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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine



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John Wood

Editorial

...Tehani Wessely

Welcome aboard! This is your captain speaking, on my third adventure at the helm of an Andromeda Spaceways mission into the unknown.

It must be one of those things that gets easier with practice, this editing business. This issue has gone through more transfigurations than Star Trek! I was slated to edit issue 30, but when we lost Ben Cook to a black hole, I took on issue 28, and the stories Ben had already selected. This was a challenge, as Ben had started out with a theme in mind, and had chosen stories that I might not necessarily have picked up in the normal scheme of things. However, with the assistance of some fine authors who took on the changes that occurred along the way (including, of course, the switch to being issue 27 in the publication schedule, which you may have noticed), I am pleased and proud to present this selection to you.

This editorial is by necessity short because, as usual, I've got far too much fiction crammed in between these pages. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed editing it.

Tehani Wessely
Editor, issue 27



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The Return of the Queen

...Bill McKinley

Apparently, the King was dead. Professor Tolkien sat in his study at home and read the *Oxford Free Press* a second time. It was a single sheet of foolscap, badly printed, with a quote from Winston Churchill at the masthead. It had appeared in Tolkien's letterbox during the night.

The paper said the King had died in Bermuda. Princess Elizabeth had cut short her tour of western Canada and was flying south. The Government-in-Exile had proclaimed her as England's undoubted Queen; the paper spoke of loyalty and resistance.

There was nothing about it in the *Daily Telegraph*; the BBC was broadcasting its usual programs. Perhaps, Tolkien thought, they were waiting for instructions from Berlin.

The sudden knocking on the front door was slower, more official, than the timid scratchings of Tolkien's undergraduates or the rat-tat-tat of Edith's friends.

Tolkien looked around for somewhere to hide the paper. There were plenty of hiding places, for the study was a hoard of books, manuscripts, maps, and drawings.

He folded the paper in half and slid it into the stack of typescript and scribble that made up his book. It had started out as a simple sequel to his children's story, but had grown in the telling to become a sweeping, unfinished epic. His characters had now spent months wandering through the darkness of a lost dwarven realm, while he wondered what to do next.

There were more knocks, insistent now. Tolkien shouted "I'll get it" to Edith, who was clattering the breakfast dishes in the kitchen, and hurried down the hall to the front door.

It was a German officer — field grey tunic, jackboots, peaked cap. One of the men who had marched through Paris and fought through the ruins of London was standing in his front garden.

Tolkien felt a wild moment of terror. Calm, he thought, there was no way the Germans could have known what he'd been reading.

"Herr Professor Doktor Tolkien?" the officer asked.

"Yes?"

"I am Oberleutnant Ernst Hippke. I have orders to bring you to headquarters. I have a car brought." Hippke's English was mechanical. It was the product, perhaps, of a Wehrmacht language course.

Tolkien felt Edith walk into the hall behind him. She slipped her arm around his waist, comfortingly.

“Am I under arrest?”

“No, Herr Professor. My commander, Major Schroder, wishes with you to speak about an academic matter.”

Tolkien put on his tweed coat and retrieved his pipe from the study. He kissed Edith and muttered, “He’s with the army, not the Gestapo. It’s all right.”

Tolkien followed Hippke through the neat vegetable beds of his victory garden and out through the gate.

The car turned out to be a pre-war Morris Oxford, requisitioned from its previous owner and painted grey. Tolkien could see the car’s original colour — dark green — around the inside edges of the door.

They swept along Banbury Road, past the jagged remnants of St Martin’s tower, and down St Aldgate’s to Christ Church, the grandest of all the Oxford colleges. Its clock tower had been designed by Wren himself; its chapel doubled as the Oxford Cathedral.

But now there were sentries on the Tom Tower entrance; the officers of the military government had replaced its titled undergraduates.

Tolkien followed Hippke through the Peckwater quad and up three flights of steps, past offices filled with maps and clattering teleprinters.

Hippke knocked on one of the doors. “In here, Herr Professor.”

It was a don’s room, with a coal fire in the grate and a view over Christ Church meadow towards the Cherwell. Its occupant was a portly German officer, who stood up from his desk as they came in. His tunic was crumpled; one of his breast pocket buttons was undone.

“Professor Doktor Tolkien, may I introduce Major Doktor Karl Schroder,” Hippke said.

Major Schroder extended his hand; Tolkien pulled his pipe from the pocket of his coat and busied himself filling it.

Schroder shrugged. “*Danke*, Oberleutnant.” Hippke saluted and closed the door behind him.

“Sit down, Professor. You can light that up if you want.” Schroder gestured Tolkien to an armchair and sat down opposite him. “I went to one of your lectures years ago. You burst into the hall and shouted the opening lines of *Beowulf*, about the Spear-Danes of old and their glory. It was remarkable.”

Tolkien lit his pipe and thought back through his fifteen years at Oxford. He had tutored many German students — including a few Rhodes Scholars — but he couldn’t place Schroder. “Were you at Merton?”

“Ach, I was only in Oxford briefly, before I went back to Heidelberg. I always wondered what it would be like to be an Oxford don.”

He looked around the oak-panelled room with satisfaction and smiled thinly. “Now I suppose I know. I have been appointed to liaise between the military government and the university. My task is to make sure that Oxford serves both England and the Reich. Our flags must go forward together now. I am organising a series of lectures about the historical and racial links between England and Germany. They will be broadcast and

printed as a new series of Oxford pamphlets. You will deliver the third lecture in the program. It will be about *Beowulf* and the other great Anglo-Saxon sagas.”

Tolkien exhaled a cloud of pipe smoke and attempted to sound apologetic. “I’m sorry, Major, I’m virtually the head of the English department these days. I just don’t have time with my administrative workload.”

“I think you do, Professor. Lectures and tutorials are suspended. They won’t start again for the Michaelmas term. You have all the time you could need.”

“I don’t think my subject would interest the general public. It’s very specialised, after all.”

Major Schroder waved his hand. “Professor, you forget that I have seen you lecture. I’m not asking you to talk about vowel shifts in West Mercian. You will talk about Nordic culture and the racial affinities between England and Germany.”

“I’m sorry,” Tolkien said. “I’m not the man for the job.”

“I think you are, Professor, because I need to discuss a second matter with you.”

Schroder rummaged around on his desk and located a thin folder. He sighed, straightened his tunic, did up his pocket button, and sat back down.

“The Ministry of Propaganda says you have written a children’s book about a burglar, a dragon, and a magic ring. Inspired by Wagner, no doubt?”

“They both involve a ring, that’s all,” Tolkien said.

“No matter. I see that a German publisher wanted to print a translation before the war.”

Tolkien remembered it well. Rütten and Loening had been very interested, but demanded that he provide them with a *Bestätigung* — a certificate of Aryan descent. Tolkien had refused.

Schroder read something in the file and chuckled. “Such an English response, and it was all so unnecessary. I can see you’re as Aryan as my Oberleutnant just by looking at you.”

“How did you find out about this?” Tolkien asked.

“Rütten and Loening sent your file to the ministry. They still want to publish your book. The only question is whether you’ll be paid for it. Rütten and Loening have argued most persuasively that your rights should be part of the war reparations, particularly given your obstructionist attitude before the war.”

Tolkien gripped his pipe and wished it was an axe. He forced himself to breathe in a deep draught of smoke and let it trickle out slowly.

“You can’t do that,” he said finally. “You can’t seize my foreign language rights just because of the war.”

“Of course we can, Professor. Reparations aren’t just about coal and iron. After the last war, you seized thousands of German chemical patents.”

Schroder leaned forward in his chair and tapped the folder on his leg to emphasise each word. “I have to make a decision. It will depend on how co-operative you are. Do you understand me?”

Tolkien did. “I’d like to think about it overnight,” he muttered.

“You do that, and tell Oberleutnant Hippke about your decision in the morning. *Guten Tag*, Professor.”

The evening shadows of double daylight saving time lengthened as Tolkien walked down the High toward Magdalen College. Church bells tolled around him, for the BBC had at last announced the death of the King. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor were on their way home from Spain; Field Marshal von Runstedt had despatched a guard of honour to welcome them at Hendon Aerodrome.

Tolkien turned off the High and walked into the New Buildings, where his closest friend, Jack Lewis, had his college rooms.

He walked up the stairs and knocked on Lewis's door. There was the sound of footsteps, the handle turned, and Lewis filled the doorway: a large man with a red, square face and a receding hairline.

"Tollers," he boomed. "What brings you to my humble quarters this evening?" His voice echoed down the stairwell. He saw Tolkien's ashen face and said, more quietly, "You'd better come in."

It was a beautiful room, with broad sash windows that overlooked the Magdalen deer park. The furniture was shabby, though: unmatched armchairs, a battered sideboard, and a chesterfield sofa that looked like a lion had slept on it.

Lewis's brother, Warnie, looked up from his Captain Marryat novel as they came in. He looked a lot like Jack, but had a large moustache — a souvenir of his long career as an army supply officer.

"You've heard about the King, I suppose," he said gloomily.

"Since this morning. There was a sheet of paper in my letterbox, hours before it was on the BBC," Tolkien said.

"I met a chap who told me it was broadcast on Radio Churchill yesterday," Warnie said. He didn't elaborate. It was illegal to own a radio that could pick up the faint shortwave broadcasts from Anthony Eden in Canada.

Lewis perched on the arm of the sofa. "Warnie was just agreeing with me: it looks like Mrs Spencer-Simpson-Windsor will finally get what she wanted. But you don't look like you're here to talk about the royal family."

Tolkien slumped in one of the armchairs and recounted his day, beginning with the knock on his door and ending with his lonely walk home from Christ Church. "I can imagine what those ruddy ignoramuses would do with my story if they took the rights. They'd make the dragon Jewish and turn it into propaganda. Everything in it would be corrupted."

Warnie dogeared his book. "I think this calls for a drink." He opened the sideboard and produced a full bottle of whisky. "It's better than anything you'll get in a pub these days. Would you like a tot?"

Tolkien and Lewis nodded; Warnie poured out two glasses. "As for me, I think I'll make a brew," he said and lit the gas ring.

Lewis sipped his drink. "You mustn't do what they want, Tollers. It's a trick. The Germans want to look cultured so they can loot the country more easily, and you would be helping them."

Tolkien said, "If I refuse, they'll take away the rights to my story, twist it, and use it to bring up more little stormtroopers."

Lewis shook his head. “They’re blackmailing you. They could do it whether you agreed to lecture or not. It wouldn’t be your fault. It wouldn’t be your decision, even if they made one of your eagles into Hermann Goering.”

“Now that would be a fat eagle,” Warnie said. He poured his tea and stirred an entire teaspoon of sugar into his cup. “It’s just as well we got those extra sugar coupons.”

Lewis looked at him sharply. “Stop it, Warnie. We all know you’re in the thick of the black market.”

“I might have to see a chap later, since you mention it.”

“Well, don’t interrupt. This is important,” Lewis said. He turned back to Tolkien. “On the other hand, it would be your decision to walk up to that lectern. You would face the consequences in the end, because a decision like that would change the eternal part of you inside. You have to stand fast and say no.”

Tolkien savoured the peaty taste of his drink. “That sounds like something you took out of your pain book.”

“It’s what I believe, and of course Warnie agrees with me.” Lewis looked to him for confirmation.

“I’m sorry, Jack. I don’t,” Warnie said.

“You weren’t even listening.”

“I heard you, and I don’t agree with you. Maybe it’s all the extra sugar.” He said to Tolkien, “Tell them how you’ve proved that *Beowulf* was written by a Christian, looking back on the pagan past. I can’t see any harm in that, and it’d keep the Germans off your back. They wouldn’t stop at taking your rights away. They’d hound you, you’d never finish your book, and there is so much in it to give people hope for the fight ahead.”

“My book isn’t about fighting the Germans,” Tolkien said. “I’ve always hated allegory.”

“It doesn’t matter. People will apply your book to the times anyway. You have to keep it secret, keep it safe, and finish it soon,” Warnie said.

Lewis snorted loudly. “It would be impossible to get a publisher. They can’t print anything without a permit, and none of them want to disappear like Stanley Unwin.”

Warnie said, “Just finish the book and do it quickly. You’ll be able to publish it somehow — even if it ends up circulated in chapters like Tyndale.”

“You mean the Lollards,” Jack snapped. “Tyndale printed his Bibles in Holland and smuggled them into England in barrels.”

Tolkien shifted uneasily in his armchair. “I don’t suppose there’s any more of that whisky?”

They talked about other things for half an hour, then Tolkien left. There was an eleven o’clock curfew, and he had a long walk home to Northmoor Road.

The house was silent. Edith had long gone to bed. Tolkien sat in the tobacco-scented darkness of his study and thought about the German demand.

Warnie was right. He had to do the lecture, to conceal himself from the sleepless eyes of the Germans. It was the only way he would be able to finish his book. It spanned the whole mythology he had created — a mythology for England in its darkest time.

Tolkien rather liked the idea of his book circulating in chapters, redolent with the sour-sweet smell of roneo ink or printed on an illicit hand press. He would talk to Warnie about it. He knew everyone these days; perhaps the chap with the illegal radio or the chap with the whisky might know a chap with a printing press.

He wouldn't turn the book into an allegory. But it needed a single, clear, and unambiguous link to the present.

Tolkien pulled the *Oxford Free Press* from its hiding place and read the story about Queen Elizabeth again. She was a wanderer without a home, the heir to a dispossessed line, a ruler without a kingdom.

The answer was obvious. She could replace his kingly hero and bear his broken sword.

Tolkien snapped on the reading lamp and paged back through his half-finished manuscript.

He turned to the front page, picked up a pen, and struck out his working title. Then he wrote out a new one in English and Elven, a title to inspire an occupied land: *The Return of the Queen*.

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Random Acts of Destruction

...Rory Douglas Abel

You can't keep something locked up forever. No matter how hard you try, sooner or later it will get out. Pandora may have opened the box but, let's be honest, it would have eventually torn itself apart from the inside. The headless corpse in front of me is proof of that.

The head has not been found, nor will it be. A CSI team could go over the area with the finest scanners and all they'd find is a couple particles of blood. A high velocity kinetic pulse will do that.

Three beatwalkers, intelligent two-legged tanks, are parked nearby. The armored officer standing over the corpse watches his surroundings nervously. Even this far from Downpour the Downtown district isn't safe for the Blue. He eyes me warily as I approach the crime scene shield, confused by my civvies. He should know better. No one in Downtown goes near a crime scene unless they have to. There's no appeal in pain and death after the fact. I hold up my palm and show him the badge imbedded there. His eyes flash as they uplink and he's fed the necessary passwords. He drops the shield only long enough for me to enter the crime scene.

The corpse is naked, yet there's no way to tell if it's male or female. The chest is flat but that doesn't mean anything. Top surgery is common among bois and warrior womyn. A mechanical apparatus covers the crotch. I haven't seen it on the street before and don't know what it does. Even before 'the event' the person was huge, nearly eight feet tall. There was clearly some splicing involved. Probably some implants too, something to keep its own weight from crushing its bones. There's no doubt this was a hard-partier.

I edge closer, letting my implants search out any tech inside the body. Surprisingly, there's an ID chip. It identifies the body as Roderick and the birth sex as male. Not that the birth sex counts for much any more but it'll do for now.

There's surprisingly little blood, just a small puddle around the neck already starting to congeal. The stump is ragged and tattered but I know for a fact that death was quick, instantaneous really. The officer edges closer, reassured by my presence. I turn to him. "Were you here during the actual event?"

He nods. This is good. I only got the case an hour ago. The original plain-clothes detective assigned, John Harris, was killed on his way to the crime scene. I've already downloaded the file and studied it but I want more than the sterile details. "Tell me what happened."

"At 0233 this thing appeared in the Downtown Red District. It was tearing the place up. Someone put in a call so we came. A full squad of beatwalkers and

officers. But nothing we did stopped it. We couldn't even slow it down. Luckily, the military was practicing war games outside the city. They sent a few units over. The army was able to keep it in one place but that was it. So they called in A-tanks. At 0420 the creature reverted back to normal," he indicates the corpse, "and one of the tanks accidentally took off his head."

Almost exactly what was in the file and of no more help than I was expecting but I had to check. The officer adds the obvious, "You know, this doesn't really seem like a case for a plain-clothes."

"Damn straight," I agree. "If the murder is military related then the MPs should look into it. If they want to know what made that thing then it's SI's job. Somebody's pulling a fast one here." I shut down the shield; it pops back up the moment I'm out. I turn back to the officer, "Have CSI come pick up the body. If they need clearance they can contact me en route."

There's a news conference concerning my case going on outside the New Clinton Police Center when I arrive. Strange that the lead detective wasn't included. A crowd of reporters and cambots are gathered on the steps around the Commissioner and a military cyborg.

The commissioner is just finishing as I start up the steps. "Now, General Sheridan would like to say a few words."

The general is a combat machine, a career soldier. His remaining skin is radiation scarred. He's bald, the hair follicles long dead. Both eyes are artificial but his tongue and voice box are still real. "Thank you, Commissioner McKay. First, I'd like to extend my sympathy to the family and friends of Plain-clothes Detective John Harris. I'm sure he was a good officer and will be missed."

John had become accustomed to the low-tech approach of most Downtowners and thought he knew what to expect. That's why the killbeam caught him off guard. With all his circuits fried Emergency Medical Services couldn't have located him even if they were looking. The first rule of Downtown, never get comfortable.

Sheridan continues, "I'd also like to express my confidence in Plain-clothes Detective Ryan White. I'm sure he'll do an excellent job and find my boys innocent of any wrongdoing."

Bingo. That's why I was brought in: so no one would cry military cover-up if the A-tank gunnery was found innocent. I've looked over the file, it's clear he is. I'm finished with that part of the case. I'm more interested in how a hard-partier like Roderick became an invincible war machine for an hour and forty-seven minutes.

Sheridan is still doling out quotes to the press as I enter the building.

New Clinton is saturated with cameras. It makes people feel safer. They never seem to notice that it has no effect on the crime rate. All the cameras are hooked into the central nervous system of the city and as such the Police Center has access to all of them. This is the easy part, tracking the movements of the war machine, finding where it physically came from. I let a technician do the search as I sit in and watch.

After so much time in Downtown the center is a nice change of pace, almost a vacation.

In reverse I watch the battle between the police, military and what Roderick had become. His head reappears and he grows back into the war machine, he puts A-tanks and beatwalkers back together, and reattaches an officer's arm to his shoulder. Wounds open and close all over his body like suckling mouths. Roderick's new form clearly came with advanced tissue regeneration. The army flees and so does the Blue a moment later. The war machine is alone rebuilding stores and homes, uncrushing shanties and junkies. He moves further and further back into Downtown. It begins to rain, brown droplets leaping into the sky. The war machine begins to shrink, its muscles deflating. Clothing reassembles itself. The face of the beast melts into the face of a man who is sometimes a woman and sometimes also a machine. Now the device makes sense — Roderick was a Trans. I have a pretty good idea where he is heading. A few more minutes of backtracking proves me right. It looks like I'm taking a trip to Downpour.

Starlight is in the district of Toptown. It is the city built over and on top of New Clinton. It's where money lives, where there are no have-nots. It's where everyone dreams of ending up but no one ever does. We're all in Downtown for life. The neighborhood called Downpour is directly below Starlight. Starlight is so big it generates its own weather patterns. In Downpour it's always raining.

I park the patrolpod on a roof and take an external elevator down. The rain kisses me; it's brown and orange, saturated with rust and oil. The lifeblood of Downpour.

If Downpour is the heart of Downtown then Club Blood, Cum & Oil is the heart of Downpour. It's a four-storey building made of brick and concrete. Its owner has it rebuilt every so often but makes sure it retains the filthy, rundown appearance of the original. I don't know if any of the partygoers inside know that the floors they're dancing on are only a few months old.

Things are so low-tech here that the cover charge at the door can't be paid wirelessly. A person has to use a charge card or even, unbelievably, paper money. My badge gets me in for free but just barely. The Blue is not welcome in Downpour and even less so in Blood, Cum & Oil. I'm hoping that my civvies, implants and splicing will camouflage me but it doesn't. The first floor goes quiet as I enter. Everyone stops what they're doing to stare at the unarmored Blue who dared enter their territory. On the walls Freaks With Leaks 8 is playing. It's robot porn, well, cyborg porn really. Everything's mechanical except the genitalia. It's illegal to show but I know who owns the copyright and he also owns the building.

I try to use their focused attention to my advantage. "My name is Detective Ryan White. Some of you know me. You know I do right by the hard-partiers. One of your own was killed last night. Killed because he took something bad. Drug or program, I want to know what it was."

I'm answered by silence. Pack mentality is required studying to become a Plain-clothes. They're probing me, looking for my weapons, searching for my armor. There's going to be a riot here in a minute. I have to act fast. Remind them why I'm a plain-clothes, why I can dare come here without armor.

I search the crowd for a worthy candidate. The air is filled with static electricity. I can feel it jumping between hairs on my arms.

I spot my victim sitting at a table on the other side of the floor. He's big, Roderick's size. He's got some gorilla bred into him and plenty of black market wartech. He's built for fighting, and killing. I stare him straight in the eye and walk over. His gorilla genes don't like that. His nostrils flare, red lights under his skin flick on.

Everyone follows my progress across the room. I'd say they're holding their breath but most of them probably don't need to breathe. A lone snicker floats up to the ceiling. I stop next to the monkey's table. "What about you? Do you know what Roderick was taking, what floor he was on?"

He looks up and meets my eyes again, probably noticing for the first time they're implanted hawk's eyes. He's unfazed though and reaches up instead and pops a zit. Black oil leaks out of it. I smirk at him, "Come on, you've got to be good for something other than eating fleas."

He stands without pushing back his chair. It topples over, clanging against the floor. That lone snicker gains some siblings. His voice is entirely synthetic, "Get out, while you can walk."

My smirk grows into a grin; I'm going to try not to enjoy this. "Come on, Monkey boy, first swing is free."

He takes the offer, doesn't notice that he misses and takes his second. I push it aside, step into him and smash my palm into his face. My badge crushes his nose, crimson gushing down. The badge activates. A look of terror blossoms like a neon rose in his eyes. His body won't move. He understands now that he is to be an example.

I break his still extended arm first. The crowd gasps and growls in anger but no one moves to help.

His left leg is entirely mechanical. One kick breaks it. Servos scream and whine but the gorilla remains silent. He topples back like his chair, colliding with the table and sending it cartwheeling away. The crowd jumps back to let it pass. They are silent again but now there is fear. They understand why I'm a Plain-clothes detective and not an armored officer.

I look them over and ask again, "What floor was Roderick on?"

Someone answers. "Four."

The fourth floor of Club Blood, Cum & Oil is reserved for RAD use. Rapid Alcidine Ditelleran. It is the most popular, fastest selling drug in the world. Roderick's body was sent to the CSI's lab but they have a four-month backlog. With the threat of tainted RAD I'm able to rush it through immediately.

Contaminated RAD is the only scenario that makes sense. RAD is tailor made to link into a person's biological make-up. I can't think of another situation that would result in Roderick's transformation.

I turn and leave. No one moves against me. The robots on the walls continue to have sex. It's time to see Mr. Katsu.

The lab results are ready before I arrive in Starlight. Sometimes I hate being right. Roderick took RAD laced with a very nasty chemical/biological agent, its only apparent purpose to turn the user into the war machine Roderick became.

Yakuza International's headquarters is one of the largest buildings in Starlight. It's a golden skyscraper built to look like one of the palaces of ancient Japan. Their corporate emblem, a black lotus in a white disk, is projected as a rotating hologram over its highest peak. The only time I get to come to Starlight is when I visit Mr. Katsu.

I pass through the sliding doors into one of the most opulent spaces I have ever been in. Everything is gold, marble and bamboo, all real. I have no idea where they get the bamboo. Like a viper coiled in the grass its beauty hides its deadly secrets. If I had not been authorized to enter I would have been dead before I was through the door. The killbots by the elevators ignore me, as does the receptionist protruding from the front desk. They do not consider the gun at my waist a threat; they all know me.

I enter the elevator and press my badge against the scanner. They interface and the elevator selects the very top floor: 300. He must be expecting me if he's letting me bypass his secretary. Normally, we pretend our encounters are formal events. The elevator slides up without any sense of motion. The only way I know I'm moving is the rising numbers displayed above the scanner. But the elevator could be lying to me if it wanted to.

It evidently is not because the doors slide open and I step into the Katsu's office. It is larger than the entire floor my apartment is on. It takes up the whole level and is surrounded by massive windows so that he can look out and down on Starlight. At night, this high above the pollution, you can actually see the stars and the colonies on the moon. He showed me this as a birthday gift one year. His desk is at the center of the room, made of real redwood, probably the last ever cut. The floor is also hard wood, polished to the point of reflection. Besides his prized swords and a few rice paper screens, the room is empty. Elegant in its Zen minimalism.

