. “All true, my lord. And I am proud of my ‘treason.’ Woodcarver has allied with the mantis queen and her maggots.”

“Maggots?” Tycoon’s eyes were wide.

“Yes, my lord. ‘Mantis’ and ‘maggot’ refer to different aspects of the same creatures, *humans* as they call themselves. ‘Mantis’ is the appropriate term for the adult. After all, it is a two- legged creature, sneaky and vicious, but also solitary.”

“*Real* mantises are insects, only about so tall.” One of the puppies yawned wide, indicating less than two inches.

“The mantises from the sky can be five feet at the shoulder.”

“I knew that,” said Tycoon. “But the maggots? They are the younglings of the grown monsters?”

“Indeed so.” Vendacious moved his two forward members confidently close to the other pack. “And here is something you may not know. It makes the analogy nigh perfect. The actual invasion from the sky began almost a year before the Battle on Starship Hill.”

“Before Woodcarver marched north?”

“Yes. A much smaller craft landed secretly, thirty- five tendays earlier. And do you know what was aboard? My lord, that first lander was filled with maggot eggsacks!”

“So that will be the real invasion,” said Tycoon. “Just as insect maggots burst from their eggsacks and overrun the neighborhood, these humans will overrun the entire world—”

Chitiratifor popped in with, “They will devour us all!”

Vendacious gave his servant a stern look. “Chitiratifor takes the analogy too far. At present, the maggots are young. There is only one adult, the mantis queen, Ravna. But consider, in just the two years since Ravna and *Oobii* arrived, she has taken control of Woodcarver’s Domain and expanded it across all the realms of the Northwest.”

Two of Tycoon’s older members tapped idly at an addition device, flicking small beads back and forth. A bean counter indeed. “And how do the mantises—this one Ravna mantis—manage such control? Are they loud? Can they swamp another’s mindsounds with their own?”

This sounded like a testing question. “Not at all, my lord. Just like insects, the humans make no sounds when they think. None whatsoever. They might as well be

walking corpses.” Vendacious paused. “My lord, I don’t mean to understate the threat, but if we work together we can prevail against these creatures. Humans are stupid! It shouldn’t be surprising since they are singletons. I estimate that the smartest of them aren’t much more clever than a mismatched

foursome.”

“Really! Even the Ravna?”

“Yes! They can’t do the simplest arithmetic, what any street haggler can do. Their memory for sounds—even the speech sounds they can hear—is almost non-existent. Like insect mantises, their way of life is parasitic and thieving.”

All eight of Tycoon sat very still. Vendacious could hear the edges of his mind, a mix of calculation, wonder, and uncertainty.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Tycoon finally said. “From my own investigations, I already know some of what you say. But the mantises are superlative inventors. I’ve tested their exploding black powder. I’ve heard of the catapults powered by that powder. And they have other inventions I can’t yet reproduce. They can *fly*! Their *Oobii* may now be crashed to earth, but they have a smaller flyer, barely the size of a boat. Last year it was seen by reliable packs just north of town.”

Vendacious and Chitiratifor traded a glance. *That* was bad news. Aloud, Vendacious said, “Your point is well taken, my lord, but there is no paradox. The mantis folk simply stole the things that give them their advantage. I have . . . sources . . . that prove they’ve been doing that for a very long time. Finally, their victims tired of them and chased them out of their original place in the sky. Much of what they have, they do not understand and cannot re-create.

Those devices will eventually wear out. The *antigravity* flier you mention is an example. Furthermore, the creatures have stolen—and are continuing to steal—our *own* inventions. For instance, that exploding black powder you mentioned? It might well have been invented by some creative pack, perhaps the same one who truly invented the *cannon* catapults.”

Tycoon didn’t reply immediately; he looked stunned. Ever since Vendacious had heard of Tycoon, he’d suspected that this pack had a special secret, something that could make him a faithful supporter of Vendacious’ cause. That was still just a theory, but—

Finally, Tycoon found his voice: “I wondered. . . . The blasting powder and the catapults . . . I remember . . .” He drifted off for a moment, splitting into the old and the young. The puppies scrabbled around, whining like some forlorn fragment. Then Tycoon gathered himself together. “I, I was once an inventor.”

Vendacious waved at the mechanisms that filled the room. “I can see that you still are, my lord.”

Tycoon didn’t seem to hear. “But then I split up. My fission sibling eventually left for the West Coast. He had so many ideas. Do you suppose—?”

Yes! But aloud, Vendacious was much more cautious: “I still have my sources, sir. Perhaps I can help with that question, too.”

What Happens After You Save the World

By Jo Walton

Among Others is a book about what happens after you've saved the world. What happens when you're fifteen, and you thought you were going to die, and your sister did die, and the world is safe but nobody knows you did it. It's about going on from there, day after day, and going to school.

It's also a book about loving books, how reading can shape your mind and the way you approach the world. It's about someone who obsessively reads science fiction, but who has fantasy problems and real world problems. It's about the loneliness of being a bright kid with nobody to talk to about the things you care about and it's about using magic to try to do something about that. And it's set in a very specific place and time—South Wales and the Marches, between September 1979 and February 1980.

I come from the South Wales Valleys, a coal mining area where the coal has run out, a post-industrial society. People set fantasy novels in Britain all the time, but not in the part of it where I come from. I had the idea for *Among Others* when I was trying to explain the landscape of my childhood. I said that I saw it as *The Lord of the Rings* when I should have seen it as *The Chrysalids*. This book results from the insight that both of these things can be true, within the story. The character is a lot more like me than most of my characters, because I wanted her to be somebody who could have that insight, and frame it that way. I wanted to write about the way landscape and places shape people, at

the same time as people are shaped by internal influences—their families, their reading, their education.

The book's written in first person, and when you do that you can get away without giving your protagonist a name, like Daphne Du Maurier in *Rebecca*. My protagonist certainly does have a name, but it's problematic. It's a name with lots of different forms. She and her twin sister were given cute Welsh twin names, Morwenna and Morganna. They were both known as Mori, or Mor, or Mo. ("Wasn't that confusing?" her father asks. "Oh yes," she replies.) She's grown up with her mother's surname Phelps, but now her father's sending her to school under his surname, Markova. In school she's called Taffy or Commie, or Hopalong—because she's been crippled in saving the world and limps along with a cane. It's been very interesting to me seeing the reviews take a position on what to call her, taking something out of this fluidity and making it seem solid.

A.S. Byatt says in *Possession* that books can't describe the joy of reading, because it's too recursive. I immediately thought that Samuel Delany has done it perfectly in *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*. It's interesting to write about a protagonist who loves to read, because Byatt's right, people in books generally don't read very much. I'm with Jane Austen, "if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?"

Among Others is about a world where if you love books enough, books will love you back.

Among Others

By Jo Walton

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[Jo Walton](#)'s novel *Tooth and Claw* won the World Fantasy Award, and the novels of her Small Change sequence—*Farthing*, *Ha'penny*, and *Half a Crown*—have won acclaim ranging from national newspapers to the *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Award. A native of Wales, she lives in Montreal.

May 1st, 1975

The Phurnacite factory in Abercwmboi killed all the trees for two miles around. We'd measured it on the mileometer. It looked like something from the depths of hell, black and looming with chimneys of flame, reflected in a dark pool that killed any bird or animal that drank from it. The smell was beyond description. We always wound up the car windows as tight as tight when we had to pass it, and tried to hold our breath, but Grampar said nobody could hold their breath that long, and he was right. There was sulphur in that smell, which was a hell chemical as everyone knew, and other, worse things, hot unnamable metals and rotten eggs.

My sister and I called it Mordor, and we'd never been there on our own before. We were ten years old. Even so, big as we were, as soon as we got off the bus and started looking at it we started holding hands.

It was dusk, and as we approached the factory loomed blacker and more terrible than ever. Six of the chimneys were alight, four belched out noxious smokes.

"Surely it is a device of the Enemy," I murmured.

Mor didn't want to play. "Do you really think this will work?"

"The fairies were sure of it," I said, as reassuringly as possible.

"I know, but sometimes I don't know how much they understand about the real world."

"Their world is real," I protested. "Just in a different way. At a different angle."

“Yes.” She was still staring at the Phurnacite, which was getting bigger and scarier as we approached. “But I don’t know how much they understand about the angle of the every day world. And this is definitely in that world. The trees are dead. There isn’t a fairy for miles.”

“That’s why we’re here,” I said.

We came to the wire, three straggly strands, only the top one barbed. A sign on it read “No Unauthorised Admittance. Beware Guard Dogs.” The gate was far around the other side, out of sight.

“Are there dogs?” she asked. Mor was afraid of dogs, and dogs knew it. Perfectly nice dogs who would play with me would rouse their hackles at her. My mother said it was a method people could use to tell us apart. It would have worked, too, but typically of her, it was both terrifyingly evil and just a little crazily impractical.

“No,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“It would ruin everything if we go back now, after having gone to all this trouble and come this far. Besides, it’s a quest, and you can’t give up on a quest because you’re afraid of dogs. I don’t know what the fairies would say. Think of all the things people on quests have to put up with.” I knew this wasn’t working. I squinted forward into the deepening dusk as I spoke. Her grip on my hand had tightened. “Besides, dogs are animals. Even trained guard dogs would try to drink the water, and then they’d die. If there really were dogs, there would be at least a few dog bodies at the side of the pool, and I don’t see any. They’re bluffing.”

We crept below the wire, taking turns holding it up. The still pool was like old unpolished pewter, reflecting the chimney flames as unfaithful wavering streaks. There were lights below them, lights the evening shift worked by.

There was no vegetation here, not even dead trees. Cinders crunched underfoot, and clinker and slag threatened to turn our ankles. There seemed to be nothing alive but us. The star-points of windows on the hill opposite seemed ridiculously out of reach. We had a school friend who lived there, we had been to a party once, and noticed the smell, even inside the house. Her father worked at the plant. I wondered if he was inside now.

At the edge of the pool we stopped. It was completely still, without even the faintest movement of natural water. I dug in my pocket for the magic flower. "Have you got yours?"

"It's a bit crushed," she said, fishing it out. I looked at them. Mine was a bit crushed too. Never had what we were doing seemed more childish and stupid than standing in the centre of that desolation by that dead pool holding a pair of crushed pimpernels the fairies had told us would kill the factory.

I couldn't think of anything appropriate to say. "Well, un, dai, tri!" I said, and on "Three" as always we cast the flowers forward into the leaden pool, where they vanished without even a ripple. Nothing whatsoever happened. Then a dog barked far away, and Mor turned and ran and I turned and pelted after her.

"Nothing happened," she said, when we were back on the road, having covered the distance back in less than a quarter of the time it had taken us as distance out.

"What did you expect?" I asked.

“The Phurnacite to fall and become a hallowed place,” she said, in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable. “Well, either that or huorns.”

I hadn’t thought of huorns, and I regretted them extremely. “I thought the flowers would dissolve and ripples would spread out and then it would crumble to ruin and the trees and ivy come swarming over it while we watched and the pool would become real water and a bird would come and drink from it and then the fairies would be there and thank us and take it for a palace.”

“But nothing at all happened,” she said, and sighed. “We’ll have to tell them it didn’t work tomorrow. Come on, are we going to walk home or wait for a bus?”