Mr. Katsu's full name is Toshiro Katsu. He controls the production and distribution of all drugs and other formerly illegal activities across the globe. Of course the Yakuza do still partake of occasional illegalities, such as blackmail or corporate espionage, but that's more to please the spirit of Katsu's great-grandfather than anything else.

Katsu is sitting cross-legged on the left side of the room, seemingly meditating. He is wearing a loosely draped kimono of blue silk. I begin walking towards him. My shoes don't make any noise on the floor. "Toshiro, you've got some tainted RAD on the street."

He turns his head and looks at me. He had been spliced in the womb. He was born with Tiger's eyes and fangs, reduced to fit his jaw of course. His hair is blue fiberoptic filaments. "I know."

He stands, the kimono sliding from his shoulders. He is sporting the latest craze among Yakuza, moving tattoos. Carps swim among crashing waves on his shoulders while a tiger menaces a sword-wielding maiden on his back. "I've had it recalled, we've found almost all of it. It's only a matter of time before we get the rest."

"Do you know how it was tainted?"

Katsu smiles and shakes my hand when we reach each other. I've known him for years. Ever since he took my accidentally saving his life as an invitation to start a friendship. It was a one-sided relationship at first; a lot has changed since then. "Ah, but that is your job and I suspect you already have a theory. You always do."

“Yes, but you’re not going to like it.” He knows me too well. The way a fighter knows his opponent. I sincerely hope we never become enemies. He turns and we walk back toward the giant windows and their view of the gold and platinum palaces of economic empires. I feel dirty and unwashed whenever I come to Starlight. I wonder if anyone from Downtown could feel comfortable here. Katsu looks out on the world he owns much of and says, “Tell me and I will decide if I like it or not.”

“It had to be in your factory. There’s nowhere else it could have been done. Once the chemical structure of RAD solidifies there’s no way to alter or add to it. If the ingredients were tainted before they entered the factory it would have been detected. Someone in your factory has gone rogue.”

Katsu shakes his head, “That’s not possible.”

“It’s the only explanation, Toshiro. I know the Yakuza prize loyalty but you’ve got to accept that some hold your values less strongly than others.”

“No, you misunderstand, Ryan,” Katsu continues still shaking his head. “It’s simply impossible. The entire factory is automated. There is no human element involved. It’s too delicate a procedure. No living person comes in contact with the RAD until it reaches the warehouses.”

Katsu has demolished my theory with each word until it is only rubble. I had been so sure that I was right. I could find no motive for tainting the RAD. The Yakuza are the sole producers and distributors of the drug. There are no competing firms, no reason for someone to try to sabotage them. I grasp at straws. “Can I at least see the factory’s records?”

Katsu gives me the smile of a parent humoring a child and leads me back to his desk. On his back both the tiger and woman mock me. I wonder how much control Katsu has over them. He lays his hands on the desk and it hums to life. A section grows into a console and a holographic monitor springs up over it. Only Katsu can use this desk. He enters the Yakuza corporate web, sliding through electronic pathways like a determined serpent. His prey in sight he dives forward and latches onto the factory mainframe. It struggles for a moment then recognizes its attacker and submits. I look at Katsu in surprise. “The factory has AI?”

“Of course, all automated Yakuza operations do. We didn’t become the best by being sloppy.” He brings up the day-to-day operations. There are no discrepancies. He was right. I’ve reached a dead-end.

He’s just starting to exit when something catches my eye, “Wait. Look at this.”

I point to a small file that almost seems purposely obscured. It takes some prying but Katsu brings it to the forefront. The factory’s AI is spending an inordinate amount of time on the World Web. “Can you bring up the sites it visits?”

The records of the sites have been deleted but the factory’s AI isn’t as smart as it thinks it is. There are back-up records it doesn’t even know about. Katsu fishes them out for me. I’m shocked at what I see and point them out to Katsu, “Look at this. These are all junk data sites. Why the hell would a computer visit these?”

Then it dawns on me and I laugh despite myself. “Jesus, Toshiro, your AI’s addicted to Spam.” The implication of this suddenly presents itself and I stop laughing. “Check the day of and the days preceding the tainting.”

The records scroll back. The day before the tainting the computer was given passwords to some particularly potent sites. I look at Katsu and he looks back, his face

grim. “Toshiro, who could have gotten your AI addicted to Spam and given it those passwords?”

The tiger on Katsu’s back has caught the carp on his right shoulder and is devouring it. “The maintenance man. Alan Green. He came the day the codes were inputted.”

“Give me his address.”

I park on the roof and take the stairs down. Unlike the Yakuza elevator, here I can judge my progress. I’m taking two and three steps at a time, my hands smearing grime off the walls and banister. The house AI tells me Alan is in his apartment alone but his movements are odd. Suddenly, every internal sensor in me goes nuts. There’s heavy-duty firepower being used in Alan’s apartment, being used on Alan. This stuff is so high grade and dangerous it scares the hell out of me. It should be impossible to get that kind of hardware into the city. I increase my speed, tapping into latent genes and implants installed for just these kinds of occasions. I’m going to hurt tomorrow but I’ll worry about that later.

I hit the hall at full speed, dodging around hookers, tricks and junkies. They pass by in a blur, a canvass of empty promises and fragile connections. I smash into Alan’s door shoulder first, hoping it doesn’t have a re-enforced metal core. The wood explodes inward, splinters spraying the room like angry hornets. I catch a glimpse of a trenchcoat, a weapon rising then I’m diving forward.

An incendiary beam just misses me, burning through fabric then concrete and steel. The hairs on the back of my leg curl up and die.

I come up, my gun drawn and firing. Two years ago a department-wide mandate went out ordering all plain-clothes to downgrade their guns to small concussive blasts or stunners. Somehow I never got the memo.

My target is gone; the wall explodes in his place. I don’t see him, don’t feel him anywhere. Instinct sends me hurtling anyway.

This time it’s a highly localized EMP. The bastard’s on the ceiling. I return fire again and again he dodges. The light explodes, glass and plaster shower down on me like jagged snow. My hawk eyes don’t need much light to see. I telescope my vision searching for any hint of movement.

Somehow he’s behind me, I feel his weapon charging. I fling myself at him, desperate to get inside his guard. I have to get close enough that he’ll risk harming himself if he uses any more of his fancy toys. He swats my gun away as though I’m not even holding it. We dance, two ballerinas trying to kiss each other with poisoned lips. He’s better than me. I only just manage to block his strikes while most of mine only find air.

In desperation I try to use my badge. It doesn’t work. It does stun him for a moment though.

I grab his arm and fling him as hard as I can. He sails across the room somersaulting like a mad gymnast. He manages to collide with the one reinforced wall. It vomits plaster onto the carpet but remains strong.

My assailant stands shakily. I don’t have time to find my gun. I point my left hand at him and launch a spike from between my middle two knuckles. He’s still fast

enough to dodge it with ease but he's not expecting the explosion. Like a petulant child it picks him up and flings him back at me.

The weapon was another gift from Katsu, given after I was nearly killed during the Slagger Riot. It's strictly in-house, only Yakuza enforcers have it. I'm the exception to the rule.

My attacker is finished. Most of his left side is gone, demolished by the momentary inferno. He's embedded in the wall a few feet from me. His leg hangs out like a blunted root. I grab hold of it and drag him free. He hits the floor with a leaden thud. His body twitches slightly, not yet aware that it's dead. It spits sparks at me out of spite. I twist my wrist, flipping the body over so I can see his face.

It is an abstract representation of a man's face, the features hard and set. A military killbot.

I'm outside of Downtown, outside of New Clinton, outside my jurisdiction, and maybe out of my league. I'm at Fort Cheyenne, home to one General Sheridan. Like all military centers it's completely lacking in ergonomics, all hard edges and chrome. A phallic dream of repressed violence. The two killbots watching me from across the room look like mannequins with assault weapons, a deadly art deco couple. They stare straight ahead with the deceptive composure only machines can fake. They're watching me with everything but their eyes.

The secretary is a robot, or at least I think it is. It's so hard to tell these days. It could be a download. The military has a strange aesthetic. I don't know if they'd prefer a machine or something with a personality answering the phones. I try to convince myself I'm not nervous but my body is a terrible liar.

An undetected cue activates the secretary and it swivels toward me. Its voice is surprisingly elderly, "You may go in now."

I stand and walk to the door. The killbots do not move. I pause at the door and glance up at one; it does not return the look. The door slides open and I step into General Sheridan's office.

He sits behind a desk made of the same metal as the entire room. There are no chairs facing it, no knickknacks or mementos on the walls. I doubt anyone ever comes to visit him here. He stands as the door closes behind me. No going back now. He smiles a regulation smile and offers me a metal hand, "Good day, Detective White. I was pleased to see you didn't hold my boys responsible for that terrible accident."

I do not move closer, I do not smile back. "That's because they weren't...but you were."

He doesn't even blink. If the eyes are the windows to the soul then Sheridan's is as cold and mechanical as the rest of him. I continue anyway. "You know, I kept referring to what Roderick became as a war machine without ever even noticing the implications."

"What are the implications?"

"Oh, come on, General, you did a piss poor job of covering this up. The killbot was an act of desperation."

Now he sighs, the first human sound I've heard him make, "You have to understand our position, Detective White. It was our belief that the Yakuza would rather

cover this up than admit their biggest seller was tainted and damage user confidence. We did not think that Mr. Green's involvement would ever come to light." Then, as if to excuse underestimating me, he adds, "You were never supposed to be assigned this case. We had no way of factoring in your connection to Mr. Katsu."

"What was this?"

He grins. "A weapons test, of course. Think of it. RAD is the new international currency. It crosses all borders. Our allies and our enemies use it. Now imagine those...war machines popping up in major capitals overnight. We just had to field test it first."

"Why New Clinton?"

"It was deemed an acceptable casualty."

"It's not. This stops now, General. No more illicit weapons testing. Not in New Clinton, not anywhere."

Sheridan laughed but it is only the mechanical approximation of mirth. "Who do you think you are, little policeman? You're not in New Clinton anymore. This is the military. You don't have the power to stop us, you don't..."

He stops and stares at the hole in his desk a few inches from his hand. Slowly, he looks up and spots the corresponding hole in the ceiling. There's an identical hole in every ceiling all the way to the roof. We had to wait a few seconds so all the innocents were out of the way. It had taken a lot of arguing and cajoling to convince Katsu to use the diamondeye satellite. The Yakuza don't like showing their swords unless they're going for the kill. Sheridan waits for alarms to start screaming but none do.

I let him consider this for a moment. "You're right, I don't have the power. Luckily, I have friends who do. The thing about you, General, you're a regulation military cyborg. You have all the required implants, including a GPS chip. No matter where you go, we'll find you."

Sheridan grinds his teeth, stewing in frustration. "You must know I don't have the final say. There are others involved in this project."

"Well, then you'll just have to convince them to stop, won't you?"

He blinks in shock, his skin growing redder. I let him flounder for a moment then without a word I turn and walk away.

You can't keep something locked up forever. Eventually it will get out. Katsu says they couldn't find all the tainted RAD. Not that I believe him. I'm sure it's tucked away somewhere in a Yakuza lab. Right this moment they're taking it apart, figuring out what it's made of, how it works and how to water it down. It'll start in the back alleys and underground clubs. But it will spread. Soon slagers and hard-partiers will be using it to pound on each other and have the kind of sex not even metal bodies will allow. But by then it'll be the norm and I won't have to worry about it.

The Case of the Overdressed Man

...Mike Lewis

“This new steam technology is all very well, but it’ll never replace magic as a means of transport,” Dr Theosophus said. “You understand why, young Nick?”

At the sound of his name, Nick looked up from the beaker he had been scrubbing and nodded vigorously. He had only been working for Dr Theosophus for three months and was still finding his feet, but had found it wise to agree with the doctor, even when he called him ‘young Nick’ like that. He was nearly seventeen, after all.

“Then tell me,” the magician said. He flicked at a mark on his suit and then tapped his wand on the bench top.

“They’re too expensive?” Nick said, trying to think of a reason that would satisfy the doctor.

“No!” The wand crashed down on the desk and Nick flinched as the magician continued in a loud voice. “Everyone uses the trams for a ha’penny a trip. No,” Dr Theosophus paused, “they’re too ugly.”

Personally, Nick thought the new trams were fascinating, almost beautiful in the way they moved in complicated motions of machinery. But he wasn’t about to disagree with Dr Theosophus. Listening to a pompous old magician was much better than being back on the streets burgling for a living, or hanging round the docks waiting for a west wind to change.

“Tell me, young Nick, can you see our dear Queen and the Prince proceeding down the mall in some contraption put together by Mr. Brunel? No, of course not. She will use the state coach and dragons as always.

“Mind you,” Dr Theosophus rubbed his face, “the dragons have not been the same since my day. Albert always remarked on how animated my dragons were.”

That had been before Dr Theosophus’s powers began to decline and he fell out of favour at court; Nick had heard the story many times before.

Fortunately, before the magician could carry on with one of his favourite topics, he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come,” Dr Theosophus said.

The housekeeper poked her head around the door. “You’ve a gentleman waiting to see you, sir.”

“Send him in.” Dr Theosophus turned to Nick and smiled. “Perhaps this will be another client?” Work had been thin on the ground lately and the doctor needed all the clients he could get.

A tall, rather bulky looking figure was shown into the room. As he entered, Nick realised that a lot of the bulk was his clothes — he wore a large overcoat, a scarf wrapped around his face and a wide-brimmed hat pulled down over his eyes. Nick glanced out of the window at the fine spring morning and thought he seemed a little overdressed.

Dr Theosophus clearly felt the same way as he greeted the visitor. “Would you care to remove your coat and hat?”

“No, thank you.” The man’s voice was slow and deep with a trace of an accent.

“Some tea?”

The visitor shook his head.

“A seat?” Dr Theosophus waved towards an armchair.

“No, I will stand.”

The man stood with his back to the fireplace and slowly scanned the room and its contents. He took in the laboratory bench and its clutter of glass tubes, jars and bottles; the huge globe and orrery that filled one corner; the robes and assorted pieces of magical equipment that hung from the walls. Above the fireplace, a large portrait showed Dr Theosophus conjuring a demon. The artist had drawn the creature with multiple fangs and spikes so it looked quite deformed as it struggled within a pentagram.

Of course, Dr Theosophus didn’t actually use that room for magic, and the beaker Nick was cleaning had held nothing more than the previous night’s nightcap. Another much plainer room at the top of the house was where the doctor practised his arts.

Dr Theosophus was a good enough businessman to know what the clients expected, hence the study and all its contents.

“My name is Alex Connaught,” the man said. “I have come here because I believe you can help me.”

“I sincerely hope so,” Dr Theosophus said. The magician sank into his armchair, his feet up on a small pouf, his arms resting across the top of his ample stomach.

Nick perched on the edge of the bench and listened intently as the prospective client continued with his story.

“I have a sister, Lavinia, who is engaged to be married to a man called Svenson.”

“Daniel Svenson?” the doctor asked, sitting up in his seat.

“Yes, Daniel Svenson. You know him?”

“He’s one of those foul new machinists.” The doctor scowled at the thought of all men of science.

“Believe me, it is not a match that I was happy about. I visited Lavinia at the home of her fiancée a few nights ago.”

“She is living with him?” Dr Theosophus asked, a note of surprise in his voice.

“She has fallen in with a society of free thinkers, who seem to ignore the moral decencies.”

“I see. Go on.”

“There was some unpleasantness, and since then I have not been able to reach her.” Connaught paused and seemed, from his movements, to be in some distress, though his voice continued in the same monotone as before. “I believe that he is holding her against her will.”

“You say some unpleasantness?”

“Yes,” Connaught said. “I’m afraid the details escape me. I remember an argument and then nothing after that, until waking up back at my rooms.”

“I see,” Dr Theosophus said. “And how can we help you?”

“Locate her,” Connaught said. “I simply want to know if she is well.”

“A minor problem, then,” Dr Theosophus said. “A scrying spell will tell me where she is and if she is healthy. I assume you have brought something suitable?”

Connaught reached into his coat and pulled out a locket on a silver chain. He fiddled with the lock for a moment, clumsily trying to snap the delicate item open. The locket twisted in his fingers and then dropped to the floor. Nick leaped from the bench and bent down to pick it up. At the same time, Connaught reached for the locket and their fingers brushed together. Connaught’s were cold: even through the gloves Nick could feel the heat being pulled from his hand.

Nick stepped back and snapped the locket. The two halves sprang apart, revealing the picture of a young woman and a lock of fine, auburn hair. He glanced at the picture, drawn in by the woman’s eyes as she stared out of the portrait.

“Nick?”

Nick handed the locket to Dr Theosophus, who looked at it for a moment and nodded. “This will do admirably,” he said. “If you’ll wait here, Mr. Connaught, I’ll have your answer in a moment.”

Connaught nodded and stood impassively with his arms by his sides.

Nick closed the door to the summoning room behind them.

“Small pentagram, please, Nick,” Dr Theosophus said. He had crossed the room to the lectern on the far side. Here, he stood and flicked through the pages of the thick volume that sat on the lectern’s top.

Nick selected a chalk from a pile by the door. He picked up a broom and swept the floorboards clean, then knelt in the centre of the floor and carefully drew five lines in the bright white chalk; in the very centre of the chalk shape, he placed the small lock of hair.

Nick stood and walked back to stand by the door. Although he had seen Dr Theosophus perform the summoning many times he was still nervous and liked to be as close to the exit as possible, just in case.

Dr Theosophus finished his preparations, raised his wand and pointed it at the pentagram. He read the words from the book in front of him in a low voice, gradually becoming louder before he spoke the final word of the summoning with a shout.

The air within the pentagram shimmered and spun, slowly at first then with gathering speed. Nick looked away as the twisting currents hurt his eyes. A strong,

sulphurous smell grew in intensity and he felt the hairs on his nose itching. There was a loud pop of displaced air and a familiar voice spoke.

“Dr T and young Nick — how nice.”

“Hello, Golgan,” Nick said with a sigh. He turned to look at the figure in the pentagram. He was a small, squat man-like creature with large ears and a hooked nose. He wore a rough brown robe, tied at the waist by a piece of cord. Nick watched him test the edges of the pentagram, as though pushing against an invisible wall.

The pentagram held — Nick was very thorough. He had first met Golgan when a pentagram had been broken and the summoned demon had escaped, taking Nick with him. Only Dr Theosophus’s intervention had enabled him to return to this world and he had no intention of visiting the demon world again. The experience had taught Nick one thing though: don’t burgle the house of a magician in the middle of a summoning.

“Golgan, I need you to find a woman for us,” Dr Theosophus said.

“I guessed as much,” Golgan said, turning the lock of hair over in his stubby little hands. “So, what’s this woman to you?”

“Just go to Svenson’s house and tell us if she is there and what state she is in,” Dr Theosophus said, ignoring the lewdness in Golgan’s voice.

“All right!” The small man clicked his fingers and was gone. Moments later, there was another bang and he returned.

If possible, he looked even more disheveled than before; his robe was singed round the edges and his hair stood out from his head in all directions.

“Why didn’t you warn me?” he cried out, waving a fist at Dr Theosophus.

“Warn you of what?”

“About the Elektron energy, of course,” Golgan said. “The stuff goes right through me.”

“Ah. I’d heard that Svenson was experimenting, but didn’t realise that he had come so far.”

“Well, I can’t go near the place, it’s buzzing with the stuff.”

Dr Theosophus sighed. He raised his wand again and uttered a single word. There was a gentle pop and the pentagram was empty.

“This new Elektron energy is more of a problem than we thought,” Dr Theosophus said. “We’d better talk to our client again.”

Nick followed the doctor down the stairs, wondering what they could do. Dr Theosophus’s services relied on the creatures he summoned; without them he was an ordinary man and this incident had clearly worried him.

“Now, Mr. Connaught,” Dr Theosophus said as he entered the study. He stopped in the doorway and Nick looked over his shoulder to see the reason for his surprise.

The study was empty; the guest had gone.

The doctor's carriage stood by the steps, Clarissa pawing the ground in the harness. Dr Theosophus murmured a few words and stroked Clarissa's horns before climbing into the carriage. Nick stepped warily around Clarissa — she had never shown any affection for anyone but the doctor. Nick used to handle horses when he worked down at the docks, but a half-goat, half-lion creature like Clarissa was something else.

Once Nick had climbed up to the seat next to the doctor, he flicked the reins and the carriage moved forwards. It was still early and the morning mist hadn't yet cleared. They moved swiftly through the streets, the only sounds the creaking of Clarissa's harness and the rattle of the carriage wheels over the cobbles.

They arrived at Daniel Svenson's house in Hampstead within an hour. Svenson's home was a large house in a long road of similarly large houses. But, whilst his neighbours' houses were ornate, with large gates and pillars at the front, his was simple brick.

They left the carriage in the front drive with Clarissa happily eating one of the ornamental shrubs that lined the fence.

The room Dr Theosophus and Nick were shown into was clearly the library and, interestingly, one designed for use, not merely to impress visitors. Rows of books lined the shelves, lit by glowing lamps set at intervals along the wall. Svenson rose from a leather armchair to greet them.

"Doctor Theosophus, I presume?" He was tall, well dressed and had close-cut blond hair.

"Yes, Mr. Svenson." Dr Theosophus shook hands and then gestured in Nick's direction. "My assistant, Nick Hake." Svenson nodded to Nick, but did not move to shake his hand.

"Now then," Svenson said as they all took their seats, "what can I do for you?"

"We have come to see your fiancée, Lavinia Connaught," Dr Theosophus said. "We were led to believe that she is here?"

"Yes, she's here," Svenson said. He smiled, looking like someone who had nothing to hide. "I shall just fetch her." He reached behind his chair and pressed a small button, apparently a summons to another part of the house.

"You're working with Elektron energy, I believe?" Dr Theosophus said. He indicated the bright, unflickering lights in the room.

"Yes, a fascinating subject, fascinating," Svenson replied. "The whole house is lit by it, much easier than using fire-imps."

The doctor seemed to purse his lips ready for a scathing reply, but there was a light tap at the door. It swung open and a young woman entered the room. She was even more striking than the picture in the locket and dressed in a brilliant yellow dress.

"Ah, Lavinia," Svenson said. "This is Doctor Theosophus and Mr Hake. Apparently they wanted a word with you."

Nick and the doctor stood and nodded to her. Lavinia Connaught smiled. It was an odd smile; her mouth moved but it failed to light up her face. Her eyes seem cold and tired and she looked around as if unsure where she was. "How can I help you?" she asked.

“We were approached by a gentleman who was concerned about your welfare,” Dr Theosophus said.

“Really,” Lavinia laughed, a gentle, pleasant sound, at odds with the distressed look in her eyes. “Well, as you can see, I am alive and well.” She walked to the back of Svenson’s chair and rested a hand on his shoulder.

“So I see,” Dr Theosophus said. “Then we had best be going.”

“Who asked you for this information, Doctor?” Lavinia asked, her eyebrows raised in a question.

“It was your brother, Miss,” Nick said. “He’s concerned.”

“My brother?” Lavinia suddenly turned very pale. The hand she had placed on Svenson’s shoulder trembled violently. “No!” She ran from the room.

Svenson jumped to his feet as if to follow her. He stopped in the doorway, his voice thick with anger.

“I don’t know if this is some type of joke, gentlemen, but it’s a distasteful joke if it is!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t—” Dr Theosophus was at a loss for words.

“Her brother is dead!” Svenson said. “He died in this very house, less than a week ago.”

The butler showed them the door. Nick was confused and tried to apologise to Dr Theosophus for what he had said.

“Don’t worry, Nick. Your impulsiveness can be useful at times.” The doctor caressed Clarissa’s muzzle in apology for the wait. “Clearly our visitor was not Mr. Alex Connaught or—” his voice trailed off as he stood in thought.

“Or?” Nick prompted.

“Or, we have a very great mystery indeed. For instance, why is Miss Connaught not in mourning?” He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“Shall I have a look around?” Nick asked. He indicated the house. “It wouldn’t take long.”

Dr Theosophus turned to look at him. “Have you got your tools with you?”

“Tools?” Nick asked, wondering whether to put some surprise into his voice.

“Nick, Nick,” the doctor said, shaking his head. “I know you kept them, even after our little discussion.”

It was hard to hide anything from the old doctor.

“And you have them on you?”

Nick nodded and pulled the small leather case out of an inside pocket. He opened it to reveal the blackened metal picklocks.

“Have a look around,” Dr Theosophus said. “Be careful,” he added. “Something is not quite right here.”