It had worked, though. The next day, the headline in the *Aberdare Leader* was “Phurnacite Plant Closing: Thousands of Jobs Lost.”

* * *

I’m telling that part first because it’s compact and concise and it makes sense, and a lot of the rest of this isn’t that simple.

Think of this as a memoir. Think of it as one of those memoirs that’s later discredited to everyone’s horror because the writer lied and is revealed to be a different colour, gender, class and creed from the way they’d made everybody think. I have the opposite problem. I have to keep fighting to stop making myself sound more normal. Fiction’s nice. Fiction lets you select and simplify. This isn’t a nice story, and this isn’t an easy story. But it is a story about fairies, so feel free to think of it as a fairy story. It’s not like you’d believe it anyway.

Mori Phelps 1979

Very Private.

This is NOT a vocab book!

“Et haec, olim, meminisse iuvabit!”

Virgil, The Aeneid

Wednesday, September 5th, 1979

“And how nice it’ll be for you,” they said, “to be in the countryside. After coming from, well, such an industrialised place. The school’s right out in the country, there’ll be cows and grass and healthy air.” They want to get rid of me. Sending me off to boarding school would do nicely, that way they can keep on pretending I didn’t exist at all. They never looked right at me. They looked past me, or they sort of squinted at me. I wasn’t the sort of relative they’d have put in for if they’d had any choice. *He* might have been looking, I don’t know. I can’t look straight at him. I kept darting little sideways glances at him, taking him in, his beard, the colour of his hair. Did he look like me? I couldn’t tell.

There were three of them, his older sisters. I’d seen a photograph of them, much younger but their faces exactly the same, all dressed as bridesmaids and my Auntie Teg next to them looking as brown as a berry. My mother had been in the picture too, in her horrid pink wedding dress—pink because it was December and we were born the June after and she did have some shame—but *he* hadn’t been. She’d torn him off. She’d ripped

or cut or burned him out of all the wedding pictures after he'd run off. I'd never seen a picture of him, not one. In L.M. Montgomery's *Jane of Lantern Hill*, a girl whose parents were divorced recognised a picture of her father in the paper without knowing it. After reading that we'd looked at some pictures, but they never did anything for us. To be honest, most of the time we hadn't thought about him much.

Even standing in his house I was almost surprised to find him real, him and his three bossy half-sisters who asked me to call them Aunt. "Not aunty," they said. "Aunty's common." So I called them Aunt. Their names are Anthea and Dorothy and Frederica, I know, as I know a lot of things, though some of them are lies. I can't trust anything my mother told me, not unless it's checked. Some things books can't check, though. It's no use my knowing their names anyway, because I can't tell them apart, so I don't call them aunt anything, just aunt. They call me "Morwenna", very formally.

"Arlinghurst is one of the best girls schools in the country," one of them said.

"We all went there," another chimed in.

"We had the jolliest time," the third finished. Spreading what they're saying out like that seems to be one of their habits.

I just stood there in front of the cold fireplace looking up under my fringe and leaning on my cane. That was something else they didn't want to see. I saw pity in one of their faces when I first got out of the car. I hate that. I'd have liked to sit down, but I wasn't going to say so. I can stand up much better now. I will get better, whatever the doctors said. I want to run so much sometimes my body aches with longing more than the pain from my leg.

I turned around to distract myself and looked at the fireplace. It was marble, very elaborate, and there were branches of copper birch leaves arranged in it. Everything was very clean, but not very comfortable. “So we’ll get your uniforms right away, today in Shrewsbury, and take you down there tomorrow,” they said. Tomorrow. They really can’t wait to get rid of me with my ugly Welsh accent and my limp and worst of all my inconvenient existence. I don’t want to be here either. The problem is that I don’t have anywhere else to be. They won’t let you live alone until you’re sixteen, I found that out in the Home. And he is my father even if I’d never seen him before. There is a sense in which these women really are my aunts. That makes me feel lonelier and further away from home than I ever had. I miss my real family, who have let me down.

The rest of the day was shopping, with all three aunts, but without him. I didn’t know if I was glad or sorry about that. The Arlinghurst uniform had to come from special shops, just like my grammar school uniform did. We’d been so proud when we passed the eleven plus. The cream of the Valleys, they said we were. Now that’s all gone, and instead they’re forcing on me this posh boarding school with its strange requirements. One of the aunts had a list, and we bought everything on it. They’re certainly not hesitating about spending money. I’ve never had this much spent on me. Pity it’s all so horrible. Lots of it is special games kits. I didn’t say I won’t be using them any time soon, or maybe ever. I keep turning away from that thought. All my childhood we had run. We’d won races. Most of the school races we’d been racing each other, leaving the rest of the field far behind. Grampar had talked about the Olympics, just dreaming, but he had mentioned it. There had never been twins at the Olympics, he said.

When it came to shoes, there was a problem. I let them buy hockey shoes and running shoes and daps, for gym, because either I can use them or not. But when it comes to the uniform shoes, for every day, I had to stop them. “I have a special shoe,” I said, not looking at them. “It has a special sole. They have to be made, at the orthopaedic. I can’t just buy them.”

The shop assistant confirmed that we can’t just buy them in the school pattern. She held up a school shoe. It was ugly, and not very different from the clumpy shoes I have. “Couldn’t you walk in these?” one of the aunts asked.

I took the school shoe in my hands and looked at it. “No,” I said, turning it over. “There’s a heel, look.” It was inarguable, though the school probably thinks the heel is the minimum any self respecting teenage girl will wear.

They didn’t mean to totally humiliate me as they clucked over the shoes and me and my built up sole. I had to remind myself of that as I stood there like a rock, a little painful half-smile on my face. They wanted to ask what’s wrong with my leg, but I outfaced them and they didn’t quite dare. This, and seeing it, cheered me up a little. They gave in on the shoes, and say the school will just have to understand. “It’s not as if my shoes were red and glamorous,” I said.

That was a mistake, because then they all stared at my shoes. They are cripple shoes. I had a choice of one pattern of ladies’ cripple shoes, black or brown, and they are black. My cane’s wooden. It used to belong to Grampar, who is still alive, who is in hospital, who is trying to get better. If he gets better, I might be able to go home. It’s not likely, considering everything, but it’s all the hope I have. I have my wooden keyring dangling from the zip of my cardigan. It’s a slice of tree, with bark, it came from

Pembrokeshire. I've had it since before. I touched it, to touch wood, and I saw them looking. I saw what they saw, a funny little spiky crippled teenager with a piece of tatty wood. But what they ought to see is two glowing confident children. I know what happened, but they don't, and they'd never understand it.

"You're very English," I said.

They smiled. Where I come from, "Saes" is an insult, a terrible fighting word, the worst thing you can possibly call someone. It means "English". But I am in England now.

We ate dinner around a table that would have been small for sixteen, but with a fifth place laid awkwardly for me. Everything matched, the tablemats, the napkins, the plates. It couldn't be more different from home. The food was, as I'd expected, terrible, leathery meat and watery potatoes and some kind of green spear-shaped vegetable that tastes of grass. People have told me all my life that English food is awful, and it's reassuring that they were right. They talked about boarding schools, which they all went to. I know all about them. Not for nothing have I read Greyfriars and Mallory Towers and the complete works of Angela Brazil.

After dinner, *he* asked me into his study. The aunts didn't look happy about it, but they didn't say anything. The study was a complete surprise, because it's full of books. From the rest of the house, I'd have expected neat old leatherbound editions of Dickens and Trollope and Hardy (Gramma loved Hardy) but instead the shelves are chock-a-block with paperbacks, and masses of them are SF. I actually relaxed for the first time in this house, for the first time in his presence, because if there are books perhaps it won't be all that bad. There were other things in the room, chairs, a fireplace, a drinks tray, a record

player, but I ignored or avoided them and walked as fast as I clumsily could to the SF shelf.

There was a whole load of Poul Anderson I haven't read. Stuffed on the top of the shelf. As there was Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonquest*, which looks as if it's the sequel to "Weyrsearch" which I read in an anthology. On the shelf below there was a John Brunner I haven't read. Better than that, two John Brunners, no, three John Brunners I haven't read. I felt my eyes start to swim.

I spent the summer practically bookless, with only what I took with me when I ran away from my mother—the three volume paperback *Lord of the Rings*, of course, Ursula Le Guin's *The Wind's Twelve Quarters, Volume 2*, which I will defend against all comers as the best single author short story collection of all time, ever, and John Boyd's *The Last Starship From Earth*, which I'd been in the middle of at the time and which hadn't stood up to re-reading as much as one might hope. I have read, though I didn't bring it with me, Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* and the comparison between the child in that bringing a new toy instead of the loved Pink Rabbit when they left the Third Reich have been uncomfortably with me whenever I've looked at the Boyd recently.

"Can I—" I started to ask.

"You can borrow any books you want, just take care of them and bring them back," he said. I snatched the Anderson, the McCaffrey, the Brunners. "What have you got?" he asked. I turned and showed him. We both looked at the books, not at each other.

"Have you read the first of these?" he asked, tapping the McCaffrey.

"Out of the library," I said. I have read the entire science fiction and fantasy collection of Aberdare library, from Anderson's *Ensign Flandry* to Roger Zelazny's

Creatures of Light and Darkness, an odd thing to end on, and one I'm still not certain about.

"Have you read any Delany?" he asked. He poured himself a whisky and sipped it. It smelled weird, horrible.

I shook my head. He handed me an Ace double, one half of it "Empire Star" by Samuel R. Delany Jr. I turned it over to look at the other half, but he tutted impatiently, and I actually looked at him for a moment.

"The other half's just rubbish," he says, dismissively, stubbing out a cigarette with unnecessary force. "How about Vonnegut?"

I have read the complete works of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, up to date. Some of it I have read standing up in Lears bookshop in Cardiff. *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* is very strange, but *Cat's Cradle* is one of the best things I've ever read. "Oh yes," I said.

"What Vonnegut?"

"All of it," I said, confidently.

"*Cat's Cradle*?"

"*Breakfast of Champions*, *Welcome to the Monkey House*..." I reeled off the titles. He was smiling. He looked pleased. My reading has been solace and addiction but nobody has been pleased with me for it before.

"How about *The Sirens of Titan*?" he asked, as I wound down.

I shook my head. "I've never heard of it!"

He set down his drink, bent down and got the book, hardly looking at the shelves, and added it to my pile. "How about Zenna Henderson?"

“*Pilgrimage*,” I breathed. It is a book that speaks to me. I love it. Nobody else I’ve met has ever read it. I didn’t read it from the library. My mother had it, an American edition with a hole punched in the cover. I don’t even think there is a British edition. Henderson wasn’t in the library catalogue. For the first time, I realised that if he is my father, which in some sense he is, then long ago he *knew* her. He married her. He had the sequel to *Pilgrimage* and two collections. I took them, very uncertain of him. I could hardly hold my book pile one handed. I put them all in my bag, which was on my shoulder, where it always is.

“I think I’ll go to bed and read now,” I said.

He smiled. He has a nice smile, nothing like our smiles. I’ve been told all my life that we looked like him, but I can’t see it. If he’s Lazarus Long to our Laz and Lor, I’d expect to have some sense of recognition. We never looked anything like anyone in our family, but apart from the eye and hair colour I don’t see anything. It doesn’t matter. I have books, new books, and I can bear anything as long as there are books.