Nick thought of Lavinia’s white face and haunted eyes and nodded. He slipped into the bushes surrounding the driveway, waited until the last sounds of the gravel crunching under Clarissa’s paws had faded, then moved through the bushes to the back of the house.

Although it was now midday the air was cold and crisp, and Nick shivered in his thin jacket. He crouched in a flowerbed and looked across the back of the house.

He crept across the lawn and up to the back of the house. As he crouched near the kitchen steps he could smell roasting meat and his stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

Two large cellar doors by the kitchen seemed securely fastened. Nick tried to tug them open, but they were locked from inside. A series of small windows ran along the building at ground level and he knelt down to peer through them. He could see a long, large room filled with desks and equipment. Svenson's experiment room.

At the far end of the room Nick could just make out a number of people. They didn't seem to be moving. He wiped the window glass and realised they must be shop mannequins — or something very like them.

He pulled a pick from out of his pocket and used it to pry open the window. Carefully, Nick dropped through the gap and into the cellar. Enough light came through the window for him to see that the room ran under the whole of the house.

A large machine took up one end of the room. It had a glass case that was as tall as Nick himself and at least twice as long. The interior of the case contained three vast wheels joined by a shaft. At the end of the shaft was an arrangement of gears that looked almost like a bicycle, with a set of pedals and seat attached. Intricate knobs and dials covered the ends of the case. Nick couldn't even begin to guess what it was for, but positioned directly in front of the machine was a lectern, very much like the one Dr Theosophus used in his magical workings.

He was moving towards the end of the cellar with the mannequins when he heard the sound of a door closing and then, footsteps. Nick hurried across the cellar and positioned himself behind the machine.

Nick could see the far end of the cellar from here and winced as a bright light came on and Svenson entered the room.

Svenson stood by the mannequins, apparently deep in thought. Nick ducked back behind the machine and waited. There were the sounds of something heavy being moved and Nick heard Svenson's footsteps advancing on his hiding place. He froze, stilling his body and breathing as best he could. Svenson paused in front of the machine, riffling through the pages on the lectern. Nick heard him mutter to himself and caught the words, "tonight" and "try again".

Nick felt his chest grow tight as Svenson moved around the machine but it seemed the other man was merely checking the equipment. Finally Svenson left the cellar, extinguishing the light as he went. Breathing deeply, Nick crept out of his hiding place and over to the end of the cellar. As he came nearer, he realised that the objects he had seen through the window were much bulkier than mannequins. They were metal imitations of men, with large, barrel-like bodies and jointed limbs. A blank, featureless face with two dark holes for eyes topped the body. There were four of the creatures standing in a row.

A fifth metal figure stood on its own. Nick knelt down and swore under his breath when he saw what Svenson had been doing.

Five, bold lines of chalk had been drawn around the figure, standing out like slashes of white against the grubby, dusty cellar floor and forming a perfect pentagram.

Nick arrived back at the house to find Dr Theosophus at his desk. He was studying a large book, closely appraising the text and making occasional notes with a large goose quill.

Nick knocked on the door to announce his presence.

The doctor looked up. "Back already? Find out anything?"

Nick nodded and related what he had seen in the cellar. Dr Theosophus put his quill down and rubbed his face.

"It is worse than I feared," he said. "We must return there tonight and stop this happening."

"Stop what?" a voice spoke from the doorway. They both turned to face the newcomer. It was Alex Connaught, still dressed in his hat and scarf.

"Mr. Connaught," Dr Theosophus said in greeting. "Please come in."

"You have seen Lavinia?" Connaught did not move from his position in the doorway.

"Yes."

"She is all right?"

"She—" Dr Theosophus hesitated. "She's as well as can be expected," he said.

"I must see her." Alex Connaught seemed agitated; his hands flexed at his sides.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Nick said, without thinking. "She thinks you're dead."

"No!" Connaught shouted. "I will see her." He turned and left the room. Nick hurried after him, but by the time he reached the street, Connaught was no longer in sight.

Nick returned to Dr Theosophus and apologised again.

"It's not your fault, Nick," he said. "It's a force of nature."

"What do you mean?" Nick asked, puzzled.

"Magic and Science are like oil and water, Nick. They cannot be mixed. But I fear that is exactly what Mr. Svenson is attempting to do."

The hansom cab dropped the two of them at the end of the road. Dr Theosophus paid the driver and watched as he drove off into the night, the horses' hooves fading into silence.

Fire imps glowed and flared in the carriage lamps at the ends of the drives and the shadows twisted and changed as they made their way along the pavement.

The carriage lamps at the end of Daniel Svenson's drive were unlit and, as they grew nearer, Nick could see that the whole house was dark.

"Good, we won't be seen," he said. Dr Theosophus nodded and followed Nick up the drive and into the bushes. They reached the back of the house without raising any alarm, though the doctor seemed unable to move through the bushes quietly.

“Wait here.” Nick motioned to him and slipped across the lawn to the back of the house. The grass was thick with evening dew and he could feel the dampness seeping through his shoes as he crouched by the cellar window.

The bright Elektron lamps lit the cellar in a stark, white light. The large machine and the lectern had been moved to the centre of the room, in front of the mechanical mannequin, which still stood in its pentagram of chalk.

Nick eased up the window he had used earlier. It squeaked slightly, but still moved freely. Good, his entrance hadn’t been found.

Nick slipped back across the lawn.

“It’s all clear,” he said. The doctor nodded and then followed him back to the window. Nick levered the window open and held it as the doctor slid through the gap. He puffed and struggled, and for a moment Nick thought he was stuck, but he wriggled free and dropped into the cellar. Nick watched as he hurried across the cellar floor and into the shadow cast by the machine.

Nick slipped through the window and pulled it closed behind him. He had only just joined the doctor in the shadows when a scraping sound came from the other side of the cellar. Footsteps heralded Svenson’s arrival.

Nick and the Doctor watched in silence as Svenson set up the lectern in front of the machine, next to the mannequin. He checked the chalked pentagram carefully and arranged some notes on the lectern.

“We should stop him,” Nick whispered.

“No, I want to see what Svenson is doing. It may help with Alex Connaught’s case,” Dr Theosophus whispered back.

Svenson had opened the panel on the back on the mannequin and appeared to be adjusting something inside. He finished her preparations and then walked to the large machine.

Svenson took a long piece of wire and attached it to the side of the machine and then attached the other end to the mannequin.

He stood back from the mannequin and took his place at the lectern. Nick felt Dr Theosophus tense beside him as he watched Svenson start to read aloud from the book. His words sounded clearly across the cellar. Even with Nick’s limited experience, he recognised them as a summoning ritual.

“How dare he!” Dr Theosophus whispered. “He’s perverting magic.”

Nick touched his arm and pulled him further back into the shadows. “I don’t think this is the time to tell him,” Nick said.

There was a sudden whine from the machine in front of them and the discs within it started to rotate. They spun slowly at first but soon gathered speed. Nick peeked round the side of the machine and saw that Svenson had climbed onto the bicycle saddle and was pedaling furiously, still continuing his chant.

As the discs spun, Nick began to see small flashes of light jump between them. The hair on his arms stirred and the air seemed to bristle with energy.

Svenson’s chanting had reached a peak now, and Nick could see eddies of current swirling in the centre of the pentagram. The summoning was nearly complete.

The sound of the discs spinning reached a sharp note and he felt his hair stand on end.

“We must do something!” Nick said to the doctor, no longer whispering as the sound of the discs drowned out everything around them.

Before the doctor could reply, there was a loud crack and the wire that ran from the machine to the mannequin lit up with a violet glow. The mannequin jerked as though alive, its surface wreathed in sparks and flame. The eddies of air around it settled and there was a sudden bang. The summoning was complete.

Nick stared at the glowing figure that was the mannequin, but couldn't see a demon anywhere.

“He's failed,” Dr Theosophus said, a note of relief in his voice. “The summoning has failed. He should know that Elektron energy stops the forces coalescing.”

Before Nick could stop him, the doctor stepped out of the shadows and into the harsh, white light of the cellar.

“Svenson,” he called, “I command you to stop this abomination now.” He stood with his cane by his side and his cloak thrown back.

Svenson looked startled as the doctor made his statement, and he steadied himself on the machine. Sweat ran down his face and his hands shook.

“You've failed in your mad attempts. Stop now, before more damage is done,” Dr Theosophus said. He stepped forward again.

“You don't know what you mess with here,” Svenson said. He wiped a hand across his forehead. “You really don't know.”

He picked up a pinch of powder and threw it into the pentagram. Then he began to read another passage from the book in front of him. The currents around the mannequin eddied and then strengthened, twisting more and more as they built into a blur of motion.

Svenson screamed a final phrase and the air currents stopped. The light died and the mannequin stood alone in the central circle. The sudden silence was a shock and Nick stood reeling for a moment, as the echoes died away.

Dr Theosophus was sweating now. His hands shook with anger as he pointed a finger at Svenson.

“You are tangling with magical forces you do not understand.”

“Oh, I understand,” Svenson said. “You and your class have tried to keep these powers in your control, but now the men of science are going to break that monopoly. We're going to give magic back to the people.”

“You cannot,” Dr Theosophus started to say. Then he stopped, his voice trailing off and he simply stood with his mouth open, staring at something. Nick followed his gaze and realised that he was watching the mannequin.

And then Nick too stared at the metal creature as it began to move. It was a slow, almost imperceptible movement at first; then the mannequin took a step across the inner circle of the pentagram. It stopped at the edge and seemed to stare at the Doctor. The face held two blazing Elektron lights where eyes would be and, as its gaze moved around the cellar, there seemed to be intelligence behind it.

The mannequin looked down at the floor and then moved its leg. It slowly brought its foot across the chalk and erased it from the floor, thus breaking the pentagram. Nick felt his heart thud in his chest as he remembered the broken pentagram that had almost been his undoing. It seemed that the mechanical part of the summoning was disrupting the protection from the magical part.

“Come back, Doctor,” Nick called out. He stepped out from behind the machine. “Get away from it!”

The doctor turned to look at Nick and at that moment the mannequin stepped forward. Its hands reached out and caught hold of the doctor’s cloak.

“Do something!” Nick called to Svenson.

The scientist seemed gripped by indecision. He stood behind the lectern, feverishly flicking through the book in front of him.

He seized the book in triumph and waved his hands in a complex pattern whilst intoning words in a chant.

“That won’t work,” Dr Theosophus said. He battered at the mannequin with his cane. He might have been hitting it with a small twig for all the effect it had. “You need an unbinding spell, not a dismissal!”

Nick ran to the doctor’s aid. He tried to pull the mannequin off. As he struggled, the metal arm hit him hard in the face and he fell back to the floor, stunned.

Nick lay there, momentarily groggy, and looked up to see the outside doors to the cellar shake. Moments later, they splintered into pieces as a figure dropped through them and onto the cellar floor.

The bulky figure jumped to its feet and Nick saw that it was Alex Connaught, still dressed in his hat and coat.

“Svenson!” he called out as he strode across the cellar and into the pentagram. He pulled at the mannequin’s arm. Surprisingly, the arm bent beneath his hand and Dr Theosophus was able to pull free.

The mannequin turned its attention to Connaught now and they grappled with each other. Connaught’s hat slipped from his head in the ensuing brawl and then his scarf came free. Nick gasped as Connaught was revealed as a twin of the mannequin that he fought.

As the two creatures struggled with each other, neither seeming to gain the upper hand, the doctor stood watching them. It was as if he were transfixed. Nick grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the lectern.

“Unbinding spell!” Nick shouted.

Svenson still stood behind the lectern, gripping the book. Nick knocked him to one side and the book fell out of his hands, the pages fluttering as it hit the floor.

Svenson tried to grab the book, but Nick kicked it quickly out of his reach, tripping Svenson as he did so. Nick leaped over Svenson’s sprawled body and grabbed the book. He threw it towards the Doctor.

“Catch!” Nick called out. Dr Theosophus looked up and caught hold of the book as it struck him in the chest. He looked at it for a moment, as if surprised to see it, then turned to the lectern and rapidly turned the pages.

Svenson struggled to stand. Nick ran towards him, nearly tumbling over the wire from the Elektron machine. Nick picked it up, his hands tingling slightly as he grasped it. Thinking swiftly, he ran around Svenson, by now on his feet, using the wire to bind his arms and legs tightly.

Nick glanced over to see that the mannequin seemed to getting the better of Connaught.

“Quickly!” Nick called to the doctor. Dr Theosophus flicked over another page, then stopped with a soft exclamation of triumph. He placed the book back on the lectern, and chanted a spell. He waved his hands with a final emphatic sign. There was a flash of light and the mannequin released its grip on Alex Connaught and toppled in a lifeless heap onto the floor.

They all stood for a moment in silence and watched as Alex Connaught retrieved his hat and scarf. He stood with them in his hands, no longer trying to hide his metal face.

The Doctor turned to Svenson.

“I think we need an explanation,” Dr Theosophus said, a hint of menace in his tone.

“Another scone?” Nick asked. He held the plate out to Lavinia Connaught.

“No, I couldn’t, honestly,” she said and smiled prettily. Nick was not surprised at her refusal. He had spent much of the last hour attempting to pass her tea or scones; anything to exchange a few words with her.

“You were saying, Doctor Theosophus, about Daniel’s demon?” Lavinia said. She still looked tired, but the effects of Svenson’s drug had worn off and her eyes were no longer dull and empty. She turned back to the Doctor, who sat in his comfortable armchair, a plate balanced on his stomach.

“Yes, interesting type,” Dr Theosophus said through a mouthful of crumbs. “Svenson had managed to summon a fairly rare creature, one he had no chance of controlling. I suspect it was a similar creature he was attempting to summon when the experiment went wrong and your brother was killed.” At this, they all looked across to where Alex Connaught stood by the fire. He still wore the heavy coat and cloak, but no longer hid his smooth metal face.

“I prefer to think of it as a transfer, Doctor,” he said in his flat tone.

“This is true, as you are clearly not dead.”

“Do you think it might be possible to do something for Alex?” Lavinia asked, leaning forward on her chair. “Even though Daniel is now in gaol?” Though Svenson had admitted to them that he was part of a much larger society who had been working on combining Elektron energy and magic, Dr Theosophus had decided to keep that information between themselves for now. There seemed no point in alarming Lavinia or her brother.

“I don’t know, but I doubt that we need you ex-fiancée’s help. I would certainly be willing to try myself.”

“If that is the case, can Alex stay here with you?” Lavinia asked. She looked across at the metal figure that now held the soul of her brother, sadness in her eyes.

“I can hardly go back to my old life,” Connaught said, as if in agreement. The doctor nodded his assent.

“It would be for the best I believe.”

“Then it is settled. Alex will stay here and I will pay you for his keep and to research into improving his condition.”

Dr Theosophus caught Nick’s eye. It looked like they had a paying client again.

And even better, Nick thought as he bit into another scone, he would have a reason to see Lavinia again.

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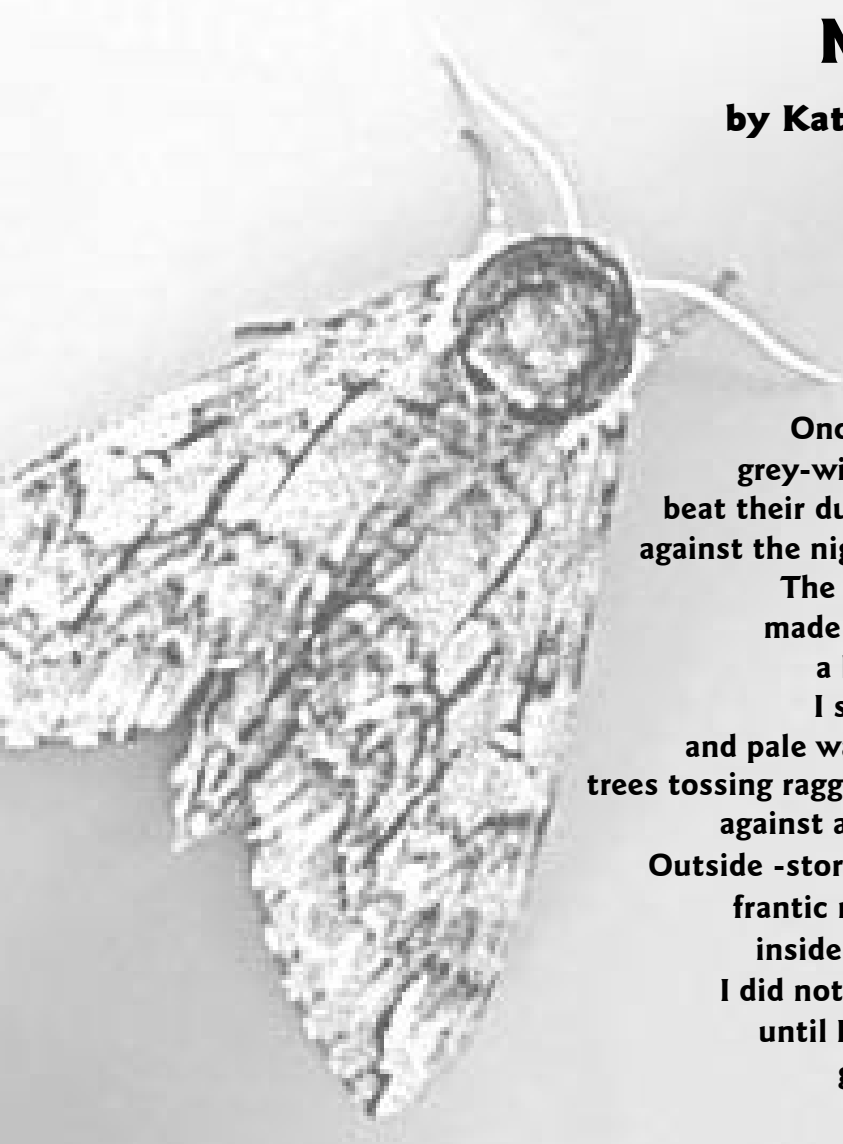
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Moths

by Kate Forsyth



**Once I watched
grey-winged moths
beat their dusted bodies
against the night window.
The yellow light
made of the glass
a black mirror
I saw my eyes
and pale watching face
trees tossing ragged branches
against a ragged sky.
Outside -storm, darkness
frantic moth wings;
inside warm light.
I did not understand
until I saw myself
grey-winged
beating**



The Fairy Wife

...Eilis Arwen O'Neal

I was a fairy wife. Still am, really; those contracts only end with the death of one of the spouses. Usually that's the human, since the Folk tend to live for centuries and then snuff it in some extraordinary way. Curses, quests, magical duels...all sorts of things. But nothing normal. Nothing human.

Don't be fooled by the name. A fairy wife is always human. I suppose it would be better to call us fairies' wives but, like so many things, that's just not how it is.

Now that I think of it, though, you sometimes hear of a fairy wife outliving her husband. But it's pretty rare. Most of the Folk who decide to marry humans put all sorts of stipulations in the pre-nup, like saying that the police can use truth spells and mind sweeps in the event of the husband's suspicious demise. That keeps most wives from trying to kill off unloved husbands.

I almost refused to marry Sylvan unless he took all of that out of our pre-nup. When he wouldn't budge, I put in a whole section barring him from using magic against me. Just so we'd be even. I wouldn't be able to get a divorce, but I would have legal recourse to separate from him if he ever tried to hurt me with magic. I suppose he was sorry for that later...

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It started the day I met Merry for lunch at the Jade Cat. I'd been shopping that morning, but for some reason nothing felt right. For instance, I'd only bought one pair of ordinary Manolo Blahniks. They had their new cushion-soled pumps in — the ones spelled to make it feel like you're walking on eiderdown — but not in the right colors.

So I already felt irritated when I sat down at our normal table outside the cafe. The Jade Cat's run by a family of Brownies, so the food is great; Brownies *live* for domestic chores like cooking and cleaning. But my mood was so bad that even the thought of their eight-layer chocolate cake didn't make me hungry, so I just ordered a salad.

After a minute, a dark car pulled up on the street in front of the Jade Cat. One of the back doors opened and Merry got out of the car, waving to me as she told the driver to go on. Then she hurried over to the table and collapsed into a chair.

I love Merry. *Everybody* loves Merry. You can't help it. She's just a little plump and she wears bright colors like tangerine and coral, but she's always smiling and happy to see you. She's married to an Oakman named Fen. It's funny to see them

together, because he's so dour and serious and she's so cheerful. But they were crazy for each other from the first time they met.

"Hey there," I said. "You okay?" Merry's cheeks were redder than usual, and she kept biting her bottom lip. Not in a guilty way, but like someone who has a secret and wants desperately to share it but hasn't quite decided to yet.

"Oh, yes," she said. She took a deep breath, like she was going to say something, but then stopped herself. "So," she asked, too casually, "did the charm you bought last week work?"

She was referring to this 'Romantic Evening' spell that I'd purchased from a local spell dealer. The box said the illusion would 'transform your dining room into a lush tropical jungle, sure to ignite your lover's desire'. It came with the works — orchids, bird-song, sounds of bubbling brooks. I'd been hoping that it would remind Sylvan of our honeymoon, maybe make us feel some of our old passion.

I eyed her for second, then decided that if she wanted to play coy, I could play along. "No," I said with a sigh. "I made a fancy dinner and set the spell up to surprise him, but then he called at the last minute and said he had to stay at work. It had worn off by the time he got home."

Merry nodded sympathetically, but her raised eyebrows seemed to say, *What else can you expect from an Elf?* Merry thinks Oakmen make more attentive husbands, and I sometimes think she might be right.

Just then the waiter approached. Merry hesitated for a minute and then said, "I'd like some peppermint tea. Do you think you could put some raspberry leaf and thistle in that?" The waiter nodded.

"Oh, don't make faces, Gwen," she said when she noticed my look. "It doesn't taste all that bad."

"It's not that." For as long as I've known her, Merry's been a Diet Coke girl. Something was definitely up.

"Spill it," I ordered, leaning forward on my elbows. "What's going on, Merry?"

For a split second, Merry beamed so strongly I thought she might catch fire. Then, placing her hands carefully on the table, she said, "I'm pregnant."

This was big news. The biggest news. After all, the whole point of being a fairy wife is to have babies. It's why the Folk marry us.

You see, it doesn't matter whether you're an Undine, a Djinn, a Gnome, a...whatever. If you're Folk and female, you have about a one in seven shot of getting pregnant even once in your life. And only about half of the Folk that do manage to get pregnant have a live baby or live through the birth themselves.

That's where fairy wives come in. Way back, after the Great Migration out of Faerie, the male Folk noticed that when they mated with humans, the human women got pregnant loads more often than their own women did, and most of the babies survived. So they started marrying humans and having children with them. Of course, some Folk go on about 'pure' babies, but a lot of them don't care. Because babies born to human mothers come out fey about half the time. And if you're born fey, you've got all the powers of a full-blood, even if your genes say you're only half Folk.

This does leave one problem, though. Because if you get a fey baby half the time, it means you get a human baby the other half. A lot of the Folk aren't terribly keen on raising human babies. But the ones that marry humans know the risk, and so as long as they get one or two fey babies, they're happy enough to keep the human ones around. Mostly. It is illegal to dump a baby just because it's human, but it happens more than the authorities want to admit. They try to ignore it, but everyone knows it's human babies they fish out of dumpsters, and never fey ones. Every so often one of the human-run papers will do a big article about the rampant baby-dumping in the city, but after a few weeks of public outrage, things start being swept under the carpet again.

"That's great!" I managed to say.

"Fen was so happy," Merry gushed. "When the healer confirmed it, he couldn't stop grinning."

"When are you due?" I asked. I could feel my own smile stretching at the corners, faltering just a little bit.

"April," she said. "I can't wait to start decorating the baby's room. I want to do a forest motif in different shades of green, something Fen will like..." She trailed off, reached over, and took my hand. "It'll happen for you too, Gwen."

"I know, I know," I said, waving my hand in the air dismissively. "Don't you dare think about me right now. Tell me about the names you're thinking of."

By the time I got home, I was completely depressed.

"Guinevere?" Sylvan called from the bedroom. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," I called back as I slipped my shoes off. I went into the kitchen and, as I was getting a bottle of water from the fridge, Sylvan came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder. I jumped — five years of living with an Elf and I still wasn't used to the fact that they don't make any sound when they move.

"Something's wrong," he said as we went into the living room and I set the chime trees singing. "What is it?"

I sighed. That's one trouble of living with one of the Folk. They pick up human moods so easily. Some don't always care, and some will use it against you, but they always know what you're feeling. Problem is, they don't always get *why* you feel that way.

Part of me didn't want to tell him, but I knew that he'd find out sooner or later. Taking a breath, I said, "Merry is pregnant."