Thursday September 6th 1979

My father drove me to school. In the back seat was a neat suitcase I never saw before, in which one of the aunts assured me is all the uniform, neatly laid out. There was also a leather satchel, which she said is school supplies. Neither of them were scuffed at all, and I think they must be new. They must have cost the earth. My own bag held what it had held since I ran away, plus the books I have borrowed. I clutched it tightly and resisted

their attempts to take it from me and put it with the luggage. I nodded at them, my tongue frozen in my mouth. It's funny how impossible it would be to cry, or show any strong emotion, with these people. They are not my people. They are not like my people. That sounded like the first lines of a poem, and I itched to write them down in my notebook. I got into the car, awkwardly. It was painful. At least there was room to straighten my leg once I was in. Front seats are better than back seats, I've noticed that before.

I managed to say thank you as well as goodbye. The Aunts each kissed me on the cheek.

My father didn't look at me as he drove, which meant I could look at him, sideways. He was smoking, lighting each cigarette with the butt of the last, just like her. I wound down my window to have some air. I still don't think he looks the least bit like us. It isn't just the beard. I wondered what Mor would have made of him, and pushed the thought away hard. After a little while he said, puffing, "I've put you down as Markova."

It's his name. Daniel Markova. I've always known that. It's the name on my birth certificate. He was married to my mother. It's her name. But I've never used it. My family name is Phelps, and that's how I've gone to school. Phelps means something, at least in Aberdare, it means my grandparents, my family. Mrs. Markova means that madwoman my mother. Still, it will mean nothing to Arlinghurst.

"Morwenna Markova is a bit of a mouthful," I said, after rather too long.

He laughed. "I said that when you were born. Morwenna and Morganna."

"She said you chose the names," I said, not very loudly, staring out of the open window at the moving patchwork of flat fields full of growing things. Some of them are stubble and some of them have been ploughed.

“I suppose I did,” he said. “She had all those lists and she made me choose. They were all very long, and very Welsh. I said it would be a mouthful, but she said people would soon shorten it. Did they?”

“Yes,” I said, still staring out. “Mo, or Mor. Or Mori.” Mori Phelps is the name I will use when I am a famous poet. It’s what I write inside my books now. *Ex libris Mori Phelps*. And what has Mori Phelps to do with Morwenna Markova and what’s likely to happen to her in a new school? I will laugh about this one day, I told myself. I will laugh about it with people so clever and sophisticated I can’t imagine them properly now.

“And did they call your sister Mog?” he asked.

He hadn’t asked me about her before. I shook my head, then realised he was driving and not looking at me. “No,” I said. “Mo, or Mor, both of us.”

“But how could they tell you apart?” He wasn’t looking at all, he was lighting another cigarette.

“They couldn’t.” I smiled to myself.

“You won’t mind being Markova at school?”

“I don’t care. And anyway, you’re paying for it,” I said.

He turned his head and looked at me for a second, then back to the road. “My sisters are paying for it,” he said. “I don’t have any money except what they allow me. Do you know my family situation?”

What is there to know? I knew nothing about him apart from the fact that he was English, which has caused me no end of playground fights, that he married my mother when he was nineteen and then ran off two years later when she was in hospital having another baby, a baby that died because of the shock. “No,” I said.

“My mother was married to a man named Charles Bartleby. He was quite wealthy. They had three daughters. Then the war came. He went off to fight in France in 1940 and was captured there and put in a prisoner of war camp. My mother left my three little sisters with their grandmother Bartleby, in the Old Hall, the house we’ve just left. She went to work in an RAF canteen, to do what she could for the war effort. There she met and fell in love with a Polish flying officer called Samuel Markova. He was a Jew. I was born in March 1944. In September 1944 Bartleby was liberated from the camp and came home to England, where he and my mother obtained a divorce. She married my father, who had just learned that his entire family in Poland had been killed.”

Had he had a wife and children too? I felt sure he had. A Polish Jew! I am part Polish. Part Jewish? All that I know about Judaism comes from *A Canticle for Leibovitz* and *Dying Inside*. Well, and the bible, I suppose.

“My mother had some money of her own, but not very much. My father left the RAF after the war and worked in a factory in Ironbridge. Bartleby left his money, and his house, to my sisters. When I was thirteen my mother died in an accident. My sisters, who were grown up by then, came to her funeral. Anthea offered to pay to send me to school, and my father accepted. They’ve been subsidising me ever since. As you know, I married part way through university.”

“What happened to Bartleby?” I asked. He couldn’t have been much older than my grandfather.

“He shot himself when the girls turned twenty-one,” he said, in a tone of voice that closed off further questions.

“What do you... do?” I asked.

“They hold the purse-strings, but I manage the estate,” he said. He dropped the butt of a cigarette into the ash tray, which was overflowing. “They pay me a salary, and I live at the house. Very Victorian really.”

“Have you lived there ever since you ran off?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“But they said they didn’t know where you were. My grandfather went there and talked to them, all this way.” I was indignant.

“They lied.” He wasn’t looking at me at all. “Did it bother you so much that I ran away?”

“I’ve run away from her too,” I said, which didn’t answer his question but which seemed to be enough.

“I knew your grandparents would look after you,” he said.

“They did,” I said. “You needn’t have worried about that.”

“Ah,” he said.

So then I realised guiltily how my very presence in his car was actually a huge reproach. For one thing, there is only one of me, when he abandoned twins. For another, I am crippled. Thirdly, I am there at all; I ran away. I had to ask for his help—and worse, I had to use the social services to ask for his help. Clearly the arrangements he made for us were far from adequate. In fact, my existence there at that moment demonstrated to him that he is a rotten parent. And, truth be told, he is. My mother notwithstanding, running out on babies isn’t an acceptable thing to do—and in fact, as an abstraction, abandoning

babies with her is particularly and unusually irresponsible. But I have run away from her too.

“I wouldn’t have grown up any other way,” I said. My grandparents. The Valleys. Home. “Truly. There was so much about it to love. I couldn’t have had a better childhood.”

“I’ll take you to meet my father soon, perhaps at half term,” he said. He was signalling to turn, and we turned between two elms, both dying, and onto a gravel drive that crunched under the car wheels. It was Arlinghurst. We had arrived.

The first thing that happened in school was the fight about chemistry. It’s a big gracious house in it’s own grounds, looking stately and Victorian. But the place smells like a school, chalk, boiled cabbage, disinfectant, sweat. The headmistress was well-mannered and distant. She didn’t give my father permission to smoke, which wrong footed him. Her chairs are too low, I had trouble getting out of mine. But none of that would matter if it wasn’t for the timetable she handed me. First, there are three hours of games every day. Second, art and religious education are compulsory. Third, I can have either chemistry or French, and either Latin or biology. The other choices were very simple, like physics or economics, and history or music.

Robert Heinlein says, in *Have Space Suit, Will Travel* that the only things worth studying are history, languages, and science. Actually, he adds maths, but honestly they left out the mathematical part of my brain. Mor got all the maths. Having said that, it was the same for both of us, we either understood it instantly or you might as well have used a drill to get it into our heads. “How can you understand Boolean algebra when you still have problems with the concept of long division?” my maths teacher had asked in

despair. But Venn diagrams are easy, while long division remains challenging. Hardest of all were those problems about people doing incomprehensible things with no motivation. I was inclined to drift away from the sum to wonder why people would care what time two trains passed each other (spies) be so picky about seating arrangements (recently divorced people) or, which to this day remains incomprehensible, run the bath with no plug in.

History, languages and science pose me no such problems. When you need to use maths in science, it always makes sense, and besides, they let you use a calculator.

“I need to do both Latin and biology, and both French and chemistry,” I said, looking up from the timetable. “But I don’t need to do art or religious education, so it’ll be easy to rearrange.”

The headmistress went through the roof at this, because clearly timetables are sacred, or something. I didn’t listen all that much. “There are over five hundred girls in this school, do you propose I inconvenience them all to accommodate you?”

My father, who has no doubt also read Heinlein, backed me up. I’ll take Heinlein over a headmistress any day. Eventually we ended up with a compromise in which I’ll surrender biology if I get to take all three of the others, which can be arranged with a little shuffling between classes. I’ll take chemistry with a different class, but I don’t care about that. It felt like enough of a victory for now, and I consented to be shown my dorm and meet my housemistress and “new friends”.

My father kissed my cheek when he said goodbye. I watched him out of the front door and saw him lighting a cigarette the second he was in the open air.

Friday September 7th 1979

It turns out to be a joke about the countryside.

Well, it is true in a way. Arlinghurst stands alone in its playing fields, surrounded by farmland. There isn't an inch of land within twenty miles that someone isn't using. There are cows, stupid ugly things, black and white like toy cows, not brown like the real cows we'd seen on holiday. (How now, brown cow? Nobody could talk to these.) They mill about in the fields until it is time for milking then they walk in a line into the farmyard. I figured it out this afternoon, when they let me take a walk around the grounds, that these cows are stupid. Bovine. I knew the word, but I hadn't quite appreciated how literal it could be.

I come from the Welsh Valleys. There's a reason they're called "The Valleys". They're steep narrow glaciated valleys without much flat land at the bottom. There are valleys just like them all over Wales. Most of them have a church and a few farms, maybe a thousand people in the whole valley. That's what they can naturally support. Our valley, the Cynon Valley, like its neighbours, has a population of more than a hundred thousand, all living in Victorian terraced houses, terraced up the hillsides like grapes, stuck together in rows with barely room between to hang out washing. The houses and the people are jammed together, like in a city, worse than a city, except that it isn't a city. But away from those rows, it was wild. And even in them, you could always lift up your eyes.

You could lift up your eyes to the hills from whence cometh your help—a psalm that always seemed self evident to me. The hills were beautiful, were green and had trees and sheep, and they were always there. They were wild, in the sense that anyone could go there at any time. They didn't belong to anyone, unlike the flat farmed fenced-in countryside around the school. The hills were common land. And even down in the valleys there were rivers and woods and ruins, as the ironworks ceased to be used, as the industrial places were abandoned. The ruins sprouted plants, returned to the wild, then the fairies moved in. What we thought would happen with the Phurnacite really did happen. It just took a little longer than we'd imagined.

We spent our childhood playing in the ruins, sometimes alone and sometimes with other children or with the fairies. We didn't realise what the ruins were, not for a long time. There was an old ironworks near Auntie Florrie's house where we used to play all the time. There were other children there, and we'd play with them sometimes, wonderful games of hide and seek, chasing through. I didn't know what an ironworks was. If pressed, I'd have worked out the etymology that someone must have once worked iron there, but nobody ever pressed me. It was a place, a thing. It was all over rosebay willow-herb in the autumn. It was unusual that we knew what it was.

Most of the ruins where we played, in the woods, didn't have names and could have been anything. We called them witch's cottage, giant's castle, fairy palace, and we played that they were Hitler's last redoubt or the walls of Angband, but they were really old crumbling relics of industry. The fairies hadn't built them. They'd moved in with the green things after people had abandoned them. The fairies couldn't make anything, not anything real. They couldn't do anything. That's why they needed us. We didn't know

that. There were a lot of things we didn't know, that we didn't think to ask. Before the people came I suppose the fairies would have lived in the trees and not had houses. The farmers would have put out milk for them, perhaps. There wouldn't have been so many of them either.

The people had come to the Valleys, or rather their ancestors had, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Under the hills there were iron and coal, and the Valleys were the boom towns of their day, filling up with people. If you've ever wondered why there wasn't a Welsh immigration to the New World on the scale of the Irish or Scottish ones it isn't because the people didn't need to leave their farms in the same way. It's because they had somewhere of their own to go. Or at least, they thought it was their own. English people came too. The Welsh language lost out. Welsh was my grandmother's first language, my mother's second language and I can only fumble along in it. My grandmother's family had come from west Wales, from Carmarthenshire. We still had relatives there, Mary-from-the-country and her people.

My ancestors came like everyone else, after iron was discovered, and coal. People started building smelters on the spot, railroads to take it out, houses for workers, more smelters, more mines, more houses until the valleys were solid strips of habitation up and down. The hills were always there between, and the fairies must have huddled in the hills. Then the iron ran out, or was cheaper to produce somewhere else, and while there was still coal mining it was a pitiful remnant of the boom of a hundred years before. Iron works were abandoned. Pits closed down. Some of the people left, but most stayed. It was home by then. By the time we were born, chronic unemployment was a fact of life

and the fairies had crept back down into the valleys and taken over the ruins that nobody wanted.

We grew up playing freely in the ruins and had no real sense of this history. It was a wonderful place for children. It was abandoned and grown over and ignored, and once you slipped away from the houses it was wild. You could always go up the mountain into real countryside, which had rocks and trees and sheep, grey-coated from coal dust and unappealing. (I can't understand how people are sentimental about sheep. We used to shout "Mint sauce!" at them to get them to run away. Auntie Teg always winced at that and told us not to, but we kept on doing it. They'd come down into the valley and knock over dustbins and destroy gardens. They were the reason you had to keep gates shut.) But even down in the valley, running through everything were the seams of trees and ruins running everywhere, through and under and parallel to the town. It wasn't the only landscape we knew. We went to Pembrokeshire on holiday, and up to the real mountains, the Brecon Beacons, and to Cardiff, which is a city, with city shops. The Valleys were home, they were the landscape of normality, and we never questioned it.

The fairies never said they built the ruins. I doubt we asked, but if we had they'd just have laughed, as they did at most of our questions. They were just inexplicably there or, some days inexplicably not there. Sometimes they would talk to us, and other times flee from us. Like the other children we knew, we could play with them or without them. All we really needed was each other and our imagination.

The places of my childhood were linked by magical pathways, ones almost no adults used. They had roads, we had these, they were for walking, they were different and extra, wider than a path but not big enough for cars, sometimes parallel to the real roads

and sometimes cutting from nowhere to nowhere, from an elven ruin to the labyrinth of Minos. We gave them names but we knew unquestioningly that the real name for them was “dramroads”. I never turned that word over in my mouth and saw it for what it was: Tram road. Welsh mutates initial consonants. Actually all languages do, but most of them take centuries, while Welsh does it while your mouth is still open. Tram to dram, of course. Once there had been trams running on rails up those dramroads, trams full of iron ore or coal. So empty and leaf-strewn, used by nobody but children and fairies, once they’d been little railroads.

It wasn’t that we didn’t know history. Even if you only count the real world, we knew more history than most people. We’d been taught about cavemen and Normans and Tudors. We knew about Greeks and Romans. We knew masses of personal stories about World War II. We even knew quite a lot of family history. It just didn’t connect to the landscape. And it was the landscape that formed us, that made us who we were as we grew in it, that affected everything. We thought we were living in a fantasy landscape when in actually we were living in a science fictional one. In ignorance, we played our way through what the elves and giants had left us, taking the fairies’ possession for ownership. I named the dramroads after places in *The Lord of the Rings* when I should have recognised that they were from *The Chrysalids*.

It’s amazing how large the things are that it’s possible to overlook.

Down the Mysterly River

By **Bill Willingham**

Illustrations by **Mark Buckingham**

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Down the Mysterly River is the children's book debut of [Bill Willingham](#), the creator of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling graphic novel series *Fables*. Complete with illustrations by *Fables* artist **Mark Buckingham**, it is a spirited, highly original tale of adventure, suspense, and everlasting friendship.

Chapter One

Wolves and Badgers and Thrilling Boy Detective Stories

Max the Wolf was a wolf in exactly the same way that foothills are made up of real feet and a tiger shark is part tiger, which is to say, not at all. Max was in fact a boy, between twelve or thirteen years old, and entirely human. He was dressed in a Boy Scout uniform. His loose cotton shirt and shorts were a light greenish-tan in color, as were the knee-high stockings that rose out of the weathered brown leather hiking boots he wore. Many brightly colored cloth badges, of every odd shape and size, were sewn onto the front of his shirt. More badges were sewn onto the breasts and back of the dusty red jacket he wore zippered halfway up over his shirt. A blue and white triangle of cloth was draped around his neck, its tightly rolled end points connected in front by a neckerchief slide, deftly hand-carved into the shape of a gray wolf's head, its fierce jaws open to reveal white fangs.

Max had blue eyes and fair skin, lightly dusted with freckles. He had a wild mop of brown hair that he frequently had to brush out of his eyes. Usually his hair was restrained by his cap, but he seemed to have lost his cap recently, though he couldn't exactly recall where.

Now that Max thought about it, not only could he not remember how he'd lost his cap, he couldn't recall where he was or how he'd arrived there. This was troubling for many reasons. In all the years he'd been a member of Troop 496, Chief Seattle Council,

in the countless hikes and camping trips he'd enjoyed, and the many adventures he'd had, Max the Wolf had never once been lost. He was a wizard with map and compass and had earned his Orienteering merit badge while still a Tenderfoot Scout. And he'd never suffered a loss of memory, nor even the briefest moment of blackout.

And yet here he found himself walking down the slope of a hill, in the midst of a great forest of mixed broadleaf and evergreen, or so at least it appeared from his limited vantage place. As he walked he passed in and out of the shade of the leafy canopy high overhead. To any observer, and there was at least one, the infrequent pockets of undiluted golden sunlight made Max seem to suddenly shine brightly, like a character in a painting, before he stepped once more into the subdued, heavily filtered light of deep green shadow. The enclosed world was alive with the usual sounds of a forest. Birds sang and bugs chattered to each other from their many hidden enclaves. Many foresty scents drifted on the cool, soft breeze.

"Well, Max, it seems you've landed yourself in another adventure," the boy said out loud, even though there didn't appear to be anyone on hand to talk to.

"At the beginning of the mystery," he continued, "the best way to isolate what you don't know is to first take stock of everything you do know." This was one of Max's five most important rules of detection. Reciting it helped him to order his thoughts and prepare his mind for the coming investigation. "First, I am in the middle of a forest I don't recognize, though it is so much like the familiar forests of the Pacific Northwest, I'll assume I'm still in that general area, until evidence suggests otherwise. Second, I don't know how I got here." He ticked each point off on his fingers as he mentioned it.

“Judging by what I can see of the sky,” he said, counting a third finger, “it’s about mid-day and not likely to rain any time soon, so I’m in no immediate danger of exposure. I can’t hear traffic sounds, so I must be at least a few miles from any well-traveled road.”

Now that he was back in a detecting frame of mind, the uneasiness brought about by his initial confusion began to fade. Max was seldom if ever fearful, not even during the Mystery of the Gruesome Grizzly, but he’d never suffered a loss of his mental faculties before. No matter what, he’d always been able to trust his ability to reason, until now. Talking out loud in such an odd situation comforted him just enough to help keep the unfamiliar traces of panic at bay.

“I must have been involved in some Scouting activity,” he continued as he strolled downhill, “because I’m in uniform. If our Troop was on a camping trip I’d have a backpack, or at least a canteen for a day hike. But I could’ve lost those along with my hat.”

As soon as he thought of his possibly missing backpack, Max checked his pockets for his Lost Kit, which an experienced Scout always carried apart from his backpack, just in case he ever became separated from the rest of his gear in the wild. He found his Lost Kit in his left front pants pocket, exactly where it was supposed to be. Inside a small watertight cylinder were a dozen strike-anywhere matches, a candle, a roll of fishing line with two hooks, a few bandages in sterile wrappings, and a needle and thread. A length of heavier twine was wrapped around the outside of the plastic cylinder, since it didn’t need to be protected from the elements.

Along with his Boy Scout Knife, which he discovered safely in his right front pants pocket, he had the minimum basic tools necessary for a resourceful Scout to

survive in all but the most extreme sort of wilderness. Since he was in the habit of carrying his knife and Lost Kit during all Scouting activities, even those which took place in the middle of civilization, their presence in his pockets shed no light on the unresolved question of whether or not he was on a day hike or overnight camping trip prior to his memory loss.

The bandages in his Lost Kit reminded him that most cases of memory loss were caused by injury, or some other serious trauma. So, mentally criticizing himself for not thinking of it sooner, he stopped walking long enough to give himself as thorough a physical examination as his situation allowed. It didn't take long. His head seemed free of lumps, cuts or tender spots. He suffered no headache or dizziness. Moving down his body, he discovered no broken bones, or serious cuts. In fact he couldn't even find superficial cuts, scrapes, or the kind of minor scratches and insect bites anyone picks up after spending a reasonable amount of time in the woods. "So the evidence suggests," he said, "wherever I am, I haven't been here long.

"If I was on a hike and became separated from my Troop, there's a pretty good chance some of them might be nearby, looking for me." Standing still and quiet in the great woods, he listened for human sounds. Any search party would be blowing on loud whistles or actively calling out his name, not only to find him, but also to aid themselves in not becoming separated from each other. Losing additional members of the search party was always the greatest danger in any rescue operation. He decided to put off calling out himself. For now, he reasoned, it was more important to listen.

He could hear all manner of birdsong, but failed to recognize any. Identifying individual birdcalls was never his strong point; not like his Patrol mate Danny

Underbrink, who could tell a hundred different birds by their song alone. Max did better with plants. Unfortunately the many varieties of tree and shrub he could immediately identify were common to all western forests.

After a few minutes of more thorough investigation, he found some mushrooms nestled in the shady roots of a large spruce tree. He recognized them as a type called *Bulbous Cort*, that were common to the mountainous forests of the Pacific Northwest, though not entirely exclusive to them. It was enough though to add support to his original theory that he wasn't far from the woodlands regularly explored by his Troop.

As bad off as he was, at least it was unlikely he'd been spirited away to some remote corner of the world. In the adventure he called the Mystery of the Cautious Kidnappers, he and Taffy Clark had been taken as far as Canada's remote Northern Territories before he could effect their escape.

Because the *Bulbous Cort* mushroom ripened only between September and October, Max was able to deduce what time of year it was, which suddenly struck him as the strangest aspect of the mystery so far. No matter how much he'd forgotten of recent events, he should still be able to remember the month, or at least the general time of year.

"You can't blank out entire seasons, can you?" Try as he may, he couldn't even pin down what his last specific memory was. Though he could recall just about every detail of each one of his adventures, and even fit them in the right chronological order, there seemed to be a big blank between the end of his last adventure and the moment he realized he was walking through these woods.

At this point the panicky feeling threatened to well up inside him again, and it was only by a great effort of will he was able to force it back into submission. It was time, he

thought, to quit worrying and go back to solving specific problems. “Figure out enough of the small details, and the big mystery will solve itself.” That was another of his famous first five rules of detection.