For a second the air crackled, and Sylvan's green eyes turned black, but he was normal so quickly you almost couldn't tell. "That's wonderful," he said. "I'll have to call Fen and congratulate him."

"She's really happy. They've only been married for about a year." Even I could hear the tremor in my voice as I said it.

Sitting down beside me on the couch, he surveyed me with a furrowed brow. "Don't worry, Gwen," he said. "You'll get pregnant soon. I just read about a new series of fertility spells they're developing at MagHealth..."

We'd been married five years and trying to get me knocked up the whole time. Nothing worked. We'd been to every healer in the city. I'd drunk more teas, had more spells recited over me, and endured more purification rituals than any one person should. Our bed jingled when we made love because of all the charms tied to it. We even tried going to human doctors with their fertility drugs and in vitro fertilization and all that cutting-edge research. No luck either.

There's nothing wrong with either of you, the healers said. The human doctors echoed them. *Just keep trying*. Sometimes though, I thought I knew the truth. I may not have Sylvan's powers, but sometimes, late at night when he was asleep and I lay awake and worried, I thought I knew why.

I was never sure I really *wanted* a baby. And I think there was enough power in that indecision to keep me from having one.

Because magic knows. Take any sort of spell that affects another person — a compulsion spell, say. If you try to spell someone to pick up a plate and throw it on the floor and that person doesn't want to, it makes it that much harder for your spell to work. It needs more power, more *oomph*. The magic knows, even if the other person doesn't have any magic, and magic's harder to work on anyone who resists it.

I'd never told Sylvan about the little kernels of doubt that wormed their way through me. He wouldn't have understood. After all, the whole point of marrying me instead of some Elf chick was that I could get pregnant. That's part of the deal if you're human and marry one of the Folk.

It wasn't as if I hated children. I liked them; I'd been a great babysitter as a teenager as long as the kid wasn't my younger brother. My mother had done a good job preparing me to become an Elf's wife. Along with giving me a suitably fey name, she'd spent a lot of my childhood making sure I got into the Folk-heavy schools, played with Folk kids, majored in business with an emphasis on the fairy gold market. And she'd made sure I liked babies. Lots of books about how great motherhood was, how fulfilling and natural and wonderful. By the time I was twenty, I was perfectly groomed to bear a fey baby.

I just wasn't sure I wanted one. What if it cried in the middle of the night, and instead of wanting to hold it I wanted to chuck it out the window? What if it were born with a disease that even healers didn't diagnose until it was too late? What if Sylvan stopped needing me once he had an Elf baby? Some nights the questions — the *what ifs* — danced in my head more brightly than will-o-the-wisps. And I did not become pregnant.

I was gardening the day Sylvan told me about the party. That's one of my oddnesses. Even Merry, who's as sweet as can be, would have raised her eyebrows to see me in the garden. After all, it ruined my hands and knees — they had to use some pretty strong beautifying spells at Rune Spa to erase the damage. They wouldn't understand that some part of me *needed* to be out there for at least a while every day. That if I didn't get to touch the dirt and the stems of plants I started feeling loose and strange, like the molecules in my body might float away, not held down by anything real. Even Sylvan thought I did it just to have our own supply of herbs for the fertility

drinks. He never noticed that only about a quarter of the garden grew plants with fertility properties.

I was standing at the edge of the yard and had just spoken the charm to activate the rain spell. The gentle rain, which fell only in our yard, was just starting when I noticed Sylvan at the back door, waving a piece of paper at me.

“Are you ready for a surprise?” he asked as I came in and sidled around him so I wouldn’t get his suit wet. “Guess whose firm is hosting a Samhain gala at SuperNatural?”

I gasped. SuperNatural was the hottest new bar in the city. Models and movie stars flocked there during the weekends and sometimes even they couldn’t get in. I’d been wrangling for an invitation for months.

“It’s going to be a masked ball,” he continued. “For all our clients and the higher-ups and their husbands and wives.” Here he grinned. “That means you.” Sylvan’s firm manages the fairy gold portfolios of A-list actors and governmental figures — high profile types. It’s mostly run by Folk, though they have a few humans in key positions to meet the affirmative action quotas. He’s the youngest vice-president in their history — only nine-hundred-and-twenty-seven.

“We should go as something matched,” I said eagerly. “Merry knows a tailor who can work wonders.” A picture of Sylvan and me in front of our fireplace, working out the details of our costumes, flashed through my mind.

The bubble of happiness, the image of warmth and companionship, popped as Sylvan nodded hurriedly. I could see his mind reverting to stocks and interest rates, moving away from me. “Sure thing,” he said. “Just decide what you want.” He smiled his beautiful smile. “I knew this would cheer you up.”

It would cheer me up more if you’d stay here and have dinner with me, I wanted to say. I’d eaten alone, or with friends, the past three nights. But he continued without stopping.

“I have to go meet with a client now. I just came to tell you about this.” He strode back toward the front door, for once not noticing the sudden slump in my shoulders. “Don’t wait up.”

I never do, I thought as the door shut behind him.

I ended up going as a butterfly. Sylvan refused to do matching costumes, since the entire top level of his firm had decided to wear costumes that involved suits. Something about maintaining a professional appearance. Feeling miffed, I had Merry’s tailor make me a blue-green dress and illusionary butterfly wings. Those wings cost a pretty penny, but they were so gorgeous Sylvan couldn’t say anything. They arched out from my back in sparkling gold and pink hues but didn’t get in the way of sitting down, since they weren’t solid.

The first toast of the evening had just started when we got to SuperNatural. Everyone raised their glasses and shouted, “To the year’s end!” and then the serious partying began. I danced with Sylvan and got him to dance with Merry, since Fen refused, saying firmly that Oakmen did not dance. We drank and laughed and eyed

the firm's more famous clients, though it was hard to place some of them with everyone wearing masks.

Around twelve o'clock I left Merry at our table to go to the bathroom. A line stretched outside the door, since there were only two stalls inside. Naturally, I was the last person in the line of seven. I can't wait until they figure out a spell to deal with bathroom lines.

When my turn finally came, I nearly bumped into the girl leaving the room. She was human, wearing a long silver dress, and the mask she held to her face was star-shaped. "Sorry," I said as we side-stepped each other. She didn't say anything, but her eyes widened behind her mask.

I was washing my hands at the sink a few moments later when I heard the cry.

For a second I thought a cat had somehow gotten into the bathroom, but then it cried again. I opened the stall I had not used and there, wrapped in silver fabric on the floor, was a baby.

I don't remember the next few hours very well. I remember stumbling out of the bathroom with the baby, strong-arming my way through the partiers. No one looked familiar, even the people who had discarded their masks. By the time I found my way back to our table, I wanted Sylvan badly, but he wasn't there. Only Merry sat at the table, a glass of virgin lemonade beside her.

"Someone left a baby in the bathroom," I said as I sank into my seat. The music, previously so melodic, was too loud, and I tried to cover the baby's ears with my hands.

"What?" she cried. For the first time, I pulled the fabric back and looked at the baby properly. It was a human boy with slate-colored eyes and a rosy mouth.

Merry's eyes widened. "He's not very old," she said. "Maybe a few weeks. Was he on the changing table?"

I shook my head. "He was on the floor in a stall."

Her eyebrows closed together. "Maybe someone just forgot him," she said doubtfully.

I didn't believe that for a second. "Can you find Sylvan?" I asked. "I don't... I don't know what to do."

The rest of the night was a blur. Merry found Sylvan and Fen, who came back to the table and looked at me holding the baby. Then they went off to make quiet inquiries. After all, Sylvan said, there was no way he was bringing shame on the firm by announcing to their A-list clientele that someone had dumped a baby in the bathroom. I didn't move. The baby went to sleep, but I didn't hand him over to anyone else, even when my arms went numb from holding him in one position.

Later, around two or three, after almost everyone had gone home, the president of the firm, Ob, came over to the table.

"There's not anything on him to identify him, Gwen?" he asked.

"I don't think his mother wanted him to be identified," I said as I shifted the baby. He was wearing a normal diaper instead of a self-cleaning one, and he had begun to smell.

“You didn’t recognize her?” Ob asked.

“Not from the firm,” I said. “But she was wearing a mask. Still, I don’t think she worked for you. She looked too...nervous.” It took a strong constitution to survive in Sylvan’s line of work. “Maybe someone brought her,” I suggested.

Ob scowled, and I remembered why Phookas make me nervous. Too mercurial. Comes with being able to change shape, I suppose. “To think this happened here,” he said. “At least none of the guests found out.”

“At least the baby’s all right,” I snapped, suddenly irritated. Sylvan moved to touch my arm, but I shrugged him off. “I’m tired. I just want to go home.”

“What about—” Sylvan started.

“We’ll take him with us. None of the services are open this late.” The Folk were staring at me — Fen puzzled, Ob still frowning, and Sylvan blinking in consternation. “I’m going to the car. Merry, will you carry my purse?”

Feeling very human, and very alone, I left SuperNatural, my husband trailing behind me.

Children’s Services wasn’t open the next day either, on account of it being Samhain and thus New Year’s Day. On Monday, a harried-looking human woman showed up on our front door with a healer to examine the baby.

“He’s about seven weeks old and pretty healthy,” the healer said as he put away his instruments. “He’s showing some signs of stress, but that’s to be expected after what he’s been through.”

“He doesn’t have an identification charm, does he?” the Children’s Services case worker asked. ID charms are a new spell that parents can have placed on their children. They’re marketed to prevent kidnappings and kids getting lost, but I think a lot of parents just like the idea of knowing where their children are, especially when they become teenagers.

The healer shook his head.

“Worth trying,” the woman said wearily.

Sylvan watched this exchange agitatedly before interrupting. “Can you take him today?”

The case worker hesitated. I could see her looking around the room we were standing in, taking in the crib, the closet full of books and toys, the monitor spells floating in the corners, the shelf of self-cleaning diapers and bottles. “You don’t have children yourselves?” she asked finally.

Sylvan’s eyes flashed a hot green and the mobile over the bed spun slowly in the breeze that had just picked up in the room. “We’ve been trying for some time,” he said coldly. “We want to be...prepared.”

The woman nodded. “Well, I hate to ask, but...Children’s Services has their hands full right now. There are simply too many homeless human babies in this town for Social Services to accommodate. Since you have all of the equipment, would you mind taking him for a few days, until we can find a foster home?”

I was standing by the crib, the baby tucked into my arms, his head nestled under my chin. I could feel the softness of his skull, smell the baby-scent of powder and

milk. He made a little mewling sound, and I moved so that he could see the spinning mobile more easily.

“That’s out of the question,” Sylvan began.

“We can keep him,” I interrupted. I licked my lips, tasting the words, seeing how they felt.

“Guinevere, I—”

“It’s only for a few days,” I said. “Right?” The woman nodded in support.

“Fine,” Sylvan said. “What paperwork is there?” Sylvan, the healer, and the case worker went into the living room, and a few minutes later I heard the front door shut. I picked up a stuffed bear and let the baby grab its furry ears.

“I don’t want you to get too attached,” Sylvan said from behind me. I turned to see him standing in the doorway. You could tell he was an Elf right then — you could feel the power rolling off him.

“We have the room,” I said finally. “And all the things. No one else is using them.”

“This room is for our baby,” he said sharply.

“A fairy baby,” I said.

For a moment, he looked puzzled. “Of course. Hopefully, anyway.”

I didn’t say anything then. He had turned to go when I said, “And if this baby were a fairy baby? Would you want to keep him then?”

He didn’t need to answer.

It turned out that Children’s Services was more overcrowded than the case worker had let on. A week after visiting us with the healer, she called and told us that they were having problems finding foster homes for the children already there and would we mind keeping the baby a little longer? Looking around the baby’s room as I listened to her, I said we’d be happy to keep him.

I avoided a fit from Sylvan by calling our primary healer and getting all sorts of information about ‘complementary magics’ and ‘sympathetic pregnancies’, which was basically a fancy way of saying that sometimes simply having a baby around made women get pregnant. Sort of like living in a dorm with twelve other women and all getting your period on the same day, only in reverse.

The weeks stretched into a month. I did the things I normally did, only now that I had a baby to do them with, they changed a little. When I gardened I sat him in a car seat under a tree and informed him in all seriousness of the properties of the plants I tended. The heeled shoes in my closet gathered dust as I found myself putting on previously unworn Nikes so as not to trip while holding the baby. I lunched with Merry at restaurants that did not mind crying infants or had sound-spells around certain tables. Invitations still came, but I declined those at night or sent Sylvan to the parties alone, even though friends always offered the names of reputable babysitters.

Strangely, the changes didn’t bother me. I could remember the *what ifs* that had crowded my head before the baby arrived. But they didn’t have the force they once had. That’s not to say that I felt instantly happy and glowy and fulfilled. I just felt... better, as if I had been afraid in the dark and someone had turned on a light.

Not everything felt better, though. I could feel Sylvan watching me at home, could feel the chill of Elven irritation when I walked into the room with the baby. He started staying at the office later and later, though he always had perfectly legitimate excuses when I asked him about it. Nothing that would hint that he was staying away from home so he didn't have to see me and the baby. I noted that except for Merry, my human friends married to Folk stopped calling and, if I met them on the street with the baby, they made excuses and hurried on. As if his humanness might be catching.

I did not tell anyone, especially Sylvan, that I had named the baby. I knew enough to keep that to myself.

Names are magic. The first, best magic, so strong it works a little even when it's only humans naming their children. I picked a name that should invoke all the things I wanted for the baby: love, protection, happiness. I told that name only to him, whispering it as I rocked him in his crib: *Hyacinth*.

The night it ended I came home late. I had taken Hyacinth to Merry's to help her look through baby name books and pick out color swatches for the nursery. We had spent more time than I thought arguing the merits of pastels versus jewel tones, and when I got home Sylvan's car was already in the garage.

He was on the phone as I let myself in. I went straight to Hyacinth's room to put him in his pajamas. I had just gotten him in them — blue ones, with footies — when Sylvan appeared in the doorway.

"That was Children's Services," he said. "They've got a foster home lined up for him. They're sending someone around at nine tomorrow to pick him up."

I didn't say anything, merely laid Hyacinth down in his crib. His diaper bag sat at my feet, and as I bent down to move it to its hook, I noticed the small gray cat poking out of its side pocket. I had bought it two days before at a toy store. It was the only thing in the room that had not been there before Hyacinth arrived.

"What if," I heard myself say, "we kept him?"

"Who?" Sylvan asked.

Hyacinth, I started to say, but changed it to, "The baby."

Sylvan stared at me for a long moment. "What do you mean?" he said slowly, as if I had spoken in another language.

"We could be his foster parents." I paused. "We could adopt him. They let foster parents do that sometimes."

It seemed like a long time that Sylvan stared at me, his eyes going greener and greener, until they were almost black. Then, without warning, he yanked the diaper bag from the hook and threw it over his shoulder. "Come on," he said. "We're taking that baby to them now."

"What?" The air in the room went flat and cold. I could see ice flowers growing across the window panes.

"You're too attached to that baby. We're not keeping him." He grabbed a blanket from the crib. "We don't need him," he said. "We're going to have our own baby." There was a tinge of desperation in his voice.

He had started to reach for Hyacinth, but I got there first. Pulling him into my arms, I cried, "When? When are we going to have a baby? We've been trying for so long and it's not working! This might be the only baby we ever get."

"We'll have a baby," he replied doggedly. "Our own baby. A—"

"A fey baby," I finished for him. "But what if we didn't? Did you ever think of that? What if we had a human baby? Would you want to give that one away, too?"

Hyacinth woke with a start and immediately began crying.

"Gwen," Sylvan said over the wailing. "We're taking the baby to Children's Services. I'm not going to discuss this anymore."

He had actually taken a step to the door, so sure that I would follow him, when I heard someone say, "No." It was a moment before I realized it was me.

"Guinevere," Sylvan said.

Hyacinth hiccuped and stopped crying, pressing his face into my neck. His hot tears burned my neck like tiny flames. "I'm not giving him up," I said. "I don't care what you say."

Magic flared around us. Wind howled through the house and a gnawing cold assailed the room. Sylvan had disappeared, the diaper bag thumping to the ground where he had stood. Scooping it over my shoulder, I ran into the bedroom and ripped open my top dresser drawer. With my one free hand I reached into the back left corner and spoke the charm cued to my voice. A wallet popped into existence. Grabbing it, I shoved it into the bag and raced into the entry hall.

Sylvan was waiting for me. He had let the trappings of humanity, the glamor that keeps humans from going a little mad when they see the Folk, drop. His suit was gone, replaced with dark robes and a cape of smoke. His hair, normally short and clean-cut, brushed his shoulders in wild, snake-like locks. I had to squint to look at him. He was more beautiful than anything I had ever seen.

"Give the baby to me," he said.

I know a compulsion spell when I hear one. They're illegal for anyone but a cop, though that didn't stop Sylvan. But even knowing what was going on, I found myself holding Hyacinth out. Sylvan stepped forward, and his features softened, reverted to the face I knew. "Gwen, I—" he said in his normal voice.

The spell loosened in that second and I snatched Hyacinth back towards myself. "Get out of the way, Sylvan," I yelled. "I'm leaving—"

I didn't finish the sentence. In the same instant, Hyacinth was magically ripped from my arms and I flew backwards into the wall. The breath knocked out of me, I felt my head slam against something sharp, heard the crack of breaking glass. As I crumpled to the floor, I could feel something wet dripping down the back of my head, and when I touched my fingers there they came away red.

Sylvan set Hyacinth down on the floor and rushed towards me. The glamor was gone; he looked the way he had when I married him: beautiful and fey, but like something real, something you could touch. "Gwen, I'm sorry," he said as he cradled me against him. "I didn't mean to."

The pain was making my vision blur and my ears buzzed shrilly. I tried to say *Hyacinth*, but was brought up short by a soft bump on my hand. Slowly, I opened my

fingers to feel the pack of stapled papers that had materialized beside me. Written in silver ink and stamped across the top were the words *Contract of Marriage*.

The papers ruffled themselves and then stopped as the third paragraph on page five began to glow. *Physical harm...inflicted by magic...Guinevere...human*. A few of the words caught my eye before the entire document flashed once and then lit itself on fire. The magical flames lasted only a second and then they, along with the papers, were gone.

“What was that?” Sylvan said.

I stood up carefully, hearing the tinkling of glass under my feet. A framed photo from our wedding lay on the floor, its glass shattered. “Our marriage is over,” I said quietly. “You broke the terms.”

“What?” Sylvan struggled to his feet. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you remember? While you were making sure the police could use truth spells on me if you died before I did, I wanted to make sure you’d never hurt me. My lawyer got it in at the last minute. If you didn’t trust me enough to know I wouldn’t kill you, why should I have trusted you not to hurt me?”

“But the rest of the pre-nup...” he said. “You can’t get a divorce. Our marriage is until one of us dies.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But the clause I put in means I can leave if you hurt me. We might be married, but it doesn’t matter much if you can’t find me.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said, but faintly.

“Check with the lawyers,” I said. “They’ll still have a copy of the contract. You agreed to everything when you signed it, including that.”

I picked Hyacinth up from where he lay on his back. He blinked solemnly at me as I hefted the diaper bag as well.

“Where are you going?” Sylvan asked. For the first time, I thought, he didn’t sound like an Elf. The pain in his voice was too raw, too human.

“Away. You don’t need to know where.”

“Don’t go,” he said. “I love—”

“Not me,” I said. “The idea of me. You just love a human girl, as well as any of the Folk can. But don’t worry. There are plenty of humans around and I won’t live forever. You’ll find someone else to marry you.”

With that, I gathered up my baby and left my life behind me.

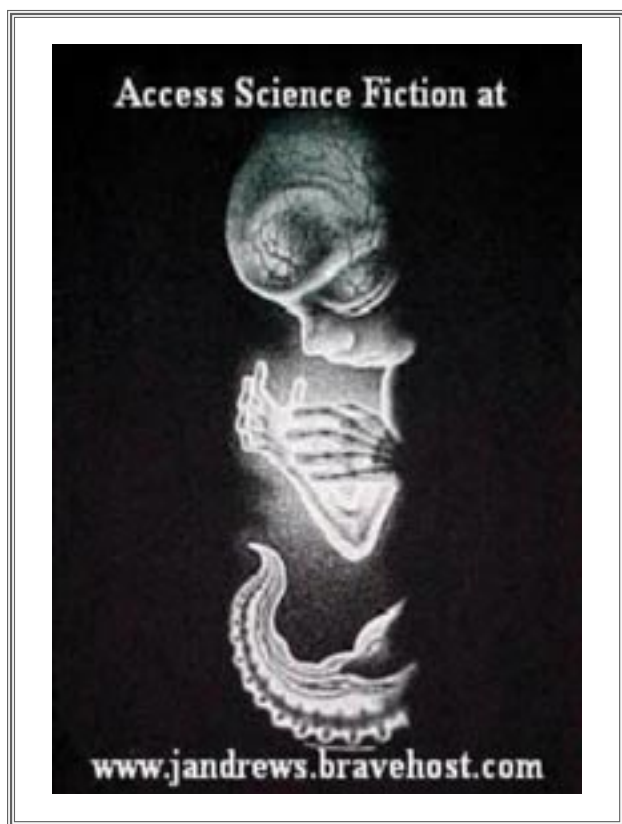
It didn’t turn out all that badly. I caught a bus and kept riding until one day, when it stopped, I got off to stretch my legs and realized we were home. A place we could make home, anyway. When the money from my private bank account came through — by anonymous Pixie Air Mail, of course — I bought a little house on the edge of town.

It’s quiet here. The town’s mostly human. The Folk that do live here tend to be the reclusive kind — Brown Men, Silvani, and the like — and don’t have much to do with us. Not the kind to let Sylvan know where we are if he wanted to find us. Quite frankly, I think he probably pulled some strings at city hall to get me declared dead and is already remarried. I wish him luck of it.

I'm writing this all down so that later, when you're older, you'll know about everything that happened. I'm going to buy a time capsule charm in town tomorrow and set it so that you'll get this on your eighteenth birthday, even if something were to happen to me. Then you can decide what you want to do. I think it's important that you know, but I'm selfish enough to want to keep you just mine as long as I can.

You've started walking recently. Generally in my flower beds. I planted your name-sake all around the house in pink and blue and white and violet. You seem to step on them with magical regularity.

Of course, I planted some other things too. You can't be too careful, after all. There's gentian, meadowsweet, rosemary, mulberry. All plants to invoke the same things I named you for: love and protection and happiness. For both of us.



Slag Fairmont — Psychic Zone Ranger

...Douglas A Van Belle

It was one of those cold, wet, colourless nights; the kind of night where you caught yourself waiting for the internal monolog to cut in over the sounds of the city. I was wearing a second-hand trench coat, but that was about as far as the cheesy film noir thing was going to stretch. There was a mysterious woman, but our weary, distraught little misfit in clearance-rack clothes was about as far as you could get from an elegant dame wandering over to the wrong side of the tracks for help. In fact, far from asking for help, I was reasonably certain she wanted nothing to do with us.

Her chauffer drove a city bus so old that graffiti had replaced steel as its primary structural component and instead of leading us into a dark alley that might be full of dangers worthy of dramatic music, she led us to the parking lot of a half-abandoned strip mall. There was a bar, but it was stuck inside a corporate chain restaurant that was precisely cluttered with designer kitsch, now twenty years past trendy.

And then there was Slag.

“Random,” Slag said as our car-shaped object wheezed, coughed and hiccupped its protest at being shut off. “She picked this place at random, just like the bus.”

I didn’t bother to ask Slag how he knew; he had no idea. But I did not doubt for a moment that he was right. Slag Fairmont, my sometimes beloved, often tolerated brother was an intuitive; a psychic if you prefer.

“She doesn’t like her shoes,” Slag added, unhelpfully.

I sincerely doubted if there was anything magic or supernatural about Slag, no mysterious voodoo rays or any of that kind of crap. It was more a bit of his head stuck in overdrive. Athletes talk about the zone, that magical state of near consciousness when a knuckle-dragging moron from Mississippi manages to calculate all the partial differential equations God put in fluid dynamics and then translate it into all the muscle twitches necessary to drop a curveball in for the perfect strike. Amazing, but nothing magic about it.

Slag threw like a girl — he threw like a retarded girl wearing mittens — but my idiot brother was always in his version of the zone. His mind ripped into information like a pack of rabid weasels on meth, swarming all over the millions

of details we all saw but never noticed. Slag lived with a constant barrage, what he called a nagging chatter of logical connections and reasonable conclusions. He couldn't tell you how many queens were left in a seven-deck shoe, never anything as useful and potentially profitable as that, but he could see right into people. He could look at someone and just know things about them.

"You should eat more fiber," Slag said to me as we stumbled over each other getting through the door.

"Fuck you," I said.

Slag had grown quite adept at using his gift but in deference to a universe that demanded the symmetry that made beautiful women stupid and rich men look like dried up gnomes, Slag's gift functioned at the expense of the more mundane and much more useful mental capabilities humans tended to take for granted. Slag was a social quadriplegic, completely incapable of any approximation of normal functional social interaction. It was like he always walked around with his head up his ass and both feet in his mouth.

When Slag looked at the artificially pleasant hostess for that extra moment, I knew he was about to strike, but I didn't react fast enough to shut him down.

"You are not pregnant," Slag said, his matter of fact statement stunning the perky little beauty school co-ed like a brick to the side of the head. "Your period is late because you've been starving yourself to stay thin."

She dropped her clipboard and raised trembling hands to trembling lips.

I smacked Slag upside the head and pulled him away from the impending soap opera. He rubbed his head and scowled at me like I was the one out of line.

I didn't bother to try to explain to Slag why I had hit him. He was completely unable to comprehend the fact that he was responsible for the whimpering sobs of the hostess. I'd have better luck explaining the mind of a woman to a deaf dog.

I pushed Slag into a chair at one of the bar tables and said, "Sit. Shut up and just sit."

Slag sat. He huffed and mumbled a bit but he sat. Over the years, through the course of playground fights, restraining orders and various other unpleasantries, we had developed an unwritten agreement. I did all the real thinking and Slag did what I said.

I spotted our woman standing between a couple of empty chairs at the bar and I walked up behind her, acting like I was waiting my turn to order.

The bartender brought the woman an industrial blender concoction of fruit and ice.

"Can you break a hundred?" our mysterious woman asked with a strangled rasp of a squeaky little voice as she handed him a dollar bill.

The bartender nodded, took the single and started counting bills out of the till. I was stunned. I wasn't surprised she was ripping the place off. That was why we had tracked her down. I had however expected an actual scam; a change counting scheme, misdirection and lift from the till, or something else from the standard book of tricks. I had honestly never worried about how she worked. All that mattered to me was that she was good, but simply asking for a hundred in change for a single was too bizarre to believe.

“You’re doing it wrong,” I said, planting a butt cheek on one of the empty chairs next to her.

“Excuse me?” she replied, casting a nervous glance over at the bartender and his fistful of money.

“Drinking,” I said. “You’re doing it wrong.”

“I didn’t realize there were rules.”

“Not rules,” I said. “Strategies. Drinking solo is a strategic thing.”

She raised an eyebrow at me while the bartender counted out ninety-some dollars of change for her dollar bill.

“Walking up to the bar by yourself to order a fruity chick drink is a classic, ‘Hey stud liquor-me-up and drag me to bed’ strategy, but you walked all the way around the bar to avoid the only human looking guys on the prowl. So you aren’t out shopping for a bed warmer. But if you are drinking to get drunk, then the fruity chick drink is the wrong way to go. All that sugary ice will have you sick and yakking up the free peanuts before you can get anywhere even close to hammered.”

She looked at me, much more comfortable now that the cash was in her pocket. “Only two reasons to drink, huh?”

“When you come into a bar alone,” I said.

She nodded, as if appraising the idea.

“But I guess you could count that dollar trick as a third reason.”

Her face suddenly turned cold, hard, worn. “Who are you?”

“Mitchell Fairmont.” I held out my hand but she just glared. As usual, I’d pushed it too far too fast.

“Cop?” The venom in her voice was as caustic as any of my ex-wives’.

“As far as you know.”

“Cute,” she said as she turned and walked away.

“Not a cop,” I said. “More like you than them.”

She flipped me off without looking back.

I watched her take a few steps. She had a nice ass, especially for a skinny little white chick, and I lingered on the lusty thoughts for a bit longer than prudent.

“Wait.” I picked up the fruity drink she had left on the bar and scrambled after her.

She turned and glared at me. Add a greasy lawyer explaining why half my stuff was not enough and she could easily be the next former Mrs Fairmont.

“Just talk to us for a minute or two,” I said.

“Us?”

I redirected her over toward the table where Slag was fidgeting like a five-year-old trying not to wet himself.

“This is my brother, Slag.”

“Slag?” she said, her nose crinkled up in disbelief. “What kind of horse’s ass name is Slag?”

“Dad wanted a linebacker. Missed twice.” I shrugged and offered her a chair.

She climbed up on the bar chair but she didn’t settle in. Even with the implied threat of exposing her trick with the dollar, she was one Slag-ism away from sprinting out the door.

Slag looked at her, looked into her eyes with the intensity that only a psychotic could muster and said, “Thunder.”

“What?” she asked as she started to slide off the chair.

“You were thinking that Mitchell isn’t the name of a linebacker, but Thunder Mitchell Fairmont is.”

Instead of lots of running and screaming, she glanced at me, smirking. “Thunder?”

“Hey, at least I got Mom’s maiden name for a middle name and didn’t end up with something really stupid like Slag Thrust Fairmont?”

“At least it wasn’t Ford.” She still didn’t relax, but she finally did sit on the damn chair.

“Fairlane. The car’s a Fairlane,” I said. I didn’t offer the fact that we had just left the decrepit remains of a 1978 Ford Fairlane station wagon grazing in the lot outside. “But we do live near Freemont.”

She almost smiled.

“I take it you have a name?” I said.

She looked at me a long moment, then said, “Susan. Susan Louise Johnson.”

“A nice normal name,” I said. “Be sure to thank your mom on Mother’s Day.”

“Her parents are dead,” Slag hissed at me as if I should have known better than mention her mother.

Susan was off the chair and I actually had to jump to get between her and the door.

“So you’ve got me all scouted out, huh?” Susan was wavering at that point just short of yelling. The intensity was there, but not the volume. “Got my credit report, sister’s name...”

“You don’t have a sister,” Slag chimed in.

Susan ignored him. “...traffic tickets, my permanent record from elementary school, every detail you could find and now you think you can work me?”

“It’s the way that *you* work people that interests us.”

That stopped her.

“Who the hell are you?” she hissed.

“Hard to say,” I said. “Something somewhere between Aquaman on *The Superfriends* and that monkey that uses sign language.”

“Chimps are not monkeys,” Slag said.

Susan scowled at us so hard it went past ugly and started to look almost cute.

“We’ve got a business proposition for you. That’s it, I swear. Just give me a few minutes to make the pitch and you can decide if you ever see us again.”

“It’s not like you’re thinking,” Slag said, trying way too hard to be reassuring.

I frantically waved at Slag, trying to get him to shut up before he chased her away, but she was waiting, silently demanding more.

“The cops, or a cop who is sort of a friend, sometimes hires us to generate leads,” I said.

“I’m psychic,” Slag said suddenly.

It took everything I had not to smack Slag with the big glass full of red slush I was still holding. I had yelled at him often enough that he knew better than to say

that. The whole psychic thing pretty much always sent people off the nearest cliff and Susan already had three toes over the edge.

Susan looked at him suspiciously, but didn't run. Slag stared right back at her.

"A couple months ago, our friend gave us a look at a big file full of petty crap he thought might be connected," I said, trying find an inconspicuous way to step between her and Slag.

Susan frowned at me, disappointed.

"And this morning he showed us the security tape from the convenience store," I said. "Bit of risk there, such a hot case and all, but he wanted to be the one who found the lead that broke it while it's still all over the front page. He had no idea the two files might be connected, no reason to suspect, but the moment Slag saw you on that tape..."

"All it takes is a moment," Slag said, staring into Susan. "You let your guard down, it slips out and things fall apart. Hidden things escape and it always hurts someone. You fight it. You hate it. It is part of you but every time you try to accept it, every time you try to use it to make things better, something goes wrong."

"What in the hell are you yacking about?" I hissed at Slag.

Slag's 'gift' always seemed to instigate fear, hostility and anger, and with women there were always hysterics. I was so accustomed to dealing with those nasty reactions that I found myself at a loss for what to do when Susan sobbed a bit but didn't get angry and, more importantly, didn't run away.

"The grocer was the last little bit of...something," Slag said.

Susan grabbed my shoulder, her claw a twitch away from snapping my collarbone.

"Slag?" I managed to grind the single word out through clenched teeth.

"He meant something to you," Slag said, barely a whisper.

"Wan," Susan whispered. "His name was Wan." She looked at us with haunted eyes. "I just kept Wan company during the night. You know. Hung out, talked, helped him by doing little shit around the store," Susan struggled against a growing whimper in her voice. "At first it was just someplace warm and safe, to spend the night, but he was actually nice to me. A cup of coffee here and there, one of yesterday's stale sandwiches."

"The robbery," I said as I finally managed to pull my shoulder from her grasp. "The tape shows you stepping out from behind a display, brandishing a candy bar and yelling at an armed man."

"King size Snickers," Slag said.

"I thought if he saw a cop the guy would just take off. I thought word of a cop hanging out in the shop might get around.

"A cop. Why in the hell would he think a tiny little chick with a candy bar..."

"King size Snickers," Slag said again as if it were important.

I ignored Slag and continued. "Why would that guy ever think a squeaky little thing like you was a cop?"

"\$96 change for a dollar bill." Susan just looked at me.

All of the sudden I saw the crime. Not an image of the store. Nothing that could have been a recording or a description-induced hallucination; I was actually there. As

the gun came out from under the thief's jacket I heard his heavily accented demand, East European. I felt the fear in Wan's frantic fumbling with the cash register, the panic that radiated from him when it wouldn't open

I was jumping out from behind the display. I was yelling "Police! Freeze!" I didn't just hear, I felt the sound of a large caliber gun going off in a small room, the concussion as tactile as the noise, slapping against my face. The thief turned the gun toward me, but it wasn't pointed at me as it wobbled in a trembling hand. The muzzle flash. Again and again. Things exploding off the shelf next to me. The smell of smokeless powder. The ringing in my ears. The hole through Wan's chest. The long, slow moment as Wan felt his life draining away, staring at me, his eyes pleading for help.

"Shit," I said when it vanished.

"I killed Wan," Susan said as she choked on a sob. "He wasn't going to shoot but I startled him and the gun went off."

"He saw a police officer," Slag said. "Your reflection in the window was a police officer."

Slag's mental demon was churning, I could see it in his eyes.

"Boots. Paint on his boots, white, probably a latex primer," Slag said. "He didn't look around when he came in. He knows the store, but he did not expect to be recognized. He had only been there in the day. He didn't know that Susan would be there at night."

I didn't bother to try to remember Slag's details and insights. He would remember them perfectly when we needed them and he would recall them on cue.

Susan's eyes were unfocused. She had a whimpering mumbling monolog going on and she was sagging toward collapse. I moved to put an arm around her, but Slag jumped from his chair and beat me to it.

Slag beat me to it? I wasn't certain what kind of alien pod person had suddenly replaced my idiot brother, but he had an arm under Susan's shoulder and she was leaning on him, not me. In the universe I knew, that could have never happened. Slag whispered to her, saying something that seemed to bring her back toward the human realm. She didn't come all the way back, but she made it close enough that we managed to exit the crappy bar without much more than the minimum of fuss and bother.

The impossibilities continued. In the car, Slag sat in the back with her, gently stroking her hair, rocking her. He warded off every effort I made to ask her where she needed to go and left me with no real choice but to take her with us back to our place. He all but carried her into the house and across the living room before his feeble burst of heroic strength gave out and they collapsed together onto the couch.

I had absolutely no idea what to do. She was lost in that uniquely feminine, sobbing, paralyzing kind of emotional breakdown. Slag was handling all the sensitivity and listening bullshit and there really wasn't anything left for me.

Shit," I said to no one as I grabbed my bottle of Happy Cossack vodka, the one I kept hidden on top of the TV, and retreated to the kitchen. Technically, I was not drinking alone. I could still see them sitting on the couch.

It was clear Slag had fallen for her. He had fallen harder than a fat lady on ice, and it was pretty damn obvious that the man who saw everything could see nothing but this squeaky little wreck of a woman. There was no way this could possibly end well and the experience would devastate Slag. Through repeated infection, I had developed something of an immunity to the cruel trauma God called woman, but Slag hadn't. Slag was inviting his own doom like an Indian eagerly helping Columbus unload a barrel of smallpox.

I was horrified. Dear God, putting the two of them together? Hell, between them there were so many not-quite-right bits that you could probably assemble an entire person out of nothing but mental problems.

At first I clung to the hope that it was just going to be a couple hours of sitting and waiting for her to get her head together enough so I could badger an address out of her, put a radio collar on her and dump her back into her natural environment. Unfortunately, that fantasy didn't last long. Thinking back through the things she had said, I quickly realized that she had no address. She had been using the store as a safe, warm place to wait out the night.

"Shit," I said again, this time to a chorus of soft snores drifting in from the living room.

I thought about waking Slag and trying to talk to him. I even considered waking Susan and trying to get her to just check out and save us the entire trauma, but rather than attempt to deal with it in any way, I respected the family tradition of stepping back and watching the train wreck.

I hate lots of things. Any religion with the gall to think other people need or want their fucking missionaries, guys that wear gold chains, couples that substitute hamster dogs for children, Margaret Thatcher, bastards that don't know the difference between pretentious and philosophical, farts that smell like seaweed, the list gets pretty long, but the worst of the worst has to be the undeserved hangover. When you get yourself stumbly drunk, the hangover is only fair. It is a small price to pay for a few hours of a soft and fuzzy world that doesn't seem quite as miserable as you damn well know it is, but the plastic pint bottle on the cardboard box I used for a nightstand was still almost full of liquid that might just barely meet the legal definition of vodka. I had drunk almost nothing but I was still well and truly hung. My heartbeat pounded in my ears and the sound of my bare feet on the cold tile of the kitchen floor echoed through my throbbing skull like the stomping of a clog-dancing buffalo.

Maybe I had been really drunk. Maybe the bottle on the nightstand was the second or third bottle. Maybe I had been drunk enough to imagine that a squeaky little monstrosity of a mentally disturbed woman followed us home. That's it. It was all a nightmare. I knew better, but it was a nice fantasy to roll around my soggy head while I waited for a two-hundred-dollar toaster to spit out my waffles. Refusing to accept reality in any guise, I clung to the fantasy as best I could, but by the time Mr. Coffee was done pissing black water into the pot, Susan was standing just outside the kitchen, still wearing last night's clothes.

That sparked a brief, teasing flash of hope, but I thought back to that first grueling trek across the living room and any hint of anything better than the worst-case scenario that defined my life went fluttering away. Neither of them had slept on the couch.

“You can start with coffee,” I offered. “If you can figure out how to make that other fancy machine work you could even have one of those espresso-latte-mochachino foamy things.”

“You rob a department store?” Susan asked as she took a cautious step forward and peered into our cluttered warehouse of a kitchen. Her voice was soft, almost a whisper, but the choking edge on that squeak grated cruelly against the tender underside of my hung-over brain.

“Wedding gifts,” I said.

She appraised the full armada of deluxe everything that covered the counters, then her eyes settled on the unopened appliance boxes stacked two deep against the wall.

“Right,” she said, sarcastically.

I grabbed one of the boxes that was still entombed in fancy foil gift-wrap and tossed it on the table in front of her.

“KitchenAid Mixer, the deluxe 400-Watt one, pulls about \$180 on eBay.”

She ripped open the shiny paper, pulled out the enclosed card, read it, and shook her head in disbelief.

“You steal from wedding receptions?” She was shooting for incredulous, but there was a bit too much of a nasty bite in it. Incredulous really needs a good dose of that school marm, uptight and puritan never-been-fucked self-righteousness behind it.

“Christ no,” I grumped. “Weddings are cruel and evil enough without adding petty theft to the atrocity. These were gifts, sent to me.”

“Sent to you?” Susan emphasized the ‘you’. I wasn’t sure what to make of that.

I sat and ate a couple of bites from my toaster waffles, hoping she would vanish, but I quickly gave up on that and decided I would have to try to explain. “My fourth wedding, or almost wedding I should say, I grabbed the wrong guest list out of my desk and accidentally sent 200 of the invitations to the demon spawn my second wife had tried to pass off as friends and family. Big dust-up from that and the governor pardoned me before the wedding, mostly because of my invitation screw up, but there were still buttlords of presents that came in from those 200 invitations. Now, I just skip all the ugly and unpleasant parts.”

“You have to be kidding?”

“Wedding invitations are cheap when you print them in bulk. I made Slag learn calligraphy, stamps are cheap and the phonebook is full of names.” I shrugged. “It helps balance the checkbook when things get tight.”

“So you’re an asshole and a criminal mastermind,” Susan said without any hint of trying to be humorous.

“Petty criminal mastermind,” I corrected her. “It’s a small scale thing, nothing like I think we could do with Slag and a decent partner that was good at a con. Besides, I’m not sure if it is illegal. They are gifts after all and with my history, it would be pretty hard to prove that there wasn’t almost a wedding.”

Susan looked at the stuff, longingly, jealously.

“If I filled your kitchen with all the best techno gadgets would you ease off on Slag?” I asked. “Keep the whole damn thing between us nothing but business.”

The look on her face confirmed what I already suspected. She was angry, but not at the suggestion I could buy her off with an espresso machine. Susan had no kitchen to fill with toasters, bread-makers and blenders.

“Look,” I said, trying my damndest to sound caring enough to get her to actually listen to me. “If you need a place to crash, you don’t have to work Slag for it. There’s a decent bedroom downstairs, window to the backyard, spaceships, planets and astronauts painted on the walls, it’s a real classy place. We can clear all the toasters and crap out of it and work that into our deal.”

Susan looked at me, lips pursed, jaw clenched.

“So if you are hooking up with Slag, it is for him and nothing else.” I was trying to achieve an impossible balance between the pounding of my head and the need to sound authoritative. The grumpy and cranky part was natural. “If you are in with him, you damn well better be in it for real and you had better be ready to deal with a truckload of aggravation and insanity. He has absolutely no concept of how to deal with real people.”

“And you do?”

“Compared to Slag, I’m Oprah and Dr Phil’s perfect love child,” I said. “At any moment, anything you could imagine, and a hell of a lot of things no human could possibly imagine, can and will come tumbling out of Slag’s mouth. Embarrassing, insulting, infuriating things. Even if you explained it to him, he wouldn’t understand and you can absolutely never think that he should have known better. He doesn’t. He will forget you exist for days or weeks at a time. He will forget your name. He will never remember a birthday or an anniversary. Slag embodies everything that could possibly piss a woman off and if you aren’t ready to take that on, day after day for a very long time, back off right now.”

As if to prove my point, Slag wandered in to the kitchen and walked right past Susan, brushing her out of the way without realizing she existed. Bowl out of the cupboard, kids’ cereal varnished with sugar, milk, spoon. After he set it on the table and turned to raid the coffee pot, Susan grabbed him and kissed him. At first Slag looked stunned, open the door to find Bigfoot selling Girl Scout cookies kind of stunned, but after she gave him a bit of tongue, he figured it out.

“It binds because it’s too big,” Slag said when Susan finally came up for air.

Susan gave him a puzzled look, which Slag didn’t notice, and she pulled away slightly.

“32B.” Slag looked down at her chest, then reached out and placed both hands on her breasts. “You are too small for a B-cup. You should try the junior miss brands, their cups are slightly undersized. Or an A-cup made out of a material that has some stretch to it.”

Susan scowled. At me, not Slag.

“Of course you taught him about fitting women’s underwear,” she said.

“If it has been on cable TV, it is probably in his head somewhere.” I shrugged.

“Mitchell doesn’t hate you,” Slag said, staring at his hands resting on her breasts. “He hates everyone.”

“Great,” Susan said.

“He does like your ass,” Slag said distractedly as his attention drifted back to coffee and breakfast. An instant later, it was as if the woman he had just been feeling up had vanished.

“Even better.” Susan may not have been able to hit incredulous, but she was world-class with sarcasm.

“A perfect foundation for a professional relationship,” I said. “You think I’m a bastard. I think you have a nice ass. It’s perfect.”

Susan stared at me. Slag slurped and chomped on his cereal like it was prey trying to escape. Normally I would have yelled at him, but this time I just let him go and I worked on my own breakfast, happy to see that he was irritating her.

“You in?” I asked her after I had finished my first waffle.

“In for what exactly?” Susan went after coffee first, pouring a cup before opening the cupboard where Slag had captured the cereal.

“Waffles if you want something hot,” Slag said without looking up from his cereal. “We don’t have any oatmeal. Your ass does look nice.”

I dropped my waffle back onto the plate, looked at Slag for a second, then turned to Susan, making sure I had her attention and could see her face when I asked, “Were you just now worrying about what your ass looked like?”

Susan shook her head, no hint of embarrassment or anything else to suggest she had been thinking about what she looked like. No reason to think that Slag was simply answering an unasked question.

“Then that was an actual compliment, directed at an actual human being.”

Slag grinned, ear to ear, as proud as a kid getting that meaningless award the teacher makes up in a futile attempt to get the class to behave.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I said.

“You call ‘nice ass’ a compliment?” Susan was unimpressed by Slag’s truly remarkable accomplishment. Grabbing a stack of waffles out of the big yellow box in the freezer, she started eating a frozen one while she loaded the others in the Toastatronic 2000.

“What? The homeless chick expects poetry and roses?” I grumbled. “You of all people should know enough to be happy to take what you can get.”

Susan scowled at me, and kept scowling until she sat at the table with breakfast. She even managed to sip the coffee and eat her untoasted waffle without breaking the scowl.

It didn’t bother me.

“So,” she finally said to me. “In for what?”

“I’m not exactly sure anymore,” I admitted. “I was looking for a pro. Slag can be pretty random. His stuff is good, but you never know what it will be. So I figured we needed to team up with someone experienced. Someone street smart and quick on their feet, someone who could take a bit of inside information and run with it.”

“I don’t really run cons,” she said.

“I know, but I still want you on the team. You and that glimpse thing isn’t what I expected, but it’s good, damn good. I just don’t quite know what could we do with it yet.”

“I can’t really control it,” Susan said. “A lot of it is random, emotional.”

“That’s not what I saw last night.”

“If it is something that someone is already thinking about or something easily suggested to them I can usually hit it, but it has to fit what they expect.”

“We can figure a way to work with that,” I said.

She stared at me for a very long time, looked at Slag, then around the kitchen, then back at me. I was sipping my last dreg of not-quite warm enough coffee when she finally said, “We find the guy that killed Wan first.”

Slag slapped the table, his eyes wide.

“He couldn’t have been outside for more than a minute or two before coming into the store. It was cold and his jacket was too light. It was raining and there were only speckles of water on his shoulders. I need to see the street,” Slag said. “I need to see where he was before he came in.”

“I guess it’s a start,” I said. It was definitely something to work from, but it wasn’t enough to sell to the cops or the papers.

I looked at Susan. I didn’t try to smile or even think friendly thoughts, I just looked at her and tilted my head toward the coat closet out by the front door. “There’s a big box full of all the precious girlie crap that I stole or hid from departing wives and girlfriends. Shirts, makeup, perfume, fancy shampoos, pretty much enough chick shit to put together a whole weekend invasion kit. There are even some lacy bras and that kind of shit in there. Clean, new in fact, but nothing in little girl sizes. Take whatever works for you and pretend like I wrapped it for Christmas.”

Susan looked up from the floor, gave me the briefest possible touch of eye contact then glanced at the closet door. She didn’t move.

“Main bathroom is fair game. Towels in the big blue basket are clean but don’t flush the toilet till I’m done with my shower.”

I didn’t wait for a response from either of them and, in hindsight, I probably should have. If I had just thought to directly tell Slag to wait for me, I wouldn’t have been stuck swearing at the scattered remains of their hurried breakfast and a fresh pot of coffee in an otherwise empty kitchen when I got out of the shower some minutes later.

Yesterday’s unread paper was kind enough to give me the location of the former Mr Wan’s shop, but it took forever to actually navigate that deep into the one-way, no-left-turn maze of the city’s brutal-mugging district, and twice that long to find a parking space. By the time I finally made it to the locked and caged convenience store, I had little hope of finding them. As a dedicated glutton for punishment, I actually did hope that they’d be standing there when I rounded the corner, but I knew better. I was so prepared to be disappointed as usual, that it took several long seconds before I realized that the little girl dressed up for the Charles Dickens play and pacing in front of the store was Susan.

I looked at Susan as Slag did what he did, poking at stuff and staring at gum on the street like an idiot tourist in a museum. The jaded part of Susan was back in control. The cold, tired, worn look was back.

“You will treat him decent,” I said, as I stepped up beside her.

It looked like a bright, not quite spring day, but the cold wet wind ripping down the street was full of winter. It really ripped down the street, newspaper tumbleweeds, ripples on the puddles, the whole miserable bit.