Even though the sun was still high in the sky, promising that there were still several hours of reliable daylight left, Max decided to make some plans, in case it turned out he truly was on his own, and he’d be spending the night in the woods. He turned slowly in place, in two complete circles, looking up and down, from the forest floor to the branches high above him. He could detect no break in the trees and underbrush that might indicate a possible clearing, where he could expect to find a less obstructed view of his location. The next best thing was to head back up the hill he’d been walking down, until he found a clearing or reached the hilltop, where he could climb one of the taller trees to see what he could see.

The disadvantage of going uphill, beyond the obvious fact that it was harder than walking downhill, was that he’d tend to be walking away from most sources of fresh water. He’d need to find some water before he settled down for the night, but he had some time before that became the first priority. He’d listen while he hiked. On hillsides any water would tend to be in motion, and moving water made noise.

Having decided on his immediate objective, Max removed his jacket and, draping it over one shoulder, set out at a brisk pace up the steep slope of the hillside. Before he had gone very far, while passing through a particularly dense area of underbrush between two black cottonwood trees, he was surprised by a gruff voice from under a leafy bush.

“I don’t think either of us would like it if you stepped on me,” the voice said.

Startled, Max stepped back a couple of paces, until he was well clear of the bushes. In almost no time at all a squat and furry form came out from under the very same brush, waddling a bit from side to side as it walked on four short legs. The stout creature was nearly twenty inches from nose to tail, and, except for its elongated snout, it was almost as wide as it was long. In a mostly white face, two dark stripes of fur ran from its black nose, one across each eye, to taper off just beyond the back of its head. An additional dark patch of fur colored each cheek. In a very striking pattern, the dark and white lines flowed back along its coat, gradually shading into a uniform gray along the way, turning brownish just before the bristly fur entirely ran out of creature to cover. Max recognized it instantly as a very large example of the species *taxidea taxus*, or in plain language, a badger.

Max looked back and forth between the badger and the bush it had just emerged from, hoping to get a look at who'd spoken, all the while wondering what odd sort of fellow would share space under a bush with a badger.

"You might want to be a touch more careful to look where you're going," the badger said, provoking a yawlp of astonishment from Max. It was the same gruff voice he'd just heard. There was no one else in the bush.

"You talked!" Max said. He backed another full step down the hill, careful not to take his eyes off of the impossible creature.

"Well, why shouldn't I?" the badger said. "You were already talking so much, it seemed impolite not to join the conversation." The creature shuffled forward a little bit as he talked. As he did, Max stepped back each time, keeping a uniform distance between them.

“But badgers can’t talk!” Max said.

“Of course we can. We talk all the time. Back in my old sett it was everything I could do to get my wife and cubs to shut up long enough to hear myself think. Of course, this is the first time one of you fire callers ever answered back. For all of your endless jabbering, this is the only time one of you said anything I can understand.”

This time as he talked, the badger didn’t shuffle forward on his stubby legs, perhaps because in doing so he would have backed the poor fire caller right into a tangle of devil’s club behind him. Their multitudes of two-inch needles were bad enough on a badger’s thick coat. Against a fire caller’s soft unfurred hide they’d be torture. Instead the creature huffed and snorted and rocked from side to side as he talked, all the while clawing absent-mindedly at the dirt in front of him. It seemed to Max a very badgerly thing to do.

Suddenly all evidence of surprise and fear at such an unusual encounter vanished from Max’s face, to be replaced by a wide grin that burped out several solitary chuckles, before they connected into a more proper and delighted stream of laughter that lasted for some moments. Max didn’t back up any more. In fact he boldly knelt down in the spongy carpet of dead leaves and pine needles to get a better look at his new companion.

“Do badgers amuse you, fella, or are you just some sort of kook?”

“Neither,” Max said, once he was able to get control of his laughter. “I’m simply relieved to have finally solved this particular mystery. I should have suspected it before. The clues were all there. Not knowing what time of year it is should have been a dead giveaway. But the sensations of my environment were so detailed and consistent with

reality, the obvious answer never occurred to me, until now. I'm in the middle of a very enjoyable dream. I'm going to regret waking up from this one."

"I hate to interrupt your good mood," the badger said, "and Brock knows I've had some crazy dreams of my own, but I don't think this is one of them."

"Of course you wouldn't think so," Max replied, "because you aren't the one dreaming. You're just a character in mine."

"Nope," the badger said. "I doubt that very much. Though you and I have both landed in a strange place, I don't think it's the land of dreams. I know the smell of that country like I know the scent of my own beloved missus in the dark of our den, and this ain't it. This land smells all wrong. Not in a bad way, precisely, but foreign like."

"Where are we then?" Max said, his broad smile fading only a little.

"I think we're in the afterlife, young fire caller," the badger said in a voice gone quiet and sober. "My best guess is that you and me are stone cold dead."

Chapter Two

Flights and Fights and Campfire Tales

McTavish the Monster was on the run again. Given the darkness of the night and the density of the woods, with all of its myriad hidey-holes, he could easily have escaped the hunter, if the hunter were on his own. Humans, for all their amazing tools and other wonders, were dull things and easy to outwit. But the two black hounds were another story. Dogs could sniff anyone out of even the most hidden lair, so the only way for McTavish to escape this time was to run and dodge and run some more.

McTavish was getting tired though. If it were only a single dog on his tail, he would have turned to fight long ago. Killing a big bad dog wasn't so hard as all that, even a well trained hunting dog. More than one hound's ghost was currently whimpering in some foul canine Hell because it had been foolhardy enough to pick a fight with him. But a dog and its master were impossible for even a crafty old fighter like McTavish to beat. And when the hunter had two dogs? Well, that was nothing short of unfair.

So McTavish ran for his life, followed closely by the hounds that howled and yipped and bellowed to their master following far behind them as best he could. This was not an occasion for stealth. All four of them, hunters and hunted, crashed headlong through the bramble, with not a care for how much noise they made. From time to time as he fled, McTavish yowled his own vulgar protests to the heavens, and whatever warrior gods there were who'd decided to stack the deck so completely against him.

He was an old yellow tomcat, of the species most commonly referred to as a Domestic or House Cat. But to attempt to describe McTavish by either of those names would be seriously misleading. He'd never been inside of any house, and in all of his thirteen hard years of life, no one had been able to domesticate him. He was feral through and through, and bigger than any cat of his variety had a right to be. He weighed at least 30 pounds of pure meanness, spit and bile, and there was not a jot of fat on him. His ratty, ungroomed fur—where there wasn't so much scar tissue that it still grew—was of a sickly yellow color, except for one white sock on his right hind leg and a splash of unusually lustrous white fur under his chin.

Once, in the process of murdering his second dog, he'd had his throat ripped open. The dog—a giant of a Shepherd-Golden Lab mix, with more daring than sense—had partially torn away a great bloody flap of flesh, from his chin down to his chest. As McTavish lay bleeding into the dust of the barnyard, preparing to join his adversary in death, the leather-skinned old man who owned the farm found him.

Normally the farmer was wise enough to avoid the evil old barn cat, but McTavish was too weak by then to resist him. The old man carried the dying animal into the barn, and set him on a workbench to see if he wasn't beyond all help. It wasn't done for love. The old man hated the foul creature, but a good mouser was worth its weight in gold on a farm. In addition to everything else it destroyed, McTavish killed a pile of rats and mice every day of the week. That alone made him worth saving, if it were possible.

Carefully the old man washed out the wound and shaved all the areas around it. Then he set the ragged flap of McTavish's skin back in place and stitched it with a normal household sewing needle and the length of extra thick neon pink thread that he

had no other use for, since his wife had passed on. He didn't have extra money to waste on animal doctors, so that was as much as he could do for the thing. He laid McTavish in a bed of dry straw and went back about his business, leaving the cat to decide for himself whether he would live or die.

It took some time, and things looked dicey for a while, but McTavish lived, eventually recovering the full measure of his health and general meanness. "Too evil to die," the old farmer said.

What's remarkable though is that the fur under the old cat's chin, where he'd been so severely wounded, grew back silky and white, as fine and lovely as the fur of the most pampered house cat, and in stark contrast to that which covered the rest of his great, battle-scarred form. It was as if some invisible hand had pinned a gleaming medal on his breast, an award for fierceness and courage in war.

The patch of glorious white only showed how ugly and ill-used the rest of him looked. Countless scars from countless battles covered his ancient body. One eye had been clawed out years past and the hole it left had healed badly. His ragged tail had a kink in it, from where it was once bitten nearly in two, and was missing the last inch, from another opponent's slightly more successful attempt to bite through it. One of his teeth had broken off in the hipbone of a plow horse who'd been too slow getting out of his way.

In the inky dark of night under the trees of the strange forest, McTavish continued to scamper just out of reach of the hunting dogs' fangs. A great boulder suddenly loomed out of the darkness, directly in his path. He was going too fast to avoid it, so instead he jumped into the sky, meeting the vertical rock face at the top of his arc and frantically

clawed his way to its top, scrambling in a wild blur of churning feet over the slick wet moss that crowned it. The dog immediately behind him wasn't quite so lucky. All of his attention had been on his intended prey. He never saw the boulder, not even when he crashed headfirst into it at full speed. Teeth broke and blood splashed with the ugly collision. The dog's cry of pain pierced the night so as to make every sort of creature shiver in its den. The other dog was more fortunate. He avoided hitting the rock face by smashing instead into his injured brother's backside, pushing his ruined muzzle back into the rock a second time.

Above them, McTavish pranced and strutted on the top of the boulder, reveling in his brief moment of victory. He would have liked to hurl insults at the two hounds, but was so out of breath he couldn't speak. So, instead, he lifted one hind leg and whizzed down the face of the rock, more or less in the direction of his injured and disheartened pursuers. "That's as much poetry as you can understand anyway," he said, when he'd recovered enough wind to speak.

Then McTavish took a look around him from his vantage point at the top of the huge rock. He wouldn't have time for more than a quick look before the dogs recovered enough to continue the chase, but that was all he needed. Far off in the darkness, up the slope of the wooded hillside, he could see the flickering light of a campfire. The rudiments of a plan formed in the huge old cat's mind and he acted on it without hesitation. He bounded off of the other side of the mossy rock and once again sped off into the night.

* * *

Lord Ander fought to draw breath into his tortured lungs as he ran through the darkened forest, following the loud baying of his hunting dogs. He was dressed in muted grays, browns and greens that blended in with his surroundings. Over his tunic and leggings he wore a long wool cloak that seemed to catch on every hidden branch in his path, as he crashed and stumbled along in pursuit of his dogs and their prey. In the frequent rains that visited the territory the heavy wool cloak was good for bleeding off water, keeping him dry and comfortable underneath, but in a nighttime chase it was just another hindrance. With every step the scabbard of his sword slapped hard against his thigh. Unseen branches whipsawed his face.

He was able to catch a brief moment of rest when he came across his hounds who'd suffered a mishap. One of them—Caradoc, he thought, but it was hard to be sure in the dark—had injured itself by running into a boulder. But the dog recovered quickly enough and seemed eager to press on, so the chase resumed. Judging by the sounds they made, they'd had no trouble picking up their quarry's trail again.