Susan heard me, but refused to acknowledge my existence.

I was angry, more angry than usual, but I wasn't exactly sure why. Something about her and Slag was terrifying me.

Susan pretended to ignore me for a bit. Then she tossed a glare in my general direction and wandered over to where Slag had suddenly become mesmerized by the pellets of shattered safety glass that used to be a window in a bus stop shelter. I could only hope that she would actually try to ride it out.

I was so caught up in getting myself worked up over the whole Susan and Slag thing that I almost stepped in front of the bus that groaned around the corner and squealed its way to a stop at the shelter a half a block away. When the sanity-challenged couple climbed on and the diesel-sucking dinosaur growled away from the curb with the two of them in its belly, I just stood there, stunned into a coma.

A bus. The bastard with the gun and the dry jacket in the rain had just stepped off the bus. He knew the inside of the store because he transferred buses here.

Fortunately, even after a few profanity filled minutes of trying to start my Ford land barge, it only took six minor and three major traffic violations to catch the bus. When the bus finally puked them out, I pulled into a stop-and-steal quickiemart gas station and ran, yes I actually ran, to catch Slag before he wandered off. It was only a hundred yards but it damn near killed me.

“Slag,” I finally managed between the gasps. “What in the hell were you thinking?”

“The clock in the store said 3:49. 56 East, from the hill, his home, stops there at 3:46. It's the only bus he could have arrived on. In front of the store, the only bus a commuter would transfer to from the 56 is the 73 North.” Slag pointed to the half-built apartment complex on one side of the street and the almost completed mall on the other. There were other construction sites at the next corner. “Paint on his boots. He's a construction worker who rides the bus to the same site everyday. That means a big project like one of these.”

“The driver said these were the only big projects on the route,” Susan chimed in.

“No, I mean getting on the god-damned bus by yourself. I told you that I will not chase another bus across the country.”

“I didn't get on the bus alone,” Slag said.

I chose not to respond to that.

“Which construction site?” I asked.

“I don't know.” Slag looked around. “One of these.”

“I think it is late enough in the morning to call Dave,” I said even though my broken watch left me guessing about what time it actually was. “I think we have

enough to hand it off to him. You two stay right here. Slag, do not move an inch from that spot until I get back.”

Fortunately, the minimart actually had a living specimen of that rarest of endangered species, the pay phone, and I wasted no time getting to it and dialing Dave our lazy cop. Dave was happy, damn happy to get the information, and he promised to write us a check that instant and look into it right away. I thanked him even though I knew both promises were bullshit. Dave never paid us for the last lead until he wanted us to try and find the next one, and he would have to do one hell of a lot of maneuvering before he did anything about following this one up. He needed to make sure he got all the right kind of attention for sticking his nose in someone else’s high profile case.

I was pleased and approaching the general neighborhood of happy, a very nice neighborhood that really didn’t care for my type, when I walked back to where I had parked Slag. Slag was running a dozen steps down the road, peering down the cross street, then running back to the spot I had told him not to move from.

“What the hell is it?” I asked as happy vanished like a suburban mirage.

“He works over there,” Slag said, pointing to the unfinished apartment complex.

“The Bulgarian that shot Susan’s store clerk?”

“Armenian,” Slag corrected me.

“Where is our squeaky little tart?” I asked even though I knew I really did not want to know the answer.

Slag didn’t answer, running a dozen steps down the corner and looking down the cross street instead. A half-block away, a man was walking, turning every time he came close to someone and scooting away in odd, almost random directions. I couldn’t tell if it was the guy from the store, but there was no mistaking the shabby little waif that followed him, stalking him.

“Shit,” I said, meaning it like I had never meant it before. “She knows he has a gun.”

Slag jumped up in the air as if the six inches of extra height would give him a better view down the street.

“You go down to that store right there. Call the cops, and tell them you saw the guy that shot up the convenience store heading west on North 75th,” I said to Slag. “Then hang up, get in the car and wait for me. Do you understand? Call the cops, then wait for me in the car. Nothing else.”

Slag jumped again, this time using my shoulder to gain an extra inch of vertical.

“Slag!”

Slag stopped hopping, looked at me and nodded before darting off toward the store.

I set off after Susan. Briefly, very briefly, I thought about just letting her get herself shot. That would eliminate a big-ass bucket of problems for me. Unfortunately, I couldn’t quite bring myself to let it play out that way. She was like the mangy puppy that had followed you home. Even if you didn’t want the diseased mongrel around, putting it down was just that little bit too much.

I walked after her, after them, moving as quickly as I could without running. I justified walking by convincing myself that running might spook him and it would

certainly draw unwanted attention to her, to them, but seriously, running twice in one day would probably kill me. It didn't help that they kept speeding up. He was getting more agitated, frightened, frantic, darting across the busy street and recoiling from people like they were all flesh-eating ghouls selling fixed-term insurance packages. And Susan was stalking him, hunting him, walking faster to keep up, clearly focused on nothing but him.

Several blocks down the road, just as he was starting to add shouting and muttering to his random little dashes, I caught up with her. When I grabbed Susan's shoulder I saw it.

Every person I looked at was Wan, chests erupting in an explosion of blood. But instead of dying they kept walking normally with an accusing look on their borrowed face.

Susan pulled out of my grasp and kept after him.

It took me a minute to shake off the gruesome vision I'd stumbled into when I touched her and catch her again.

"Susan," I said, this time ready for the image to hit me when I grabbed her.

She pulled away.

"Stop it," I insisted.

Susan glared at me for a second before turning back after him. I didn't let her get away; two quick steps and I had her again, but it was too late. As she jerked her arm out of my hand and turned around, he ended it.

You could literally see him snap. There was a visible, obvious transition from panic and terror to an unnatural calm. He stopped right in the centre of the last lane of traffic, stood still for a minute, then dove back toward the middle of the street. He threw himself under the front bumper of a bus, flinging his body like an Olympic swimmer shooting out of the blocks.

The sound, wet-crunching and popping of bones with a meaty squishing splurt to it, was revolting.

To Susan's credit, I don't think that was what she was trying to accomplish. It shocked the living shit out of her. She faded to a computer geek shade of pale, trembled a bit, then launched what was left of her toaster waffles onto the shoes of the first gawking vulture to flock to the mess. Susan's second salvo caught him on the thigh.

"Buck up, chick," I said.

Susan gave me a bit more of her well-practiced glare before spitting the dregs of vomit from her mouth.

"Not so sweet, is it?" I said gruffly. "It should feel better, but it doesn't. It doesn't matter how much of a bastard it is. Chasing a murderer, exposing the embarrassing secrets of the playground bully — no matter how much they deserve it, doing it makes you feel like shit."

The look on Susan's face was ugly, but for once she wasn't glaring.

"Come on," I said, lifting her forcibly to her feet. "This mess needs some fixing."

It took her a minute before she could stand on her own, and another couple before she nodded.

“Sir,” I said to one of the gawking vultures chatting excitedly on his cell phone. “I’m Detective Lovenuts.” I flashed him a glance at the inside of my wallet.

The vulture’s chatter stopped and he looked at me, giving me the slightest nod of acknowledgement, respectful, as if he had seen an actual badge.

Good. Susan had it together enough to work with me.

“My cell phone was damaged in the pursuit,” I said. “I need to borrow yours while Detective Nipples takes your statement.”

He glanced at Susan, locked his eyes on her chest as he handed his phone to me. I hung up on the gawker’s buddy and dialed an occasionally sober reporter that disliked but did not quite despise me. The reporter was out of his chair by the end of my first sentence and on his way out of the parking lot by the time I had finished the details I wanted in the story.

Handing the phone back to the vulture I said, “You said the suspect was shouting something about not being able to take the guilt of killing a man.”

“No, I was...”

The gawker recoiled, flinching like he had been bitchslapped.

“You saw him run across the street.” I put my hand on Susan’s shoulder and as I spoke I could see the scene unfold in front of me, as if I were remembering it as I described it. It was so totally Obi-wan Kenobi. “He looked manic, insane and he was shouting something about being sorry he killed the shopkeeper.”

A few seconds later the vulture nodded and said, “That’s about it.”

“Given the importance of this case, I think it is vital that the media get this information as soon as possible,” I said. “Why don’t we go over those details one more time?”

With Susan’s help, I had a good dozen witnesses chattering about all the right details by the time the first real cop arrived.

“You look like secondhand crap,” I said as we walked back toward where we had left Slag. It wasn’t what I wanted to say, but I have never been one for doing things the easy way. “Does that glimpse thing take a lot out of you?”

“Not really,” she said. “It’s harder to stop it than to use it.”

A half block of silence later I finally just came out and said it.

“You can stay at our place.”

She just kept walking.

“No strings, no obligations, you don’t have to work Slag for it...”

“I like him,” she said.

“Do you really think you can handle all his insanity?” I asked.

“Probably not,” she said. “But I do like him.”

I sighed. I wanted to believe that adding one more lunatic to the asylum was not that big of a deal, but I knew better.

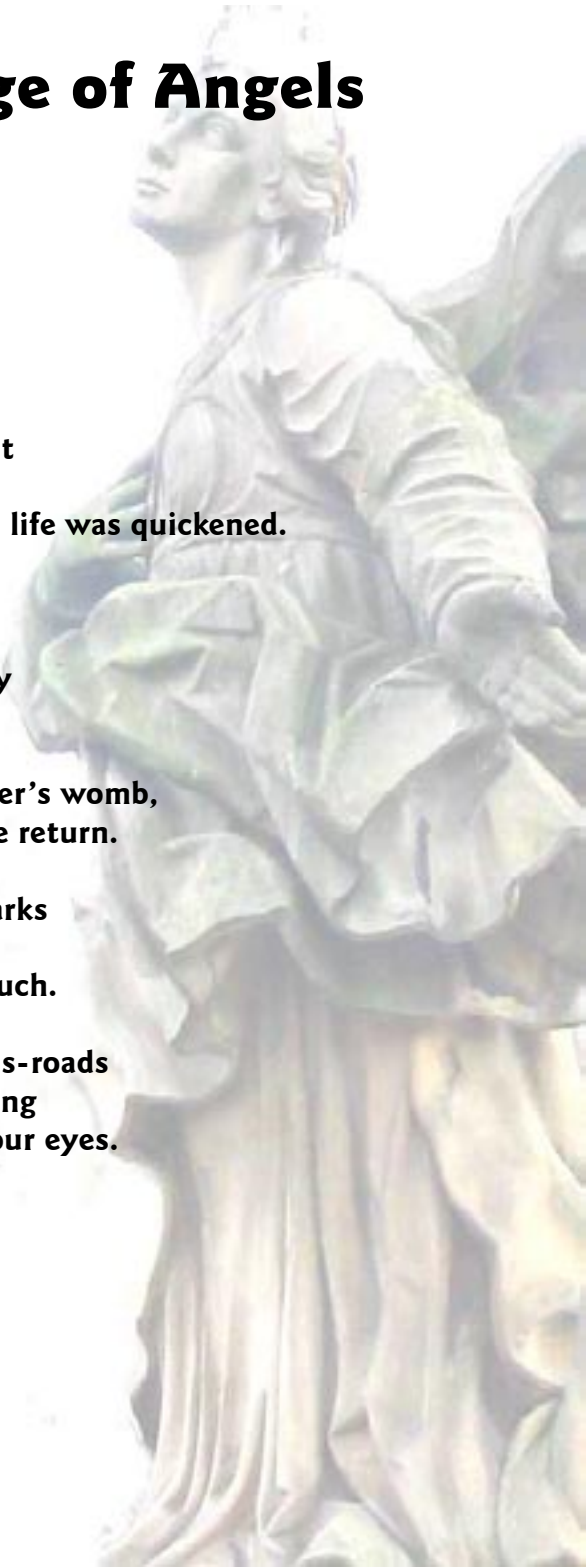
The Knowledge of Angels

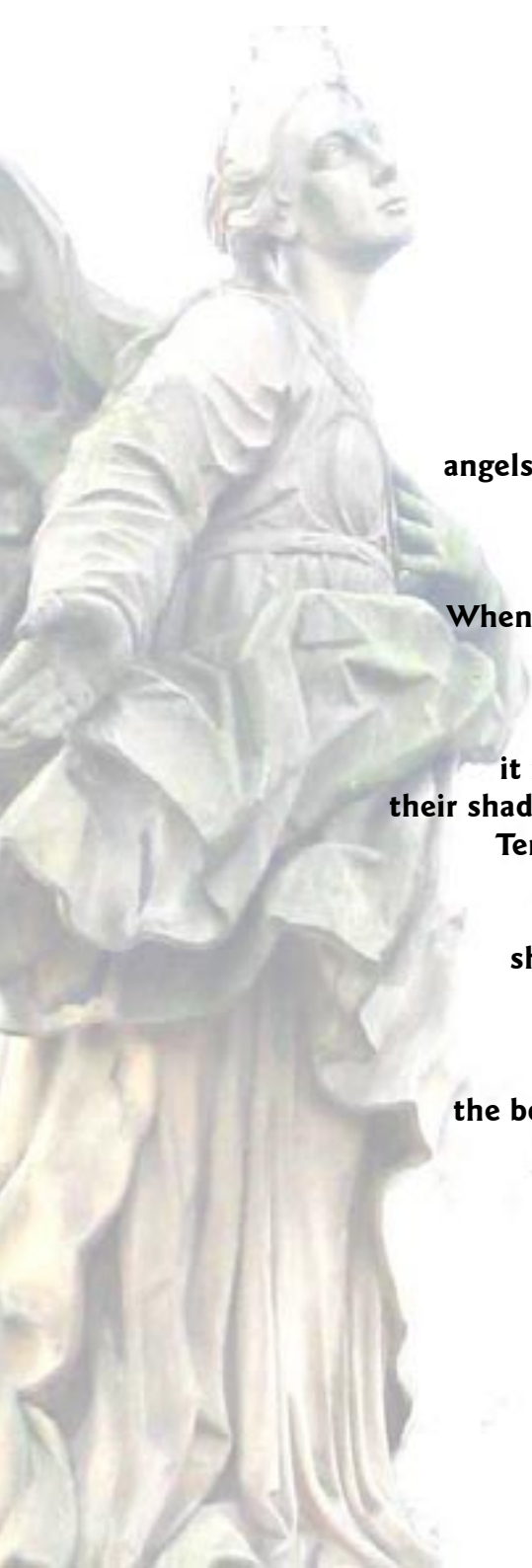
by Kate Forsyth

**In that first convulsive heave
as space and time catapult out
and the fabric of the universe
buckles and stretches — then life was quickened.**

**Clumsily humans were made
by hands unused to shaping,
the seeds of growth and decay
pressed deep into our clay
so in panic we butt our heads
against the walls of our mother's womb,
knowing to dust and ashes we return.**

**Dangerous as wind-blown sparks
the djinn were birthed in fire,
the world kindling to their touch.
In secret places they hide
dry wells, ruined houses, cross-roads
we only see the djinn in passing
as willy-willies blow dust in our eyes.**





**Of radiance and shadows
angels were made — wings translucent
as dragonflies', as iridescent
with rainbows, as easily torn.**

**When beauty stabs us through, bright
and incandescent piercing,
it is the touch of their wing.
As we stumble in blindness,
it is their light that shows the way,
their shadow that consumes ours in death.
Terrible is the knowledge of angels.**

**The universe whirls with suns,
shooting stars, black holes, a deep
but dazzling distance. Darkness
and brightness spin together,
bliss and misery. In us all
the bottomless pits, the blue heavens.
In us all the chance to fall or fly.**

Calling the Unicorn

...Aliette de Bodard

When Emily entered the rooms of Lady Agnes, there was a fire burning in the hearth, although it was the height of summer. The heat struck her like a physical blow, and she wondered how anyone could live in that sweltering atmosphere. She stood hesitantly on the threshold.

Lady Agnes herself, seemingly unaffected by the temperature, was waiting for her by the chimney. Her face still held the beauty Lord Henry had married her for: lips as red as a lover's rose, pearly skin over high cheekbones, and brown hair streaked through with highlights of red. She scrutinised Emily for a moment; not a muscle of her face moved. Then she gestured for her to enter.

"So you are the king's ward," she said.

Emily curtsied. "Yes, my lady."

"I wish you would do not that. I am not so much older than you, or so much more respectable. I am the one who should curtsy." But she did not. A bitter smile twisted a corner of her mouth. Lady Agnes gestured towards two chairs in the room, "You might as well sit down."

Emily sank into green velvet, found herself staring into the eyes of Lady Agnes, which were tawny, with flecks of green — not a shade she had ever seen in the court, but something that belonged in the wilderness under the trees. She did not know where to begin, could find no purchase in the other's bland expression.

Lady Agnes saved her the trouble by saying bluntly, "So they want you to catch a unicorn."

Emily nodded.

"Who is the sick one? Your father? Your fiancé?" She was affecting not to know. As if the whole court had not been afire with the news for the past day. It was impossible to be that removed from the flow of events. Or was it?

"My parents are both dead. It's my brother... We know it was poison, but not who administered it or how. The physician says it is Devil's Finger."

"And as the old wives say, 'The ground horn of a unicorn is the surest antidote to all poisons.' So they sent you to me." Lady Agnes did not sound pleased at all.

"You caught a unicorn once. I want to do the same, for my brother."

"I see. But you have your facts wrong, child. I never caught a unicorn. It was my sister who did, long before we both married in separate kingdoms, and thus parted ways." Her voice was emotionless, as if her sister were long dead,.

"But—"

“Never fret, girl. It was long ago, in another land, in another time, and the tale grew mangled in the telling, no doubt. I was there when she caught it, though. I remember.” Her voice had softened. “It was the white of snow under a wintry sun. It came to the grove, moving as if to a music only it could hear, and knelt before her. And the king’s men held it down and sawed the horn from its forehead.” Her mouth curled in distaste.

“What happened to the unicorn? Afterwards?”

Lady Agnes looked surprised for a fleeting moment. Then she regained her contemptuous assurance. “It died. What else could happen to it, after what mattered most to it had been taken away?”

“I thought—”

“You never thought. Do you think your brother’s life worth that of the unicorn?”

An odd question to ask. Determined to be as honest to the other as she was with herself, Emily said, “It would grieve me to see a unicorn killed, but my brother is dying, and I love him. He matters more to me than any beast. Will you help me?”

“The king commands it,” Lady Agnes said, without joy. “Too much, perhaps. A unicorn is intelligent; it is no beast, to slaughter as you will. You dare decide who is to live between two creatures who were born equal in the eyes of God? Tell me, child: who appointed you judge of that? I pray that you learn the meaning of misplaced pride before it is too late.”

My brother is dying, Emily screamed inwardly. Someone poisoned him and all I can do is watch. Don’t tell me what I have to do. Don’t patronise me. But she said nothing.

“I will teach you the words of the spell, child. But know this: everything that will happen after you say it is none of my responsibility.”

“It is my own life.”

“No,” Lady Agnes snapped. “There is much more than your life at stake, you foolish girl. But, like my sister, you will only understand it when it is too late.”

“Then tell me what I should do instead.”

Lady Agnes smiled mirthlessly. “I did try, once. Do you think you are the only one to come to me for this purpose? She did not believe me. You would not either. In your heart of hearts you have already chosen.”

“Tell me.”

“Why should I?” Lady Agnes said. “I have stopped to care for anything or anyone. Even my own kin are alien to me: they let me go without a word, and have not inquired about me since I left them. I owe them nothing. I owe nothing to anyone. Let the world take care of its own foolishness. Make your own choices, girl. At least you will have more than I was ever given.”

In the evening, Emily went to see her brother. She found him awake, staring at the ceiling. His face held the pallor of death; his legs, now paralysed by the poison, lay in an unnatural position on the bed.

“Alexander?” she asked.

“Yes,” he whispered. He stared at her for a while. “So you’ve seen her.”

“Yes.” She sat by his side. Devil’s Finger. A slow poison, the physician had said. It would take at least three more days before the numbness reached the heart and stilled its beat forever. He was dying. It is unfair, she thought, but she knew this would not purge the poison from his body.

“What does she say?”

“She taught me the spell. I don’t know whether I will have the courage to use it.”

“You’re my sister. Courage runs in the family.”

She shrugged, trying to feel more comfortable than she really was. “I— I’ve done what the king said I should do. Everything will be fine.” She could tell by his face that he didn’t believe her, that he knew exactly the depths of her uncertainty.

You foolish girl, Lady Agnes had said. Who appointed you judge of who should die? I have no choice, she thought. I can’t let him die. I can’t.

Alexander coughed again. “She’s an odd one, you know. Lady Agnes. She holds herself like a queen, but they say that the way she acts, one would think she had been raised in a tower in the middle of the forest.”

Emily considered the words. Lady Agnes frightened her, but she also felt a strange kinship for her. It must not have been easy to be a stranger at court, where only your husband was a familiar face.

The long speech appeared to have exhausted Alexander; he sank back into his pillows. He did not speak, and neither did Emily. After a while she rose, and blew the lamp by the side of the bed. “Sleep well, brother.” Her voice was shaking.

At dawn Emily sat in the grove. She had an escort of king’s men — for bringing the beast down, one of them had said, and Emily had felt a strange hollow in the pit of her stomach that would not go away. The king had brought a handful of nobles, among whom was Lady Agnes. She was dressed too warmly for the balmy weather; she had no attendant in evidence. Alexander was right: she was an odd one.

The grove was within walking distance of the palace. Emily had never been there. But it was a place of beauty: the slender, bare trunks of aspen trees rising around her, the sunlight filtered through the foliage into dazzling patches like mirrors on the grass, and the stump of polished red wood on which she sat, trying to slow the hammering of her heart against her ribs. And, in her ears, the voice of the wind, rising through the branches until it seemed each shaking leaf was whispering her name.

Emily. Emily. This is madness.

She shook her head. I do what needs to be done. The wood beneath her was as cold as the embrace of the sea to a drowning man.

No. She couldn’t afford to doubt now. She needed to focus on the spell; to remember the words, and the arcane tune. She started singing, at first in a low voice, and then louder as she gained assurance.

Come hither, sister, come to me.

From the depths of the forest I call you

I, your equal,

I, your sister in spirit,

I, who, like you, have never known a man’s touch on my flesh,

I, whom no-one has ever owned,

I call.

Come hither, sister, come to me.

She sang the words, over and over. At first she thought that Lady Agnes had been wrong. She felt her cheeks redden with shame that she should have believed children's tales. But gradually she heard a second voice weave itself within her song. It spoke no words; the more she tried to focus on it the more it fled from her. She let it wash against her own voice, felt its presence grow until her mind was filled to bursting with it.

And the unicorn came. Slowly it stepped from the depths of the wood before her eyes. All Emily could see was the glossy radiance of its coat, shining like a fallen star in the shadow of the trees; the sound of its hooves filled her chest to bursting.

It reached her. Knelt before her with the tip of its horn in her lap. And, in that split second before the king's men leapt forward, Emily looked into its eyes, and saw. Saw the tawny pupils, with flecks of green, the same distant expression. Knew, beyond reason, beyond logic, that they were the eyes of Lady Agnes.

What happened to the unicorn?

It died, child. What else could happen, after what mattered most to it had been taken away?

It didn't die. It changed. And the tale grew mangled in the telling.

"I'm so sorry," she said, aloud, as the guards pinned the unicorn to the ground. She was not looking at them, not even when they started sawing the horn from its forehead. Her gaze was locked on Lady Agnes's face, which held a grim, triumphant smile. Do you see, now? the other asked, silently.

I see, Emily thought, but it was too late. For everything there is a price to pay.

I pray that you learn the meaning of misplaced pride before it is too late.

"Your horn, my lady," the captain of the guards said, slipping something warm in her hand. She heard him gasp audibly. "What in God's name is that?"

She did not move. Only when the clearing around her erupted once more in a frenzy of movement did she turn. Still holding the horn, she pushed aside the guards as if they were no more than men of straw, and put her arms around what had been the unicorn.

The eyes of a girl with a heart-shaped face stared up at her, frozen in shock. Later would come resentment; later would come bitterness, along with the cold that would never die, not even in the heat of summer.

"Don't worry," Emily whispered. "I'll take care of you."

Emily rose, holding the other against her. The girl's hand in hers was as small as that of a child; she let Emily guide her away from the bloody log without resistance, as if her will had deserted her with the removal of her horn, and her transformation to this strange, unfamiliar body.

"Come, sister," Emily said.

They walked out of the clearing through a sea of frozen faces. Emily obstinately kept her eyes on the palace ahead, kept her thoughts on an image of her brother rising whole from his bed. But still she heard the wordless song of the unicorn in her mind. And she knew that she would never stop hearing it for as long as she lived. A penance for my sins, she thought. For my pride.