The demonic creature had led them all on a merry chase, up and down the hillside, through the thickest parts of the forest. It led them, it seemed, through every hazard the night-dark woods could offer. Despite his thick protective clothing, Ander had already suffered numerous cuts and bruises, and a painful twist to one ankle that he'd likely not be able to walk on in the morning. Once they caught it, he'd enjoy cutting every evil thing out of the beast, until it no longer remotely resembled its present form.

* * *

Max and his newfound badger companion sat near the comforting warmth of the fire he'd built. To be accurate, Max seemed to be the only one that derived any comfort from the fire. The badger, true to its wild nature, continued to be wary of flame and would only approach it cautiously, ready to bolt at any provocation.

Earlier that afternoon, after his first startling pronouncement about death and the afterlife, the badger had complained about being hungry and suggested putting off any further conversation until they'd found food and water. Max couldn't do anything but agree. An actual talking badger was strange enough, but one who insisted they were both dead was especially disturbing. Though he was still convinced he was dreaming, doubts began to weaken his certainty. Too many details were unlike dreams he'd had in the past. He felt real pain when he pinched himself, and real hunger when the badger suggested they seek out dinner. That didn't happen in dreams.

Time and again, on past Scouting trips, Max had proved his skills at finding edible plants in the wilderness. He had little trouble finding some mushrooms, roots and tubers that could sustain him, even if they wouldn't be exactly tasty. But where Max was merely competent, the badger was an expert. In the hours it took Max to find his few edible items, the badger had located enough for a feast. He gorged on wild strawberries, blueberries and raspberries, then dug up squirming bundles of fat, juicy earthworms and greedily slurped them down. After that he spent some time rooting tasty crunchy nuts out from under the wet carpet of matted dead leaves and pine needles that covered most of the forest floor.

When he was so full he couldn't eat another bite, he found a cool mountain stream to ease his thirst. Then the newly contented badger waddled off to see how the young fire caller had fared. He found the boy looking forlornly at the small pile of edible plants and fungi he'd been able to gather.

"Is that all you're going to eat?" the badger asked in his low grumbling voice.

"Aren't you very hungry?"

"Oh, I'm plenty hungry," Max said, "but this is all I could find so far." Talking to an animal hadn't become any more normal over the intervening hours since their first encounter. But one of his rules of detection directed that, "A detective can't solve a mystery simply by picking and choosing the evidence that suits him." So, for the time being, he decided to accept the fact that a badger could talk, until he woke up, or some better explanation presented itself.

"Then I guess you're just particular about what you eat," the badger said.

"Because you walked right past a bunch of fat, sweet berries to get at those twisted little roots you dug up."

"Really?" Max said. "I never noticed. I don't suppose you'd be willing to show me?"

"Of course. It would be bad manners not to."

"Speaking of manners," Max said. "I suspect that it's time we got around to introducing ourselves to each other. I'd have suggested it sooner, but discovering the world's first talking badger sort of threw me off balance."

"Yes," the badger answered. "Trading names is a good thing to do, but I didn't know what the custom was for you fire callers. Some folk think giving their name to a

stranger is a good way to get a black curse put on them. Never ask a goose his name, if you want to save your eardrums. But we're more enlightened than geese. Badgerkind isn't burdened with such superstitions. Trading names is fine with me.

"I'm called Banderbrock, hero of the Great War of the Thumbly Hares. My name means 'one who follows the ways of the first badger,' and that is the code I live by."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mister Banderbrock. I'm called Max the Wolf."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry to hear that," Banderbrock said. "Did you get your head bopped in, or fall down a steep hill when you were a cub, or what?"

"I don't understand," Max said.

"Yes, that's evident. But do you know what happened to get you that way, or is that particular memory part of what's broken in your mind?"

"No," Max said, quite confused by this point. "I don't understand why you think I'm injured in my head. My head is fine, as far as I know."

"Well, I'm sorry to be the one to bring you bad news," Banderbrock said, "but something has you confused, because you aren't a wolf."

"Oh, I understand now," Max said with a grin of visible relief. "I didn't mean to suggest I'm a real wolf. That's just a nickname I have. Everyone calls me Max the Wolf because I'm the leader of the Wolf Patrol in my Scout Troop."

"Oh, you're a hunter of wolves," Banderbrock said.

"No, not exactly," Max said. "Although I did have to hunt a wolf once during the Mystery of the Silver Moon. But as a general rule I don't do that. We're called the Wolf Patrol because... Well, it's actually sort of complicated. The wolf is a symbol for us, almost like a totem. Don't your kind take nicknames?"

“Not like that,” Banderbrock said. “If I were to take the wolf’s name he might come to get it back some day. I’ve had to fight wolves a time or two before, but always for a better reason than taking a fancy to his name. You fire callers have odd ways.”

“Yes, I suppose we do. I don’t imagine we can go find those berries now?”

“We can indeed,” Banderbrock said, and then started off through a stand of blackthorn trees. “Follow me.”

Once Banderbrock had directed Max to the various bushes, shrubs and patches where all manner of delectable berry could be found, Max’s mood improved considerably. He picked and ate, while the badger napped in the sun, snoring quietly.

He woke up about an hour later to find Max sitting in his own slowly fading patch of sun, licking the ripe juices of the last strawberry off of his fingers.

“Did that fill you up?” Banderbrock murmured sleepily, while scratching his big belly with his long digger claws. “Or would you like some meat to go with that? I’d be happy to dig you up a mess of fresh worms.”

“No thank you,” Max said. “I never developed a taste for worms, but if you happen to know where to find a plump chicken...”

“I doubt we’ll find any chickens this far from a farmstead, but would a rabbit do?” the badger asked.

“Seriously?”

Not much more than an hour later a skinned and cleaned rabbit slowly cooked on a wooden spit, over the fire Max had built while the badger hunted. They’d made their camp near the splashing waters of the small stream Banderbrock had found earlier in the

day. The sun had set behind the crest of a far hill and darkness settled in quickly behind it. The fire popped and crackled as juices from the cooking rabbit dripped into it.

“Are you sure you want to burn it like that?” Banderbrock asked.

“We fire callers prefer our meat this way,” Max said. “It will take some time to cook, so maybe this would be a good opportunity to pick up our discussion on why you think we’re dead.”

“There’s many reasons that occur to me,” Banderbrock answered from the edge of the firelight. “One is that I’ve never talked to a fire caller before. Such miracles are to be expected in the great beyond, don’t you think?”

“I guess that makes a degree of sense,” Max answered, in a non-committal voice.

“But the most compelling reason is I remember dying,” Banderbrock continued.

“I was in the lair of a great and evil dragon, destroying its monstrous offspring as they hatched. One of the dragon cubs got its fangs into me and I was paralyzed by its poison. It took some time to die from it, and I was still awake when more of the creatures hatched and began to eat me up. Then there was the expected darkness, and then I found myself here on this hillside in this forest, under vasty mountains that had never existed in my earthly home. I expect to find the Great Sett somewhere around here.”

“What is that?” Max asked.

“The Great Sett is the endless communal badger warren, where every good and honorable badger lives in the afterlife. All of my friends who died bravely in any of our wars are there, waiting to welcome me.”

“And does this look like the sort of place you’d expect to find the Great Sett?”

Max said.

“Yes it does,” Banderbrock said. “Though I expect it’s a bit farther down the hill where the bones of the earth aren’t so close to the surface and the trees aren’t so thick together. Tomorrow I’ll head down into the valley to find it.”

They continued to talk as the night grew older, trading tales of their many adventures. Max ate the rabbit when it was done. He offered a bite to Banderbrock who didn’t like the burned taste of it. Then, after another trip to the stream, they settled in to sleep. Max built the fire up first, because the night was cold and breezy, and he only had his thin red jacket to act as a blanket. Banderbrock had his fine fur coat, so didn’t need the fire’s warmth. He moved off to find a comfy notch under a fallen log in which to make his bed.

Chapter Three

The First Night, the Battle and What Was Learned as a Result

Before Max and Banderbrock had been asleep for very long, they were wakened by the sounds of barking and howling dogs not too far off in the distance. Added to that were the intermittent screams of some other sort of creature.

“What do you suppose that is?” Max asked of the fruggerdly old badger, as he shivered and snorted himself into wakefulness. Max was surprised to be woken by dogs barking in the night, but he was more surprised to still find himself in strange woods in the company of a talking badger. He’d fully expected to wake up quite badgerless in his own bed in the suburbs of Renton, Washington. His theory that he was only dreaming was getting harder and harder to support.

“Hunting hounds are on the scent of some quarry,” Banderbrock said. Then, after shushing Max so he could listen, and then snuffling at the air for a time, he said, “There are two dogs, and someone of your kind behind them I think. I don’t know what sort of thing it is they’re chasing, but we’re likely to find out soon. They’re coming this way.”

“What should we do?” Max asked.

“It’s too late to snuff your fire. You called up too much of it. So we should expect their arrival. I wouldn’t count on night hunters to be among the friendly sort, so we’d best prepare for a fight. Now would be a good time to pull out that portable claw you carry in your pocket.”

Banderbrock referred to Max's Boy Scout knife, with its various blades, which he'd seen in use earlier. The badger seemed fascinated by the thing, but couldn't understand why anyone would find advantage in a claw that one could put away, and possibly lose. "The only good place to keep your claws are on the end of your paws, always out and ready for business," he'd said earlier in the evening. He'd also wondered whether fire callers also make their teeth removable. He didn't quite believe Max when he admitted that they sometimes did, but usually only their eldest.

"Do you really think we'll have to fight?" Max said, listening to the hounds come closer.

"It's better to prepare for what could happen, than what you hope will happen," Banderbrock said. "I'll need your help if it is a fight we're facing. On my own I can beat at least two of anything, but three or more isn't as certain."

Max did take out his knife and opened the longest cutting blade. He'd never had to stab anyone before, and didn't relish the thought of doing it now. But his companion's words made sense, and Max wouldn't leave a friend to face danger alone. He gripped the knife firmly in his right fist, but didn't hold it out in a threatening way. If there were going to be violence, he wouldn't be the first to start it. He turned to face the sound of the oncoming dogs, and whatever screeching, wailing thing they were chasing.

Just then there was a crashing of leaves, and a frightening yellow shape flew out of the darkness and landed almost in the fire, skidding against the hot stones Max had placed around it.

"I'd run or hide if I were you," the bizarre apparition said. Then it streaked off into the night again, in the opposite direction from where it appeared.

Max didn't have time to decide what it was he'd just seen, because by then two large black hounds trotted out of the circle of darkness surrounding their camp. Their eyes seemed to glow with demonic fire. A mere reflection of the firelight, Max had to remind himself.

The dogs paced and growled at the edge of the light, slipping into and out of shadows, like beastly ghosts. Max had to turn every which way to keep them in sight as they circled the barrier of light, which they seemed in no hurry to enter. Banderbrock was nowhere to be seen. Max hadn't heard him leave the camp area. He was alone against whatever danger the hounds represented.

"Hello the camp," a voice said from out of the darkness. "I'm alone, and master of these hounds. May I come forward?"

"Come ahead," Max called.

Within moments there was a soft rustling of underbrush and then a tall man, quite human in appearance, stepped into the circle of firelight. As he approached, he whispered some sharp command to the dogs who stopped their pacing and growling, but remained back in the shadows, twin statues of impending danger.

The man wore a long, hooded gray cloak. The hood was lowered at the moment and Max could see that he was somewhere either side of thirty years old. He had long dark brown hair that was tied behind him in a curly ponytail. He also wore a short beard and mustache in good trim.