Head in the Clouds

...Hayley Griffin

Prince Rupert pulled sharply on the reins as he approached the tower. After dismounting, he checked his teeth in his men's pocket mirror and bellowed, "Princess, oh Princess Lucinda, your ordeal is over, where are you, princess?"

He was clearing his throat in preparation for further exertion of his vocal cords, when a figure leaned out of the tower window.

"Oh my princess," Rupert gushed, his pupils dilating at the sight of her long golden hair billowing in the breeze, "I thought you did not answer because some other suitor had visited your tower before I."

"No, no it's not that," said Princess Lucinda, frowning down at him from her tower. "I was just treasuring the silence."

"Oh...well...um, sorry to interrupt, but I've— I've come to rescue you."

"Rescue me?"

"Ah, yes, you know...this is the part where you let down your hair, I climb up the tower, release you from your prison and...and we both ride off into the sunset together."

"My hair? You want to climb up it?"

"Ah...that's right."

"Didn't you think to bring your own abseiling equipment?"

"Um...well...no, I— I guess not."

"Oh."

"Is it...not a convenient time, Princess? Should I come back later perhaps?"

"Well, your timing isn't the best. Like I said, I was enjoying the silence — until you arrived rather noisily of course — but no, I, um, well I don't think any intervention on your behalf will be necessary." She curled a long blonde strand of hair around her finger.

"Pardon?"

"Thanks so much for thinking of me, but I don't particularly want to be rescued."

"But you have been imprisoned against your will in a tower by an evil witch, have you not?"

"Well, sort of. It was looking that way to start with, but now that I've got over the initial shock of having a flour sack thrown over my head and being abducted at knife point, I've had a chance to get a new perspective on things."

“How so, Princess?”

“Well, for starters, the view from up here is fantastic. I can see for miles. The sunsets are just heavenly. And I’ve never been a morning person, but now I know why. These days I’m woken by birds chirping and flitting daintily through the treetops, not by Father booming down the corridor, complaining as always that the cook’s food has made him constipated. You know, I’m surprised he hasn’t cut her head off yet.”

“Actually, I um...I believe he has.”

“Really?”

“Yes, whacked it off last Wednesday. Apparently the dumplings were too salty.”

“Oh. Golly. Guess I miss out on all the gossip up here...but I think I can manage without it. Anyway, where was I? Ah yes, the benefits of my new lifestyle. Table manners are entirely up to my discretion. If I want to burp I can, and if I want to let sweet, sugary syrup run down my chin, I can do that too.

“And I’ve discovered that those dizzy spells I’ve been prone to ever since I can remember aren’t a natural disposition. It was just that my frightful corset was too tight — never again I tell you, never again. Now I’m free to dress as I please...or undress, if I feel the urge. Nudity brings with it a whole new freedom. I guess you could say that for the first time in my life, I’ve really been able to let my hair down.”

The prince pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his velvet pantaloons and pressed it to his brow.

“Are you all right down there? You look a little...flushed.”

“Yes, Princess.”

“Good to know. So, as you can see, I’m enjoying the benefits of my new home.”

“But Princess...you— you can’t stay here.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because...because...well, for one thing, it would be such a momentous crime if your loyal subjects could no longer gaze upon your exquisite beauty.”

“They’ll get over it.”

“But surely you must miss being...admired?”

“You mean — perved at?”

“Ah...”

“Being a beautiful maiden is all very well, but I don’t think anyone really understands how time consuming it is, all the manicures, pedicures and having to sleep with rags in my hair... Then there’s the preoccupation with making sure my cleavage looks its best... And presentation isn’t the only burden. It’s so tedious having to bat my eyelids, smile coyly, and pretend that I’m interested in what my many suitors have to say. They do tend to prattle on. And it’s always the same old stories; how many dragons they’ve slain lately, how many poor defenceless villages they’ve conquered.

“Now that I’ve been away from the castle for a while, I’ve discovered that a break from the monotony was just what I needed. I never realised how much my family really get on my nerves. The way Father’s nose whines with every breath...and that disgusting habit he has of sitting on the throne with his legs thrust wide apart, I mean, *ick*, why has no one ever told him about that before?”

“Could it be because he has the power to behead people at random?”

“Ah yes...that might be it. But anyway, back to my annoying family. No longer do I have to put up with Mother lecturing me on the duties of being a lady, or for that matter, nagging me to stop biting my nails. And I don't have to endure the company of my foul-mouthed gluttonous brothers anymore. And let's not forget the endless rituals. How many times a day can a person 'take tea'? I mean *really*.”

“But...but surely you must miss your friends?”

“Those sycophants? I know they were mocking me behind my back. Amara is more of a friend than they could ever be.”

“Amara?”

“The witch. She's actually kinda nice once you really get to know her. We're all so eager to cling to stereotypes, aren't we, assuming that just because she's a witch who does evil things that she must be, well, evil. What I really mean to say is that she has her good points. Like a wicked sense of humour, for example. Oh, the laughs we've had. Good gracious. And she's really helped me to grow as a person, to discover who I am and what I can be.”

“By kidnapping you?”

“Well, yes, her methods are a little unorthodox, but as a consequence I have seen both sides of her personality. I know she's not pretending to be something she isn't. Plus she's also a fabulous cook. Her date and ginger loaf is to die for. And I even requested that she add a few of my favourites to the menu, and she graciously agreed, so now I get chocolate self-saucing pudding for dessert every Tuesday and Saturday. And there's always plenty of fresh fruit to snack on. She's the perfect host. You could say she's cast a spell on me.”

“So it would seem.”

“And the tower is very homely. She's furnished it with beautiful things. It's like it's been tailor-made for me. And she was even kind enough to order in my favourite shampoo. How thoughtful is that?” She giggled. “I thought I was afraid of heights until I actually gave it a go. Now I think living down there at ground level is just so terribly dull. I'd rather have my head in the clouds any day.”

“But—”

“Obviously, it's a lot smaller than the palace, but I don't think of it as cramped — probably because I don't have to share it with anyone. What more could a girl ask for? Of course, having to empty my own chamber pot has taken a bit of getting used to, but one has to make some sacrifices, I guess...”

The prince stepped back a few feet, away from the base of the tower, and discreetly inspected the soles of his winkle-pickers.

“We're actually in talks at the moment about adding a trap door and a deck so I can plant my own garden up on the roof, and it's looking promising that I'll get the go ahead... Ahhhh, the thought of spending summer nights gazing up at the stars surrounded by pretty blooms... Sounds delightful, wouldn't you agree?”

“Indeed...bu—”

“And at some stage I'll raise the chamber pot issue with her, but although my own handmaiden would be a treat for sure, I don't want to be too demanding — it's not good to take advantage of one's friends, is it? Living up here has definitely taught me the virtue of patience. I think my temperament has improved dramatically. I don't

yell anymore, probably because there's no one to yell at, and nothing to yell about. Instead I find myself singing a lot, along with the birds. I just can't help myself."

"So it would seem."

"You said that before." She scowled at him, twisting her hair back into a bun.

"Did I, Princess?"

"Yes, and I'm not sure I like your tone."

"Ah, well..."

"It seems you are a little resentful of my lifestyle choices?"

"It's just that I— I came here to rescue you..."

"I do recall you mentioning that, but as I believe I've already explained, being 'rescued' isn't something I care for. If I change my mind, you will be the first to know."

"So there's nothing I can do to persuade you to ride off into the sunset with me then?" He flashed her a full teeth, Prince Charming smile and gestured towards the horizon.

"I get a better view from up here. Besides, riding has never really been my thing."

"Well, Princess," he raised his eyebrows, "might I suggest that it's not the *riding* itself that has been the problem, but more *who* you've been *riding* with? Maybe if you were to *ride with me*..."

"No, it's not that, I just don't think it's very nice for a beautiful creature like that adorable horse of yours, to have one — let alone two — humans sitting on its back. Seems a bit demeaning to me."

"Oh...well...ah...we don't have to go out. We could stay in..."

"You mean, you want to...to come up here?"

"W— why, what a splendid idea, Princess. How thoughtful of you to suggest it."

"I wasn't actually. I'm sure you're a very charming prince, Prince...what is your name?"

"Prince Rupert of Armadillo."

"Well, Prince Rupert of Armadillo, I'm not really looking to make any new friends at this point in time, and besides, if I invite you up, I'd have to do the same to other visitors, now wouldn't I?"

"It could be our little secret..."

"At the risk of repeating myself, I'm kinda enjoying my own space at the moment."

"But won't you get lonely, Princess?"

"With Amara, the birds, and a dear little mouse who pops in for date and ginger loaf leftovers every supper time to keep me company? I think not."

"I see."

"Nothing personal."

"Of course."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some alone time to catch up on."

"Yes, Princess," he sighed. "I um...I understand. Is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

"There is one thing..."

"Yes, Princess?"

“If you could try to leave quietly, that would be much appreciated.”

“I— if you’re sure that’s what you want...”

“Oh yes. I’m sure.”

“Any messages?”

“Nope.”

“But, Princess...what shall I tell your father? He’s expecting me to return triumphant with his daughter straddled across my loyal steed...”

“Just tell him I said hi.”

“Shall I um...shall I also mention that it would upset you terribly if he were to have me beheaded for not rescuing you from your tower, perhaps?”

“If you like.”

“I will forever be in your debt, your highness.”

“That’s nice.”

“Then I bid you farewell, sweet maiden, and wish you all the best for your...your life of isolation.”

“Why, thank you.”

“I hope that one day our paths will cross in more favourable—”

“Now might be a good time to implement that leaving quietly request we discussed earlier.” Lucinda walked away from the window.

“Y— yes, Princess,” Rupert whispered. He climbed up onto his horse and rode off into the fading sunset.

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Speedbumps on the Road to Recovery

...Timothy Mulcahy

Arnie Campbell woke. The room was still dark but that didn't mean anything. His hair was soaked; sweat covered his pillow and sheet. The light blanket was rolled in a ball and pushed over to the left side of his bed, where his wife used to sleep.

"Clear windows," he said. He sat up. Pulling his head from the pillow's well, individual hairs clung to the fabric. Despite the heat, he felt a chill.

The windows cleared. As he feared it was still dark. A full yellow moon showed through his window, bathing the room with a shadowy light.

"Your shake is ready," the Scheduler inside his head said. "Please drink immediately, three minutes before solidification."

"I need to take a shower."

"Five minutes allocated to personal hygiene, downloading appointments now."

Campbell grabbed the breakfast shake on his way to the bathroom. He took a sip, leaving a brown mustache above his lip. "When's my first appointment?"

"6:00am, Brian Ruggierio of Enricon Magnetic Devices."

Arnie Campbell was a divorced, overweight salesman trying to keep up with the world in a never ending quest to get himself back on top.

After his first nervous breakdown, Arnie took a pretty nasty fall, losing his job and then his wife. After eight weeks of recuperative institutionalization, even his dog took off. That was the last straw. *Disloyal little prick.*

He had to be honest with himself. Shanty wasn't really his pet, more like a roommate. After Arnie plugged himself into the center, he couldn't really blame the dog for bailing. He probably would have bailed himself had the situation been reversed.

The liquid slid down his throat as water streamed over his body. Small rivulets formed between the folds of fat that grew during his time in the clinic. The water had a mix of solvent that took away body oils and dirt, giving Arnie a moment to savor his breakfast.

It was a brief moment. "Ten seconds to solidification," the glass announced.

"No."

"Nine."

"It's not fair."

"Eight."

“Shit,” Arnie drank with increased earnestness but he knew it was too late. The shower stopped just as his shake solidified. A brown wafer, in the shape of the bottom of the glass, formed and fell, hitting him in the face.

There was no point complaining. Arnie had to lose weight. He grabbed the wafer out of the glass and took a bite of it as a warm breeze dried him.

By the time he got back to his bedroom, his bed was made and there was a single piece, navy blue, power suit laid out waiting for him. It was one of the magics of the late 21st century. Arnie never saw how his bed got made or his clothes put out. They were always there.

“You have fifteen minutes till your first appointment,” the Scheduler said.

“Okay, okay.” Arnie held the wafer in his mouth as he put on his clothes.

“Morning news briefing, you want video or audio?” the Scheduler asked.

“Audio,” Arnie said. He put on his shorts and shirt.

“Four deaths overnight, three to domestic violence, one suicide. Details?”

“No.”

“Market indicators are up. Consensus explanation is increased productivity and reduced overhead. Details?”

Arnie thought about that one for a second. It might be relevant. He decided he didn’t have time. *Maybe I’ll catch it later.* “No.”

“Comet C/2077 T22, a long period comet is expected to make a close approach to Earth. Details?”

“No.” Arnie wondered how that one got past his filter. He could care less about astronomy.

“In addition, you have five calls, three identified as urgent,” the Scheduler said.

“I’ll get them later.” Within five minutes he was out the door. Despite the shower, he was already sweating.

The doors to the subway almost got him. They closed just as he stepped on. Even though the safety mechanism would have caused the doors to open again, the five second delay would have been intolerable to the hundred or so other people on the train who would look up from their schedules or papers all annoyed.

And it wouldn’t be the first time. Arnie seemed to be always in catch-up mode, always behind the curve. The regulars on the train knew this. He couldn’t bear to see them shake their heads again before looking down at their work. “Congratulations,” a woman said from the other side of the car.

“Hallelujah,” said the man standing next to her. Both were regulars on the train and both had been subjected to Arnie-induced delays.

Arnie flashed both of them his best dirty look but couldn’t hold it. He was distracted. From the instant he entered the train he was bombarded by motion billboards and holographic images. There was a sexy woman wearing a tight fitting red dress. She had black hair and blue eyes and she almost looked real. Arnie was fooled for a second and actually smiled at her.

Then the woman walked right through him, still carrying the make-up she was selling. A woman standing behind him stopped the holographic image to get a closer look at some eye shadow. Arnie thought he recognized the model.

Letters flashed in front of his eyes, generated from his mind, or at least from the Scheduler implanted there.

The day's events flashed in front of him. "You have a time compression warning for 2:00pm," the Scheduler said.

"What do you mean?" Arnie said aloud, drawing dirty looks from other passengers intent on their own schedulers.

"Insufficient time for travel between appointments. Current estimates indicate you will be ten minutes late for your three o'clock."

"Can you warn Fibrinogen Industries that I'll be late?" Arnie asked.

"Suggest you reconsider, eighty percent chance they will cancel."

"Shit," Arnie said, aloud again. This time, even the holographic model turned to give him a dirty look.

"What about my one?"

"Could be moved back to twelve but you'll be forced to cancel lunch with your daughter."

"I can't do that."

"You must, schedule prioritization protocols require business ahead of pleasure. Should I notify her scheduler?"

"No, I'll call."

"You don't have time."

"What do you—"

"Incoming newsflash."

Arnie exhaled. He could feel his neck start to tighten as the data wave broke over him. It was one the tricks therapy taught him. He used to tighten up, brace for impact of a sort. It was the wrong thing to do. During therapy he learned to relax and take data waves as they rolled in.

There was a murder outside of the 83rd Street Station; a woman flipped and killed a restroom attendant with a plastic fork. There was more. Chordate Pharmaceuticals had just announced that its CFO resigned under a cloud of scandal. There were allegations that she stole more than twenty-two billion from the corporate coffers and cooked the books to make it look like there was even more money in the company to compensate. Arnie made a mental note not to schedule an appointment with Chordate.

Then there was the mass suicide at Harbinger Financial. The shrinks were calling it suicide contagion. One employee snaps and kills him or herself right in front of his or her coworkers. Then, the trauma of watching the suicide causes the rest of the employees to off themselves. It was the latest thing in high pressure employment.

"Lucky I work alone," Arnie said.

"What?" a woman next to him said. She looked up, annoyed.

Arnie saw the data flow in front of her face for just an instant before it collapsed. "Sorry, I was talking to myself."

“You should be more considerate,” she said. She turned back, her data redisplaying in front of her. Arnie noted her heft and pale complexion and wondered if he looked as unhealthy as she did.

The train got to the 92nd Street Station, bypassing the 83rd because of the murder. Arnie got out and ran up the stairs to street level. He would have to back track to 85th.

Arnie got to his 6 am five minutes early. Even as he walked in, he had messages flowing in.

“Arnie Campbell to see—”

“Call from Adrian Fisk,” the Scheduler said.

“Take a message.”

“What?” the receptionist asked.

“Sorry, I’m talking to the Scheduler,” Arnie said.

“Who shall I say is calling?” the receptionist asked.

“Arnie Campbell.”

“To see?”

“Adrian Fisk.”

“Who?”

“Adrian...oh sorry, that’s the call, I’m here to see Brian Ruggierrio.

“Just a moment,” the receptionist said.

Sweat was beginning to form on Arnie’s forehead and in the two indentations of his receding hairline. As he walked back to some overstuffed couches to sit down, he pulled a handkerchief and wiped his head.

He mumbled to himself as he walked. To the casual listener, they sounded like the ravings of a schizophrenic. In fact Arnie was repeating a Zen Koan. It was a relaxation technique he got at therapy.

The reception area was gray and purple, the carpeting being gray and the furniture being purple. Arnie had no clue what the effect the furniture was meant to have. It didn’t matter. He didn’t have a chance to sit. A call came in. It was his daughter.

At that same instant, Brian Ruggierrio came walking into the reception are, smile on his face, right hand extended.

“Daddy?”

“Just a minute, sweetie.”

“Arnie Campbell.” Arnie took Ruggierrio’s hand.

“Brian Ruggierrio.”

“Daddy.”

“Just one second, honey.”

“Pardon?” Ruggierrio asked.

“Oh, sorry, it’s my daughter.”

“Is this not a good time?” Ruggierrio asked, obviously annoyed.

“No, fine. Look, honey, I’m in a meeting. I’ll call you back.”

“Daddy, I—” The Scheduler cut her off.

“Sorry,” Arnie said again. The two men walked back to Ruggierio’s office.

Arnie grabbed Ruggierio’s hand for the third time as he opened the office door. He was positively bouncing. It was the largest order he ever got. “Delivery will be in three weeks,” Arnie said as he shook Ruggierio’s hand in parting.

The receptionist caught some of Arnie’s transitory happiness and was smiling at him. He thought about asking her to lunch.

Lunch, he thought. *Shit*. He called his daughter. There was a message waiting for him. “How dare you cut me off like that? I’m not talking to you ever again.”

“Leave a message,” Arnie said.

“Site not accepting,” the Scheduler responded.

“Can’t you bypass?”

“Not possible. You have a call coming in from Ms. Crandall.” Louise Crandall was the regional manager and Arnie’s boss. He had to take the call.

“Yes?”

“I just heard, great news.”

“Thanks,” Arnie said.

“You’re coming back, Arnie. I knew you had it in you.”

“Thanks,” Arnie said again.

“I’ve taken the liberty of scheduling another two sales calls.”

“Really, when?” Arnie was smiling, already spending the additional commissions he would earn.

“Ergo Industries at 11:30a.m. and Blameworthy Forest Products at 1:00.”

“Time compression and conflict warning,” the Scheduler said.

“Hold on, I may have a conflict,” Arnie said. “What?”

“Lunch with your daughter and a two o’clock with Branella Pharmaceuticals.”

“I have conflicts,” Arnie told Louise.

“Business or personal?”

“One of each.”

“Whose the business conflict with?”

“Branella.”

“Cancel your personal and blow off Branella,” Louise said.

“Blow off Branella? Hal Condroiton is a long time customer.”

“Don’t care, it’s a ‘C’ customer, these two are high order potentials. Like I said Arnie, you’re on your way.”

“But Louise, Hal’s a friend.”

Arnie heard a sigh over the comm. line. *Shit, I’m blowing it*, he thought.

“Okay, I’ll have Frankie O’Brien handle your Branella call.”

“But Frankie’s just out of college. He doesn’t—”

“What’s wrong with you Arnie? It’s about the money. Don’t you want the bigger orders?”

“I guess.”

“Good, take these calls, let me know how you do.” Louise broke the connection before Arnie could say anything.

Arnie grabbed the door to the office. That’s when the Scheduler spoke up. “You have eleven messages, seven marked as urgent. Three were repeat calls from this morning.”

“I’ll return them later,” Arnie said. About half way down the corridor he realized he never talked to his daughter. His heart started racing again.

By 12:30, Arnie finished the meeting with Ergo. It had gone well. He felt pretty good about it and expected an order in a future meeting.

Arnie was hungry. He had just enough time to grab some street meat before his one o’clock.

The Scheduler dinged. “Incoming message.”

“I’ll take it live,” Arnie said.

“It’s message only. It’s your daughter.” There was a second delay before the Scheduler played back the message.

“Daddy, it’s Jenna, I’m at the restaurant. Where are you?”

“What time did this come in?” Arnie asked.

“Twelve fifteen.”

“Why didn’t you buzz me?”

“You were in a meeting. You have a call coming in.”

Arnie’s shoulder’s tightened up. “From who?”

“Your daughter.”

“Jenna—”

“Where are you?”

“I’m sorry, honey, I had a meeting.”

“I’m sitting here like a jerk. You didn’t even bother contacting me, how typical. Mom was right to dump—”

“You weren’t taking messages.”

“It’s always some excuse with you. I’ve had it.” Jenna hung up before Arnie could say anything.

“Re-establish connection.”

“She’s not accepting,” the Scheduler said.

Arnie felt a drip of sweat break loose from his armpit hairs and work its way down his side, towards his belt. It got about half way before it was absorbed by his suit. Soon it was followed by others.

“Anyplace nearby to grab some lunch?” Arnie asked his Scheduler.

“Yogurt vendor on the corner of Fifth and Yolanda.”

“Anyplace to grab a hotdog or hamburger?”

“You’re not cleared for those, it would exceed your allowed calorie intake.”

“Damn,” Arnie said to himself. When he got out of the nut house, he was put on a strict diet. The counselors went out of their way to inform Arnie that half his problems were because he was overweight, which seemed odd, given the fact that he gained most of the weight while in therapy.

The elevator doors opened. Arnie stepped on. There was a gorgeous woman on it. She looked familiar. Arnie smiled at her. She ignored him, turning away.

About halfway down to the lobby, Arnie remembered where he saw the woman. She was the holographic image on the subway. Arnie looked at the woman and smiled. “I’ve seen you before,” he said.

The woman looked down at her feet. “I’m not surprised,” she said.

“On the subway,” Arnie said.

“Yeah, I do ads,” she said. Her arms were folded in front of her. She turned her body away from Arnie’s.

“Who are you?”

The woman looked up at the ceiling. She exhaled explosively through her nose before turning to look at Arnie. “My name’s Dani Haynes, I’m a model, all right?”

“Jesus, take it easy. I’m just trying to make polite conversation.”

“I’m sick of you assholes hitting on me—”

“Wait a minute, nobody’s hitting on you,” Arnie said. “I just said I saw you in the subway, that’s all. Jesus, you can’t talk to anyone anymore.”

She seemed to soften a little bit. “Sorry.” The elevator reached the lobby and the doors opened. “Bye,” she said.

Arnie followed her out. He couldn’t help but admire her butt as she walked toward the front door.

“Midday news update,” the Scheduler said.

“Go ahead.”

“Markets down sharply, no explanation.”

“Okay.”

“Mass panic in Central Asia, again no explanation.”

“What’s going on?” Arnie wondered.

“According to NASA Comet C/2177 T22 will pass close enough to Earth that it will be visible during the day. You should be able to see it in the northeastern sky.”

“How is this getting past my filter?” Arnie asked.

“Don’t know,” the Scheduler said.

“How could you not know?”

“Eat your yogurt, you’ll be late for your one o’clock,” the Scheduler said.

If Arnie didn’t know better, he could swear the Scheduler sounded a bit testy.

“And you have twenty-two new messages, fourteen marked as urgent, one threatened to hack past my security if you didn’t call her back and six more repeats.”

“I’ll get them later.”

The meeting with Blameworthy didn't go well at all. The customer was expecting someone else and no one bothered telling him that Arnie would be coming. Not only didn't he get the order but was told that Blameworthy would probably be doing business with another company in the future.

Arnie stepped on to the street. The sky seemed brighter than normal, almost white.

"You have thirty six calls," the Scheduler said. Fifteen are marked urgent. Your dinner with Hal Condroiton has been cancelled, no explanation."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, you have a message from your daughter, she says she never wants to see you again."

Arnie sagged. "Anything else?"

"Your ex-wife called. She wants to know what you did to make your daughter so upset."

"Fine, anything else?"

"You know that comet."

"The one you kept bugging me about?"

"That's the one."

"What about it?" Arnie asked.

"It looks like it's going to pass way closer to Earth than originally thought."

"How close?"

"It's going to hit."

"Bad?"

"Pretty much the end of everything," the Scheduler said.