"I'm surprised to find a young man alone in these dangerous woods at night," the stranger said, with a slight and not very comforting smile. "I'm Lord Ander, of the

Fellowship of Justice. Also called the Clarifiers or the Ring of Truth. Who might you be?"

"Max of the Wolf Patrol," Max said. He'd only intended to say "Max," but the rest slipped out unbidden. Maybe he wanted this man to think he wasn't necessarily as alone as he looked. It seemed to do the job, because suddenly the man looked impressed.

"Do I understand that you're the one called Max the Wolf?" Ander said.

"Yeah, do you know me?" Max said. This was an unexpected surprise. "Have you been looking for me?"

"Not me," Ander said. "But some of my companions have been. You're not where you were supposed to be. You arrived in the wrong part of the Heroes Wood. I'll be happy to take you to them though."

"I'm sure that will be fine," Max said. "But there are lots of things I don't understand, so I'd like to have some questions answered first."

"That wouldn't be practical, young man. Why should I bother loading you up with a lot of information we'd just have to cut out of you later?" As he said this, Ander reached inside his cloak and drew a menacing sword out of a leather scabbard belted to his left hip. The sword had a relatively short blade, only eighteen inches at most, but it was of an eerie blue metal that shined with the reflected light of the campfire.

"You'd best drop that little knife you have clutched in your sweating paw," Ander continued, as he advanced towards Max, one pace, then another. "You won't be able to hurt me with it, but I'll get angry if you try." Ander's subtle smile had broadened considerably, but there was still no warmth in it.

As he stepped forward, Max stepped backwards. He raised his small knife defensively and, as he did so, Ander spoke a sharp command that had both dogs growling and on the move again. The three of them together advanced towards Max, who had no chance of escape.

Then there was an ear-piercing screech of animal rage, and something small but terrifying in its violence dropped out of the sky, between the two dogs. It was Banderbrock, and he was instantly locked in battle with both dogs. The three beasts fell into a howling tumble of twisting, biting fury. They moved with blurring speed, kicking up a small whirlwind of dust and loam. The sounds they made were horrifying in their ferocity. Max could see nothing more coherent than an occasional flash of tooth and claw.

He looked back at the swordsman, to discover that he'd also been distracted by Banderbrock's arrival. Max wasted no more time and aimed a vicious kick between the man's legs. Either it was badly aimed, or Lord Ander moved, because it didn't quite land where Max had intended. Instead it struck Ander's right thigh, but it connected hard, and Ander grunted in pain. In return, Ander slashed at Max with his sword, but his leg buckled slightly under him and the blow fell short. The cut aimed at Max hit low across the trunk of an ash tree instead, and the tree – at least ten inches thick – was severed clean through where the blade cut it. "That's impossible!" Max said.

Impossible or not, it happened, and it saved Max's life. The bulk of the tree came crashing down between them, just as Ander was about to strike again with the miracle blade. A flurry of ash leaves and branches hid the two opponents from each other long enough for Max to run out of the circle of firelight, into the darkness of the woods. From

behind a thick tree trunk Max watched as Lord Ander forced his way through the branches of the fallen ash tree, only to find that Max had disappeared.

The fight between Banderbrock and the dogs raged on, but by now there were as many yelps of pain as there were screams of fury. Max wanted to run deeper into the protective night and keep going, but that would leave the badger alone to eventually face that terrible sword. Max decided he had to stay and do his part, no matter how frightened he was of Ander and his deadly weapon. But he had no plans to get within its reach again. He folded the blade of his knife and put it away. Then, as quietly as he could, he crouched down and felt around the damp ground for rocks of good throwing size. Ander paused at the edge of the firelight, peering in every direction. Max searched more frantically. If he didn't act before Ander left the lighted area, he'd have no chance of hitting him.

When Max had six usable stones, he put four in his jacket pockets and held one in each hand. Then he stepped out from behind the tree, but still well within the concealing darkness, and threw the first stone at Ander with all his might. He aimed for the man's head. His body would make a better target, but a hit there wouldn't do the damage Max needed to inflict. The first stone missed, going too high and wide to the left of its target. Ander flinched from the missile, but then rushed the area where it looked to have come from. He was angling slightly off from Max's location, but Max moved to place himself squarely in the man's path. It wasn't due to courage, or any foolhardy sense of fair play on Max's part. He needed to keep Ander positioned between him and the firelight in order to have any hope of a clear target to throw at. Ander's bold advance only gave Max time for one more shot, before the man would be on him again.

Max held his ground and waited, letting Ander come as close as he dared. Then he threw the second stone. It impacted Ander's forehead with a sickening thump. Max watched the man's firelight-haloed silhouette as it stood still for a long moment. Then it seemed to fold in on itself and crumple to the ground.

Max didn't approach the fallen swordsman right away. He waited to see if there was any movement from him, but there was none that he could detect. Max approached him tentatively, ready to run back again at the first sign of renewed menace. The man was still except for the rhythmic twitching of his fingers that kept closing and relaxing. His head was painted in a dark splash of blood, almost black in the dim light.

Max felt for his knife own in his pants pocket. It would be easy to cut the man's throat now, and it was probably the sensible thing to do. But Max didn't have it in him to kill a helpless man, no matter what his crimes, or what danger he may offer in the future. Still, mercy only went so far. Max knelt next to the man and gingerly picked up his sword from where it had fallen near him. He carefully handled it only by the grip. He wasn't about to touch the strange blue metal of its blade.

Standing again, with Lord Ander's sword in his hand, he twirled the blade three times over his head and then threw the deadly thing far into the darkness. It crashed once among unseen leaves and made no further sound.

Next, with a bit of fumbling about, Max stripped the heavy wool cloak off the unconscious and disarmed swordsman. The fight between Banderbrock and the dogs continued, and he had the notion of throwing the heavy cloak over one of the dogs to entangle him, leaving his courageous partner with only one foe to fight.

Max walked back towards the light of the campfire, holding the cloak spread out before him, in both hands like a net. He walked around the fire to the spot on the other side of it where the other battle still raged unabated. Then Max heard a whisper of sound behind him. He turned in time to see Ander, back on his feet and staggering towards him, blood flowing copiously down his face, spreading out in a gruesome river delta before it soaked into his wet sticky beard.

Ander stumbled into Max and the two of them went down together. Even unarmed and injured, the man outweighed Max by as much as a hundred pounds, so when he landed on him, all the air rushed out of Max's chest in a single painful whoosh.

Ander threw his arms around Max in a clumsy bear hug, pinning them together face to face. One of Ander's eyes was covered in blood and useless for the moment. Max tried to work one hand free to claw at the other. But, even weakened with his injury, Ander was too strong and both of Max's arms remained trapped.

They rolled over and over in their ungraceful struggle until Max's shoulder smacked against the sharp edge of one of the large rocks surrounding the fire, which still blazed away. The impact sent a wave of pain through him, and his right arm lost all sensation. They had come to rest with Ander back on top of him, a look of uncontained madness in his one visible eye.

Ander released his grasp on Max, but remained sitting on the boy, pinning him with his body weight. With no thought for the pain it must have caused him, Ander grabbed one of the large hot rocks surrounding the fire, and brought it up high over his head in both hands. At least my death will be instant, Max thought.

Then Ander just let the stone fall out of his hands. It fell to one side of Max's head, into the fire, sending an explosion of sparks into the night sky, as if every fallen star that had ever hit the earth had all at once decided to return burning back into the heavens. Something had caused Ander to drop the stone, rather than crush Max's head with it. Whatever it was that had saved Max, it made a lot of noise, like the wail of a hundred tortured ghosts.

Ander rolled off Max, frantically batting at his own head, desperately trying to dislodge a yellow, clawing thing that had attached itself there. There was a short moment of rolling and screaming, and then Ander was back on his feet, free of the terrible thing that had finally fallen away from him. Now Max could see the beast, which had landed inside the circle of firelight, on four splayed out legs. It was just a big yellow tomcat.

With no further glance at any of the combatants, Ander run drunkenly out of the camp, calling his dogs to come with him. Only one dog followed him back into the darkness of the forest, favoring one deeply gashed leg as it went. The other dog lay still and ragged in the churned earth.

At some point during his second struggle with Lord Ander, the fight between Banderbrock and the dogs had ended. Banderbrock stood over the fallen dog, a wild look in his eyes, his breath heaving in and out of his chest like a blacksmith's bellows. Most of the badger was coated in dark blood. Max had no immediate way of knowing whose blood it was.

"That is absolutely the first and last time I ever climb a tree," Banderbrock gasped out in the spaces between labored breaths. "I got no higher than the lowest branch, but it was enough to nearly scare the pellets right out of me."

“I was wondering where you’d gotten to,” Max said, failing to sound nonchalant. For all his past adventures, he was still only a boy. Tears began to bead at his eyes, but he swore to himself that he wouldn’t start crying.

“I wanted to be able to come at them from a direction they’d never suspect,” Banderbrock said. He was beginning to get control over his breathing.

“Well, you certainly accomplished that,” Max said. “Your arrival from above surprised all of us. Are you okay?”

Max didn’t feel okay. His arm was still dead numb and he was beginning to get the cold shakes from the recent adrenaline surge.

“Of course,” Banderbrock said. “It wasn’t even a fair fight. One of the dogs was already injured before it began.”

“Is that one dead?” Max asked, indicating the dog lying under the badger’s front paws.

“I sure hope so,” Banderbrock said. “That was my intention, anyway.” Banderbrock bounced up and down on the dog’s bloodied ribs a few times with his front end, sinking his long claws back into the dog’s chest each time. There wasn’t so much as a twitch of response from the creature.

“I would say he is definitely dead,” Banderbrock said. “His brother should have been too, but I couldn’t concentrate properly on my work. I kept getting distracted by what you and the dogs’ master were doing. I wanted to help you out, but these damned mutts didn’t know enough to quit.”

“That’s okay, Banderbrock,” Max said. He was trying to rub some life back into his arm. “I was rescued at the last second by that thing.”

That's when Banderbrock and Max saw the huge cat clearly for the first time. It sat placidly in front of the fire, grooming bits of Lord Ander's face and neck out from between its claws. To Max it looked at best like a grotesque parody of a real cat, in much the same way that Frankenstein's monster resembled a real human.

"I was wondering how long you two were going to ignore me, without so much as a thank you," McTavish said.

The Dark at the End

A Repairman Jack novel

By F. Paul Wilson

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The Dark at the End is the final Repairman Jack book. It segues into *Nightworld* which, with its ensemble cast from the Adversary Cycle and the Repairman Jack series, serves as the capstone of both series and the end of the Secret History.

WEDNESDAY**1**

“Sir!” the cabby said in heavily accented English as Jack slammed the taxi door shut behind him. “Those people were—”

“Drive!”

“They were there first and—”

Jack slammed the plastic partition between them and shot him his best glare.

“Drive, goddammit!”

The guy hesitated, then his dark features registered the truth that he wasn’t going to win this one.

“Where?”

“There!” Jack pointed uptown, where the cab was facing. “Anywhere, just move!”

As the cab pulled into the bustling morning traffic on Central Park West, Jack twisted to peer through the rear window. The couple he’d shoved out of the way to commandeer the taxi stood at the curb, huddling against the March wind as they stared after him in open-mouthed shock, but they seemed to be the only ones.