"When?"

"In about fifteen minutes."

"From now?"

"From now. You also have forty new messages."

"Do I have to go to work tomorrow?"

"Probably not," the Scheduler said.

"Good." Arnie looked up at the comet. The muscles in his shoulder relaxed, then he slouched before sitting down on a nearby bench. He slowly exhaled as he stared at the growing yellow orb in the sky. It was the first time he relaxed all day.



Demons of Fear

...Jennifer Fallon

Plastic chairs. The aroma of unfulfilled dreams. These are the things I remember most about the place. It's a charred ruin now, but every time I pass the old women's shelter, that is what leaps to mind: plastic chairs and the smell of unfulfilled dreams.

The chairs were always in a circle. There was some sound psychological premise for the arrangement. Something about nobody feeling left out. Some odd scrap of Freudian logic left over from the days of King Arthur. It's an illusion, of course. Ask any junior manager facing the CEO across a round boardroom table where the power lies. Power moves with the person. It doesn't matter where you sit.

I went there to conquer my fear. Not the ordinary fears that people have. Not the quite acceptable fear of heights or spiders. I don't suffer from unreasonable phobias. I'm talking about true fear. The debilitating, mind numbing fear that makes it impossible to function in the real world. The fear that drives people to contemplate murder or suicide. The fear from which there is no escape.

I had never really been afraid before. Perhaps that's why it hit me so hard. I was a strong person. Proud of it. I was the one others turned to in a crisis.

But then I met Ray.

It wasn't bad in the beginning. In fact, it was quite the opposite. It was wonderful. Heady. It was love. True love. The sort of love you see immortalised on the screen and in cheap romances. It was the real thing. I knew it in my heart; in every fibre of my being. This was what I had been searching for and for a time I was indescribably happy.

Maybe that's why I finished up in a support group. The higher you are, the further you have to fall when the ground gives way beneath your feet. There were warning signs, I can see that now, but I was in love, so I chose to ignore them.

The first time I saw Ray's dark side was at a pub one evening, several weeks after we became officially engaged. Ray was at the bar buying drinks. I was alone at the table, tapping my fingers unconsciously to the beat of the juke box in the corner. I can't remember what song was playing, but I remember the beat. Harry Stinson, an old acquaintance from high school, came over to say hello. He was drunk, but not obnoxiously so. Drunk enough to be foolish, perhaps. He congratulated me. Told me he'd always fancied me. Asked for a kiss.

Ray came up behind him at that point. He grabbed Harry's shirt and tossed him backwards, into the crowded dance floor. That was all. Nothing else happened. The bouncers were efficient and Harry was bundled out of the room with little fuss. Ray smoothed things over with the bouncer who had come to perform the same task on him, smiling. Charming. Sober. The bouncer let us stay. Apologised for the disturbance. When the bouncer left, I explained who Harry was. Ray was instantly remorseful. *I just saw some drunk bothering you, he said. I was trying to protect you.*

His words filled me with a warm feeling of security.

They should have made me run like hell.

When I related the incident, everyone in the support group nodded sagely, as if they could see what I had not. Sally Ferber, the battered wife who had lived through twenty years of beatings, looked at me like I was a child who'd just discovered the perils of playing with matches. Kathy Williams, the meek and forgiving fool who had gone back to her abusive husband so many times I felt she deserved everything she got, smiled and said: *That's why they're so hard to leave. It's nice to feel protected.*

Pam Cook, the woman who had turned from men so completely that she now had a 'wife' shook her head with a heavy sigh. *Arsehole*, she said. That was the way she described all men. Arseholes.

Dianna said little during these discussions. She let us talk as we poured out our tales of woe, each trying to outdo the other with the horror of our lives. She was a good counsellor. She didn't judge us, or make comments, other than to ask occasionally: *And how do you feel about that, Jill?*

Frightened, I would always answer. *That's why I'm here. I'm sick of being frightened.*

Dianna was a beautiful woman, with dark hair and nutbrown skin. She was tall and elegant and seemed much too genteel to be stuck here in this circle of plastic chairs listening to a gaggle of battered wives and girlfriends cataloguing the misery of their lives. The less she said, the more I wanted to know her. Was she really here for us, or had she once sat where we were now sitting?

Could a person bear to share so much pain and fear, if it didn't echo in some dark and hidden recess of their own soul?

I almost hoped she had. She was so self-contained, so together. It would be nice to think that some day, I could have that much command over my life again...

I was a snob in those days. I wasn't some pitiful trailer-trash wife with nothing to live for but my next beating. I had a degree. A good job. I had money of my own. I owned my house and had a share portfolio. Women who have share portfolios are not battered wives. It was one of the unalienable laws of the universe. It happened to other women. Poor women.

It was Dianna who suggested we go for coffee after our regular Thursday night meeting. She asked me to stay back and help stack up the chairs in the common room of the women's shelter where we gathered. Once the others were gone, we pushed the chair stacks against the wall, under a poster that announced 'Domestic Violence is a Crime'. The woman on the poster had a black eye and was clutching a frightened child as she fled a dark looming figure in a backlit doorway. Did I look like that the night I ran away?

I could do with a coffee, Dianna said. Care to join me?

There was a small café not far from the shelter. It served taxi drivers on the late shift. It was the kind of place I would never have ventured into alone. I liked my coffee served with a smile and a small shortbread. Here it was served in polystyrene cups with those little paper packets of sugar that claim they are one level teaspoon that someone borrowed from his daughter's miniature tea set. I put three sugars in the coffee. Dianna had none. *I like the bitterness, she said.*

We sat in silence for a time, soaking up the ambience. *They're afraid, Dianna said, looking around at the drivers sipping their coffee and eating the greasy fare served up by the café. They never know if their next fare will be the one who kills them.*

It was an odd thing to say. I looked at her curiously. Her eyes were shining. It was as if their unspoken fears gave her life a sharper focus.

What are you afraid of? I asked.

Nothing, she replied. And I believed her.

We often had coffee on a Thursday night after that. We would sit in the taxi drivers' café and talk about trivial things, watching the drivers come and go. She let me do most of the talking, I realised later. With barely a word of encouragement, she got me to open up. She extracted from me the details of my life that I would never have shared in the support group. She made me admit my fear. Articulate it. Relive it.

I told myself it was doing me good. That's why I had come, wasn't it?. To face up to my fear? To find a way to live with it? I think back now and wonder if I should have noticed the eagerness of her smile. The way she drank in my fear as if it was a particularly good vintage.

Then one Thursday night Kathy Williams was missing. She had gone back to her husband, Pam explained. *Arsehole.*

Dianna said nothing. She just smiled.

We had coffee again that night. I asked Dianna what she thought about Kathy's decision to go back to a man who was so patently a beast and whose first action would — undoubtedly — be to beat her black and blue for having the temerity to leave him.

Some people like fear, Dianna told me, her eyes alight, as if the very idea was seductive. It makes them feel alive.

I couldn't agree. Fear didn't make me feel alive. Fear had stolen my life from me.

Another woman joined the group the following Thursday. She was very young, just nineteen. Her face was scarred. Her boyfriend had thrown acid on her face in a fit of jealous rage. He didn't want other men looking at her.

Kylie Something. I never found out what her last name was.

She was pathetic in her terror, too afraid to speak her own name. It made me angry to look at her. What right did any man have to inflict such pain on a woman? What ancient law made it acceptable for a man's rage to manifest itself in such a brutal way? After two years with Ray, I had concluded rage was a form of insanity. And apparently blind rage was a legal defence, too. Kylie's boyfriend had been let off with a suspended sentence. *Be a good boy and don't throw acid at any more pretty girls and that will be the end of it, the judge had said. Arsehole.*

That night, Dianna didn't invite me for coffee. She invited Kylie.

She does that, Pam shrugged, watching the two of them stack the plastic chairs. She likes to take the new ones under her wing. The frightened ones.

I don't know what made me follow them. I can't explain why I sat outside the café in my car, a dark space amid a sea of yellow cabs. They sat at the same table Dianna and I usually occupied. Talking about fear, I supposed.

Dianna liked talking about fear.

Kylie left in one of the cabs a little while later. Dianna left in the opposite direction on foot. I shadowed her slowly in my car, feeling like a cross between James Bond and a complete idiot. I couldn't understand why I was doing this. Was I jealous that Dianna had dumped me for Kylie?

Dianna walked the night without fear and that annoyed me. I was too afraid to answer my phone. I couldn't step out of my front door without glancing around nervously, wondering if Ray was out there, lurking in the shadows. A walk through the car park at work late at night left me quivering, sitting in my car with all the doors locked, taking deep calming breaths before I was composed enough to start the engine.

Dianna owned the night. She strutted along with her stiletto heels and her swaying hips and dared the darkness to challenge her.

And then she turned down a laneway and simply disappeared. Vanished. She had been out of my sight for less than a second and she was gone.

I followed her every Thursday after that and every time the same thing happened. She would vanish, always in the same place, the same dark laneway, as if she was stepping from this world into another dimension.

Inexplicably, I began to look forward to Thursdays as my fear was slowly replaced by a sense of gnawing curiosity. And as my fear receded, I began to notice other things. Dianna nurtured our fears. She only smiled when one of us was reliving a horror. She concentrated on those who couldn't deal with their fears, lost interest in those who could. With a nod and an understanding smile, she made us dependent on her. Even Pam, the lesbian who had decried all men, was not immune to the pull of her persuasive smile. Pam wasn't just afraid of the man who had abused her. She was afraid of all men. Fertile ground for Dianna's insidious charisma.

Kathy came back to us one sweltering, humid Thursday. She had just been discharged from hospital after a particularly savage beating. The air-conditioner had broken down and we were all sweating, but Kathy's sweat reeked of fear. It was a tangible thing. Dianna seemed to grow larger than life as she basked in it.

Not surprisingly, that night, she invited Kathy for coffee.

Kylie was devastated and the instinct I had always prided myself in — the willingness to step in and help during a crisis — surfaced for the first time since I'd met Ray. Seeing the look of despair on Kylie's acid charred face, I asked her if she'd like to join me for coffee instead. I invited Pam along too.

That was the turning point, I suppose. Once we started comparing notes, Dianna's warmth was revealed as control. Her sympathy was a tool. She fed off our fears. Encouraged them. Tossed us away like an orange peel when those fears could no longer sustain her.

We could have complained to the management of the women's shelter, I suppose, but somehow I knew it would be pointless. They were just as much Dianna 's victims as we were. Their fears were different. The fear of losing their funding. The fear of not getting their lease renewed, perhaps. But fear is fear, and I suspected Dianna didn't mind where it came from.

I'm not sure which one of us suggested that we confront her. It might have been Pam. I doubt it was Kylie. But we made a pact that night, like schoolgirls swearing a blood oath.

The week dragged until next Thursday. I couldn't concentrate at work. I was afraid, but the fear was different. This wasn't the bladder-weakening fear of the unknown, or the terror I had felt when confronted with Ray's blind, mindless rage. This was the fear of anticipation, the same sort of fear you encounter when speaking in public for the first time. The fear before an examination you can't afford to fail. It was a better fear. A *good* fear. The fear that you might not have control. Not the fear that you had already lost it.

We waited until the end of the session. Sat through it steeped in uncertainty. Dianna smelled our fear, I'm certain. And she knew the flavour of it.

Kathy was stacking the chairs when we confronted Dianna, looking like a pale imitation of the three musketeers. All for one and one for all. Kylie was visibly trembling. Pam was rigid with anger as much as fear. I'm not sure what I felt.

Dianna didn't need to be told why we were there. She knew already. She had tasted our fear and knew what it meant.

So, all good things must come to an end, she said.

Who are you?

I should have asked: *what are you?* It would have been more to the point.

I am you, she replied. *The sum of all your fears.*

You make us afraid.

I make you live, she countered. *Without fear, there is no life. I am what makes you aware that you're alive.*

You're evil, Pam snarled, which I thought a bit melodramatic.

Evil is simply what you chose to believe. There is no good or bad.

Is that how you justify what you do? I asked.

I don't have to justify it, she shrugged. *I simply am.*

As we spoke, the crushing weight of all my fears began to press on me. Every secret I had shared with Dianna, every fear I owned, every moment of blinding terror that had plagued me, not just since I'd met Ray, but throughout my whole life, was there in front of me. The darkness when I was five and thought the boogie man lived in my wardrobe. The first day of school. The exam paper I hadn't studied for. The look in Ray's eyes when I said something he didn't like. It was all there, all at once. Crushing me. Paralysing me. I wanted to scream. To run. To flee the terror of my pitiful existence. I heard Kylie whimpering. Pam was sobbing, too. It wasn't just me who felt it. Dianna was making us all confront the horror of our miserable, worthless lives.

You are your fears. That's why you came to me.

I came to you because I was frightened, I tried to say, but I couldn't breathe. I wanted to shrivel up and die.

She smiled.

That made me angry. My fears were *mine*. They weren't there to be shared, or nurtured. I was jealous. Protective of them, even. And I hated her in that moment. Even more than I hated myself.

I forced myself to breathe.

I was so damned sick of being frightened.

Dianna knew the instant I was no longer cowering in the shadows. I didn't have to say it. She felt it. A fleeting look of anger blazed in her eyes and then she vanished. Just as she vanished in the laneway every Thursday when I followed her. This time, however, she gave us a parting gift. Something to remember her by.

The ball of flame she left in her wake singed our hair. Someone — Kylie, I think — screamed. The flames caught quickly, melting the plastic chairs and curling the edges of the poster with the dark looming man and the frightened woman. We fled the shelter, barely getting clear as sirens sounded in the distance and the high-pitched panicked beeping of the smoke alarms was cut off by the hungry fire.

We stood there for a long time, watching the shelter burn. We answered the questions of the firemen and later the police in a monotone. They didn't press us too hard. We were poor battered wives, after all. We'd been through enough.

They put it down to an accident in the end. I heard the shelter's management committee held a memorial service for Dianna, but I didn't attend. I like to think I'm not a hypocrite.

I still meet with the others occasionally. We have our own support group now. I thought Kylie was getting better, but she wasn't. She killed herself a few weeks after the fire. I feel guilty that I never learned her last name.

Pam and I fare the best, I think. Kathy went back to her husband yet again. I suspect that one day I will read about her death in the newspapers too; a small by-line in a life wasted on the altar of a brutal man's selfishness. But there is nothing we can do for her. You can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped.

I met Ray for the first time yesterday since we split up. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. He was charming, as he always is in public. So charming that nobody believed me when I told them what he'd done to me. Only I ever saw the menace that lurked behind those smiling eyes. He asked after my mother. Asked me to give her his love. *Arsehole*.

I told him to go to hell. I wasn't afraid of him.

I'd conquered a fear demon.

I'm not afraid of anything, anymore.

I Don't Believe in Anita Blake Anymore: A Problem of Balance

...Devin Jeyathurai

(Spoilers, ho!)

I loved Anita Blake from the first moment I met her, but that love is slowly fading. For those of you who don't know her, Blake is the chief protagonist of Laurell K Hamilton's Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter (ABVH) series (the fourteenth book, *Danse Macabre*, was released in large format paperback earlier this year). True to its title, the series chronicles the ongoing adventures of Anita Blake, but describing her as a 'vampire hunter' barely scratches the surface.

The case file

You see, Blake is an animator by trade. That means that she raises the dead (for a living, so to speak), for a variety of reasons — so that they can clarify legal issues around their wills, for example. You see, Blake lives in a world that's a lot like our own, but that's also markedly different; where vampires have been legally recognized; where lycanthropy is a blood-borne disease with different strains that create not just werewolves, but also wereleopards, wererats and more; where all manner of other creatures and races exist (even if they haven't been given any sort of legal status) and where many supernatural powers actually exist.

Blake is one of a small group of licensed vampire executioners, authorized to kill vampires once the appropriate warrant has been issued. Blake owns (and uses remarkably well) a range of weaponry, including guns, silver daggers and even a silver crucifix, and she carries all the paraphernalia that you'd expect from someone who makes zombies for a living. Oh, she always puts them back afterwards, in case you were wondering.

Blake even has a relationship with the local police force in St Louis (where she's based), and is often called on by the Regional Preternatural Investigation Taskforce (RPIT, pronounced RIP-IT) who deal with supernatural crime in the area. This makes for an interesting incongruity for Blake, as much of what she is involved in is so outside the boundaries of human law that she often risks life, limb,

morality and sanity to walk a fine line of legality. Throw in an uneasy friendship with a preternatural assassin (Edward, an ongoing character) and you get an idea of just some of the problems Anita copes with.

More fascinatingly, Blake is romantically involved with all manner of men, all supernatural, all at various depths of feeling — including a relationship with Jean Claude, a master vampire, that has been going on since the very first book, sometimes almost against her will.

The novels are engrossing reading. Hamilton's world-building is swift, subtle and sure, and she takes great joy in exploring the ramifications of the St Louis she has built. She cheerfully puts rules in place, almost with no obvious exposition whatsoever (e.g. "some vampires can summon and control animals") and then carries those rules to their logical conclusion ("a vampire who can summon and control wolves can control the local werewolf pack").

Here you have the perfect setting for a series that entangles the romantic and sexual exploits of the central character with hard-boiled crime investigation, some stunning action sequences, and intrigue. Lots of intrigue, since the various groups (vampires, werewolves, humans, and more) in St Louis are intricately connected, socially and metaphysically. The vampires, particularly, all seem to be jostling for power and position, or constantly trying to eliminate whoever or whatever they see as a threat. A master vampire with a vampire executioner at his right hand and the Ulfric (leader) of the local werewolf pack at his left in a rare triumvirate of power, is surely a threat to vampires everywhere. Everyone wants a piece of Anita, which is actually fine with her, since she's more than capable of taking them all on.

So what's the problem?

The problem is that the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter books have become less and less believable. Not because the stories have gotten boring, or because the characters are unbelievable, or because the plotting is uneven. No, the problems arise not because Hamilton is a less-than-capable writer, but because of how good a writer she is.

Over time, the series has become a cross between a Sunday serial and a soap opera. While Blake's romantic exploits keep readers coming back for more, the novels also revolve around the challenges she faces, and each book pits Blake against a different foe. Whether it's a serial killer, or a renegade witch, or members of the Vampire Council trying to manoeuvre Jean-Claude into having her killed for breaching vampire etiquette, Blake gets into scrape after scrape, and defeats villain after villain. She has to use all of the tools at her disposal (her wits, her combat skills, her anger, her powers) to solve each situation, with complications provided by the many men in her life.

And that's where the problem arises.

Writers of superhero comics are always having to think up new ways to challenge their heroes, and then have to come up with new and innovative uses of their hero's powers so that they can overcome the villains. It's like an escalation of weapons

— the villains plot new and exciting ways to take the hero down (since they know what the hero is capable of) and the hero surprises the villain by doing something unexpected, by using their powers differently than before, or by displaying a new, improved version of their powers.

The same is true of Hamilton's handling of Blake. Blake's abilities are more than just a plot device to help her overcome the latest baddie to pop up. A lesser writer might leave it as that, but Hamilton's masterful plotting ensures that the acquisition of powers is accompanied by complications that provide more opportunities for storytelling. For example, being bonded to Jean-Claude brings Blake greater strength, and an increased healing ability — but it also means that she's one step closer to becoming his human servant. If anything, Hamilton always plays within the rules that she's set up, and things only get more and more difficult for Blake.

Of course, Blake's constant acquisition of new abilities (both natural and supernatural) have the effect of getting her into even bigger trouble. The more powerful she is, and the greater the villain she vanquishes, the more of a threat she becomes, so more bad guys (vampires, werewolves, murderers, you name it) come after her.

The result?

The Wikipedia entry on Anita Blake explains it best:

“In almost every book, Anita either discovers new abilities, develops old ones, or both. At this point, she is probably one of the most powerful humans in history.”

And it's true. She begins with your standard crime-fighting capabilities (good with guns, good with knives) and the ability to raise the dead as zombies. By the fourteenth book, she's a necromancer, and can do all this (also taken from the Wikipedia entry):

“She can raise zombies, sense the dead, sense vampires and lycanthropes, estimate their power level, and can resist (at least partially) mental influence from vampires. She can raise zombies that are centuries dead, and can do so without human sacrifice. She is one of the few animators who can act as a “focus” to combine the powers of multiple animators, and is the first person in centuries that can raise vampires (during daylight) as if they were zombies.”

Plus she's metaphysically bound to Jean Claude, the Master of St Louis, and Richard, the Ulfric of the local pack of werewolves, and together, the three of them have powers aplenty, not to mention that she can draw on the supernatural abilities of the others. She has also, somehow, formed a second triumvirate of power for herself, unheard of in vampire history. She's gotten her own were-powers and carries four strains of lycanthropy in her blood (no one is quite sure how). Her latest acquisition (and plot impediment) is the *ardeur*, a vampire ability that lets her feed on sex and lust — and that causes many more occasions for her to have sex with the wide range of men around her — because she has to, to feed the *ardeur*. If she doesn't, well, it goes wild and makes everyone horny, among many other complications

I oversimplify, of course.

Why is this a problem?

Primarily, it creates a credibility gap. Despite the wonderful job of world-building that Hamilton has done (and her world holds together astonishingly well, considering) after a while it just seems too incredible that this woman continues to gather powers and lovers like a snowball rolling downhill.

Not only that, the powerful Blake becomes, the more Hamilton has to stretch to find more worthy opponents for her. It's amusing to watch, but is becoming ever more unbelievable, particularly since Blake seems to have more abilities than all the characters in the books put together.

Of course, this is a byproduct of the serial nature of the ABVH books. Any series which depends on its central character defeating new and bigger threats each time has to manage this particular balancing act, because the audience won't stand for the villains being defeated the same way every time.

(The Power Rangers, who do seem to defeat their foes the same way every time, might be an exception to this, but they too also sometimes discover new powers, weapons or Zords, just not every episode. After the third season, the Power Rangers have changed titles and themes each year, which 'resets' them back to a manageable level at the start of each new series.)

This might be a plot problem that appears to affect primarily...well, superheroes. Whether or not Blake counts as a superhero I leave as an exercise for the reader — it doesn't matter. What does is that there's a delicate balancing act between the 'strength' of the protagonist and the level of opposition she faces, and in Blake's case, it's not working all that well.

I can offer no solutions, only point to the problem. It looks like Hamilton is about to drop Blake into a bitch fight between the two most powerful vampires in her world, Belle Morte and Marmee Noir, so perhaps that will justify Blake's constant acquisition of power.

But what happens afterwards?

References:

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, "Anita Blake", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita_blake (accessed Nov 29, 2006)

Mythologies

by Kate Forsyth



I perceive I have a siren soul,
half the stuff of dreams, half surging blood,
skin and scales fused. I sing for love
when he comes to me, his eyes are wet,
his mouth is full of water .
As our fingers touch, he sinks.
I could transform myself, hide
in a woman's flesh, undivided, mute.
But to be human I must lose
my strange fluid beauty, my seductive call.
If not to sing, if not to love and lose,
why was I given a siren soul?

I find I have a harpy heart,
half-flesh, half-storm, born in turmoil.
I snatch what I want with my claws,
riding the sky in search of prey.
You are my meat, my nourishment.
I will wrap my hair around your heart,
together we'll ride the storm winds.
Do not struggle for you will fall –
I cannot love a broken man.
Lie still and safe in my arms
for if not to snatch your soul away
why was I born with a harpy heart?



I know the secrets of the sphinx
are coiled deep within my stuff,
sky-brushing wings, the fatal roar,
a shrouded womb, the scorpion's goad.
I fathom the fierce arc of meteors
the death-blast of stars and galaxies.
I speak in riddles, for truth is
a blade to cut the eye, a poisoned sting.
Yet to answer my riddle is no escape,
death is the encumbrance of life –
if not to know this sure sum,
why do I have the mind of a sphinx?



About the authors...

Rory Abel is an independent filmmaker living in the United States. He was raised on a steady diet of horror and science-fiction literature and films as a child and has retained those two genres as his primary interests. He has had writing featured on the science fiction literary website alienskinmag.com and has had his films screened at festivals around the United States. His short horror film "Love Story" was recently featured on horror magazine Fangoria's broadband website, Fangoria.tv. He is engaged and looking forward to the adventure of being married.

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Kate Forsyth is the bestselling author of The Witches of Eileanan series and Rhiannon's Ride series, as well as numerous other novels, poems and short stories in a variety of genres. She can be found at <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~kforsyth/>

Hayley Griffin had her first literary success at the age of eleven, when she won a Smurf short story competition. A twenty-three year dry spell followed. She has written a humorous fantasy novel for teenagers, a mystery for middle-grade readers and various other books for big kids and little kids — none of which have yet been published. She lives in Christchurch, New Zealand.

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