Good ... as if anything about this could be called good.

He faced front again and checked his arm. His left deltoid hurt like hell. He noticed a bullet hole in the sleeve of his beloved, beat-up bomber jacket. He reached inside, touched a reeeally tender spot. His fingers came out bloody.

Swell. Just swell. This was not how the day was supposed to go.

It had begun serenely enough: shower, coffee and kaisers with Gia, then a trip to Central Park West to drop in on the Lady. He knew certain forces wanted to rid the world of her, and had almost succeeded a couple of weeks ago. But he'd never expected an armed ambush.

#

After finding the Lady's apartment empty, he'd taken the stairs one floor up to Veilleur's apartment.

Even though he could call him Glaeken now, he'd trained himself to think of him as Veilleur and Veilleur only for over a year, so shifting to his real name was going to take a little time.

He knocked on the steel door at the top step. "Hello?"

"Come in, Jack," said a voice from somewhere on the other side. "It's open."

Inside he found Glaeken slumped in an easy chair in the apartment's great room, sipping coffee as he stared out at the morning sky through the panoramic windows.

Jack slowed as he approached, struck by his appearance. He was as big as ever; his shoulders just as broad, his hair as gray, his eyes as blue. But he looked older today. Okay, the guy was old—he measured his age in millennia—but this morning, in this unguarded moment, he looked it. Jack hadn't been by since the Internet mess. Could Glaeken have aged so much since then?

"You okay?"

He straightened and smiled, and some—but not all—of the extra years dropped away. "Fine, fine. Just tired. Magda had a bad night."

His aged wife's memory had been slipping away for years and was little more

than vapor now. Glaeken radiated devotion to her, and Jack knew he'd hoped they'd grow old together. The old part had worked out, but not the together. Glaeken was alone. Someone named Magda might be in a bedroom down the hall, but the mind of the woman he'd fallen in love with had left the building.

“Didn’t the nurse—?”

“Yes, she did what she could, but sometimes I’m the only one who can calm her.”

Jack shook his head. Like the old guy needed more stress in his life.

“Have you seen the Lady? I stopped in to check on how she’s doing but her place is empty.”

She occupied the apartment just below. Couldn’t say she lived here, because the Lady wasn’t alive in the conventional sense.

“You just missed her.” Glaeken gestured to the window. “She went for her morning walk in the park.”

“Really? When did she start that?”

“Almost a week now.”

Jack stepped to the glass and stared down at Central Park, a dozen or so stories below. A little to the left, ringed by winter-bare trees, the grass of the fifteen-acre field known as the Sheep Meadow showed brown through patches of leftover snow.

“I take it she’s recovering then?”

“Still weak but feeling a little stronger every day.”

“Well, I guess after being wheelchair-bound and damn near dead a couple of weeks ago, that’s not bad.”

“Would that I had a fraction of her resilience.”

Jack scanned the park but couldn't pick her out. Even though the park was relatively empty due to the cold, the strollers looked too small from up here. All his uncles looked like ants, as the joke went.

"Can you spot her?"

Glaeken rose and stood beside him, leaning into the sunlight as he squinted below. "My eyes aren't what they used to be."

"What's she wearing?"

"One of those house dresses she favors lately. It's yellow today."

"That's all? It's freezing—" He caught himself. "Never mind."

Glaeken shot him a quick glance but said nothing.

Right. He knew. The Lady didn't feel cold. Or heat. Or pain. And her clothes weren't really clothes, simply part of whatever look she was presenting to the world. She'd worn the form of Mrs. Clevenger before her near-death experience and seemed to be stuck in that ever since.

Glaeken said, "You know how she likes to be out among her 'children.'"

Jack spotted a bright yellow someone strolling the near half of the meadow.

"Got her." He turned away from the window. "I'll catch up to her."

"She'll be back soon."

Jack shook his head. "Got things to do. Today's the day I start looking for the R-Man."

"You can say his name now."

"I know. But it's geekier to have code names for him."

Glaeken looked at him. "Geekier?"

“Don’t worry about it. Just me running at the mouth.”

“I hope it doesn’t indicate that you are in any way taking him lightly.”

“Believe me, I’m not. I’ve seen what he can do.”

Just my way of coping, he thought as he headed for the elevator.

Glaeken’s elevator had two buttons—one for the top floor and one for the lobby.

One of the perks of owning the building.

At street level, Jack waved to the doorman and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Central Park loomed just across the street. He strode to the corner of Sixty-fourth and waited for the light.

He’d developed enormous respect, maybe even a sort of love for the city’s traffic signals after they’d gone down during the Internet crash. Days of pure hell followed. They were back in working order now, though not all in synch yet. The Internet, however, still had a ways to go before it could call itself cured. The virus that had brought it down—and the city’s traffic and transit system along with it—was still replicating itself in unvaccinated regions of the Web. Cell phones were back up and running, much to everyone’s relief, though local outages were still a problem.

He adjusted the curved bill of his Mets cap lower over his face. Working lights meant working traffic cams. Designed to catch red-light runners, they recorded tons of pedestrians every minute. Couldn’t go anywhere these days without some goddamn camera sucking off a bit of your soul.

He crossed with the green and trotted a block uptown to one of the entrances. He stopped at the edge of the fifteen-acre field known as the Sheep Meadow. In the old days it had lived up to its name, with a real shepherd and his flock housed in what was now

Tavern on the Green. Nowadays, in warmer weather, hordes of sun worshippers littered the grass. Not much sun to worship on this blustery March day, making the Lady's yellow dress easy to pick out.

He spotted her ambling along the tree line at the northern end. Mrs. Clevenger had been a fixture in his hometown when he was a kid, but she'd always worn black. To see her in any other color, especially yellow, was jarring.

As he started toward her, he noticed the stares she was attracting. People had to think she was a little off in the head, strolling around in this temperature wearing only a thin, sleeveless housedress.

He was about fifty yards away, and readying to call out, when four men stepped out of the trees, raised semi-automatic pistols, and began firing at her.

Jack froze for a shocked instant, thinking he had to be hallucinating, but no mistaking the loud cracks and muzzle flashes. He yanked the Glock 19 from the holster at the small of his back and broke into a run.

The Lady had stopped and was staring at the men firing nearly point blank at her head and torso as they moved in on her. She didn't stagger, didn't even flinch. They couldn't be missing.

As he neared and got a better look, she seemed to be unharmed. No surprise. Her dress was undamaged as well. The bullets seemed to disappear before they reached her.

One of her assailants looked Jack's way. As their eyes locked he shouted something in a foreign language and angled his pistol toward him. Jack swiveled his torso to reduce his exposure and veered left, popping three quick rounds at his center of mass. Two hit, staggering him, felling him. He landed on his back in a patch of old

snow. The third bullet missed but winged his buddy behind him. Another of the attackers shouted something and fired just as Jack changed direction. He felt an impact and a stinging pain in his left upper arm. He dropped to a knee and began pulling the trigger, firing two-to-three rounds per second in a one-handed grip. This was going to run his mag in no time, but he had only one man down and couldn't allow any of the three still standing to get a bead on him.

Relief flooded him as they grabbed their wounded pal and ran back into the trees. He stopped firing and didn't follow. He'd counted thirteen rounds fired. That left two in his magazine and he wasn't carrying a spare—a firefight had not been on the morning's agenda. He did have his Kel-Tec backup in an ankle holster, but that was useful only at close range.

The Lady was staring at him. “They tried to kill me.”

“Ya think?”

Jack looked at the downed attacker. His face matched the shade of the dirty snow cushioning his head. Ragged breaths bubbled the blood in his mouth. His pistol lay by his side. A Tokarev. Jack had seen a lot of Tokarevs lately—too many—and its presence pretty much nailed who'd sent him and his buddies.

The Order.

Drexler had sent out a hit team on the Lady. What was he thinking? Nothing of this Earth could harm her, and lead slugs were of this Earth. Drexler knew that. So why would he try? Unless he thought he'd come into some special super bullets.

As Jack holstered his Glock, he grabbed the Tokarev and felt a jab of pain in his left upper arm. Yeah, he'd been hit. Worry about that later. People were pointing their

way, some already on cell phones. Too much to hope for one of the random phone outages here and now, he supposed. And even if they couldn't get their calls through, they could use the phones as cameras. None of the callers was too close but that could change. Cops would be here soon.

He shoved the pistol into his jacket and grabbed the Lady's arm.

"We've got to get you out of here."

In the good old days—as in, before last summer—she could simply change into someone else or disappear and reappear somewhere else. But nowadays she was stuck in old-woman mode and had to travel like a human.

She wasn't very spry but Jack moved her along as fast as she could go. He pulled his cap even lower and kept his head down, not exactly sure of where he was taking her—out of the park, definitely, but after that? Couldn't take her straight back to her apartment. Her damn yellow dress made her stick out like a canary at a crow convention. Needed to get her off the street, then figure out what to do.

As they reached the sidewalk he saw a taxi pull to a stop before a late-middle-age couple—he wore an Intrepid cap and she carried a Hard Rock shopping bag. Tourists. They stood a few feet ahead. He knew his next step...

#

The Lady sat beside him in the rear of the cab and stared at the blood on his hand.

"You're hurt,"

"Yeah. Looks that way."

Jack wiped his fingers on his jeans and moved his left arm. Pain shot up and down when he flexed the elbow. He checked the sleeve and found the exit hole in the

leather. He wondered how bad it was but wasn't about to remove the jacket here in the cab to find out.

The Lady gently touched his sleeve over the wound, her expression sad.

"Not so long ago I could have healed you."

"I know." What he hadn't known was that she no longer could. "You've lost that too?"

She nodded. "I have lost so much. But at least I am still here."

"Yeah, that's the important part. But there is something you could do that would help things."

"Tell me."

"Can you change into someone else?"

She shook her head. "I am not able. I am still fixed as Mrs. Clevenger."

"Well, how about switching that dress to something less noticeable?"

"That I can do." Suddenly she was wearing a drab cloth coat. "Better?"

"Much."

He marveled at how he'd come to take these things as a matter of course. The workaday world remained blissfully unaware of the secret lives and secret histories playing out around them. As he once had been. As no doubt their cabby was.

He checked their driver. The Lady was seated directly behind him and he gave no sign that he'd witnessed the transformation. If and when he did notice the coat, he'd assume she'd carried it in with her.

Jack spotted Seventy-second Street approaching. The light was green. He rapped on the plastic partition.

“Take a right up here—into the park.”

The cab turned into the traverse and headed across Central Park. Where to now? Couldn't have this guy take them back to Glaeken's. He'd left a dead guy behind in the park. NYPD would be all over the area, collecting witness accounts, checking the traffic cams. They might end up talking to ... he checked the operator license taped on the other side of the partition: Abhra Rahman ... they might tack down Abhra here and want to know where he'd dropped them. Jack needed a diversionary stop.

He pictured the city. They were heading east. What was landmarky in this area of the East Side? Of course—Bloomie's down on Sixtieth and Third. Get out there, walk through the store, then over to the subway station on Lexington, hop an inbound N, R, or W two stops to West Fifty-seventh, then cab back to Glaeken's.

Yeah. That would work.

He rapped gently on the partition. “Drop us at Bloomingdale's, please.”

He'd make sure to give Mr. Rahman a good tip.



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